

Political positioning and acceptance of environmental measures: the case of the far right

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Based on the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) of 2020, we are analyzing the relationship between political positioning, trust, and attitudes towards environmental policies. Our study reveals that voters of far-right parties in France, Europe, and the United States are less concerned about environmental issues compared to others. Their environmental concerns also differ in nature: they focus on local issues whose consequences directly affect their daily lives.

Furthermore, these voters are generally opposed to any binding environmental policy, regardless of its nature. They also prefer punitive environmental policies over positive incentives for behavioral change, unlike centrist voters. We also confirm a previously known result: far-right voters express lower trust than others towards the rest of society and institutions in general. However, this distrust appears to hinder their adherence to environmentally friendly policies and attitudes.

The official analysis note can be found on the CEPREMAP website using this link: <https://www.cepremap.fr/2023/12/positionnement-politique-et-acceptation-des-mesuresenvironnementales-le-cas-de-lextreme-droite/>

1. Introduction

This note analyzes the data collected during the "Environment IV" survey conducted in 2020 by the International Social Survey Program. This survey explores environmental concerns and attitudes in 28 countries, providing indications of respondents' levels of interpersonal and institutional trust, as well as classical socio-demographic data. The data were independently collected between 2020 and 2023 by national survey institutes and then aggregated into a common database. Our study specifically focuses on five countries: Germany, Spain, the United States, France, and the United Kingdom.

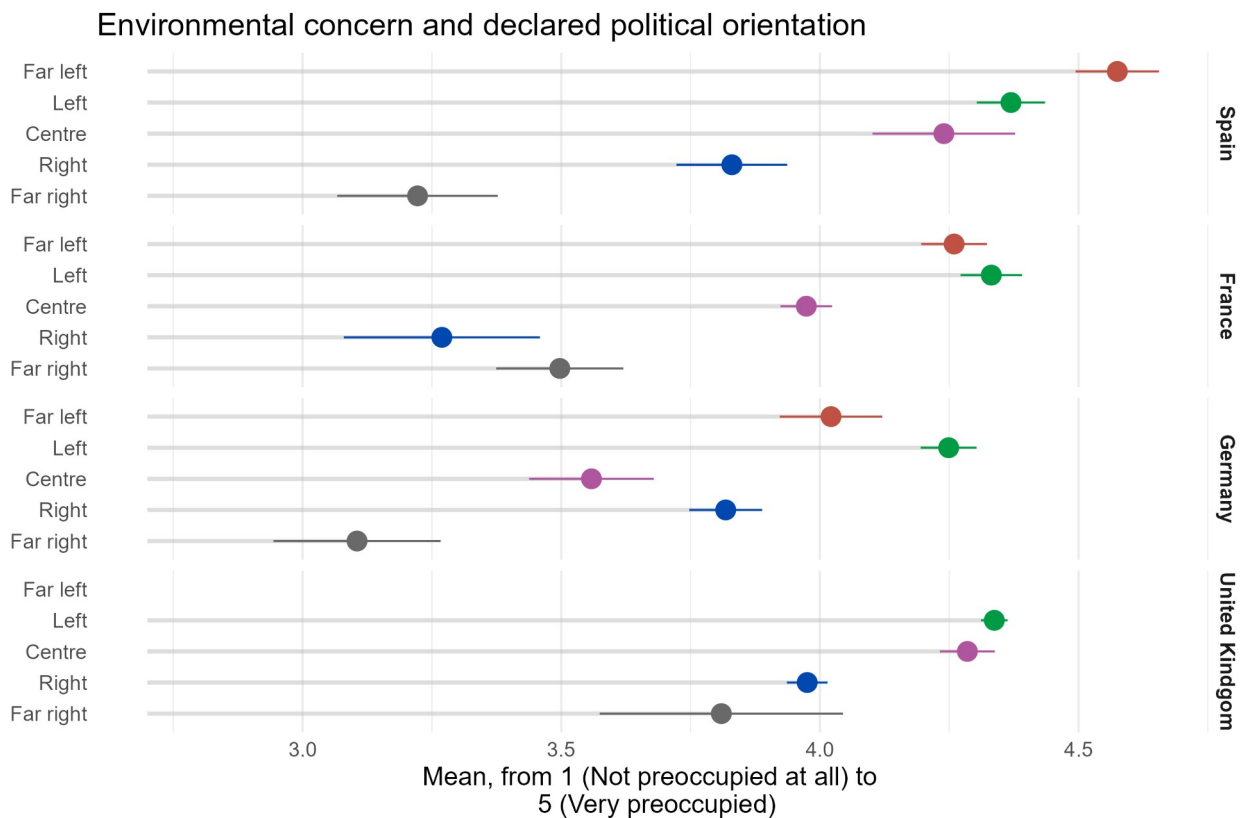
Recent studies demonstrate that the acceptability of environmental policies is influenced by individuals' political orientation¹. Political polarization and the rise of populism are reflected in attitudes towards environmental policies and practices, notably in the attitude of Republican voters (USA) and far-right individuals: they generally exhibit greater opposition to these measures. This observation applies to many countries, particularly in Europe.

Indeed, voters of far-right parties often find themselves in situations marked by lower incomes and geographically remote locations, which undoubtedly contribute to explaining their reluctance towards measures they perceive as detrimental to their purchasing power or mobility. However, their lower level of trust in others also contributes to their resistance towards ecological policies (Algan et al. 2019). Hence, it is important to consider, during the design of environmental policies, the link between political orientation, trust, and the acceptability of the proposed measures.

2. Far right voters are less sensitive to the environmental issue

Who cares about environmental issues? Figure 1 shows that voters who cast their ballots for far-right parties in the most recent national general elections at the time of the survey² consistently express less concern about environmental issues than others. They often believe that there are more important issues than environmental protection and that many theories about environmental threats are exaggerated (see Ap-

Figure 1.



Source : International Social Survey Programme 2020 - Environment IV

¹ (Blanc, 2022) (Taniguchi et Marshall, 2018) (Ziegler, 2017)

² Refer to the annex: dates of the studied elections, classifications of parties and candidates in national elections, and distributions of respondents' votes. Parties identified as environmentalist are consistently categorized as left-wing parties.

pendix: unfavorable attitudes towards environmental protection, Figure 14). A notable finding: among the countries examined, France is the only country where moderate right-wing voters, on average, display less concern about environmental issues than supporters of extreme movements. In the United States, Republicans also exhibit less concern for the environment compared to Democrats (see Figure 2)³.

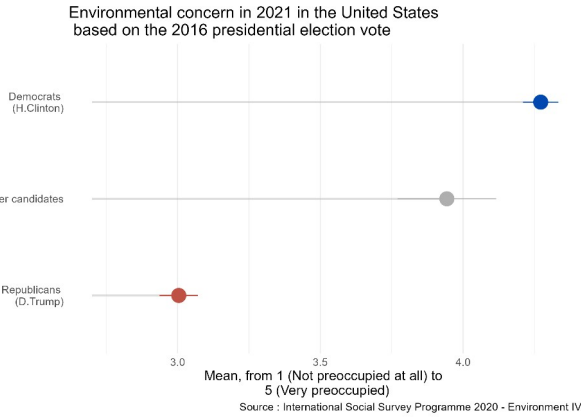


Figure 2.

However, voters of far-right parties are not completely disinterested in environmental issues (their average level of concern is above 2.5/5). But their concerns are generally of a different nature. They tend to focus significantly more on local issues, which aligns with these parties' emphasis on the importance of local belonging as opposed to global abstraction⁴.

In France, for instance, climate change ranks only as the 3rd environmental concern among far right supporters (and 2nd among far-left voters), trailing behind concerns about chemical products, pesticides, and air pollution. However, it stands as the primary environmental worry for the rest of the population. It's noteworthy that individuals who did not report any environmental concerns all voted for a right-wing or far-right party (see Figure 3).

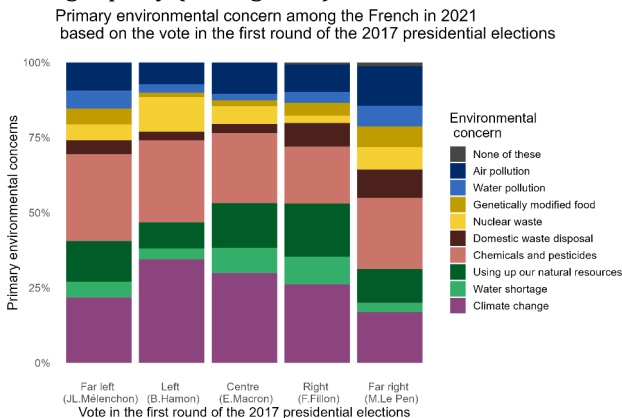


Figure 3.

We observe a similar pattern in many other European countries as well as across the Atlantic: climate change is generally the primary concern of the population, while air pollution or water shortages are the main concerns of far-right supporters. In Spain, 10% of these voters do not recognize any environmental concerns—a rate notably higher compared to other European countries, even though the country is already experiencing numerous climate-related disasters. Conversely, there is a significant emphasis on water scarcity among Spaniards' fears (see Figure 4).

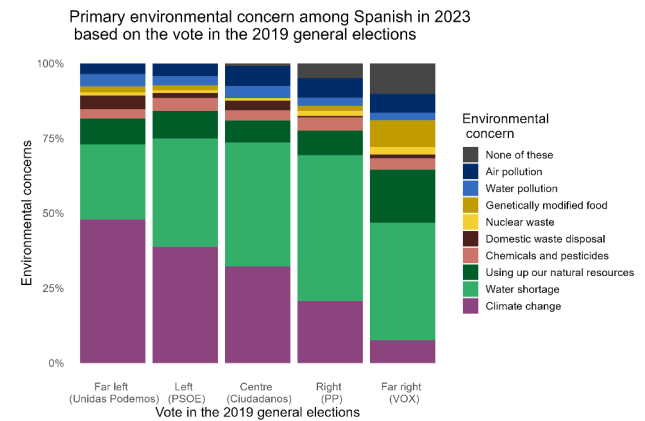


Figure 4.

Partisan differences in concerns are particularly evident in the United States. Among Republican voters, climate change ranks only 5th, trailing behind concerns about natural resource depletion, water pollution, chemicals and pesticides, and GMOs. Among Donald Trump's voters, just under 10% do not express any concerns (see Figure 5).

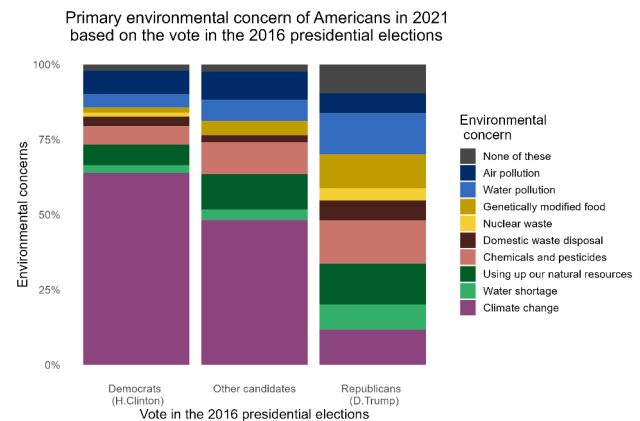


Figure 5.

3. The opposition against binding policies

In 2016, French citizens who voted for far-right parties were the most opposed to fuel taxes and subsidies for

³ The main parties or candidates from the studied political categories are noted in parentheses. Refer to the full list of studied parties and candidates.
⁴ Refer to (Forchtner 2019 [3]) for a discussion on the various types of skepticism within far-right parties.

renewable energies (Blanc 2022). In 2020, this hostility towards stringent environmental policies remains. Generally, the French are less willing to pay significantly higher taxes to protect the environment and prefer to see higher prices or accept a decrease in their standard of living, regardless of their political opinion (see Figure 6)⁵. Far-right voters are particularly opposed to tax increases (1.8/5) and, more broadly, to the three measures studied

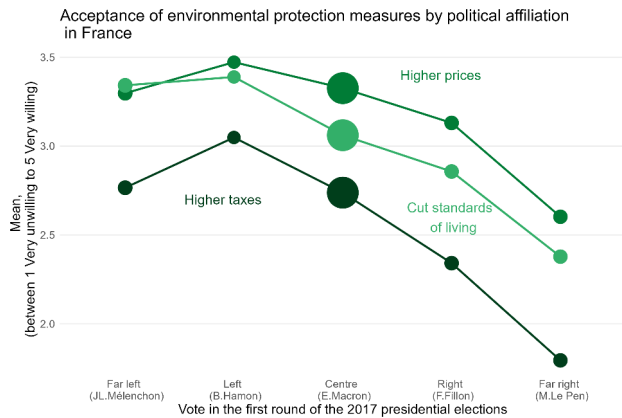


Figure 6.

In the United States, acceptance of environmental policies is also very low among Republicans (falling between the levels of the French right-wing and far-right). Republicans also strongly oppose tax increases (2/5). Conversely, Democrats' level of acceptance is substantially similar to that of the French left-wing (see Figure 7).

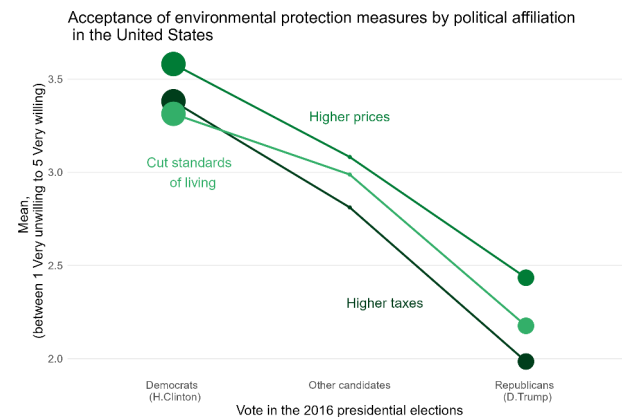


Figure 7.

In Germany, the willingness to pay significantly higher taxes to protect the environment faces resistance from citizens, more so than policies raising prices or reducing the standard of living, especially among far-right supporters (see Figure 8). Unlike France or the United States, in Germany, a reduction in the standard of living is preferred over price increases.

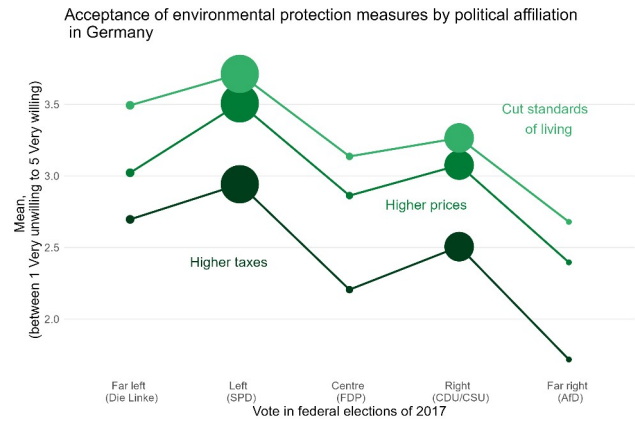


Figure 8.

4. Positive or negative incentives?

To encourage behavioral changes in businesses, various measures are proposed to the respondents. Some are positive incentives such as "rewards," others are punitive measures like "fines," and a third category involves informing businesses about the benefits of environmental protection. It appears that punitive policies are widely preferred by individuals positioned at the extremes of the political spectrum, notably those from the far left (see Figure 9). This observation aligns with their very low trust in commercial and industrial enterprises (Figure 11). Conversely, policies rewarding environmentally friendly behavior are more often chosen by centrist voters.

However, when it comes to encouraging individuals, not just businesses, to adopt environmentally friendly behaviors, the hierarchy of responses is entirely different. In this case, information and education (less costly and avoidable) are the most frequently chosen by French citizens as a whole (see Figure 9). Concerning far-right supporters, they tend to strongly favor punitive measures, such as hefty fines for individuals damaging the environment. They consider preventive measures and information about the benefits of environmental protection—namely, the softer incentive policies without concrete constraints—as less relevant. Moreover, far-right supporters are relatively more inclined to believe that making environmental efforts is pointless if others are not doing the same (Annex, Figure 14 - unfavorable attitudes).

⁵ The size of the dots is proportional to the distribution of votes in the sample.

The best way to encourage French businesses and households to protect the environment

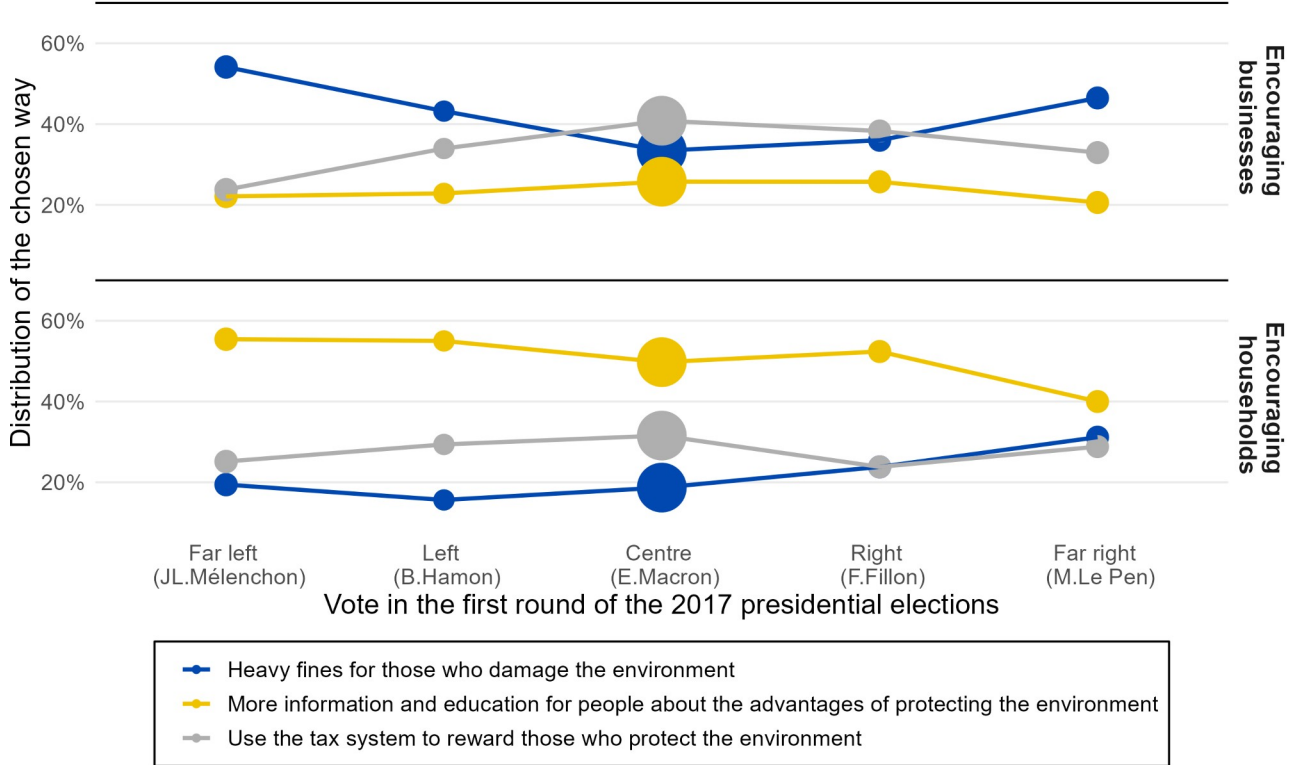


Figure 9.

4. Défiance among far-right voters

In this survey, we observe a typical trend: in France, the level of interpersonal trust is lower within the far right than in other political parties in France (Figure 10). This outcome is often associated with lower life satisfaction among these populations (Algan et al. 2019). Our econometric analysis shows that the link between interpersonal trust and environmental attitudes is entirely mediated by individuals' political opinions. Thus, a lack of interpersonal trust, combined with voting for the far-right, jointly leads to an unfavorable mindset towards environmental protection.

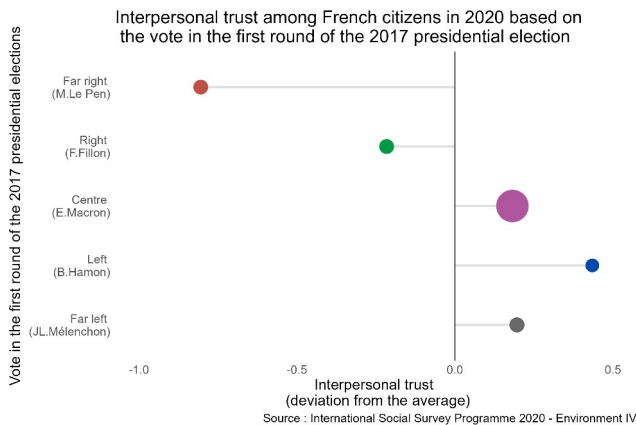


Figure 10.

What about other dimensions of trust? All are linked to the acceptance of environmental measures. Trust in research institutions is necessary to assess the detrimental impact of human activity on the environment and quantify the efforts required to reduce emissions. Trust in the media enables reliance on information deemed neutral and relevant. Trust in commercial and industrial enterprises is a prerequisite for implementing new environmentally friendly production systems. Finally, trust in the French Parliament is necessary for the acceptance of environmental protection legislation.

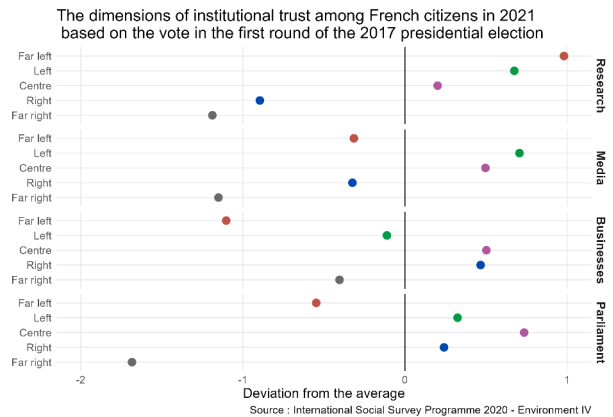


Figure 11.

However, far-right voters are characterized by the lowest level of trust across all these dimensions, except for trust in businesses (Figure 11).

These various facets of institutional trust are also correlated with each other. For instance, an individual with low trust in the national parliament will also have low trust in the media. Similarly, trust in research centres and trust in the media are correlated with interpersonal trust. Noticeably, for the majority of respondents, trust in university research centres and trust in businesses exhibit contrasting relationships with environmental attitudes (even with given political affiliations). Increased trust in research centres almost systematically implies stronger adherence to proenvironmental attitudes (see Figure 12).

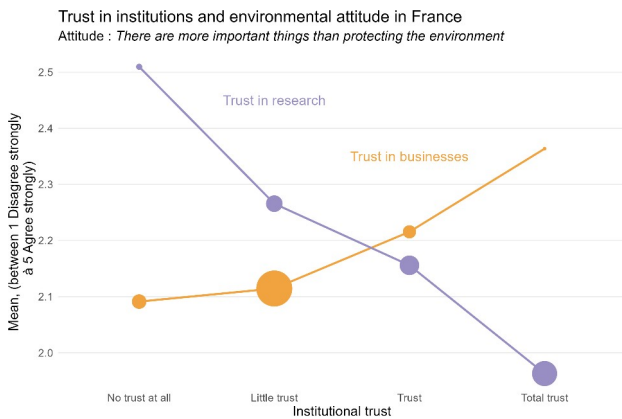


Figure 12. The link between institutional trust and political orientation can be illustrated as depicted in Figure 13 within four quadrants. On one hand, the right-wing spectrum, where distrust towards research centres is common but with a marked divergence concerning businesses: the far-right exhibits distrust while moderate right-wing trusts businesses. On the other hand, left-wing and far-left voters, who tend to have relatively higher trust in research institutions but little or no trust in businesses. Lastly, centrists, relatively more trusting in all institutions than the rest of the population.

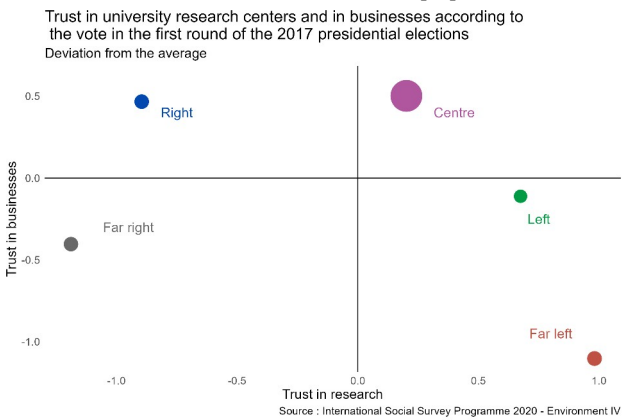


Figure 13. This triptych reveals the interplay between trust in different institutions responsible for environmental policies, the societal acceptance of these policies, and citizens' political orientation.

5. References

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6. Appendix

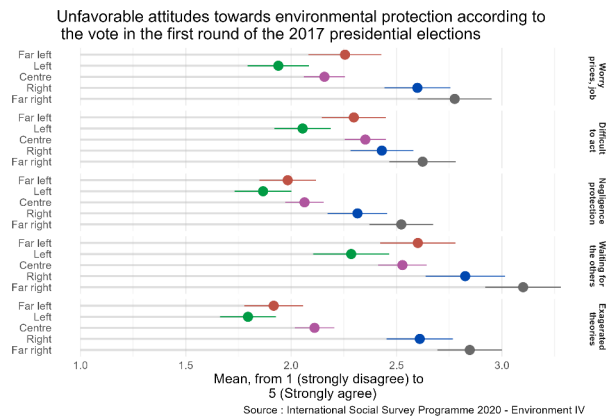


Figure 14. All annexes are to be found on the CEPREMAP website: <https://www.cepremap.fr/2023/12/positionnement-politique-et-acceptation-des-mesuresenvironnementales-le-cas-de-lextreme-droite>

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Collection *Notes de l'Observatoire du Bien-être*, ISSN 2646-2834