

# Preferences for a controlling government implementation style for environmental strategies: A matter of autonomous motivation, controlled motivation, and psychological distance

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Past research has shown that perceptions of government implementation style (GIS) for environmental strategies have implications for citizens' environmental motivation and frequency of pro-environmental behaviours (PEB). An autonomy-supportive GIS (i.e., environmental strategies are a choice) fosters high quality motivation (i.e., increased autonomous motivation and decreased amotivation) and more PEB. A controlling GIS (i.e., environmental strategies are imposed) fosters poor quality motivation (i.e., increased controlled motivation and amotivation) and less PEB.

However, recent research has shown that individuals are more likely to endorse government controllingness relative to issues where they perceive to have low levels of personal control. In light of these findings, there is a need to understand citizens' preferences for GIS for environmental strategies as they have the potential to shape citizens' motivational orientation for PEB.

The present study examined how motivation relates to preferences for a controlling versus an autonomy-supportive GIS for environmental issues of different psychological distance (i.e., perceived geographical scope); water conservation (i.e., more concrete and proximal) and global warming (i.e., more abstract and distal). Psychological distance affects "preferences and judgments by changing the way individuals mentally represent future events" (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Proximal events activate low-level construals that are associated with concrete and context-specific representations of the event and are more likely to be perceived as under one's personal control. Distal events activate high-level construals that are associated with abstract and self-congruent representations of global goals and are less likely to be perceived as under one's personal

control. Based on this analysis, we assumed individuals would endorse government controllingness more for global warming and less for water conservation as a way to compensate for low levels of perceived personal control. We also assumed that, paradoxically, autonomous motivation (compared to controlled motivation) would further activate high-level construals and citizens' preferences for controllingness.

An online survey was administered to 326 undergraduate students (mean age=21 years). As hypothesized, we found that, compared to water conservation, global warming was rated as more distal and associated with a greater preference for a controlling (but not an autonomy-supportive) GIS. Furthermore, hierarchical regression analyses revealed that (a) autonomous motivation predicted preferences for a more controlling and less autonomy-supportive GIS for both issues, especially as perceived psychological distance *increased*; (b) controlled motivation predicted a preference for a controlling (but not an autonomy-supportive) GIS for water conservation (i.e., proximal issue) but did not predict preferences for global warming (i.e., distal issue); and (c) amotivation predicted preferences for an autonomy-supportive (but not a controlling) GIS for both issues.

This research highlights the 'motivated preference for control paradox'. To the extent that preferences for GIS are indicative of voting intentions and behaviour, the most highly motivated environmentalists may in fact be creating a political climate that undermines environmental motivation; especially for far-reaching environmental issues.

## References

- Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2003). Temporal construal. *Psychological Review*, *110*, 403-421.