
Latinos Are Ready to Fight Climate Change Are Green Groups Ready for Them?

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Smart Republican strategists—yes, they do exist—acknowledge that their party’s loss of Latinos was critical to President Obama’s re-election. Alienated by Mitt Romney’s call for the “self-deportation” of undocumented immigrants, a whopping 75 percent of Latino voters backed Obama. And they turned out in large enough numbers—nearly 13 million voted, roughly 10 percent of all ballots cast—to make a decisive difference in swing states like Ohio, Pennsylvania and Florida, according to the website Latino Decisions, which tracks Latino politics.

What hasn’t been recognized is Latinos’ potential to play a similar role on climate change: providing the electoral muscle to compel politicians to get serious, finally, about the crisis. Just as Latinos overwhelmingly supported Obama over Romney, they also—along with African-Americans, Asian-Americans and youth of all races—demonstrate the highest levels of support for action against climate change and air pollution, according to extensive polling data.

In one sense, this should come as no surprise. Minorities are more likely to live in areas burdened by extreme pollution, and young people are the ones fated to spend the rest of their lives coping with worsening climate

change. Of the 6 million people living within three miles of America’s coal-fired power plants, 39 percent are minorities, according to a report by the NAACP, “Coal Blooded: Putting Profits Before People.”

Nevertheless, the notion that Latinos, blacks and Asian-Americans are the nation’s most fervent greens contradicts the stereotype of environmentalists as white, upper-middle-class Prius drivers. And that stereotype contains enough truth that the emergence of a super-green constituency of minorities and youth—a constituency likely to grow as America’s demographic transition unfolds—presents enormous but challenging opportunities for mainstream environmental groups. In most cases, those groups rhetorically affirm the value of diversity even as their operations remain dominated by white, middle-aged staffers and funders and the strategies and tactics they pursue.

“It’s a little like how the Republican Party ran away from demographic realities for years, and then realized after the 2012 election that they had made a gigantic mistake,” says Manuel Pastor, director of the Program for Environmental and Regional Equity at the University of Southern California. “The mainstream environmental groups have to realize that working with Latinos and African-Americans and Asian-Americans and youth is not

just the morally right thing to do—it’s the politically effective thing to do. And it will only become more so over time.”

The need couldn’t be greater. Last summer’s record heat is over, but 60 percent of the Lower 48 still suffer from extreme dryness. Ominously, global temperatures have been high enough that a chunk of Arctic ice larger than the United States has melted. A recent string of reports from impeccable mainstream institutions—the International Energy Agency, the World Bank, the accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers—have warned that the Earth is on a trajectory to warm by at least 4 degrees Celsius in this century, which would likely be incompatible with continued human survival. Nevertheless, Obama persists with his “all of the above” energy strategy of increasing coal, oil and natural gas production while boosting support for renewables. In his first post-election climate-related action, Obama sided with Senator James Inhofe, the leading climate change denier in Congress, and signed a bill exempting US airlines from carbon restrictions imposed by the European Union. More damaging still, his administration then approved the sale of 20 million acres of new oil and gas leases in the Gulf of Mexico. Meanwhile, US negotiators at the latest round of UN climate negotiations in Doha, Qatar, are once again proposing disastrously slow progress on emission reductions.

The potential of nonwhite environmentalism to counter such madness is most evident in California, where whites make up only 40 percent of the population and Hispanics are projected to become the largest demographic by 2016. A 2010 Los Angeles Times/USC poll found that 50 percent of Latinos and 46 percent of Asian-Americans “personally worry a great deal about global warming,” compared with 27 percent of whites. Likewise, significantly more Latinos and blacks see air pollution as a serious health threat, according to the last three years of annual statewide surveys by the nonpartisan Public Policy Institute of California.

These attitudes helped deliver one of the biggest victories against climate change deniers yet—the defeat of Proposition 23 in 2010. Backed by the Koch brothers, Prop 23 aimed to suspend California’s landmark climate law, the Global Warming Solutions Act, which requires the state to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 80 percent by 2050. Voters rejected Prop 23 by a lopsided 62 to 38 percent, and there was a massive ethnic gap: “73 percent of voters of color...voted against the measure,” compared with 57 percent of whites, wrote Catherine Lerza for the Funders Network on Transforming the Global Economy.

The strong turnout by voters of color, Lerza argued, was the result of a major push from environmental justice groups, which maintained their independence even as they worked with mainstream groups. The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, the California Environmental Justice Alliance, the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) and 100 others formed a coalition that held “one-on-one conversations

at the door or on the phone (in English, Spanish and Mandarin and Cantonese Chinese) with 250,000 households in the 10 counties that are home to 75 percent of CA’s voters of color,” wrote Lerza, who concluded that “people of color are...the future of the environmental movement.”

The 2012 elections, when people of color voted in record numbers in California, offered further evidence of this trend, says Roger Kim of APEN. He points out that Republican Congressman Dan Lungren, a “climate denier,” was ousted by Democrat Ami Berra, “who campaigned on standing up to the oil industry. And while passage of Governor Brown’s tax measure is getting all the attention, another revenue measure received more yes votes and won handily with 61 percent of the vote—Proposition 39, the Clean Energy Jobs Act.”

What happens in California does not stay in California. Polls suggest that Latinos nationally hold the same environmental views as Latinos in the state. A 2012 survey for the National Council of La Raza and the Sierra Club (one of the few big green groups to collaborate with Latinos) found that 77 percent of Latinos believe climate change is already happening, compared with only 52 percent of the general public—and they want the government to invest in green energy to fight it.

The opportunity for white-oriented environmentalist groups seems obvious, but institutional inertia can leave even well-intentioned folks behind the curve. The “Do the Math” national organizing tour, sponsored by 350.org and featuring Nation contributors Bill McKibben and Naomi Klein, has been a roaring success in many respects. Building

the climate movement by targeting fossil-fuel companies makes strategic sense, and the call for universities, institutions and individuals to divest their stock holdings has been cheered by big crowds in more than twenty cities. But some rally photos reveal the crowds to be as monochromatically white as the one that cheered Romney’s mocking of climate change at last summer’s GOP convention. Jamie Henn of 350 .org says, “Many of the people who bought up tickets for the shows were middle-aged white people who had read Bill’s books. The majority of the students to whom we gave free tickets, on the other hand, were a much more diverse cast. As this divestment effort takes off, we’re excited to find new ways to highlight their voices and show a new face of the climate movement.”

So learn from California, urges Pastor. “Mainstream environmental groups have to do everything that makes sense to diversify their staff and membership,” he says. “That’s partly a question of who they recruit as staff and leadership, but also of which issues they take up. They should look for campaigns like Prop 23, where they can work with [environmental justice] groups and they can get to know and trust each other. That way, when you call a rally, it won’t be only the mainstream groups’ members who show up.”

“We should not have called it Hurricane Sandy. We should have called it Hurricane Exxon,” says climate activist Bill McKibben (video). But Christian Parenti, in a conversation with NYU student Becky Nathanson, explains why fossil-fuel divestment campaigns may be a costly distraction.