



## Analysis

## Public Attitudes Toward Climate Policies: The Effect of Institutional Contexts and Political Values

Marianne Aasen<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Arild Vatn<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> CICERO, Center for International Climate and Environmental Research – Oslo, P.O. Box 1129, Blindern, NO-0318 Oslo, Norway<sup>b</sup> NORAGRIC, Department of International Environment and Development Studies, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, P.O. Box 5003, NO-1432 Ås, Norway

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## ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the literature on public responses to climate policies in two ways. We investigate the effect of institutional contexts on attitudes toward policies, and we examine the relevance of political values for these effects. Institutional theory suggests that the institutional context influences whether “individual rationality” (IR) or “social rationality” (SR) frames choices. To investigate the effects of such contexts and political values on attitudes toward policies aimed at reducing private car use, we conducted a survey experiment involving 1500 car owners in Oslo, Norway. One group of respondents received a text emphasizing the individual health gains from reducing local air pollution (IR context), a second group received a text emphasizing the social responsibility for avoiding climate change (SR context), and a control group received no such text. We found effects of the contexts on attitudes toward emission-reducing policies, and found that the effects vary across individuals with different political values. The SR context yielded higher support for an increase in petrol prices among non-individualists only. The IR context yielded higher support for a decrease in space for cars among both non-individualists and individualists. Ways forward regarding expanding this field of research are discussed.

## 1. Introduction

Climate change is a major public policy issue, with related effects likely to be extensive and potentially devastating (IPCC, 2013, 2014). It is widely accepted that avoiding dangerous climate change will require urgent mitigation and significant societal changes. However, lack of broad public support is a major barrier to realizing a transition to a low-carbon economy (Wiseman, Edwards, and Luckins, 2013; Höppner and Whitmarsh, 2010; Pietsch and McAllister, 2010). One approach to increasing public support for emission-reducing policies is to create contexts where individual contribution to a social good is emphasized as correct. This approach uses the assumption that different rationalities may co-exist in one person. It further builds on the proposition that the institutional context influences what is considered to be the right thing to do in response to a social dilemma (March and Olsen, 1989). The context may emphasize individual rationality. It may, however, be formed to support social rationality (Vatn, 2015).

The effect of institutional contexts on environmentally relevant choices and attitudes is particularly interesting in an era of unsolved environmental problems. Despite extensive commentary on this issue in the policy and academic literatures (Devine-Wright, Price, and

Leviston, 2015; Spence and Pidgeon, 2010), relatively little field research has examined the effects of such contexts on attitudes toward policies aimed at solving social dilemmas, such as climate change. We contribute to this field by investigating the effect of different institutional contexts on car owners' attitudes toward policies to cut car emissions. Several researchers<sup>1</sup> identify people's degree of political value orientation – that is, position on state involvement and regulation – to be important for their attitudes toward climate policies. Therefore, we also investigate whether the effects on attitudes from institutional contexts differ in different value groups. Specifically, we ask:

- 1) Does institutional context affect attitudes toward policies to cut car emissions?
- 2) Does institutional context affect these attitudes differently among people with different political value orientations?

We employed a survey experiment to answer these questions, involving 1500 car owners in Oslo, Norway. We varied the institutional context experimentally by randomly assigning the participants to one of three groups receiving different text treatments, and asked about their attitudes toward policies aimed at reducing emissions from private car

\* Corresponding author at: CICERO, Center for International Climate and Environmental Research – Oslo, P.O. Box 1129, Blindern, NO-0318 Oslo, Norway.

E-mail addresses: [marianne.aasen@cicero.oslo.no](mailto:marianne.aasen@cicero.oslo.no) (M. Aasen), [arild.vatn@nmbu.no](mailto:arild.vatn@nmbu.no) (A. Vatn).

<sup>1</sup> See for instance Drews and van den Bergh (2015) for a review of studies.

use. One text emphasized the individual health gain from reducing local air pollution (IR context), and the other emphasized the social responsibility for avoiding climate change (SR context); the control group received no such text treatment. “Attitudes toward policies” refers to disagreement or agreement with statements about policies that involve different degrees of individual loss and social gain: 1) increasing petrol prices, 2) decreasing the space for cars to develop more bike lanes and public transport, and 3) respondents' willingness to voluntarily choose public or bike transport despite longer travel time.

In Section 2 we present the theoretical perspective applied in this study. In Section 3 we review previous studies of the effect of institutional context on public support for climate policies. The method is presented in Section 4, and the analysis and its results in Section 5. In Section 6 we conclude.

## 2. Institutional Contexts, Values and Attitudes Toward Climate Policies

### 2.1. Concepts and Theories

Institutions are here understood as conventions, norms, and legal rules of a society. They influence attitudes and action by defining what is seen as the “natural” way to act (conventions), the right way to act (norms), and/or the sanctioned form of action (the law) (Vatn, 2015). According to institutional theory, humans are regarded as multi rational (Hodgson, 1988, 2007; Sjöstrand, 1995). Moreover, the kind of rationality involved is understood to be influenced by the institutional context. Institutions create expectations and give meaning to individual action. Such expectations and meanings can vary between institutional contexts such as the market, the community, and the family (Scott, 2014).

Institutional contexts define the expected rationality or logic as specific to various arenas of human action and interaction. Institutional contexts may for instance support individual rationality (IR), what is best for the individual, or social rationality (SR), what is best for a group or for others (Vatn, 2009). An IR context emphasizes an “I” logic and a SR context emphasizes a “we” or a “they” logic. For instance, in some contexts, such as a market, choosing what is best for the individual – “maximizing individual utility” – is emphasized. In a family context, care is a dominant norm. When being faced with a “situation,” people will, consciously or unconsciously, look for information that specifies what kind of context they are confronted with and what type of action is expected. The definition of the situation informs the person about what institutions apply (Weber, Kopelman, and Messick, 2004).

Assigning roles – for instance citizen or consumer, mother or teacher – is a way to define a set of conventions and norms regarding what are expected actions. As such, these roles support specific forms of rationality (e.g., Soma and Vatn, 2010, 2014; Liberman, Samuels, and Ross, 2004). Ostrom (2000), Biel and Thøgersen (2007), and Vatn (2015) offer examples from different experiments and areas of life supporting this type of relationship between rationality and institutional context.

While the institutional context may be explicitly defined by reference to, for example, norms or from being assigned a role, an institutional context may also be informationally induced. For instance, the content of information offered about an issue may activate a held norm. One may learn something new that alters beliefs and what is considered correct to do (Dietz and Stern, 2002). Learning that an issue influences mainly one's own life may evoke other norms than if one learns that one's own action influences the situation of other people. In the latter case, norms regarding social responsibility may be evoked. Information may also induce an institutional context without changing beliefs or knowledge. The information's content may emphasize a certain aspect of an issue, and cause individuals to focus on this aspect instead of on others (Nisbet, 2009).<sup>2</sup> For instance, Sniderman and Theriault (2004) found that when information about government spending for the poor was characterized as enhancing poor people's

opportunities, individuals tended to support increased spending. However, when such spending was characterized as resulting in higher taxes, individuals tended to oppose the increased spending.

Institutional context may thus influence attitudes toward policies. Attitudes, the dependent variable analyzed in this study, are commonly understood as psychological tendencies that are expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor (Eagly and Chaiken, 1998). The entity may be for instance a person, or a policy. However, a person's attitude toward policies is also dependent on individual characteristics like values, as partly formed by an individual's “institutional history” (Vatn, 2015).

Values are in social science seen as central for evaluations of individuals' actions, choices, and attitudes. They are “desirable trans-situational goals varying in importance, which serve as guiding principles in the life of a person” (Schwartz, 1994, p. 21). Rokeach (1973) argues that we can classify values in domains or spheres. Accordingly, political values can be defined as the category of values that pertain to the political sphere, and refer in this paper to peoples' positions on state involvement and regulation, following Karlsen and Aardal (2016).

Values may be important for people's interpretation of information in situations and for defining institutional contexts. Individuals will search for cues, consciously or unconsciously, to interpret the situation. The definition of the situation informs the person about what institutions apply. Individuals' idiosyncratic dispositions, such as values, may affect which situational cues they attend to, and how much weight the cues are given (Weber et al., 2004).

However, few individuals hold only one set of values entirely at the expense of other sets (Stern, Dietz, and Kalof, 1993). For instance, a person who is generally against state involvement and regulation may support a specific regulation if it supports other values which that individual holds. Such support for a policy may increase without changes in value orientation as measured in surveys. Institutional context may change the relevance of a value for an attitude, which may manifest itself in changes in correlations between the value and the attitude in a statistical analysis.

### 2.2. Previous Studies

Empirical studies on the effects from what are here defined as institutional contexts on attitudes toward climate policies are relatively rare. Recently however, a few studies have been published that one may interpret to directly or indirectly allude to effects of institutions. These studies are not typically framed within institutional theory, but range from analyses referring to so-called attribution framing and loss versus gain frames (Kahneman and Tversky's (1979) prospect theory)<sup>3</sup> to theories on social norms in psychology (e.g. Cialdini, Kallgren, and Reno's, 1991 focus theory of normative conduct).<sup>4</sup> Institutional theory deviates from these theories in that it offers a stronger focus on framing as part of social dynamics.

For instance, Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook (2014) refer to attribution framing in their study applying a survey experiment. They found that behavior intention was affected by a text treatment that both referred to a norm – that all individuals have a responsibility for making environmentally friendly choices – and described environmental benefits for society. Respondents who received this text treatment showed higher willingness to invest in energy conservation and to pay more for insulating homes than did respondents who received no such text treatment. Both the reference to a norm and/or the information about the environmental effect might have affected respondents' willingness.

<sup>2</sup> This effect of information is often referred to as a “framing effect” (Nisbet, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> They are typically focusing at the individual and her/his capacities to act rationally. The work around ‘prospect theory’ and ‘loss aversion’ is documenting different evaluation of losses and gains.

<sup>4</sup> Cialdini et al. (1991) acknowledge the importance of situational factors in determining the degree of ‘salience’ of particular social norms.

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