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Trade-Offs in Public Support for Climate Action? The Role of Environmental and Economic Shocks

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Authors

Roman Hoffmann - Team leader and researcher of the SPES project, International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital (IIASA, OeAW, University of Vienna), Laxenburg, Austria

Camille Belmin - Researcher of the SPES project, International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital (IIASA, OeAW, University of Vienna), Laxenburg, Austria, University of Applied Arts, Vienna, Austria

Jonas Peisker - Researcher of the SPES project, International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital (IIASA, OeAW, University of Vienna), Laxenburg, Austria

Gregor Zens - Researcher of the SPES project, International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital (IIASA, OeAW, University of Vienna), Laxenburg, Austria

Contributors and Peer reviewers

Filippo Cuccaro, University of Florence; András Gábos, TARKI Social Research Institute; Katja Reuter, Social Platform; Eric Rougier, Bordeaux University; István György Tóth, TARKI Social Research Institute.

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Abstract

Public support for climate policies depends on how people prioritize environmental concerns over other issues. While experiencing climate change and related extreme events can raise environmental concerns, economic disruptions can shift attention away from environmental issues. Using 36 waves of Eurobarometer surveys (2003-2023) merged with regional economic and climate data, we examine how external economic and environmental shocks shape public concerns across 339 European subnational regions in 35 countries. Fixed effects panel regressions reveal evidence for the existence of trade-offs: Environmental shocks increase environmental concerns while reducing economic concerns, consistent with the finite pool of worry hypothesis. Economic shocks, on the other hand, increase economic concerns and decrease environmental concerns, although to a lesser extent. If both shocks co-occur, respondents typically prioritize economic over environmental issues. These trade-off patterns vary across demographic groups and regional contexts. The findings demonstrate that public attention to environmental issues is responsive to external shocks and highlights the need to design environmental policies and communication strategies that remain politically viable also under adverse economic conditions.

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