



DUPONT SUMMIT 2013

..... Pressing Issues, Economic Realities

December 6, 2013 * Historic Whittemore House, Washington, DC

The Policy Studies Organization

Speakers

Graham Bullock – *Davidson College*

“Respond and Deliver? Persuasion and the Politics of Taxes, Jobs, and Climate Change”

Recent political science research has demonstrated the pervasive effects of framing on public opinion. While framing has become a critical part of political communication strategy, research has shown that counter-framing by the opposition can eliminate the effects of the original frame. An alternative “respond and deliver” strategy focuses not on framing but amending the original proposal in order to address the opposition’s objections. Such “responsive persuasion” is a critical foundation for republican theory and the concept of deliberative democracy, as it enables honest debate and engagement among citizens and policymakers. It can also build bipartisan support for a policy and catalyze its adoption. However, it may also be strategically risky as it cedes the frame of reference to the opposition and forces the policy’s proponents to fight on their opponent’s turf.

This paper describes this “respond and deliver” political strategy in detail, and provides examples of its use over the last 30 years. It then uses a mixed methods approach to analyze the use of this strategy in the context of climate change politics and carbon tax proposals. First, the paper includes a historical analysis of debates over climate policy since the early 1990s, and how policy entrepreneurs have adjusted their proposals in light of arguments presented by the opposition. This analysis identifies increasing taxes and decreasing competitiveness as the two primary concerns raised about efforts to curb climate change.

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The paper then presents results from a survey experiment that tested the support for two recent policy amendments – a carbon tax associated with a carbon tariff and a revenue neutral carbon tax – that attempt to address these two objections. We find that a carbon tax associated with a carbon tariff has greater support than a standard carbon tax, demonstrating that responsive persuasion can increase support for a policy proposal. A revenue-neutral tax, however, did not have any greater support than a standard carbon tax, and Democratic support is lower for a revenue neutral carbon tax than a lower carbon tax. This demonstrates that there can be unintended consequences and tradeoffs associated with a respond and deliver strategy if it alienates the original supporters of the proposal. Overall, Democrats expressed positive support for all versions of carbon taxes, and the percentage of Republicans who expressed positive support for the carbon tariff proposal was low. Other measures and policy adjustments are necessary to make a carbon tax palatable to a majority of Republicans, but the concept of a carbon tariff could be an important part of a broadly persuasive proposal.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the potential risks and benefits of a respond and deliver strategy that uses responsive persuasion. It compares this approach to more traditional “spinning” strategies that use persistent persuasion to continually re-frame political debates in terms that are perceived as supportive of the original proposal. The paper concludes with recommendations for future research on these dynamics and for future efforts to design, communicate and contest climate change policies.



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Biography

Graham Bullock is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and Environmental Studies at Davidson College. Dr. Bullock's research focuses on the relationships between business, politics, and the environment, with a particular focus on the role of information in mediating and influencing those relationships. He is interested in how different forms of information are deployed as ratings, certifications, and messaging to encourage collective action and policy change. Such "information-based" environmental governance strategies is one of the most prominent developments in environmental policy and management over the last 25 years, and has been initiated by a wide range of actors across the economy and around the world.

Dr. Bullock completed his PhD in Environmental Science, Policy, and Management at the University of California, Berkeley. He has a Master in Public Policy (MPP) degree from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government where he completed a policy analysis for the White House Council on Environmental Quality. His undergraduate degree is in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology (with a Five-Year Certificate in East Asian Studies) from Princeton University. At Davidson, Dr. Bullock teaches courses on American Politics, Environmental Social Sciences, Environmental Politics, Citizens, Consumers, and the Environment, and the Politics of Information. He has also worked for The Nature Conservancy, Resources for the Future, and the Edison Electric Institute, and is a co-founder of the social venture, GoodGuide.com.