

The Freedom to Breathe: African Americans and Political Participation

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Objective: *This research assesses political efficacy, religion, affluence, educational attainment, network social ties, extended work hours, and number of children to determine political participation in the Freedom to Breathe campaign. The author seeks to establish the distinctness between residents of Oakland, CA who participated in a “Freedom to Breathe” campaign, organized by environmental justice group Communities for a Better Environment (CBE) advocating against excessive air pollution, and the remaining residents who did not participate in the campaign.*

Methods: *A survey was mailed to Oakland residents who did not participate in the campaign by means of random cluster sampling. A total of 10 blocks was randomly selected from the area map and five households were surveyed from each block. For each selected block, about 5-7 households were contacted for participation in the survey. Residents of the city of Oakland who had participated in the campaign were given a survey to complete at the headquarters of CBE during a weekly meeting.*

Results: *We find that several contextual factors and social ties play a major role in mobilization of African Americans in this specific campaign. Avenues for future research are also discussed.*

INTRODUCTION

¹Environmental equity affirms that all people have the right to breathe clean air, drink clean water and not be exposed to environmental hazards that can affect their well being in anyway. Understandably, one can presume that people who are in the confines of environmental exposures would adamantly speak against such inequities.

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However, this is not always the case. Most probably, those who do participate politically are people who become involved for several reasons such as feeling strongly about a particular idea, seeking to promote issues and causes that personally profit themselves, or self-satisfaction. Conversely, people may choose not to participate because they feel happy or satisfied by the status quo, are uninterested or do not know much about politics, or believe that no one in power takes note of their views and that the government is indifferent to them.

This research is a continuation of my past research (Gutierrez 2008) that

assessed Latino political participation and found that several socio-demographic factors as well as cultural inhibitors resulted in participation and non-participation in a candlelight vigil. This research, on the other hand, did not look at socio-demographic factors that influenced participation such as sex and age, but proffered that income does contribute to participation; other factors such as political efficacy and educational level were also assessed. Reasons for non-participation included variables such as respondents who work several hours in a workday and those that must care for children. These variables were assessed in an attempt at future research comparing Latino participation with that of African American.

For this study, I attempted to understand some of the factors that influenced African American participation, specifically in an effort called the "Freedom to Breathe" campaign hosted by an environmental justice organization called Communities for a Better environment, better referred to as CBE. The campaign took place in the summer of 2009 and involved people of the community willing to stand in a high traffic area of East Oakland's Hegenburger Corridor for two weeks, about four hours a day, to calculate the number of commercial and non-commercial vehicles that dispensed toxic ambient pollutants as they went by; organizers, members, and volunteers took to the streets in an effort to combat air pollution in their community. The majority of the participants were African Americans with very little exceptions; Oakland residents were 36% African Americans at the time and were the only ethnic group evaluated in this research.

100 respondents were evaluated, all African American; half of respondents (N=50) did not participate in the campaign. All respondents were given a survey with a series of questions about variables such as political efficacy, income educational attainment, and social ties, all of which were hypothesized to prompt participation. Conversely, variables that pinpoint number of hours worked per day and number of children per family were hypothesized to be indicators for lack of participation in the campaign.

I conceptualized *political efficacy* as the amount of political effectiveness or influence a respondent believed to have over political matters and outcomes. *Affluence* was categorized as personal abundance of money, property or material goods and was operationalized using a survey question assessing personal income. For the purpose of this study, \$50,000 or more a year was categorized as "affluent" not because I believe it is an adequate income to live in affluence, but because of the fact that African Americans constitute the largest ethnic population living in poverty. *Educational attainment* was conceptualized as the level of schooling a respondent received. Being acquainted with an organizer or member of CBE was conceptualized to mean that the respondent was acquainted with a community organizer or member of CBE in any way (friend, acquaintance, removed acquaintance, etc.). Finally, *working more than eight hour workdays* meant that respondents had a full time job, continually worked over time, or had a second shift. *Having more than two children* meant that the respondents primarily cared for more than two

children whether they were their own or products of mixed families such as a stepchild or half-son or daughter.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Environmental equity for all is a fundamental right; no person should be exposed to health hazards regardless of his or her ethnicity or social class. This fundamental right is especially relevant to people who reside in the United States because under the law no one can be discriminated against. The importance of studying the rationale that produces the participation of people to struggle for environmental justice is an important assessment for community organizers, politicians and academics; environmental protections have been taken for granted by the unexposed and amply suffered by the overexposed. Studying these reasons for participation have helped organizers and state officials become knowledgeable of the limitations that force marginalized groups not to participate for the sake of their livelihood. Past research about environmental participation is rare and when it does apply, it seems to lack insight about the reasons people do or do not participate toward the betterment of their communities. Most key research found laid the groundwork for environmental inequities and were attentive to matters that pertain to groups who are affected, how they are affected, and what health concerns have been relevant to exposure--all literature that is necessary to piece together the linkages between environmental justice and inequity.

Minorities, specifically Latinos and African Americans, are among the

most affected group, and have been consistently shifting into first place as most affected (Pollock and Vittas 1995; Grineski, Bolin and Boone 2007). Those with lower incomes have also been disproportionately affected. These impoverished minority groups have been exposed to many different types of hazards, including toxic exposure through source emissions like factories and industrial districts (Morello, Pastor and Sadd 2001; Schweiter and Valenzuela 2004; Pastor, Morello-F. and Sadd 2005), residential proximity to roads that causes higher levels of air pollution (Schweiter et al. 2004; Gelobter 1993), water contamination (Novotny 1995), and proximity to toxic waste production or disposal sites (Futrell 2000). The high exposures of these ambient toxins were observed to cause asthma, bronchitis, birth defects, learning disabilities, respiratory problems and even different cancers such as lung and brain cancer (Schweitzer et al. 2004; Pastor et al. 2005; Morello-Frosch 2001). All aforementioned research necessarily helped approximate who has been disproportionately affected, how they have been affected, and what types of health risks result from such exposure. Previous research is necessary to be conscious of the basic information of environmental injustices in an effort to empower those affected.

More recent research based on environmental justice illustrates the importance of conceptualizing what environmental justice has come to mean and how a generalizable definition for all disciplines is necessary to address the unequal distributions of harms (Sze and London 2008). Sze et al. (2008) assert

that a “critical analysis of power” need to be explored to uncover why the distribution of harms and opportunities related to environmental inequity have often been dispersed among minorities and the poor.

Few examinations of how small sites and zoned areas of environmental inequity have been established (Boone and Modarres 1999) look at their historical nature, mainly in the case of Los Angeles, before minorities moved in. The work of Boone et al. (1999) was concerned with the surrounding cities of Los Angeles for their examination, and they found that industrial zones were already allocated in the early 1920 and 30s. Cities surrounding Vernon were established as predominantly wealthy and mostly Anglos—a population that then started moving toward the Westside once they discovered industrial zones were beginning to be created. Boone et al. (1999) claim that these blueprints were already established, making the neighboring city of Commerce predominantly industrial as well. Coincidentally, the authors minutely address the fact that at the time on the other side of Vernon, the city of east Los Angeles consisted of residents who were predominantly working class first generation Italians and Mexicans. Although this research did point out that industrial zones were already established prior to Latinos moving in, they state that no evidence showed that the decisions made by the zoning committees of that time had been based on the location of minority communities surrounding industrial zones. Although the literature did provide a useful assessment of the history of aforementioned industrial zones; this

research does nothing more than to assert that minorities chose to live around these toxic facilities. The topic of this research is appreciated but does not cover the equal distribution of waste sites and other environmental exposures; it merely proclaims that environmental inequity is somehow predestined.

Other relevant research about environmental exposures included the need for focus on sustainable energy decisions (Rich, Edelstein, Hallman and Wandersman 1995). This research did not assess that minorities should become empowered to change their communities, even though health threats were prevalent, but sought to find that sustainable energy was more suitable for their focus. Other research focused on the need for multicultural organizations (Chambers 2007) and believed that members should be offered workshops on policy, leadership and technology, and building coalitions. It is my experience in CBE that community organizers have tried these strategies but the underlying issue is that many factors play in to why Latinos and African Americans do not have the opportunity to take part in these skill building workshops. Landmark research (Nelson 1979) addressed the idea that researchers believed that ethnic participation in the movement was withering away. My present study will assess if, in fact, this is decidedly so. Significant literature conducted in Canada assessed social networking ties and political participation in the environmental justice movement, but specifically dealt with problems projected onto the wilderness (Tindall 2002). An established gap in research persists that does not adequately cover many factors that

affect (social networking ties, political efficacy) and lessen (long work hours, caring for children) the level of participation of minorities in the environmental justice movement. My past research, the only of its kind because it intertwined several theories of participation into one study, focused on Latino participation, and assessed various reasons people did and did not participate politically, but those factors had been limited to the Latino culture.

The purpose of this research is to understand the reasons for African American participation or non-participation in matters of environmental inequities, specifically among African Americans in Oakland, California who constitute 36% of the city's population. The "Freedom to Breathe" campaign took place in east Oakland, California in the summer of 2009. This paper hypothesized the following:

- (1) Respondents with a high sense of political efficacy are more likely to participate in the campaign.
- (2) Respondents who earn over \$50,000 annually or more will be more likely to participate in the campaign.
- (3) Respondents who have had earned a four year degree (BA, BS) will be more likely to participate in the campaign.
- (4) Respondents who are acquainted with organizers or members of CBE are more likely to participate in the campaign.
- (5) Respondents who work more than eight hours per workday

are less likely to participate in the campaign.

- (6) Respondents who have more than two children are less likely to participate in the campaign.

First, I hypothesized that those respondents with a high sense of political efficacy were more likely to become involved in the campaign because they were capable of being motivated enough to endorse their issue. I believed that if this issue has been widely known in the community, then people with the belief that they can make change in their community were more likely to participate. Second, I believed that African Americans who earned \$50,000 or more annually were more likely to participate because of their presumed extra time for other activities, like making use of a gym membership or becoming active members of community groups, compared to those living in poverty. Next, I believed that those respondents who had earned a higher education degree, such as a BA or a BS, would be more likely to participate in the campaign because of the supposition that they would be more aware of the injustices of their city. Professionals would have more means of receiving information (television, Internet, etc.) I predicted that the respondents who were acquainted in any way with community organizers or members of CBE would be more likely to participate in the campaign because of their background knowledge about the subject and the campaign from the organizers or members. In addition, I expected to find that respondents who worked more than eight hour workdays would not have the

time to participate in the campaign either because they did not know about it or because they could not attend due to extended work hours. Similarly, I hypothesized that those respondents who had more than two children were less likely to participate because of lack of time (time after the workday would be dedicated to helping children with homework, preparing their dinner, driving them to extracurricular activities, etc) or lack of help to care for the children (babysitter, spouse, relative, etc).

METHODS

Respondents

The 100 African American respondents in this study were all residents of Oakland, CA. For the purpose of this research, *campaign participants* were those respondents that took part in the “Freedom to Breathe” campaign in Oakland. Those respondents referred to as *non-participants* were residents of Oakland but did not take part in the “Freedom to Breathe” campaign. The survey was distributed in two ways. Because of my affiliation with CBE (an environmental justice organization based in Huntington Park and Oakland), I had access to the *campaign participants*. Over the course of three weeks, I distributed the surveys at the organizations’ weekly meetings. A total of 50 surveys were obtained from campaign participants. As for the *non-participants*, those who were also residents of Oakland but did not participate in the campaign had been surveyed by method of random cluster sampling. A site map of Oakland had been sectioned off into areas of 3-4

blocks. A total of 10 blocks had been randomly selected from the area map and 5-7 households would be given a survey from each selected block. The survey was distributed to each block to ensure that our goal of 50 respondents purely of African American ethnic background would be collected. The survey questions were regressed using Pearson’s correlation coefficient and multivariate regression analysis, specifically logic regression because our dependent variable, political participation is dichotomous.

Measures

To measure if respondents participated in the campaign, they were asked, “most recently, there was a “Freedom to Breathe” campaign in the city of Oakland that took place in the summer of 2009, did you participate in the event?” The variable name [VAR: POLRALLY] and response categories included 0, which represented no and 1, which represented yes.

Respondent’s political efficacy was categorized by the variable [VAR:POLEFFC] and was measured with the question, “how much impact do you think your participation in the “Freedom to Breathe” campaign will make?” *Will make much difference* was coded as 3, *will make little difference* was coded as 2, *will make no difference* was coded as 1 and *I don’t know* was coded as 0.

To measure respondent’s income [VAR:RINCOME] the following question was asked: “what is your own *personal* income last year?” Categories included: 1 signifying under \$1,000, 2 signifying \$ 1,000 to 2,999, 3 signifying \$3,000 to 3,999, 4 signifying \$4,000 to

4,999, 5 signifying \$5,000 to 5,999, 6 signifying \$6,000 to 6,999, 7 signifying \$ 7,000 to 7,999, 8 signifying \$8,000 to 9,999, 9 signifying \$1 0,000 to 12,499, 10 signifying \$1 2,500 to 14,999, 11 signifying \$1 5,000 to 17,499, 12 signifying \$1 7,500 to 19,999, 13 signifying \$20,000 to 22,499, 14 signifying \$22,500 to 24,999, 15 signifying \$25,000 to 29,999, 16 signifying \$30,000 to 34,999, 17 signifying \$35,000 to 39,999, 18 signifying \$40,000 to 49,999, and 19 signifying \$50,000 or more (categories were taken from GSS data year 2000, for income).

Respondents were asked, “what is the highest level of education you have completed?” to address the respondents level of education. The response categories had been coded as follows: *did not complete high school* was coded as 0, *high School graduation/GED* was coded as 1, *some college/2-Year college degree* was coded as 2, *4-year college degree (BA, BS), was coded as 3*, *some graduate school or higher* was coded as 4.

To determine if a respondent was acquainted to any member or community organizer of CBE [VAR: CBEACQ] they were asked, “how did you hear about the vigil?” *I read a flier* was coded 0, *I read advertisements* was coded 1, *word of mouth (but not from members of CBE organizations)* was coded 2, *I have a friend in CBE (member or organizer)* was coded 3.

Respondents were asked, “how many average hours do you work a day?” To assesses how long their average workday was [VAR: WORKDAY]. Responses were coded as follows: *1-4 hours* was

categorized as 1, *5-6 hours* was categorized as 2, *7-8 hours* was categorized as 3, *eight hours or more* was categorized as 4.

Finally, to verify how many children respondents had, [VAR:CHILDS], they were told, “please indicate how many children live with you?” *I have no children living with me* was coded 1, *1-2 children* was coded 2, and *3 children or more* was coded 3.

FINDINGS

Results of this study will be analyzed using bivariate and multivariate levels of analysis; in particular, Pearson’s correlation coefficient and logistic regression for dichotomous variables. Logistic regression will be used instead of OLS regression because OLS regression assumptions would have been violated with a dichotomous dependent variable.

Bivariate

Respondents with a high sense of political efficacy are more likely to participate in the campaign. I believe that political participation will be positive and significantly correlated with political efficacy largely because of the fact that people who believe they can create change would actively participate to create it. I also believe that respondents who earn over \$50,000 annually (affluent for the purpose of this study) will have a positive and statistically significant correlation with participating in the campaign. As for respondents that have some graduate education, I believe findings will show a positive and significant association with participating in the campaign. Graduate

students are more likely to inform themselves about the problems in their community. I seek to find that respondents who were acquainted with organizers or members of CBE will be positively and statistically significant when correlated with political participation. Respondents who work more than eight hours per workday will also have a positive and significant association with political participation; as a result, those parents with two or more children will be less likely to participate in the campaign. Finally, respondents who have more than two children will also have a negative and significant correlation with political participation and therefore, will be less likely to participate because of the number of hours they must care for their children.

Multivariate

I will find that political efficacy will be statistically significant at the 0.05 level. I also believe that it will have a positive effect on the dependent variable, political participation, and net all the other variables in the model. I believe I will also find that the respondents' income, specifically if it is \$50,000 or more annually, will have a positive and significant effect on political participation. Respondents who make more than \$50,000 will have more time and resources to participate in the campaign. As for having some graduate education, I also think that it will have a positive and statistically significant effect on the dependent variable, net all other variables in the model. Being acquainted or friends with a member of CBE will have a positive effect on political participation and will be

statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Having social networking ties with members of CBE will be an avenue to gaining knowledge and interest in the environmental movement. Working more than eight hours will have a positive and statistically significant effect on the dependent variable. Respondents working more than eight hours will not have the energy to participate in activities in the evening nor will they be able to participate in hours of high traffic because they will be in that traffic or will be working a second shift. Respondents with more than two children will have a positive and statistically significant effect on political participation. Those respondents who must care for several children may not have the means to leave their children with a sitter or choose to spend more time away from them.

DISCUSSION

In this study, I focused on the participation factors that influenced African Americans to take part in the "Freedom to Breathe" campaign in Oakland, CA. This study is the only of its kind particularly because it seeks to underpin the reasons people participate politically in the field of environmental justice as well as account for some reasons people do not. Other research about political participation in environmental justice concentrated generally on empowerment and active communities in decision-making processes (Rich et al. 1995). The downfall of this research was that it placed more importance on the "capacity to resolve" environmental practices by

being friendly with large corporations before the importance of political action. Although this may have worked for affluent communities that perchance learned about environmental exposures beforehand, this case has not been exemplar to that of minority communities (Boone et al. 1999). Other research focused on minority participation but addressed the need for sustainable energy instead of immediate action for those at risk of lifetime health defects and illness (Rich, Edelstein, Hallman and Wandersman 1995). Others focused on the need for multicultural organizations (Chambers 2007) and the mistake that other literature asserted about ethnic participation in the movement withering away (Nelson 1979). My study showed that minorities that did have means (education, income) and desire (political efficacy, social ties) to participate would participate, while their struggling counterparts that indicated their need to work long hours and care for children were less prevalent in the campaign. This offers an important avenue for future research noting that unable participants may feel inclined to participate but due to several constraints have been unable to.

Political action is one of the most important forms of expression because it has been proven to create policy reform like in the time of the civil rights movement and the Chicano walkouts of east Los Angeles that inspired change that in turn benefited future generations. Some researchers assert that minorities moved into these industrial zones in early 20th century (Boone, et al. 1999) but even if that is the case, environmental inequity should not

persist. Although this research is only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak, in assessing factors that influence minority participation in the environmental justice movement, it is unique in that it sought to understand why some people participate and others do not. Future research should develop a large-scale study that includes more factors and have respondents from several minority communities. Another interesting idea for future research would be to set up a qualitative study to better understand what factors influence participation and hinder any form of participation before creating a large scale quantitative study.

Limitations of this study include a minute number of variables correlated with our dependent variable, political participation. Political efficacy, affluence, educational attainment and social networking ties were offered as reasons for participation. Reasons for non-participation were only based on amount of work hours per workday and number of children. This study was limited only because of the fact that it sought to compare findings to those of previous research. Limitations aside, this research can give us a clear indication that minorities that have high levels of political efficacy, affluence, education, and social networking ties will participate politically, at least in this campaign. More research should try to recognize the reasons minorities do not participate in a problem that involves their health and well being, as well as the health and well being of their families.

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