

# Perceptions of the past and the future affect individual climate change action

April 8 2025, by Mary A. Spiro

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Have you ever spotted a problem but assumed someone else would handle it, so you did nothing? A recent sociological study explores this common mindset in the context of how we respond—or fail to respond—to climate change.

Research [published](#) online in the April 2025 issue of *American Sociological Review* reveals that people's perceptions of what others

expect for the [future](#) affect their own reactions to climate change. In the paper, "Time's Up? How Temporal Maps of Climate Change Shape Climate Action," researchers wanted to find out how thinking about the future and the past influences behaviors like recycling or protesting for [climate action](#).

Ioana Sendroiu (University of Hong Kong), Amalia Álvarez-Benjumea (Spanish National Research Council), and Fabian Winter (University of Zurich) surveyed 875 people in Germany in May 2022 to determine how these perspectives shape real-world choices.

They looked at two types of future expectations. The first is people's own beliefs about what will happen with climate change. The second is their perception of what others believe will happen.

The study found that people who are personally worried about the future take more action, while those who believe others are already concerned often do less. When people think others are already caring for the problem, they may feel less responsible for acting themselves—evidence of what is known as a "tragedy of the commons."

"Instead of treating climate change as the collective action problem it is, where any contribution is better than nothing, individual responsibility appears to diffuse," the authors wrote. "Our respondents are less likely to engage if they think others are concerned (and implicitly more likely to engage)."

The study also examined how [past experiences](#) with climate change impact behavior. Not surprisingly, the researchers found that people who have seen or experienced the effects of [climate change](#) firsthand are more likely to act. However, if someone believes it's too late to make a difference, they may give up on trying to help.

Because of Germany's well-established climate policies and high public awareness, researchers discovered how people's beliefs develop in a setting where climate action is evident. The results suggest that climate action campaigns should focus on people's narratives of the past and the future. Reminding people of the climate impacts they have already experienced can motivate action while also making it clear that every effort still matters.

**More information:** Ioana Sendroiu et al, Time's Up? How Temporal Maps of Climate Change Shape Climate Action, *American Sociological Review* (2025). [DOI: 10.1177/00031224251320103](https://doi.org/10.1177/00031224251320103)

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