



Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D.
Greening the Media

Anyone for Altruism? Calling All Republicans

As winters warm, Americans live more comfortably.
But what about others?

Posted May 11, 2016



Nature is one of the leading scientific journals in the world.¹ Six decades ago, it announced the structure of deoxyribose nucleic acid, our veritable genetic building blocks.² So when *Nature* publishes pretty much anything, even correspondence, the results are scrutinised with as much rigor as full-scale research articles.

A recent issue contained a lengthy letter that has drawn much attention. Patrick J Egan and Megan Mullin, from NYU and Duke University respectively, demonstrate that US weather already appears to be affected by climate change, across both seasons and places.³

So far, this tendency, evident since the mid-1970s, has worked quite well for Americans, who have either moved to places with increasingly warmer winters or enjoyed them at home—hence the difficulty of persuading them that climate change is a danger, because they are living in temperate conditions. The *New York Times* headlined its story on the paper (by the original authors) “Global Warming Feels Quite Pleasant.”⁴

But the medium-term message will differ markedly. Predictive models suggest that this leavening of winter cold will soon give way to intensification of summer heat, such that the vast majority of the population will encounter less pleasant weather as the century progresses, unless greenhouse-gas emissions diminish significantly.

Because the impact of these changes will be tangible, and negative, the authors propose that this could lead to a bipartisan desire to mitigate climate change, akin to the displeasure with local pollution that helped galvanise the electorate forty years ago and saw the foundation of the Environmental Protection Agency and other governmental responses to current damage and future danger.

Meanwhile, we find a thawing of Republican Party intransigence on this topic. Two weeks back, a poll indicated that 56 per cent of Party registrants recognise the reality of global warming. That’s up from 40 per cent five years ago.⁵ And there is now a Bipartisan Climate Solutions Caucus on Capitol Hill, despite the anti-science intellectual blockade presented by all the Party’s Presidential hopefuls this campaign season.⁶

The original paper in *Nature* has already been criticized, rightly, for working only with averages and summers rather than the riskiest and most dramatic side to climate change—catastrophes and their increasing force and frequency.⁷ Both that tendency, and the differential impact globally that may come with climate change—nicer for Russians and Canadians, deadlier for East Asians—requires us all to think beyond ourselves, to care for others.

What makes for such altruism? In addition to religious faith, for instance in martyrs as those who have suffered, there is a long and distinguished history of commemorating and repeating valor by the slain, sacrifice by the scientific, humility by the credulous, and resistance by the enslaved. The concept of altruism is, however, quite a modern one—it emerged with the appearance of 19th century sociology, albeit drawing on older and less secular traditions to explain the phenomena it identified.

For some psychologists, the notion of altruism is absurd, because they believe in an inexorable, inevitable selfishness, rather like adolescent existentialists—even when this selfishness protects the ego from critique and does so in ways that assist those in need.

When it comes to the environment, altruism in the form of solidarity needs to be animated in ways that appeal both to one’s own interests and others’.

So the adage of caring for generations yet to come—which may include one’s own relatives—is a clear candidate for persuading people to act selflessly, at least in terms of their immediate concerns. Acting to protect those already with us from powers that are beyond their control also requires identifying with others. This can take many forms in the English language, such as compassion, caring, empathy, sympathy, love, identification, and so on.

For those who like their compassion served cold, clinging on to a monadic vision in which we are all selfish consumers simply out to better ourselves with nary a thought for the other, there is a voluminous literature of sacrifice and thoughtfulness to counter.

As the Republican field narrows in the Presidential nominating process, let’s hope their eventual nominee heeds the views of most of his presumptive supporters. And whether you enjoy newly temperate winters or steamy summers, that you, too, look beyond those individual experiences to show charity in your concern for all.

1. <http://www.scimagojr.com/journalrank.php?country=GB>
2. <http://www.nature.com/nature/dna50/archive.html>
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About the Author

Richard Maxwell, Ph.D., is a professor and chair of media studies at Queens College, City University of New York. **Toby Miller, Ph.D.**, is an interdisciplinary social scientist.



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