

When it comes to disaster prevention policies, who can we trust?

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A dilemma for policymakers: The world needs to start preparing for the weather-related disasters happening with increasing frequency and intensity due to climate change. World leaders are proposing measures to

quickly reduce emissions and build resilience. Yet, many voters oppose spending on measures to prevent or mitigate disaster.

It is this hesitation that interests UConn Department of Political Science Assistant Professor Talbot Andrews, who studies what shapes [public opinion](#) and support for adaptive policies for climate change. Andrews is also part of UConn's Environment and Human Interactions cluster.

Andrews and collaborators from Stony Brook University published research earlier this year in *The Journal of Politics* looking at how trust is eroded when [voters](#) know leaders can personally benefit from policies they support.

Much of the existing research into these questions points to voters focusing on single issues, or suggests that voters tend to be ill-informed on the topics, says Andrews.

"We took a different approach, thinking maybe there's a good reason why voters sometimes oppose these disaster prevention policies, and maybe changing the institutions and how we shape these policies might increase support for them."

The team designed an incentivized experiment that took place in a behavioral political economy lab. Thirty students in groups of five were tasked with preventing simulated disasters on computer terminals, they were given real money, and had to make decisions while trying to maximize their earnings. Some participants were assigned to be citizens, while others were designated as leaders.

Citizens were given the option to contribute a fair share of money to prevent disaster, while leaders knew the cost of prevention and reported costs to citizens, with the option to exaggerate. To test if [personal gain](#) influenced voter confidence, the researchers manipulated whether

leaders personally benefited if citizens contributed too much for prevention.

These experimental treatment effects were what most interested the team, says Andrews, with an eye toward understanding if changes in institutions could influence whether people are willing to help prevent disasters.

The results showed that perhaps institutional change could work, since citizens were sensitive to the fact that leaders benefited from exaggeration, which led not only to a decline in trust in leadership, but also resulted in citizens contributing less to disaster prevention. If changes to the institution were made to remove the ability for leaders to gain personally, perhaps disaster prevention measures would gain more voter support.

Andrews draws on one example of a measure that could eliminate the personal gain element, namely, the pre-commitment of funds.

"There's a fascinating case from a small town in Oklahoma, where the mayor was able to essentially embezzle four million dollars, because of poorly committed prevention funds," Andrews says. "He asked for disaster prevention funds, with few details, promising to form a [task force](#) to figure everything out later. The funds were not pre-committed, and he was able to embezzle them. We suspect there would be more trust if someone said they already have a plan of where the money's going."

Another measure that could remove the personal benefit element is revenue-neutral taxes.

"We see a lot of environmental organizations supporting carbon taxes," says Andrews. "Based on the results from this research, I suspect that people trust revenue-neutral taxes more because there's just no room for

the government to misappropriate the funds because they're not generating extra funds."

Through her research, Andrews says that people do care about these issues, that perceived apathy about [climate change mitigation](#) is overstated, and that people are more supportive of these policies than many may think.

"Designing good, transparent institutions to address the problem will help harness that enthusiasm," Andrews says. "Lots of people who care about climate change worry about it, but if they don't know what to do, then all they can do is tune out because it's stressful to sit and think about climate change and feel like there's nothing you can do. But if there's a good policy that you can vote for, there's good information about what you can do on the ground, I think that helps."

The truth, Andrews says, is that we know how to stop [climate change](#), but the problem is politics.

"I find that intersection of institutions and individual behaviors extremely fascinating," says Andrews. "I think it's easy to be quick to say people just aren't informed enough to interact with these institutions, but I think in a lot of cases, the burden is on policymakers to make policies that take into account the way voters think about these issues."

"Sometimes perfect is the enemy of the good in the climate activism movement. We want to pass a carbon tax, to raise the revenue needed to generate new sustainable energy, but we might end up with nothing unless leaders and policymakers consider people's preferences on these smaller steps in between. Voters care about many issues and that doesn't make them uninformed if there's so much out there to care about. Respecting that and taking that into account when passing policies is important."

More information: Talbot M. Andrews et al, Who Do You Trust? Institutions That Constrain Leaders Help People Prevent Disaster, *The Journal of Politics* (2022). [DOI: 10.1086/720650](https://doi.org/10.1086/720650)

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