

ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES AND CIVIC ORGANIZING FOR CLIMATE ACTION IN DISINVESTED REGIONS

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ABSTRACT

Organizational and civic organizing resources provide critical inputs to communities in need. The skills and know-how of climate action tend to be concentrated with scientific experts and in research institutions. In order to reach broader segments of the population in terms of access and participation in climate action, expertise needs to be shared beyond academic and specialized organizational settings. This study examines the correlates of organizational resource sharing via participation in climate action planning by members of a research university located in a disinvested region – the San Joaquin Valley (SJV) of California. We consider the organizational, civic engagement, and ideational elements of individual participation in climate action in environmental justice communities with a large-scale census survey. Organizational members with civic capacity experience, environmental

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justice-type awareness, and shared lived experience were found to be the most willing to participate in public meetings to address climate change and equity in frontline communities.

Keywords: Universities; climate action; environmental justice; civic engagement; outreach

INTRODUCTION

Large organizations have played a critical role in the early development of climate planning, particularly in advancing climate mitigation strategies. This includes the part played by the United Nations, government agencies within nation-states (e.g., environmental protection agencies, ministries of the environment, departments of energy, etc.), nongovernmental organizations such as ICLEI, private alternative energy firms, and research universities. Research universities can be especially impactful in local settings. Such institutions have a variety of useful resources for climate planning, green transitions, and training. In addition, public universities are often mandated by state law and tax revenue to serve the surrounding regions in which they are geographically located. Such declarations of public service can be found in university mission statements. In terms of climate action planning, universities can offer sharing of scientific expertise on several forms of climate action, including carbon capture and renewable energy technologies and implementation, greenhouse gas (GHG) inventories, and the application of nature-based climate solutions. They can also provide climate education via extension offices and green workforce development projects with labor and community centers based at the university. In the United States, research universities exist in every state and, therefore, have the potential to reach wider publics beyond their enrolled students. In a period of growing climate denialism, skepticism, and delay, research universities may be one of the most critical complex organizations available to address the climate crisis.

This study analyzes the conditions that increase willingness of organizational members of a research university to participate in climate planning and resource sharing. With vast regions of the planet lacking climate action strategies and awareness, understanding the mechanisms associated with members of well-resourced organizations to pursue climate action planning may assist in accelerating the rate of initiating climate-friendly initiatives (Vasi & Walker, 2024). Members of research universities may be relatively more aware about climate change as a social and environmental problem (Zald, 2000). Moreover, creating new organizational forms such as climate action planning programs via coordinated efforts of university members may assist in legitimizing the practices and assist in their proliferation (Rao et al., 2000). In this case, we examine a University of California (UC) campus located in a region lacking climate protections and inhabited by a large population of marginalized and vulnerable residents.

REGIONAL IMPACTS OF UNIVERSITIES AS COMPLEX ORGANIZATIONS

University campuses across the United States (and world) play key organizational roles in their nearby communities in terms of economic development, social mobility, and technology transfer (Zimpher, 2012). At the same time, universities may also fall short in terms of becoming elite enclaves and/or partnering with powerful local actors that support the economic status quo maintaining structures of subordination and inequality in the regions where they are located. In addition, universities can be energy intensive and extractive and create a larger carbon footprint with faculty and staff commuting long distances to work. Understanding micro-level dynamics of interest in community outreach within institutions of higher education provides information on how universities can invest resources and time into building long-term external partnerships and initiatives for uplifting nearby regions.

As open systems and complex organizations, universities adapt and interact with their larger environment (Scott & Davis, 2000). Open systems' perspectives acknowledge universities exist in a broader context with networks that cross the organizational boundaries of the institution. University students and staff are connected to the local community and their hometowns. Faculty work with peers at other universities and external granting agencies. Administrators seek external institutional funding and interact with the state over regulations and accreditation. University employees and graduate students also engage with organizations beyond campus boundaries such as participating in labor unions and civic associations. Faced with an escalating climate crisis, universities may be central agents in enhancing regional mitigation and adaptation strategies along with equity principles. In terms of climate change and green energy expansion, colleges have engaged with local governments, communities, and firms to sustain resource sharing to build local models of sustainability (Knuth et al., 2007; Pierson et al., 2017).

Universities can play a major role in providing resources for social movements (McCarthy & Zald, 2001), including those promoting climate action. Arguably one of the most important international climate advocacy organizations over the past two decades, 350.org, began with a campaign led by students at Middlebury College in Vermont (Bates et al., 2025). In 2007, the college students launched the "Step It Up" for climate campaign with local mobilizations in over 1,600 locations in the United States in April and November, with a high participation of universities. Step It Up participants demanded that the US Congress pass legislation reducing GHG emissions by 80%. This university student-initiated campaign acted as the largest mobilization for climate action in the nation in the 2000s. On another front of climate action, Vasi (2011) found universities as key players in diffusing wind power as a viable renewable energy by serving as early adopters for their campuses or through electricity purchase offsets via renewable energy certificates. Pro-environmental administrators, along with students, faculty, and staff connected to the broader environmental movement acted as the catalysts in making these arrangements for their institutions to be powered by renewable energy sources.

Examples of community-focused climate action are observed in various university-led initiatives. In Detroit, universities have shared technical assets to promote sustainable living and foster urban resilience (Pierson et al., 2017). Another “living laboratory” model involves student architects working directly within their surrounding city to support sustainable development projects (i.e., green spaces, community gardens) as part of urban planning efforts in cities with declining populations, such as Toledo (Shetty & Luescher, 2017). Portland State University offers another model of collaboration with community partners, as the university has joined with the Portland Clean Energy Community Benefits Fund, which supports carbon reduction and climate resilience efforts. The Luskin Center for Innovation at University of California, Los Angeles, also engages community organizations in a variety of climate action issues in the greater Los Angeles region, including heat, water, urban greening, and wild fires.¹ These initiatives highlight the potential for universities to lead transformative climate action by integrating research, education, and community engagement (Di Chiro & Rigell, 2018).

PERSPECTIVES ON CLIMATE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN LARGE ORGANIZATIONS

In order to better understand organizational member engagement over climate issues, we incorporate insights from social movement research on individual movement participation. We examine if similar conditions promoting social movement participation also encourage willingness to engage in climate action by members of relatively climate-friendly organizations, such as research universities. Individual participation models are multidimensional, with a combination of factors contributing to actual involvement with a collective effort. In particular, biographical availability, peer and family networks, organizational affiliations, a sense of efficacy (Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023), and previous collective action experience all have been found to increase willingness to participate (Almeida, 2019). For climate action initiatives, having environmental awareness and environmental activist experience should be especially favorable to participation (Rainsford & Saunders, 2021). Moreover, when climate action involves equity and environmental justice, more progressive forms of past organizational and civic engagement would increase the likelihood of participation in the present (Han et al., 2021). By understanding the skill sets involved relating to motivation to participate in climate initiatives, leaders can direct resources into enhancing those organizational assets (Staggenborg, 2020).

Organizational members harboring these social and psychological affinities of participation (Abrams, 2023) have been referred to as the pool of sympathy (Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023) or the latitude of acceptance (Zald, 2000). Widening the pool of sympathy within large organizations, such as universities, enhances the mobilization potential for climate action (Klandermans, 1997). Explaining the processes by which each of the broad dimensions may increase interest in participating in climate action by organizational members is essential

for developing a framework for sustained resource sharing in disinvested economic settings (McCarthy & Zald, 2001).

Organizational Facilitators

Members of civic organizations are familiar with civic engagement and have participated in past community issues and capacity-building activities that make one's participation effective and meaningful (Ganz, 2024). This will be especially likely with affiliation in civic organizations focused on public outreach and advocacy such as labor unions, community-based organizations (CBOs), and, in the case of climate change, environmental organizations (Tindall et al., 2024), more so than more inward type organizations such as self-help, recovery, or hobby groups. CBOs and many labor unions work in civic capacity-building arenas (Cossyleon & Flores, 2020; Kerrissey & Schofer, 2018). They hold workshops on public engagement with their memberships, develop leaders, and invite broader sectors of the community to participate, including in climate action (Almeida et al., 2023). This may involve forums on local policy issues, canvassing for elections, or how to interact with elected officials and state agencies. Such skill sets would likely make one more comfortable and confident in engaging in urgent issues such as climate change. The institutional authenticity of CBOs builds the kind of trust and relationships in a community where they operate, enhancing the effectiveness of members (Walker & McCarthy, 2010; Walker & Stepick, 2020).

Civic Engagement Facilitators

The actual experience of participating in different forms of civic engagement, regardless of organizational affiliations, would also make one more open to consider joining in new issues impacting the community such as the climate crisis. Civic engagement ranges from volunteering in a locality, to attending rallies and interacting with elected officials and local agencies. While civic organizations sponsor and support many civic engagement activities, the actual participation in these events would likely make one more willing to engage in new opportunities impacting the larger public (Ganz, 2024).

Ideational Facilitators

A wide variety of ideational factors may influence interest in participating in climate action (Rainsford & Saunders, 2021; Saunders & Rainsford, 2025). Ideational influences include collective identities, political orientation, and awareness of climate and environmental issues. Those identifying with environmentalism would be more open to climate participation than others. As rightwing parties across the world increasingly adopt climate denialism into their campaign platforms, we would expect those with a conservative political orientation to be less motivated to partake in activities addressing the climate crisis (Kulin et al., 2021). Another major obstacle to climate action participation by the general public (and even the membership of universities) resides in the scientific nomenclature of the causes of planetary warming and the technical jargon used by climate

advocates and scientists seeking solutions (Bruine de Bruin, 2021). Concepts such as “decarbonization,” “climate mitigation,” and “carbon neutrality” often appear confusing. Those more aware of the language of climate action and environmental justice and corresponding policy would likely feel more empowered to act than those less familiar with the terminology. This same logic would also hold for those concerned about the impacts of climate change on themselves as well as vulnerable populations.

Demographic and Biographical Facilitators

Additional demographic and biographical factors may also shape one’s willingness to be involved with local climate planning. For residents in frontline communities that are already facing multiple environmental hazards (e.g., air, water, and soil pollution), there is more pressure to act in the face of ecological threats. Climate planning may provide an opportunity to address these threats. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities face a disproportionate amount of such threats and may be more motivated to act as climate change serves as an additional harm (Méndez, 2020). About half of the census tracts in Merced classify as both low income and highly polluted by federal and state indexes. We would expect people of color and those residing near environmental justice communities in research universities to be more interested in addressing climate planning issues, especially from an equity perspective (Taylor, 2011). Women have also been found to be more willing to participate in environmental initiatives than men, and more recently, in climate action (De Moor et al., 2021). In terms of biographical ability, young adults have relatively less job and family constraints than those older with deeper commitments to careers, family obligations, and other time constraints. Moreover, the climate social movement has been reinvigorated since the late 2010s, by young activists in groups such as Fridays for Future and the Sunrise Movement.

THE CASE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, MERCED

As the nation’s first public research university to achieve carbon neutrality, the University of California, Merced (UCM) has become a recognized leader in decarbonization.² This was easier to achieve as a new campus built in the early 2000s (compared to more established institutions). Sustainability is a valued aspect of the school, with all buildings achieving Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification, enhancing campus energy efficiency, and bringing down GHG emissions. Current living laboratories for undergraduate students on sustainability and renewable energy issues allow them to be actively involved in the process of climate action planning. The campus also teaches several undergraduate and graduate courses on climate change related topics. At least two dozen faculty (and many more staff and graduate students) work on climate change-related research, including water management, renewable energy technologies, carbon capture and removal in soils and biochar, pesticide

reduction, and community outreach for labor rights and equitable and sustainable economic development. With the UC's mandate for all 10 campuses to attain carbon neutrality by 2025 and in the state by 2045, prioritizing equity and energy justice research with community collaboration in the larger region is essential. More specifically, campuses in the UC system are directed by the President's Pathways to Fossil Free UC Task Force to work toward climate justice, equity, and just labor transitions in the broader community surrounding each university.³

In the case of UCM, the campus sits in the middle of the San Joaquin Valley (SJV). The eight counties constituting the SJV mark one of the most climate vulnerable areas in the United States (see Fig. 1). The region consistently ranks

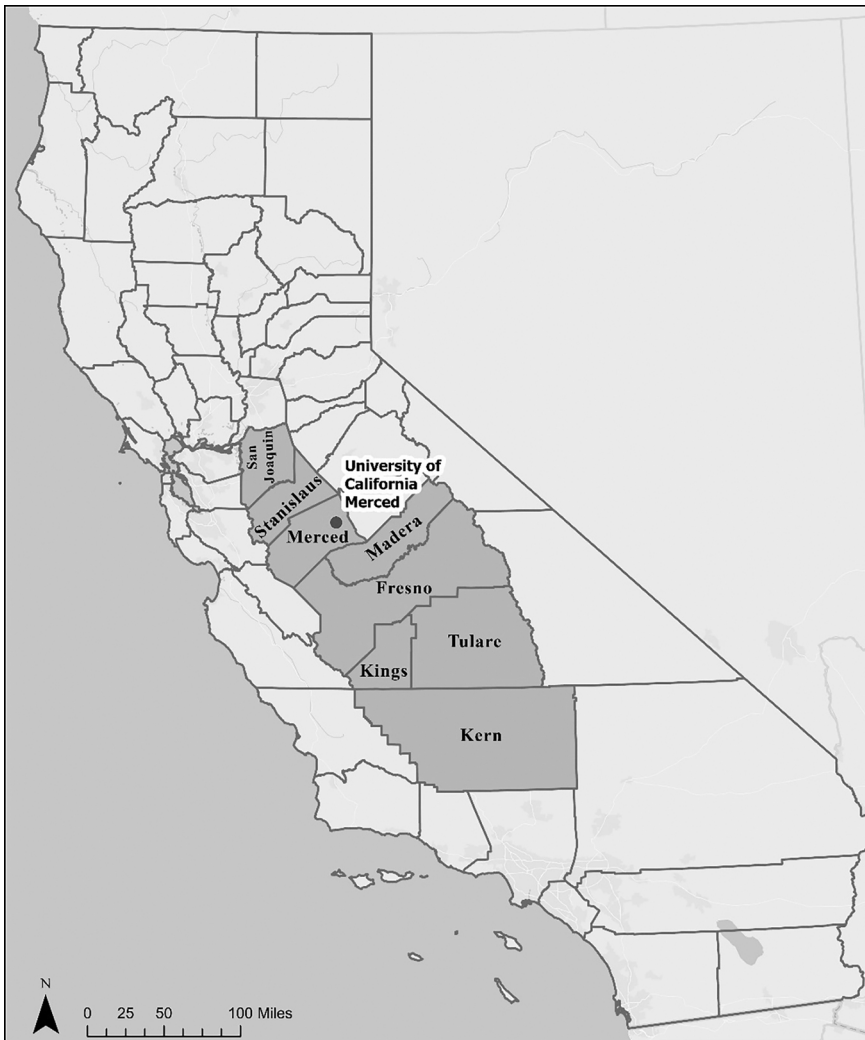


Fig. 1. Eight Counties of the San Joaquin Valley.

highest in the nation for air pollution, maintains large pockets of outdoor workers in agriculture and construction, and suffers from extreme heat waves, wildfire smoke, and low wages for working families. Fifty-five percent of the population resides in disinvested communities burdened by both low household income and multiple environmental hazards.⁴ The SJV also lacks municipal-level climate action planning and community choice renewable energy programs relative to other parts of the state. Some of the largest cities in the region do not have a city-level climate action plan (CAP), including the cities of Bakersfield, Fresno, and Modesto. CAPs offer a strategic roadmap where *multiple* decarbonization initiatives can be implemented under a single program incorporating equity priorities (Angelo et al., 2024).

Seventy-one cities and five counties in California have adopted gas-free building commitments or electrification building codes.⁵ None of these cities or counties are located in the SJV. Given the dearth of climate action planning and decarbonization initiatives in the region, UCM is well-positioned to engage with local communities in potential models of a just transition away from fossil fuels. Recognizing that disinvested communities are disproportionately impacted by climate change (Berberian et al., 2022), it is urgent to ensure the inclusion of socially vulnerable populations and prioritize their needs throughout climate action processes. UCM currently engages in climate action off campus with several major initiatives led by UCM-affiliated researchers to transition away from fossil fuels in the SJV such as installing solar panels over the region's canals, policy proposals for highroad jobs in the move away from petroleum extraction in Kern County (Brostrom et al., 2024), climate disaster reparations in Planada (UC Merced Community and Labor Center, 2023), and fossil-free job transition and climate investments in Stockton (Almeida, Brostrom, et al., 2024). Nonetheless, the region needs much more climate action.

Despite the lack of climate planning and decarbonization initiatives, there appears to be public support to engage in more climate actions in the SJV. Table 1 presents representative public opinion data across the eight-county region. Roughly two-thirds of the adult population “is” concerned about climate change, and majorities would like to see more local government action and civic engagement. This broad support for climate action in the SJV offers UCM a unique

Table 1. Public Opinion on Climate Change in SJV Counties, 2023.⁶

County	Worried About Global Warming (%)	Local Officials Should Do More to Address Global Warming (%)	Citizens Should Do More to Address Global Warming (%)
San Joaquin	66	58	61
Stanislaus	66	55	60
Merced	67	57	62
Madera	67	56	61
Fresno	70	57	59
Tulare	64	55	59
Kings	61	53	57
Kern	62	55	58

opportunity to serve as a hub to accelerate equitable forms of climate action in multiple arenas, such as renewable energy, resilience and adaptation planning, green and high road workforce development, community solar programs, and implementation of nature-based climate solutions (Almeida, González Márquez, et al., 2024). Examining the correlates that increase individual participation in equitable climate action off campus by UCM students, faculty, and staff offers a window into understanding the micro-level processes of enhancing and sustaining resource sharing between large and complex organizations and surrounding disinvested communities.

METHODS

Survey Design

The study is based on an online census survey of the UCM campus. A list was generated of the entire population of campus, including staff, students, faculty, and administrators, and the survey was emailed to each member of campus. The survey was conducted between February 20 and March 8, 2024, to gather views on a just transition in decarbonization for the university and surrounding community. The instrument contained largely closed-ended questions that was completed by nearly one in three campus community members (30% response rate), with relatively equal representation from undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and staff. The survey resulted in a sample size of 2,865 respondents for multivariate analyses.

Survey Measures

Table AI in the Appendix lists the descriptive statistics for all variables in the analysis. There are two dependent variables in the study covering different aspects of interest in participation in community-based climate action activities. The first dependent variable examines the willingness to attend a community meeting addressing climate change in the SJV focusing on equity issues; 26% of respondents were willing to participate in such meetings. The second dependent variable queried about one's willingness to organize a meeting about climate change in the SJV, and 12% of respondents answered in the affirmative. The two dependent variables are measured as binary variables as respondents reported yes (coded 1) and no (coded 0) to willingness to engage in the climate action activity in the SJV. Social desirability may influence responses to intentionality variables as incorporated in this study. By using an anonymous survey design combined with specific behavioral questions, we are likely to reduce social desirability bias (Zhu et al., 2024). Moreover, the literature examining social desirability bias in environmental and ecological responses has found only minimal effects (Milfont, 2009; Vesely & Klöckner, 2020; Vilar et al., 2020). Our past civic engagement independent variables reporting *actual behavior* described below also fall in the range of the dependent variables in terms of the means.

The independent variables include measures of organizational affiliations, civic engagement experience, awareness and belief systems, and demographic characteristics. The first set of questions asked the participants about their organizational affiliations with labor unions, community organizations, and environmental organizations. The respondents reported yes (coded 1) and no (coded 0) for their organizational affiliations. For past civic engagement, respondents answered a set of questions reporting yes (coded 1) and no (coded 0) for their past participation in the following activities: attended a protest, attended a local neighborhood meeting, volunteered in the community, participated in a labor strike, canvassed, participated in an Earth Day event, attended an environmental rally, or raised social awareness on social media.

Another set of questions asked respondents about their belief systems and environmental concerns and awareness. The first variable measures the political orientations of participants who were asked to report their political orientation by using a 7-point Likert scale, where (1) indicated “very liberal,” (2) indicated “somewhat liberal,” (3) indicated “slightly liberal,” (4) indicated “moderate,” (5) indicated “slightly conservative,” (6) indicated “somewhat conservative,” and (7) indicated “very conservative.”⁷ A second variable measured respondents’ identification as an environmentalist with yes (coded 1) and no (coded 0), over 40% of respondents identified as an environmentalist. In terms of environmental issues in the SJV, participants were asked to rate their concerns about the climate impacts on low-income communities by using a 4-point Likert scale ranking their concern from (1) indicating “not at all concerned,” (2) indicating “a little concerned,” (3) indicating “moderately concerned” to (4) indicating “very concerned.” In two measures of awareness, respondents were asked to rate their level of knowledge and how informed they are about just transitions and environmental justice principles by using a 4-point Likert scale where (1) indicated “not at all informed,” (2) indicated “a little informed,” (3) indicated “moderately informed,” and (4) indicated “very informed.”

A set of demographic characteristics inquired about gender, age, income, race, and residence. Gender was coded as (1) for female and (0) for male.⁸ Age was measured based on respondents’ reported year of birth where they were asked to choose from the following ranges (18–25, 26–40, 41–55, 56–65, and over 65). To better estimate the effects of age on participation in climate action, age was coded as an ordinal variable and assigned a value at the midpoint of each range as the following (21.5, 33, 48, 60, 71.5). The open-ended age category of “over 65” was coded “71.5” based on a midpoint of life expectancy reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Annual household income was measured as a self-reported six category ordinal variable as \$0–24,999 (0), \$25,000–49,999 (1), \$50,000–74,999 (2), \$75,000–124,999 (3), \$125,000–174,999 (4), and \$175,000 or higher (5). In our sample, 71.26% of respondents reported their household income as under the median household income in the United States (\$75,000), indicating that about three-fourths of UCM respondents come from low-income and working-class households found in environmental justice communities. Racial/ethnicity categories were self-reported by respondents who were asked to identify their race/ethnicity from the following categories: Black/African American, Asian/Asian American,

Pacific Islander, Latino/a/x, Native American, white/European Americans, Middle Eastern/Arab American and those that identified as Other. Race/ethnicity was then recoded as a dummy variable with those identifying as non-Hispanic white coded (0) and those identifying as BIPOC or nonwhite as (1); 85.7% of respondents in our sample self-identified within the categories BIPOC/nonwhite, and 91% of the undergraduate student population at UCM identifies as nonwhite. Respondents were also asked about their primary residence where (1) was coded for residence in the city of Merced and (0) was coded for residence outside the city of Merced. Finally, the survey asked about the respondents' position at UCM and selected from the following categories: undergraduate student, graduate student, postdoctoral scholar/research or project scientist, staff, administration, faculty, lecturer, adjunct faculty, and other. We created dummy variables of categories of interest in this study and combined postdoctoral scholar, staff, administration, lecturer, and adjunct faculty together under "staff" coded as (1) and (0) for all other categories other than "staff." Faculty was coded as "1" for faculty and "0" for any category other than faculty. For both staff and faculty variables, we use students (undergraduate and graduate) as the comparison category.

Given our two binary dependent variables, we use multivariate logistic regression estimation models for each dependent variable. Tests for multicollinearity were conducted using the variance inflation factor (VIF) statistic. All independent variables had a VIF below 3 and the mean VIF was below 2 for all models, indicating very low correlation between the covariates. Results are presented as logit regression coefficients with robust standard errors in [Tables 2](#) and [3](#). The models in each table are presented in a nested format grouped by the core dimensions associated with participation: organizational affiliations, civic experience, beliefs and awareness, and demographic controls. [Figs. 2](#) and [3](#) present the change in predicted probabilities for the statistically significant covariates in [Tables 2](#) and [3](#).

RESULTS

[Table 2](#) reports the findings from the willingness of university members to participate in off campus climate meetings in the SJV with equity considerations. In model 4, the saturated model, in terms of organizations, labor union and CBO memberships were associated with participating in both forms of climate action. These are precisely the types of organizations that develop civic skills for public engagement ([Terriquez, 2011](#)). Commitment to participate in climate action is more associated with capacity-building organizations than passive memberships in environmental organizations. In the full model 4, three out of eight measures of past civic engagement experience increased one's willingness to participate in a local climate meeting, demonstrating the impact of previous community outreach and the importance of working outside of university boundaries from an Open Systems organizational perspective. The act of collectively working together in a locality, especially community organizing-type routine activities, such as volunteering and attending past neighborhood gatherings or participating in Earth Day, enhances present interest in addressing the climate crisis through an equity lens.

Table 2. Multivariate Logistic Regression Models on Attending a Community Meeting About Climate Change Focusing on Equity in the SJV (With Robust Standard Errors), $N = 2,865$.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Organizational affiliation				
Union affiliation	1.077*** (0.156)	0.691*** (0.172)	0.692*** (0.174)	0.757*** (0.186)
Community organization	0.799*** (0.110)	0.422*** (0.118)	0.373** (0.122)	0.343** (0.124)
Environmental organization	0.874*** (0.163)	0.524*** (0.179)	0.354 (0.185)	0.325 (0.186)
Civic engagement experience				
Attended a protest		0.404*** (0.118)	0.186 (0.121)	0.223 (0.125)
Attended a neighborhood meeting		0.453*** (0.129)	0.420** (0.134)	0.471*** (0.137)
Volunteered in community		0.461*** (0.095)	0.432*** (0.098)	0.442*** (0.100)
Participated in labor strike		0.451*** (0.139)	0.334* (0.147)	0.285 (0.149)
Canvassing door to door		0.188 (0.189)	0.182 (0.194)	0.100 (0.201)
Participated in Earth Day		0.335** (0.109)	0.235* (0.112)	0.256* (0.114)
Participated in environmental rally		0.312 (0.175)	0.348 (0.181)	0.351 (0.182)
Raised awareness via social media		0.366*** (0.106)	0.160 (0.111)	0.143 (0.114)
Beliefs and awareness				
Political orientation (very liberal = 1, very conservative = 7)			-0.124*** (0.034)	-0.126*** (0.036)
Environmental identity			0.191 (0.098)	0.184 (0.100)
Concern about climate in low-income communities			0.295*** (0.060)	0.254*** (0.062)
Informed about just transitions			0.0787 (0.061)	0.071 (0.062)
Informed about EJ principles			0.137** (0.052)	0.152** (0.053)
Demographic controls				
Merced residence				0.206* (0.103)
Gender (male = 0)				0.205* (0.102)
Age				0.004 (0.007)
Income				0.006 (0.035)
Race/ethnicity (white = 0)				0.477** (0.157)
Faculty (vs students)				0.019 (0.307)
Staff (vs students)				0.007 (0.227)
Constant	-1.365 (0.049)	-1.888 (0.071)	-2.775 (0.266)	-3.397 (0.365)
Pseudo R^2	0.05	0.10	0.13	0.13

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$ (two-tailed tests) (robust standard errors in parentheses); E.J: environmental justice.

Table 3. Multivariate Logistic Regression Models on Organizing a Community Meeting About Climate Change in the SJV (with Robust Standard Errors), $N = 2,865$.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Organizational affiliation				
Union affiliation	0.474* (0.197)	0.125 (0.224)	0.021 (0.228)	0.161 (0.247)
Community organization	0.582*** (0.142)	0.280 (0.151)	0.287 (0.153)	0.342* (0.160)
Environmental organization	0.946*** (0.181)	0.483* (0.199)	0.290 (0.203)	0.365 (0.212)
Civic engagement experience				
Attended a protest		0.319* (0.154)	0.279 (0.160)	0.447** (0.161)
Attended a neighborhood meeting		0.449** (0.164)	0.411* (0.166)	0.507** (0.171)
Volunteered in community		0.250† (0.130)	0.214 (0.132)	0.163 (0.137)
Participated in labor strike		0.378* (0.175)	0.377* (0.177)	0.281 (0.184)
Canvassing door to door		0.416† (0.233)	0.232 (0.241)	0.134 (0.256)
Participated in Earth Day		0.373** (0.145)	0.291* (0.147)	0.288 (0.151)
Participated in environmental rally		0.639*** (0.210)	0.545* (0.216)	0.650** (0.216)
Raised awareness via social media		0.092 (0.140)	0.061 (0.144)	0.033 (0.149)
Beliefs and awareness				
Political orientation (very liberal = 1, very conservative = 7)			0.055 (0.044)	0.025 (0.047)
Environmental identity			0.391** (0.129)	0.402** (0.131)
Concern about climate in low-income communities			0.158* (0.077)	0.140 (0.080)
Informed about just transitions			0.201** (0.076)	0.165* (0.076)
Informed about EJ principles			0.080 (0.072)	0.141 (0.073)
Demographic controls				
Merced residence				0.308* (0.134)
Gender (male = 0)				-0.017 (0.135)
Age				-0.012 (0.012)
Income				-0.059 (0.048)
Race/ethnicity BIPOC (white = 0)				0.961*** (0.231)
Faculty (vs students)				-0.573 (0.443)
Staff (vs students)				0.181 (0.340)
Constant	-2.27 (0.049)	-2.68 (0.093)	-3.94 (0.345)	-4.47 (0.513)
Pseudo R^2	0.03	0.07	0.09	0.11

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$ (two-tailed tests) (robust standard errors in parentheses); EJ: environmental justice.

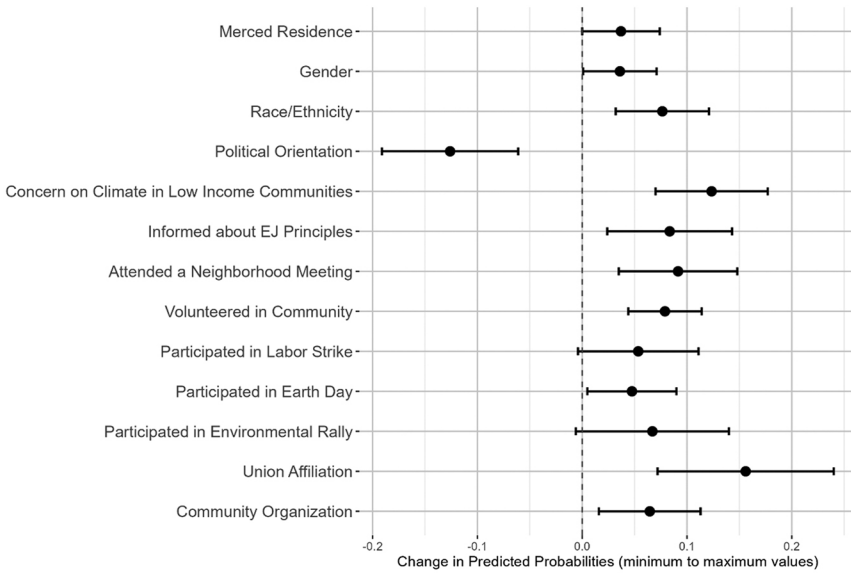


Fig. 2. Change in Predicted Probability of Attending a Local Climate Meeting About Equity.

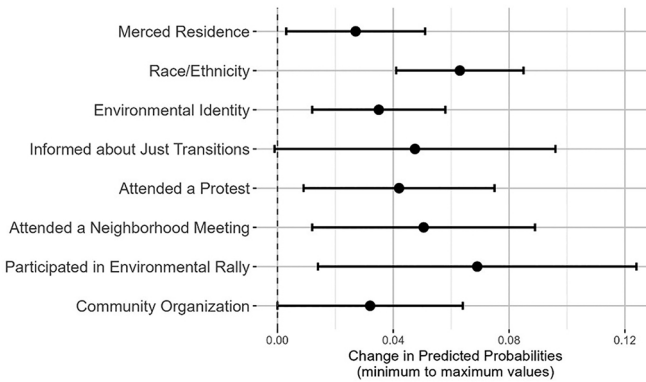


Fig. 3. Change in Predicted Probability of Willingness to Organize a Local Climate Meeting in the SJV.

In the area of beliefs and awareness, those identifying as more conservative on the political spectrum were less willing to attend a local gathering about climate equity. This is consistent with the recent rise of climate skepticism as a key component of the ideological platform of populist authoritarian parties across the globe. Concern for climate change in low-income populations in the SJV and knowledge of environmental justice principles also increased willingness to

engage in climate equity issues via local assemblies. Local climate gatherings offer a space to act on one's concerns and awareness.

The most consistent demographic indicators associated with attending climate equity meetings were those living near the university in the disinvested region, those identifying as nonwhite or BIPOC, and non-male. Those living outside of the city appear less invested in engaging in the *local consequences* of planetary warming for marginalized groups. Nearly half of the census tracts in the city of Merced are classified as environmental justice communities, and this geographical proximity to environmental hazards experienced by low-income populations and working-class families directly connects UCM affiliates living in the city to climate vulnerable populations. The disproportionate impact of climate change on communities of color also provides additional incentives to act with equity principles (Benz & Burney, 2021). Indeed, representative public opinion polling in California over the past two decades shows a consistent trend whereby Black and Latino residents report much more concern over the threat of climate change than white respondents (Pastor et al., 2024).

Fig. 2 presents the change in predicted probabilities for the statistically significant covariates in model 4 of Table 2, to better estimate the magnitude of the associations. This figure represents the change in the predicted probability of joining a climate meeting for a change in the independent variable from its minimum to maximum value (holding all other independent variables at their means). The most impactful changes come from political orientation, concern for climate in vulnerable communities, and labor union membership. Going from extremely liberal to extremely conservative *reduces* the likelihood of participating in a local climate meeting by nearly 50% from a 0.28 to a 0.15 probability. Concern about local low-income communities and climate change has nearly the same impact in the other direction moving from a 0.15 probability when there is no concern to 0.27 when there is much concern. Union affiliation had the strongest influence on attending a climate equity gathering in the nearby region. Non-union respondents have a 22% likelihood of attending a climate meeting while union members have a 38% likelihood. This finding is consistent with the literature on the capacity-building functions of labor unions beyond the workplace and into the civic and public sphere. Unions may prepare their memberships and the larger community in workshops, canvassing, and leadership skills (Terriquez, 2011), and the fungibility of such skills may result in more interest in climate action (Almeida et al., 2023).

Table 3 examines a deeper level of commitment to participating in climate action – willingness to *organize a meeting* about climate change in a disinvested region. This would be a much higher cost in relation to the time and energy invested to coordinate such an event in the SJV compared to attending a meeting. Focusing on the full model 4, CBO membership was associated with a disposition to organizing an event. CBO members would more likely have the civic capacity training and experience to organize the local population and perhaps draw on the support of fellow CBO affiliates. Attending protests and past local neighborhood meetings also made one more willing to initiate a local climate meeting. The neighborhood or “house meeting” is a time honored and tested strategy dating back to the Community Service Organization of Fred Ross in the 1940s with

urban Mexican American populations in California, to the United Farmworkers in the SJV in the 1960s and 1970s as a way to build trust and determine who is committed to the issue in question (Ganz, 2024). More recently, activists employed neighborhood meetings in the first Obama presidential campaign in 2007 and 2008 to get out the vote (McKenna & Han, 2014).

Past environmental civic experience was also associated with organizing a local climate gathering via participation in an environmental rally, whereby there may be incentives to continue environmental civic engagement in the future. Consistent with environmental organization affiliation and environmental activism, harboring an environmentalist identity also was associated with willingness to coordinate a climate meeting as was awareness of just transition principles. The multiple networks of progressive environmentalism enhance the level of participation (Andrews & Edwards, 2005). In addition, demographic characteristics were associated with interest in organizing a local climate assembly – those with nonwhite racial and ethnic identities and university members who live in the city of Merced were more willing to host a climate meeting.

Fig. 3 examines key covariates in Table 3 influencing interest in organizing a local climate meeting. The most impactful factors involve race/ethnicity and past participation in an environmental rally. Nonwhite respondents have a predicted probability of 0.106 of organizing a climate meeting, compared to a predicted probability of 0.043 for white respondents. This represents an absolute difference of 0.063, indicating that nonwhite respondents are 6.3 percentage points more likely to coordinate a local climate gathering in the SJV. Fig. 3 estimates that individuals who have never attended an environmental rally have a 9.0% chance (a probability of 0.090) of organizing a climate meeting in the region. For individuals who have attended an environmental rally in the past, their predicted chance of organizing a meeting increases to 15.9% (a probability of 0.159). This suggests that prior engagement with environmental civic engagement, such as attending a rally, is associated with a noticeably higher likelihood of organizing around climate issues. Someone who has attended an environmental rally is almost twice as likely to organize around climate compared to someone who has never attended one.

CONCLUSION

The correlates of members of large organizations willing to participate in climate action with nearby communities derive from multiple dimensions. Members of large organizations serve as conduits or channels for resource sharing in disinvested communities at the micro-level of civic life. Capacity-building organizations are critical for getting people to turnout for climate meetings – a starting point for a number of climate action initiatives (e.g., clean energy, nature-based climate solutions, green workforce development, etc.). Moreover, the kinds of civic engagement practices high-capacity organizations promote are equally relevant, such as protests, rallies, neighborhood meetings, and volunteering, as they also lead to more interest in climate action. Environmental awareness also

accelerates potential participation with concerns about climate change in low-income communities and knowledge of the meaning of environmental justice. Those faculty, staff, and students of color and living near or in frontline communities in the city of Merced also showed more interest in engaging in local climate action outside the university.

Deep integration in the environmental movement was associated with organizing climate meetings, including participation in environmental rallies and maintaining an environmental identity. CBO membership was associated with the deep commitment of organizing a local climate meeting in the SJV. BIPOC members of the university and those residing in the city of Merced also demonstrated a heightened interest in organizing local climate meetings as they are more likely to bear the direct burdens of pollution and climate vulnerabilities.

The results provide information to decision-makers within research universities (student associations, staff assemblies and labor unions, faculty committees, and administrators) and other large organizations on how to expand outreach beyond the organizational boundaries into surrounding and nearby communities. Large and complex organizations can structure their practices and incentive programs to increase community engagement in climate action and use their memberships as pipelines for resource sharing, similar to how states structure organizational fields (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011). In the case presented in this study, this would include incentives for organizational members to serve as volunteers or be community engaged through joint town/gown events such as urban forestation programs or climate education workshops. Forums and curriculum focusing on the meaning and history of environmental justice and climate impacts on low-income populations would be especially relevant for enhancing interest in regional climate action. Offering these same opportunities on campus to *all members* of the university community through a climate curriculum would also expand knowledge and awareness in the issues covered. This may be through university extension programs or direct ties between the university and community and labor organizations. Also, holding university-sponsored public events off campus, such as Earth Day celebrations and environmental rallies, may heighten responsiveness for future climate actions. Identification of the units and groups on campus already working with (and living in) frontline communities in the region would be another focus area to steer investments and resources. Encouraging and developing inducements for organizational members to reside near their workplace will provide a larger population from which to participate in climate action events with deeper commitments to the concerns of disinvested communities.

Future work would also benefit in terms of empirically analyzing the correlates of *actual climate action participation* versus the hypothetical levels of willingness examined here. Since civic engagement around climate issues is relatively low, especially in extraction regions such as the SJV, experimental field designs and representative sample surveys may be most promising in environmental justice communities with an active CBO presence to understand more precisely the linkages between action participation and non-participation in events involving just climate solutions.

NOTES

1. <https://innovation.luskin.ucla.edu/what-we-do/>
2. <https://news.ucmerced.edu/news/2020/campus-reaches-carbon-neutrality-ahead-schedule>
3. <https://www.ucop.edu/leading-on-climate/task-force/index.html>
4. Fernandez-Bou et al. (2021).
5. <https://www.sierraclub.org/articles/2021/07/californias-cities-lead-way-pollution-free-homes-and-buildings>
6. Yale Climate Opinion Maps, 2023, ± 8 points, <https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/visualizations-data/ycom-us/>
7. We did not include a measure of political party affiliation in the study. Our measure may be more applicable to make comparisons beyond the United States by posing the political orientation question in a more generic fashion.
8. Three additional categories of non-binary gender identification combined for 4% of the sample, and we ran models with and without this measure, and our results did not change.

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APPENDIX

Table A1. Descriptive Statistics of Dependent and Independent Variables.

	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Dependent Variables				
Attending a community meeting about climate change focusing on equity in the SJV	0.259	0.438	0	1
Organize a meeting about climate change in the SJV	0.119	0.323	0	1
Independent Variables				
Organizations				
Union affiliation	0.066	0.248	0	1
Community organization	0.157	0.364	0	1
Environmental organization	0.065	0.247	0	1
Civic engagement experience				
Attended a protest	0.201	0.401	0	1
Attended a neighborhood meeting	0.118	0.323	0	1
Volunteered in community	0.455	0.498	0	1
Participated in labor strike	0.110	0.313	0	1
Canvassing	0.051	0.219	0	1
Participated in Earth Day	0.207	0.405	0	1
Participated in environmental rally	0.069	0.254	0	1
Raised awareness	0.240	0.427	0	1
Beliefs and awareness				
Political orientation	3.105	1.485	1	7
Environmental identity	0.430	0.495	0	1
Concern about income	3.101	0.949	1	4
Informed about just transitions	1.560	0.837	1	4
Informed about EJ principles	2.002	1.006	1	4
Demographic controls				
Merced residence	0.339	0.473	0	1
Gender (male = 0)	0.579	0.494	0	1
Age	25.939	9.825	21.5	71.5
Income	1.552	1.646	0	5
Race/ethnicity (white = 0)	0.855	0.352	0	1
Faculty	0.042	0.200	0	1
Staff	0.094	0.292	0	1

Note: SD: standard deviation; EJ: environmental justice.