

Behavioral and Social Tipping Interventions to Scale Climate Action

Abstract: The net-zero transition poses unprecedented societal challenges that cannot be tackled with technology and markets alone. It requires complementary behavioral and social change on the demand side. Abandoning entrenched detrimental norms, including those that perpetuate the fossil-fueled lock-in, is notoriously difficult, preventing change and limiting policy efficacy. A nascent literature tackles social tipping interventions—STI, aiming at cost-effective disproportionate change by pushing behaviors past an adoption threshold beyond which further uptake is self-reinforcing. Intervening on target groups can greatly reduce the societal cost of a policy and thus holds promise for precipitating change. This presentation takes stock of the potential of STI to scale climate action by first reviewing the theoretical insights arising from behavioral public policy based on applications of threshold models from sociology and economics; then, it assesses the initial evidence on the effectiveness of STI, in light of the outcomes of laboratory and online experiments that were designed to study coordination on an emergent alternative to the initial status quo. Lastly, I will discuss potential conceptual limitations and fruitful avenues for increasing the robustness of STI assessments beyond theory and small-scale experimentation.