

Underestimating the crowd

Climate mitigation policy is fundamentally simple; we need to cut carbon emissions steeply to prevent additional increments of warming that will make the world increasingly less hospitable for everyone. There is a very strong scientific, and clear international political consensus that this is what needs to happen. Yet we are being very slow in implementing these changes. Why is this?

There are many possible explanations, these include powerful actors who wish to maintain the status quo to keep their power and position. Chronic short-termism which prevents longer-term thinking whenever it seems to have even modest short-term costs. An inflexible dominant economic model that emphasises aggregate growth above all else. A lack of public concern making policy measures unpopular and therefore discouraging governments and businesses from taking action which might make them less profitable, or less likely to stay in power. Concerns about a lack of collective action so that costs are borne by the early movers with minimal overall benefit due to wider inaction. Misinformation, disinformation and practices of obfuscation. Techno-optimism, the belief that technologies will resolve the problem without any need for wider changes. Probably all these factors and others have a role to play.

What many of these possible causes of insufficient climate action have in common though is that they seem to be rooted in, or at least facilitated by a lack of public concern. For this reason, talking about climate change is often seen as an important activity with the goal of raising awareness sufficiently that climate action becomes a political imperative. It seems intuitively true that few people care about climate change, at least enough to make or push for meaningful changes. However, new research suggests that this intuition is dead wrong and in fact the vast majority of citizens around the world are concerned and willing to take action on the climate.

The research, based on a representative survey across 125 countries—around 130 000 individuals—sought to investigate the extent to which individuals around the world are willing to contribute to the common good of climate action, and how people perceive other people's willingness to contribute. They found that

69% of respondents would be willing to contribute 1% of their household income every month to fight global warming. This varied between countries but in the majority of countries the proportion willing to contribute was well over 50%.

Further 86% of respondents believed that people in their country should try to fight global warming and there was an almost universal demand for intensified political action, with 89% of respondents saying that their national government should do more.

There was, however, a notable disparity between the willingness of individuals to act and a prevailing pessimism regarding others' willingness to act against climate change. In other words, there appears to be a widespread and systematic misperception about the beliefs and attitudes held by others. The authors argue that having a high willingness to act but pessimism about the willingness of others to do so can be an obstacle if it deters individuals from engaging in climate action, which then seems to confirm the negative beliefs held by others.

This study suggests therefore that people don't so much need to be convinced that they should be willing to act on climate—most already are—but they rather need to know that others largely already agree with them. An appreciation of existing widespread support for climate policy could offer a real boost to already high levels of personal support and willingness to contribute to climate policy among populations globally. This in turn could improve confidence among governments in pursuing strong climate policies and in companies employing more climate friendly practices. These findings support 'the spiral of inaction' and potential for 'a spiral of action' outlined by Thijs Bouman and Linda Steg in their 2022 comment.

In future research it will be interesting to investigate how incorporating aspects of distributive justice—who should pay more or less to tackle climate change—affects public support for climate policy.

It seems that a little more faith in humanity could help to remove a barrier to people realising their climate motivations. ■ *The Lancet Planetary Health*

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