

Ethnic Voters Want Environmental Protections, But Do Their Lawmakers?



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Ethnic minorities in California strongly favor environmental protections, yet their elected representatives -- for the most part -- don't share the same values.

New America Media analyzed the environmental voting records of Asian, African American and Latino legislators, using a [2014 scorecard](#) by the California League of Conservation Voters (CLCV) that assigns an overall score to all state

legislators based on how they voted on dozens of key environmental bills during the 2013 legislative year.

NAM found that [Latino](#) and [Black Legislative Caucuses](#) -- made up entirely of Democrats -- are more pro-business than their Asian and white Democratic counterparts in the state legislature. After heavy lobbying by industry, more moderate Latino and African-American lawmakers shot down or abstained on pro-environment bills more often than Asian Democratic lawmakers.

[Asian and Pacific-Islander \(API\) Caucus](#) members earned the highest environmental scores of any group, including whites: senators in the API caucus received a perfect score of 100 percent, while assembly members in that caucus averaged a score of 96 percent.

Among senators only, the Black Caucus had the lowest environmental score on average (75 percent), whereas senate members of the Latino Caucus averaged 85 percent. White Democratic senators received a score of 95 percent.

In the assembly, Asian and African-American lawmakers received scores of 96 and 92 percent, respectively, scoring better than their white Democratic counterparts (85 percent).

Overall, the environmental scores of ethnic caucus members were higher than the average for all legislators, which hovered in the mid-60s, but they were lower than the rankings for Democratic senators (90 percent) and assembly members (87 percent) as a whole.

Jena Price, a lobbyist for CLCV, says the Latino Caucus is being targeted by industry groups because of its sheer size and the presence of many first and second-term assembly members who haven't "secured their position in their voting record."

"Industry is going to put money into the districts and the members they are going to be most likely to sway, and it's been seen that a lot of Latino members -- especially down in Southern California -- are voting the way of the business interests and the money," said Price, adding that many of them call themselves "business Dems, not moderate Dems, although they are synonymous with one another."

New America Media also looked at donations made to ethnic caucus members, and then looked at how those legislators voted on two key environmental bills last year.

In 2013, nearly a dozen bills were introduced to regulate the controversial oil extraction technique known as hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking." One of those, SB 4 -- it was considered weak by some environmental groups -- was backed by the ethnic caucuses and ultimately signed into law. But two other bills that were supported by the CLCV and which focused on groundwater monitoring related to fracking -- AB 669 being one of them -- did not receive enough votes to pass the Assembly.

Using online campaign finance databases created by [Maplight](#), a non-partisan organization that sheds light on money and politics, NAM [analyzed the ethnic caucus votes on AB 669](#).

We found that the [API Caucus received substantial donations](#) from environmental groups, and nearly all of their members voted "yes." Only one member, Richard Pan (D-Sacramento), did not vote. Environmental groups gave much less money to the [Latino](#) and [Black Caucus](#) -- both groups, however, received much more oil money than their API counterparts -- and far fewer of the members of those caucuses voted "yes" on AB 669, compared to the API Caucus.

On the SB 669 vote, six members in the Latino Caucus and three in the Black Caucus abstained, in some cases, after having received hefty donations from the oil industry.

[Nile Malloy, Northern California Director for Communities for a Better Environment, a statewide environmental justice organization, said the influence of industry -- not just oil or energy, but also labor -- is very clear.](#)

["You see the influence of lobbying in terms of decisions," he said. "\[It should be a\] no-brainer to say 'no' to fracking, but there's a force that says 'yes,' because it creates jobs."](#)

The ethnic caucus votes on a proposed plastic bag phase-out last year (SB 405) were similarly split, with Asian lawmakers voting in favor of the bill, while their Latino and Black counterparts cast more “no” votes or abstained.

Asian, African American and Latino senators received donations from both environmental and industry groups. Although Asian lawmakers received hefty amounts of industry money, they voted “yes” on SB 405. Senator Rod Wright, the sole vote from the Black Caucus, abstained after receiving just under \$10,000 from the bill’s supporters and nearly five times as much from opposition groups. Latino Caucus members who voted against the bill received nearly five times as much from industry groups than those who supported the bill.

CLCV’s Price says the low average score for Black Democratic senators, which includes just two members, doesn’t give an accurate representation. Senator Holly Mitchell (D-Los Angeles) has reintroduced a fracking moratorium bill, which Price says, aligns with the desire for clean air and water among her constituents. Mitchell received a perfect score on CLCV’s 2014 scorecard. One of her colleagues in the Senate, Rod Wright, received a score of 50 percent.

“Mr. Rod Wright is a perfect example of someone who is... certainly part of that moderate caucus, and he took a lot of his money and a lot of his pointers from industry,” Price said.

While the Latino and Black Caucuses lean more toward pro-business interests, the API Caucus is “very green,” says Mari Rose Taruc, state organizing director for the Asian Pacific Environmental Network. Still, Taruc says she’d like to see more Asian lawmakers carry progressive environmental legislation.

“They will vote well on environmental issues, but they aren’t the ones carrying the bills,” she said. “It takes more leadership and risk to put out a bill.”