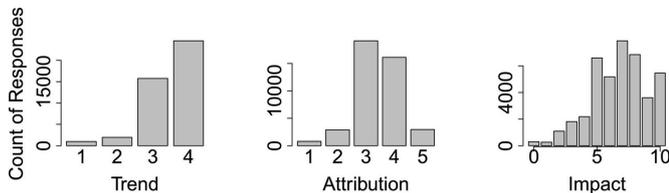


Political distrust a major barrier to climate action

26 November 2019



Histograms for the distributions of each of the three scepticism/belief items, pooling across all countries in the ESS 2016 dataset.

Distrust in politicians and the political system is preventing people from supporting increased taxes on fossil fuels, a potentially important climate policy. By comparison, most people believe in climate change. So says a new study based on surveys in 23 European countries. "What we found is that political distrust is currently a more serious barrier to climate action than is simple denial of the problem," says Malcolm Fairbrother, one of the authors of the study.

The study, by researchers at Umeå University, Sweden, was published in the scientific journal *Global Environmental Change*. Fairbrother and the study's other authors, Ingemar Johansson Sevä and Joakim Kulin, received funding for their work from the Marianne and Marcus Wallenberg Foundation, the Swedish Research Council, and Riksbankens Jubileumsfond.

Using data from the European Social Survey, they found that three-quarters of Europeans believe in climate change and its dangers, but only about one-third support increasing taxes on fossil fuels. They found that political trust differs much more across countries than beliefs about climate change. In high-trust countries like Sweden people are more open to high taxes on fossil fuels. On the other hand, in European countries with little political trust, like Poland or Spain, even people who

believe in [climate change](#) do not support increasing these taxes.

The taxation of [fossil fuels](#) like coal, petrol, or natural gas is a way governments can make polluters pay for their carbon pollution. Environmental economists have been saying for decades that taxes are an effective way of discouraging polluting activities. And governments can reduce other taxes to compensate, making environmental taxes a win-win solution.

This new study shows why this solution, however, remains surprisingly unpopular with the general public—especially in countries with low political trust.

More information: Malcolm Fairbrother et al. Political trust and the relationship between climate change beliefs and support for fossil fuel taxes: Evidence from a survey of 23 European countries, *Global Environmental Change* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2019.102003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2019.102003)

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