



## Review

## A review on political factors influencing public support for urban environmental policy

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## ABSTRACT

Environmental quality is important to urban residents' physical, social and psychological well-being. Governments have been formulating and implementing policies to mitigate environmental deterioration in cities. To effectively implement policies and achieve policy goals, gaining sufficient public support is an essential prerequisite; the policies would be in ruins and the government may also suffer from setbacks in other policy areas in the absence of public support. Therefore, to understand what contributes to public support is a crucial task for policymakers. Though current literature on socio-demographic and attitudinal/psychological factors provides fruitful accounts for policy support, a comprehensive examination of political determinants has yet to be established. In response to this, this review paper explores political factors that influence level of policy support based on existing literature. An integrated framework is proposed to explain policy support for urban environmental policy. This paper also discusses the possible directions of future research.

## 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Background

Countries around the world encounter growing urban environmental problems ranging from water pollution, air pollution, excessive waste, loss of biological diversity, climate change, to name just a few examples (Hardoy et al., 2013; Satterthwaite, 2003; Van Kamp et al., 2003). To address the severity of environmental problems and improve the livability of the environment, governments have set up environmental institutions and designed various types of policy measures and regulations. For instance, early in 1970 the U.S. government established Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) which intends to control pollution and protect the environment via laws and regulations (Kamieniecki and Kraft, 2013). Apart from establishment of institutions, different types of policy frameworks and measures have been proposed in many countries and across continents. For example, Europe 2020, a strategy which includes targets of greenhouse gas emissions reduction, and promotion of renewable energy usage and efficient use of energy (López-Mosquera et al., 2015); or measures such as mandatory source separation of waste in Nagoya, Japan (Ohnuma et al., 2005). Although cases of successfully implementing environmental policies like plastic bags levy can be found (Convery et al., 2007), not

every policy is welcomed by the public. Some of these policies were rejected because of a lack of policy support (Kim et al., 2013). For example, both French carbon tax in 2010 and road pricing in Edinburgh in 2005 encountered opposition from the public and failed to be implemented at the end (Kallbekken and Sælen, 2011). Therefore, gaining sufficient public support would be essential to effectively implement measures to deal with environmental problems in cities.

## 1.2. Defining policy support

Support in a broad sense is defined as an individual's underlying attitude or behaviour towards an object, and it can be expressed in overt (e.g., action or advocacy) and covert (e.g., evaluation) behaviours (Easton, 1975). Policy support refers to the extent of an individual's orientation towards policies through his attitudes or behaviours. Citizens' support for environmental policy has indirect effects on the environment and can be presented by different means, for example, willingness to pay higher taxes for environmental action, approval of environmental regulations, or endorsement of allocating more resources on environmental protection (Stern, 2000; Wan et al., 2015). Public policy, as one type of formal institutions, can change behaviours of individuals (North, 1990). Accepting or supporting an environmental policy implies that citizens are willing to engage in behaviours shaped or guided by

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the policy, e.g., paying taxes, saving energy, therefore, public support would indirectly extend the beneficial effects on the environment (Stern, 2000). Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) put forward a similar view by arguing that policy support is an indirect pro-environmental behaviour.

Recruiting support from citizens plays a critical role in both governance and policy-goal achievement. It is a way of which a political authority seeks approval from the governed and secures it from potential overthrow by the public. If a policy is well equipped with public support, the government is able to institute the policy in a rather smooth way; and gaining support from the public also facilitates the authority to achieve policy objectives (Rauwald and Moore, 2002). Support for environmental policy contributes to minimization of harmful effects on and protection of the environment. Therefore, to understand underlying factors of policy support is a key condition to reach effectual environmental policies and foster pro-environmental behaviours among the public.

### 1.3. Prior studies on policy support for environmental policies

Over the last two decades, a profusion of studies have been conducted to examine the correlation between level of policy support and socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, education, and income (for a comprehensive review on socio-demographic factors, see Dietz et al., 1998 and Jones and Dunlap, 1992). Age and education are suggested to be the consistent predictors among socio-demographic factors (Dietz et al., 1998). Young people are proved to be more supportive for spending on environmental protection than older generations (Dunlap et al., 2000; Jones and Dunlap, 1992). Education can raise individuals' environmental awareness (Daniels et al., 2013; Torgler and García-Valiñas, 2007). An educated individual is expected possessing a positive environmental attitude and being more supportive of increased environmental spending (Dietz et al., 1998; Dunlap et al., 2000; Israel and Levinson, 2004). Nonetheless, a few studies found mixed results for age and education variables, for example, Grønhøj and Thøgersen (2009) suggested that the elderly engage in more pro-environmental activities than young people; Uyeki and Holland (2000) reported that education level is not a significant factor of pro-environmental behaviours. Compared to age and education, gender is a less stable factor of policy support that the results vary across studies. In some studies women are proved to be more concern with environment than men and appear to be more supportive for pro-environmental actions (Hunter et al., 2004; Zelezny et al., 2000), and more willing to pay higher taxes for environmental protection (Jones and Dunlap, 1992; Stern et al., 1993). Interestingly however, Blocker and Eckberg (1997) suggested that women, compared with men, are less actively engaging in public pro-environmental behaviours. Income is also an inconsistent predictor of environmental concern compared to other socio-demographic factors. On the one hand, it is assumed that affluent people can perform more pro-environmental actions than their poor counterparts. Studies of environmental concern on global scale revealed that people in countries with higher GDP would devote more efforts on environmental protection than those in developing countries (Franzen, 2003; Inglehart, 1995). On the other hand, some scholars suggested that people in wealthier countries do not necessarily perform more pro-environmental behaviours as those in poor countries do (McCright and Dunlap, 2013; Mostafa, 2012; Uyeki and Holland, 2000). Though above generalization on environmental behaviours does not appear across variables, these studies provide a necessary basis in understanding the relationships between socio-demographic factors and policy support.

A second line of research has been eagerly investigating policy support in connection with attitudinal/psychological matters. Of which, the Value-Belief-Norm theory (VBN) constructed by Stern et al. (1999) provides a comprehensive account for exploring individuals' support and acceptance of environmental policies. The VBN theory links value theory, norm-activation theory, and the New Environmental Paradigm

in a causal chain sequence (Stern, 2000; Stern et al., 1999). According to the theory, values of a person (biospheric, altruistic, and non-egoistic) would directly activate one's belief in ecological worldview, then belief in adverse consequences of environment, and finally belief in perceived ability to reduce threat to the environment. The sequence of induced-beliefs leads up to personal norms such as a sense of obligation to take pro-environmental actions. The causal chain engenders four types of behaviours, namely, activism, non-activist public sphere behaviours (e.g., supporting environmental policies, theme of this paper), private sphere behaviours, and behaviours in organizations. In order to test the predictive power of VBN theory for three types of non-activist environmentalism, that is, environmental citizenship, private-sphere behaviour, and policy support (willingness to sacrifice), Stern et al. (1999) compared the VBN with six other theories such as post-materialist values. Empirical results suggested that the VBN theory had a significant predictive power for non-activist behaviours, among which policy support obtains the highest score. The result revealed that the VBN theory does have a significant explanatory power for policy support (Stern, 2000; Stern et al., 1999). The theory is adopted in a number of studies for testing the acceptability of environmental policies (Steg et al., 2005) and its explanatory power is generally recognized (Steg et al., 2012).

### 1.4. Bridging the gap: the call for examining political matters

The summarized literature on socio-demographic and psychological aspects only contributes a piece of puzzle to understand people's support for environmental policy. As Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) suggested, scholars should expand the realm to other fields for exploration of unattended but crucial factors for enrichment of discussion. Matti (2015) also argued that in order to grasp a full condition for the model of policy support, characteristics related to policy instruments such as fairness should be counted in for investigation. Only a small number of studies echoed to the suggestions. For example, Ebreo et al. (1996) and Harring and Jagers (2013) investigated the impacts of procedural fairness and political trust on policy support for urban environmental policies, respectively. Others focused on specific political factors, e.g., political affiliation (Dupont and Bateman, 2012), public participation (Daley, 2013; Halvorsen, 2003), and policy preferences (Daniels et al., 2013). However, the fragmented investigations failed to grasp a full picture of the issue; therefore, this review aims to answer the following research question: what are the political determinants of level of policy support. The contribution of this study is to identify and discuss the political factors of policy support and convert them into the axes of our proposed conceptual model for analyzing urban environmental policies.

Conceptually, this paper contributes to the theoretical understanding of political environment of environmental policies. Practically, this yields a threefold benefit in regard to environmental governance. First, governments can gauge a more thorough understanding of potential policy supporters and improve environmental policy formulation process. Second, a policy with strong public support can enhance policy legitimacy that would facilitate public compliance with rules and regulations (Levi and Sacks, 2009; Wallner, 2008). Third, this review establishes a referential value for other policies' formulation and implementation process.

This review will first identify political factors that explain level of policy support from available literature. A conceptual framework based on these factors would be proposed for analyzing public support for environmental policy. The framework provides a new dimension for future research studies of policy support. Moreover, the newly identified political factors, together with socio-demographic and psychological factors form a three-dimension conceptual block which can shed light on the complexities of policy support.

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