

RESEARCH

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Does international action affect domestic public opinion on climate change policy?

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Liam Beiser-McGrath's research into attitudes towards environmental policy – both domestic and international - reveals a global public appetite for climate change action.

Domestic policies on climate change must make substantial contributions to global efforts whilst remaining politically viable in their home countries. On climate change mitigation, an issue of global scale, do populations compare their own actions to those of other countries, and should this affect policymaking?

Dr Liam Beiser-McGrath of the Department of Social Policy at LSE, researches public opinion on climate change policies: "People's attitudes and their behaviours can act as extremely important constraints or enablers on effective policy. The Gilets Jaunes in France, for example, began as a fuel tax protest; in Switzerland one year ago there was a major initiative to drive forward more ambitious climate policies that ultimately failed at referendum; and in the US there have been various ballot initiatives that have failed when it came to a direct vote.

"If policymakers are committed to understanding what aspects of design are more or less salient or potentially politically contestable in the public sphere, they must pay attention to public opinion. My research covers the many influences on public opinion in policymaking, and in an international context, findings have sometimes produced surprising results."



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How vulnerable is the Paris Agreement to commitment failures?

In 2019, Dr Beiser-McGrath produced a study surveying Chinese and American citizens on their opinions of the Paris Agreement.

“The COP system and initiatives such as the Paris Agreement take a bottom-up approach, where states are given freedom to choose their own targets,” he explains.

“Whilst this comes with the advantage of countries being able to tailor their own approaches, the Paris Agreement, for example, has faced challenges such as failures of states to reduce their emissions, and a fluctuation of commitment amongst signatories when political power changes hands.”

These weaknesses could raise concerns that public support might fall away from such approaches, but findings from the study showed otherwise. Dr Beiser-McGrath continues:


“Support for international agreements was found to be high in both countries. Remarkably, when participants on both sides of the Pacific were informed of higher levels of carbon emissions in other countries, their support waivered, but not to a significant degree.

“Citizens do pay attention to the action of other countries, and clearly prefer that everyone contributes to these efforts, but their support for international agreements proved to be largely unaffected by the actions of other countries.

“What we think we’re seeing here is a determined focus on climate action within individual countries, regardless of the actions of others. This seems to reflect a wider acknowledgement of the need to act.”

Behavioural comparisons between countries



There seems to be a public appetite to move forward and make a difference. 

Developing this research, Dr Beiser-McGrath carried out a second study in 2022 into whether other countries’ behaviours matter for public opinion on climate change policy.

“We focused specifically on reactions to policies on emissions and found that when citizens are aware that other countries are decreasing their emissions, domestically this leads to support for further action – in other words, positive news from other countries leads to positive action domestically.

“Interestingly, however, increases in emissions by other countries did not necessarily lead to in-kind responses domestically - negative news internationally does not necessarily lead to a negative reaction at home. It seems to be more

nuanced, where influences are only really felt if countries are very close geographically or economically.

“There seems to be a public appetite to move forward and make a difference.”



Carbon taxes have the potential to be an effective policy instrument for decarbonising the global energy supply. ”

Carbon taxes and revenue recycling

Dr Beiser-McGrath has also studied public opinions on carbon taxes specifically, where findings again were international in their scope.

“In this study, we chose to survey citizens from the US and Germany – the US because it is the second largest CO2 emitter after China, and Germany as the largest economy in Europe and a climate policy heavyweight.

“Carbon taxes have the potential to be an effective policy instrument for decarbonising the global energy supply. This works because by increasing the price of fossil fuels, people may be inclined to use them less. There’s also more of an incentive to switch to renewables because they’re not subject to the same tax.

“We found that revenue recycling, where revenue from the tax is put directly back into initiatives to support climate change mitigation measures, could help achieve majority support for carbon tax levels of up to \$50 to \$70 per metric ton of carbon.

“However, whereas in previous research we found that the actions of other countries were not greatly influential on domestic public policy, this time, in both countries, we found that for the public to accept a higher tax they would have to see this happening at the same time in other industrialised countries.

“When it comes to taxation, this reflects the need for a level playing field. ”

The future of international climate change policy

Dr Beiser-McGrath’s work builds a picture of a global public appetite for action in regard to climate change mitigation, where international collaboration is welcomed and beneficial. Public opinion across countries seems to suggest that countries are also willing to “go it alone”.

Dr Beiser-McGrath does note, however, that there is more work to be done: “Many countries are facing growing domestic challenges, including the pandemic and the cost of living crisis, which might affect that desire and willingness to engage in climate change.



“On an international level, it will be interesting to question the scope for countries who are dealing with these domestic vulnerabilities - to what extent might these issues crowd out the longer term thinking that’s needed to deal with climate change?” ■

Dr Liam Beiser-McGrath was speaking to Molly Rhead, Media Relations Officer at LSE.

All the research referenced in this article and other work by Dr Liam Beiser-McGrath can be found at www.liambeisermcgrath.com

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