Citizens and the climate change

Executive summary. Second edition, 2023

Lara Lázaro-Touza, Carmen González Enríquez, José Pablo Martínez

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Executive summary[1]

Five years ago the Elcano Royal Institute conducted its first survey analysing the views of Spanish citizens regarding climate change. Since then, many surveys on the matter have been published.

Following the pandemic, the energy crisis, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza and the first global stocktake (that analysed progress towards meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement), the Elcano Royal Institute has again conducted a survey that builds on and broadens the scope of its 2019 predecessor –which focused essentially on mitigation– by including water and adaptation to the impacts of climate change.

The design of this survey, the fieldwork for which was carried out at the end of 2023, uses the same theoretical framework as the 2019 survey, drawn both from social psychology and from stated preference techniques used in environmental economics. As with its predecessor, the goal of the current survey is to analyse the degree of knowledge, concern, attitudes, intentions and behaviours regarding climate change by Spanish citizens as well as their acceptance of the technologies, policies and initiatives proposed to address it.

Some of the most salient results of the survey are as follows:

1. Climate change is perceived as the second greatest threat after armed conflict and, consequently, as a very serious problem by a large majority of citizens surveyed.

2. Climate deniers have increased in Spain, especially among people located towards the right of the political spectrum. However, despite the increase, only a very small minority of the overall sample are climate deniers, possibly because of the growing impacts of climate change, which are already being felt around the world according to a large majority of the interviewees.

3. Although respondents' level of pro-environmental world view remains high, it is lower compared to 2019. Despite this decline, the vast majority of respondents claim to be aware of the importance of consumer decisions for the environment and state that they are able to save water and energy, although the perceived capacity for saving energy has fallen since 2019. The willingness to consume recycled water is also widespread.

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4. When asked about who is responsible for climate change, less than half of the interviewees acknowledge they are. This figure has also fallen since 2019, despite the publication of the Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), where the anthropogenic nature of climate change is described as unequivocal. On the other hand, most interviewees state that their peers (family, partner, friends and colleagues) talk about how to address climate change.

5. Approximately half of regular public and private transport users say they would be willing to pay more to compensate for (internalise) the damage caused by their use of public and private transport. However, the number of people who say they should be able to continue using internal combustion engine vehicles has doubled since 2019.

6. As for the degree of support for various climate change mitigation technologies and instruments, practically ubiquitous support for electricity being generated from renewable sources is maintained, even if this means having large infrastructures such as wind farms or large installations of solar panels. There is a very significant increase in support for extending the lifespan of nuclear power plants compared with 2019. The view that banks are overall expected to invest in activities that do not harm the environment continues to be widespread, in line with the 2019 findings. As in 2019, there remains considerable support for setting up an independent scientific committee on climate change that recommends climate targets and evaluates their attainment. According to interviewees, initiatives to address climate change should be aligned with scientific recommendations. As expected, taxes garner little support among the public. At the same time, only a fifth of interviewees would support fossil fuel (coal, oil and gas) and mineral exploration in Spain.

7. Interviewees are largely supportive of the government allocating resources for the General State Budget to climate initiatives. Support for measures involving adaptation to the effects of climate change (preferably those that help to protect natural assets) and the allocation of funding to accompany sectors and regions undergoing transition (ie, support for a just transition) is extensive.

8. The gap between concern, intentions and behaviours continues to be highly significant. For instance, of approximately one quarter of interviewees who say that they have changed their transport habits, only just over 25% have done so to combat climate change. Despite a notable increase in the development of sustainable financing, the percentage of people who ask their banks about green financial products is unchanged since 2019, at 5% of the sample.

9. With regard to socioeconomic variables, women, younger people (and sometimes older people), those with a more pro-environmental view of the world, those with medium or medium-high incomes, those with a higher level of education and those located towards the left of the ideological spectrum are the ones most concerned with climate change, exhibiting attitudes and behaviours that are more often geared towards fighting it.

The above indicate that climate policy in Spain faces a complex context in 2023 that is significantly less conducive to meeting increasingly ambitious climate goals in comparison with 2019. The results of the survey depict the initiatives, policies and instruments that attract the greatest –and the least– support among the general public in order to contribute to the debate about the implementation of the Strategic Energy and Climate Framework.