

Experience of climate extremes increase Green voting in Europe

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What role do experiences with climate change and extreme events play in shaping environmental attitudes and to what extent can they explain the recent rise in environmental concerns and willingness to vote for Green parties across Europe? IIASA researchers set out to investigate these and related issues in a new study just published in *Nature Climate Change*.

Just two decades ago, [climate](#) change and associated [extreme events](#) were difficult for many Europeans to imagine as a threat to their way of life—it was something that affected other people in other places. In the past few years, Europe has however witnessed its warmest years on record and the summer of 2021 not only saw the number of wildfires more than double from the annual average of the past 10 years, but several western European countries were struck by the most devastating floods of the past few decades. These events highlight the urgent need for [climate change mitigation](#), the success of which will rely heavily on [public support](#) for government policies aimed at limiting global warming.

In their paper, the researchers analyzed the effect of people's increased experiences with climate extremes on environmental concern and explored to what extent changes in concerns translate into actual political support for climate action in the form of Green voting. For this, the team used time-series Eurobarometer data (42 survey waves, 2002–2019) and European Parliament election data (6 elections, 1994–2019) to analyze changes in concerns and voting at the subnational level across 34 and 28 European countries, respectively. Using innovative methods, the team combined this data with climatological data.

"This is the first study to collect subnational election data for such a large number of countries and to combine it with environmental data," notes Piero Stanig, associate professor of Political Science at Bocconi University, Italy.

Awareness and concern for environmental issues have risen across Europe in the past two decades. This increase was particularly pronounced in Northern and Western Europe and weaker in Eastern and Southern Europe. Although trends in green voting are erratic over time, there is a clear North-West and East-South divide with higher shares of Green voters in the North-West. The statistical analysis shows that the

rise in concerns and voting for Green parties can partly be ascribed to the more frequent and intense experiences with climate extremes. The impacts of climate extremes were, however, not uniform but differ from region to region.

"We found a significant and sizeable effect of temperature anomalies, heat episodes, and dry spells on environmental concern and Green voting. Interestingly, the effects were most pronounced in regions with a moderate and colder climate, and weaker in regions with a hotter, Mediterranean climate," explains Roman Hoffmann, a researcher in the Migration and Sustainable Development Research Group of the IIASA Population and Just Societies Program.

"Populations in these regions may have already adapted to the warmer, drier baseline conditions, for instance, with respect to housing and agriculture, or they may be more used to temperature-related extremes, making the extreme events become less noticeable," adds Jonas Peisker, a researcher jointly associated with the IIASA Equity and Justice Research Group and the Vienna Institute of Demography, Austrian Academic of Sciences.

According to the researchers, other factors related to the socioeconomic, cultural, and political conditions in a region can also play a role in explaining the observed differences between regions. In particular, the study found that [economic conditions](#) moderate the climate impacts on concerns and voting, suggesting that while climate change experiences increase public support for climate action, it only does so under favorable economic conditions.

Raya Muttarak, former IIASA Population and Just Societies Program director and professor of Demography at the University of Bologna, Italy further points out that demographic factors can also play a role.

"Regions with a more highly educated and younger population tended to respond more strongly to climate extremes by adapting their environmental concerns and changing their voting behavior," she says.

The study's findings are particularly relevant for current debates on how to best promote and effectively implement further climate change mitigation measures in line with the Paris Agreement and the European Green Deal, where the EU aims to take a leading position in tackling climate change. Economic challenges and political disruptions might however hamper the EU's ability to fulfill its role of a policy innovator pioneering solutions that tackle the climate emergency in a sustainable fashion. This calls for an inclusive and equitable approach to climate protection that comprehensively highlights the potential threats of climate change while taking into account the major differences in [environmental concerns](#) and voting across Europe and addresses the needs and fears of local populations.

"Our findings highlight the importance of increasing the salience of climate impacts in an inclusive way. There is a need to address the substantial geographic differences in public concerns and political support for [climate action](#) across regions in Europe. Obviously, exposure to climate change impacts is not the ideal way to promote public concern and action, but climate communication and education can help fill the experience gap. This could help to reduce people's psychological distance to the effects of [climate change](#) and to encourage mitigation behaviors," Hoffmann concludes.

More information: Roman Hoffmann, Climate change experiences raise environmental concerns and promote Green voting, *Nature Climate Change* (2022). [DOI: 10.1038/s41558-021-01263-8](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-021-01263-8)

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