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There is little evidence extreme weather events spur political action on climate change

Extreme weather events like flooding and wildfires are often cited as evidence of the need to tackle climate change. But do these events lead to real political change? Drawing on a new study covering nine European countries, **Tim Wappenhans, António Valentim, Heike Klüver** *and* **Lukas Stoetzer** *find no evidence of a shift in the political attention paid to environmental policies in the aftermath of extreme weather events.*

The intensifying frequency of extreme weather events, from catastrophic wildfires to devastating floods, underscores the urgent need for climate policy leadership. In a recent study, we test the assumption that these events spur political action on environmental issues.

We examined over 260,000 press releases from 68 political parties across nine European countries spanning 2010-2020. We wanted to understand whether exposure to extreme weather events leads political parties to talk more about environmental issues. Our findings? Beyond a fleeting uptick from Green parties, there is no consistent shift in the attention paid to environmental policies. These findings hold across the political spectrum, event type or whether parties are in government or opposition.

A wake-up call? Not quite

Climate change is exacerbating the severity of weather events. Public discussions often frame such disasters as turning points for public awareness and policy momentum. Yet, while studies suggest these events can briefly increase individual concern about climate change, the translation of this concern into sustained political action is far from guaranteed.

We wanted to address this gap by examining whether extreme weather serves as a wake-up call for political parties. While research has explored voter responses to climate impacts, less is known

about how political leaders react. Empirically, we combine machine learning and a difference-in-differences design to study the impact of extreme weather events on party press releases.

A closer look at party communications

We analysed press releases – a key medium for parties to communicate priorities. As press releases are published very frequently, they allow us to see real-time shifts in priorities and messaging as they adapt to current events or public concerns.

Each release was categorised to assess the proportion focusing on environmental issues, capturing the attention parties give to climate and environmental issues. More specifically, we collected press releases from all nationally represented parties in nine countries (Austria, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom). We used supervised machine learning algorithms to classify press releases.

Building on the Comparative Agendas Project, we developed a codebook with detailed coding instructions to distinguish various issue areas. This codebook included example press releases to train native-speaking coders. Subsequently, we generated daily counts and proportions for each press release category by party, integrated this data with party-level information and aggregated it by calendar weeks and months.

Regarding extreme weather data, we use data from the Emergency Events Database and focus on high-impact events that caused casualties, including floods, wildfires, storms and extreme temperatures. Pairing the event data with the press releases data, we estimate the effects of these extreme weather events on the attention parties give to environmental issues using a difference-in-differences design.

What we find is that even after fatal disasters, most parties did not increase their emphasis on environmental issues in the weeks (or months) following these events. We find an exception – Green parties – who briefly raised attention by about six percentage points during the week of an event. However, even this increase dissipated within a week.

Why aren't politicians responding?

We focus on high-profile events in environmentally aware societies, where climate discourse is already prominent, which could be seen as most-likely cases. The fact that we find no effects there suggests that even these dramatic and extreme contexts fail to trigger political momentum for climate policies.

There are some potential explanations for our findings, which we hope future research can enlighten. First, political priorities often reflect immediate public demands, which, in the aftermath

of disasters, focus more on relief efforts than prevention. In line with this, press releases following extreme events often focused on discussions of recovery rather than climate action.

Second, political calculations play a role. Extreme weather events can sometimes influence pro-climate attitudes or voting, but these effects tend to be modest. It could be that parties do not think this is enough of an incentive to change their behaviour. Alternatively, it could be that this is an opportunity that is worth capitalising on, but parties underestimate support for climate policy or pro-climate stances.

Where do we go from here?

Our findings challenge assumptions about the relationship between climate disasters and political action. While voters might momentarily rally around environmental concerns, translating this into sustained political will to take action likely requires more than natural disasters. If the goal is to address climate change, policymakers and advocates must focus on building long-term support for climate action, leveraging moments of heightened awareness to foster enduring commitment.
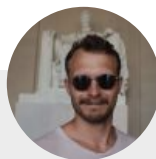
For more information, see the authors' accompanying paper in Nature Climate Change.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: Fernando Astasio Avila / Shutterstock.com

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