

Backlash:

Political insights from Europe and North America on opposition to climate and biodiversity policies

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July 4, 2024

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The politics of backlash: Lessons from Europe

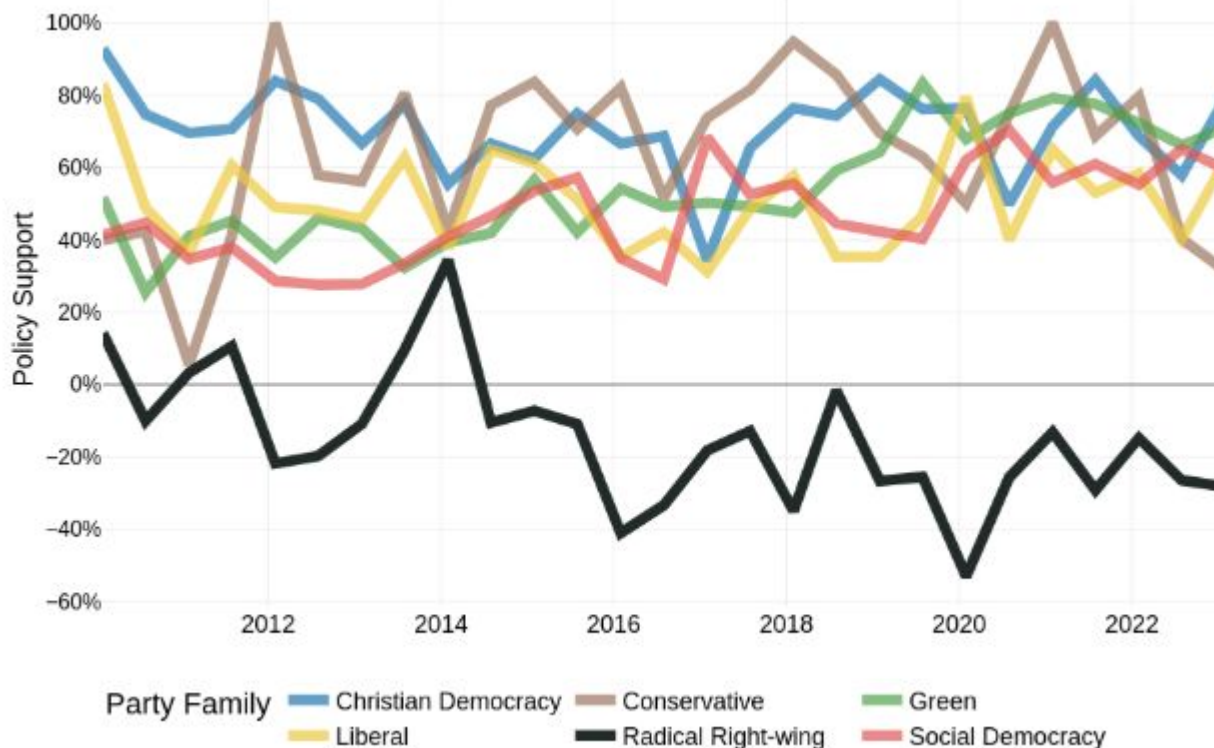
Professor Neil Carter, University of York, UK

Climate change: valence or positional issue?

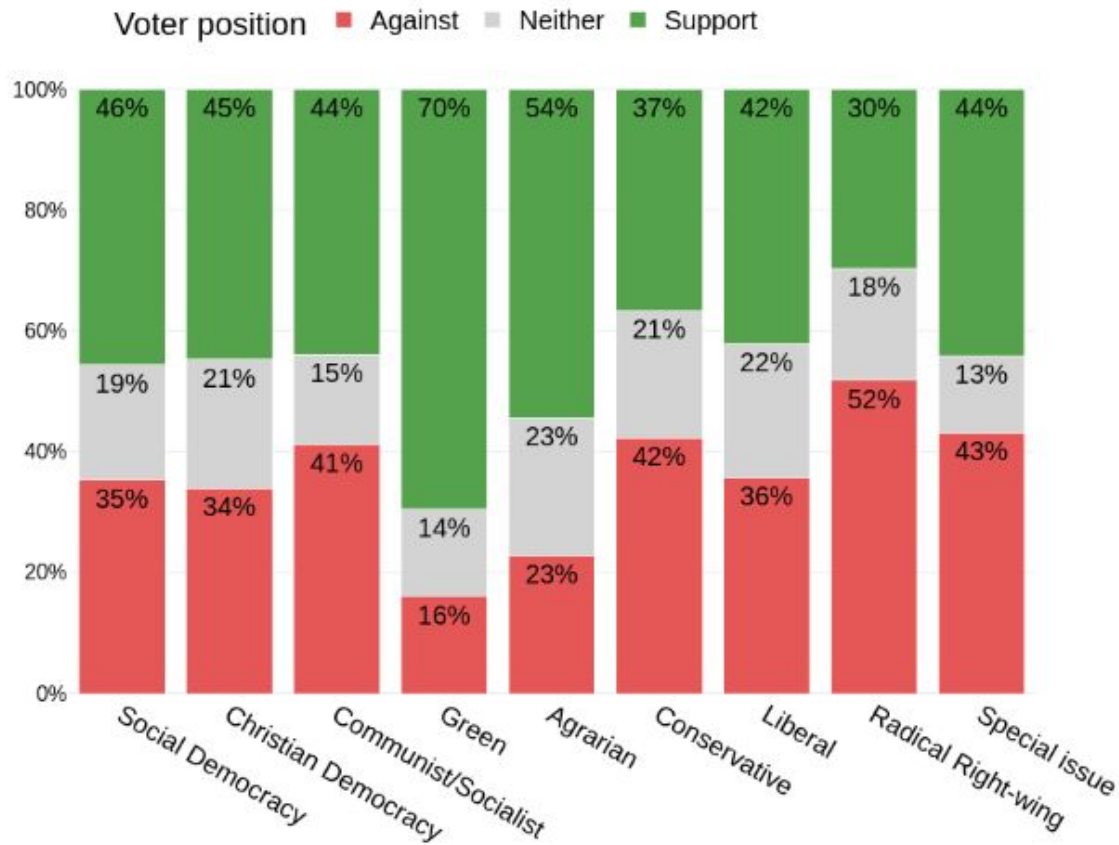
- *Positional* issues have sharply contrasting alternative views and clear trade-offs between positions
 - Polarisation of CC in N. America/Australia
- *Valence* issues are characterised by consensus amongst the electorate about the desired outcome
 - Party competition is about competence/trust
 - Greater consensus in Europe on need for action on CC

Radical right parties using climate change as a wedge issue

- Increased issue emphasis since 2021
- Adversarial position v other parties

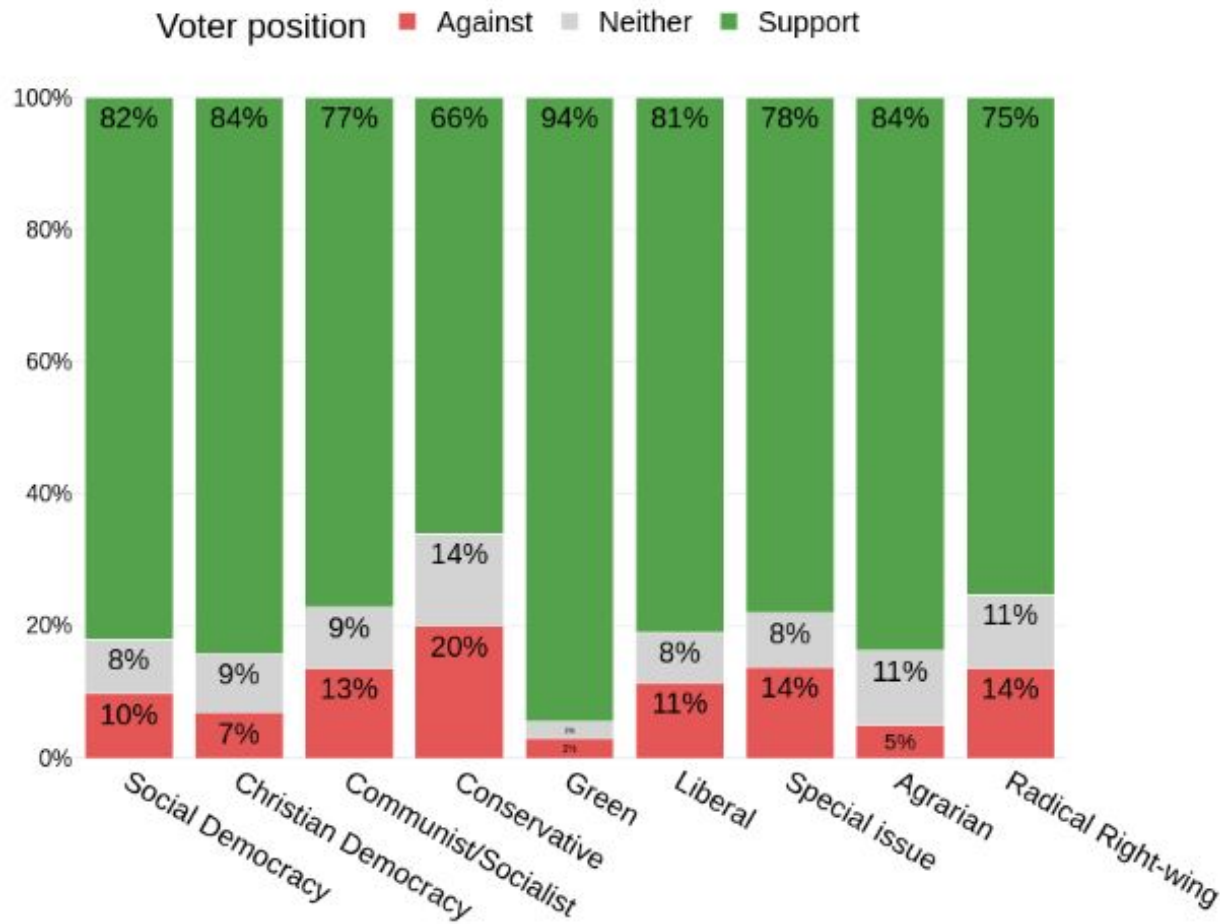


Mobilising potential: many voters across all parties oppose fossil fuel taxes



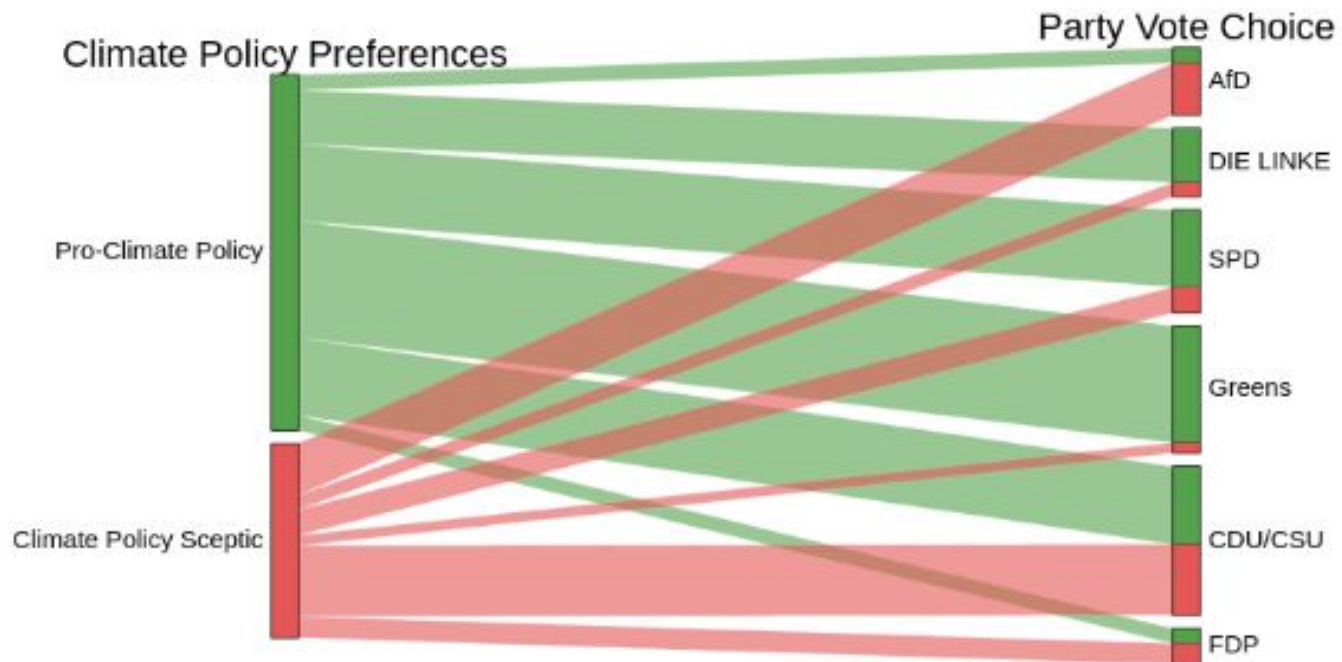
Support for increasing fossil fuel taxes to reduce climate change by party family vote choice

Mobilising potential: but stronger support for renewable energy subsidies



Support for subsidising RE to reduce climate change by party family vote choice

Climate policy scepticism and vote choice in Germany



From Dickson & Hobolt (forthcoming)

Scope to win votes for the radical right

- Climate change preferences don't map neatly onto partisan support
- Voters supporting all parties are vulnerable
- Framing is critical
 - Successful where radical right frames it as about costs and prices

European Parliament election results 2024

Party Group	MEPs	Change
The Left	39	2
Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats	136	-3
Greens–European Free Alliance	51	-20
Renew Europe	81	-21
European People's Party	189	13
European Conservatives and Reformists	83	14
Identity and Democracy	58	9
Non-aligned with any EP party group	45	-17
New Parties	38	38

Headlines

- Surge in radical/far right
 - ID (RN, Lega, FPÖ, PVV, VB, Chega, SOS etc)
 - ECR (Fdl, PiS, Vox, Reconquête, NVA, SD etc)
- Centre-right EPP strengthened its position
- Socialists consolidated
- Losers: Greens, Liberals

Bad news for European Green Deal

- Von der Leyen (EPP) likely re-elected President
 - may need support from Greens or from ECR
- Security/defence will top her agenda
- European Green Deal will be downplayed

- Will EGD be implemented?

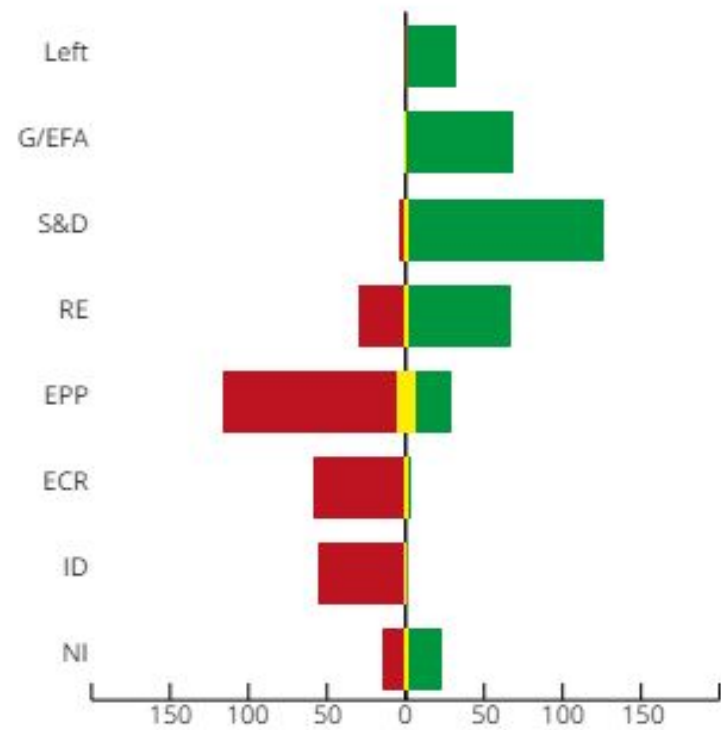
- Shift in power may see EPP work with RR on climate change

European Green Deal

EGD laws all passed, some diluted

- Emissions Trading Scheme strengthened
- New ETS for buildings & transport
- Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM)
- Effort Sharing
- But Nature Restoration Law stripped of many key targets

Party splits on Nature Restoration



Source: Hix & Noury 2024

Where's the backlash?: Producers

- Farmers protest over measures reducing emissions
 - Diesel – resist removal of subsidies
 - Limit manure use
 - Reduce livestock numbers
 - Solar panels on farmland
- Not all about CC/biodiversity
 - Competition from abroad
 - Prices paid by supermarkets



Where's the backlash?: Consumers

German consumers angry about heat pumps

- Building Energy Act to ban new gas boilers from 2024
 - even subsidised heat pumps still c€8000 more expensive
- AfD led backlash against 'eco-dictatorship' threat
 - grand narrative of Germany under attack, removing citizen rights
- Result:
- Law pushed phase-in back by 2-4 years,
- allows gas boilers if hydrogen-compliant



German Climate Minister admits...

He underestimated how fragile and change-weary Germans had become:

“Across society, there is a feeling of fatigue due to the many crises of the past few years...After COVID or the war in Ukraine, the climate crisis or the rise of the populists, you think: What kind of times are we living in? And now, in this atmosphere, such a law is introduced.”

- Robert Habeck (Green Party), Federal Minister for Economic Affairs and Climate Action

Where's the backlash?: *Culture warriors*

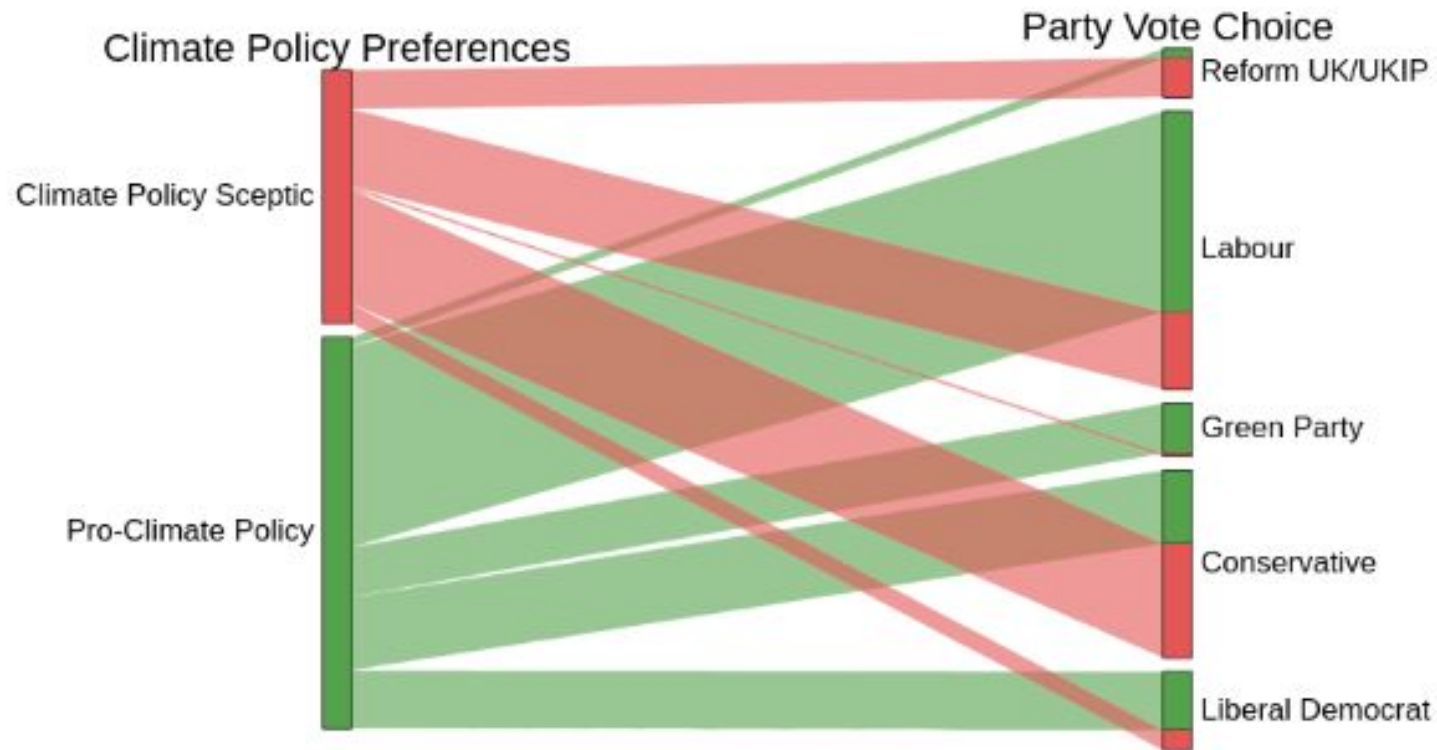
Radical right seize opportunity to pit “*metropolitan elites*” against average voters concerned about petrol prices:

- “Whether we eat meat, catch a plane or drive a gasoline car is something we decide for ourselves. Not Brussels” (PVV, Dutch Party for Freedom manifesto)
- *Fit for 55* climate policy is “killing the European middle class” (Victor Orbán, Prime Minister of Hungary)
- “Abolish all climate laws at the national and European level, as well as stop the EGD (European Green Deal)” (AfD, Alternative for Germany manifesto)

UK backlash against Net Zero

- Funded by Global Warming Foundation
- Engineered by Conservative Net Zero Scrutiny Group of right-wing MPs, plus UKIP/Reform UK
- Backlash issues:
 - Petrol prices (longstanding freeze on fuel duty)
 - Heat pumps
 - Electric vehicles
 - 15-minute cities/ULEZ schemes
 - Oil/gas extraction – Scotland/trade unions
 - Solar farms on agricultural land
 - Onshore wind farms

Climate policy scepticism and vote choice (UK)



Tories making climate change a positional issue?

Roll back key climate policies

- Delayed 2030 ban on new petrol/diesel cars by 5 years
- Weakened phase-out of gas boilers by 2035
- No requirement to improve insulation of rental properties
- Issues new oil/gas extraction licences (annual process)

“If we continue down this path, we risk losing the consent of the British people. The resulting backlash would not just be against specific policies but against the wider mission itself, meaning we might never achieve our goal.”

- Rishi Sunak, British Prime Minister

Conservative v Radical Right pledges

Conservative manifesto

- No new green levies/frequent flyer tax
- Support solar “in the right places not best agricultural land”
- “Backing Drivers Bill” to stop road pricing, ULEZ, Low Traffic neighbourhoods
- Require independent Climate Change Committee consider household costs

Reform UK “contract”

- “Net Zero is crippling our economy”: scrap NZ target to save £30 billion/year
- Scrap £10 billion RE subsidies
- Grant shale gas licences
- Fast-track North Sea oil/gas licences
- Fast-track small modular nuclear reactors



Counter the backlash, indirectly

When climate change is a positional issue:

- Target technical infrastructures
 - Grid upgrades, planning reforms, RE, fiscal reforms
- Promote green industrial revolution
- Policies difficult to reverse when implemented
 - New energy infrastructure, rooftop solar, retrofitting buildings

...And or attack the backlash directly

- 'Pro-people' policies
 - Housing retrofits to reduce energy bills
 - Community RE schemes
- Emphasise energy security
 - Renewable energy, energy efficiency
- Identify popular policies
 - 'Pro-people' policies
 - German €49 train pass
 - Target corporate climate activity where popular anger

References

- Dickson & Hobolt (forthcoming) 'Going against the Grain: Climate Change as a Wedge Issue for the Radical Right', *Comparative Political Studies*
- Hix & Noury (2024) The 2024 European Parliament Elections: Potential Outcome and Consequences
- https://www.sieps.se/en/publications/2024/The_2024_European_Parliament_Elections/
- Paterson et al (2024) Navigating the Backlash: the Future of British Climate Strategy
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The politics of climate backlash

Dr. Lori Thorlakson, University of Alberta



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Climate backlash is a political interaction

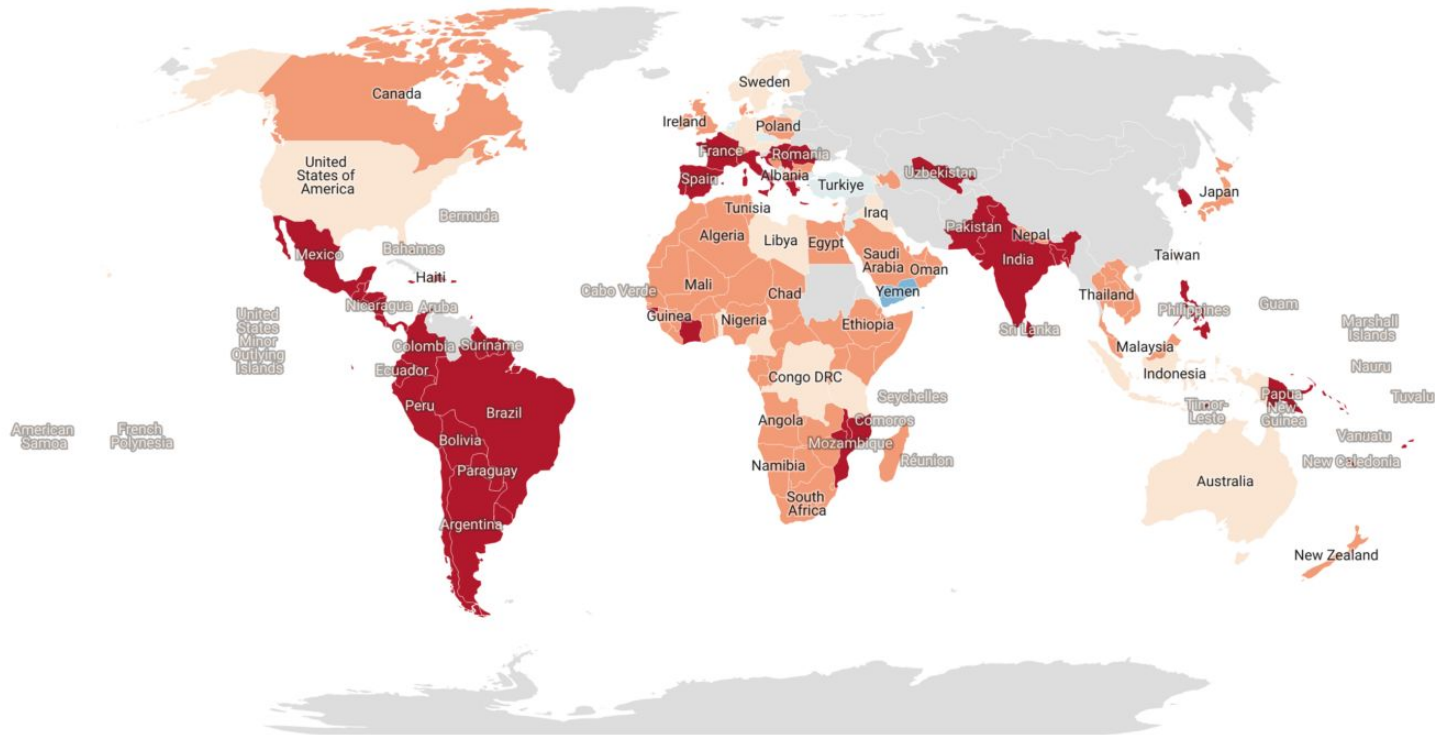
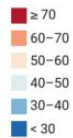


Political polarization and the institutional setting shape outcomes.

Majorities (still) believe climate change should be a priority

Climate change should be a government priority

% who think climate change should be a 'very high' or 'high' government priority



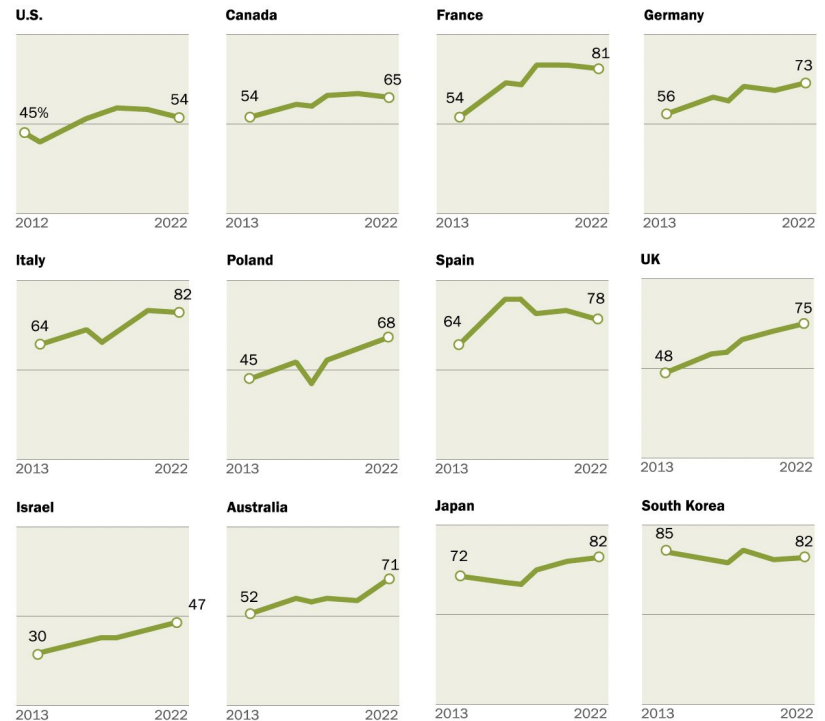
Source: Yale Program on Climate Change Communication / Data for Good at Meta / Rare's Center for Behavior & the Environment, 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

Climate concern trends upwards; but...

Publics underestimate the degree of climate policy support.

Concern about global climate change remains at all-time highs in many countries

% who say *global climate change* is a *major threat* to their country



Note: Not all countries in survey shown. Prior to 2020, U.S. and Australia surveys were conducted by phone. See topline for full results.

Source: Spring 2022 Global Attitudes Survey, Q10a.

"Climate Change Remains Top Global Threat Across 19-Country Survey"

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Share of people who support policies to tackle climate change, 2023

Support was measured on a scale from 0 to 100 across nine interventions, including carbon taxes on fossil fuels, expanding public transport, more renewable energy, more electric car chargers, taxes on airlines, investments in green jobs and businesses, laws to keep waterways clean, protecting forests, and increasing taxes on carbon-intensive foods.



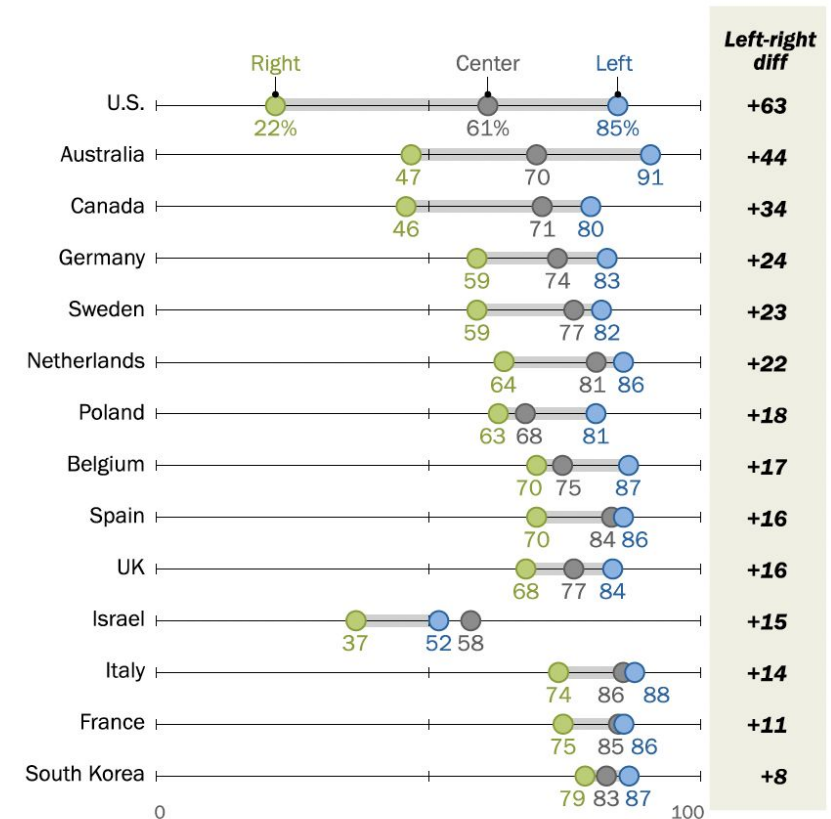
Data source: Vlasceanu et al. (2024). Addressing climate change with behavioral science: A global intervention tournament in 63 countries.

Note: The final score was based on the average of the nine interventions, each measured on a 0 to 100 scale.
OurWorldInData.org/climate-change | CC BY

Polarization on climate concern sets Anglo-American democracies apart from European ones

Those on political left more likely to consider global climate change a major threat than those on the right

% who say **global climate change** is a **major threat** to their country, among those on the political ...



Note: Only statistically significant differences shown.

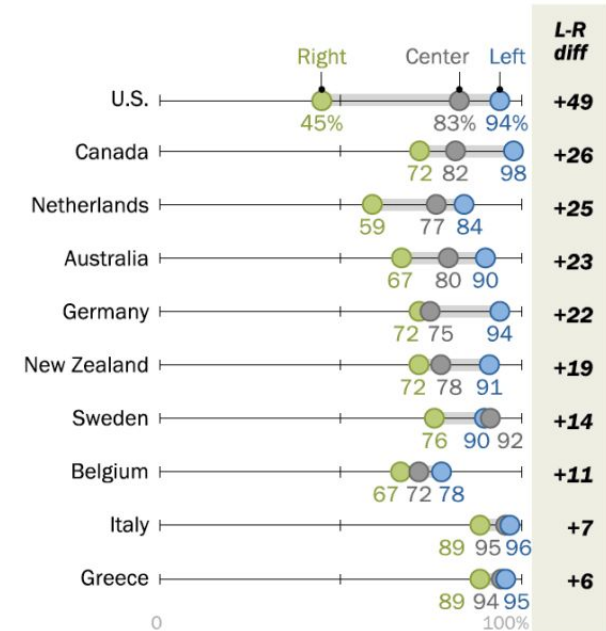
Source: Spring 2022 Global Attitudes Survey. Q10a.
 "Climate Change Remains Top Global Threat Across 19-Country Survey"

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This polarization affects our willingness to act

Ideological left is more willing to adjust lifestyle in response to climate change

% who would be willing to make a lot of/some changes to how they live and work to help reduce the effects of global climate change, among those on the ideological ...



Note: Only statistically significant differences shown. In the U.S., ideology is defined as conservative (right), moderate (center) and liberal (left).

Source: Spring 2021 Global Attitudes Survey. Q32.

"In Response to Climate Change, Citizens in Advanced Economies Are Willing To Alter How They Live and Work"

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Populism shapes two key narratives of climate backlash

- Energy transition and climate policy as **driven by an elite**
- Energy transition and climate policy **threatens traditional ways of life**

Both of these are about **legitimacy**



Economic conditions matter, but cultural and identity frames can be more powerful

- Climate policy as limiting freedom and choice
- Climate policy threatening socio-cultural identities



Backlash themes in Canada: legitimacy, fairness & identity

- Axe the Tax framed as defence of **individual freedom & fairness**
- Carbon tax & climate policies framed as **federal – provincial conflict**
- Restrictions on RE development in AB “**protect agriculture and nature**”
- Opposition to Bill C-69 framed as **free speech struggle**, against “absurd authoritarian censorship”



ESG backlash shifts narratives, but not outcomes

- Rise in measures attacking *economic and social governance* in US red states
- Decrease in ESG investment funds
- Corporate narratives shifting, but ESG *ratings* continues to impact valuations and deals

Four strategies for countering backlash

- Populism can highlight problems with the democratic process: use this to increase public participation
- Populism calls for policies for *the people*: highlight the gap between real and perceived support for climate action
- Reframe the “corrupt elite”: shift focus to leaders of fossil fuel industry
- Choose climate policy tools carefully

References

Leiserowitz, A., Verner, M, Goddard, E , Wood, E. Carman J., Ordaz Reynoso N., Thulin, E., Rosenthal, S., Marlon, J. and Buttermore, N. (2023). *International Public Opinion on Climate Change*, 2023. New Haven, CT: Yale Program on Climate Change Communication.

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