

A Window for Climate Action

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A Window for Climate Action

Recent student-led (Fridays for Future) and climate change activist-initiated (Extinction Rebellion) protests have effectively mobilized substantial resources and received extensive media coverage. However, potentially due to differences in these movements' tactics, it appears that Fridays for Future has had a more positive impact in bringing attention to the issue of climate change. The protests may have opened a policy window for climate change, presenting a momentary opportunity for substantial political action.

Comment

After decades of remaining on the political back burner, climate change has emerged as a top priority for voters in 2019. Green parties received historically high support in the 2019 European Parliamentary Elections, as well as in federal elections in Austria, Belgium and Switzerland. Climate change also emerged as one of the most important political issues in federal elections in Australia[1] and Canada[2].

Climate change was the most important issue for voters in several Western and Northern European states in the most recent European Parliamentary elections (Eurobarometer[3]). Like many of the current political issues, concerns for climate change appear to be split amongst generational lines – younger voters (45% of <25 years old) were more likely than older voters (34% of >55) to say that combating climate change was an issue motivating their vote. However, concern for climate change is not universal throughout Europe, but rather is viewed as secondary to economic and labor is-

ues in Southern and Eastern European states (fitting with historical pattern of comparatively decreased environmental concerns within these states[4]).

Recent increases in concerns for the environment have also not been uniform across Western European states. In Germany, public opinion has rapidly shifted in the past year, where the environment is viewed as the most important problem facing the country. Since 2000, rarely more than 10% of Germans have viewed the environment as an important problem (see Figure 1). Currently, recent survey data suggests that between 45%–60% of Germans view the environment and climate change as an important problem (Politbarometer[5]). Within the UK, viewing the environment as an important issue has also reached a record high, but still remains a far second to concerns over Brexit (Yougov[6]). While in the United States, there appears to be minimal changes in viewing the environment as an issue (Gallup[7]). But what appears to be driving increased perceptions

of the environment as an important issue in places like Germany, and why haven't we seen similar changes other locales, such as the United States?

Climate change activism

Climate change activism has also taken on a far more prominent public role in 2019. In particular, two large activist social movements have arisen, the student-led Fridays For Future movements and the activist-initiated Extinction Rebellion. While both are advocating for similar goals, namely rapid decarbonization aimed at net zero emissions, they have very different organizational forms and strategies.

Fridays for Future, and related student-led climate change activist groups, are largely decentralized, locally-based groups established around the world, and are generally credited as being sparked by Greta Thunberg. Thunberg is a Swedish teenager who, after becoming inspired by the student activist

survivors of Parkland High School, began protesting for climate change action on the steps of Parliament in Stockholm in August 2018. She has become a global phenomenon in 2019, even being tipped as a leading contender for the Nobel Peace Prize[8]. Thunberg has largely advocating for increased focus on climate change science and the necessity for immediate coordinated action. In general, the Fridays for Future movement has adopted the tactic of weekly student strikes, as well as frequent large-scale coordinated marches, loosely organized around diverse calls for further climate change actions. In 2019, there have been three global climate strikes, in March, May and September, with a fourth planned for the end of November.

Extinction Rebellion, on the other hand, was formed by a group of environmental activists and social movement scholars based in the United Kingdom.

The leaders of Extinction Rebellion have taken a much more publicly aggressive activist approach, routinely staging large acts of civil disobedience. Extinction Rebellion has organized a well publicized ‘die in’ at the British Museum, as well as disruptive acts such as achieving mass arrests and blocking commuter trains. While initially based in the UK, Extinction Rebellion is beginning to spread to actions in other countries as well, notably with recent high profile protests in Berlin.

The student-led climate protests and Extinction Rebellion activists have clearly taken different tactics in mobilizing their resources, and these approaches may have resulted in different affects on public opinion towards climate change.

Conversely, in the UK, Extinction Rebellion has played a far greater public role, receiving substantively more press coverage than Fridays for Future. But, the press coverage of Extinction Rebellion has often been negative, or questioning of the specific adopted tactics[9],

presenting a limit to outreach of the movement to the broader public. Further, there also appears to be comparatively less of a correlation between the Fridays for Future global marches and viewing the environment as an important issue in the UK, rather the increased public opin-

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This suggests that Fridays for Future may present a more ideal model for motivating the broader public towards cli-

mate change. For social movements to thrive over the long-term, new participants must replace older members. The involvement of youth in such movements (who may have the resource of greater free time) is critical if they are to survive over time[10]. Further, such strategies may be better at mobilizing potential resources[11], having the dual effect of activating adherents in the existing environment movements as well as bringing in latent bystanders, such as traditional labor organizations and members of the broader public. Within the German context, the decades-long environmental movement appears have been activated in support of the student protests, along with other interest groups, such as scientists[12] and labor groups[13].

Alternatively, non-normative protest methods, such as those used by Extinction Rebellion, potentially decrease popular support because they can be perceived as a violation of broader social norms[14]. But, the non-violent methods adopted by Friday for Future, such as rallies, strikes and marches, can increase support and mobilization potential as they are perceived to be more “efficacious” and “legitimate”[15]. As such, the tactics adopted by the Fridays for Future movement has the potential to effectively motivate resources and support from traditional environmental sources, as well as expanding to other non-traditional groups, all while avoiding the alienation of the broader public as their actions and members may be perceived more positively and legitimate.

Within Germany, the Fridays for Future movement has been far more prominent, as judged by coverage in national prestige print media outlets (see Figure 2). Fridays for Future student protests in Germany have received steadily increased coverage since August 2018, with roughly 15 times as many press articles as Extinction Rebellion during this time period. The media coverage of Fridays for Future in Germany appears to have spiked around each of the three global climate strikes in 2019. Further, there appears to be related increase in Germans viewing the environment as an important issue after each of these strikes, suggesting that the Fridays for Future movement may have supported, or even triggered, this rapid shift in public opinion.

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Opening the Policy Window for Climate Change Action

The increased media attention to the issues of climate change combined with the shift in public opinion dynamics presents an opportunity to open a “pol-

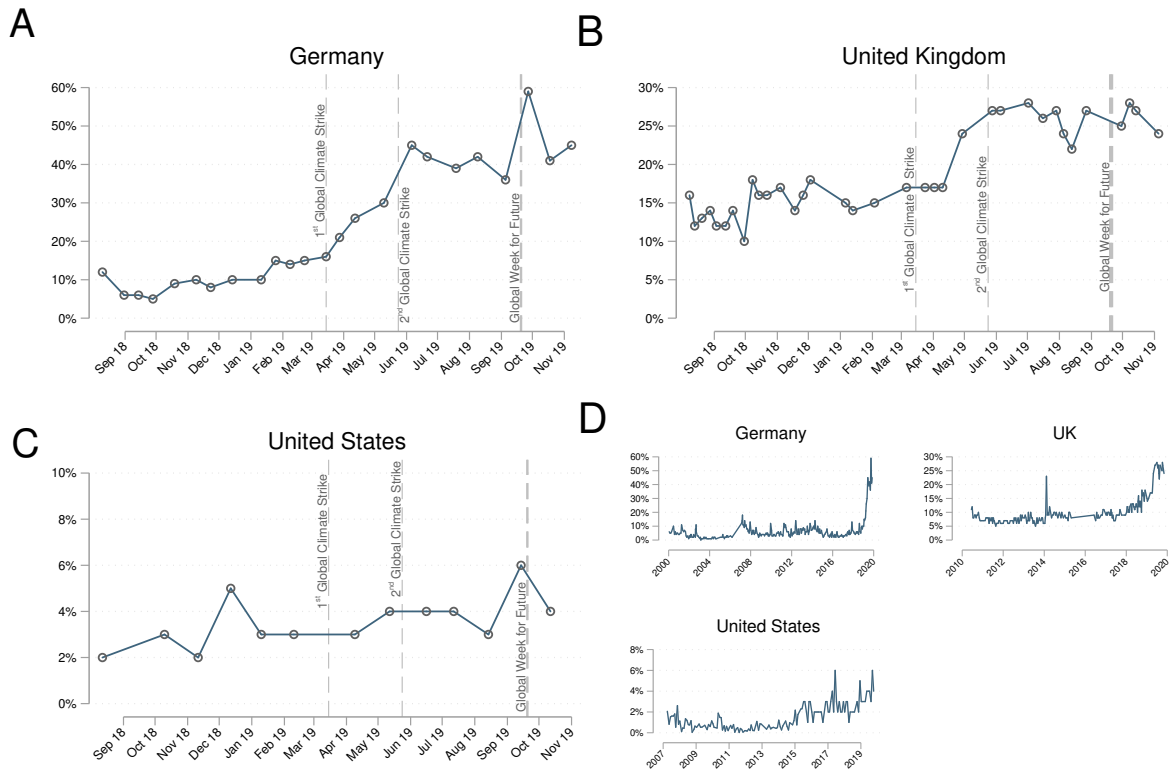


Figure 1: Percentages of adults that list the "Environment as an Important Issue". Panels (A), (B) and (C) present survey data collected at least monthly since the beginning of the Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion protests in August 2018 until current from Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States, respectively. Dotted grey vertical lines display days of global strikes organized by Fridays4Future in March, May and September 2019. Panel (D) presents survey data collected from the longest periods available for each program. Data is collected by Forschungsgruppe Wahlen: Politbarometer (Germany)[5], YouGov (United Kingdom)[6] and Gallup (United States)[7]. The question wordings and survey methodologies are similar, but are not identical. Therefore, direct interpretation of percentages between countries is cautioned against. Rather, comparisons are better made within each country over time.

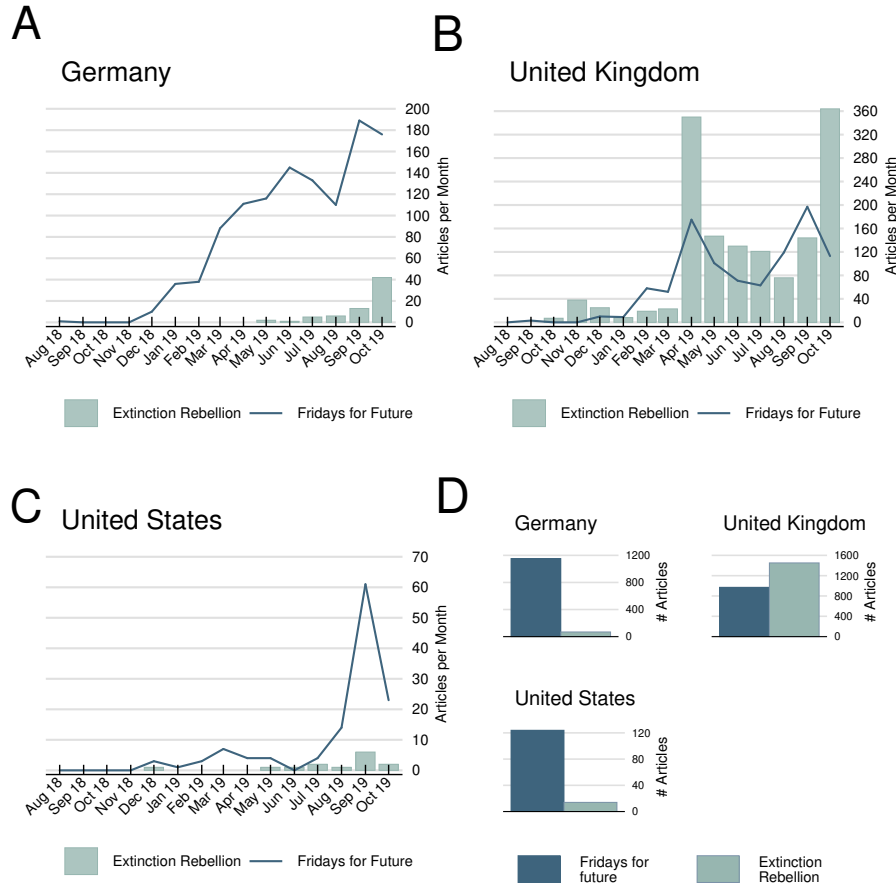


Figure 2: Prestige print media coverage of Friday's for Future and Extinction Rebellion in Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States. Panels (A), (B) and (C) display the number of articles per month appearing in domestic prestige print media outlets that mention Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion, or their associated leadership figures, in Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States, respectively. Panel (D) compares the total number of articles since August 2018 to October 2019 that mention Fridays for Future or Extinction Rebellion in each of the three countries. The prestige print media sources adopted for each country are: Germany (Der Spiegel, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Süddeutsche Zeitung and Die Zeit), United Kingdom (The Guardian, The Independent, The Times and The Observer) and for the United States (The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal and USA Today). Search terms utilized for Fridays for Future were "Fridays for future", "FFF", "Greta Thunberg", "school strike for climate", "youth for climate", "climate strike", "youth strike for climate" in English-language publications, as well as including the terms "Schulstreik für das Klima" OR "Schulstreik" OR "Klimastreik" in German language publications. Search terms utilized for Extinction Rebellion articles were "extinction rebellion", "Roger Hallam" and "Gail Bradbrook" for all English and German language publications.

icy window”. Policy windows are opportunities for advocates to promote their preferred policy instruments[16]. These advocates, also known as “policy entrepreneurs,” often wait for political opportunities that can be used to their advantage. Political opportunities that can open policy windows include changes in political leadership or governing coalitions, or shifts in the national mood which can be reflected in large-scale changes in public opinion. However, policy entrepreneurs must act quickly, as these ephemeral windows of opportunity happen infrequently and are usually only open for a short period of time[16].

Further, political actors are considered to be responsive to shifting public opinions[17]. Contemporary right-wing populist parties are often seen as a potential hindrance to developing climate policies[18], but may not always be the case. Some populist parties, such as the ‘Five Star Movement’ in Italy, have adopted progressive climate policy stances. That is, populist parties are not inherently opposed to climate change actions, but frame their politics around what the public considers to be popular, reflecting the

‘will’ of the people against the elites[19]. Further, due to climate change social movements, new political coalitions can be developed[20]. For example, scientists recently became involved in the student-led climate protests[21] (Schiermeier et al. 2019). These shifts in public opinion have the potential to punctuate previously sticky institutions, such as environmental regulatory regimes, resulting in substantive policy shifts[22].

Lastly, negative economic conditions have been noted as hindrances to environmental policies, as they have long been viewed as holding competing objectives with an oppositional trade-off[23]. While the recovery from the Great Recession has been neither complete, nor uniformly experienced, The US, UK and Western European states have all experienced annual growth since 2010 (World Bank, 2019). Similarly, the average unemployment rate in OECD countries has dropped from the highpoint of 8.3% in 2010 down to 5.3% in 2018, including rates under 4% in Germany, the US and the UK (OECD, 2019).

Given these shifting conditions, it may finally be time to have some op-

timism about the future of public policy responses rising to meet the needs of climate change mitigation. That is, the climate policy window may be temporarily opening. Germany, for example, has recently introduced its first ever federal climate change laws, mandating that the country meet its 2030 goals (a 55% reduction in GHG emissions) as well as establishing pathways to pursue carbon neutrality by 2050. Currently, only a limited set of countries have enacted national climate change laws, and Germany is by far the largest and move diverse economy to propose such actions. This presents the possibility for policy diffusion and transfer to other states[24], particularly considering the powerful role Germany plays within the European Union. Climate policy entrepreneurs need to build upon this momentum to further capitalize on this window of opportunity, pushing climate change proposals prominently into national and supra-national governmental agendas before this ephemeral moment passes.

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