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Citizens' attitudes on climate policy instruments

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The public debate about climate change has been visible from time to time in recent years. However, among the scientific community, it has been discussed for much longer, ever since the 19th century. In 1979, climate science was already at the point where World Meteorological Organization's Declaration of the World Climate Conference stated the following:

> " …we can say with some confidence that the burning of fossil fuels, deforestation, and changes of land use have increased the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere – – it appears plausible that an increased amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere can contribute to a gradual warming of the lower atmosphere…" (WMO, 1979, 2).

Although climate change proceeds according to natural laws, there are different societal processes behind the increase in greenhouse gas emissions. Climate change is therefore not only a physical phenomenon but also a societal problem that cannot be solved only within the scientific community (Valkonen & Saaristo, 2016). Many kinds of changes at the societal level are needed when society or the world is shaped in a low-carbon or, in the longer term, carbon-negative direction.

The situation has opened numerous opportunities for social scientists to examine the relationships between society and climate change and other environmental issues. The approach of my dissertation, which examines citizen attitudes related to climate policy, is part of this process, which increases understanding of the connections between climate and society and sheds additional light on what dimensions are involved in climate change mitigation process. Previous research has also found a significant connection between environmental or climate attitudes and implemented policies (Anderson et al., 2017; Levi et al., 2020).

Although research cannot directly lead to what would be the most optimal way to prevent climate change, research can help, for example, to evaluate the effectiveness of policy measures in terms of emission reductions, what kind of economic effects they have, and how supported the different measures are. However, citizen attitudes are obviously not, and should not be, the only factor on which politicians make their decisions.

Citizens can create pressure for the implementation of political actions: legitimize or question them. Supported policy actions are, in principle, more effective and more likely to remain in place than those that have less support (Matti, 2015). In addition, politicians are often worried about how citizens think about their actions as decision-makers, due to, among other things, the uncertainty related to being re-elected in upcoming elections. Public attitudes are one factor in the whole when weighing which measures to implement, maintain, or abolish.

According to attitude surveys, the majority of people internationally report that they see climate change as at least a somewhat serious threat (e.g., Lloyd's Register Foundation, 2020; IPSOS, 2020). Whether this

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leads to something more concrete is then its own question. When asked on an abstract level, most Finns want a stronger climate policy than the current one (Ministry of Environment, 2019; 2023). However, when you explore attitudes at a more concrete level, there is great variation in attitudes.

According to the scientific community, the uncontrolled progression of climate change leads to gloomy scenarios, and it would also be the most expensive to let it continue unchecked (e.g., Stern, 2007; Sterner, 2020). Since the goal of curbing climate change is based on a broad scientific consensus and is also widely shared outside the scientific community, it cannot be considered a particularly political issue.

If the goal of mitigating climate change is not a particularly political issue, how the mitigation is implemented is a more political one; there are always alternatives in politics – although other have been claimed – and it cannot be derived directly from research as to what would be the best toolkit to prevent the phenomenon. There are strong financial interests involved: when the economy is affected, there are often winners and losers. For example, since the 1980s at the latest, large oil companies with their networks have incited distrust towards climate science and lobbied against decisions preventing the use of fossil fuels, even though they have been aware of the progress of climate change (Grasso, 2020; Ruser, 2018). This has happened especially in the United States but is also a broader phenomenon (Ruser, 2018).

Among people, not only climate change but also policies that attempt to mitigate it can cause concern, for example regarding possible rising costs. In an ideal situation, we could identify methods that at the same time reduce emissions effectively, are accepted by citizens, and do not cause unsolved social problems, for example, in relation to livelihoods.

The means of climate policy can be classified as those that aim to prevent activities that cause greenhouse gas emissions, for example by making it more expensive or prohibiting it, and those that aim to promote low-emission or zero-emission practices, for example by making them easier or cheaper. In the vernacular, we talk about sticks and carrots.

The carrot-type approach is generally more popular among citizens: The background here is that, in general, actions with a small, hidden, or indirect impact on one's own life are usually the most highly supported. An example is the financing of renewable energy with public funds. At this point, it can perhaps be pointed out that time has at least partially overtaken this set of questions, as the price of renewable energy has dropped in such a way that increasing it does not necessarily need public funding, but these results clarify the principle related to attitudes. On the other hand, support for measures whose limiting effect on one's own life is felt more directly or more visibly is on average lower – such as, for example, a higher carbon tax. Framing the carbon tax with environmental reasons is not necessarily enough to increase its support significantly, but the social effects should also be considered.

Experts, especially economists, often recommend a stick strategy that affects prices, which is not particularly popular among citizens. However, with economic compensations, it is at least to some extent possible to influence how supported, for example, environmental taxes are (Jagers et al., 2021).

At the same time, it is good to note that whether an action aims to prevent or promote a certain type of activity, however, tells a limited extent about the popularity of policy actions: In the research results concerning Finland, both the most popular and the least popular action could be classified in the carrot category.

In my doctoral research, I compared the support for climate action between different regions and groups of people in Europe, at the same time examining the essential background factors connected to those attitudes. Despite there being more concern about climate change in Southern Europe than in the Nordic countries (Pohjolainen et al., 2018), the Nordic countries show more support for the taxation of fossil fuels. It seems that in Southern Europe, concern is therefore poorly channeled into support for climate policy or at least fossil fuel taxation.

A key background factor in higher support for the carbon tax is trust in political institutions. In Finland – like other Nordic countries – trust in political institutions is relatively strong (Söderlund, 2019). Higher and relatively universal social spending and lower corruption have been found to be associated with higher political trust (Shore, 2019; Söderlund, 2019). The Nordic welfare state model may therefore offer an ad-

vantage in promoting climate-friendly taxation.

The Nordic countries have indeed been pioneers in introducing carbon and fuel taxes. Although Sweden has sometimes taken credit for this, the first country to introduce a carbon tax was Finland in 1990 (Honkatukia, 2000). Of course, the guiding effect has been limited if we look at total emissions. In Sweden, on the other hand, it is at the highest level in the world and there its effects can be verified, for example, in district heating system (Sterner, 2020).

Given that trust in political institutions appears to increase support for a carbon tax, should we actively work to enhance political trust? From one point of view, this could be the case, because high-quality administration and a comprehensive welfare state can be useful in increasing trust, and thus also help in promoting climate-friendly taxation. The problem here is the quick schedule in which measures should be taken to prevent the worst effects of the climate crisis. It is a reality that climate action must be implemented in vastly different social contexts. The idea that societies should first, for example, significantly eradicate corruption, may too long a path to travel in this case, although it is otherwise a good goal for many reasons. On the other hand, some argue that a certain amount of mistrust can be a healthy situation, and too much trust can also be associated with risks. In addition, it is worth noting that per capita emissions are still relatively high in Finland, so Finnish welfare state cannot be considered a particularly good exemplary in this regard.

In the future, it would also be advantageous to have a further analysis of why certain means of climate policy are more popular than others. Why might certain policies be perceived as unfair among citizens, and how could these views be considered? Here, qualitative research or research combining its methods with quantitative research can provide valuable information.

As the mitigation work schedule is tight, it would be appropriate in an attitude survey to take a closer look at what kind of combinations of different environmental and socio-political measures are supported. A sustainability transition that is extensive and includes many different policy measures can of course be implemented in numerous ways, and the related attitudes would be an appropriate subject for further research. The transition will require, for example, combinations of economic, social, and environmental policy measures. This also poses a challenge to attitude research and requires interdisciplinary cooperation: what combinations of methods could be effective, supported and otherwise legitimate in the eyes of experts and others at the same time.

Furthermore, although this work has focused on mitigation policies, more information is also needed on people's attitudes towards climate change adaptation measures.

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