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# Remaking “the people”: Immigrant farmworkers, environmental justice and the rise of environmental populism in California’s San Joaquin Valley

Priya R. Chandrasekaran

*Environmental Studies Program, Hamilton College, 198 College Hill Road, Clinton, NY, 13323, USA*

## 1. Introduction

In Kern County, California, the 2016 election reaped a local upset, even as Donald Trump predictably won the majority of votes here for president. In the small but rapidly growing municipality of Arvin, José Gurrola, the twenty-three-year old son of farmworkers beat the favored oil industry-backed incumbent José Flores to become mayor on a pro-immigrant and environmental justice platform. Kern County – located in the San Joaquin Valley, the southern half of a 20,000-square mile geological depression that comprises California’s interior – is a place where agribusiness and the oil industry have long dominated economic and political outcomes. Gurrola’s win reflects what this paper argues is the emergence of progressive environmental populism, a countervailing force to Trump’s anti-immigrant appeal in a region deeply associated with white rural conservatism.

Recent scholarship has associated an affinity for Trump’s authoritarianism among segments of white America with the repercussions of neoliberal austerity, global trade and corporate flight on rural places (Edelman, this issue; [Gandesha, 2018](#); [Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020](#); [Skocpol and Williamson, 2012](#)). While illuminating critical aspects of why rural people and places matter, the focus on conservatism has obscured progressive rural trends that have developed simultaneously. Moreover, rendering US rurality a white space risks casting historically disenfranchised groups, especially those predominated by “undocumented” status, beyond purview of rural politics ([Pied, 2018](#)). This issue has particular resonance in California, where about one-third of roughly 2.4 million US-based farmworkers work and live ([Branch and Lipton, 2018](#); [Thompson, 2017](#)). Though their numbers have dropped significantly in the past decade, a majority of farmworkers in Kern County remain Mexican-born and without voting rights ([California Research Bureau, 2013](#)). Arvin, today, embodies some of the major demographic shifts that are transforming California’s interior, with political implications. Its population of now over 20,000 people is 93 percent Latinx. Many residents work as farmworkers or in food processing, and the majority live at or below the poverty line. Strikingly, according to the 2015 US State Census Report, over 80 percent of Arvin residents are younger than

forty-four.

This analysis of Arvin’s leftward pivot centers farmworkers and young people’s growing role in shaping California’s rural politics. It posits that Trump’s brand of right-wing populism, which espouses nationalist white identity politics, recoils against perceived failures of neoliberalism, in particular the absence of class security and advancement, the loss of social status and the threat of multicultural encroachment ([Gandesha, 2018](#); [Hawkins and Littvay, 2019](#); [Hall, 2011](#); [Müller, 2016](#)). In contrast, long-term political suppression and racialized exclusion from broader society has situated farmworker and Latinx residents very differently in the anatomy of neoliberal crisis. As I argue, Arvin’s recent wave of progressive populism can be understood in terms of neoliberal “success,” in the sense that it recognizes a political project that has achieved its aims of reproducing regional plutocracy, farmworker disposability and racial inequity ([Harvey, 2007](#)). Devoid a “great” era in America to mourn, it is temporally oriented to the existential present ([Mondon and Winter, 2019](#)).

The frame of “environmental populism” can explain the politics that emerged in Arvin from 2014. It captures how groups, historically severed from “the levers of power,” mobilized existing grassroots networks to disrupt business- and government-as-usual in order to articulate place-based claims, for the purpose of stopping environmental health hazards ([Gilmore, 2002:16](#)). By doing so, they have both broadened and transformed possibilities for who constitutes “the people” of Arvin and Kern County’s body politic. This transformation was a process, which this study traces, in part, through Gurrola’s two-year rise from councilman to mayor, and the central role environmental justice organizing played in it. Furthermore, oil industry efforts to squash residents’ input on local city decisions reveals how important, though overlooked, political disenfranchisement has been, and remains, to the region’s two ruling industries.

In the first three sections that follow, I put the 2016 convergence of Gurrola’s and Trump’s victories in broader socio-spatial and historical context, grounded both in theories of racial capitalism and analyses of US populism ([Gilmore, 2007](#); [Robinson, 1983](#); [Pulido, 2016](#)). I show that rural California’s geography of “racial agrarian capitalism” has

E-mail address: [pchandra@hamilton.edu](mailto:pchandra@hamilton.edu).

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cultivated a landing ground for Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric in the neoliberal context; in addition, it has established farmworkers as resident "outsiders," denied entry in political society. Developing out of these same historical conditions, progressive politics in Arvin has challenged racism as the bedrock of the San Joaquin Valley's economic success. It has asserted a platform that extends beyond labor rights and farmworker disposability to environmental crisis and the disposability of rural places, communities and families. While both strains of populism respond to social contradictions of neoliberalism, they suture together different concerns and must be understood as dialectically related, while qualitatively distinct (Hall, 1979, 2011; Harvey, 2007).

Sections five and six then narrow in on the period leading up to and following Gurrola's mayoral win. I examine how environmental justice organizing became a mechanism for shifting representations of "the people" and enabling progressives to inhabit local governing institutions. This, in turn, provides a mechanism to scale up environmental justice activism in Arvin to visibility on the map of California politics. The conclusion reflects on why and how rural places might matter in new ways for progressive politics in the US as demographic shifts chip away at intransigent forms of electoral exclusion. To this end, it is important to recognize the coalition-making and power-building potentiality of environmental justice discourse and organizing methods as a counter to right-wing politics.

### 1.1. Methodological note

This article primarily analyzes scholarship, media reports and legislation concerning the political geography of rural California; labor regimes and social life in Kern County; and recent conflicts within California and between the California government and Trump administration about immigration and environmental issues. Interviews with eight activists, advocates, outreach workers and local scholars and toxic site visits in or near Arvin in early 2018 provided local and environmental justice perspectives to understand, critique or corroborate these materials. In 2016, I served as college faculty on a climate justice program and, over a month in California, attended multiple presentations by lawyers, journalists and scholars on the region's environmental conflicts. The vast majority of those I interviewed or heard speak have been working, organizing and/or living in the region for at least a decade; three have deep generational connections through family or movement networks. I had repeated (three to seven) conversations with four interviewees in 2018 and 2019, either in person or on the phone; this included iterative feedback on the thinking and writing that forms the basis of this article.

Interviewees and presenters consistently discussed racial differentiation and racial violence as central, not ancillary, to industry development and governance. Most framed their work and concerns in regional and state contexts, at times scaling up to the national arena; except for occasional references to the 1994 trilateral North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), no one emphasized a critique of globalization, global climate tensions or rising authoritarianism worldwide. Every person stressed the profound vulnerability for farmworkers today, due to Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE) raids, police profiling and the power of oil industry magnates. As the last comprehensive immigration reform was in 1986, networks of family and community today include undocumented immigrants, legal residents, Green Card holders and citizens and comprise a web of varying levels of vulnerability. Under such conditions, anonymity and vigilance is important even for those who have documented residency. Thus, excepting those of a scholar and an organizational leader, names have been omitted or changed.

## 2. Dueling populist responses to the neoliberal "Gilded Age"

We can understand the convergence of Gurrola's and Trump's 2016 victories in Kern County as simultaneous and oppositional populist

responses to how neoliberalism has played out in this rural region. Recent scholarship has highlighted the global expansion of authoritarian and rightwing populism (which are not always congruent) since the Great Recession of 2007–8; this has been attributed to deepening economic inequities and narrowing public spaces for political expression (Hendrikse, 2018; Müller, 2016). Most prominently, the Tea Party emerged on the national state as a grassroots network of local activism in 2009 that succeeded in propelling US politics to the right. Since then, Reijer Hendrikse (2018) observes that strongmen leaders throughout the world have fused nationalist ideology and racist notions of cultural incompatibility to facilitate privatizing public goods and expanding the security state (Balibar, 1988; Mudde, 2019). The Great Recession also fueled leftist movements, evident through Latin America's "pink tide," anti-authoritarian uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa and the Occupy and Black Lives Matter movements, which empowered Bernie Sanders' democratic socialist bid for president in the US (Gandehsa, 2018).

Ideational theories of "populism" help to explain patterns despite variations in form and ideology (Hawkins and Littvay, 2019; Mudde, 2019). Scholars observe direct expression of "the people's" will against (an) establishment and/or elite opponent(s) (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020; Laclau, 2005). Populist movements exert and gain power through new or existing political parties, often shifting, transforming, constricting and/or expanding the terrain of political society. To acknowledge exclusionary and pluralistic, as well as right-leaning and left-leaning, tendencies does not relegate "populism" an empty signifier. Rather, each instantiation of populist expression is inalienable from its distinct material conditions and from the relational identities of "the people" it professes to represent. Opposing ideologies and styles evolve both in dialectical relation to establishment politics and each other.

The strands of populism in Kern County analyzed below respond to neoliberal crisis and contradictions in formation well before the 2007–8 recession. We can trace them, as David Harvey (2006, 2007) writes, to the consolidation of a political project from the 1970s to redistribute wealth upwards by marshaling the discourse of freedom, anti-statism and individual expression. In the US, the strategic coupling of Christian conservatives and the capitalist class secured white working class allegiance to the Republican Party, while alliances with corporate funders detached the actions of the mainstream Democratic Party from the concerns of its BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) and working class base (Harvey, 2007). Almost fifty years later, the global neoliberal project has unfolded into a "second Gilded Age" (Giroux, 2008). The first, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, marked the advent of US populism on both poles of left and right. The progressive Populist Party rose as third party, representing homesteaders allied with urban workers against corporate behemoths. Public dissent was also aimed at the monopolistic Standard Oil, which fragmented into affiliated companies, including Chevron, a major player in Kern County politics today (Juhász, 2016). Contemporaneously, xenophobic movements like the newly formed KKK asserted deeply racist visions of "the people" and pressured US politics rightward. During this time, California legislators, aligned with the state's landowning power brokers, successfully pushed for restrictive national immigration laws targeting the Asia-Pacific, such as the 1917 Immigration Act (Kazin, 2016).

As conceptualized by Stuart Hall (1979, 2011), authoritarian populism manufactured consent at neoliberalism's incipient moment (Gramsci, 1989 [1971]). Though concerned with the specificities of Thatcherism in Great Britain, Hall's overall analysis applies to concurrent US developments under President Reagan, a Californian whose popularity perseveres in the San Joaquin Valley. To temporarily resolve Keynesian crisis, a decisive move towards "law and order" divided the working class along racial lines and justified the violent policing of those typecast as "disorderly" and "unproductive" (i.e. newly unemployed and non-docile workers) (Hall, 1978). Diverging from Nicos Poulantzas' (1978) "authoritarian statism," Hall (1979) was preoccupied with Gramscian questions of hegemony: how and why this authoritarian

swing to secure capitalist interests retained the trappings of democratic governance and representation. However, because consent must be continuously renovated, a deep crisis can set the stage for a new “balance of forces” (Hall, 1979). Elaborated below, Trump’s appeal in the Kern County resuscitates consent for the existing power structure. However, for California farmworkers, coercion and exclusion – not consent – has been *modus operandi* (Gramsci, 1989 [1971]). Gurrola’s win portends emerging political forces and the potential for structural transformation.

### 3. “The people” minus some people: racial agrarian capitalism in the San Joaquin Valley

#### 3.1. “Bare life” as *status quo*

Materializing Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s (1998) biopolitical theory, regimes of law and economy in Kern County have systematically severed farmworkers from political society and the potential for quality of life (“bios”), relegating their existential options to “bare life” or basic survival (“zoe”). Reinforced over time, this divide has hardened into social fact (Durkheim, 1982 [1895]).

The disposability of California farmworkers has played a key *productive* role in rural California’s political economy, in large part because state has, repeatedly, sanctioned their “exposure to pre-mature death” and denied them political representation through programs, policies, policing and the threat of deportation (Gilmore, 2007). Richard Walker (2004) and other scholars have convincingly conceptualized California’s interior landscape as “agrarian capitalism” from the mid-1800s, when California became a state. While the importance of race-making certainly has been highlighted, an economic rationale has been deeply associated with California’s countryside. Racism and political repression, however, have been more than instruments for exploiting labor and reaping profits; they have comprised the ideological foundations of this rural geography (Robinson, 1983; Gilmore, 2007; Pulido, 2017; Melamed, 2015).

Two mechanisms in particular worked over more than a century to sever California farmworkers culturally, geographically and politically from the broader polity and working class. One was targeting vulnerable groups that could be racially marked as outsiders. The other was systematizing migrant forms of labor, which has guaranteed a paucity of property ownership, place-based claims and community alliances. California’s “factories in the field,” as dubbed by journalist Carey McWilliams (1939), long relied on the contingent and seasonal workers – through sharecropping or hourly and piece rate wages – whose alienation eased abuses (Wells, 1984). Racism repeatedly justified this process. In turn, the debasement of farmworker labor over decades reinforced a racial caste seemingly destined for “bare life,” without political voice.

Interestingly, Walter Goldschmidt’s much-cited 1946 governmental study comparing Arvin and Dinuba in the San Joaquin Valley, asserted that the lack of municipal incorporation and political access, exemplified in Arvin at that time, weakened rural social fabric in places dominated by large farms (Olmstead, 1984). This correlated with inferior schools, fewer social organizations, less occupational diversity and a restricted middle class. Yet, the study omitted the factor of race (selecting places researchers considered “white”) and temporary agricultural workers (then, mostly “Dust Bowl” refugees from the US South) who worked but did not live in Dinuba. This meant, as Brian Haley (2010) observes, that Goldschmidt’s study avoided the question of “whom” rural social structures served. Moreover, analyzing places and groups as discreet entities camouflaged how the robust social and political life in some places evolve through their historical and spatial connection to deprivation and bare existence in others – a relational process that, in the San Joaquin Valley, has been driven by racial projects (Pulido, 2000; Omi and Winant, [1994]2004; Smith, 1984).

#### 3.2. Racial agrarian capitalism cultivated a landing ground for anti-immigrant populism

Similar to that of other contemporary right-wing populist leaders, Trump’s rhetoric hinges on an exclusionary and nationalist “origin myth” (Fletcher, 2016). Though there is value in identifying patterns in the appeal of this to “rural white America,” we should not overlook the significance of regional and historical distinctions (Pied, 2018). In the San Joaquin Valley, we can say that anti-immigrant populism revitalizes California’s own “origin myth” and elemental tenets of class and rurality (McWilliams, 1939; Santos-Gomez, 2013; Hernández Romero, 2012).

Settler conquest and agriculture here diverged from the Jeffersonian model of homesteading that shaped white settlement in the US Midwest. From the mid-1700s, feudalistic land relations defined property ownership in California. Spanish, and then Mexican rulers, established large-scale land tracts on land stolen from indigenous peoples, upheaving regenerative resource management practices of the Yokuts, Kitanemuk, Chumash, Miwok and other groups (Anderson, 2005). After its annexation into the US in 1850, the state “became a battleground for land grabbers;” big businessmen like Henry Lux used federal and state laws to create “land empires” in Kern County, with only the Southern Pacific Railroad as a real competitor (Santos-Gomez, 2013:43–44). By the early 1900s, white settlers had appropriated Yokuts’ use of tar that seeped from natural asphalt lakes and Kern County became a loci of a second major capitalist industry: oil (San Joaquin Valley Geology, 2016). As with agribusiness, from its early days the oil industry had direct ties to California lawmakers; California’s extractive industry regulator, the Division of Oil, Gas, and Geothermal Resources, formed in 1915 with the purpose of helping oil-and-gas companies obtain drilling permits (Aronoff, 2017). Associated with “boom towns,” whose allure fused California’s natural wealth with settler ambition, hard work and class advancement, the oil industry developed as a white working class space, and an avenue to accumulate property.

Racial hierarchy formed the bedrock of agrarian capitalism in the San Joaquin Valley. This hierarchy has situated farmworkers intransigently outside the social order, even as it has flexed with and motivated demographic changes in this labor base. Morphing essentialist tropes have perennially differentiated, alienated and counterposed groups (Cruz, 2014; Martin, 1998). In tandem, the work itself has been denigrated as “unskilled” (refuted by skill-based “schools” integrated into farm work today) and racialized as nonwhite and/or – increasingly since the mid-1990s – non-citizen (Hernández Romero, 2012; Guthman, 2017:31). As the ability to leave signified a rite of passage into social belonging, reinforcing American ideals of merit and advancement, farm work and the places associated with farmworkers have accrued debasement (Thompson, 2017). The largely horizontal labor structure, with a strict delineation between poor farmworkers and wealthy executives, embodies this immobility.

For example, in the mid-1800s, California growers benefited from stark racism against Chinese laborers who could not find other employment after the railroads were completed (Chan, 1986). When restrictive immigration laws pushed by California legislators created farmworker shortages, the agribusiness lobby succeeded in suspending the head tax and literacy test for Mexican farmworkers and got quota exemptions for Mexico (Martin, 1998). Before long, thousands of Mexican immigrants and their US-born children were deported during the Great Depression (Steinhauer, 2015). “Dust Bowl” refugees were the next in line; however, these majority Anglo Americans were eventually able to pass out of farm work and minority status into middle-class life (Hernández Romero, 2012). Japanese, Punjabi and Filipinos, as well as African-Americans from cotton regions, filled the void (Hernández Romero, 2012; Steinhauer, 2015; Greenberg, 2018).

Ultimately, it was the “Bracero” program between 1942 and 1964 that cemented farm work into a racial caste, and imprinted the “not quite human” status of Mexican farmworkers into the core of California agribusiness (Mitchell, 2012; Cruz, 2014:49). As Don Mitchell (2012)

argues, this temporary Mexican “guest” worker program systematized extreme exploitation by setting wages far beneath what would be acceptable to “[Anglo-]white citizen workers” and withholding a portion of pay until workers returned to Mexico (millions went unpaid) (Guthman, 2017:27). As Caroline Farrell, the Executive Director of the Center on Race, Poverty & The Environment (CRPE) located in Kern County, noted in an interview, agribusiness has virtually guaranteed that white citizens would not take these jobs today.

Not to be overlooked, in this epoch, big growers collaborated with the state government to position undocumented Mexican workers against working-class organizers (Cruz, 2014). Adrian Cruz (2014:43) claims that the Bracero program was a “racial state project,” which, in tandem with Japanese internment during World War II, “decimated the momentum and militancy of the farmworker movement” that “strove to organi[z]e a racially integrated farm worker union” (Omi and Winant, [1994]2004). At risk of deportation, undocumented workers were brought in as strikebreakers. Beyond securing cheap labor and routinizing inhumane working conditions, these efforts trapped farmworkers in a silo of political suppression. Even the United Farm Workers (UFW) – whose labor strikes and consumer boycotts of the 1960s and 1970s catapulted San Joaquin (and the broader Central) Valley’s labor issues to the national stage – had tensions with Bracero workers and undocumented immigrants, whose presence undermined organizing efforts (Bardacke, 2013).

Bailing California agribusiness out of economic crisis, the Bracero program enabled the fruit, nut and vegetable sector – as well as industry wealth and power – to expand significantly. Thus, securing the San Joaquin Valley’s agricultural preeminence on the national and global stage was only achieved through further alienating farmworkers. Since this time, and especially since the mid-1990s in the post-NAFTA era, California agribusiness has relied heavily on undocumented Mexican workers. The political class has cemented a material and ideological division between farm work and the broader regional economy, where work has the potential to be valued and seen. Kern County’s conservative media outlets, such as KNZR, tap into this locally circulating “common sense” when they denounce “illegals” that are “leaching off the state,” and “getting something for nothing.”

### 3.3. Right-wing populism framed as neoliberal “failures”

Trump’s “Make America Great Again” mirrors antiestablishment and exclusionary doctrine espoused by right-wing leaders of charismatic populist movements today (Hawkins and Littvay, 2019; Weber and Whimster, 2004). Tapping into a sense of loss and decline, the phrase hails as “the people” those who can assert previous belonging and acceptance. In Kern County, this dovetails more specifically with the failures of neoliberalism to secure economic gain and social status for the white working class in the context of colliding globalization “shocks” of trade and immigration (Rodrik, 2017). Furthermore, Trump’s self-promotion as the white male authority that can fix what is broken resembles the exhibition of benevolent rule by which oil industry hegemony have placated their base in volatile times.

California’s oil and agricultural dominance have not buffered the region’s white population from hardship: it has faced high unemployment, housing foreclosures and drug addictions, while Kern’s oil and agriculture barons have reaped great profits (Kindy, 2016). Fluctuating oil prices in the global market since the mid-2000s have created great job instability (Juhasz, 2016). It’s been shown that, along with these kinds of economic drivers, fear of progressive values and multiculturalism also feed right-wing populism (Hawkins and Littvay, 2019; Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2018). In California, this idea is not abstract. State politics have swung consistently leftward since the 1990s, when an intense anti-immigrant backlash (including Proposition 187, which sought to prevent immigrants from participating in basic aspects of society) led to a mass defection from the state’s Republican Party, especially from Latinx groups (Bowler et al., 2006). Since that time,

California has become a minority-majority state.

That agribusiness and the oil industry magnates in Kern County have not been the targets of mainstream anti-establishment ire is a noteworthy feat, given how their interests openly control regional politics and economy. Seven of the top ten taxpayers are oil and gas companies (Aronoff, 2017). Kern County corporations have known ties to the Central Valley Air District and Water District, which regulates pollution. Industry moguls overtly display wealth and political connections. When interviewed, Dr. Mark Martinez, a political scientist at California State University of Bakersfield, emphasized the county’s profound class and racial segregation. As he described, agribusiness and oil executives, government lobbyists and lawyers live in the same gated communities, “belong to the same rotaries” and “attend the same parties,” while rarely acknowledging problems – such as high rates of poverty, infant mortality, cancer, heart mortality and asthma (Kern County Public Health Services Department, 2017) – “a stone’s throw away.” Trump’s characterization of the elite as coastal influencers and corrupted government officials conveniently directs grievances away from those who monopolize regional resources and land and the means of production through status quo political networks (Abromeit, 2018).

Other interviewees describe what is essentially a patron-client relationship between the oil industry and “the people.” For example, Emiliano, an environmental justice activist in his twenties who grew up here, explained that residents get “institutionalized their whole lives,” starting from school, to remain “faithful” to ruling industries. Dr. Martinez’s attunement to local politics has led him to conclude that anyone who stands up against “Oil and Ag” goes against what Kern “is all about.” This elision of industry interests and civic life enables the former to stand in for “the people.” Mirroring a pattern in many “sacrifice zones,” Kern County corporations have filled in some holes of neoliberal austerity and economic vulnerability vis-à-vis public-private partnerships, even as they have benefited from environmental deregulation and worker desperation (Lerner and Brown, 2012). In Emiliano’s estimation, beyond the promise of jobs, Chevron has made itself integral to everyday life. It funds university ventures, local businesses, hospitals, religious institutions, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and Cinco de Mayo parades. It has sustained venues for cultural expression.

Right-wing populism often expresses diminishing “relative status” rather than calls for general wellbeing (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018). In Kern County, cosmopolitan ideas have spiraled closer to rural white identity, whether through basic human rights claims by farmworkers and their advocates or the valorization of diversity. Millennials and working-class immigrant families priced out of California’s coastal cities have begun to move inland, spiking the populations of towns and cities. To maintain their influence, the agricultural and oil industries have incorporated middle-class Latinx into political and business class, while clamping down hard on the cultural aspects of globalization. Both Dr. Martinez and Emiliano remarked on the peculiar fact that Kern County’s largest city, Bakersfield, roughly 13 miles northwest of Arvin, shows only fragmented signs of cosmopolitanism, despite being a nexus for two major global industries. They gave examples of industry-backed leaders blocking public high-speed rail, alternative energy initiatives and even a motion to improve a public library.

### 3.4. Trump-era swing towards authoritarianism

In tandem with these industry efforts to secure the consent of the white working class, the local and federal governments have deployed coercive tactics against BIPOC communities, which set the stage for their recent uptick, something that concerned all my interviewees. Emblemizing this, for-profit GEO Group-owned Mesa Verde Detention Center near downtown Bakersfield, which was renovated in 2015, routinizes the surveillance, policing and intimidation of immigrants in the city’s built environment. In 2017, the American Civil Liberties Union published a scathing report detailing widespread police profiling of black and brown people in Kern County in the preceding years.

Since Trump's election, anti-Mexican rhetoric combined with a federal "zero tolerance" crackdown on undocumented immigrants has given local law enforcement the mandate and legitimacy to defy progressive state mandates. For instance, in response to California's 2017 "sanctuary" bill, the county sheriff Donny Youngblood pushed to make Bakersfield a "non-sanctuary city," so police could freely collaborate with ICE agents. Though a coalition of activists quickly mobilized to squash these efforts, the circulating sentiment, as Dr. Martinez put it, is that "we can go after anybody we want." Confirming people's fears, in late February and early March 2018, ICE agents detained at least two-dozen immigrants in the area (Pierce, 2018). A UFW Foundation outreach worker who was previously a farmworker, and María, a Latinx paralegal who has worked at a local nonprofit for almost twenty years, spoke of families too afraid to buy groceries or call the fire department in an emergency. In 2016, they began "knocking on doors" to inform people of their rights. Grassroots strategies such as this have long been woven into the fabric of farmworker advocacy and organizing, as a way to circumvent industry dominance. Emerging out of a condition of social vulnerability, they provided the social infrastructure that enabled Gurrola to win.

#### 4. Disposable places: neoliberal conditions for environmental justice organizing

##### 4.1. Kern County dominates the market

As neoliberal policies and global competition have devastated the economy of rural places throughout the US, Kern County helped propel California's to the fifth largest in the world. In 2018, the Central Valley contributed 8% of US agricultural output, a significant proportion of the over one-third of US vegetables and two-thirds of US fruits and nuts grown in the state (Branch and Lipton, 2018). Kern County has also risen to the "Oil Capital of California." From the 1980s, the oil industry pivoted from conventional drilling to "fracking," a technology that uses pressurized water, sand and chemicals to blast shale rock, abundant in the region's subterranean. By 2014, the San Joaquin Valley – Kern County foremost within it – produced 74% of California's oil, 4.8% of US oil and 0.5% of the global supply (San Joaquin Valley Geology, 2015).

This success does not look like thriving public spaces or repaired sidewalks in the neighborhoods where the farmworkers live. A far more ubiquitous sight, as I observed when Emiliano drove me around in January 2018, are oil derricks intermingling with whitish pesticide-glazed trees, beneath a canopy of smog. The view conspicuously displays how the consolidation of surface land ownership and the consolidation of underlying mineral rights have occurred cheek by jowl and simultaneously (Manning, 1969). Less detectable, racial agrarian capitalism here had already built-in the monopolistic and plutocratic tendencies of neoliberal globalization, and therefore did not require the kind of deeper structural transformations that occurred in many other places (Howard, 2009; Clapp, 2019). Instead, political economic changes had more to do with scale, methods and intensity; leading to sprawling plantations of hundreds of thousands of acres (Arax, 2018). Pollution visible to the naked eye in streams, fields, the air and the sky reveals why pressing farmworker concerns would now be expressed in environmental terms.

##### 4.2. "Parasitic" rurality: expanding power of two global industries in a resource-rich place

Kaitlin Kelly-Reif and Steve Wing (2016:351) coined "parasitic relationships" to describe how post-1980s globalization has siphoned rural resources into urban (izing) spheres to meet the demands of economies of scale. In Kern County, oil extraction and agribusiness production have not only siphoned natural resources – most prominently, fossil fuel, water and soil nutrients – but have indiscriminately contaminated sites where value is created. The oil and agricultural industries have invested

heavily in new technologies that enable them to ramp up and diversify the production of commodities, which has ramped up and diversified the production of waste and use of chemical inputs. To this end, "wastelanding," as theorized by Traci Voyles (2015), emphasizes the critical component of racial ideology. A capitalist-colonial logic that imagines and establishes people and/or practices as disposable often precedes and/or justifies places being treated as waste or fit for waste dumping (Voyles, 2015). The continuous disregard and devaluation of farmworkers' lives and knowledge over epochs of US and California history paved the way for neoliberal wastelanding as a natural corollary to "parasitic" extraction.

"Parasitic relationships" in Kern County also include wastelanding processes in rural Mexico, which have siphoned a reliable stream of immigrants to California fields over the two decades following NAFTA. This guaranteed a labor force that was paradoxically "indispensable" and "disposable," with few or no political rights (Pellow, 2016, Kelly-Reif and Wing, 2016; Voyles, 2015). Most farmworkers in the San Joaquin Valley today come from rural Oaxaca and Guanajuato, Mexico, where neoliberal policies and the globalization of agriculture from the early 1990s onwards decimated local economies and social supports (Holmes, 2013; Patel, 2007; California Research Bureau, 2013). Notably, though young and US-born, "Emiliano" chose this pseudonym in honor of Emiliano Zapata, a leader of the Mexican Revolution, which codified the *ejido* (communal land) system that the Mexican government began dismantling as a prerequisite for NAFTA, at the behest of the US. Emiliano's choice symbolically redraws intergenerational and transregional connections that parasitic and wastelanding narratives obscure.

The oil industry has benefited from systemic farmworker disposability established by agribusiness. However, it can "wasteland" farmworker places without any internally imposed limits because it does not directly rely on this labor source (Voyles, 2015). As US politics moved rightwards, post-2000 pay-to-play politics removed even the illusion of external regulation, leading to Kern County's toxic boom and environmental health calamities in Arvin. Oil industry-friendly national legislation mobilized the neoliberal language of freedom, while suppressing voices of local dissent. Specifically, the 2005 Energy Policy Act, and its "Halliburton loophole" (named after the corporation of which the Vice President Dick Cheney was a CEO), allowed federal mandates to bypass state and local regulations in the name of energy independence (Food and Water Watch, 2015). Oil and gas exploration and extraction were exempted in part or full from the Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act, Safe Drinking Water Act and Solid Waste Disposal Act. Five years later, the US Supreme Court's "Citizens United" ruling allowed corporations and unions to spend unlimited funds on election campaigns as "free speech." After national crude oil production almost doubled from 2008, fossil fuel magnates donated \$100 million to 2016 Republican presidential campaigns (Desjardins, 2016; Goldenberg and Bengtson, 2016). Between 2011 and 2019, investor-owned utilities donated over \$4 million to California governor and establishment Democrat Jerry Brown's 2010 election campaign; despite ardent protests, he expanded fracking (Aronoff, 2017; Mishak, 2017).

##### 4.3. From disposable lives to disposable places

Countless air and water quality rankings expose the "wastelanding" and perceived disposability of Arvin among other Kern County places (Voyles, 2015). Between 2015 and 2017, the American Lung Association (2019) ranked the county number one for short-term particle pollution and number two for year-round particle pollution among the twenty-five most polluted counties in the US. Toxic metals, radioactive substances and hazardous chemicals – benzene, ethylbenzene, xylenes, tetrachloroethylene and toluene, to name a few – have been measured in alarming quantity (Grinberg, 2014). High levels of arsenic and nitrates have been found Arvin's ground water (California State Water Resources Control Board, 2013). When I visited in January 2018, Arvin's air particulate matter hovered around 300 parts per million, "very unhealthy" according to the US government air index; no one I met expressed

surprise (AirNow, 2018). Air pollution in Arvin takes a particular toll because the valley in which it is located abuts the Sierra foothills, naturally trapping industrial and vehicular exhaust. If farmworker families were seen as political constituents (rather than the oil industry, through its patronage of the white working class), this geographic vulnerability would deter oil industry expansion. Instead, the exacerbated effects of pollution serve to justify further “wastelanding,” in a positive feedback loop (Pulido, 2000; Voyles, 2015).

The environmental impacts of Kern County’s “success” exhibit three main features: accrual, intensification and generalization.

#### 4.3.1. Accrual

Similar to sedimented historical processes that constrain farmworker agency today, measurements of pollutants reflect multiple temporalities. New contaminants intermingle with persistent ones from earlier epochs, compounding their effects. For example, water throughout the San Joaquin Valley contains “legacy pesticides,” including the banned fumigant trichloropropane, uranium and DBCP (Meadows, 2017). A major reason for this is that, because of agribusiness’s political clout, California’s water quality regulations exempted agriculture until 2003.

#### 4.3.2. Intensification

As agribusiness mergers were linking seed, chemical and food companies, California was turning to fracking and ratcheting up oil extraction. Corporations in both industries have benefited from changing legislation, zoning laws and compartmentalized legal processes that require time and money to maneuver. Emiliano explained that even protective regulations are not enforced because victims are afraid of deportation, job insecurity, retaliation or being sued. Networks of subcontractors allow big growers to evade legal responsibility for workplace risks and deflect the consequences of using undocumented labor onto workers themselves. Similarly, mega-oil corporations commission “small” companies conveniently exempted from gas flaring and data collection regulations (Lohan, 2014). Thus, despite proof of abysmal air quality and high incidents of respiratory and neurological illnesses, the Eastern Kern Air Pollution Control District reduced risk guidelines for cancer in 2017 (the Trump administration followed suit). In recent years agribusiness has used hundreds of thousands of pounds of the carcinogenic neurotoxin Chlorpyrifos annually in Kern County – a major focus of local farmworker and environmental activists (the Trump administration repealed a 2015 federal ban on its use on food crops, which California lawmakers reinstated in the state, beginning 2020).

#### 4.3.3. Generalization

As environmental hazards in Kern County have accrued and intensified, their effects have become more broadly experienced. For example, during the Bracero era, the toxic insecticide DDT was sprayed directly on farmworkers who crossed the Mexico-US border (Mitchell, 2012; Street, 2005). In contrast, recent biotechnological breakthroughs facilitate spraying vast swathes of cropland (Kloppenborg, 2004). Often, big growers do not bother with precision because it is cheaper for them to lose some crop than invest in labor and technology (Arax, 2018). As fracking in Kern County multiplied exploratory wells and reinvigorated old wells at a frenzied pace, active wells began to adjoin residences, schools and fields (McLean, 2018). Children are being gravely sickened. Fracking contaminates air and water at every stage in the process. In Kern County, companies largely frack for oil, “flaring” (burning) the gas and releasing its highly toxic contaminants into the air (CRPE, 2018). Because oil wells here are relatively shallow (less than 2000 feet deep), chemicals seep into the water table (Pacific Institute, 2016; Center for Biological Diversity, 2017). The industry also disposes of huge quantities of wastewater in unlined open pits (Grinberg, 2014). Millions of barrels of “flow back” waste gets aired in “percolation pits” or injected underground, potentially increasing the risk of seismic activity in an earthquake zone (Center for Biological Diversity, 2017).

The combination of accruing, intensifying and generalizing industry pollution have caused farmworker families and other Kern County

communities asthma, respiratory diseases, migraines, neurological impairments, sterility, birth defects and cancer – a public health recipe for what Gilmore (2007:28) describes as “vulnerability to premature death.”

#### 4.4. Neoliberal contradictions, changing demographics and practicing citizenship

The same neoliberal developments that have endangered farmworkers in Kern County have animated place-based resistance and opened up avenues for political expression. Perhaps most strikingly, remarkable demographic shifts swung state politics to the left, even as the US moved rightwards. California now has at least a 38% Latinx population. As immigration reform stagnated and NAFTA-driven immigration from Mexico later plateaued, farmworkers began rearing US-born and English-speaking children and establishing intergenerational communities (Zong and Batalova, 2018). Roughly one-third of California farmworkers today are women (Center for Farmworker Families, 2019). More recently, skyrocketing rents in California’s “revitalized” coastal cities have propelled working-class families inland, diversifying Kern County and its Latinx population.

Significantly, the turn to high-value crops, such as tomatoes, almonds and pistachios, also metamorphosed farm work from migrant to stationary forms (Martin, 1998; Santos-Gomez, 2013). Because California growers cannot rely on automation (at this point) or any other labor source, labor shortages have opened the door to a small degree of farmworker agency (Guthman, 2017). “Possibilities of differentiation” for farm work within and between companies have emerged (Hernández Romero, 2012:77). These transitions have opened the door to practicing citizenship and place-based political, cultural and symbolic claims (Santos-Gomez, 2013). Farmworkers may be more inclined to apply for government entitlements, especially for citizen children (though, as interviewees note, fear often prevents this). They also use public spaces for events that enrich and reshape social and cultural life (Santos-Gomez, 2013). Thus, places like Arvin where farmworker families reside have come to matter in new ways.

In light of these changes, Kern County’s, and specifically Arvin’s, Latinx voting population has jumped in the past half-century, as has its number of youth. María observed that most farmworker families she interacts with today include undocumented and citizen members. Therefore, new voters are more likely personally connected to those who are disenfranchised. The public callousness of oil industry representatives to the harm inflicted on young children has left farmworker families little reason to view the oil industry as anything other than an antagonist. As Caroline Farrell remarked, the younger generation have “nothing to lose.” These three words reflect the material conditions of what Kern County’s success has meant for farmworker families. Notably, they defy neoliberal ideas of individual mobility and choice, which Emiliano associates with oil executives whose attitude he summed up with, “if you don’t like it, leave.” In contrast, “nothing to lose” becomes a reason for community organizing among those whose most viable option is staying. By framing neoliberal developments as a continuation of racism and farmworker exploitation, a structural critique recognizes neoliberalism as a “success” for industries and interests it was meant to serve.

### 5. Sowing seeds of progressive populism: environmental justice organizing in Arvin

#### 5.1. A galvanizing event

Following a pattern documented in many environmental justice cases, an ongoing hazard in Arvin sparked an extreme incident, which rallied residents around a focused aim (Lerner and Brown, 2012). In this case, eight households in the Nelson Court neighborhood came down with severe migraines, nosebleeds, chest congestion and other ailments in March

2014 (Brown, 2014). They soon discovered a serious gas leak beneath their homes. It turned out that Petro Capital Resources, LLC had not tested an almost fifty-year-old pipeline it had just acquired, even though this aging infrastructure would be used to transport waste gas adjacent to people's homes and a few blocks from a public high school. As residents learned, the company had not even bothered to find out the pipeline's precise location or direction. The poisoning symptoms disappeared when families were evacuated to Bakersfield, only to reappear after they moved back on the assurance the leak had been fixed (Brown, 2014). Despite these egregious events, government officials refused to disclose the results of air, soil and other environmental tests. Moreover, the county planned to proceed with opening Arvin to new oil exploration in potential "hot spots" the following year (Lohan, 2014).

At the time, José Gurrola was a young member of Arvin City Council with a relatively benign public stance towards the oil industry. However, his parents, also farmworkers, were among those harmed. As Gurrola's inner circle faced a preventable and dire health calamity, and no one in power took meaningful action, his position on the city council became a nexus of political resistance and bridge between farmworker families, environmental justice organizers and Arvin's political machinery (Thompson, 2017).

## 5.2. Environmental justice activism builds political power

Though California's environmental justice movement from the 1980s is often associated with toxic dumping targeting urban and poor communities of color, Arvin, and Kern County more broadly, has seen concerted movement building around environmental issues for well over a decade. These environmental movements articulate personal, historical and/or symbolic connections to region's history of labor organizing. For example, three interviewees (two younger than thirty) spoke about the importance of farmworker strikes and boycotts, which had significance because of parents, mentors or childhood experiences.

In the Arvin case, there had been a previous galvanizing event. Two brothers, Armando and Eladio Ramirez, died from inhaling hydrogen-sulfide fumes at an industrial recycling and compost center in nearby Lamont in 2011. After this tragedy, two affiliated local groups, Committee for a Better Arvin (CBA) and Comité Progreso de Lamont, in collaboration with CRPE, intensified an ongoing battle to shut the facility down. By 2014 when the oil leak happened, CBA had established links with other Kern County organizations, including Committee for a Better Shafter, Greenfield Walking Group, Central California Environmental Justice Network (CCEJN) and Californians Against Fracking. The 10-year \$1 billion initiative of the California Endowment to fund progressive rural organizations from 2010 had strengthened these intergroup alliances. In Caroline Farrell's experience with CRPE, this enabled groups to "collaborate more," rather than "competing for resources." Beyond building social networks, environmental justice (and labor) organizing against powerful corporate interests had cultivated a culture of tenacity and a long-range view. Emiliano, for example, had learned from elders and his own experience that fighting "small" battles "gives hope that we may win bigger."

Some populist movements diverge from authoritarian and charismatic leadership and come into being, instead, through nonhierarchical relations and "spontaneous coordination" (Hawkins and Littvay, 2019). Both the progressive Populist Party of the 1890s and the conservative Tea Party of the 2000s stand as US-based examples. Over a decade of organizing around environmental justice in Arvin before the events of 2014 had already established similar decentralized grassroots networks. "Citizen science" and other participatory methods had acknowledged and responded to residents' immediate concerns for years, fostering an appetite for direct representation. For example, in response to government negligence, Arvin residents organized a "bucket brigade" through CBA and CCEJN, "grabbing" contaminated air in 5-gallon food grade buckets for their own testing. Environmental justice organizations collaborated directly with researchers from the University of Colorado

develop boxes Arvin residents could erect beside or on their homes to measure volatile organic compounds (VOCs), which are highly toxic particles prominent near fracking sites. More recently, CCEJN has started crowd-sourcing pictures, videos and multi-lingual voice messages pinned to GIS locations to map and monitor toxic sites. CRPE is also helping to train youth advocates in the San Joaquin Valley.

These efforts became a means of civic engagement, regardless of official status. When describing them, Emiliano said, "Everything is generated by the community for the community." While geared towards addressing pollution, this ethic expresses place-based commitments and a sense of belonging translatable to party politics. "Community" here is not racially exclusive; rather, it is defined by experience of and geographic proximity to harm, which has been shaped by systemic racism. In Arvin, this affects predominantly Latinx residents, and specifically Mexican farmworker families. In other words, while language, cultural practices and racial and ethnic identity matter tremendously, they do not delimit "the people," enabling pluralistic and coalitional possibilities. Unlike current expressions of right-wing populism in the US, the opponents here are those who control the regional means of production (Abromeit, 2018).

Moreover, the environmental justice organizing described above both fits and diverges from the characteristics of new rural movements identified by Michael Woods (2003, 2012), in which rurality itself has emerged as a site of struggle. On the one hand, as we see, activists have employed decentralized strategies similar to those noted by Woods to challenge the power establishment and make moral claims. On the other hand, they have not based their arguments or strategies on racial, ethnic and cultural identity or asserted historical rights. This makes sense because farmworkers, and in particular those of Mexican descent, have been historically excluded from political society and dominant notions of Central Valley rurality. Race has been a "modality" that has severed them from, rather than connected them to, political power (Hall, 1980). As "outsiders," farmworkers could not claim ancestral ties to the land or former social status. Current claims, thus are grounded in their experiences as residents, workers, family members and humans.

José Gurrola was not yet twenty years old when he joined the Arvin City Council. His youth and inexperience might have made him appear impressionable and untimidating to the oil industry. His Mexican heritage could present the visage of diversity in Kern County politics. However, these very attributes also meant that personal and childhood allegiances could sway him over political entrenchments. He joined with existing networks of residents and environmental justice activists, and backed a plan to temporarily halt drilling.

Dr. Martinez was then one of Gurrola's undergraduate professors and followed the events closely as they transpired. He relayed "a real David versus Goliath story" where the industry sought to "make an example out of Arvin's resistance." As reported by news outlets during and after that time, oil lobbyists filled the city council meeting to pressure the other two council members to vote against the moratorium. Because Arvin's oil output is insignificant compared to the region's major oil fields, Dr. Martinez interpreted this as a blatant show of political force, rather than a move to protect the bottom line. It makes visible how crucial political suppression has been in maintaining and renovating racial agrarian capitalism. Dr. Martinez also described the political calculations of oil industry lobbyists to be inflected with racist assumptions, such as viewing Gurrola as "a weak Mexican opponent." This view mirrored how Emiliano talked about his multiple experiences testifying at public hearings as someone of Mexican descent. These interpretations express the sense that political suppression has been naturalized as a matter of racial capacity.

The oil industry won the battle in 2014, and the moratorium did not pass. Moreover, despite over 400 legal complaints filed by Arvin residents against the city and county, Petro Capital was hardly fined (Statler, 2018). However, Gurrola's and activists' door-to-door canvassing for the moratorium thickened existing networks and intensified collective energy and consciousness. As before, organizers continued to build a movement after



their loss. Meanwhile, as Dr. Martinez and Gurrola himself explain it, new personal connections forged through environmental justice mobilization propelled the young politician to a patron of farmworkers and other immigrants excluded from political society (Thompson, 2017).

### 5.3. The importance of incorporation

That Arvin is an incorporated municipality bears attention here. In the 1940s, Goldschmidt (1946) associated Arvin's unincorporated status with its deficient social institutions. When the town was incorporated in 1960, Arvin's 5000 residents were predominantly Anglo-white and poised to leave farm work and eventually Arvin itself (US Bureau of the Census, 1972). Arguably, its incorporation would not have threatened Kern County's ruling industries, which could not have foreseen major demographic shifts a half a century later.

Environmental justice and environmental health research confirms that incorporation has mattered in California, because it provides governmental infrastructure for populations to be counted and residents to have a say in budgetary, environmental siting and representational decisions (Pulido, 2000; Von Glasco and Schwartz, 2019). Most of those I interviewed mentioned how incorporation, or its lack, affects resource access, social wellbeing and waste dumping in the Central Valley. For example, two farmworker advocates observed obvious differences between Arvin and neighboring, unincorporated, Lamont, where the sidewalks, buildings, stores, services and sewer systems are in much worse shape. Similar to Mark Arax's (2018) depiction of big growers taking advantage of nebulous locales to surreptitiously redirect water flows, Caroline Farrell remarked that companies strategically exploit "no man's lands" where "the county doesn't feel accountable."

The Arvin case study illuminates another point. Incorporation also allows the possibility for more holistic responses to environmental justice concerns. As Laura Pulido (2017) has argued, having to identify a particular cause and/or prove malicious intent in individual cases has stymied environmental justice progress, especially – as in Arvin – when ailments cannot be disentangled from the effects of endemic poverty caused by the same industries. Power over local governance enables legislative changes and regional programs that go beyond a site, company or neighborhood. It offers potential solutions linking issues and localities, against the compartmentalizing logic of racial capitalism.

### 5.4. Forging (progressive) rural environmental (justice) populism

Though coercion worked for the oil industry in 2014, it backfired as a longer-term strategy in Arvin's changing political context. Grassroots campaigning to promote the drilling moratorium laid the ground for Gurrola's mayoral win and the progressive transformation of the Arvin City Council two years later (Thompson, 2017). Despite continued challenges, activists and residents have been able to experience a level of success that previously eluded them (Pulido, 2017). As Gurrola's campaign benefited from environmental justice networks, a direct line to Arvin's governing institutions has provided a mechanism for environmental justice activists advocating for farmworker families to re-shape, rather than reform, the workings of state power on the local level (Pulido, 2017; Pellow, 2016).

In Kern County, there has been undeniable progressive momentum. Well before Gurrola became mayor, a coalition of local environmental justice organizations, many previously mentioned, launched a campaign to rein in the oil industry; CRPE filed a lawsuit on their behalf (Bacher, 2018). After Gurrola was elected, Arvin officials began collaborating with those same organizations on an ordinance to stop fast tracking oil exploration and up to 72,000 new wells without public input or environmental assessment. This ordinance set out to do what would have been unfathomable a few years earlier: restrict oil and gas development, mandate "setback distances for sensitive sites," including hospitals, homes and schools, and establish "Buffered Protected Zones" (Ferrari, 2018). It passed in 2018, with the votes of new city council members,

younger than thirty. A year later, the local government announced a \$14.3 million project for clean drinking water. Then, in 2020, Earth-Justice and CRPE filed another lawsuit on behalf of six Central Valley groups to challenge the loopholes to petroleum refineries granted by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District (Johnson Meszaros et al., 2020).

These measures prioritize farmworker families' health and survival. They also recognize that farmworkers' voices should shape environmental outcomes in a place where their labor has produced much of the wealth. We can understand "environmental populism" in Arvin as the link between farmworkers' concerns, environmental justice organizing and local party politics. This link denaturalizes farmworkers' structural exclusion from political society. We can also see here how occupying government institutions is a place-based strategy that allows environmental justice activists to seize more institutional power and grow their movement base. The timing of these recent events is no coincidence. "People are learning how to engage and [are] harder to ignore," said Caroline Farrell; and Trump's rise has ignited a "new breed of organizing," according to Emiliano. Based on varied experiences, everyone I interviewed felt that Kern County's Latinx population today tends to be more informed about their rights and more likely to ask questions of public officials, for reasons ranging from grassroots organizing to demographic shifts to more English speakers.

The political potential of environmental populism might explain why the oil industry so virulently suppressed the 2014 drilling moratorium in Arvin, rather than allowing this economically benign concession. Certainly since Gurrola's win and the passage of the 2018 ordinance, activists in more oil-rich municipalities, like Shafter, publicly stated that they intend to build on Arvin's successes. Bakersfield City Councilman and California Independent Petroleum Association spokesman Willie Rivera warned reporters, "every notch in (activists') belt, I think, empowers them to keep biting off more" (Mayer and Cox, 2018). As well, see oil corporations have something at stake in fueling white nationalist discontent and support for Trump. In addition to challenging the systemic racism that has long benefited the oil industry, the methods and principles of environmental justice evokes and reinforces democratic ideals antithetical to how politics has long happened and what rurality has long meant in the San Joaquin Valley. The industry faced another political loss in 2018, when the Dolores Huerta Foundation won a lawsuit against the county for redrawing the supervisor's map in an attempt to dilute Latinx electoral representation (Freeman, 2018).

We can also see how small steps that earn farmworkers and other disenfranchised groups even the possibility of basic representation might appear to threaten the "relative status" of Kern County's white working class (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018). Though federal policies and the novel coronavirus in 2020 have intensified farmworker precarity, the ravaging effects of the pandemic on unemployment and the fossil fuel industry could deepen this sense of white decline. Thus, progressive and environmental justice wins in the region both portend the possibility of new political forces in Kern County and are highly susceptible to usurpation (Hall, 1979; Gramsci, 1989 [1971]).

## 6. Scaling up rural environmental populism

Environmental populism in Arvin has already exhibited scalar potential, through translocal connections (some described above) and vertical linkages to state, and even national, politics. Two points are important to highlight here: first, the discourse of environment and climate enables meaningful coalition building; and second, the inclusion of farmworkers' concerns makes a qualitative and ethical difference for California's environmental policy and US progressivism.

Arvin has gained undeniable visibility on the map of state politics. By 2015, its elected representatives had linked up with California's progressive front. As a city council member, Gurrola joined 100 officials throughout the state to petition Governor Brown for a 45-day fracking moratorium (Californians Against Fracking, 2015). Organizing efforts

after the 2014 leak prompted the passage of a California state bill (AB-1420) mandating that any active pipeline older than ten years and smaller than four inches in diameter near an environmentally sensitive location gets regularly monitored, and operators must submit an up-to-date map ([California State Legislature, 2015](#)).

When Arvin's local representatives passed its restrictive drilling ordinance in 2018, California's Attorney General Xavier Becerra made a public endorsement congratulating a "momentous public health victory." He went on to say, "Earlier this year, we established a Bureau of Environmental Justice so that communities like Arvin know we have their backs. We look forward to continuing to fight on behalf of all Californians and their right to breathe clean air" ([State of California Department of Justice, 2018](#)). Significantly, Becerra here uses struggles of farmworkers in Arvin to represent those of all residents in the state, discursively stitching them into the fabric of broader society and mainstream politics. His statement indicates how important environmental justice has been to Arvin's new visibility on the map of California politics, as well as how the environmental justice movement has begun to seize institutional power on the scale of the state. Cinching these rural-urban alliances, in 2017, Becerra appointed Arsenio Mataka, a long-time and respected environmental justice advocate with ties to rural activism in the Central Valley, as his Special Assistant.

In 2018, Republicans lost seven seats in California elections, some in surprising upsets, aided by changes to California's voting system. Though the Central Valley claims two of Trump's staunches Congressional allies (Representatives Devin Nunes and Kevin McCarthy), California has arguably presented the most visible state opposition to the federal anti-immigration and environmental deregulation policies. Becerra has filed over fifty lawsuits on behalf of California against the Trump administration ([Bowden, 2019](#)). In 2019, he announced California would lead twenty-three states in a lawsuit against the federal government's attempt to revoke the rights of states under the Clean Air Act to set stricter vehicular emissions than the national limits.

Climate crisis especially might further scale up environmental populism and fracture the industry hegemony in the San Joaquin Valley. Rising temperatures, air pollution and wildfires at an unprecedented scale are challenging ideals of unhindered growth and resource exploitation baked into California's identity. Though "not out in open yet," Dr. Martinez hypothesizes "a crack in what used to be a solid base" of California's agricultural and oil companies. Neoliberal profit-making strategies have exacerbated drought and water scarcity, stressing a water system historically steeped in political conflicts ([Reisner, 1986](#)). At times when the water table plummeted in recent years, big growers found ways to steal from each other ([Arax, 2018](#)). In addition, fracking in Kern requires massive amounts of water because the oil is highly viscous, setting oil and agricultural companies in competition. Since April 2020, the fracking industry has floundered because of a precipitous drop in oil prices followed by an oil glut during the Covid-19 pandemic. While this new vulnerability threatens business viability, it will also lead to more mergers; we cannot assume it a death knell.

For all these reasons, this might be a moment when the call of rural movements to rein in unfettered local industrial pollution gains broader moral ground. The perceived boundary between environmental justice and climate change has well served agricultural and oil industries, helping to naturalize the disposability of farmworkers and places, as well as leave unchallenged the tyranny of major greenhouse gas emitters in the places of extraction and production. Over the past few years, CRPE has deployed the language of "climate justice" to protest the effects of toxic air and water poisoning on farmworker families, and its leader Caroline Farrell has argued that effective climate policy centers equity and environmental justice. Such ideas push California's establishment Democratic Party to the left.

Along these lines, various Kern County organizations, including CRPE and CBA, supported two Democrat-proposed bills, debated in 2018, to move California's climate policy away from market-based cap-and-trade and towards addressing the "social cost" of carbon emissions;

for example, by using dividends to build public infrastructures and address racially disparate pollution. Against the influence of the Western States Petroleum Association lobby, the bills did not pass. However, as with the events in Arvin, the alliances formed and consciousness raised may lead to future wins ([Aronoff, 2017](#)).

## 7. Conclusion

From this analysis, we can draw a few conclusions about rural politics in local and national contexts, and the relationship between rural populism and environmental justice.

First, this study confirms the importance of studying rural places in the US with significant nonwhite and noncitizen adult populations to understand how rural politics might play out over the next decade as young people, including citizen children of undocumented workers, gain political voice. Left-leaning anti-Trump politics have centered on changing the minds of rural white Americans or getting urban communities of color to vote. However, a broader long-term strategy would include voter education and structural interventions to enfranchise new groups, as well as strengthening social networks linking immigrant farmworkers with other community members. In other words, Arvin helps us to see rural places as political sites of struggle in new ways, at a time when the US is likely to follow in the footsteps of the state of California to become a minority-majority country.

Second, the San Joaquin Valley might be seeing what Stuart Hall ([1979](#)) calls "formative" political forces, emerging out of a deep crisis. The "authoritarian populism" Hall ([1979](#)) theorized garnered consent for neoliberalism to resolve the crisis of Keynesianism. In California's landscape of racial agrarian capitalism, Trump-style rightwing populism today gives voice to "structures of feeling," articulated as loss, regarding the contradictions and failures of that project in fulfilling its initial promises ([Williams, 2015](#) [1979]). However, it does so in a manner that mimics the political characteristics Hall described, reasserting the regional industry hegemony.

In contrast, rural environmental populism, as seen in Arvin from 2014, reflects new coalitions, new discourses and new possibilities for the balance of forces in the San Joaquin Valley and California. It expresses a structural critique of neoliberalism, in particular political disenfranchisement, farmworker disposability and "parasitic" and wastelanding relationships ([Kelly-Reif and Wing, 2016](#)). It arises out of particular and place-based contradictions that stitch together changing political, lingual and social demographics; growing consciousness; dire environmental hazards; and the collective sense of having "nothing to lose" – rather than of loss for what disenfranchised groups never had. As we see, while populist movements can take rightwing and progressive forms in the same region at the same time, these are neither interchangeable nor arbitrarily opposed, but distinctly situated within – and express – particular sets of contradictions that are dialectally related.

Third, environmental justice as a set of practices, principles, relationships and discursive arrangements can grow progressive politics and scale up power. Reciprocally, inhabiting political institutions at various scales can lead to better and more holistic environmental justice outcomes. Though the mainstream politics in the pay-to-play era lends itself to corruption and appropriation, the community allegiances of young people from historically disenfranchised groups, like José Gurolo, might lead to different outcomes. Because racism is geographic and spatial, and because the deleterious effects of neoliberalism have profoundly exacerbated place-based harms and endangered land, water, air, homes, communities and human and nonhuman life, "environment" and "climate" provide a means for expressing a collective "people" in ways that aren't constricted by identity, but nonetheless express it. In California, farmworker families' concerns can link environmental justice with climate change to enable more effective climate policy, as well as more democratic and representative politics.

## Credit author statement

**Priya Chandrasekaran:** Investigation, Photographs, Writing - review & editing.

## Declaration of competing interest

None.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.08.043>.

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