

**Local Growth Coalitions, Environmental Groups,
and Air Pollution Control Technologies**

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It has been over 30 years since the U.S. federal government enacted sweeping legislation – the Clean Air Act of 1970 – to address the acute air pollution that was facing numerous urban areas (Jones 1975). Air pollution emissions, nevertheless, continue to persist at high levels, with several U.S. urban regions facing seemingly intractable poor air quality (Rosenbaum 1998; Andrews 1999; "Lung Association" 2002). Moreover, global warming has solidified into an accepted scientific fact (Revkin 2001 June 12; 2002 June 3). The recent global warming trend is in large part the result of human-made airborne emissions of such gasses as carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxide (Christianson 1999). Despite this scientific consensus, and the ominous signs pointing to a rapid heating of the globe (e.g., the ongoing melting of the polar ice caps [Revkin 2002 March 20]), U.S. policymakers have not enacted policies to directly abate the emission of human-made greenhouse gasses (Revkin 2002 Feb. 15). Why, despite strongly worded regulatory legislation and the ample scientific data demonstrating the negative environmental and health effects of air pollution, does the U.S. continue to experience poor air quality in many urban areas as well as significantly contribute to global warming?¹ A primary reason the United States has not taken decisive action against airborne emissions is because the political energy to abate air pollution in the U.S. does not flow from a specific effort to protect human health or the environment, but from a historic effort to realize wealth from the ownership and sale of land.

David Ricardo (1830) describes the political economy of capitalism as comprising an effort between land owners, workers, and capitalists to capture the economic benefits derived from modern production techniques. The historic conflict over air pollution in the U.S. is largely the result of landed interests seeking to maximize the value of their land by minimizing the economic harm from airborne

pollution. Therefore, as industrial capitalists, in the process of producing and selling commodities to capture profit, emit air pollution, landed elites seek to abate localized air pollution to capture rent from the utilization of their land. Segments of the working class have only been recently mobilized on the issue of air pollution, but this recent mobilization has not significantly altered the terms of the air pollution debate set by large land owners and industrial capitalists. This debate is centered around the deployment of technology to abate localized air pollution (i.e., the "ecological modernization" of production and transportation facilitates).

To analyze the politics of air pollution in the U.S., I have deduced from the above theoretical framework a thesis with four interrelated components. Each component of this thesis is original and controversial in its own way:

1.) The first component of this thesis is that U.S. air pollution abatement policies are driven by landed interests. These interests take the contemporary form of local growth coalitions – composed of large land holders, land developers, and the owners of regional media and utility firms. Local growth coalitions economically profit from economic growth in particular localities (Logan and Molotch 1987).

My position on the political impetus underlying U.S. clean air policies is not shared by most scholars who analyze clean air politics. They generally hold that U.S. air pollution abatement policies flow from middle class concerns over the negative aesthetic and health effects of air pollution. In other words, the politics over air pollution is set by most contemporary thinkers within a framework pitting relatively privileged segments of labor (i.e., the middle class) against capital (e.g., Inglehart 1977; Hays 1987; 2000; Stradling 1999).

2.) The second part of my thesis is that clean air policies are functional to the operation of the market and to the realization of profit. Political scientists and historians who study U.S. pollution abatement policies have failed to realize this, with some exception (Dewey 2000), because they exclusively focus on the economic costs absorbed by industrial manufacturers as a result of clean air policies. They fail, however, to consider the economic benefits derived from cleaner air by real estate interests and other profit-driven concerns whose markets are place bound (e.g., regional media outlets and utilities). To the extent that clean air policies reduce air pollution, such policies contribute to a positive local investment climate, and, in turn, they help locally-oriented economic interests realize the profits associated with such a climate.

3.) The center of policymaking in the area of clean air is the urban milieu. Researchers who study U.S. environmental politics normally assume that it is the politics and policies at the federal level that are driving events in the environmental policy arena. This is particularly the case with those environmental policies instituted after the federal environmental legislation of the early 1970s (Rosenbaum 1998; Andrews 1999; Graham 2000). Even those political scientists that analyze clean air policymaking on the state and local levels (e.g., Kamieniecki and Farrell [1991]; Lowry [1992]; Ringquist [1993]; Potoski [2001]), hold that the federal government is the dominant institutional force in this policy area. Instead, however, as different local growth coalitions have moved politically to mitigate the adverse economic effects of air pollution, it is local and state governments that have taken the political and policy lead on the issue of air pollution. In light of state and local government assertiveness on the issue of air pollution abatement, the role of the

federal government has in large part been to provide uniformity in the nation's clean air regime. This is most readily apparent in the politics surrounding the 1990 Clean Air Act and its content.

4.) Environmental groups have been symbolically included in the clean air policymaking process. Historians and political scientists either directly argue or assume that environmental groups have a direct and positive impact on the creation and strengthening of air pollution abatement policies at all levels of government. As I will demonstrate, however, contemporary and historical environmental groups have little to do with the current approach to air pollution abatement. Moreover, it is an open question whether environmental groups help determine the present level of regulation assessed on business and industry. Their most tangible contribution to the policymaking process is to provide it with legitimacy.

In this paper I expound on the four facets of my thesis.

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End Notes

1. The U.S. economy is the source of 25 percent of the world's carbon dioxide emissions.