

Eichhorn, Jan; Grabbe, Heather

Research Report

Europeans still want climate action, but don't trust governments to deliver

Bruegel Policy Brief, No. 08/2025

Provided in Cooperation with:

Bruegel, Brussels

Suggested Citation: Eichhorn, Jan; Grabbe, Heather (2025) : Europeans still want climate action, but don't trust governments to deliver, Bruegel Policy Brief, No. 08/2025, Bruegel, Brussels

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<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/322589>

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Europeans still want climate action, but don't trust governments to deliver

Jan Eichhorn and Heather Grabbe

Executive summary

Jan Eichhorn (j.eichhorn@dlpart.org) is Director of dlpart

Heather Grabbe (heather.grabbe@bruegel.org) is a Senior Fellow at Bruegel

Neele Eilers at dlpart has led the design and collection of the data the analyses are based on

THE VAST MAJORITY of Europeans continues to support action to combat climate change, but many are losing faith in governments to deliver a transition that is effective and fair. Based on a large-scale questionnaire answered by nearly 8000 people in five EU countries in 2024, with a comparison to responses from 2020, we find that Europeans continue to worry about climate change and want effective action to combat it, even though the pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine significantly increased their concerns about economic and physical insecurity. Scepticism about the causes of climate change has risen a bit, and concern about adapting to its impact has grown. People across all income groups, particularly in France, Germany, Italy and Sweden, feel negative about the outlook for their economic future and their governments' ability to improve it.

PEOPLE WHO FEEL politically disaffected think that decisionmakers are not taking their views and interests into account when making economic and climate policies. Some people are now shifting their attention away from action against the climate crisis towards adaptation, but this does not mean they are less concerned about climate change. Instead, for some people, it is an expression of their disillusionment with state institutions – and this feeling is present among supporters of parties across the political spectrum.

WORRY ABOUT CLIMATE change is equally spread across all socio-economic groups. Closer examination of attitudes in Germany, using evidence from focus groups, which we also discuss in this Policy Brief, reinforces the finding of increasing scepticism about the German government's ability to manage the climate crisis.

IF POLITICAL LEADERS want the public to continue to support climate policies, they must engage proactively now to avoid even greater loss of confidence in government. If governments go soft on efforts to combat the climate crisis now or delay action, they will not meet voters' demand for an effective and just transition. Moreover, hesitation and delay would boost populist and far-right actors' efforts to sow doubt about the causes of climate change and whether policies will be effective.

Recommended citation

Eichhorn, J. and H. Grabbe (2025) 'Europeans still want climate action, but don't trust governments to deliver', *Policy Brief* 08/2025, Bruegel

1 Introduction

Election results in 2024 have been interpreted as European voters turning against climate and environment policies. In the European Parliament elections, for example, the vote share of Green parties fell from 10 percent to 8 percent, and the 2024-2029 Commission has emphasised competitiveness more than transformative climate policies. The rollback of sustainable agriculture measures in response to protests, and the hardening of anti-green rhetoric by centre-right parties¹, have led some commentators to assume that political support for climate action is diminishing across EU countries².

However, the reasons behind voters' choices deserve deeper empirical investigation. Before jumping to conclusions, political parties and policymakers need to understand the views of the public in more detail, especially the variation across social, geographical and generational lines – that is, people with different socio-economic profiles, countries of residence and ages.

Broad opinion surveys show the priorities of Europeans shifted between 2020 and 2024. Their top concerns are now economic security and international conflicts, with climate falling to fourth place in Eurobarometer's list of priorities (Eurobarometer, 2024). This is unsurprising given two changes in circumstances since 2020: Russia's war in Ukraine and higher inflation following the COVID-19 pandemic without corresponding increases in real wages (Schnabel, 2024), which has raised the cost of living for many Europeans. But does the increased salience of those issues mean that people no longer care about climate change and environmental degradation? Not necessarily: the underlying attitudes to climate change and action to address it may not have changed significantly, as found by Abou-Chadi *et al* (2024).

In this context, this policy brief investigates the following questions:

- Instead of a backlash, might people have consistent views on the climate crisis, but give more salience to other issues at the moment?
- Might voters be taking cues from political leaders on issues like carbon neutrality and environmental sustainability, rather than politicians following public opinion?
- Given the impact of inflation on household budgets, to what extent are progressive climate policies something only wealthier citizens are willing to subscribe to, as is frequently alleged?
- How does the debate on the cost of the green transition in the context of the cost-of-living crisis affect views across people of different income groups, countries of residence and age groups?
- Do voters still support climate action?

We investigate these questions using data from a survey of 7,819 Europeans carried out in April 2024, ahead of the European Parliament elections, in France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Sweden (Eilers *et al*, 2024; Box 1), and compare the results to a similar survey of 6,206 respondents in 2020 in those five countries (Eichorn *et al*, 2020)³. In addition, we examine views in Germany ahead of the February 2025 federal elections, using insights from focus groups carried out in January 2024 (Box 1), to evaluate how to make sense of public perceptions and what conclusions political leaders should draw.

Since 2020 people have become more concerned about security and the cost of living,

1 EPP Group in the European Parliament, 'Start over with the Nature Restoration Law', 6 July 2023, <https://www.eppgroup.eu/newsroom/start-over-with-the-nature-restoration-law>.

2 See for example *Tagesspiegel*, 'Politik verliert die Wähler beim Klimaschutz', 15 May 2024, <https://interaktiv.tagesspiegel.de/lab/die-verdraengte-krise-wer-hat-angst-vorm-klimaschutz/>.

3 Eilers *et al* (2024) also collected data in Romania, Latvia and Greece but we do not analyse this data in this Policy Brief because we do not have comparison data from 2020.

Despite recent election results, underlying concern about climate change has not changed significantly

slightly pushing down climate change on their list of concerns. Scepticism about the causes of climate change has risen somewhat, and concern about adapting to its impact has grown. People across all income groups, particularly in France, Germany, Italy and Sweden, feel negative about the outlook for their economic future and their governments' ability to improve it.

Box 1: Quantitative and qualitative data

Survey data collection details

- Representative survey of 7,819 people conducted in April 2024 in Germany (N=2344), France (N=1480), Italy (N=1496), Poland (N=1499), Sweden (N=1000) on a range of issues related to the 2024 European Parliament elections;
- Large online panels with quota sampling (age, gender, region, educational attainment) with cross-quotas (age X gender, age X education, education X region);
- Slow, balancing invitation management; attention checks to exclude those responding too quickly;
- Weight adjustments for (small) parameter deviations in sample characteristics using raking (or sample-balancing) weights (all results shown are weighted).

Focus group details

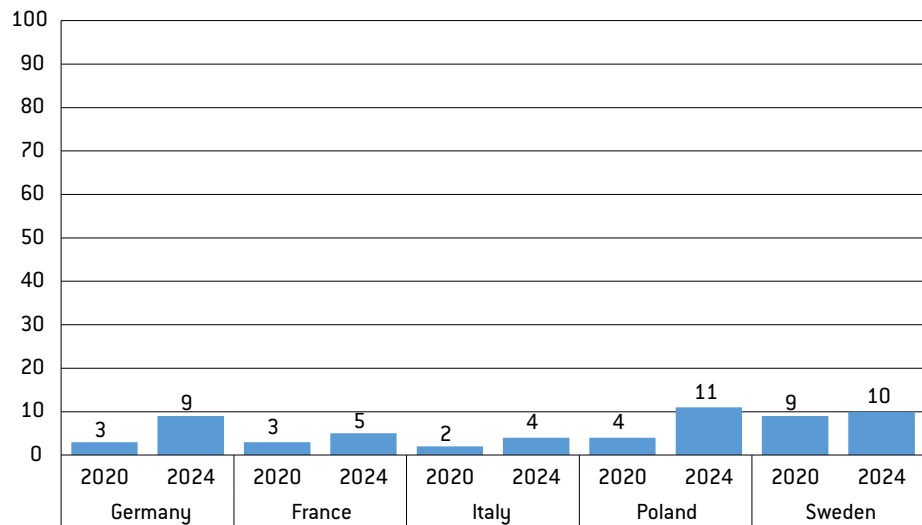
Four focus groups were conducted on 23 and 24 January 2024 in Leipzig, Germany, with each group consisting of seven or eight participants. Participants were recruited to represent people across a mix of genders, ages, levels of educational attainment and income, urban/non-urban residency contexts and party preferences within each focus group.

For further details, see Eilers *et al* (2024).

2 The climate crisis continues to be a major concern for most citizens

One fundamental point has not changed since 2020: outright climate change deniers are in a small minority in Europe. While there has been a slight increase in Poland and Germany, only around ten percent of people or less across the five countries claim that climate change is not a big issue and therefore does not require any action (Figure 1). As in 2020 (Eichhorn *et al*, 2020), most voters are aware of climate change, understand that it has a real impact and expect their government to take action on it.

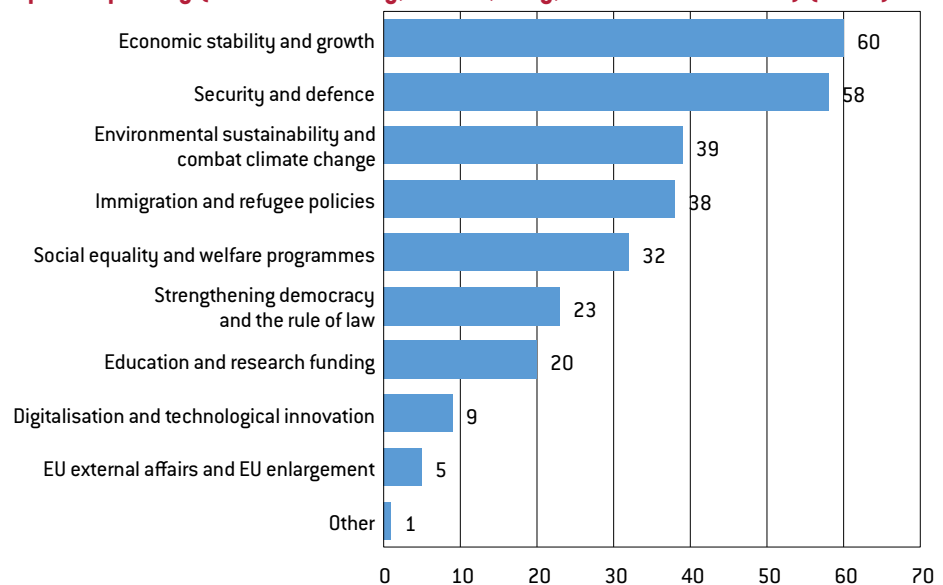
Figure 1: Responses to the question “taken together, what should people do to respond to climate change overall?”, by country and year; % saying “we do not need to do anything, because climate change is not a big issue”



Source: Bruegel based on data from d|part.

The list of issues that the public think the EU should focus on is topped by ‘economic stability and growth’ and ‘security and defence’ (Figure 2). However, climate policy has not been relegated far down their list of concerns. Across the surveyed countries ‘environmental sustainability and combating climate change’ is the next most pressing issue people want to see a focus on, at the same level as immigration and refugee policies – a topic extensively covered by the media and the top theme of far-right parties in many countries, and increasingly centre-right ones as well. Concern about environmental sustainability and combatting climate change therefore has a resilient level of base support.

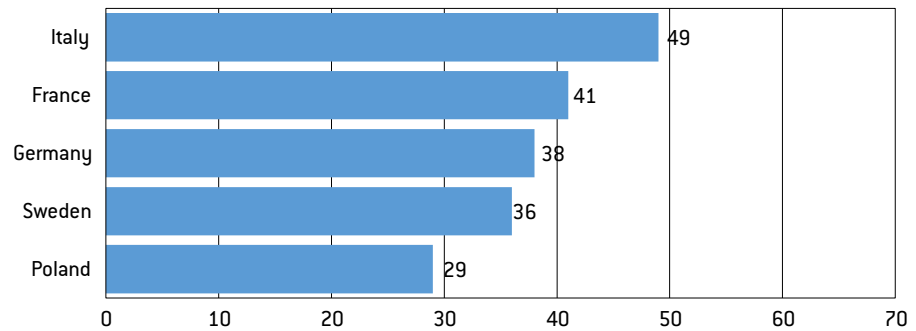
Figure 2: Responses to the question “in your opinion, what should be the political priorities for the European Union in the next few years?” – % choosing issue as a top-3 EU priority (across Germany, France, Italy, Poland and Sweden) (2024)



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

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.

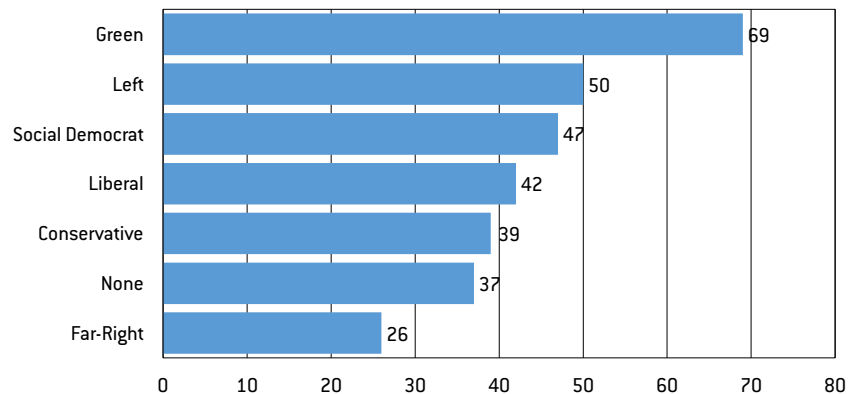
Figure 3: Percentage of respondents seeing climate change and environmental sustainability as a top-three priority for the EU (2024)



Source: Bruegel based on data from d|part.

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.

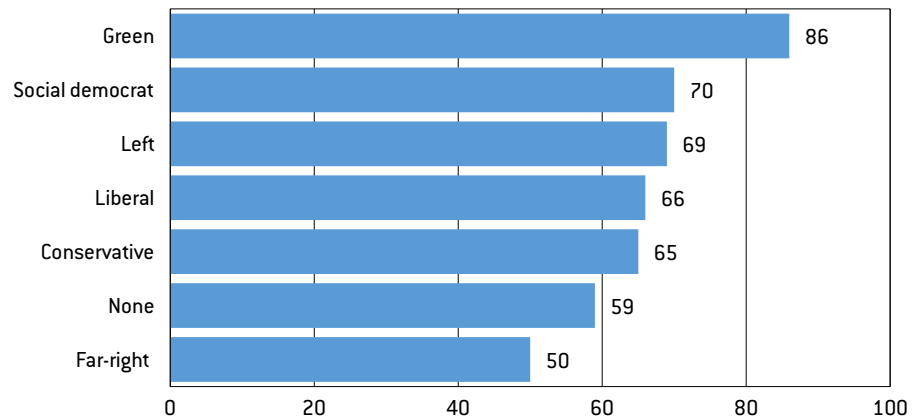
Figure 4: Percentage of respondents seeing climate change and environmental sustainability as top-three priority for the EU, by political party affinity (across Germany, France, Italy, Poland and Sweden) (2024)



Source: Bruegel based on data from d|part. 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 Green parties are even more likely to hold that view (86 percent), the findings demonstrate widespread concern.

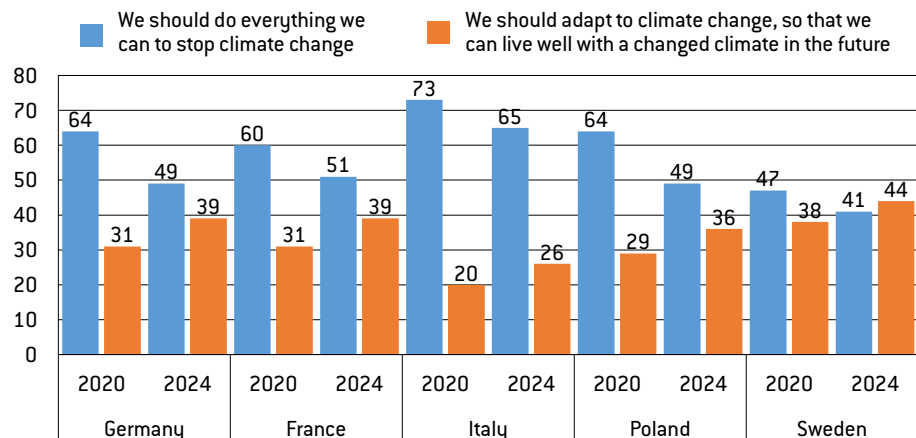
Figure 5: Percentage of respondents answering “very concerned” or “concerned” when asked “what are your current sentiments regarding the following societal issues in [respondent’s country]: climate change”, by political party affinity (across Germany, France, Italy, Poland and Sweden) (2024)



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 most pronounced in Germany and Poland, where just under two-thirds of respondents supported all action to stop climate change in 2020, but only about half did so in 2024. The gap between mitigation and adaptation support narrowed in all countries, although it remains very pronounced in Italy (with 65 percent still approving action to stop climate change). In Sweden, on the other hand, mitigation and adaptation have similar levels of support.

Figure 6: Responses to the question “taken together, what should people do to respond to climate change overall?”, by country and year



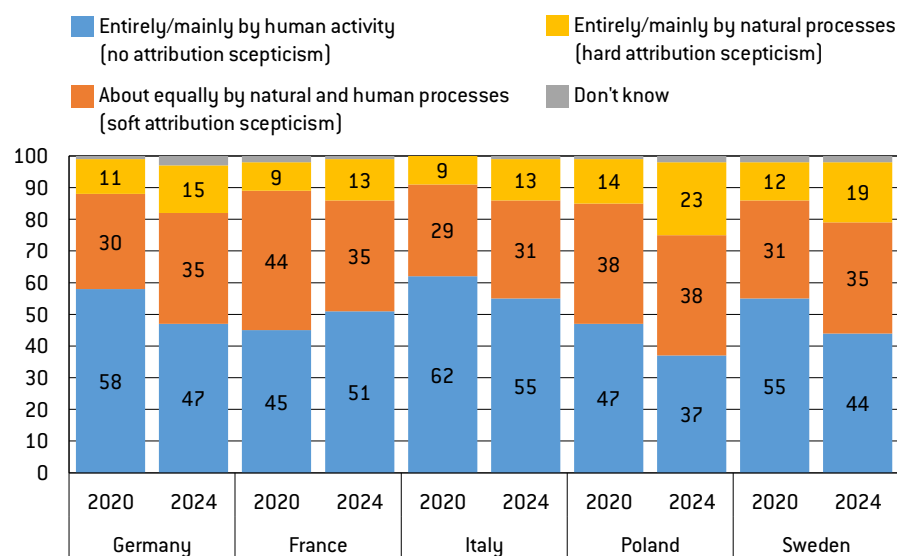
Source: Bruegel based on data from djpart.

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 a ‘green wedge’ in public debates about climate change, rather than consent above the level of party politics, were underway for several years before 2020 (Counterpoint, 2021) but have intensified since.

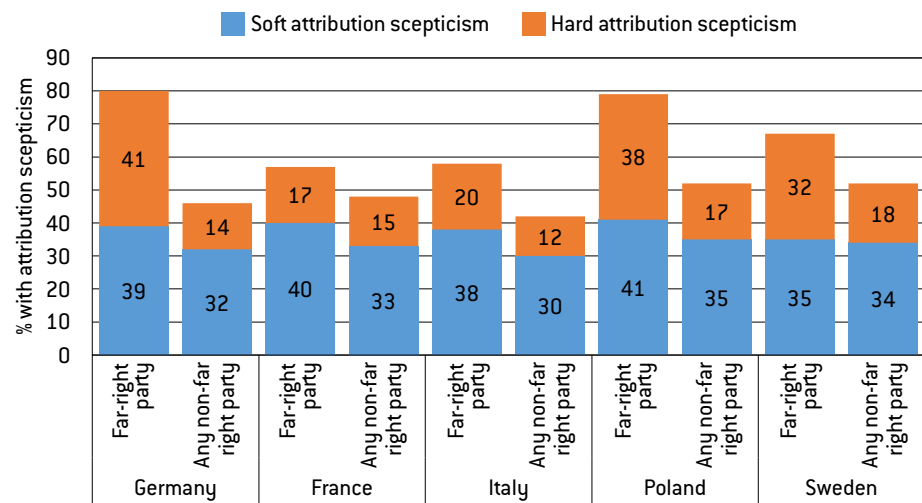
Figure 7: Responses to the question “do you think that climate change is caused by natural processes, human activity, or both?”, by country and year



Source: Bruegel based on data from djpart.

Despite the differences in the role that far-right parties play in the five countries examined, in all instances climate attribution scepticism is higher among supporters of these parties. This is most striking in Germany, where 80 percent of far-right supporters show some attribution scepticism, compared to 46 percent among those favouring other parties. The gap is least pronounced in France (9 percentage points).

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.

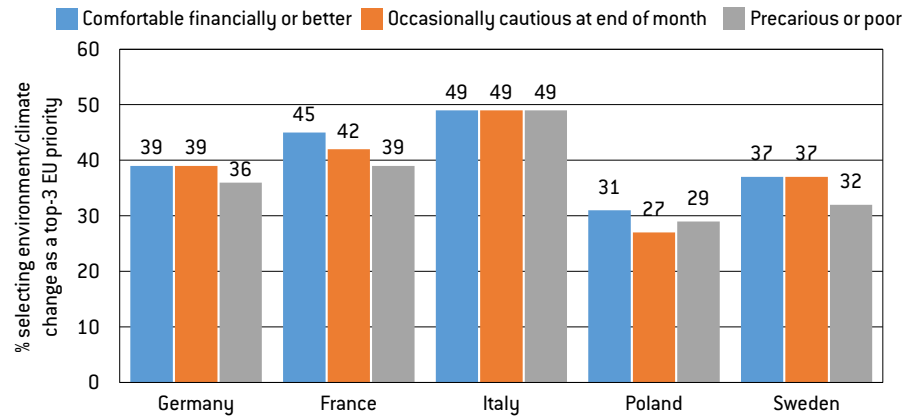
Political leadership matters, as people take cues from parties they support. The data presented above shows that people respond to the themes discussed by political actors. If actors across the political spectrum talk about climate crisis responses that seem likely to be effective and also address other 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 what the EU's top three priorities should be. The extent to which people select combatting climate change as a top priority varies little by a household's financial situation (Figure 9). Whether people feel financially comfortable, have to be prudent occasionally or are in a

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.

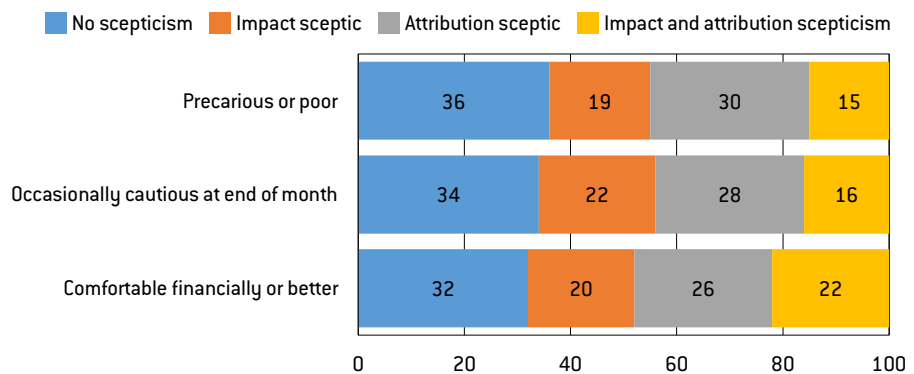
Figure 9: Percentage of respondents who see climate change and environmental sustainability as a top-three priority for the EU, by household financial situation and country (2024)



Source: Bruegel based on data from d|part.

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).

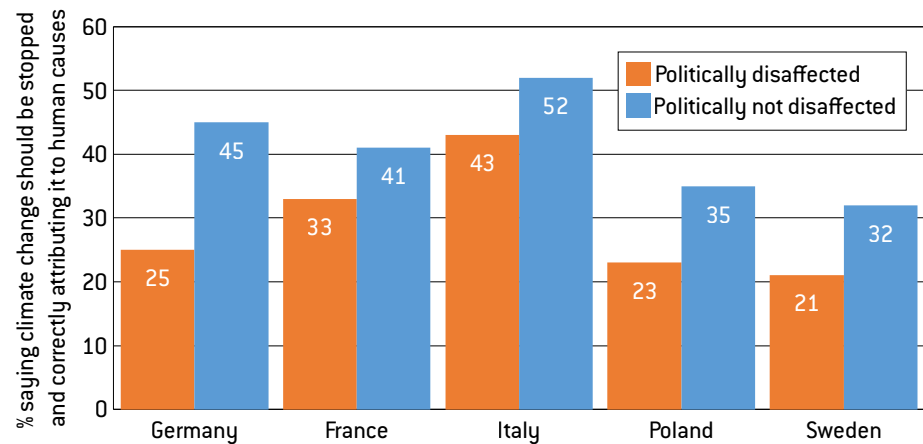
Figure 10: Impact and attribution scepticism (combined) by household financial situation (across Germany, France, Italy, Poland and Sweden) (2024)



Source: Bruegel based on data from d|part. 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 11: Percentage of respondents correctly attributing climate change to human causes and saying we should stop it, by country and reaction to the statement (agree/disagree) “It’s pointless for me to participate in politics; nothing ever changes anyway” (2024)



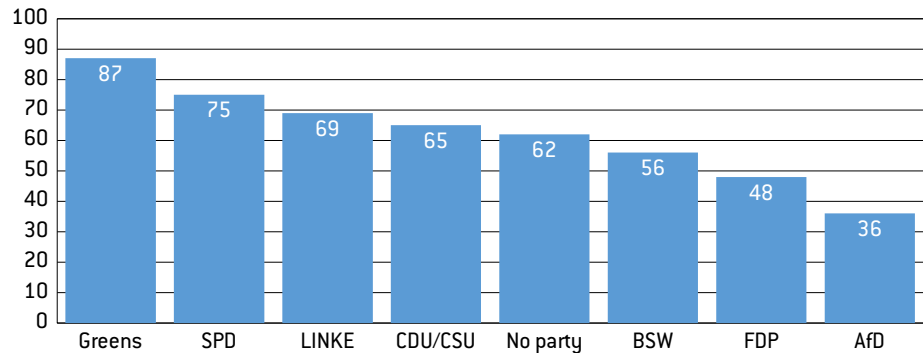
Source: Bruegel based on data from d|part.

How should these findings be understood? People’s personal financial situations do not affect much how concerned they are about climate change, but political disaffection affects it significantly. There is a potential paradox here: strong levels of concern about the climate crisis continue, but at the same time there is a marked increase in soft attribution and impact scepticism. We need to dig deeper into the underlying patterns in attitudes. Given that Germany has the highest levels of change and stratification, we look more closely at the German public and supplement the survey data with qualitative insights from focus groups.

5 A deep dive into Germany

The overall pattern regarding climate change concerns found across all five countries also holds in Germany: supporters of most parties show great concern for the climate crisis. While the highest level was found among Green Party supporters (87 percent), three-quarters of Social Democratic Party (SPD) and around a third of Christian Democratic Union (CDU) supporters expressed similar levels of concern. There is a bit more variation, however, than just broad party family groupings reveal. Climate concerns are still significant, although at lower rates, for supporters of the Bündnis Sarah Wagenknecht (BSW) party (which could be described as left-wing on economic policy but socially conservative), at 56 percent, and people who feel close to the market-liberal Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP) at 48 percent. The only party with supporters for whom climate concerns are a distinct minority – although still more than a third – is the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) at 36 percent. This mirrors findings from other studies showing that the differences in the support for climate action by party affinity are, with the exception for AfD supporters, small (Betsch *et al*, 2024).

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”, by political party affinity (2024)



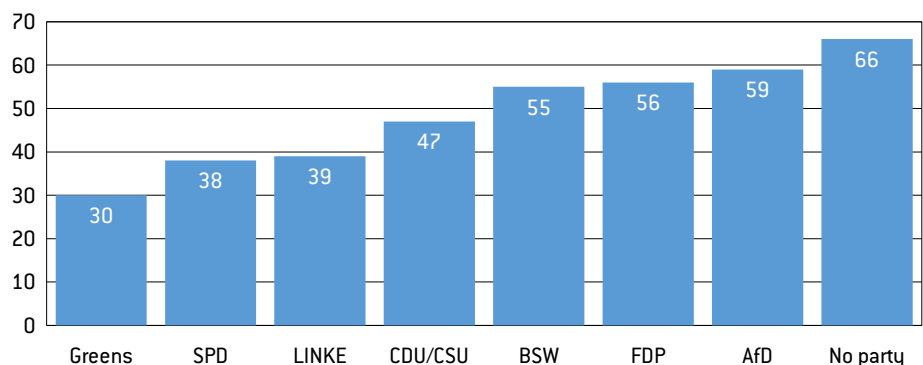
Source: Bruegel based on data from d|part.

The sentiment that the climate crisis poses real challenges for society, businesses and politics was shared by many participants in our focus groups. During the discussions, Marko, a Green Party voter, faced opposition to many of his policy views, but very little disagreement with his assessment that climate change poses serious problems, but can still be acted upon:

“...what really bothers me is that the world is pretty much at the abyss when it comes to the climate crisis, (...) what makes me feel somewhat more positive is just that humans are wired so they can still delay it by a few hundred years or so.” (Marko, 36, lower socio-economic status, Green Party voter)

While most Germans acknowledge that action is needed, there is a strong sense that political decision making does not take into account the concerns of ordinary people and that their voices are not heard. A fascinating finding is that the political disaffection is greatest among supporters of parties whose voters are least concerned about climate (Figure 13). Supporters of the Green Party were least likely to feel that participation in politics was pointless (30 percent), while supporters of the AfD, FDP and BSW were twice as likely to express that sentiment.

Figure 13: Percentage of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that “it is pointless for me to participate in politics; nothing ever changes anyway”, by political party affinity in Germany (2024)



Source: Bruegel based on data from d|part.

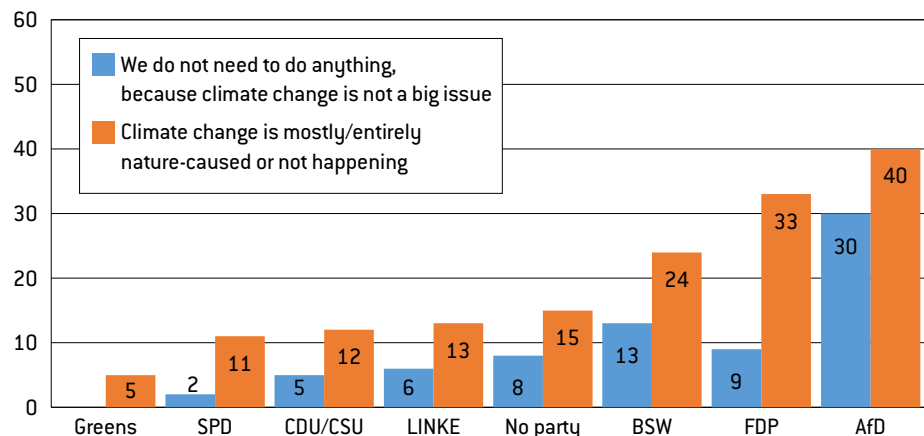
There was a strong worry that climate policies specifically and politics more generally

were made in a way that was far removed from the realities of most people. This resulted in a sense of *malaise* and disillusionment across many party boundaries. A strong desire for major change (expressed by people in support of all parties in the focus groups, except the AfD) was matched by a sense that such change could not be enacted. Most focus group participants agreed with this statement by Katja, a Social Democrat voter:

“(...) yes, all of this is true, but what can we change, if people don’t do anything? (...) I alone cannot achieve anything (...), you’re trapped in yourself. That won’t change, it’ll only get worse, I’d say. I’ve gotten used to it (...) I really wish that we’d get a 180 degrees turnaround, (...) that something else comes that does justice to people and what they really want.” (Katja, 46, lower socio-economic status, SPD voter)

This disaffection with German politics creates a space in which alternative and populist voices have a chance to sow doubt about mainstream views, including about the climate crisis. So far, hard climate scepticism is rare among Germans. Excluding AfD supporters, only around 10 percent or less think that no action is needed (Figure 14). Outright attribution scepticism is also low. But for German parties whose supporters have the greatest level of political disaffection, we see much more attribution scepticism: a quarter of BSW and a third of FDP supporters, as well as 40 percent of those favouring the AfD, think that climate change is mostly caused by natural processes. Conversely, supporters of the Greens, SPD, CDU and Die Linke – and people who do not feel close to any party – mostly believe that climate change is caused by humans and needs to be addressed.

Figure 14: Impact and attribution scepticism (combined) by party affinity in Germany (2024)



Source: Bruegel based on data from d|part.

The feeling that ordinary people were not really considered in political decision making – especially regarding climate transition policies – was often supplemented by scepticism about whether Germany, and especially its political leaders, were capable of properly addressing the challenges. Additionally, some had noticed political leaders, especially on the centre-right, emphasising the challenges rather than the opportunities of technological change to address the climate crisis. Such cue-taking can further reduce people’s confidence in the potential for positive change⁴. Across the focus groups, there was significant doubt about whether parties’ claims about the need for climate action were followed up with appropriate policies. Moreover, there was a sense that Germany had lost its ability to innovate and harness opportunities

4 Susanne Götze, ‘Wie Klimapolitik für Konservative funktionieren könnte’, *Der Spiegel*, 26 January 2025, <https://www.spiegel.de/wissenschaft/klimaschutz-wie-klimapolitik-fuer-konservative-funktionieren-koennte-a-edff3e0b-b0db-4e23-9d15-6839903474d6>.

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:

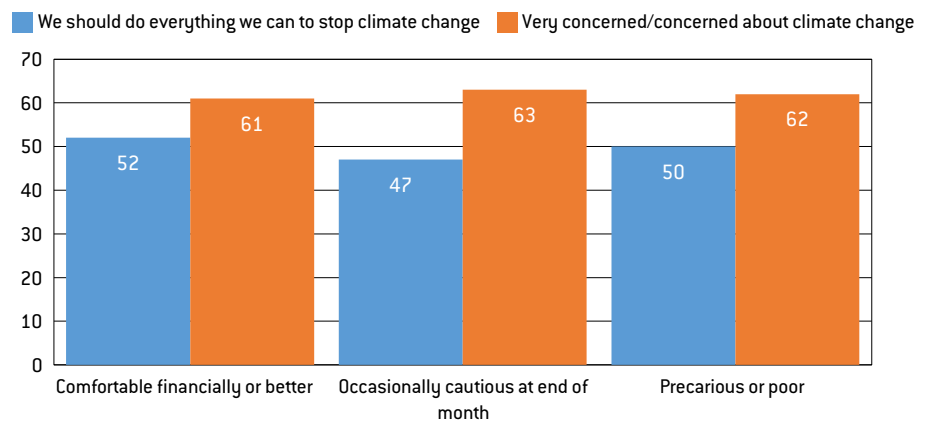
“... We’re so far behind, also with the dependence on resources like oil, gas, etc. We should have done so much already with wind and had the opportunity to do construction with solar. And the government of the CDU together with the SPD simply messed that up, they rather relied on cheap Russian gas (...) All of these are things we missed out on. We would be in so much better a position, if our politics over the past twenty to thirty years had been conducted in a forward-thinking way.” (Peter, 58, lower socio-economic status, Die Linke voter)

Jannik, a young, highly-educated supporter of the Bündnis Sarah Wagenknecht shared his disappointment about the lack of capability in Germany to address major challenges:

“All large innovative companies are based in the US. Germany has no stake, although we have good universities, and a school system that still functions well to some extent. It has some problems, but it is still better than in many, many other countries and, nevertheless, we are incredibly behind (...) because we do not pool our knowledge. And so, we stay behind or are being left behind by the rest of the world.” (Jannik, 23, higher socio-economic status, BSW voter)

Importantly, such concerns were raised equally by people in higher and lower socio-economic status groups. When we compare Germans according to their current financial situation, we find hardly any differences in their concern about the climate crisis or the desire for action (Figure 15). Worries about the ability of the state to support the economy, both in general and specifically the climate transition, were widespread.

Figure 15: Percentage saying that “we should do everything we can to stop climate change” and who are concerned or very concerned about climate change by household financial situation in Germany (2024)

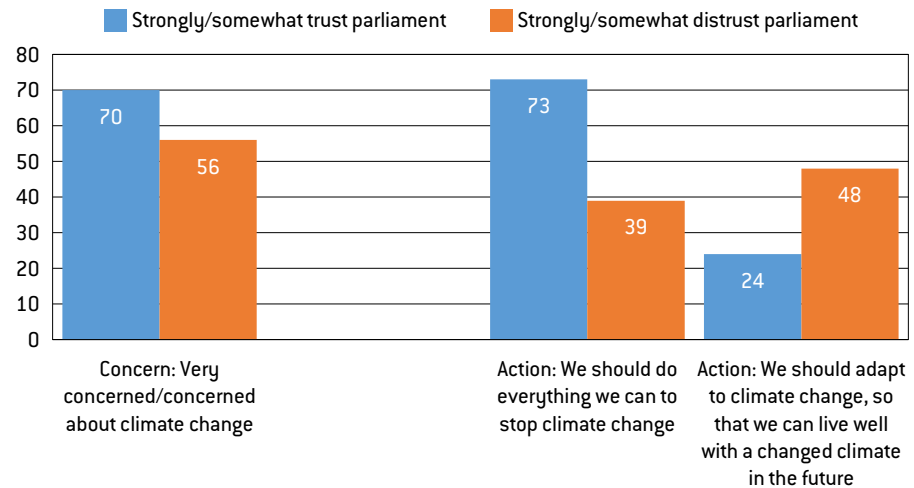


Source: Bruegel based on data from d|part.

Unsurprisingly then, there is a big difference in people’s views on climate action depending on how much they trust political institutions such as the German Parliament (Figure 16). Overall concern about the climate crisis is lower amongst those who do not trust parliament (56 percent) compared to those who do (70 percent). But views about what should be done differ much more. In both groups, the vast majority of people want action on the climate crisis. But while around three quarters of those who trust the German Parliament say that the

focus should be on action to stop climate change, only 40 percent of those who do not trust parliament think the same. In that group, nearly half emphasise adaptation. The sense of disaffection with politics and the lack of a belief that the state can address the big challenges of our time, has created a negative outlook amongst many. This affects the scope of what action is considered to be viable.

Figure 16: Percentage who are concerned or very concerned about climate change and who would prioritise countering or adaptation measures by trust in parliament in Germany



Source: Bruegel based on data from djpart.

Scepticism about climate action should therefore not be read in all instances as a deep underlying scepticism or a rejection of climate action *per se*. While this is true for some people, for others their lack of emphasis on action to stop climate change is an expression of their disillusionment with decision makers to manage major ventures successfully.

Appreciating this deeper sense of disaffection also helps in understanding why respondents across the whole socio-economic spectrum hold sceptical views about climate policies, despite showing great concern about the climate crisis. Even those in financially comfortable positions often feel that the overall situation in Germany has deteriorated so much that they feel their lives are getting worse.

Consider, for example, Arne, a public servant in a well-paid job who supports the AfD, reflecting on his current financial situation:

"I am fortunate, because I actually earn good money (...) 2021 I sold my car and bought something smaller, because it doesn't work anymore financially at all. The question I ask every day is why I even go and work. Of course, it's for the house, my daughter and my wife. But that I do something for myself, or get for myself, that doesn't work anymore. You can't finance a genuine hobby you have anymore. Sorry, this just isn't fun anymore."
(Arne, 34, higher socio-economic status, AfD voter)

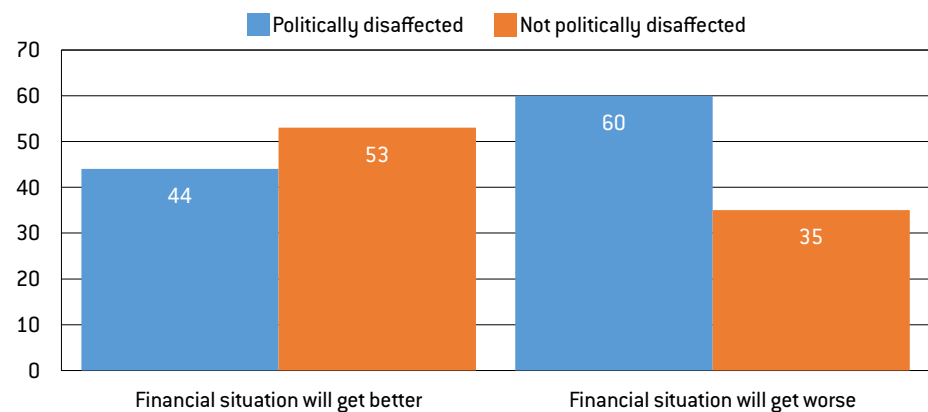
The sense of declining standards of living paired with the feeling that political decision-making is not taking account of normal people during these major transitions, fuels further disenchantment. Katharina, a CDU-voting accountant with a high level of savings, expressed her deep anger about how hard life has become for the next generation, even when they invest a lot in their education and training, like her daughter did:

"I recognise that problem. It is incredibly tough. Those are well trained young people, they want to move something, they are diligent and nevertheless, it is very, very tough."

(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 politically disaffected, 60 percent also think that their personal financial situation will worsen over the next few years, while only 35 percent of those who are not politically disaffected think the same (Figure 17).

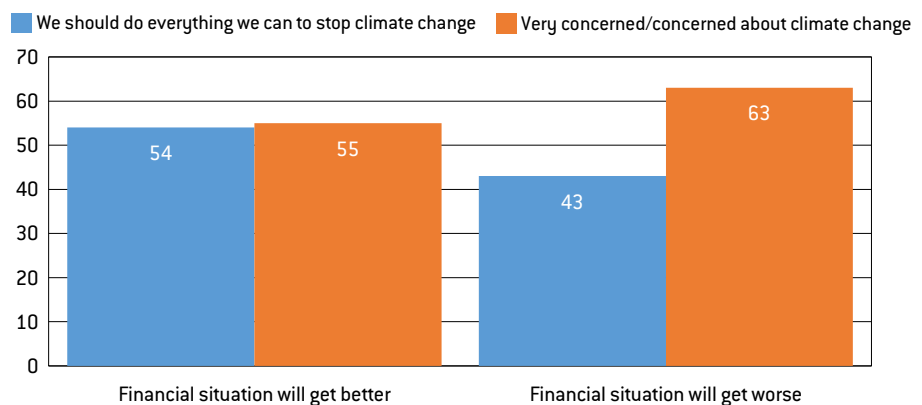
Figure 17: Percentage agreeing/disagreeing with the statement “it is pointless for me to participate in politics; nothing ever changes anyway” by response to the question “looking ahead to the next 3-5 years, how do you think your personal financial situation will develop?”



Source: Bruegel based on data from d|part.

Views about the climate crisis are also strongly linked to material expectations. The negative outlook is not predominantly driven by people's current socio-economic positions, but instead by their downward expectations of the future and the lack of hope that politicians are interested in or able to change anything. As a result, people who think their financial situation is going to worsen over the next few years are eleven percentage points less likely to emphasise action to stop climate change (over adaptation or no action) than those who think their financial situation will improve (Figure 18). Yet people who think their financial situation will worsen are more concerned about the climate crisis in general (by eight percentage points) than those who think their situation will improve.

Figure 18: Percentage saying that “we should do everything we can to stop climate change” and who are concerned or very concerned about climate change by expectations for personal finances in 3-5 years (2024) in Germany



Source: Bruegel based on data from d|part.

Concern about the climate crisis then becomes two-fold, especially for people who have a negative personal outlook: they are worried about the impact of a heating planet in the first place, but also worried that political action, that they feel disregards them, will make their lives worse in response. As Katharina put it:

“... the financial situation is bad, inflation is high. Anyone who shops, whether it's for food or fuel, for heating, electricity, water, or rent, will confirm that. It's all bad. (...) No matter who promises anything, I am very sceptical, because when the elections are over, they forget what they promised. It doesn't matter what anyone promises. Right now, I believe nothing.” (Katharina, 52, higher socio-economic status, CDU voter)

6 Conclusions

The main insight from our survey and qualitative research is that Europeans still want governments to act on climate change but have limited trust in states' ability to deliver.

People in Europe have not stopped caring about the climate crisis. On the contrary, they continue to show a high level of concern about it. The issue is seen as an important priority for EU policymaking by many – at the same level as concerns about migration. Crucially, worries about the climate crisis are similar in all socio-economic groups. But policymakers need to rebuild public trust in the idea that climate action will be effective and the burden of the transition will be shared fairly across society.

For many people, climate action should be an EU policy priority. But even when other concerns top the list, decision makers would make a major mistake if they assumed that people do not care about it anymore. While security issues may have great salience right now, concern about climate change remains very significant across the democratic political spectrum. The public puts environmental sustainability and climate change at the same level as immigration and refugee policies, topics with much greater prominence in political discourse.

People are more concerned about adapting to a changing climate than efforts to stop it, but this is not because they are less concerned about mitigation. Rather, it seems to reflect people losing faith in the capacity of their governments to make the necessary efforts and feeling that their experiences and lives do not matter in decisions about the green transition. They are not less concerned about the climate crisis in itself, but are rather feeling political disaffection and a lack of trust in state institutions. An increasing number of people feel pessimistic about achieving the transformations they want to succeed.

The deep dive into Germany shows that the public remains concerned about climate change. But the cost-of-living crisis, coupled with a sense that the German economy is in decline, leads even people with good salaries to look pessimistically at the future. Scepticism about strong climate action by the government is for many partially an expression of doubt that the state is capable of managing it well – or at all. Germans are worried about the impact on the economy and their personal finances, but they also have pervasive doubts as to whether policymakers have any interest in engaging with the concerns of the population.

Consequently, political leaders must engage proactively with climate change agendas now to avoid reduced trust and room to act in the future.

Such a sense of disenchantment and distrust is not easily overcome. But to maintain and build public support for major reforms, political decisionmakers must address voters' disenchantment head on. People understand that climate change threatens their daily lives in multiple ways. Ducking the tough questions now will not be satisfactory to voters. To rebuild trust in the capacity of the state to deliver for people, questions about how their views are represented in the political process and what material outcomes it delivers for them must be

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.

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