

The Landscape of Environmental Justice in the Federal Government

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I. Background and Historical Context

Environmental degradation does not exist in a vacuum and impacts various communities in several ways. Moreover, the federal government plays a significant role in climate change-related regulation and government consensus. Overburdened communities, as defined by the EPA in 2020, are “minority, low-income, tribal, or indigenous populations or geographic locations in the United States that potentially experience disproportionate environmental harms and risks” (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2021). They are disproportionately impacted by climate change and other man-made systems that impact our environment. Through this realization, many community members across the nation have advocated and continue to advocate for environmental justice as the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, national origin, income, and education (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2021). In this specific context, that refers to meaningful involvement in the development and implementation of environmental regulations. The federal government deeply influences environmental protections and regulation in the U.S. both historically and present-day.

Both historically and modernly the federal government deeply influences environmental protections and regulation in the U.S. Firstly, Reagan’s ‘attack on the EPA’ involved budget and staff cuts as a direct form of deregulation (Frederickson, et al., 2018, p. 95). These attacks were overt, including the removal of strong environmental players and redistributing staff to other offices. A key move was the appointment of Anne Gorsuch as the head of the EPA who effectively “demoralized, marginalized, and reorganized EPA staff” (Frederickson, et al., 2018, p. 96) as well as significantly reducing the EPA’s operating budget. Next, George W. Bush’s administration reflected a more subtle deregulation strategy focused on undermining science-based policy regarding climate change (Frederickson et al., 2018, p. 95). Bush relied on

delaying regulatory decisions in the EPA and cutting budgets. By subtly delaying climate-based action at the EPA and reducing climate change education among the general public, Bush withdrew the US from the Kyoto Protocol talks and promotion of fossil fuel development (Frederickson et al., 2018, p. 99). Following this, during Trump's current administration, he has combined both Reagan's and Bush's strategy for the strongest deregulation process yet. By overturning bans on products like chlorpyrifos, which is tied to low birthweight, attention problems, lowered IQ, and motor delays in children, (Frederickson et al., 2018, p. 100) the Trump administration demonstrates its ignorance toward climate change as a public health concern. Thus, federal administrations play an integral role in environmental justice.

Today, the consequences of systemic and structural racism like Jim Crow segregation and the Home Owners' Loan Corporation's redlining run deep. Environmental racism refers to policy, practice or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages communities of color (Bullard, 1994, p. 1037). This definition comes from environmental justice advocate Dr. Robert Bullard who wrote *Environmental Racism and 'Invisible' Communities*, which examines the effect of segregation in Black communities environmentally. Bullard refers to West Dallas, a predominantly Black area in Texas, as one of the oldest dumping grounds for garbage waste and lead smelter. He writes, "Lead waste from the nearby smelter was dumped in the neighborhood beginning in the 1930s, ... The lead smelter operated and poisoned neighborhood residents for over fifty years with the full knowledge of the Dallas Health Department" (Bullard, 1994, p. 1043). Essentially, following the freeing of slaves, the United States enforced Jim Crow segregation practices that forced Black communities into certain regions and out of others. From there, corporations and state governments took advantage of the lack of legal representation for

Black people to exploit them further. As Bullard presents, this puts Black people and communities of color at special risk.

Second, redlining stems from discriminatory and exclusionary practices through the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) in which the corporation assigned value to neighborhoods and properties across the United States in zones. Within HOLC-graded areas, 78.2% of people of color lived in C and D zones, compared to 62.2% of White residents (Collins & Grineski, 2025). This divide has led to lower property value, mortgage acceptance rates, and policing concerns in lower-grade regions. Simultaneously, redlining contributes to environmental harm exposure including noise pollution and flood and heat risk. Collins and Grineski assert “people of color (POC) experience unadjusted excess transportation noise exposures that are higher than White people across the CONUS, within HOLC counties, and within HOLC A–D zones” (2025, p. 53). Essentially, people of color are exposed to more noise pollution than White people within lower-grade zones *and across* zones A–D. This issue extends into flood risk as well in *Long-term effects of redlining on environmental risk exposure*, whereby “properties on the lower-graded side of a HOLC border have significantly higher flood factor and heat exposure than properties on higher-graded sides” (Conzelmann, et al., 2022, p. 8). Historically, lower-grade borders were drawn along the Gulf Coast and predominantly in the Deep South, though low-grade zones are prevalent across the country in urban regions. Nonetheless, higher flood risk and heat exposure proves an increased risk for people of color and overburdened communities.

A. Intergenerational Environmental Justice

Environmental injustice is a cycle where the harms compound biologically and pass between generations. Chronic pollution exposure in minority communities accumulates as

elevated allostatic load, which is the “wear and tear” that builds up on the body when stress responses are triggered repeatedly over time. Lavin et al. (2026) explain that environmental exposures including air pollution, endocrine disrupting chemicals, heavy metals, pesticides, and volatile organic compounds operate through mechanisms like oxidative stress, immune dysfunction, epigenetic modification, and systemic inflammation, all of which can shape health outcomes well beyond the moment of exposure (Lavin et al., 2026).

Higher residential air pollution exposure has been associated with activation of the HPA stress axis (the body’s central stress response system), and with epigenetic modifications that influence how genes are expressed. This means pollution exposure can alter the biological programming in ways that are passed down generationally. The Union of Concerned Scientists report on the Trump administration's deregulation of children's environmental protections describes this dynamic as a “life course” health risk, where alveolar development continues throughout childhood, immune systems remain immature, and detoxification pathways are less efficient in young people, meaning the same pollution dose produces disproportionately greater harm in children than in adults (Union of Concerned Scientists, n.d.). This vulnerability does not stop at the individual child either. As Lavin and colleagues argue, when communities already face cumulative exposure and reduced adaptive capacity, deregulation widens existing health inequities across generations (2026, p. 38). The result is that EPA rollbacks become drivers of multigenerational health harm in the communities least equipped to absorb it.

B. Maternal Stress From Pollution Exposures

A particularly important pathway through which intergenerational environmental harm operates is pregnancy. Pregnant women, infants, and young children are biologically more vulnerable to environmental exposures than the general population. This is partly because

pregnancy involves increased oxygen consumption, which raises the rate at which airborne pollutants are taken in, and partly because infants have higher ventilation rates and narrower pediatric airways that are more easily obstructed by inflammation (Lavin et al., 2026). So, pollution exposure produces a much more serious developmental effect in a fetus or infant.

Air pollution during pregnancy has been associated with low birth weight, preterm birth, hypertensive disorders of pregnancy including preeclampsia, neurodevelopmental impairment, and infant mortality (Lavin et al., 2026). The biological mechanisms behind these outcomes mirror the ones described in the previous section: oxidative stress, systemic inflammation, endocrine disruption, and epigenetic modification. Research has also found a direct link between residential air pollution exposure and maternal stress hormone levels. Three-month mean residential nitrogen dioxide and black carbon concentrations have been associated with third-trimester hair cortisol concentrations, meaning that mothers living in more polluted environments have elevated stress hormone levels late in pregnancy. Cortisol elevations during pregnancy, in turn, are linked to downstream developmental vulnerability in the child.

This matters for environmental justice because pregnant women in low-income, rural, tribal, and fence-line communities near refineries, highways, power plants, and waste sites are disproportionately exposed to exactly the pollutants that drive these effects (Lavin et al., 2026). When the EPA reduces enforcement, eliminates greenhouse gas regulation, or stops counting health benefits in pollution rules, the result is more pollutant exposure in those communities, and biological harm that can be passed to the next generation before it has even been born.

C. Disproportionate Pollution Exposure in Overburdened Communities

As such, research shows that there is a disproportionate disease burden from pollution exposure in communities of color. According to a transformative piece written by the

“Commission for Racial Justice” titled *Toxic Waste and Race*, race proves to be the most significant factor tested in regards to hazardous waste facilities on a national level (United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, 1987). The Commission examines the dumping of toxic waste across the United States to draw this conclusion. Furthermore, “Although socio-economic status appeared to play an important role in the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities, race still proved to be more significant” (United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, 1987, p. 13). Income level and upward-mobility are undoubtedly a factor in environmental harm exposure, however, the Commission proves that race dominates.

A similar phenomenon is reflected in a study assessing water pollution in the U.S. titled *Health risks from contaminated water: Do class and race matter?*, whereby researchers assess various functions of water accessibility and cleanliness. They discover, among a variety of assertions, even when accounting for socioeconomic status, people of color have higher blood lead levels than White people (Calderon et al., 1993, p. 888). Again, this points to race as a significant factor. Similarly, other minority communities including migrants and Native Americans experience similar exposure. Water supplies in migrant camps “tested positive for total coliforms (44%), fecal coliforms (26%) and *E. coli* (20%) while none of the water supplies on other farms in the same area were positive for these organisms” (Calderon et al., 1993, p. 886). As for the Indigenous community, water contamination is extremely high as half of the US’ uranium reserves occur *under* reservation land (Calderon et al., 1993, p. 883).

Lastly, to fully support this point, minority status is also a significant indicator in the effects of soil pollution according to Jones, et al. They examine the level of heavy metal contaminant across the United States; they assert, “areas with a higher population of minorities have an increased exposure to heavy metal contamination in their environments” (2022, p. 7).

Moreover, socioeconomic status was proven insignificant in comparison as an indicator of soil pollution disparity. These disparities call into question the exploitation of minority communities and proliferation of environmental racism across parameters. After all, these issues are an extreme risk to public health in minority communities. Thus, the standard to which minority communities are served by government on the local, state, and national level is an important piece to this puzzle.

II. Policy Context

The federal government's role in environmental regulation, and by extension in environmental justice, has been shaped over decades through a layered system of legislation, executive action and judicial interpretation. Understanding the context of this policy landscape reveals both the tools available for protecting overburdened communities and the structural constraints that limit how durable these protections can be.

The cornerstone of federal air quality regulation is the Clean Air Act (CAA), first enacted in 1963 and substantially transformed in 1970. The enactment of the Clean Air Act of 1970 resulted in a huge shift in the federal government's role in air pollution control. It authorized the development of comprehensive federal and state regulations to limit emissions from both stationary industrial resources and mobile resources (U.S. EPA, 2025). In 1977 and 1990, Congress made major revisions to the CAA, targeting newly recognized air pollution problems such as acid rain and stratospheric ozone depletion (U.S. EPA, 2025). These new amendments significantly expanded the EPA's authority and allowed it to have much greater power and responsibility when it came to regulating environmental pollutants. Analyses have determined that the CAA regulations prevented over 205,000 premature deaths and avoided millions of non-fatal illnesses. This includes a wide range of ailments such as severe cardiac and respiratory

issues. This resulted in an estimated benefit of as much as \$50 trillion compared with implementation costs of \$523 billion (Ross et al., 2012). Importantly, the CAA has always been especially beneficial for low-income communities and communities of color, where polluting facilities are disproportionately sited (Hu, 2025).

A pivotal moment in incorporating environmental justice into the federal policy framework came in 1994, when President Bill Clinton signed Executive Order 12898. The purpose of this order was to focus federal attention on the environmental and human health effects of federal actions on minority and low-income populations. It would direct federal agencies to identify and address the disproportionately high and adverse health or environmental effects of their actions. Moreover, it would aim to develop strategies for implementing environmental justice and promote nondiscrimination in federal programs affecting human health and the environment (Clinton, 1994). However, despite its significance as the first formal federal commitment to environmental justice, Executive Order 12898 was fairly limited in practice. The broad language of the order left many agencies uncertain about how to effectively comply and what the ramifications were for non-compliance. A study of 2000 final agency rules found that environmental justice was largely irrelevant to most agency actions even during administrations that referenced the order most frequently (Brower, 2021). Still, Executive Order 12898 established the conceptual foundation on which subsequent environmental justice infrastructure would be built upon.

The next major development came through the courts. In 2007, the Supreme Court issued a landmark decision in *Massachusetts v. EPA* (2007), holding that the EPA had statutory authority to regulate greenhouse gas emissions because carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases fall within the Clean Air Act's definition of air pollutant. Therefore, the EPA cannot deny a

request to regulate pollutants on grounds not mentioned in the act (*Massachusetts v. EPA*, 2007). Moreover, the court held that the EPA Administrator must determine whether emissions of greenhouse gases from new motor vehicles cause or contribute to air pollution that may reasonably be anticipated to endanger public health or welfare (*Massachusetts v. EPA*, 2007).

Following the previous ruling, on December 7, 2009, the EPA Administrator signed the Endangerment Finding. The Endangerment Finding determined that the current and projected concentrations of six key greenhouse gases in the atmosphere threatened the public health and welfare of current and future generations (U.S. EPA, 2009). Critically, this finding provided the legal foundation for federal climate action, enabling the EPA's to regulate emissions from cars, trucks and power plants (Jordan, 2025). The Endangerment Finding is particularly relevant to environmental justice because the communities most harmed by greenhouse gas driven pollution are disproportionately low income communities and communities of color (Orford, 2026).

The Clean Power Plan, finalized in 2015, was among the most significant regulatory action to emerge from the Endangerment Finding. It was a plan projected to contribute significantly to pollution reductions. It would have power plant sulfur dioxide emissions falling 90 percent below 2005 levels, and nitrogen oxide emissions falling 72 percent by 2030. With these regulations, thousands of premature deaths and thousands of premature asthma attacks/hospitalizations would be prevented each year (U.S. EPA, 2015). The EPA separately projected that the plan would prevent up to 100,000 asthma attacks in its first year of implementation (U.S. EPA, 2015). These health benefits would find their greatest success within the same overburdened communities that bear the greatest amounts of pollution.

However, these protections established through the Clean Air Act, the Endangerment Finding, and Executive Order 12898 have weakened in recent years. An important shift in EPA

regulatory practice has been the removal of health cost considerations from how pollution standards are determined. Previously, the EPA weighed the cost of pollution on people's health, against the cost of regulation when setting standards, taking count for variables such as, hospitalization, lost work days, or premature deaths. It should be noted that the Clean Air Act has historically demonstrated benefit to cost ratios of around thirty to one, meaning that even the smallest of pollution reductions yield substantial economic savings when health outcomes are properly accounted for (Feldscher, 2026). With this being removed, pollution standards can be weakened without any formal recognition of the harm that is caused to affected communities.

Moreover, the legal foundation that once allowed the EPA to broadly interpret and enforce environmental protections has been significantly weakened. For forty years, the Chevron doctrine, established by *Chevron U.S.A., Inc. v. Natural Resources Defense Council* (1984), required courts to defer to federal agencies' interpretations of unclear laws, giving the EPA broad authority to create and enforce environmental protections (Hemmersbaugh & Chaifetz, 2024). However, in 2024, the Supreme Court ruling in *Loper Bright Enterprises v. Raimondo* eliminated this doctrine. Meaning courts must now independently decide what ambiguous laws mean rather than deferring to agencies like the EPA. In practice, this makes it much easier to challenge EPA regulations in court. In the months following this decision, new agency rules were struck down at a much higher rate compared to before (Craig, 2025). This means that EPA protections, even though specifically designed to help overburden populations, are now far more likely to face successful legal challenges.

These policy developments paint a picture of an unstable environmental justice policy. The Clean Air Act and the Endangerment Finding gave the Federal Government powerful tools to reduce pollution and protect public health. Executive Order 12898 tried to ensure those tools

were directed towards communities who were most harmed by environmental degradation. However, with the removal of health cost considerations from pollution rulemaking and courts now taking a much more active role in limiting agents' authority, the long term stability of environmental justice policy remains uncertain.

III. Case Studies

A. Juliana v. United States and Union Electric Co. v. EPA

Juliana v. United States and *Union Electric Co. v. EPA* show two ends of the spectrum when it comes to leveraging the federal judiciary for environmental justice. One shows a path that worked, and the other shows a path that did not, but both are useful for thinking about what the courts can and cannot do.

Juliana v. United States was filed in 2015 by twenty-one youth plaintiffs who argued that the federal government's continued promotion of fossil fuels violated their constitutional rights to life, liberty, and property, and that the government had breached its public trust obligations to preserve natural resources for future generations (Our Children's Trust, 2025). The plaintiffs asked the courts to order the federal government to develop a plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions consistent with climate science. The case made it through ten years of procedural battles, including a notable 2016 ruling from Judge Ann Aiken denying the government's motion to dismiss, but it was ultimately dismissed by the Ninth Circuit in 2020 on standing grounds. The court held that even if the plaintiffs had been harmed by federal climate policy, the courts were not the appropriate venue to provide a remedy. In March 2025, the Supreme Court denied the plaintiffs' final petition for certiorari, formally ending the case (Our Children's Trust, 2025).

Although the case did not succeed itself, it inspired more than sixty youth-led climate lawsuits worldwide, including successful state-level cases like *Held v. State of Montana* and

Navahine v. Hawai'i Department of Transportation, both of which won in jurisdictions where state constitutions explicitly recognize environmental rights. So, federal courts proved unwilling to recognize a constitutional right to a stable climate, while some state courts have been willing to do so. This reinforces the broader argument that durable environmental justice protections cannot rest on hopes that the federal judiciary will read new rights into existing constitutional text. The legal infrastructure has to be built directly through legislation.

Union Electric Co. v. EPA, 427 U.S. 246 (1976), points in a more useful direction. In that case, the Supreme Court upheld the EPA's authority to require Missouri to enforce its own state implementation plan under the Clean Air Act, and importantly, the decision affirmed the structure of cooperative federalism that allows states to set environmental standards stricter than federal floors. As Johnston (2018) explains, Section 116 of the Clean Air Act “permits states to establish or maintain standards that are either stricter or broader in scope than the relevant federal requirements” (p. 879), and *Union Electric* helped solidify this principle in case law. This means even when federal environmental regulation is being aggressively rolled back, progressive states still have the legal authority to maintain higher standards on air quality, vehicle emissions, and similar issues. Several states have already used this authority to push back on the current wave of federal deregulation. While state-level action cannot substitute for federal protection, especially in areas of exclusive federal jurisdiction like interstate pollution and federal lands, *Union Electric* shows a real pathway for progress that complements the legislative recommendations laid out in Section V.

B. Shalanda Baker's Oral History

Shalanda Baker's oral history offers a first-hand account of what it looked like to actually build federal environmental justice infrastructure, and what it looked like when that

infrastructure was taken apart. Baker served as the first Director of the Office of Energy Justice and Equity at the Department of Energy under the Biden administration. In that role, she developed the Community Benefits Plan framework, which required every applicant for DOE funding to demonstrate how their energy project would benefit the communities it affected through job creation, stakeholder engagement, and investment in disadvantaged neighborhoods. The framework was embedded in roughly \$100 billion of program funding (Baker, 2025).

Baker describes the framework as “the culmination of my life’s work” and explains that she had built a team of over a hundred people at DOE, developing what she calls “this unprecedented policy framework with others around community benefits for energy, large scale energy projects, the energy transition” (Baker, 2025). Her broader vision was rooted in the Biden administration's Justice40 commitment, which directed that 40 percent of federal climate and clean energy investment go to disadvantaged frontline communities. For a brief period, that vision translated into real projects on the ground, including the \$72.8 million Viejas microgrid loan guarantee discussed in the introduction, the Energy Improvements in Rural or Remote Areas (ERA) grants for small-town microgrids, and the Project Marahu solar farms in Puerto Rico.

The dismantling came almost immediately. Baker recounts that “in January of this year, within three days, everything I built in the Biden Harris administration, all the architecture of justice that I erected in the Department of Energy was torn down” and that “in three days all of it was burned to the ground” (Baker, 2025). The question Baker says she is most often asked is whether the work was worth it. Her answer is yes, “because it showed what is possible, and also what is possible was never going to be enough” (Baker, 2025). She frames the current moment as a “scorched earth approach,” but also argues that the next phase of environmental justice work will need to go further than what was built and dismantled. Her account underscores our central

point: federal environmental justice infrastructure built through executive action is structurally vulnerable, and the path to durable protection has to run through Congress.

IV. Opportunity Structures and Constraints

The ability the federal government has to act on environmental justice is shaped by two overlapping structures: the institutional discretion that comes with administrations changing every four to eight years, and the legal landscape that determines how durable any agency action can actually be. Both of these are an important part of why the traditional model of using executive orders and agency rulemaking for environmental justice issues is no longer as viable as it used to be.

A. Institutional Constraint: EPA Authority is Contingent on the Administration

Almost every meaningful step the federal government has taken on environmental justice has come through executive action rather than legislation. Congress has never actually passed an environmental justice specific law, so progress has depended on executive orders, agency rulemaking, and discretionary funding decisions. The obvious problem with this arrangement is that anything built through executive action can also be torn down through executive action. The current administration demonstrated this almost immediately. Within three days of taking office, the Community Benefits Plan framework at the Department of Energy was dismantled, and Congress later zeroed out the Office of Energy Justice and Equity that Shalanda Baker had spent years building. Orford (2026) documents how the executive branch has used an “all-of-government” strategy of impoundment, internal agency reviews, and aggressive litigation to freeze or terminate hundreds of billions of dollars in congressionally mandated funding, including an estimated \$7.6 billion in clean energy grants canceled by DOE alone. The 2026 rescission of the Endangerment Finding is the clearest example of this pattern at EPA

specifically, since it removed the legal foundation for federal greenhouse gas regulation in a single rulemaking.

This is what we have been calling the “ephemerality problem.” Environmental justice gains that were hard won over the course of an administration can be erased before the next one is even fully staffed, which means communities can never really count on the protections in place. Baker’s oral history speaks directly to this, as she reflects on both the significance of the energy justice infrastructure she built at DOE and the speed with which it was taken apart.

B. Structural Legal Constraint: The Post-Chevron Landscape

Another constraint operates across administrations regardless of who is in office. The Supreme Court's 2024 decision in *Loper Bright v. Raimondo* overturned the Chevron deference doctrine, which for forty years had required courts to defer to federal agencies’ reasonable interpretations of ambiguous statutes. Craig (2025) found that in the first six months after the decision, new agency rules faced an invalidation rate of roughly 84% in court. This matters for environmental justice because it means even a future administration that wanted to restore robust EPA climate regulation through rulemaking would face a legal environment where ambitious agency action is extremely vulnerable to challenge. Alongside this, Orford (2026) describes how the executive branch has used Tucker Act jurisdictional arguments to shift spending freeze cases into the Court of Federal Claims, which effectively shields those freezes from timely judicial oversight. The combined effect is that agency rulemaking has become less legally durable while executive impoundment has become harder to challenge in court on any reasonable timeline.

C. Beyond EPA: Other Federal Levers

It is worth noting that the EPA is not the only federal actor with environmental justice relevance. The Department of Energy, HUD, the Department of Transportation, and the

Department of the Interior all play a role in environmental outcomes through things like funding, siting, and land use decisions. Civil rights litigation under Title VI and multi-state attorney general coalitions are still active pathways, too. But most of these levers have the structural vulnerabilities described earlier, which is why durable progress on environmental justice ultimately has to come from Congress. That is the argument Section V discusses in detail.

V. Recommendations and Call to Action

The evidence collected throughout this paper points toward a single overarching recommendation: federal environmental justice protections must be made durable through legislation rather than continuing to rest on executive action that any incoming administration can reverse. The “ephemerality problem” described in Section IV has now been demonstrated in real time, with the Endangerment Finding rescission, the dismantling of the Office of Energy Justice and Equity, the freezing of \$7.6 billion in clean energy grants, and the cancellation of community-level projects like the Viejas microgrid and the Tebughna lead and asbestos remediation in Tyonek. These were failures of legal durability: each of them was built through executive action, which meant each of them could be unbuilt the same way.

The path forward, then, has to involve Congress. There is already a legislative vehicle that addresses many of the protections currently being lost. The Environmental Justice for All Act, which has been introduced in multiple sessions of Congress, would amend the Civil Rights Act to allow disparate impact claims for environmental harm, codify community input requirements for federal permitting decisions, and establish dedicated funding for environmental justice grants. Passing the Environmental Justice for All Act, or comparable legislation, would convert protections that are currently vulnerable to executive reversal into statutory law that requires congressional action to undo. A statute is not unbreakable, but it raises the bar

significantly compared to an executive order or an agency rulemaking, especially in the post-Chevron landscape where agency rulemaking is increasingly fragile in court.

The 2026 midterm elections will determine the composition of every seat in the House of Representatives and roughly one-third of the Senate, and the legislative environment for environmental justice depends almost entirely on the outcome. Voters who care about clean air, safe drinking water, durable climate policy, and protections for the communities most exposed to environmental harm should treat the midterms as a referendum on those issues. The League of Conservation Voters' annual National Environmental Scorecard, tracks every member of Congress's voting record on environmental and environmental justice issues and is a useful starting point for evaluating candidates. Beyond voting, there is also a role for sustained constituent engagement with members of Congress, including pushing committee leadership on whether the Environmental Justice for All Act will receive a hearing and a vote.

Shalanda Baker, when asked whether the work she did at DOE was worth it given how quickly it was dismantled, said yes, because it showed what was possible (Baker, 2025). Showing what is possible is necessary but not sufficient. The next step is making what is possible permanent, and that step runs through Congress.

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