

PRESS RELEASE

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Research: “Us-Versus-Them” Thinking Drives People’s Climate Action

- Online survey experiment with 1,300 U.S. Americans
- EPoS Economic Research Center at Bonn and Mannheim publishes results

Bonn, Mannheim, 26.08. 2026 – **This summer, many parts of the world suffer from severe effects of climate change. Despite this, voter support for specific climate policy measures tends to be rather weak and heterogenous. Why do some people support a carbon tax or international climate aid, while others reject the very same measures? A new study offers an answer that goes beyond classic explanations such as income, party preference, or factual knowledge: people’s moral outlook. The results show that people with a stronger universalist orientation — who think that moral obligations apply equally to everyone — are more likely to back ambitious climate action. The EPoS Economic Research Center at the Universities of Bonn and Mannheim publishes the findings in the discussion paper “Morality and Climate Policy Attitudes”.**

“We map people’s moral orientation between two poles,” says Florian Zimmermann from the EPoS Economic Research Center. “A ‘universalist’ believes that moral obligations apply to everyone, not just the people close to us, such as our family or nation. At the opposite pole are what we call ‘communitarians’ who tend to give moral priority to their own group.”

Findings: Moral outlook affects support for climate action

The researchers then compared people’s moral orientation with their views on climate action. The results show that people who score higher on the universalism measure are significantly more likely to support specific climate policies such as, for instance, a domestic carbon tax or a green infrastructure program. This holds even after the researchers accounted for factors, such as income, political affiliation, or skepticism about climate change. They conclude that people’s moral outlook appears to matter in its own right.

PRESS RELEASE

“Us versus them” mentality

Communitarians were less likely to support specific climate policies. Their written explanations revealed that communitarians disproportionately used group- or place-based reasoning, such as prioritizing help for their own country over people elsewhere. “Our results show that climate policy attitudes are not just a matter of economic self-interest or information gaps — they are in part rooted in people’s moral worldviews,” says Zimmermann.

Gap between general support and support for specific policies

“The experiment furthermore confirms the pattern that support for ‘fighting climate change’ is high in general terms but drops substantially when individuals are asked about specific policies,” says Zimmermann. “The gap between abstract and concrete support is something policymakers should take into account.”

About the survey

Researchers surveyed about 1,300 U.S. adults online via the online survey provider Prolific, with a sample matched to the U.S. population on age, gender, and ethnicity. Participants completed a universalism measure, answered questions about their support for specific climate policies, and completed “who should pay” tasks. After each donation decision, participants explained their reasoning in their own words.

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The presented discussion paper is a publication without peer review of the Collaborative Research Center Transregio 224 EPoS. Access the full discussion paper here: <https://www.crctr224.de/research/discussion-papers/archive/dp773>

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The Collaborative Research Center (CRC) Transregio 224 EPoS

Established in 2018, [the Collaborative Research Center Transregio 224 EPoS](https://www.crctr224.de), a cooperation of the universities Bonn and Mannheim, is a long-term research institution funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG). EPoS addresses three key societal challenges: how to promote equality of opportunity; how to regulate markets in light of the internationalization and digitalization of economic activity; and how to safeguard the stability of the financial system.

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