

BOOK REVIEW —

The Climate War: True Believers, Power Brokers, and the Fight to Save Earth

Eric Pooley

(Hyperion, 496 pp., \$27.99)

By Jeff Williams

Eric Pooley's, *The Climate War: True Believers, Power Brokers, and the Fight to Save the Earth*, is a fascinating inside-look at the people and events that shaped the recent political debate on climate change in the United States. A wide range of personages, from professional politicians, to special interest group members and leaders, to scientists, to activists and advocates, are depicted in well-researched detail. This story delivers extensive background on the modern climate change political debate as well as the public and backroom dealings that have led to the current state of climate change policy in the United States. Those interested in learning more about how policy is really decided at the national level are advised to read this book.

Pooley undertook the research on which this book is based in order to understand why it is so difficult for the US political system to respond to the threats associated with climate change. For the most part, he has produced an insightful account of just that. The characters are thoroughly fleshed-out and engaging, giving this historical account the feel of a polished novel. The lionization of select advocates for climate change legislation and evil characterization of some of their

opponents distracts from the story, but the insights into the many-layered process behind recent climate change policy efforts make this a rewarding book for those who can focus on the story and not the author's caricatures. Pooley is deputy editor at *Businessweek*, former national editor at *Time*, and a long-time political correspondent. The connections he has made over the years provided access to some of the more central actors in the US climate change debate, and allowed his narrative to have tremendous depth.

So who should read this book? Those interested specifically in climate change policy and science policy, as well as those interested in policymaking in general, will find *The Climate War* to be an excellent, in-depth depiction of the wide variety of opinions, events, and machinations that characterize any complex policy effort. Pooley's most important contribution with this book is to highlight why there are no easy political solutions to complex problems. Anyone who has ever made the statement, "All Congress has to do to solve this problem is do X," will find Pooley's book to be an eye-opening journey. Who should not read this book? People who do not support the scientific consensus on climate change and those

who are skeptical of the environmental movement. Pooley's work is a combination call-to-action and lamentation for lost chances at dealing with climate change; it is not intended to serve as a platform for bringing the undecided or skeptical into the fold. Indeed, readers who are skeptical of the human causes of climate change will find themselves implicitly described as being easily-duped, unwitting henchmen and henchwomen of the various nefarious entities named in the book.

Pooley gets a lot of things right in his book, but there are some problematic elements and omissions. One of the major deficiencies of Pooley's analysis is the lack of investigation of the role of the average citizen. With a few exceptions, we really only get to see this particular policy story told from the point of view of a select group of highly-focused insiders. Even when we do see members of the public, they are, for the most part, passive consumers of information. For example, the author mentions how reporters and the public tend to believe most reports put out by trade associations and not those put out by environmental groups, but then there is no investigation of why this is the case. By not talking about the public involvement, Pooley leaves out what may be important impacts on the policy discussion. As Kingdon (2003) described in his seminal work on agenda setting, the role of the national mood is one of the forces central to getting an item on the legislative agenda. Perhaps the public was heavily involved in the climate change policy process during the time covered by this book. Or, as tends to happen in areas of complex policymaking, the public had a less direct role. We don't get to find out. Pooley himself is of two minds on this matter. By leaving the public out of most of the book, he implicitly downplays its involvement. However, in one sentence in the very last chapter, he lays the blame for the failure of climate change legislation squarely at the feet of the voters. This assignment of blame is just one sentence and there is no associated analysis. Perhaps

this final finger-wagging statement was intended to be more of a literary device than an analytical comment. Regardless, for this reviewer, it served to highlight the conspicuous lack of attention to the role of the public.

Structurally, the book is divided into nine parts, with each part having multiple chapters. The parts and chapters are not necessarily a chronological retelling of events, but are instead organized around specific personalities and actions. With such a complex policy scenario being discussed in this book, a strict adherence to time order by Pooley likely would have made it more difficult to follow some of the central characters. Woven into this non-linear narrative are two concepts that are applicable for policy in general, as well as to climate change policy specifically. These themes are the power of misinformation and the difficulty of moving complex policy changes forward. Both will be discussed later in the review.

Part 1 sets the stage for the climate change debate in 2009 by looking back at the role of the United States in the 2007 Bali conference on climate change. Part 1 also sees the first appearance of Al Gore. He is one of the major characters in this story, and Pooley's near-worshipping of the former Vice President quickly wears thin. Glorification aside, Pooley's insights into Gore's public and backroom role in the policy process are revealing, interesting, and important to this story.

Aside from Gore, in Part 1 we also meet a number of other climate activists and organizations, including the Sierra Club, which Pooley (2010) describes as an organization with "the clout to kill any environmental bill that didn't meet its standards, but not to get one passed" (25). This idea of environmental groups having limited influence appears at least once later in the story. While not explored in great detail, it does help to set the stage for the role of climate change policy supporters and the difficulties they experienced in conveying their message to decision makers. Part

1 is also where we are introduced to the structure of the cap-and-trade mechanism intended to reduce carbon dioxide emissions through use of the market. Pooley provides the right amount of detail on how cap-and-trade is designed to function, deftly touching on the economic and implementation challenges associated with the proposed legislation. He also captures perfectly the atmosphere of excitement and opportunity, as remembered by this reviewer, that accompanied the climate change debate in 2007. Pooley's retelling of the significant, bipartisan, and near-global enthusiasm that once accompanied possible climate change legislation makes the current state of affairs all the more lamentable for those who expected to see the US create significant policy changes in this area.

Part 2 covers some of the efforts at misinformation that were intended to derail climate change legislation in favor of vested interests and those who were concerned with potential costs. Misinformation, while often in the eye of the beholder, is an accurate description of some of the tactics used by those who opposed addressing climate change at the political level. One particularly egregious example is a survey sponsored by a conservative religious organization. Called the Oregon Petition, it sought the opinions of thousands of US citizens who held undergraduate Bachelor of Science (BS) degrees. When many thousands of the respondents indicated that they doubted the science of climate change, the survey was portrayed as indicating that the scientific community doubted the science, even though most people would be hard-pressed to call those holding a BS scientists in the common sense of the word. This and other examples of misinformation are certainly potent and blood boiling for supporters of climate change legislation.

For this reviewer, Pooley relies too much on the power of misinformation to explain climate change political failures. While provocative, the idea that

climate change deniers, and only climate change deniers, control the tone of policy-making seems oversimplified. Policy and political science theorists such as Ripley and Franklin (1991), Bachrach and Baratz (1962), and Sabatier (1988) all describe the complexity of policy creation and implementation. Importantly, the large number of actors and decision steps present in most policy issue areas are highlighted by these authors. While climate change deniers might have been spreading misinformation, it is not clear from Pooley's book how it spread to all of the actors and all of the decision-stages involved with climate change. Advocates for climate change policies had champions on both sides of the aisle, including veteran Republican Senators such as Warner (R-VA) and McCain (R-AZ). No matter one's political leanings, it seems implausible that some very smart politicians fell for climate change misinformation hook, line, and sinker. And why do people believe these groups and not the legion of scientists and environmentalists speaking out in acknowledgement of the human role in climate change? If misinformation is really a driving factor in people's decisions, Pooley needs to make a clearer argument regarding how misinformation trumps information in general.

Parts 3 and 4 address some of the actors and underlying currents of the climate change movement and describe previous political attempts at similar legislation. Importantly, it is here that Pooley outlines how opponents of cap-and-trade began to label it as a tax in order to make it politically unpalatable. Part 5 of the book describes attempts to forge a compromise on climate change legislation, wherein some industry leaders and environmental groups begin working together to get mutually-beneficial policy enacted. As in a novel, we know that this moment of hope will pass, but are still drawn to the possibilities of cooperation on climate change. From a policy standpoint, Pooley's overall story is a great example of the process of negotiation, with Part 5 providing some

insightful details.

Part 6 highlights the difficulties of shepherding the nascent compromise that was described in Part 5. Here, Pooley describes how the coal industry, concerned about possible cost increases, went on the attack against cap-and-trade. Democrats in the Senate, especially Barbara Boxer (D-CA), argued that there was no room for compromise; cap-and-trade must not be watered down. Quite quickly, the atmosphere of shared purpose described by Pooley in Part 5 vanished, and people and organizations felt like they needed to take sides. With the partisan nature of debate in Washington, once an issue is officially divided, the window for negotiation often is closed as neither side wants to appear weak. With Pooley's skillful storytelling, the reader almost can palpably feel the chance at true progress in climate change legislation slipping away.

In Part 7 of the book, Pooley discusses how complicated the proactive camp's situation was in terms of alliances. Those supporting climate change legislation were from a variety of camps; radical environmental groups, power company CEO's, mainstream environmental organizations, and influential individual activists. One example of the complicated relationships was that, while they all shared the goal of reducing greenhouse gases, they did not always share a preferred method for reducing those gases, nor did they agree on how quickly reductions should take place.

This is where Pooley is at his best in the book — highlighting complexities and describing the difficulties of consensus-building, especially with a problem as many-layered as is climate change. He makes it quite easy to understand how those opposed to climate change legislation had a simpler task before them. All they needed to do was portray hasty change as unpredictable, and potentially expensive, and thus unadvisable. As political scientists Jones, Baumgartner, and True (1999) show, the status quo, or very

modest change, is the typical course of events, and major changes to the policy flow, which they term a “punctuated equilibrium,” are quite rare. They assert that these changes need a focusing event that engages the public sufficiently to put pressure on political leaders. Climate change is a textbook example of a non-emergency emergency. The polar caps will not disappear in one day, and rain forests will not become deserts overnight. As discussed earlier, Pooley does not explicitly address how the general public is involved in this debate, though it is logical to assume that the lack of a focusing event would lessen the chances for spontaneous public action. There is no event to bring the problem to a head in the minds of the public. But paying higher rates for electricity or being hit with any other cost increases, no matter how small, are immediate changes that the public would see.

While skillful at highlighting complexity, Pooley does seem to be inconsistent when it comes to the role of negotiation in the climate change policy process. There is a tug-of-war within his writing in that he acknowledges the difficulty in building consensus among large groups of people, but simultaneously decries those who did not sign-on immediately to climate change legislation. We know from the book's introduction that Pooley sought to understand why climate change policy is mired at the political level even though it is so clearly, in his mind, a global emergency. It may seem like a subtle distinction, but perhaps Pooley wrote this book instead to discover why his viewpoint did not prevail. Had the book been presented in the context of the viewpoint presented in the introduction, it seems plausible that we would have seen a much more even-handed treatment of the role of negotiation. Negotiation is not about one side arguing until everyone else gives up, which is sometimes how it is described in this book.

Part 8 sets the political stage for the final battle for climate change legislation and includes a tribute to Van Jones,

the green jobs advocate removed from President Obama's administration after it was discovered that he signed a petition implicating the Bush administration in orchestrating 9/11. In the final section of the book, Part 9, the story fittingly ends with a whimper and not a bang. Climate change legislation went the way of so many other policy efforts; coalitions were formed, Presidents weighed in, compromise was reached, and then nothing happened. It all just faded away. The end of the book takes place in 2009, with the country already in the grip of recession. Interestingly, we learn that, despite Pooley's earlier emphasis, it wasn't evil lobbyists who killed cap-and-trade, but simple disagreement. Politicians of all stripes found that any sort of cost increase was untenable at that time, and the movement stalled. It is unfortunate for Pooley that the manner in which climate change legislation faded off of the national stage seems to downplay the role of the climate deniers. The

actual outcome of events would argue for the power of misinformation to be much less of a part of this book, but one can also see that it would be a less gripping story without that dose of drama. It is quite conceivable that the intended audience of this book expects to see the role of climate deniers highlighted, and Pooley delivers on that point.

That being said, Pooley does a great job of showing how, in the end, the momentum for policy action on climate change could not be maintained and, like a marathon runner who has given their all, there was no energy remaining. Readers will come to the end feeling exhausted and battered, having shared a very rough policy journey. That makes the outcome all the more tragic for supporters of climate change legislation, as so much time and effort expended over the course of several years brings us nothing more concrete than a few tabled bills in Congress.

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