



Gro Harlem Brundtland -  
Environmentalist Because She's a  
Woman?

[At least some researchers think so](#). According to a new study in *Social Science Research*, “controlling for other factors, in nations where women’s status is higher, CO2 emissions are lower.”

Study coauthors Christina Ergas and Richard York, sociologists at the University of Oregon, write:

even when controlling for a variety of measures of “modernization,” world-system position, and democracy, nations where women have higher political status — as indicated by the length of time women have had the right to vote and women’s representation in parliament and ministerial government — tend to have lower CO2 emissions per capita. This finding suggests that efforts to improve women’s political status around the world, clearly worthy on their own merits, may work synergistically with efforts to reduce CO2 emissions and avert dramatic global climate change.

Ergas and York concede that they don’t know why this trend exists, but speculate that, among other potential reasons, it’s “possible that women make different decisions than do men when placed in positions of power.”

Sorry — not buying it yet. It seems to me that there is a more straightforward explanation. Women reach higher levels of political power sooner in more progressive countries. More progressive countries are more likely to take action on climate change. Just apply the transitive property. A good example of this might be someone like Gro Harlem Brundtland (pictured), the former Norwegian Prime Minister, whose eponymous report established a widely-used definition of sustainable development.

I expect this to change over time: Margaret Thatcher might have been an exception in her time, but now we have Angela Merkel as well. Sarah Palin, thank God, never reached a position of national power. Here [is wikipedia’s list of female heads of government](#): I haven’t done a count, but it seems to me that a clear majority of them are somewhat on the left.

[Ann dealt with this a while back](#), commenting on another study that finds that men are more

confident about their views on climate while knowing less (this is one aspect of what I sometimes refer to as “testosterone poisoning”). Ergas and York reference this study, as well as others that seem to indicate women are more sensitive to environmental problems. But I would have been persuaded that women make more environmentally-conscious decisions *while in office*, controlling for political ideology, before buying that women are greener as a general matter.

Here’s a good test case. The current chair of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee is Barbara Boxer. The current ranking member is James Inhofe. Would you ascribe that to gender or political ideology?

Now, one might say that you cannot disentangle these two variables so neatly. If women are more liberal politically than men, it is hard to say that it is just about ideology: maybe women are more pro-environment. Perhaps: in the United States, the gender gap is well-known, although its causes are not. Perhaps it is because [women care for elderly relatives more](#) (although [some reports say](#) that it is changing), or care for children after divorce more, so they appreciate social spending more acutely. (In Nick Kristof’s fabulous book *Half the Sky*, he reports that in the Global South, when wives get more disposable income they spend it on health care and children’s education, but when husbands get more income, they spend it on alcohol and prostitutes.) But that does not track onto environmental policy.

I’m more than happy to concede that my gender isn’t doing its part when it comes to wise policy choices: the gender gap itself proves that! But I’d need more data than this one study to think that it goes deeper than progressive politics.