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MOTIVATING CLIMATE ACTIVISM THROUGH FRAMING: HOPE, FEAR, INJUSTICE,  
AND SACRIFICE

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On October 6<sup>th</sup> 2018, the UN International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published a report on the different effects that a 1.5 and 2-degree Celsius temperature increase would have on the earth, and what would be needed to prevent anthropogenic climate change from continuing beyond these points. The report noted that for anthropogenic climate change to stay at or below 1.5 degrees, “[models require] global net anthropogenic CO<sub>2</sub> emissions [to] decline by about 45% from 2010 levels by 2030” (UN IPCC). Furthermore, the report noted the dangers that would be presented by breaching 1.5 degrees, stating that 10 million fewer people would be displaced by sea level rise and several hundred million less people would be susceptible to poverty in a 1.5 degree scenario rather than a 2 degree scenario (UN IPCC). These results are themselves notably dire, yet the possibilities for mass migrations and increased economic inequality have the potential to create a political climate that is extremely unstable (Schleussner et al. 2016). Despite the urgency needed in action and the extreme effects that will occur without action, significant governmental action to prevent climate change has not been forthcoming (McKinnon 2014). Furthermore, large segments of the global population either full scale deny climate change, or believe that climate change isn’t pressing enough to necessitate action (Fleur 2015).

The lack of action on climate change can be depressing to many climate activists, as are the apocalyptic scenarios that climate change could lead to. Indeed, this depressing combination of politics and science has led theorist Dale Jamison to write that “we must accept that ‘the struggle against climate change has failed’ and begin to come up with ways to live with that reality” (Lane 2016, 119). Even if not all concerned citizens agree with Jamison, the combination of possibilities scientists report, and the present lack of government interest in stopping climate change, can paralyze concerned citizens from engaging in political climate action (McKinnon

2014, 31). In this political climate, which has the possibility to paralyze citizens from climate action through despair, better understanding how internal conceptions of climate change may lead concerned citizens to become more passionate as political climate activists would be useful.

I intend to start to provide such a framework. I shall explore what motivates climate action in the United States. I narrow my focus from global to national because United States action on climate change is likely to be a necessary condition for international climate agreements to be effective (Meyer 2016). My other narrowing will be in the form of context. I shall limit the context of my discussion to how the different elements of hope and fear—themselves forms of mental framing—affect the propensity of citizens to engage in climate action. My considerations of sacrifice and injustice shall thus largely be extensions and applications of the arguments about hope and fear.

In my first section, I shall explore why hope and fear are not the mutually exclusive concepts they at times seem to be, but instead two different elements that must both be present in any mental framework that is to promote climate action. Second, I explore how a desire for unconstrained economic growth and the related concept of consumer sovereignty have caused climate change in such a manner that requires activists to take a group oriented political mindset in combatting climate change. Third, I reason that climate change activism must be understood from the outset as a form of sacrifice so as to properly conceive of what activism will entail. Forth, I explore how the synergies between sacrifice and hope and fear provide additional benefits to each concept. I argue that political climate activism is best inspired by an understanding of climate change as a yet avertable slide toward an apocalypse that will sacrifice the future of mankind and thus do great injustice on future generations.

Before I continue to the substance of my paper, I will define the form of activism I am looking to promote. As shall become clear in the section on the normative roots of climate change, I do not believe that personal acts of energy saving are enough to prevent the worst effects of climate change. As such, I look to definitions of political action that are centered on groups of concerned citizens who themselves do not have the ability to unilaterally make systemic changes. Hannah Arendt's somewhat controversial definitions of what constitutes political power provide a framework that addresses these goals. According to Arendt, "power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse" (Arendt 1958, 200). Based off Arendt's definition, I shall, for the context of this paper, define "political climate action" as the coming together of people to achieve the goal of in some manner preventing climate change. The utility in such definition shall become further apparent as the paper progresses.

### Hope and fear

I assert that to be properly motivated to engage in political climate action, a certain belief in the potential for climate change to result in an apocalyptic end of humanity, or life on earth, is necessary. This assertion is by no means obvious, as there has been substantial discussion among theorists, activists, and scientists, as to whether framing climate change in terms of an apocalypse is helpful. Indeed, Robin Globus Veldman (2012) argues that many environmentalists (excluding herself) believe "apocalypticism hinders activism, whether by encouraging fatalism or skepticism, risking self-fulfilling prophecies or alienating moderates" (1-2). Veldman's disagreement with other theorists regarding apocalypticism is indeed but a subset of the larger discussion of how fear and hope should be used to promote climate activism. This

discussion is indeed large enough that theorist Melissa Lane mentioned it in her review of the contributions of political theory to climate change (2016).

Veldman enumerates an argument that envisioning climate change as leading to an apocalypse, or “apocalypticism,” is not only useful in portraying climate change, but indeed a primary cause of activism. Continuing, Veldman notes “a fair amount of environmental activism occurs not despite apocalypticism but because of it,” and that “environmentally apocalyptic views are often associated with activism” (2). Indeed, there is empirical evidence supporting the idea that climate change activism is promoted by fear: according to Roser-Renouf et al. (2014), variable regressions have found climate change activism to be promoted by greater risk perceptions from climate change (164).

Despite the convincing argument Veldman makes for climate activism being promoted by apocalyptic viewpoints, Catriona McKinnon (2014) argues the seemingly contradictory argument that hope is of “instrumental value” in leading people to political climate action (45). McKinnon proceeds to define hope as the opposite of despair, claiming despair “is typically a debilitation of the will” (35). Furthermore, McKinnon claims that to despair about climate change is philosophically unjustified (31).

While Veldman and McKinnon’s arguments might first seem to be mutually contradictory, they are in fact arguing about different things. Veldman’s argument is about the eventuality that climate change will lead to apocalypse, though she mentions that in her conceptualization of apocalypse this eventuality can yet be averted (2012, 5). McKinnon’s argument instead is that hope in one’s attempts to stop climate change is necessary (2014, 40). The key distinction here is that Veldman is arguing for how people should view the potential results of climate change, *should activists not step up*. By contrast, McKinnon is arguing that one

needs to have enough internal efficacy to believe that there is some hope that one's actions will prevent climate change. In essence, McKinnon is arguing that people need to feel like *stepping up will make a difference*. It is thus apparent that despite McKinnon's suggestion that "doom and gloom" politics are unjustifiable, there is nevertheless room for exactly such arguments given that they are put in the correct context. This context is that of apocalypse: it is possible to believe that climate change is likely to cause an apocalypse—a frightfully gloomy scenario—even as one still believes there is some hope in personal action.

It is useful to view a more tangible example of fear combining with efficacy to prompt action. I posit that voting is just such an example. Fear was used on both sides of the political aisle in the 2018 election in an attempt to get out the vote: The Republicans employed frightful images of a migrant army even as Democrats warned of the danger president Trump presents to Democracy. It is thus clear that political strategists believed fear to be instrumental in motivating voting. At the same time, studies on motivations to vote find that citizens who believe their votes matter are significantly more likely to vote than those who believe their votes to have an insubstantial affect (Darmofal 2010). It thus seems reasonable voting is better inspired by a combination of fear of the opposite party and hope that one's vote is important.

Drawing from the comparison to voting, I further argue that not only can doom and gloom coexist with hope, but in the context of an avertable apocalypse such a combination is more effective in combatting climate change than either hope or fear by themselves. The reason is simple: both hope and fear are by themselves insufficient to motivate climate action. Hope for change promotes passivity: citizens who believe climate change to be a problem and have hope that it will be resolved may content themselves to allowing others to solve climate change. These citizens may hope for science to advance to the point of stopping climate change, even as they

themselves feel no urgency to act. A framing of climate change solely as apocalypse does the opposite, suggesting climate change will lead in a predetermined fashion to an ungodly end of days. To a citizen who believes climate change will lead to apocalypse but who doesn't believe there is hope to stop it, there is absolute dread but again no motivation to act. Instead of either of these scenarios, citizens must frame climate change in terms of an apocalypse that may yet be averted by human action. Here the issue of climate change remains monumental in scope, creating a level of importance that is altogether absent in those who do not frame climate change as leading to apocalypse, while still providing hope in individual action to stop climate change. In this framework, the enormity of the climate change problem intersects with internal efficacy to bring citizens to believe that climate change is one of, if not the most, important of issues—and yet an issue that humans can have an impact on.

There is one additional subtlety to add to how citizens should combine doom and gloom with hope in a manner that better promotes activism. Specifically, understanding the apocalypse as an injustice against future generations would better promote activism. This may seem to be inherently involved in apocalypticism—indeed I am arguing simply for an explicit enumeration noting the injustice of a climate apocalypse. This enumeration would likely stress that the injustice in climate change results from the fact that the humans living in the climate apocalypse will have had no hand in creating their plight. The benefit of enumerating the injustice inherent in a climate apocalypse is that it makes explicit another motivation for climate activism, without significantly reframing concepts. Indeed, Corner, Markowitz, and Pidgeon (2014) note that concern about the injustice climate change would bring is one of the primary predictors of climate activism (414).

In this section, I have argued for framing climate change as a disaster that may yet be averted through human action, and that if humans fail to prevent climate change, it will cause an apocalyptic future that would constitute an extreme injustice against future generations. The benefits of such a portrayal of climate change extend beyond those mentioned in this section, as we will see that such portrayals render another useful concept more palatable, namely sacrifice. However, before fully exploring how sacrifice fits into the framing citizens must use around climate change, a description of the societal underpinnings and hidden principles that have led to climate change is necessary.

### Theoretic underpinnings of climate change

I shall now explore how particular neoliberal and capitalist economic theories are at fault for causing and perpetuating climate change. According to Stephan James Purdey (2012), the primary theoretical cause of climate change has been a preference for unconstrained capital growth (80-81). Purdey continues on to explain that this preference for unconstrained growth is in many ways a physical manifestation of an unwillingness in modern society to ask specific individuals or groups to make sacrifices (81-82). Instead, by simply advocating policies of continued economic growth, higher living standards can be promised to all. Yet to fuel a continuously growing economy, a continuously growing pool of resources will be needed, and an increasingly large amount of waste will be produced. Purdey concludes that, in the end, it is this unwillingness to address inequality that causes climate change (92). While Purdey does not explicitly call it sacrifice, it is not a stretch to say that the unconstrained capitalism Purdey claims has led to climate change is simply a sacrifice of both the future health of the world and

the current livelihood of those on the lower rungs of the economic ladder. I will return to this connection to sacrifice later.

While a preference for unconstrained growth may ultimately be the root cause of climate change, the concept of consumer sovereignty is a closely related and similarly problematic normative offshoot. According to Thomas Princen (2010), consumer sovereignty is the idea that “its all about the consumer; consumers exercise free choice; the consumer is the decider, indeed the ruler” (145). This theory in many ways seems to be a direct result of the theory of supply and demand, such that it makes little sense to critique consumer sovereignty, unless one disagrees with the principle of supply and demand. Yet according to Princen, consumer sovereignty is not inherent (148). Furthermore, shielding consumer sovereignty from a normative discussion of costs and benefits fails to address whether the concept is a cause of climate change. Princen’s main concern with consumer sovereignty, however, is that it insidiously allows companies to remove any responsibility they otherwise would have to combat climate change, instead putting all the responsibility on consumers (152).

Understanding the root causes of climate change, enumerated above, is useful for two reasons. First, the above concepts return this paper to why climate activism must be political. Since it is but a small number of companies that are the primary contributors to climate change, there is extremely limited utility in attempting to prevent climate change through individual abstinence from consumption, as the fact remains that companies themselves are acting to constrain individual choice. Furthermore, since Americans do not by their own economic decisions have a substantial impact on the companies that are responsible for climate change, any reduction in emissions on the scale that is needed must be political in nature. Here we return to why Arendt’s conception of political power is useful. For Arendt, power is not derived from

individual actors with great strength, but instead from groups of people who want to see change. If political power simply signified military or economic strength, there would be little hope in preventing climate change, as the economically strong are the main contributors to climate change. But if, as Arendt holds, political power arises from the coming together of citizens, then it follows that citizens are able to impact climate change so long as they act in large enough groups. This definition of political action is thus in line with our requirement that Americans believe they have the agency to prevent climate change.

In this section, I have noted the arguments that climate change has its theoretic roots both in a preference for unconstrained economic growth, and in the concept known as consumer sovereignty. Understanding the role these theories have had in causing and perpetuating climate change is important, as it provides a basis for my definition of political power. Furthermore, analyzing the normative preference in the U.S. for economic growth and how it arises from an unwillingness to sacrifice sets up the next topic of this paper, sacrifice.

### Sacrifice

One issue that has not been addressed yet in this paper is how citizens concerned with climate change may avoid having their passion wane as they embark in activism. I believe the solution here is that the somewhat contested idea of sacrifice is itself a necessary conceptualization of climate change. The reason that such a concept would be helpful is as follows: by conceiving of political climate activism as involving sacrifice before citizens engage in it, those citizens will be better prepared for any surprises that may arise due to the at times onerous nature of political activism. Activism requires significant amounts of time, and an understanding that this is the case from the outset would allow citizens to avoid misinterpreting

the amount of commitment required. In addition, understanding climate change in terms of sacrifice would better enable climate activists to act as role models for what they believe society must do. Here I am not arguing that activists should sacrifice modern lifestyles in hopes that it will impact climate change. While activists certainly may sacrifice modern lifestyles if they wish, such a sacrifice does not qualify as political climate action: sacrificing lifestyles is an individual act and thus does not include the coming together of people that political climate action requires. What I am arguing is that activists who conceptualize climate change in terms of sacrifice may better be able to promote climate change policies. While framing climate change as sacrifice may seem counterintuitive, it has been argued that one of the main reasons citizens haven't latched onto carbon tax policies is that they haven't been framed in terms of sacrifice (Gunster 2010). The question then remains how to make sacrifice a palatable concept.

To make climate sacrifice an acceptable conception and activity for climate activists, they both must understand the hidden sacrifices promoted by America's individualized and growth orientated culture, and understand the consequences that would be caused by a lack of sacrifice in the form of climate activism. The first of these two tasks is explained extensively by Maniates, Meyer, and their contributors, in *The Environmental Politics of Sacrifice* (2010). Throughout the chapters of this book, the sacrifices that are made in society as it currently stands are laid bare. These sacrifices are quite numerous, including rather momentous sacrifices for especially integral parts of American society. Such examples include the statistic that each day 150 Americans are killed by cars, an indication of society's preference for personal vehicles even if it means American deaths (Princen 2010, 152). Such a sacrifice would be unacceptable to Americans in many other contexts, largely because it would be more obvious.

The importance of sacrifice goes beyond understanding what sacrifices have been made, for there is often little to no democratic discussion involved in deciding what should be sacrificed. This is the case in the matter of the individualized and resource intensive living standards in the American economy. Most Americans have no choice but to own and drive a personal vehicle, and there are numerous other carbon intensive living patterns not truly decided upon by individual Americans (Williams 2010, 254). Instead, these actions are decided upon by the companies that benefit from these lifestyles through their advertisements to affect popular opinions and their lobbying to physically constrain the choices available to Americans (Princen 2010, 152). What is essentially occurring here is a relatively small number of companies are causing practices that create extraordinary amounts of emissions and hiding it through the guise of consumer sovereignty. The wealthy few who benefit extraordinarily from the current societal order do so by sacrificing the future of humans. As this is clearly an extreme injustice, it follows that understanding that climate change is being caused by a few individuals and corporations sacrificing the future of the earth for their own gain is a conceptualization that may help promote activism. I shall proceed to explore how understanding climate change as sacrifice is helped by apocalypticism, even while understandings of sacrifice are themselves useful to framing climate change in terms of hope and fear.

#### Relations between hope, fear, and sacrifice

While understanding climate change as sacrifice is useful in its own right, the relation between sacrifice and hope and fear adds many beneficial nuances to framings of climate change. One massive benefit of apocalypticism is that it has the potential to overcome the psychology issue that humans have a hard time rationally reasoning in a manner that promotes

long term goals, a concept known in psychology as judgment discounting (Gifford 2011, 292-293). Judgment discounting relates to climate change through the inability of humans to correctly judge the scope of climate change, instead estimating it to be significantly less dangerous than scientists suspect it will be (Gifford). Yet if climate change is framed by activists as leading to an apocalypse that ends human existence or life on earth, it is hard to imagine a worse result of climate change. Thus, by intentionally framing climate change in terms of apocalypse, humans may be able to attempt to counter judgement discounting. While it isn't clear that apocalypticism is itself enough to combat judgement discounting, it nevertheless could prove beneficial in reducing the amount of discounting that occurs. If judgment discounting is effectively combated, it follows that humans would be willing to sacrifice more in the present than would otherwise be viewed as acceptable.

Another useful connection between sacrifice and hope and fear is exemplified by the hidden sacrifice that is deadly automobile accidents. The reason this sacrifice is hidden from society is that the deaths involved have been framed as a tragedy rather than as a sacrifice. While tragedy and sacrifice are often used in similar contexts, the terms have meaningful differences. In its modern usage, tragedy is something that happens to people so that there is no agency in tragedy. By contrast, sacrifice is an act that often implies some level of consent, even if the consent occurs at a societal level (Hall 2010). Society hides the sacrifice involved in automobile accidents by framing them as tragedy. In this way, the consent society gives to automobile deaths is obscured, and the agency humans have in stopping the deaths is removed. Yet if America was to completely move to a mass transportation system, these deaths would be prevented. In this same sense, framing climate change as a form of sacrifice, rather than a form of a more passive concept such as tragedy, connotes that humans have the agency to stop climate change. The logic

of this argument is as follows: since sacrifice requires agency, and climate change is a form of sacrifice, it follows that humans have agency over climate change. In this manner, viewing climate change as a form of sacrifice helps activists to develop the exact type of hope in human agency I argue they must have.

Apocalypticism is extremely useful in helping political climate activists to accept that sacrifices will be required in climate action. This benefit of apocalypticism comes from its ability to help bridge the gap caused by judgement discounting through the immense scale of the eventual sacrifice that is made by not sacrificing in the present. Furthermore, the nuanced connotations of sacrifice cause activists who frame climate change as sacrifice to believe they have agency over climate change.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I argue for an analytic framework that should energize citizens concerned with climate change to political climate action. My focus on political climate action comes from the normative roots of climate change, roots which suggest that individualized reductions in consumption are not enough, and that instead citizens must engage in political action that brings the government to act. I further suggest that since the preference for uncontrolled economic growth that has caused climate change primarily benefits relatively few individuals and corporations, which already have extreme political and economic clout, it makes sense to use the principles of group cooperation for forming political power that Arendt conceptualized.

The subject of analysis in this paper is individuals in the United States. Since the US has such a large amount of global strength, in economic, military, and diplomatic forms, the example it sets is often followed by much of the world. Furthermore, since the United States is one of the

largest contributors to the climate change problem, and has substantial scientific and technological resources, it is unlikely that global climate agreements could properly function without the United States participating in them (Meyer 2016). As such, it makes logical sense to look for the normative framing devices that promote climate activism in the United States.

In arguing for how citizens can energize themselves for political climate activism in the United States, I suggest citizens need a more nuanced approach than has previously been taken in framing climate change in terms of hope and fear. The primary basis of this argument was that both hope and fear are necessary for promoting climate activism, but must be used in different settings. Fear is necessary in the more abstract setting of what climate change will cause should humans fail to act sufficiently. Thus, the fear is of the future—an apocalyptic future that will occur if no action is taken. This fear should provide a strong form of motivation for political climate action. Hope is needed in the present. Individuals must have hope that their actions can cause the policy changes that are needed to sufficiently combat climate change. This internal political efficacy is needed to prevent the fear that motivates action from overcoming the will to fight and thus causing citizens to despair.

Two additions were then added to the theory of hope and despair. First, the requirement that the apocalypse is framed in terms of the injustice it causes was added. The main benefit of such an enumeration was the belief by political scientists that climate action is strongly promoted by individual beliefs that climate change is a form of injustice. The second addition was that individuals must frame any climate action in terms of sacrifice. The benefit of framing climate change in terms of sacrifice is the potential that such a framing could help activists to avoid being shocked into complacency by the demanding nature of activism. In order that activists might find large sacrifices of their time to be acceptable, a discussion was then given as to the

necessity for activists to understand that climate change is itself a form of sacrifice. The paper then concluded with a brief remark on how the concepts of sacrifice, hope, and fear have surprising synergies that expand the usefulness each have as framings of climate change.

In this paper, I have striven to create a framework that bridges the gap between activists who believe climate change is best seen as a likely apocalypse, and something that humans are yet likely to avoid. The intent of this analysis is to provide a framework for citizens to use to inspire themselves to climate action in even depressing political times. In the era of the Trump presidency, I hope this framework is useful. In terms of what the academic next step is however, a study of how such a framework can be used to bring otherwise uninterested citizens to climate action would be a monumental step forward.

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