



The  
City  
Project

**BLOG**

Equal Justice, Democracy, and Livability for All

## Climate is a civil rights issue as well as a health, economic, and environmental issue

Posted: February 12th, 2015

*En español*



*Robert García and Ariel Collins\**

Climate is a civil rights issue as well as a health, economic, and environmental issue. A successful climate movement will address the rights of communities of color and low income communities directly.

Recent polls show that Latinos are far more likely to view climate change as extremely or very important to them personally. Latinos are among the strongest supporters of climate action to curb climate change, most willing to pay an increase in utility bills for clean energy, and most loyal green voters. Consistent poll findings demolish the myth that the environment is a luxury that people of color and low income people do not care about and are not willing to pay for. The Latino community is nevertheless often marginalized by mainstream environmentalists, government agencies and public officials, and the media. Poll findings could have significant implications for the 2016 presidential campaign as both parties seek to win votes from Hispanics, the fastest-growing segment of the population.

One reason Hispanics may be concerned about global warming is that they disproportionately live in areas most heavily burdened for pollution and vulnerability, as discussed below.

Climate will disproportionately hurt low income people, exacerbating the economic divide. Climate worsens a range of health problems that are particularly problematic for many Latino communities. Climate threatens the original homelands of many Latinos even more dramatically than communities in the US. Responding to the climate challenge can create jobs, improve people's health, reduce heating and cooling bills, and reduce the damage caused by production of fossil fuels. Too many elected leaders have ignored the problem for so long that climate is now a dire emergency that requires immediate action at all levels of government.

We can grow the economy and promote human health, the environment, and equal justice at the same time.

## Recent Polls on Latinos and Climate

### ***New York Times/Stanford/Resources for the Future (2015)***

Climate change is of growing personal concern to Hispanics. Hispanics are far more likely than whites to view global warming as a problem that affects them personally. They are far more likely to support policies, such as taxes and regulations on greenhouse gas pollution, aimed at curbing climate change.

Among Hispanic respondents, 54% rated global warming as extremely or very important to them personally, compared with 37% of non-Hispanic whites. 67% of Hispanics said they would be hurt personally to some degree if nothing was done to reduce global warming, compared with half of non-Hispanic whites.

63% of Hispanics said the federal government should act broadly to address global warming, compared with 49% of non-Hispanic whites.

Hispanics are more likely to be concerned about the impact of global warming outside the United States, Latino researchers say, particularly in Latin America, Mexico and the Caribbean. Stronger droughts and storms there can lead to flooding or shortages of food and water.

President Obama has proposed investing \$3 billion on a Green Climate Fund to help developing countries adapt to climate change. Two-thirds of Hispanics said the government should invest in developing countries to help reduce the damage caused by global warming. Two-thirds of non-Hispanic whites said the United States should not provide the money. See Coral Davenport, *Climate Is Big Issue for Hispanics, and Personal*, N.Y. Times, Feb. 9, 2015.

An overwhelming majority of the American public, including half of Republicans, support government action to curb global warming, according to an earlier poll conducted by The New York Times, Stanford, and Resources for the Future. See Coral Davenport and Marjorie Connelly, *Most Republicans Say They Back Climate Action, Poll Finds* N.Y. Times, Jan 30, 2015.

### ***Washington Post-ABC News poll (2014)***

Both Hispanics/Latino Americans (69%) and Africans Americans (71%) are more likely than non-Hispanic white people (50%) to say climate change is a very serious problem confronting the country.

Hispanics/Latino Americans (75%) are more willing than non-Hispanic white people (68%) and African Americans (69%) to say that the federal government should limit the release of greenhouse gases in an effort to reduce global

warming.

Hispanics/Latino Americans (70%) are far more willing than African Americans (51%) — and a little more so than non-Hispanic white people (61%) — to allow the government to regulate greenhouse gases, even if that means an increase in utility bills of \$20 per month. See Chris Mooney and Peyton Craighill, *Why do black and Latino Americans support climate action so much more than whites?*, Washington Post Wonkblog (Dec. 1, 2014).

### **Public Religion Research Institute (2014)**

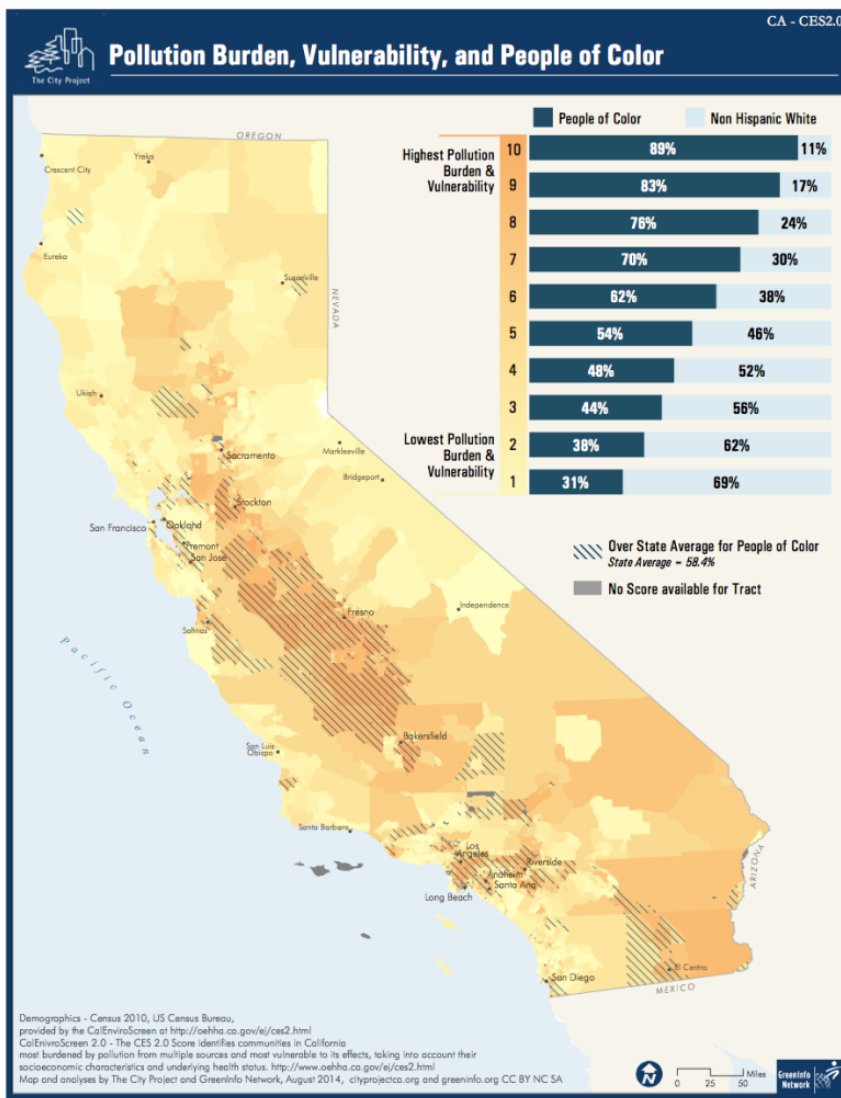
Nearly 6-in-10 (58%) of Latinos believe that climate change is happening and humans are at fault, a view shared by less than half (42%) of non-Hispanic white people.

Latinos are the ethnic group most concerned about the issue. More than 7-in-10 (71%) Latinos are somewhat or very concerned about climate change while fewer than half (43%) of non-Hispanic white people express similar concern. In fact, Latinos are twice as likely as non-Hispanic white people to be very concerned about climate change (46% vs. 23%).

Latinos are substantially more likely than non-Hispanic white Americans to believe the science of climate change is largely a settled matter. Nearly 6-in-10 (57%) Latinos say that scientists generally agree that the earth is getting warmer because of human activity. Among non-Hispanic white people, only 45% believe there is a scientific consensus on climate change.

Nearly two-thirds (65%) of Latinos born outside the country say the earth is getting warmer due to human activity compared to half (50%) who were born in the U.S. See Daniel Cox and Juhem Navarro-Rivera, *Are Transnational Ties Leading Latinos to Express Greater Concern about Climate Change?* Public Religion Research Institute (Nov. 24, 2014).

One reason Hispanics may be concerned about global warming is that they disproportionately live in areas most heavily burdened for pollution and vulnerability



*Click on the map for a larger image*

As the map illustrates dramatically:

1. In the communities that are the most burdened for pollution and vulnerability (the 10% highest score under CalEnviroScreen), fully 89% of the people are of color; only 11% are non-Hispanic white people. Statewide, the population average is 58% people of color.
2. In the communities that are the least burdened for pollution and vulnerability (the 10% lowest CES score), only 31% of the people are of color; fully 69% are non-Hispanic white people.
3. 64% of people of color live in the most burdened communities for pollution and vulnerability (the 50% highest CES scores); only 31% of non-Hispanic white people live in those areas.
4. Only 36% of people of color live in the least burdened communities for pollution and vulnerability (the 50% lowest CES scores); fully 69% of non-Hispanic white people live in those areas. (CalEnviroScreen scores measure pollution and potential vulnerability to the effects of pollution.)

The same communities that are disproportionately of color and low income are the most burdened for pollution and

vulnerability, and have the worst access to green space. See [Invest Cap and Trade Funds to Benefit Underserved Communities and Communities of Color](#) (The City Project Blog Oct. 6, 2014).

## Funding Climate Action

There are structural obstacles to fund climate justice. Studies show that the more committed to the environment, the less likely a foundation will fund social justice. While environmental funders spent \$10 billion between 2000 and 2009, just 15% of those dollars benefited marginalized communities, and only 11% went to advancing social justice. To help address these concerns, foundations should invest at least 25% to advance social justice—that is, policy advocacy and community organizing that work toward structural change on behalf of those who are the least well off politically, economically and socially, and that build on the lessons of the Civil Rights Movement, according to one study. See Sarah Hansen, *Cultivating the Grassroots: A Winning Approach for Environment and Climate Funders* (Feb. 2012, National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy). *The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations* report by Green 2.0 found that although people of color are now almost 40% of the U.S. population, they have not broken the 16% “green ceiling” in mainstream environmental organizations. Green 2.0 is working with foundations and mainstream enviros to increase diversity. Black and Latino communities suffer from lower expenditure levels for parks and recreation by both the government and nonprofit sectors in Southern California, according to other peer reviewed studies. People must mobilize and many organizations must work together in a sustained democratic movement to build a green economy. See Theda Skopcol, *Naming the Problem: What It Will Take to Counter Extremism and Engage Americans in the Fight against Global Warming*, Prepared for the Symposium on the Politics of America’s Fight Against Global Warming (Jan. 2013).

## We can grow the economy and protect human health, the environment, and equal justice at the same time

California Senate leaders have released a [climate change package](#) that includes groundbreaking bills to protect human health and the environment, spur innovation and investment in sustainable energy and green jobs, and strengthen our economy. California is providing best practice examples to address climate change.

## The Climate Movement

The climate movement should draw lessons from — and indeed is a part of — the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement continues today, and it is not limited to the Movement in the streets. The People’s Climate March in September 2014 in New York City is a step in the right direction.

The Civil Rights Revolution is based on multiple strategies to promote human dignity, equal justice, and just democracy, and to overcome discrimination. The Civil Rights Revolution includes creative Civil Rights attorneys working in and out of court; ground breaking judicial decisions by courageous courts; grass roots organizing; legislation by Congress and the states; action by the President; implementation by administrative agencies; and we the people providing a mandate to support civil rights through the right to vote.

The Civil Rights Movement inspired, influenced, or includes the environmental justice movement, Latino Civil Rights

Movement, American Indian Movement, Women's Movement, Antiwar Movement, Free Speech Movement, LGBT Movement, and health justice. Internationally, the Civil Rights Movement had an impact on the fall of the Soviet Union, Tianamen Square, the abolition of apartheid in South Africa, and the human rights movement. Climate justice is bringing people together across movements and nations. Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere.

### **La lucha continúa.**

See the Policy Report called [Celebrate The Civil Rights Revolution: The Struggle Continues](#) by Robert García and Ariel Collins (The City Project 2014).



Photos: People's Climate March, New York City Sept. 2014

\*Robert García is Founding Director and Counsel, The City Project, and Assistant Professor, Charles Drew University of Medicine and Science. Ariel Collins is a Policy Analyst and Juanita Tate Social Justice Fellow at The City Project.

Download this Policy Brief [Climate is a civil rights issue](#)

