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Trends in Climate Change Disinformation within Latino Communities

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Introduction

Every year, the United Nations (UN) Conference of the Parties (COP) convenes to negotiate global priorities for climate change policy. COP30, held in November 2025, introduced a first-of-its-kind "Declaration on Information Integrity on Climate Change" to address how misinformation and disinformation campaigns can potentially erode public trust in climate science and democratic discourse (Ferreira, 2025). More than twenty countries, excluding the United States (U.S.), will collaborate with civil society partners to implement the UN endeavor.

The developments at COP30 highlight a growing global awareness of the fossil fuel industry's alleged disinformation strategies, which have emerged as a potent tool for stalling sustainable governance (Roberts et al., 2025; Ferreira, 2025). In these proceedings, misinformation was generally defined as the *unintentional* spread of harmful or inaccurate information, whereas disinformation is the deliberate *intent* to mislead (Gertrudix et al., 2024, p. 3). The UN's declaration not only demonstrates a strong commitment to bolstering confidence in science-based policies but also aims to protect public discourse from industry pressures (Ferreira, 2025). Given this context, it is crucial to explore how the fossil fuel industry's influence sustains society's dependence on a carbon-intensive economy.

This influence often appears in political messaging that some researchers label as climate disinformation, which can alter the public's understanding of climate science and policy (Gertrudix et al., 2024; Reyes-García et al., 2025). Moreover, they argue that these messages seek to obstruct climate change legislation through a network of industry-funded advertising firms, research, think tanks, lobbying groups, and public relations organizations that amplify them (Roberts et al., 2025, p. 3). Through this network, industry-funded narratives can foster division and adversarial views on environmental issues, such as casting climate change science and policy as economically unsound (Gertrudix et al., 2024, p. 4; Sethi, 2024). Studies also indicate that these narrative devices often emerge when regulations could decrease fossil fuel demand and limit industry profits. To challenge such regulations, campaigns often focus on identifying key voting constituencies at the national and subnational levels to guide opposition efforts (Ulucanlar et al., 2016; Niven, 2024; Plachta and Rubin, 2026). However, linking alleged climate disinformation to obstruction is complex because cultural and regional policy environments shape how fossil fuel messaging is crafted and received (Barboza, 2023). To better understand the scope of climate disinformation, the following sections explore California as a subnational case. The state is a world leader in addressing climate change, with both mainstream environmental and environmental justice organizations actively shaping climate policy. Shifting demographics show that support from Latino voters and lawmakers is essential to advancing environmental legislation. Yet, multinational industries and agricultural interests remain powerful in the state's economy and governance. These elements underscore the intricate political dynamics at local, state, and transnational levels that influence California's climate policy and initiatives (Méndez, 2020; p. xiii; LCA, 2024).

California as a Microcosm of Misleading Climate Narratives

The U.S. has long represented a conflicted political arena for climate action. In recent years, climate change policies have become increasingly partisan and politicized, portrayed as incongruent with economic priorities. This has led to the U.S. withdrawal from UN climate proceedings and sweeping federal rollbacks of climate-related rules, policies, and funding (Borunda et al., 2025; Elbeyi et al., 2025, pp. 30-32).

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California, however, demonstrates how subnational governments can adopt effective climate policies even despite national policy gridlock and intense local political conflicts (Méndez, 2020). The state has consistently implemented ambitious, comprehensive climate change and environmental justice laws with stricter standards than those of the U.S. federal government (Roberts et al., 2025). This leadership has become crucial amid federal regulatory backsliding. California Governor Gavin Newsom attended COP30 and the Munich Security Council to foster international partnerships, reduce carbon emissions, and enhance climate resilience.

However, these climate action commitments are somewhat overshadowed by a recent decision to fast-track thousands of new oil-drilling permits through Senate Bill (S.B.) 237, a stopgap measure prompted by rising gasoline prices in the state (Gross, 2025). This decision highlights the geopolitical tension between supporting global efforts to address climate change and the state's deep-rooted dependence on a fossil-fuel economy. California ranks as the eighth-largest oil producer and the third-largest crude oil refiner in the United States. The state is also one of the world's top gasoline consumers (EIA, 2024).

This reliance likely reflects the continued presence of fossil fuel companies and their trade associations in the state. Several scholars argue that trade associations serve as an important 'command center' within the climate obstructionist network, coordinating industry resources for lobbying, research, and advertising campaigns (Roberts et al., 2025, p. 8). These scholars further contend that trade associations often obscure their funding by establishing affiliated tax-exempt 501(c)(4) 'social welfare' nonprofits, allowing them to keep their donors private (Friedman, 2024). This strategy can enable the industry to engage in unfettered political lobbying and public relations activities through organizations that mimic grassroots, bottom-up campaigns, a practice researchers call "astroturfing" (Roberts et al., 2025, p. 42). Studies show that trade associations in the food, beverage, and tobacco sectors employ similar strategies. They often finance campaigns that resonate with minority or lower-income populations, leveraging those groups' genuine economic or social concerns to oppose regulations that could harm industry interests (Ulucanlar et al., 2016, p. 9; Tanrikulu et al., 2020; Barboza, 2023).

In California, the Western States Petroleum Association (WSPA) is the fossil fuel industry's trade association. Lobbying disclosure reports show 501(c)(4) groups under WSPA's purview spent over $40 million on advertising in the state between 2014 and 2023 (LCA, 2024, Table 4). Year after year, state disclosure reports show the fossil fuel industry has increased its lobbying and public relations spending in California more than in any other state in the country (Gross, 2025). For example, the industry spent $10.3 million on lobbying activities in the first quarter of 2026 alone. Political experts opine that they are leveraging the Iran conflict to push back against the supposed high cost of the state's fossil-fuel phaseout efforts (Lazo, 2026).

These ongoing efforts show how the industry can use the political salience of "affordability" narratives (i.e., arguments that reducing carbon emissions increases utility bills, gas prices, and taxes) to advance its interests. In a 2023 Shell Corporation Climate and Energy Transition Lobbying Report, WSPA was praised for its "media outreach program…to increase public engagement in the state's energy policy debate," and for its ability to remain relevant to "low-income and under-represented communities" (Shell plc, 2023, p. 27). Several news articles also frame WSPA as seeking to influence Latino voters to be wary of California's climate change laws, citing concerns about job losses and effects on their pocketbooks (Barboza, 2023; Mulkern, 2023; Plachta and Rubin, 2025). To put this ongoing strategy into context, between 2023 and 2026, the second co-author of this letter and several of their Latino family members received multiple direct-mail pieces and social media posts from fossil fuel-related groups. These messages frequently emphasize affordability concerns and the need to prevent the adoption or implementation of climate change policies (Barboza, 2023; Mulkern, 2023). During the 2026 New York Climate Week, the second author also served as a panel expert at an invite-only briefing for Spanish-language broadcast and digital media on "Responsibilities of Emerging Technologies in Latino Communities." Journalists posed critical questions to the panel about climate disinformation and more effective messaging to address affordability concerns in Latino communities.

California Latinos and Alleged Climate Disinformation

Affordability-focused political messaging has become increasingly salient for many members of the Latino community. This population consistently experiences the highest poverty rates, accounting for nearly half of all poor Californians (Méndez & Sadhwani, 2022). In response to growing affordability concerns, WSPA launched an initiative titled *Levanta Tu Voz* (Raise Your Voice). This narrative campaign aims to galvanize opposition among Latino voters, who they believe are adversely affected by what are being called California's "costly" climate change laws (Levanta Tu Voz, 2025). Because Latinos make up a significant portion of California's population and represent the state's fastest-growing voter demographic, WSPA likely focuses on this group to amplify its message and legitimize its position (Venteicher, 2024).

The WSPA campaign primarily features Latino workers who promote slogans claiming that California's energy transition will 'leave Latino communities behind,' eliminate jobs, and increase household utility bills (Levanta Tu Voz,

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2025). However, the Los Angeles Times reported that, in interviews with journalists, several Latinos involved in Levanta Tu Voz held nuanced views on sustainable energy, openly stating that "electrification is the future" (Barboza, 2023).

This was followed by a Times Editorial Board (2023) piece titled: "Big Oil is exploiting California's Latinos in its latest climate disinformation push." The board acknowledged the fossil industry's right to free speech and lobbying. However, they underscored that while their messaging may begin with some truth about rising energy costs, the oil industry "offers only doubt and delay" rather than real solutions (The Times Editorial Board, 2023). Politico subsequently published an investigative news article focused on two WSPA-affiliated groups, Californians for Affordable and Reliable Energy (CARE) and Californians for Energy Independence (CEI) (Mulkern, 2023). According to their analysis, these groups spent a combined $4.3 million in 2023 on television and Facebook ads in both English and Spanish, warning against reduced oil production and blaming state policies for higher gas and electricity prices.

Consumer rights groups called the ads "misleading" and labeled the organizations "front groups" for the oil industry (Mulkern, 2023). Academic research (Gertrudix et al., 2024; Yang, 2025; Schoch et al., 2022) supports these claims, showing that alleged coordinated disinformation efforts can obscure industry motives through networks of business- and community-affiliated coalitions that claim to defend voters' economic interests while protecting fossil fuel companies (Roberts et al., 2025, p. 68).

These strategies appear across local contexts and regions, particularly focusing on shifting perspectives within communities of color. In "Fossil Fueled Foolery," a series of research reports released by the oldest and largest civil rights organization in the U.S., the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), explores how fossil fuel companies influence public opinion and community leaders' policy decisions. According to reports from 2019, 2021, and 2026, this approach is especially evident in African American communities in the Northeastern and Southern U.S. (Patterson, 2026).

These strategies also appear in California, home to long-established environmental justice groups (Méndez, 2020). Latino communities often serve as important voices in these grassroots organizations, considering they are disproportionately impacted by climate change. In California and across the country, infrastructure disinvestment and exclusionary zoning leave communities of color continuously exposed to environmental health hazards from industrial and fossil fuel sites (Méndez, 2020). Research has consistently shown that this historical context typically makes Latinos more supportive of and engaged with climate change policies (Segura, 2024; Roth, 2020).

The lived experience and advocacy of Latinos in California, combined with their voting power, pose significant obstacles for the fossil fuel industry. Environmental justice groups contend that fossil fuel groups often seek to undermine Latinos' and other communities of color's historic support for climate change laws and policies (CEJA, 2020). Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools are increasingly used to challenge this support (Smith, 2026). For instance, environmental advocates recently called for an investigation into an AI campaign that used residents' identities without permission to inundate California air regulators with over 20,000 alleged fake opposition emails. The volume of comments reportedly influenced a 7–5 vote against clean air rules to phase out gas-powered appliances (Zillac and Rott, 2026; Handel, 2026). These efforts likely build on a long-standing strategy. A 2025 Sacramento Bee article by Plachta and Rubin noted that the industry spent millions to block building electrification, focusing on gas-powered stoves. It allegedly targeted Asian and Latino voters and restaurant owners through mail and digital campaigns, using cultural and culinary concerns to portray a diverse opposition to state initiatives. Several journalists have described these narrative framings as relying on reductive messaging that can obscure the complex, layered economic and environmental health conditions Latinos face (Roth, 2020; Barboza, 2023; Mulkern, 2023; Plachta and Rubin, 2025).

Additionally, climate disinformation campaign messages become harder to counter when mainstream environmental groups, such as the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), have not substantively addressed climate change as a socioeconomic and public health issue. Scholars view this as a missed opportunity to link climate change impacts to 'kitchen-table' economic and health issues that matter to Latino communities (Méndez & Sadhwani, 2022).

Within California's legislative halls, there is nuanced pushback to climate disinformation from several Democratic Latino legislators who are confronting the local socio-economic realities of environmental laws. Research shows these members often come from politically moderate rural and suburban regions in the San Joaquin Valley and Orange County. In many of these competitive districts, Democratic voter registration led Republican registration by only a few percentage points. This means these legislators must strike a delicate balance between environmental stewardship and economic development to remain in office (Méndez, 2020). Studies further show that Latino voters in these communities often respond to industry arguments about the cost of environmental regulation, such as increased energy costs for residents or the loss of blue-collar jobs in their regions. This reality has pushed several Latino legislators to reframe climate change legislation as a public health issue and a

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means of local job creation, ultimately leading to the adoption of multiple statewide climate initiatives. In essence, to counter disinformation efforts, Latino legislators have often balanced fiscal and environmental justice concerns. They highlight the natural and material consequences of climate change as a core message, alongside potential public health and job-creation opportunities of climate change laws (Méndez, 2020, pp. 62-64).

Future Policy and Research Outlook

The economic and public health resilience of low- and middle-income communities is intrinsically tied to the climate crisis, as worsening climatic effects exacerbate historic injustices along racial and class lines. To confront the false dichotomy between economic and environmental concerns, policymakers and mainstream environmental groups should communicate beyond abstract, globally focused climate change policy. By not tethering climate change concerns to lived, local realities, campaigns like WSPA'S Levanta Tu Voz can more readily leverage genuine fears about job loss, household and energy affordability, and familial livelihoods within Latino, Black, Indigenous, and working-class communities (Meisei, 2025).

Ensuring a culturally relevant and human-centered approach to climate change policy requires the active involvement of community-based environmental justice organizations that have, for decades, articulated the importance of centering equity and affordability in climate change laws (Meisei, 2025). However, research shows these groups are often excluded from sustainable governance dialogues or, when included, are tokenized in their participation and lack substantial decision-making influence (Méndez, 2020). Forging synergistic, cross-sectoral climate coalitions between grassroots and mainstream environmental actors could pose a critical challenge to industry-funded networks.

Studies underscore that climate disinformation networks are formidable largely because they coordinate powerful actors across spheres of influence. Their depth, reach, and funding strengthen their rapid growth (Roberts et al., 2025, p. 145). Therefore, additional research is needed to examine the long-term stability of climate disinformation campaigns globally, in contentious regions such as California, and beyond 'WEIRD' countries: *Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic* (Roberts et al., 2025, p. 85; 203). Longitudinal comparisons of disinformation campaigns can also identify variables and strategies across regional, policy, and cultural contexts (Gertrudix et al., 2024; Elbeyi et al., 2025; Yang, 2025). This research can help civil society and policymakers address the growth and evolution of climate disinformation more effectively (Niven, 2024).

While campaigns like WSPA's expand, it's equally important to highlight community-driven innovations that counter these strategies. Across the country, groups are strengthening media literacy, conducting multilingual fact-checking and community reporting, and promoting scientific, place-based environmental and political education (Roberts et al., 2025; LCA, 2024; Niven, 2024; Elbeyi et al., 2025; Bisht et al., 2025). As reflected in the UN's Initiative on Climate Information Integrity, international venues can effectively champion on-the-ground programs to address climate disinformation (Ferreira, 2025). This is also evident in GreenLatinos, a U.S.-Latino-led environmental justice nonprofit. Their 'Climate Loteria' campaign uses culture, humor, and multilingual dialogue to educate Latinos about disinformation (Meisei, 2025). Similarly, Climate Power En Acción (2025), a Latino environmental group, monitors Spanish media and social networks to fact-check climate-denial messages. Alongside Sachamama, they also launched Latido Climático (Climate Heartbeat), a campaign featuring local events to combat disinformation and show climate action's economic and health benefits. In 2026, they held over 1,500 events. They seek to reach millions of Latinos nationwide. These examples show that information integrity initiatives can succeed when environmental institutions collaborate with the grassroots.

Nurturing these "seed" initiatives can build momentum by leveraging community resources, such as social capital and skills development, to create transformative pathways, even amid social, political, and environmental challenges (Bennett et al., 2016). To accomplish this, we need to understand disinformation networks, expand the mainstream environmental movement, and ensure policymakers prioritize the needs of low-income residents and communities of color in climate change strategies. COP30 emphasized that maintaining information integrity is essential to safeguarding multilateral progress on climate action. Evidently, growing support for science-based climate change policies relies on collective trust in fundamental resources: information sharing and relationship building.

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