

Varieties of Environmentalisms and Latino Views of Climate Action

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The well-understood gap between “mainstream” environmental organizations and Americans from minority populations is rooted in two phenomena. First, in the mid-1990s, hostility expressed toward immigrants and immigration by the Sierra Club (among other groups) drove a wedge between environmentalism and Latinos, as 87% of all Latinos are within two generations of the immigration experience. Second, whereas larger environmental groups focused on pollution and other forms of environmental degradation as well as conservation of natural and wild spaces, minority Americans showed less engagement in these issues and were affected more directly by air and water pollution and its consequences—phenomena that more directly affect communities of color. “Environmental justice” movements and organizations emerged to fill the gap left by the somewhat diminished focus of large “mainstream” groups on minority populations.

In the wake of these conflicts, it was unclear whether people of color held generally pro-environment policy views. Almost two decades ago, we tested two competing views (Whittaker, Segura, and Bowler 2005). The first, rooted in the post-materialist value literature (Dalton 2002; Inglehart 1977), hypothesized that Latinos and other minorities would show little interest in the environment because they faced more urgent and proximate demands on their resources. The alternative was that Latinos and other resource-disadvantaged groups were aware of the direct health, well-being, and quality-of-life challenges posed by proximate environmental degradation, including brownfields, poor air, and the absence of green space (Lowe and Pinhey 1982; Van Liere and Dunlap 1980). This awareness translated into support for environmental action on proximate issues. This theory was dubbed “environmental deprivation.”

To test which of these expectations was accurate, we examined policy opinions across an array of environmental issues such as pollution, toxic waste, offshore drilling, environmental spending, and self-identification as an environmentalist. Although Latinos were found to be less pro-environment on a variety of issues when compared to whites, the slope over time showed rapid trends in the pro-environmental direction, steeper than for non-Hispanic whites but confined to proximate concerns such as toxicity and pollution. Latinos were less interested in distant

concerns such as offshore drilling; however, they were becoming more aware and pro-environment about issues that mattered to them.

More recent studies (Benegal, Azevedo, and Holman 2022; Leiserowitz and Akerlof 2010) provide a far more nuanced and complex cross-race portrait for pro-environmental positions. The high-profile issue of climate has received far greater attention across the media environment, and the connection of global climate change with issues such as water quality, heat in workplace environments, and desertification in farm regions collectively have brought the broader environmental fight to the proximate concerns of Latino workers and families (Mendez and Sadhwani 2022; Park et al. 2020).

Do Latino voters today view climate change as a proximate threat or a distant concern? Has there been any movement on issues not perceived as proximate? Does support survive disadvantage in policy costs, application, and effects? If so, why?

Although the dangers of climate change are profound, their relative immediacy and effect is low vis-à-vis background noise in local weather over time and the lengthy causal chains between climate change and its deleterious consequences. To an uninformed observer, climate change is neither as proximate nor as immediate as air quality and local toxicity; therefore, it is not obvious whether Latinos would perceive this as a direct threat. If this were the case, environmental-deprivation arguments may not apply. For them to apply, we would need to know that some Latinos viewed the threat as immediate—for which there certainly has been emerging evidence (Mora and Lopez 2021).

Pro-environment positions are complicated further by maldistributed costs and benefits. The costs of climate remediation and carbon reduction are borne by disadvantaged communities and communities of color, Latinos, and others. Cushing et al. (2018) found that the sites for continued greenhouse-pollution release under the California cap-and-trade policy were located overwhelmingly in low-income and minority neighborhoods. Large-scale polluters also simply may decide that emissions reductions are worth the costs of emission credits and do little to improve environmental conditions.¹

California’s ban on the sale of new gasoline vehicles is slated for 2035. Hybrid and electric vehicles are significantly more expensive and still have only a limited secondary market

where many working-class Americans buy their vehicles. These vehicles are unfamiliar to most people, thereby foreclosing self-maintenance. Public infrastructure to support electric vehicles also is maldistributed geographically, and home-based infrastructure is expensive and, for renters, more difficult to secure.

Taxes and regulations that increase the price of gasoline, coupled with the limited availability of mass transit, adversely affect those who drive mostly for work. AB 1346 also required the California Air Resources Board to issue regulations in 2022 and to ban the sale in 2024 of small off-road engines, including mowers and leaf blowers, which means that conversion costs will fall heavily on low-income Latino landscapers.

Likewise, benefits and incentives designed to move individuals and families into climate-friendly behavior are structured in ways that benefit middle- and upper-income citizens. Tax credits and other incentives for electric vehicles accrue first to those who can afford one. Taxpayer subsidies for solar conversion are of little use to those who struggle to own homes.

Whether it is the adversely distributed costs of climate action or the adversely distributed benefits of both climate improvement and financial incentives, there are sufficient signals in this policy domain that weaker support for climate policies among Latinos and other communities of color would not be surprising.

EVIDENCE IS MOUNTING THAT LATINO SUPPORT FOR CLIMATE ACTION IS HIGH

Emerging literature appears to show that adverse distributions of costs and benefits have *not* undermined Latino environmentalism. For example, Latinos have been found to be more likely to contact government officials about environmental concerns (Ballew et al. 2020). Moreover, Latinos see climate change as having a local impact, potentially rendering moot the concern about proximity as a limiting factor (Mora and Hugo Lopez 2021).

Recent survey data provide a current window into the state of Latino opinion on all of these concerns. Across multiple studies, including data gathered immediately before the 2022 midterm election, these data demonstrate consistently pro-environment and pro-action results. First, Latino voters overwhelmingly support climate action. In general, Latino voters favor policies and candidates that will advance a pro-environment agenda in California and nationwide. Second, they even appear to be willing to pay meaningful costs for that action.

A 2022 poll of California Latinos voters found that 85% are more likely to support candidates favoring greater environmental regulation, compared with 15% who are less likely. Fear that the environmental message from the Left was not connecting with Latinos (Mendez and Sadhwani 2022) appears misplaced. Pro-environmental candidates—almost all Democrats—could and perhaps are benefiting from that position among the Latino electorate.²

A second survey of six potential battleground states with meaningful Latino electorates (i.e., Arizona, Georgia, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Texas) revealed a win-win scenario on environmental regulation wherein environmental regulation is accompanied by job growth rather than loss.

Registered Latino voters favored policy implementation 79% to 13%, a 66-point margin.³

To place these state-specific results in context, I examined the results of a cooperative Midterm Election Voter Poll⁴ that was completed immediately prior to the 2022 midterm election and included only those who reported having already voted or that they were certain to vote.⁵ In that study—which was mixed-mode, bilingual, and included oversamples of all major racial/ethnic voter subpopulations (based on their self-identification)—the results were strongly consistent with those presented previously. As shown in figure 1, when Latinos were asked whether climate change was (1) an urgent problem requiring action, (2) a problem but not immediate, or (3) overblown, 68% chose the “urgent” response. This compared to 21% stating that it is a problem but not immediate and only 11% stating that it is overblown (Segura 2023). In fact, every racial and ethnic minority group was more likely than non-Hispanic whites to see climate change as requiring urgent action and less likely than whites to think that the issue is “overblown.”

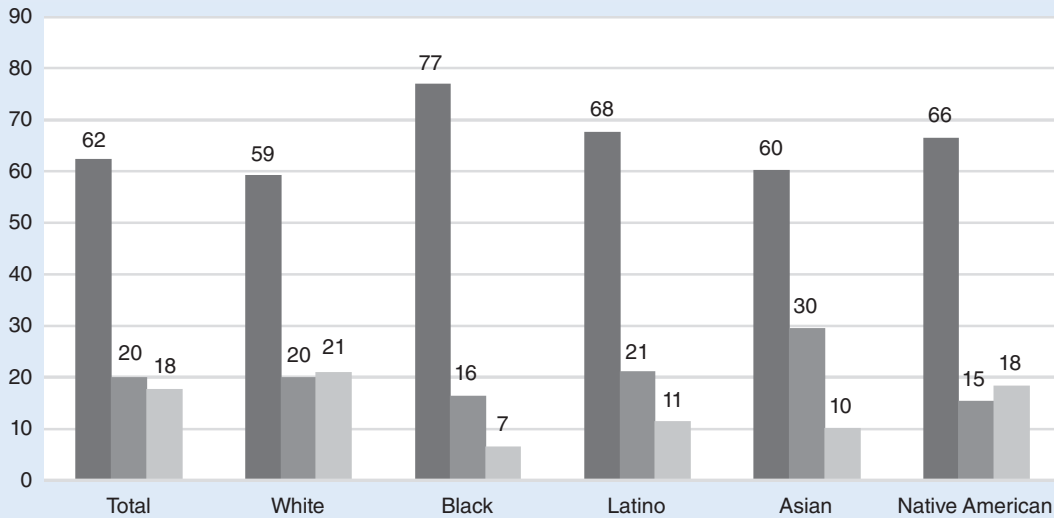
I assessed those comparisons in a multivariate context. Table 1 presents results of an ordered logit predicting the three-category variable regarding the urgency of the climate issue and the need for policy response. After controlling for various predictors including partisanship, the distinction between Latinos and African Americans on the one hand and non-Hispanic whites on the other persists. Both groups were significantly more likely to hold the position that climate change is an urgent concern that we must address now. The distinctions for Asian Americans and Native Americans fell to insignificance and, in the case of Asian Americans, approached significance in the opposite direction. Nevertheless, the principal result is reliable. Despite the relative esotericism of climate change as a policy domain, the opinions of Black and Latino Americans are to the left of whites. Why?

First-generation Latinos often arrive with direct experience of climate catastrophes in their nation of origin. Long-term drought and desertification in the Mexican breadbasket region and repeated hurricane devastation on the island of Puerto Rico are only two of many examples. Coming from a location with greater exposure to climate effects and a weaker infrastructure for addressing it may make immigrants more sensitive to the issue (Hunter 2000; Pfeffer and Stycos 2002). The findings on age and education may have a greater effect on Latinos vis-à-vis other Americans because of their relative youth—that is, their median age is in the upper 20s rather than the low 40s as it is for non-Hispanic whites. Younger people are more concerned about climate change (and arguably more affected), and younger Latinos are far more likely to have some college—or to have completed college—than older cohorts.⁶

Table 2 presents the results from an ordered logit estimation of the same dependent variable only for Latino voters. Latino-specific variables were added, including measures for status as an immigrant (i.e., born outside of the United States, with native born as the unexpressed category) and as national-origin distinctions (the larger groups were dummied and all others—Dominicans and South Americans—as the unexpressed base). Immigrants were more sensitive and more

Figure 1

Urgency of Climate Action, by Race and Ethnicity, 2022 Midterm Voter Poll



■ Climate change is an urgent problem we must address now by investing in clean energy, cutting pollution and cutting energy costs
 ■ Climate change is a problem, but we can wait to address it later
 ■ Climate change is being overblown and we do not need government action on this issue

Source: African American Research Collaborative/BSP Research Midterm Election Voter Poll.

Table 1

Ordered Logit Estimation of Three-Category Beliefs about Degree to Which Climate Change Is Urgent

Predictor	Coefficient (Standard Error)	(Standard Error)	Two-Tailed Significance
Latino	0.140	(0.066)	*
Black	0.356	(0.068)	***
Asian	-0.178	(0.094)	+
Native American	0.068	(0.210)	
Income	-0.018	(0.012)	
Education	0.157	(0.014)	***
Age	-0.009	(0.001)	***
Republican	-1.282	(0.042)	***
Religiosity	-0.035	(0.019)	+
Female	-0.041	(0.038)	
Non-Binary	1.636	(0.315)	***
_Cut Point1	-2.178		
_Cut Point2	-1.019		
N	12,103		

Chi-square=1.661.42***
 McFadden (adjusted) R²=0.071
 McKelvey and Zavonia R²=0.153
 Two-Tailed Test: +p<=0.075, *p<=0.05, **p<=0.01, ***p<=0.001
 Data Source: African American Research Collaborative/BSP Research Midterm Election Voter Poll.

Table 2

Ordered Logit Estimation of Three-Category Beliefs about Degree to Which Climate Change Is Urgent, Latinos Only

Predictor	Coefficient	(Standard Error)	Two-Tailed Significance
Income	-0.047	(0.020)	*
Education	0.033	(0.002)	***
Age	-0.006	(0.001)	***
Republican	-1.259	(0.063)	***
Religiosity	-0.121	(0.032)	***
Female	-0.068	(0.061)	
Non-Binary	0.158	(0.460)	
Immigrant	0.261	(0.076)	***
Mexican	0.225	(0.080)	***
Puerto Rican	0.264	(0.112)	*
Cuban	0.415	(0.156)	**
Central American	0.091	(0.148)	
_Cut Point1	-2.790		
_Cut Point2	-1.383		
N	5,231		

Chi-square=465.85***
 McFadden (adjusted) R²=0.049
 McKelvey and Zavonia R²=0.105
 Two-Tailed Test: * p<=0.05, **p<=0.01, ***p<=0.001
 Data Source: African American Research Collaborative/BSP Research Midterm Election Voter Poll.

supportive of climate action now, and education remains an important predictor at a scale somewhat greater than in the general model. Moreover, Mexicans, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans appear to be more supportive than all other Latinos. Whereas the Mexican and Puerto Rican results were as expected, the ideological history of Cuban Americans highlights the ability of climate change to cross other lines. Party identification and religiosity continue to have the same roles among only Latinos.

Whereas climate concerns may not intuitively appear immediate or proximate, Latinos appear strongly supportive of taking climate-protecting action, with immigrants and young and educated Latinos leading. This finding, therefore, is different from our findings of two decades ago (Whittaker, Segura, and Bowler 2005). Either Latinos view climate as more proximate, perhaps as an effect of the broad-based effort at public education by climate activists, or because their concern may no longer be confined to relatively proximate concerns as it was in my earlier study. Rather, Latinos may have developed a broader embrace of environmental concerns.

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A TEST CASE: OCEAN PROTECTION

In 2005, we found that offshore drilling and ocean conservation were of less interest among Latinos in California, with no trend in a positive direction (Whittaker, Segura, and Bowler 2005). The ocean, therefore, is an excellent issue to examine because it allows a comparison of current results to the earlier data, and it clearly is distant from the concerns and daily experiences of environmental threat by Latinos. Environmental deprivation cannot apply because virtually no Latinos live proximate to the ocean in the United States, few make their living in this manner, and ocean-based recreation is limited to infrequent

beach visits. The extent to which Latinos care about the ocean is evidence of the expenditure of cognitive resources on a topic not immediately visible in their daily life.

In the summer of 2022, I surveyed Latinos for the ocean conservancy Azul.⁷ Respondents to this survey were asked questions regarding ocean protection. They were asked about the 30/30 plan—a goal of protecting 30% of US land and US waters “for recreation and environmental protection.” Approximately 80% of respondents somewhat strongly favored such a conservation plan. Of those responding that they supported the plan, 84% would do so if it meant that the government had to spend more, and a respectable 66% was still willing if it “cost your family a bit more per month.” Although the phrase “a bit more” may be ameliorating misgivings with respect to costs, the fact that that opinion remains supportive when costs are non-zero is indicative.

When they were asked whether they supported banning “offshore drilling for oil and gas,” 78% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. Moreover, 66% of all respondents supported the ban “even if it meant paying more per month for

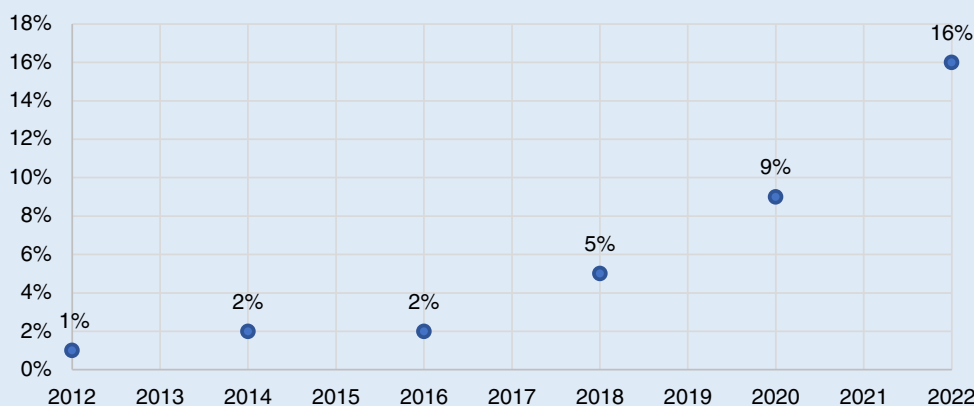
gasoline and household gas.” Although there was no phrasing to signal that the costs would be small, the result was the same: Latinos supported the environmentally friendly policy.

CONCLUSIONS

The Azul study indicated a broader embrace of environmental protection by Latinos in the United States and did so even after emphasizing that the respondents and their families would bear costs. Moreover, in the past 10 years, Latinos were far more likely to identify climate or environment as one of their top concerns, increasing from 1% to 16% (figure 2).

Figure 2

Latino Election-Eve Percentage Reporting Environment/Climate as a Top 3 Issue



Sources: 2012–2020 Latino Decisions Election-Eve Polls; 2022 African American Research Collaborative/BSP Midterm Election Voter Poll.

This broadening of support may reflect changing dynamics within the Latino electorate, the success of environmental messaging by climate advocates, and even a secular drift in environmental concern in which Latinos are moving like all other voters. However, the relative strength of Latino support—as well as that of African Americans—when compared to non-Hispanic whites appears to undermine the argument that there is no specific change in minority communities. Education and the political influence of immigrants have combined to make Latinos more aware of climate change, its impact, its effect on them, and the need for policies to address it—withstanding the disproportionate costs that they might pay for such policies. Latinos support climate action now.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/IKRJWI>.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. See www.registerguard.com/story/news/2020/12/29/californias-landmark-cap-and-trade-policy-facing-backlash-from-environmental-racism/4064871001. Accessed January 24, 2023.
2. Latino Community Foundation Survey of Latino Registered Voters, September 26–October 5, 2022. N=1,200, nominal margin of error =+/-2.8%. Question: “Would you be more likely or less likely to vote for this candidate running for US Congress if they support: Increasing regulations that seek to reduce pollution and the effects of climate change?”
3. Source: Voto Latino Battleground States Survey, Latino Registered Voters, October 12–17, 2022. N=800, nominal margin of error =+/-3.5%. Question: “[P]lease indicate whether you support or oppose the policy idea being considered: Enact clean-energy policies to address climate change that would lower utility costs and create good-paying jobs while reducing pollution.”
4. See <https://2022electionpoll.us>. Accessed January 21, 2023. For complete methodology, see <https://2022electionpoll.us/methodology>.
5. Previous iterations of this methodology, when validated for actual turnout, resulted in affirmative match rates exceeding 90%.
6. Another reason could be occupational impingement—that is, job exposure to the effects of climate change and the costs of climate regulation. Unfortunately, I did not have data on those aspects for testing in this study.

7. BSP interviewed 1,900 Latino adults across the six high-concentration regions for Latino populations: California, Texas, Florida, Illinois, New York/New Jersey, and New England, from May 26 to June 7, 2022.

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