

Parting Shot

Before we can tackle climate change, we first need to convince people to care much more about it.

By Andrew Oswald

The recent flooding in Germany and wildfires in North America are a reminder that if we are to avoid tragedy in the future, society needs to make progress in tackling global warming. Human beings will have to alter how they live. That is likely to be painful. People will not be pleased about having to pay more for their travel, fuel, heating and lighting – and having to alter their lifestyles to do and use all those things less. So, are our citizens ready and willing to make climate change a major priority? Recent data suggests – worryingly – the answer is no.



“...this survey gives us the opportunity to understand how many people see an urgent need for change in environmental policy.”

With Adam Nowakowski, I examined data from the Eurobarometer Survey of 2019. This survey asked approximately 30,000 randomly chosen respondents across Europe to choose the two societal issues they consider to be the most important. There is a long list of 13 possibilities to choose from. This dataset has a special advantage because it asks respondents about their ranking of *different kinds* of problems in society. While anyone can say in an abstract sense, ‘yes, I think something should be done about climate change’, this survey gives us the opportunity to understand how

many people see an urgent need for change in environmental policy. The key question is whether citizens will tolerate tackling environmental and climate issues by giving up something else (as will be necessary).

As we might expect, different people prioritise different topics. But the ranking of the results is revealing (Table 1). The most mentioned national problem is that of Health and Social Security: 25.8% of Europeans emphasise this. The least mentioned national problem is that of Terrorism: 4.4% of Europeans emphasise this. Environment, Climate and Energy Issues come only fifth in the ranking of societal importance. It is mentioned by 16.3% of Europeans.

In other words, only approximately one in seven Europeans think of climate change as one of the two most important problems facing society. Climate concerns are ranked lower than priorities about Health and Social Security, Inflation, the Economic Situation, and Unemployment.

For policymakers and environmentalists, this implies that personal economic considerations matter to people much more than environmental and climate concerns. A small percentage of citizens put high weight on the problem of global warming. Yet most Europeans do not. The typical citizen is instead focused on their own economic interests.

To take steps forward in the fight

against climate change, policymakers will need to alter people's feelings about it. Right now, European citizens are not ready for policies that might cause upheaval to their daily lives. But education is needed to alter perceptions about the urgency of this environmental crisis. If we fail to encourage individuals to care more about climate change, our grandchildren, and especially their grandchildren, could be in severe peril. ◀

About the author

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Table 1: What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment?

Societal Issue	Average % mentioned	Mentioned	Not mentioned
Health and social security	25.8	7,447	21,452
Rising prices / inflation / cost of living	23.6	6,833	22,066
Economic situation	18.4	5,330	23,569
Unemployment	18.3	5,276	23,632
The environment, climate and energy issues	16.3	4,720	24,179
Immigration	15.5	4,468	24,431
Pensions	14.4	4,173	24,726
Crime	11.3	3,264	25,635
The education system	11	3,192	25,707
Housing	10.4	3,019	25,880
Government debt	9.52	2,751	26,148
Taxation	8.12	2,348	26,551
Terrorism	4.35	1,256	27,643

Notes: Eurobarometer Data, 2019. The answers are ranked according to the frequency they were mentioned in response to the question. Each respondent was permitted to give a maximum of 2 answers. The sample size is 28,899. Some answers are omitted from the table: 'Don't know', 'Other (SPONTANEOUS)' and 'None (SPONTANEOUS)'.

Further reading

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