

Discussing climate change – the impact of the quality of discussion in media coverage on citizen engagement and political behavior

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This study tests, from a political communication perspective, to what extent the quality of debate in media coverage about climate change affects how people make sense of the issue, i.e. their own issue position, opinion quality, behavioral intentions as well as actual behavior. Special attention is paid to the mediating role of emotions, as a result of the exposure to different levels of quality in discussion in media coverage. Public debate on the issue is widespread and increasingly intense and the topic has become a regular ingredient of national public debate. Recently, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published its assessment of the current state of scientific understanding regarding human-caused climate change and again warned of future consequences of climate change. One prominent concern which is both topic-specific as well as of general theoretical interest is the 'quality of discussion' regarding this topic, i.e. the way the rather complex topic of climate change is publicly discussed. Some commentators criticize the debate as 'superficial' or 'hysterical' or 'overly complex' or 'not understandable', others criticize the way scientific evidence is presented in the media and interpreted.

However, the role of the information environment and how it affects citizens regarding this issue surprisingly has not received a lot of attention by previous research (see Kellstedt et al. 2008). Up until now we know much more about how the media frame the topic of climate change and global warming (e.g., Boykoff 2008; Dirikx and Gelders 2010; Olausson 2009; Weingart et al. 2000) than about the impact such media portrayal has on audiences. This is striking not only because of the apparent relevance of the topic and periodical nature of intense public debate via the media but especially considering that future policies regarding global climate change hinge on public support and public opinion can influence political agendas (Page and Shapiro 1983). What is also striking is that despite the affective potential of the topic, e.g. in terms of severe future threats and negative future consequences, previous research has focused predominantly on cognitive effects (e.g., Jones and Song 2013) and much less on emotions and their role in affecting subsequent beliefs and behavior (for an exception, see Yang & Kahlor 2013).

On the contextual level national differences such as previous and current environmental and energy politics in a country as well as national particularities (party positions on the topic, level of contestation, salience of the topic in public debate, existence of large-scale national energy infrastructure projects) can be expected to affect how media coverage affects citizens in a country. On the individual level it is assumed that emotions function as important mediator for the impact of media coverage of climate change on citizen engagement. Relevant content features are the degree to which media coverage presents the consequences of climate change as inevitable or still manageable (i.e. creating a sense of efficacy among citizens) or fosters public deliberation on the topic.

The present study builds on existing literature about deliberation and refers to the quality of arguments, the range of different sources, the presentational style (i.e. the use of emotions) in media coverage of the issue of climate change, testing how variations regarding these ingredients of public debate influence citizens. It is based on a media effects experiment (N=1,080), with a 2x2x2 between-subjects factorial design comprising 8 different groups and a control group. More specifically, we use a 2 (variety of sources – high vs. low) X 2 (argument quality - high vs. low) X 2 (presentational style – emotional vs.

non-emotional) post-test only design (+ control group), conducted in three countries (USA, UK, and Australia). These three countries differ in terms of their respective energy mix and policies as well as public opinion of core technologies such as solar and wind energy, nuclear energy and support for public subsidies to support renewable energies.

Thus, the present study turns to the effects side of the issue of how media report on global climate change and pays special attention to the underlying mechanism behind such effects. In more concrete terms, we not only examine if different levels of quality of discussion in media coverage affect how citizens think of global climate change and if they become more mobilized but we also contribute to current media effect and political communication research by testing emotions as possible mediators of media effects. Preliminary findings indicate that 'high quality' level of discussion in media coverage can yield certain desirable outcomes (such as greater knowledge) but is also perceived as more complicated and less engaging. This carries important normative implications when asking what the 'ideal' level of discussion should be in order to result in more knowledgeable *and* engaged citizens. Emotions show to play an important role in this respect, as some level of emotionality in media coverage on this issue show to contribute to higher levels of interest and engagement. Normatively high quality of debate might be informative and contribute to learning but in order to also be engaging other elements of public debate, such as emotions, which are typically not regarded as a sign for high quality, can make a relevant contribution. As such this project tackles an important and increasingly relevant societal issue, it is innovative in employing a comparative design and in examining the underlying dynamics of effects on citizens perceptions regarding the issue of climate change.