



# Why Do People Oppose Solutions To Climate Change?

By: **Todd Cherry**

## Abstract

Climate change gridlock is not from the absence of promising actions. It is a result of social and political failures. CICERO research is working to break this gridlock by showing how to overcome the barriers.

**Cherry, Todd** (2015). "Why Do People Oppose Solutions To Climate Change?" *Klima (Climate)*, CICERO: Center for International Climate Research. Publisher version of record available at: <https://www.cicero.oslo.no/en/posts/climate-news/why-do-people-oppose-solutions-to-climate-change>

# ***Why Do People Oppose Solutions to Climate Change?***

**Climate News – News and opinions about climate science**

**By: Todd Cherry**

**Published 13.08.2015**

**Climate change gridlock is not from the absence of promising actions. It is a result of social and political failures. CICERO research is working to break this gridlock by showing how to overcome the barriers.**

The Stockholm congestion charge is eight years old. Most commentators and experts agree that the policy has been a success. By charging a tax on vehicles entering and leaving Stockholm, the city has realized a 20-25 per cent decrease in traffic counts, 30-50 per cent decrease in waiting time in traffic queues, 5-10 per cent decrease in injuries related to traffic accidents, and related to climate change, a 10-14 per cent reduction in vehicle emissions.

## **The challenge is social**

Studies on the Swedish policy's impact show that benefits of the policy have exceeded expectations and far outweighed the costs. The public, once very resistant, now has broad support for the policy.

But this success story almost didn't happen. Despite experts advocating for a congestion charge, the city's public was strongly opposed to the policy. Such resistance has thwarted similar policies at different times and places. Congestion charge programs were rejected in New York City and Hong Kong, while carbon pricing was rebuffed in Australia, the UK and the US. So what allowed the Stockholm congestion charge to overcome the considerable opposition, and what creates barriers to implement climate-related policies?

This is a critical question because, while research has identified climate change as a problem, it has also identified a menu of promising solutions. The pressing challenge is to navigate the social and political processes of implementation.

## **How to get people on board**

Myself and other social science researchers at CICERO are using innovative methods to understand and overcome this challenge. We've created new ways to observe how people choose to respond to problems with features that parallel climate change. Findings from our research in this area provide some insights on why people may or may not support the implementation of climate policies. Here are a few of our findings.

*Are the people that oppose the policy simply confused or did they not understand the policy?*

To consider this obvious initial question, we tested whether people were more likely to support the policy after learning more about it. We found that the educational efforts improved how well people understood the policy, but that the improved understanding did not translate to greater support. People may be confused, but it does not appear that confusion is the main barrier to implementing policy.

*Does the distribution of the congestion/carbon tax revenues matter?*

Previous work has suggested that people are more likely to support a tax if the revenue is earmarked, so we explored some of the nuances on this relationship. Our research confirms that earmarking can increase support for taxes, but we find this positive influence is not universal. It matters how the revenue is distributed. Support for an environmental tax is harmed if the burden of the tax is viewed as unfair, but support gets a large boost when the revenues are directed to environmental causes.

*Do people let the good become the enemy of the perfect?*

The ideal is to enact perfect policies, but typically the negotiations and compromises within the political process provide good, though less than perfect, policies. We thought it might be insightful to explore how opposition to a policy is affected by its effectiveness—perfect or good. In both cases, the policy improves upon inaction; it's just that the perfect policy outperforms the good policy. Results show that many people support the good version more than the perfect version, which matches experiences with insufficient carbon taxes and weak limits in trading schemes. People can be reluctant to take full steps towards solutions, but they find baby steps more acceptable. This is particularly true when the policy is viewed more coercive, such as a mandate. It appears that, when deciding whether to support policy, people balance supporting a solution and retaining individual autonomy. However, there is hope that partial steps will be followed by subsequent steps towards a complete solution.

*Can a trial period of the policy improve support?*

Inspired by the Stockholm congestion charge, we considered how support may be affected by people experiencing a trial period of the policy. We compared the support for policies across two groups—one that experienced a trial period of the policy, and one that did not. As in the Stockholm case, findings show that a trial period can greatly increase support for the policy. The application however is limited. While a trial period is particularly effective for a congestion charge because the impact on traffic is immediate, it is doubtful that any effect would exist in the case of a general carbon tax. However, trial periods in some cases offer an opportunity to overcome initial opposition. For instance, the proposed congestion charge for San Francisco (USA), expected to start any day now, includes provisions for a trial period.

*Are people predisposed to support or oppose policies?*

To dig a little deeper, we began to explore how a person's fundamental worldviews could explain the opposition to policies that makes them better off. Results show that worldviews matter. People that view society in an individualistic and hierarchical way tend to reject policy solutions, particularly policies that may be considered coercive. This implies that overcoming opposition can be difficult, but we also find that the worldviews associated with opposition are the ones that increase support after a trial period.

## **A long time coming**

Evidence of anthropogenic climate change has accumulated for over 100 years, beginning with Svante Arrhenius's work in the late 19th century and continuing with work by experts at CICERO and around the world.

The ongoing research increasingly shows that climate change is a problem, but it also has provided a menu of promising solutions. The failure to effectively respond to climate change is not from a lack of solutions, but from the inability to implement them.

Understanding the science of climate change is not enough; we must also understand the social and political processes that allow and encourage the implementation of effective responses to climate change.

**CICERO: Center for International Climate Research**

**CICERO is Norway's foremost institute for interdisciplinary climate research.**

Postal address: Pb. 1129 Blindern, 0318 Oslo - Office address: Gaustadalléen 21, 0349 OSLO - Telephone: 22 00 47 00 - E-mail: [post@cicero.oslo.no](mailto:post@cicero.oslo.no) Organization number: 971 274 190

Executive Editor: Christian Bjørnæs