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Broad Support for Climate Action in the EU

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Broad Support for Climate Action in the EU*

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Abstract

This paper shows that support for climate action is high across survey participants from all EU countries in three dimensions: (1) Participants are willing to contribute personally to combating climate change, (2) they approve of pro-climate social norms, and (3) they demand government action. In addition, there is a significant perception gap where individuals underestimate others' willingness to contribute to climate action by over 10 percentage points, influencing their own willingness to act. Policymakers should recognize the broad support for climate action among European citizens and communicate this effectively to counteract the vocal minority opposed to it.

I. Introduction

Climate action has been a landmark of the last European Commission. Following the European Parliament elections in May 2019 and the Fridays for Future movement, which peaked in the first half of 2019¹, the newly elected European Parliament declared a climate and environmental emergency in Europe and globally and urged the European Commission to align its legislative and budgetary proposals with the objective of limiting global warming to below 1.5°C, in line with the Paris Agreement. The Commission responded by presenting the European Green Deal, which aims to make the EU climate neutral by 2050, complemented by the Fit for 55 package proposing legislative measures to reduce emissions by 55% by 2030. The legally binding EU Climate Law provides a framework for achieving climate neutrality by 2050, with continuous monitoring and target adjustments. The commitment to attaining net-zero CO₂ emissions was reaffirmed by the international community at the COP28 meeting, and the urgency of this mission was underlined by the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its 2023 report, which warns that without enhanced mitigation efforts, the mid-range projection for global temperature rise during the 21st century could exceed 3°C (IPCC, 2023). The authors of the IPCC report further model that scenarios

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¹ After the First Global Climate Strike in March 2019 saw a turnout well above 1 million participants, the organisers deliberately chose 24 May 2019 as the next date to coincide with the election to the European Parliament and to influence the outcome in a pro-climate direction (Haynes, 2019).

targeting to limit global warming to below 2°C typically reach net-zero CO₂ emissions in the early 2070s, while those aiming for 1.5°C reach net-zero in the early 2050s (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Net global CO₂ emissions

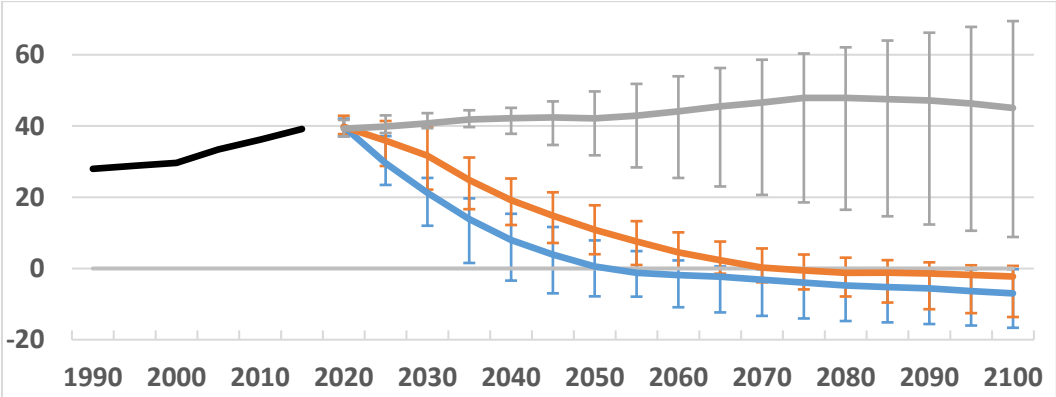


Figure 1 shows the development of global CO₂ emissions in modeled pathways. Error bars denote the 5th to 95th percentile across the global modeled pathways falling within a given category as described in Box SPM.1 (IPCC, 2023). The grey line depicts emissions pathways assuming policies that were implemented by the end of 2020. Ranges of modeled pathways that limit warming to 1.5°C with no or limited overshoot are shown in blue and pathways that limit warming to 2°C are shown in orange. Source: IPCC (2023).

To meet these objectives, the European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change emphasizes the imperative for a substantial increase in climate-related investments. In line with the findings of the IPCC report, it estimates that current investments need to be quadrupled to reach approximately EUR 1,000 billion per year by 2030 (IPCC, 2022; ESABCC, 2024). While acknowledging the EU's sufficient investment capacity, the report highlights the need to redirect a significant portion of current investment flows, underscoring the delicate balance between financial reallocation and climate change mitigation (ESABCC, 2024).

However, these ambitious policy measures face criticism in both the political sphere and society, with dissenting voices expressing concerns about the feasibility and societal impact of these green initiatives (Niranjan, 2024; Reuters, 2023). The Covid-19 pandemic, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the return of inflation and the rise in the cost of living have not only affected public budgets and possible climate-friendly investments, but have also reduced the salience of climate change before the European election in June 2024.

In this challenging environment, this paper seeks to explore the extent to which criticism and resistance to climate policies are representative of societal attitudes. Specifically, it examines whether there is a general willingness within society to actively combat climate change. We further consider respondents' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions regarding their personal contributions, societal obligations, and governmental responsibilities in the fight against global warming (Andre et al., 2024a) and argue that support for climate action is high across the EU. While this paper does not take positions

on specific climate-friendly policies, it sends a clear message to European policymakers: Don't confuse temporary inattention with climate fatigue.

II. Survey setup

The results presented in this paper are based on the “Global Climate Change Survey” (GCCS) designed and presented by Andre et al. (2024a).² It is part of the Gallup World Poll 2021/2022 and was conducted in 125 countries with nearly 130,000 respondents. We extract the results for 26 member states of the European Union.³ For each country, a random sample of the resident population aged 15 and over is used to ensure representativeness. In Europe, all interviews were conducted via telephone using randomly selected telephone numbers.

First, the respondents are asked whether they are “willing to contribute 1% of [their] household income every month to fight global warming”, and, if not, whether they would be willing to contribute a smaller amount (*willingness to contribute*). Second, the survey includes a question about the respondents’ beliefs about the share of respondents in their country willing to contribute at least 1% of their monthly household income to fight global warming (*perception of others’ willingness*). Third, respondents are asked whether they think that other people in their country should try to fight global warming (*pro-climate social norms*), and fourth, whether their national government should do more in this regard (*government activity*).

III. Results

The results of the survey show overall support for the four dimensions of climate action, albeit heterogeneous across countries.

Willingness to contribute: In particular, the share of individuals who say that they would be willing to contribute 1% of their household income each month to fight global warming ranges from 79% in Greece to 41% in Lithuania, the only country in the European sample with a share below 50%. The average share of individuals willing to contribute across European countries is 64% — only slightly lower than the global average of 69%.

² The methodological setup is described in more detail in this reference.

³ Luxembourg is not part of the sample of countries included in the GCCS.

Figure 2: Support for climate action in the EU

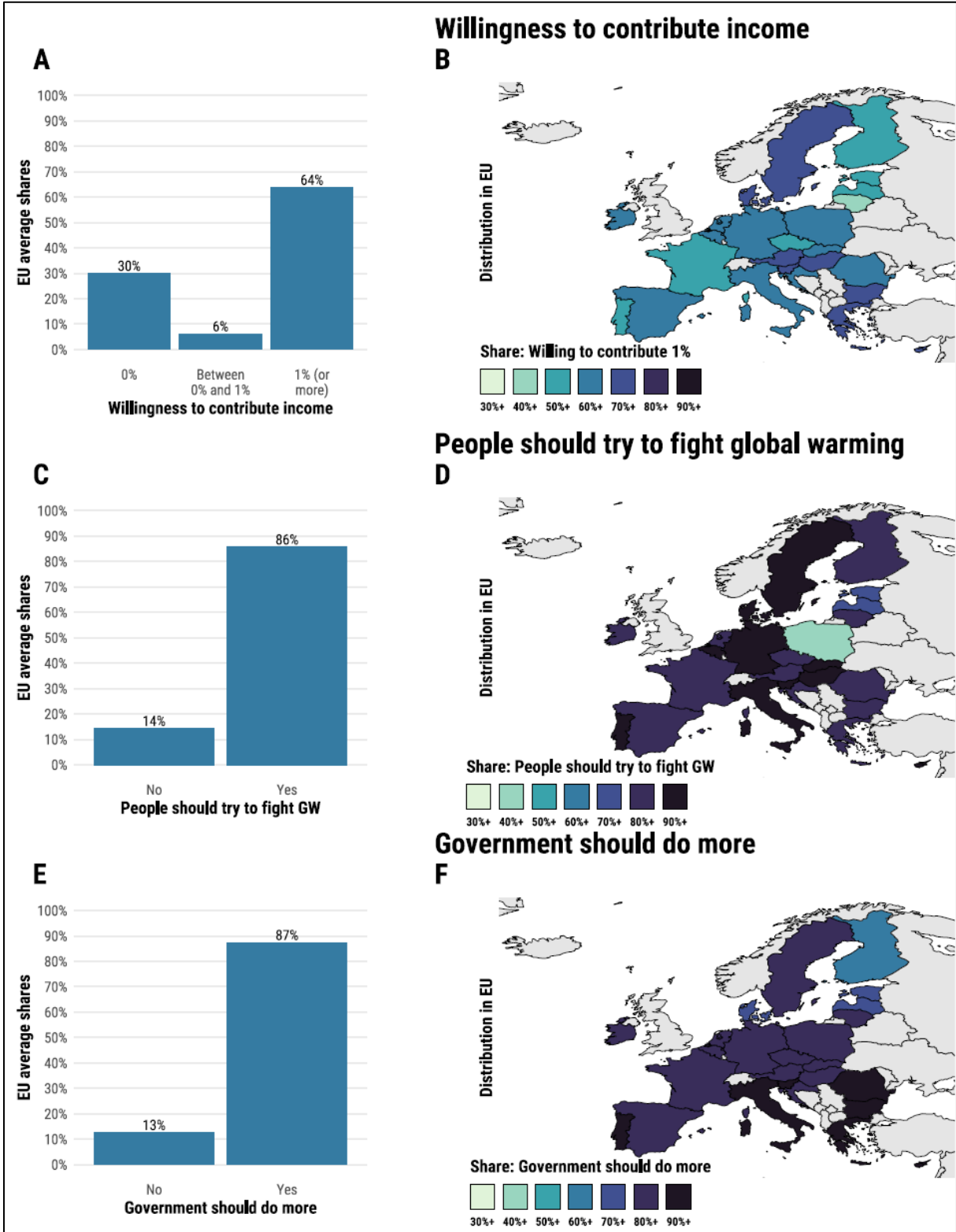


Figure 2 shows the EU average proportions of respondents willing to contribute income (a), approving of pro-climate social norms (c) and demanding political action (e). Population-adjusted weights are used to ensure representativeness. On the right side, it shows world maps in which each country is coloured according to its proportion of respondents willing to contribute 1% of income (b), approving of pro-climate social norms (d) and demanding political action (f). Sampling weights are used to account for the stratified sampling procedure. GW, global warming. Source: Andre et al. (2024a).

Pro-climate social norms: The survey results also suggest widespread support for pro-climate social norms, with an EU average of 86% of individuals stating that others in their country should try to combat global warming. Support is fairly homogeneous across countries, with the proportion of supporters exceeding 80% in almost all countries in the European sample (see Figure 3). While in Estonia and Latvia the share is only slightly below 80%, in Poland it is only 47%.

Government activity: Furthermore, the survey reveals a high and widespread demand for governments to do more to fight global warming. Overall, 87% of respondents in the European sample demand intensified government action, which is very close to the average share (89%) in the global sample. Support ranges from 96% in Cyprus to 62% in Finland. In 22 out of 26 countries, more than 80% of respondents say that their government should do more to fight global warming.

Perception of others' willingness: Finally, the survey reveals a large gap between the actual share of respondents being willing to contribute 1% of their income to climate action and the perceived share of others in their country willing to contribute (Figure 4). This perception gap exceeds 10 percentage points in all countries, indicating that individuals strongly underestimate the actual willingness of their fellow citizens to contribute to climate action. At nearly 42 percentage points, Greece has the largest perception gap: While almost 78% of respondents say they would be willing to contribute 1% of their household income, only 36% believe their fellow citizens are willing to contribute. For France, the survey reveals the smallest perception gap, with a difference of 13 percentage points between the respondents' actual willingness to contribute and the perceived willingness of others. On average, the survey reveals a perception gap of 25 percentage points across European countries.

The fact that the willingness to act against climate change is commonly underestimated can form a dangerous obstacle to climate action. Individuals are discouraged by the (mis)perceived lack of support. Likewise, governments and companies can become victims of the perception gap when they refrain from tackling climate change since they underestimate popular support (Ritchie, 2024). As documented by Andre et al. (2024a, b), the perceived share of others' willingness to contribute is positively associated with one's own probability of contributing. Put simply, people are more willing to contribute if they believe that others contribute, too. Fortunately, this diagnosis also implies an opportunity to promote and accelerate climate-friendly norms and behavior. Andre et al. (2024b) show that informing respondents about the actual prevalence of the willingness to act reduces these misperceptions and encourages climate-friendly behavior.

Figure 3: Gap between perceived and actual willingness to contribute

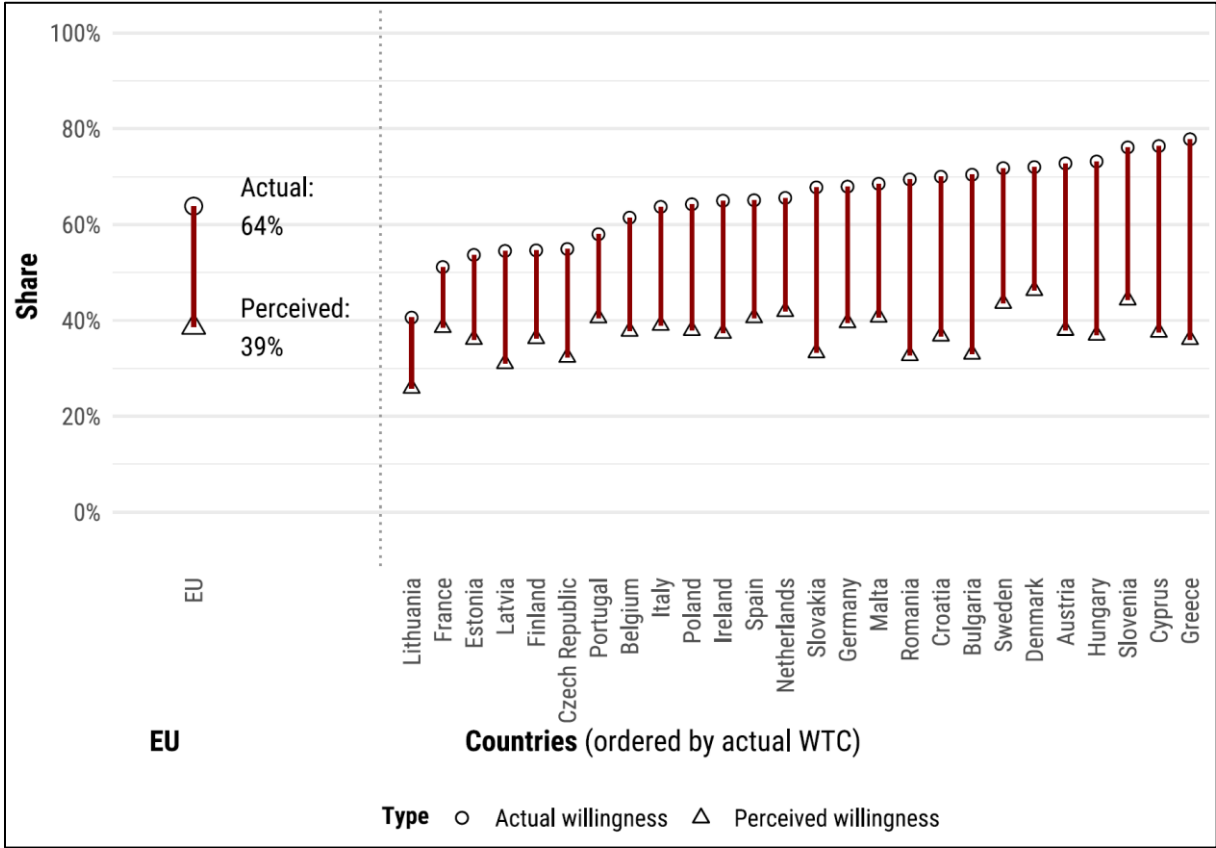


Figure 3 shows the gap between the proportions of respondents who are willing to contribute 1% of their income (circles) and the average perceived proportions of others willing to contribute (triangles). Source: Andre et al. (2024a).

IV. Conclusion

The Paris Agreement marked a global commitment to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above 1990 levels, emphasizing the need to achieve net-zero CO2 emissions by 2050. Following the 2019 European election and aiming to meet these goals, the EU introduced policy packages such as the EU Green Deal and Fit for 55. While climate concerns have not featured prominently in the campaigns for the June 2024 European elections given other prevalent issues such as the Covid-19 pandemic, geopolitical developments, and the return of inflation, this paper shows that European voters remain committed towards climate action. The survey reveals that support for climate action is high across all EU countries in three dimensions: Participants are willing to contribute personally to combating climate change, they approve of pro-climate social norms, and they demand government action. Of course, the support for concrete policy measures depends on numerous factors. For example, the effectiveness of a policy and its perceived fairness matter for popular support. Not all of these aspects could be portrayed in the survey. Nonetheless, drawing on additional data from the US, Andre et al. (2024a) observe a strong link between the overall demand for increased political action and the

support for specific environmental policies, such as implementing a carbon tax on fossil fuels, setting regulatory caps on carbon dioxide emissions from coal power plants, or investing in renewable energy research. Overall, the important conclusion is the following: A vast majority of people in the EU and worldwide are ready to incur personal costs to combat climate change. After five years of regulatory and legislative policy activities, the EU must not retreat to discussions whether climate action is feasible at all, but must move the goalpost to evaluate results, find and implement effective policies with high success rates.⁴

Finally, there is a systemic misperception of the willingness of others to contribute, with individuals underestimating their fellow citizens' actual willingness by more than 10 percentage points in all European countries surveyed. As others' willingness to contribute is highlighted as a potential influencer of individuals' actual willingness to contribute, this perception gap needs to be acknowledged. Policymakers should bear in mind that the European citizens broadly support climate action, even if a vocal minority would like them to think otherwise, and even if other issues such as war and inflation are currently on the minds of the citizens. Communicating such results more effectively is critical to make people aware of the widespread support for climate action among their fellow citizens and to relativize the perception of a vocal minority opposed to climate action.

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⁴ Results from another survey experiment indicate that support for climate policies is positively impacted, when policies address distributional concerns and provide material gains for households (Dechezleprêtre et al., 2023).

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