



Debating clean energy: Frames, counter frames, and audiences[☆]



Michaël Aklin^{a,*}, Johannes Urpelainen^b

^a Wilf Family Department of Politics, New York University, 19 West 4th St., New York, NY 10012, United States

^b Columbia University, 420 West 118th St., 712 International Affairs Building, New York, NY 10027, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 April 2012

Received in revised form 15 March 2013

Accepted 18 March 2013

Keywords:

Clean energy
Climate change
Public opinion
Survey experiments
Frames
Counter frames

ABSTRACT

In the United States, both scholars and practitioners have repeatedly emphasized the importance of “issue framing” for garnering public support for climate change policy. However, the debate frequently overlooks the importance of counter frames. For every framing attempt by advocates of climate policy, there will be a counter frame by the opponents of climate policy. How do counter frames influence the effectiveness of issue framing as a communication strategy? To answer this question, we report results from a survey experiment on a nationally representative sample of 1000 Americans on clean energy policy, a key policy issue in the public debate on climate change in the United States. Overall, we find that different combinations of positive and negative frames have remarkably little effect on support for clean energy policy. A follow-up on-line survey experiment with a convenience sample of 2000 Americans suggests that the counter frames are responsible for undermining the effects of the original frames.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Climate change mitigation requires effective and politically feasible climate policies. In democratic countries, the credibility and effectiveness of climate policy depends on continued public support. The difficulty of formulating such policies in the United States has generated a heated debate on how the problem of climate change should be *framed* in the public discussion. Much of this discussion focuses on “issue framing,” defined as “situations where, by emphasizing a subset of potentially relevant considerations, a speaker leads individuals to focus on these considerations when constructing their opinions” (Druckman, 2004, p. 672). This article analyzes the effects of competition in issue framing on public opinion about clean energy policy in the United States.

Given that the American public does not seem enthusiastic about reducing carbon dioxide emissions to combat complex and distant pollution problems, many participants to the debate have sought alternative ways to frame the problem of climate change. In particular, the role of clean energy policy has been pronounced in the contemporary debate. Some advocates, including Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger of the Breakthrough Institute,

argue that proponents of climate policy should emphasize the economic benefits of clean energy (Nordhaus and Shellenberger, 2007; PCT, 2009). Others, including many combat veterans, have portrayed clean energy as a way to improve America’s national security (see <http://www.operationfree.net>; accessed on February 22, 2012). Among scholars of climate policy and science communication, the importance of problem framing is also widely acknowledged (Moser and Dilling, 2004; Moser, 2010), reflecting a broader interest in framing among social scientists (Chong and Druckman, 2007b).

As scholars and advocates continue their quest for effective issue frames, they are confronted with the difficult problem of “counter frames.” According to Nisbet (2009, p. 14), successful public policy efforts have historically “depended on generating widespread public support and mobilization while effectively countering the communication efforts of opponents of these efforts.” If advocates of climate policy change their framing of the problem, the opponents of climate policy can respond by strategically changing their counter frame. Such competitive framing is a standard feature of democratic politics and public debate (Druckman, 2004; Druckman et al., 2012). For example, if advocates begin to emphasize the economic benefits of supporting clean energy, such as technological innovation, opponents could counter by emphasizing the fiscal cost of subsidizing clean energy. As McCright and Dunlap (2000) show, the conservative movement in the United States has consistently used “counter-claims” to question the legitimacy of climate change policy. However, previous survey studies of climate change framing have not considered the implications of counter framing for public opinion. Available survey studies compare the implications of different

[☆] We thank Yotam Margalit for his generous help with designing the survey experiment and for comments on a previous draft, as well as two anonymous reviewers and the editors for excellent comments. An online appendix is available on the journal’s website and a replication package is available at <https://files.nyu.edu/ma1896/public/>.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 917 250 9872.
E-mail addresses: michael.aklin@nyu.edu (M. Aklin), ju2178@columbia.edu (J. Urpelainen).

frames (Gifford and Comeau, 2011; Yeager et al., 2011), but they do not examine how the effectiveness of a positive frame depends on the negative frame that opponents use.

This article presents the results of a nationally representative survey experiment in the United States. To each of 1000 respondents, we randomly assigned one positive and one negative frame for federal clean energy policy. Given that the United States Congress has repeatedly failed to pass legislation for a carbon tax or emissions trading, the promotion of clean energy has become an increasingly important issue in the American debate on climate policy. Therefore, understanding the effects of frames and counter frames on public support for clean energy in the United States is particularly important for formulating more effective strategies to mitigate climate change.

One of the two positive frames was economic, emphasizing beneficial employment effects of clean energy policies, while the other related to national security, highlighting the possibility that clean energy would reduce America's dependence on Middle Eastern oil. One of the negative frames was also economic, noting the possibility of rising energy prices, while the other concerned national security, suggesting that clean energy policies may prevent the United States from relying on domestic coal resources. In total, each respondent saw one of four possible frame combinations.

These frames are widely deployed in American politics. To examine the relevance of our frames, we analyzed the public statements and letters of 49 major interest groups that publicly supported the American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009, as well as the statements and letters of 16 groups that publicly opposed the bill. For an objective list of interests, we relied on the Open Congress's summary of lobbying over the bill (see <http://www.opencongress.org/bill/111-h2454/show>; accessed on April 20, 2012). This bill is perhaps the most important attempt to pass a federal climate and clean energy policy, so it offers a unique perspective to frames and counter frames in the American context. We sought on-line information about the public position of a total of 65 groups. Of the 49 supporters, 42 argued for "green jobs" and 14 argued for improved national security. Of the 16 opponents, 12 warned about increased energy prices while 3 warned about increased dependence on foreign energy.

The results from our survey experiment reveal the limitations of framing as a political strategy. There was little difference between support for clean energy policy across different combinations of frames, suggesting that negative frames effectively undermine the impacts of positive frames. Framing may not be the silver bullet for creating effective climate policy, contravening many of the more optimistic assessments, such as Nordhaus and Shellenberger (2007). This result is consistent with a more general result from experiments: "contextual influences moderate accessibility processes by leading individuals to resist the impact of the initial frame, envision alternative frames, and, as a result, avoid being driven by a particular frame" (Druckman, 2004, p. 674). In a competitive political environment, counter frames are deployed to neutralize the effects of frames, and such competition is intense in the case of climate policy.

To scrutinize the logic of competitive framing further, we conducted a second experiment on a convenience sample of 2000 adult Americans using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (see <https://www.mturk.com/mturk/>; accessed on December 19, 2012). This experiment showed that different combinations of frames and counter frames reduced support relative to both a control group without a frame and each of the positive frames, and the support levels were even lower if only negative frames were deployed. While these results should be interpreted with a bit of caution (relative to those of the earlier, nationally representative sample), they suggest that frames deployed without competition, as well as

policy options presented without a frame, would have garnered different levels of public support.

2. Climate policy: frames and counter frames

Traditionally, advocates of environmental protection have emphasized the negative externalities from pollution and resource waste. However, this is not the only possible way to frame climate change as a policy problem. Policies that mitigate climate change also produce ancillary benefits that advocates can use to mobilize public support. In particular, advocates of climate change policy have noted that clean energy produces a variety of positive side effects, from "green jobs" to reduced dependence on foreign energy imports.

These alternative framings are examples of issue framing, which we defined in the introduction as a speaker's choice of emphasizing different sides of an issue in communication (Druckman, 2004, p. 672). This definition of framing highlights the presentation of the issue (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007, p. 13). Another dimension of framing is "equivalence framing," whereby logically equivalent statements are formulated in varying ways to different effects (Tversky and Kahneman, 1986). A broader definition is found in Goffman's (1974) sociological analysis of how people use frames to interpret events around them.

The availability of multiple issue frames means that advocates face the strategic decision of how climate change and clean energy policies should be framed. This decision is not a simple one. For example, Ockwell et al. (2009) argue that climate change communication should promote both acceptance of regulation and "grass-roots engagement" by the people. In an experimental study, Hart and Nisbet (2011) show that in the United States, people's identification with climate change victims depends on their partisan ideology; strikingly, Republicans become more opposed to climate mitigation if the negative effects of global warming for health are emphasized.

While scholars have studied the importance of framing for climate policy, empirical studies mostly do not examine the effectiveness of alternative frames. O'Neill and Hulme (2009) find that an "iconic" approach to climate change, whereby people's personal experiences are emphasized and utilized, can improve the effectiveness of climate communication. Some studies have examined the importance of specific words, such as "climate change" versus "global warming" (Lorenzoni et al., 2006; Schuldt et al., 2011; Villar and Krosnick, 2011), finding relatively small framing effects. Others have evaluated the importance of representing climate change as a present or future threat (Yeager et al., 2011), showing that while Americans do not regard climate change a major present issue, they do believe climate change will be a major problem in the future. Similarly, it has been noted that presenting climate change as a dire threat may reduce people's willingness to act because alarmistic communication contradicts their beliefs about the world (Feinberg and Willer, 2011). Finally, some studies have examined how representations of uncertainty and the localness of climate change interact with positive and negative communication about climate change (Morton et al., 2011; Spence and Pidgeon, 2010).

These studies do not evaluate the relative effectiveness of simultaneously deployed, different arguments for and against climate policy. One exception to this general pattern is Lockwood (2011). His survey experiment identifies the effect of different frames on support for climate policy in politically contested districts in the United Kingdom. Specifically, he presented respondents with three different frames for renewable energy policy: reducing reliance on foreign oil and gas, tackling climate change, and creating new economic opportunities. He found that the national security framing, specifically reduced reliance on foreign oil and gas, generated the highest level of support for renewable energy policy.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10505112>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10505112>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)