DIW Weekly Report 38+39 2025

A policy bulletin from the German Institute for Economic Research

Economy. Policy. Science.

245 Report by Matilda Gettins and Lorenz Meister

Narratives on the Distributional Impact of Climate Policy Can Fuel Populism

- Populist parties deliberately use narratives about the distributional effects of climate policy
- Climate populism is reinforced among right-leaning voters by narratives highlighting the burden on poorer households
- Fair and transparently communicated climate policy remains the most effective safeguard against populist exploitation

LEGAL AND EDITORIAL DETAILS

DIW BERLIN

DIW Berlin — Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung e. V.
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Volume 15 September 30, 2025

Publishers
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Cover design
© imageBROKER / Steffen Diemer

Composition
Satz-Rechen-Zentrum Hartmann + Heenemann GmbH & Co. KG, Berlin

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ISSN 2568-7697

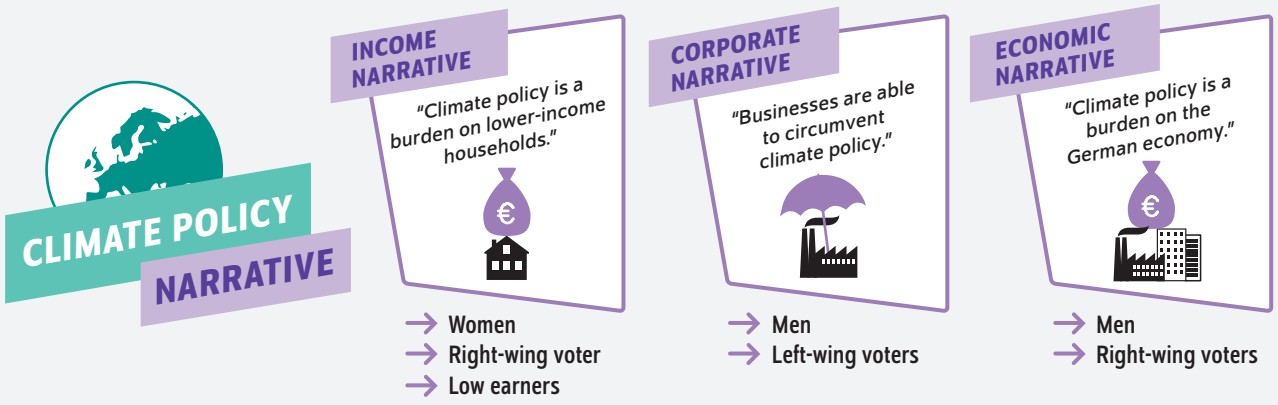
AT A GLANCE

Narratives on the Distributional Impact of Climate Policy Can Fuel Populism

By Matilda Gettins and Lorenz Meister

- Populist parties deliberately use narratives about the distributional effects of climate policy
- A survey experiment explores how such narratives shape populist attitudes
- Climate populism is reinforced among right-leaning voters by narratives highlighting the burden on poorer households and the adverse impact on the economy
- Conversely, narratives highlighting businesses' lack of accountability resonate more with left-leaning voters
- Fair and transparently communicated climate policy remains the most effective safeguard against populist exploitation

Survey experiment: Different narratives on the effects of climate policy have a measurable impact on populist attitudes across various population groups



Source: Authors' illustration.

Notes: In a survey experiment with about 1,600 participants, each person was randomly given one of the narratives to read. Afterwards, they were asked about their political views.

FROM THE AUTHORS

"Populist parties deliberately exploit narratives about social injustice to portray climate policy as driven by the elites at the expense of ordinary people."
— Lorenz Meister —

MEDIA

Audio Interview with Lorenz Meister (in German)
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Narratives on the Distributional Impact of Climate Policy Can Fuel Populism

By Matilda Gettins and Lorenz Meister

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 CO_2 per capita—nearly twice the emissions consistent with keeping warming below 2°C.[1] While technological solutions and policy instruments to reduce CO_2 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 CO_2 emissions between households: high-income households, for example, emit about twice as much CO_2 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 CO_2 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 Kücük (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 Kücük, ibid.

5 See Box 1 for a definition of populism.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.18723/diw_dwr:2025-38-1

self-serving project of the elite.[6] When populist parties win political mandates, this can have huge implications for global climate policy, as seen in the decisions undermining climate policy following the last European Parliament elections[7] and Donald Trump's reelection.[8] Against this backdrop, the present report examines how narratives about the distributional effects of climate policy shape populist attitudes. Using two surveys, it analyzes the influence of three widespread narratives—regardless of their factual accuracy—on populist views in general and climate-populist positions in particular.[9]

Climate policy narratives used by populists

Political debates are not based solely on facts; they also rely on narratives, i.e., interpretive frameworks or stories that simplify complex issues and make them easier to understand. Populists, in particular, often use such narratives to make their arguments more pointed and highlight social conflicts.[10]

In Germany's climate change debate, narratives that emphasize the economic costs of climate policies are widespread.[11] On the political right, for example, climate protection is framed as a threat to Germany's economic position. On the left, similar narratives criticize large companies for failing to take responsibility or passing climate-related costs onto consumers.

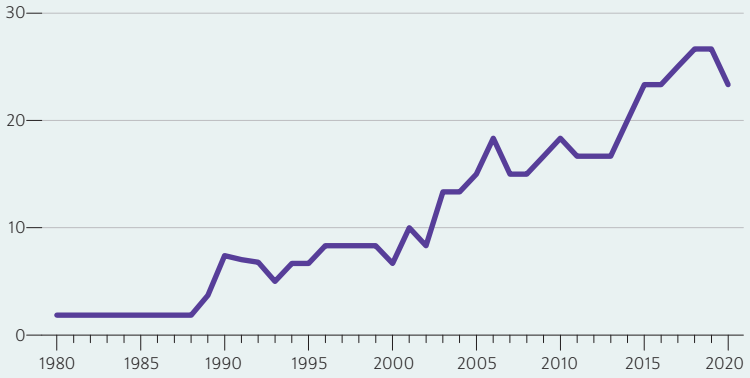
Such narratives can weaken support for climate policy by undermining trust in the fairness and effectiveness of political measures. They can also influence individual consumption behavior, making climate-friendly choices seem less attractive.

Populism and climate skepticism go hand in hand

Concern about climate change is closely linked to political party preference (Figure 2). Notably, the trends over time

Figure 1

Share of populist governments among the world's 60 largest economies
In percent



Notes: A government is classified as populist if its rhetoric exhibits all three populist traits: anti-elitism, anti-pluralism, and a claim to popular sovereignty. The 60 largest economies include EU and OECD member states as well as 19 additional countries from South America, Asia, and Africa. Together, they account for over 95 percent of global GDP.

Source: Based on Manuel Funke, Moritz Schularick, and Christoph Trebesch (2023): Populist Leaders and the Economy. American Economic Review 113, no. 12, 3249–3288 (available online).

The number of populist governments has globally risen markedly over a long period.

are similar across party lines: until around 2014, levels of concern remained largely stagnant, before rising sharply during periods of heightened media interest—in response to Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports and the Fridays for Future protests, for instance. Brief declines also occurred, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020) and following Russia's invasion of Ukraine (from 2022), both of which temporarily forced climate protection out of the public discourse.

Despite similar overall trends, clear differences in levels of concern remain: Voters of the Greens consistently express by far the greatest concern about climate change, followed by supporters of the Left Party (Die Linke) and the Social Democrats (SPD). Christian Democrat (CDU/CSU) voters fall in the middle range. Concern is noticeably lower among voters of the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP). Least concerned, however, are consistently the supporters of the AfD, Germany's largest right-wing populist party.

These results suggest that voters' attitudes toward climate policy broadly align with their parties' political platforms. Notably only AfD supporters showed a decline in climate concerns between 2020 and 2023, pointing to a growing political polarization in the climate debate.

One possible explanation for this is the targeted communication of populist narratives. In AfD circles, narratives about the adverse economic impacts of climate policy are particularly

6 Robert Huber et al. (2021): From populism to climate scepticism: The role of institutional trust and attitudes towards science. Environmental Politics 31. 1115–1138 (available online); Bernd Sommer et al. (2023): Rechtspopulismus vs. Klimaschutz?, Schriftenreihe der Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 10885, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (in German; available online).

7 Claudia Kemfert (2024): Ausgang der EU-Wahl ist klimapolitisches Desaster: Kommentar. DIW Wochenbericht, no. 29, 467 (in German; available online).

8 Claudia Kemfert (2024): Trump Wahl – Desaster für die internationale Klimapolitik: Kommentar. DIW Wochenbericht, no. 46, 728 (in German; available online).

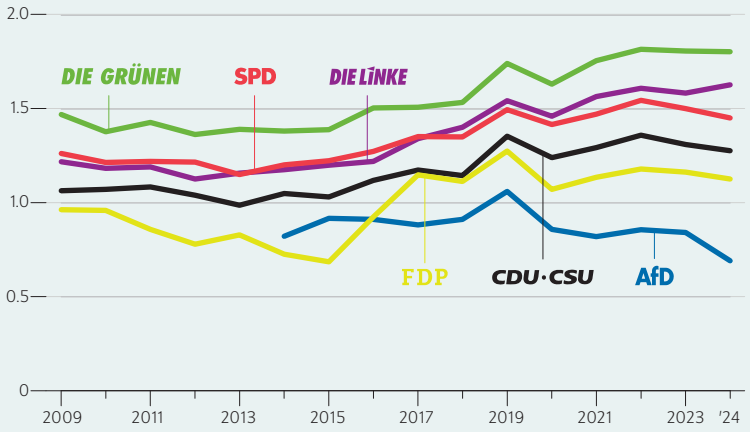
9 For a more detailed illustration, see Matilda Gettins and Lorenz Meister (2025): Who pays for climate policy? Distributional narratives and populist backlash. DIW Discussion Paper, no. 2139 (available online).

10 Dieter Dekeyser and Henk Roose (2023): What makes populist messages persuasive? Experimental evidence for how emotions and issue characteristics moderate populist framing effects. Communication Research 50, no. 6, 773–797 (available online). Johan Nordensvard and Markus Ketola (2022): Populism as an act of storytelling: Analyzing the climate change narratives of Donald Trump and Greta Thunberg as populist truth-tellers. Environmental Politics 31, no. 5, 861–882 (available online).

11 Georg Sturm (2020): Populismus Klimaschutz. Der AfD-Klimadiskurs. Soziologiemagazin 13, no. 2, 69–82 (in German; available online). Anne Küppers (2024): 'Climate-Soviets,' 'Alarmism,' and 'Eco-Dictatorship': The Framing of Climate Change Scepticism by the Populist Radical Right Alternative for Germany. German Politics 33, no. 1, 1–21 (available online). Sommer et al. (2023): Rechtspopulismus vs. Klimaschutz? Schriftenreihe der Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 10885 (in German; available online).

Figure 2

Climate concern by party affiliation
Average level[1]



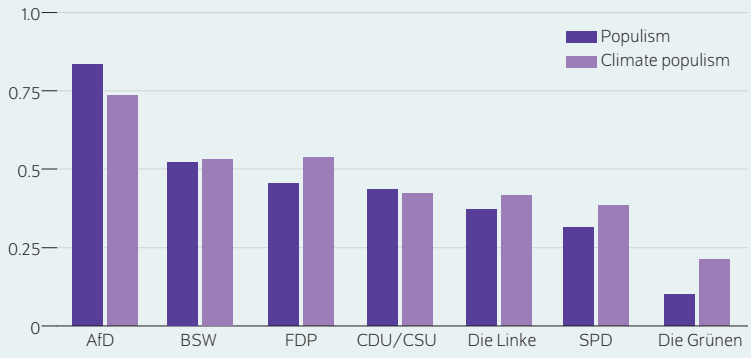
1 Average level of concern, calculated based on response categories: 3 = great concern, 2 = some concern, 1 = no concern.

Sources: Authors' calculations using Socio-Economic Panel data (SOEPv40, SOEPv41).

Climate concerns have increased among supporters of all parties, except AfD voters.

Figure 3

Populism and climate populism by party preference (as of June 2025)
Standard deviation



Notes: Attitudes toward populism (purple) and climate populism (light purple) by party affiliation. Values are scaled to a standard deviation of one. N= 1343. Source: Authors' calculations.

Populism and climate populism are most pronounced among AfD and BSW voters.

prevalent, appearing in party-affiliated publications[12], press releases[13] and statements by supporters, for example.[14]

Outside the AfD camp, the public has more nuanced views of conflicting objectives, particularly when it comes to the difficult balance between climate protection, economic prosperity, and social justice. Among more moderate groups of voters, who generally support climate protection, climate policy measures are therefore often weighed against social policy and other priorities.[15]

The opposite picture emerges when populist and climate-populist attitudes are examined by party preference (Figure 3). What is evident here is that the AfD and the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) constitute significant populist forces in Germany. They are followed by supporters of the FDP and CDU/CSU, who show mid-range values. The lowest levels are found among voters of the SPD, the Left Party, and, in particular, the Greens.

What is striking here is that the pattern runs counter to the one described in the analysis of climate concern above: parties with high levels of climate concern (especially the Greens) tend to display low levels of populism, while the groups with the least concern for the climate (AfD, BSW) have the strongest populist tendencies. This points to a fundamental link between climate skepticism and a tendency toward a populist mindset.

Populism therefore is a key driver of polarization over climate policy and public resistance to Germany's socio-ecological transformation.

Survey results: Distributional effects seen as key issue in climate policy

An online survey of roughly 1,600 participants explored why many people view climate policy as unfair. Respondents were asked to describe in their own words what they found particularly unjust – a method used to elicit unbiased responses outside of fixed response categories.

The most frequently mentioned terms were "people," "costs," and "climate policy." Other keywords point to distributional conflicts, including "rich," "income," "taxes," "citizens," "responsibility," "poor," and "wealthy." These findings suggest that many people increasingly view climate policy not only as an environmental issue but also as a social one, often seeing themselves as socially disadvantaged or bearing a disproportionate burden.

12 Küppers (2024), ibid.

13 Sturm (2020), ibid.

14 Caroline Werkmann and Hans-Jürgen Frieß (2024): Enttäuschung, Frust und Resignation. Monitor Wahl und Sozialforschung der Konrad Adenauer Stiftung; June 2024 (in German; available online).

15 Sara Holzmann and Ingo Wolf (2023): Klimapolitik und soziale Gerechtigkeit: Wie die deutsche Bevölkerung Zielkonflikte in der Transformation wahrnimmt. Bertelsmann Stiftung (ed.), Gütersloh (in German; available online).

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.

Table 2

Regression results from the survey experiment
Regression coefficients

Variables	Populism	Climate populism	Satisfaction with democracy
Income narrative	0.024	0.277***	−0.144**
	(0.070)	(0.070)	(0.069)
Corporate narrative	0.072	0.270***	−0.049
	(0.070)	(0.070)	(0.070)
Economic narrative	0.084	0.138**	−0.005
	(0.069)	(0.070)	(0.069)
Individual level controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	0.085	0.222	−0.488***
	(0.160)	(0.161)	(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.

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.

Box 1

What is populism?

Populism generally refers to a political mindset that divides society into two opposing groups: "the ordinary people" on one side and "the corrupt elite" on the other. Populist actors claim that politics should reflect only the "will of the people." In research, populism is often measured not through party preferences, but through attitudes.[1] One common approach uses 12 statements to capture agreement with three core elements of populism:[2]

- Anti-elitism (criticism of those in power)
- Anti-pluralism (rejection of diversity of opinion)
- Popular sovereignty (call for direct decision-making by the people)

Respondents rate these statements on a scale from 0 to 10. A composite score (principal component score) is then calculated to represent overall populist attitudes, scaled according to standard deviations. This approach allows researchers to measure populism independently of party affiliation or voting behavior, and without explicitly using the term "populism," in order to avoid bias.

Climate populism and satisfaction with democracy

In this study, climate populism is measured as a degree of agreement (on a scale from 0 to 10) with the following statement:

"Climate policy is largely driven by elites, often overlooking ordinary citizens."

Another measure used in the study is satisfaction with democracy, also assessed on a 10-point Likert scale:

"How satisfied are you with democracy in Germany? Please answer on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means "not at all satisfied" and 10 means "very satisfied."

1 Cas Mudde (2024): The populist zeitgeist. Government and Opposition 39, no. 4, 541–563 (available online).

2 Agnes Akkerman et al. (2014): How populist are the people? Measuring populist attitudes in voters. Comparative Political Studies 47, no. 9: 1324–1353 (available online). Anne Schulz et al. (2018): Measuring populist attitudes on three dimensions. International Journal of Public Opinion Research 30, no. 2: 316–326 (available online).

noticeably (–14 percent of a standard deviation). In contrast, overall populism scores remained unaffected.

The corporate narrative also significantly increased agreement with climate-populist positions (+27 percent of a standard deviation), without affecting satisfaction with democracy or overall populist tendencies.

The economic narrative also led to an increase in climate-populist attitudes (+14 percent of a standard deviation), though to a much smaller extent.

As with the other narratives, there were no significant effects on satisfaction with democracy or overall populism scores.

These results suggest that narratives emphasizing social inequality or economic injustice in climate policy specifically reinforce climate-populist attitudes. In the case of the income narrative, they even increase distrust in democratic institutions.

Narrative effects vary by social background and political position

The effects of the narratives are not equally pronounced across all population groups (Figure 4):

Income: The income narrative has the strongest effect among households with a net income below 2,000 euros; in higher-income groups, the effect is much weaker.

- **Education**: Individuals with a lower level of education generally react more strongly to all narratives. However, due to the small sample size in this group, these effects are not statistically significant.
- **Region**: In eastern Germany, the effects of all three narratives are more consistent and stronger than in western Germany, regardless of thematic focus.
- **Voting behavior**: Economic and income narratives resonate more with supporters of parties on the right of the spectrum, whereas left-leaning voters show a stronger reaction to the corporate narrative.
- **Gender**: Women respond more strongly to the income narrative, while men are more sensitive to the corporateand economic narratives.

These differences show that narratives resonate differently depending on individuals' life circumstances and prior political experiences. For effective political communication, this means that climate policy measures must be designed to be fair as well as communicated in a credible and targeted way.

Conclusion: Climate policy with a social dimension can help counter polarizing narratives

Narratives that emphasize social or economic inequality in climate policy can reinforce climate-populist attitudes, particularly when they highlight burdens on low and middle-income households. In such cases, this leads to a decrease in people's overall satisfaction with democracy.

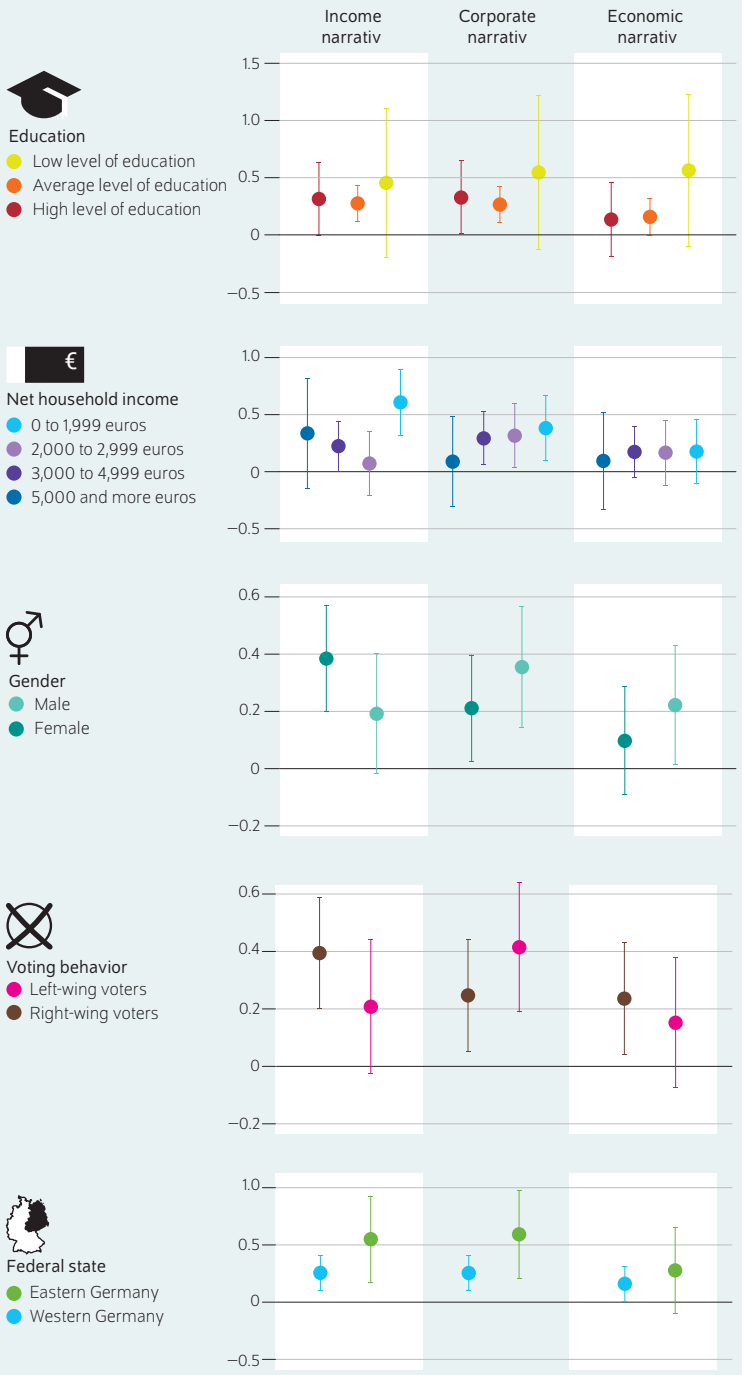
At the same time, public support hinges not only on narratives, but also on the concrete design of climate policies.

When policies are perceived as fair—for instance, through socially just compensation mechanisms or climate dividend schemes—even polarizing narratives lose much of their impact.

Effective climate policy thus requires not only technological and market-based tools but also a social dimension, with political communication that does not avoid distributional conflicts but rather addresses them head-on.

Figure 4

Climate populism, effect sizes by demographic group
Regression coefficients



Notes: 95 percent confidence intervals are shown, expressed in standard deviations. Age, gender, education level, and income were included as control variables. Effect sizes are reported in standard deviations. Data for non-binary gender are not shown due to the small sample size. Left-wing voters include SPD, Die Linke, Greens/B90, and BSW. Right-wing voters include CDU/CSU, FDP, and AfD. Berlin is not assigned to either eastern or western Germany.

Source: Authors' calculations.

All effects are more pronounced in eastern Germany than in western Germany.

Box 2

Data basis and methods

The analyses are based on two online surveys conducted using the Qualtrics survey tool in May 2024 and again in May/June 2025. The surveys are representative of the German population in terms of age, gender, level of education, income group, and federal state. The panel was provided by the company Bilendi. The studies were approved under GfeW (German Association for Experimental Economic Research) No. p3164FAi and preregistered with AsPredicted (#230333).

The first survey wave (May 2024) produced 1,498 valid responses after rigorous quality control steps such as tests to assess whether respondents are paying attention, bot detection, removal of duplicate IP addresses, and excluding surveys completed in under three minutes. The second wave (May/June 2025), which also incorporated a survey experiment, yielded 1,614 valid responses. On average, respondents took about eight minutes to complete the survey, accessible via PC, tablet, or smartphone.

Sociodemographic features, voting behavior and party preferences, as well as political attitudes—particularly regarding climate policy and sustainable consumption—were collected. In survey wave 2, participants in the embedded survey experiment were randomly assigned to experimental conditions, stratified by gender and level of education.

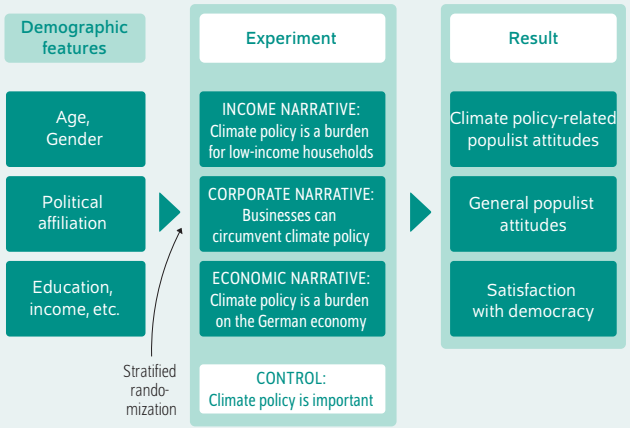
The survey experiment

To examine the effect of different narratives about the distribution of climate policy costs on (climate-)populist attitudes and satisfaction with democracy, respondents in the survey experiment[1] were randomly assigned to different treatment groups (see Figure). Participants in the control group received a neutral narrative, while those in the three treatment groups were assigned either an income narrative, an economic narrative, or a corporate narrative.

Next, the respondents' attitudes toward populism and climate populism, as well as their satisfaction with democracy, were surveyed. Since participants were assigned to the treatment groups randomly, any differences in political attitudes across groups can be interpreted as the causal effect of the narratives.

Figure

Survey experiment design and methodology



Source: Authors' illustration.

1 Ingar Haaland, Christopher Roth and Johannes Wohlfahrt (2023): Designing Information Provision Experiments. Journal of Economic Literature 61, no. 1, 340 (available online).

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JEL: P18, I38, H41

Keywords: populism, climate policy, distribution