

# Law and Norms in Collective Action: Maximizing Social Influence to Minimize Carbon Emissions

*Jed S. Ela\**

## ABSTRACT

Legal scholars have long argued that informal social norms can solve collective action problems, as long as these problems occur in close-knit groups. This “group knittedness hypothesis” may suggest that social norms, by themselves, will not be able to solve the world’s largest collective action problem: anthropogenic climate change. Yet recent scholarship has taken the group knittedness hypothesis too far, suggesting that any attempt to manage social influences in large, loose-knit groups is likely to be relatively ineffective.

In fact, social norms *can* shape individual behavior even in loose-knit groups, and climate policies that ignore norms may miss important opportunities to reduce carbon emissions. To predict how social norms might aid specific policy interventions, this Comment proposes looking at the visibility of specific behaviors rather than the knittedness of groups. According to two leading theories of the origin of social norms, norms govern the behaviors that people use to compete for social status or economic benefits. Because behaviors must be visible to become vehicles for competition, policymakers may be able to leverage norms by tailoring interventions to the visibility of carbon-emitting behaviors. For highly visible behaviors, where social influences are likely to be strong, policymakers should focus on creating a normative consensus in favor of changing behavior in order to align social influences with the desired policy. In contrast, for lower-visibility behaviors, policymakers must first focus on raising visibility, since visibility is necessary for social enforcement to begin. Finally, for inherently low-visibility behaviors,

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\* Emil Joseph Stache Public Interest Scholar, J.D. class of 2011, UCLA School of Law.





































































































