

Narratives on the Distributional Impact of Climate Policy Can Fuel Populism

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ABSTRACT

Populist parties use narratives about social injustice to portray climate policy as elite-driven and socially unjust. This study—based on a survey experiment with some 1,600 participants—examines how three common narratives about the costs associated with climate policy affect populist and climate-populist attitudes. The results show that the narrative highlighting the disproportionate burden on low-income households fuels climate-populist attitudes and undermines trust in democracy. This effect is particularly pronounced among women and low-income households as well as eastern German and conservative voter segments. The narrative portraying climate policy as harmful to the German economy, on the other hand, resonates most strongly with right-leaning voters, while the narrative claiming that businesses are failing to take responsibility was found to fuel climate-populist attitudes primarily among male, eastern German, and left-leaning voters. Overall, the impact of narratives depends on a person's individual circumstances and prior political experiences. Socially just and transparently communicated policies, however, can enhance public support for climate policy and help prevent populist exploitation.

Today, food, housing, and mobility in Germany generate roughly 6.5 tons of CO₂ per capita—nearly twice the emissions consistent with keeping warming below 2°C.¹ While technological solutions and policy instruments to reduce CO₂ emissions exist, they often struggle to gain the political support necessary for implementation. A major reason for this is the short and medium-term costs of climate measures, which can undermine public acceptance.²

While an understanding of the actual costs is vital, how they are distributed across different groups is perhaps even more important.³ On the one hand, there are significant differences in CO₂ emissions between households: high-income households, for example, emit about twice as much CO₂ as those with lower income—partly because they have larger homes and fly more often.⁴ On the other hand, the impact of climate measures also depends on where people live, with rising fuel costs due to CO₂ pricing hitting rural residents, who often rely on cars for daily mobility, particularly hard. In urban areas, in contrast, there is often the climate-friendly alternative of reliable public transport.

Awareness of such distributional issues in the context of climate change mitigation can create tensions between different groups in society. On the one hand, these perceptions are shaped by the actual effects of climate policy; on the other hand, they can be politically leveraged through different narratives. Populist parties are gaining support worldwide (Figure 1, Box 1),⁵ attracting followers by using science-skeptical rhetoric and portraying climate protection as a

¹ As of 2023. Cf. Sandra Bohmann and Merve Küçük (2024): High-Income Households Emit More Greenhouse Gases—Primarily Due to Transport Behavior. DIW Weekly Report, no. 27, 177–186 (available online; accessed on August 29, 2025; this applies to all other online sources in this report unless stated otherwise).

² Era Dabla-Norris et al. (2024): Does information change public support for climate mitigation policies? Climate Policy 24, no. 10, 1474–1487 (available online).

³ Sandra Bohmann et al. (2025): Mehr Klarheit schaffen: Klimageld als sozialer Ausgleich bei höheren CO₂-Preisen. DIW Wochenbericht, no. 6, 76–82 (in German; available online).

⁴ Bohmann and Küçük, *ibid.*

⁵ See Box 1 for a definition of populism.