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D8.1 Environmental sustainability from below: Public opinions across the Globe

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Abstract

Against the backdrop that most political economies across the globe need to promote transitions towards more environmentally sustainable public policies and economic practices, we ask what factors explain public support for and opposition to such trajectories among people living in different institutional and socio-economic contexts.

To study this, we used survey data on individual attitudes from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) 2020 module on the environment. The dataset included a random sample of adult population in 28 countries. The analysis was organised in two steps. First, we examined whether improvement in living standards for people should now be prioritised over the preservation of nature for future generations, commonly referred to as the trade-off between economic growth and the environment. Next, we studied public support for and opposition to three specific environmental policy instruments: higher prices, higher taxes and decreased standard of living across numerous countries in the Global South and Global North. The countries differ greatly both in terms of human development, welfare systems and vulnerability to climate change. The motivation is to examine how these variations influence individual priorities in transition processes.

The analysis results showed that the correlation between individual-level variables and pro-environmental attitudes varies across countries, and the results from the regression models were only partially in line with previous literature in this field. Importantly, typical explanatory factors identified in previous studies using data from Europe and North America explain, only to some degree, the variation in attitudes in other parts of the world. The explanatory power of our models is particularly weak in the case of acceptance of environmental policy instruments that facilitate the transition to more sustainable societies in countries with low rankings on the Human Development Index.

1. Introduction

The consequences of climate change are becoming increasingly severe each year, with more frequent occurrences of heat waves, heavy rainfall, droughts and floods impacting peoples' livelihoods, endangering health, and rendering some areas uninhabitable (World Meteorological Organization, 2024). A majority of citizens worldwide recognise the urgency of climate action (Fairbrother, 2022), but they also demand policies that are socially just and economically fair (United Nations Development Programme, 2024b). The principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities (CBDR-RC) is central to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the global institutional framework within which international climate negotiations have taken place since 1992. The Paris Agreement embraces the CBDR-RC principle in recognition that countries' 'contribution to greenhouse gas emissions, development needs, and vulnerability to climate change vary greatly' (Pauw et al., 2019). A growing body of research has showed that, while affluent nations and people are responsible for the lion's share of carbon emissions, socio-economically disadvantaged groups are disproportionally affected by the consequences of both climate change and the policies to mitigate it (Büchs et al., 2011). This triple injustice calls for social policies to counteract the regressive distributional effects of mitigation policies.

By combining economic, social and environmental factors, the theoretical framework of the SPES (Sustainability, Performances, Evidence, and Scenarios) project offers an analytical lens to study sustainable human development (Haq, 1995). Productivity, Equity, Environmental Sustainability, Participation and Empowerment and Human Security are the five main pillars around which this framework is centred (Biggeri et al., 2023). These pillars provide communities with a roadmap to address the complex issues of sustainable development to create better futures. However, the relative significance of each pillar might change based on the perceived difficulties and advantages that various individuals and locations encounter. The present report focuses on environmental sustainability and, more specifically, citizens' willingness to bear some of the costs that sustainability transitions entail. Setting countries across the globe on environmentally sustainable paths requires large-scale systemic changes across a range of areas, including energy systems (see Zens et al., 2024), industrial systems (Bashmakov et al., 2022) and individual consumption patterns (Thøgersen, 2021). Public policy plays a fundamental role in inducing such changes. Examples of policy instruments include different combinations of regulations, tax measures and subsidies which are targeted at either businesses or private individuals.

Drawing on data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP)—which, in 2020, focused particularly on the environment, this report analyses public attitudes towards some general policy measures that governments may adopt to promote environmental sustainability. We ask what characteristics explain public support for and opposition to transition policy trajectories among people living in different institutional and socio-economic contexts. To address this, we proceed in two steps. First, we ask what explains the differences in citizens' preferences for improved living standards for people today over the preservation of nature for future generations, commonly referred to as the trade-off between economic growth and the environment. This has been a concern for at least half a century since the important Club of Rome report 'Limits to growth' (Meadows et al., 1972). Next, we analyse differences in public support for and opposition to three specific environmental policy instruments – higher prices, higher taxes and decreased standard of living – across countries in both the Global South and Global North. The countries differ greatly when it comes to standard of living, welfare regimes and vulnerability to climate change. The motivation is to capture how such variation matters for individual priorities in transition processes.

Much research has been conducted on this issue, but most of this research has relied on European data. Our main contribution to the literature is to provide insights from countries beyond Europe.

An underlying assumption of our analysis is that (lack of) public acceptance of transition policies impacts the scope for politicians to enact public policies that facilitate sustainability transitions. As the famous political theorist Robert A. Dahl (1989, p. 95) once pointed out, in liberal democracies, 'citizens can induce the government to do what they most want it to do and to avoid doing what they most want it not to do'. Individual attitudes influence how people vote in elections, thereby shaping the context in which politicians make policy decisions in a potentially constraining or enabling direction (Cooper & Burchardt, 2022; Powell, 2004). Few studies have empirically investigated whether awareness and concern translate into voting behaviour; however, Hoffmann et al. (2022), in their study across European countries, found that green voting increases with environmental concern. In their study on the relationship between public opinions and environmental policies, Anderson et al. (2017) found that pro-environmental shifts in public opinions increase the adoption of renewable energy policies in a European context.

Despite the environmental and economic benefits of carbon taxation and subsidy reforms, political challenges persist, and the perceived lack of fairness is a key issue. Social conflicts have emerged in response to policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The French Yellow Vest movement's vocal reactions to an increase in carbon tax (Levain et al., 2022) and the violent protests against the removal of diesel and petrol subsidies and doubling of retail prices in Nigeria in 2012 (Lockwood, 2015) illustrate the potential force of public reactions to policies perceived as socially unjust.

In the following section, we provide a brief review of relevant literature, and section 3 describes the ISSP data along with the analytical approach. In section 4, we present our results, and in section 5, we conclude and draw some policy implications.

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