

Everyone sees the world through their own prism

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We all build our own images of the world – images that are strongly shaped by our individual ideologies. Credit: Colourbox/ETH Zurich

How can public opinion be influenced in favor of climate protection? ETH political scientist Thomas Bernauer explored the question in a recent study. His sobering answer is that there is no magic formula.

Policy-makers have been charged with taking appropriate measures against the looming threat of climate change. But the success of these

measures requires acceptance and support on the part of the public. With this in mind, politicians and climate scientists are looking for ways to make the subject, and the costly political measures associated with it, more tangible and easier for the general public to understand. "We looked into the question of whether - and if so, to what extent - the public's attitude to [climate policy](#) and the risks of climate change can be influenced," explains Thomas Bernauer, professor of political science at ETH Zurich. "Above all, we wanted to know whether it is better to provide economic justifications, such as the positive effects of climate policy on technological innovation and the [labour market](#), and personal aspects like protection of our health, rather than to focus on conveying scientific facts and the risks of climate change." Previous studies by other researchers have pointed to the idea that an emotional and personal presentation of the issue may help political measures gain acceptance more easily.

We hear only what we want to hear

According to the recent study, there's no magic formula for making climate policy easier to "sell". "We all see the world through our own ideological prism," says Bernauer. It's not specific justifications, but rather preconceived ideas that ultimately decide whether people see climate protection as important and necessary. "Our opinions on climate policy vary according to factors such as socialisation, political attitudes, age, gender and education." Someone who has always supported green policies will find their point of view validated by the arguments, whereas those who have always been sceptical about climate change will not be influenced by reasoning based on economic or health grounds.

The study's results were based on an online survey of more than 1,600 Americans. Various justifications for costly climate protection measures were put to participants on a random basis, and the effect of these arguments on their attitudes to climate protection was then estimated.

The survey is part of a five-year research project on [public opinion](#) and climate change. Funded by a grant from the European Research Council (ERC), Bernauer's team is investigating public opinion on climate protection in the US, China, Brazil, India, Germany and Switzerland.

No single argument is decisive

"The results of the study are certainly sobering in some respects," admits the ETH professor. But only when viewed from the perspective of climate protection: "Fundamentally, it's a good thing that people don't allow themselves to be easily influenced," stresses Bernauer. As far as communication in climate policy is concerned, the study's results suggest that in future a comprehensive mix of information on [climate change](#) and various justifications for [climate protection](#) will be necessary. Scientific information about the risks is just as important as messages on the implications for health, technology and the labour market.

More information: Thomas Bernauer et al. Simple reframing unlikely to boost public support for climate policy, *Nature Climate Change* (2016). [DOI: 10.1038/nclimate2948](https://doi.org/10.1038/nclimate2948)

Provided by ETH Zurich

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