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Climate change policies lose popularity when combined with pausing regulations or social justice

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Legislators love bundling things together. It lets them accomplish more with less hassle and attempt to make legislation more appealing to a broader group. But a new study in the journal [Climatic Change](#) suggests that this can sometimes backfire. The authors found that pairing climate policies with other policies does not necessarily increase their popular appeal, and can actually reduce public support.

“The bundling strategy has the potential to address many policy issues that appeal to different constituencies,” said lead author [Renaë Marshall](#), a doctoral candidate at UC Santa Barbara’s Bren School of Environmental Science and Management. “Our study suggests that there are also risks to policy bundling from a public opinion standpoint.”

Progressive policymakers sometimes combine climate change and social justice policies that address related priorities like racial inequality. And bipartisan groups will combine climate change with conservative-friendly policies, like reducing

regulations, to increase their appeal across the political spectrum. However, both of these strategies could reduce public support for climate change measures, according to the new study from UC Santa Barbara, the University of Colorado Boulder, and the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs.

The study's authors asked 2,521 American adults about their opinions on four different climate change policies. Some participants were asked about the climate policies on their own, while others saw the climate policies paired with another measure. The second policy was selected from four options: pausing new EPA regulations; infrastructure spending; economic redistribution, like increasing taxes on the wealthy or healthcare expansion; or a social justice policy, like race and gender quotas for infrastructure contracts. All of the policies tested in the survey were based on real statutes or proposals at state or federal levels.

"People oppose policies they don't like more strongly than they support policies they do like."

Climate policies paired with pausing EPA regulations or with social justice were less popular than the climate policies alone. Pairing them with pausing EPA regulations cost the climate policies support among liberals and moderates, without affecting conservatives' opinions. On the other hand, pairing them with social justice measures cost them support among conservatives and moderates, while not affecting liberals. Climate policies paired with infrastructure spending or economic redistribution were just as popular among participants as the climate policies were alone.

"People oppose policies they don't like more strongly than they support policies they do like, an example of 'negativity bias,'" said co-author Leaf Van Boven, chair of Psychology and Neuroscience at the University of Colorado Boulder. "Liberals are

more put off by pausing EPA regulations than conservatives are enticed by it. And conservatives are more put off by social justice than liberals are enticed by it.”

That said, [a 2020 study](#) from a different group of researchers at UC Santa Barbara found that pairing climate change policies with certain economic redistribution measures could raise their appeal. In that study, support increased among Democrats while remaining unchanged among Republicans. The current study actually found a similar pattern, but the differences were too small to be statistically significant. So it appears that certain pairings might increase support for climate policies, it’s just a matter of choosing the right issues.

“One pattern that may be relevant here is that the average American is economically liberal and socially conservative,” said co-author Matt Burgess, director of the Center for Social and Environmental Futures at the University of Colorado Boulder. “In this light, it makes sense that economic redistribution has a larger constituency than social justice — a socially liberal policy — or pausing regulation — an economically conservative policy.”

Despite their findings, the authors noted that there could still be valid reasons for bundling policies together. “There are profound racial inequalities that climate change makes worse. There are also a lot of experts from across the political spectrum who think we need to streamline permitting and cut red tape to speed up the energy transition,” Marshall pointed out. “So, policymakers may still want to address social justice or reduce regulations in their climate-related policies, even if this comes at a cost to popularity from some segments of the electorate.” Legislators simply need to be mindful of the potential costs bundling can have.

Tags

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