

If I want to a pizza, that's something I can handle on my own. If I want to protect a wilderness from oil companies, I can't do that on my own. I must work with others, which means I need to be able to communicate and coordinate, however loosely, to reach my goals. I also need information about the threat before I can even think about responding. This can't happen without freedom of speech and association. Yet those freedoms are under assault today as they have not been since the 1950s.

From an economic perspective, the logic is clear. Environmental quality is a public good, which requires collective action. But collective action won't take place without some mechanism for cooperation, which requires that people be able to communicate and organize. The government is often the key to providing public goods, but getting the government to act is itself a problem in collective action. Thus, anything that increases the costs of information and the costs of coordination undermines society's ability to deliver collective goods. Information itself is a public good, so it will be undersupplied by the market. Thus, government subsidies for environmental research also have an economic foundation.

We tend to take for granted the existence of environmental groups at all scales, from grassroots neighborhood groups to national organizations. We also take for granted that these groups will have access to lawyers, at least some of whom may provide pro bono services to help a worthy cause. We take for granted that research will expand our knowledge of environmental issues. Finally, we take for granted that people will learn enough basic information in school to understand environmental issues, that they will be able to get information through conventional and social media, and that they have the right to protest environmental harm. All those assumptions are now at risk.

Much of that is at risk due to attacks on First Amendment rights. Major law firms used to do important pro bono work on environmental issues. Trump's attacks on major firms were challenged by four firms, all of whom won in court. But his attacks were successful anyway, since many of the largest firms cut deals with the Administration or are simply shying away from any work that might offend the Administration. I have also heard stories about donors who are now leery of funding environmental work, especially on climate change, for fear of attracting the Administration's ire.

Given the Administration's willingness to attack its enemies and silence criticism, those fears are not completely unfounded. The head of the FCC has repeatedly threatened to take away broadcasting licenses from networks with unfavorable

news coverage. The Administration has also made it clear that it will favor its friends and punish its enemies in other ways, such as denying merger approval if media firms are critical or reserving lucrative opportunities like TikTok ownership to its friends and allies. Even law school professors and environmental research centers have become targets, as I've [posted](#) previously. There have also been seemingly unending efforts to harass opponents with criminal investigations and spurious indictments. These have not, so far, involved environmental issues, but the message to critics of the regime is clear. Threats that the Administration might [designate](#) a range of organizations as domestic terrorists and the politicization of the Justice Department, augment the chilling effect on organizations that oppose Administration policies.

The Administration and its allies have taken other steps to make it harder to obtain information about the environment or to influence government decisions. Dissenters in environmental agencies have been [punished](#). Massive amounts of environmental data have been stripped from government websites, and government research programs have been shuttered. Research grants relating to suspect topics like climate and environmental justice have been decimated. Requirements for public notice and input on decisions impact the environment have been [casualties](#) of "permitting reform."

All of this is to say that the fight to save the environment cannot be separated from the effort to defend democracy. It's not a coincidence that the title of this post is taken from what used to be the motto for the *Washington Post* until its billionaire owner decided that democracy was not, after all, a priority. Because of the inherently collective nature of environmental protection, democracy and environmental protection are inseparable. The government's efforts to suppress opponents have a cumulative effect, creating a climate of repression. If we want to fight global warming, we also need to fight the chilling effects of repression on First Amendment freedoms.