Understanding Public Opinion Formation: Why do People Support or Reject Climate Change Policies?

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Who Rejects Climate Change Policies?

Interpretative Communities:
“A group of individuals that share common risk perceptions, affective imagery, cultural worldviews, and sociodemographic characteristics.” (Leiserowitz, 2005:1439)
Variables Correlated with Climate Change Policy Support

- **Demographics** (Bord et al., Leiserowitz et al., Dietz et al.)
  - Race, class, education, political party
- **Values & Beliefs** (Dietz et al., Dunlap, McCright et al.)
  - Altruistic v. Egoistic, NEP, political orientation

**Others:**
- Risk Perceptions of climate change (Zahran et al)
- Trust (Dietz et al.)
- Previous knowledge (Hamilton)
Why do socio-demographic factors predict climate change policy support?

Theoretical Explanation 1: Rational Actor Model

*Social structural factors predict policy support via material resources or interests*
Why do socio-demographic factors predict climate change policy support?

Theoretical Explanation 2: Social Actor Model
Social structural factors predict policy support via similar experiences (i.e. social networks & information exposure) influencing subjective construction of material resources & interests.
Why do social psychological factors predict climate change policy support?

“Even sociologists who rejected a strict rational choice approach (in the 1970’s-90s) tended to accept the principle that actions should be explained by interests and resources rather than values and beliefs.” (Weakliem, 2005: 235)
Why do values, beliefs and attitudes predict climate change policy support?

Theoretical Explanation 3: Social Psychological Model

Values and beliefs predict policy support via guiding exposure and adoption of claims in construction of material resources & interests
Rationales for Rejecting or Supporting Policies

All these theories suggest that the reasons or interests identified in deciding policy support would be correlated with social psychological and social structural variables and subsequent policy support.
Study

• Mail survey (500 in MI, 500 in VA)
• N=316 (38% response rate)
• Close-ended questions
  – Demographics
  – Social psychological variables
  – Climate change policy support
• Open-ended question: “what factors did you consider in deciding your climate change policy support?” (n=216 providing one factor or more)
Methods

• 2 researchers identified 30 distinct codes and their frequency (Kappa values = > .80, 92-97% coder inter-reliability)
• Like factors grouped together in 4 categories (rationales) – plus 1 miscellaneous
• Bi-variate t-tests and OLS regressions used to investigate the relationships between reasons individual characteristics and policy support.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rationales</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>66%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>39%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technological</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>57%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>10%</td>
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Common Specific Factors: Personal Costs (58%)

“What it is going to cost me personally. I like other Americans am on a fixed income and increases of costs severely affect my quality of life.”

“I mainly think about how this would affect my monthly costs. If something is going to raise my cost of living, I don't want it.”

“Anything that hits my budget and my money I vote against (anything that I have to pay out of my pocket I vote against).”
Common Specific Factors: Policy Approach Objections (19%)

“Overall probable effectiveness versus "pie-in-the-sky“

“People won’t decrease their driving because of Increased gas costs.”
Common Specific Factors: Government efficiency/ability (10%)

“The market can take care of this if we let it. The government will only slow the process due to it's inefficiency.”

“I marked "probably yes" on all because, knowing our government, these bills may be chock full of pocket lining pork for them and their buddies so I would have to actually read what I was voting for before deciding. Do you detect a certain lack of confidence in our government?”
Common Specific Factors: Environmental Concern (24%)

“I feel that nothing is more important than protecting our environment. It is totally worth it to change our lifestyles to use less fossil fuels.”
Common Specific Factors: Future orientation (11%)

“There is no question to vote for helping facilitate cleaner air for not only our generation but for future generations to help reduce environmental health risks.”

“I weighed the environmental effects on my grandchildren's world versus the financial burden on my children. For my husband and I the cost increases are tolerable but, for our children it could be the "straw that breaks the camel's back."
Common Specific Factors: Alternative resources (15%)

“I am highly in favor of utilizing wind generation, and any other means to capture the energy potential of natural phenomena that will reduce our energy products depletion.”
Specific Factors: Climate Skepticism (5%)

“Climate change may not be due to fossil fuels but rather from normal cyclical changes in solar radiation or other cause.”

“I am not as sure as you seem to be in determining that there is indeed global warming. Back in the 1970's many government and liberal groups claimed there was global warming, and we ended up having some of the coldest winters on record. So much of this global warming information is coming to us via the liberal press, whom I do not trust anymore.”

“I would have to have real proof that there is global warming. Every week I pick up an article that questions the theory is fact. This week it was in New Scientist "Antarctic warming"HOT AIR"
Factors that Predict Policy Support

• Lower policy support – personal costs, policy support objections (anti-tax, anti-government intervention, and pro-market), skeptical.

• Increased policy support – concern about environment, future orientation
Individual Characteristics & Identification of Factors

• Women, younger people, Michigan residents, and those less open-to-change more likely to consider personal costs.
• Men more likely to cite technological and political rationales.
• Political orientation (conservative/liberal) did not sig. correlate with identification of factors.
Future Research Questions

- Policy opinion formation & its social processes
- Discourse exposure
- Discourse adoption
- Role of trust