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Entering the Political Climate, Whether Policy Makers Are Becoming More Responsive to Public Demand

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Abstract: The results underscore the importance and usefulness of our concept and empirical measures for public demand, as well as of our disaggregated analysis of climate policy outputs in this area. Normative theories of democracy agree that public demand should be the main guide in policymaking. But positive theories and related empirical research disagree about the extent to which this holds true in reality. We address this debate with an empirical focus on climate change policy. Specifically, we are interested in whether observable variation in public demand for climate change mitigation can help explain variation in adopted national climate policies. Using our own data approximate public demand, we estimate the responsiveness of policymakers are responsive and react in predicted ways to variation in our opinion component of measured public demand, rather than to mere salience of the climate issue. The effect of issue salience is strongest in combination with our opinion measure as this creates a scope for action.

Keywords: Public Demand, Policy Responsiveness, Comparative Politics

INTRODUCTION

In this article, we seek to explain the observed variation in national climate change policy outputs by focusing on domestic demand for climate change mitigation. The reason is that any government's decision about policies for mitigating climate change is ultimately based upon domestic political decision that are shaped by home-grown electoral preference, special interest, national discourses, and domestic political institutions (Aklin and Urpelainen 2013) in the case of democracies, conventional wisdom holds that policy choices are, at least to some degree, driven by what the public wants. The general presumption here is that democratic policymakers are more attentive and responsive to public demands than their nondemocratic counterparts. The literature offers mixed empirical evidence about whether public demand is in fact, *ceteris paribus*, a significant determinant of variation in climate policy across countries and over time.

Our article aims to identify the extent to which differences in public demand for climate change mitigation lead to differences in public policy targeted at GHG mitigation across

countries. To this end, we first theoretically distinguish different components of public demand and link them to government responsiveness in climate change policy. A major hindrance to testing the proposed relationship relates to what measures of public demand for climate change mitigation are available and commensurable. As Konisky et al. (2017:50) rightly point out, the relationship between societal demand for change and policy outputs under various political institutions remains poorly understood largely because of the lack of empirical material.

Public opinion surveys arguably provide the most direct measure of public demand. However, using such data imposes major limitations on undertaking comparative cross-country research over time. In most policy areas, surveys either are not implemented in a large cross-section of countries over long periods of time and/or survey items change over time (Saputra & Ali, 2021). As Burstein (2010, p. 75) succinctly put it: “It has to be a bad idea to measure public opinion’s impact on policy by using whatever survey items are around, however loosely they may be connected to the policy in question.” In other words, filling survey data gaps in a meaningful manner ex-post is not possible.

Hence, for the research described herein, we use original data that was hand-coded via extensive print media content analysis, as well as new data on legislative activity concerning climate change mitigation in six Annex I countries for the period 1995–2010. We cover the US, Canada, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and Spain to ensure the representation of different continents (North America and Europe), better- (Germany, Switzerland), and worse climate policy performers (Canada, US) with respect to GHG emissions and climate protection in general, and different levels of exposure to climate-change-related risks.

METHOD

Measuring policy output (dependent variable)

To explain differences in climate change policy output across countries and over time, we need indicators that provide accurate and useful information about laws, regulations, and various other types of public policy measures. In contrast to other studies that concentrate on a specific subfield of climate policy, such as renewable energy, we analyse a rather broad range of policies (Mahaputra & Saputra, 2022).

To construct our measure of national climate “policy output”, we identified the most important sectors, targets, and instruments used in climate policy. We identified five instruments – taxes, tax incentives, regulations, labels, and subsidies – and four sectors: energy supply, transport, buildings, and appliances and collected data for each country in our sample. With respect to the energy supply and transport sectors, we further distinguished whether a policy targeted renewable energy or fossil fuels (energy supply) or whether it targeted private transport or public transport. For these six targets (renewable energy supply, fossil fuel supply, private transport, public transport, buildings and appliances), we coded whether in any given year – from 1995 onwards – the country adopted a policy that used a particular instrument and aimed at a particular target. In federal systems, we restricted the measurement to the national level.

We used various information sources, including IEA and EU databases, country reports to the UNFCCC, and information from national environmental and energy agencies to code the data for the dependent variable. Especially useful in this context were the IEA database on Climate Change Policies and Measures and the national communications (NCs), which Annex I countries to the Kyoto Protocol submitted under the UNFCCC.

To examine the different conceptualizations of policy responsiveness that are inherent to our main hypothesis, we used two dependent variables. One variable counts the total number of climate policies enacted during a given year (general responsiveness) as a proxy for public in the field of climate change. In our sample, the values of this variable range from 0 (= no new policies) to 16 new policies. Data for this dependent variable also provide us with a policy stock variable (the cumulated number (sum) of all policy adoption), which we use as a control variable. Our second dependent variable details the specific targets of policies; for example

whether they target appliances or public transport (target-specific responsiveness). It thus also provides information about the total number of climate policies enacted within a specific policy target during a given year.

These two dependent variables implicate two different units of analysis. In the first analysis, which looks at the overall influence of public demand on total climate policy output, the unit of analysis is the country-year. Thus, we analysed one observation per year from the US, Canada, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, and Spain, the six countries in our sample. The second analysis then explored the different policy targets in more detail. Accordingly, the unit of analysis here was the country-year-target. For example, we used one observation per year from the US for the target “renewable energy,” one observation from the US for the target “fossil fuels,” and so on. All targets were then pooled. For this target-specific part of the analysis, the independent variables (public demand) were also measured in a target-specific way to provide the same level of detail.

Measuring public demand (independent variable)

To operationalise our theoretical construct, public demand, we need to translate its three facets, namely public interest, public opinion, and public debate, into measurable indicators. The data for our public demand variable is constructed based on a media content analysis of two newspapers in each of the six OECD countries - US, Canada, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and Spain. And the observation period from 1995 to 2010. The main advantage of this approach is that data can be collected *ex post* for any topic in any country for which online newspaper archives exist. Because we intended to test whether policymakers respond to the preferences of the public, we needed to take into account information sources policymakers are likely to use in order to gauge public sentiment.

Many studies show that the main information source for policymakers indeed is the news media, and that policymakers tend to consider published opinion to be equivalent to public opinion. At the conceptual level, we relate to Neidhart, 1994, who views “public opinion as an output of public communication”. We derived two indicators, published opinion and media salience, to proxy for public opinion and public interest as the most important elements of public demand for policy responsiveness (Ali, H., & Limakrisna, 2013).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The research presented in this article adds to the literature on comparative climate change policy and on policy responsiveness in several important ways. First, we use a more fine-grained concept of public demand for climate change and original data to measure related public demand across countries and time (our independent variable). This is a substantial improvement over other medium to large N studies in comparative climate change policy, which usually approximate public demand for climate change via votes or numbers of seats for green parties (Holzinger et al. 2008, Hughes and Urpelainen 2015), or via survey data that stems from questions about for example the environment, as the most important problem (Bakaki et al. 2020).

Second, further merit of our data is that we are able to look at policy responsiveness in relation to subcategories (targets) of climate change policies. This means that we can link target-specific public demand (e.g. claims concerning wind energy promotion) to target-specific policies (e.g. policies on renewable energy). We argue that policy choices between countries vary not only in their absolute number but also to what extent different sectors (targets) are targeted. We thus heed the call of scholars such as Stokes and Breetz (2018) or Schaffer and Levis (2021) for a more disaggregated sectoral analysis of climate policy to eventually be able to theorise on differences between sectoral demand and policy supply. This disaggregation exposes our general responsiveness analysis to a hard test. To our knowledge, this is the first analysis of target-specific responsiveness in comparative environmental politics.

Future research may continue in this direction and theorise and analyse differences in responsiveness depending on the sectors targeted in more detail.

Third, with respect to the broader literature on policy responsiveness, we add to existing scholarship by covering a topic of moderate saliency (i.e. climate change). The bulk of studies on responsiveness deal with topics that are highly salient to people (e.g. welfare policy) and research has only recently begun to systematically explore other topics (Lax and Phillips 2012; Vandeweerd et al. 2016). Scholars such as Burstein (2003, 2006) thus note that overall conclusions about the extent of policy responsiveness in democracies may suffer from a confirmatory bias (in the sense of inflated estimates of policy responsiveness) because they are based on items from public opinion surveys that, by design, ask questions about highly salient issues. While we do not have a theoretical explanation for the differences in cross-issue responsiveness, our study, and data collection related to early developments in climate change policy may prove a very useful resource considering that the issue of climate change has increased in saliency from low to high over the past 25 years.

The Responsiveness of democratic policymakers

What ideally happens in democracies corresponds to the notion of dynamic representation, as Stimson et al. (1995, p. 560) define it: “a simple idea and an old one. Public sentiment shifts. Political actors sense the shift. And then they alter their policy behaviour at the margin.” Moreover, the concept of “thermostatic representation” proposed by Wlezien (1995) views representation as a dynamic process in which the public and the government respond to one another. As mentioned above, one limitation of prior research about the relationship between mass public opinion and government policy is its geographical concentration on the US, and lack of cross-national comparisons. Accordingly, within the domain of environmental policy responsiveness, most academic contributions have examined responsiveness in the US states (Ringquist 1994; Hays et al. 1996; Johnson et al. 2005; Agnone 2007; Dolšák and Houston 2014). Hays et al. (1996), for instance, find that US state environmental regulation is “quite responsive” to public opinion. Johnson et al. (2005) use a modified (environmental policy) “thermostatic” model of the reciprocal links between citizen preferences (state-level environmental opinions) and government policy outputs, taking into account the effectiveness of policies. They find a thermostatic adjustment in environmental policy, but only in cases when policy responsiveness has improved environmental conditions. Agnone (2007) examined time series data from the US states in the period 1960–1998 to gauge the impact of the environmental movement on environmental policymaking using public opinion data, as well as data on protests. He found that, when controlling for the saliency enhancing effect of protests, public opinion influenced changes in pro-environmental public policy.

Dolsak and Houston (2014) examined sub-national climate change policies in the US. Their method resembles the approach adopted in this article: they used newspaper coverage to explain policy outputs and conclude that legislative activity increased when the consequences of climate change were discussed in the media. In their recent contribution, Bromley-Trujillo and Poe (2020) also link issue salience on climate change and environmental issues to a broad range of climate change policies within US states. They find that variation in salience across states impacts climate policy output. Moreover, various interactions between problem status and issue attention amplify the connection between public issue salience and policy output (Bromley-Trujillo and Poe 2020: 298).

Recent country-comparative contributions by Anderson et al. (2017) and Bakaki et al. (2020) have used survey data from the Eurobarometer to proxy citizens environmental issues (Bakaki et al. 2020) to explain policy output in the area of energy policy and have found evidence that policymakers react to public demand. Both contributions do not directly test policy responsiveness in the specific area of Climate Change as they rely on different environmental

questions on, for example, pollution from the Eurobarometer (Anderson et al. 2017:6; Bakaki et al.2020:9) as their public opinion proxy. In Summary, while there is some confirmatory evidence for the public demand policy output nexus in environmental policy, research does not yet offer much comparative insight into public demand concerning the issue of climate change. Our contribution can be regarded as the first comparative and comprehensive effort to directly link demand for climate change policies to climate change policy output.

What explains climate policy output?

We consider policy output (in our study measured by public policy output related to climate change mitigation) to be a function of policymakers' attentiveness to the issue of climate change, related public demand, and the institutional context they operate in. We thus argue that public policy output tends to occur when policymakers are attentive to a specific issue or problem, and when they feel need to do something about it in order to respond to public demand (c.f. Shapiro 2011). Our baseline hypothesis is thus simple and straightforward.

Hypothesis: Stronger public demand for climate change mitigation is likely to lead to more climate policy output. This applies both in aggregate terms, and with respect to the demand for and output of climate policy measures that address specific targets.

The notion that policy responsiveness is present both if we look at the influence of aggregate public demand on aggregate climate change policy output and if we look at target-specific demand and target-specific policy output is central to our study and needs to be explained in greater detail. Policymakers can be responsive and satisfy public demand in different ways. They can – for example – react to the general saliency of an issue. We believe this requires a broad definition of governmental issue responsiveness that can help us establish a link between public demand and public policy.

A more specific conceptualisation of government responsiveness to public demand involves looking at public policy output in specific target areas that appear to be dear to the public. To provide a more nuanced view of responsiveness, we will examine both the effect of public demand on the number of climate change mitigation policies adopted per year and country (general responsiveness definition) and the number of climate change mitigation policies adopted with respect to specific targets such as buildings or appliances (specific responsiveness definition) in our empirical analysis. To our knowledge, we are the first to explore target-specific responsiveness in the area of environmental politics. We argue that future comparative research should proceed along this avenue to actually describe and explain climate policy outputs in more detail. Below, we elaborate further on the implications of these two conceptualizations of policy responsiveness and how they relate to our measures of public demand that are described in the following paragraph.

Whats Is Public Demand

We regard the concept of public demand as consisting of a combination of public interest (issue salience) and public opinion concerning the respective issue (in our case, climate change) (Oehl 2015; et al 2017). The public interest concept (issue salience) captures how important a given issue is from the viewpoint of members of a given social unit (e.g. a country). The opinion concept captures what people think about a given societal problem and, more importantly, what they think should be done about it, if anything and by whom. The two dimensions are distinct in the sense that individuals may hold opinions about a given issue, whereas the issue may or may not be important (salient) to them. We also argue that the combined effect of the later (public debate) further enhances policymakers' responsiveness, or more precisely, that higher issue salience increases that impact of opinion on policy responsiveness we elaborate on this relationship in more detail below.

Public Interest (issue saliency) issue saliency matters for policy responsiveness because, due to electoral motivations in democracies, policymakers' attentiveness is greater in

the case of salient issues. In other words, when policymakers want (and need) to be re-elected, they will turn their attention in policymaking to problems that resonate more strongly with citizens; salient issues from the public's perspective. Several studies have found that both the public and policymakers tend to prioritise legislation in economic and welfare domains, meaning that responsiveness is relatively high in these areas (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). In relation to the above-mentioned, two implications arise: first, the issue salience of climate change over time is likely to be an influential factor in terms of policy responsiveness in general. We thus expect that greater public interest (issue salience) will be linked with greater legislative activity on climate change.

Second, however, as we noted above, the attentiveness of policymakers and thus policy outputs are probably generally greater for the key issues on a government's agenda, such as policies dealing with the economy and social welfare (redistribution). This means that we should pay attention to confirmatory bias when studying issues of high salience. Of course, this begs the question of whether climate change is a medium salience issue relative to other issues on the public agenda. We presume that, despite recent increase in climate concern, climate change policy is of moderate salience in most countries, especially concerning the 1990s (and relative to other policy issues on national agendas). In most countries, climate change related issues do not play a prominent role in processes of electoral competition at least not yet. Overall, this supports our assertion that climate change is an issue of moderate salience with respect to other national policy issues such as unemployment, welfare and immigration (Nofrialdi et al., 2023).

Public Opinion

Another component of public demand that matters for legislative activity is public opinion on the respective issue. In earlier research, public opinion has primarily been measured with survey data. There is a burgeoning literature that seeks to measure and explain individual attitudes towards climate change using survey data (Dounne and Fabre 2020; Umit and Schaffer 2020; Schaffer 2021). There has been very little work, however, that connects data on public opinion on climate change to climate change policy outputs (Bromley-Trujillo and Poe 2020).

As noted above, the concept of opinion is distinct from salience inasmuch as the former shows people's agreement or disagreement with governmental activity in relation to an issue. In our case, opinion refers to whether people desire more or less governmental activity in the area of climate change, and the concept is thus more closely linked to public preferences related to public policy than the mere salience of the issue. Positive opinions about more climate change legislation should thus influence whether policymakers become more attentive, and as we argue, more active in relation to an issue. Conversely, if public opinion about an issue is negative (less desire for regulation), we expect to observe less public policy output (Widjanarko et al., 2023).

While public interest (issue salience) and public opinion are, in our view, the most important single components of issue-specific public demand, we acknowledge that these two components interact, and that issue salience is important in the opinion-policy responsiveness nexus by enhancing public debate and creating scope for policy action. Our concept of public debate thus brings together both issue salience and issue-related opinion. We submit that, in addition to their direct effects on policy action, the main effect of opinion on responsiveness is contingent on different manifestations of issue salience. Public interest in an issue and stated opinions about an issue may thus mutually enhance policymaking activity as regards creating scope for policy action. The question, however, is which combination of public interest and public opinion enhance responsiveness, and which combination tend to dampen policymaking. Does the impact of opinion indeed change as issue salience increases?

We hypothesise that the more salient an issue is, the larger the effect of opinion on policy responsiveness is likely to be (Lax and Philips 2009). In their study on public opinion and policy responsiveness regarding the issue of gay rights, Lax and Philips (2009) found that the higher the salience of gay rights issues, the greater the policy responsiveness to issue-specific public opinion. We accordingly submit that, from the viewpoint of policymakers, opinion may only matter given that an issue is salient. We propose that the cooccurrence of high levels of issue salience and positive opinion amplifies the direct effect of both on policy output and creates the most favourable conditions for inducing further climate change policies. Our theoretical rationale here is that when the salience of the issue of climate change is high (low) and opinion regarding public policies on climate change is clearly positive (negative), the attentiveness of policymakers will be highest (lowest), as will the related electoral gains (losses) from action (inaction). This means that we assume that the direction of the effect on policy responsiveness (i.e. whether positive or negative) is determined mainly by whether opinion is positive or negative. Issue salience will then enhance this effect (if high), or diminish it (if low). In considering the level effect of salience, we further expect that positive (negative) changes in salience from one year to another also have the potential to amplify (dampen) the effect of opinion on policy responsiveness.

Partisan Preferences

It is commonly assumed that left-leaning governments pursue greener policies; that they are more inclined to adopt and implement environmental legislation (Neumayer 2003; Schaffer and Bernauer 2014) and are more responsive in general (Brooks 1985, 1987). Conversely, right-leaning governments, especially in Anglo Saxon countries, have been associated with climate skepticism (McCright and Dunlap 2011). Parties on the political left tend to have issue ownership of environmental topics in many countries, and issue ownership has been shown to have a significant impact when an issue is salient (Belanger and Meguid 2008; Schaffer and Luth 2021). In general, governments have some capacity to enact legislation during their terms in office and will try to concentrate on legislation that caters to their core constituencies because their aim is to be re-elected.

As governments in parliamentary systems have considerable influence to set the agenda within the policymaking process, left-leaning governments are supposed to introduce more climate change legislation. In presidential systems, veto power by the executive makes the partisanship of the government relevant to explain policy choices, as for example, the executive branch in the US might veto progressive action on climate change. In any case, it is important to control for the partisanship of the government to explain climate change policy output. And while the effect of partisanship has turned out to be ambiguous in several studies (Ward and Cao 2012; Schaffer and Bernauer 2014), for simplicity we hypothesise that left-leaning governments are more likely to adopt climate change legislation.

Institutional Context

While our main theoretical and empirical contribution focuses on the effects of public demand on climate policy output, we need to control for supply side factors-notably, the institutional context. We thus add a brief discussion on the effects of electoral system type, which we regard as a crucial variable (Soesanto et al., 2023).

Electoral system: The type of electoral system may matter for policy responsiveness, but exactly how has been a matter of debate in scholarly research. Powell (2000) finds that majoritarian systems pay greater attention to the ebb and flow of public opinion because a shift in opinion has greater consequences on election day in such systems. Through testing this argument empirically, Wlezien and Soroka (2012) found that governments in proportional systems are less responsive to changing public opinion. However, in terms of government

rhetoric, Hobolt and Klemmensen find that government is more responsive in Denmark (a proportional system) than in the UK (a majoritarian system)

Institution are relevant in relation to responsiveness because they change the incentive for policymakers to actually be responsive to the public. As Fredriksson and Millimet (2004) note, parties in majoritarian electoral systems only need to win the majority of votes in half of all districts, and can therefore strategically focus on (regional) subsets of the population with the electoral platforms they offer. In contrast, in proportional systems, a party has to cater to the preferences of half of the electorate with its platform in order to obtain a majority. Therefore, issues relevant to the entire population should receive more attention from parties in proportional systems. We thus expect that proportional representation is conducive to more legislative activity on climate change (Ali & Saputra, 2023).

Published Opinion

To proxy for the public opinion dimension of public demand, we used the published opinion in news media sources. In our media content analysis, we thus coded claims for more climate protection, for the preservation of the status quo, and claims for less climate protection. Based on these claims, we then estimated the published opinion indicator. Claims (for or against climate change policies) are expressions of opinions and point towards the future; the claim-maker seeks to influence something beyond the sphere of their own immediate influence. Therefore, statements by government members were excluded. The requirement of a future orientation was also necessary to avoid endogeneity problems in the analysis. This means that statements appearing in the news media after the adoption of a policy (referring to the specific policy) were not coded as claims (since they appeared after the fact).

The question remains whether our focus on published opinion can produce a valid and reliable proxy for public demand for climate change policy. In a previous article, we compared our public demand measures with the best available survey and internet search data to determine whether there are some cross-correlations between those and our measures over time. Only in the US, however, we were able to obtain at least some time series data on climate change indicators. Moreover, the indicators we could compare our measures to were mostly proxied for the attention to or concern about global warming and climate change and thus, could not exactly approximate the demand for political responses on climate change (which our opinion measure is focused on). Overall, our study found that indeed the one period lag of the Gallup Most Important problem question on the environment in the previous period is a decent predictor of our published opinion measure. While the cross-correlations with respect to issue salience are much higher, this result still gives us confidence in our choice of a more fine-grained indicator to proxy public demand for climate change policy (Fauzi et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

Our main result is that public demand, measured in terms of overall media salience and calls for or against climate change mitigation (published opinion) matters in relation to the total number of climate change mitigation policies that are adopted. That is, we are able to show that policy output in the area of climate change is affected quite consistently by change in published opinion. The more direct claims put forward within news media, whereas, the effect of mere issue salience is not so clear cut. This demonstrates the added value of using a more comprehensive measure of public demand for climate change policies.

Moreover, disaggregating both the public demand and our policy output measures at the climate policy target level (whether a policy targets the buildings or the transport sector) supports our main findings. Overall, more positive opinions (those that demand more climate action) are robustly and significantly related to policy output. The effect of issue salience is strongest in combination with an opinion as this creates a scope for action. Another finding of our target-related analysis is that the lagged policy stock has a consistently positive effect in the

large majority of our statistical models. We cautiously interpret this as positive news from a climate change mitigation perspective as it suggests path dependency rather than a saturation effect (Aklin and Urpelainen 2013). That is, it suggests that when countries adopt more climate mitigation policies at one point in time, this makes them more likely to adopt climate change mitigation policies thereafter, rather than less.

Additionally, we examined the (moderating) influences of several political/institutional factors, for partisanship of government, we found that leftist governments not only adopt more climate policies, but also appear to be more responsive to public demand. The type of electoral system indirectly affects climate policymaking via demand: especially policymakers in majoritarian systems seem to react much more strongly to the opinion measure of public demand, compared to their counterparts in political systems with proportional representation.

By and large, we thus observe a considerable degree of responsiveness of policy-makers to public demand in the climate policy area right from the beginning of serious national climate change efforts in the mid-1990s. This finding is new and important for at least three reasons. First, whereas the large majority of related studies deal with high salience issues and thus run the risk of confirmatory bias, our study deals with moderate salience issues. The fact that we still observe a considerable degree of responsiveness can be regarded as good news from a normative perspective as it emphasizes that the main advantage of democracy is that policy-makers are more accountable, and thus also more responsive, to public demand.

Second, whereas the large majority of related studies cover one single country overtime, or compare subnational units within one country, our study is the first to compare the climate change policy output of several countries over time to find that responsiveness to public demand is present in different country contexts. Moreover, we find interesting differences on how public demand for climate change is linked to policy output depending on institutional factors such as the electoral system. Future research may study more thoroughly the (institutional and political) context conditions of climate policy responsiveness.

As a final remark, future research needs to look more carefully into whether climate change mitigation policies that are adopted are effective at reducing GHG emissions. This task is beyond the scope of this article (Eskander and Fankhauser 2020). Indeed, a high degree of responsiveness of policy output to variation in public demand does not necessarily bring about ambitious climate policies as there appears to be a gap between words and deeds in this area. Particularly in democratic countries. High-quality democracy in terms of responsiveness is not necessarily inductive to deeper cuts in GHG emissions, but means that citizens tend to get from the government what they want (and thus deserve).

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