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**Fossil Fuels Lobby and Climate Change: Influencing the  
Discourse in Politics and Media**

Master's thesis

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Year of the defence: 2020

## **Declaration**

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on  
19.5.2020

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## References

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## **Abstract**

Climate change denial is a widely spread phenomenon in the United States that has for decades shaped the country's response to the numerous environmental challenges it has been facing. This thesis deals with the role of the American fossil fuels lobby in the analyzed matter, as it constituted the main force behind its rise. The main goal of the thesis is to prove that the success of the climate change denial orchestrated by the fossil fuels industry was enabled by its ties to the political establishment. Moreover, it argues that this was done by using professionally drafted strategies, which turned a once-widely-accepted fact – backed by a scientific consensus – into a matter of debate, opinion, politics, ideology, and identity. In order to do that, the thesis firstly covers the historical development of the climate debate in the United States. It looks at the major milestones in the country's approach in dealing with the problem of the environment as well as the emergence of the climate change denial campaign itself. Secondly, it analyzes the various connections between U.S. politics, special interests, and climate science from the 1970s until the end of the George W. Bush Administration. Next, it introduces the specific tactics and methods employed by the climate change denial campaign. Moreover, the thesis examines a number of aspects that enabled the rise of the denialist movement. It goes over the role of the media, the polarization of the American public, and the pre-existing political factors that determined the deniers' success. Lastly, the thesis takes apart the role that Exxon(Mobil) played in the issue. This example is used in order to support the theoretical basis laid out earlier. Furthermore, it allows for an introduction of some of the actors that played key roles in the industry's extensive denial campaign. Their ties to the country's politics are also demonstrated here.

## **Abstrakt**

Popírání klimatických změn se ve Spojených státech stalo rozšířeným fenoménem, který v posledních několika desítkách let zásadně ovlivnil postoj americké vlády k rostoucím environmentálním problémům. Tato práce se zabývá rolí lobby fosilních společností v dané problematice, která byla hlavní silou za jejím vznikem. Hlavním cílem práce je dokázat, že úspěch protiklimatického hnutí vedeného fosilním průmyslem byl umožněn jeho politickými vazbami a profesionálně vedenou kampaní, jež z dříve uznávaného a vědou podloženého faktu vytvořila problém, který se stal otázkou diskuse,

názoru, politiky, ideologie a identity. Práce se nejprve věnuje historickému vývoji klimatické debaty ve Spojených státech. Postupně se zaměřuje na jednotlivé milníky politického přístupu k problémům spojeným s životním prostředím a na vznik samotného popírání klimatických změn. Práce dále analyzuje vztahy a vazby mezi americkou politickou reprezentací, zájmovými skupinami a klimatickou vědou od 70. let 20. století do konce vlády prezidenta George W. Bushe. V další části jsou představeny jednotlivé strategie a metody často používané protiklimatickým hnutím. Práce zde také zkoumá řadu aspektů, které tomuto hnutí umožnily vzestup, zejména roli médií, polarizaci americké veřejnosti a již existující politické faktory, které rozhodly o úspěchů klimaskeptiků. Poslední část se věnuje společnosti Exxon(Mobil) a její angažovanosti v protiklimatické kampani. Tento konkrétní příklad byl použit jako praktická ukázka ilustrující dříve pojednávané teorie, který zároveň dává prostor k přestavení klíčových aktérů hrajících roli v protiklimatické kampani a analýze jednotlivých vazeb mezi fosilním průmyslem a americkou politikou.

## **Keywords**

Fossil fuels, fossil fuels lobby, climate change, climate change denial, global warming, ExxonMobil, Republican Party, environmental skepticism, USA, science

## **Klíčová slova**

Fosilní průmysl, lobby fosilních společností, klimatické změny, popírání klimatických změn, globální oteplování, ExxonMobil, Republikánská strana, environmentální skepticismus, USA, věda

## **Title**

Fossil Fuels Lobby and Climate Change: Influencing the Discourse in Politics and Media

## **Název práce**

Lobby fosilních společností a klimatické změny: ovlivňování politického a mediálního diskurzu

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## Introduction

The existence and severity of climate change has been a widely debated topic in the United States for decades. Throughout the years, the matter has become one of the most polarizing hot-button issues that resonates both in American politics and with the public. This thesis deals with climate change denial in the United States and the role that fossil fuels lobby played in the phenomenon. It covers different aspects of the American environmental debate from the 1960s until the end of the George W. Bush Administration. This timeframe was specifically chosen because it includes the beginning of the debate on global warming in the country, the main progress in scientific environmental research, and the subsequent breaking point that brought about the rise of climate skepticism. Finally, this period is also when the fossil fuels lobby reached the peak of its influence both in politics and on the public discourse.

The main goal of this thesis is to map the causes that lie behind the massive global warming/climate change denial/skepticism campaign that has been taking place in the United States since the 1970s. The principal assumption of the thesis is that a sophisticated, decades-long campaign to counter climate science led by the fossil fuels industry greatly contributed to political inaction on climate change in the country. Building on that assumption, the hypothesis is that the key components of the campaign were the industry's ties to the political establishment and thought-through, professionally drafted strategies that managed to turn once widely accepted fact – backed by a scientific consensus – into a matter of debate, opinion, politics, ideology, and identity.

To prove the correctness of the hypothesis, the thesis analyzes the development of political approach to environmental issues in the referenced period and examines the broader political context of the problem. It also covers various ties between U.S. politics and the fossil fuels industry. Next, it looks at the media coverage of environmental issues and the relativization of science that were both key to the spread of the phenomenon. Moreover, it explores what sort of influence the fossil fuels industry had on the media content. Lastly, it demonstrates the inner structure of the denial lobby on a case study of Exxon(Mobil) by examining primary sources produced by various watchdog/environmental initiatives as well as the lobby actors itself.

The thesis attempts to answer the following questions: What caused the fossil fuels companies to turn its back on the environment? What were the connections of the lobby to

politics? What was the role of the Republican Party in the phenomenon? How was the environmental debate pictured in the media? How did climate change even become a matter of debate? What were the main strategies of the movement? And finally, how did the public opinion reflect the manipulations from the denialist campaign? The thesis is divided into four chapters that deal with the main topics of analysis and gradually cover the individual questions.

The first chapter introduces the history of the environmental debate in the United States. It goes over the major milestones of the scientific research on the issue and the political response to it. It also describes how the topic was received and dealt with in the world of politics in different time periods. Most importantly, it looks at the position of the Republican Party which later played a key role in the rise of climate skepticism and became a crucial ally to the counter-environmentalist movement.

The main topics of the second chapter is the position of climate science in the environmental debate and various examples of strategies that the deniers used in the attempt to sow doubt about global warming. More specifically, the chapter deals with the position of climate science throughout the years and describes how it was (mis)used and countered by climate change deniers. It analyzes what tools were employed in order to try to win over the public, the media, and policy actors and turn the whole topic into a highly discussed controversy.

The third chapter tries to explain how and why the American media became a useful ally to the anti-environmental propaganda. Moreover, it looks at how the media's coverage of environmental issues impacted the public opinion in the country. It pinpoints the biggest mistakes the media made in approaching and covering the phenomenon as well as identifies the major distortions of climate change reporting over time. What is more, the effects such reporting had on the public are also analyzed here. The chapter deals with framing theory, the concept of echo chambers, or the process polarization that are all closely connected to both media and public opinion in the context of climate change denial.

The last part describes the structure and the workings of the fossil fuels lobby in practice. It goes over the numerous ties between the individual members of the lobby as well as other actors involved in the anti-environmental agenda. Various organizations, companies, think tanks, and even individuals connected to the denialist machine are

introduced here. This chapter also provides evidence of the fossil fuels industry's climate-change-countering activities and the movement's ties to the American political system.

This work builds on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are mainly documents published by the individual members of the denialist movement such as think tanks or fossil fuels corporations and are mostly used in the practical part of this thesis. Some parts also use articles published by various denialist outlets as proof of counter-climate activities. While some sources that were used here might be considered by some (including the fossil fuels industry) to have a left-leaning bias – for instance Greenpeace – that assertion is based on the sources' recognition of the existence of climate change and its seriousness or their support for climate action. Since the basic assumption, that is supported by vast scientific evidence, this thesis is built on is, in fact, the existence of the phenomenon, it considers the usage of information provided by such sources to be justified. Nonetheless, all sources was approached cautiously given the controversial nature of the topic.

Regarding the secondary sources, the thesis used a few types. The first type of secondary sources used here were academic studies written by peer-reviewed authors from field like political science, environmental studies, sociology, and more. The main examples that were key to this research are *A Widening Gap: Republican and Democratic Views on Climate Change*<sup>1</sup> by Riley E. Dunlap and Aaron M. McCright, *Climate Change Politics*<sup>2</sup> by Thomas Bernauer, or *Hurricanes and Hegemony: A Qualitative Analysis of Micro-Level Climate Change Denial Discourses*<sup>3</sup> by Peter J. Jacquesa and Claire Connolly Knoxb.

The second type were articles by established media that did whole investigations into various aspects of the climate change denial phenomenon, such as *The Guardian* or *The New York Times*. Another key source was *Climate Cover-Up*<sup>4</sup> by James Hoggan, as it is considered to be an essential piece of work when studying climate change denial. Hoggan is a public relations expert and a founder of *DeSmog.com*, website which focuses on the issue of climate change and public relations. More specifically, his work deals with climate change disinformation, including the connections between American politics and

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<sup>1</sup> Riley E. Dunlap and Aaron M. McCright, "A Widening Gap: Republican and Democratic Views on Climate Change," *Environment* 50, No. 5 (September/October 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Bernauer, "Climate Change Politics," *Annual Review of Political Science* 16 (Annual Reviews, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Peter J. Jacquesa and Claire Connolly Knoxb, "Hurricanes and Hegemony: A Qualitative Analysis of Micro-Level Climate Change Denial Discourses," *Environmental Politics* 25, No. 5 (2016).

<sup>4</sup> James Hoggan and Richard Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up* (Greystone Books, 2009).

special interest. The book introduces a system of strategies, contacts, and linkages used by climate change denialists in the United States. It goes over the key aspects of the debate and explains the main ways the phenomenon of climate change skepticism was brought to life. What is more, the author describes the process of how the denialist propaganda spread throughout the country's political system and among the public. Finally, the book offers an insight into the intricate web of connections between special interests, media, and political subjects.

Many of these aspects are further explored in the book *The Politics of Climate Change*<sup>5</sup> edited by Maxwell T. Boykoff, an expert specializing in cultural politics and environment. A number of other environmental experts and political scientists deal with these topics from their specific points of view in their respective chapters. The parts most instrumental to this thesis cover the politics of climate science, public understanding, or political discussion on climate change.

Further sources were institutions and platforms that focus directly on environmental issues such as *Inside Climate News*, *DeSmog.com* or *Exxonsecrets.org* established by Greenpeace. For information about public opinion preferences and views, the main sources were *Gallup* and *Pew Research Center*. Information about political funding were taken from *Open Secrets*.

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen H. Schneider and Michael D. Mastrandrea, "The Politics of Climate Science," in *The Politics of Climate Change* (Routledge, 2010).

# 1. History of the Climate Debate in the United States

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, American climate scientists were among the first to notice significant changes and unprecedented trends in the Earth's climate. Along with other members of the international scientific community, they started issuing warnings about the possible dire consequences of these trends. In the past several decades, however, the United States has held a unique position in the field of climate science and the public climate debate has taken a very specific shape and form there – the United States can be considered the cradle and the hub of climate change denial.<sup>6</sup>

Although the first mentions of modern-day warming of the planet date all the way back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the issue and its linkage to human activity became a more widely studied phenomenon in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Around this time, the changes in the planet's climate on a global scale started being perceived as undesirable and potentially disastrous. Scientific predictions entailed a sharp rise in the Earth's temperatures, melting of glaciers, rising sea levels, more frequent occurrence and intensification of natural disasters such as severe droughts, floods, etc. The future scenarios also included famines, lack of resources, and mass migration on a global scale as some areas of the world would become uninhabitable. These phenomena were expected to be accompanied by political and economic instability and to require massive changes in practically every aspect of human life.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1970s, these concerning theories were backed up by more scientific proof and subsequent research led to a formation of a wide consensus throughout the scientific field. The experts of the time gained a more complex understanding of the issues causing global warming and other changes in Earth's climate. They also managed to disprove numerous theories that had questioned the science at hand and had shed skepticism on the climate change consensus up until then.<sup>8</sup> That being said, the whole controversy of the

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<sup>6</sup> Hoggan and Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up*, 17–18.

<sup>7</sup> David Roberts, "Scientists Have Gotten Predictions of Global Warming Right since the 1970s," *Vox*, December 4, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2019/12/4/20991315/climate-change-prediction-models-accurate>.

"The Effects of Climate Change," *NASA Website*, <https://climate.nasa.gov/effects/> (Accessed March 21, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Aaron M. McCright and Riley E. Dunlap, "The Politicization of Climate Change and Polarization in The American Public's Views of Global Warming, 2001-2010," *Sociological Quarterly* 52 (Midwest Sociological Society, 2011): 157.

issue was just starting to unfold, and a contrasting phenomenon started to spread – climate change denial.<sup>9</sup>

Even though, as already said, the 1970s were the period of the largest scientific advancement in studying global warming and climate change, the future political and public debate on this issue in the United States did not exactly evolve in a way that would mirror these findings. Although only on quite a small scale at first, the breakthrough in climate science started a discussion that attempted to deal with the proven facts. What is more, the scientific community tried to push politicians to create a comprehensive strategy aimed at mitigating the above-mentioned murky future prospects. However, in reaction to this rising awareness and proactiveness on the matter of the environment, a new opposition movement emerged and started slowly gaining a significant amount of power and influence. Embraced and mainly represented by the political right, climate change denialists refused to acknowledge the science at hand or to take a stance that would react to the growing concern and alarming facts appropriately. Moreover, they started a campaign furthering their views and intents that were in direct conflict with the scientific facts. Although the political attention given to environmental issues was minimal in the 1970s, the emerging polarization of the public made a significant mark on the future environmental debate. As a result, in the subsequent years, whenever the United States, for decades the world's biggest polluter, and its political representation tried to deal with the problem, it found itself split on the issue.<sup>10</sup>

The phenomenon of such split and its development has many reasons, however, the largest share of the blame for the very deliberate and very successful spread of climate change denialism belongs to American fossil fuels giants. Most of the major players from the fossil fuels industry and other actors benefiting from activities with high offset of greenhouse gas emissions or activities similarly highly detrimental to the planet, suddenly found themselves facing a potentially tremendous challenge. The increasingly louder warnings coming from the scientific community and the reaction of the public greatly impacted the industry. With the exposure of the harmful aspects of their business, the future of the fossil industry and their profits became endangered.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Hoggan and Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up*, 17–18.

<sup>10</sup> Kevin C. Armitage, “State of Denial: The United States and the Politics of Global Warming,” *Globalizations* 2, No. 3 (December 2005): 418–420.

<sup>11</sup> Hoggan and Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up*, 19–22.

Therefore, while the human understanding of the changes in the planet's climate was getting more complex and global warming was becoming a topic of public debate, many of those with great economic and political power found themselves facing a dilemma as to how they should respond to the whole issue. And their response to the situation came fast. Many fossil fuels companies began to fight back in order to protect their interests, their main objective being to protect their profits despite the destructive effect on the environment. To maintain and increase their wealth, status, and power, they set out to contest the scientific consensus and to win over the American public, media, and politics.<sup>12</sup>

Although years before its actual peak and not as far-reaching at the beginning, climate change denialism was, as already mentioned, on the rise in the 1970s. The first item of the climate deniers' agenda and the easiest way to further their goals was to spread their influence inside the American political machine. This started being done mainly by exploiting the already-established close ties to U.S. politics through the powerful fossil fuels lobby. The fossil fuels giants could rely on a very strong ally in this area – the Republican Party. This interconnectedness of the GOP and the fossil fuels industry gradually led the party to adopt the industry's goals and tactics.<sup>13</sup>

The closeness to the GOP rather than to the Democrats can be explained by strong ties that the GOP started developing with the American industry at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the parties' respective ideological/agenda background – e.g. the GOP is traditionally a stronger defender of the current economic system based on a free market and proponent of smaller government interference, individual freedom, and private property rights. Any action aiming at mitigating climate change would require wide-ranging changes to the current system and intensified interference of the government in many areas, especially the economy. More specifically, such action on a global scale would to a great extent inevitably impact sustained economic growth, national sovereignty, individual and private property rights, and more. Such limitations are not compatible with the Republican ideology.<sup>14</sup>

Consequently, in the 1980s, climate change started being framed as a matter of ideology and opinions, and the debate began shifting from facts to politics. Step by step, global warming and climate change started to become a weapon in the everyday political

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Armitage, "State of Denial," 418–422.

McCright and Dunlap, "The Politicization of Climate Change," 156–158.

<sup>14</sup> McCright and Dunlap, "The Politicization of Climate Change," 157, 160.

battle. In the 1970s, environmentalism and concern for the state of the planet were present among a large part of the U.S. public and relatively non-partisan at the time, as *Gallup* research shows.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, although not very strong, political willingness to look for solutions and to take actions was present among members of both parties. Environmental regulations (although on a much smaller scale than what was to be proposed in the later years) were at the time supported by both the Democrats and the GOP, including President Nixon. However, with time and effort made by the fossil fuels lobby, the American conservatives joined the fossil industry and started a wide-ranging campaign aimed to undermine climate science and discredit any attempts to combat the global changes in climate. What is more, climate skepticism became quite engrained in the conservative agenda, and it can even be seen as one of the features of the conservative backlash that the United States was experiencing in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, environmentalism started being perceived as a liberal agenda mostly supported by urban population and minorities, i.e. voters of the Democratic Party.<sup>17</sup>

The split between the Republican and the Democratic Party on this issue and the development of the polarization of the U.S. climate politics increased significantly when comparing the 1990s and the early 2000s. After the above-described initial spread of climate skepticism, the late 1980s and early 1990s represented the last hopeful period for a comprehensive response to the problem. The country found itself experiencing a period of a growing environmental mobilization and high popularity of climate-connected problems. However, this period did not last for long and any hopes for a comprehensive climate action on national level were soon to be shattered. Denialism managed to survive this short surge of environmentalism and came back stronger than ever. The existence of climate change and any potential responses to it became a highly divisive partisan issue also wrapped around different views of the role of the government. Denialism experienced its biggest boom. This time, as climate change became a problem of a much higher importance and exposure, the divide also managed to reach every level of U.S. politics and

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<sup>15</sup> Riley E. Dunlap, "Climate-Change Views: Republican-Democratic Gaps Expand," *Gallup Website*, May 29, 2008, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/107569/climatechange-views-republicandemocratic-gaps-expand.aspx>.

<sup>16</sup> Armitage, "State of Denial", 418.

Christopher Sellers, "How Republicans Came to Embrace Anti-Environmentalism," *Vox*, June 7, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2017/4/22/15377964/republicans-environmentalism>.

<sup>17</sup> Sellers, "How Republicans Came to Embrace Anti-Environmentalism".



through the Republican Party, the fossil fuel lobby strengthened its grip on American politics.<sup>18</sup>

## 1.1 The Role of the GOP

The shift towards and the subsequent deepening of the GOP's rejective stance on climate change can be detected in several cases during the late 1980s and early 1990s. A very striking example of the Republican final turn can be the GOP members' activity on the Congressional floor. One of the most important climate debates took place in 1988. It started not only in reaction to the often repeated and highly concerning climate science but also in response to a long string of natural disasters such as extreme droughts, floods, hurricanes and more had taken place all around the world. It led to an extensive coverage of global warming by the media and a mobilization of the environmental community. Congress scheduled hearings on the greenhouse effect which included testimonies from NASA scientists warning against the disconcerting outlooks for the future. Many prominent politicians of the time, including members of the Republican Party, started calling for action on environmental issues. The then-presidential candidate George H. W. Bush even included combating climate change as part of his political agenda. The following statement from his 1988 campaign speech was quoted countless times when considering Bush's environmental legacy in the years that followed: "Those who think we are powerless to do anything about the greenhouse effect forget about the 'White House effect.' As president, I intend to do something about it."<sup>19</sup> After his election, he signed into law the National Energy Policy Act that established national energy policy which was aimed at decreasing the generation of greenhouse gases and protecting the environment.<sup>20</sup>

However, in spite of his campaign promises, the then-new President turned out to be less pro-environment than it might have originally seemed. Although some of his policies were significant in terms of environmental protection, such as the acid rain legislation pushed through under his Administration or the 1990 amendment strengthening The Clean Air Act, his overall record is not as positive.<sup>21</sup> It did not take long for Bush's

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<sup>18</sup> Armitage, "State of Denial", 420–421.

<sup>19</sup> Keith Schneider, "The Nation; The Environmental Impact of President Bush," *The New York Times*, August 25, 1991, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/08/25/weekinreview/the-nation-the-environmental-impact-of-president-bush.html> (accessed March 7, 2020).

<sup>20</sup> Armitage, "State of Denial," 420–421.

<sup>21</sup> Marshall Shepherd, "The Surprising Climate and Environmental Legacy of President George H. W. Bush," *Forbes*, December 1, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/marshallshepherd/2018/12/01/the-surprising-climate-and-environmental-legacy-of-president-george-h-w-bush/#527d5254589c> (Accessed March 7, 2020).

strong position and rhetoric on climate change to weaken after his election. He joined many of the right-wing voices by questioning the uncertainty of the climate science and stressed the need for more research. Furthermore, he had close ties to the fossil fuels interests. His White House invested time and resources into emphasizing the economic costs of any possible climate action and underlining the alleged uncertainties surrounding the whole issue.<sup>22</sup>

Therefore, the short albeit not entirely complete political consensus on environmental issues of the late 1980s and early 1990s was the last time the GOP publicly demonstrated support for action against the global changes in climate in any significant way and took a stance that was in accordance with the scientific facts at hand. The following years meant a complete retreat from this position and hardening of the Republicans' anti-environmentalist attitude. After winning the Congress during the so-called Republican Revolution of 1994, the GOP nearly unilaterally started its anti-environmental offensive. This trend continued after the election of George W. Bush whose eight years in power, in the end, meant the harshest period of climate inaction, skepticism, and denial yet.<sup>23</sup> This shift is further explained in chapter 4 of this thesis.

In their article "Analyzing Climate Change Debates in the U.S. Congress: Party Control and Mobilizing Networks," Hyung Sam Park, Xinsheng Liu, and Arnold Vedlitz mapped and analyzed a number of relevant climate change debates in the U.S. Congress and compared the positions and rhetoric of the two political parties and their members between the years 1976, when the first congressional hearing on climate change took place, and 2006. This study describes the process and the used political strategies and showcases the GOP's position on climate change and the abandonment of any seeming proactiveness of the party in this context.<sup>24</sup>

More concretely, the article analyzes how party control determined the conditions and the tone in Congress when discussing global warming and climate change in the referenced period. It explains how underlining different aspects, facts, or interests affect the overall framing of the debate and consequently the response to and the possible solution of the issue. The authors point to major differences in the type of expert

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<sup>22</sup> Armitage, "State of Denial," 421-422.

<sup>23</sup> Riley E. Dunlap, "The Politicization of Climate Change and Polarization in the American Public's Views of Global Warming, 2001-2010," *Sociological Quarterly* 52 (Midwest Sociological Society, 2011): 158-159.

<sup>24</sup> Hyung Sam Park, Xinsheng Liu, and Arnold Vedlitz, "Analyzing Climate Change Debates in the U.S. Congress: Party Control and Mobilizing Networks" *Risk, Hazards and Crisis in Public Policy* (Wiley Periodicals, 2014): 239-258.

knowledge presented by each party, presence of outside interests and actors in the framing of the debate and the main arguments.<sup>25</sup>

The study concludes that, generally, both Congressional Republicans and Democrats purposefully mobilized different sectors, gave priority to different policy actors, and their information inputs were underlined by their respective political goals. The process was thus influenced by various, mostly antithetical biases and prior beliefs of the two parties. Logically, the prevailing approach to climate change issues would be that of the party currently controlling Congress.<sup>26</sup>

To be more specific, although Republican-controlled Congress does not tend to hold fewer hearings on environmental issues, it is much less likely to introduce new legislation in this area. The selection of the issue aspects inside the congressional committees in the analyzed period differed significantly depending on who held the majority in Congress at the time. More specifically, Republicans were less likely to discuss scientific evidence or invite environmentalists as witnesses in matters of the environment. They also strategically highlighted scientific uncertainty or claimed that climate scientists were exaggerating the environmental risks. Acting on the recommendations provided by the scientific community would, according to the GOP, only result in “overly stringent” limits and regulations being put in place. This position not only corresponds with the general anti-regulation stance of the GOP already mentioned above, but also protects the befriended special interests of the party, including the fossil fuels industry.<sup>27</sup> Another of the Republicans’ strategies was to expand the debate by including perspectives and testimonies from a number of various sectors and fields. The discussed issue would then be considered much more broadly, not just from the environmental aspect.<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, based on the study, Congress controlled by the Democratic Party would discuss energy and natural resources regulations and climate science much more frequently, while not paying much attention to economic impacts of climate change policies or other similar aspects of the issue. The Democrats thus approached the problem with a much narrower categorization and a more focused vision. Furthermore, they tended

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 240, 243.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 243–244, 247.

to frame climate change as a public policy problem and tried to adopt a much more proactive position.<sup>29</sup>

Another dimension of the phenomenon and further evidence illustrating the Republican pivot on the environment are numerous public appearances and speeches made by different protagonists of the GOP in the 1990s and early 2000s. There is a plethora of footage featuring members of the Republican Party questioning the accuracy of climate science or even outright denying the existence of climate change and global warming. This rhetoric is often in contrast with the politicians' actual beliefs, as sources close to them often reveal, or even in conflict with their personal historic record on the issue.<sup>30</sup> What is more, such position can be most noticeable among Congress or Party members with high revenues coming from fossil fuels industries.<sup>31</sup> For example, according to statistics provided by OpenSecrets.org, between the years 1990 and 2008, minimum of 14 out of the top 20 oil and gas money recipients were members of the GOP. In some years – for example in 1998 and 2002 – only one Democrat ended among the top 20 recipients and in 2006, all the top recipients were Republican.<sup>32</sup>

In numerous cases, these public appearances often deny not only science but also rationality. One example of that can be the now-famous video of Republican Senator John Inhofe throwing a snowball at then-President Barack Obama on the Senate floor. The existence of snow was meant disprove the existence of global warming. This is only one of the examples that demonstrate how much the debate shifted from facts to absurdity. It also illustrates the disdain for science coming from some members of the political right and the overall level of willingness to completely disregard science.<sup>33</sup>

Generally, the language and the overall strategy and tactic (some already mentioned, some to be analyzed later on in this paper) used by climate deniers inside the GOP often bear similarities which points to a systematic, organized, and at times almost seemingly scripted approach. The impact of this method on the climate debate has been

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 243–244, 247, 253.

<sup>30</sup> “Why Republicans Still Reject the Science of Global Warming,” *Rolling Stone*, November 4, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rnc6ZG9Xlws>, (Accessed February 18, 2020).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

“Watch the US stall on climate change for 12 years,” *Vox*, October 10, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzDjjUAt3zc>, (Accessed February 18, 2020).

<sup>32</sup> “Oil & Gas: Top Recipients,” *Open Secrets Website*, <https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/recips.php?ind=E01&recipdetail=A&sortorder=U&mem=Y&cycle=2006> (Accessed May 2, 2020).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

tremendous. It has managed to transform the political dimension of the issue and is one of the grandest successes of the fossil fuels lobby.

## 2. Science and Strategies

The climate debate and climate change denial in the United States bear some very specific features in terms of political strategies and position of science. The ability to navigate these waters well and to use them to their advantage is what enabled the climate deniers to secure such strong position and led to their campaign's success. This chapter uses several works to map the numerous strategies that were employed in order to mold public opinion in the United States and to reshape the climate debate. Moreover, it analyzes the role of science and introduces the way it was misused by the denial movement.

The main sources of this chapter are *Climate Cover-Up*<sup>34</sup> by James Hoggan and *The Politics of Climate Change* edited by Maxwell T. Boykoff. These two books combined with other sources should provide a clearer picture of how special interests – led by the fossil fuels lobby – infiltrated the American environmental debate. This chapter should cover the particular mechanisms that the fossil fuels industry applied throughout the past several decades. Put together, the individual examples demonstrate how a group of corporations hijacked and completely changed the way politics, media, and the public think about one of the most pressing issues the world is and has been facing for more than half a century now.

### 2.1 Public Relations and Climate Change Denial

The first one of the analyzed tactics of climate skepticism is the use of public relations as the main tool in communication about climate change with the American public. In *Climate Cover-Up*, Hoggan introduces a mechanism in which public relations experts and spin doctors develop procedures, tools, and methods for those participating in the denialists' efforts. He sees the use of PR as the key factor that enabled the American special interests to carry out their efforts and consequently determined the rise of climate skepticism in the United States.<sup>35</sup>

The strategy of employing public relations in the attempt to discredit scientific consensus was not without precedent in the United States. The approach that the fossil

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<sup>34</sup> Hoggan and Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up*.

<sup>35</sup> Cook, J., Supran, G., Lewandowsky, S., Oreskes, N., & Maibach, E., "America Misled: How the Fossil Fuel Industry Deliberately Misled Americans about Climate Change" (2019): 4–8. Hoggan and Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up*, 4.

fuels industry used has its roots in and is in many ways similar to the one the American tobacco industry or the National Rifle Association have been using ever since the 1960s. In the case of the tobacco companies – to which the case of climate change denial is likened the most – the main aim of the campaign was to cast doubt on science by questioning the discovered link between smoking and cancer or emphasizing the “uncertainty” of scientific research. The industry and its public relations experts also tried to reframe the discussion to more abstract and general concepts and topics such as free choice, individual freedom, democracy, government regulations, or even female empowerment. The tobacco companies even employed fake grassroot associations on several occasions in order to induce an illusion of smokers standing up for their “rights”. This type of campaign turned out to be highly successful and managed to redefine the field of public relations and lay ground for similar attempts in the future.<sup>36</sup>

Climate change denialism is one of the spheres whose proponents discovered the potential of such approach and adopted many of these methods. The main features of the anti-environmentalists’ public relations strategies thus consisted of constant campaign that includes relativization of science, restructuring of the entire debate, and shifting it towards other issues and ideological questions. An excellent example of such shift and discussion redefinition rooted in the public relations field is the relabeling of the issue in terms of semantics. To lessen the acuteness and the overall negative perception of the problem, the denialists’ PR experts came up with a new vocabulary. The new language was meant to be used when talking about environmental issues to evoke different, less threatening and alarming connotations. Using the less explicit term “climate change” instead of “global warming” or describing the *conservative* Republican Party and its supporters as “conservationists” (but never “environmentalists”) went a long way in influencing the public’s perception of the discussed problems. This shift in rhetoric spread fast and quickly became part of the mainstream environmental discourse.<sup>37</sup>

Employing spin doctors and PR professionals turned out to have a massive impact on the public perception of environmental issues in the United States. The meticulously thought-out strategies were distributed among the movement and applied to manipulate the general public opinion. As a result, the special interests could easily directly influence how

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 35-36.

Neil Francey and Simon Chapman, “‘Operation Berkshire’: The International Tobacco Companies’ Conspiracy,” *The BMJ* 321, No. 7257 (August 2000): 371–374.

<sup>37</sup> Hoggan and Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up*, 65-66.  
Schneider and Mastrandrea, “The Politics of Climate Science,” 19.

both their role in the climate debate and the issue as a whole would be discussed. Gaining this weapon thus allowed them to question the scientific facts behind climate change and to appear knowledgeable and professional while doing it. What is more, this advantage put the denialists on level ground with science where it mattered most – in the eyes of the public and the media.<sup>38</sup>

## 2.2 Relativization of Science, Junk Scientists

When the actual science behind the problem is concerned, one of the major aspects of the systematic climate change denial in the United States is an intricate and quite evolved process of science relativization. Attempts to mold scientific “opinion” to their desired image and creation of “alternative science” became the most common attack of the environmental skeptics and denialists. With time, the fossil fuels lobby and the American political right evolved and mastered a number of various techniques which became their strongest weapons when contesting the scientific consensus on climate change.<sup>39</sup>

The first method they applied was to constantly question the reasoning and the abilities of established climate scientists. This involved underlining the dangers of human error and the incompleteness of human understanding of such complex processes.<sup>40</sup> Scientists were also often accused of alarmism by politicians who in turn often presented themselves as the voice of reason, attempting to maintain stability and avoid “unnecessary panic”.<sup>41</sup> As environmental attorney Barbara Freese points out in *Industrial Strength Denial*, the denialist PR machine portrayed the scientific community’s position as a plot to gain more funding and to keep profiting from further research activities. They would give voice to conspiracy theories according to which scientists across the world were working together to create a fake global crisis by forging data and spreading fear and hysteria. This theory was expanded by accusations of financial ties being established between the scientific community and the green energy industry. Moreover, climate change denialists and the “scientists” hired by the industry often accused their opposition of politicizing science and presented themselves as victims of oppression from various political interests.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Hoggan and Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up*, 21.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>41</sup> Schneider and Mastrandrea, “The Politics of Climate Science,” 20.



Green activists and environmental organizations were also likened to communists and their agendas labeled as Marxist.<sup>42</sup>

What is more, as Freese notes, information put out by the scientific community was often falsely interpreted by the denialist PR machine or “debunked”. An example of a case where this strategy was applied can be the “hockey stick controversy” from 1998. In that year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a graph showing a sharp increase in the Earth’s surface temperatures which occurred in the past one hundred years – the curve on the graph resembled a hockey stick, hence the hockey stick controversy. Immediately after its release, many – mostly unqualified – critics of climate science started their attempts to dispute the factual accuracy of the graph. Numerous climate skeptics labeled the figures as either fake or exaggerated or disregarded the danger such increase would pose. Although the graph was supported by subsequent scientific evidence and upheld by numerous credible scientific institutions such as the National Academy of Sciences, the deniers turned the issue into a pseudo-scandal which was taken over by the media and publicized.<sup>43</sup> The factual aspect of the issue was thus made irrelevant and the deniers successfully shifted the debate to one based on “alternative facts” and opinions.

What makes it easier for denialists to label climate science as full of uncertainties and unknowns is the fact that any predictions about the climate’s development is based on assessment of future risk rather than absolute certainty. As Schneider and Mastrandrea point out, that is connected to the overall approach and the reality of science – scientists leave room for reasonable uncertainty as no facts are ever considered to be set in stone among the professionals. Furthermore, there is no such thing as pure objectivity in science. However, the room for mistakes only serves as an insurance of sorts in case of possible deviations and as part of natural uncertainty. It should serve as room for further debate and research and an opportunity to consciously review and manage biases. Instead, the campaign of climate change denial used it as an opportunity to undermine the soundness of science itself and to further use it to its advantage.<sup>44</sup> Generally, although there is not an

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<sup>42</sup> Barbara Freese, “Deceitful, Hysterical, Out-of-Control Rampage” in *Industrial-Strength Denial* (University of California Press: 2020): 248, 249, 253, 255.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-111.

Chris Mooney, “The Hockey Stick: The Most Controversial Chart in Science, Explained,” *The Atlantic*, May 10, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/05/the-hockey-stick-the-most-controversial-chart-in-science-explained/275753/>.

<sup>44</sup> Schneider and Mastrandrea, “The Politics of Climate Science,” 17, 23.

absolute consensus on some important scientific predictions and projections, they all forecast dangerous impacts and a problematic future.<sup>45</sup> Although conceding the possibility of a reasonable scientific uncertainty, climate scientists still very much agree on the existence of climate change and its urgency. In result, what the climate change skeptics have been doing is blowing natural uncertainties out of proportion and exploiting them. With this approach, they also set the foundations for further campaign of fabrications and falsifications.<sup>46</sup>

The second strategy revolves around giving a loud voice to “scientists” whose views correspond with the deniers’ agenda. These chosen scientists and often self-appointed experts usually tend to seem credible, however, their field of expertise is almost never climate science. The so-called experts are often political ideologues or scientists from other fields such as political science, geology, or economics, but not reputable climate scientists recognized by their peers.<sup>47</sup> In fact, according to a research made by Naomi Oreskes, prominent historian of science and expert on the climate change debate, between the years 1993 and 2003, there was an absolute consensus on the existence and urgency of human-caused global warming in the field of climate science. This is founded on an analysis of peer-reviewed literature and research on global climate change published in the referenced period. In this sample, Oreskes found no work that would dispute the existence of climate change or question the role of human activity in the matter.<sup>48</sup> More recent studies usually find about 97 percent consensus in the peer-reviewed literature.<sup>49</sup> Despite that fact, the American denialist machine continued to relativize peer-reviewed science and base its credibility on a seemingly large group of “scientists” and “experts” of their own choosing – the most influential ones can be found in chapter four.<sup>50</sup>

The reason why the “science card” is so important in this context is because, as a rule, the American public tends to trust scientists much more than its political representation or political activists. For instance, the Pew Research Center presents data collected between 1970s to 2018 which shows that the scientific community is one of the most trusted authorities in the country with over 40 percent of Americans having a great

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Armitage, “State of Denial,” 418.

<sup>48</sup> Naomi Oreskes, “The Scientific Consensus on Climate Change,” *Science* 306, No. 5702 (2004): 1686.

<sup>49</sup> Freese, “Deceitful, Hysterical, Out-of-Control Rampage,” 237.

<sup>50</sup> Hoggan and Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up*, 21.

deal of confidence in it.<sup>51</sup> That surpasses the country’s elected officials by far – when asked, generally less than 10 percent of Americans had the same amount of confidence in the Congress.<sup>52</sup> Even in climate science, the psychological effect is still applicable – a seemingly “technical source” carries more credibility and creating “alternative science” thus offers a good opportunity to make the public doubt established scientific findings.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, the denial movement did not need to put an emphasis on the quality of the distributed information since its main goal was to sow doubt and create confusion around science and undermine its credibility. For that reason, the outpour of the lobby-funded “science” was tremendous, and the debate was flooded by disinformation.<sup>54</sup>

As a result, this strategy creates a seeming disagreement of pseudo-experts, whose “professional opinions” do not need to be proven by any kind of research or reviewed by their fellow scientists. What is more, the people opposing the scientific community on climate change do not even have to be real experts in the field. The reason for why such strategy works is that the debate is taking place in mainstream media, not scientific journals. When proven wrong, the defense of the PR experts and the deniers can be one of simply exercising free speech. Furthermore, the public often has difficulties recognizing or even understanding the differences between peer-reviewed science and junk science. This phenomenon has been present even in reputable American media where climate change is debated based on opinions in order to maintain the right to free speech and “balanced reporting”.<sup>55</sup>

The above-mentioned strategies are carried out through a complex system of think tanks, various “political operatives”, and sympathetic media.<sup>56</sup> The fossil fuels companies also created and sponsored numerous “grassroot organizations”. Their purpose was to serve the companies’ goals by organizing educational campaigns, outreach to schools, or petitions. However, their authenticity was highly questionable. For example, the petitions created for this purpose had oftentimes names on them that did not even exist or names of

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<sup>51</sup> Cary Funk and Brian Kennedy, “Public Confidence in Scientists Has Remained Stable for Decades,” *Pew Research Center*, March 22, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/03/22/public-confidence-in-scientists-has-remained-stable-for-decades/>.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Hoggan and Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up*, 70.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

prominent climate experts that later on denied their participation or any other connection to the petitions' organizers and were long-time proponents of climate action.<sup>57</sup>

According to Hoggan, the organization of these attempts was generally quite sophisticated, repetitive, and on first impression came across as legitimate. The fact that they were created artificially was only obvious after a closer inspection. Their success is obvious when looking at the division of the public when it comes to the issue of climate change.<sup>58</sup> For example, a Gallup survey from 2009 shows that 41% of Americans at the time thought that the seriousness of global warming was being exaggerated.<sup>59</sup>

In summary, there are three main reasons that allowed the deniers to succeed in their efforts. The first one is that the whole climate debate did not take place only on a scientific level but on a public one as well. That allowed for the debate to be shifted to a different dimension, from straight facts and figures to opinions, emotions, and disinformation. The relativization of science and the creation of alternative explanations became key. The second reason for their success are the actual abilities of the deniers. The employment of trained PR professionals went a long way in the promotion of the cause. Furthermore, the movement managed to design and construct an echo chamber that significantly contributed to the spread of misinformation and doubt. The developed network system of think tanks, blogs, and "experts" became the perfect platform to undermine climate science and block many attempts to take action on the climate issues. The final reason, taken apart in more detail in the next chapter, is the very unique role played by the media.<sup>60</sup>

All of these strategies created substantial obstacles for the scientific community in their work. Their main methods such as research, responsible reporting of data, best practice theory, or policy recommendations were made much more difficult to use. The potential impact of the scientists' activities and the overall position of science as reliable source suffered greatly due to the denialists' campaigns and activities.<sup>61</sup> Although scientists themselves can influence the way how their findings are being communicated to the public – for example using more accessible language, increasing their media

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

Supran, Lewandowsky, Oreskes, and Maibach, "America Mised," 4–8.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 47–48.

<sup>59</sup> Frank Newport, "Americans' Global Warming Concerns Continue to Drop," *Gallup*, March 11, 2010, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/126560/americans-global-warming-concerns-continue-drop.aspx>.

<sup>60</sup> Hoggan and Littlemore, "Climate Cover-Up," 108.

<sup>61</sup> Schneider and Mastrandrea, "The Politics of Climate Science," 16.

appearances, or working on their public communication skills – these efforts can only reach so far. As Schneider and Mastrandrea assert, when the elemental credibility and integrity of science is repeatedly being questioned by an organized, skillful, and efficient movement with vast resources, the chances of the scientists’ success are slim.<sup>62</sup>

### **3. Media and Public Opinion**

To understand the problem of climate change denial more completely, one must also include an analysis of the role of the media. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, the American media has played an enormous part in the whole phenomenon and became – often unintentionally – a crucial ally of the analyzed environmental countermovement. What is more, their role turned out to be a strong determinant of the denialist campaign’s success. The following chapter looks at the shortfalls of the media and explains the reasons for their failure. Moreover, it goes over the impact this has had on the American public and its opinion formation.

#### **3.1 American Media and Climate Change**

The majority of information about environmental issues, climate change, and the science behind the phenomena are reproduced to the public through media. This reproduction is a natural process and one of the main purposes of the media’s existence. However, as with any process of indirect information sharing, it allows for the information to be significantly distorted or be subject to various biases. The most common and unavoidable distortion is framing. Framing is a process that determines the form through which the media interprets certain information to its audience. It is a set of tools that is provided to the audience by the media. These tools then help with compartmentalization and contextualization of the issue by connecting it to already existing values and knowledge. Through framing, some aspects of an issue can be emphasized over others which in turn can evoke different connotations. That in result determines in what terms an issue will be received, processed, interpreted, and understood.<sup>63</sup> The frames used by the American media when talking about climate change were influenced by relationships

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>63</sup> Maxwell T. Boykoff and J. Timmons Roberts, “Media Coverage of Climate Change: Current Trends, Strengths, Weaknesses,” *Human Development Report* (Human Development Report Office: 2007): 9–10. Maxwell T. Boykoff, “From Convergence to Contention: United States Mass Media Representations of Anthropogenic Climate Change Science,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, New Series* 32, No. 4 (Wiley, 2007): 478–479.

between scientists, special interests, the public, and policy actors that are being analyzed in this thesis. The disbalance of power among these actors created a bias.<sup>64</sup>

In order to limit said bias, journalists have in the course of time developed a number of norms and strategies they apply in trying to keep their work as impartial and as balanced as possible. However, these rules need to be implemented in accordance with the nature of the reported issue. This includes the usage of appropriate frames when covering the given topic. With climate change, the media failed to do so in several areas.<sup>65</sup>

The first one of the problems with reporting on the environment, and especially global warming/climate change, is that the media usually tend to present “both sides” of the issue. Such approach is often legitimately used when covering various political, moral, or economic matters. The aim is to offer the same space and time to all the key points of views and sides involved. However, in a situation where one of the sides is peer-reviewed science and the other a disinformation campaign, this reporting technique becomes highly problematic. Reporters waiting for an absolute consensus on climate change from all sides while reporting on both “perspectives” thus critically failed in doing their job well.<sup>66</sup>

The main reason for why the media should not frame the whole discussion as having two sides, which were being covered nearly equally, is the principle of science itself. Peer-reviewed science, in this case climate science, is by its very nature a product of legitimate experts who are reviewed and measured by their scientific peers. To dismiss this aspect means to fail to report on issues accurately. This argument is further reinforced by the numbers from the statistics mentioned in chapter two of this paper – when there is an almost absolute consensus backing the existence of man-made climate change, an equal representation of “scientists” doubting climate change means a critical misrepresentation and misunderstanding of facts and reality. The minority contesting the soundness of climate science (whose credentials are already highly questionable), suddenly have the same voice as the legitimate experts.<sup>67</sup>

In *Climate Cover-Up*, Hoggan offers a metaphor to underline the absurdity of such modus operandi: Approaching the issue in such way, Hoggan explains, would be similar to a situation when a person who got a prescription from a doctor went to seek a second

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<sup>64</sup> Boykoff, “From Convergence to Contention,” 478–479.

<sup>65</sup> Dunlap, *The Politicization of Climate Change*, 165.

<sup>66</sup> Schneider and Mastrandrea, *The Politics of Climate Science*, 19.

<sup>67</sup> Hoggan and Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up*, 21–22.  
Armitage, “State of Denial”, 424-425

opinion on their medical condition from a carpenter or a representative of a drug company whose product they are trying to avoid using.<sup>68</sup>

Since the American media went along with this principle and created a false journalistic balance, they themselves validated the deniers' campaign and significantly contributed to the spread of doubt and misinformation. The failure of the American media thus provided the anti-environmentalists with a powerful weapon and the success of the propaganda was far more extensive. Instead of serving the public, the media – some purposely, some unintentionally – managed to do a great service to the fossil fuels industry and other actors who profit from the anti-environmental agenda.<sup>69</sup>

This issue is made all the more troubling by the fact that media in the United States often have closer connections to the fossil fuels industry than to experts and scientists. According to *Checks and Balances Project*, an investigative watchdog blog, it is very common for most American media to accept funding from fossil fuels companies for advertisements the media then run or even create.<sup>70</sup> In such system, journalists then might have an even harder job to ensure that balanced reporting means balance in terms of verified, reliable information, and representation of facts, not equal time and space for both sides of the barricade. At times, balanced representation means giving more voice to those who are being silenced and silencing those, who are trying to be heard the most. This is especially true with environmental issues since scientists would not go out of their way to appear in the media or to lead an active media campaign. Special interests, on the other hand, invested a lot of effort and resources to do exactly that, as Hoggan points out in his research.<sup>71</sup>

In terms of specific strategies regarding the media, the main tactic of the fossil fuels lobby was to start small and sow doubt gradually. The main reason for that was that, in the 1960s and 1970s, the big media in the United States generally did not pay much attention to environmental issues. The denial propaganda would thus target small, local newspapers mainly by publishing op-eds and getting out the deniers' narrative. As Maxwell T. Boykoff and J. Timmons Roberts describe in their paper *Media Coverage of Climate Change:*

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<sup>68</sup> Hoggan and Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up*, 21–22.

<sup>69</sup> Hoggan and Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up*, 21–22.

<sup>70</sup> “Report: Fossil Fuel Front Groups on the Front Page,” *Checks and Balances Project*, December 12, 2012, <https://checksandbalancesproject.org/report-fossil-fuel-front-groups-on-the-front-page/>.

Dawn Stover, “Climate Journalism and Fossil Fuel Ads: An Unholy Marriage?,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January 22, 2020, <https://thebulletin.org/2020/01/climate-journalism-and-fossil-fuel-ads-an-unholy-marriage/>.

<sup>71</sup> Hoggan and Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up* 165.

*Current Trends, Strengths, Weaknesses*, a shift in this strategy came in the 1980s. Global warming and other environmental problems started to become a bigger topic on a national level and the major American media would therefore report on climate-connected issues more often. Consequently, climate change deniers suddenly got the chance to talk about the environment more as well – an opportunity they used greatly to further the movement’s goals and agendas. As Boykoff and Roberts argue, this new development was also enabled by more general trends the country was experiencing at the time: an increase in corporate influence on the media, more emphasis being put on democratic principles, and a growth of media power. These factors thus not only gave more power to fossil fuels corporations but also reinforced the belief that all sides of the issue should be considered in a “fair” manner.<sup>72</sup>

As Freese asserts, the overall idea of the counter movement was to flood the global warming/climate change discussion with information contradicting the scientific consensus and thus to gain a better footing in the debate.<sup>73</sup> A specific language and “information kits” of sorts were developed for this purpose. The PR experts and spin doctors of the fossil fuels industry ensured a steady stream of “alternative climate science” to journalists and writers around the United States. Such strategy only reinforced the impression that the issue was not settled as well as supplied the media with “useful” vocabulary. When appealing to both the public and the media, they used voices of junk scientist whom they hired or who were sympathetic towards the industry’s agenda.<sup>74</sup>

The lobby machine also organized letter campaigns to different editorial staff and offices authored by these scientists. Various grassroot workshops and debates were being held, ads were distributed around the country, and the campaign started appealing to “the conventional wisdom” of the population.<sup>75</sup> As Supran, Lewandowsky, Oreskes, and Maibach argue in *America Misled*, the average citizens would thus see the seeming uncertainty of climate science and the whole issue would give out an impression of being a matter of opinion. Fossil fuels industry’s representatives also made sure they came off as relatable and understanding to avoid bad publicity and that the promoters of climate action were perceived as alarmists out of touch with reality. Their statements were usually confident, presented attractively and without doubt. Peer-reviewed experts, on the other

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<sup>72</sup> Boykoff and Roberts, “Media Coverage,” 5–6.

<sup>73</sup> Freese, “Deceitful, Hysterical, Out-of-Control Rampage,” 237.

<sup>74</sup> Hoggan and Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up*, 40–44.

Supran, Lewandowsky, Oreskes, and Maibach, “*America Misled*,” 4–8.

<sup>75</sup> Hoggan and Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up*, 44.



hand, would leave space for reasonable doubt. To an uninformed public, the climate discussion would thus hardly seem like an already settled, one-sided matter.<sup>76</sup> As a result, the deniers' visibility in the media and among the public started increasing and the issue soon became a political hot button.<sup>77</sup>

This strategy itself would not have worked as well if it had not been for the media's aforementioned ambition to offer "balanced" coverage and maintain fairness in the discussion.<sup>78</sup> This was applied by small newspapers, TV and radio stations at first but soon spread to mainstream, national media, and elite press. As a result, even prestigious media, such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and the Wall Street Journal, would cover the climate change debate as a problem with two sides and leave nearly the same space for both the proponents and the deniers. That, however, creates a distorted representation of the issue in the media debate as it only has one "side" on the scientific level. As Hoggan argues, what might seem as balance at first is in fact a severe misunderstanding of the issue's essential principle.<sup>79</sup>

In the analyzed period, climate change skepticism and denial also started being spread through modern type of mass media. Then-booming blogs or YouTube videos became a useful tool in widening the audience of the denialist propaganda. With the help of these platforms, a number of movies produced and payed for by groups and people tied to the fossil fuels industry became popular at the time. "Documentaries" such as *The Greening of Planet Earth* – an infamous movie presenting completely unsubstantiated environmental benefits of carbon dioxide production – thus became successful with popularizing the anti-environmental agenda. The modern form of communication enabled fast spreading of unchecked information. Later on, this approach culminated with the rise of social media.<sup>80</sup>

### 3.2 Public Opinion

Apart from the nature and the form of the information coming from the media, its reception by the public is also highly consequential. The pervasive state of mind of the

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 165.

Supran, Lewandowsky, Oreskes, and Maibach, "America Mised," 8–11.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 43.

Armitage, "State of Denial", 419.

<sup>78</sup> Hoggan and Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up*, 40–43.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 21–22.

Armitage, "State of Denial", 424-425

<sup>80</sup> Jacquesa and Connolly Knoxb, "Hurricanes and Hegemony," 834.

public decides its susceptibility to an influx of certain type of information or its vulnerability to the influence of various interest groups or other actors. How much of an effect these can have on the population can be defined by many factors such as the country's economic structures, political system, or its social and cultural values. Aside from these, the two main aspects that determined the position of the American public on matters connected to the environment were individual partisan predisposition and polarization.<sup>81</sup>

In *The Politicization of Climate Change and Polarization in the American Public's Views of Global Warming, 2001-2010*, Riley E. Dunlap summarizes findings of a number of studies dealing with polarization of the American public both in general and in terms of climate change. The analyzed studies looked at the development in recent decades and registered two striking increases in polarization of the United States. The first out of the two waves came in the 1970s and early 1980s, the other one in late 1990s and early 2000s. With the earlier surge, experts detected only a limited degree of general polarization of the public, with exceptions to specific issues. These issues were part of the so-called culture wars, a conservative polarizing movement evolving around topics such as abortion, gender, sexual politics, LGBTQ rights and other social problems.<sup>82</sup>

With the second case, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Dunlap describes a much more general political and ideological polarization. It extended more broadly and included a wider range of economic, social, and cultural issues, which consequently shaped very different ideas of identity. When looked at from an environmental perspective, this development corresponds with the political consensus/division on climate action and the position of the Republican Party over time covered in chapter one. Furthermore, Dunlap describes the second wave of polarization as a deepening of the earlier divisions as well as extension of party and ideological conflicts on other topics. The whole process, originating in party activism, gradually moved to party leadership and from there spread among the general population.<sup>83</sup> Consequently, this process turned out to be one of the factors that enabled the anti-environmentalists to reach such broad audience since a more polarized society was more susceptible to manipulation and further division.

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<sup>81</sup> Sara L. Wiest, Leigh Raymond, Rosalee A. Clawson, "Framing, Partisan Predispositions, and Public Opinion on Climate Change," *Global Environmental Change* 31 (2015): 187–188. Bernauer, "Climate Change Politics," 438.

<sup>82</sup> Dunlap, *The Politicization of Climate Change*, 162.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 162–163.

These cultural and political discrepancies also impacted and were impacted by the media. The alienation of the two ideological bases and the deepening of the political differences were taking place simultaneously with a great shift in media neutrality. Journalism in the United States was experiencing a similar process as American politics. A great role in this process played the so-called Fairness Doctrine. Established by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in 1949, the Fairness Doctrine was an effort to maintain objectivity of American broadcast media. All TV and radio stations that held FCC-issued broadcast licenses had to report on “controversial issues of public importance” and air opposing views on these topics.<sup>84</sup> Media that would not oblige with this regulation would get their FCC license revoked. In 1987, however, the strongly anti-regulation Reagan Administration stopped enforcing the doctrine.<sup>85</sup>

As a result of that, many media developed stronger political affiliations and deepened their ideological bias. This phenomenon thus consolidated the societal disparities and created a system of echo chambers and friendly media.<sup>86</sup> Members of these echo chambers would then subscribe to information sources that reinforced their political beliefs. Each group would thus receive very different information and their choices in media subscription would determine the audience’s position on many matters, including environmental issues. What is more, the individual echo chambers were extremely difficult to penetrate and usually remained closed to any outside influences that could have a potential to erode the prevailing positions its members held.<sup>87</sup> What is more, since the issue of climate change was and still is a very complex one, in order to relieve this burden of complexity, people tended to put their trust into a media source, political party, or other authority without gaining a deeper understanding of the matter. Such trusted authority would then provide its subscribers with respective frames to use, opinions to adopt, or policies to support. These authorities could be anyone from peer-reviewed scientists,

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<sup>84</sup> Dylan Matthews, “Everything you Need to Know about the Fairness Doctrine in One Post,” *The Washington Post*, August 23, 2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/ezra-klein/post/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-fairness-doctrine-in-one-post/2011/08/23/gIQAN8CXZJ\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/ezra-klein/post/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-fairness-doctrine-in-one-post/2011/08/23/gIQAN8CXZJ_blog.html).

<sup>85</sup> Kevin M. Kruse and Julian Zelizer, “How Policy Decisions Spawned Today’s Hyperpolarized Media,” *The Washington Post*, January 17, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/01/17/how-policy-decisions-spawned-todays-hyperpolarized-media/>.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>87</sup> Dunlap and McCright, “A Widening Gap,” 31–32.

environmental groups, or regulatory institutions to think tanks sponsored by fossil fuels giants, media with extreme biases, or the GOP.<sup>88</sup>

At some point, the concern of the public stopped being determined by knowledge and facts and became a matter of emotions, manipulation, identity, or politics.<sup>89</sup> Such phenomenon combined with strong party affiliation of the population directly determined its climate change beliefs.<sup>90</sup> For conservatives and Republicans this development translated into a stronger inclination towards climate change skepticism, liberals and Democrats generally became more concerned about global warming and climate change.<sup>91</sup>

In *Hurricanes and Hegemony: A Qualitative Analysis of Micro-Level Climate Change Denial Discourses*, the authors Peter J. Jacquesa and Claire Connolly Knoxb describe how the anti-environmental movement successfully recognized highly effective frames and organized the dissent around it. These frames were already known to resonate strongly with the American public. Presenting climate change mitigation action as a threat to national sovereignty and power by for example being part of international organizations and other efforts was met with a strong reaction. Similarly effective was framing environmental policies as danger to distribution of wealth caused by excessive governmental restrictions on business activities and a subsequent erosion of the existing system. The anti-environmentalist machine also exploited the fear of governmental abuse of power (highly sensitive issue in the United States), opposition to energy taxes, and vowed to protect Western neoliberal order, corporate interests and capitalism. Understanding what were the sensitive topics connected to people's partisan or ideological identity enabled the countermovement to target their audience much more effectively. People who internalized the above-mentioned values were purposely targeted and the issue of climate change was presented in such a way that they incorporated it among the problems that defined their ideological/partisan identification. This approach set climate change denial as the new "common sense" for a significant part of American conservatives.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Sandra T. Marquart-Pyatt, Rachael L. Shwom, Thomas Dietz, Riley E. Dunlap, Stan A. Kaplowitz, Aaron M. McCright, and Sammy Zahran, "Understanding Public Opinion on Climate Change: A Call for Research," *Environment* 53, No. 4 (October 2009): 40.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Dunlap and McCright, "A Widening Gap," 31–32.

<sup>91</sup> Dunlap, "The Politicization of Climate Change," 157.

<sup>92</sup> Jacquesa and Connolly Knoxb, "Hurricanes and Hegemony," 846–847.

Between 2002 and 2010, Nicholas Smith, social-environmental psychologist at Yale University, and Anthony Leiserowitz, Yale University's expert on public opinion and climate change, conducted four nationally representative surveys to assess public perceptions of climate change and policy preferences on the matter. The surveys list five main justifications of the denialist movement's members when asked about their skeptical views on climate change. The first reason, listed by more than 40 percent of the respondents, is the premise that global warming was promoted by a conspiracy. Secondly, approximately 20 percent outright denied any existence of global warming. About 13 percent of respondents based their climate change beliefs on their lack of faith in climate science, other 12 percent thought the importance and impact of climate change were being exaggerated. Finally, 11 percent of asked participants saw global warming as a natural phenomenon instead of one being extremely troubling and caused by human activity.<sup>93</sup> The answers given by the survey participants mirror the strategies deployed by the counter-environmental movement which were analyzed in the previous chapter.

To sum up, the vulnerability of the public opinion in the United States is influenced by several factors, the main one being a high level of polarization of the population. People's affiliation and loyalty to their preferred political entity, media, or other authority sets up an environment of compliancy and high tendency to be easily persuaded, manipulated, or radicalized. As result, this system created a vicious circle in terms of information sharing and opinion formation in the matters of the environment and climate change. What makes matters worse is the seeming abstract nature of environmental issues. It allows for easy manipulation of facts and subsequent spread of disinformation without the audience being immediately able to recognize it as such. That being said, according to studies quoted in *The Politicization of Climate Change and Polarization in The American Public's Views of Global Warming, 2001-2010*, the susceptibility to elite cues and political manipulation is so extensive with most of conservatives and Republicans, that for the majority of this audience providing more information on the issue at hand will have no effect anymore.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Nicholas Smith and Anthony Leiserowitz, "The Rise of Global Warming Skepticism: Exploring Affective Image Associations in the United States over Time," *Risk Analysis* 32, No.6, (2012): 1021–1032.

<sup>94</sup> Dunlap, "The Politicization of Climate Change," 179.

In 2019, a team of experts in the field of environmental studies, science, and climate change denial including John Cook, Geoffrey Supran, Stephan Lewandowsky, Naomi Oreskes, and Ed Maibach published an educational pamphlet called *America Misled*. The authors see three main ways of how to bring the American public back on track where climate change is concerned: The first way is by communicating facts, which, however, is insufficient on its own mainly because of the sophisticated system of disinformation already

## 4. Fossil Fuels Lobby

The following chapter will demonstrate how the theory described in the previous three parts of this thesis took shape in the real world. After covering the process of climate change denial and describing the main strategies of the fossil fuels lobby, this part now looks at the biggest industry players themselves. Firstly, it offers an overview of the lobby itself – how it works, who the main players are, and what the lobby’s relationship with climate change, science, or politics was like in the analyzed period. Secondly, in order to examine the far-reaching effects of the lobby machine in more detail, this chapter looks closely at the case of ExxonMobil, one of the key players in American climate change denial. The main goal here is to create a more complex picture of the analyzed phenomenon by following specific actors, examining their role in the disinformation campaign, and thus to connect theory with its actual implementation.

The United States is a country with a history of strong lobby culture and high degree of special interest influence. The culture of extensive corporate power stems mainly from the era of decreased governmental intervention and low regulations established during the Reagan Administration in the 1980s. Enabled by the country’s political system and distribution of power, lobby plays a highly significant role on every level of American politics. In the past five decades, lobby has been one of the most distinct influences to have shaped the country’s legislation, politics, and political culture.<sup>95</sup> The fossil fuels lobby belongs to some of the most powerful interests in the United States, to be more exact, oil and gas alone have been put on the list of 20 most influential special interests in federal politics between the years 2000 and 2020.<sup>96</sup> As explained above, throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the fossil fuels industry gradually adopted an approach of climate change denial in order to protect their profits and with the help of the strategies and structures described in the previous chapters. The denialist culture, although not a new

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circulating within the population. That is why it is also necessary to reveal misleading sources so that the public can better understand why and how the misinformation is being created and who are the ones benefiting from it. Thirdly, the authors see as crucial to start explaining denialist techniques that are being used to mislead the public.

<sup>95</sup> Lee Drutman, “How Corporate Lobbyists Conquered American Democracy,” *The Atlantic*, April 20, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/04/how-corporate-lobbyists-conquered-american-democracy/390822/>.

<sup>96</sup> “Top Interest Groups Giving to Members of Congress,” *Open Secrets Website*, <https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/mems.php?party=A&cycle=2020> (Accessed May 1, 2020).

phenomenon, originated with the industry and was built into a widespread movement, as the data in the following chapter shows.<sup>97</sup>

The largest branch of the fossil fuel industry has for decades been oil and gas. The biggest players in the denial movement are thus, without much surprise, the most influential oil and gas giants. Out of the entire fossil fuels industry, the oil and gas sector is also the largest contributor to political subjects and campaigns. Their political support is significantly partisan. Since the 1990s, approximately two thirds of the oil and gas industry's political contributions went to the GOP.<sup>98</sup> The crucial member of the denialist movement and the largest contributor of the industry between 1998 and 2009 was ExxonMobil.<sup>99</sup> The case of ExxonMobil is studied more closely in the second part of this chapter.

Apart from ExxonMobil, another key player in the American fossil fuels industry are the Koch Brothers. The conglomerate specializing in oil refining was built by two brothers, both highly controversial libertarians, David and Charles Koch. Both dedicated their life to opposing “the system” and building a far-reaching network through which they would execute their influence on politics. Like many other fossil fuels giants, the Koch Brothers industry established a net of political donors, think tanks, and activist groups to make their mark in the climate change debate.<sup>100</sup> The company grew a network of employees and volunteers through which they could establish and maintain control. The meticulously structured system covered all levels of potentially helpful areas in which the company could sow the metaphorical seed of influence. The campaigners took part in all sorts of activities from knocking on doors, protesting climate change legislation at rallies, or directly visiting lawmakers who were likely oppose the Koch Industries in any way. Other examples of highly influential companies from this sector are Chevron Corporation, Royal Dutch Shell, BP, and Total.<sup>101</sup>

After these oil and gas giants, another important force in the climate change denial phenomenon is the coal industry. Companies such as Peabody Energy, Arch Coal, or

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<sup>97</sup> Sybille van den Hove, Marc Le Menestrel, and Henri-Claude de Bettignies, “The Oil Industry and Climate Change: Strategies and Ethical Dilemmas,” *Climate Policy* 2 (2002): 4.

<sup>98</sup> Alex Glorioso, “Industry Profile: Oil and Gas,” *Open Secrets Website*, <https://www.opensecrets.org/federal-lobbying/industries/background?cycle=2020&id=E01> (Accessed May 1, 2020).

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Freese, “Deceitful, Hysterical, Out-of-Control Rampage,” 238.

<sup>101</sup> “The Climate Denial Machine: How the Fossil Fuel Industry Blocks Climate Action,” *The Climate Reality Project Website*, September 5, 2019, <https://www.climateproject.org/blog/climate-denial-machine-how-fossil-fuel-industry-blocks-climate-action>.

Murray Energy belong to the biggest coal producers in the United States.<sup>102</sup> At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, coal companies were the most threatened group out of the fossil fuels industry. That was brought about by a number of factors such as issues with workers' rights and health problems of the coal miners. However, the biggest reason was the fact that coal is the dirtiest fossil fuel and its production is highly detrimental to public health and the environment.<sup>103</sup> What is more, coal has generally held a unique position in the industry by having quite an adversarial relationship with oil and gas. These two factors combined put a significant strain on the coal companies' prosperity and position on the market. To fight for its survival, coal miners and producers were no strangers to the denialist strategies or the anti-environmentalist movement in general.<sup>104</sup> Over the years, they contributed greatly to the climate change denial campaign. Furthermore, the coal industry's contributions predominantly went to the Republican Party.<sup>105</sup> These connections and efforts paid off, as demonstrated by the fact that coal is still seen and supported as a viable energy source.

In 2001, after eight years of the Clinton Administration, it seemed that coal production would be significantly limited by government regulations which could put the industry's bare survival on the line. The coal industry had been the main target of the – quite limited – governmental policy attempts in switching to cleaner energy. As a result of passed legislation aiming at mitigation of greenhouse gas production, a number of coal companies experienced serious financial difficulties and some even had to file for bankruptcy. However, with the election of George W. Bush, coal got a second chance – and all thanks to its extensive lobby activity and long-established ties mainly to the Republican Party. When looking at the coal industry in the ensuing period, it can be seen as an example of a successful member of the denial movement – the coal industry's anti-environmentalist activities contributed to saving the coal industry from its looming end, even if for only a short time.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Freese, "Deceitful, Hysterical, Out-of-Control Rampage," 239.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Glorioso, "Industry Profile."

Niv Sultan, "Mining," *Open Secrets Website*, April 2017,

<https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/background.php?cycle=2020&ind=E04> (Accessed May 3, 2020).

<sup>106</sup> "The Politics of Energy: Coal, the Bush Administration's Fuel of Choice," *The Center for Public Integrity*, November 21, 2003, <https://publicintegrity.org/environment/the-politics-of-energy-coal-the-bush-administrations-fuel-of-choice/> (Accessed April 27, 2020).



During the Bush Administration, coal companies were not the only ones to profit greatly off of the White House's friendly position towards the industry. Oil and gas producers gained a great amount of influence during this era as well. The so-called revolving door, a transition of former government employees to lobbying for private sector that is quite usual in American politics, was suddenly reversed. Many positions inside the administration were filled by people from the fossil fuels industry. For instance, a former coal-industry executive and lobbyist with ties to American Petroleum Institute and the National Mining Association J. Steven Griles became the Deputy Secretary of the Interior Department; the new Assistant Attorney General for Environment and Natural Resources was Thomas Sansonetti, a mining lobbyist formerly employed by Peabody Coal; David Lauriski, a former board member of Utah Mining Association and general manager of Energy West Mining Company, became the Assistant Secretary for Mine Safety and Health at the Labor Department.<sup>107</sup> The last of these examples is Philip A. Cooney, a former API lobbyist, became the Chief of Staff for the White House Council of Environmental Quality. Without having any scientific credentials whatsoever, Cooney made adjustments to governmental reports on climate research in an attempt to conceal the report's damning assessments of the state of the environment.<sup>108</sup> After this was discovered and published in the media in 2005, Cooney resigned only to be hired by ExxonMobil the very next day.<sup>109</sup> These new officials, and a number of others, thus established an even closer connection between the industry and the government.

In their denialist efforts, many of the industry's giants use allied companies to petition and lobby on their behalf. An example of that is the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). These companies would target legislators or other government officials at all levels and distribute fake or misleading scientific data produced by various conservative think tanks and industry scientists. In this way, they would try to push for fossil fuels-friendly public policies and sway the officials' positions on climate change. This kind of representation also gave an illusion of a much larger number of people opposing pro-environmental policies.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Andrew C. Revkin, "Bush Aide Softened Greenhouse Gas Links to Global Warming," *The New York Times*, June 8, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/08/politics/bush-aide-softened-greenhouse-gas-links-to-global-warming.html>.

<sup>109</sup> Andrew C. Revkin, "Former Bush Aide Who Edited Reports Is Hired by Exxon," *The New York Times*, June 15, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/15/politics/former-bush-aide-who-edited-reports-is-hired-by-exxon.html>.

<sup>110</sup> *Climate Reality Project*, "The Climate Denial Machine."

Throughout the years, the fossil fuels industry also funded or even directly created a number of think tanks. These think tanks would then spread conservative agenda including climate change skepticism and denial on the industry's behalf.<sup>111</sup> This issue is taken apart in *Industrial Strength Denial* written by Barbara Freese, an environmental attorney, energy policy analyst, and expert on air pollution laws. According to Freese, employing seemingly independent third parties in such way helped create more obscurity in the whole process. The fossil fuels companies thus appeared to be detached from various lobbying or grassroots activities of their intermediaries, such as think tanks, trade groups, or advocacy groups they were in reality closely connected to. Although this cover was not always absolute and the ties between the actors not completely hidden, Freese argues that this tactic still managed to reduce the feeling of moral, political, or legal responsibility.<sup>112</sup> According to a study done by Riley E. Dunlap and Peter J. Jacques, both experts on environmental politics, the most influential and effective conservative think tanks which took part in climate change denial are the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Heartland Institute, the Marshall Institute, and the Competitive Enterprise Institution.<sup>113</sup>

In 2019, an analysis was written by Richard Heede, the world's leading author on the fossil giants' role in the climate crisis, and published by the Climate Accountability Institute – a non-profit research and educational organization specializing on man-made climate change. Its data shows that 20 major fossil fuels companies are responsible for 35% of all energy-related carbon dioxide and methane produced worldwide since 1965.<sup>114</sup> On their own, Exxon together with BP, Chevron, and Shell are behind 10% of the production. What is more, in 1965, when the study started to measure the data, both American politicians and the companies involved already had knowledge about the negative impacts of fossil fuels production and burning. This was discovered from internal company documents obtained by *The Guardian*.<sup>115</sup> In the past three decades, these four

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Freese, "Deceitful, Hysterical, Out-of-Control Rampage," 242.

<sup>113</sup> Riley E. Dunlap and Peter J. Jacques, "Climate Change Denial Books and Conservative Think Tanks: Exploring the Connection," *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, No.6 (SAGE Publications: 2013): 700.

<sup>114</sup> Matthew Taylor and Jonathan Watts, "Revealed: The 20 Firms behind a Third of All Carbon Emissions," *The Guardian*, October 9, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/oct/09/revealed-20-firms-third-carbon-emissions>.

<sup>115</sup> Dana Nuccitelli, "Scientists Warned the US President about Global Warming 50 Years Ago Today," *The Guardian*, November 5, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/climate-consensus-97-percent/2015/nov/05/scientists-warned-the-president-about-global-warming-50-years-ago-today>.

companies made nearly \$2tn in profits.<sup>116</sup> In his study, Heede also emphasized the responsibility of the polluters not only because of the knowledge they had and ignored, but also for having decided to deny the negative impacts of their business and mislead the public rather than choosing to use their capital and technical expertise to work on solving the issue and contribute to a low-carbon future.<sup>117</sup>

## 4.1 ExxonMobil

Originating as Standard Oil Company with John D. Rockefeller in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the company gradually developed into a world energy giant and became one of the five largest publicly traded oil and gas majors. Together with Royal Dutch Shell, Chevron, BP, and Total, these so-called Big Oil companies hold an instrumental position on the energy market, in the world of politics, and, also, in the climate debate. *The Guardian* notes that between 1986 and 2015, ExxonMobil, BP, ChevronTexaco, Royal Dutch Shell, and ConocoPhillips spent a total of at least \$3.6 billion dollars just on advertisements.<sup>118</sup>

In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, Exxon or – after merging with Mobil in 1999 – ExxonMobil – has found numerous ways to extend its impact on politics both directly and indirectly and gain an enormous influence. What is more, it adapted its structures and strategies to thrive in the environment of American political and economic competition. Most importantly, it became one of the leading forces in purposely concealing the discoveries proving the fossil fuels/energy industry’s negative impact on the environment.<sup>119</sup> According to an investigation done by Greenpeace, between the years 1998 and 2014, Exxon(Mobil) funded 67 different organizations, foundations, and institutions that took part in spreading climate change denial. In order to protect its interest

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<sup>116</sup> Matthew Taylor and Jillian Ambrose, “Revealed: Big Oil’s Profits since 1990 Total Nearly \$2tn,” *The Guardian*, February 12, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/feb/12/revealed-big-oil-profits-since-1990-total-nearly-2tn-bp-shell-chevron-exxon>.

<sup>117</sup> Taylor and Watts, “Revealed.”

<sup>118</sup> Emily Holden, “How the Oil Industry Has Spent Billions to Control the Climate Change Conversation,” *The Guardian*, January 8, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/jan/08/oil-companies-climate-crisis-pr-spending>.

<sup>119</sup> Neela Banerjee, Lisa Song and David Hasemyer, “Exxon’s Own Research Confirmed Fossil Fuels’ Role in Global Warming Decades Ago,” *Inside Climate News*, September 16, 2015, <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/15092015/Exxons-own-research-confirmed-fossil-fuels-role-in-global-warming>.

“ExxonMobil’s Funding of Climate Science Denial,” *DeSmog Website*, <https://www.desmogblog.com/exxonmobil-funding-climate-science-denial> (Accessed May 3, 2020).

and profits, the company's anti-environmental expenditures reached nearly 31 million dollars in that time period.<sup>120</sup>

During the first boom in climate change research, in the 1960s and 1970s, Exxon belonged to one of the main research pioneers. It allocated a lot of resources to studying the effects burning of fossil fuels had on the Earth's environment. Based on the new findings, Exxon's own scientists issued first warnings to the company's leadership as early as 1977, as pointed out by *Inside Climate News* reporters Neela Banerjee, Lisa Song, and David Hasemyer.<sup>121</sup> The authors of the research estimated that, at the time, there was a five-to-ten-year-long window to take action before hard decisions needed to be made or the changes to the global climate would become critical and possibly irreversible. Exxon's experts repeated their warning a year later, this time to a broader audience including the company's management and scientists.<sup>122</sup> These revelations led the Exxon leadership to allocate even more funds into the company scientific program, which continued for over a decade, up until the 1980s. During this time, Exxon gained a deep understanding of the ongoing environmental issues in connected to fossil fuels burning and mapped out the probable future impacts of fossil fuels production. The findings promised uneasy times for not only the company but the fossil fuels industry as a whole.<sup>123</sup> For an industry whose existence and profits had up until then been completely dependent on activities that turned out to be unsustainable, without any major changes, the future held a certain end. Simultaneously, the company realized the threat their business was posing to the environment. Based on these facts, Exxon's scientific teams were tasked with exploring innovative ideas that would lead to a more sustainable future of the industry and ensure a greener future for the planet.<sup>124</sup>

Then, by the end of the 1980s, Exxon completely changed course on the matter. It significantly curtailed its research program and in the course of the following decades

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<sup>120</sup> "ExxonMobil Climate Denial Funding 1998-2014" *ExxonSecrets.org Website*, <https://exxonsecrets.org/html/index.php> (Accessed May 5, 2020).

<sup>121</sup> Banerjee, Song and Hasemyer, "Exxon's Own Research."

<sup>122</sup> Jonathan Watts, Garry Blight, Lydia McMullan, and Pablo Gutiérrez, "Half A Century of Dither and Denial – A Climate Crisis Timeline," *The Guardian*, October 9, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2019/oct/09/half-century-dither-denial-climate-crisis-timeline>.

<sup>123</sup> Banerjee, Song and Hasemyer, "Exxon's Own Research."

Watts, Blight, McMullan, and Gutiérrez, "Half A Century of Dither and Denial."

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

"Exxon's Climate Denial History: A Timeline," *Greenpeace Website*, <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/global-warming/exxon-and-the-oil-industry-knew-about-climate-change/exxons-climate-denial-history-a-timeline/> (Accessed April 20, 2020).

became one of the leading forces behind the vast anti-environmentalist movement in the United States.<sup>125</sup> From investigation done by *Inside Climate News* – a Pulitzer-winning non-profit news organization focused on the problem of climate change – the reason behind the decision to turn away from climate science towards climate skepticism were mainly corporate gains. *Inside Climate News*' journalists analyzed a number of internal company documents and conducted interviews with a number of Exxon's former employees that had a front-row seat to the company leadership's decision making on the matter. According to this research, the determination to understand the industry's impact on Earth's climate in the first place came from a culture of the corporation's farsightedness and consideration for future development at the time.<sup>126</sup> However, the resolution to prevent a climate catastrophe was never all-encompassing. Exxon's executives were always careful about how much they shared with their shareholders about the implications of fossil fuels production. They also kept to themselves how much environmental risks shaped their business decisions.<sup>127</sup> Then, an unexpected oil glut came in the mid-1980s caused by an overproduction of oil which was followed by a collapse in the prices of oil. The overproduction was a result of an economic slowdown of the 1970s brought about by oil crises and deepened by an adoption of more efficient methods in oil production.<sup>128</sup> To save money, Exxon made extensive cut in its staff, including many of those working on the climate research teams.<sup>129</sup>

At the same time, environmental issues started to become a more prominent political topic and starter to resonate louder in the media. Therefore, after the significant slump in profit caused by the oil glut, uncertainty created by rising climate awareness and expectations of looming political action, Exxon's executives came to a decision. The company started putting more and more money to efforts attempting undermine the science behind climate change – as the following timeline and attached documents show – and its turn on the environment begun.<sup>130</sup> The following milestones – mainly covered by an extensive investigation done by *Greenpeace*, *Inside Climate News*, and *Climate*

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<sup>125</sup> Banerjee, Song and Hasemyer, "Exxon's Own Research."

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Steven Kettell, "Oil Crisis," *Britannica Official Website*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/oil-crisis> (Accessed May 7, 2020).

Robert D. Hershey Jr., "Worrying Anew Over Oil Imports," *The New York Times*, December 30, 1989, <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/12/30/business/worrying-anew-over-oil-imports.html?pagewanted=all>

<sup>129</sup> Banerjee, Song, and Hasemyer, "Exxon's Own Research."

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

*Investigations* – demonstrate how Exxon (and later on ExxonMobil) built the far-reaching and highly efficient mechanisms that became part of the vastly influential climate change denial machine.<sup>131</sup>

In 1989, the company became a founding member of a group called the Global Climate Coalition (GCC). The GCC is a coalition of heavy producers of greenhouse gasses such as ExxonMobil, Royal Dutch Shell, BP, Texaco, General Motors, Ford, DaimlerChrysler, the Aluminum Association, or the American Petroleum Institute. Its establishment marks one of the first organized group efforts of the industry to counter the environmental movement in the United States and sow doubt among the public. Their main activities, as uncovered and later documented by Hoggan and Littlemore, revolved around advertising and lobby aimed at influencing public officials, countering climate science, delaying attempts to reduce emissions, and furthering other goals of the big oil corporations. What is more, the member companies often went against findings of their own scientists and even buried any reports that could potentially become harmful to their cause and profits.<sup>132</sup>

In 1990, Exxon started funding Dr. Fred Seitz and Dr. Fred Singer, two researchers with background in physics who had previously been on the payroll of large tobacco corporations doing “research” and questioning negative impacts of smoking. After being hired by Exxon, they continued in their task of contesting science and challenging the existing scientific consensus, this time focusing on climate change instead of smoking.<sup>133</sup> In the same year, another “expert” paid by Exxon – Dr. Brian Flannery – made himself known by publicly opposing the first environmental report released by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The report estimated that global carbon emissions needed to be curbed by 60 to 80 percent.<sup>134</sup> Flannery opposed this estimation by claiming that the uncertainty of climate science was so significant, that any such recommendation should not be taken seriously.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Hoggan and Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up*, 12–13.  
Watts et al., *Half A Century of Dither and Denial*.

<sup>133</sup> “Frederick Seitz,” *DeSmog Website*, <https://www.desmogblog.com/frederick-seitz-dead> (Accessed May 9, 2020).

“Fred Singer,” *DeSmog Website*, <https://www.desmogblog.com/s-fred-singer> (Accessed May 9, 2020).

<sup>134</sup> J.T.Houghton, G.J.Jenkins and J.J.Ephraums, “Climate Change: The IPCC Scientific Assessment,” *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge: 1990): 5.

<sup>135</sup> Jeremy Leggett, “Carbon Wars,” *The Guardian*, April 25, 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/apr/25/exxonmobilslonglivedemulatio>.  
Greenpeace Website, “Exxon’s Climate Denial History: A Timeline.”

In 1992, Exxon became a member of the previously mentioned lobby group American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC).<sup>136</sup> Five years later, in 1997, Mobil published an ad in *The New York Times* with the title “Reset the Alarm” which emphasized uncertainty of science behind climate change and warned against economic costs of environmental action. This ad was part of the so-called advertorials – editorial-style advertisements – that were published weekly from 1972 to 2001 and read by millions.<sup>137</sup> This campaign is a perfect example of how the industry used the media in their efforts to discredit climate science and environmentalism. This particular campaign’s goal was to impact the outcome of the Kyoto global climate negotiations that were taking place at the time.<sup>138</sup> The industry, with the GCC as its leading force, started a broad campaign, trying to prevent the United States from ratifying the Kyoto Protocol, an international treaty aiming at limitation of greenhouse gas emissions. In 1998, the treaty failed to pass the ratification process in the Senate, at the time controlled by the Republican Party.<sup>139</sup>

In 1998, *The New York Times* published leaked documents revealing information about a five-million-dollar plan of the American Petroleum Institute for a widespread campaign with the aim to challenge the scientific consensus on climate change.<sup>140</sup> Exxon was also listed as one of the participants. The plan entailed recruiting and training a team of scientists whose task would be to reach out to the media and spread the denial agenda.<sup>141</sup> In the same year, the Exxon-sponsored think tank – the George C. Marshall Institute – co-organized a petition countering climate science. The petition was accompanied by a “research paper” published in *The Wall Street Journal*<sup>142</sup> resembling a scholarly article which managed to trick some legitimate scientists into signing. The rest of the list of signatures was also highly suspicious as some of the names on the petition included characters from the TV show M.A.S.H. or “Dr.” Geri Halliwell, one of the Spice Girls.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Greenpeace Website, “Exxon’s Climate Denial History: A Timeline.”

<sup>137</sup> Clyde Brown and Herbert Waltzer, “Every Thursday: Advertorials by Mobil Oil on the Op-Ed Page of *The New York Times*,” *Public Relations Review* 31 (2005): 197–200.

<sup>138</sup> “1997 Global Climate Coalition NYT Advertisements,” *Climate Files*, <http://www.climatefiles.com/denial-groups/global-climate-coalition-collection/1997-anti-kyoto-ads/> (Accessed May 9, 2020).

<sup>139</sup> Watts et al., *Half A Century of Dither and Denial*.

<sup>140</sup> John H. Cushman Jr., “Industrial Group Plans to Battle Climate Treaty,” *The New York Times*, April 26, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/26/us/industrial-group-plans-to-battle-climate-treaty.html>.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

Greenpeace Website, “Exxon’s Climate Denial History: A Timeline.”

<sup>142</sup> Arthur B. Robinson and Zachary W. Robinson, “Science Has Spoken: Global Warming Is a Myth,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 4, 1997, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB881189526293285000>.

<sup>143</sup> “Oregon Petition,” *DeSmog Website*, <https://www.desmogblog.com/oregon-petition> (Accessed May 9, 2020).

Two years later, the company faced another controversy. ExxonMobil's CEO, Lee Raymond, presented the company's shareholders with a study from 1996 named *The Little Ice Age and Medieval Warm Period in the Sargasso Sea* that supposedly disproved that fossil fuels emissions cause global warming. The study's author, Lloyd Keigwin, then accused Raymond of misusing his data which, in fact, supported the premise that anthropogenic global warming was, in fact, happening and was detrimental to the environment.<sup>144</sup>

The era of ExxonMobil's greatest influence came in 2001 with the inauguration of George W. Bush. After donating 100,000 dollars to the new President's inauguration ceremony, the company quickly established a very close relationship with his administration. The company used its influence to try to convince Bush to rethink the United States' participation in the Kyoto process.<sup>145</sup> The Kyoto Protocol was signed by President Clinton in 1997 but – as already mentioned – never ratified due to the fossil fuels lobby efforts. In March 2001, the Bush Administration decided to fully withdraw from the treaty. As internal documents of the Department of State show, this step was taken partially based on the advice from the Global Climate Coalition and conversations with ExxonMobil's Senior Environmental Advisor Randy Randol.<sup>146</sup> What is more, after more pressure from ExxonMobil, Bush decided to oust climate scientist Robert Watson from his position as chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). During Watson's time as chair, the IPCC released several reports that explicitly linked human activity and changes in the global climate.<sup>147</sup>

In 2002, the Global Climate Coalition(GCC) announced its disbanding, stating that the organization had served its purpose as the reason. Shortly after, Bush released a new environmental policy mainly built on development of technologies that would mitigate greenhouse emissions – the exact approach that had long been promoted by the GCC.

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<sup>144</sup> Greenpeace Website, "Exxon's Climate Denial History: A Timeline."

Lloyd D. Keigwin, "The Little Ice Age and Medieval Warm Period in the Sargasso Sea," *Science* 274, No.5292, (November 29, 1996): 1504-1508.

<sup>145</sup> Neela Banerjee, "Exxon's Oil Industry Peers Knew About Climate Dangers in the 1970s, Too," *Inside Climate News*, December 22, 2015, <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/22122015/exxon-mobil-oil-industry-peers-knew-about-climate-change-dangers-1970s-american-petroleum-institute-api-shell-chevron-texaco>.

<sup>146</sup> "Briefing Memorandum 200302595," *United States Department of State*, June 20, 2001, <http://insideclimatenews.org/sites/default/files/documents/Global%20Climate%20Coalition%20Meeting%20%282001%29.pdf> (Accessed May 8, 2020).

"Your Meeting with Randy Randol on July 25, 2001," *United States Department of State*, July 23, 2001 obtained via "2001 State Department Briefing for Exxon's Randol Meetin," *Climate Files Website*, <http://www.climatefiles.com/exxonmobil/2001-state-department-briefing-exxon-randol-meeting/> (Accessed May 8, 2020).

<sup>147</sup> Greenpeace Website, "Exxon's Climate Denial History: A Timeline."



Although ExxonMobil was experiencing its golden era in terms of its hold on politics, it started to become a target of increasing backlash from the American public.<sup>148</sup>

In the following years, ExxonMobil carried on with its lobbying activities and continued to sponsor various denialist organizations, as evidenced by Greenpeace investigations. It also took part in anti-environmental propaganda itself, for instance by releasing its own ads that were attempting to make a case for climate skepticism.<sup>149</sup>

For example, the Competitive Enterprise Institute received close to two million dollars from ExxonMobil between the years 2000 and 2005 as funding for the think tanks' denialist activities.<sup>150</sup> However, as more time passed, the growing opposition and more vocal criticism (including from ExxonMobil's shareholders) led the company to take some new steps. ExxonMobil gradually started softening its public image in terms of climate issues. That is also why, in 2008, ExxonMobil's 2007 Corporate Citizenship Report announced that the company would end its contributions to *some* of the think tanks and other groups that played an enormous part in spreading the anti-climate narrative.<sup>151</sup> However, the reality was somewhat different from what the company wanted to be perceived as. ExxonMobil still continued funding a number of groups opposing climate policies in order to "broaden the debate" on climate change. For the time being, the company generally stuck to its existing agenda, only a little more quietly, as evidenced by *The Washington Post* reporter Amy Westervelt.<sup>152</sup> An example of that can be an investigation done by *The Guardian* in 2009. It shows that ExxonMobil continued to fund denialist think tanks such as the National Center for Policy Analysis or the Heritage Foundation despite promising to terminate such activities years earlier.<sup>153</sup>

In 2017, Naomi Oreskes and Geoffrey Supran, research associates in the Department of History of Science at Harvard University, carried out a study named *Assessing ExxonMobil's Climate Change Communications (1977–2014)*. In their research, they analyzed numerous communication documents created by ExxonMobil between 1977 and 2014 in order to assess the degree to which the company attempted to mislead the

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Freese, "Deceitful, Hysterical, Out-of-Control Rampage," 242–243.

<sup>151</sup> "2007 Corporate Citizenship Report," *ExxonMobil* (2008): 15–18.

<sup>152</sup> Amy Westervelt, "How the Fossil Fuel Industry Got the Media to Think Climate Change Was Debatable," *The Washington Post*, January 10, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/01/10/how-fossil-fuel-industry-got-media-think-climate-change-was-debatable/>.

<sup>153</sup> David Adam, "ExxonMobil Continuing to Fund Climate Sceptic Groups, Records Show," *The Guardian*, July 1, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2009/jul/01/exxon-mobil-climate-change-sceptics-funding>.

public on the matter of climate change. Oreskes and Supran reviewed ExxonMobil's peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed publications, internal company documents, advertorials in *The New York Times*, and more. Their findings show a long history of both factual reporting based on scientific research, and environmental skepticism. Based on the authors' research, the company's positions differ in time, starting with extensive climate research in the late 1970s, weakening in the 1980s, and finally experiencing a surge in climate denial in the late 1990s. That trend continues until around 2005 when outright denial is gradually starting to be replaced by acknowledgment of the phenomenon, however, its seriousness is still being downplayed.<sup>154</sup>

As Supran and Oreskes conclude, the stance on climate change also varies depending on the type of document. Advertorials and non-peer-reviewed publications were documents with the highest rate of unabashed climate denial. Most either denied the existence of climate change or questioned the danger or solvability of the phenomenon. An instance of that can be the already mentioned "Reset the Alarm" advertorial in *The New York Times* emphasizing the economic pain that would be caused by the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol.<sup>155</sup> With peer-reviewed publications and internal documents, the factuality was higher. These documents mostly explicitly acknowledged the existence of anthropogenic global warming, very few times including reasonable doubt.<sup>156</sup> An example of this is an Exxon internal document *1982 CO2 'Greenhouse' Effect* talking about the possible catastrophic impacts of carbon dioxide production.<sup>157</sup> In their article, the authors also highlight the discrepancy between the company's scientific contribution in climate research and the information they distributed to the general public.<sup>158</sup> This research is consistent with ExxonMobil's above-described deliberate turn on the environment and the data can serve as a proof of the company's elaborate denialist agenda.

By the end of Bush's term, the public pressure on fossil fuels culminated and the era of blatant climate change denial came to an end. Rex Tillerson, the company's new CEO and the future Secretary of State for the Trump Administration, ordered a reassessment of the existing environmental policies, think tank funding, and public image.

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<sup>154</sup> Geoffrey Supran and Naomi Oreskes, "Assessing ExxonMobil's Climate Change Communications (1977–2014)," *Environmental Research Letters* 12 (2017): 5–8, 15.

<sup>155</sup> "Mobil 1997 Reset the Alarm" (Advertorial), *The New York Times*, October 30, 1997, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/705561-mob-nyt-1997-oct-30-resetalarm.html>.

<sup>156</sup> Supran and Oreskes, "Assessing ExxonMobil's Climate Change Communications," 5–8.

<sup>157</sup> M. B. Glaser, "1982 CO2 'Greenhouse' Effect," *Exxon Internal Document* (1982).

<sup>158</sup> Supran and Oreskes, "Assessing ExxonMobil's Climate Change Communications," 12.

Without admitting of ever being in the wrong, ExxonMobil switched to softer strategies, while eliminating climate change denial as one of the main tactics. Financial support to the most hardline denial organizations was cut and others were limited.<sup>159</sup> Although being more subtle, the company's mission against the environment still continued in some ways, as demonstrated later on in this chapter.

In *The Climate Responsibilities of Industrial Carbon Producers* published in 2015, the authors, all peer-reviewed scientists with expertise in climate science and environmental politics, Peter C. Frumhoff, Richard Heede and Naomi Oreskes conclude the following:

They [fossil energy producers] have worked systematically to prevent the political action that might have stabilized or reduced GHG emissions, including through unethical practices such as promoting disinformation; While ostensibly acknowledging the threat represented by unabated reliance on fossil fuels, they nevertheless continue to engage in business practices that will lead to their expanded production and use for decades to come.<sup>160</sup>

Furthermore, in its vision for 2040 published in 2014, ExxonMobil emphasizes the continued need for oil and gas, and proclaim that “oil and gas will continue to supply more than 50 percent of global energy.”<sup>161</sup>

## 4.2 The Structure of Corporate Influence

In order to demonstrate the mechanisms of the strategies and system of influence described in chapter 3, this part of the thesis describes the individual connections between Exxon(Mobil) and its allies in the denialist crusade. It goes over Exxon(Mobil)'s ties to different think tanks, public officials, organizations, or even individuals in service of the denial cause.

One of the key aspects of Exxon's success on its denialist quest was its affiliation with the American Petroleum Institute (API). API is the largest trade association for the oil and gas industry in the United States. Together with the Global Climate Coalition, API was a major power in political lobbying. For example, according to *The Washington Post*, by leading an aggressive lobby campaign, the industry managed to prevent passing of a potentially significant energy tax proposed by the Clinton Administration in 1993. The

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<sup>159</sup> Freese, “Deceitful, Hysterical, Out-of-Control Rampage,” 242–243.

<sup>160</sup> Peter C. Frumhoff, Richard Heede and Naomi Oreskes, “The Climate Responsibilities of Industrial Carbon Producers,” *Climatic Change* 132 (2015): 167.

<sup>161</sup> “Key Takeaways of 2040 Projections,” *ExxonMobil Website*, <https://corporate.exxonmobil.com/Energy-and-environment/Looking-forward/Outlook-for-Energy> (Accessed May 8, 2020).

campaigners both lobbied individual members of Congress and targeted the public through newspaper and TV ads.<sup>162</sup> By spreading doubts about the scientific consensus and emphasizing the economic risks of climate action, many more policies of similar nature were opposed and eliminated in a similar manner.<sup>163</sup>

Throughout the years, the industry (including Exxon) also used the services of a number of individuals for the purposes of denialist counter-science. According to Amy Westervelt, some of the most important ones were Willie Soon, William Happer, and David Legates. They posed as experts on climate change and were often cited by the denialist propaganda as scientific opposition to reputable climate scientists.<sup>164</sup> According to an investigation by Greenpeace, ExxonMobil together with Southern Company, the API, and one of Koch Brother's foundations paid Willie Soon 1.25 million dollars for his services between the years 2000 and 2015. Out of that sum, 335,000 dollars came directly from ExxonMobil, however, the company stopped with Soon's funding in 2010.<sup>165</sup> Another scientist in the services of the fossil fuels industry was Freeman Dyson. Dyson won a number of scientific awards for his work in quantum field theory from the 1940s and 1950s, however, his credentials in climate science were nonexistent. Even though he was a climate skeptic with no background in climate science or any research to prove his claims, he still often appeared in the media, countering the scientific consensus.<sup>166</sup>

A pronounced individual on the industry's payroll from the public relations area was Frank Luntz. Luntz was a spin doctor and a Republican pollster who briefed George W. Bush in the 2002 midterm election on how to approach environmental issues in public. His role in the counter-climate movement was covered by Terry L. Anderson and Kurt R. Leube in their analysis of language used in environmental politics. According to Luntz, the problem was not the systematic dismantling of environmental protections by the GOP but the language the party was using. Put in other words, he saw the perception of the issue as more important than the issue itself. Based on these ideas, Luntz supplied the Republican Party with a new vocabulary for environmental topics, such as using "climate change"

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<sup>162</sup> David S. Hilzenrath, "Miscalculations, Lobby Effort: Doomed Btu Tax Plan," *The Washington Post*, June 11, 1993, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/business/1993/06/11/miscalculations-lobby-effort-doomed-btu-tax-plan/d756dac3-b2d0-46a4-8693-79f6f8f881d2/>.

<sup>163</sup> Hove, Menestrel, and Bettignies, "The Oil Industry and Climate Change," 3–18.

<sup>164</sup> Westervelt, "How the Fossil Fuel Industry Got the Media to Think Climate Change Was Debatable."

<sup>165</sup> Suzanne Goldenberg, "Work of Prominent Climate Change Denier Was Funded by Energy Industry," *The Guardian*, 21 February, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/feb/21/climate-change-denier-willie-soon-funded-energy-industry>.

<sup>166</sup> Hoggan and Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up*, 9.

instead of “global warming” or emphasizing that “the debate remains open,” and directed them on the matter.<sup>167</sup> In a memo he sent to the GOP in 2002, he provided the party with structured instructions on how to approach both individual environmental issues and the general topic as a whole.<sup>168</sup> Implementing those changes helped the GOP to turn around a fight that Luntz suggested the party had been losing at the time and helped the Republicans to become more successful in their anti-environmental rhetoric.<sup>169</sup>

Two other noticeable PR experts that helped shape the denial campaign were Steven Milloy and (the already mentioned) Fred Singer. Both started their career working for Big Tobacco companies (e.g. Philip Morris) and later on brought their experiences to the field of environmental issues. They would take money from companies such as Exxon or Edison Electric Institute and helped develop strategies for climate skepticism. They both became helpful with publicly setting the tone of the propaganda for instance Fox News would bring Milloy to the studio in order to discuss climate change without even mentioning his ties to the industry lobby.<sup>170</sup>

Another major part of the denial machine were organizations and groups either established by the industry or heavily supported by it. Some of the pioneers were the National Coal Association, the Western Fuels Association, and Edison Electric Institute. Together, they formed the Information Council on the Environment (ICE) in 1991. Its main activity was attempting to redefine global warming as a theory, not as a fact and to sow the seed of doubt among the public by exaggerating the uncertainty of negative effects of global warming. Furthermore, they would give louder voice to “alternative facts” and even mobilize non-climate scientists.<sup>171</sup> ICE soon set a precedent for the denial campaign – companies would put bigger resources to services that were supposed to influence the public debate for instance by creating effective slogans, hiring junk scientists, and much more.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Terry L. Anderson and Kurt R. Leube, “Warning: Semantic Traps Ahead” *Hoover Digest: Research and Opinion on Public Policy* 3 (2017): 78–79.

<sup>168</sup> Frank Luntz, Memorandum to Bush White House “The Environment: A Cleaner, Safer, Healthier America,” *The Luntz Research Companies* (2002): 131–146.

<sup>169</sup> Anderson and Leube, “Warning,” 78–79.

<sup>170</sup> Hoggan and Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up*, 156.

<sup>171</sup> “Information Council for the Environment,” *DeSmog Website*, <https://www.desmogblog.com/information-council-environment> (Accessed May 1, 2020).

<sup>172</sup> George Monbiot, “The Denial Industry Case Notes,” *The Guardian*, December 7, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/georgemonbiot/2009/dec/07/george-monbiot-blog-climate-denial-industry>.

Further organizations that were all on Exxon(Mobil)'s payroll – some directly, some indirectly – are: American Enterprise Institute, which paid people to write critique on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports,<sup>173</sup> Cato Institute, directly established by the Koch Brothers,<sup>174</sup> Science and Environmental Policy Project, created by Fred Singer,<sup>175</sup> American Council on Science and Health,<sup>176</sup> Frontiers of Freedom Institute,<sup>177</sup> The Advancement of Sound Science Coalition (TASSC),<sup>178</sup> Institute for Humane Studies – George Mason University,<sup>179</sup> National Center for Policy Analysis,<sup>180</sup> Independent Institute,<sup>181</sup> Hoover Institution,<sup>182</sup> Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy,<sup>183</sup> and Heritage Foundation.<sup>184</sup> The leading think tank on climate skepticism and the biggest recipient of Exxon(Mobil)'s funding was the Competitive Enterprise Institute.<sup>185</sup> All of these organizations actively participated in the spreading of environmental skepticism. That can be seen either directly from materials they published themselves or from various analyses and investigations done by the media over the years.

In summary, ExxonMobil is in many ways the perfect representation of the fossil fuel lobby's efforts to counter climate change. The company had known about the negative effects of its corporate activities' for over 60 years and spent most of that time putting an enormous amount of resources towards a far-reaching campaign countering the scientific consensus on global warming. However, what makes Exxon(Mobil) quite unique is its activity in the early days of climate research. Up until the second half of the 1980s, the company assigned large sums to its scientific teams in an effort to understand the ongoing

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<sup>173</sup> Ian Sample, "Scientists offered cash to dispute climate study," *The Guardian*, February 2, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2007/feb/02/frontpagenews.climatechange>.

<sup>174</sup> "Cato Institute," *DeSmog Website*, <https://www.desmogblog.com/cato-institute> (Accessed May 10, 2020).

<sup>175</sup> Thomas P. Sheahen and Kenneth A. Haapala, "Mission Statement," *Science and Environmental Policy Project Official Website*, July 1, 2019, <http://www.sepp.org/> (Accessed May 10, 2020).

<sup>176</sup> Alex Berezow, "Al Gore: Still Demented After All These Years," *American Council on Science and Health Official Website*, February 16, 2017, <https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/02/16/al-gore-still-demented-after-all-these-years-10874>.

<sup>177</sup> Larry Fedewa, "The Dems and Climate Change: A Ship of Fools!," *Frontiers of Freedom Institute Official Website*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.ff.org/the-dems-and-climate-change-a-ship-of-fools/>.

<sup>178</sup> George Monbiot, "The Denial Industry," *The Guardian*, September 19, 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2006/sep/19/ethicalliving.g2>.

<sup>179</sup> "Institute for Humane Studies (IHS)," *Greenpeace Official Website*, <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/global-warming/climate-deniers/front-groups/institute-for-humane-studies-ihs/> (Accessed May 10, 2020).

<sup>180</sup> "A Global Warming Primer," *National Center for Policy Analysis* (2007): 4–36.

<sup>181</sup> Monbiot, "The Denial Industry."

<sup>182</sup> Richard A. Epstein, "A Climate Change Emergency?," *Hoover Institution Official Website*, October 7, 2019, <https://www.hoover.org/research/life-planet-thunberg>.

<sup>183</sup> "Annual Report 2008," *Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy* (2009) 8–9.

<sup>184</sup> Monbiot, "The Denial Industry."

<sup>185</sup> Monbiot, "The Denial Industry."

Hoggan and Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up*, 82.

trends in the Earth's climate and to explore the impacts of fossil fuels production on the environment. Moreover, the company's scientists were one of the first ones in the United States to raise alarm over global warming. After experiencing a drop in profits, the company made a decision to go the other way and put financial gains over environmental responsibility. Choosing to ignore the continuous warnings from the scientific community, Exxon not only went on with its ongoing activities, but grew into one of the most significant polluters in the world all the while cashing in high profits.

What is more, the company became one of the leading forces in climate change denial. By manufacturing uncertainty, engineering and spreading false information, employing various PR techniques, or shifting the public's focus to other issues, Exxon(Mobil) gained vast amount of power and influence. Most importantly, the company also established a close relationship with American politics – namely the Republican Party – through extensive lobby activities, campaign contributions, as well as personal ties. That allowed the corporation to gain access to government officials and policy makers and thus have a say in political decisions through which they could further its goals and agenda.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> “Smoke, Mirrors and Hot Air: How ExxonMobil Uses Big Tobacco’s Tactics to Manufacture Uncertainty on Climate Science,” *Union of Concerned Scientists* (2007): 1.

## Conclusion

The main hypothesis of this thesis was proved in several steps. Firstly, the analysis of media coverage shows the role the American media played in the anti-environmental disinformation campaign. It identifies the attempted “balanced coverage” as the main reason for the media’s failure in its reporting on the environmental debate. By trying to maintain a seeming fairness to “both sides” in the debate, the media painted a largely distorted picture of the reality. Instead of informing the public about a possible global catastrophe that would inevitably change nearly every aspect of the human life, the media covered climate change like another topic that falls victim to politics, ideology, identity, or opinion. What is more, it acceded to the fossil fuels industry’s strategy of science relativization – often unintentionally, by trying to remain “unbiased” – and thus damaged its credibility.

Apart from the media’s part, the success of the denialist propaganda was enabled by the vulnerability of public opinion. This was caused both by wider historical, political, and systemic determinants and the sophisticated methods employed by the denial machine. The industry’s PR experts found ways how to capitalize on the weaknesses and deep divisions of the American population. By sowing doubt, emphasizing uncertainties, or using various frames that helped shift attention from the acuteness of the problem, they exploited and increased the already existing polarization of the population.

Secondly, this analysis also showed how far the fossil fuels lobby managed to reach in terms of political power. The extent to which the special interests interfered with politics during the referenced period was significant. That can be seen on the example of the industry’s connection to the George W. Bush Administration, which was so close that fossil fuels companies and lobby had direct links to the White House and even impacted important political decisions of the administration. The magnitude of the corporate influence of the fossil fuels industry can be compared to the power the American tobacco industry once had or to the position the U.S. gun lobby still holds to this day.

Although much of the responsibility goes to the Republican Party when it comes to political connections to the industry, Democrats were not without blame either. The rise of the climate change denial phenomenon was caused by a failure of all political authorities. The political representation allowed one of the greatest dangers of our time to be turned into a political game instead. And although the political support of the deniers’ cause was



mainly coming from the GOP, there was a number of Democrats that were long-term recipients of fossil fuels money as well. Since 1990, about one third of the industry's donations went to the Democratic Party.<sup>187</sup> What is more, during presidential campaigns, both of the parties' main candidates received substantial sums from fossil fuels corporations. For instance, in 2004, the top two political recipients of oil and gas money were the Republican candidate George W. Bush (\$3,119,360) and John Kerry (\$353,210), who ran for the Democratic Party.<sup>188</sup> However, climate change denial/environmental skepticism never became part of the Democratic agenda. For the Republicans, the phenomenon of denial/skepticism became incorporated into their creed and partisan identity. Furthermore, the issue of climate change denial fit well into the party's general set of values and its overall political agenda.

It also needs to be said that the fossil fuels lobby was not the only special interest or political/ideological current that tried to influence the environmental debate; however, it was the most consequential by far. Although there were indeed lobbyists from the renewable energy industry, they were not as successful in furthering their agenda as the fossil fuels industry in the referenced period.<sup>189</sup>

Thirdly, the Exxon(Mobil) case study reveals the reason behind the industry's turn on the environment. Although determined to research, understand, and also face the challenges of climate change at first, the company changed course after experiencing a loss in profits that was to become even more significant with time. From then on, the industry put vast resources into their public image and public opinion manipulation. As a result, it managed to build an extensive system of junk scientists, fake experts, lobby groups, and think tanks. Their goal was to halt climate action, divide the public, and maintain the industry's profits.

The strategies that the fossil fuels companies – ExxonMobil included – used in the referenced period such as sowing doubt or denying the existence of climate change became unviable with time. Therefore, the companies adopted new techniques such as stressing the potential negative impacts of environmental action on the economy and jobs, or proposing solutions implemented by decarbonization technology yet to be developed.<sup>190</sup> However,

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<sup>187</sup> Glorioso, "Industry Profile."

<sup>188</sup> "Oil & Gas: Top Recipients," *Open Secrets Website*.

<sup>189</sup> Park, Liu and Vedlitz, "Analyzing Climate Change Debates," 254.

Viveca Novak, "Alternative Energy Production & Services: Background," *Open Secrets Website*, <https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/background.php?cycle=2020&ind=E1500> (Accessed May 11, 2020).

<sup>190</sup> "Big Oil's Real Agenda on Climate Change," *InfluenceMap* (March 2019): 7.

relativization of environmental risks is still very much present and the problem of climate change is still highly controversial in the United States.

By declaring a war on climate science, the fossil fuels lobby started one of the most dangerous and quite paradoxical phenomena in the U.S. history. The campaign managed to manipulate and reverse the position of the public on the matter as well as win over a large part of the country's political officials to its side. By doing that, it made any action on the climate threat nearly impossible. What is more, by relativizing proven facts and attacking the scientific community, it eroded the credibility of science and largely decreased public trust in legitimate scientific institution. All the while, the probability of long-term consequences of climate change including droughts, lack of food, mass migration, and much more is increasingly becoming inevitable. Most importantly, these changes will not only impact the United States but will lead to a worldwide environmental crisis.

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## **Master's Thesis Summary**

By analyzing various aspects of the climate change denial campaign in the United States and looking at the wider context of the issue, this thesis introduces the key factors that led to the successful spread of the phenomenon. It looks at how the American fossil fuels industry managed to sow doubt among the country's population about a once-widely-accepted matter.

Firstly, the thesis covers the historical development of the American climate debate and identifies the key moments that shaped the anti-environmental movement in the United States. What is more, the thesis looks at the role of Republican Party and the connections between the fossil fuels industry and the GOP. It researches the political power the fossil fuels lobby managed to gain throughout the years as one of the main reasons for the campaign's success and magnitude. The inner workings of the denialist and the concrete ways through which the fossil fuels companies exercised its influence over the country's political system and representation are then demonstrated on the case of Exxon(Mobil).

Based on the conducted research, the thesis determines that the main reason behind the industry's initial turn on the environment was the prospect of loss in profits caused by prepared legislation aimed at mitigation of environmental problems. This fear led to a development of a far-reaching campaign whose main task was to counter climate science and spread uncertainties about environmental issues. The denialist machine consisted of numerous think tanks, PR experts, and junk scientists paid by the fossil fuels companies. They would then lobby on the industry's behalf and come up with complex techniques and strategies for the industry to employ.

Secondly, the thesis goes over the main strategies used by the denialist campaign. After the already mentioned countering of climate science, another frequently used tactic was framing. By connecting the discussed environmental questions with other, usually more general issues, the denialists tried to influence in which terms their audience would understand the topic. The audience's position could be determined by targeting their pre-existing ideological preferences, identity, or partisan identification. What is more, the success of this tactic was intensified by high level of polarization among the American public. The fossil fuels industry capitalized greatly from exploiting those divisions.

Lastly, the thesis looks at how the American media contributed to the rise and spread of environmental skepticism. It identifies the "balanced coverage" approach employed by the media as the main reason for its failure in reporting on the environmental

debate. Presenting the existence of climate change as a matter of debate with two equal sides distorts the basic essence of the issue. Furthermore, it gives advantage to the environmental skeptics over the scientific community. The strategy puts peer-reviewed science on the same level with a disinformation campaign thus creating a significant misrepresentation of the reality.

## **ZÁVĚREČNÉ TEZE MAGISTERSKÉ PRÁCE NMTS**

Závěrečné teze student odevzdává ke konci Diplomního semináře III jako součást magisterské práce a tyto teze jsou spolu s odevzdáním magisterské práce do SIS předpokladem udělení zápočtu za tento seminář.
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<b>Semestr a školní rok ukončení práce:</b> <b>LS 2020</b>
<b>Vedoucí diplomového semináře:</b> <b>Lucie Kýrový, M.A., Ph.D.</b>
<b>Vedoucí práce:</b> <b>Mgr. Jana Sehnálková, Ph.D.</b>
<b>Název práce:</b> <b>Fossil Fuels Lobby and Climate Change: Influencing the Discourse in Politics and Media</b>
<b>Charakteristika tématu práce (max 10 řádek):</b> <b>The main topic of the thesis revolves around the issue of climate change denial in the United States and the role of the fossil fuels lobby in the phenomenon. The thesis looks at the reasons behind the successful denialist campaign that drastically shaped the country's response to various environmental challenges in the past several decades. It examines the political ties of the powerful fossil fuels industry to the American politics and the inner workings of the extensive climate change denial machine. Moreover, it analyzes the ways through which the fossil fuels industry managed to turn a once widely accepted fact supported by a scientific consensus into a matter of opinion, discussion, politics, ideology, and identity.</b>
<b>Vývoj tématu od zadání projektu do odevzdání práce (max. 10 řádek):</b> <b>Originally, the topic of the thesis was the role of the Republican Party in the phenomenon of climate change denial. After gaining a deeper understanding of the issue, the main subject of analysis shifted from the GOP to the fossil fuels lobby. Even though the thesis does cover the GOP's turn on the environment, it analyzes the issue from a much wider perspective. That allowed for a more complex understanding of the phenomenon's main causes and the key determinants of the denialist campaign's success.</b>
<b>Struktura práce (hlavní kapitoly obsahu):</b> <b>1. History of the Climate Debate in the United States</b> <b>2. Science and Strategies</b> <b>3. Media and Public Opinion</b> <b>4. Fossil Fuels Lobby</b>
<b>Hlavní výsledky práce (max. 10 řádek):</b> <b>The thesis proved the the main hypothesis. The analysis uncovered the inner workings of the climate change denial campaign in the United States and its ties to the American politics. What is more, it managed to put these findings into a broader context of the country's political system and historical development. That was done by identifying wider cultural and political factors that played into the phenomenon's successful spread. One of the main ones was the sophisticated character of the campaign. It employed PR professionals and a wide network of think tanks and other similar organizations that helped spread environmental skepticism throughout the population. Another crucial determinant was the vulnerability of</b>

the public and the general polarization of the population. Lastly, the successful outcome of the deniers' efforts was also shaped through relativization of science.

**Prameny a literatura (výběr nejpodstatnějších):**

Riley E. Dunlap and Aaron M. McCright, "A Widening Gap: Republican and Democratic Views on Climate Change," *Environment* 50, No. 5 (September/October 2008).

Thomas Bernauer, "Climate Change Politics," *Annual Review of Political Science* 16 (Annual Reviews, 2013).

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James Hoggan and Richard Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up* (Greystone Books, 2009).

Stephen H. Schneider and Michael D. Mastrandrea, "The Politics of Climate Science," in *The Politics of Climate Change* (Routledge, 2010).

"Exxon's Climate Denial History: A Timeline," Greenpeace Website, <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/global-warming/exxon-and-the-oil-industry-knew-about-climate-change/exxons-climate-denial-history-a-timeline/> (Accessed April 20, 2020).

"ExxonMobil Climate Denial Funding 1998-2014" ExxonSecrets.org Website, <https://exxonsecrets.org/html/index.php> (Accessed May 5, 2020).

"ExxonMobil's Funding of Climate Science Denial," DeSmog Website, <https://www.desmogblog.com/exxonmobil-funding-climate-science-denial> (Accessed May 3, 2020).

Etika výzkumu:\*\*

**Jazyk práce:**

AJ

**Podpis studenta a datum**

Tereza Balková, 20.5.2020

Schváleno	Datum	Podpis
Vedoucí práce		
Vedoucí diplomového semináře		
Vedoucí specializace		
Garant programu		

\* BAS – Balkánská a středoevropská studia; ES – Evropská studia; NRS – Německá a rakouská studia; RES – Ruská a eurasijská studia; SAS – Severoamerická studia; ZES – Západoevropská studia.

\*\* Pokud je to relevantní, tj. vyžaduje to charakter výzkumu (nebo jeho zadavatel), data, s nimiž pracujete, nebo osobní bezpečnost vaše či dalších účastníků výzkumu, vysvětlíte, jak zajistíte dodržení, resp. splnění těchto etických aspektů výzkumu: 1) informovaný souhlas s účastí na výzkumu, 2) dobrovolná účast na výzkumu, 3) důvěrnost a anonymita zdrojů, 4) bezpečný výzkum (nikomu nevznikne újma).