

# What makes people care about the environment?

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A new study analyzes the factors that drive environmental concern among Europeans in an effort to understand how we can bolster popular support for combatting climate change.

While we can already feel the effects of [climate change](#) on our skins, the majority of the European population still does not consider climate change, the environment, and energy to be among the most pressing issues for national policymaking. Support from the public, however, is crucial to enable stringent and sustainable environmental policy in democracies.

To raise the motivation of the general population towards [climate action](#), we need to know which factors drive concern in people for the climate and the environment. In a new study published in *Global Environmental Change*, Jonas Peisker, a researcher in the IIASA Population and Just Societies Program, addressed how environmental preferences in 206 European regions are shaped by socioeconomic, geographical, and meteorological circumstances.

"I wanted to offer a data-driven perspective on the determinants of environmental concern that highlights the relevance of individuals' embeddedness in socioeconomic and environmental contexts," explains Peisker. "While previous research has only considered a few contextual influences at a time, this study allows for a comparison of their relative importance, including also factors that differ mostly between regions, such as inequality, [income level](#), or geographical features."

To find determinants of environmental concern, Peisker used the method of Bayesian Model Averaging based on 25 Eurobarometer surveys conducted between 2009 and 2019 combined with measures of the regional economy, population, geography, [environmental quality](#), and meteorological events.

The study found that favorable economic contexts, such as a relatively high income level and low inflation, foster environmental concern. This is likely related to the idea of a "finite pool of worry" in which more immediate issues like economic security crowd out less immediate issues

like [climate policy](#). Interestingly, rising energy prices only lowered [environmental concerns](#) up to a certain point at which environmental concerns started to rise as well. At this point, [energy supply](#) could become an issue which raises environmental concerns in itself.

The results showed that a more equal distribution of income and wealth had a positive impact on the prioritization of environmental issues, suggesting that social cohesion is beneficial for green concerns. Moreover, Peisker found that regions with greenhouse gas-intensive industries had lower environmental concern among locals.

This could be related to worries about the potential effects of environmental policies on economic competitiveness in the transition from fossil to clean technology. While environmental factors, such as having a low-elevation coastline, also influence environmental concern, overall, the socioeconomic context proved more important.

"The results of the study emphasize that [social cohesion](#) and a just transition to carbon neutrality are key for the bottom-up support for environmental policy," says Peisker. "Climate policy and environmental protection are likely to be unpopular if they are increasing income and wealth inequality, inflation, and unemployment. Therefore, a way to support climate action could be to emphasize the co-benefits of environmental policy, for instance, positive employment effects of the transition to renewable energy sources."

**More information:** Jonas Peisker, Context matters: The drivers of environmental concern in European regions, *Global Environmental Change* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2023.102636](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2023.102636)

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