

Policy Brief 5:

Climate emotions – and how they can motivate or hinder action



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SUMMARY

People's emotions related to climate change and climate solutions are highly relevant for their climate attitudes and engagement, and for how they perceive and interpret new climate change information. Emotions such as guilt, anger, hope, fear, and sadness can motivate or hinder action - unite or polarize. Of special interest to democracy is the potential polarizing or de-polarizing effect of emotions, as well as the role of emotions in voting decisions, policy support and people's trust in democratic processes. Studies on climate emotions can help us understand and predict opposition and conflict and contribute to tailored communication campaigns.

THE ISSUE

To meet the climate targets and adapt to a changing environment, democratic societies depend on citizens' willingness to accept new policies and technologies and (for some groups) change their behaviors. People's emotions related to climate change can help or hinder mitigation efforts. For example, worrying about the wellbeing of oneself and others can motivate willingness to reduce one's carbon footprint and climate anger can mobilize movements, but might also fuel reactance and polarization.

Emotions can reveal how people perceive a situation and help us predict how they will act. People's emotional reactions depend on their appraisal of a situation (e.g., sadness in response to experiencing irrevocable loss, fear in response to an uncontrollable threat) and motivate behavioral reactions. Different emotions are related to different action tendencies and most emotions can lead to more or less constructive reactions (e.g., sadness can lead to withdrawal or to helping behaviors, fear to fight, flight, or freeze). People are not likely to experience only one isolated emotion in relation to a situation or phenomenon, further complicating the links to cognition and motivation.

Emotions also influence how information is evaluated. Emotion-inducing communication strategies (e.g., tailoring messages aimed at eliciting fear or hope) and displays of emotions by activists, researchers or citizens can influence the emotions, thoughts, and behaviors of the audience. However, the same information, situation, or emotion display can give rise to hope in some people and anger in others, depending on their existing emotions, values, and beliefs. In sum, the motivating potential of emotions is complex.

OUR RESEARCH

- Studies looking into specific causes of climate emotions have found that their effects are not straightforward. Emotions such as hope and anger might relate to both higher and lower climate change engagement – depending on who or what the emotion is directed at, and what the specific outcome is. For example, Gregersen, Andersen, et al. (2023) illustrates that climate anger can stem from various sources - not all equally motivating for climate action. While some are angry about public apathy or lack of climate action, others explain their anger with skepticism towards the threat of climate change or dissatisfaction with mitigation measures. Consequently, feelings of anger might fuel activism aiming to pressure governments to act to address climate change, but also activism opposing climate solutions and policies, such as wind power development and carbon taxes. While the study supports that climate anger is related to climate change engagement, its effect depends on the specific outcome. While anger is particularly relevant for activism, other emotions, such as sadness or fear, are more relevant for policy support and individual mitigation behaviors.



- Because emotional reactions indicate that a situation or phenomenon touches upon something people see as relevant, that they value and care about, both the presence and absence of emotion can be interesting. Gregersen, Doran, et al. (2023) investigated people's explanations for (not) worrying about climate change. The most common reason for being at least somewhat worried was concern about the consequences of climate change, and those reporting high levels of worry were in particular more likely to bring up consequences for humans than those reporting medium worry. Respondents reporting low levels of worry referred to a broader range of reasons in their answers, such as believing in natural rather than human causes of climate change, expressing a sense of optimism towards potential solutions, or being discontent with political measures or public discourse on climate change.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

- Emotions related to climate change (sometimes referred to as 'climate emotions') are highly relevant for whether and how we succeed in mitigating climate change. Previous research has established important relationships between climate emotions on the one hand, and important outcomes such as risk perception, technology acceptance, policy support and mitigation- and adaptation behaviors on the other. Policymakers should consider the potentially motivating and (de)polarizing effect of climate emotions when developing communication strategies related to climate change mitigation.
- Up until now, much of the research on climate emotions has been based on correlational data. This research has mainly focused on certain (individual-level) emotions such as worry and hope and has first and foremost investigated how these emotions relate to different forms of climate change engagement. Going forward, there is a clear need for expanding the focus to a broader range of both individual and collective emotions, further investigating social effects, and looking for causal relationships.

REFERENCES

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