UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

June 20, 2024
Christin Palmstrom

Leveraging social psychology to overcome barriers to climate action

Most Americans believe that climate change is happening, is caused by humans and is a threat to humanity. Most people also think we should do something to address it. But we still do not have climate policy to match the urgency and scale of the crisis. Why haven't public views on climate change translated into bold enough action?

Tackling this problem, Professor David Sherman of UC Santa Barbara's Department of Psychological & Brain Sciences and a member of The 2035 Initiative, said social psychology can help us understand. Sherman teamed up with Leaf Van Boven, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of Colorado Boulder, in a recent review paper exploring the connections and misconnections between public beliefs and climate action.

"The climate crisis is an all-hands-on-deck moment," said Sherman. "There is an overwhelming need for research from all disciplines to try to understand what are the barriers to climate policy and how to overcome them."

In the paper, Sherman and Van Boven review findings from social psychology and related fields to examine the relationship between these groups — and how they interact to produce climate policy. "Despite broad public concern about climate change, there's a significant disconnect in translating this concern into effective climate policy," added Van Boven. "Our research explores how social psychology

can bridge this gap by examining the intricate relationships between the public, politicians, activists and the media."

Politicians' climate opinion is shaped by other politicians and the public, the researchers said. Members of the public shape each other's climate opinion but are also influenced by messaging from politicians. Activists and the media intervene in these channels and can both amplify and diminish communication between the public and politicians. Throughout, social norm pressures and ingroup and outgroup dynamics can influence individual climate action or inaction.

"Social norms play a pivotal role in shaping climate policy support," said Van Boven. "People tend to align their actions with what they perceive as the norm within their ingroup, influenced by political elites, media and activists." This framework is used to organize a wide range of findings from social psychology, political science and communications.

The perceptions of climate attitudes are critical. "One of the key findings is the underestimation effect, where both the public and politicians vastly underestimate the actual level of concern and support for climate policies," said Van Boven. "This misperception can hinder climate action."

In the paper, the authors present research from other scholars showing that 80-90% of Americans underestimate the true level of public concern about climate change and that politicians vastly underestimate the support among their constituents for climate policy.

"Whereas people think that only a minority of the country support climate policies, such as 100% renewables by 2035 or a carbon tax, in actuality these policies have a clear majority of support," explained Sherman.

This can lead to a self-defeating cycle. Since the public and politicians believe that others do not support climate policy, they are less motivated to take climate action. This also builds off of the authors' previous research on climate prioritization, which found that people tend to prioritize climate policies based on the preferences of their own political party.

Therein lies another important aspect that is central to understanding behavior around climate policy: polarization and partisan framing. The authors explore how

the impact of partisanship — a form of ingroup and outgroup dynamics — can be seen in politics. For example, people are more supportive of policies from their own political party, though they believe that this "Party Over Policy" effect has an even stronger impact on others, as Van Boven and Sherman found.

Despite these challenges, the research reveals the potential to harness social norms and inspire climate action.

"A big message of this research is for those policymakers who may be concerned about climate change and its impacts but do not support climate policy," said Sherman. "They may get much more support than they anticipate from independents and those on the other side of the partisan divide. And they also may not lose as much support as they fear. Indeed, our work on the party over policy effect in climate policies show that Republican voters are willing to accept Republican led or bipartisan proposals."

Additionally, enacting climate policy could also shift social norms to be more accepting of the policies, he said.

The review paper also shows how activists shape perceptions on climate. Activists can increase attention on climate issues and elevate concern about the climate crisis on the political agenda. This could be through highly visible public protests, which can increase perceived norms that a particular group supported or opposed a climate policy, or by working with policymakers behind the scenes to advance their agenda.

Finally, the media has a large impact on how both the public and politicians view the climate crisis. Shifting perceptions of the urgency and saliency of the climate crisis, the media also can shape policy preferences. However, according to the authors, the media often fuels the "underestimation" effect that makes people believe that others do not support climate action. For example, the media might emphasize the large fraction of Republicans among climate skeptics, instead of the small proportion of climate skeptics among Republicans.

"Our research emphasizes the importance of accurately portraying public opinion to increase support for climate policies," said Van Boven. "Legislators may find more backing from their constituents for climate action than they expect, which can help overcome political intransigence."

“Moving forward, I want to continue my research on what is the best way to promote understanding and compromise and a sense of optimism to meet the challenges that we have,” said Sherman. “I think that doing research in this field provides some windows into where we can go as scientists, citizens, activists and policymakers to do the things that are so vastly needed.”

Sherman will be continuing his research as a Russell Sage Foundation Fellow for the 2024-2025 academic year.

Media Contact

Shelly Leachman

Editorial Director

(805) 893-2191

sleachman@ucsb.edu

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.