

How activists can increase climate policy support in Hill meetings

Research finds four empirically supported strategies climate advocates may use to increase support for climate change policy when meeting with their Congressional Representatives.

Based on Sherman, D. K., Shteyn, M. F., Han, H., & Van Boven, L. (2021). The exchange between citizens and elected officials: A social psychological framework for citizen climate activists. *Behavioural Public Policy*, 5(4), 576-705.

The Policy Problem

The majority of Americans, Democrats and Republicans alike, believe that climate change is happening, that it threatens humans, that it is human caused and that reducing greenhouse gas emissions would reduce climate change, yet there has been no bipartisan support for climate policies in the U.S. Citizen activists play a role in translating public concern about the climate crisis to policymakers and elevating it on the political agenda. While these activists lobby members of Congress, the best messaging approaches for representatives and staff who vary in their support for climate change policies is not clear. Social psychological research in the domain of climate policy communication has identified best approaches for crafting messages, but it is an open question how to best apply these strategies in climate advocacy.

Key findings and proposed solutions

- Advocates of climate policy can use four empirically supported strategies when directly communicating with politicians in interpersonal meetings:
- Legacy - Emphasize the future generations who will have to deal with our climate decisions now. Point out long-term costs and benefits. Our post-lobbying survey suggests this may increase Congressional support.
- Affirmation - Focus on shared values; express appreciation. This may reduce identity pressures and let people absorb otherwise threatening information.
- Norms - Explain that a majority of Americans in both parties agree that

climate change is real, caused by humans, and could be mitigated by lowering carbon emissions. It's not just scientific consensus - it's attitudinal as well.

- Immediacy - Highlight extreme events like flooding, fires and heatwaves. This adds emotional urgency and collapses the distance of climate threats.

What We Found

We reviewed the social psychological literature for best approaches in climate change communication for environmental citizen activists when meeting with policy makers. Through this review we identified four empirically supported strategies for climate advocates to use with politicians in interpersonal meetings. Then, we conducted a study with climate activists assessing their use and perceived effectiveness of these strategies before and after they lobbied Congressional Representatives in person for a specific policy to reduce carbon emissions.

The four strategies we identified are: (1) create an affirming context that reduces the defense of partisan identities and builds on shared values; (2) communicate descriptive norms about citizens' views on the urgency of climate action; (3) emphasize the concern for future generations and create a lasting environmental legacy as a shared value; and (4) capture the attention and priorities of policymakers by including a focus on the immediacy of extreme weather that is increasing in strength and frequency due to climate change.

We found that a strategy of establishing an affirming context, shared values and common ground (affirmation) was used most frequently overall. We also found that a strategy emphasizing the long-term costs and benefits for addressing climate change (legacy) was associated with perceived increases in Congressional Representatives' support of a climate policy.

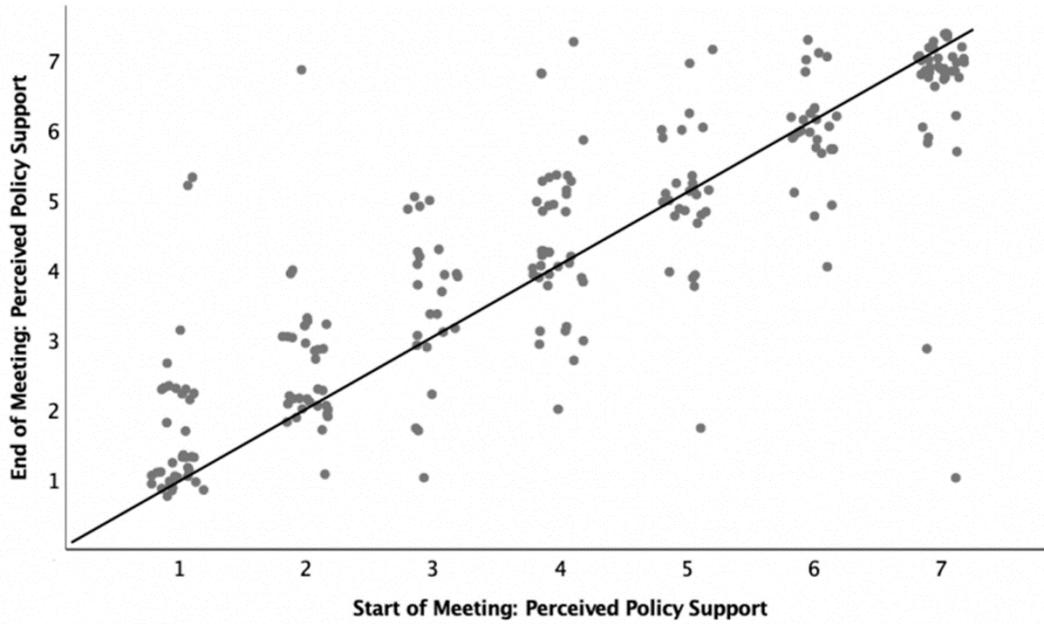


Fig. 2 Perceived policy support at the end of the meeting with the Congressional Office as a function of perceived support for the policy at the start of the meeting. Points close to the line represent people who perceived no change, which was the majority (57.4%) of the sample, and points above the line represent people who perceived an increase in support (30.4%). The strategy most strongly associated with that increase in support was emphasizing the long-term costs and benefits for addressing climate change.