



How the physical proximity of climate mitigation projects influences the relationship between affect and public support



P. Sol Hart ^{a,*}, Richard C. Stedman ^b, Katherine A. McComas ^b

^a University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, United States

^b Cornell University, United States

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how the physical proximity of university-sponsored climate mitigation projects may moderate the relationship between affect and project support and impact public support for the respective projects. Using a mail survey (N = 667) of residents near a major university in New York State, we find that positive and negative affective responses to proposed climate mitigation projects have a stronger association with project support when the project will be implemented in close, as opposed to distant, physical proximity. In contrast, we do not find that the physical distance of project implementation moderates the relationship between affective responses to climate change in general and project support. In addition, we find no evidence of a NIMBY effect in public support/opposition to the particular projects, but do find that public support varies depending on the type of project that is being proposed.

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1. Introduction

This study investigates how the physical proximity of proposed climate mitigation projects may moderate the relationship between affect and project support and impact public support for the respective projects. While affect has been identified as a potential driver of support for environmental projects (Cass & Walker, 2009), less is known about how affect might relate to climate change initiatives (Myers, Nisbet, Maibach, & Leiserowitz, 2012). In response, our study examines the strength of the association between affect and public support for university-sponsored climate mitigation projects depending on their location, i.e., whether the proposed project will be built near or farther away from a respondent's residence. In addition, as affect has been identified as a potential driver of Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY) attitudes (Cass & Walker, 2009), we examine how physical proximity may impact public support. Recent years have seen mixed findings about whether nearby implementation of climate mitigation projects may be supported by the public or instead lead to oppositional NIMBY responses, suggesting the need for further research on this relationship.

2. Literature review, hypotheses, and research questions

2.1. Affect and decision making

Affect, the general feeling of goodness or badness that someone assigns to a stimulus, can have a powerful role in guiding how individuals respond to risk information (Slovic, Finucane, Peters, & MacGregor, 2004) as it strongly influences both information processing and motivation to take action (Neuman, Marcus, Crigler, & Mackuen, 2007; Slovic, 1999, 2007). Recent initiatives have probed what factors may influence the strength of an individual's emotional response to climate change (Myers et al., 2012; Spence, Poortinga, & Pidgeon, 2012). Less is known about what influences the role of affect in climate change related decision making may have *independently* of the amplification or attenuation of affective states. This is a crucial gap; such information would help us to understand when affect may play a greater role in decision making and thus when communicators need to be more cognizant of the affective feeling that an individual may bring to forming judgments about objects and events. In addition, in light of recent calls for the public to participate as stakeholders in decision-making processes related to risk issues (McComas, Arvai, & Besley, 2009), it is important to better understand how affect may be used when individuals assess proposals to address those risks, such as climate mitigation projects.

* Corresponding author. Communication Studies, University of Michigan, 105 South State Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, United States.

E-mail address: solhart@gmail.com (P.S. Hart).

Our study uses construal level theory to guide the investigation of psychological distance and the use of affect in decision making. Construal level theory (Fujita, Eyal, Chaiken, Trope, & Liberman, 2008; Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope, & Liberman, 2006; Henderson, Fujita, Trope, & Liberman, 2006) holds that objects and events have varying levels of psychological distance, which is defined by how far (psychologically distant) or near (psychologically close) the objects are construed to be. According to construal level theory, viewing an object as being psychologically close leads to a cognitive representation that is more concrete and contextualized while psychologically distant objects are cognitively represented in more abstract, decontextualized terms. Construal level theory, and specifically how psychological distance impacts concrete and abstract representations of an object, has been found to operate across multiple domains, including temporal, social, and physical proximity.

Several previous studies have found that more physically distant objects are generally construed as being more psychologically distant (Fujita et al., 2006; Henderson et al., 2006). As objects become more psychologically distant and thus construed in more abstract rather than concrete representations, affective information is often discounted more in decision-making processes (Trope, 2004; Trope & Liberman, 2000). In other words, as an object becomes more psychologically distant due to physical distance, individuals may rely less on affect when making decisions about the object.

We examine affect related to both climate change in general and discrete proposed climate change mitigation projects. Climate change has been discussed primarily as a threat to humans, wildlife, and ecosystems (Hart & Feldman, 2014); we thus focus on negative affect associated with the issue as a whole. In contrast, climate mitigation projects may elicit strong positive or negative associations (Myers et al., 2012; Spence & Pidgeon, 2010), leading us to examine how positive and negative emotions associated with the proposed mitigation projects may respectively impact support. Thus, we examine three hypotheses related to project support for nearby (close to where respondents live) and distant (in the same county but not near where respondents live) implementation:

H1: Negative affect associated with climate change will have a stronger positive association with support for a proposed climate change mitigation project that is proposed to be built in close, rather than relatively distant, physical proximity to the respondent.

H2: Negative affect associated with a specific proposed project to address climate change will have a stronger negative association with support for the project that is proposed to be built in close, rather than relatively distant, physical proximity to the respondent.

H3: Positive affect associated with a specific proposed project to address climate change will have a stronger positive association with support or opposition to the project that is proposed to be built in close, rather than relatively distant, physical proximity to the respondent.

Please see Fig. 1 for a conceptual map of these hypotheses.

2.2. Public support for climate change initiatives

Given that emotion has been identified as an important factor in determining public support for implementing environmental projects (Cass & Walker, 2009; Myers et al., 2012) and that in *H1–H3* we predict that the physical distance of proposed project implementation will alter the strength of association between affect and project support, we also explore how the distance of the proposed implementation may impact support for the projects. Public support for climate mitigation measures such as renewable energy projects has generally been very strong (Wüstenhagen, Wolsink, & Bürer, 2007), but there have been mixed findings for community

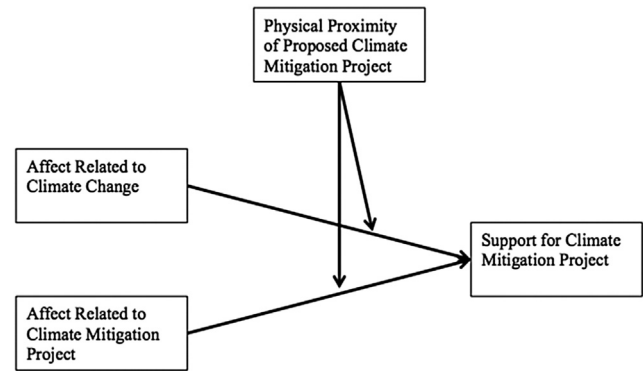


Fig. 1. Conceptual map for hypotheses 1–3.

support and opposition when a project is proposed to be built in close proximity to community members. A variety of factors have been associated with support for renewable energy projects, including environmental beliefs (Dietz, Dan, & Shwom, 2007), place attachment, and place identities (Devine-Wright, 2013). Looking at factors that may influence support for near and distant implementation, Spence and Pidgeon (2010) and Scannell and Gifford (2013) found that the choice of how the issue is framed in terms of local or global considerations can impact engagement and public support.

Some studies have found robust organized communal opposition to renewable energy projects when they are being proposed nearby. For example, Upreti (2004) found that while communities in the United Kingdom saw environmental benefits to the development of biomass energy plants, many still organized opposition to the plants due to perceived negative risks that the plants posed to the local communities and landscape. The opposition to renewable energy projects has been linked to NIMBY attitudes and behaviors that have also arisen over other developments such as hazardous waste disposal (Groothuis & Miller, 1994; Kraft & Clary, 1991; Luloff, Albrecht, & Bourke, 1998).

Other research has questioned the use of NIMBY terminology to describe community attitudes towards renewable energy projects, noting that the term lacks conceptual clarity (Devine-Wright, 2009; Wolsink, 2006) and can obscure the complex nature of opposition that may arise from factors other than the pejorative qualities of “ignorance, irrationality and ignorance” (Devine-Wright, 2009, p. 431) that the NIMBY paradigm implicates. As part of this criticism, scholars note that in many cases communities have supported the local siting of renewable energy projects (Rogers, Simmons, Convery, & Weatherall, 2008), and several studies have found that communal attitudes may move in the opposite direction of NIMBY predictions, with community members preferring that the project be built nearby if possible (Van der Horst, 2007; Warren, Lumsden, O’Dowd, & Birnie, 2005; Wolsink, 2000).

In light of mixed findings on how the physical proximity of climate mitigation projects may impact public support for the projects, our study continues this line of investigation to examine both how the location and type of proposed project may lead to public support or opposition to the projects. Thus, in addition to our hypotheses described above, we examine the following research questions:

RQ1: How does community member support for climate mitigation projects vary depending on the type of project?

RQ2: Are there differences in community member support for the proposed climate mitigation projects when they are proposed to be built in close, rather than relatively distant, physical proximity to the respondent?

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