Understanding New Zealand Public Opinion on Climate Change

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Ross Allan
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Abstract

This project explored how climate change is understood by members of the New Zealand public and how these understandings relate to their climate-related policy preferences and actions. Although climate change is regarded as one of the most serious threats facing humanity, there remains a gap between scientific findings and the political responses in New Zealand and the wider international community. Given that public opinion is a key driver to political action on the matter, it is important to understand its complexities, how it is constructed and shaped, and how it relates to behavioural preferences and practices. The research literature, however, reveals an emphasis on the polling of New Zealanders' opinions on climate change and a neglect of these dynamics. To address this lacuna, the study explored the climate change understandings and actions of six New Zealanders in rural and urban settings. In-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and the methodological approach of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis were used to gain rich insight into the lived experiences of climate change. The analysis of data revealed four key themes, which depicted climate change as a physical process; as a sociocultural story; as a personal story; and as a call to action. Despite a general understanding of the veracity of climate change and its human causation there is evidence of widespread conflation with other environmental phenomena, distrust of elites, and subtle forms of denial, which together hamper effective action. Shaped by various beliefs, values, and experiences, the heterogeneity of interpretations implies the need for disaggregated research into climate change public opinion, and for tailored strategies in designing climate policy, activating behavioural change, engendering policy support, and mobilising collective action.
Keywords: Climate change, Public opinion, New Zealand, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
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