

Wildfires make Democrats but not Republicans more likely to vote for climate policy

Experiencing the impacts of climate change increases support for climate policy at the ballot box – but only among voters who already accept climate science.

Based on Chad Hazlett and Matto Mildenerger. 2020. "Wildfire exposure increases pro-environment voting within Democratic but not Republican areas." *American Political Science Review* 114(4): 1359-1365.

The Policy Problem

Climate change has long been viewed by Americans as a distant threat for future generations or people in other parts of the world. But the impacts of climate change have arrived. Every year, more and more Americans experience intensifying climate disasters, from extreme storms to wildfires. Will these direct experiences with climate change break the climate politics logjam that has stalled policymaking for the past three decades?

Key Findings

- Wildfire exposure increases voting for costly climate and energy policies by 5 to 6 percentage points
- Effect is concentrated in the most Democratic parts of California
- Experiencing climate change enhances willingness-to-act but only in places where voters already accept climate science

What We Found

We find that Californian voters who had a direct experience with wildfires over the previous two years were 5 to 6 percentage points more likely to vote for climate policies at the ballot box. This effect went away when wildfires were more than 15-20 km away. When we divide the state into more Democratic-leaning and Republican-leaning areas, we find these effects are concentrated in the more Democratic areas. By contrast, wildfire exposure had no impact on voting patterns in more Republican areas.

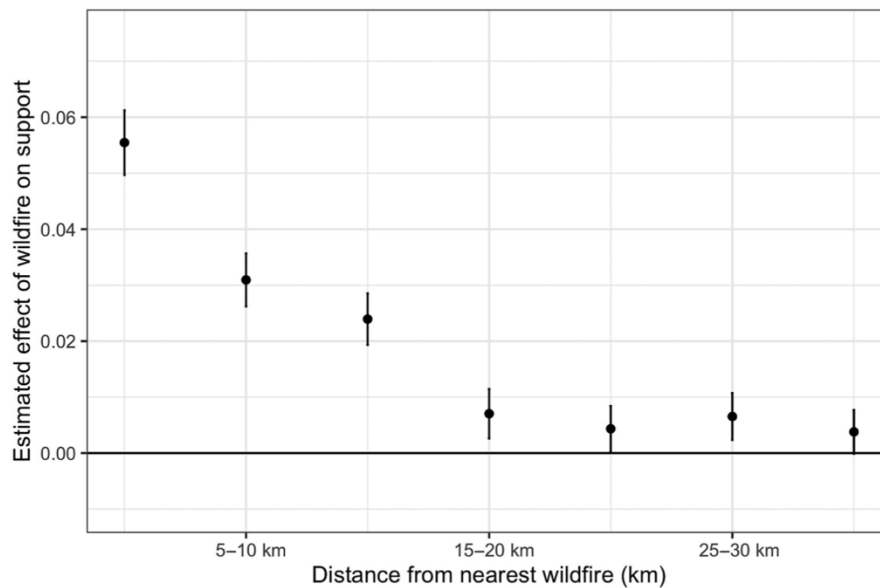


Figure: The effect of experiencing a wildfire on support for pro-climate ballot initiatives, by distance from a wildfire. The y-axis shows the change in pro-climate voting by electoral precinct. The x-axis shows distance from wildfire. Voters immediately beside a wildfire are 5-6 percentage points more likely to vote for pro-climate ballot initiatives. By 15-20km from the wildfire perimeter, voters have unchanged preferences.

What We Did

We collected data on ballot initiative voting outcomes and wildfire exposure for every Californian election precinct between 2002 and 2010. This included ballot initiatives like Proposition 23 in 2010, when the public voted on the state’s Global Warming Act. We ran statistical models to test whether wildfire exposure shapes over-time environmental voting, including tests to demonstrate statistical robustness.