

Bringing both sides for conservation

Like a lot of things, environmental conservation is another issue that divides conservatives and liberals -- but maybe it can turn into a bipartisan issue with a little bit of tweaking on how the conservation message is conveyed.

Kai Ryssdal: There are academic studies on pretty much every topic you can imagine released all the time. Most fade into the relative obscurity of one journal or another -- but there is occasionally research that catches on with the mainstream media. One such example came out of UCLA a couple of months ago, about a program aimed at inspiring people to save energy. "Nudges Gone Wrong" was a typical headline about it. Researchers found that some conservatives, as in political conservatives, didn't respond all that well to a little nudging from their power company to conserve -- and that got our sustainability reporter Sarah Gardner thinking.

Sarah Gardner: Thinking, specifically, about the politics of conservation. But first, that UCLA study. Economists analyzed a group of utility customers who were getting regular notices from their power company comparing their energy use with similar households. See, behavioral psychologists have convinced utilities that if customers can compare their kilowatt hours to their neighbors, they'll want to "keep up with the Joneses..." Turns out that's not always true.

Patrick Michaels: I'm absolutely unsurprised by this result.

That's Patrick Michaels, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute. He shrugged at the study's results that show "nudging" ended up reducing energy consumption by a little, 1 to 2 percent. But here's the real headline: Some Republican households responded by using more power.

Michaels: If you tell a class of grade schoolers, "no talking right now," I guarantee you somebody's going to talk. This is not quite as command-and-control as that, but it is a little bit paternalistic on the part of the energy companies.

Paternalistic. Big Brother. Intrusive. Jim DiPeso is director of Republicans for Environmental Protection. He says it's understandable that some in his party could view utility nudging in that light. He says the Republicans who cranked up the air conditioning even more, post-nudge, may have been making a statement. But that doesn't mean they're not interested in saving energy.

Jim DiPeso: Conservation is conservative. The two words come from the same root, and the ethic of true conservatism is to conserve, to save, to be prudent, to be a good steward. And how we got onto this idea that somehow conservation is not conservative is just mind-boggling.

DiPeso says energy conservation started getting a bad rap in this country back in the 1970s.

DiPeso: I think the word "energy conservation" for some people may bring to mind an image of a scowling Jimmy Carter sitting in the White House with a sweater and telling us all to shiver and turn the lights off.

Well, President Carter didn't say to shiver exactly.

Then-President Jimmy Carter: And I'm asking you to take no unnecessary trips, to use car pools or public transportation whenever you can and to set your thermostats to save fuel.

DiPeso says the idea of energy cutbacks doesn't easily fit in with America's culture of freedom and enterprise.

DiPeso: But what we can do is we can have all these benefits, we can have all this abundance and prosperity, but we don't have to do it with so much waste, we don't have to do it with so much depletion of our natural capital and I think that's a point of common ground that Republicans and Democrats can come together on.

In other words, an energy-saving light bulb is neither liberal nor conservative. It's just a smart investment. But environmental historian Paul Sabin at Yale University says political attitudes are also shaped by how you define the problem. Liberals, like Jimmy Carter, perceived an energy shortage. Conservatives like his successor, Ronald Reagan, saw untapped markets.

Paul Sabin: If you don't believe there's a fundamental scarcity of energy, then energy conservation by itself can be seen as more of a personal decision, a values decision as opposed to a social imperative.

Cue Vice President Dick Cheney in 2001, when he said energy conservation might be a sign of "personal virtue" but no basis for a sound energy policy. Still energy conservation and efficiency are widely regarded as the low-hanging fruit for cutting fossil fuel consumption.

Jim DiPeso says utilities that want to nudge more conservative customers into conserving should forget those neighbor-to-neighbor comparisons and talk bottom lines.

Sabin: If you save energy, you'll have more money to spend on things that you really enjoy -- unless you really truly enjoy sending money to your friendly utility.

You can count on that message getting a bipartisan reaction.

I'm Sarah Gardner for Marketplace.