

A more in-depth analysis of the open-text responses shows that narratives of injustice can be categorized into three main patterns of cost distribution: (i) between high and low-income individuals, (ii) between businesses and private individuals, and (iii) between countries. These patterns show just how much public discourse on climate policy is shaped by how costs and responsibilities are distributed.

Certain narratives can fuel climate populism

A survey experiment was conducted to examine how narratives influence political attitudes. The three most frequently mentioned narratives from the previous survey were systematically tested, with slight editorial adjustments. A reference narrative with a neutral position on distribution was also included:

- **Neutral narrative:** “Climate policy is important to limit global warming. Policymakers should act more decisively.”
- **Income narrative:** “I find it unfair that climate protection means policymakers make things more expensive through additional taxes and payments, making life increasingly difficult for low and middle-income earners.”
- **Corporate narrative:** “I find it unfair that ordinary people often have to pay, while large companies evade responsibility.”
- **Economic narrative:** “Climate policy puts a strain on the German economy, while other countries, such as China, do not assume any responsibility.”

For the experiment, respondents were first grouped by gender and education level and then randomly assigned to one of four groups (three treatment groups and one control group) (Table 1, Box 2). Those in the control group were presented with the neutral narrative, while those in the treatment groups received either the income narrative, the corporate narrative, or the economic narrative. The next step was surveying attitudes about populism in the general sense, climate populism more specifically, as well as satisfaction with democracy.

The random assignment allows for causal interpretation of differences between the groups. The results thus provide insight into how specific narratives can influence political attitudes in the context of climate policy. It appears that narratives that highlight the social and economic distributional effects of climate policy have a measurable impact on political attitudes, particularly when it comes to climate populism (Table 2).¹⁶

Participants who were assigned the income narrative showed significantly higher agreement with climate-populist positions (+28 percent of a standard deviation). At the same time, satisfaction with democracy in this group decreased

Table 1

Demographic features of the sample

Average (age); in percent (gender, household income, education)

	Control	Income narrative	Corporate narrative	Economic narrative
Age	52.4	52.1	51.3	50.2
Gender				
Male	48.6	52.2	51.8	53.3
Female	51.4	47.0	47.7	46.7
Non-binary (N/A)	0	0.7	0.6	0
Household income				
0 to 1,999 euros	24.4	25.5	26.4	25.6
2,000 to 2,999 euros	24.9	26.2	26.6	25.4
3,000 to 4,999 euros	37.8	40.1	31.7	36.2
5,000 euros and above	12.9	8.2	15.3	12.8
Education				
Primary	5.0	4.9	4.5	4.7
Secondary	75.9	75.6	76.4	76.2
Bachelor's	9.2	9.6	9.8	9.3
Master's	8.9	9.1	8.8	8.8
PhD	1.0	0.7	0.5	1.0
Observations N = 1,614	25.0	25.2	24.7	25.2

Source: Authors' calculations.

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Table 2

Regression results from the survey experiment

Regression coefficients

Variables	Populism	Climate populism	Satisfaction with democracy
Income narrative	0.024 (0.070)	0.277*** (0.070)	-0.144** (0.069)
Corporate narrative	0.072 (0.070)	0.270*** (0.070)	-0.049 (0.070)
Economic narrative	0.084 (0.069)	0.138** (0.070)	-0.005 (0.069)
Individual level controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	0.085 (0.160)	0.222 (0.161)	-0.488*** (0.160)
No. of observations	1,600	1,599	1,602

Notes: Multivariate regression model. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. Control variables include age, gender, education, and income group. Asterisks indicate confidence intervals. The more asterisks, the more precise: *** corresponds to a confidence interval of 99 percent, ** indicates 95 percent, and * is 90 percent.

Interpretation example: The income narrative increases climate-populist attitudes by 27.7 percent of a standard deviation (row 1, column 2).

Source: Authors' calculations.

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¹⁶ Climate populism is measured as the degree of agreement with the following statement: Climate policy is largely driven by elites, often overlooking ordinary citizens. For more details, see Box 1.