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Nuclear Energy: Powering the Latino Future

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Executive Summary

The United States faces an energy crisis. According to the Department of Energy, the retirement of existing generation facilities and rising grid demand will increase the risk of power outages by 100 times in 2030. [1] To address this challenge, some lawmakers have sought to revitalize the nuclear industry through provisions in the ADVANCE Act of 2024 and the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA). These developments present both challenges and new promises in advancing risk-informed clean energy goals, safeguarding national energy security, and providing economic opportunities for the Latino community.

Background

Two trends, one demographic and one technological, are projected to coincide with far-reaching implications for the state of energy security in the United States. First, AI data centers continue to scale and place greater demand on the national grid. [2] Second, the Latino population is projected to grow, leading to a general increase in energy consumption. [3-4]

The current energy crisis is also attributable to a lethargic federal policy response, which has fallen behind the rapid development of AI and failed to adequately address the consequences of its high energy consumption. This has led to a greater frequency of blackouts and higher electricity bills for American ratepayers. [5] These issues take on domestic as well as international significance; the race for American energy dominance and grid resiliency—stated national security priorities informed by strategic competition with China—is constrained by the varying political and economic viability of existing energy options. [6]

In response, lawmakers and analysts alike have touted an ‘all of the above’ energy strategy. [7] At the same time, overarching commitments to decarbonization and clean-energy development remain priorities for numerous states and stakeholders. This has led some to advocate for a revitalization of the nuclear industry, citing new safety advancements and its reliability as a middle-term solution to the energy crisis, as renewables like wind and solar continue to scale for market competitiveness. [8] Nevertheless, concerns remain regarding public perceptions of the actual forecasts for AI data centers, the safety of nuclear energy, and the lack of a permanent political solution to spent fuel storage. [9] These matters cut to the key questions relating to environmental justice and socio-economic mobility, which here must be contextualized insofar as it relates to the Latino community.

Latinos and the Clean Energy Transition

Latinos are driving the evolution of American energy politics. The community accounts for 70% of current U.S. population growth, [10] and the nation’s 65 million Latinos generate more than \$4 trillion for the U.S. economy. [11-12] However, Latinos continue to pay higher energy burdens compared to the national average. [13] Moreover, these expenditures tend to gravitate toward utilities powered by fossil fuels and natural gas. Communities in proximity to these facilities—many of whom are people of color—face disproportionate health challenges,

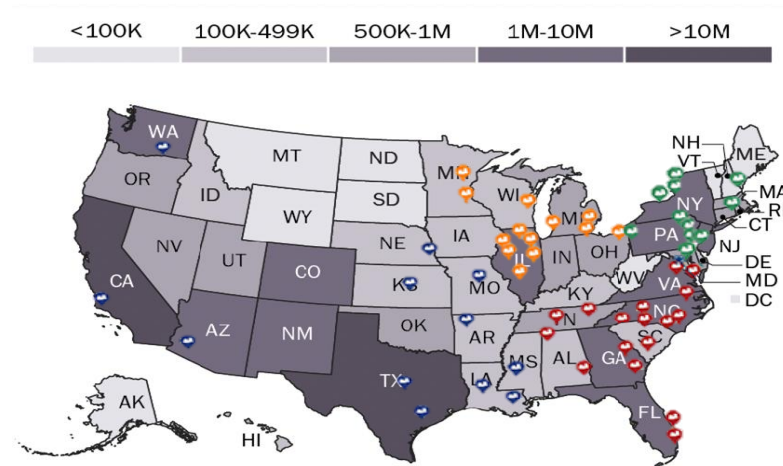
exacerbating disparities in socio-economic outcomes. [14] Therefore, the development of a multifaceted, ‘all of the above’ energy policy offers a way to transform the current landscape and provide key resources to benefit the Latino community. In this context, nuclear is uniquely positioned.

Nuclear power does not produce greenhouse gases. [15] However, past economic models of nuclear power suffer from high up-front licensing and construction costs, as well as long-term storage and decommissioning costs. [16] The development of small modular reactors (SMRs) offers new advantages in flexibility and affordability, positioning them as useful tools in the fight against climate change. [17] Similarly, augmentations to design criteria, as in Generation IV reactors, improve nuclear safety and fuel efficiency. [18]

Latinos & Nuclear by the Numbers

There are currently 54 nuclear power plants in the United States across 28 states, the majority being located on the Eastern Seaboard, in the Southern United States, and in parts of the Midwest. Twelve states generate more than 30% of their electricity from nuclear power. [19] Given the potential expansion of nuclear sites, these sites may not be exhaustive, and, given the geographic dispersion of the Latino community itself, any expansion will impact how many Latino-majority communities utilize and access nuclear energy. For example, the Palo Verde facility in Arizona is the largest in the country, providing more than 4,000 megawatts across four states, serving a wide swath of Latinos in the Southwest [20]. On a nationwide basis, cross-referencing data from the 2020 Census and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), an estimated three million Latinos reside in counties housing a nuclear plant. However, the number of Latinos who use nuclear energy is undoubtedly much higher due to the wide transmission possibilities, as shown by Palo Verde. [21-22]

Figure 1. Nuclear Reactor Sites + U.S. Hispanic population, by state [23-24]



¿Aficionados Atómicos? America’s Nuclear Landscape

Latinos make up approximately 15% of the nuclear workforce [25]. The nuclear energy industry maintains a unionization rate nearly double that of the national workforce rate, which signals an increased likelihood for secure, good-paying jobs [26]. At the same time, Latinos remain underrepresented in middle and higher management positions within the nuclear industry.

Meanwhile, the legislative environment has undergone dynamic policy shifts. The ADVANCE Act of 2024 laid down new parameters to facilitate and streamline the Nuclear Regulatory Commission’s (NRC) licensing process for advanced reactors. Such actions have been taken up by the current administration, which has issued a slew of executive orders (EOs) aiming to support a ‘nuclear renaissance’ in the United States. [27, 28, 29, 30] They are as follows:

Table 1: Nuclear Energy Executive Orders

EO#	Title	Purpose
EO# 14299	Deploying Advanced Nuclear Reactor Technologies for National Security	Accelerate the development and deployment of advanced nuclear tech—such as SMRs and microreactors—to provide resilient, secure energy for military, AI, and national security infrastructure, and to bolster U.S. nuclear exports.
EO# 14300	Ordering the Reform of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission	Restructures NRC personnel and regulations to streamline nuclear reactor licensing while maintaining safety.
EO# 14301	Reforming Nuclear Reactor Testing at the Department of Energy	Overhauls DOE’s reactor testing process, establishes a pilot program to authorize advanced reactor tests outside national labs, and expedites environmental reviews.
EO# 14302	Reinvigorating the Nuclear Industrial Base	Revamps nuclear energy production and fuel supply chains, expanding reactor construction alongside workforce development while enhancing spent fuel management.

Of particular note are EOs 14299 and 14302 due to their expanded support for nuclear research and workforce development initiatives, such as career and technical education pathways into nuclear engineering and related fields. These efforts are further buttressed by ambitious targets set by the DOE to triple nuclear energy capacity by 2050. [31/17]

Indeed, these coincide with international initiatives to scale the nuclear industry and compete with China, which is rapidly expanding its own nuclear power production. [32] Last fall, the United States and Japan signed a landmark deal to deliver more than \$500 billion in new investments for nuclear energy infrastructure. [33-34] These projects have the potential to open up a wide sector of jobs for the Latino community in construction and maintenance, along with research and development. Nonetheless, a balanced appraisal of the opportunities and risks of nuclear energy should be presented to identify precisely why and how this issue matters to the Latino community and other stakeholders of note.

Opportunities for Advancement

New financing mechanisms, such as the Energy Dominance Financing (EDF) program, established this year by the “One Big Beautiful Bill Act,” present both opportunities and risks for the Latino community. [35] Latino workers, who comprise a sizable portion of the energy and construction workforce, stand to benefit from job creation, workforce retention, and infrastructure investment if these projects are deployed at former fossil-fuel sites, many of which are located in Latino-majority regions. [36-37]

One must understand why nuclear is significant relative to other clean energy sources; that is, what kinds of outcomes do nuclear-adjacent or nuclear-participating communities experience, and are these outcomes desirable? There are several factors that distinguish nuclear energy; for instance, nuclear facilities require a highly educated and highly skilled technical workforce, even compared to fossil fuels and renewables like solar and wind. As such, it attracts employees who are associated with above-average socio-economic backgrounds and outcomes. As one study notes:

“This suggests nuclear power plants and perhaps the higher wages paid may help raise housing values, but only up to a certain point. The resultant ‘cap effect’ may reflect housing values being affected by the perceived risks of living close to nuclear power plants. A similar, but smaller, effect is visible for college degrees. This suggests that

nuclear may initially increase the number of people with college degrees due to employment requirements, thereby lifting the education profile of communities with typically lower levels of high school completion.” [38]

In effect, this describes a sort of ‘tide-lifting all-boats’ phenomenon. That is, the growth of one industry and the influx of high-SES ratepayers and employees into a community have the potential to uplift the wider community. However, it should be noted that the potential role of the Latino workforce in nuclear energy cuts across white- and blue-collar distinctions. Nevertheless, it is the R&D aspect that is perhaps most crucial in providing Latinos with the foothold needed to make generational advancements toward socio-economic equity. What is needed is a simultaneous effort to cultivate the nuclear workforce through technical training and construction while promoting Latinos in STEM, particularly in nuclear engineering and related fields.

Understanding the Risks of Nuclear

There are several risks concerning nuclear’s relationship to the Latino community. As noted, the key areas in which Latinos could make strides are exactly those from which they have been historically excluded (i.e., upper/middle management and engineering placements). However, without the requisite training programs and educational resources to support such efforts, it is possible that Latinos will fail to fully capitalize on this labor-market trend.

Second, there is the concern about nuclear siting—for both the facility itself, as well as the actual repository for the spent fuel. Impacted communities may suffer from lower property values, which in turn depreciates the tax base for local schools, leading to overall lower socio-economic outcomes, though empirical studies contest this notion. [39] Furthermore, it is paramount that community-level stakeholder engagement takes place consistently and meaningfully. While some initiatives advocate for consent-based siting and public outreach which incorporates bilingual resources for community engagement, consistent with the NRC’s 2023 Strategic Limited English Proficiency Plan (SLEPP) [40], more work is needed to secure community trust and expand constituent buy-in. [41]

Finally, the public perception of nuclear energy’s safety remains an item of political risk. [42] While the legacy of events like Chernobyl, Three Mile Island, and Fukushima has shaken confidence, the facts tell another story regarding nuclear’s overall safety performance. According to the Pew Research Center, eight-in-ten Latinos in the United States rank climate change as a top or near-top personal concern; moreover, the same study found that Latinos are nearly 20 percent more likely to rate climate change as a local, community level concern relative to non-Latinos [43]. This suggests that Latinos—more so than other groups—would support clean energy policies that incorporate clean energy resources like nuclear, which complements the fundamental, renewable trio of solar, wind, and hydropower.

Latinos & America’s Energy Future

Addressing the challenges of America’s energy transition requires a multifaceted policy approach. This requires a nuanced understanding of how the growth of AI data centers intersects with demographic changes, noting the Latino community’s central role in driving this transformation. Furthermore, policymakers must recognize that progress toward decarbonization and a more resilient electrical grid necessitates an ‘all of the above’ energy solution, with an acknowledgement of nuclear energy’s unique role in advancing these goals.

The clean energy future of the Latino community may benefit from nuclear energy’s expansion, though outstanding issues remain. Indeed, one risk in the United States’ apparent full-steam-ahead movement on nuclear power is that the Latino community misses the train by not taking full advantage of the present political-economic conditions that could place Latinos in the optimal scenario. Past efforts, such as the Biden Administration’s EO 14045, which expanded the White House Hispanic Initiative to the NRC, leading to new grants for Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) as well as work-study programs facilitating scholarships and apprenticeships for Latinos in STEM—stand out in this respect. [44-45]

Therefore, potential policy solutions and avenues for consensus building include the reinstatement—and reform—of the NRC’s Minority-Serving Institutions Grants Program (MSIGP). On a bipartisan basis, a revitalized form of the MSIGP would help address the educational and research provisions outlined in EO 14302; specifically, section five, “Expanding the Nuclear Energy Workforce”. Given the demographic trends and the need for the nuclear industry to obtain social license not only from its customers, but from the communities physically near its facilities—a fresh look at incorporating Latino leadership through such initiatives would prove a meaningful step in establishing public trust and social mobility.

In this sense, it is equally important, in the process of a streamlined and expedited development of nuclear power, that regulatory oversight (e.g., NRC independence) remains consistent to ensure public confidence, transparency, and accountability. Furthermore, it is paramount that Latinos maintain a place at the table on both sides of the equation; that is, within the industry and the regulatory bodies, to ensure a truly representative voice for the community in all aspects of energy policymaking.

What is clear is that it is not enough for Latinos to simply build and construct, but to have the opportunity to design and instruct. That is, a truly equitable nuclear future for the community would entail leadership from the bottom-up, as well as the top-down. Therefore, the issue boils down to a clear conclusion: A strong and diverse representation for Latinos in emerging energy markets is a strong and diverse investment in the future of American energy dominance.

Endnotes

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