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Explaining Sweden's Exceptionalism in Carbon Tax Acceptance: Trust, Fairness, and Policy Design in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract. This paper investigates how the Swedish public views carbon taxation and the social factors that shape support or resistance. It compares a nationally representative sample with a group of fuel tax protesters to explore differences in demographics, political orientation, and levels of trust in government. To capture broader trends in public acceptance, a Difference-in-Differences (DID) model is used to examine changes in willingness to pay environmental taxes in Sweden and a set of comparison countries between 2000 and 2010. The results show that, although opposition to environmental taxes increased globally during this period, the rise in Sweden was notably smaller. This suggests that Sweden's early and transparent "green tax reform" and revenue recycling measures helped sustain public support. The study shows the importance of trust, fairness, and transparency in designing carbon tax policies that are both politically feasible and socially acceptable over time.

Keywords: Carbon Tax, Public Acceptance, Institutional Trust, Revenue Recycling, Political Feasibility

1. Introduction

In the global effort to address climate change, carbon taxation, a levy imposed on the carbon content of fossil fuels has increasingly gained attention from governments and policymakers in recent years as a widely recognized market-based tool for reducing emissions [1]. However, despite its strong theoretical advantages, the practical implementation of carbon taxes has repeatedly encountered obstacles such as public resistance, political pressure, and social controversy—challenges that are particularly pronounced in contexts of rising fuel prices or energy inflation. Compared to the design of the policy itself, public acceptance and opinion have become one of the key factors determining whether a carbon tax can be successfully implemented.

This paper based on the hypothesis that institutional trust and perceptions of fairness mediate acceptance and adopts a comparative approach to investigate public attitudes toward carbon taxation, with Sweden as the primary case study and a broader multi-country panel serving as a control group. Sweden is an ideal candidate for such analysis due to its long-standing experience with carbon taxes, introduced in 1990 and progressively strengthened over time. Its carbon tax is

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also unusually comprehensive, applying not only to transport fuels but, in principle, to most sectors, excluding only those under the EU Emissions Trading System and energy-intensive industries [2]. Moreover, Sweden exhibits high levels of environmental concern—75% of its population considers climate change the greatest challenge of the 21st century [3]—and public trust in government remains relatively strong, creating a fertile ground for policy experimentation and analysis.

To uncover the socio-political mechanisms behind carbon tax acceptance or opposition, this paper combines two Swedish micro-level survey datasets—a nationally representative sample and a protester sample—with a Difference-in-Differences (DID) analysis using cross-national panel data covering the period 2000–2010. This time frame is particularly significant, capturing Sweden's green tax reform period (2001–2006) and external shocks such as the 2007–08 global oil price surge and the 2008 financial crisis. By comparing Sweden's attitudinal shifts with those in a group of 18 control countries, this study aims to causally identify how revenue recycling, perceptions of fairness, institutional trust interact to shape public opinion and explain why Sweden has achieved higher public acceptance of carbon taxation compared to other countries.

In doing so, the paper highlights Sweden's "exceptionalism" in carbon tax governance and contributes to broader debates on the political economy of climate policy. The findings are intended to inform policymakers seeking to design carbon tax schemes that are not only economically efficient but also politically feasible and socially legitimate.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature and analyzes Swedish citizens' attitudes toward the carbon tax using survey data. Section 3 applies a Difference-in-Differences model to compare Sweden's public acceptance trends with those in other countries. Section 4 concludes with a summary of key findings and policy implications.

2. Drivers of public attitudes toward carbon taxation: a review and empirical analysis from Sweden

2.1. Literature review

Economists' support or opposition to carbon tax policies largely depends on whether such taxes are seen as promoting or hindering economic growth. Murphy, Michaels and Knappenberger [4] presented a critical analysis of the proposed U.S. carbon tax, arguing that it could hinder economic growth rather than promote it. They argued that carbon taxes will create more economic damage than generic taxes on labor or capital even if raised in a revenue-neutral manner. In contrast, Porter and van der Linde suggested that in the long term, environmental regulations, including carbon taxes, could spur technological innovation and enhance economic competitiveness [5]. Thus, it means that excellent environmental policies can benefit companies such as enhancing productivity, reducing costs, etc.

The public's views on carbon taxes may be shaped by different considerations. As individuals, members of the public are often primarily concerned with the short-term increase in their personal cost of living, meaning that their main worry may center on the potential personal consequences of the carbon tax. The potential rise in energy and transportation costs, particularly for low-income households, can foster resistance to carbon taxation [6]. However, Nonetheless, research has indicated that public acceptance could be shaped through policy design. Sælen and Kallbekken [7] conducted a choice experiment in Norway, and found that while people are typically against increased fuel taxes, they are more supportive of taxation when the tax revenue is specifically allocated to certain environmental or social purposes.

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Moreover, trust in the carbon tax policy and policy-makers is also crucial. Fairbrother [8] found that individuals with a higher level of political trust in Britain is easier to accepting an environmental tax. This indicates that confidence in government will manage tax revenue is critical for acceptance. As another example, Umit and Schaffer [9] studied perceptions of carbon tax across Europe and documented the role of effectiveness and self-interest. They noted that people would be more supportive of introducing a carbon tax if the respondents believed it would be an effective policy for climate change that would lead to revenue for the public. On the other hand, having the opinion that the policy will not work, or having self-interest that taxpayers will absorb the burden of climate change policy will lessen support. Ewald, Sterner and Sterner [2] focus on attitudes toward the carbon tax, but also attitudes and behaviors toward environmental policy in general in Sweden. It is even more specific to the general public and a large political movement to oppose fuel taxes.

Furthermore, Beiser-McGrath and Bernauer [10] demonstrated experimentally that attitudes about distributional equity shape opinion about carbon taxes. Policies that are perceived to disproportionately affect low-income groups are met with greater resistance, while policies that make provisions to offset this impact through mitigating measures like recycling revenues or directing benefits at certain groups garner public support. Also, Finnegan [11] highlighted the role of stable and credible policies for public trust to last into the long-term. Independent regulatory authorities, long-term commitments and transparent governance structures ameliorate uncertainty and provide assurance that carbon taxes are intended to be fair. It is important to address the inequalities created by different social economic statuses at the same time as building institutional legitimacy in order to bolster public support for carbon tax and ultimately work toward achieving long-term success with a carbon tax.

Building on previous studies, this paper explores how trust and perceptions of fairness influence public attitudes toward carbon taxation in Sweden. It extends prior research by combining survey evidence with cross-country comparative analysis to examine both individual and systemic factors shaping acceptance.

2.2. Analysis of existing data on Swedish citizens' attitude towards carbon tax

To analyze public attitudes toward the carbon tax in Sweden and the underlying reasons, this study uses data collected by Jens Ewald, Thomas Sterner, and Erik Sterner in their research on the drivers and barriers among fuel tax protesters [2]. The survey was conducted between February 28 and March 8, 2021. The questionnaire included Swedish respondents' views on climate change and current policies, as well as their attitudes toward carbon taxes and taxation in general, we ask: What is the overall public attitude toward the carbon tax in Sweden? How do opponents/protesters differ from the national (nominal) sample in social demographics and political psychology? And controlling for demographics and residence, do government trust and views on fairness/revenue use significantly predict opposition to the carbon tax?

Two comparable samples are available: a nationally representative sample and a protester (opponent) sample. The design is representative in age, gender and political orientation (80+ under-represented; higher education/income slightly over-represented). Our main dependent variable is attitude toward the carbon tax operation either as opposition (oppose = 1, otherwise = 0) or as a Likert score (e.g., 1–5). Key independent variables capture trust in government and beliefs about fairness and the use of carbon-tax revenue (e.g., support for rebates or earmarking). Controls include gender, age group, education level, employment status (employed, student, pensioner, other), residence type (city, town/small city, village, countryside), political orientation (left–right self-placement), and membership in environmental organizations. These variables together characterize

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respondents' social demographics and political psychology to explain variation in carbon-tax attitudes.

Table 1. Swedish respondent data composition [12]

	Nominal sample (%)	Protest sample (%)
Gender		
Male	48.7	74
Female	51	25.1
Other	0.3	0.9
Age		
18-19	0.8	1.4
20-39	30.5	26.9
40-59	33	46.4
60-79	35.5	24.5
>79	0.1	0.8
Occupation		
Other	10.9	10.1
Employed	55.8	67.5
Student	6.8	5.7
Pensioner	26.5	16.7
Member of environment organization		
No	90.1	74
Yes	9.9	26
Education level		
Comprehensive schooling	6.5	3.1
Upper secondary schooling or equivalent	30.9	22.7
Postsecondary nontertiary education	21.2	23.3
Bachelor's degree or equivalent	25.9	21.6
Master's degree or equivalent	15.5	29.0
Residence		
City	26.2	22.5
Town or smaller city	31.9	23.6
Village	23.5	20.9
Countryside	18.5	33
Trust in government		
Trust	43.9	28.9
No trust	41.9	63
Do not know	14.1	8.2
Political orientation		
Clearly left	11.6	12.2
Left	22.2	19.5

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Neither left nor right	20.6	25.4
Right	24.2	21.9
Clearly right	15.2	15.8

The sample was designed to be representative in terms of age, gender, and political orientation, with the exception of individuals over the age of 79, who were underrepresented. Individuals with higher education and income levels were slightly overrepresented. Since those with higher education levels tend to have stronger environmental awareness and a better understanding of policy, this may result in a generally more positive attitude toward the carbon tax. This suggests that the overall "environmental inclination" in the sample may be overestimated. In terms of occupational distribution, 55.8% of respondents were employed, while students accounted for only 6.8%, which may cause the results to reflect more strongly the working population's understanding of the carbon tax—particularly on issues such as economic impact and cost-sharing—while potentially overlooking the concerns or specific perspectives of the student group.

We will separately identify the group of respondents who do not support carbon tax, namely the protein sample, and compare it with the entire national sample. We can observe a significant gender disparity among protesters, with men being much more likely to participate in protests. While men make up 48.7% of the national sample, their proportion rises sharply to 74% in the protester sample. Conversely, the proportion of women drops from 51% to just 25.1%. This suggests that opposition to the carbon tax is strongly gendered, possibly because men are more sensitive to economic pressures, changes in energy prices, or more inclined to express political dissatisfaction. Highly educated individuals are also more represented among the protesters. For instance, those with a master's degree account for 15.5% of the national sample, but this rises to 29% in the protester sample. This shows that the protesters are not a "low-knowledge group." On the contrary, many of them have medium to high levels of education and may choose to criticize the policy precisely because they understand it more deeply. Residential location also plays a significant role. Rural residents are more likely to oppose the carbon tax: while they make up 18.5% of the national sample, they account for 33% of the protester sample. One possible explanation is that rural areas are more dependent on fossil fuels for transportation and heating, making them more heavily affected by the carbon tax and thus more prone to dissatisfaction and protest [13]. Distrust in government also appears to be a key driver of carbon tax opposition. In the protester sample, as many as 63% reported low trust in the government, while only 28.9% of protesters reported having trust in the government. Therefore, it can be argued that trust in government is a critical variable in explaining protest behavior against the carbon tax. Individuals with low levels of trust in government are more likely to oppose any measures involving taxation and state intervention.

To explore the subjective reasons behind carbon tax opponents' distrust toward the government and carbon tax policies, this study further draws on data from Jens Ewald, Thomas Sterner, and Erik Sterner's report regarding Swedish respondents' attitudes towards fairness and the use of carbon tax revenue [2]. This data highlights the differences in responses between the general Swedish public and carbon tax opponents concerning both the positive and negative aspects of the carbon tax.

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2.3. Analysis of the reasons for the attitude of Swedish citizens towards carbon tax

Table 2. Attitudinal differences toward carbon tax in Sweden

Statement	National sample (%)	Protest sample (%)	Difference (pp.)
It applies the polluter-pays principle	39.9	35.2	4.7
It affects my own and other people's behavior	39.4	33.5	5.9
It gives incentives for research	25.1	23.2	1.9
It collects government funds to fight climate change	18.7	13.1	5.6
There is nothing positive about a carbon tax	14.4	44.2	-29.8
It is unfair because it hurts rural areas	55.1	56.7	-1.6
It is unfair because it hurts low-income earners	25.3	34.3	-9
It has an insufficient effect on the climate	24.4	31	-6.6
It hurts Swedish industry and competitiveness	14.6	27.6	-13
It is too expensive	14.6	15.9	-1.3
There is nothing negative about a carbon tax	6.4	14.4	-8
Tax money could go to corrupt purposes	5.3	10.3	-5

From the data, we can see that although around 40% of respondents in the national sample believe the carbon tax reflects the "polluter-pays principle" or "affects my own and other people's behavior," these figures drop to 35.2% and 33.5%, respectively, among protester respondents. When it comes to the view that the carbon tax "raises revenue to address climate change," support in the protester sample is significantly lower (13.1%) than in the national sample (18.7%), with a difference of 5.6 percentage points, which is statistically highly significant. This suggests that protesters are less likely to recognize the positive functions of the carbon tax, particularly regarding its environmental orientation and fiscal purpose. And the core mechanism behind this phenomenon is that the protesters are not simply opposing climate policy itself, but rather rejecting the positive environmental and fiscal functions of the carbon tax because they lack trust in the government, in how tax revenues are used, and in the fairness of the system [2].

The most striking difference appears in the response to "There is nothing positive about a carbon tax." A full 44.2% of the protester sample agreed with this statement, compared to just 14.4% in the national sample — a gap of 29.8 percentage points — indicating a complete lack of trust in the carbon tax among a segment of the population. Additionally, 27.6% of the protester sample believe the carbon tax "harms industry and competitiveness," compared to 14.6% in the national sample — a difference of 13 percentage points.

Moreover, political trust is strongly correlated with public support for carbon taxation in Sweden. Trust in politicians is a key factor in explaining the intensity of public support for CO_2 taxes—particularly CO_2 taxes on gasoline. Among individuals with high political trust, even those who own cars—an attribute that might self-interestedly lead to opposition to CO_2 taxation—show significantly less resistance compared to those with low political trust. In sum, political trust significantly increases public support for CO_2 taxation in Sweden [14].

In the national sample, around 40% of respondents recognize positive functions of the carbon tax, such as applying the polluter-pays principle, whereas in the protester sample this proportion drops below 35%. Strikingly, 44.2% of protesters believe there is nothing positive about a carbon tax, compared to only 14.4% in the national sample, highlighting the gap in public support. At the same

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time, distrust in government is much more common among opponents (63% versus 41.9%), indicating that lack of political trust is strongly correlated with opposition to the carbon tax. This pattern is in line with Hammar and Jagers [14], who find that political trust significantly increases support for CO_2 taxation, even among groups otherwise expected to resist such policies.

3. A cross-country DID analysis of carbon tax acceptance

3.1. DID model to explain the differences in Sweden's carbon tax acceptance from 2000 to 2010 compared to the global average

In order to study the effectiveness and impact of carbon tax policies, I established a Difference in Differences (DID) regression model.

$$Y = \beta 0 + \beta 1 \cdot Treat + \beta 2 \cdot Post + \beta 3 \cdot (Treat \times Post) + X + \epsilon$$

In this model, Treat is a binary variable for the treatment group, where Treat equals 1 for the treatment group and 0 otherwise. Post is a binary variable indicating the post-policy period. Post is set to 1 for all observed countries in 2000 and 0 in 2010.

The Y variable in this model, which is Unwillingness to pay higher taxes, the higher the score, the fewer people are willing to pay more taxes for environmental protection. A lower score means more people are willing to pay higher taxes for environmental protection.

The data for this model comes from Sweden. The control group consists of countries from different continents with varying economic conditions and population sizes, including Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Israel, Japan, Latvia, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, the Philippines, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, and the United States.

Through this Difference-in-Differences estimation, we obtained a coefficient for treat of -4.38e+07 (P<0.001), indicating that before the implementation of carbon tax policies in the 1990s, the return on capital in Nordic countries was significantly lower than that of the control group, which consists of the United States, China, and India.

Table 3. Difference-in-Differences (DID) regression results: Sweden vs. global average, 2000–2010 [15]

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Std. Error	Significance
Treat (Sweden = 1)	-1.27	0.53	$p < 0.05$
Post (2010 = 1)	4.94	2.08	$p < 0.05$
Treat × Post	-3.62	1.17	$p < 0.01$
Control Variables (X)	GDP per capita, Education, Energy price, etc.	—	—
Constant (β_0)	18.45	1.92	$p < 0.01$
Observations (N)	420	—	—
R^2	0.31	—	—

Notes: Significance levels are indicated as *p<0.01, p<0.05, p<0.1.The dependent variable is “Unwillingness to pay higher taxes for environmental protection”, where a higher score indicates less willingness to pay higher taxes.

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In this model, within the control group, $\beta 2 = 4.94$ ($p = 0.019$), indicating that, on average, the dependent variable increased by approximately 4.94 points in 2010 compared to 2000. This suggests a general rise in public attitudes over the decade in non-Swedish countries. A negative β_3 implies Sweden's willingness to pay declined less (i.e., higher acceptance) than in the control group. This means that after accounting for the common trend, public attitudes in Sweden declined relatively (or increased by a smaller margin), and the DID effect is significantly negative.

3.2. Possible factors of data results explanation

During the 2008 economic crisis, the recession and rising unemployment significantly depressed public concern for climate policy and willingness to pay; after 2008, climate concern in Europe and the United States declined noticeably, which can explain the general increase in "Post > 0" in the control group [16]. Moreover, the 2007–08 oil price shock raised travel and heating costs. Research has found that the higher the fuel price, the lower public support for climate policies (especially those involving taxes), with support declining more sharply among low-income and more liberal groups [17].

β_2 is positive and significant, indicating that non-Swedish countries were, overall, less willing to pay higher taxes for environmental protection between 2000 and 2010. Existing research attributes this to concerns about regressivity and effectiveness, high costs with less visible benefits, and low levels of government trust. β_3 is negative and highly significant, meaning that the increase in opposition in Sweden was markedly lower than in the control group. This aligns with the literature's conclusion that revenue recycling, transparency, and trust can enhance carbon tax acceptability: Sweden's policy experience and communication practices may have offset part of the decade-long general rise in opposition.

Compared with the control group, Sweden showed relatively lower levels of opposition, partly attributable to perceptions of fairness and revenue use. According to the logic reported in earlier data, if the public believes that carbon tax revenues are recycled, used for tax reductions, or directed toward visible green investments, acceptability can increase significantly. Sweden's early and relatively transparent practices of "green tax reform/revenue recycling" help explain its relative improvement. At the same time, the Swedish public's high level of trust in government makes citizens more willing to accept carbon taxes and other price-based climate policies [2].

As for the changes in Sweden between 2000 and 2010, they can be explained by the fact that, under the global impact of the 2008 financial crisis and the sharp rise in oil/fuel prices, Sweden's "green tax reform/revenue recycling" and high institutional trust provided a strong buffer.

Before 2008, Sweden implemented a "green tax reform" between 2001 and 2006 (raising environmental taxes, reducing labor income taxes) and continued to increase environmental taxes after 2007. The gradual tax increases and the differentiated tax treatment for ETS industries enhanced political feasibility and public acceptability, because a stepwise approach allowed households and firms to adjust progressively to higher costs, while exemptions or reduced rates for energy-intensive, trade-exposed sectors reduced fears of competitiveness loss and carbon leakage. By combining these elements, Sweden managed to ease distributional concerns and mitigate political resistance, making the policy more durable. This can help explain Sweden's relative improvement in the model ($\beta_3 < 0$) [18].

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4. Conclusion

This research highlights that public opinion regarding carbon taxation is influenced by a combination of trust and economic considerations. The carbon tax in Sweden has achieved relatively higher acceptance than other countries in Europe, because of it is carbon tax has achieved relatively higher public acceptance in Europe mainly due to its early and transparent “green tax reform/revenue recycling” approach and its high level of institutional and governmental trust, which have helped cushion the widespread opposition caused by economic crises and oil price shocks, making the policy more socially acceptable. However, there remains considerable opposition among groups who perceive unequal distributions of burden or do not believe the policy will be effective. The findings reinforce the literature’s consensus that successful implementation requires not only robust policy design but also proactive efforts to bridge gaps in public awareness and trust. In order to achieve their objectives of minimizing emissions and advancing social equity in the context of climate action. Of particular interest for further research would be trends in public attitudes over time after changes to policy, particularly how elements of transparency and redistribution of costs shape policy acceptance. In conclusion, the Nordic experience underscores that carbon taxes are not merely technical fiscal instruments but complex public policies whose long-term success depends on transparency, fairness, and continuous engagement with citizens to maintain trust, adapt to social concerns, and sustain legitimacy in climate action.

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