

# Think Globally, Act Locally: The Determinants of Local Policymakers' Support for Climate Policy

## Abstract

Given the lack of sufficient progress at the national level to combat climate change, local environmental initiatives have taken on increased importance. However, relatively little research examines the policy preferences of local policymakers themselves and whether policymaker and public preferences are contradictory or congruent. To address these gaps in the literature, we conduct a conjoint experiment on over 500 local policymakers and pair this elite experiment with an identical replication conducted on the American public. Per our theoretical expectations, we find that a range of climate policy attributes have a significant impact on policymaker support, and elite preferences are largely congruent with public preferences. Although national polarization over climate change suggests hope for progress is far-fetched, our findings demonstrate the probability of policy adoption can be increased by strategic design and local climate initiatives can potentially gain the support of both policymakers *and* members of the public.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>This study was pre-registered with OSF and was granted exempted status by the Institutional Review Board of the authors' university.

Given the lack of sufficient progress at the national level to combat climate change, local environmental initiatives have taken on increased importance. For example, while the federal government under the leadership of President Trump withdrew from the Paris Climate Agreement, over 400 mayors subsequently committed to upholding its emissions targets. This “We Are Still In” campaign includes cities and states with a combined GDP of over 9 *trillion* dollars and representing over 150 million Americans. As Salt Lake City Mayor Jackie Biskupski said, “We must lead where the White House refuses to” (Daalder, 2017). Similarly, President Barack Obama said that “the determination of our state and local governments...allowed our country to move forward despite hostility from the [Trump] White House [towards the Paris Agreement]” (Zak, 2021). Thousands of cities and towns have also joined international initiatives—like the ICLEI Local Governments for Sustainability—and developed their own Climate Action Plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Betsill and Bulkeley, 2004). Many of these plans set highly ambitious climate goals, such as carbon neutrality. Consequently, although American politics has nationalized in recent years (Hopkins, 2018), progress on climate change has been a more bottom-up phenomenon compared to other policy issues (Pulver, Rabe and Stoett, 2009; Egan and Mullin, 2017).

What factors impact whether local policymakers decide to support climate plans, and do policymakers and the public have congruent or contradictory preferences? Answering these two essential questions is crucial for the future of environmental initiatives for two broad reasons. First, policymaker preferences are intrinsically meaningful because they are the key decision-makers directly choosing whether to support or oppose local climate initiatives (Freire, Mignozzetti and Skarbek, 2021). Even when there is broad support among the public for certain policies—such as universal background checks for gun purchases—a lack of policymaker support can prevent these policies from being enacted. Although many previous studies have analyzed the American and global *public’s* views on climate change policy,<sup>2</sup> there has been much less research on the views of lo-

---

<sup>2</sup>See Bechtel and Scheve (2013); Bernauer and Gampfer (2015); Drews and van den Bergh (2016); Egan and Mullin (2017); Bergquist, Mildemberger and Stokes (2020).

cal *policymakers* themselves despite the substantive significance of their preferences. The small number of studies that do survey local policymakers on environmental issues provide valuable insights, but are often focused on descriptive rather than causal relationships (e.g., [Bae and Feiock, 2013](#); [Einstein, Glick and Palmer, 2020](#); [Lee and Stecula, 2021](#)), or utilize state-specific or region-specific samples rather than national samples of local policymakers (e.g., [Gerber, 2013](#)).

Moreover, it is unclear to what extent policy attributes are expected to affect policymaker preferences. Some studies find null or limited effects of policy design—and other factors like exposure to environmental disasters or issue frames—on support for initiatives to combat climate change ([Bernauer and McGrath, 2016](#); [Hazlett and Mildenerger, 2020](#); [Mildenerger et al., 2022](#)). Because polarization over climate change remains high in the United States, there may be little room for policy design and attributes to impact support for addressing climate change. In contrast to these pessimistic results, we pre-registered hypotheses that the design of climate plans and other salient factors like partisan endorsements and international participants can increase (or decrease) support for environmental action among local policymakers, including Republicans. Different policy designs have distinct political, economic, and environmental implications, which should influence policymakers' preferences ([Bechtel and Scheve, 2013](#)).

Second, policymaker climate change preferences are also important *relative* to public preferences. If policymakers and the public hold contradictory views on the optimal structure of climate plans, then that makes it more difficult to design environmental policies with broad political support among elites *and* the public. This, in turn, increases the chances that such efforts will fail. Wildly divergent views between elites and the public would also raise thorny questions about democratic accountability and representativeness on this significant issue ([Broockman and Skovron, 2018](#); [Sheffer et al., 2018](#)). The presence or lack thereof of elite-public gaps is contested in the literature (e.g., [Dellmuth et al., 2019](#); [Kertzer, 2020](#)), and the potential existence of an elite-public gap specifically in the realm of climate change is particularly understudied.<sup>3</sup> Given policymakers' po-

---

<sup>3</sup>But see [Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenerger and Stokes \(2019\)](#) and [Lee et al. \(2021\)](#).

litical incentives to be responsive to public opinion, as well as the impact elite cues can have on the public (Broockman and Butler, 2017; Guisinger and Saunders, 2017), we pre-registered an expectation that policymaker and public preferences would be largely congruent. Additionally, because of the salience of climate change as an issue, we expect congruence is especially likely in this context since policymakers have relatively high political incentives to be attuned to public views on climate policy.

To address these gaps in the literature, we develop a series of theoretical expectations and draw on two sources of data. First, we leverage a national sample of local policymakers that includes mayors, county executives, and council members from across the United States (Malhotra, Monin and Tomz, 2019; Shaffer et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021; Lee, 2021; Lee and Stecula, 2021). Specifically, we conducted a pre-registered conjoint experiment on over 500 local policymakers that randomly varied seven key attributes of a climate plan. We utilize a conjoint design because it allows us to simultaneously vary many attributes at once, better representing the multiple tradeoffs policymakers face in choosing between complex policy instruments (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014). The seven attributes we experimentally manipulate are theoretically motivated and fall into three broad categories: specific policies, politically-relevant endorsements and participants, and structural characteristics. The specific policies relate to taxes, energy efficiency standards, and economic relief. The politically-relevant factors include domestic partisan endorsements of the climate plan and international participants in the plan. The structural characteristics involve the time to implementation and a cost-benefit projection of the climate initiative. Our elite experiment, which is relatively rare in political science research (Kertzer, 2020), allows us to causally identify the effects of these different factors on support for climate initiatives among local policymakers.

The second source of data we draw on is a nationally representative sample of over 1,000 members of the US public. The design of this study is substantively identical to the design of our policymaker experiment, which enables us to analyze whether there are large elite-public gaps in climate change policy preferences.

Overall, the results of our experiments demonstrate that a range of factors have

a significant impact on local policymaker support for climate policies, including for Republican policymakers. Providing unique insight into local policymaker preferences on climate change, we show that partisan signaling matters, but it is not the *only* thing that matters in generating support for climate plans. We also find that the preferences of policymakers and the mass public are largely congruent. Although national polarization over climate change suggests hope for progress is fleeting, our findings demonstrate the chances of policy adoption can be raised *if* environmental policies are optimally designed across a range of different dimensions to maximize support. Our results also indicate it is feasible to design climate change plans with broad political support among local policymakers *and* the public, increasing the probability they will have sufficient backing to pass. While other barriers remain to progress, these findings are heartening compared to if the opposite dynamics held.

Our study also yields a series of more specific findings that should be of interest to both climate change scholars and political scientists more broadly. For example, our analysis reveals that policies with more hidden costs (such as subsidies) are favored compared to policies that impose more direct costs (such as taxes and penalties); including economic compensation to defray the costs of new government policies is popular, but does not increase support for bolder policy action; and there is a “backlash” effect whereby policies endorsed only by the Democratic party are less likely to be supported than policies endorsed by neither party.

To summarize, this project makes several contributions to the literature on climate politics and environmental policy, which spans multiple disciplines and all of the subfields of political science. First, we examine a substantively important and relatively understudied group of actors—local policymakers—whose decisions significantly impact the chances of climate progress. Second, the method we utilize—an elite experiment conducted on local policymakers—is rare in political science, but helps address a gap in the literature on the causal impact climate plan attributes have on policymaker support. Third, by pairing our elite experiment with an identical replication on the mass public, we are able to assess whether elite-public gaps exist on this issue. This is a contested

question in the literature, but one that is relevant for the future of climate progress and the representativeness of American democracy. Fourth, our findings will inform activists about what policies they should advocate for in order to achieve their goals, the public about what types of climate change policies their local officials are willing to support, and policymakers themselves about what their constituents want and the kinds of climate policies they can successfully pursue with their colleagues.

Our findings are also relevant to political science research more generally. For example, they contribute to the study of local government and federalism (Bulkeley, 2010; Le Galès, 2021), elite versus public opinion (Dellmuth et al., 2019; Kertzer, 2020), democratic accountability and representativeness (Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Sheffer et al., 2018), institutional design (Bechtel and Scheve, 2013; Freire, Mignozzetti and Skarbek, 2021), fiscal policy (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw, 2016; Gaikwad, Genovese and Tingley, 2022), and partisan dynamics (Guisinger and Saunders, 2017; Merkley and Stecula, 2021). While climate change should certainly be thought of as a global problem, one of the most promising pathways to combatting it is to act locally.<sup>4</sup>

## Climate Plan Attributes

Will climate policy attributes impact the willingness of local policymakers to adopt environmental plans? There are several reasons to doubt that this would be the case. First, policymakers may be unwilling to absorb the short-term costs of environmental action—irrespective of policy design and other salient attributes—because they view climate change as a problem with consequences distant in time and tend to discount the future (Hovi, Sprinz and Underdal, 2009; Jacobs and Matthews, 2012; Brugger et al., 2015). Second, high levels of polarization over this issue could mean that only partisan signaling (i.e., endorsements by the Republican and/or Democratic parties) will impact

---

<sup>4</sup>In addition to “We Are Still In” and the ICLEI Local Governments for Sustainability Program already mentioned, see also United Cities and Local Governments, *Regions4 Sustainable Development, C40*, and the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law.

support (e.g., [Hart and Nisbet, 2012](#); [Bernauer and McGrath, 2016](#)); substantive policy design will have little impact.

Third, public opinion among the electorate is unlikely to be a positive motivating factor. Given low public support for climate action and the relative stickiness of climate attitudes among the public (e.g., [Egan and Mullin, 2017](#); [Arias and Blair, 2022](#)), studies have found null or limited effects of policy design—as well as of other factors like exposure to climate-related wildfires or issue frames—on public support for action to combat climate change ([Bernauer and McGrath, 2016](#); [Hazlett and Mildenerger, 2020](#)). For instance, [Mildenerger et al. \(2022\)](#) analyze carbon tax rebate programs in Canada and Switzerland and find they had a quite limited impact on support for carbon pricing among the public. Given policymakers' electoral incentives to be responsive to public opinion, these dynamics may mean variation in climate policy attributes will do little to move the needle one way or the other; support will remain low no matter what.

On the other hand, there are also reasons to think that policy attributes should impact policymaker willingness to support climate plans. Logically, different policy designs have distinct political, economic, and environmental implications, which should influence policymakers' preferences (at least at the margins). In accordance with this view, although some studies do find null or limited effects of policy attributes on public support for climate policy, many analyses find evidence for the opposite, including among elites (e.g., [Bernauer and Gampfer, 2015](#); [Drews and van den Bergh, 2016](#); [Bergquist, Mildenerger and Stokes, 2020](#)). For example, [Bechtel and Scheve \(2013\)](#) find that policy attributes impact support for environmental initiatives in an experimental study on the public in the US, UK, France, and Germany. To the extent that the public updates their preferences in response to the economic and environmental consequences of variations in policy attributes, policymakers will have political incentives to adjust their preferences as well. Providing even more direct evidence for the possibility that policy attributes will impact the preferences of local policymakers in the US, [Freire, Mignozzetti and Skarbek \(2021\)](#) find design matters in an experimental study of Latin American elites.

Overall, in contrast to the pessimistic view that policy attributes cannot increase

support for environmental action, we expect that a range of climate plan attributes can increase—or decrease—support for environmental policies among local policymakers, including Republicans.<sup>5</sup>

There are, of course, nearly an infinite number of attributes associated with climate plans that could be studied. We focus on three different categories of attributes that we believe are particularly salient and important: (1) specific policies, (2) politically-relevant endorsements and participants, and (3) structural characteristics. From these categories, we derive seven particular attributes of climate plans and test how they impact support for the plan. We choose *ideal type* attributes that are broad enough to be relevant to local policymakers and members of the general public across the United States in both big and small cities and towns. Brutger et al. (2022) establish that a more abstract experimental design better enables researchers to identify whether an effect exists, which is the primary goal of our study. Though increasing contextual detail (e.g., exactly how much taxes would be raised etc.) is certainly an avenue for future research, Brutger et al. (2022) also show that doing so does not typically result in substantively different results.<sup>6</sup> This means our findings using relatively general and abstract treatments are likely to be externally valid. The seven attributes and their different levels are summarized in Table 1, and we now proceed to discuss each in more detail.

## Specific Policies

The first category of attributes we consider is substantive climate-related policies. Actual policies are at the heart of any climate plan and thus essential to study.

### Property Taxes

We analyze support for environmentally-relevant property taxes because tax instruments are one of the principal tools that have been implemented and advocated for

---

<sup>5</sup>This relatively broad hypothesis is consistent with our pre-analysis plan, which posited specific hypotheses about how individual features would impact policymaker support.

<sup>6</sup>It does dampen effect sizes to some extent due to a lower ability to recall the treatment.

**Table 1:** Climate Plan Attributes

Attribute	Levels
Type of Property Tax	<i>Benefits for clean/efficient energy use</i> Penalties for exceeding a certain carbon budget A general tax increase to fund clean/efficient energy projects
Higher Energy Efficiency Standards For	<i>Newly constructed government buildings</i> All new construction All new construction and existing buildings
Economic Relief	<i>None</i> Provided to all constituents Provided to constituents hurt by the policy
Party Endorsement	<i>No party endorsements</i> Democratic Party Republican and Democratic Party
International Participants	<i>Neither cities in China nor NATO countries</i> Cities in China but not in NATO countries Cities in NATO countries but not in China
Policy Begins In	<i>2 Years</i> 4 Years 6 Years
Cost-benefit Projection	<i>Low short-term costs; high long-term benefits</i> Low short-term costs; low long-term benefits High short-term cost; high long-term benefits

*Notes:* Levels used as baselines are italicized.

as a solution climate change (Mildenberger et al., 2022). According to economic theory, Pigovian taxes or subsidies can help bring about the socially optimal level of greenhouse gas emissions by either putting a “price” on carbon (via taxes) or rewarding actors for using clean sources of energy (via subsidies).

We focus on property taxes because this is the largest single source of tax revenue directly collected by local governments.<sup>7</sup> Many local governments also offer property tax subsidies for clean and efficient energy use and some are experimenting with taxes as well. For instance, nine counties in the Bay Area, Orange County in North Carolina, and Iowa City all increased property taxes in recent years specifically to address climate change. Some local governments are even implementing penalties for carbon use. For example, the city of Boulder in Colorado adopted a carbon tax on electricity use, and Aspen and

<sup>7</sup>See statistics collected by the [Tax Policy Center](#).

Pitkin counties in Colorado charge homeowners with energy-intensive amenities (e.g., heated pools and snowmelt driveways) a fee if they exceed a certain carbon budget.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, this attribute is realistic and reflects the types of policies local leaders could consider adopting.

The different levels of this attribute will enable us to test whether local policymakers are more supportive of environmental taxes or subsidies, a critical question for climate policy design specifically and fiscal policy more generally. Although taxes have received much attention, previous literature finds the *public* generally prefers subsidies to taxes and specifically prefers environmental subsidies to environmental taxes (Jagers and Hammar, 2009; Cherry, Kallbekken and Kroll, 2012; Drews and van den Bergh, 2016). This makes sense given that subsidies have more indirect and hidden costs than taxes, which causes individuals to underestimate their costs (Jagers and Hammar, 2009). Since policymakers have political incentives to avoid angering their constituents, we pre-registered a hypothesis that they will also prefer subsidies over taxes. Instead of penalizing their constituents with taxes, they can reward them for good environmental behavior with subsidies. A similar dynamic may also operate in other policy areas.

## Energy Efficiency Standards

Besides taxes and subsidies, regulations are another foundational policy tool that governments can employ to combat climate change. Instead of incentivizing good behavior through the use of economic carrots (subsidies) or sticks (taxes), governments can adopt a command-and-control approach and impose more direct limitations to combat climate change. Energy efficiency standards in buildings are an especially significant factor to study given that residential energy usage alone accounts for about 20% of greenhouse gas emissions in the US (Goldstein, Gounaridis and Newell, 2020). Moreover, energy efficiency standards are particularly relevant to local climate policy-making because local governments typically have control over building codes. This means energy efficiency

---

<sup>8</sup>While carbon penalties are not always implemented via property taxes, they can be in principle and doing so here enables us to hold constant the vehicle for implementation.

standards are a domain where local governments can have a significant impact (Bae and Feiock, 2013; Gerber, 2013).

The different levels of this attribute will allow us to test the extent to which policymakers are willing to support more expansive regulations to combat climate change. For example, are policymakers more supportive of relatively narrow standards just on government buildings since this will entail a minimal direct economic impact on constituents and thus potentially insulate policymaker from public blowback? Or will they support more expansive standards—like those on all new construction and existing buildings—that will likely combat climate change to a greater extent?<sup>9</sup>

## **Economic Relief**

We also explore the impact of providing economic relief to constituents because climate advocates have posited that this can help defray the short-term costs of environmental policies and thus increase support for climate action. This conjecture follows from the literature on international trade, which finds that compensation can increase support for free trade policies (Ruggie, 1982; Autor et al., 2014). Several studies have analyzed the impact of economic relief and found that members of the public, and possibly members of Congress, are more likely to support climate policies when they include some element of economic relief (Bergquist, Mildenberger and Stokes, 2020; Gaikwad, Genovese and Tingley, 2022; Kono, 2020). After all, support for climate action among the public is highly sensitive to the economic costs associated with it (Bechtel and Scheve, 2013; Bernauer

---

<sup>9</sup>For this attribute, as well as the time to implementation and cost-benefit analysis attributes, we pre-registered an expectation that, on average, policymakers would prefer less ambitious climate policies. This is because climate policy remains controversial and thus supporting environmental initiatives can lead to political backlash. On the other hand, due to the polarized nature of the issue, we also expected that policymakers with a greater general concern about climate change (e.g., Democrats) would be more supportive of ambitious climate policies. See the section below on subgroup analysis by political identification and the analysis of heterogeneous effects in the appendix.

and Gampfer, 2015; Bergquist, Mildemberger and Stokes, 2020). We pre-registered an expectation that local policymakers will generally be in favor of economic compensation to defray the costs of climate policies to constituents and, in turn, reduce the chances of political blowback. A similar logic could also hold for other types of government policies that impose costs on constituents.

## **Politically-Relevant Endorsements and Participants**

The second broad category we analyze concerns politically-relevant endorsements and participants. An essential element of politics is coalition-building, which makes it critical to understand the actors that must be won over to pass climate policies. Who must be part of the coalition in favor of a climate plan for it to obtain support among local policymakers?

### **National Party Endorsements**

We include this attribute in our study because despite the maxim that “all politics is local,” in recent years local politics has become increasingly nationalized, meaning national party endorsements may be particularly salient factors affecting local policymaker support for a climate plan (Hopkins, 2018). National party endorsements—or the lack thereof—may also provide a useful signal to local policymakers about how supporting a climate plan will impact their prospects for re-election to their current office or election to higher office in the future.

Following previous studies that find the public is more likely to support climate policies that have bipartisan support (Bergquist, Mildemberger and Stokes, 2020), we expect the same will hold among local policymakers as well. If both parties support a climate plan, then that makes it less likely a local policymaker’s support for a climate plan will be (effectively) used against them as a political weapon. We are also especially interested in whether there will be a “backlash” effect whereby Republican—and, potentially, even Democratic—policymakers and members of the public are more likely to support climate plans with no party support compared to only Democratic support. For

example, in an observational and experimental analysis, [Merkley and Stecula \(2021\)](#) find that Democratic elite cues in favor of climate action increase climate skepticism among Republicans. [Guisinger and Saunders \(2017\)](#) find evidence of a similar dynamic in a wide-ranging analysis of elite cues on international relations issues. If this holds among local policymakers, then that would have important implications for how climate activists and local policymakers themselves should think about how to effectively build coalitions for environmental action. It might also have implications for the partisan dynamics associated with other highly polarized policy issues.

### **International Participants**

We also test the impact of foreign cities participating in a climate plan since climate change is a global problem. Given the proliferation of international climate agreements between cities and other localities—such as the ICLEI Local Governments for Sustainability Program, which includes over 2,500 local and regional governments in more than 125 countries, including China—this is a realistic factor that might impact support for climate initiatives ([Betsill and Bulkeley, 2004](#)). For example, in a 2021 [call for participation](#) in the “Race to Zero” Campaign that was directly targeted to mayors, the participation of cities *around the world* was emphasized to encourage participation. Of course, this is not to say that international climate cooperation between cities typically involves reciprocal adoption of *identical* climate plans and policies. Nonetheless, participants in ICLEI’s Cities for Climate Protection Program and the “Race to Zero” campaign do have to commit to taking specific steps. For example, participants in the CCP Program commit to conducting a local emissions inventory, adopting an emissions target, developing a plan to meet the target, and then implementing the plan. Thus, a future international initiative that involves local governments committing to adopt more specific policies to combat climate change (like tax subsidies or greater energy efficiency standards), but that are still general enough to be adapted to local conditions, is plausible. More generally, the inclusion of this attribute enables us to explore how international participation in climate networks impacts support for climate policy.

If foreign local governments participate in a climate plan, then that may encourage

US local policymakers to do so as well since they will be less likely to feel as if their efforts are being taken advantage of by foreign countries (Axelrod, 1984; Keohane, 1984). They may also be more likely to believe their environmental actions will have a substantive impact on climate change compared to if foreign actors do not participate in the plan. Following studies that find greater international participation in climate initiatives increases public support for climate plans (e.g., Bechtel and Scheve, 2013), we expect that the same will hold among local policymakers. On the other hand, research by Tingley and Tomz (2014) finds that reciprocity is not a significant factor impacting public support for climate policy, as most members of the public believe environmental action at home should not depend on the level of action abroad. Our experiment can help adjudicate which view holds among local policymakers.

Our research design also allows us to examine whether participation by cities in in-group countries, like NATO members, matter more or less than participation by cities in out-group countries, like China. On the one hand, cues from in-group countries may send a stronger signal about a policy's appropriateness and necessity than cues from out-group countries (e.g., Duque, 2018; Chu, 2019). On the other hand, support for climate action may actually be higher when Chinese cities participate if policymakers fear environmental policy adopted by the US and NATO countries—but not China—will erode America's relative economic competitiveness.

## **Structural Characteristics**

The final broad category we analyze involves structural elements of climate plans. These kinds of institutional design elements have been shown to be critical empirical (Bechtel and Scheve, 2013) and theoretical (Keohane, 1984) factors impacting support for and the effectiveness of policy regimes and institutions.

## **Time to Implementation**

We analyze the impact of different timelines to policy implementation because given the urgent necessity of climate action to stave off catastrophic global warming,

the willingness of policymakers to act now as opposed kicking the can down the road is critically important. However, the “time-inconsistency” problem associated with climate change, whereby investing in reducing greenhouse gas emissions today may not fully pay off for many generations, incentivizes the current generation to under-invest in climate action (e.g., [Hovi, Sprinz and Underdal, 2009](#)). This is exacerbated by the fact that climate change is still often depicted as a problem with consequences distant in time ([Brugger et al., 2015](#)) and the public has been shown to discount the future ([Jacobs and Matthews, 2012](#)). Policymakers may therefore have political incentives to eschew climate action in the short-term. Similar incentives also exist for other policy areas that involve time-inconsistency problems.

### **Cost-Benefit Analysis**

The last attribute we include is an estimate of the plan’s short-term costs *and* long-term benefits. Unsurprisingly, a plethora of studies find that climate plans with higher costs are less likely to be supported by members of the public ([Bechtel and Scheve, 2013](#); [Bernauer and Gampfer, 2015](#); [Bergquist, Mildenerger and Stokes, 2020](#)). However, the key question we examine is not whether local policymakers are less likely to support plans with higher costs all else equal—undoubtedly they are—but whether they are willing or unwilling to *trade off* higher short-term costs for higher long-term benefits. Previous studies often look at the benefits and costs of climate action in isolation, but they are not independent and thus it is essential to consider them in combination. Though this attribute is admittedly abstract, it contrasts different ideal type plans and therefore forces policymakers to consider whether high long-term benefits are worth high short-term costs. Given the findings of [Brutger et al. \(2022\)](#), we expect increasing contextual detail (which, in this case, might involve including more details about the expected costs and benefits) would not lead to substantively different results.

In summary, we expect that these different climate plan attributes *will* generally have a significant effect on local policymaker support for environmental plans. Next, we consider whether policymaker preferences on climate plans are expected to mirror or diverge from those of the general public.

## Elite-Public Gaps

The presence or lack thereof of elite-public gaps is contested in the literature. Some studies—like [Dellmuth et al.’s \(2019\)](#) analysis of international organization legitimacy—find large divergences in opinion between government officials and the public. Studies in this tradition point out that contradictory views between policymakers and the public can arise for at least three different reasons ([Kertzer, 2020](#)). First, elites and the public generally differ in their average demographic characteristics, which can impact preferences. For example, a greater percentage of policymakers are male compared to the general public, and previous literature shows women are more likely to believe in and be concerned about climate change ([Egan and Mullin, 2017](#)). Second, elites and members of the public may have different policy preferences and beliefs. For instance, there is evidence that policymakers are more likely to believe global temperatures are increasing than the public ([Lee et al., 2021](#)). Finally, elites may have more rational and deliberative decision-making processes than average members of the public.

However, despite the many different ways elite-public gaps can arise, [Kertzer \(2020\)](#) conducts a meta-analysis of 162 paired experiments on members of the public and elites, and he finds that elites generally respond to treatments in the same ways as members of the public. Of the 162 treatment effects he analyzes, over 98% do not differ in sign (i.e., whether the relationship is positive or negative) between members of the public and elites, and almost 90% do not differ in size. In accordance with this finding, we pre-registered an expectation that policymaker and public preferences on climate plans would be largely congruent. Theoretically, we believe congruent preferences are likely for three reasons. First, policymakers have political incentives to be responsive to public opinion. Second, elite cues can impact public opinion, leading to preference convergence ([Broockman and Butler, 2017](#); [Guisinger and Saunders, 2017](#)). Third, climate change is a particularly salient issue, meaning policymakers have relatively high political incentives to be attuned to public views on climate policy compared to other, less salient policy areas. Similarly, elite cues on climate policy should be relatively conspicuous compared to elite cues about less salient policy areas. On the other hand, [Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenerger and Stokes](#)

(2019) show that Congressional staffers underestimate their constituents’ support for climate regulations, suggesting whether our pre-registered hypothesis will or will not hold in this context is an open question.

## Data and Methods

### Design

To analyze the determinants of local policymaker and public support for climate plans, we utilize a conjoint experimental design that randomly varies the level of each attribute outlined in Table 1. More specifically, this involves presenting respondents with two hypothetical climate plans side-by-side and asking them to choose which plan they prefer, as well as to rate each plan individually.<sup>10</sup>

We employ a choice-based conjoint design because it allows us to simultaneously vary many attributes at once, better representing the multiple tradeoffs policymakers face in choosing between complex policy instruments compared to more simplified factorial designs (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014). Conjoint experiments have also been used extensively by previous research to analyze how the design of climate policies affects support for them among the general public (Bechtel and Scheve, 2013; Bernauer and Gampfer, 2015; Bergquist, Mildemberger and Stokes, 2020). Though a conjoint experiment—like any survey experiment—measures *stated* rather than *revealed* preferences, the realism of conjoint designs minimizes social desirability bias and satisficing behavior, and has been shown to capture real behavioral benchmarks (Hainmueller, Hangartner and Yamamoto, 2015). Furthermore, given that this is an online experiment and participation is anonymous, respondents’ stated preferences should be more likely to match their actual preferences.

The context that respondents receive in the beginning of the experiment is that these are climate plans proposed by a non-partisan international organization. This mirrors real-world international climate initiatives aimed at local governments, and makes

---

<sup>10</sup>See the appendix for the full survey instrument and details on the conjoint methodology.

the inclusion of the international participants attribute more credible. After evaluating four pairs of plans, respondents are then asked to select the attribute that was most important in making their decisions, and to explain in an open-ended question why this factor was the most important in their opinion.

## Samples

In partnership with CivicPulse, a nonprofit research organization, we leverage a sample of 573 local policymakers that includes mayors, county executives, and council members from across the United States. This sample has been utilized in prominent research, including on environmental issues (Malhotra, Monin and Tomz, 2019; Shaffer et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021; Lee, 2021; Lee and Stecula, 2021). CivicPulse recruited respondents in April/May 2021 by inviting via email a *random* sample of *all* US town, municipal, and county elected officials serving populations above 1,000.<sup>11</sup> Survey weights, which we utilize in robustness checks, are provided by CivicPulse to increase sample representativeness.<sup>12</sup> We focus on US elites because America is the second largest emitter of greenhouse gases in the world (behind only China), meaning US environmental policy is substantively important for combatting climate change and thus essential to study. Additionally, as a leader on the global stage, the United States' action—or inaction—in combatting climate change can also potentially influence other countries' policies. In total, respondents in our elite experiment completed over 2,100 paired choice tasks.

We also field our conjoint experiment on a sample of 1,029 Americans recruited in December 2021 in partnership with Lucid. Lucid offers nationally representative samples based on age, gender, race/ethnicity, and region. Recent work shows experiments fielded on Lucid are high-quality and do well replicating previous findings (Coppock and McClellan, 2019), even during the COVID-19 pandemic (Peyton, Huber and Coppock, 2021).<sup>13</sup> Pairing our elite experiment with a substantively identical replication on the

---

<sup>11</sup>Summary statistics are shown in the appendix.

<sup>12</sup>Results are also robust to manually constructed Census-based weights.

<sup>13</sup>To mitigate the negative effects of respondent inattention, we include a pre-treatment

mass public enables us to compare and contrast the views of these populations.

## Results

Following the procedure set out by [Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto \(2014\)](#), we estimate the average marginal component effect (AMCE) for each attribute.<sup>14</sup> AMCEs indicate how much the probability of choosing a climate plan changes if a single attribute switches from one level to another.<sup>15</sup> For example, if no party endorsements is the baseline level for the party endorsements attribute, then an AMCE of -15 for the Democratic Party endorsement level means that respondents are 15 percentage points less likely to choose a climate plan when the Democratic Party endorses it compared to when no parties endorse it (averaging over the distribution of the remaining climate plan attributes). Consequently, AMCEs allow us to understand how each attribute impacts respondents' attitudes towards climate plans. [Figure 1](#) displays the main results for all policymakers in our sample, as well as the results for the public. [Figure 2](#) then illustrates the differences between policymakers and members of the public by plotting the difference in marginal means ([Leeper, Hobolt and Tilley, 2020](#)). Marginal means reflect the probability that a respondent will support a particular climate plan with a particular attribute level, averaging over the distribution of the remaining climate plan attributes.

In accordance with our expectations, we find that many different categories of climate policy attributes—from the specific policies included in them and political endorsements to their structural characteristics—impact local policymaker and public support. In total, 75% (21/28) of the AMCEs we analyze in our elite and public studies are significantly different from 0 at the 5% level, even after using the Benjamini-Hochberg

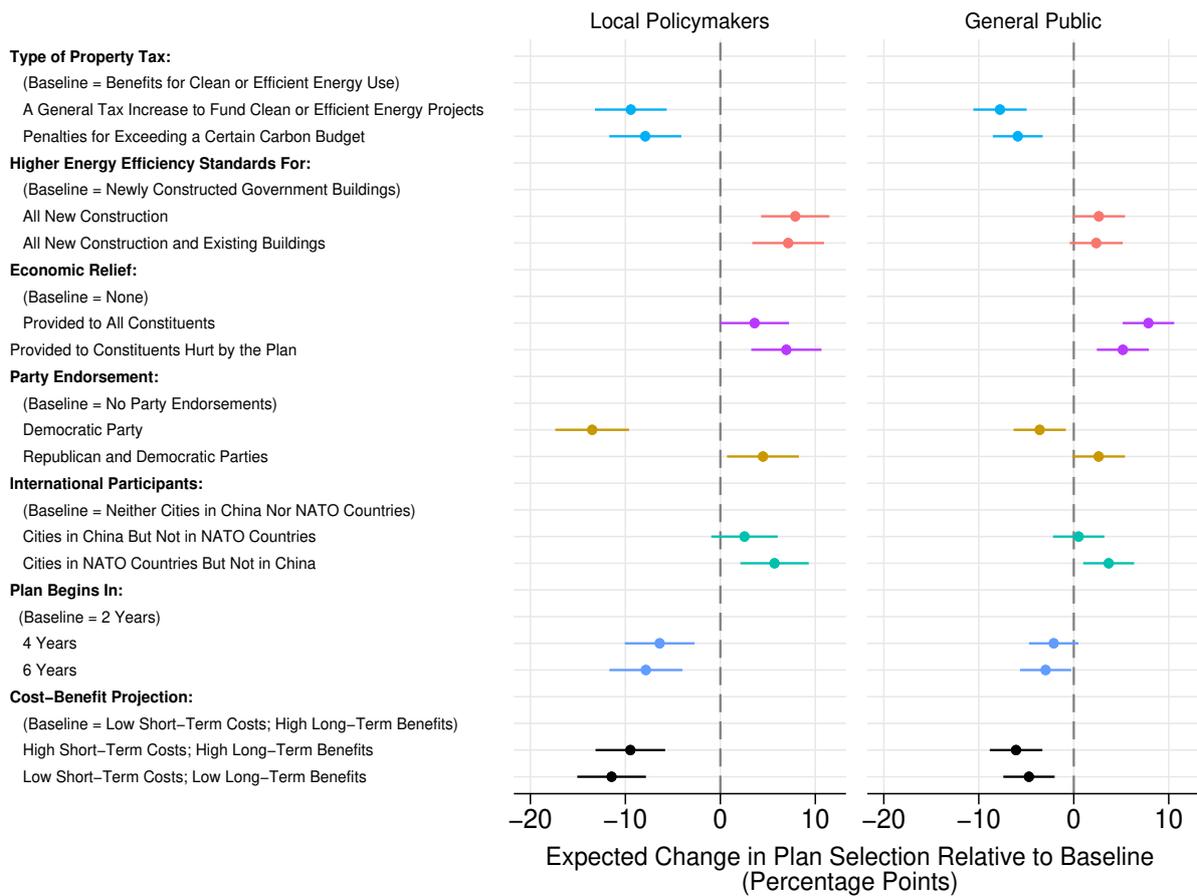
---

attention screener ([Berinsky, Margolis and Sances, 2014](#)).

<sup>14</sup>Because AMCEs can be sensitive to the choice of baseline ([Egami and Imai, 2018](#); [Leeper, Hobolt and Tilley, 2020](#)), we also analyze marginal means in the appendix and find that the results are robust.

<sup>15</sup>We cluster standard errors by respondent since each respondent completes multiple tasks.

**Figure 1:** The Impact of Climate Policy Attributes



**Note:** Bars are 95% confidence intervals based on respondent-clustered standard errors for the Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE) of each attribute level.

procedure to account for the possibility that some of our significant results are “false positives” (Kertzer, 2020).<sup>16</sup> Among policymakers, the percentage of significant AMCEs is even higher: over 85%.

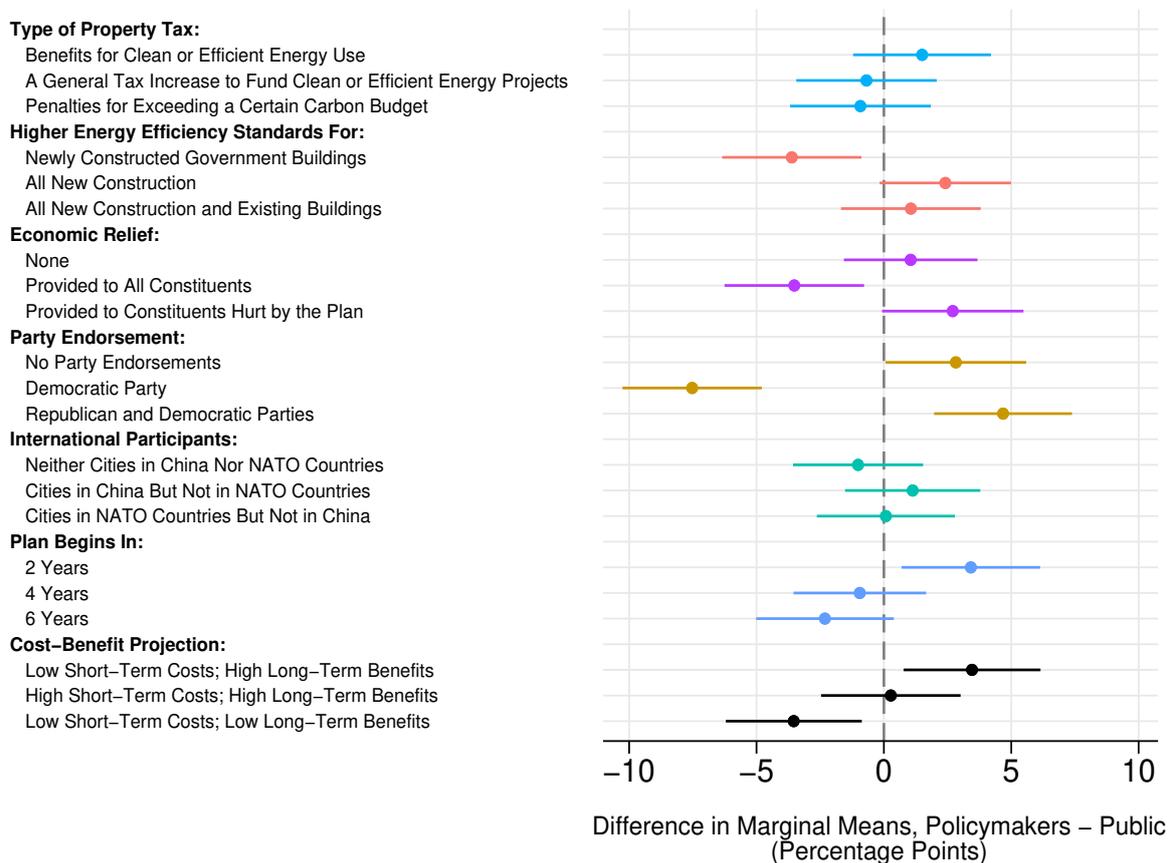
Also per our expectations, the preferences of policymakers and the mass public are largely congruent, in both sign and size. Per Kertzer (2020), effects can be said to differ in sign when (1) average treatment effects for both elites and members of the public significantly differ from 0, and (2) when one effect is negative and the other is positive. Following this procedure, *none* of the AMCEs outlined in Figure 1 significantly differ in sign between local policymakers and members of the public. Figure 2 further shows that

<sup>16</sup>Our false discovery rate, which is the expected share of rejected nulls that are “false positives,” is controlled at 5%.

a substantial majority—66%—of the marginal means we estimate do *not* significantly differ in size between local policymakers and members of the public when using the Benjamini-Hochberg procedure.

Collectively, these results—some of the first causal insights into a national sample of local policymakers’ preferences on climate policy—imply that (a) the probability of actually adopting climate plans can be increased with strategic policy design, and (b) climate initiatives can potentially gain the support of both policymakers *and* members of the public. To probe these results further, we now proceed to discuss our findings for each attribute in turn.

**Figure 2: Probing Elite-Public Gaps**



**Note:** Bars are 95% confidence intervals based on respondent-clustered standard errors for differences in marginal means between local policymakers and the public.

## Property Taxes

In accordance with our pre-registered expectations, we find that local policymakers and members of the public prefer subsidies compared to taxes. Specifically, local policymakers are about 8 to 9.5 percentage points less likely to support a climate plan that includes some kind of tax instead of benefits for clean or efficient energy use. A substantively identical pattern of results also holds for members of the public, and there are no significant differences between elite and public views with respect to this attribute. Although carbon and other related taxes have received much attention as a solution to climate change, this result implies that it is wiser from a political perspective to advocate for subsidies that encourage clean energy usage. This is especially the case because taxes and subsidies are policy substitutes in that they can have similar substantive impacts on climate change. Interestingly, we do not find any statistically significant evidence that local policymakers or members of the public are partial towards targeted taxes on a smaller proportion of the population that engage in counter-productive environmental behavior (that is, imposing penalties for exceeding carbon budgets) or a broader-based tax on all constituents. These findings may also have broader implications to the extent that policymakers support subsidies over taxes in other policy areas, which seems likely given that the logic driving this result applies in other policy contexts as well.

## Energy Efficiency Standards

Optimistically for the future of climate change efforts, we find that local policymakers are significantly more likely to support expansive energy efficiency standards. Compared to climate plans with higher energy efficiency standards only for newly constructed government buildings, respondents are about 7 to 8 percentage points more likely to support plans with higher standards for all new construction or all new construction *and* existing buildings. Given that the latter two policies would be significantly more invasive, disruptive, and potentially costly for constituents relative to higher standards only for government buildings, this result suggests at least some level of willingness on the part of local policymakers to impose costs on their constituents to make progress on

combatting climate change. Since residential buildings in the US have a huge carbon footprint, this is an especially significant finding. Although a similar pattern of results holds for the public, the substantive size of the effect is smaller and only statistically significant at the 10% level. This may reflect the fact that the economic costs of higher energy efficiency standards in this context are relatively direct for members of the public. While the level of public support is lower than that of policymakers, it is still non-negative, indicating that the public would be unlikely to raise substantial opposition to stricter energy efficiency measures.

## **Economic Relief**

Per our expectations, local policymakers and the public are generally supportive of economic compensation to defray the costs of climate policies. For policymakers, economic compensation may also be attractive for its potential to reduce the chances of political blowback. Given these findings, including economic compensation in climate plans (or in the context of other types of public policies that impose costs on constituents) may be a pathway to increasing local policymaker and public support.

There are also interesting differences when comparing the results among policymakers and public. Most notably, policymakers are less likely to support plans with relief provided to all constituents than members of the public ( $p < 0.02$ ). This divergence makes sense as members of the public have economic incentives to support universal rather than narrow economic compensation to maximize the probability they obtain financial relief themselves. This discrepancy between policymaker and public preferences makes designing climate plans marginally more difficult, as plans with greater policymaker support may have less public support and vice-versa. Nevertheless, given that both groups prefer some type of economic relief to no relief at all, a compromise should be possible.

## **National Party Endorsements**

In accordance with our theoretical expectations, support for a climate plan is greater when there is bipartisan endorsement of it than when neither party endorses the

plan. More interestingly, and in line with the backlash hypothesis (Guisinger and Saunders, 2017; Merkley and Stecula, 2021), support is significantly lower—13.5 percentage points for policymakers and 3.6 percentage points for the public—when only the Democratic party endorses the plan compared to when neither party does. This policymaker AMCE is the largest in our entire study and suggests supporters of climate action must take great care to avoid the perception of overly partisan environmental plans. For example, perhaps policymakers should attempt to negotiate bipartisan climate plans before publicly proposing partisan plans. While the same pattern of results hold for members of the public, they are more likely to support climate plans with only Democratic Party endorsement and less likely to support plans with bipartisan endorsements relative to local policymakers ( $p < 0.01$ ). This difference suggests that local policymakers are particularly averse to partisan climate plans, likely due to fear of electoral consequences.

## International Participants

Despite some mixed evidence in previous studies (Bechtel and Scheve, 2013; Tingley and Tomz, 2014), we generally find that policymakers and the public are more likely to support a climate plan with greater international participation compared to no international participation. This suggests that transnational climate initiatives might provide an advantage over initiatives that are solely domestic in nature. Interestingly, we find statistically significant evidence that international participation from in-group entities (e.g., NATO) increases support relative to no international participation, whereas we do not find similar evidence for participation by out-group entities (e.g., China) compared to no international participation.

## Time to Implementation

Optimistically, policymakers generally support shorter implementation times for climate plans compared to longer ones, suggesting that concerns about the effects of climate change outweigh “time-inconsistency” problems. Support is about 6.5 percentage points less for plans that begin in 4 years instead of 2 years, and about 8 percentage points

lower for plans that begin in 6 years compared 2 years. The US public also prefers shorter implementation times in general, though the substantive size of the effect is smaller and the public is less likely to support plans that begin in 2 years than local policymakers ( $p < 0.02$ ). Given the time pressure humanity is under to avoid the worst effects of climate change, these are promising findings overall.

## Cost-Benefit Analysis

Finally, we unsurprisingly find that local policymakers and the American public prefer plans with low short-term costs and high long-term benefits compared to climate plans with either high short-term costs or low long-term benefits. More interestingly, on average among our full sample of policymakers and members of the public, we do not find any statistically significant differences between plans with high short-term costs and high long-term benefits compared to plans with low short-term costs and low long-term benefits. This optimistically implies that climate plans with high short-term costs are not dead on arrival in the minds of local policymakers or the public, as long as the expectation is they will also yield high long-term benefits.

## Subgroup Analysis: Party Identification

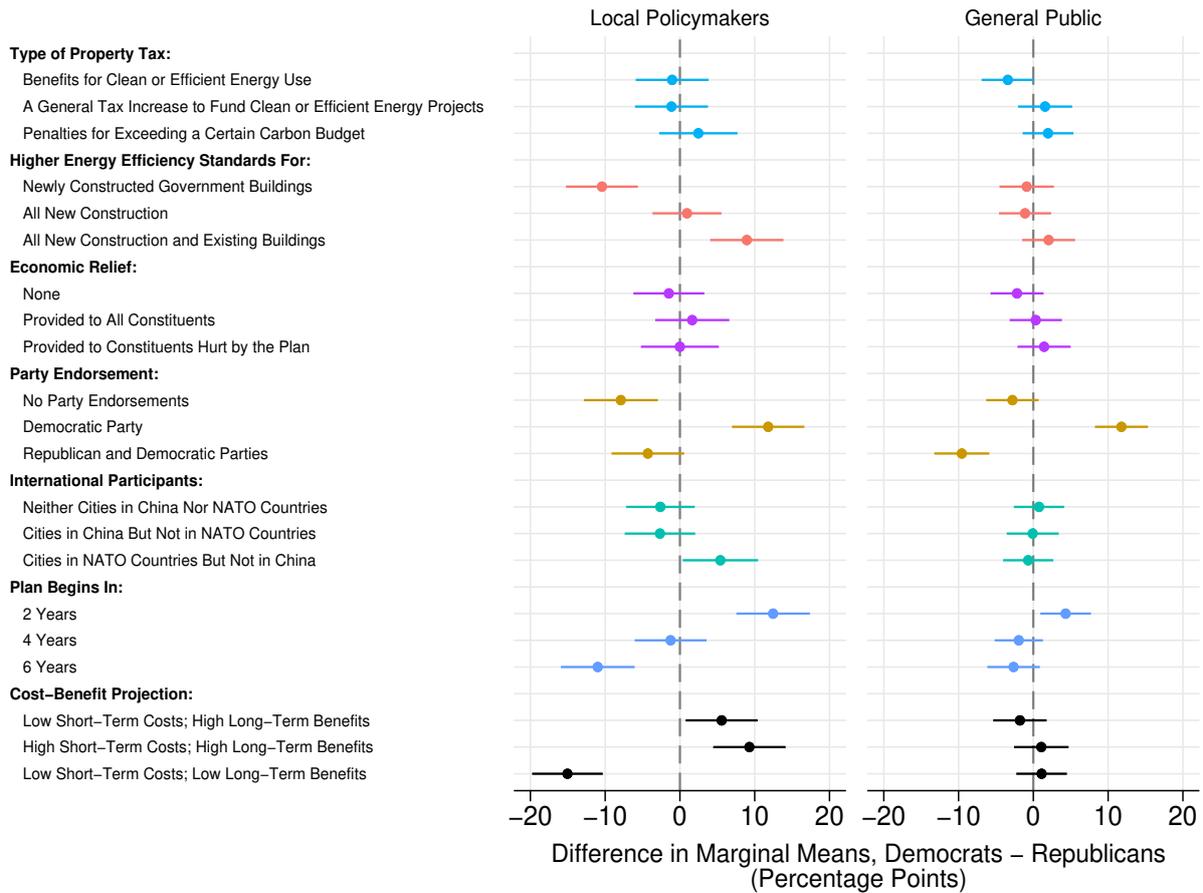
To identify subgroup attitudes, we follow [Leeper, Hobolt and Tilley \(2020\)](#) and examine marginal means rather than AMCEs for each attribute level. In subgroup analyses, AMCEs can be misleading because they are sensitive to the choice of baseline category.

In the appendix, we present subgroup analyses based on a range of factors, including belief in climate change, political ambition, perceived effect of climate action on election prospects or local economic conditions, presence or lack thereof of carbon/green industries locally, government type, and other demographic factors like education and gender. Here, we focus on a particularly salient respondent-level characteristic: political identification. Figure 3 illustrates the difference in marginal means between Democrats and Republicans separately for policymakers and members of the public.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup>Marginal means by party identification can be found in the appendix.

**Figure 3: Differences By Partisan Identification**



**Note:** Bars are 95% confidence intervals based on respondent-clustered standard errors for differences in marginal means between Democrats and Republicans.

Starting with our property tax attribute, we find no significant differences between Democratic and Republican local policymakers or members of the public. Subsidies are favored over taxes on a bipartisan basis, which only strengthens the political rationale for climate advocates to support the former over the latter.

We find larger differences in support for higher energy efficiency standards by political identification. In accordance with our pre-registered expectations, Democratic policymakers are significantly more likely to support higher standards on all new construction and existing buildings, while Republicans are more likely to support higher standards on government buildings only. This implies that it may be harder to gain Republican policymaker support for the most stringent energy efficiency standards. Nevertheless, we do not find a significant difference by party identification for higher standards on all new

construction, the middle-ground policy. Moreover, there are no significant differences at all between Republican and Democratic members of the public. This suggests a political compromise is possible between narrow and expansive energy efficiency standards.

No significant differences emerge between Democratic and Republican policymakers or the public for the economic relief attribute. This suggests that economic relief in the context of climate plans has bipartisan support and thus could be a useful tool to increase local policymaker backing for environmental action.

For partisan endorsements, the subgroup analysis reveals substantial heterogeneity that is masked in a topline examination. In line with our pre-registered expectations and the “backlash” hypothesis, Republican policymakers and members of the public are much less likely than their Democratic counterparts to support climate plans when they are endorsed by only the Democratic Party. However, even *Democratic* policymakers are less supportive of plans with only Democratic party support compared to no endorsements. By comparison, policies with bipartisan support are relatively popular among policymakers of both parties. Overall, our findings suggests a strategy of *no* partisan endorsement may yield more support than plans with only a Democratic Party endorsement.

With respect to international endorsements, we find that Democratic policymakers are more likely to support climate plans when cities in NATO countries participate compared to Republican policymakers. This is an interesting finding worthy of additional research, but makes sense given that polling shows Democrats have a more favorable view of NATO than Republicans.<sup>18</sup>

We also uncover striking differences between Democratic and Republican policymakers for the time to implementation attribute. As outlined in our pre-analysis plan, Democratic officials are much less likely than Republican officials to support plans that begin in 6 years and much more likely to support plans that begin in 2 years. Democratic members of the public are also more likely to support plans that begin in 2 years than Republican members of the public. Although Republican policymakers generally prefer longer implementation times, their preferences are less strongly held than Democrats’,

---

<sup>18</sup>See this poll from [Pew](#).

and there are no significant differences between Republican and Democratic policymakers and members of the public for plans that begin in 4 years. Once again, this suggests that political compromise may be possible, though the urgent necessity of climate action might mean climate advocates should still push for the shortest implementation times that are logistically feasible.

Lastly, while Democratic policymakers are significantly more likely to support plans with high short-term costs if associated with high long-term benefits, Republican policymakers are more likely to support plans that eschew long-term benefits to keep the short-term costs down. This illustrates a fundamental disconnect between Democratic and Republican elites with respect to their outlooks on the severity of climate change.

In sum, these heterogeneous effects demonstrate that it is important to disaggregate preferences by salient individual-level characteristics—like party identification—to have an accurate understanding of climate attitudes. Even so, when partisan differences exist, we observe that there is often space for compromise on middle-ground policies.

## Interaction Effects Between Attributes

To probe interaction effects, we follow [Egami and Imai \(2018\)](#) and estimate the non-parametric average marginal interaction effect (AMIE). We test two primary interaction effects outlined in our pre-analysis plan.<sup>19</sup> The rationale behind the posited interactions are that political cover—either by reducing the salience of costs or signaling broad support—could create space for policymakers to support more ambitious plan designs.

First, we assess whether local policymakers are more likely to support expansive climate policy proposals (e.g., broader-based energy efficiency standards and climate plans with high short-term costs and high long-term benefits) when economic costs are made less salient to constituents due to economic relief or delayed implementation time. We do not find any statistically significant evidence of this dynamic. This suggests that while climate plans with economic relief are more likely to be supported overall by local policymakers, the inclusion of economic compensation will not necessarily convince them

---

<sup>19</sup>See the appendix for more details.

to support bolder environmental action.

Second, we analyze whether local policymakers are more likely to support expansive policy proposals when broader policy support is signaled either by greater national party endorsements or greater international participation. We find no support for this possibility, implying external endorsers and participants will also not necessarily persuade local policymakers to support larger-scale climate action.

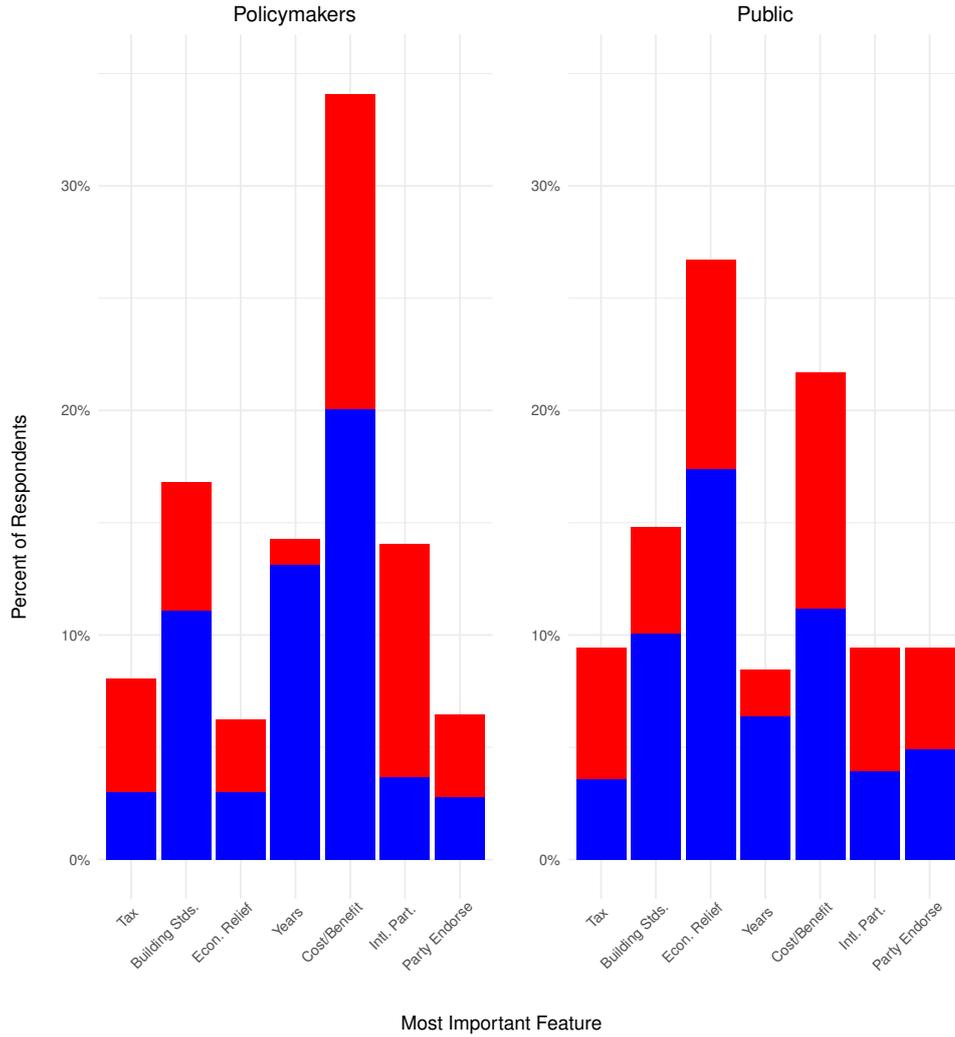
## Most Important Feature and Open-Ended Responses

Because the AMCE averages over the direction and intensity of preferences, to better understand the relative preference intensity across the different attributes, we also ask respondents to select the most important feature in their decision-making. For the few areas where local policymakers and the public differ, the probability of climate action may be increased by catering to whichever group indicates that specific policy attribute is more important to them.

In Figure 4, we show that a plurality of local policymakers—about 33%—report that the cost-benefit analysis attribute was the most important factor in making their choice of plans, and that this feature was the most critical factor for both Democrats and Republicans. This suggests that the overall cost-benefit analysis of a climate plan may have a bigger impact on policymaker support than more detailed elements of a plan’s design (e.g., exactly how higher energy efficiency standards are structured).

By contrast, the most important feature for the public is economic relief, which actually received the *fewest* votes for most important feature among policymakers. A qualitative review of the open-ended responses suggests significant support among the public for providing economic relief to defray the plan’s costs specifically or help people in general. For example, one respondent said, “Since converting to green energy will be somewhat expensive, low-income families will need some form of economic relief.” Another noted, “I am very low income and high costs would hurt.” The greater importance placed on economic relief by the public compared to policymakers makes logical sense. Given that the public is relatively less well off economically than elites, they have greater

**Figure 4: Most Important Feature By Party ID**



**Note:** Republicans shown in red, Democrats in blue.

financial incentives to care about economic relief (Gaikwad, Genovese and Tingley, 2022). Including economic relief in climate plans may therefore be a particularly effective strategy for policymakers to pursue to gain public support. Furthermore, given that members of the public are more likely to prefer universal relief than targeted relief to those hurt by climate plans, local policymakers would be wise to cater to the public’s preferences on this attribute to increase the chances of policy adoption.

We also uncover heterogeneity between Democratic and Republican policymakers and members of the public. Almost 25% of Democratic local policymakers said the time to implementation attribute was the most important factor in making their choice of plans,

compared to under 4% of Republicans.<sup>20</sup> A similar split also exists for the US public. A review of the open-ended responses suggests policymakers that believe this is the most important attribute perceive climate change as a time-sensitive challenge that requires urgent action. For instance, one policymaker said, “The clock is ticking,” another argued, “Timing is critical!! Action must be taken quickly,” and a third insisted, “Really important to move quickly to avoid cataclysmic [destruction].” The disparity we observe between Democrats and Republicans on this question likely reflects a fundamental difference in belief about how urgent the climate crisis is.

We also find that a significantly larger percentage of Republican policymakers than Democratic policymakers view the international participants attribute as the most important. The open-ended responses provide anecdotal evidence that some respondents chose this attribute due to an understanding that climate change is a global problem and action by only the United States will be insufficient. For example, one policymaker said, “...All contributors to climate change must be at the table. A global problem needs a global solution.” A qualitative review of the open-ended responses also suggests that while many policymakers used hostile language when discussing China, few discussed NATO countries at all. For instance, one policymaker said, “Let’s face it. China is the problem. There. I’ve said it...”. Among some members of the public, animosity towards China is so high that many expressed the view that China should be excluded from climate initiatives altogether: “Anything with China I oppose.” Future research should unpack the linkage between hostility towards China and climate attitudes (Mutz, 2018).

## **Robustness**

To verify the robustness of our core results and further validate our design, we take a number of steps described in the appendix. First, we illustrate that our results are substantively similar when we compare attribute levels using our rating outcome measure—which asked respondents to rate each plan individually on a 5-point scale—rather than the traditional forced choice outcome measure we utilize in our main models

---

<sup>20</sup>Our sample was evenly split on party identification.

and that has been employed in prior prominent experimental research on climate policy attitudes (e.g., [Bechtel and Scheve, 2013](#); [Bergquist, Mildenerger and Stokes, 2020](#)). While the binary measure used in our main models enables us to analyze how the manipulated factors impact *relative* levels of support for climate plans, the rating measure illustrates how the experimental factors affect *absolute* levels of support for climate plans ([Bechtel and Scheve, 2013](#), 13766). In other words, the former measure can tell us how different factors impact the probability of one plan being chosen over another, whereas the latter speaks to how various attributes affect whether policymakers and members of the public would support taking climate action at all. As one final test, we also create a dichotomous version of our *ratings measure* that equals 1 if respondents “strongly support” or “somewhat support” a climate plan and 0 otherwise. This variable captures the extent to which different levels of the attributes we analyze can move respondents from not supporting a climate plan to supporting a climate plan.<sup>21</sup> The robustness of our results across these three different types of dependent variable measures suggests we are capturing something real about policymakers’ preferences and our findings are not simply an artifact of the forced-choice nature of typical conjoint designs.

Second, we demonstrate that our results among local policymakers are robust to the inclusion of probability weights designed to increase sample representativeness. Third, we show that each level of each attribute was shown in equal proportion. Fourth, we show that our analysis of AMCEs holds when examining marginal means, so our findings are not sensitive to the choice of baseline. Finally, we show that elite and public preferences remain largely congruent even when weighting both samples to Census data on the US population. This procedure minimizes demographic differences between our policymaker and public samples—a potential driver of elite-public gaps—and thus provides additional evidence that climate policy views do not radically differ between local policymakers and the American public. In cases where differences between the populations *do* exist,

---

<sup>21</sup>About 46% of climate plans presented to respondents are either strongly or somewhat supported, meaning it is *not* the case that an overwhelming proportion of plans are opposed no matter the particular attributes associated with them.

this test demonstrates these differences are driven by other features of “eliteness” than compositional differences (Kertzer, 2020). Taken together, these tests build confidence in our design and core findings.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the significant threat posed by climate change, limited progress at the federal level to combat it has increased the importance of initiatives at the local level. This paper addresses a gap in the literature by examining the causal determinants of local policymakers’ support for climate policy, and systematically comparing the preferences of policymakers to the mass public. Our two core findings provide optimism about the future of climate action at the local level. First, we find that a range of climate policy attributes have a significant impact on local policymaker support, including for Republican policymakers. This means that the probability of policy adoption can be increased by strategic design. Furthermore, there are clear areas of bipartisan agreement among local policymakers, and in some cases elected officials are willing to support relatively expansive climate policies. Second, our analysis reveals that policymaker and public preferences are largely congruent, making it easier for climate policies to gain broad-based support among both elites and the public. This finding is also a positive sign about the representativeness of American democracy and has broader implications outside of climate change research. Future work can build on this project by examining the impact of other climate plan attributes, analyzing the views of state or federal-level officials,<sup>23</sup> and conducting similar studies in different countries. Overall, though climate change is a global problem, one of the most promising pathways to combatting it is to act locally. As the saying goes,

---

<sup>22</sup>Although it would be fascinating to match policymaker climate policy preferences with the views of their actual constituents, this type of fine-grained geographical analysis is, unfortunately, not possible given the need to maintain the policymakers’ anonymity.

<sup>23</sup>For example, are elite-public gaps smaller for local policymakers compared to federal policymakers given that the former may be closer to their constituents (geographically, culturally, in terms of their sources of information, etc.) and have fewer constituents to keep track of (Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger and Stokes, 2019)?

“think globally, but act locally.”

## References

- Arias, Sabrina B and Christopher W Blair. 2022. “Changing Tides: Public Attitudes on Climate Migration.” *The Journal of Politics* 84(1):560–567.
- Autor, David H, David Dorn, Gordon H Hanson and Jae Song. 2014. “Trade Adjustment: Worker-Level Evidence.” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129(4):1799–1860.
- Axelrod, Robert. 1984. *The Evolution of Cooperation*. Basic Books.
- Bae, Jungah and Richard Feiock. 2013. “Forms of Government and Climate Change Policies in US Cities.” *Urban Studies* 50(4):776–788.
- Bechtel, Michael M and Kenneth F Scheve. 2013. “Mass Support for Global Climate Agreements Depends on Institutional Design.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 110(34):13763–13768.
- Bergquist, Parrish, Matto Mildenerger and Leah C Stokes. 2020. “Combining climate, economic, and social policy builds public support for climate action in the US.” *Environmental Research Letters* 15(5):054019.
- Berinsky, Adam J, Michele F Margolis and Michael W Sances. 2014. “Separating the shirkers from the workers? Making sure respondents pay attention on self-administered surveys.” *American Journal of Political Science* 58(3):739–753.
- Bernauer, Thomas and Liam F McGrath. 2016. “Simple reframing unlikely to boost public support for climate policy.” *Nature Climate Change* 6(7):680–683.
- Bernauer, Thomas and Robert Gampfer. 2015. “How robust is public support for unilateral climate policy?” *Environmental Science & Policy* 54:316–330.
- Betsill, Michele M and Harriet Bulkeley. 2004. “Transnational networks and global environmental governance: The cities for climate protection program.” *International studies*

*quarterly* 48(2):471–493.

Broockman, David E and Christopher Skovron. 2018. “Bias in perceptions of public opinion among political elites.” *American Political Science Review* 112(3):542–563.

Broockman, David E and Daniel M Butler. 2017. “The causal effects of elite position-taking on voter attitudes: Field experiments with elite communication.” *American Journal of Political Science* 61(1):208–221.

Brugger, Adrian, Suraje Dessai, Patrick Devine-Wright, Thomas A. Morton and Nicholas F. Pidgeon. 2015. “Psychological Responses to the Proximity of Climate Change.” *Nature* 5(12):1031–1037.

Brutger, Ryan, Joshua D Kertzer, Jonathan Renshon, Dustin Tingley and Chagai M Weiss. 2022. “Abstraction and detail in experimental design.” *American Journal of Political Science* .

Bulkeley, Harriet. 2010. “Cities and the governing of climate change.” *Annual review of environment and resources* 35:229–253.

Cherry, Todd L., Steffen Kallbekken and Stephan Kroll. 2012. “The Acceptability of Efficiency-Enhancing Environmental Taxes, Subsidies and Regulation: An Experimental Investigation.” *Environmental Science & Policy* 16:90–96.

Chu, Jonathan A. 2019. “Social Cues by International Organizations: NATO, The Security Council, and Public Support for Humanitarian Intervention.” *Unpublished Manuscript* .

Coppock, Alexander and Oliver A McClellan. 2019. “Validating the Demographic, Political, Psychological, and Experimental Results Obtained from a New Source of Online Survey Respondents.” *Research & Politics* 6(1):1–14.

Daalder, Ivo. 2017. “Why Cities Need Their Own Foreign Policies.” *Politico* .

- de Benedictis-Kessner, Justin and Christopher Warshaw. 2016. "Mayoral partisanship and municipal fiscal policy." *The Journal of Politics* 78(4):1124–1138.
- Dellmuth, Lisa, Jan Aart Scholte, Jonas Tallberg and Soetkin Verhaegen. 2019. "The elite–citizen gap in international organization legitimacy." *American Political Science Review* pp. 1–18.
- Drews, Stefan and Jeroen CJM van den Bergh. 2016. "What Explains Public Support for Climate Policies? A Review of Empirical and Experimental Studies." *Climate Policy* 16(7):855–876.
- Duque, Marina G. 2018. "Recognizing International Status: A Relational Approach." *International Studies Quarterly* 62(3):577–592.
- Egami, Naoki and Kosuke Imai. 2018. "Causal Interaction in Factorial Experiments: Application to Conjoint Analysis." *Journal of the American Statistical Association* .
- Egan, Patrick J and Megan Mullin. 2017. "Climate Change: US Public Opinion." *Annual Review of Political Science* 20:209–227.
- Einstein, Katherine Levine, David M Glick and Maxwell Palmer. 2020. Can mayors lead on climate change? Evidence from six years of surveys. In *The Forum*. Vol. 18 De Gruyter pp. 71–86.
- Freire, Danilo, Umberto Mignozzetti and David Skarbek. 2021. "Institutional Design and Elite Support for Climate Policies: Evidence from Latin American Countries." *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 8(2):172–184.
- Gaikwad, Nikhar, Federica Genovese and Dustin Tingley. 2022. "Creating Climate Coalitions: Mass Preferences for Compensating Vulnerability in the World's Two Largest Democracies." *American Political Science Review* pp. 1–19.
- Gerber, Elisabeth R. 2013. "Partisanship and local climate policy." *Cityscape* pp. 107–124.

- Goldstein, Benjamin, Dimitrios Gounaridis and Joshua P. Newell. 2020. "The Carbon Footprint of Household Energy Use in the United States." *PNAS* 117(32):19122–19130.
- Guisinger, Alexandra and Elizabeth N. Saunders. 2017. "Mapping the Boundaries of Elite Cues: How Elites Shape Mass Opinion across International Issues." *International Studies Quarterly* 61(2):425–441.
- Hainmueller, Jens, Daniel J Hopkins and Teppei Yamamoto. 2014. "Causal Inference in Conjoint Analysis: Understanding Multidimensional Choices via Stated Preference Experiments." *Political Analysis* 22(1):1–30.
- Hainmueller, Jens, Dominik Hangartner and Teppei Yamamoto. 2015. "Validating vignette and conjoint survey experiments against real-world behavior." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112(8):2395–2400.
- Hart, P Sol and Erik C Nisbet. 2012. "Boomerang Effects in Science Communication: How Motivated Reasoning and Identity Cues Amplify Opinion Polarization About Climate Mitigation Policies." *Communication research* 39(6):701–723.
- Hazlett, Chad and Matto Mildemberger. 2020. "Wildfire exposure increases pro-environment voting within democratic but not republican areas." *American Political Science Review* 114(4):1359–1365.
- Hertel-Fernandez, Alexander, Matto Mildemberger and Leah C Stokes. 2019. "Legislative staff and representation in Congress." *American Political Science Review* 113(1):1–18.
- Hopkins, Daniel J. 2018. *The Increasingly United States: How and Why American Political Behavior Nationalized*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Hovi, Jon, Detlef F Sprinz and Arild Underdal. 2009. "Implementing Long-Term Climate Policy: Time Inconsistency, Domestic Politics, International Anarchy." *Global Environmental Politics* 9(3):20–39.

- Jacobs, Alan M. and J. Scott Matthews. 2012. “Why Do Citizens Discount the Future? Public Opinion and the Timing of Policy Consequences.” *British Journal of Political Science* 42(4):903–935.
- Jagers, Sverker C. and Henrik Hammar. 2009. “Environmental Taxation for Good and for Bad: The Efficiency and Legitimacy of Sweden’s Carbon Tax.” *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 18(2):218–237.
- Keohane, Robert Owen. 1984. *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton University Press.
- Kertzer, Joshua D. 2020. “Re-Assessing Elite-Public Gaps in Political Behavior.” *American Journal of Political Science* .
- Kono, Daniel Yuichi. 2020. “Compensating for the Climate: Unemployment Insurance and Climate Change Votes.” *Political Studies* 68(1):167–187.
- Le Galès, Patrick. 2021. “The Rise of Local Politics: A Global Review.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 24:345–363.
- Lee, Nathan. 2021. “Do Policy Makers Listen to Experts? Evidence from a National Survey of Local and State Policy Makers.” *American Political Science Review* pp. 1–12.
- Lee, Nathan, Brendan Nyhan, Jason Reifler and DJ Flynn. 2021. “More accurate, but no less polarized: Comparing the factual beliefs of government officials and the public.” *British Journal of Political Science* 51(3):1315–1322.
- Lee, Nathan R and Dominik Stecula. 2021. “Subnational bipartisanship on climate change: evidence from surveys of local and state policymakers.” *Climatic Change* 164(1):1–12.
- Leeper, Thomas J, Sara B Hobolt and James Tilley. 2020. “Measuring Subgroup Preferences in Conjoint Experiments.” *Political Analysis* 28(2):207–221.

- Malhotra, Neil, Benoît Monin and Michael Tomz. 2019. “Does private regulation preempt public regulation?” *American Political Science Review* 113(1):19–37.
- Merkley, Eric and Dominik A Stecula. 2021. “Party cues in the news: Democratic elites, Republican backlash, and the dynamics of climate skepticism.” *British Journal of Political Science* 51(4):1439–1456.
- Mildenberger, Matto, Erick Lachapelle, Kathryn Harrison and Isabelle Stadelmann-Steffen. 2022. “Limited impacts of carbon tax rebate programmes on public support for carbon pricing.” *Nature Climate Change* pp. 1–7.
- Mutz, Diana C. 2018. “Status threat, not economic hardship, explains the 2016 presidential vote.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115(19):E4330–E4339.
- Peyton, Kyle, Gregory A Huber and Alexander Coppock. 2021. “The Generalizability of Online Experiments Conducted During The COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Journal of Experimental Political Science* .
- Pulver, Simone, Barry G Rabe and Peter J Stoett. 2009. *Changing climates in North American politics: Institutions, policymaking, and multilevel governance*. MIT press.
- Ruggie, John Gerard. 1982. “International regimes, transactions, and change: embedded liberalism in the postwar economic order.” *International Organization* 36(2):379–415.
- Shaffer, Robert, Lauren E Pinson, Jonathan A Chu and Beth A Simmons. 2020. “Local elected officials’ receptivity to refugee resettlement in the United States.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117(50):31722–31728.
- Sheffer, Lior, Peter John Loewen, Stuart Soroka, Stefaan Walgrave and Tamir Sheafer. 2018. “Nonrepresentative representatives: An experimental study of the decision making of elected politicians.” *American Political Science Review* 112(2):302–321.
- Tingley, Dustin and Michael Tomz. 2014. “Conditional cooperation and climate change.”

*Comparative Political Studies* 47(3):344–368.

Zak, Dan. 2021. “Obama, Playing ‘Hype Man,’ Tries to Holt COP26.” *Washington Post* .