

The Political Geography of the 2025 LA Fires: An Experiential Perspective

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January 7 2025 will long be remembered across southern California. It was on that day, beginning in the morning but extending into the afternoon and evening, that the two largest fires ever experienced within the urban fabric of Los Angeles started and spread: the Palisades and Eaton Fires. Several other smaller fires started in subsequent days, one in the Hollywood Hills and another in Calabasas, and a large fire later sprang up on the northern edge of the LA metropolitan area. It is the two that proved to be the most difficult to suppress and left most damage that will be most remembered across the region as a whole (see fig. 1). All this unfolded in the shadow of “Hollywood,” the capital of the American film, television, and celebrity industries, so it quickly became a global news story, notwithstanding the fact that the fires collectively constituted a truly massive natural disaster. Quickly, the houses lost or surviving the fires belonging to celebrities became one of the most noted features of the fires across regular and social media¹.

This essay cannot be a definitive account of what happened and why it did the way it did. Time must pass for that to be a possibility. This is more by way of an experiential perspective bringing together a personal experience with journalistic sources and scientific literature about California fires and the impact of climate change. Beginning with a first-person account about January 7 and its aftermath, the essay then turns to brief discussions of the way in which the two major fires spread, the practical lessons that can be learned from what happened for future preparations, and how rather than following this path the disaster was overtly politicized as if it had no natural basis whatsoever. A final section draws out some political-geographical implications relating to how climate change should be discussed in relation to fire hazards and the barriers to planning against future fires from the complex jurisdictional barriers that exist in Los Angeles and its vicinity.

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¹ WALSH S. and MURPHY C., *Celebrities who have lost their homes in the Los Angeles Fires*, Vanity Fair, 10 January 2025.



Fig. 1 – The fires of January 2025 across the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area.
 Source: Author's elaboration.

1. *The Experience*

I had intimate personal experience with the Palisades Fire. I live in Santa Monica about 2 kilometers or so south of the southern edge of the Pacific Palisades district. Warnings about the fire and the possible need for evacuation arrived by mobile phone in the late afternoon. I went out to bring home dinner from Benny's Tacos on Wilshire Boulevard about 6 PM. On the return walk home I was nearly blown off my feet by a wind gust that almost made me levitate. Winds were reported as gusting up to 100 miles per hour just up the street in the Palisades. Back home I could see the fire burning in the distance beyond the reassuring concrete bulk of the Saint Monica's Catholic School across the street. We quickly decided to leave and go to my wife's brother's house in Long Beach, much further south, away from the imminent danger. I had visions of the wind blowing embers from palm fronds

and other debris down the tree-lined streets in our vicinity. The impossibility, given the wind, of drenching the fire with water and fire-suppressant from planes and helicopters meant that this fire was likely to spread unhindered. Any ground assault would face limitations of hydrant water supplies designed for single-house fires and the inability to ever get ahead of a fire spread by arbitrarily blown embers (fig. 2).

We packed a car with a few days clothes and boxes with precious documents including passports and drove off. We stayed away for two nights and then ventured back once we thought the fire was contained. This proved mistaken because the air quality was terrible. An Air Quality Index of 310 on an iPhone app suggested we should retrace our steps. So we left again, returning finally on Saturday January 11. The air was still poor but the fire itself had been largely “contained,” if not put out by this time. Adding to the drama, on the evening of Thursday January 9, my elder daughter and family had evacuated their home in Calabasas as the Arthur Fire spread near to their immediate neighborhood. Fortunately, the wind had dropped by then and helicopters came to the rescue by unloading on it and limiting its spread. They returned home relatively quickly. The same could not be said for the thousands of people affected by the Palisades and Eaton Fires (the latter in the mountainous fringe of Pasadena to the northeast of central Los Angeles). At least 30 people were killed directly as a result of the fires, often because they were disabled, because warnings came too late (particularly in the western part of Altadena afflicted by the Eaton Fire), or from deciding to stay and fight the flames. More than 16000 buildings have been destroyed in the two major fires covering about 40,000 acres. By one conservative estimate, the two major fires will cost at least \$9 billion in lost incomes and tax revenue and take 4 to 10 years for a recovery². The city as a whole has also paid a price, at least in the short term, as even a major annual event in the city, the Oscars, failed to generate the usual income for local businesses³.

Entire neighborhoods, with a few random houses or groups of houses miraculously left standing, have been reduced to rubble (see fig. 3). Chimneys, made with bricks for houses largely made of wood, were all that were left on some lots. They stood like headstones in graveyards. Concrete stairs to nowhere stood next to where doorways used to be in [these] places of mainly single-household houses along with the odd apartment block here and there. Many trees, scarred by burning but still standing, testified to the fact that these fires were not simply vegetation ones. The fires had finally been contained if not finally extinguished by full-on air assault once the wind had dropped. The fear was of a resurgence of the winds. This did happen for several days

² LA COUNTY EDC, *Impact of 2025 Los Angeles Wildfires and Comparative Study*, Los Angeles, Institute for Applied Economics, 2025.

³ GRIMES C., «Low-key Oscars season hits small business in “traumatized” LA», in *Financial Times*, 28 February 2025.

in the second week, but fortunately at nothing like the force of the previous ones. About two weeks later heavy rains finally arrived and brought with them mudslides in the burned-over areas with some of the Palisades debris washing into the Pacific Ocean where much of it polluted the beaches between the Palisades, Malibu, and Santa Monica⁴.



Fig. 2 – A view of the Palisades Fire showing the spread through wind-blown embers, 7 January 2025. Source: Author's elaboration.

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Aerial views of the damage were compared on widely distributed social media to the destruction visited on Gaza (e.g. by celebrities like Sean Penn and Jamie Lee Curtis). I think this analogy is problematic for several reasons. One reason is that this was in its central aspect a natural disaster, not an entirely human-induced one like Gaza. Yes, people were living in biophysical settings vulnerable to fire and in house-types more suitable to the US Midwest. Both were in essence urban fires, fueled by wood and plastic once under way from flying embers, more than just wildfires fueled by trees and other vegetation. But it was the combination of dry vegetation with no rainfall since May 2024 and incredibly high winds outside of the usual season of so-called Santa Ana Winds from September to November blowing from the continental interior that ignited the fires once a spark from an electric transformer (in the Eaton case) or the resurgence of a small wildfire seemingly put out a week previously (as in the Palisades case) that started the blazes.

The second reason was that an incredibly effective cooperative firefighting system had quickly come to life, even while some people--particularly far-right national anti-California politicians with long histories of being confused about

⁴ MARCOS C.M., «Wildfire debris washes up on LA beaches after major rainstorm», in *Guardian*, 26 February 2025.

the causes of California's and other western states' vulnerability to fire--cast around for people to blame (for example, the Black female Mayor of Los Angeles was away on a trip to Ghana when the fires started or the lesbian Fire Chief were both indicted as villains because of who they were). "Mutual aid" among fire departments both local and statewide, establishing fire lines and bringing in planes and helicopters, prevented the fires from spreading further once the winds died down⁵. This is not to say that there were no complications in the response or that more equipment and personnel deployed sooner might not have helped. It is to say that unlike in Gaza there was a cooperative response to a disaster and in this case made it much less awful than it could have been. Living down the street from one of the fires made me very much aware of how the firefighting response mattered, however much one wished that the fire had never happened or could find some convenient scapegoat to blame.



Fig. 3 – An aerial view of part of the Pacific Palisades showing surviving structures as well as extensive damage, 14 February 2025.

Source: Author's elaboration.

2. *Fire Dynamics*

Although the Los Angeles region is no stranger to summer and autumn wildfires, the latter associated with the so-called Santa Ana winds that blow southwesterly from inland towards the sea, this January 2025 outbreak was a surprise. Wildfire season is typically from September through November, the classic dry season. Later in the year and into January the annual rains arrive and keep fire activity in check. Not only were these fires "later;" they came with extremely high winds so that once ignition had started flying tree

⁵ BRADLEY R.F., «The LA fire where something went right», in *New York Times*, 5 February 2025.

and house debris became the main way in which the fires actually spread. So, these were not just the same old wildfires as in the past. Over 200 fire alerts were registered in Los Angeles County between January 7 and January 22 2025, more than 130 times the average for the month of January from 2012-2024. Most years, in fact, no fire alerts are raised for the entirety of the first three months of the year, let alone in the first three weeks. Only in one other recent year (2021) were there 10+ fire alerts between January and March⁶.

But the huge increase in fire alerts was not just because of being outside the usual calendar and the unusually high winds⁷. The summer of 2024 had record-breaking high temperatures, and rainfall was way below normal between October and January. This dried out the ample vegetation that had grown in the previous two wet seasons. Forest and brush fires can be ascribed largely to these factors and the fact that rainy periods have become increasingly separated by periods of drought. This changing climatic pattern can be attributed to the regional effects of broader climate change. Tree cover loss and wildfires have increased in intensity as average global temperatures have increased. Particularly important in and around Los Angeles, is increased hydro-climatic volatility (large and/or frequent transitions between very dry and very wet conditions) plus extended droughts in the immediate continental interior sparking high winds in unpredictable patterns that will probably contribute to lengthened fire seasons.

The Los Angeles Fires, however, cannot be put down just to these forces, important undoubtedly as they were and will continue to be. Critical has been the spread of settlement into areas appealing partly because of the integration of physical attractions (such as views of the sea or the mountains), relatively dense vegetation (often of species of grass and trees, such as palms and eucalyptus not native to the localities) and house styles brought by settlers from “back east” that are based largely on wood-framing and asphalt roofing. Most of the areas afflicted by the January 2025 fires had this combination of elements⁸.

So, not all so-called wildfires are the same. Indeed, arguably the January 2025 fires spread in a very different manner from typical forest and brush fires. Clearing undergrowth can mitigate forest and brush fires but removing the chaparral that is the dominant vegetation in the hills around Los Angeles would probably lead to the invasion of even more flammable plants and grasses⁹. Clearing veg-

⁶ MACCARTHY J. and RICHTER J., «4 graphics explain Los Angeles' rare and devastating January fires», in *World Resources Institute*, 5 February 2025.

⁷ SWAIN D.L. *et alii*, «Hydroclimate volatility on a warming Earth», in *Nature Reviews*, 6, 2025, pp. 35-50; HOOVER D.L. and SMITH W.K., «The growing threat of multiyear droughts», in *Science*, 387, 16 January 2025, pp. 246-7; DONG C. *et alii*, «The season for large fires in Southern California is projected to lengthen in a changing climate», in *Communications Earth and Environment*, 3, 2022, p. 22.

⁸ SOMMER L., «Why clearing the brush around Los Angeles won't reduce the wildfire danger», in *NPR*, 11 February 2025.

⁹ SOMMER L., «Why clearing the brush around Los Angeles won't reduce the wildfire danger», in *NPR*, 11 February 2025.

etation from the immediate environs of buildings could still help. “Fuel breaks” around groups of houses and buildings could also help in access for firefighting as well as limiting the ground-spread of fires. The problem is that at the urban-rural interface there are now too many rather than too few fires. As a result the density of vegetation is much reduced. So, the surrounding vegetation is not then the main problem. This brings us, first, to the problem of ignition. Back in the day before the European settlers arrived, it was lightning strikes every 30-100 years that set off conflagrations. Now it is humans and their behavior: Most fires today are ignited by: downed overhead power-lines, faulty transformers, cars, fireworks, heavy equipment, and arson. The recent Los Angeles Fires are cases in point. Second, embers are the primary way in which the fires spread, so houses need to be adapted to that potential fire dynamic. In the Palisades Fire it was glowing palm fronds that spread the blaze far and wide before firefighting on any scale became even possible. If the houses had been made of concrete and other fire-resisting materials, the toll would also have been much less. Taking out the palm trees and other highly flammable and ember-driving trees might not then be necessary. Once the fires start, particularly under windy conditions, questions about how many firefighters and fire engines, water pressure, and who was or was not “in charge” appear of utterly secondary importance.

3. *Practical Lessons to Learn*

The physical and emotional effects of the fires lingered well into February. If the air quality, particularly of airborne particles, did improve, many worried about all of the asbestos, lead, plastic and other contaminants produced by the large-scale burning of buildings¹⁰. Several other issues became as important as recounting the stories of people who had lost, or sometimes, kept their homes. One issue was about how many of the victims would find that insurance coverage would be insufficient to rebuild¹¹ and what government could do to help out¹². This was also framed in terms of the long-term sustainability of the house insurance market in California and other regions with histories of disasters such as the fires¹³ and the increase in rents in an already tight metropolitan-area housing market with the influx of “fire refugees”¹⁴. Years ago,

¹⁰ BORRELL B., «LA's clear skies conceal a “toxic soup”», in *New York Times*, 12 March 2025; CORNWALL W., «In the ashes», in *Science*, 387, 28 March 2025, pp. 1343-46.

¹¹ PHILLIPS A., «For most LA fire victims, insurance won't pay enough to rebuild», in *Washington Post*, 8 February 2025.

¹² MILLER J. *et alii*, «California fires could be the costliest disaster in US history, says governor», in *Financial Times*, 12 January 2025.

¹³ GONZALEZ-BONARINO A., «The staggering hidden costs of the Los Angeles wildfires», in *Los Angeles Times*, 19 February 2025; FLAVELLE C., «California's high-risk insurer gets \$1 billion bailout after LA fires», in *New York Times*, 11 February 2025.

¹⁴ KHOURI A. and FLEMING J., «Rents rise with fire refugees», in *Los Angeles Times*, 24 January 2025.

Mike Davis, possibly the best known historian of contemporary Los Angeles, had pointed out that the owners of houses in the parts of California most vulnerable to fires (such as Malibu) were effectively subsidized in their insurance by people living in less hazardous areas. His writings were suddenly rediscovered in January 2025 even as critics noted that the fire danger was now much increased because of so much new building at the “urban-rural interface” and the negative externalities from fires, such as ash and bad air, now afflict people at some distance from the actual fires¹⁵.

A second issue concerned the use of language such as “wildfires”, as mentioned previously, to describe all the various types of fire that currently affect California and other US states as if they were all alike. Fires in deep forests, for example, should be distinguished in their dynamics from brushfires and what are essentially urban conflagrations such as the Palisades and Eaton Fires¹⁶. Many people, not the least leading national politicians, have been confused about the origins and course of fires, often attributing all of them to single factors such as a lack of clearance of forest undergrowth when the waves of fire across tree canopies in many forest fires are very different from the ember fires such as those in the Palisades and Eaton Fires. “Forest management” (largely on federal lands in California) is something different from managing the urban-rural interface with its chaparral bushes, palm trees, and flammable houses¹⁷.

Finally, and not least, what to do with all the very hazardous waste left by the fires became a major problem, not least for those living near the landfills or waste-disposal sites chosen for removal? The US Army Corps of Engineers, the EPA, and FEMA (the latter two US federal government agencies charged, respectively, with environmental protection and disaster recovery) declined to test soil at any depth after the fires, even though they were officially charged with this responsibility, and this decision made it seem as if removed material was of unknown toxicity¹⁸. This and the absolute amount of material to be disposed of led to NIMBY protests by local residents in such spots as the Calabasas Landfill even as the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors voted 5-0 to keep dumping hazardous waste from the fires in those places¹⁹.

Two questions have arisen in scientific commentary about the fires in light of these issues. How could the calamity have been less disastrous under

¹⁵ MIRANDA C.A., «The “Dark Prophet” of L.A. wasn’t dark enough», in *The Atlantic*, 22 January 2025; JERRETT M. *et alii*, «Climate change and public health in California», in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 121, July 2024.

¹⁶ LIN S. and CASTLEMAN T., «Wildfires are burning deeper into urban areas», in *Los Angeles Times*, 26 February 2025.

¹⁷ PETERS A., «The GOP blamed the LA fires on California’s “forest management.” But that’s not the problem», in *Fast Company*, 24 January 2025.

¹⁸ UDASIN S., «FEMA declines to test soil after LA fires», in *The Hill*, 28 February 2025.

¹⁹ BRISCOE T., «Fire debris protestors stand ground at landfill», in *Los Angeles Times*, 25 February 2025.

the natural conditions that produced it? How should the fires change America's second largest metropolitan area?

Fires are not going away, however much you prepare for them in terms of investing in firefighters and equipment. Indeed, changing weather patterns are increasing fire risk²⁰. Several seasons of heavy rain from atmospheric rivers coming in across the Pacific Ocean had increased vegetation density. This was followed by a long dry season that primed plants to burn. Obviously, in clear forest and brushfire zones prescribed burns and clearing flammable vegetation could lead to dramatic drops in fire intensity if not necessarily in frequency.

More fundamental in urban areas, however, is building better fireproof houses and insisting on upgrading older buildings to conform to new building codes that are already in place for new construction. Notoriously, current inhabitants balk at changing the landscape that they have come to love, even if it is increasingly dysfunctional in terms of the fire hazard. The diminution in local revenues from the lid on property taxes established in 1978 statewide has led by way of substitution to the imposition of fees on new construction. This has discouraged building that might come closer to making neighborhoods more fireproof even with high winds. State limits on raising fire insurance rates have also discouraged property owners from upgrading their buildings to reflect the increased fire risks. In the more specific firefighting domain, reasonable questions do arise about the budgets of public services, the availability of equipment, and the impact of the jurisdictional jumble that constitutes the Los Angeles metropolitan area. It seems clear that although there had not been net reductions in the budget of the LAFD in particular, requested increases had not been forthcoming. This combined with the increased cost of fire engines (due to a national oligopoly in building them), and a lack of necessary maintenance because of a shortage of mechanics, could have reduced the immediate response to the fires particularly those such as the Palisades Fire within the borders of the city of Los Angeles²¹. But it was the Los Angeles *County* Fire Department that was running the response to the Eaton Fire and they ended up in much the same situation, destruction wise, so it is hard to identify firefighting budgets and so on as key factors in the overall outcomes of the fires. Indeed, across all of the fires the high level of organized cooperation among firefighting units from different counties and cities²² suggests

²⁰ HOOVER D.L. and SMITH W.K., «The growing threat of multiyear droughts», in *Science*, 387, 16 January 2025, pp. 246-7.

²¹ NAGOURNEY A., «The LA fires expose a web of governments, weak by design», in *New York Times*, 19 January 2025; ECONOMIST, «How will the calamity change Los Angeles?», in *Economist*, 13 January 2025; BAKER M. *et alii*, «As Wall Street chases profits, fire departments have paid the price», in *New York Times*, 17 February 2025.

²² BRADLEY R.F., «The LA fire where something went right», in *New York Times*, 5 February 2025.

that the jurisdictional jumble critique actually has limited substance to it-at least as far as firefighting is concerned.

So, what of the future LA? If jurisdictional centralization is probably not the panacea for firefighting, it might be to a certain extent in terms of planning a city more resilient in the face of fires. Here what is probably needed is twofold. The first is to discourage construction in the most obviously fire prone areas such as Malibu and the Palisades and if done it should be to the highest standards of fireproofing. Yet, across California and the country as a whole relatively more construction is in hazardous zones²³. Much of this is down to places with superior “vistas,” access to beaches and so, that might in the past have been less problematic but with increased hurricane and fire hazards have become dysfunctional settings for residential development. Some people may choose to leave if they cannot just reproduce what they have lost, perhaps by moving away from southern California. Although two months after the fires most LA county residents sampled in a poll reported that they planned on staying put²⁴.

Second, to the extent that fire ravaged areas are rebuilt they should be with respect to higher density of housing, fire resistant building, buffer zones, and fire walls to keep brushfires at bay²⁵. More broadly, however, the fires offer an opportunity to both make the region as a whole more fire resistant and provide more housing by insisting on higher density development (such as apartment buildings) so that those who work in neighborhoods can also live in them rather than commuting long distances on crammed roadways²⁶. A denser and less sprawling Los Angeles might then slowly emerge. Whether this will happen is open to doubt. Already plots are being sold in the Palisades and Altadena “above expectations” in price and this will probably lead to a simple reproduction of housing patterns similar to those before the fires²⁷. There is already resistance to the idea of building at higher densities and for a range of income groups²⁸. Lessons are not always easily learned.

²³ CHALABI M., «More than 80% of new California properties are in high fire-risk areas», in *Guardian*, 15 February 2025; XIAO E., «Why is America still building houses in climate danger zones?», in *Financial Times*, 26 February 2025.

²⁴ NELSON L.J., «Despite the stress of the fires, most LA county residents don't plan to leave, poll finds», in *Los Angeles Times*, 13 March 2025.

²⁵ FLEMMING J., «Planning, design protected OC enclave in 2020 blaze. Are there lessons for LA?», in *Los Angeles Times*, 20 February 2025.

²⁶ ECONOMIST, «How will the calamity change Los Angeles?», in *Economist*, 13 January 2025.

²⁷ PICCIOTTO R., «Home-selling season starts after LA wildfires – and there is demand», in *Wall Street Journal*, 3 March 2025; MATTSON H., «A once-in-a-generation opportunity», in *The Malibu Times*, 8 April 2025.

²⁸ DILLON L., «Palisades residents want to keep it exclusive», in *Los Angeles Times*, 4 March 2025; BARRON J., «Trial by fire: Inside the high-stakes fight over the rebuilding of the Palisades», in *New York Times Magazine*, 13 April 2025.

4. *The Blame Game*

The actual dynamics of the fires and the lessons to be learned from them for the future were not the main immediate responses among politicians and in the mass media. In past disasters, such as the Northridge (Los Angeles) earthquake in 1994 and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2008, while managing the aftermath was an important political question, there was nothing like the same politicization of the disasters themselves²⁹. Sadly, therefore, much of the initial response to the fires from the mass media and among national political figures was not so much rational as inflammatory. Someone had to be to blame, was the basic premise. One story was about the “shortage of water” owing to various environmental safeguards in place across California and the other was dismissive of any role for climate change whatsoever in what had occurred. Even saying it all was “an Act of God” would have been an improvement. Across both main stories there had to be a human villain, preferably “a lib” who had to be “owned,” as if in a rerun of those Hollywood films about superheroes such as Captain America. “Common sense” on Fox News and other news outlets signified an approach in which massive overgeneralizations based on little to do with an actual situation or policy were invoked to justify a politicization of issues that were not centrally political in origin at all, like a fire³⁰. Thus, the fires could not be the result of an extreme weather event exacerbated by climate change “but the responsibility of Gov. Gavin Newsom of California and Mayor Karen Bass of Los Angeles and the city’s fire chief, until this point anonymous nationally, who had the audacity to be a woman”³¹. Some of this rhetorical overkill was a response to the ritual invocation of “climate change” as a mysterious force by some commentators without attending to the contingencies of place and jurisdiction. But most of it was ludicrous. Some prime examples follow.

One story was that the fire hydrants in the Palisades were dry because there was a absolute shortage of water in Los Angeles and this was down to the preference given to preserving a fish called the Smelt in the Sacramento River Delta over sending water south to Los Angeles (plus the local Palisades reservoir was empty because of this)³². In truth, the fire hydrants suffered from low water pressure because so many of them were in use fighting the fire,

²⁹ OLSHANSKY R.B. *et alii*, «Rebuilding communities following disaster: lessons from Kobe and Los Angeles», in *Built Environment*, 32, 4, 2006, pp. 354-74; MAESTAS C. D. *et alii*, «Shifting the blame: federalism, media, and public assignment of blame following Hurricane Katrina», in *Publius*, 38,4, 2008, pp. 609-32.

³⁰ THOMPSON S.A., «For Trump and Fox News, new policies are simply “common sense”», in *New York Times*, 13 February 2025; LOZADA C., «Trump is on the border between common sense and nonsense», in *New York Times*, 25 February 2025; KELLY J., «When we politicize everything we make society stupider», in *Financial Times*, 22 February 2025.

³¹ WALLACE-WELLS D., «You don’t get disasters like the Palisades Fire without human failure», in *New York Times*, 11 January 2025.

³² MILMAN O., «From showers to tiny fish to windmills, Trump’s climate policies are driven by fixations», in *Guardian*, 26 January 2025.

and the local reservoir; out of service for maintenance, did not affect water availability. President-elect Trump, a major source of the water shortage story, subsequently instructed the US Army Corps of Engineers when he came into office to release 2 billion gallons of water from a reservoir in the Central Valley that was earmarked for agriculture and that could not be channeled southwards anyway. Fortunately, local water managers intervened and the amount released was reduced and used to recharge local ground water. This suggests the potential negative impact of policies based on fallacies³³.

The second dominant but mistaken story concerns the role of climate change. This topic is a *bête noire* for the US political right. To them it is axiomatic that there is no such thing as human-caused climate change associated with the introduction of carbon gases on a massive scale into the Earth's atmosphere. California has also been a national and global leader in adopting policies to lower greenhouse gas emissions³⁴. Dark conspiracies or the incompetence of their political opponents were much preferred. Thus, in an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal*, one writer³⁵ went to town on the LAFD chief and the city's mayor excoriating them for various failings, not least privileging DEI (affirmative action) policies in hiring and of firefighters' being overpaid, while praising the mayor for removing the fire chief when, as the title of his piece said "But didn't we all agree to blame global warming?" This was the tenor of much of the commentary around the fires with hardly any discussion of the dynamics of the fires themselves. Trump himself went on what could be called a "Trumpage" (the term used by *The Times of India*)³⁶ in an editorial about his proposal for turning Gaza into a resort) regarding climate change and emergency response to disasters such as the fires, proposing counterfactually to ramp up oil and gas production, reduce environmental regulations, and abolish FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency)³⁷. Yet, of course, Trump's obsession with annexing a melting Greenland suggests that implicitly he accepts that some sort of global climate change is at work³⁸.

Stupid stories then can have real consequences. They reflect the prevalence today in much American political discourse of what is phony or counterfeit rather than just being false in the sense of untruthful: making up stories to fit an ideological niche or mask what has really happened rather than try to analyze what actually happened in a particular situation like the fires. It

³³ VON KAENAL C. and SNIDER A., «Trump dumped these farmers' water. They'd rather not talk about it», in *Politico*, 6 February 2025.

³⁴ HUI I. *et alii*, «Think globally, act locally: adoption of climate action plans in California», in *Climatic Change*, 155, 2019, pp. 489-509.

³⁵ FREEMAN J., «But didn't we all agree to blame global warming?», in *Wall Street Journal*, 21 February 2025.

³⁶ TIMES OF INDIA, «On a Trumpage», in *Times of India*, 6 February 2025.

³⁷ SHAH S., «Here are all of Trump's major moves to dismantle climate action», in *Time*, 18 February 2025.

³⁸ SIMPSON B., «The truth about Trump's Greenland campaign», in *The Atlantic*, 28 March 2025.

appeals to an audience that has lost trust in science and in the possibility of truthful knowledge beyond what they hear from their celebrity politicians³⁹. It is a rejection of the primacy of reason⁴⁰. It is also about the way in which affective polarization works by demonizing your opponents and appealing to the loyalty of your supporters with the promise that you will protect them and benefit them; in a word, patrimonialism⁴¹. Yet, we know that well beyond the boundaries of Los Angeles and worldwide that fire weather seasons are lengthening and the fire risk is extending to places hitherto without much experience of fires⁴². Should this broader reality not chasten those who seem to think the LA fires were all about a fish in a river hundreds of miles away or DEI in the LAFD (LA City Fire Department)?

5. Political-Geographical Implications of the LA Fires

There are at least two specifically political–geographical implications of the January 2025 Los Angeles fires. The first concerns how we talk about and invoke climate change in relation to localized disasters like the fires. The second is how local political organization can be improved to address the practical lessons of the fires noted previously.

The first matters because it is both important in the “blame game” and as a plausible factor in producing more and more intense fires in settings such as Los Angeles. Unfortunately, climate change is often portrayed by politicians (who think it is happening) and in the media in overly global and abstract terms. So, much was made of how January 2025 has been the hottest one *globally* on record, the “tipping point” to a much warmer future approaching faster than previously thought, and because of this the bill for the fires should be charged to fossil fuel companies⁴³. This discourse can come over as both deterministic in the classic sense of climatic determinism⁴⁴ and without much causal linkage to the local conditions (housing and vegetation) as described previously. This misses the fact that alarmism about climate change could ac-

³⁹ LUKE T.W., *The Travails of Trumpification*, Candor NY, Candor Press, 2021.

⁴⁰ STEWART K., *Money, Lies, and God: Inside the Movement to Destroy American Democracy*, London, Bloomsbury, 2025.

⁴¹ RAUCH J., «One word describes Trump», in *The Atlantic*, 24 February 2025.

⁴² ECONOMIST, «Which parts of the world are becoming more prone to wildfires?», in *Economist*, 22 January 2025; NOVAK S., «Wildfires are making their way east – where they could be much deadlier», in *National Geographic*, 3 March 2025; BURTON C. *et alii*, «Global burned area increasingly explained by climate change», in *Nature Climate Change*, 14, 2024, pp. 1186-92.

⁴³ MOONEY A., «Risk the era of 1.5C of global warming is here sooner than expected, studies find», in *Financial Times*, 10 February 2025; KOPP R.E. *et alii*, «“Tipping points” confuse and can distract from urgent climate action», in *Nature Climate Change*, 15, 2025, pp. 29-36; JONES D., «This is who should foot the bill for the Los Angeles fires», in *New York Times*, 22 January 2025.

⁴⁴ LIVINGSTONE D.N., *The Empire of Climate: A History of an Idea*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2024.

tually undermine doing much at the local-regional scale to limit its impacts⁴⁵. Rather than playing into the hands of climate-change deniers by engaging in abstract alarmism, tying climate change to visible local and regional challenges (such as fires, hurricanes, and sea-level rise) makes the case most practically. Emphasizing the mediating role of local places thus matters in addressing the impacts of climate change⁴⁶.

The second point matters because the fires have revealed serious deficiencies in the way in which the housing, road, water and power patterns and infrastructure are currently managed and regulated in Los Angeles and its wider region. If only these elements of the city were as well managed as the cooperative firefighting finally turned out to be. But notoriously weak urban planning and the dominant role of real estate interests in the city have made making the city more fireproof next to impossible⁴⁷. Working *with* nature by attempting to accommodate the built environment to natural-human processes, such as fires, should be the objective⁴⁸. At the center of the dilemma is the “peculiar American definition of ‘freedom’ – allowing anyone to do anything anytime and anyplace they please”⁴⁹. The insurance industry, if allowed to accurately price risk, currently may be the only solution (2025).

The aftermath of the fires in terms of cohesive efforts at addressing the various issues raised earlier (the character of rebuilding, fireproofing, etc.) does not encourage optimism. Initial promises from local politicians across jurisdictions and local power brokers to work together have foundered on differences over financing, ambitions, and agendas. “Instead of one united voice, there have been many dissonant ones”⁵⁰. Some of this is the outcome of contemporary partisan polarization in the United States more generally but much reflects the diffuse system of governance that has long decentralized power to multiple municipalities, unlike in many eastern US metropolitan areas⁵¹. There are 87 other municipalities besides the city of Los Angeles in the County of Los Angeles and a patchwork of so-called unincorporated communities (such as Altadena). This reflects the historic dominance of real estate developers and brokers who have profited from this fragmentation and

⁴⁵ HULME M., *Climate Change Isn't Everything*, Cambridge, Polity, 2023.

⁴⁶ COX K.R., *Geography Indivisible: How and Why Configuration Matters*, London, Routledge, 2023.

⁴⁷ ARMSTRONG J.H., «Formal local government coordination to mitigate climate change», in *Urban Climate*, 51, 2023, pp. 626-35; BANERJEE T., «Who designed the Los Angeles region?», in NEUMAN M. and ZONNEVELD W. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Regional Design*, New York, Routledge, 2021.

⁴⁸ CROW D.A. and ALBRIGHT E.A., *Community Disaster Recovery: Moving from Recovery to Resilience*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

⁴⁹ FILLER M., «Eden on fire», in *New York Review of Books*, 13 March 2025.

⁵⁰ RESTON M. and THEBAULT R., «The LA fire recovery effort: colliding egos, ambitions and financing», in *Washington Post*, 3 March 2025.

⁵¹ NAGOURNEY A., «The LA fires expose a web of governments, weak by design», in *New York Times*, 19 January 2025.

the massive residential segregation by class and ethnicity it has engendered⁵². Many local governments, particularly the city of Los Angeles, also have serious financial shortfalls⁵³. On top of this is a pattern of utility companies and state agencies (such as *CalTrans* responsible for major roads) that are ill coordinated⁵⁴. Fires spread irrespective of jurisdictional boundaries, but preparations for them are divided⁵⁵. In years to come the region is scheduled to host World Cup football/soccer games (in 2026), the Super Bowl (in 2027), and the Summer Olympics (in 2028), however ill prepared. Much will have to change if these mega-events and more regular threats, such as fires, remain hostage to such a diffuse and combative governmental system. Coordination locally between county and municipalities and with state and federal governments will be vital to their success.



⁵² BARRON J., «Trial by fire: Inside the high-stakes fight over the rebuilding of the Palisades», in *New York Times Magazine*, 13 April 2025.

⁵³ ZAHNISER D., «L.A.'s budget gap nears \$1 billion», in *Los Angeles Times*, 20 March 2025.

⁵⁴ OLSHANSKY R.B. *et alii*, «Rebuilding communities following disaster: lessons from Kobe and Los Angeles», in *Built Environment*, 32, 4, 2006, pp. 354-74; CALKIN D. *et alii*, *California wildfires*, in RUBIN C.B. *et alii* (eds.), *US Emergency Management in the 21st Century*, New York, Routledge, 2019.

⁵⁵ DAVIS C., «The West in flames: the intergovernmental politics of wildfire suppression and prevention», in *Publius*, 31, 3, 2001, pp. 97-110.