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DISCUSSION PAPER

How framing and crisis saliency can reshape political coalitions: evidence from a cross-country experiment

Beijer Discussion Paper Series No. 284

Lindahl, T., G. Engström, J. Gars, S. Jagers, and S. Källman. 2026.

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Abstract: How does different policy motivation framing affect broad public support for climate-related policies and is there a link to crisis saliency? Using a preregistered survey experiment conducted in six European countries, we randomly assign respondents to evaluate identical policy proposals introduced with either a climate-mitigation framing or an energy-security framing. We classify respondents according to the societal crisis they consider most important (give priority to) to capture differences in crisis salience. We find no significant average difference in policy support depending on which framing is used. However, framing effects are strongly heterogeneous: a climate framing increases support among climate-priority respondents while reducing support among those prioritizing economic or immigration concerns compared to the energy-security framing. These results suggest that framing reshapes political coalitions rather than increasing overall policy support.

1. Introduction

The world is experiencing an era of polycrisis (WEF, 2023; Lawrence et al., 2024), where pandemics, energy shocks, geopolitical conflicts and climate change induced extreme events together shape societal perceptions of risk and future outlooks, public priorities and policies (Lawrence et al., 2024). These overlapping and to some extent competing crises create a challenge: long-term problems such as climate change risk being deprioritized when attention is dominated by immediate crises (Sisco et al. 2023), potentially undermining support for mitigation efforts and policies. Understanding how the public respond to this new reality is critical, not only for advancing theory on risk perceptions, but also for designing communication and policy strategies that can sustain support for policies targeting long-term threats such as climate change.

A promising avenue of research deals with strategic framing of policy proposals. Framing research demonstrates that the way information is presented can shape perceptions, make certain beliefs, values and behavioural intentions more salient (Lecheler and de Vreese 2012; Nisbet 2009; Severson and Coleman, 2015; Brügger et al., 2016). In the context of climate policy, multiple studies show that framing can alter public support. For example, emphasizing co-benefits, such as economic, health and national security benefits can potentially broaden support (Bernauer and McGrath, 2015; Dasani et al., 2022) show that repeated exposure to frames emphasizing immediacy and local relevance can increase support. There are typically heterogeneity effects linked to these framing effects. Wiest et al, (2015) and Howel et al., (2016) show for example that the effectiveness of framing is context-dependent and interacts with political ideology.

Despite this evidence on framing effects, less is known about how multiple overlapping crises conditions support, and if framing building on crisis saliency can be used to bolster support. Moreover, most of the research examining heterogeneity does so along traditional dimensions, such political leaning (Fesenfeld et al., 2024),

European policy attitudes are no longer simply divided between left and right and between pro and anti- environmental and immigration attitudes (Krastev and Leonard, 2024; Eurobarometer, 2025). Rather recent empirical surveys show that policy attitudes are shaped by current socio-political realities including the crisis landscape (Krastev and Leonard, 2024; Eurobarometer, 2025). Over the last decade, Europe has experienced at least five major crises: the climate crisis with associated extreme events such as flooding and drought, a a global financial crisis, a migration crisis, the covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine not only shattering the illusion that war would never return to Europe, but also leading to an energy shortage. And even though these are interacting crises, from an individual perspective, one crisis usually plays a more dominant role above others, which in turn will shape how this person sees the future and the importance of different policy areas. Specifically, European dependence on Russian fossil fuels has become increasingly associated with broader geopolitical issues and transitioning to renewable energy is widely acknowledged as a crucial step in reducing these geopolitical vulnerabilities (IEA, 2023).

Could an energy-security framed justification garner more support for climate policy interventions compared to a climate framed motivation, and will support vary along which crisis a person view as more important?

Indeed, there is evidence suggesting that energy related frames can generate broader public support for policy interventions than climate frames. For example, U.S. survey experiments have shown that when clean energy policies are framed in terms of energy dependence or energy security, support tends to be higher (Feldman and Sol, 2018; Gainous et al., 2021). A study performed in Finland, a justification referring to energy independence marginally increased the acceptability of climate emission interventions (Ahonen, et al., 2025).

We depart from the following viewpoint: individuals differ in which societal risks they perceive as most salient. When policy motivations align with these priorities, individuals perceive policies as more relevant or legitimate, increasing expressed support. We hypothesize that an energy-security motivated policy is on average perceived as more relevant and legitimate and thus associated with a higher support compared to a climate motivated justification. We also hypothesize that due to heterogeneity effects framing can also reallocate support across constituencies.

We test these predictions using a preregistered survey experiment conducted in six European countries (Germany, Spain, France, Italy, Poland, and Sweden). Respondents evaluated identical policy proposals framed either as climate mitigation or energy security. By holding policy content constant, the experiment isolates the causal effect of our different policy motivation framing. Respondents were classified according to the societal crisis they consider most important of the following: climate change, energy, health, immigration, or the economy.

The results reveal no aggregate persuasion effects from using an energy-security motivation instead of a climate change motivated justification. We do however, find strong

heterogeneous framing effects. Climate framing substantially increases support among individuals prioritizing climate change but reduces support among respondents prioritizing economic or immigration concerns. These patterns remain robust when controlling for attitudes toward EU institutions, trust in EU institutions, and knowledge about EU institutions. Moreover, the findings remain after a robustness-test, checking for the influence of omitted variables, indicating that the primary source of variation in framing responses indeed lies in crisis salience rather than demographic differences.

This paper contributes to the literature. First, it provides cross-country experimental evidence on how motivational framing affects support for climate-related public policies. We show that aggregate estimates mask substantial heterogeneity across citizens across Europe linked to which current crisis they consider the most important for shaping how they look upon the future. Second, using a harmonized survey experiment, we show that heterogeneous responses are systematic and predictable across contexts, highlighting that political communication shapes coalition formation rather than aggregate opinion.

2. Conceptual Framework

Building on previous evidence that framing can shape policy support and that individuals prioritize different crises or societal challenges, we conceptualize citizens as evaluating policies through the lens of crisis salience. The effectiveness of a policy frame therefore depends not only on its content but also on the alignment between the frame and the individual's most salient concern. To formalize this intuition we present a framework in which the utility of an individual derives from a policy (and hence translates into support) depends on both the policy itself and the motivation framing attached to it, capturing how framing interacts with crisis salience to shape policy acceptance.

Let individuals derive utility from a policy according to

$$U_i = V(P, \phi_i M) + \varepsilon_i,$$

where, P denotes the policy itself, M denotes the motivation framing attached to the policy, ϕ_i measures alignment between the framing and the individual's prioritized societal concern meaning that $V(P, \phi_i M)$ captures the intrinsic evaluation of the whole policy package (including both the policy and its motivation).

Individuals whose salient crisis aligns with the framing should interpret the policy as more beneficial or legitimate. Conversely, misaligned framing may weaken support even when policy content is unchanged. The framework therefore predicts that framing effects should be strongest when policy motivations match individuals' salient concerns. If policy content is held constant, differences in support arise from variation in ϕ_i, i.e., how strongly individuals perceive the motivation as relevant to their primary crisis of concern.

In this paper we are particularly interested in two crises: climate change and energy security. Aggregate effects are theoretically ambiguous. An energy-security framing may generate broader support if it appeals to a majority holding those concerns and vice versa for the climate framing. Aggregate treatment effects therefore depend on the distribution of issue salience in the population:

$$ATE = \sum_j s_j \cdot \delta_j,$$

where s_j denotes the population share of each 'priority-concern' group and δ_j the group-specific framing effect. This implies that average effects may be small even when heterogeneous effects are substantial.

A growing body of evidence suggests, however, that energy related frames can generate broader public support for policy interventions than climate frames (Feldman and Sol, 2018; Gainous et al., 2021; Ahonen, et al., 2025). Moreover, although concern about climate change is also widespread, recent polls indicate that climate action does not always emerge as the most immediate priority for many citizens compared with issues tied to their daily lives and security, including economic and energy stability (Krastev and Leonard, 2024; Eurobarometer, 2025). Together, these findings motivate the expectation that an energy-security framing may yield higher aggregate support because such motivations tap into broader and more immediate public concerns than a climate framing alone. We thus also hypothesize:

(H1): An energy-security framing will generate higher average policy support than climate framing.

The framework yields the following empirical prediction:

(H2): A climate framing increases policy support among individuals prioritizing climate change.

3. Data collection

The empirical analysis uses data from an online survey experiment conducted in six European countries: Germany, Spain, France, Italy, Poland, and Sweden. Respondents were recruited through a professional survey panel (Yougov) to obtain approximately nationally balanced adult samples within each country. The final pooled dataset contains 12,325 respondents.

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two informational framings which differed in the motivational framing of identical policy proposals. Two introduction versions were used to prime respondents' perceptions of societal challenges:

Energy-security motivation framing:
"Residents of Europe have experienced several crises in recent years, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As a result, we have and are still experiencing energy supply shortage and higher energy prices. Against this background, it is important to secure future energy supply."

Climate motivation framing:
"Residents of Europe have experienced several crises in recent years, such as the effects of climate change like floods and droughts. As a result, we have and are still experiencing food

supply shortage and higher food prices. Against this background, it is important to avoid future climate change effects."

Randomization was implemented at the individual level within each country. In both conditions, respondents indicated their agreement with the introductory statement using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *"I do not agree at all" (1) to "I completely agree" (7)*.

Following, respondents were presented with three EU policy proposals, which were identical across both framing conditions. Participants rated each proposal on the same 7-point Likert scale indicating to what degree they would support the policy.

"Increase the capacity to produce renewable energy within the EU so that it accounts for about 45% of the energy supply, which would nearly double the share of renewable energy."
"Improve energy efficiency. A new goal to improve energy efficiency by about 12%, which would mean that each member country would save about 1.5% in energy use by 2030."
"Introduce a minimum level of an energy tax for heating and transport, which is implemented in all member countries."

These policy measures reflect current EU policy discussions and initiatives, including renewable energy targets, efficiency improvements, and harmonized energy taxation, ensuring that respondents evaluated realistic interventions (European Commission, 2022). The experimental design isolates framing effects by holding policy content constant while randomly varying motivational framing.

We operationalize crisis salience using respondents' ranking of current societal crises. We follow the framework of Krastev and Leonard (2024) as it has already been tested and evaluated in a European context. In their survey from 2024, surveying 11 European countries they elicited how Europeans differ in respect to their crisis perceptions. Following Krastev and Leonard (2024), we let respondents rank crises according to which had most changed the way they think about their future by answering the following question: which of the following issues has, over the past decade, most changed the way you look at your future? The following crises were listed:

Table 1: Crises presented to respondents.

Climate crisis (e.g. floods, heatwaves, wildfires)
Covid-19 pandemic
Russian invasion of Ukraine leading to energy crisis
Large immigration flows
Global financial crisis
Other (open-ended)

Individuals are classified into mutually exclusive "crisis-priority groups" according to which crisis they ranked as number one. Our survey also collected standard demographic variables (age, gender, education, income, employment status) as well as attitudinal measures towards EU institutions. Support for policy proposals may also depend on broader institutional orientations. Individuals with higher trust, knowledge, or positive attitudes toward EU institutions may for example interpret policy proposals as more credible or effective, independently of framing. Including institutional indices allows the analysis to distinguish

framing effects driven by crisis salience from those reflecting general institutional confidence.

Empirical strategy

The preregistered primary outcome is an index measuring support for proposed policies. Respondents evaluated three policy proposals on Likert scales ranging from 1 to 7. The main outcome variable, $Average\ support_i$, is constructed as the respondent-level average across these items:

$$Average\ support_i = \frac{1}{3}\sum_{k=1}^{3} PolicySuppor\ t_{ik}.$$

Higher values indicate greater policy support. Averaging across items reduces measurement noise and captures general support for the policy package, consistent with the preregistration.

An indicator variable is used for the crisis group classification, from now referred to as crisis 'tribe'. Also following the preregistration, three indices capturing EU-related orientations are included as controls. These are 1) attitudes toward EU institutions, constructed as the means of three survey items, 2) Trust in EU institutions, constructed analogously, and 3) Knowledge about EU institutions, measured using four factual items. Indices are standardized averages of their respective components, with higher values indicating more positive attitudes, greater trust, or higher knowledge. These variables account for variation in institutional orientation that may correlate with policy support independently of framing.

The preregistration specified two primary hypotheses.

Hypothesis A (Average framing effect): Energy-security framing will generate higher average policy support than climate framing.

Hypothesis B (Preference alignment): Within the climate framing condition, respondents prioritizing climate change will exhibit higher policy support than other respondents.

To test these hypotheses the primary analysis used two-sample mean comparison tests (t-tests and rank-sum tests). For robustness checks we used a linear regression model with interaction terms, and average marginal effects were computed from the regression model. Robust standard errors were used. This analysis pooled countries while controlling for country fixed effects, allowing treatment effects to be estimated using within-country variation.

The following linear model was used:

$$Average\ support_i = \alpha + \beta ClimateT_i + \sum_j \gamma_j\, Tribe_{ij} + \sum_j \delta_j\, (ClimateT_i \times Tribe_{ij}) + X_i'\theta + \lambda_c + \varepsilon_i,$$

where $ClimateT_i$ denote an indicator equal to one if respondent i received the climate framing and zero otherwise. Because policy content was held constant across conditions, the experimental variation isolates the effect of policy motivation framing rather than policy design. $Tribe_{ij}$ denotes indicators for the crisis-priority groups, X_i includes EU attitude, trust, and knowledge indices, λ_c are country fixed effects. The health-priority group and energy framing serve as baseline categories. The interaction terms test whether framing effects differ systematically across crisis group constituencies.

All outcome definitions, subgroup constructions, and main hypothesis tests follow the preregistered analysis plan. The pooled dataset was constructed prior to hypothesis testing.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive statistics

The pooled sample consists of 12,325 respondents from six European countries (Germany, Spain, France, Italy, Poland, and Sweden). After listwise deletion due to missing covariates in regression analyses, 11,348 observations remain. Respondents were randomly assigned to either an energy-framed policy introduction (control condition) or a climate-framed introduction (treatment condition), yielding balanced group sizes (5,639 and 5,709 observations, respectively). The distribution of crisis tribe memberships, defined by respondents' highest-ranked societal concern is provided in the Table 2 below.

Table 2: Crisis tribe constituencies distributed across the treatments.

Crisis tribe	ClimateT = 0	ClimateT = 1	Total # obs.	Relative size (%)
Climate	1,339	1,441	2,750	24.2%
Energy	916	1,053	1,969	17.4%
Health	961	987	1,948	17.2%
Immigration	1,159	1,105	2,264	19.9%
Economy	1,264	1,153	2,417	21.3%
Total # obs	5,639	5,709	11,348	
Ave support (St. dev)	4.787 (1.409)	4.761 (1.484)	4.774 (1.447)	

Average support for the policy proposals is 4.77 on a 7-point scale (SD = 1.45). Climate concerns constitute the largest single crisis tribe group (24.2%), followed by economy (21.3%), immigration (19.9%), energy-security (17.4%), and health (17.2%). Crisis tribe composition is broadly comparable across countries, where the climate tribe group is the largest in all countries but in Poland where the economy tribe is the largest.

Table 3: Crisis tribe constituencies across countries.

Crisis tribe	Germany	Spain	France	Italy	Poland	Sweden	Total
Climate	492	478	474	529	341	436	2,750
Energy/security	275	338	407	379	236	334	1,969
Health	316	311	353	366	310	292	1,948
Immigration	410	368	391	362	390	343	2,264
Economy	429	366	258	303	570	391	2,417
Total	1,922	1,861	1,983	1,939	1,847	1,796	11,348

4.2 Framing effects (Hypothesis A)

Mean support under the energy-security framing is 4.79, compared with 4.76 under the climate framing. The difference of 0.026 scale points is small and statistically insignificant (two-sample t-test: $t = 0.99$, $p = 0.322$). A nonparametric Wilcoxon rank-sum test yields the same conclusion ($p = 0.637$). Thus, contrary to Hypothesis A, the data provides no evidence that framing policy proposals in terms of energy-security rather than climate motivations increases overall policy support.

4.3 Heterogeneous effects across crisis tribes (Hypothesis B)

Hypothesis B proposes that a climate framing will increase policy support among respondents belonging to the climate tribe relative to members of other tribes. Restricting the sample to respondents exposed to the climate framing, climate-tribe members exhibit substantially higher support than all other respondents. Mean support equals 5.56 (SD = 1.48) among climate-tribe members compared with 4.53 (SD = 1.41) among other crisis tribes, a difference of 1.03 scale points ($t = -23.96$, $p < 0.001$). The result is confirmed by a Wilcoxon rank-sum test ($p < 0.001$). This large estimation difference provides strong support for Hypothesis B, individuals whose primary concern is climate change respond substantially more favorably to policies presented using climate motivations.

4.4 Regression analysis with preregistered controls

To assess robustness and incorporate preregistered covariates, we estimate a linear regression including treatment– crisis tribe interactions, indices measuring knowledge about EU policies, trust in EU institutions, attitudes toward EU institutions, and country fixed effects. The health tribe and the energy-security framing serve as baseline categories.

Consistent with the mean comparison tests, the regression results show that the average treatment effect of climate framing compared to the energy-security framing is essentially zero ($\beta = -0.001$, SE = 0.054, $p = 0.989$). However, also here we see substantial heterogeneity emerges across tribes. Relative to the health tribe, baseline support is significantly higher among climate- and energy-security-tribe respondents and lower among immigration- and economy-tribe respondents. Among control variables, knowledge about EU policies, trust in EU institutions, and positive attitudes toward EU institutions are all positively and significantly associated with policy support. Country fixed effects indicate somewhat higher support in Italy, Spain, and France relative to Germany, while differences for Poland and Sweden are statistically insignificant. See Table 4 below.

Table 4: Linear Regression Results (Robust Standard Errors)

Variable	Coefficient	St. error	t	p>|t|	99% confidence interval	
ClimateT	-0.0007	0.0542	-0.01	0.989	-0.1069	.1054
Crisis tribe						
Climate	0.2749	0.0500	5.49	0.000	0.1768	0.3730
Energy-Security	0.1853	0.0547	3.39	0.001	0.0782	0.2924
Immigration	-0.1601	0.0528	-3.03	0.002	-0.2637	-0.0566
Economy	-0.4822	0.0544	-8.87	0.000	-0.5888	-0.3757
ClimateT x crisis tribe						
x Climate	0.2421	0.0703	3.44	0.001	0.1043	0.3799
x Energy-Security	0.0928	0.0757	1.23	0.220	-0.0555	0.2411
x Immigration	-0.1725	0.0749	-2.30	0.021	-0.3193	-0.0257
x Economy	-0.3152	0.0768	-4.10	0.000	-0.4658	-0.1647
Controls						
KnowledgeEU	0.1554	0.0202	7.70	0.000	0.1158	0.1949
TrustEU	0.0432	0.0088	4.93	0.000	0.0261	0.0604
AttitudeEU	0.1412	0.0096	14.76	0.000	0.1224	0.1599
Country ID						
FR	0.0790	0.0401	1.97	0.049	0.0005	0.1575
IT	.3214	.0388	8.29	0.000	.2454	.3974

ES	.0827	.0405	2.04	0.041	.0034	.1620
PL	.0483	.0406	1.19	0.235	-.0313	.1278
SE	.0579	.0388	1.49	0.136	-.0182	.1340
Constant	3.797	.0657	57.81	0.000	3.6684	3.9259

Regression statistics: Obs. = 11246; Prob > F= 0.0000; R square = 0.1812; Root MSE = 1.3242

The average marginal effect of climate framing across all respondents is likewise small and statistically insignificant (AME = −0.028, SE = 0.023, $p = 0.232$). Marginal-effects within the climate framing estimates indicate positive and significant effects for the climate tribe (+0.24, $p = 0.000$), weakly positive but statistically insignificant effects for the energy-security tribe (+0.09, $p = 0.081$), no effect for the health tribe (baseline), negative effects for immigration (−0.17, $p = 0.001$) and economy tribes (−0.32, $p < 0.001$). See Table 5 below. These results are also illustrated in Figure 1.

Table 5: Average marginal effects

Variable	Dy/dx	St. err	*T*	p > |*t*|	95% conf.	Interval
ClimateT	-0.0275	0.0230	-1.20	0.232	-0.0726	0.0176
ClimateT x Crisis tribe						
x climate	0.2414	0.0448	5.39	0.000	0.1536	0.3291
x energy-security	0.0921	0.0529	1.74	0.081	-0.0115	0.1956
x health	-0.0007	0.0542	-0.01	0.989	-0.1069	0.1054
x immigration	-0.1733	0.0517	-3.35	0.001	-0.2747	-0.0718
x economy	-0.3160	0.0544	-5.80	0.000	-0.4227	-0.2093

Figure 1: Average Marginal Effect of Climate Framing by Tribe

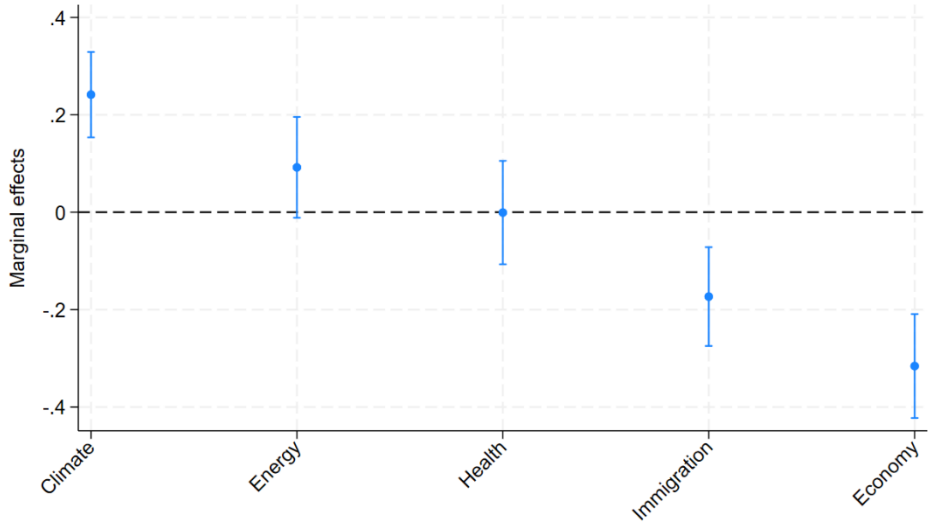
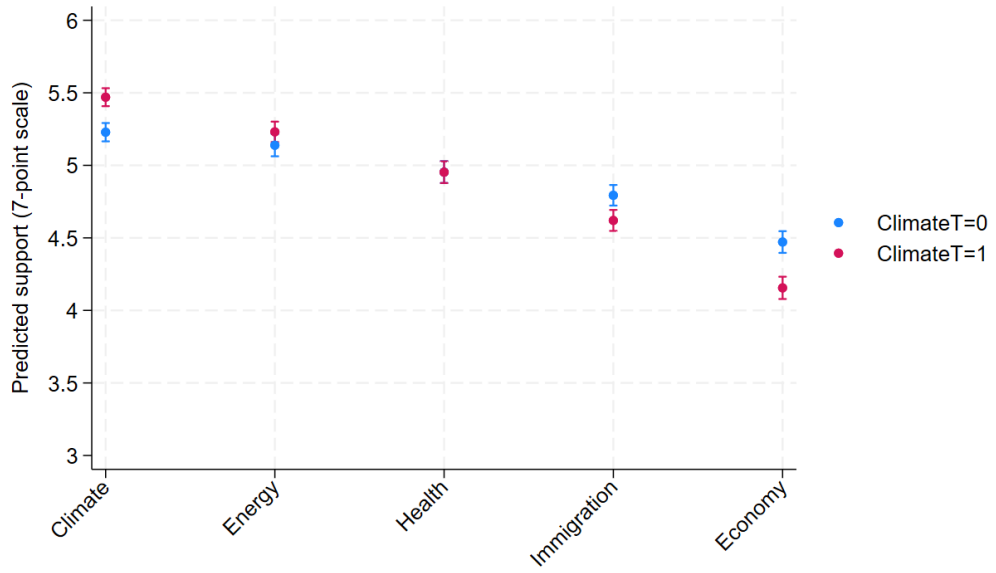


Figure 2 shows that climate framing increases predicted support among climate-tribe respondents while reducing support among economy and immigration tribes, resulting in negligible aggregate effects. Moreover, it further illustrates that while the climate framing does not shift average support (compared to the energy-security framing) it reallocates support across groups with different crisis priorities.

Figure 2: Predicted Support by Tribe and Treatment



Additional robustness test (not pre-registered)

We further examine whether socio-demographic characteristics account for the observed heterogeneity in framing effects. Using a LASSO-based variable selection procedure, we include education, age, gender, and their interactions with the treatment indicator. The results indicate modest demographic heterogeneity: climate framing reduces support among male respondents but has no detectable effect among women. However, the magnitude of these effects is small compared with the heterogeneity observed across crisis-priority groups. While education and age can are strong predictors of overall policy support, we find no evidence that it moderates the effect of framing. These results thus suggest that the primary source of variation in framing responses lies in crisis salience rather than demographic differences.

We also check whether personal experience can predict which crisis tribe one belongs to. We find only a very weak association between crisis experience and crisis prioritization (Spearman's $\rho = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that lived experience explains little of the variation in crisis salience. This suggests that individuals' crisis priorities reflect preference structures rather than direct exposure.

5. Discussion

The present study examined whether policy support depends on how policy proposals are motivated and whether framing effects differ across groups (tribes) defined by their primary societal concerns. Across six European countries, the findings provide little evidence that framing alone changes aggregate levels of policy support. Instead, framing primarily redistributes support across citizens with different crisis priorities.

When policies are substantively unchanged, reframing their motivation appears insufficient to shift average preferences.

However, the absence of an average treatment effect does not imply that framing is irrelevant. Instead, the results indicate that aggregate neutrality masks substantial heterogeneity across

groups. A climate framing significantly increased policy support among respondents belonging to the climate tribe. Regression analyses confirm that climate-tribe members respond positively to climate framing relative to energy framing, while immigration- and economy-tribe respondents exhibit negative responses.

Rather than moving the entire opinion distribution in one direction, framing shifts support between groups.

From a policy-design perspective, the findings imply that communication strategies involve trade-offs. Emphasizing climate motivations increases support among climate-concerned citizens but simultaneously reduces support among groups prioritizing economic or immigration issues. Policymakers therefore face a coordination problem: framing that mobilizes one constituency may alienate another.

This could help explain why political debates frequently feature competing justifications for identical policies (e.g., climate mitigation framed as environmental protection, energy security, or economic modernization). Different framings may not change total support but instead reshape coalition structures underlying policy acceptance.

The results also suggest limits to attempts at depoliticization through reframing. Presenting climate-related policies in energy-security terms does not universally broaden support; rather, it shifts which groups perceive the policy as aligned with their priorities.

Across specifications, knowledge about EU policies, trust in EU institutions, and positive attitudes toward EU institutions are strongly associated with higher policy support. These relationships indicate that institutional confidence remains an important predictor of acceptance of supranational policy initiatives. While these variables are not experimentally manipulated, their consistent association with support suggests that institutional legitimacy may condition responsiveness to policy communication more broadly.

There are a few limitations. First, tribe membership is constructed from respondents' ranked crisis concerns and therefore captures relative rather than absolute crisis salience. Second, framing was implemented through introductory text rather than repeated exposure typical of real political communication environments. Third, outcomes rely on stated support measured on Likert scales rather than observed behavioral choices.

These findings suggest that political communication strategies should be understood less as tools of mass persuasion and more as mechanisms that activate distinct constituencies. Future research may therefore benefit from focusing on how framing shapes coalition formation and political alignment rather than average opinion change alone.

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