

How to tackle climate change appropriately? Climate governance norms in the public debate

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Many observers agree with UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon who described action on climate change as "the biggest challenge to humanity in the twenty-first century". As a global and long-term problem which is caused by side-products of many human activities (mainly greenhouse gases) climate change is arguably not an easy issue for established political institutions and routine politics. While a number of new governance structures has been established since the issue emerged on the political agenda in the late 1980s, there remain significant uncertainties about the appropriate norms and goals of climate governance. These normative uncertainties concern, for example, the relation between national sovereignty and competencies of supranational institutions or the principles for sharing the burden of climate mitigation and adaptation measures, both intra- and intergenerationally.

These issues get quite a lot of attention in academic literature. One strand of research tries to justify certain norms by means of philosophical argumentation and by weighing between different moral demands according to the respective ethical theory (e.g. utilitarianism or ethics of responsibility). Another strand looks at the genesis and diffusion of norms, but often the analyses remain on a rather superficial level, i.e. do not consider the (roots of) argumentation patterns and abstain from studying wider societal debates apart from official politics.

With my research I want to build on, and go beyond, these approaches. I analyse public debates about climate governance because I am interested in the dynamics of overall societal opinion formation on this issue. For this, I have sampled articles dealing with climate governance from the national quality press of Germany, India and the US. By means of qualitative content analysis I identify normative justifications and criticisms employed by different societal actors. This allows for the identification of differences and similarities beyond the dichotomy of support/rejection – I can show in a comparative perspective what norms get support on which (moral) grounds. At the same time, this approach takes the positions and convictions of a broader group of societal actors serious as their communicative negotiations over the appropriate norms for tackling climate change are important for the legitimacy of political efforts.

My findings suggest significant normative conflicts which are, at least partly, rooted in diverging perspectives on the nature of climate change and in different moral value hierarchies. Among others, positions concerning the principles for burden sharing vary greatly: According to many US and some German actors, ecological effectiveness and a fair competition require emission reductions by all countries ("carbon and job leakage"). Others, in contrast, highlight industrialized countries' primary responsibility and reject constraints on catch-up development ("historic debt", "equal access").