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Climate worry is moving right



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As the world moves to the right, concern about climate change is moving with it. *Already there are more climate-worried people on the right than on the left.*

It is easy to see climate change as a progressive issue. The cause is typically driven by the political left and embedded in broader progressive issues of social justice. But this perspective is numerically wrong and practically limiting.

Climate policy and the climate movement are out of sync with today's world. They need a reset. The climate-worried on the right and left have different priorities and expectations. The answer to polarization is not unity; it is pluralism.

To appeal to the climate-worried right, we need to offer a pure-play climate agenda, the opportunity for national advantage, and the recognition of choice.

More climate-worried on the right than left

The issue of climate change has become so politically polarized, and so melded with social justice, that it gets taken for granted as a left-wing cause. But analysis of two waves of quantitative, multinational research (see Appendix) by Zero Ideas shows two findings that change that picture substantially:

1. Even on the far right, most people worry about climate change.

Climate skepticism is stronger on the right than the left (at least in the Global North). But it is a minority position across the political spectrum. In the US—the country with the most politically polarized views on climate—among those who see themselves on the political left, 92% are climate-worried. Among those on the right it's still 61%—and even on the far right it's 56%.

Other countries we have tested show an even stronger majority for climate worry on the right: 66% in Germany, and 72% in the UK and Poland.

We use a simple left-right scale for easy comparison between countries, but we get a similar picture if we look at political parties. In the US, 89% of people who align with the Democrats are worried about climate change, but so are 73% of independents, and 55% of those who align with the Republicans. Germany has seen a big swing to the right in its 2025 election, but 84% of people who align with the Christian Democrats are worried about climate change, as are 54% of people who align with the AfD.

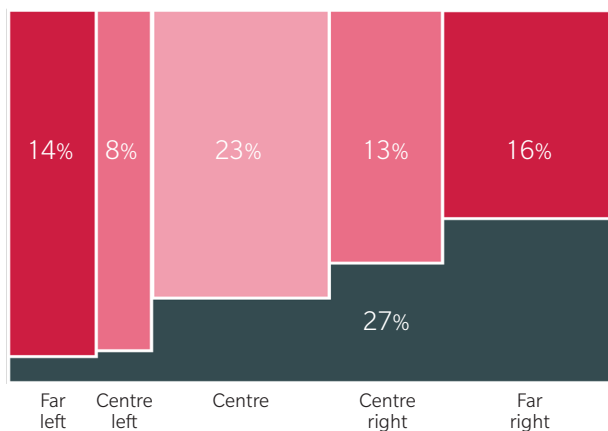
2. Numerically, there are more climate-worried people on the right than on the left.

The significance of this climate worry on the right becomes clear when we see the size of the right compared with the left. Although the *proportion* of people worried about climate change is smaller on the right, the size of the right means that there are more climate-worried people on the right than on the left.

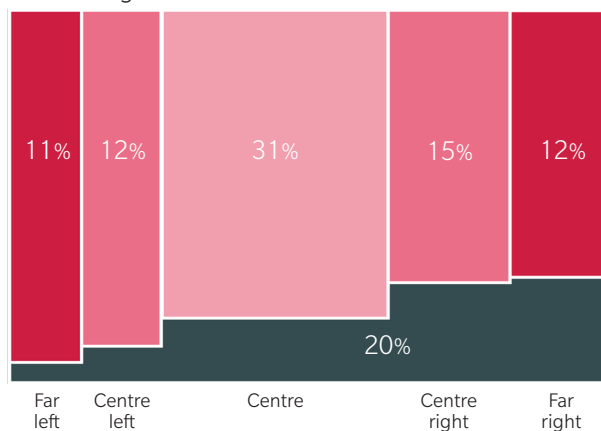
Figure 1 shows the effect graphically. The point holds whether you consider only the far left and

Figure 1. Distribution of people by climate change worry and political spectrum

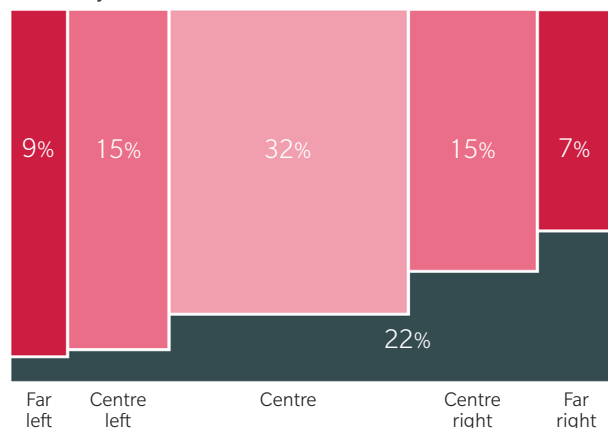
United States



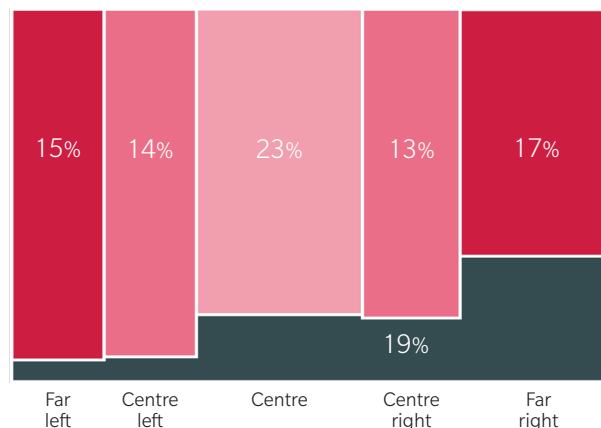
United Kingdom



Germany



Poland



Very/somewhat worried about climate change
Not at all/not very worried about climate change

How worried are you about climate change?

Some people talk about politics in terms of left, centre, and right. On a left-right scale from 1 to 7, with 1 indicating extreme left and 7 indicating extreme right, where would you place yourself?

US N=2,508, UK N=2,079, Germany N=2,027, Poland N=2,103
Zero Ideas/Savanta research.

right (in red) or also include the centre left and right (in dark pink). There are more climate-worried people on the right than left in the US, UK and Poland, and slightly fewer in Germany.

In Germany we do see the same effect happening at a party level. There are more climate-worried people aligned with the AfD (13% of people overall) than with the Greens (9%).

In Germany, there are more climate-worried people aligned with the AfD than with the Greens.

If the idea that there are more climate-worried on the right than the left is surprising, one reason why is that it is new—at least for these countries (see box for a more global context). When we ran the same questions in a survey back in 2023, there were more climate-worried people on the left than the right (Table 1).

The past two years have seen a significant shift of climate-worried people to the right in all three countries.

Table 1
Climate-worried people on the right vs left
Difference in percentage of the population

	USA	UK	Germany
Today	+6 %pts	+4 %pts	-2 %pts
2023	-7 %pts	-2 %pts	-8 %pts

In the UK and Germany, this shift has been driven by the countries' overall shift to the right; we see no significant change in the proportion of people worried about climate change *within* the left or *within* the right. In the US, we see both a national shift to the right *and* an increase in climate worry within the right.

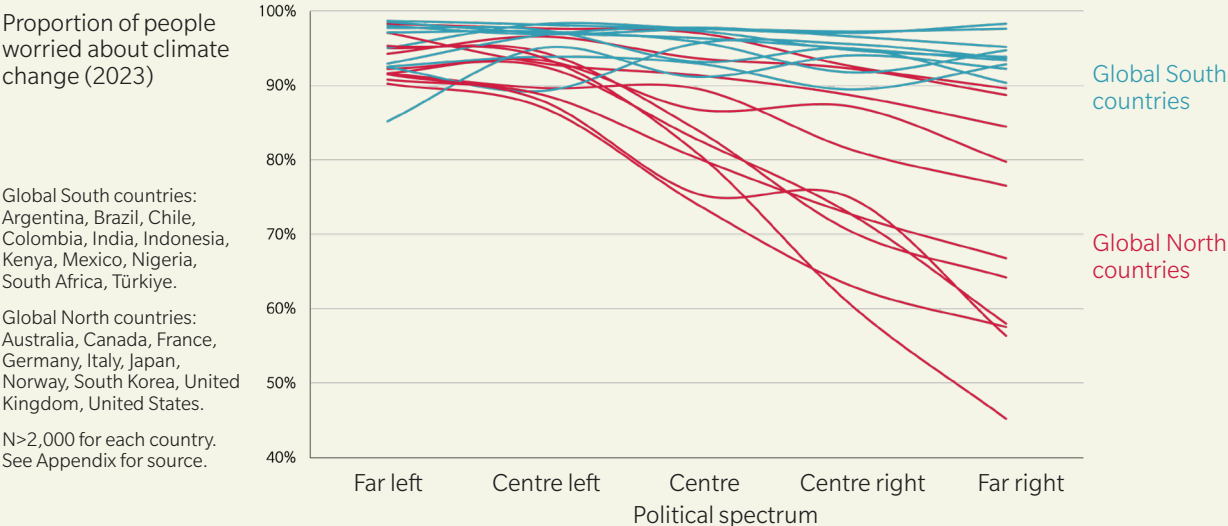
Either way, today we have large numbers of people on the political right who are worried about climate change—even more than on the political left. What is their experience? What ideas do they relate to? What policies can they support? Whether from governments, business or the climate movement, the answers are distinctly unwelcoming.

A global perspective of the climate-worried right

Already in our 2023 survey, having more climate-worried people on the right than the left was the norm in the Global South, though rare in the North.

This partly reflects more people in some Global South countries placing themselves on the right of the political spectrum. But it also reflects a uniformly high level of climate worry among those on the right.

The chart below shows the level of climate worry across the political spectrum for 21 countries we surveyed. Global North countries are in red; Global South countries are in blue. The political polarization of climate worry is limited to the Global North—and is far from universal even within the Global North.



Climate policy skews left

The framing of climate change as a progressive cause is pervasive.

This framing is baked into our treaties on climate change. The principle that countries should contribute based on equity and according to their ‘common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities’ was established at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 and written into Article 2 of the Paris Agreement in 2015. That agreement also links climate action to sustainable development, eradication of poverty, a just transition of the workforce, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, gender equality, empowerment of women, intergenerational equity and more.¹

The COP meetings charged with executing this agreement are dominated by negotiations about the transfer of wealth from developed to developing countries and demands for climate justice.

There is nothing inherent to climate change that makes it a progressive issue.

The progressive framing extends into the broader context in which climate change is managed—the other issues it is grouped with. The United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals position climate change, together with some other environmental goals that are essential for sustainability, alongside a set of progressive societal goals regarding human welfare.² The construct of Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) investing does the same thing, creating composite metrics within which climate targets are interchangeable with diversity, equity and inclusion.

This progressive framing of climate change has been deliberate. The politicization of the climate issue is not limited to the political right. For decades, politicians and activists with progressive agendas have seen the urgency, necessity and transformative potential of climate action as an opportunity to further their cause. When Brazil hosted the 1992 Earth Summit that established the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, it purposefully integrated ‘Environment and Development’ in the name and agenda of the conference, pushing the interests of developing countries and ensuring that negotiations would be handled politically under the UN General Assembly, rather than technocrati-

cally under the World Meteorological Office and UN Environment Program.³ Bernie Sanders, in promoting his Green New Deal as part of his campaign for the US presidency in 2020, described climate change as ‘our single greatest opportunity to build a more just and equitable future.’⁴

In 2022 in Greta Thunberg’s *The Climate Book*, Lucas Chancel and Thomas Piketty said that ‘it’s time for us to acknowledge that there can be no deep carbonization without profound re-distribution of income and wealth.’⁵ Sandrine Dixon-Declève, co-author of *Earth for all* and then-president of the Club of Rome, launched a climate gathering in 2024 with the assertion that ‘we’re not going to survive if we don’t focus on poverty and inequality.’ This is an implausible claim: we have survived with poverty and inequality since the dawn of time. But it was met by general approval and a proposal from a prominent corporate chief sustainability officer that ‘making the connection between the sustainability movement and the social justice movement is the number one thing for corporates to do.’⁶

Some of this harnessing of climate change to the progressive agenda may be self-serving, but much is driven by conviction and desire for a better world. What its proponents miss is that it represents one worldview. And as we have seen, that worldview is now a minority one in many countries.

Time for a reset

There is nothing inherent to climate change that makes it a progressive issue. Indeed in the UK, the first political leader to take it seriously was Margaret Thatcher.⁷ The politicization has grown out of ideologically driven perspectives about how we should respond. To win support for climate action from the climate-worried on the right as well as the left, we need to challenge these perspectives. Which ones are fundamental to the objective urgency of climate change itself, and which are a political choice among available options? There is nothing wrong with campaigning for a political choice. What is wrong—because it is unproductive and alienating—is to insist that your choice is the only way to think about climate change.

If it was ever plausible that the political solution to climate change is first to convert the world to progressive ideology, it must be clear today that this is not what is about to happen. A common response is to lament the current shift to the

right and to a multipolar world of competing interests, and double down on the same ideological approach, hoping to ride out the cycle. But this response ignores both the geopolitical realities and the opportunity that is provided by the climate worry and appetite for action on the expanding political right. Now is the time to engage that worry and potential support.

If we want to appeal to the climate-worried on the political right, we need to understand who they are and what they value. They differ from both the climate-worried on the left and the non-climate-worried on the right.

Figure 2 illustrates one underlying difference in attitude. The climate-worried left tend to see humans as a destructive force on our planet. In this view we are exceeding the limits of our planet and need to change our way of living so that the planet can regenerate. The net position of the climate-worried right is more balanced, and can even lean towards the view that humans are a force for good. In this more optimistic view we

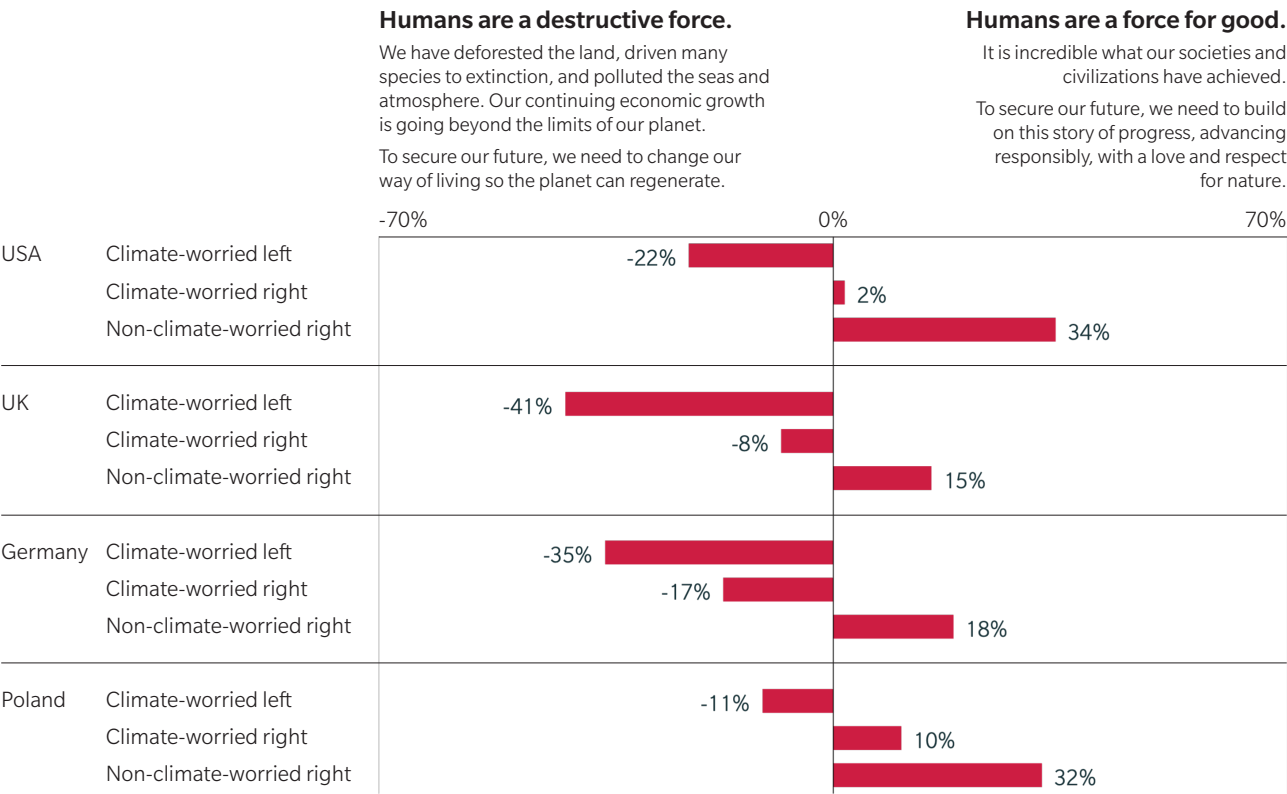
need to build on our story of progress, advancing responsibly, with a love and respect for nature.

Figure 3 illustrates a related and consequential difference. The climate-worried left tends to believe that we need to make big, disruptive changes to our society in order to stop climate change. (This is particularly true of the climate-worried far left, who have a strong voice in the climate movement.) The climate-worried right think that we need only gradual, step-by-step changes.

Figure 4 shows, for the United States, the authorities that people would most trust to say that a particular technology is safe and ready for use. A majority of the climate-worried left most trust scientists at major research universities. A majority of the non-climate worried right trust no-one at all. In the middle, the climate-worried right show relatively little mistrust, and no particular favourites. Scientists at major universities are their most common choice, with the US Government a close second.

Figure 2. Belief about humanity and the planet

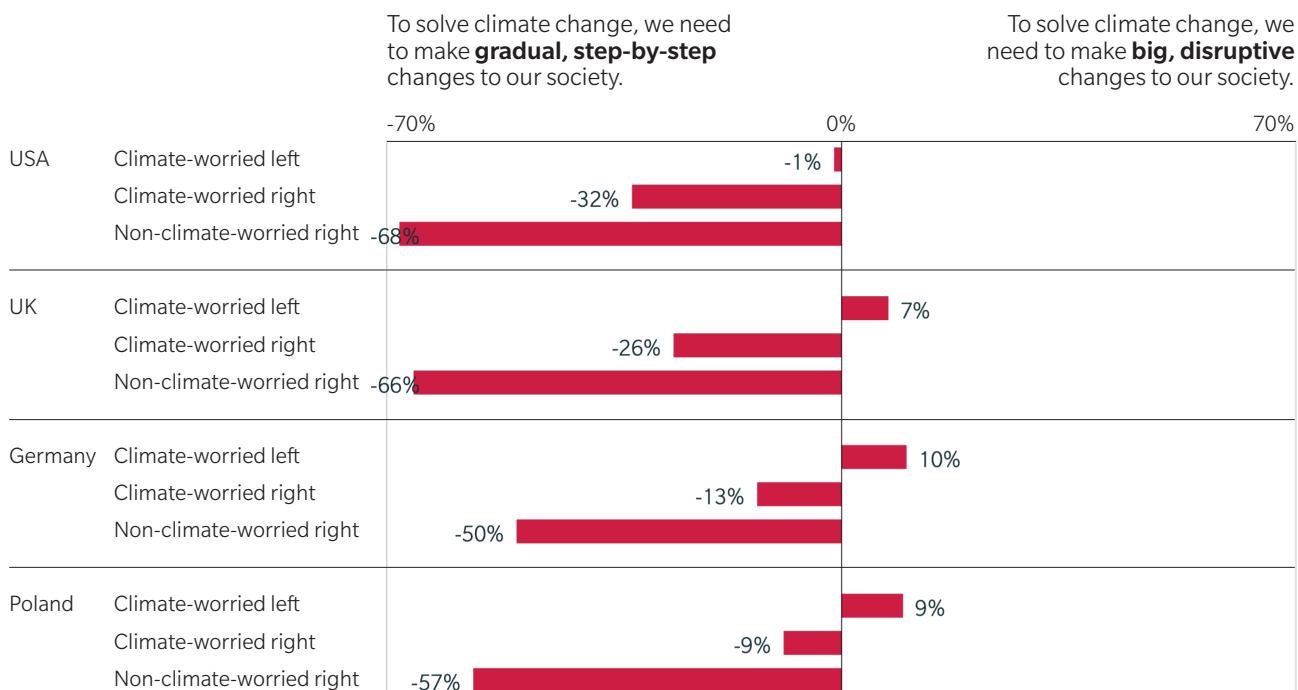
Proportion of people who align more strongly with the righthand statement minus those who align more strongly with the left



Which of the following two statements better aligns with your own views?
US N=2,508, UK N=2,079, Germany N=2,027, Poland N=2,103. Zero Ideas/Savanta research.

Figure 3. Belief about the type of change needed

Proportion of people who align more strongly with the righthand statement minus those who align more strongly with the left

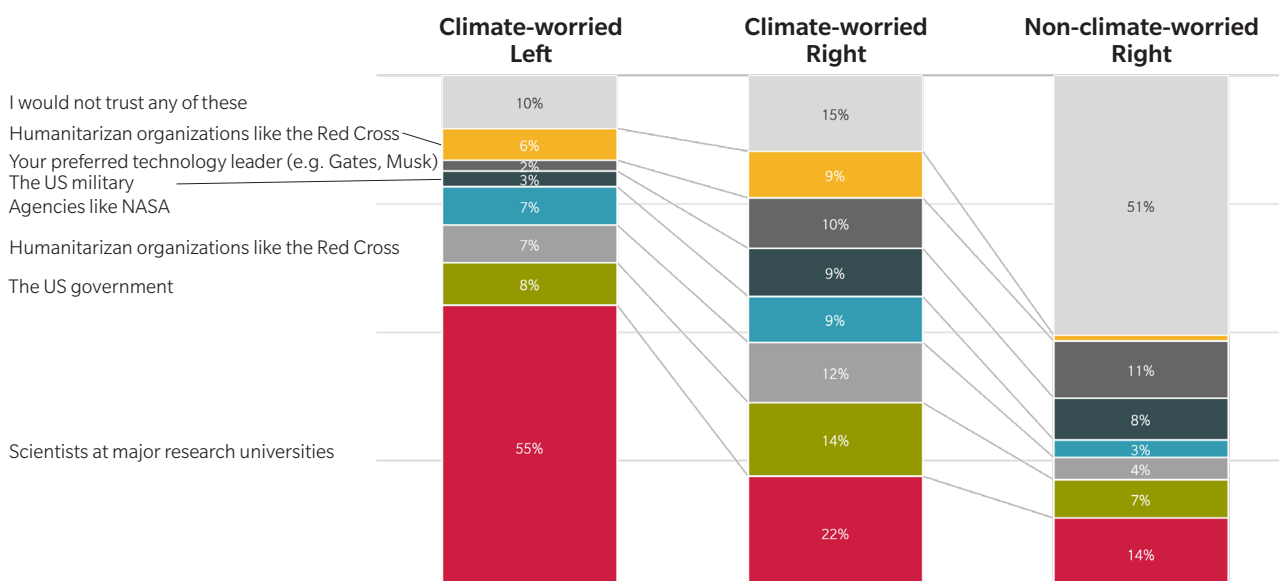


Which of the following two statements better aligns with your own views?

US N=2,508, UK N=2,079, Germany N=2,027, Poland N=2,103. Zero Ideas/Savanta research.

Figure 4. Authorities most trusted on the safety of climate technologies

Proportion of people who naming each authority as the one they would trust most (United States)



Which of the following would you be most likely to trust if they said that a particular technology is safe and ready for use?

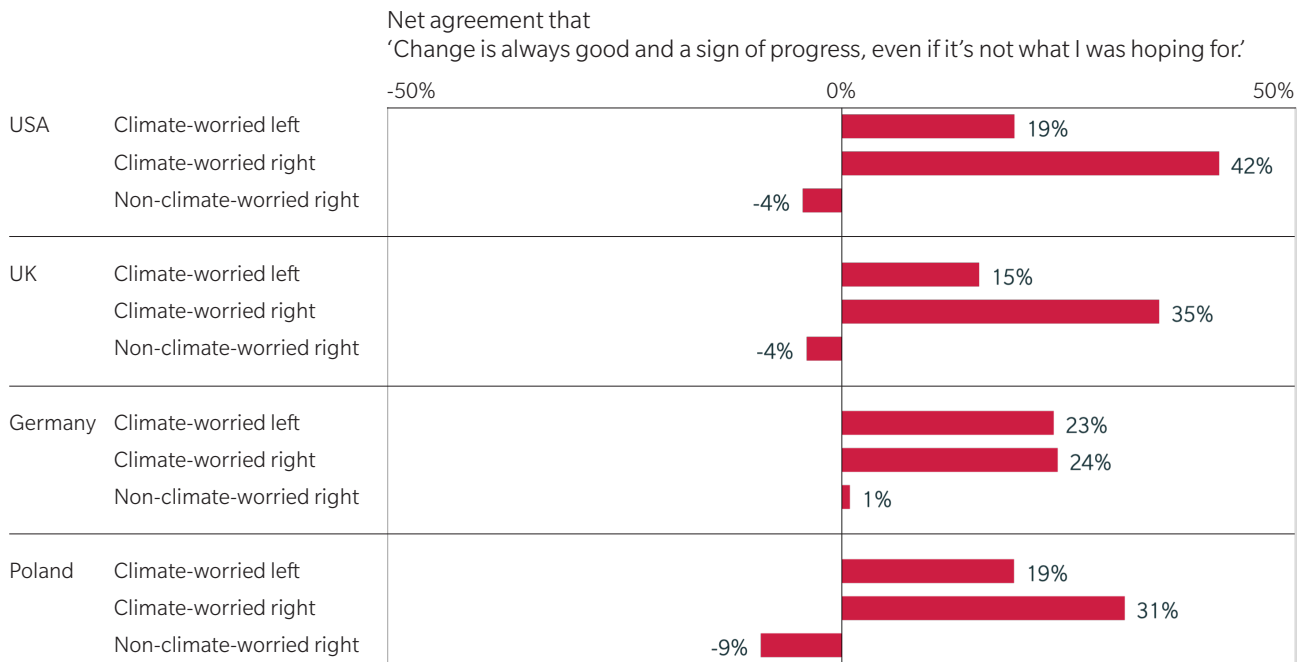
US N=2,508. Zero Ideas/Savanta research.

A plea for pluralism

It is clear from Figures 2-4 that the widely shared worry about climate change transcends some quite different worldviews. This is why the answer to polarization is not unity; it is pluralism.

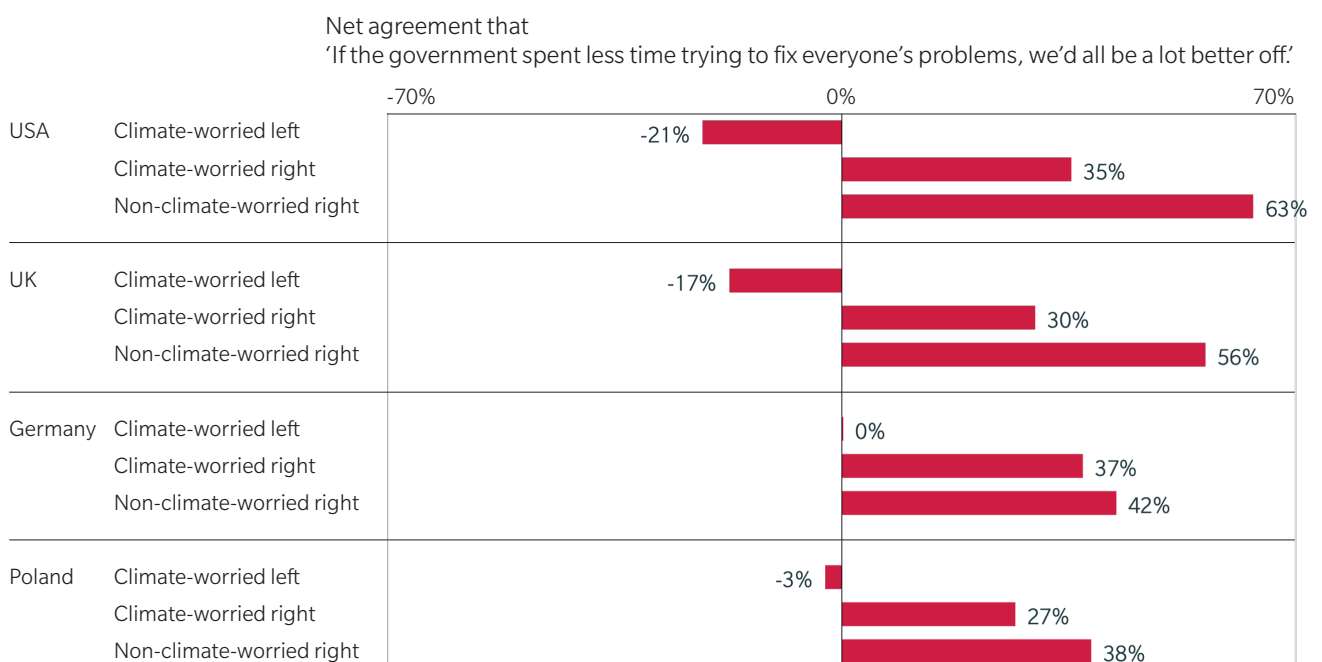
Pluralism is a realistic goal. The climate-worried right are not the conservative right. In fact, they are even more optimistic about change, and ready to accept change, than the left. The contrast with the non-climate-worried (conservative) right is stark (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Change vs conservatism



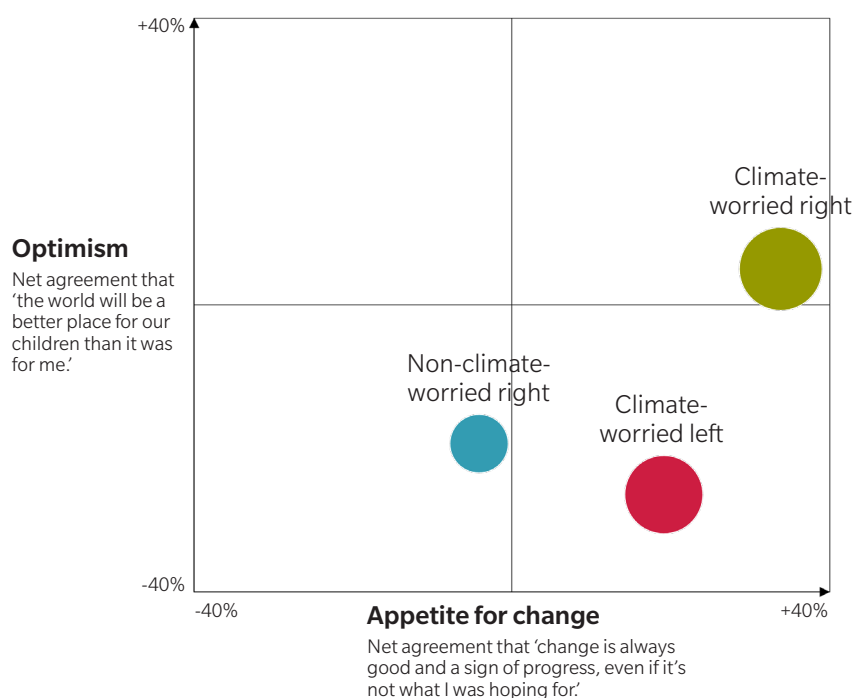
Please read each of the following statements and tell us how much you agree or disagree with each of them.
US N=2,508, UK N=2,079, Germany N=2,027, Poland N=2,103. Zero Ideas/Savanta research.

Figure 6. Reaction to perceived government overreach



Please read each of the following statements and tell us how much you agree or disagree with each of them.
US N=2,508, UK N=2,079, Germany N=2,027, Poland N=2,103. Zero Ideas/Savanta research.

Figure 7. Optimism and appetite for change



Please read each of the following statements and tell us how much you agree or disagree with each of them.
USA, UK, Germany, and Poland combined. N=8,717. Zero Ideas/Savanta research.

But they do believe in freedom of choice. They don't want to be told what they have to do. While they trust the government as an authority on climate technologies, they resist what they see as government overreach (Figure 6). On this issue, their stance is much closer to the conservative right than to the left.

The answer to polarization is not unity; it is pluralism.

As we have previously argued,⁸ they tend to see responsibility as a moral choice ('I am a responsible person') rather than an imposed burden ('I have been given responsibility through the position I have been put in'). With this lens it is easy to see why much of today's climate narrative is not accepted on the right, even by people who worry about climate change.

Yet as the environmental agenda shifts from conservation to transition,⁹ there is plenty of opportunity for narratives that *would* resonate with the climate-worried right. Their unique combination of optimism about the future and appetite for change (Figure 7) aligns particularly well with a transition mindset.

A recent survey by More in Common of 'progressive activists' in the United Kingdom found that most of them would not be prepared to campaign alongside anyone who had voted for one of the country's rightwing political parties.¹⁰ The researchers concluded from their study that progressive activists' 'political outlook and approach to bringing about change makes them outliers from much of the wider public and those they are trying to win over.'¹¹

To be effective against climate change in the world we live in today, we need to be more genuinely inclusive and open to a plurality of people, policies and ideas.

What we can offer the climate-worried right

Within this pluralistic view, what tangibly can we offer the climate-worried right? What will engage their forward-looking appetite for change, and crystallize their climate worry into support for—or at least consent to—climate action?

Answering this question matters, because although the climate-worried right are numerous, they are not (yet) putting their worry into action. Among the climate-worried left, across the four countries we surveyed, 40% of people rank cli-

mate change or the environment as one of their top three voting issues. Among the climate-worried right that number is 23%.

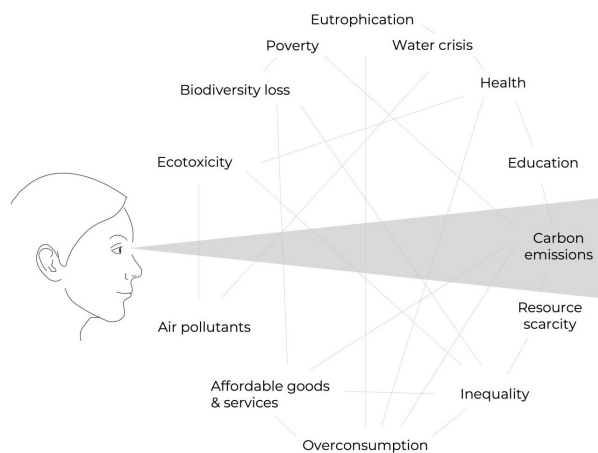
Our previous analyses suggest the answer may not primarily be about the prioritization of specific policies. Some of the policy territories that might be favoured by the climate-worried right—such as a demand-side focus on promoting clean energy technologies as opposed to a supply-side focus on ending fossil fuels—turn out to be favoured by the climate-worried left also.¹² But the context for these policies matters. To appeal to the climate-worried right, our findings suggest we should offer three propositions that are missing in the progressive approach:

1. A pure-play climate agenda

One of the big factors likely to alienate the climate-worried right, as we have seen, is the integration of climate change into a broader progressive social agenda that they don't support. So the first step to bringing in the climate-worried right is to offer a pure-play climate agenda, allowing them to support the cause they believe in without attaching themselves to causes they don't. This is not straightforward, because the belief in the integrated view is strongly held in the climate movement. There is even a name for being too narrowly focused: 'carbon tunnel vision'.¹³

But the graphic depicting carbon tunnel vision (Figure 8) illustrates the problem. It rightly argues that focusing only on carbon emissions is too narrow. The scope of the objectively, globally urgent environmental agenda is broader than carbon emissions: it includes (to use the language of that original graphic) biodiversity loss and resource scarcity. The climate-worried

Figure 8. 'Carbon tunnel vision'

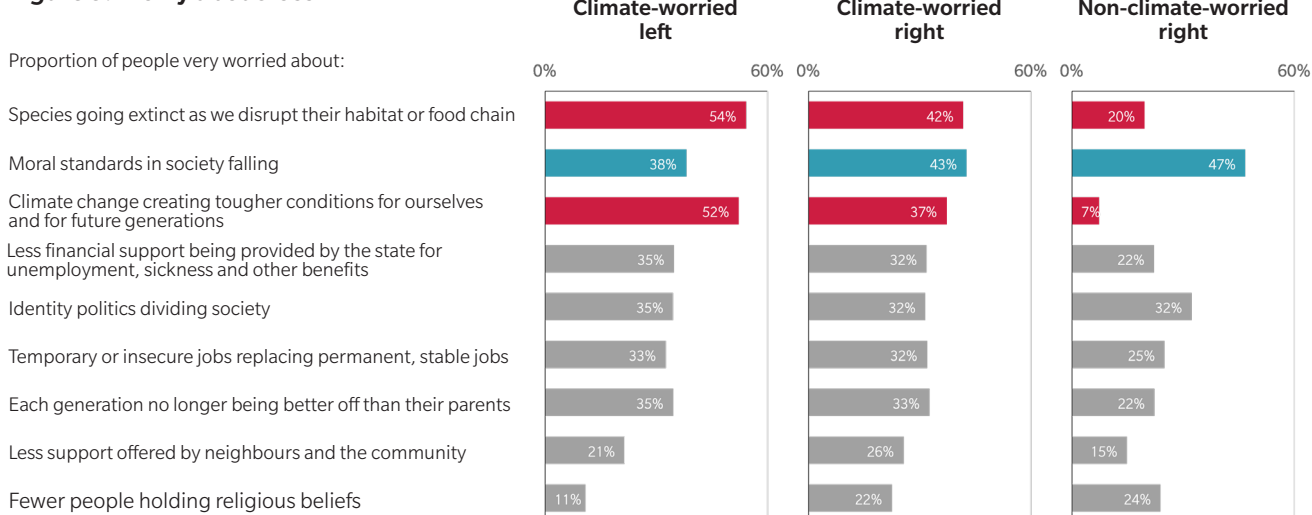


Source: Jan Konietzko, 2021

right see it that way too. In our research, they are more worried about species loss than they are about climate change (not always true of the climate-worried left). The problem comes from what else is in the circle outside the carbon tunnel vision, including inequality, poverty, affordable goods and services, and education. These are social issues, and any universal attempt to solve them at a global level risks alienating the right—climate-worried or otherwise.

Of course, the climate-worried right worry about social issues too. But they worry about different issues, and in different ways. We asked people how much they personally are worried about a number of societal shifts that could lead to a sense of loss (Figure 9). For the climate-worried left, the shifts to do with climate change and species loss stand out. For the climate-worried right, the most worrying of the shifts is the falling of moral standards in society. Their answer to that shift is unlikely to be shared with

Figure 9. Worry about loss



Please tell us how much you personally are worried about each of the following shifts. Percent answering very worried. Germany, Poland, UK, USA. N=8,717. Zero Ideas/Savanta research.

the climate-worried left. By definition, the climate-worried left and right can't align on social issues, which is why we need to separate out a pure-play climate agenda in order to get support from across the political spectrum.

2. Opportunity for national advantage

The climate-worried right are not strongly nationalist: they are more concerned about the rest of the world than the non-worried right are, and they tend to agree that ‘the world would be a more peaceful place if its wealth were divided more equally among nations.’ But they are optimistic, believing in a better future for their children, and are in search of opportunity. Like the rest of the right (but unlike many in the climate-worried left) they tend to be proud of their country’s history (Table 2). They are likely to respond well to positive opportunities that play to the strengths of their country.

Table 2. National pride
Net agreement that ‘I am proud of my country’s history’

	Climate-worried left	Climate-worried right	Non-climate-worried right
USA	+9%	+51%	+71%
UK	+7%	+61%	+76%
Germany	-12%	+24%	+30%
Poland	+58%	+71%	+65%

Please read each of the following statements and tell us how much you agree or disagree with each of them. US N=2,508, UK N=2,079, Germany N=2,027, Poland N=2,103. Zero Ideas/Savanta research.

Responding to this is partly a question of narrative, but also substance. The solution they want to see is not only about what every country must contribute because we are all in it together. It is

also about how *our* country can contribute in a way that will help it thrive in the post-fossil fuel world.

This approach is particularly important for countries that have advantaged positions in the fossil fuel world that they fear losing, whether in natural materials or heavy manufacturing. It is what China is famously good at, building a leading technology position in wind, solar, and electric cars. It is what Japan’s Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry does when it plans the transition for each industry sector together with the leading corporations in that sector, in a spirit of trust and collaboration, with dual goal of decarbonizing Japan and positioning Japanese companies to help decarbonize the world. The answer will be different for each country, but there are plenty of specialized leadership opportunities to play for.

3. Recognition of choice

Perhaps the issue of greatest sensitivity is the recognition that we (as the world, as countries, and as people) have choices. A frequent claim in the climate world is that we don’t have a choice; the situation is such that we just have to do whatever is being prescribed.

Objectively, this is not true: we have big choices to make, trading off the different risks we face, different timescales we prioritize, and different people who may be positively or negatively affected. From the perspective of the climate-worried-left, we have a collective responsibility to choose the socially ‘right’ answer, and the state is best placed to do that. For the climate-worried right, that may feel like government over-reach. We need to recognize the choices we have, and give people the freedom to make the trade-offs.

Appendix

A note on research methodology

This paper draws on two primary research programs.

Unless otherwise stated, the findings are from a 10,815-respondent research study by Zero Ideas in partnership with WePlanet, covering Germany, Poland, the United Kingdom and United States (as well as Nigeria, which is not included here).

The fieldwork was conducted by Savanta in November 2024 (after the re-election of President Trump in the US and before his inauguration). Respondents in each of the four countries reported in this paper are approximately nationally representative in age, gender, income, education, and region. Each country has more than 2,000 respondents.

The primary focus of this study was on popular support for the science and technologies that can help stop climate change. A Zero Ideas research report on that topic, titled *Climate Tech Forward*, is to be published in May 2025.¹⁴

The present paper draws on selected questions within that research, and profiles respondents based on their answers to two questions in particular. First:

How worried are you about climate change?
Select one.
1. *Very worried*
2. *Somewhat worried*
3. *Not very worried*
4. *Not at all worried*

‘Climate worried’ in this report refers to people who answer (1) or (2) to this question. Second:

Some people talk about politics in terms of left, centre, and right. On a left-right scale from 1 to 7, with 1 indicating extreme left and 7 indicating extreme right, where would you place yourself?
Select one.

Language used in this report relates to the 1-7 scale in this question as follows:

1	Far left	Left
2		
3	Centre left	
4	Centre	
5	Centre right	Right
6	Far right	
7		

Within each country, we also asked people for their political party affiliation, with the question, *Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as aligned with? Select one.* We use this question both in its own right, and to check for consistency in how people use the 1-7 left-right scale.

On page 3 we refer to a 2023 study. These findings are from a 57,968-respondent, 23-country research study by Potential Energy Coalition and Zero Ideas in partnership with Yale Program on Climate Change Communication and Meliore Foundation. The fieldwork for this study was conducted by Dynata between June and August 2023. Again, each country has more than 2,000 respondents.

The primary focus of this study was on what moves and motivates people to support government-led climate action. The research report on that topic was published in November 2023, titled *Later is Too Late*.¹⁵ A subsequent report on the political aspect of these motivations, using the same data, was published by Zero Ideas in August 2024, titled *Unleashing multipartisan support for climate action*.¹⁶

The present paper draws on the same two questions used as described above, which we used also in this earlier study, to give a longitudinal read for the countries that are covered in both (Germany, UK, US) and a broader global perspective from across the G20 and beyond.

Authors

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About Zero Ideas

Zero Ideas is a research and education charity established to challenge leadership thinking on climate action. We conduct primary and secondary research and publish articles and research reports to inform business and other leaders on climate issues and to drive a more ambitious leadership mindset regarding climate action.

Recent research projects and collaborations have explored:

- Popular support for the science and technologies that can help stop climate change;
- The use of theories of change to assess and guide corporate climate action;
- What moves and motivates people to support climate action across the G20 and beyond;
- Why sustainable finance supply needs industrial strategy demand;
- Understanding and responding to public demand for nuclear energy;
- Keeping politics out of companies' climate action.

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Endnotes

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- 9 <https://www.responsible-investor.com/comment-a-transition-plan-needs-a-transition-mindset/>
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- 15 John Marshall, Jessica Lu, Simon Glynn, Anthony Leiserowitz and Tom Brookes (2023), Later is too late: A comprehensive analysis of the messaging that accelerates climate action in the G20 and beyond, *Potential Energy Coalition*, <https://zeroideas.org/late-is-too-late/>. The data can be explored interactively in the accompanying Global Data Explorer at <https://zeroideas.org/support-for-climate-action-global-data-explorer/>
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