

# Emphasizing individual solutions to big issues can reduce support for government efforts

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Following the shutdown of the Fukushima power plant, which endured one of the worst nuclear accidents in history in 2011 due to a 9.0 magnitude earthquake and resulting tsunami, Japan began a national initiative that encouraged saving electricity. This created an opportunity for Seth Werfel, a graduate student in political science at Stanford University, to investigate how recognition of individual efforts to improve energy usage might affect support for government-based solutions.

He found that the more [people](#) said they curbed energy use on their own, the less they supported a tax increase on carbon emissions.

"At first, I thought this result was counterintuitive because you'd expect people who took those actions to support government action as well," said Werfel, whose work was published today in *Nature Climate Change*. "But it is intuitive, just not obvious. When the surveys made people feel like they'd done enough, they said that the government shouldn't make them do more."

Although his study was focused on an environmental issue, Werfel said other research suggests this reaction could be highly pervasive, affecting many other issues. He also found that the loss of support for government actions among the people who reported their personal efforts occurred regardless of political ideology.

## How surveys changed support

Taking advantage of the energy-saving initiative, Werfel surveyed about 12,000 people in Japan. All surveys included a question about the extent to which people supported a government [tax increase](#) on [carbon emissions](#). Half of the surveys contained a checklist that respondents used to indicate energy-saving actions they performed. On average, people who received the checklist surveys were about 13 percent less likely to support the government tax than people who did not receive a checklist.

People who performed the checklist tasks also indicated on the accompanying [survey](#) that they felt that individual actions were more important than those of the government for achieving energy sustainability, and that conserving energy and protecting the environment shouldn't be a top national priority.

Werfel then sent checklist surveys to about 200 respondents who had been in non-checklist groups. Compared to how they responded in the initial, non-checklist survey, the respondents who checked the most boxes in the list of energy-saving actions in this second survey exhibited the greatest increase in their opposition to [government actions](#). Werfel said this seems to indicate that people who perform more of these types of actions are more likely to see individual contributions as sufficient progress toward energy-saving goals.

Additional surveys showed that a checklist containing only one very easy individual action did not affect people's support of the carbon tax. However, people were 15 percent less likely to support the tax if they checked a box stating that they thought recycling was important – an effect that was largest among people who said they cared most about the environment. Werfel stressed that this, as with all of these results, should lead people to not assume anything about the behavior of any one

person.

"It would be way too strong to say these findings apply to someone who spends their life being environmentally conscious and advocating for government [support](#) of pro-environment initiatives," he said.

Werfel also tested whether making people feel morally good about themselves made them more likely to oppose [government](#) action, but the results of that survey were inconclusive.

## Striking a balance between pride and complacency

Werfel said he believes this phenomenon likely impacts issues beyond environmentalism, such as disease prevention, economic inequality and homelessness, a hypothesis he is currently investigating. Given the evidence so far, Werfel cautions that we should be more aware about the potential downsides of celebrating every individual and private sector contribution we see as benefitting the greater good.

"Sometimes there's a danger to thinking you've done enough," said Werfel. "We spend a lot of time encouraging people to do these things at home – to care about them and announce that they've done them – and there could be some backfire effect."

**More information:** Seth H. Werfel. Household behaviour crowds out support for climate change policy when sufficient progress is perceived, *Nature Climate Change* (2017). [DOI: 10.1038/nclimate3316](https://doi.org/10.1038/nclimate3316)

Provided by Stanford University

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