



# Finding common ground in uncertain times: assessing the prospect of multilateralism in transatlantic climate change policy

Jakob Wiedekind<sup>1</sup> · Christiane Lemke<sup>1</sup> 

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## Abstract

Climate change policy stands out as a highly salient issue in European and in American public opinion. This article contends that a significant transatlantic consensus supports multilateral action on climate change. Leveraging a broad review of survey data in our time series, the analysis identifies a clear pattern of increasing agreement in public opinion. Yet progress in joint transatlantic climate change action has been rather slow and fragmented. To explain this puzzle, we connect these findings to pitfalls for transatlantic cooperation by weighing partisan polarization and regional differences in the U.S. and country variations in the EU as plausible hurdles to policy consistency. We argue that, beneath broader trends in shared concerns, roadblocks on the national level inhibit the implementation of coherent and effective transatlantic climate change policies.

**Keywords** Climate change · Multilateralism · Public opinion · Transatlantic relations · Energy policy

## Introduction

Relations between Europe and the U.S. are a cornerstone of international cooperation. Both sides of the Atlantic are not only connected by history, culture, and a sense of common global purpose, but also by multiple multilateral institutions

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✉ Jakob Wiedekind  
j.wiedekind@ipw.uni-hannover.de

<sup>1</sup> Hannover, Germany



created in the aftermath of WWII. One of the most crucial and challenging issues in contemporary transatlantic relations is climate change. According to surveys in Europe, in 2022, 81% of citizens in the European Union responded that climate change is a major concern (EU Commission 2022).<sup>1</sup> Likewise, surveys in the U.S. point to a similar level of concern. Three-quarters of Americans support U.S. participation in international climate change efforts, which signals widespread backing of multilateral action.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, a Gallup poll showed that 59% of respondents in the U.S. said that the government was not doing enough to protect the environment,<sup>3</sup> and a study conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs in 2021<sup>4</sup> highlights that 54% of American respondents said that limiting climate change is a very important foreign policy goal—a 14 percentage points increase compared to 2016. Initiatives such as the European Green Deal 2019 and the bipartisan infrastructure bill passed by the Biden Administration in November 2021 clearly prioritize climate change policy and seem to be responsive to transatlantic public demand.

However, progress in establishing coherent global climate change policy has been slow and fragmented. This was particularly evident during the 27th Climate Conference under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP27) which took place in Egypt in November 2022.<sup>5</sup> While the convening parties acknowledged the necessity of global climate change frameworks, the 197 countries represented could not agree on passing effective, binding measures to further curb carbon dioxide emissions, despite rather alarming data presented by the UN Emissions Gap Report 2021.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> European Commission Press, ‘EP Autumn 2022 Survey: Parlemeter’, *European Parliament*, February, 2023, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2932>. To be more precise, 81% of respondents ranked climate change as a leading worry, which ranks third behind the rising cost of living (93%) and Poverty (82%). The question allowed for respondents to reply “worried”, “not worried” or “don’t know” per listed item. As this article uncovers, the picture of unity fades when respondents are asked to what extent they perceive of climate change as the single most serious problem. In single choice formats, perceptions emerge more clearly, because respondents have to rank their views.

The shared sense of urgency in climate change policy on both sides of the Atlantic is also corroborated by the German Marshall Fund survey. ‘Transatlantic Trends Survey 2022’, *GMF Bertelsmann Foundation*, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/transatlantic-trends-2022#>.

<sup>2</sup> Alison Spencer, and Cary Funk, ‘Americans largely support U.S. joining international efforts to address climate change’, *Pew Research Center*, March, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/09/americans-largely-support-u-s-joining-international-efforts-to-address-climate-change/>.

<sup>3</sup> Gallup, ‘In Depths: Topics A-Z: Environment’, Gallup 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1615/environment.aspx>.

<sup>4</sup> Dina Smeltz, Emily Sullivan, and Colin Wolff, ‘Republicans and Democrats in Different Worlds on Climate Change’, *The Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, October, 2021, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/Final%20Climate%20Brief.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations, COP27, 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/cop27>. See also:

What is Cop27 and why does it matter? *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/nov/07/what-is-cop27-and-why-does-it-matter>.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), *Emissions Gap Report 2021*. <https://www.unep.org/resources/emissions-gap-report-2021>.



This article seeks to contribute to the ongoing efforts in extant work that tries to make sense of the mismatch between broad public support and deficient action in transatlantic climate change policy.<sup>7</sup> Despite partial success in international negotiations, we argue that domestic-level determinants inhibit transatlantic multilateralism, which remain hidden on the aggregate level of opinion surveys. We demonstrate that a shared sense of urgency motivates transatlantic unity on policy goals expressed through multilateral institutions, while policy enactment on the domestic level is hamstrung by disagreement between EU member states and state-level divergence in the U.S. The current confluence of public support for more comprehensive and coordinated climate change policy creates a momentum with international consequences that is difficult to capitalize on because the apparent consensus is challenged on the domestic level where climate change action should unfold.

Conceptually, we conceive climate change policy as a multi-level policy area that is interwoven and complex. That is to say, changes occur on the international level (mostly within the framework of the UN) in the context of transnational initiatives, the national level, and the subnational levels. Both in Europe and the U.S. environmental governance has played an increasing role, even though support and efficiency has fluctuated over time. While U.S. leadership was instrumental in reaching the conclusion of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, for example, opposition to curbing emissions by setting global standards and implementing regulations grew over time and repeatedly obstructed American action on international commitments. Presidential leadership has played a crucial role, but presidents increasingly face tough domestic opposition in Congress, where increased partisan polarization distances positions on climate change along party lines. On the other side of the Atlantic, the European Union's ambitions speak to the fact that it is often considered to be a leader in climate change policy.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, here too consistency and coherence are continuously lacking, and European approaches vary. Previous research uncovered a broader pattern. Democracies tend to commit to climate change policy, but the actual output remains ambiguous.<sup>9</sup> Although consistency seems in high demand across publics, it is difficult to sustain politically. We want to know how persistent the public demand really is and what factors seem to stifle political action beyond ever new deadlines. We highlight growing partisan polarization and state-level differences in the U.S. and country specific variations in the EU as roadblocks that inhibit substantive progress on what appears to be a common and urgent public demand. As part of our

<sup>7</sup> Jale Tosun, and Guy Peters, 'The politics of climate change: domestic and international responses to a global challenge', *International Political Science Review* 42, no. 1 (2021); Elizabeth Bomberg, 'The 2020 US Election and its climate consequences', *Environmental Politics* 30, no. 5 (2021); Dennis Tänzler, and Alexander Carius, 'The Prospects for a Transatlantic Climate Policy', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2004).

<sup>8</sup> Henrik Selin and Stacy D. VanDeveer, *European Union and Environmental Governance* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2015); Sebastian Oberthür, and Claire Dupont 'The European Union's international climate leadership: toward a grand climate strategy?', *Journal of European Public Policy* 28, no. 7 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1918218>

<sup>9</sup> Michéle Bättig, and Thomas Bernauer, 'National Institutions and Global Public Goods: Are Democracies more Cooperative in Climate Change Policy?', *International Organization* 63, no. 2 (2009): 303.



explanation, we point to partisan polarization fueled by right-wing populist movements which are increasingly vocal in opposing global climate change policies on both sides of the Atlantic.

The first step of the analysis leverages survey data for transatlantic perceptions of climate change, comparing European and American positions on this issue. Our findings suggest that climate change only rather recently came to be viewed as the most serious threat of our times, pointing to a novel sense of joint purpose in transatlantic relations. The second step moves beyond the aggregate level and brings data on partisan polarization in the U.S. and public opinion patterns within the EU into conversation with this shared sense of urgency. This step pinpoints pitfalls in transatlantic cooperation which continue to hamper coherent climate change policies and that have done so in the past. Also, serious chasms in the ways in which climate change is to be addressed emerge, which continues to separate the U.S. from the EU. Based on our findings, we caution against transatlantic enthusiasm on serious policy implementation as domestic-level constraints and contestation persist. In the next section, we explain our theoretical framework that understands significant perception patterns as meaningful cues for foreign policy making.

### **Meaningful cues or inconsistent snapshots: Theorizing the connection between public opinion and foreign policy**

Public opinion polls are an important tool to ascertain attitudes, detect perceptions, and analyze long-term shifts in policy priorities. We conceptualize transatlantic relations as a multi-level relationship which directs us to not only focus on leadership of politicians in power, but to analyze the values, views, and perceptions of the broader public. We emphasize that the cognitive maps actors use and apply in their relationships also matter and, in times of change, may be more important for the analysis of preference formation than the structural features of foreign relations.

In foreign policy analysis, this line of inquiry is conditioned by debates on whether or not public opinion matters for foreign policy. While earlier scholarship tended to argue that the public's opinion was too volatile to be a good advisor for foreign policy, recent literature follows the seminal work of Thomas Graham<sup>10</sup> and Ole Holsti<sup>11</sup> and highlights the significance of studying patterns of public opinion and mental maps more closely.<sup>12</sup> According to Holsti's work, new issues aside from

<sup>10</sup> Thomas W. Graham, 'Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy Decision Making' in *The New Politics of American Foreign Policy*, ed. David A. Deese (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 190–215.

<sup>11</sup> Ole R. Holsti, 'Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond-Lippmann Consensus Mershon Series: Research Programs and Debates', *International Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (1992); Ole R. Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> James Headley and Jo-Ansie van Wyk, 'Debating the Public's Role in Foreign Policy' in *Public Participation in Foreign Policy*, ed. James Headley, Andreas Reitzig and Joe Burton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 3–20; Michal Onderco, 'Public support for coercive diplomacy. Exploring public opinion data from ten European countries', *European Journal of Political Research* 56, no. 2 (2017); Stephen Ceccoli, and John Bing, 'Taking the lead? Transatlantic attitudes toward lethal drone strikes', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 16, no. 3 (2018).



security have gained prominence since 1990, such as immigration and the environment.<sup>13</sup> Similar research ranges from early empirical studies of “cognitive mapping”, following the work of Robert Axelrod,<sup>14</sup> to the study of frames informing decisions on transnational issues such as migration,<sup>15</sup> moral codes,<sup>16</sup> foreign policy,<sup>17</sup> and the influence of social media on fragmented knowledge and the formation of “echo chambers”.<sup>18</sup> Lastly, democratic representation is based on the principle that the government is receptive to significant perception patterns evident in polling data.<sup>19</sup>

Climate change policy is a particularly fruitful field to analyze public preferences for three reasons. First, the discourse about climate change shows a long-standing salience providing ample material for empirical research on public opinion. This trend already emerged in the 1970s and 1980s with studies on the limits of economic growth and calls for sustainable development. It gained momentum in the 1990s and broadened thereafter. Second, the effects of climate change are felt by broader segments of the population in many different parts of the world, including the countries of Europe and most regions in the U.S. Cross-country research, such as data collected by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change,<sup>20</sup> emphasizes the urgency of policies halting global warming and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from a scientific point of view. Knowledge creation and dissemination of knowledge in international organizations increased significantly, including environmental security concerns.<sup>21</sup> The reach and range of climate change effects compounded the urgency of demanding effective policies and animated shifts in public opinion. Third, the issue itself is driven by a number of grassroots movements and transnational networks, such as the subnational network of the C40-cities. Strikingly, the number of non-governmental international organizations and local activism addressing climate issues skyrocketed since the early 1990s.<sup>22</sup> This bottom-up logic supports the claim already made

<sup>13</sup> Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Axelrod, *The Structure of Decision: The Cognitive Maps of Political Elites* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976). See also Richard Sobel, *The Impact of Public Opinion on US Foreign Policy since Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Ruth Wodak, ‘Discourse and European Integration’ in *European Integration Theory*, 3rd edition, ed. Antje Wiener, Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 151–173.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Nye, *Do Morals Matter: Presidents and Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Pawel Zerka, ‘Why should anyone care? Foreign policy and public opinion’, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, April 19, 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/article/why-should-anyone-care-foreign-policy-and-public-opinion/>.

<sup>18</sup> Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris and Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Mary L. Atkinson, K. Elizabeth Coggins, James A. Stimson, and Frank R. Baumgartner, *The Dynamics of Public Opinion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<sup>20</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, ‘Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report’, IPCC, 2015, [https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/SYR\\_AR5\\_FINAL\\_full.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/SYR_AR5_FINAL_full.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Natalia Dalmer, *Building Environmental Peace: The UN Environment Program as a Knowledge Actor* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

<sup>22</sup> Karen A. Mingst and Margaret Karns, *The UN in the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge, 2019).



by Holsti that new issues in foreign policy will increasingly be driven by public demand.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, it would be important according to Holsti<sup>24</sup> to make a serious effort to engage the public in discussions about the scope and direction of American national interests. We posit that Holsti's argument applies to the EU and its member states as well.

Drawing on Liberalism as a school of thought in the study of international relations, we argue that foreign policy analysis benefits from considering domestic determinants such as preferences, information asymmetries, and institutional setups. As such, we reassert Andrew Moravcsik's seminal call to take preferences seriously,<sup>25</sup> and we extend his argument by systematically carving out the continuities and shifts of public opinion across time in climate change policy. In doing so, we add public views to transnational activities, preferences, and cooperation as driving forces in addressing climate change. Public opinion analysis on climate change therefore aims to bring citizens back into the study of transatlantic relations.

In the complex realm of international politics, multilateralism is predicated on overlapping preferences that have been consistent due to the shared set of cultural codes which channel public perceptions. Similar values, norms, historical ties, and societal connections provide fertile ground for agreement and, subsequently, for joint action; these points mark the bedrock of transatlantic relations. However, political systems, policymaking, and societal organizations differ substantially, creating, at times, divergent preferences.<sup>26</sup> How these differences play out in transatlantic cooperation is a crucial question for global action as well.

Climate change policy is a perfect example of how domestic and international affairs are closely connected. In the case of the U.S., we argue that the reliability of transatlantic comparisons of public opinion patterns needs to be contextualized by a careful assessment of partisan polarization and state-level differences. "Although demographics, cultural predispositions, and personal experiences all contribute to individual perceptions and attitudes about climate change, far more influential—and with more profound implications for aggregate opinion—is the role of political predispositions."<sup>27</sup> As such, scholars established that subscriptions to conservative parties or ideology indeed predict a higher degree of climate change skepticism.<sup>28</sup> In the EU, variations include nation specific differences due to political leanings and

<sup>23</sup> Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*.

<sup>24</sup> Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*, 21.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Moravcsik, 'Taking Preferences Seriously. A Liberal Theory of International Politics', *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (Autumn 1997): <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550447>.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Kalberg, 'The Influence of Political Culture upon Cross-Cultural Misperceptions and Foreign Policy: United States and Germany', *German Politics and Society* 21, no. 3 (2003); Stephen Kalberg, *Searching for the Spirit of American Democracy. Max Weber's Analysis of a Unique Political Culture, Past, Present, and Future* (Boulder/London: Paradigm Publishers, 2014).

<sup>27</sup> Patrick Egan, and Megan Mullin, 'Climate Change: US Public Opinion', *Annual Review of Political Science* 20 (2017): 216.

<sup>28</sup> Robert J. Antonio, and Robert J. Brulle. 'The Unbearable Lightness of Politics. Climate Change Denial and Political Polarization', *The Sociological Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (2011); Matthew J. Hornsey et al., 'Meta-analyses of the determinants and outcomes of belief in climate change', *Nature Climate Change* 6 (2016).



strength of parties and movements, both on the side of proactive climate change policies and on the side of opponents. Furthermore, the rise of right-wing populist movements and parties has added to the theater of climate change policy challengers in Europe and the U.S. In sum, polarization in the U.S. and fragmentation in Europe might impose limitations on emerging common ground for multilateral progress on climate change in transatlantic relations.

## The emerging salience of climate change policy on the aggregate level

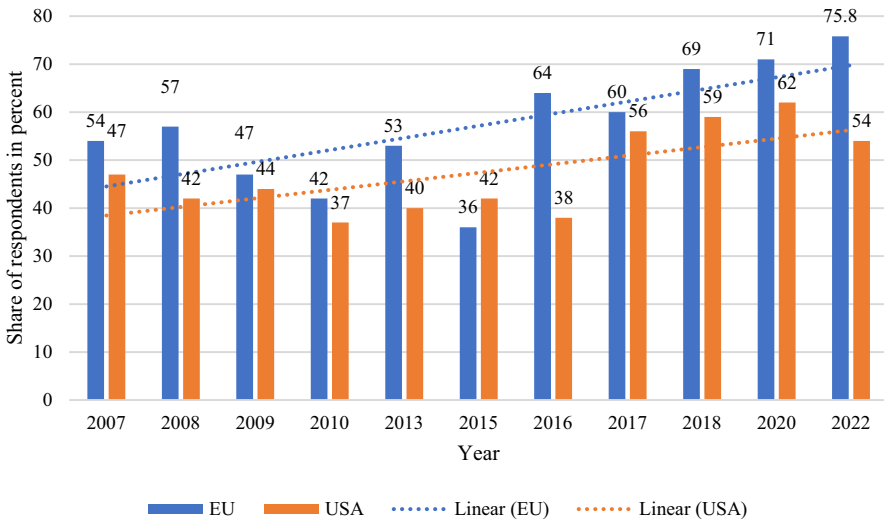
Our time series covers the years 2007–2022 and the analysis identifies a clear pattern of increasing transatlantic agreement in public opinion on perceiving climate change as a major concern. The respective trends appear to be rather similar, albeit on different levels. Figure 1 illustrates the shares of people who responded that climate change is a major concern. The question is fixed on climate change without weighing other possible threats. The GAS questionnaires tend to survey varying degrees of concern about climate change, whereas the Eurobarometer surveys a range of possible threats asking respondents to pick multiple (prior to 2011) or just one (starting in 2011). Hence, the Eurobarometer and the GAS should not be interpreted jointly. These differences in operationalization already hint at the empirical difficulties in compiling comparable time series data which are crucial to grasp patterns and trends.<sup>29</sup>

Figure 1 shows that the awareness of climate change posing a threat has rather steadily increased after 2015. The level of threat perception is still higher in Europe than it is in the U.S., but it stands out that the extent of serious concern increased in the U.S. as well, despite the hostile rhetoric and politics of the Trump Administration. In 2009 and in 2010, the financial crisis was felt imminently by both the European and the American respondents alike, which arguably depressed the salience of climate change, while fears of spiraling inflation after the Coronavirus pandemic and rising costs of living likely overshadowed climate change in 2022.<sup>30</sup> The extent of concern reached a low point in the EU in 2015, setting up its most significant leap

<sup>29</sup> Scholars work on solutions for discontinuous time series: Brulle et al. (2012: 172) developed a “Climate Change Threat Index” for the US, which applies the Stimson algorithm to polling data from different sources to develop a time series that can be used as a dependent variable. While question continuity, the dates of the surveys and the sample sizes were accounted for, wording differences and variations in operationalizations are accepted as a given and keywords were used to search databases. Interestingly, Brulle et al. (2012) searched for the terms “climate change,” “global warming” and “greenhouse,” while omitting terms such as “environment,” “emissions” or “pollution.” In the European context, multilingualism exacerbates the wording problem, which is why the CCTI is not an ideal fit here.

<sup>30</sup> Our analysis also shows varying concern about climate change among political leaders in the G7-meetings since 2000 accentuating the lack of consistency on the top level of political decision-making. We compared the G7-final communiqués regarding the extent to which they address climate change issues by identifying respective sections on climate change and viewing the number of words therein in relation to the remainder of the document. We also controlled for G7-presidencies and a range of keywords. The data are available in the journal’s dataverse.





**Fig. 1** Transatlantic perceptions of climate change as a major concern. Source: Own illustration using data from the GAS Database. “EU” calculates the average of the results for Germany, France, Italy, Poland and the UK. The precise questions varied slightly: 2007–2010 “How serious is Climate Change as a global threat”—share of respondents shown who replied “Serious Problem”; 2015 “How concerned are you about global climate change”—share of respondents shown who replied “very concerned”; 2013, 2016–2022 “Is climate change a major threat?”—share of respondents shown who replied “major threat.” In 2016, the question for U.S. respondents was phrased as “Do you care a great deal about climate change”—share of respondents shown who replied “A great deal.” Data on Italy is missing for 2010. There is no comparable data in the GAS for 2011, 2012, 2014 and 2019, which is why we excluded these years.

in 2016. In the U.S., 2017 marked a similar turning point despite President Trump taking office. The key message is that perceiving climate change as a pivotal threat became a dominant perception pattern in transatlantic relations by 2017. According to another survey in 2020, two-thirds of Americans think that the government should do more for the climate.<sup>31</sup> A majority also believes a range of public and private actors are not doing enough to help reduce climate impacts. More than six-in-ten Americans say large businesses and corporations (69%) and the energy industry (62%) are doing too little to address climate change. In particular, the younger generation supports a more active climate change policy,<sup>32</sup> which is echoed in the demographic results of the Eurobarometer.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Alec Tyson, and Brian Kennedy, ‘Two-Thirds of Americans Think Government Should Do More on Climate’, Pew Research Center, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Alec Tyson, Brian Kennedy, and Cary Funk, ‘Gen Z, Millennials Stand Out for Climate Change Activism, Social Media Engagement With Issue’, *Pew Research Center*, May 26, 2021a, <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2021/05/26/gen-z-millennials-stand-out-for-climate-change-activism-social-media-engagement-with-issue/>.

<sup>33</sup> In 2022, the EU reported: “Today’s Eurobarometer shows that 91% of 15–24-year-olds believe that tackling climate change can help improve their own health and well-being, while 84% of those aged 55 or over agree.” [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/%20en/ip\\_22\\_447](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/%20en/ip_22_447). See also European





Rising awareness about climate change is also reflected in domestic environmental and energy policy. For some time now, public opinion in the U.S. has been opposed to extracting fossil energy from protected lands, such as National Parks, Wilderness Areas, and tribal lands. The issue of whether or not to allow oil and gas drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska, for example, has long been a controversy in American environmental and energy policy. Most Americans (70%) oppose the idea, while 27% support it.<sup>34</sup> After taking office, President Biden immediately canceled permits to drill for oil issued by his predecessor, but the legal battle is ongoing.<sup>35</sup> Other controversial projects include the Keystone XL pipeline which would have carried oil from Canada into the U.S. Here, public opinion is split, reflecting what social scientists have called the “political divide on climate change.”<sup>36</sup> When President Biden revoked the permit for this pipeline, about half of Americans (49%) said this was the right decision, while 45% said it was the wrong decision. The positions were clearly divided along party lines.<sup>37</sup>

In the EU, the question of fossil energy sources became even more pressing after Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine began in February 2022. Sanctions against Russia resulted in the decoupling from its gas and oil resources by a formerly highly dependent Europe. New approaches include the search for other energy sources such as hydrogen gas, increasing the share of renewables, and a controversial extension of coal production. Meanwhile, the question of whether or not nuclear energy can serve as a transitional energy source separates member states such as France and Germany, while Italy considers reintroducing nuclear energy under the far-right government. These examples show that even though the issue of climate change itself is high on the public’s agenda, policy strategies are contested due to party politics, national and geographic differences, and political ideologies. In many cases, social protest as well as intense lobbying by various interest groups and litigation in courts also shape policy outcomes.

In sum, at least on the aggregate level, climate change has risen to the top level of people’s concerns. There is a joint sense of urgency across the Atlantic. However, as the subsequent second step of our analysis shows, this broad consensus breaks down along partisan lines in the U.S. as well as across nations in the EU. European publics

Footnote 33 (continued)

Commission, ‘Special Eurobarometer—Climate Change’, *European Commission*, April, 2019, [https://ec.europa.eu/clima/system/files/2019-09/report\\_2019\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/clima/system/files/2019-09/report_2019_en.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> Alec Tyson, Brian Kennedy, and Cary Funk, ‘Climate, Energy and Environmental Policy’, *Pew Research Center*, May 26, 2021b, <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2021/05/26/climate-energy-and-environmental-policy/>.

<sup>35</sup> Coral Davenport, Henry Fountain, and Lisa Friedman, ‘Biden Suspends Drilling Leases in Arctic National Wildlife Refuge’, *New York Times*, June 1, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/01/climate/biden-drilling-arctic-national-wildlife-refuge.html?action=click&module=Spotlight&pgtype=Homepage>.

<sup>36</sup> Dunlap, Riley E., Aaron M. McCright, and Jerrod H. Yarosh. 2016. The Political Divide on Climate Change: Partisan Polarization Widens in the U.S. *Environment Science and Policy for Sustainable Development* 58, no. 5 (Summer 2016): <https://doi.org/10.1080/00139157.2016.1208995>.

<sup>37</sup> Tyson, Kennedy, and Funk, ‘Climate, Energy and Environmental Policy’.



also diverge on the question of who is responsible to act on climate change, indicating difficulties in coordinating policy in settings of multi-level governance.

### Institutional context and transatlantic dialog

Both, Europe and the U.S. have ratified key international treaties such as the Paris Climate Agreement (2015). In addition, several transatlantic institutions support and foster the climate change dialog across the Atlantic. This institutional apparatus for climate change cooperation includes, for example, the EU-U.S. Energy Council and its three supporting working groups—the Energy Technology Working Group, the Energy Policy Working Group, and the Energy Security Working Group. Founded in 2009, the Council aims to provide a new framework for deepening the transatlantic dialog on strategic energy issues and energy security, the move toward low-carbon energy sources, and research collaboration on energy technologies. Annual meetings on ministerial levels of the EU Commission and the U.S. Secretary for Energy were established to further develop strategies along these goals. In 2016, a new working group on climate change was created. However, a gap in communication and meetings occurred between 2018 and 2021, which coincides with the Trump presidency. The Council met again in February 2022 and pledged to boost transatlantic energy cooperation.<sup>38</sup> As this example shows, fora for transatlantic exchange in response to increasingly matching perception patterns exist, but intensity and direction of climate change discourse are contingent on political leadership on both sides of the Atlantic.

Other institutions created to address climate change policies and technology development include the Carbon Sequestration Leadership Forum (CSLF) and the Clean Energy Ministerial (CEM). Already founded in 2003, the CSLF, which meets on the ministerial level, has 24 members, including the European Commission and the U.S. Its goal is to promote carbon dioxide capture and storage technologies and to invest resources in research, development, and demonstration activities. While its meetings are rather technical, the goal closely relates to climate change policies limiting greenhouse gas emissions and reducing the speed of global warming.<sup>39</sup> The Clean Energy Ministerial is another high-level global forum created to encourage the transition to a global clean energy economy.<sup>40</sup> Topics of their meetings include sustainability, biodiversity, energy transition to non-fossil sources, and country specific expertise and examples.<sup>41</sup> Overall, the evident trend toward shared threat

<sup>38</sup> European Commission 2022. EU-US cooperation on energy issues.

[https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/international-cooperation/key-partner-countries-and-regions/united-states-america\\_en#eu-us-energy-council](https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/international-cooperation/key-partner-countries-and-regions/united-states-america_en#eu-us-energy-council).

<sup>39</sup> Carbon Sequestration Leadership Forum, 2022, Technical Group Mid-Year Meeting, <https://www.csulforum.org/csulf/Events/Bergen2022>.

<sup>40</sup> Who we are. Clean Energy Ministerial, 2022, <https://www.cleanenergyministerial.org/who-we-are/>.

<sup>41</sup> Transatlantic energy issues are also discussed in international fora including the US and EU countries such as the International Energy Agency, founded in 1973 during the oil crisis, and the Generation IV International Framework, founded in 2001 to promote research on the so-called fourth generation nuclear



perceptions in American and European publics is echoed in international institutions that foster multilateralism. The roadblocks to enhanced progress are found elsewhere.

### Transatlantic public opinion patterns and their domestic inhibitors

Transatlantic multilateralism is hamstrung not by a lack of international institutions or a shared sense of urgency, but by domestic hurdles that stand in the way of meaningful international progress. Aside from obvious geographic and climate differences, the institutional context in the EU and the United States differs greatly. In the following, we assess two problems that thwart efforts of transatlantic cooperation: Partisan polarization in the U.S. and different levels of commitments to combating climate change among the 27 EU member states.

The rise of environmental movements in Europe and the U.S. greatly impacted climate change policies on both sides of the Atlantic. The U.S. has always been a “laboratory” for different social movements and their impact on policy change has been widely debated.<sup>42</sup> The U.S. has offered a more open opportunity structure for a variety of social movements that sprung up on local and regional levels, but their political impact varied and was less visible on the national level than in Europe. Here, environmental movements had a lasting institutional impact, with Green parties rising to prominence and significantly changing politics as well as party systems. The first and most prominent party to enter a national parliament were the German Greens in 1983, which became a model case study for a successful transition from movement to party politics that echoed throughout Europe.<sup>43</sup> The subsequent institutionalization of the European Green Party allowed new green parties to better coordinate policies on the EU level.<sup>44</sup> In the European parliamentary elections in 2019 the Greens gained votes and came in as the fourth largest group; 55 members now represent the European Green Party in the European Parliament (705 members

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Footnote 41 (continued)

systems. It brings together 13 countries; the EU agency Euratom is a member, as is France, the only EU member, the UK, and the US.

<sup>42</sup> Herbert Kitschelt, ‘New Social Movements in West Germany and the United States’, *Political Power and Social Theory* 5 (1985); Herbert Kitschelt, ‘Social Movements, Political Parties, and Democratic Theory’, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 528, no. 1 : <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716293528001002>.

<sup>43</sup> As political scientist Herbert Kitschelt astutely describes: “When the newly elected Green members of the German parliament carried a tree withered by acid rain into the opening session of the tenth Bundestag in the spring of 1983, they were convinced that their arrival marked a watershed in the development of West German democracy. The dead tree in parliament, as well as the Green deputies’ unconventional clothing, symbolized both a point of arrival and a point of departure for a political and cultural movement that had already spanned a period of close to twenty years.” (1989: 1).

<sup>44</sup> Niko Switek and Kristin Weissenbach, ‘An Ever-Closer Party? The Institutionalization of the European Green Party After the 2019 European Election’ in *Die Europawahl 2019. Ringen um die Zukunft Europas*, ed. Michael Kaeding, Manuel Müller, Julia Schmäler (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019), 63–77.



total). Their electoral success has been linked to a “quiet revolution.”<sup>45</sup> Yet, a closer look reveals that the influence of climate change on politics and the political landscape differs greatly across Europe. In several European countries such as Austria, Finland, Sweden, and Luxemburg, the Greens are (or were) part of national government coalitions. In Germany, the Greens continued their positive trend by becoming part of the coalition government in 2021. However, while some countries have strong Green parties, others like Poland and Hungary do not, and their compliance with EU climate change policies is frequently undermined by right-wing nationalistic politicians. Despite rather strict environmental standards and an EU-wide cap and trade regulation in place to curb carbon dioxide emissions, internal inconsistency between member states hampers conceptual coherence and a stronger strategic positioning in external relations of the EU.

In the U.S., growing environmental awareness gained political momentum in the Democratic Party, forming an influential stream in their party politics by the early 2000s. Barack Obama and Joe Biden promoted stricter environmental standards to mitigate climate change, advocating, among other measures, the transition to renewable energies through subsidies and targeted federal support, environmental regulations, and clean energy policies.<sup>46</sup> Reversing some truly detrimental decisions made by the previous administration, Biden immediately moved after his election in 2020 to reinstate key policies to curb climate change, bringing, among other measures, the U.S. back into the Paris Climate Agreement and reinstating regulations on the federal level.<sup>47</sup> These steps clearly reflect the growing concern about climate change in the U.S. as they also showcase the impact of leadership change.

Climate change policy has become a highly polarizing topic in the U.S. Survey data show that support for or opposition to climate change policy breaks along party lines, which is tied to echo chambers in communication networks.<sup>48</sup> Whereas Democratic Party voters and supporters more clearly favor mitigation of climate change, Republican voters often reject such measures. Ideological differences regarding regulation and the role of the federal government, the business orientation of many Republicans, and political leaders openly rejecting climate change science all contribute to the more negative positioning of Republicans and their base. But Democrats are not united either. Biden’s ambitious “Build Back Better” legislative proposal which included social and environmental reform policies failed to secure a majority early in 2021, not only because of Republican resistance, but also because

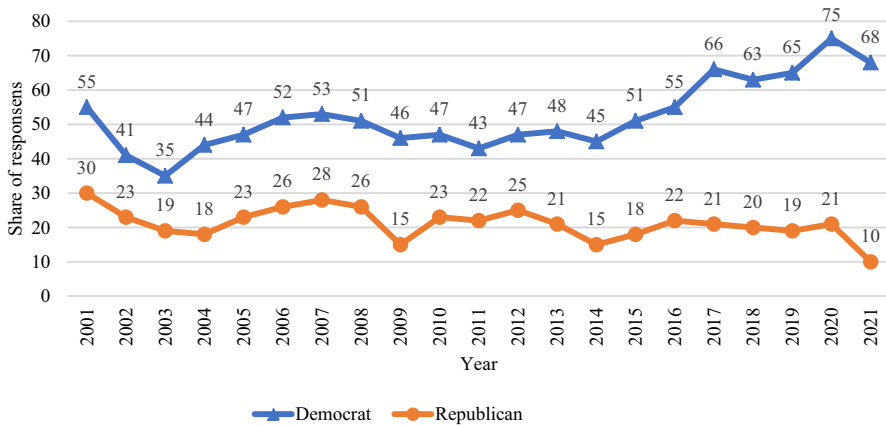
<sup>45</sup> Emma Graham-Harrison, ‘A quiet revolution sweeps Europe as Greens become a political force’, *The Guardian*, June 2, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jun/02/european-parliament-election-green-parties-success>.

<sup>46</sup> In 2019, progressive activists in the Democratic party, such as Alexandria Ocasio Cortez from New York City, pushed for a “New Green Deal.” The Biden/Harris team for presidency then incorporated some of these ideas (but not all) into their platform in 2020.

<sup>47</sup> See the list by the Brookings Institution in: Tracking regulatory changes in the Biden era, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/interactives/tracking-regulatory-changes-in-the-biden-era/>. Accessed January 2023.

<sup>48</sup> Jason T. Carmichael, Robert J. Brulle, and Joanna K. Huxster, ‘The great divide: understanding the role of media and other drivers of the partisan divide in public concern over climate change in the USA, 2001–2014’, *Climate Change* 141 (2017).





**Fig. 2** Partisan polarization in threat perceptions regarding climate change. Source: 2001–2019, 2021: Gallup database (Question: “How much do you personally worry about the quality of the environment?” Share of respondents shown that replied “Worry a great deal”); 2020: Chicago Council on Global Affairs (Question: “Please select whether you see climate change as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat or not an important threat at all.” Share of respondents shown that replied “critical threat”)

some Democratic legislators openly opposed it—such as Senator Joe Manchin who represents West Virginia with an economy that heavily relies on coal. A bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Bill passed in November 2021 included environmental policies, but it became a scaled down version of the original.<sup>49</sup>

Polarization in the U.S. is increasing, as the most prominent datasets suggest.<sup>50</sup> Republicans and Democrats are separated by significant ideological differences. This divide is particularly pronounced in climate change policy. “Results in the United States are clear and consistent: Democrats and liberals are substantially more likely to believe the science about human caused climate change, to express concern about its effects, and to support policy action, than are Republicans and conservatives.”<sup>51</sup> Similarly, the Pew Research Center<sup>52</sup> reported in 2020 that 78% of respondents who self-identified as Democrats said that climate change should be top priority for President and Congress, while only 21% of Republican partisans shared that view. Figure 2 incorporates data from the Gallup Organization as well as from the

<sup>49</sup> The White House, Fact Sheet: The Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal, 2021. See for the Act: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/11/06/fact-sheet-the-bipartisan-infrastructure-deal/> Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Public Law No: 117-58, <https://www.congress.gov/bills/117/congress-house-bill/3684>.

<sup>50</sup> Jeffrey B. Lewis et al., ‘Voteview: Congressional Roll-Call Votes Database’, 2023, *Voteview*, <https://voteview.com/>.

<sup>51</sup> Egan, and Mullin, ‘Climate Change: US Public Opinion’, 216.

<sup>52</sup> Brian Kennedy, and Courtney Johnson, ‘More Americans see climate change as a priority, but Democrats are much more concerned than Republicans’, *Pew Research Center*, February 28, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/28/more-americans-see-climate-change-as-a-priority-but-democrats-are-much-more-concerned-than-republicans/>.



Chicago Council on Global Affairs to illustrate the growing partisan gap on climate change in more detail.

Figure 2 indicates that the partisan gap in being worried about climate change increases distinctly after 2016. During Trump’s tenure in the White House, Republican concern remains at about the same level, whereas Democrats’ level of concern increases. For the respondents with a Democratic preference, there seems to be a lingering Al Gore effect in 2001, which appears to lose momentum under the impression of the global war on terror and the controversial Iraq war. However, levels of concern begin to rise again in 2004, which could be tied to the disastrous impact of hurricane Katrina in 2005, which showcased the destruction inflicted on entire communities when natural disasters worsen. Overall, Republican concerns about climate change remained rather stable across the studied time frame, except for distinct declines in 2009 and 2021—both are years where a Democratic president was inaugurated. Declines in 2009 could also be indicative of the economic hardship most Americans felt due to the global financial crises. The dip in 2021 might in part be explained by the coronavirus pandemic that shifted attention toward public health and the measures designed to contain the virus. However, the decline in the level of concern voiced by Republican respondents is particularly pronounced. Climate change is almost irrelevant in this group; whereas Democrats are far more attuned to the threats it poses.<sup>53</sup> Political polarization also has a significant geographical component.<sup>54</sup>

Table 1 gathers two-dimensional information on the extent of polarization on climate change policy on the U.S. state level. On the first dimension, it differentiates between three categories of climate policy action: states with a climate action plan (CAP) and Greenhouse Emissions Targets (GET), states with only a climate action plan and, lastly, states with neither a CAP nor a GET.<sup>55</sup> On the second dimension, it organizes states according to their composition of government in 2023.<sup>56</sup> The four categories are defined as follows: “Dem.-Dem.” means Democratic control of legislature and the governorship; “Dem.-Rep.” equals Democratic control of the legislature with a Republican governor; “Rep.-Dem.” stands for Republican control of the legislature with a Democratic governor; “Rep.-Rep.” is Republican control of the legislature and the governorship. The table includes additional information on

<sup>53</sup> Because of gridlock and partisanship in Congress, the judiciary is increasingly shaping US climate trajectory, adding to the complex and multilayered process of decision-making in climate change policy. But rulings cut both ways: for example, while a Louisiana federal judge ruled to resume federal oil and gas leasing, thus increasing CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions, another federal judge blocked a controversial oil project for Alaska’s North Slope in an attempt to curb emissions. Dino Grandoni, and Steven Mufson, ‘As Biden urges global warming action, courts shape policy at home’, *The Washington Post*, August 19, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2021/08/19/biden-climate-drilling/>.

<sup>54</sup> Howe, Peter; Matto Mildenberger; Jennifer Marlon; and Anthony Leiserowitz, A. “Geographic variation in opinions on climate change at state and local scales in the USA,” *Nature Climate Change*. (2015) <https://doi.org/10.1038/nclimate2583>.

<sup>55</sup> Center for Climate and Energy Solutions, State Climate Policy Maps, 2023, <https://www.c2es.org/content/state-climate-policy/>.

<sup>56</sup> National Conference of State Legislatures, State Partisan Composition, 2023, <https://www.ncsl.org/about-state-legislatures/state-partisan-composition>.



**Table 1** Climate change policy on the U.S. state level. Sources: Yale Climate Opinion Map (Public Opinion Data); Center for Climate and Energy Solutions (CAP+GET); National Conference of State Legislatures (Composition of State Governments); American Presidency Project (Presidential Election Results 2020)

Climate change policy in action		CAP + Greenhouse Emissions Targets		Climate Action Plan (CAP)	None	N
Composition of State Government	Dem.-Dem	California (D), Colorado (D), Connecticut (D), Delaware (D), Hawaii (D), Illinois (D), Main (D), Maryland (D), Massachusetts (D), Michigan (D), Minnesota (D), New Jersey (D), New Mexico (D), New York (D), Oregon (D), Pennsylvania* (D), Rhode Island (D), Vermont (D), Washington (D)				19
	Dem.-Rep	Nevada (D)				1
	Rep.-Dem	Louisiana (R), North Carolina (R), Wisconsin (D)	Arizona (D), Arkansas (R), Kentucky (R)		Kansas (R)	7
	Rep.-Rep	Montana (R), Virginia* (D)	Florida (R), Iowa (R), New Hampshire (D), South Carolina (R)	Alabama (R), Alaska (R), Georgia (D), Idaho (R), Indiana (R), Mississippi (R), Missouri (R), Nebraska* (R), North Dakota (R), Ohio (R), Oklahoma (R), South Dakota (R), Tennessee (R), Texas (R), Utah (R), West Virginia (R), Wyoming (R)		24
	N	25	7	18		51

Key to the table: **Bold**=Public opinion “worried about global warming” at or above national average of 65%; (D)=State won by Biden in 2020; (R)=State won by Trump in 2020; “Dem.-Dem.”=Democratic control of legislature and governor; “Dem.-Rep.”=Democratic control of legislature and Republican governor; “Rep.-Dem.”=Republican control of legislature and Democratic governor; “Rep.-Rep.”=Republican control of legislature and governor; N=number per category

Nebraska: Unicameral, nonpartisan legislature w. Rep. Majority + Rep. Governor; Pennsylvania: Dem. Majority in House and Rep. Majority in Senate+ Dem. Governor; Virginia: Rep. Majority in House of Delegates and tie in Senate + Rep. Governor



public opinion patterns. The share of respondents that express concern about climate change in states highlighted in bold is equal to or higher than the national average. We leveraged the Yale climate opinion maps 2021 for the corresponding state-level survey data.<sup>57</sup> Lastly, “(D)” indicates states won by Biden in the 2020 presidential election and “(R)” points out states won by Trump.<sup>58</sup>

Two major observations stand out from Table 1. First, Democratic state government appears to be a condition for substantial climate change policy action while Republican control is a major roadblock in this regard. Second, in strong support of our theoretical framework, public threat perceptions at or above the national average almost perfectly align with substantial climate change policy action and Democratic state government control. This also translates to success in the 2020 presidential election. Biden won states controlled by Democrats where climate change policy is salient and put to action; whereas, Trump overwhelmingly won in states controlled by Republicans where respondents are less worried about climate change and where neither a Climate Action Plan nor Greenhouse Emissions Targets are in place. Republican control of state and national government is a major obstacle to coherent and lasting climate change policy action. The evident partisan split is a major concern for future American commitment to transatlantic multilateralism in addressing climate change. A Republican victory in the 2024 election cycle would likely upend any progress made in the conducive setting of matching threat perceptions and leadership action on climate change policy.

In Europe, divisions are also pronounced, shaped by party politics and national government preferences. Even though broad environmental movements quickly spread throughout Europe and nearly all political parties with the exception of the far-right have meanwhile adopted climate change policies in their program, strategies and goals continue to differ substantially. The EU has implemented a toolkit for combatting climate change with environmental regulations and EU-wide policies, such as the Emissions Trading System (ETS) in place which is binding for all 27 member states.<sup>59</sup> However, major differences arise across member states. While many eastern and some southern members are more reluctant to push for active climate change policies, northern and central states are considered drivers, or at least active promoters, of common European climate change policy.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Jennifer Marlon, Liz Neyens, Martial Jefferson, Peter Howe, Matto Mildenerger and Anthony Leiserowitz, *Yale Climate Opinion Maps 2021*, *Yale Program on Climate Change Communication*, 2022, <https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/visualizations-data/ycom-us/>.

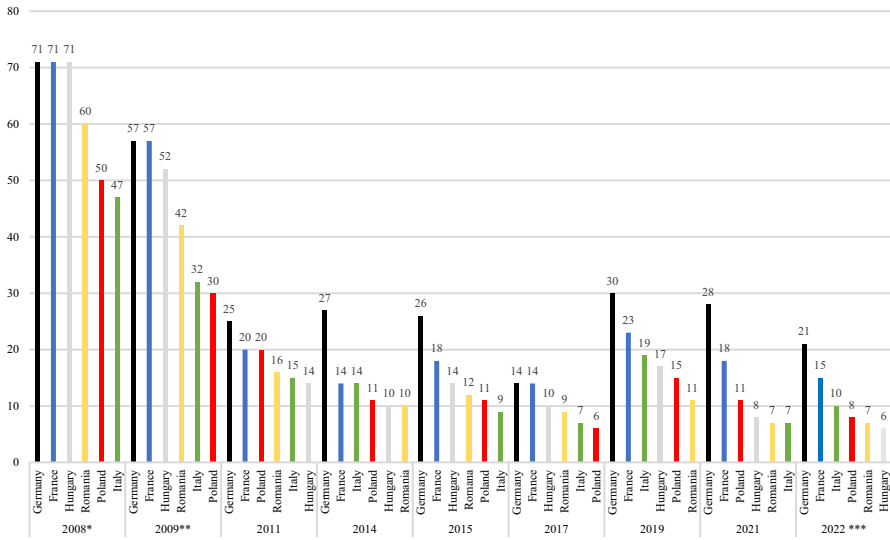
<sup>58</sup> John Woolley, and Gerhard Peters, 2023, *American Presidency Project*, 2020 Presidential Election results, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/elections/2020>.

<sup>59</sup> Based on the strict emissions policies, the EU is set to introduce a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) to avoid carbon leakage in trade at its outside borders. The US is less enthusiastic about this new trade regulation which is scheduled to take effect in 2026/27. European Commission 2021, *Carbon Border Adjustment System: Questions and Answers*. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda\\_21\\_3661](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_21_3661)

<sup>60</sup> As Konrad Jarausch points out about coherent policies: "One key challenge for Brussels is to get all the EU members to follow the Scandinavian and Central European example by improving recycling, reducing energy consumption, and avoiding plastic packaging." Konrad H. Jarausch, *Embattled Europe. A Progressive Alternative* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 204.







**Fig. 3** Views on climate change in the EU. Source: Own illustration based on the Eurobarometer database. \* In 2008, first and second answers for this item are included, no single choice. Problem definition is "global warming/climate change". \*\* In 2009, max. four answers for this item are included; no single choice. \*\*\* In 2022, max. two answers for most important issue were possible, results show answer "climate change"

On the member state level, the urgency connected to climate change policy in public opinion differs greatly across Europe with some countries such as Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and Austria showing higher shares of respondents concerned about the climate than others.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, the urgency of climate change policies since 2011 increased in some countries (Portugal +30 percentage points, Finland +23 percentage points), while it fell in several others since then (Cyprus -21 percentage points; Slovenia—11 percentage points).<sup>62</sup> Tracing the divide over time reveals an interesting picture. We sampled Germany, France, Italy, Hungary, Romania, and Poland to cut across the European East and West divide, while also including a nation of Europe’s south. The sample also ensures variation in economic size and a multitude of demographic measures.

Figure 3 uncovers a number of interesting observations including a change in operationalization. In 2008 and 2009, respondents were free to select a given number of threats and climate change oftentimes made it into the list of top threats for most respondents in Germany, France, Hungary, and Romania, but less so in Poland and Italy. After 2009, answers were limited to a single choice of the most pressing global issue. Across the board, Italian respondents emerge as the least worried group when it comes to climate change. This result is surprising, because Italians are regularly

<sup>61</sup> European Commission Press, 'Eurobarometer Survey'.

<sup>62</sup> European Commission, 'Special Eurobarometer', 18.



exposed to extreme weather condition that are directly linked to climate change.<sup>63</sup> One reason why climate change might not rank as a high threat among Italians could be the heavy and prolonged consequences of the financial crises in combination with Italy facing severe impacts by the migration crises as well as by the coronavirus pandemic—especially so when answers are framed in a single choice format.

The perceptions in Germany are much different when compared to Italy. Climate change seems to be a very salient topic in Germany across the time frame. With the exception of 2017, at least a quarter of German respondents voice predominant concern about climate change in single choice formats, whereas a majority of over half of respondents included it as a top concern among other threats (2008 and 2009). In Poland, Romania, and Hungary, climate change usually ranks lower compared to France and Germany with rather consistent margins. Overall, we do not see a clear pattern of an emerging inter-European consensus. Instead, the issue of climate change seems to struggle to reach the top of people’s concerns all across Europe in the period included in our study. Comparatively within the single choice time frame, 2019 marked a high-point in climate change concerns in Europe. The drop in Italian concern about climate change in 2021 stands out all the more clearly when compared to 2019, and it only slightly recovers in 2022. Poland and Hungary also appear to be ideal case studies for exploring the detrimental impact of right-wing populist rule and the exposure to conservative media on the level of alarm about climate change. This result echoes established knowledge on the predictors for climate change skepticism.<sup>64</sup>

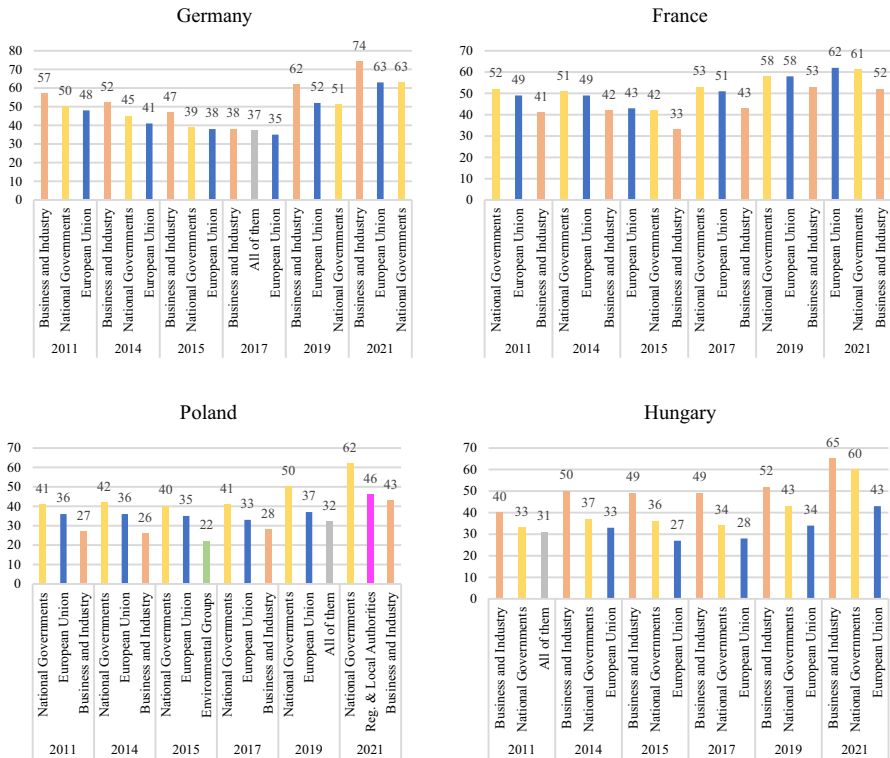
The key message is that European publics are not as united in their level of general concern about climate change as the aggregate level of survey data might suggest. Hence, the pressure on governments to act on climate change is not equally high in the EU. The image of a rather fragmented public opinion landscape within the EU emerges just as clearly regarding the question of who the publics see as being responsible to tackle climate change. Figure 4 also relies on the Eurobarometer and compares the survey responses in Germany, France, Hungary, and Poland on this question for all the years in which data are available. We sampled these countries to compare the significantly concerned publics in France and Germany to the less alarmed publics in Poland and Hungary. We show the top three most frequent answers given per national public.

Figure 4 illustrates that it is not only the extent to which publics are concerned about climate change that separates European public opinion. The question of responsibility to act shows a similar split that indicates the above mentioned problems of coordinating climate change policy in settings of multi-level governance. In 2021, Polish respondents did not highlight the European Union as an actor responsible to tackle climate change, while the EU is seen to be most responsible in this policy area by French respondents. In Germany and France, emphasizing the EU’s responsibility to combat climate change becomes more prominent in the last two

<sup>63</sup> Stella Levantesi, ‘Assessing Italy’s Climate Risk’, *Nature Italy*, November 2, 2021, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d43978-021-00136-0>.

<sup>64</sup> Carmichael, Brulle, and Huxster, ‘The great divide’; Hornsey et al., ‘Meta-analyses’.





**Fig. 4** Perceptions of responsibility to act on climate change. Source: Own illustration using the Eurobarometer database. Survey Question: “In your opinion, who within the EU is responsible for tackling climate change?” Respondents were able to give more than one answer

rounds of surveys included here. There is a similar trend in Hungary, albeit on a lower level. Hungarian and German respondents agreed in 2021 that businesses and the industry are most responsible to address climate change, while Polish respondents are the only group that point to regional and local authorities. Across the sample, the publics appear to agree on viewing national governments as key actors in tackling climate change, which is a noteworthy observation given the EU’s supranational characteristics.

Overall, serious pitfalls for consistent climate change policy emerge beyond the consensus on the aggregated level. The data might explain why Germany and France pull ahead on environmental policies, but even this established duette for European policy progress is not united when it comes to the nuts and bolts of addressing climate change—witness the ongoing debate on whether or not nuclear energy qualifies as a transitional “clean” source of energy. It becomes clear that public perception patterns indicate significant obstacles on the way to actually achieve the ambitious



Green New Deal that has solidified Europe's role as a frontrunner in turning the tide on climate change.<sup>65</sup>

Different political cultures, ideologies, and geographic conditions in Europe and the U.S. are also visible in differing approaches to energy policy. In the United States, oil, gas, and coal are the prime energy providers since the U.S. is rich in these sources; whereas, the use of renewables varies greatly from state to state. Energy production in the U.S. even exceeded energy consumption in 2020 and 2021. In 2020, more than two-thirds of U.S. energy consumption relied on oil or natural gas.<sup>66</sup> Powerful interest groups are organized around energy production, and energy-rich states often function as brakemen in the transition to renewable energy. As Lowi et al. point out, climate change "illustrates some of the limits of public opinion in shaping policy. [...] In fact, the preferences of the American public are often at odds with those of the organized interests that will bear the burden of governmental regulations."<sup>67</sup>

Due to limited energy resources, European countries typically have to import energy. Therefore, countries have had a stronger incentive to promote renewable energies such as wind and solar, in addition to curbing energy consumption, as compared to the resource-rich United States. Russia's war against Ukraine has amplified the urgent need to diversify energy sources in Europe and to cut back on fossil energy sources. After abandoning the controversial Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, Germany as well as other countries moved to diversify and to replace Russian gas and oil.<sup>68</sup> Many in the EU also hope that the crisis will accelerate the transition to non-fossil energy sources. The EU aims to cut emissions by more than half by 2030 and reach net zero emissions by 2050, but some countries are more rigorous in their energy transition than others.<sup>69</sup> Several European countries also take a more critical approach to nuclear energy largely due to security concerns and the difficulties surrounding the disposal of nuclear waste. Several European countries such as Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, and Sweden receive about one third of their energy from this source, while Germany and the Netherlands continue to scale back their already low levels of nuclear energy. Others, like Ireland and Austria, have never introduced nuclear energy.

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<sup>65</sup> The Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 which includes support for domestic industries producing green technologies and renewable energy in the U.S. may further deepen the rift between Europe and the U.S. because of the competition dividing partners across the Atlantic.

<sup>66</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration, 'U.S. energy facts explained', *eia*, May 14, 2021, <https://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/us-energy-facts/>.

<sup>67</sup> Theodore J. Lowi et al., *American Government. Power and Purpose*, 15th edition (New York/London: W. W. Norton, 2019), 420.

<sup>68</sup> The controversial Nord stream 2 pipeline also showcased deep divisions not only between the US and Germany, but also among the European states. Jonathan Hackenbroich, and Kadri Liik, 'The Nord Stream 2 dispute and the transatlantic alliance', *European Council on Foreign Relations*, April 20, 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-nord-stream-2-dispute-and-the-transatlantic-alliance/>.

<sup>69</sup> Kira Taylor, 'Eleven EU countries call to ban fossil fuels from trans-European infrastructure', *Euractiv*, May 6, 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/climate-environment/news/eleven-countries-call-to-ban-fossil-fuels-from-trans-European-energy-infrastructure/>.



The rise of right-wing populism in the past decade emerges as an important factor impacting the climate change discourse, both in the U.S. and in Europe.<sup>70</sup> From the German "Energiewende" to the U.S.' Green New Deal and Infrastructure legislation in 2021, energy and climate change issues have provoked strong reactions around which various (fringe) groups could take hold. Parties on the far-right and right-wing populists generally downplay or outright reject scientific evidence on climate change and they oppose respective policies. This development plays out along several dimensions. First, the pro-business, free market stand of right-wing parties is incompatible with calls for regulating emissions and holding companies responsible for environmental and climate damage. It also undercuts the transition from fossil to non-fossil energy sources, since cuts to subsidies and other supportive structures for fossil industries are often unacceptable to the pro-business lobbies. Second, populist right-wing movements across Europe and the United States wish to curtail government power, but climate change policies generally require active governments and regulations in compliance with international guidelines to mitigate climate change. The anti-government ideology of right-wing populists, however, shuns necessary policies and rejects existing rules and regulations as overboarding government bureaucracy, as a job killer, or as unwanted foreign/supranational intervention. Third, mistrust in scientific findings is part of the right-wing populist ideology. Its anti-intellectual position rather feeds into misinformation and denial of manmade climate change. Moreover, a fourth problem is the orientation of right-wing populists along the lines of short-term vote-seeking behavior, rather than long-term commitments necessary to counteract climate change.

As an example, Italy's prime minister, Giorgia Meloni from the populist far-right party "Brothers of Italy" with neo-Fascist roots, has repeatedly shunned the European Green Deal as "climate fundamentalism," reinforcing her antagonistic view toward the EU. She also stated that ecology has been "militarily occupied" by "the left." In her approach to climate change, she claimed that her party is the true defender of the environment contending that the right "loves the environment because it loves the land, the identity, the homeland."<sup>71</sup> To strengthen their anti-climate change claims and to alleviate criticism, the "Brothers of Italy" have joined center-right parties, Christian Democrats, classic liberals and free marketeers in signing a "Climate Action Declaration" lobbying for pro-market, anti-regulatory policies around the world.<sup>72</sup>

Likewise, in Sweden, an EU country known for active climate change policies, the rise of right-wing populism and its electoral success in 2022 poses a challenge to future climate change policies. Their influence could reach well beyond Swedish borders, especially since Sweden has the EU presidency of the Council of the

<sup>70</sup> On right-wing populism see Cas Mudde. *The Far Right Today*. Cambridge UK, 2019.

<sup>71</sup> Federica di Sario, Italy's Meloni aims to make climate change a right-wing issue, Politico, October 20, 2022. <https://www.politico.eu/article/italy-giorgia-meloni-climate-change-right-wing/>.

<sup>72</sup> Center Right Climate Action Declaration <https://www.climateactiondeclaration.com>.



European Union in 2023.<sup>73</sup> Aside from its anti-immigrant stance, the Sweden Democrats, a nationalist far-right populist party with neo-Nazi roots, also deny humans' responsibility for climate change. They reject international treaties such as the Paris Climate Change Agreement and EU policies aiming to curb emissions. In addition, they want to push Sweden into expanding nuclear energy programs.<sup>74</sup> In Germany, populist positions of the far-right are no less pronounced. While the country has strong climate change activism and a Green party in the federal government coalition since 2021, the right-wing extremist Alternative for Germany (AfD) rejects climate policy and calls for a fundamental reversal of all measures aimed to curb emissions.<sup>75</sup> Denying scientific data supporting climate change, the AfD moreover targets climate activists, calling them "Klimaterroristen" ("climate terrorists"). Even in the center-right opposition group in parliament populist rhetoric opposing climate change protests is pronounced.<sup>76</sup>

Climate change policy has become a focal point in the culture war of far-right populist movements and parties as evident parallels to Trump's rhetoric suggest. Although some parties such as the German AfD are not part of government coalitions, they bend the political discourse to generate negative perceptions of climate change policies, skepticism, and denial with potentially far-reaching consequences for Europe and beyond.

## Conclusion

This article finds that a broad transatlantic consensus supports multilateral action on climate change, which is echoed in active multilateral institutions. The salience of the issue points to a growing public concern with consequential implications for foreign policy on both sides of the Atlantic, because consistent public opinion patterns are meaningful cues for foreign policy. Based on our assessment of survey data, we argue that the salience of climate change as an existential threat has increased on both sides of the Atlantic, indicating common ground for multilateral action. In reaction to growing concerns in member states, the European Green Deal sets more ambitious goals for global emissions, encouraging the shift from fossil to renewable

<sup>73</sup> Ahead of Sweden's EU-presidency, several observers have critically addressed positions of the far-right. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/former-pm-attacks-new-swedish-climate-policy-ahead-of-eu-presidency/>. The Sweden Democrats are the second-largest party in Parliament having received 20.5% of the vote in 2022. While they are not officially part of the government, they support center-right Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson from the Moderate Party.

<sup>74</sup> Sweden Democrat slammed for denying climate crisis in parliament, <https://www.thelocal.se/2022/01/19/sweden-democrat-slammed-for-denying-climate-crisis-in-parliament/>.

<sup>75</sup> This is evident, for example, in the debate about a bill submitted by the AfD in 2019 and in their party program for the German national elections in 2021. <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2019/kw42-de-echter-umweltschutz-662298>.

<sup>76</sup> For example, the chair of the Christian Social Union in the Federal Parliament, Alexander Dobrindt, linked climate protests to the former RAF (Red Army Fraction) terror organization in Germany. Alexander Dobrindt "Die Entstehung einer Klima-RAF muss verhindert werden." in: *Zeit online*. November 6, 2022. <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2022-11/alexander-dobrindt-klimaaktivisten-strafen-raf>.



energy sources to curb global warming. In the United States, President Biden confirmed his administration's commitment to climate change policy by immediately rejoining the Paris Climate Agreement after taking office and outlining goals for a more rigorous policy combatting climate change at home. The nearly simultaneous timing of these moves on both sides of the Atlantic and the mutual recognition of the importance for such changes is noteworthy. We argue that this sense of urgency spearheads an important trend in public opinion as climate change awareness rises. The analysis reveals a lasting shift rather than a short-lived response to the transition of power in the U.S. and in the EU that provides fresh momentum for transatlantic multilateralism.

Beneath the shared sense of urgency visible in public opinion data and multilateral actions, however, great variations on the domestic levels persist. Both in the U.S. and in Europe, support for and enactment of climate change policies vary according to political geography. These political patterns and their consequences inhibit strong coherent policies on the national and, as a consequence, on the international level. Partisan polarization, which is especially pronounced in the U.S., national variations in the EU, and the influence of right-wing populism further constitute hurdles for more coherent and effective climate change policy. In fact, the influence of right-wing populism cuts across both the EU and the U.S. and could impact significantly their future cooperation in multilateral institutions. Another shared challenge is Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, which has important consequences for energy policies but also for international environmental security. In order to act efficiently on the international level, communicating parties on both sides of the Atlantic need to address these hurdles and nurture the political will to actively pursue joint action in the global realm to convincingly produce joint policies and overcome collective action road blocks detected in our findings. Our analysis finds that beneath the veneer of shared threat perceptions and active multilateral institutions, polarization in the U.S. and intra-European divergence hamper the enactment of ambitious climate change policy. As long as climate change policy of international and domestic institutions diverge, lasting progress will remain contested. These findings cast substantial doubt on the prospects of consistent and impactful climate change policy as long as right-wing populism bolsters and capitalizes on domestic level rifts in public opinion.

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**Dr. Jakob Wiedekind** a postdoctoral researcher and teaching fellow at the Institute of Political Science at the Leibniz University Hannover/Germany. He was a visiting scholar at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (NC, United States) in 2021 and received his doctorate at the Leibniz University Hannover in July 2023. His research focuses on transatlantic relations, American foreign policy and European politics. His publications include *The Battle for the White House. The US Presidential Elections 2020*, (Springer VS 2023; with Christiane Lemke) and *Preemptive Action: Measuring Presidential Assertiveness in Foreign Policy Lawmaking* (American Politics Research, 2022).

**Prof. Dr. Christiane Lemke** Emerita Professor of Political Science at Leibniz University Hannover/Germany and senior non-resident fellow at the Center for Global Affairs at New York University. Her research focuses on International Relations, European politics, right-wing populism, and transatlantic relations. She received her PhD and Habilitation at the Free University Berlin. She was co-founder of the interdisciplinary Jean Monnet European Studies Center in Hannover and, from 2007 until 2013, she served as the director of the Center. Christiane Lemke was a Visiting Krupp Chair at Harvard University, visiting professor at UNC Chapel Hill, and the Max Weber Chair for German and European Politics at New York University (2010-2014). Her publications include *Germany Today. Politics and Policies in a Changing World* (Rowman and Littlefield 2018, with Helga Welsh); *International Relations (in German, 2018, de Gruyter Oldenbourg)*; *The Battle for the White House. The US Presidential Elections 2020*, (Springer VS 2023; with Jakob Wiedekind).

