



How Confrontational Protest Shapes Public Opinion: Experimental Evidence from Climate Mobilization

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Abstract

This study examines how different protest forms shape public opinion, distinguishing between support for protest tactics and policy goals. While protest is widely recognized as a legitimate mode of political participation, its forms vary in how they are perceived by the public. Drawing on two cross-sectional surveys and two survey experiments on climate protests in Germany, we focus on the distinction between demonstrative and confrontational protest forms. We find that demonstrative tactics are broadly perceived as legitimate. Being exposed to them leads to a stronger sympathy and more support for the movement compared to a control group. In contrast, confrontational tactics—such as blockades or symbolic art attacks—reduce these responses, particularly among left-leaning citizens, while leaving the already low support levels of right-leaning citizens unchanged. Crucially, we find null effects concerning policy support: the negative impact on attitudes toward protesters neither weakens nor strengthens support for their policy goals. Thus, confrontational protest may not substantively harm its broader political cause, at least in the short run. This finding contributes to the literature on social movement and protest effects by highlighting that loss of support for the movement does not automatically translate into changes in public support for the policy goals the movements advocate.

Keywords Protest form · Legitimacy · Protest event analysis · Protest politics · Survey experiments · Climate activism

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Introduction¹

In recent years, climate activists across several European countries have mobilized in unprecedented numbers, with protesters increasingly turning to confrontational forms of protest (New York Times 2023; Wired 2023; Borbáth and Hutter 2025). The German activist group the Last Generation has drawn public attention with highly disruptive actions, most prominently by blocking major roads and intersections to pressure the government into stronger climate action. At the same time, Fridays for Future, also referred to as the climate strike movement, organized peaceful rallies worldwide, mobilizing hundreds of thousands of people to protest against climate change and advocate for stronger environmental protection policies (Libération 2023; Washington Post 2023; Guardian 2024).

Such activism and protests have become ubiquitous in today's democracies, with the power to change participants' attitudes (Pop-Eleches et al. 2022) and elites' behavior (Barrie et al. 2024; Gillion 2012). Not a week goes by without news of protesting crowds demonstrating for or against new or established policies. Hence, several researchers have posited the existence of a "social movement society" (Meyer and Tarrow 1997; Meyer 2024), where protest is normalized and considered a legitimate way to express political views.

However, protest tactics or forms vary considerably, ranging from peaceful demonstrations to acts of civil disobedience and even politically motivated violence. The tactics available to political actors belong to the modern repertoire of contention, a concept traced to the seminal work of Tilly (1978; 1995) and Tarrow (1998). Subsequent protest event catalogs frequently employ a threefold classification of demonstrative, confrontational, and violent forms (Earl et al. 2004), emphasizing how variations in these repertoires are crucial to understanding mobilization and participation dynamics (Oser 2022; Rojon et al. 2025). In line with this classification, we focus on the distinction between demonstrative protest, understood as low-disruption actions such as marches or rallies, and confrontational protest, understood as non-violent but disruptive tactics that deliberately impose costs or disrupt the flow of everyday life, such as road blockades or sit-ins.

Yet, while a growing body of research has examined how protests influence public attitudes (e.g., Feinberg et al. 2017; Muñoz and Anduiza 2019; Wouters 2019; Simpson et al. 2018), there is still a need for further systematic evidence on how different protest forms separately affect attitudes toward the protest itself and the policy goals it promotes. Recent political controversies around climate activism have reinvigorated this debate, with critics warning that confrontational tactics may alienate potential supporters and harm the protesters' cause. This view contrasts with the expectation that confrontation might also be an effective strategy for drawing attention and putting pressure on political institutions.

Building on and extending this debate, we focus on the crucial distinction between demonstrative and confrontational protest forms to better understand how protest influences public opinion. Our primary contribution lies in the empirical scope and

¹The survey experiments in this study were pre-registered and are available here: <https://osf.io/srtjz> (Wave 1: December 2022); <https://osf.io/nuq9e> (Wave 2: December 2023).

design of our study: we differentiate multiple dimensions of public opinion—namely, legitimacy, sympathy, and support—toward the protest from support for the policies being advocated. This allows us to assess how and to what extent demonstrative and confrontational protest forms differently affect citizens' reactions to the protest itself and their support for the underlying policy goals.

To address this question, we bridge studies on social movements, political participation, and public opinion research. Political participation research shows that demonstrative protest forms such as marches and rallies are widely regarded as legitimate modes of engagement. In contrast, more disruptive but non-violent tactics continue to provoke public reservations (Barnes and Kaase 1979; Giugni and Grasso 2022). Social movement scholarship similarly argues that protest has become a routine feature of democratic politics in the “social movement society,” yet this normalization is highly uneven across protest forms (Meyer and Tarrow 1997). Expanding upon this conceptual framework, our subsequent analysis centers on the pivotal role of protest forms in shaping citizens' preferences. Drawing primarily from the field of public opinion research, we study to what extent different protest forms hurt or benefit the protesting group and their claims (Feinberg et al. 2017; Muñoz and Anduiza 2019; Wouters 2019; Simpson et al. 2018).

Methodologically, we present original experimental survey evidence. Specifically, we conducted two representative surveys in Germany in December 2022 and December 2023. The experiments focus on the activities of one of the most prominent recent social movements in Germany and worldwide, the climate movement (Borbáth and Hutter 2025; Wahlström et al. 2019). We use vignette experiments and manipulate which type of protest event, i.e., demonstrative or confrontational, respondents are exposed to via a fictional brief news item. We are interested in how alternating the protest forms affects the various dimensions of support we have listed. We contextualize the findings from the survey analyses with original protest event analysis data covering the past 75 years of protest history in Germany as well as descriptive findings from our surveys, contrasted with related questions fielded in the late 1970s by Barnes and Kaase.

Our descriptive evidence shows that the public distinguishes between two groups of protest forms: *demonstrative forms* have gained legitimacy, and *confrontational forms*, which remain less legitimate. Compared to prior studies, our comparative survey analysis indicates that this distinction became more pronounced as Germany progressed toward a social movement society. Our experimental findings reveal that confrontational protest forms harm citizens' perception of the protesting group, in our case, climate activists. Notably, the effects differ across political orientations: left-wing respondents withdraw their approval for climate protests when confronted with confrontational protest forms. In contrast, right-wing respondents dislike climate mobilization altogether, regardless of the protest forms. Likewise, respondents who hold generally pro-climate views are the most sensitive to the type of protest.

However, we find that confrontational protest does not directly reduce support for the policy goals advocated by the respective protesters, at least in the short run. These null effects are consistent across political orientations: regardless of the respondents' ideological positions or their views on climate protection, preferences for pro-climate policies are stable when exposed to demonstrative or confrontational protest

forms. The differentiation between movement and policy support is fundamental and comprises our central contribution to the literature on social movements and protest effects. Additionally, these findings align with research highlighting a divergence between support for protest claimants and for the protest claim (see Passini and Morselli 2015; Kelman 2001), echoing research on out-group dislike without full ideological polarization (Iyengar et al. 2019). It also connects directly to the broader literature showing that radical tactics tend to reduce support for the movement itself (Dasch et al. 2024; Feinberg et al. 2020; Simpson et al. 2022; Nylund et al. 2025), while generally leaving attitudes toward the underlying cause unchanged (Bugden 2020; Brehm and Gruhl 2024; Kenward and Brick 2024; Kountouris and Williams 2023). In short, our findings highlight that the negative impact on attitudes toward protesters does not substantively weaken support for their policy goals.

Theoretical Approach

How the Public Perceives Demonstrative and Confrontational Protest

When studying current climate mobilization across the globe, we are confronted with two different forms of protest: demonstrative and confrontational protest. We focus on the distinction between these two protest forms (Rucht 2007). While demonstrative protest is related to low-disruption actions, including marches and rallies, confrontational protest is understood as a non-violent but disruptive form that deliberately carries costs or disrupts everyday life, such as road blockades or sit-ins. Some protest tactics fall between these categories. For example, short sit-ins or marches without permits that temporarily obstruct traffic are non-violent and expressive, yet they also cause incidental disruption. Such borderline cases blur the line between demonstrative and confrontational protest. However, the broad distinction remains analytically and empirically robust. We determinedly differentiate as well between these protest forms and violent protest in qualitative terms.

Before developing our expectations about how protest tactics shape public responses to protesters and their policy goals, we first review the scholarly literature on how demonstrative and confrontational protest forms are perceived by the public. Two strands of research are particularly relevant here: political participation studies and social movement scholarship (see Kriesi 2008). Although they differ in analytical focus—individual-level political engagement versus collective mobilization—both offer consistent insights into the normative distinctions citizens draw between protest forms.

Political participation research has long emphasized that individuals evaluate political acts in terms of their perceived legitimacy and disruptiveness. The classical distinction between conventional and unconventional participation by Barnes and Kaase (1979) builds on such perceptions, and subsequent work has shown that the boundaries of what the public considers legitimate evolve with changing political cultures (e.g., Brady 1999; Giugni and Grasso 2022; Ejaz et al. 2023). Demonstrative protest has increasingly become part of many citizens' action repertoires and is now broadly regarded as a legitimate expression of political engagement (e.g., Oser 2022;

Rojon et al. 2025). By contrast, confrontational tactics continue to trigger wider public reservations, as they are often associated with norm violations or undue disruption (Badullovich et al. 2024).

Social movement scholars arrive at similar conclusions from a broader perspective on contentious politics. The “social movement society” thesis (Meyer and Tarrow 1997; Meyer 2024) argues that protest has become a routine and institutionalized feature of democratic life. Yet this normalization has not extended equally across all protest forms. Demonstrative actions have become widely accepted within democratic politics, whereas confrontational forms remain at the margins of legitimate contention. These forms are more likely to be framed by political elites and the media as irresponsible, disruptive, or extreme, shaping public perceptions in turn. Movement organizations adapt strategically to this environment, calibrating their use of more disruptive tactics given their potential reputational costs.

Taken together, the two strands of research show that demonstrative and confrontational protest forms are viewed differently by the public. This insight motivates the next step of our argument, where we examine how such differences translate into broader public responses.

How Demonstrative and Confrontational Protest Influences Different Dimensions of Public Opinion

We now turn to the core question of this paper: how do different protest forms shape public opinion toward protest actors and the policy goals they advance? More specifically, we ask whether negative reactions to confrontational tactics extend beyond evaluations of the protest itself to influence support for the protesters and for the demands they promote.

We do so by using various measures of public opinion toward protest, three focusing on the protest actor itself and one that is tailored toward measuring policy support. We focus, on the one hand, on the important distinction between legitimacy, sympathy, and support for the protest itself. Following Klandermans’s (1984) gradual understanding of “mobilization potential”, we define *legitimacy* as the broader attitudinal dimension capturing the recognition that others have the right to protest (Olsen 1968). It is followed by *sympathy* as the common ground between the individual and the movement and its demands and goals, and, last, *support* as the public opinion dimension with the closest link between individuals and protest (see Gutting 2020; Feinberg et al. 2017). As one of the three dimensions of public opinion toward the protest, *support* indicates an expression of public backing of the movement and a stronger sentiment toward the movement than just legitimacy and sympathy; support resembles the likelihood of participation the most. On the other hand, we focus on individuals’ *support for the policy goals and demands* advanced by the protest and its participants.

Previous research in political science and sociology has shown that the public has a negative opinion (legitimacy, sympathy, support) toward confrontational protest, as we have already argued above (Barnes and Kaase 1979; Crozat 1997; Jennings and van Deth 1990). In studies on Western Europe and the US, confrontational protest suffered from less support for the movement. Recent experimental evidence across

different protest issues shows that “extreme protest” (like blocking traffic and vandalism) decreases individuals’ support for protest actors (Feinberg et al. 2017). In this regard, the public acceptability of specific confrontational protest actions might also depend considerably on the *appropriateness* of their tactics and targets (Badullovič et al. 2024): blocking roads is perceived as more appropriate than throwing soup at a painting in a museum. Furthermore, Muñoz and Anduiza (2019) provide evidence that protests with explicit use of violent acts lower support for the movement. Moreover, violent protest can also mobilize fewer individuals (Steinert-Threlkeld et al. 2022). In sum, individuals tend to perceive confrontational protests negatively across the three dimensions of public opinion toward the protest.

Taken together, these studies suggest a systematic “backfire effect”: rather than expanding support, confrontational and violent tactics often alienate potential allies. Consequently, it is important to analyze whether the decreasing support for specific protest forms also spills over to public preferences on the policy demands of the protest. In the public debate in many countries, a considerable part of the media, politicians, and civil society actors have taken the position that *confrontational protest hurts the goals of the movement* (Göllert 2023; More in Common 2023; ZEIT 2022; Coren 2024). This consideration leads us to the first hypothesis:

H1 *Exposure to confrontational protest decreases legitimacy/sympathy/support for the protesting groups compared to exposure to a demonstrative protest.*

However, the literature is inconclusive on whether confrontational protest actions diminish support for the policy issues that the protesters advocate for. One strand of the literature highlights the positive effect of protest on influencing politics through different channels. Sustained mobilization can, for example, increase public awareness of certain policy issues (Brehm and Gruhl 2024) and mobilize individuals to vote for parties aligned with the protest goals (Valentim 2023; Fabel et al. 2025). At the same time, two studies focused on Fridays for Future protests in the UK and Germany have shown how pro-climate mobilization has raised awareness for their goals in the parliamentary agenda and impacted how MPs discuss protest and climate change in general (Schürmann 2024; Barrie et al. 2024).² Enos et al. (2019) show how political violence against discriminatory practices can positively affect liberal positions among the public, based on their case study of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Furthermore, following the positive radical flank effect thesis, confrontational protest legitimizes moderate actors within the common social movement sector and thus increases support for them overall (Simpson et al. 2022). Morris (1993) studies the civil rights protests of Alabama in 1963 finding a nuanced picture of confrontational mobilization and political violence:

²Few empirical studies have distinguished between different protest forms and their effects on movement goals, and most of these focus on the US. A notable exception is Brehm and Gruhl (2024), who analyze prominent protest events by various climate movement groups in Germany and show that climate concern increases following both demonstrative and confrontational protests.

"the massive mobilization and the effective employment of multiple tactics were the key factors that produced success in Birmingham, not the provocation of violence from the opposition [...] northern capitalists with economic interests in Birmingham supported the demands of the movement only after their interests were jeopardized by the economic boycott and widespread protest" (p. 635)

A second strand of the literature focuses on negative radical flank effects. This perspective confirms that public opinion and support loss toward confrontational protests can spill over to public opinion on their policy demands and negatively influence both. As previously discussed, confrontational protest is likely to elicit negative reactions, resulting in diminished legitimacy, sympathy, and support for the movement. Empirical evidence indicates that more radical violent protest forms might translate into negative public opinion toward the protest policy goals as well. Wasow (2020) found that non-violent protest during the Civil Rights movement positively affected public opinion on civil rights and the Democratic vote, compared to violent actions. Thomas and Louis' (2014) results show that in contrast to political violence, "non-violent protest may provide a vehicle for the promulgation of legitimating ideology, effectively exposing illegitimacy and instability and providing an enactment of alternative ways of being [...]" (p. 273). More recently, Olzak (2024) studied the impact of exposure to violent Black Lives Matter protests in the US with nuanced results. While violent protests negatively affected the intention to vote for a Republican presidential candidate, they did not affect voting for a Democratic candidate. Yet her panel study also reveals that violent protests decrease the endorsement of liberal solutions to urban unrest and may thus "undermine the convergence between an individual's attitudes toward a movement and its goal" (p. 302). In short, this literature indicates that violent protest tactics mostly lead to negative radical flank effects. We transpose this dynamic to the expectation on confrontational protest while recognizing the key differentiation between demonstrative, confrontational, and violent protest that reflects an incremental process between categories that are qualitatively distinct from each other.

Thus, the overall evidence is mixed. Additionally, most research focuses on political violence and not specifically on non-violent, confrontational protests; their outcomes of interest center on support for the movement or mobilization potential and not on support for the movements' goals (Muñoz and Anduiza 2019; Wouters 2019; Bugden 2020). We acknowledge the general evidence of the positive effect of protest on policy support. However, we base our expectations on the broad violence literature and argue that confrontational protest, similar to violent protest, will backfire and decrease support for the movement's policy goals. Accordingly, we expect that confrontational protest forms decrease support for the policy claims demanded by the protest. This consideration leads us to the following hypotheses on the policy claims of the protest:³

H2 *Exposure to confrontational protest decreases support for policies compared to exposure to a demonstrative protest.*

³ H1 and H2 have been pre-registered.

Last, we briefly elaborate on the importance of ideology to understand how confrontational protest impacts public opinion toward the movement and its policy goals. Clearly, not all individuals across the ideological spectrum will react similarly to protest. It is reasonable to expect that individuals whose ideological positions and overall policy preferences align more or are closer to the protesting movement are less likely to decrease their public support when exposed to confrontational protest (Teixeira et al. 2022; Armaly and Enders 2024; Reimer et al. 2025; McLaren and Walker 2024; cf. Feinberg et al. 2017).⁴ In other words, individuals sharing an ideological common ground with the protest should support the movement and its policy goals regardless of the protest forms. This dynamic has been referred to in protest studies as in-group identification (Teixeira et al. 2022) and ideology-based double standards (Reimer et al. 2025). We, therefore, expect the following heterogeneous dynamics concerning confrontational protest effects⁵:

H3.1 *Exposure to confrontational protest decreases legitimacy/sympathy/support for the protesting groups compared to exposure to a demonstrative protest, especially among individuals ideologically distant from the protest.*

H3.2 *Exposure to confrontational protest decreases support for policies compared to exposure to a demonstrative protest, especially among individuals ideologically distant from the protest.*

Research Design

Case: The Protest Arena in Germany

To test the hypotheses, we study the German political and protest arena. Germany is particularly well-suited as a case study for several reasons. First, Germany boasts a comparatively long history of a stable democracy with civil liberties, including the right of free assembly, guaranteed since the end of World War II. Figure 1 provides an overview of the yearly protest events and participants in Germany. The figure shows that since 1968, Germany has continuously experienced a large number of protest events with predominantly demonstrative protest forms. The lower panel focuses only on climate and environmental protest events from 2019 to 2023.⁶ For this visualization, we use the categorization of protest forms into demonstrative and confrontative, following our hypothesis. This rich history has fostered a vibrant civil society, actively involved in various political issues (Hutter and Weisskircher 2023). Social movements and activism have become integral components of the German socio-political landscape, shaping public discourse and influencing policy decisions. The

⁴Note that this research is strongly focused on political violence in the US and the UK.

⁵H3.1 and H3.2 have not been pre-registered.

⁶Note that although violent climate protest was marginally present in the 1980s and 1990s in Germany, it is virtually inexistent today; and thus, we removed it from the analysis. For a more comprehensive explanation of the Figure and the underlying data collection, see Appendix J.



Fig. 1 Protest events and participants in Germany. Note: Upper plot presents yearly data of all protest events reported in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*; Bars indicate the number of events separately stacked by protest form; Line indicates the aggregated number of participants; Lower plot presents monthly data of climate and environmental protest events reported in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *taz*

longstanding democratic tradition has provided fertile ground for citizens to exercise their rights, ensuring robust civic engagement that focuses on various societal challenges. With regard to protest, Germany is regarded as an “archetypical European country” (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 18). Appendix K provides a comparative overview and a discussion on how the German protest events and protest participation numbers compare to other European countries.

Second, Germany is currently experiencing a new wave of protest, largely shaped by the climate movement. Similar to other European countries (Borbáth and Hutter 2025), since 2018, influential actors like Fridays for Future have successfully mobilized substantial segments of society through peaceful mass demonstrations (Sommer and Haunss 2020), profoundly impacting political decision-making processes (Schürmann 2024). However, a shift has been visible since 2022, with the emergence of more radical protest forms, also driven by the climate movement group *Die Letzte Generation*. This coexistence of demonstrative and confrontational forms allows us to examine how the public differentiates between protest repertoires within a single country. This evolving climate protest wave, coupled with the escalating tension arising from adopting increasingly radical protest forms, provides an opportune setting to test our hypotheses.

Data and Methods

Our analyses build upon two surveys conducted in December 2022/January 2023 and in December 2023 by the WZB ProtestMonitoring at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center. We analyze the two survey waves separately because they capture different stages of public exposure to confrontational protest: the first wave followed the very first actions of Letzte Generation, while the second occurred after repeated activities had reduced their novelty. This distinction allows us to account for potential habituation effects and demonstrates that our findings are robust across both contexts. In total, 5,760 adults in Germany were surveyed. The survey was quota-sampled based on age, gender, and educational status in line with the population distribution and was conducted by respondi/Bilendi.

In the first step, we conduct descriptive analyses of individuals' perception of protest forms more generally. Our original surveys included the respondents' assessment of the legitimacy of various protest forms. The forms of protest we asked about were *petitions, demonstrations or rallies, boycotts of companies and products, strikes, road or highway blockades, throwing food at art in a museum, blocking an airport, squatting, hate messages online, and political violence against people*. This item battery, albeit not including all of the protest forms, was part of both *Political Action Studies*, which we use to descriptively contextualize our experimental results (Barnes and Kaase 1979; Jennings and van Deth 1990).

In the two survey waves, we additionally conducted a vignette experiment to test how individuals would react to demonstrative vs. confrontational protest forms in terms of public opinion toward the protest and support for the policy issue at stake during the protest.⁷ In the experiment, respondents were first reminded that in the last months, pro-environmental and pro-climate protests were taking place in different German cities. Following this general statement, treated respondents read one of three different scenarios of specific protests by the climate movement that had happened in the previous few weeks: (1) a peaceful demonstration, (2) a street blockade, and (3) a food attack—throwing mashed potatoes—on a piece of art (in the following labeled “art attack”). A fourth group, without exposure to a specific protest (not treated), served as a control group, which was not exposed to any specific protest form scenario. In sum, four groups with 25% of the respondents each were exposed to one of the four conditions.⁸

The experiment was conducted in the context of intense periods of confrontational protest in Germany in 2022 and 2023 (see Appendix C.1). As mentioned above, the different protest scenarios implicitly referred to actions by the protest groups Fridays for Future and Die Letzte Generation. Fridays for Future emerged as a transnational climate movement in 2018 and is known for moderate mobilization in the form of mass demonstrations (Sommer and Haunss 2020). Since then, the movement has

⁷The repeated experiment in December 2023 expanded the post-treatment question set. The two experiments have been pre-registered.

⁸Appendix C.2 includes details on the structure of the experiment and the exact wording of the different treatment groups and the control. Although we do not hypothesize about different protest form effects compared to no exposure, we include a control treatment in the experimental design to have a benchmark group for comparison in the empirical analysis.

become an established political actor in several European countries. Die Letzte Generation (the Last Generation) was founded, in turn, during the German federal election campaign of 2021 when the group held a hunger strike that caught much public interest. The disruptive group Die Letzte Generation orchestrated an intensive series of street blockades from 2021 to 2023 across German cities, gaining vast but mostly bad press and political criticism (Rucht 2023), to the degree of being compared with terrorist groups. In the experimental setting, the treatment descriptions did, however, not mention the protesting groups to avoid biasing the results through possible group-specific sentiments and to generate a more generalizable assessment of the phenomenon of interest.

For example, in the online survey, the treatment condition for a street blockade was presented as follows:

Vor ein paar Wochen klebten sich am Morgen einige Aktivisten auf die Stadt-autobahn in Berlin. Ein Mitglied der Bewegung betonte: “Die Bundesregierung muss den Klimawandel entschiedener bekämpfen.” (*A few weeks ago, activists glued themselves to the city highway in Berlin. One member of the movement emphasized: “The Federal Government must fight climate change more decisively.”*)

Following the protest treatments, respondents reported their opinion of the protest across three dimensions: legitimacy, sympathy, and support (0–100). As argued above, we follow Klandermans (1984), that is, attitudes toward a protest movement build up in a procedural logic. Thus, we distinguish between three dimensions of public opinion as different degrees of positive attitudes toward the protest movements.

Furthermore, we asked respondents for their policy preferences toward climate protection, followed as the last outcome variable of interest (wording and descriptive statistics of survey items in Appendix C.2). The 2023 iteration of the experiment expanded on the post-treatment questions by also asking about the preferences for specific climate protection policies: public transportation subsidies, speed limits on highways, replacement of oil and gas heating systems, expansion of solar and wind energy. With this experimental design, we aimed to explore whether legitimacy and attitudes toward protest groups translate into preferences for the policy issues the protest groups are advocating for. It is important to mention that the experiments included a second treatment dimension that presented the activists as portraying an apocalyptic frame in their protest claim. However, we abstain from engaging in depth with this aspect of the study because this is not the focus of our research question. Still, we discuss this aspect in length and present the null results in Appendix I. In the following, we analyze the results through differences-in-means since the treatment assignment has been randomized. We engage with different robustness analyses in the Appendices.

Analysis and Results

General Legitimacy Perceptions of Protest Forms

Before turning to the experimental analysis, we provide descriptive evidence on how the public evaluates different protest forms. This allows us to contextualize our focus on demonstrative and confrontational protest by mapping how various tactics are perceived in terms of legitimacy. Employing an exploratory factor analysis, we find a clear distinction between one group of protest forms (*Strike, Petition, Demonstration or rally, and Boycott of products and companies*) that load onto one single factor, and a second group of protest forms (*Throwing food at art, Squatting, Political violence against people, Hate speech online, Blockade of streets or highways, and Blockade of an airport*).⁹

Figure 2 shows the relative distributions of the answer options for the legitimacy perceptions among the respondents in wave 1 (December 2022) and wave 2 (December 2023).¹⁰ The distribution of the answers shows that legitimacy perceptions of protest forms during the two survey waves are largely congruent. This descriptive evidence supports the claim that demonstrative protest forms enjoy substantially higher public legitimacy than confrontational forms. At the same time, the very low levels of legitimacy of confrontational tactics suggest possible floor effects, which limit the variation we can observe in these responses. Figure 3 illustrates the temporal evolution of these perceptions. Only protest forms are included that were asked in the Political Action Study (Barnes and Kaase 1979; Jennings and van Deth 1990) and in our original two survey waves. Because these data span 50 years, a panel design is not feasible. However, the large cross-sectional samples at each time point (over 5,000 respondents) allow us to identify meaningful aggregate-level trends. The analysis demonstrates a notable shift in the differentiation of legitimacy perceptions among protest forms. In the Political Action Survey waves, the legitimacy perception exhibited a more continuous pattern, whereas nowadays, it has evolved into two very distinct groups as identified above.¹¹

⁹Appendix B.1 presents a detailed explanation and visualizations of the exploratory factor analysis. Furthermore, we apply an automated selection of items as part of a Mokken scale analysis, testing the homogeneity of different variables. It identifies the same two groups of protest forms as the exploratory factor analysis. Appendix B.2 presents a detailed description of the results and the procedure. We compared respondents' average legitimacy ratings for the two identified groups. We computed the mean rating for group 1 (petition, demonstration, boycott, and strike) and for group 2 (street blockade, paint/food action, airport blockade, house squatting, political violence, and digital hate). In the first wave (2022), a paired t-test shows that demonstrative protest forms are rated significantly more legitimate than confrontational forms (mean difference = 1.48, $t(2823) = -94.20$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [-1.51, -1.45]). In the second wave (2023), we observe a similar pattern (mean difference = 1.34, $t(2935) = -88.74$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [-1.37, -1.31]).

¹⁰For tables with descriptives, see Appendix A.

¹¹For illustrative reasons, the data of the two Political Action Study waves are merged to create the 1970s data points; our two original survey waves are merged to create the 2020s data points.

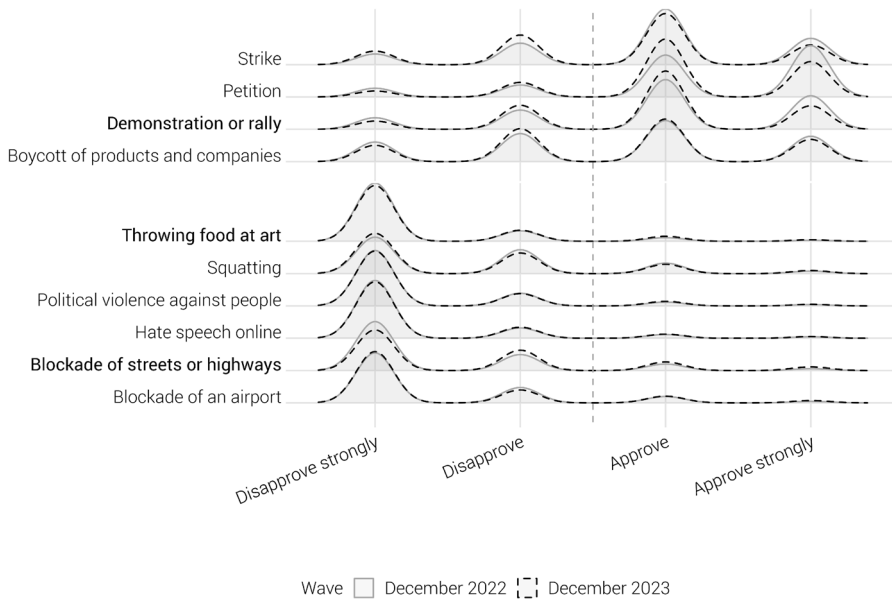


Fig. 2 Distribution of legitimacy perceptions in the 2022 and 2023 waves. Note: Bold protest forms are used in survey experiment

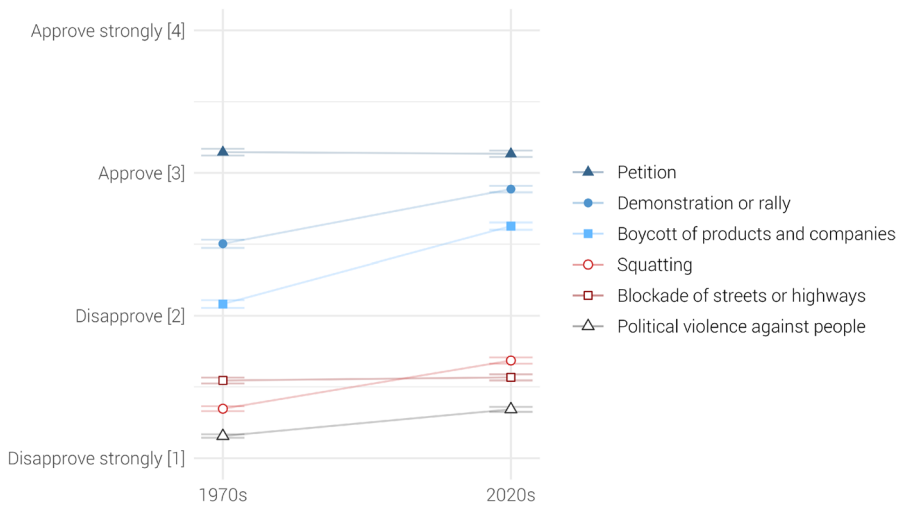


Fig. 3 Average legitimacy perception in Germany. Source: Political action studies I+II and original survey data

Protest form Effects: Experimental Evidence

Having established the distinction between the various protest forms into two groups, we now turn to the causal effects of the different protest forms in the context of the recent climate mobilization. Overall, we expect confrontational protest forms will negatively affect the public's perspective on the protest, namely on the legitimacy of, sympathy for, and support for the protest, compared to demonstrative protest forms. Similarly, we expect that confrontational protest forms will negatively impact policy preferences on the issue at stake, namely, climate policy preferences.

We focus first on the results of the different dimensions of public opinion on *the protest* and *the protest group* itself before turning to discuss the results on policy attitudes. The results on public opinion on the protest are portrayed on the top three panels of Fig. 4. Three patterns are worth mentioning. First and foremost, confrontational protest forms such as street blockades and art attacks are “punished” across the dimensions of legitimacy, sympathy, and support vis-à-vis conventional demonstrations. For example, in the December 2022 wave, climate demonstrations received an average legitimacy of 52.3 points, whereas blockades and art attacks only received 40.9 and 39.8 points on average in terms of legitimacy, respectively. The differences between the demonstration and the confrontational protest forms are statistically significant at $p < 0.001$, while the differences between the two confrontational protest forms are not ($p = 0.49$).¹² We find similar effects in terms of sympathy for the protest and support for the protest. The values across dimensions differ in absolute levels

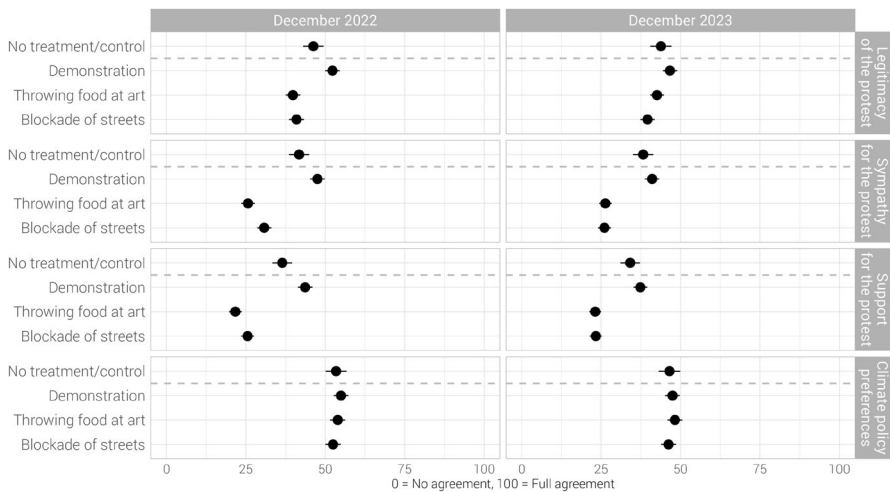


Fig. 4 Protest form effects on public opinion on the protest and climate policy. Note: error bars indicate 90% confidence intervals

¹²Tables 9 and 10 in Appendix C.2 include the statistics of the main experimental results as well as the p-values for all cross-comparisons.

since they capture different intensities of public opinion conceptually.¹³ In short, confrontational protest is *less popular* than the control condition across different dimensions of public opinion toward the protest.

Second, despite the negative effects of confrontational protest, demonstrations consistently yield positive effects across the public opinion dimensions on the protest group compared to street blockades and art attacks, even surpassing the impact observed in the control group that was not exposed to any protest form. Demonstrative protest forms were supported at a level of 43.7 during wave 1 and of 37.4 during wave 2, which meant a higher level of support than in the control group of +7.3 ($p < 0.001$) and +3.3 ($p = 0.07$), respectively. This control condition, which did not present any specific protest form, thus received moderate levels of support at 36.4 (wave 1) and 34.1 (wave 2), which were at the same time higher than the two confrontational protest treatments (all comparisons at least +10 points, $p < 0.001$). In other words, demonstrations can positively affect the popularity of climate protests, which in turn are negatively affected by the general presence of confrontational forms in the movement. The general perception of climate mobilization—represented by the control group as a baseline—appears to be positioned at an average level between the more effective demonstrative protests and the less favorable confrontational tactics. These results align with the previous descriptive assessment of the perceived legitimacy of demonstrative and confrontational protest forms over time. We therefore find overall evidence to support the H1 about the negative effect of confrontational protest forms on movement support. Briefly, demonstrative protest is not only consistently *more popular* than confrontational protest but also than the control group not exposed to any specific protest form.

Third, these effects are stable over time. In both the December 2022 and December 2023 waves, the negative effects of confrontational protest and the positive effects of demonstrations on public perceptions hold. This finding is important because the first wave captured a moment when *Letzte Generation's* protests were still novel and highly newsworthy, whereas the second wave reflects a context in which such actions had become a more familiar feature of public life.

A further relevant aspect of the analysis concerns the significant absolute loss of legitimacy, sympathy, and support for climate demonstrations from the first to the second wave (-6.3 points for support). Although demonstrations are seen as more positive at both time points, this protest form lost popularity over one year. The experimental findings remain robust over time, even if the experimental design based on two snapshots in time cannot tackle *why* the protest form of demonstrations has a general popularity loss. By contrast, there are no significant and systematic absolute differences in protest support loss toward confrontational protest between the two waves. Yet, beyond attitudes toward the protest groups, we are also interested in the political consequences of different protest forms.

We examine the effect of different protest forms on policy preferences in the lower panel of Fig. 4. The results show a null effect of demonstrative and confrontational protest forms on climate policy preferences; the ANOVA test is not significant. In

¹³As in the gradual understanding of public opinion dimensions, support is a stronger measure of public opinion, followed by sympathy and, last, by legitimacy.

other words, in our experimental design, demonstrative or confrontational protest forms do not affect the public's preferences on the protest claims, either negatively or positively. Individuals are very consistent about their climate policy preferences, irrespective of the protest forms they are exposed to. In the second wave of December 2023, however, the absolute support for demanding more climate change policies from the federal government drops 6.5 points on average. Yet this difference is unaffected by different protest forms. Thus, the empirical results do not support H2, namely that confrontational protest forms hamper the support for the protest claims at stake.¹⁴ It is important to highlight, as well, that these null results indicate that demonstrative protest does not enhance the support for policy goals either. In short, consistent with the earlier results, we find that confrontational protest forms do not undermine support for protest policy goals, even if they lessen sympathy, legitimacy, and support for the protest group.

Moreover, we explored the potential effect of demonstrative and confrontational protests on concrete climate change policies in the second survey wave. Costly and restrictive climate change policies might evoke negative responses among economically deprived individuals (Gaikwad et al. 2022; Drews and Van den Bergh 2016). Thus, we asked respondents about their post-treatment preferences on costly policies such as the introduction of a 49 EUR ticket for public transportation in Germany, replacing the German heating system, and culturally divisive disputes such as reforming highway speed limits. Similarly to the main results on attitudes toward climate change, the results show a null effect across the more specific policy dimensions (see Appendix F). In short, we do not find evidence for either a positive or a negative impact of exposure to different climate protest forms on the public's preferences for concrete climate change policies. The experimental evidence indicates that *exposure to confrontational protest does not affect the support for climate policies compared to exposure to a peaceful demonstration*.

Last, we analyze *who* drives the effects we found, namely that the public dislikes confrontational protests (supporting H1) but does not update their climate policy preferences based on direct exposure to different protest forms (contradicting H2). We examine this aspect by analyzing ideological heterogeneous effects based on respondents' left-right self-placement to test H3.1 and H3.2. Figure 5 presents predicted values of the interaction of protest forms and individuals' left-right positioning across the different public opinion dimensions of interest.¹⁵

First, across the different dimensions of public opinion *on the protests themselves*, a pattern emerges that is very similar to the main results: Centrists, and especially left-wing individuals, are more negatively reactive to confrontational protest forms. Left-wing individuals especially dislike confrontational protests compared to peace-

¹⁴In Appendix H, we engage with covariate and entropy balance analysis to account for potential imbalances across treated groups. In Appendix D, we conduct a robustness test of the results based on manipulation checks; we sub-sample only respondents who successfully pass the manipulation question just after the experiment. The additional analyses confirm the main results and show the robustness of our inferences.

¹⁵The models behind these interactions account for gender, age (incl. second polynomial), and educational level as well as for a further treatment aspect that is irrelevant for the current case (apocalyptic frames). These analyses and co-variables were pre-registered as exploratory in the first Pre-Analysis Plan.

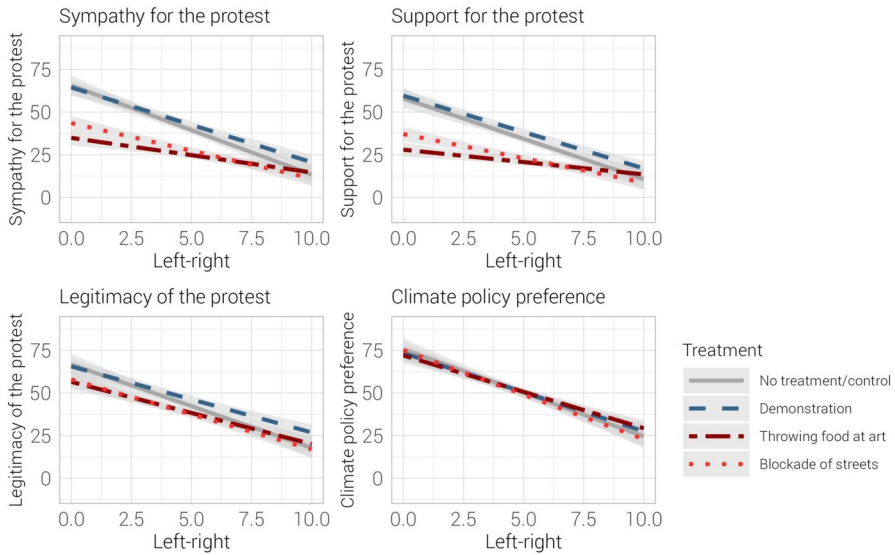


Fig. 5 Left–right heterogeneous effects of protest form on public opinion. Note: Predicted values based on regressions with OLS specification controlling for survey wave (see Appendix G, Tables 14 and 15). Further results and interpretation with the left–right second polynomial specification in Appendix G. Grey bands indicate 95% confidence intervals

ful demonstrations, even though they have a more positive opinion of climate mobilization in absolute terms across the board. For example, center-left individuals who locate themselves at 0.4 on the left-right scale sympathize with demonstrations at a level of 46.9 (0.95 CIs: 44.7; 49.0). However, they express less sympathy for street blockades as a form of confrontational protest at 30.55 (CIs: 28.4; 32.7). Similarly, these center-left individuals support demonstrations at 42.55 (CIs: 40.5; 44.6) and support street blockades significantly less at 25.7 (CIs: 23.7; 27.8). The only exception, however, appears for left-wing and centrist individuals concerning protest legitimacy in the second wave. In this context, both left-wing and centrist individuals legitimize confrontational protest forms similarly to the no-treatment (control) group. By contrast, right-wing individuals express low levels of legitimacy, sympathy, and support for climate protests, regardless of the form of action; in other words, always. In sum, the heterogeneous effects analysis contradicts H3.1, which posits that confrontational protest will more negatively affect public opinion among individuals ideologically distant from the protest. The opposite is the case: individuals holding centrist and progressive positions (left-leaning) dislike confrontational protest from the climate movement, although they ideologically align with these more closely. Conservative individuals’ public opinion toward the protest, in turn, is unaffected by exposure to different protest forms, although they show overall lower levels of sympathy, legitimacy, and support for the protest.

Second, the heterogeneous effects analysis confirms the main results on policy preferences and is in line with studies on climate change preferences: left-wing individuals are more in favor of mitigation policies, while right-wing individuals are significantly less so (Fisher et al. 2022). Furthermore, the bottom right panel reiter-

ates the main finding on the consistency of climate policy preferences across protest forms: we do not find evidence that confrontational protest forms—negatively or positively—affect preferences on climate policy in any of the survey waves. Thus, we do not find support for H3.2: regardless of their ideological position, individuals do not adapt their preferences on climate policies when exposed to confrontational protest.

Last, in Appendix G, we analogously analyze heterogeneous effects by interacting pre-treatment pro-climate preferences with the experimental exposure to the different protest forms (within-subject effects). We find the same pattern applies to pro-climate preferences.

Concerning support for the protest, respondents with pro-climate political preferences are more responsive to the protest form, whereas respondents with less pro-climate preferences have low values for sympathy and support for the protests, regardless of the protest form. Furthermore, confrontational protest forms do not affect the climate policy preferences of individuals with different pre-treated pro-climate preferences. The results are, thus, robust to different measures of individuals' political orientations.

In short, progressive and centrist individuals, or individuals with pro-climate preferences, are the ones *delegitimizing* and *losing sympathy* for confrontational protest, although this group of individuals shows broader support for the climate movement in general. We discuss these heterogeneous results together with the main results in the following concluding section.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper studies legitimacy perceptions of different protest forms and their consequences for policy preferences in contemporary Germany. It is based on two original survey waves fielded in 2022 and 2023 with altogether over 5,000 respondents. We first present descriptive and long-term comparative results of how German citizens perceive various protest forms more generally as contextual information. Nowadays, we observe a strong differentiation of the legitimacy perceptions of protest forms into two distinct groups, which are demonstrative forms on the one hand, and confrontational protest forms on the other hand. Comparing the results over time, we show that this differentiation between the two groups has become more pronounced over the last decades. The widening legitimacy gap between these two groups of protest forms underscores the complex interplay between societal developments and the legitimacy perceptions of different modes of political participation.

For the main part of the analysis, the paper zooms in on the climate movement, one of Germany's most prominent social movements in recent years. We employ survey experimental evidence to show how the different protest forms affect citizens' policy preferences in a more applied setting, resembling recent real-world events of climate protests. The climate movement was highly active and received widespread media attention during the period when our survey waves were conducted, which is why we focused our in-depth analysis on this movement. This main part of the analysis goes beyond mere descriptive results and employs experimental methods

applied to a tangible case with protest forms employed by activists. While the choice of current protest actions implies potential priming effects, it increases the validity and social relevance of our findings.

At first, we explore the popularity of confrontational protests compared to demonstrative ones, yet in a more nuanced way. By distinguishing between three dimensions of public opinion toward the protest—support, sympathy, and legitimacy—we can show once again that confrontational protest forms are relatively unpopular among the public. In contrast to Badullovich et al. (2024), we do not find relevant differences in legitimacy, support, and sympathy across specific confrontational protest tactics with different levels of *appropriateness*. For example, throwing food at museum paintings is perceived similarly across the three public opinion dimensions as is blocking streets, although the former can be read as a less appropriate protest tactic. Our findings connect perfectly to the long-term development of legitimacy perceptions over time, as they show that the findings hold when using different operationalizations to capture protest perceptions.

The second main finding of the experimental study is the examination of the impact of protest forms on policy preferences. Contrary to popular claims about confrontational protests arguing that, e.g., street blockades do a disservice to climate protection, the experimental evidence ultimately yields null results, finding stability in climate policy preferences regardless of the presented protest form. This finding aligns with earlier studies focusing on climate concern as an outcome measure, which also did not detect backlash effects of confrontational protest (see Brehm and Gruhl 2024). Our study adds by testing this in a more controlled and nuanced experimental setting with a focus on general and specific policy preferences. Overall, this is an encouraging finding, as it shows that the public supports policies to fight climate change regardless of whether they encounter confrontational protest activities. These results hold when we present respondents with concrete climate policy measures that are potentially costly for them.

The final exploration in the experimental study shows that individuals with progressive and centrist, or pro-climate attitudes, stop supporting climate mobilization when encountering confrontational protest forms. Conservative, right-wing individuals do not support climate protests regardless of the protest form. This result indicates that for the progressive parts of the population, confrontational protests fuel negative reactions toward such social movements, although they do not change their policy preferences.

In other words, confrontational protest generates negative reactions toward protest actors among the public but does not promote negative (or positive) effects on their climate demands. Therefore, we make a sharp differentiation between perceptions of social (protest) groups and their actions and preferences for the issues at stake. Negative perceptions of specific protests do not translate into lower or higher support for the policy issues that the protesters advocate for, aligning with previous studies (Pardini and Morselli 2015). In this regard, negative reactions toward protesting groups or activists might be activating pure out-group dislike toward the protesters (the *claimant*) but not necessarily programmatic divergence or ideological polarization (the *claim*). Relatedly, Iyengar et al. (2019) argue that “affective polarization can increase while ideological divisions shrink” (see Röllicke 2023). However, further research

is necessary to understand how dislike toward protesting groups might be at play considering climate mobilization, especially among left-wing and centrist individuals (for a media research example, see De Kleer et al. 2025).

Furthermore, unlike political parties, social movements and protest actors generally do not advocate gaining majorities or votes for themselves. Protest actors aim to gain attention for their issues and shift public agendas. In this respect, social movements can use confrontational, contentious action forms for their purpose without detrimentally damaging their goals. Our results emphasize the divide between group-based perceptions and programmatic preferences. We believe that this differentiation also connects to the radical flank effects literature (Simpson et al. 2022; McCammon and Moon 2014): if confrontational protests do not directly hurt the movement's goals, they have the potential to unleash positive radical flank effects, legitimize moderate protest actors, and indirectly fuel support for a policy option (Haines 1984; Tompkins 2015). Adding to research on protest's positive effects on issue-based preferences in the electoral arena (Colombo et al. 2024; Ellinas and Lamprinou 2024), our findings highlight that demonstrative mobilization can exploit its full potential in terms of positive effects on policy preferences, regardless of confrontational protest. Last, our study presents a clear, substantial demarcation between confrontational and violent protest. As we discussed, the literature on violent protest tactics strongly motivated our expectations regarding confrontational protest effects on policy support (Wasow 2020; Olzak 2024). However, confrontational protest does not seem to undermine the protesting movement's goals and policy demands as in previous cases of violent protest dynamics. This differentiation highlights the relevance of not equalizing confrontational protest tactics with political violence and the potential consequences that criminalization of social movements and protest can have in the political realm.

The insights derived from this study have substantial implications for scholars of social movements and public policy, as well as for activists and policymakers. The findings provide a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics between confrontational protest forms and policy preferences. In contrast to studies that find positive effects of protest exposure on related outcomes such as climate concern (Brehm and Gruhl 2024) or voting for Green parties (Fabel et al. 2025; Valentim 2023), our results suggest that even highly confrontational protest forms do not significantly shift citizens' policy preferences in either direction. This underscores the importance of distinguishing between types of protest forms, outcome measures, and underlying mechanisms. Future research endeavors could aim to investigate the underlying mechanisms that drive these findings and study other issue areas beyond climate policies. Moreover, it is advisable to expand research employing similar experiments in a multi-country context. This would validate that the outcomes are not confined to the German context alone but apply to other countries with active climate movements.

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Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare none.

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