

Chapter Twenty-one

Environmental Policy

The Controversies

- Environmental policy creates both winners and losers
- It is shrouded in scientific uncertainty so problems and solutions are uncertain
- It encourages emotional appeals that may lead to distorted priorities
- It profoundly affects how the federal government deals with states and other nations

American Environmental Policy

- Exists in an adversarial political culture
- Rules are often uniform nationally (e.g., auto emissions)
- Many regulators and rules, strict deadlines, and expensive technologies are required
- Government and business often conflict
- Example: Clean Air Act took thirteen years to revise in Congress (1977–1990)

State Implementation

- Methods to achieve standards are left to states, subject to federal control
- Local politics influences allocations
- Federalism reinforces adversarial politics
- Separation of powers provides multiple points of access

The Environmental Movement

- Public increased its momentum in the 1960s
- Santa Barbara oil spill (1969), Earth Day (1970), aroused more interest
- 1970: Environmental Protection Agency established, Clean Air Act passed
- 1972: clean water legislation passed
- 1973: Endangered Species Act passed

Endangered Species Act (1973)

- Forbids buying or selling any creature or plant that is likely to become extinct unless it receives special protection
- Regulations also forbid adversely affecting habitats of endangered species
- Firms and agencies that wish to build anything in an area where an endangered species lives must comply with these regulations, often at a substantial cost

Clean Air Act (1970)

- Clean Air Act imposed tough restrictions
- 1975: 90 percent reduction of hydrocarbons and carbon monoxide
- 1976: 90 percent reduction in nitrogen oxides, as well
- Led to a reliance on catalytic converters, because there was not enough time to redesign the engines

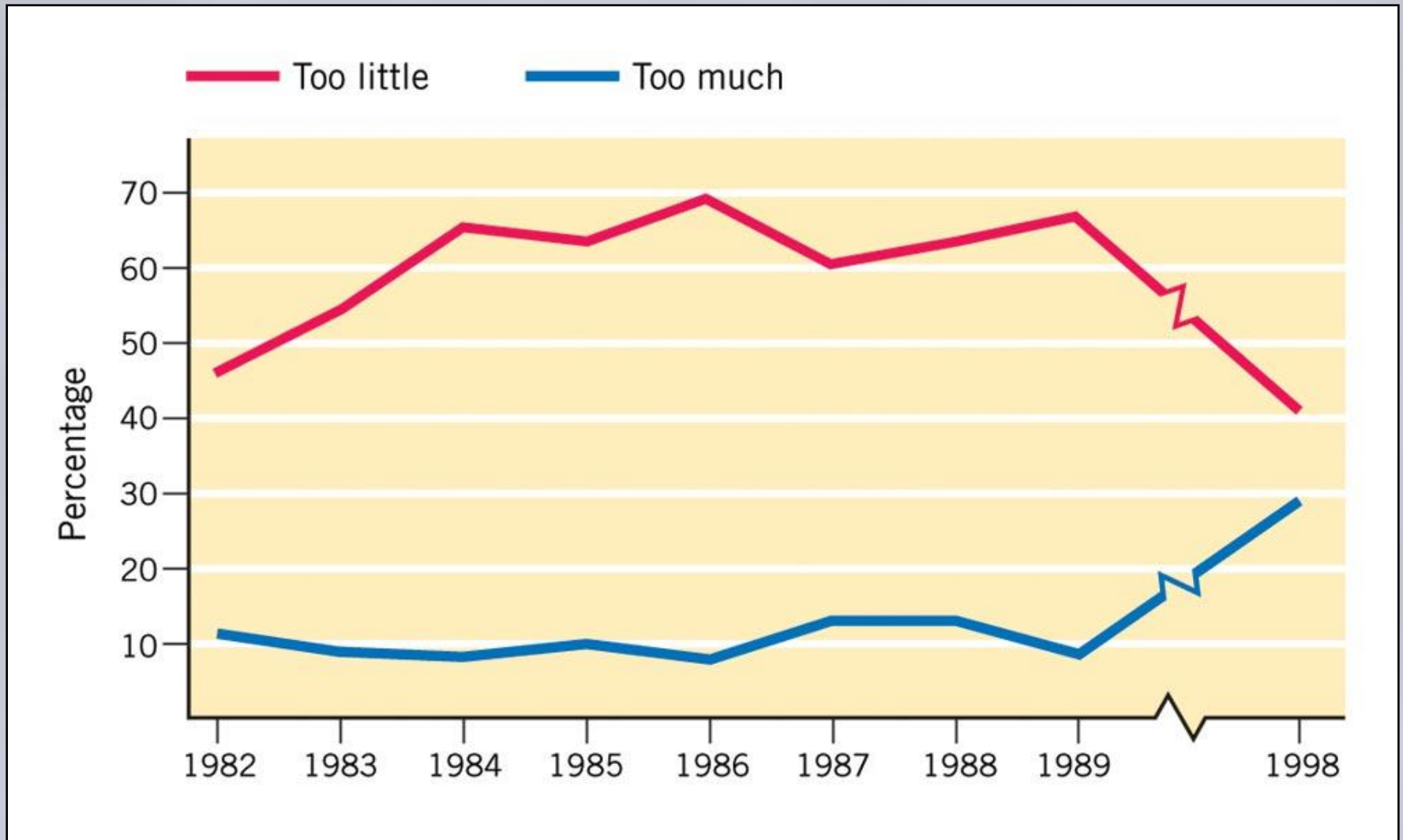
Clean Air Act (1970)

- The Clean Air Act was weakened in 1977 but revived in 1990 with tougher standards; deadlines were again delayed
- Most clean air laws passed since 1990 target particular industries (e.g., construction, agriculture)

National Environmental Policy Act (1969)

- Requires environmental impact statement (EIS)
- Does not require specific action
- Encouraged numerous lawsuits that block or delay projects
- Popular support remains strong, because costs appear low, benefits high

Figure 21.1: Government Regulation



Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report (January 20, 1990): 185, updated with Wirthlin Worldwide Survey.

Clean Air Act (1990)

- Before 1995: some plants could choose their approach to reducing emissions by a fixed amount
- 1995–2000: sharper reductions for many more plants, requiring the use of some scrubbers
- Sulfur dioxide allowances could be bought and sold
- Financial compensation was provided for coal miners who lost jobs

Agricultural Pesticides

- The EPA makes efforts to evaluate the safety of all pesticides
- Many have only long-term effects, which require extended study
- Proposals are expensive and time-consuming to evaluate

Agricultural Pesticides

- Farmers are well represented in Congress
- Subsidies often encourage overproduction and that also encourages overuse of pesticides
- Few pesticides have been removed from the market

Environmental Uncertainties

- Many environmental problems are not clear-cut
- Goals are often unclear
- The means of achieving goals (command and control strategy) are complicated

Costs and Benefits

- People do not distinguish between realistic and unrealistic threats, reasonable and unreasonable costs
- It is difficult to keep policy focused on real risks, and not diverted by unfounded popular concerns

Environmental Improvement

- The environment has improved since 1970
- Less air pollution: less carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, lead
- May be less water pollution but harder to judge
- Hazardous wastes remain a problem