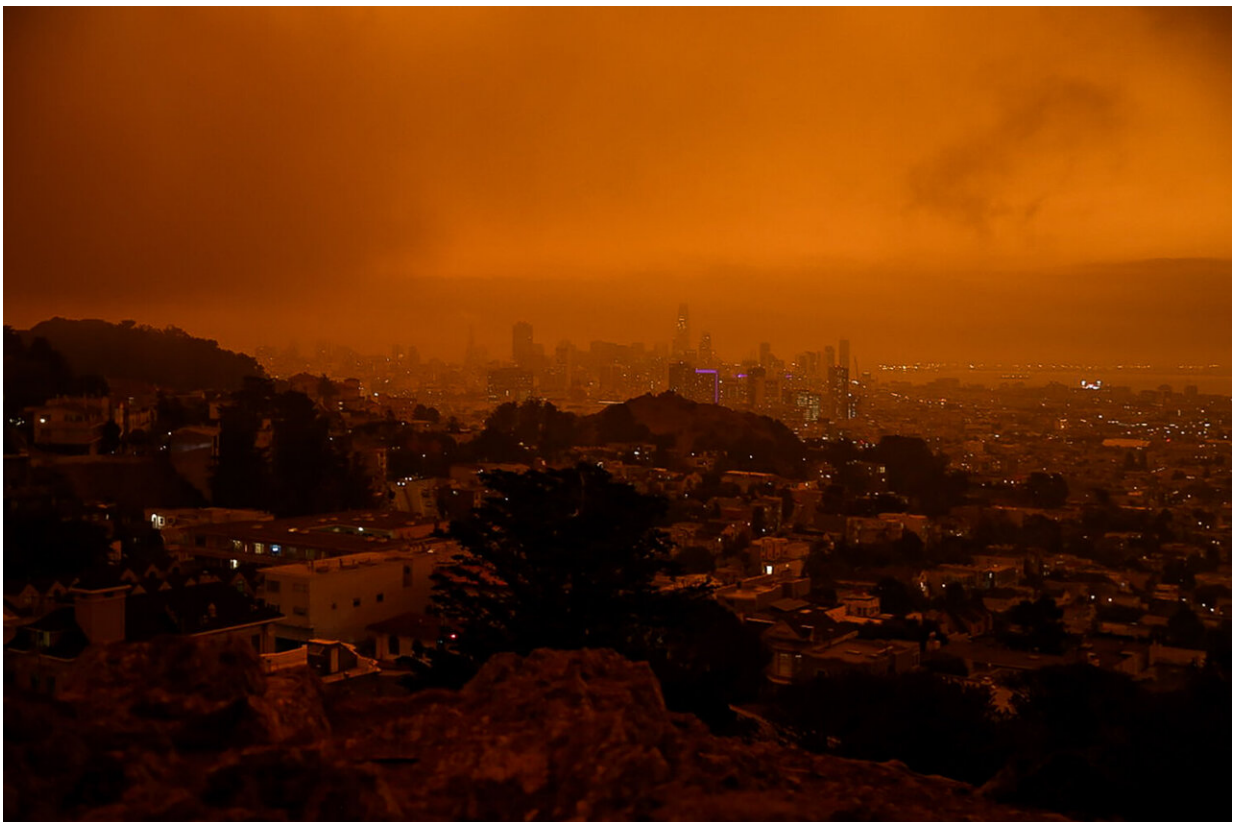


# Researchers find California wildfires shrink partisan differences about climate change strategies

September 25 2020, by Kylie Gordon

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A view from Tank Hill in San Francisco, just before noon on Sept. 9, 2020.  
Credit: Sonya Abrams

When the smoke from recent wildfires caused an eerie, orange sky to

darken San Francisco for an entire day earlier this month, the cultural conversation took an apocalyptic turn. National headlines reflected growing concern about the influence of climate change on extreme weather events, and Twitter seemed to register heightened levels of what is increasingly being called "climate grief."

And yet, even as hundreds of lightning-sparked wildfires tore through 1.2 million acres in Northern California, the conflagrations had the unexpected effect of drawing people with opposing [political views](#) closer together. A recent survey conducted by Stanford's Bill Lane Center for the American West suggests that [personal experience](#) with wildfires may lessen partisan gaps over [climate policy](#).

Historically, Republicans are less likely than Democrats to support [climate](#)-adaptation measures. In order to investigate whether a partisan gap in pro-environment voting might stymie efforts to combat climate change, a team of Stanford researchers set out to understand how people in different political groups recall [wildfire](#) experiences, and how wildfire exposure affects people's policy choices on an individual level. Led by Iris Hui, a senior researcher at the Bill Lane Center, the team surveyed 1,042 respondents in California who were asked to self-identify as "Democrats," "Republicans" and "Independents," or "others." They presented their research on Sept. 11 at the annual American Political Science Meeting.

One significant finding from the survey concerns partisan distortion and recall. When asked about their exposure to wildfires, Republicans were less likely to remember and report experiencing them. "We know partisanship plays a strong role in how people perceive reality," said Hui. "For example, if you ask people their opinion about how the economy is going, Republicans are more likely to give a rosier picture than Democrats since Trump is in office. In this case, what surprises us is that we find partisanship matters in how people recall their actual

experiences with climate events."

In spite of these partisan differences in the recollection of wildfires, the researchers were able to match the addresses of survey participants with wildfire locations and show that Republicans were actually no different from Democrats in their objective exposure to either wildfires or smoke. The partisan gap in perception was largest when Democrats and Republicans lived farther away from wildfires and smoky air. But living in close proximity to fires and dense smoke bridged this gap, leading to more consensus between partisan groups. "When asked, self-identified Republicans were less likely to recall experiencing a wildfire and smoke from wildfires. And that difference is attributable more to ideology and general attitude toward climate change than discrepancy in actual experiences," said Bruce Cain, a professor of political science in the School of Humanities and Sciences and co-author of the study.

Other questions in the survey asked respondents their opinion on using public money to fund adaptation measures that would protect people and property from the devastating impacts of wildfire. Traditionally, the issue tends to divide Republicans and Democrats, but again, convergence was observed. "Generally, Republicans are less likely to support the use of public funds to subsidize climate-adaptation measures for private homeowners," said Hui. "But our findings show that when Republicans experience a nearby wildfire more than once, they act no differently from Democrats in their support for using public funds to subsidize adaptation measures. In other words, the partisan gap in the willingness to support climate adaptation strategies diminishes."

Bipartisan consensus in the U.S. on any issue can be difficult to come by these days, but successful climate resilience policies will depend upon cooperation across party lines, Cain said. He and his Bill Lane Center colleagues expressed hope that more frequent [extreme weather events](#), though stressful and sometimes devastating, may open "policy windows"

for bipartisan agreement. "If weeks of pervasive wildfire smoke become the new normal in the American West," said Cain, "it could be the reality check that loosens some of the partisan logjams about climate change politics in our region."

Provided by Stanford University

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