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Concerned and willing to pay? Comparing policymaker and citizen attitudes towards climate change

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Abstract

Public opinion about climate change is well documented, but policymaker attitudes are less known. To examine the foundations for policymaking, we analyze congruence in policymaker-citizen attitudes concerning climate change. We use surveys conducted among the Finnish policymaking elite (n = 675) and a representative sample of the Finnish voting-age population (n = 1,701) in 2018-19, which included identical items of climate change concern and willingness to reduce personal living standard to curb climate change. Policymakers demonstrate much more concern for climate change and willingness to pay to, suggesting a significant attitudinal disconnect between policymakers and citizens. The incongruence remains when taking personal income into account. In terms of party support, policymaker opinion aligns with opinions of voters of the green party in Finland. We speculate whether the observed opinion incongruence could restrict policymakers' possibilities to make climate-friendly policies and whether the climate-skeptic populist parties could use it for political gain.

Introduction

Democracies struggle to produce successful policies to deal with climate change. Across industrialized democracies, reductions in emissions lag far behind target rates needed to gain control over climate change. Among notable reasons for democratic policy failure are resistance from organized interests, over-emphasis on costs, lack of a mechanism for global-scale

governance and intra-state political competition (e.g., Victor et al., 2017). We suggest another possible factor – incongruence between elite and public opinion on climate change. Whilst there are many studies of public attitudes towards climate change (e.g. Egan & Mullin, 2017), studies of policymaker opinion are much rarer. In what, to our knowledge, is the first analysis of its kind, we go beyond simple measures of public and policymaker opinion, and compare the two with identical measures. This allows us to draw attention to a sizable gap between public and policymaker opinion with regard to climate change. We demonstrate that the policymaking elite is much more worried about climate change than the general public.

This is important from a policy perspective, because the legitimacy and functioning of representative democracy assumes that citizens' interests and democratic policy output, to some degree, converge (Arnold & Franklin, 2012). Actual policies do not always reflect citizen opinion, but radically diverging from it could cause instability in democratic governance in the long term. Since democratic governments are typically attentive to public opinion (e.g. Wlezien & Soroka, 2012), opinion incongruity could potentially be an obstacle to effective climate policy. This makes the policymaker-citizen opinion linkage a vital aspect in the study of climate politics.

Policymaker attitudes toward climate change

Scholars have shown remarkably little interest in the opinions of policymakers. The extensive review of climate change politics by Bernauer (2013) does not mention any studies that examine policymaker opinion, although policymakers are obviously key actors in climate policy. Policymaking is constrained by both public opinion and institutional realities, but the policymakers' personal opinions also affect the decisions they make. Moreover, research shows that policymaker opinion is an important driver of public opinion about climate change (Brulle et al., 2012).

According to the few available studies, policymakers typically approach climate change policy from an economic viewpoint, which makes them wary of possible electoral loss (Kammermann & Dermont, 2018). In addition to emphasizing the economy, politicians often speak about climate policy in technical terms, rather than focusing on its impact on people and society (Willis, 2017). This contributes to a feeling of distance from climate policy in the minds of ordinary citizens. Moreover, elite opinion seems to mirror the same ideological demarcation line that is found among conservatives and liberals in the general public (Fielding et al., 2012).

Conservative political leaders often demonstrate a sense of climate change skepticism. In fact, citizen opinion might actually be less polarized and partisan than elite opinion (Kammermann & Dermont, 2018).

However, an analysis of congruence between policymaker and citizen opinion is still lacking. Such an analysis requires proper samples of policymakers and the general public and identical opinion measures. This unique combination is available in two surveys conducted in Finland in 2018-2019. We make two comparisons using these data. Firstly, we compare citizens and different policymaker groups – politicians, public officials and advocacy group representatives. By distinguishing between different policymaker groups, we include the various perspectives that are present in the real-life democratic policymaking process. Secondly, we examine opinion congruence between policymaker opinion and partisanship among citizens. Previous research suggests that climate change attitudes are structured primarily along partisan lines, both among policymakers and citizens. From the viewpoint of democratic representation, comparing opinion congruence among voter groups offers a look into whose preferences policymakers are likely to be attentive to.

Methods

Conducted online in November 2018, the policymaker survey targeted the top-tier of national-level policymakers in Finland. Invitation was sent to work e-mail addresses of mid- to top-level public officials in government ministries and agencies, all MPs, parliamentary party officials and the mid- to top-level managers in the largest advocacy groups, such as trade unions. From the total population of 3,500 individuals, 675 respondents provided complete responses to the survey. The citizen survey was conducted in February 2019. The sample (n=1,701) is representative of the voting-age population in terms of age, gender, education and place of residence.

Using identical measures in both surveys, we can compare two key attitudes across policymakers and citizens: 1) a personal sense of *concern for climate change* (hereinafter CCC) which is linked with support for climate policy and climate mitigation behavior (Bouman et al., 2020); and 2) *willingness to pay for climate change mitigation* (hereinafter WTP), which is widely used by scholars to capture the real-life dilemma faced by democratic publics, where successful climate policy requires willingness to bear policy costs (e.g., Mayer & Smith, 2019).

Results

Figures 1-2 compare the means in climate change attitudes among the public and the various policymaker groups (politicians (n = 161), public officials (n = 436) and advocacy group representatives (n = 58)). Although policymakers and citizens alike might want to portray themselves as the ‘good guys’ and display climate-friendly attitudes, politicians’ dependence on public support could make them particularly vulnerable to such a social desirability effect. Public officials or advocacy group representatives may not feel such pressure, because their careers do not depend directly on public support. They are, however, typically policy experts and perhaps likely to hold climate-friendly attitudes due to the scientific consensus around climate change urgency.

Ranging between 1 and 4, the means are calculated from Likert scale responses to the statements ‘How concerned are you personally about climate change?’ (‘Very’ = 4; ‘Somewhat’ =3; ‘Only a little’ = 2; ‘Not at all’ = 1) and ‘How much would you be prepared to compromise on your personal standard of living in order to help curb climate change?’ (‘A lot’ = 4; ‘Somewhat’ = 3; ‘Only a little’ = 2; ‘Not at all’ = 1). Higher values mean higher CCC / WTP and the whiskers indicate confidence intervals at .005-level.

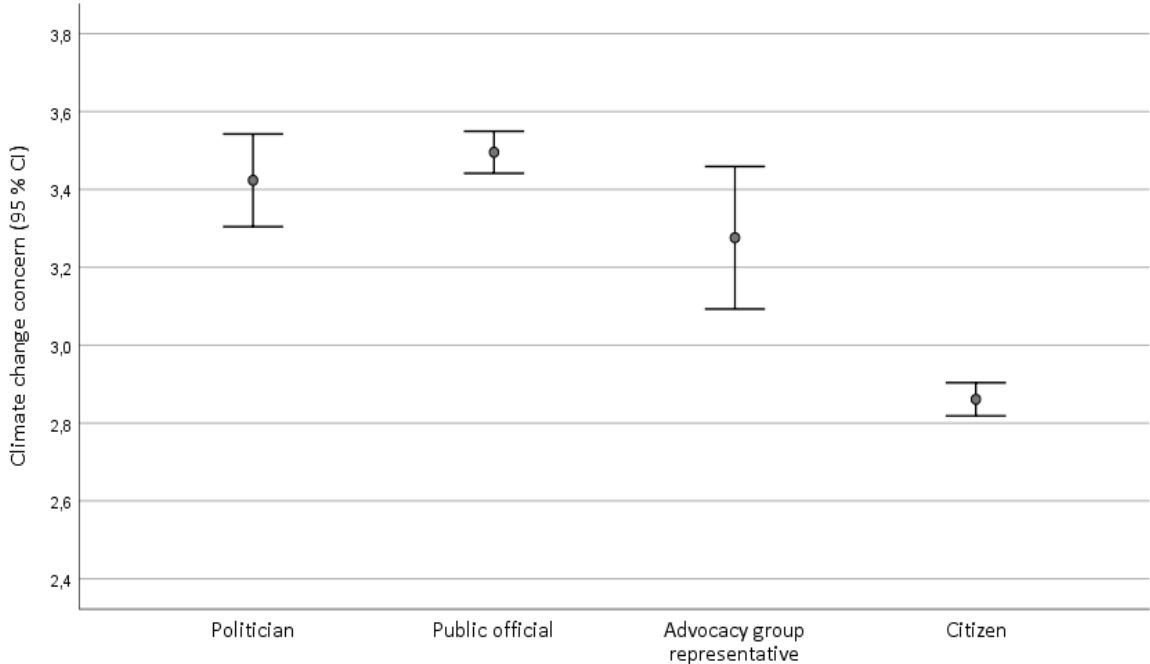


Figure 1. Climate change concern across the respondent groups

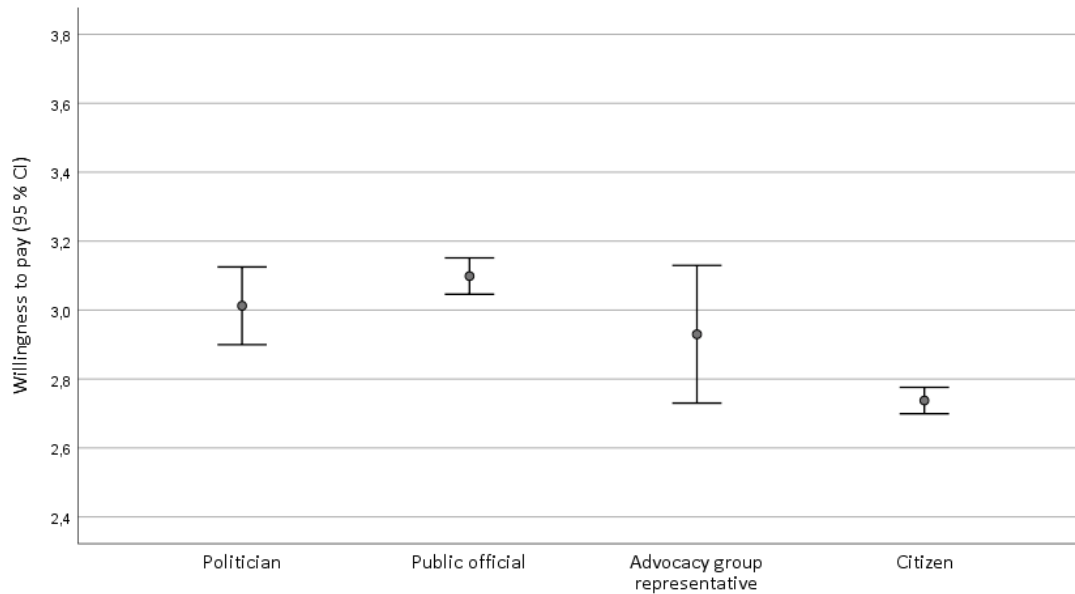


Figure 2. Willingness to pay across the respondent groups

Policymakers clearly demonstrate more CCC and show greater WTP to mitigate it. Pairwise comparisons of group means (Bonferroni method) show no statistically significant differences between any of the policymaker groups, while all comparisons with citizens are statistically significant both for CCC and WTP. Thus, differences are only found between citizens and policymakers.

Although a thorough investigation of how much CCC and WTP vary across individuals in the citizen sample is outside our scope, checking the possible impact of (high) personal income seems warranted, as a simple robustness check. It seems plausible that people, who can afford environment-friendly life choices, could be more prepared to express environmental concern and more willing pay for environmental benefits. In Figures 3 and 4, the citizen sample is divided according to income. The 'top income' group includes respondents, who reported an annual personal income of 50 000 € or higher, which corresponds to approximately top 13 percent earnings in Finland (Statistics Finland, 2018).

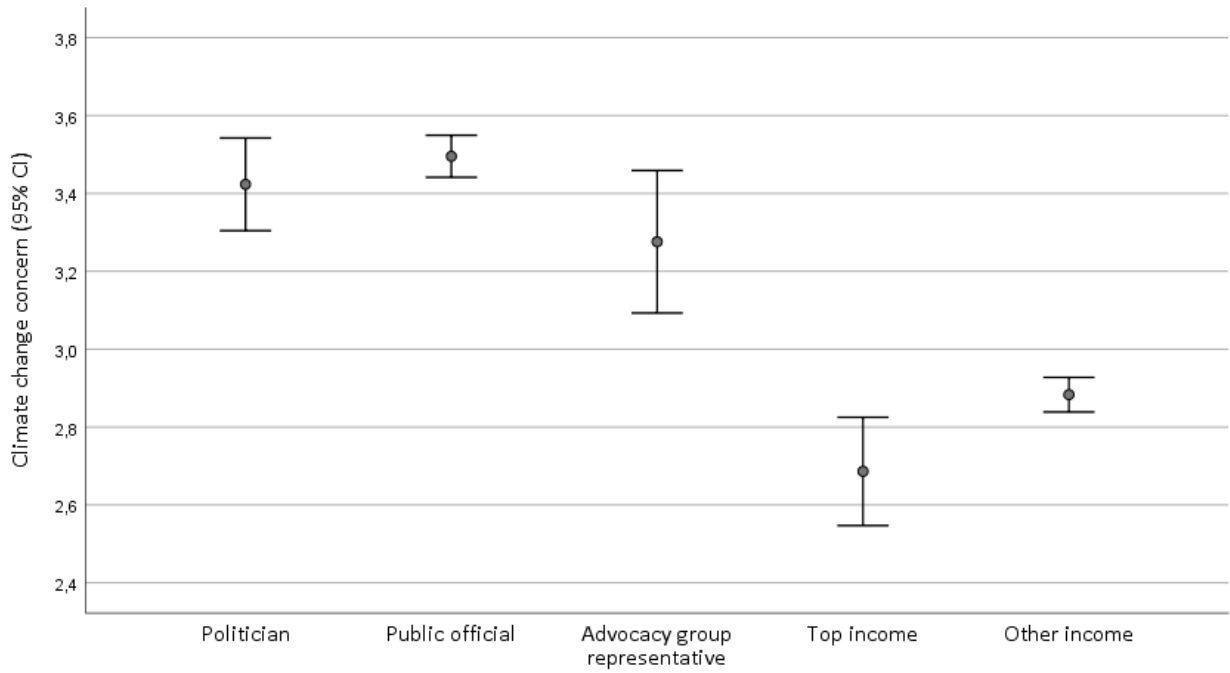


Figure 3. Climate change concern by respondent group, citizens separated into two income categories

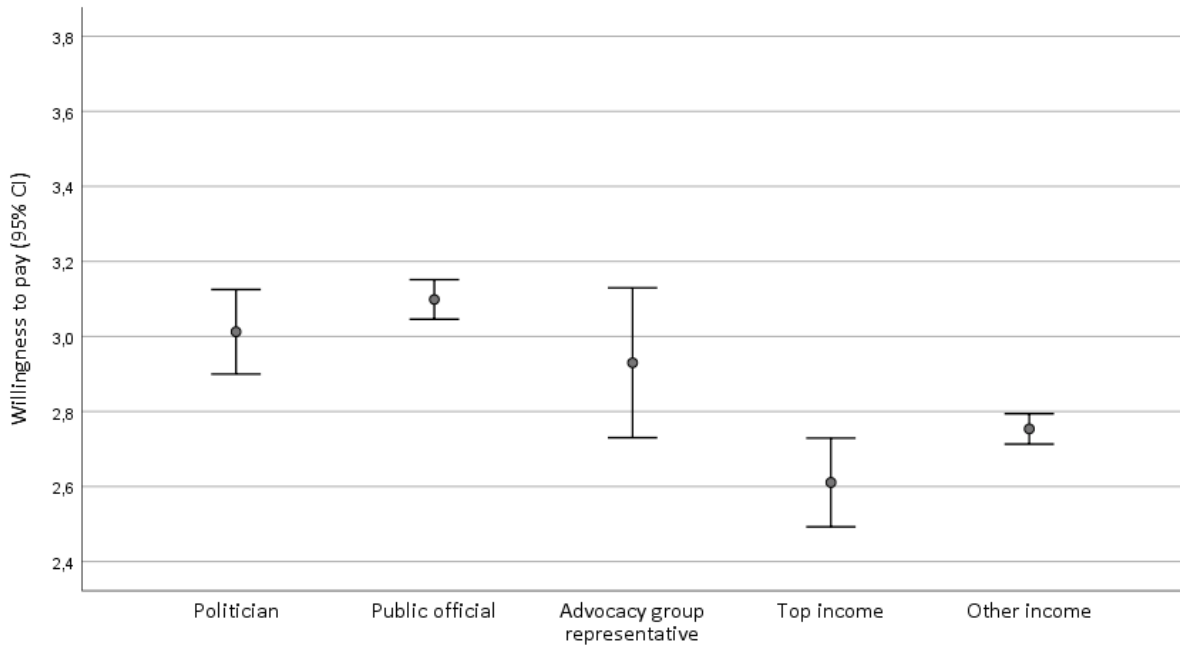


Figure 4. Willingness to pay by respondent group, citizens separated into two income categories

Figures 3 and 4 demonstrate that people with high income show lower levels of CCC and WTP than people outside the (approximately) top income decile. Although the group-level analysis offers only a crude estimate, the figures suggest that high income is not driving the observed elite-citizen attitude gap. Actually, top earners in the citizen sample are, on average, less concerned and willing to pay than others.

Across all preceding group comparisons, the CIs are largest for advocacy group representatives, suggesting more uncertainty for the findings in this group. The larger variance likely stems from the fact that the group includes representatives from various advocacy groups, ranging from business peak organizations to environmental lobbies. The low n is further reason to approach the findings for the group with some caution.

Standard deviations for the group means are slightly larger for citizens than for the policymaker groups. They are largest for the top income group (CCC = .966, WTP = .814), suggesting more attitudinal variation within this group. In economic-rational terms, opposing costs of environmental protection is probably sensible for these individuals, although some high-earners nevertheless display environment-friendly attitudes. In contrast, public officials are the most unanimous group with lowest standard deviations, suggesting they may view the cost burden more from a viewpoint of public, but not personal, spending.

From the perspective of democratic representation, the crucial question behind opinion congruence is whose voice does policymaker opinion best resemble? We tentatively touch upon this complex issue in Table 1, which shows opinion congruence between policymakers and citizens grouped according to partisanship. As explained, the most important divide in climate attitudes is found between conservative/populist supporters and liberals. To capture this, we include the ‘party voted for in the most recent (2015) parliamentary election’ in the analysis. In the Finnish context, the climate skeptics are represented by the Finns Party, and to a lesser extent the agrarian Centre Party, whilst the Green League, followed by the Left Alliance, are the strongest supporters of climate action (The Finnish Climate Barometer, 2019)¹.

Entries in Table 1 are differences in mean aggregate opinion, measured on the same Likert scale as above, ranging between 1 and 4. Higher negative values indicate greater opinion incongruence.

Table 1. Opinion congruence according to party support

	CCC	WTP
<i>All</i> (n = 1,646)	-.60***	-.32***
<i>Party voted for</i>		
Centre (132)	-.75***	-.39***
The Finns Party (203)	-.1***	-.74***
National Coalition (188)	-.57***	-.30***
SDP (165)	-.51***	-.33***
Green League (154)	-.08	.16***
Left Alliance (95)	-.31***	-0.01

Welch's unpaired t-test. *** P < 0.001.

Table 1 demonstrates that policymakers and citizens are further apart from each other in terms of CCC than WTP and that partisanship draws distinct, and expected, dividing lines. The Finns Party voters are clearly furthest from policymaker opinion, while green and leftist voters are closest. Policymaker opinion approximates to the attitudes of Green League supporters. Besides the Green League and the Left Alliance, we detect a significant representative disconnect between the voters of all other parties in terms of climate change attitudes. From the perspective of representation, there seems to be a substantial, partisan-based gap in climate change attitudes, which could potentially impede policymaking.

Discussion

Existing research has not properly compared policymaker and citizen attitudes toward climate change, although from the viewpoint of democratic policymaking, the comparison is vital. Democratic leaders often steer public opinion, but they must also be attentive to it, which makes the elite-public opinion linkage significant for democratic governance.

Comparing policymaker and citizen attitudes regarding climate change concern and willingness to pay with Finnish survey data, we find a significant gap between policymakers and ordinary citizens. Policymakers, regardless of their role in the policymaking process, are much more concerned and willing to pay for climate change than citizens. The incongruence remains also when taking into account differences in personal income. In terms of partisanship, Green

League voters hold similar opinions to policymakers, and their willingness to pay to reduce the negative consequences of climate change is even greater. However, the majority of voters are clearly more critical, with supporters of the populist Finns Party being the most distant group in terms of climate change attitudes.

From the perspective of representative democracy, a disconnect in climate change attitudes might contribute to democratic shortcomings in managing the climate crisis. It seems that policymakers would like to commit more strongly to fighting climate change, but the citizenry is not equally convinced. While we can only speculate about policy consequences, the attitude gap is suggestive of a problem of policy representation, which could hamper political efforts to mitigate climate change.

Finland typically ranks as a high-performer in environmental policy (e.g. Jahn, 2014; but see Gronow et al., 2019), thus challenging the idea that public opinion automatically directs policy output. One explanation could be that most citizens do not consider the demonstrated attitude gap important enough to be a genuine problem of representation. People might realize that their preferences are not reflected in environmental policy, but their focus is in other matters. Alternatively, it might simply be that the public is not fully aware of the substantial gap between policy output and public opinion within environmental policy. Often poorly informed about politics (e.g. Bartels, 1996), it would not be surprising if democratic publics were unaware of such discrepancies. The degree of awareness is also likely to vary between political systems. Finland is a highly fragmented multiparty system, and placing political blame or claiming political credit is very difficult. For policymakers, ‘hiding’ the discrepancy between policy and public opinion is much harder in two-party systems where political accountability is, at least theoretically, clearer.

We argue that scholars should pay more attention to (in)congruence in climate change opinion between policymakers and ordinary citizens. Research has shown that public support for climate policy may be the most important determinant of policy adoption at the local level (Yeganeh et al., 2020), yet recent findings show that the public’s concern for the climate does not necessarily increase even when the negative impact of climate change increases (e.g. Howe et al., 2019). We suggest paying attention to policy acceptance by democratic publics. As pointed out by Bryner (2008, 33), some of the most dramatic shifts toward green policies have occurred as a result of changes in public opinion caused by dramatic events such as the discovery of the ozone hole in the 1980s.

The Finnish case suggests that public opinion does not necessarily encourage policymakers to make ambitious climate change policy, despite a widespread preparedness among policymakers to do so. The observed attitude gap could be utilized by those political forces, which resist climate policy. In fact, the current wave of electoral success for parties representing the populist radical right, originated as a counter-reaction to the emergence of the green political movement (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020, 29-30). A persistent and substantial incongruence in climate change opinions between policymakers and citizens could be used by populist parties for political gain. The power of public opinion for democratic climate policy should not be underestimated. Policymakers who wish to mold public opinion towards climate-friendliness, should not rely exclusively on science-based communication, but instead understand the key role played by (social) media in shaping attitudes in either direction (e.g. Carmichael & Brulle, 2017; also Lyytimäki et al., 2020).

Although the data provide a unique analytical opportunity, they raise questions of validity and generalizability. For example, we cannot rule out that high income among policymakers could contribute to their climate-friendly attitudes. Trust in political institutions, politicians and public administrators are very high in Finland, suggesting that attitude gaps could be even larger in countries with less trust towards the political system.

¹ Public accounts indicate that Finns Party formally accepts climate change, but is skeptical towards climate action.

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