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Climate Action: Community and Labor Organizations Build Capacity for Environmental Change

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SUMMARY

A study of over 2,000 registered voters in the City of Fresno demonstrates key characteristics associated with interest in attending local meetings focused on climate action. The research was conducted between August and September of 2020 by the UC Merced Community and Labor Center and the Fresno County Civic Engagement Table – the Fresno Speaks survey.¹ It is the only representative study of civic engagement on climate and pollution issues in the region.²

KEY FINDINGS

1. Women, young adults, and people of color are more interested in attending local meetings about climate change and pollution.
2. Prior membership in labor unions and civic associations is linked to greater interest in attending meetings addressing climate change and air pollution.
3. Past civic participation in activities typically coordinated by labor unions and community-based organizations (CBOs) is associated with a greater willingness to attend local gatherings to address climate change and air pollution.

¹

https://clc.ucmerced.edu/sites/clc.ucmerced.edu/files/documents/75_page_report_2020.pdf

² The sample has a margin of error of +/- 2.5 percent.

RECOMMENDATION

California state agencies and local governments should continue with recent plans to collaborate with civic and labor-based organizations and increase climate investments in disadvantaged communities. Such state-community collaborations will ensure greater participation by local residents in developing climate resiliency and pollution reduction programs.

CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS IN THE CENTRAL VALLEY

According to the American Lung Association's 2022 State of the Air rankings, The San Joaquin Valley maintains the three highest air pollution regions in the nation out of over 200 metropolitan regions examined, which include Bakersfield, Fresno-Madera-Hanford, and Visalia.³ Fresno ranked as the highest for short-term particle pollution and second highest for year-round particle pollution. High concentrations of particle pollution are associated with increased hospitalizations, asthma attacks, cardiovascular disease, lung cancer, COPD, heart attacks, and premature death.⁴ The region has also been negatively impacted by the mounting climate crisis with wildfire smoke, extended heat waves, and drought.

³ <https://www.lung.org/research/sota>

⁴ <https://www.epa.gov/pm-pollution/health-and-environmental-effects-particulate-matter-pm>

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Those Willing to Attend a Local Meeting Addressing Climate Change/Global Warming and Air Pollution in Fresno

| Category | Percent Willing to Attend Local Meeting to Address Climate Change | Percent Willing to Attend Local Meeting to Address Air Pollution |
|----------------|--|--|
| Total Sample | 32.3% (n=2227) | 36.0% (n=2227) |
| Race/Ethnicity | White (30.3%) Non-White (34.3%) (n=2087) | White (34.7%) Non-White (36.8%) (n=2087) |
| Gender | Men (30.3%) Women (34.6%) (n=2170) | Men (34.7%) Women (37.3%) (n=2170) |
| Age | 18-25 (44%) 26-35 (35.5%) 36-45 (32.4%) 46-55 (29.6%) 56-65 (28.1%) Over 65 (26.0%) (n=2152) | 18-25 (45.4%) 26-35 (39.1%) 36-45 (38.3%) 46-55 (33.6%) 56-65 (27.4%) Over 65 (31.8%) (n=2152) |

CREATING EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS FOR CLIMATE ACTION

The State of California has committed to investing funds into climate resiliency and environmental mitigation at the local level, especially for designated disadvantaged communities (DACs) and heavily polluted regions (e.g., via SB 1000, SB 535, SB 162 (CERF), AB 1550, AB 617, AB 398, and AB 2722). The revenues generated from the state cap and trade program deposited in the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund reached \$3.1 billion dollars for the 2022-2023 budget cycle and provide one major source of funding for environmental and economic recovery in DACs.

Several pieces of state legislation also call for active community participation in developing just/high road labor transitions and economically equitable climate resiliency and pollution

reduction programs at the local level. For example, “SB 1000 ... requires local governments to fully engage disadvantaged community residents in decision-making and to prioritize investments that meet their community's needs.”⁵ 83 of the 136 census tracts in the city of Fresno are DACs (61%). Out of California’s 2300 disadvantaged communities, five of the ten most polluted communities are located in the city of Fresno.

Understanding the correlates of citizen engagement on climate and pollution issues **is critical in developing shared governance over local policy development** to mitigate environmental hazards and seeking solutions for equitable economic recovery, especially in the most vulnerable communities. Table 1 presents some of the core demographic characteristics associated with willingness to attend local climate change and air pollution meetings.⁶ Overall, nearly

⁵ Sanders, Steve. 2020. Time for California Communities to Step Up on Environmental Justice.” *Cal matters* July 3.

⁶ For Education and Income characteristics, the differences were not statistically significant, though there was a general trend for higher educated respondents to be more willing to

one in three respondents (32%) reported they would be interested in going to a community gathering to address global warming and 36% reported willingness to attend a meeting about air pollution. People of color were more willing to attend than white respondents. This finding is consistent with the populations most vulnerable to climate change in the Central Valley as well as the nation.⁷ This includes farmworkers and others that work outdoors and are exposed to extreme heat and poor air quality from wildfires as well as from fossil fuel emissions in industrial activity and transportation.

Women also showed more signs of concern over climate change than men.⁸ A clear pattern emerges with age of respondents – older individuals are less likely to engage in the issue of global warming. The current energy in mobilizing around climate change since 2019 has come from youth-based groups such as Fridays for Future and the Sunrise Movement.⁹

Table 2 reports past civic engagement characteristics associated with willingness to participate in climate and air pollution meetings at the community level. The table is divided into two types of civic engagement activities: organizational membership and past civic engagement behavior. Individuals with **labor union membership showed the greatest willingness to attend a local meeting to address climate change or air pollution, with half of those belonging to a labor union reporting a positive response.** Youth, non-profit, and neighborhood organizational membership also made one more likely to attend a local meeting about environmental hazards than non-members.

attend an air pollution meeting. Race/Ethnicity and willingness to attend an air pollution meeting falls within the margin of error.

⁷ Benz, Susanne Amelie, and Jennifer Anne Burney. "Widespread race and class disparities in surface urban heat extremes across the United States." *Earth's Future* 9, no. 7 (2021): e2021EF002016.

⁸ An additional nine respondents identified as nonbinary for gender, and seven of those nine (78%) were willing to attend a local climate change meeting, and six of those nine (66%) were willing to attend an air pollution meeting.

⁹ Almeida, Paul. 2020. "USA-Country Report." Pp. 247-253 in Joost de Moor, Katrin Uba, Mattias Wahlström, Magnus Wennerhag and Michiel De Vydt (Eds.). *Protest for a future II:*

In terms of past civic engagement behaviors, **persons that had volunteered in the community, met with a government official, attended a neighborhood meeting, attended a rally, or participated in a strike were more willing to attend climate or pollution meetings than those that had not engaged in such activities.**

Past interactions with government officials, appears especially promising in developing long term ties between the state and communities to build local partnerships. All of the above civic engagement activities associated with attending meetings about climate change and air pollution are similar to those encouraged by community-based organizations (CBOs) and labor unions in their local capacity building campaigns (e.g., neighborhood meetings, volunteer canvassing, and reaching out to local elected officials).

State environmental and economic investment programs that collaborate directly with local civic organizations provide the types of novel coalitions that have been found to produce sweeping environmental policies that benefit excluded groups.¹⁰

The findings of this report support deepening state partnerships with local community-based and labor organizations. State collaborations with community and labor organizations provide the most effective public investment for engaging communities around action on initiatives addressing climate and pollution in the most disadvantaged regions.

Composition, mobilization and motives of the participants in Fridays For Future climate protests. Stockholm: Swedish Research Council for Sustainable Development; and Almeida, Paul D. 2019. "Climate justice and sustained transnational mobilization." *Globalizations* 16(7): 973-979.

¹⁰ Stearns, Linda Brewster and Paul D. Almeida. 2004. "The Formation of State Actor-Social Movement Coalitions and Favorable Policy Outcomes." *Social Problems* 51(4): 478-504; and Banaszak, Lee Ann. 2005. pp. 149-176. "Inside and outside the state: Movement insider status, tactics, and public policy achievements." *Routing the opposition: Social movements, public policy, and democracy.* Eds., D. Meyer, V. Jenness and H. Ingram. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Table 2 Civic Engagement Characteristics of Those Willing to Attend a Local Meeting Addressing Climate Change/Global Warming and Air Pollution in Fresno (n=2227)

| Category | Percent Willing to Attend Local Meeting to Address Climate Change | Percent Willing to Attend Local Meeting to Address Air Pollution |
|--|--|---|
| Total Sample | 32.3% | 36.0% |
| Labor Union Member | Non-member (29.8%) Union Member (49.5%) | Non-member (33.6%) Union Member (51.2%) |
| Youth Association | Non-member (28.7%) Member (47.0%) | Non-member (33.3%) Member (46.7%) |
| Non-Profit Organization | Non-member (27.4%) Member (45.9%) | Non-member (31.4%) Member (48.3%) |
| Neighborhood Organization | Non-member (31.1%) Member (41.8%) | Non-member (34.5%) Member (46.6%) |
| Volunteered for Community Service | Never Volunteered (25.8%) Volunteered (40.3%) | Never Volunteered (31.6%) Volunteered (41.3%) |
| Attended a Neighborhood Meeting about Quality-of-Life Issues | Never Attended (28.9%) Have Attended (47.5%) | Never Attended (32.6%) Have Attended (50.6%) |
| Met with or Called a Government Official | Never (27.4%) Have Met or Called (47.4%) | Never (31.9%) Have Met or Called (48.3%) |
| Attended a Rally | Never Attended a Rally (26.3%) Attended a Rally (47.8%) | Never Attended a Rally (32.7%) Attended a Rally (44.3%) |
| Gone on Strike | Never Gone on Strike (30.9%) Gone on Strike (45.9%) | Never Gone on Strike (35.3%) Gone on Strike (42.2%) |

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Mission Statement

The UC Merced Community and Labor Center conducts research and education on issues of community, labor and employment, in the San Joaquin Valley and beyond.