

CLIMATE CHANGE, ENERGY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

TURNING CONCERN INTO ACTION

Summary of a comparative study
of the relationships between climate concern,
personal responsibilities and climate policies
in Denmark, Germany and Sweden

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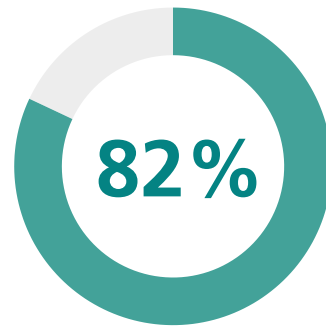
Preface

This publication summarizes a study¹ that reveals widespread climate concern among citizens in Germany, Denmark and Sweden. The study also shows that climate concern is coupled with strong support for compensating low-income groups affected by costly climate policies. This consensus spans across all countries and socio-economic groups, suggesting that implementing policies for a socially just transition is within reach for today's policymakers.

A general conclusion from the study is that differences between the three countries are smaller than the differences between socio-economic groups within each country. There are substantial differences between different income groups, between people with different levels of education, and between people living in urban or rural areas.

On average, people with higher education express a higher level of climate concern, personal responsibility, and support of climate-friendly policy than other groups. In general, those who are most concerned about the climate, show higher levels of support for climate policies. It is important to note, however, that support for climate policies is not the same thing as leading a climate friendly lifestyle. People with higher levels of education often have a higher income, which tends to correlate with a higher carbon footprint.

A socially just transition can be achieved in many ways. While economic incentives for climate action may be effective in many cases, they tend to favour those with a thick wallet. In a similar way, higher fuel prices are effective when public transportation is a reasonable alternative, but present a higher burden to those for whom mobility with a car is the only available means of transport. To build widespread, lasting support across diverse socio-economic groups, it is critical that ambitious climate policies are balanced with redistributive measures.



supports compensation
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¹ This study has been carried out by the Danish think tank CEVEA, financed by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Nordic Countries and is based on data from an international survey project commissioned by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung's "Competence Center for Climate and Social Justice" at the SINUS-Institute, an independent, owner-managed institute for market and social research based in Heidelberg and Berlin. Sinus was commissioned to conduct a population survey in 19 European and North American countries. More about this project and its publications: <https://justclimate.fes.de/survey-attitudes-towards-the-social-ecological-transformation.html>

INTRODUCTION

Climate change remains one of the most critical challenges of our time. While awareness and concern about its impacts have grown across Europe, translating concern into support for climate policies presents significant hurdles, particularly when these policies come with personal financial costs. The report summarises a study that explores the nuanced relationships among climate concern, personal responsibility,

policy preferences, and social justice perceptions among different demographic groups in Denmark, Germany, and Sweden. The findings illustrate the diverse socio-economic and geographic factors influencing attitudes toward the social-ecological transition, offering insights for policymakers aiming to enhance public support for climate action.

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on survey data collected from approximately 1,200 individuals aged 18 to 69 in each of the three countries (Denmark, Sweden and Germany) between April 20 and July 28, 2023. The survey was translated into the national languages (Danish, Swedish, and German) and weighted for national distributions of age, gender, education, and region.

Climate concern was measured using an index of questions about perceived importance and consequences of climate change, while personal responsibility was assessed through a nine-question index focusing on willingness to modify behaviour for environmental reasons. Policy preferences were evaluated through support for measures like airline ticket taxes and reductions in climate-damaging subsidies. Socio-demographic variables included education, income, and urban/rural residence. The full report with more details and appendices can be accessed at <https://www.fes.de/cgi-bin/gbv.cgi?id=21852&ty=pdf>.

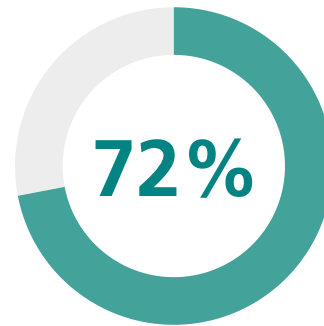
KEY FINDINGS

CLIMATE CONCERN AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

- **Education:** Higher education consistently predicted greater climate concern and stronger feelings of personal responsibility across all groups.
- **Income and Geographic Differences:** Income did not significantly influence general concern levels, although individuals with lower income were more likely to express stronger concerns in certain contexts. Urban residents generally reported higher climate concern. In Denmark and Germany, urban residents also felt more personally responsible than rural residents. In Sweden, rural-urban differences in feelings of personal responsibility were small.

POLICY PREFERENCES

- **Education and Urbanisation:** Higher levels of education strongly correlated with support for more extensive climate policies. Urban residents, particularly in larger cities, favoured measures like car tolls and fossil fuel subsidy reductions more than rural residents, who may rely more on private cars for their daily mobility.
- **Income and Policy Support:** Income did not significantly predict overall policy support, even for policies involving personal costs. However, high-income individuals were more likely to translate concern into policy support, possibly because people with higher incomes have greater financial capacity to act on their concerns and absorb costs related to climate measures.



are afraid of the consequences of climate change

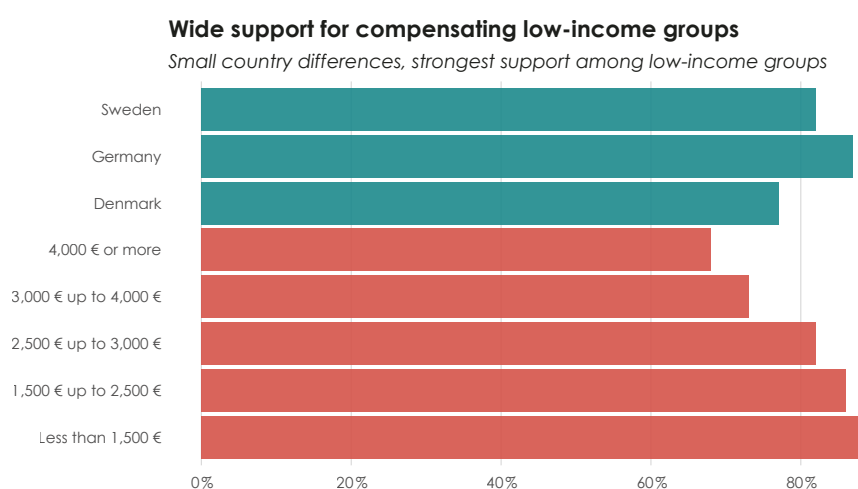
ATTITUDE-BEHAVIOUR GAP

Despite strong climate concern, translating concerns about climate change into a feeling of personal responsibility to change lifestyles or to support climate policy varies. The relationship between concern and personal responsibility is stronger than between concern and policy preferences, likely due to the higher perceived personal costs of climate policies. Higher education levels amplify the feeling of personal responsibility even at lower levels of concern, highlighting education's mitigating effect on the attitude-behaviour gap.

Social Justice Perceptions

- **Perceived Inequity:** Individuals with lower education and income levels are more likely to view climate measures as socially unjust and more likely to support compensating low-income groups for costly climate policies.

Figure 1
Proportion of those who support compensating low-income groups. Shares include partly and completely agree answers.



- **Policy Preferences for Equity:** Broad support exists for compensating low-income groups, though support is weakest among high-income individuals.
- **Urban vs. Rural:** Rural residents often perceive climate policies as more socially unjust, which is likely due to greater reliance on carbon-intensive transportation and fewer eco-friendly alternatives. However, in our survey, this was evident only in Denmark, where residents in larger cities perceive climate measures as less socially unjust compared to those in rural areas. In the two other countries, there were no major differences.

Linking Perception and Policy

The relationship between perceiving policies as socially unjust and supporting compensatory measures is influenced by education and income. High-income and highly educated individuals are less likely to perceive injustice but show increased support for compensatory measures when they do.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings highlight the need for climate policies that balance ambition with social equity:

- **Formal Education as a Key Factor:** Higher formal education and training increases climate concern, personal responsibility, and policy support. At the same time, those with lower levels of formal education more often perceive climate and environmental protection as socially unjust. This suggests that policy makers have to focus on the distributional consequences when they introduce climate policy.
- **Compensatory Measures for Inclusivity:** Policies should include financial aid for low-income and rural populations to mitigate higher costs to those with fewer options and income.
- **Urban-Rural Disparities:** Tailoring policies to account for geographic differences in transportation needs and infrastructure can improve support in rural areas.

A fair and effective social-ecological transition requires policies that distribute costs equitably while addressing climate goals. Balancing redistributive measures with ambitious policies will foster broader public backing across diverse socio-economic groups, enhancing the success of climate action in Denmark, Germany, and Sweden.

VARIATIONS ACROSS COUNTRIES

As mentioned above, differences between different income groups, and between people living in cities or in rural areas, tend to be larger than differences between the three countries. However, there are some interesting variations.

Danes expressed the highest level of climate concern, while Swedes showed the least, being more concerned with other issues like health care and crime. Germans reported the lowest sense of personal responsibility. Denmark led in climate policy support, followed by Germany, with Sweden trailing. These preferences align with the relative levels of climate concern in each country.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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