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Figure 1: Responses to the question “*taken together, what should people do to respond to climate change overall?*”

There is some variation between countries. But in all countries, we find a strong base of people wanting the EU to prioritise the environment and climate change – reaching far beyond those who vote for Green parties (Figure 3). Support is highest in Italy, where around half of respondents see climate as one of the top three issues for the EU, followed by France and Germany at around 40 percent, Sweden at 36 percent and Poland at 29 percent.

Figure 3: Percentage of respondents seeing climate change and environmental sustainability as a top-three priority for the EU (2024)

Source: Bruegel based on data from djpart.

While Green party supporters are the most likely to see the topic as one of the top issues for the EU (69 percent), concern is also significant among supporters of most other political party groups (Figure 4). Of those who feel closest to conservative or liberal parties, around four in ten see climate as a key priority, while it is in the top three priorities for about half of supporters of social democrat or left parties.

Figure 4: Percentage of respondents seeing climate change and environmental sustainability as top-three priority for the EU, by political party affinity (across Germany, France, Italy, Poland and Sweden) (2024)

Source: Bruegel based on data from djpart. Note: see Box 1; sample sizes for each country weighted equally.

Furthermore, people across the political spectrum who do not consider it as one of the top policy areas for the EU often still express significant concern about climate change (Figure 5). Roughly two thirds of conservative, liberal, left and social democratic party supporters say that they are concerned or very concerned about climate change. While those favouring

Figure 5: Percentage of respondents answering “*very concerned*” or “*concerned*” when asked “*what are your current sentiments regarding the following societal issues in [respondent’s country]: climate change*”, by political party affinity (across Germany, France, Italy, Poland and Sweden) (2024)

Source: Bruegel based on data from djpart. Note: see Box 1; sample sizes for each country weighted equally.

While nine out of ten Europeans agree that action is needed to respond to climate change, a significant number of people have concluded that action aimed at stopping climate change (mitigation) is less important than measures to cope with the consequences (adaptation). Between 2020 and 2024, support for “*We should do everything we can to stop climate change*” fell in all five countries, while support for “*We should adapt to climate change, so that we can live well with a changed climate in the future*” rose in all of them (Figure 6). This change was

3 Populists and the far-right have increased doubts about climate attribution

While outright climate denialism remains a minor phenomenon in Europe, a softer form of scepticism has grown regarding the attribution of climate change to human activity (attribution scepticism) since 2020, despite scientific research confirming this attribution. In most countries, only a minority thinks that climate change is mostly caused by natural processes or is not real at all. In France, Italy and Germany, up to 15 percent hold this view (Figure 7). More people doubt that human activity is the cause in Sweden (at 19 percent) and Poland (at 23 percent). However, in all countries except France, there has been a decrease (by 7 to 11 percentage points) in the number of people who correctly attribute climate change predominantly to human activity, while the shares of those who think that human and natural causes are equally responsible has correspondingly increased.

This increase in attribution scepticism is likely to result from the campaigning of populist and far-right politicians since 2020 to foster this relativising sentiment. Efforts to create

Figure 8: Responses to the question “do you think that climate change is caused by natural processes, human activity, or both?”, by country and party preference (far-right/non-far right) (2024)

Source: Bruegel based on data from djpart.

These findings have a crucial implication for non-far-right political leaders: rhetoric that relativises the scope of the climate crisis and human influence on it hardens what was initially soft scepticism by boosting populist and far-right narratives. This makes it harder later on to advocate policies aimed at combating climate change. As shown above, supporters of mainstream parties are concerned about the climate crisis and expect action on it. The smartest move for political leaders who aim to utilise the opportunities from innovations in the green-transition sector economically would be to engage proactively with climate action now, while their potential voters are still open to it.

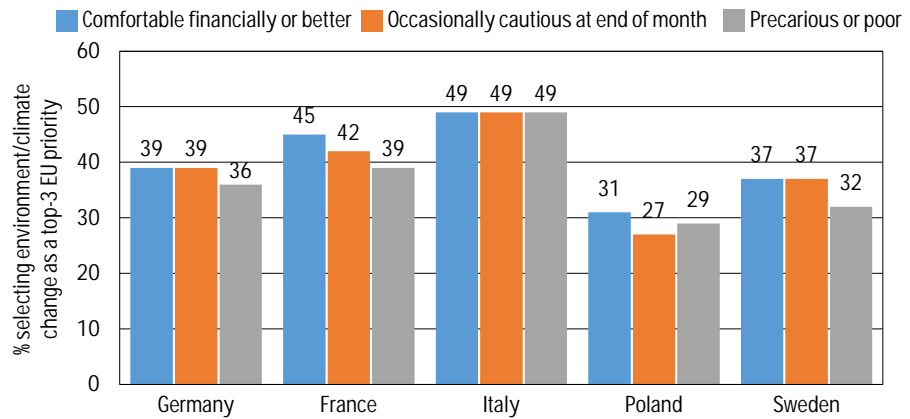
Political leadership matters, as people take cues from parties they support. The data presented above shows that people respond to the themes discussed by political actors. If actors across the political spectrum talk about climate crisis responses that seem likely to be effective and also address other issues of concern to voters, such as competitiveness and the cost of living, they are likely to gain support. But if the political discourse contains a lot more claims that call into question the causes of climate change and what would mitigate it, people are less likely to support green policies.

4 Concern about the climate crisis affects all socio-economic groups, but scepticism is greatest amongst those who feel politically disaffected

Concerns about the climate crisis are not only present across the whole democratic political spectrum, but they also cut across socio-economic groups. In the survey, people were asked

precarious situation or poor does not make much difference in terms of how likely they are to prioritise climate change as a policy issue. Except for some fairly marginal differences in Sweden and France between the financially most and least comfortable households, there are hardly any noticeable differences.

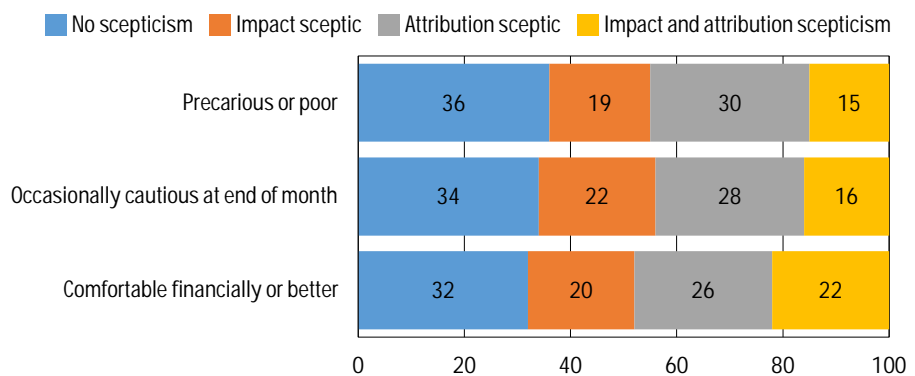
Figure 9: Percentage of respondents who see climate change and environmental sustainability as a top-three priority for the EU, by household financial situation and country (2024)



Source: Bruegel based on data from djpart.

Conversely, levels of soft (and hard) climate scepticism are roughly evenly distributed across all socio-economic backgrounds (Figure 10) – not just present for people in economically precarious situations. Combined attribution and impact scepticism is most commonly found among those who consider themselves to be financially comfortable or rich. This aligns with previous research that has shown how higher status groups, who benefit from the status quo, are sometimes less open to transformative climate policies (Eichhorn *et al.*, 2024).

Figure 10: Impact and attribution scepticism (combined) by household financial situation (across Germany, France, Italy, Poland and Sweden) (2024)



Source: Bruegel based on data from djpart. Note: see Box 1; sample sizes for each country weighted equally.

We see a clearer distinction in degrees of political disaffection. People who feel that there is no point in engaging politically are much more likely to subscribe to at least one type of climate-change scepticism. In France, Italy and Sweden, those who do not show the same political disaffection are on average about 10 percentage points more likely to hold neither impact nor attribution scepticism. The number is slightly higher in Poland (13 percentage points) but markedly more pronounced in Germany, with a 20-percentage points difference in scepticism between those who feel disaffected and those who do not.

Figure 12: Percentage of respondents answering “*very concerned*” or “*concerned*” when asked “*what are your current sentiments regarding the following societal issues in Germany: climate change*”

were made in a way that was far removed from the realities of most people. This resulted in a sense of *malaise*

for positive developments. Disaffection with politics was therefore not only about people feeling personally left behind but also reflected a deeper disillusionment about the capacity of the state and of decision-makers to support German businesses and deeper economic transitions. Such views could be found across the political spectrum. Peter, for example, a Die Linke voter, said:

“.. We’re so far behind, also with the dependence on resources like oil, gas, etc. We should have done so much already with wind and had the opportunity to do construction with

(Katharina, 52, higher socioeconomic status, CDU voter)

The survey findings confirm that people's expectations of their financial situation are linked strongly to their overall sense of political disillusionment. Amongst those that feel

answered confidently by political leaders. Otherwise, decisive action that is still possible now will become more difficult to pursue in the future.

These findings have important implications for national and European policymakers. Interpretations of opinion polling on public climate attitudes undertaken by political parties and public institutions must be carefully examined. But the reduced policy salience of climate does not equate to significantly reduced public concern about it. Policymakers will not gain from de-emphasising strong climate policy now or publicly delaying action. Instead, delay is likely to legitimise the arguments put forward in populist and far-right narratives, which raise doubts about whether climate change is caused by humans. Public support for strong climate action, including market-based approaches, would become more difficult to gain in future.

Material concerns are strongly linked to views about the climate crisis. Support for action is strong not only among those in higher income groups. Even people in precarious financial situations and poverty are concerned about climate. But action on the climate crisis must be connected to policies that directly improve people's lives materially in ways they notice to win their support.

Scepticism about the effectiveness of climate action is linked to a feeling of political disaffection. Therefore, methods of bringing public concerns into policy debates beyond the mechanisms of representative democracy are required. Both engagement with organised civil society and deliberative democracy innovations should be considered to increase public engagement. As evidence of climate change on the European continent grows, in the form of wildfires, droughts, floods and higher temperatures, leaders across the political spectrum need to give very clear messaging about the scientific basis for the connection.

Given that people are responsive to political messaging, leaders need to champion strong engagement with climate transitions now. If political actors do not prioritise policy action and do not communicate about it, people will take their cues from this inaction. This would only make engagement and ambitious action harder in the future.

References

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