

# Family values outweigh politics in US Latinos' climate beliefs

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For many in the U.S., human-caused climate change is a political tug-of-war between the left and the right. But for Latinos in this country, the issue hits much closer to home.

New research led by Adam Pearson, associate professor of psychological science at Pomona College, and Jonathon Schuldt, associate professor of communication in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and interim executive director of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, shows that [family](#) values are a much stronger predictor of [climate](#) opinions and policy support than [political views](#) for U.S. Latinos.

"Cultural Determinants of Climate Change Opinion: Familism Predicts Climate Beliefs and Policy Support Among US Latinos" published July 15 in the journal *Climatic Change*. Rainer Romero-Canyas, lead senior social scientist at the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), is a co-author.

"There's a growing body of work that finds that Hispanics and Latinos in the U.S. report some of the strongest environmental concerns—concerns about climate change specifically—and support for climate mitigation," said Schuldt, a faculty fellow of the Cornell Atkinson Center for Sustainability, which along with the EDF provided funding for this research through a 2015 grant.

"People have been trying to figure out why that might be," Schuldt said. "And so here we thought about familism, or family values, as one potential piece of this puzzle."

Schuldt admits that they didn't find a definitive answer as to why familism—cultural values representing a commitment to and prioritization of the family—should be such a strong predictor among U.S. Latinos, but their research and previous studies offer some clues.

"When you think about the kind of threat climate change is," he said, "if you're more attuned to family values, you might be more concerned about climate change and its effects on loved ones and across generations."

Other studies have shown that Latinos, compared to whites, have more contact with extended family, including family who live abroad, "some in places where climate change is having devastating impacts," Schuldtsaid.

"Feeling a sense of connection and commitment to your family, and believing that family considerations should guide our everyday decisions, may shape consensus views within a family, including for a societal problem like climate change," Pearson said. "And this may have implications for the sharing of climate beliefs and concerns within Latino families."

For their work, Pearson and Schuldts's group used data from a national survey of 1,212 U.S. adults, conducted in spring 2016 as part of a larger study on climate change opinion. Analysis was restricted to respondents who identified as either Latino (304 total; 29.2%) or non-Hispanic/Latino white (741 total; 70.8%).

The research focused on two key climate beliefs: Certainty that climate change is occurring; and belief in the scientific consensus. Support for policies aimed at reducing [greenhouse gas emissions](#) was also measured with five questions, each answerable on a scale of 1-7 (strongly oppose to strongly support).

Familism was measured by agreement with the statements: "A person should help his or her elderly parents in times of need, for example, helping them financially or sharing a house" and "Children should be taught to always be good because they represent the family." Measurement was on a 1-5 scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree, reflecting a sense of commitment and obligation to one's family.

The researchers also measured climate beliefs and concerns focused specifically on the family, including consensus views within the

family—agreement with the statement, "Most of my family believes that human-caused climate change is [NOT] occurring"—and concern about harm to the family was assessed with the statement, "I am concerned that climate change will harm my children and grandchildren," using a scale of 1-5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree).

For all measures, and controlling for several demographic variables, familism emerged as the strongest predictor of climate opinion among Latinos. For whites, political ideology and education were consistently the strongest predictors, though family values also predicted their policy support.

One finding that stood out for Romero-Canyas is the degree to which familism indicated climate beliefs among Latinos.

"Among Latinos, it's the most important predictor—even more important than politics," he said. "That's what's interesting to me. If you look at whites, familism also predicts their climate belief, but nowhere near as strongly as politics. Among Latinos, when it comes to climate change, family values seem to outweigh political values."

Schuldt said other research shows that as a Latino family becomes acculturated in the U.S., the familism effect diminishes. "Family values may be a bit at odds with American culture's focus on self-reliance and independence."

Pearson said this work, and future studies in this area, could have implications for climate organizations and public outreach.

"It's often seen as a political issue, and I think what our findings suggest, is that for certain groups, politics might not be the lens through which they look at [climate change](#)," Pearson said. "This has important implications for stakeholder engagement. What do we appeal

to—people's politics, their sense of fairness, their concern about the environment, or perhaps to their [family values](#)?"

Other contributors included Guadalupe Bacio, assistant professor of psychological science and Chicana/o and Latina/o studies at Pomona College; and Sarah Naiman, a Cornell doctoral student in the field of natural resources.

**More information:** Adam R. Pearson et al, Cultural determinants of climate change opinion: familism predicts climate beliefs and policy support among US Latinos, *Climatic Change* (2021). [DOI: 10.1007/s10584-021-03165-2](#)

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