



The influence of political leaders on climate change attitudes

Thad Kousser^a, Bruce Tranter^{b,*}

^a University of California, Department of Political Science, San Diego, United States of America

^b University of Tasmania, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia



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ABSTRACT

Is public opinion on global climate change stable, with voters holding deeply rooted attitudes that guide them to consistent policy positions? Or is public opinion malleable, with voters adjusting their environmental positions when they learn about the positions of political leaders? To explore whether leaders can influence mass opinion on climate change, we conduct a pair of survey experiments in Australia. Emissions trading plans and renewable energy targets have been central issues in Australian politics over the last decade, with the members of the major parties deeply polarized on these issues. Our experiments reveal that survey respondents take different positions on climate change policy when they learn what positions leaders hold. When respondents learn that leaders take divergent positions on addressing climate change, they become more polarized along party lines. But when leaders converge on a policy proposal, they also bring those who follow them into closer agreement, providing evidence that partisan polarization at the mass level can be overcome when leaders come together on environmental policies.

1. Introduction

Parker et al. (2015, 435) maintain that ‘[W]hen confronting complex global problems, such as the climate change challenge, in which the stakes are high and solutions can be blocked by collective action problems, leadership is essential. Leadership can make a decisive difference by providing a model others may want to emulate...’ However, leadership has the potential not only to unite, but also divide public opinion over issues such as climate change. Where there is an absence of political consensus within countries, the implementation of policy to effectively address climate change is bound to falter. In many countries, including the USA (e.g. Wood and Vedlitz, 2007; Jacques et al., 2008; McCright, 2010; McCright and Dunlap, 2011; Hamilton, 2011; Hamilton et al., 2015), Great Britain (e.g. Poortinga et al., 2006), Australia (e.g. Tranter, 2011, 2014, 2017; Fielding et al., 2012) and elsewhere (Tranter and Booth, 2015), deep political divisions exist over the veracity of anthropogenic climate change. In the United States, for example, Dunlap (2014, 2) argues that conservative political leaders contribute to ‘distrust in climate science and other environmental sciences, and environmental scepticism in general, among lay conservatives who take their cues from trusted political leaders’.

We are particularly interested in the influence political leaders have upon their constituents in relation to climate change. Lewis-Beck et al. (2011, 166) argue that political leaders can influence their respective party identifiers by providing ‘cues’ that help their followers negotiate

complex political issues. Yet as Gilens and Murakawa (2002, 43) point out, ‘while elite cues can provide an efficient shortcut to political decision making, the extent to which they are used and their effectiveness as a substitute for substantive knowledge remain unclear.’ To our knowledge, the nature of this political leader-follower relationship has not been elucidated when it comes to climate change. We seek to address this issue by considering the Australian case, as it offers a unique opportunity to empirically examine the influence of national political leaders upon partisan attitudes on climate change.

In Australia, conservative politicians (Fielding et al., 2012) and conservative political candidates (Tranter, 2013) are far less likely than progressive politicians to agree that anthropogenic climate change is occurring, or that strong action should be taken to address climate change. Fielding et al. (2012) surveyed Australian politicians to examine the lack of political consensus over climate change. They found political affiliation strongly differentiates climate change beliefs, and that Labor and Greens politicians are far closer to the scientific consensus position on anthropogenic climate change than are conservative Liberal or National party politicians. Tranter (2011, 2013) argued that political leaders influence the attitudes of their respective partisans when it comes to environmental issues, particularly in relation to global warming and climate change. Analysing survey data from Australian political candidates and voters, he found that positive evaluations of national Labor leaders were associated with greater concern over global warming, while positive evaluations of conservative coalition leaders

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: bruce.tranter@utas.edu.au (B. Tranter).

were negatively associated with global warming attitudes (Tranter, 2013).

Yet neither Fielding et al. (2012) nor Tranter (2011, 2013) were able to demonstrate a causal relationship, that leaders actually influence voter attitudes on climate change. While their findings are important for understanding polarization on climate change, Fielding et al.'s (2012) study was limited to an assessment of politicians' attitudes toward climate change. Further, although Tranter (2013) found associations between leader evaluations and climate change attitudes, and posits an association between political leaders and partisan attitudes, his research based upon cross sectional survey data could not demonstrate a causal relationship between leader cues and public attitudes. Our research constitutes an attempt to address this gap in the literature.

Why is public opinion on climate change so often polarized along party lines? Is the divide created by deeply rooted and unwavering divisions between groups of voters who take divergent positions, and then chose to support leaders who match their views (thus giving strategic politicians an incentive to go where the votes are)? Or is public opinion on the environment much more malleable, with voters looking to elected officials to help inform their policy choices? In other words, do leaders respond to voter demands when crafting their party platforms, or, when it comes to addressing climate change, do voters follow their leaders?

If leaders simply respond to divisions between groups of voters, then voter sentiment on environmental policy should be quite static. Members of major parties will hold divergent views and will not shift their positions when they learn about where party leaders stand. The congruence between mass and elite opinion will come as a result of politicians courting voters, according to the logic laid out in Downs' (1957) classic account of electoral incentives or more recent work such as Loewen and Rubenson (2011). Voting blocs will be immovable objects, resisting the force of political rhetoric and calcifying the party divide. In this state of the world, policy gridlock will be likely if voters are inherently divided on the environment and neither party has complete control of government.

If, by contrast, voters go along with their party leaders on the complex issue of climate change, mass political behavior will follow a markedly different pattern and the prospects for policymaking will be significantly altered. In this case, the congruence between voter and elite opinion comes because voters adjust their positions to leadership cues (Abramowitz, 1978; Zaller, 1992; Gabel and Scheve, 2007; Lenz, 2012; Minozzi et al., 2015). When voters learn where party leaders stand on an issue, many will adjust their own positions, exhibiting the behavior that Broockman and Butler (2017, forthcoming) reveal in their recent field experiment. Elected officials will have the ability to pull their voting blocs away from each other when leaders of the major parties diverge in their policy positions, but could also bring the electorate together on environmental policy solutions when there is an elite consensus. This could lead to either gridlock or compromise, depending on the decisions of political leaders.

To test whether or not voters will follow leaders in the realm of global climate change, we conduct two survey experiments in Australia. We implement these in the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA), a nationally representative sample administered in four waves from late 2015 through early 2016 (Blunsdon, 2016). By randomly assigning survey respondents either to receive cues about the positions of party leaders or not, we can credibly identify the causal impact of leadership cues (for an elucidation of the survey experimental approach, see Schuman and Bobo, 1988; Sniderman and Grob, 1996). We turn to Australia because of the unique opportunities created by the environmental positions held by top leaders in the right-leaning "Coalition" of the Liberal and National Parties. Former Prime Minister Tony Abbott opposed many actions to address the impact of climate change, while current Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull—a member of the same party, who replaced Abbott through an internal party vote between elections—supported many of these policies. In one experiment, we test

the impact of a cue about Abbott's positions that diverged from the policy favored by the leader of the opposition Labor Party, Bill Shorten. The other experiment explores the effect of a consensus cue, informing poll respondents that Turnbull and Shorten both espoused the same position.

Through both approaches, we are able to test whether many Australian voters follow their leaders when it comes to climate change policy. Previous researchers have posited leader influences in Australia (e.g. Tranter, 2013), but there is a dearth of research that attempts to establish this association empirically. In broad terms, our aim is to explore the question *do national political leaders influence attitudes on climate change among their respective partisans?*

2. Setting

Australia is a valuable venue in which to explore the dynamics of public opinion on climate change for three reasons. First, the environment has played a central role in Australian politics over the past decade. The nation adopted an emissions trading scheme that put it at the forefront of comprehensive responses to climate change but then, after the public reaction to this policy shift played a major role in the Labor government's loss in the 2013 elections, the new Coalition government reversed course sharply (Wanna, 2014). The environment has thus been a highly salient issue for the Australian public.

Second, there is a significant level of partisan polarization overall in the nation (see Jackman, 1998; Goot, 2004; Kousser, 2015a) and on the environment in particular (Tranter, 2013). If leadership cues can accentuate or ameliorate polarization on the environment in a nation where this is already a high-profile and contentious issue, then the results of our survey will likely generalize to other nations in which climate change politics are not yet as salient and party lines are not as hardened.

Third, Australia provides, in current Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, a leader of the right-leaning party coalition who has taken progressive stands on climate change. While this has often imperiled his personal power—his positions played a precipitating role in the in-party coup that removed him from power as the Leader of the Opposition in 2009, although did not prevent Turnbull from returning to power as Prime Minister through another party coup in 2016 (Devine, 2010) – it provides a rare opportunity to see how voters in a right-leaning party respond to a leftward signal from one of their leaders on environmental policy.

Australia's recent policy moves on climate change begin in 2007, when Labor Party Leader Kevin Rudd made the creation of an emissions trading scheme (ETS) a centerpiece of the campaign that led to Labor capturing the government in that year's federal election. At that point, the general idea of an ETS, accomplished through a market-based cap-and-trade approach, had bipartisan support, with Coalition Prime Minister John Howard introducing his own plans for an ETS before the election. Howard called climate change, "a great economic challenge for Australia as well as an environmental challenge," (Cole, 2007) while Rudd termed it "the greatest moral challenge of our time." Yet after Rudd's Labor government took power and began to work through the devilish details of a comprehensive plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, he began to encounter opposition both on the left and on the right. Some environmental groups and leaders of the Greens Party voiced concerns that Rudd's plan did not go far enough, while internal fissures opened up within the Liberal-National Coalition, out of government and led by new opposition leader Malcolm Turnbull, over whether it went too far. Turnbull supported an ETS and negotiated with the government on its details in 2009, but this left him open to attack within his own caucus, termed the "party room" in Australia.

"We had horrific debates within the party room on climate change in 2009. That was the issue—whether we should have an emissions trading scheme or do direct action instead—that led to Malcolm Turnbull losing the leadership of the party," reports Liberal Party legislator

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