

# Institutional Context, Political-Value Orientation and Public Attitudes Towards Climate Policies: A Qualitative Follow-Up Study of an Experiment

MARIANNE AASEN

*Centre for International Climate Research (CICERO)  
Oslo. P.O. Box 1129, Blindern, NO-0318 Oslo, Norway  
Email: [marianne.aasen@cicero.oslo.no](mailto:marianne.aasen@cicero.oslo.no)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2415-3795>*

ARILD VATN

*Department of International Environment and Development Studies  
(NORAGRIC)  
Norwegian University of Life Sciences, P.O. Box 5003, NO-1432 Ås, Norway.  
Email: [arild.vatn@nmbu.no](mailto:arild.vatn@nmbu.no)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9092-8712>*

## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we are interested in the effects of institutional context on public attitudes towards climate policies, where institutions are defined as the conventions, norms and formally sanctioned rules of any given society. Building on a 2014 survey experiment, we conducted thirty qualitative interviews with car-owners in Oslo, Norway, to investigate the ways in which institutional context and political-value orientation affect public attitudes towards emissions policies. One context (presented as a text treatment) highlighted individual rationality, emphasising the ways in which local pollution impacts the individual citizen; the other highlighted social rationality, emphasising the wider significance of carbon emissions and global responsibility for climate change. We analysed the effects of these contexts on attitudes, finding that institutional context influenced individuals' perspectives as well as their attitudes towards climate policies. Groups with different value orientations differed in terms of their evaluations but not their interpretations of these contexts.

## KEYWORDS

Climate policies, institutional contexts, public attitudes, social dilemmas, values

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Recent studies show that we are far from reaching the goal set out in the Paris Agreement (Le Quéré et al. 2015). Policies and policy instruments designed to reduce emissions have been slow to come forth, and a lack of broad public support for such policies has been found to be major barrier to realising a transition to a low-carbon economy (Wiseman, Edwards and Luckins 2013; Pietsch and McAllister 2010). Recent mobilisations, such as that of ‘yellow vests’ in France (Grossman 2019), demonstrate an urgent need for understanding the public response to climate policies. At the core of global warming is a demanding social dilemma, which highlights the necessity of political action to coordinate behaviour. Policies may coordinate action at a local or national level and may ensure that burdens of pro-environment behaviour are widely shared. However, the costs avoided by mitigating climate change are broadly global in scope and, critically, distant in time. Hence, agreeing with local or national policies that involve some individual costs for the sake of mitigating climate change also represents a social dilemma, and may go some way toward explaining individuals’ lack of support for climate policies.

A growing literature looking at public positions on climate policy reveals political-value orientation – specifically regarding state involvement and regulation – to be important in determining attitudes towards climate policies (Drews and van den Bergh 2015; Unsworth and Fielding 2014). Several authors stress the need for creating policies that are supported by people holding different values, since public support for climate policies is crucial to the viability of such policies (Bruvoll, Dalen and Larsen 2012; Hulme 2009). Further, an emergent but diverse body of research identifies the effects of varying the institutional context on attitudes towards climate policies – for instance, introducing or moving between contexts that variously emphasise emissions-reduction as being ‘the right thing to do’. According to J.G. March and J.P. Olsen (1989), for instance, human action is strongly influenced by what is considered appropriate, though this may vary with people’s identities and perceptions of the situation at hand (Weber, Kopelman and Messick 2004; March 1995). However, there has been relatively little field research examining such effects in groups with different political-value orientations – specifically, there is a lack of *qualitative* studies that aim at understanding how various institutional contexts may be perceived by people with varying political-value orientations.

This study contributes to the above field of research by documenting a follow-up of a 2018 survey experiment showing that institutional context affects attitudes to climate policies – or, to be precise, policies related to private car use – and that this effect depends on political-value orientation (Aasen and Vatn 2018). The aim of the follow-up study was to gain a deeper understanding of how the variation in institutional contexts influences people’s attitudes

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towards climate policies. In the discussion that follows, we aim at understanding respondents' perceptions and evaluations of the treatments used in the survey experiment, as well as the role of political-value orientation versus that of institutional context in shaping these perceptions and attitudes. In Section 2, we present the existing theoretical literature and overview previous studies in this field; in Section 3, we briefly outline the survey experiment from which the present study arises (Study 1). We go on to describe the design of the qualitative interviews (Study 2) in Section 4, and the results of this study in Section 5. In Section 6, we discuss findings and limitations before offering some conclusions in Section 7.

## 2. INSTITUTIONS AS RATIONALITY CONTEXTS

A basic proposition in institutional theory is that humans are multi-rational agents (Hodgson 1988 and 2007; Sjöstrand 1995), whose rationality or logic can be influenced by institutional context. Institutions are here defined as the conventions, norms and formally endorsed rules of any given society which influence action and attitudes by defining how something is usually done (conventions), the right way to act (norms) and/or the formally sanctioned form of action (the law). Institutions create expectations and give meaning to individual action (Vatn 2009). Simplified, institutions may support what is best for the individual (individual rationality – IR), or what is best for others or for a group of which one is a member (social rationality – SR); an IR context thus emphasises an 'I' logic, whereas SR contexts rely on a 'we' or 'they' logic. An institutional context may be explicitly defined or informationally induced: individuals will commonly search for social cues, either consciously or unconsciously, to help interpret the situation, define the context and clarify what rationality or expected actions apply.

*2.1. Explicitly defined and informationally induced institutional contexts*

Assigning roles – for instance, as a citizen or consumer – is a way to specify the institutional context and, hence, affect (or ascertain) what kind of rationality is expected (Soma and Vatn 2010). Alexa Spence and Nick Pidgeon (2010) provide an example of such an effect in their survey experiment of attitudes towards climate policies. Varying the instruction about the role participants should take on, they asked one group of respondents to evaluate certain climate policies in terms of personal considerations only, and another to assess to these policies 'in social terms' – that is, as a member of society. Those who were asked to evaluate policies in social terms were more positive towards mitigation policies than those asked to consider policies from an individual perspective.

Providing information about other people's behaviour and attitudes offers another way to influence what people consider to be correct behaviour (Cialdini, Kallgren and Reno 1991). For instance, Mark Hurlstone et al. (2014) found that informing respondents about what their peers considered to be correct influenced the respondents' attitudes towards climate policies. Their peers demonstrated high acceptance of policies that entailed individual loss for overall gain, and this information influenced the respondents' attitudes to be closer to those of their peers (in comparison to a control group). A related finding was made by Matto Mildenerger and Dustin Tingly in their 2017 study of the effects of correcting so-called 'second-order' beliefs – that is, beliefs about what others think about an issue. Regarding social dilemmas, they hypothesised, people tend to underestimate other people's opinions about what should be contributed; adjusting second-order beliefs can thus result in a higher willingness to contribute to a wider social good such as mitigating climate change (Mildenerger and Tingly 2017).

Institutional contexts can also be induced informationally – for instance, one may learn something new about the environmental consequences of a certain behaviour that alters beliefs about what is considered the right way to act (Dietz and Stern 2002). Yet information may also engender an institutional context *without* changing beliefs: the informational content may influence which aspect of an issue is emphasised, for example, and thereby cause individuals to focus on certain characterisations of an issue over others. The kind of rationality set in motion by information and institutional context is thus expected to influence attitudes and associated behaviours.

## 2.2. *The role of political-value orientation*

A person's attitude towards policies is not only dependent on institutional context, however, but also on individual characteristics such as a person's political values. Milton Rokeach (1973) argues that we can classify values in domains or spheres, where political values pertain to the political sphere, and so on. Although they are often studied at the individual level, values are in social science understood to be a result of socialisation and therefore formed by an individual's 'cultural/institutional history' (Vatn 2015). The most important phase of socialisation and formation of an individual's values occurs early in life; values may nevertheless change over time owing to different life stages, new relationships, notable events, etc. Nonetheless, values are considered more resistant to change than attitudes, and are even considered the *basis* of a person's system of attitudes and beliefs (Hogg and Vaughan 2011). Values are also central to individuals' evaluations of actions and choices, and they are commonly referred to as 'desirable trans-situational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or other social entity' (Schwartz 1994, 21).

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The values individuals hold may thus be important for their interpretations of institutional contexts. Values may, for instance, influence the effect a context has on attitudes by affecting which information people care about and believe in; the same facts may thus be understood differently, and be given different weight, by people holding different values. This variance may be due to people having different interests or holding different beliefs about the world or a specific situation (March 1995). It may also be caused by biased assimilation processes, which might include a propensity to judge evidence supporting one's existing values as relevant and reliable, and to judge disconfirming evidence as irrelevant and unreliable (Lord, Ross and Lepper 1979). This bias may also be explained by people's interest in protecting their identity and social standing – for instance, by conforming their beliefs to those of people perceived to share their values (Weber, Kopelman and Messick 2004).

### 2.3. Previous research

In this study, we are particularly interested in the effects of what are here defined as institutional contexts on attitudes towards climate policies. An emerging body of research investigates the effects that can be seen from varying the institutional context.<sup>1</sup> There are some exceptions, but few studies investigate the role of political values in influencing this effect. One exception is Petrovic, Madrigano and Zaval (2014), who provide two examples of how different institutional contexts affected attitudes towards mitigation policies in groups with different political-value orientations. They conducted a survey experiment involving about 800 US residents, which investigated how attitudes towards policies to reduce emissions were affected by emphasising the effects of emissions on local individuals' health compared with the environmental consequences of climate change. They found that the health frame elicited stronger support for policies among conservative residents, while the climate frame elicited stronger support among those who identified as liberals.

Another exception is the study of Wiest, Raymond and Clawson (2015), who found that presenting different descriptions of climate change to groups with diverse political-value orientations caused varying effects on individuals' behavioural intentions. Akin to Petrovic et al. (2014), they discovered that presenting the local effects of climate change yielded higher scores on behavioural intention among Republican and Independent respondents than presenting the actual, possible and likely global effects. However, they found that there was no impact on behavioural intentions among Democrats, who also reported stronger initial intentions than the other groups. Wolsko, Ariceaga and Seiden (2016) carried out a similar experiment on attitudes towards environmental protection among North American respondents. Specifically, they studied the

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1. Some examples are Hurlstone et al. (2014), Gifford and Comeau (2011) and Spence and Pidgeon (2010).

impact of a text highlighting environmental protection as a form of patriotic support for American values, obeying authorities and defending the purity of nature, which they hypothesised would correspond with conservative values. Accordingly, they found there to be no effect on attitudes among Democratic respondents, while Conservatives who read the text were more supportive of environmental protection than those who did not.

Lorraine Whitmarsh and Adam Corner (2017) tested the effects of three narratives on people's beliefs about climate change and attitudes toward climate policies. One narrative was about resource use, unnecessary waste production and the degradation of resources; a second was about how renewable energy production in Britain can support national industrial development and help secure energy independence in addition to emissions reduction. The third narrative was about climate justice, emphasising that those who cause the problem have resources to better deal with it than those who contribute least to the problem. The narratives were tested in a web-based survey among 2,000 British respondents with different political orientations; each participant read one of the narratives and answered some questions about climate change and mitigation policies. The researchers found that the first two narratives reduced scepticism towards the existence of climate change and climate policies among right-wing respondents, and that respondents agreed with the texts across political orientation. Regarding the third narrative, they found that the left-wing respondents agreed with the text, whereas the right-wing respondents disagreed with its content.

These various experiments demonstrate the role of political values in influencing the effects of institutional contexts on attitudes. The present study aims at understanding *how* and *why* such effects may come about by using qualitative analysis to explain participants' responses.

### 3. STUDY 1

The survey experiment underlying this study focused on Oslo city residents and the emissions produced from private cars. We conducted a web-based survey of 1,516 car owners in Oslo who would likely experience an individual/personal loss from policies aimed at reducing car emissions. Two different contexts or motives for curbing emissions were presented as 'text treatments', highlighting either an individual rationality (emphasising the impact of local pollution on the individual) or a social one (emphasising the global effects of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions). We randomly assigned participants to one of three groups comprising 500 respondents each: one group received the text emphasising an individual rationality (IR) for curbing emissions; a second received the text emphasising a social rationality (SR) context; and a control group received no such texts at all.

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Both texts concerned emissions from private car transport (see Supplementary material A) but differed in terms of which perspective they emphasised, explicitly defining their institutional context by including a sentence encouraging either IR or SR. We also aimed at inducing the two institutional contexts informationally: the IR text also contained numbers and facts about the contributions of car transport to local air pollution, for instance. As a local environmental problem, this topic unavoidably concerns other people in the local environment. However, in the IR treatment, we emphasised the fact that the effects of emissions directly impact ‘you’ (the reader), pointing out that local pollution reduces the length and quality of life for everyone, not only for those who are considered vulnerable (such as asthmatics and people with heart diseases). The SR treatment, on the other hand, informed participants about the contributions of private car emissions to total national emissions, and the respective shares of rich and poor nations in contributing to global emissions. The text also emphasised the benefits of mitigating climate change for future generations and for people in countries that may be more vulnerable to climate change.

The dependent variables in the quantitative survey were participants’ varying attitudes towards emissions policies, measured in terms of respondents’ agreement or disagreement with the statements that: a) ‘we ought to make petrol and diesel so expensive that we choose to drive less’, and b) ‘we ought to develop bicycle lanes and public transport, even if doing so means less space for driving cars’. We constructed an index of political-value orientation – measured by the degree of support for state involvement and regulation – using common response items, such as: ‘there is too much state intervention and regulation in today’s society’ (see Aasen and Vatn 2018). Below, we refer to those who scored above twelve on the index as ‘individualists’, and those who scored below twelve as ‘non-individualists’.

The results from regressions showed that the IR treatment affected attitudes towards ‘less space for cars’ in both value orientation groups. Hence, both ‘non-individualists’ and ‘individualists’ who received this text were more likely to agree with the statement than the respondents in the control group. The SR treatment, on the other hand, affected only the non-individualists’ attitudes towards an ‘increase in petrol prices’.

#### 4. METHOD

One way to achieve a better understanding of underlying statistical associations found in a quantitative study is to conduct qualitative interviews of sub-samples (Brannen 2005).

To gain deeper insight into the results of Study 1, we conducted 30 semi-structured, in-person interviews with the respondents.

#### 4.1. *The sample*

For our sample, we selected respondents from a group of 309 individuals who had indicated in the survey experiment (Study 1) that they were willing to be contacted for an interview (Study 2). The respondents' scores on the political-value orientation index was used as recruitment criteria. Eight months after the survey experiment was run, we sent emails to 47 respondents who scored higher than 12 on the index (most of them above 17), and to 47 respondents who scored lower than 12 (mostly below 7) on the same index. About twenty respondents in each value-group confirmed that they could meet for an interview in the period suggested. From these, we selected fifteen respondents from each value-group, ensuring a reasonable spread within both groups in terms of gender identification, age range (30–59 years) and geographical distribution (east/west Oslo). In total, we interviewed fourteen women and sixteen men; the interviews took place where the respondents preferred, and they were compensated with a universal gift card worth 400 Norwegian kroner. Each interview lasted about an hour, they were all recorded and we took detailed notes.

#### 4.2. *The interviews*

The interviews consisted of both structured and open-ended questions. This provided scope for categorising the empirical material into predefined concepts, but also for exploring whether the results came about according to the theory of institutions as rationality contexts or not. The interview guide consisted of five parts (see Supplementary material B). We began by explaining the aim of the follow-up study and asking whether interviewees remembered Study 1. In the first part of the interview itself, we asked participants about their background, education, work situation, family, etc., as well as about their personal car use and general engagement with environmental issues. We devoted the second part of the interview to exploring their thoughts on emissions from road traffic (whether it is a problem; how and why; what to do about it; whose responsibility it is to solve, etc.). Thereafter, we asked about their attitudes towards two of the statements about emissions policies used in Study 1: 'increase in petrol prices' and 'less space for cars'. Here, we asked interviewees about their positions concerning these statements, and asked them to elaborate on their answers.

In the third part of the interview, we introduced (in random order) one of the two texts used in Study 1, asking respondents to read it carefully and give their thoughts (e.g. was the issue well-known to them? Did they agree with the way the topic was presented? Did it make sense? Why/why not?) We also asked whether the text made them think differently about car emissions and asked for their thoughts regarding solutions and about where the responsibility for emission cuts lies (if they considered these emissions to be a problem).



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Moreover, we asked if the text influenced their attitudes towards a possible ‘increase in petrol prices’ and/or creating ‘less space for cars’, and to elaborate on their answers. We then asked them to read the *other* text and repeated the questions we asked in response to the first text.

The fourth part of the interview was devoted to the respondents’ perceptions of the two texts and their reflections on their contents. We wanted to expand our qualitative investigation into the influence of the treatments beyond their effects on attitudes towards the two specific policies. We therefore asked respondents to elaborate on which of the texts would more powerfully motivate them to reduce their own car use, and to accept restrictions on car use in general. In part five, we asked interviewees to indicate their general view on state involvement and regulation by showing where on a line they perceived their political-value orientation (i.e. left or right of centre). We asked them to signal their position by pointing on this line, and to explain their view of the state’s role regarding environmental issues compared with its role in other policy areas.

## 5. RESULTS

None of the respondents remembered the answers they gave in the survey experiment – neither the treatment they received, nor the questions they were asked. When reflecting on emissions from car transport in their city, respondents from both groups (individualists and non-individualists) mentioned both local pollution and climate change as constituting significant problems. The non-individualists reported stronger environmental engagement in general, as well as a stronger individual/personal effort to minimise environmental damage – for instance, through recycling and taking fewer flights. All respondents that expressed some concern about environmental issues stressed that politicians hold the lion’s share of responsibility for facilitating low-emitting transportation, but also mentioned everyone’s responsibility for reducing their own individual emissions. In the following sections, we describe how the different text treatments were perceived and how they variously affected the respondents.

*5.1. Equal perceptions of the text treatments*

The positions on general state involvement and regulation indicated in the qualitative interviews were consistent with the respondents’ scores from the survey experiment conducted in Study 1. The political-value orientation of our respondents thus seemed to be quite stable throughout the data collection period. When respondents were asked to compare the treatments, we found no differences between the value-groups in how they perceived the two texts. Both

individualists and non-individualists noted that the IR treatment encouraged them to think about how policies would benefit them personally, while the SR treatment encouraged them to think of global injustice and the negative effects on others from car-driving. In this respect, they referred to both the texts' differing emphases on what perspective to take and the content of the information contained therein. Most respondents found the texts unproblematic, although they did not necessarily agree with the formulations. They were familiar with the content and, although none of them knew the exact numbers referred to in the texts, the general information and messages were not new to them (except for one respondent). When we asked respondents to elaborate on how the texts affected them, however, the two groups deviated in their answers.

### *5.2. Different evaluations of the texts' content*

We asked respondents about which of the texts was most appealing to them, but also which was most motivating in terms of reducing car use voluntarily and/or accepting other kinds of policies that restrict car use. The individualist respondents mentioned the IR treatment as being generally more appealing than the SR treatment, while the non-individualists found both texts appealing but said they were more motivated to act because of climate change than because of local air pollution. We also asked respondents for their thoughts on the state's role regarding environmental problems. Interestingly, we found no difference between the value-orientation groups regarding their position on general governmental restrictions on car use as exemplified, for instance, by road pricing. Most individualists thus deviated from their general position on state involvement and regulation in that they said they would accept some state regulation (such as road pricing) for the purpose of decreasing car emissions. However, when asked if this in any way influenced their general political-value orientation, these individualists said they would still answer in the same way as before the interview.

### *5.3. Effects of treatments on attitudes towards policies*

Before turning to the findings on how the texts influenced respondents' attitudes, we summarise their initial attitudes and changes in attitudes after reading the two texts.

#### *5.3.1. Overview of attitudes towards policies and source of attitude changes*

Table 1 summarises the respondents' attitudes before and after they read the supplied texts. As expected, the individualists were generally less positive towards both policies, while the proposal for making 'less space for cars' was generally more popular than the suggested 'increase in petrol prices'. We see, however, that some individuals in *both* value-groups change their attitudes

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owing to the perspectives and information conveyed by one or both texts. The table indicates the text-based source (either SR or IR, or both) of these changes in attitudes.

Table 1. Changes in attitudes in the two value-orientation groups.

Value-group	Attitude towards 'Increase in petrol prices'		Attitude towards 'Less space for cars'	
	Before text	After text	Before text	After text
Non-individualists	5 positive 10 negative	2 changed due to SR 1 changed due to IR 1 changed due to SR/IR	10 positive 5 negative	1 changed due to SR 2 changed due to SR/IR
Individualists	3 positive 12 negative	2 changed due to IR	11 positive 4 negative	1 changed due to SR/IR 2 changed due to IR

### 5.3.2. *Being reminded about the 'distant they'*

All but one respondent said that the texts did not influence their attitudes because of learning or changes in beliefs, but because the texts reminded them of what was important. Several of the non-individualists (and one individualist) referred to the SR treatment as being a useful reminder of something they personally care about – such as global poverty and inequality – that they wanted to act upon, regardless of the small effect of their individual actions. For instance, one non-individualist said: 'I do whatever I can in my own consumption decisions; compared with other Norwegians I can't do more ... My consumption versus the consumption of a person in Bangladesh makes a stronger impression. Perhaps those of us who use cars very seldom could drive even less'.

Another non-individualist described how she initially responded negatively to an increase in petrol prices because of distributional concerns, worrying that people who are dependent on car-driving would experience increased costs and might become less mobile as a result. The rationale for being negative about an increase in petrol prices was therefore social, rather than individual; in this case, she had a local 'they' (people more dependent on car use than her) in mind. Yet reading the SR treatment also reminded this respondent about what we call a 'distant they'. 'It's downright unfair', she stated, noting that: 'it feels a bit pathetic complaining about high fuel prices when our emissions are affecting people's basis of existence', and that it was still possible to 'resolve the issue of distribution in Norway'. The normative sentence in the SR treatment – '[w]e cannot expect poorer countries with lower emissions per person to reduce emissions more than we do' – had seemingly influenced her attitude

by shifting her focus and, indeed, she acknowledged that she became strongly positive about increasing petrol prices as a result of reading the text.

We found a change from a ‘local they’ to a more ‘distant they’ logic among all non-individualist respondents; two also made this change after reading the IR context. One respondent was similarly concerned, for instance, about the distributional effects of an increase in petrol prices in Norway. Yet this argument fell short, she said, when compared with the argument about consequences for others’ health and wellbeing – both ‘local’ and ‘distant’ – and this shortfall became clearer to her from reading both treatments. She interpreted the IR treatment as emphasising individual benefits; however, this interpretation did not influence her initial perspective and she maintained that it concerned her, ‘not because of concern for my own health, but for others’ health’.

The one individualist who reported this experience of a change of logic from reading the SR treatment was initially negative towards ‘less space for cars’ because he thought that cars should be part of any future transport alternatives. The SR treatment nevertheless made him think of his own car use as unnecessary, having been reminded about its effect on the global climate. Furthermore, he mentioned that people in other countries need to increase their consumption and emissions to enhance their standard of living, which is not necessary in Norway, and acknowledged that ‘quite a lot’ of Norwegians’ car use is a luxury.

### 5.3.3. *Health benefits for ‘me’ and for ‘others’*

Respondents in both value-orientation groups mentioned that they think of climate change as a more complex problem than local air pollution since the effects are global and individuals’ efforts to reduce emissions have a comparatively smaller effect. However, the respondents had different thoughts about the impact of individual behaviour on the climate. Some individualists thought of their own car-driving as being insignificant and thus irrelevant in the global perspective; this perception of irrelevance was more apparent among individualists than non-individualists.

One participant who changed his mind about the ‘less space for cars’ policy serves as an illustration of the typical individualist response to the IR treatment. This respondent was more concerned about climate change than local air pollution, he said, and there was nothing new to him in the texts. But he considered private car use to be of little relevance and referred to large structural changes – such as international trade agreements and coal-based energy production – as being more important in solving the issue of climate change. He pointed to the sentences in the IR text that encouraged him to think of himself and his own health, highlighting both the explicit and the informationally induced institutional context. Being reminded about the positive consequences of reduced air pollution and more biking on his health and wellbeing made him more supportive of the ‘less space for cars’ proposal, he stated.

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Another example comes from an individualist respondent who was generally against all policies that restricted her individual choices and initially negative to the idea of reducing space for cars. She explained that she uses a car four times a week and was originally resistant because this policy would make car-driving more difficult for her. Both the explicitly formulated and informationally induced contexts within the IR treatment affected her attitude: ‘this text makes me think about the consequences this has for me personally... I think it’s embarrassing to say it, but it’s sheer selfishness’. She acknowledged that the individual benefit to her health from biking more and breathing clean air would ultimately outweigh the negative effect on her life from having ‘less space for cars’.

Nevertheless, non-individualists were also influenced by the IR treatment. One such respondent said that both treatments made her change her mind about having ‘less space for cars’. Regarding the IR treatment, she referred to both the emphasis on what perspective to take and the information in the text as having affected her attitude towards this policy suggestion. The IR treatment made her think of the potential benefits for her own life, which made her more positive about the proposal. Interestingly, she was the only respondent who stated that she learned something about the severity of local air pollution from the text. This respondent was also significantly influenced by the SR treatment, which she said reminded her that she should do more: ‘the small things that I can do, like using a bike more, are very small contributions compared with what poor people lose because of climate changes’. She thus switched between individual rationality and social rationality depending on which treatment she read.

The IR treatment also caused changes in attitudes towards petrol prices in two individualists. One was initially semi-positive towards an increase in petrol prices because of the societal gains to be made from reduced health risks and greenhouse-gas emissions, but hesitated because of the negative effects for car users. The reason he gave for becoming strongly positive was that the IR treatment provided convincing additional arguments which, though he was already familiar with them, did not come to mind when considering increased petrol prices. He pointed to the benefits for his own health from breathing better air and said that the text reminded him about such individual benefits, which outweighed the negative effects from an increase in petrol prices. He also said that both the explicit emphasis on which perspective to take and the general focus on individual benefits in the IR treatment influenced his attitude.

#### 5.3.4. Concrete references to local air pollution

The text in the IR treatment reminded our respondents of their own experiences of finding black dust in their eyes, noses and windows. Interviewees in both value-groups mentioned the concreteness of the information conveyed when elaborating on how the text influenced their position on policies. For

instance, one non-individualist stated that he was more concerned about climate change than about local air pollution before *and* after having read the texts. Nonetheless, the IR treatment notably affected his attitudes towards emissions policies, since it was ‘concrete and local’ and therefore seemed more relevant to his life and his city. Regarding the SR treatment, he said that the potential effects on climate change from this small change in car space in Oslo were difficult to perceive. Both the individual and societal health gains emphasised in the IR treatment were thus more important for the change in his attitude towards ‘less space for cars’ than wider climate considerations. Referring to the presence of black dust on his windows, he said that the concrete and perceptible effects from a decrease in emissions as described in the IR treatment were integral to this attitude shift. The answers from this respondent offer another example of the activation of both social and individual perspectives from reading the IR treatment.

One of the individualist respondents also mentioned the concreteness of the information in the IR treatment when elaborating on how the text influenced his position on a potential increase in petrol prices, to which he was initially negative. Nonetheless, he did not refer to the sentence emphasising explicitly which perspective to take; instead, the text reminded him of his experience of finding black dust in his eyes and nose on some winter days. While he was worried about climate change more broadly, he said it was easier to accept policies when they were connected to local circumstances (although this was not because he was more concerned about his own or local peoples’ health than the health of people outside Norway). He also referred to how the descriptions in the IR text helped him grasp both the problem and the effects of reduced emissions. As another respondent reflected: ‘I picture the street outside my house with less cars and more bikes, and that the black dust on my windows is gone’.

#### *5.4. Lack of legitimacy – a topic across value-groups*

This study also provides useful insights into why the contexts did *not* affect all of the respondents’ attitudes. Particularly interesting was the finding that some respondents in both value-orientation groups rejected the texts because of their perceptions that they were written by a distant political elite. Four respondents (two individualist and two non-individualist) admitted that they were provoked by the content and ultimately discarded the texts. These respondents did not deny the existence of environmental problems, but they were not so worried about such issues. They grounded their distance from the perceived messenger in what they felt to be a substantial and unfair difference between themselves and the authorial elite – particularly regarding control over their own life conditions and consumption levels – and said that they were doing more for the environment than any politician by having lower private consumption levels. Common to these respondents were low education and income levels (two also

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received social benefits because of health problems), and thus little flexibility in terms of their own lives and spending capacities.

## 6. DISCUSSION

*6.1. The role of political-value orientation versus institutional context*

The data in this study revealed that individuals may switch between social and individual rationalities when responding to climate policies, depending on the institutional context. We found that both explicit and informationally induced institutional contexts influenced attitudes, although the latter had a more profound influence in our case. Some respondents were affected by the explicit context, pointing out the sentences that emphasised which perspectives they should take on certain policies; however, the information content caused respondents to focus in on certain issues related to car emissions, such as potential health impacts, as opposed to other or wider effects. The information in the texts seemed to play an important role determining in which perspectives the respondents grounded their attitudes, whether individual or more social in weight and consequence.

The study also revealed how rationalities may be flexible depending on identity and different perceptions of the institutional contexts (see also March 1995). The qualitative data provided insight into how the differences in the two value-orientation groups may have emerged – not from different *interpretations* of the two texts, that is, but from different evaluations of these interview treatments. Respondents in both value groups deviated in terms of their views on the two coordination problems: climate change and local air pollution. The relatively small size of each individual's contribution to the problem of climate change (outcome-efficiency) made the 'individualist' respondents demotivated to act or even accept the policies, whereas 'non-individualists' did not question the relevance of their own behaviour or local policies to the global problem of climate change, but rather saw individual action as a moral imperative. This finding reminds us that people's various, often notably divergent, motivations to act make it challenging to find legitimate solutions on a societal let alone international level. Nonetheless, given the need for rapid cuts in greenhouse gas emissions, it seems crucial to understand these differing motivations and what solutions can provide meaning for a public with different value orientations.

The results of this study point to an optimistic finding in this respect. The IR treatment influenced respondents' views on policies because it referred to their concrete experiences with local air pollution (see Scannell and Gifford 2013). Respondents in both value-orientation groups referred to local air pollution as being easier to relate to and act upon than global climate change. This finding implies an important message for communicating and garnering support for environmental policies: namely, that highlighting the more local and tangible

effects of policies (e.g. earmarking of taxes, building communities, improving public health and wellbeing, etc.) may resonate across political-value orientations more powerfully than global warming. However, the sum of solutions for local challenges may not be enough to solve the global problem of climate change, while the joint or overlapping benefits of reducing emissions may be exhausted. It seems from our study that engagement with a global and distant ‘they’ is an unrealistic basis for (broadly supported) local and national climate policies. A position somewhere between ‘me-logic’ and ‘they-logic’, which is neither purely altruistic nor purely self-oriented, may therefore be a better normative imperative for such policies. As the next section shows, moreover, a ‘we-logic’ (of solidarity) would be relevant for both value-orientation groups.

### *6.2. Strong demand for fairness*

Resistance to pro-environmental messages and politics must be understood, at least partly, in the context of social identities (Kahan et al. 2012; Weber, Kopelman and Messick 2004; Cohen 2003). Several respondents in each group expressed strong negative reactions to the texts, rejecting them because of their perception that they were written by a political elite from which they felt distant. This finding illustrates that, when designing climate policy instruments, lack of a class-based perspective may lead to objections – not only to these instruments, but also to the general appeal to lowering consumption of carbon-intensive goods. If the message does not contain some sensitivity to the uneven consumption levels of these goods in the population, that is, it may neither be trusted nor acted upon and may even provoke opposition and hostility towards local government or state actors.

Fairness considerations also played an important role in formulating and influencing attitudes towards the specific policies. However, in contrast with the type of issue just mentioned, fairness considerations about the effects of the policies manifested differently depending on political-value orientation. Individualists put more weight on local distributional effects from policies, whereas non-individualists were more concerned with the global distributional effects of climate change. Yet the least popular policy (petrol tax) was also most often and commonly mentioned as being unfair across both groups.

These findings support results from other studies that demonstrate how beliefs about the distributional effects of the policies are important in shaping attitudes towards such policies (Baranzini and Carattini 2017; Kallbekken and Aasen 2010; Hammar and Jagers 2007). This seems to be the reason why the proposed decrease in space for cars was more popular than a fuel tax. Economic instruments can be very effective (Stern 2007), but if people are not convinced of their efficacy and/or perceive them as unfair, strict legal instruments or physical barriers to car-driving might be more attractive and effective in changing environmentally unfriendly behaviours. More profoundly,



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these results also provide some hope that institutional contexts may have the capacity to change perspectives and remind people of the relevance of a collective ‘we’. A challenge, then, will be to develop policies and actions that appeal on both an individual and local level but also create solidarity with a larger ‘we’.

### 6.3. *Comment on methods*

It is important to be aware that some mechanisms (such as information assimilation bias) that affect results in a quantitative study may not be revealed through qualitative interviews (Lord, Ross and Lepper 1979; Cohen 2003). Similarly, when an interviewee is asked to read and reflect upon a text in a face-to-face interview, their interpretation of that text may differ from when they read the same text in solitude, on a screen, as an introduction to a web survey. In addition, creating a clear rationality context is more difficult in an experiment referring to real-life settings where people have strong and differing associations with a topic. We realise that creating a ‘clean’ IR context would never be possible as there will always be a relevant ‘we’ to consider; however, this does not undermine or negate our general conclusion.

## 7. CONCLUSION

For this paper, we conducted a qualitative follow-up study of Aasen and Vatn’s 2018 survey experiment on institutional context and public attitudes to climate policies. Their survey experiment investigated *whether* institutional contexts affected attitudes towards emission-reducing policies in groups of people with different political-value orientations – namely, their positions on state involvement and regulation. The survey confirmed that institutional contexts affect attitudes, but that these effects differed according to value orientation. In this paper, we analysed *how* the institutional contexts influence these attitudes based on data from qualitative interviews of sub-samples drawn from the survey experiment.

Our study supports the observation that individuals may switch between social and individual rationalities depending on the institutional context; nevertheless, the contexts did not provide new information to the respondents but reminded them of what was important to them. It also demonstrates the importance of understanding how institutional contexts work and how they are perceived among different groups of respondents. Significantly, the differences between the two groups did not arise from different interpretations of the texts, but rather from the participants’ different evaluations of them. Respondents deviated in their views on the two coordination problems of climate change and local air pollution: individualists were less motivated to act and accept the

policies after reading about climate change, whereas non-individualists did not question the relevance of their own behaviour or local policies to this planetary issue. In addition, we found that, when respondents perceive climate policies as invalid, they tend to refer to general inequality in the population (and thus unequal capacity to adapt to policies) as a reason.

In both this study and the 2018 survey experiment, the effects of changing the institutional context on attitudes towards climate policies were admittedly modest. Such effects are expected to be small, however, considering all the information individuals are already exposed to in their daily lives. More interestingly, the study provides useful insights into how common ways of presenting climate policy are received. The text treatments proved to be very effective means of accessing respondents' reflections on dilemmas related to designing appealing climate policies and policy instruments. In future, we should prioritise studies that can provide deeper insight into the complex dynamics of and between situational factors and individual characteristics, in order to better understand their influence on attitudes and behaviours pertaining to climate change mitigation. Recent mobilisations – including protests against congestion charges in Norway (Boffey 2019), and against gasoline tax rises among 'yellow vests' in France (Grossman 2019) – underline the urgency of deepening this understanding and developing climate policies that promote rather than discourage social cohesion and, therefore, collective action.

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