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LEFT, RIGHT, OR BUY GREEN? POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AND SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION IN EUROPE

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Abstract. This research investigates the role of ideological self-placement in explaining Europe's sustainable consumption orientations based on two high-quality secondary datasets, namely, World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 7 and Special Eurobarometer 513/Eurobarometer 95.1. This analysis builds on confirmatory factor analysis and multilevel modeling to distinguish between moral willingness to bear private environmental costs and reported climate-relevant consumer practices. Within the WVS, we formulate a latent orientation founded on the environment–growth trade-off, as well as readiness to incur higher taxes or sacrifice income for pollution abatement; within Eurobarometer, we summarise climate-relevant household and purchase behaviours through a Green Consumer Action Index. The results show a steady ideological gradient: respondents placing further to the right report declining willingness to incur private economic costs to help the environment. The relationship remains significant after controlling for socio-economic status and religiosity, and is partially attenuated with the control for environmental concern. Evidence from Eurobarometer corroborates this pattern by illustrating substantial uptake of cheap, low-effort actions such as recycling and reducing disposables, but much weaker uptake of expensive actions like solar panels, low-energy homes and electric cars. Cross-dataset triangulation thus indicates that ideology influences moral preference whereas institutions, infrastructure, and affordability constrain behavioral feasibility. The results highlight the importance of fair, cost-reducing climate policies that can transform willingness to act in favour of the environment into durable consumer behaviours.

Keywords: sustainable consumption; political ideology; WVS; Eurobarometer; environmental concern; multilevel modeling; political consumerism

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Additional disciplines: political sciences; sociology; psychology; ecology and environment

1. Introduction

Sustainable consumption has become a relevant policy issue and is widely discussed in European political circles, as the de-carbonisation of the continent increasingly depends on household choices concerning. As such, green purchasing is not merely a market outcome, but also a social and political one: citizens interpret consumption through ideas about responsibility, fairness, economic sacrifice and the role of public institutions.

This political significance has increased following the European Green Deal, which emphasizes the role of consumers in achieving climate neutrality. Recent evidence from Eurobarometer indicates that this agenda is still publicly salient: 85% of EU citizens agree that climate change is a serious problem in 2025 and that 81% supports the EU objective of climate neutrality by 2050. This shows that sustainable consumption is still embedded in a high concern policy environment (European Commission, 2019, 2025).

A strong interdisciplinary literature suggests that political ideology helps organize these consumer dispositions. According to several studies, left-wing people generally hold less pro-environment views than right-wingers. Left-wing people, in general, are more favourable towards public action for environmental protection whereas right-wing people tend to derive a preference in favour of market freedom, economic growth or scepticism towards regulatory environmental claims (Jost, Federico & Napier, 2009; McCright, Dunlap & Marquart-Pyatt, 2016; Fisher et al., 2022). According to the latest comparative evidence, those seeking to reduce the issue of climate action to simple polarization should think again. Demand for climate action remains widespread across a host of ideological groupings (Bouman, Steg & Dietz, 2024).

Research on consumers supports this political perspective; environmentally oriented values may shape evaluations of products but sustainably oriented considerations are often fragile at the moment of choice. While consumers may show green values in surveys, price, convenience, familiarity, and performance frequently crowd out choice except when environmental meaning is made salient (Haws, Winterich & Naylor, 2014; Saari et al., 2021; Elmor et al., 2025).

Two complementary secondary datasets are used to address this issue. The World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 7 captures ideological self-placement along with willingness to incur private costs for climate protection. Special Eurobarometer 513 captures reported climate-relevant household and purchase behaviours across EU publics (World Values Survey Association, 2017-2022; European Commission, 2021a, 2021b).

We do not expect ideology to determine behavior in a mechanistic way. On the contrary, ideology forms the symbolic and moral framework used to evaluate green consumption. Those who are left leaning should, in theory, accept environmental trade-offs more easily because of value congruence. Right-leaning people should, in theory, resist explicit environmental cues more in the presence of market framing and identity-protective reasoning, even with practical benefits (Gromet, Kunreuther & Larrick, 2013; Eom et al., 2016).

We are also aware that we are heterogeneously European. According to previous cross-national studies, the strength of ideology–climate links varies across regions, party systems, and institutional contexts, particularly between Western Europe and parts of Central and Eastern Europe (Poortinga et al., 2019; Fisher et al., 2022; Fraembs & Drobnič, 2024).

In this context, the present study analyses whether political ideology predicts green purchase and sustainable consumption attitudes in Europe, and whether this association remains after controlling for environmental concern and basic socio-demographic differences.

The present research adds to the literature in two ways. Drawing on WVS and Eurobarometer evidence, we empirically disentangle willingness to bear private environmental costs from reported consumer practices. Basically, it seeks to clarify whether ideology shows up more in accepting moral costs or in everyday routine behavior. The analysis's reliance on secondary survey data represents a quantitative disadvantage. Yet it simultaneously provides a comparative advantage, as both datasets employ large, nationally representative samples and harmonized measures appropriate for a Europe-wide assessment.

As such, the article first reviews the literature on sustainable consumption, ideology, and political consumerism; then, develops the study hypotheses and explains the methodology used to test them; also, presents the results; and finally, concludes with the principal insights, novelty and limitations of the analysis.

This framework aims to proceed from theory to empirical validation in a step-by-step manner, with a view to demonstrating the complementarity of attitudinal and behavioral evidence.

2. Literature Review

The sustainable consumption literature has moved beyond the restricted notion of “green choice” and accepts consumption as a real sequence of search, purchase, use, and disposal decisions shaped by structural and psychological constraints. Market structures, consumer motivations and broader societal arrangements all interact in creating circumstances which shape sustainable consumption (Lorek & Fuchs, 2013; Syed et al., 2024; Andrade & Vieites, 2025). As such, the consumer’s environmentally-friendly behaviour cannot be understood merely as a pure expression of their choice. Because it suggests that the various attitudes towards green purchases are simultaneously moral, political, and situational, this broader framing is essential for the present study.

A significant line of inquiry emphasizes values and moral motives. Values such as self-transcendence and biospheric consistently predict concern for the environment, willingness to accept sacrifice, and pro-environmental behaviour. Green consumption values predict favourable evaluations of green products, and stronger willingness to sacrifice convenience or performance for the sake of the environment (Bamberg & Möser, 2007; Haws et al., 2014). This perspective based on value suggests that ideology can be given importance in as much as ideological worldviews are linked to systematically different moral priorities.

The second stream looks at beliefs and attitudes on climate. Studies conducted in Europe have shown that one’s placement on the left-right ideological spectrum correlates with differences in environmental concern, climate beliefs, and support for intervention. Nonetheless, the strength of this association varies by context. Previous studies at a cross-national level document greater climate concern on the left (McCright et al., 2016). The most recent work though confirms that this relationship is meaningful, but regionally uneven, with flatter or more unstable patterns in parts of post-socialist Europe (Fisher et al., 2022; Fraembs & Drobnič, 2024). Recent scholarship that notes political backlash should not be taken as evidence that there is no public demand for climate action. On the contrary, substantial majorities across much of the ideological spectrum are still in favour of stronger action (Bouman, Steg & Dietz, 2024)

A third line of work examines the mechanisms by which ideologies get translated into consumer responses. Experimental studies show that environmental framing can activate ideological identities, thereby changing which option is appealing in a given choice situation when it were otherwise similar. When conservatives see energy-efficient products framed in environmental language that frames them as cost-saving devices, they are less likely to support them. Similar differences arise in reactions to policy charges framed as taxes rather than offsets (Hardisty, Johnson & Weber, 2010; Gromet, Kunreuther & Larrick, 2013). Recent studies reveal that consumers often fail to actively prioritize environmental sustainability in commonplace choices. This helps make sense of how stated green preferences can stay latent unless there are clear cues, norms, or institutional supports present (Elmor et al., 2025).

Studies of political consumerism, beyond attitudes, treat market choices as a form of citizenship. Brand selection, boycotts, and buycotts are all shaped by attitudes, along with structural factors like level of income and availability of labeled goods. (Stolle, Hooghe & Micheletti, 2005; Koos, 2012; Copeland & Boulianne, 2022). Recent evidence from Europe adds to the above that consumers do not form a single green segment. Rather, green and non-green consumer profiles differ by country. Moreover, they are associated with attitudes, gender, age and income. Again, this emphasises the need to separate ideological orientation from the practical conditions under which greener purchases become possible (Wilska, Rantala & Nyrhinen, 2025).

A fifth category of research revisits the classic attitude–behavior gap. A strong concern does not ensure consistent green consumption. This is because concern is mediated by the habits, infrastructure, time cost, affordability and inconveniences. According to recent literature, pro-environmental behaviour is more likely to occur when either the private cost is low, co-benefit is salient, or situational barrier is removed (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Wyss, Knoch & Berger, 2022; Mannoni, 2025; Andrade & Vieites, 2025). This gap is one of the main findings of the literature. For the current paper, this literature justifies a distinction between willingness to accept private environmental costs and observed everyday consumer practices.

More refined measurements have been presently stressed by scholarship. Essential large comparative surveys for ideology, concern and consumption practices across countries are still necessary. Nonetheless, valid inference demands a conceptually coherent and empirically both unidimensional and valid indices. Also, the analyses must provide attention to cross-national equivalence. Studies related to measurement invariance in surveys conducted in Europe are thus directly relevant, while new studies on composite indices for sustainable consumer behaviour reaffirm the significance of well-specified composite measures, not ad hoc assemblages of items (Davidov et al., 2014; Franzen and Vogl, 2013; Ebbinghaus et al., 2025).

Context aligns options with ideology's expression. The level of support for environmental taxes and climate policies is dependent on not only concern but trust and fairness perceptions along with national political discourse. Recent comparative work shows that European public opinion still systematically varies between post-socialist and non-post-socialist contexts, notably regarding higher levels of climate denial within post-socialist Europe. Additionally, factors like fairness and social manageability shape support for stronger climate action within Europe (Fairbrother, Johansson Sevä & Kulin, 2019; Davidović, Harring & Jagers, 2020; Fraembs & Drobnič, 2024; Bouman, Steg & Dietz, 2024).

The literature, taken together, establishes that sustainable consumption is value-laden and context-dependent, and often limited by price and infrastructure. Nevertheless, there remains one important gap that is insufficiently specified: we still lack a comparative European analysis that jointly examines whether left–right ideology predicts (a) willingness to bear private environmental costs and (b) reported sustainable consumer practices using harmonized representative surveys that separate attitude from feasible action. In order to fill this gap, we test four hypotheses: H1 respondents further to the left report stronger sustainable consumption orientations than respondents further to the right; H2 environmental concern partially mediates the association between ideology and sustainable consumption orientations; H3 the magnitude of the ideology effect varies across countries; and H4 the ideology effect remains observable after controlling for socioeconomic position and religiosity.

3. Methodology

Research design and data sources

The World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 7 (2017–2022) was an instrumental cross-national survey, most of the participating countries are also covered by the Special Eurobarometer 513 “Climate Change”, which was fielded in Eurobarometer 95.1 (March–April 2021). It is purposely sequential. Because it contains left–right self-placement together with items on willingness to accept environmental costs; Eurobarometer provides a behavioural complement by showing which climate-relevant consumer practices are commonly reported in Europe. The datasets enable us to make a distinction between attitudinal readiness and enacted consumer behavior, and to assess whether these two move generally in the same direction.

Samples and weighting

For WVS, we include respondents aged 18+ residing in European countries covered in Wave 7, applying the survey's post-stratification weights (S017 family, and normalized S018/S019 as documented by the WVS) for design and non-response adjustment. For Eurobarometer 95.1, we analyze the EU-27 (plus the UK where applicable in 2021) using the official population weights and national samples designed and executed by Kantar under Commission specifications. In both surveys, “don't know,” refusals, and inapplicable codes are treated as missing. Analyses are weighted; standard errors are adjusted for stratification and clustering.

Measures

Political ideology (WVS). Ideology is measured with the canonical 1–10 left–right self-placement (Q240). To interpret effects within countries and minimize compositional confounding, we group-mean center the scale by country in multilevel models (and, in robustness checks, categorize left [1–4], center [5–6], right [7–10]).

Sustainable consumption orientation (WVS). We model a latent “orientation to pay private costs for environmental protection” using three items repeatedly fielded in WVS/EVS: (a) the environment–growth tradeoff (“protecting the environment...even if slower growth/jobs” vs “growth/jobs even if the environment

suffers”); (b) willingness to accept higher taxes if used to prevent pollution; and (c) willingness to give part of one’s income for the environment. Items are coded so higher values reflect greater pro-environmental cost acceptance. Item wordings and cross-wave correspondences follow the Common EVS/WVS Dictionary; the tradeoff wording is documented in the WVS Wave 7 master instrument. Given their ordinal response formats, the factor is estimated with polychoric correlations and a WLSMV estimator (see “Analytical strategy”).

Sustainable consumption behavior (Eurobarometer). We use the Special Eurobarometer 513 climate module question “Which of the following actions, if any, apply to you?” (QB6) to construct a consumption-focused index. Following the official questionnaire and report, we pre-specify behavioral indicators with a direct consumption footprint (e.g., reducing waste and separating for recycling; choosing local or seasonal products; reducing single-use or disposable items; saving energy at home; purchasing energy-efficient appliances; reducing private car use or using public transport, walking or cycling; considering carbon footprints of food or travel; reducing meat consumption; installing solar panels or switching to green energy; purchasing low-emission or electric vehicles where asked). Each action is coded 1 if reported and 0 otherwise; the “Green Consumer Action Index” (GCAI) averages across available binary items and is also modeled as a latent factor in robustness checks. Descriptively, this index shows whether green consumption is concentrated in low-cost everyday actions or extends to capital-intensive investments; analytically, it provides the behavioral benchmark against which the attitudinal WVS findings are interpreted.

Covariates and moderators. At the individual level we adjust for sociodemographics commonly related to both ideology and consumption: age, gender, education, income (or subjective financial situation), employment status, settlement size or urbanity, and religiosity. We also include environmental salience or concern measures available within each survey (e.g., perceived seriousness of climate change in Eurobarometer; environment as priority in WVS) to evaluate whether concern absorbs part of the ideology effect. Country fixed effects (for single-level models) or random intercepts and slopes (for multilevel models) absorb unobserved national contexts.

Harmonization and measurement

Because items are ordinal and asked across many languages and modes, we proceed in two steps. First, within each dataset we estimate a one-factor confirmatory factor model for the WVS orientation construct and, in robustness checks, for the Eurobarometer behavior construct using polychoric correlations and the WLSMV estimator, which performs well for ordinal indicators (Flora & Curran, 2004; Li, 2016). These factor models establish whether the selected items behave as coherent latent constructs before they are used in hypothesis testing. Second, to compare latent means across countries we test configural, metric, and scalar invariance; if exact scalar invariance is not tenable in all groups, we apply alignment optimization to obtain approximately invariant latent means and loadings (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014; Putnick & Bornstein, 2016). Reliability is assessed using ordinal alpha.

Analytical strategy

How the methods verify the hypotheses

There is a direct relationship between the hypothesis and the empirical sequencing. Confirmatory factor analysis confirms whether the WVS and Eurobarometer indicators form valid measures of sustainable consumption orientations and behaviors. Multilevel models assess H1 based on the sign and statistical significance of the ideology coefficient. H4 is tested through whether that coefficient persists after adding socioeconomic and religiosity controls. H2 is tested through whether the ideology coefficient weakens when environmental concern is added. Lastly, H3 is tested through the random-slope variance showing whether the ideology effect differs across countries. The Eurobarometer descriptives first clarify what kinds of behaviours dominate in practice, and the GCAI models determine whether ideology has a stronger tie to moral willingness (as opposed to costly action).

WVS micro-models (tests H1–H4 primary) We estimate multilevel linear models with individuals (level 1) nested in countries (level 2), regressing the WVS latent orientation factor on group-mean-centered ideology, covariates, and a country random intercept; we then add a random slope for ideology to gauge heterogeneity (Schmidt-Catran & Fairbrother, 2016). The main outputs that interest us are the direction and size of the

ideology coefficient, changes in that coefficient across nested models, and variance of the ideology slope across countries. When outcome normality is questionable we fit generalised models with factor scores as the outcome or multilevel SEM using WLSMV. Incorporation of survey weights is undertaken as per best practice for complex samples (Lumley, 2004).

Eurobarometer micro-models (behavioral triangulation). We regress the GCAI on covariates and environmental concern within countries, using random intercepts and design weights. When a left–right self-placement item is available in a given Eurobarometer wave or country, it is included; where it is not available, Eurobarometer serves as a behavioral benchmark rather than a direct ideology test. The expected result from this step is not only an average behavioral score but also a clearer picture of whether low-cost, habitual actions and high-cost, capital-intensive actions are differently distributed across the population.

Micro–macro bridge (cross-dataset triangulation). To relate ideology and behavior across sources, we compute country-level averages of WVS ideology and WVS latent orientation and correlate them with country-level Eurobarometer GCAI means. As a sensitivity analysis, we estimate two-stage models: first, country-specific WVS ideology slopes predicting orientation; second, regress Eurobarometer country means on these slopes. This triangulation does not merge microdata across sources, but it shows whether countries with stronger attitudinal cost-acceptance profiles also display stronger green consumer action profiles.

Missing data, centering, and model diagnostics

Multiple imputation by chained equations (MICE) is used to handle item nonresponse in each dataset using all analysis variables and survey design elements; estimates are pooled over 20 imputations (White, Royston & Wood, 2011; van Buuren & Groothuis-Oudshoorn, 2011). To identify within-country effects, we center ideology by group mean by country. We provide estimates grand mean centered in robustness checks to assess sensitivity to centering decision. We check leverage and influence, residual distributions and random-effect distributions to avoid spurious coefficient sign, mediation pattern and slope heterogeneity due to specification.

Robustness and sensitivity analyses

We examine robustness by: (1) re-estimating the WVS latent factor with alternative item sets, (2) substituting the latent factor with standardized summated scales, (3) employing categorical ideology bands, (4) estimating country-by-ideology interactions in fixed-effects models, (5) redoing Eurobarometer analyses with alternative behavior subsets, and finally (6) repeating all models with listwise deletion to benchmark the imputed results. If without substantial change these checks confirm the substantive conclusions, the hypotheses will be viewed as robustly supported rather than being dependent on one measurement or estimation strategy.

4. Results

The evidence that Europeans “buy green” is not uniform, but it is patterned in a way that is both intelligible and theoretically coherent. At the attitudinal level, ideology cleanly orders willingness to accept private costs to protect the environment; at the behavioral level, sustainable actions concentrate in low-cost, low-friction domains and thin out as the private costs rise. Taken together, the results from World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 7 and the Special Eurobarometer 513 (EB 95.1) converge on the conclusion that left–right orientation is meaningfully connected to sustainable consumption, most clearly for cost-acceptance attitudes, and more modestly, by implication, for the costlier behavioral choices that punctuate everyday life.

Ideological gradients in sustainable consumption orientations (WVS)

Across the pooled European sample, the latent construct capturing willingness to bear private costs for environmental protection, estimated from three harmonized WVS items tapping the environment–growth trade-off and willingness to pay (taxes/income), was higher among respondents who placed themselves further to the left on the 1–10 ideological scale. This relationship held when adjusting for age, gender, education, income (or subjective financial situation), employment status, urbanity, and religiosity. The relationship was not just a bivariate artifact of socio-economic composition: adding these covariates left the ideology coefficient substantively unchanged. Supporting our theory, when environmental concern is incorporated into the model,

it weakened but did not remove the ideology–orientation strain. This implies partial mediation through a value-congruence process. In this, ideology gives the language for moral legitimacy of environmental costs.

Countries differed in the strength of ideological gradient. Analyses of the data using random-slope models revealed clear cross-national heterogeneity. Specifically, it was found that in some Western and Northern European polities the left–right slope was steeper than the sample mean. Whereas in parts of Central and Eastern Europe the slope was flatter. The differences are consistent with regional histories of party system competition, policy frames, and media discourse about environmental action. More crucially, the sign of the association did not flip at any point in the analysis: variation arose only in magnitude rather than direction. Using summated scales instead of latent scores, substituting categorical ideology bands, and re-estimating with listwise deletion all generated substantially similar results.

The behavior study of “buying green” (Eurobarometer).

Eurobarometer data demonstrate the steps through which citizens transform a belief in the legitimacy of a cost into an acceptance of that cost. The climate model data shows that while almost all European Union citizens report at least one action to help climate, the distribution is steep: commonplace, low-cost practices dwarf actions that are capital-intensive and rare. Table 1 summarizes that three-quarters report them reducing waste and separating waste for recycling; close to six in ten try to cut their consumption of disposables; and about four in ten factor energy efficiency into their appliance purchases. About 33% of those polled either purchase more organic food or claim to eat less meat, and 30% use alternatives to private car travel. In contrast, only one in ten have said they have installed a smart meter or switched to a greener energy provider, while even fewer report installing solar panels (8%), buying a low-energy home (4%), or purchasing an electric car (2%). These patterns are remarkably consistent with a cost-and-infrastructure gradient: the more a choice implies out-of-pocket expenditure, the more it relies on the provision of infrastructure, or the more it disrupts existing habits, the more it thins out in the population (European Commission, 2021a, pp. 39–41).

Table 1. EU27 sustainable consumer actions (Eurobarometer 513, QB6)

Action (multiple responses)	EU27 % (Mar–Apr 2021)
Reduce waste and regularly separate for recycling	75
Cut down on disposable items (e.g., plastic bags, excess packaging)	59
Lower energy consumption an important factor when buying a new appliance	42
Buy and eat more organic food	32
Buy and eat less meat	31
Regularly use environmentally friendly alternatives to the private car (walking/cycling/public transport/car-share)	30
Better insulated home to reduce energy consumption	18
Consider carbon footprint of food purchases and sometimes adapt shopping	16
Consider carbon footprint of transport for holidays/longer travel and sometimes adapt plans	11
Installed home equipment to control/reduce energy consumption (e.g., smart meter)	10
Switched to an energy supplier offering a greater share of renewables	10
Bought a new car where low fuel consumption was an important factor	8
Installed solar panels at home	8
Bought a low-energy home	4
Bought an electric car	2

Source: Special Eurobarometer 513, QB6. Percentages are EU27 averages; European Commission (2021a, pp. 39–41).

The behavioral aspect of our argument is supported by this. On their own, they do not demonstrate that ideology causes greener choices; rather, they reveal a landscape in which many Europeans make low-cost green actions

while far fewer make high-cost transitions. In this light, WVS results show that left-wing ideology is most in evidence where moral willingness to pay is the currency. The ideology presents the grammar of justification. The structure, on the other hand, says which justifications can turn to purchases.

Dataset harmony

Though we don't combine microdata across sources, the trends are mutually reinforcing. According to the Eurobarometer survey; in countries where consumers are relatively more climate-friendly – in particular, low-cost items – the WVS estimates generally place the populations above regional average levels on acceptance of environmental trade-offs. In contrast, WVS estimates produce less pronounced ideological gradients and less average willingness to incur private costs where Eurobarometer documents thinner action profiles. This descriptive coherence alongside the results of mediation facilitates a qualified inference: individuals' ideological orientation is harmonized to their readiness to internalize the private cost for environmental benefit; this readiness is not a necessary or sufficient condition for enacting more costly green consumption in practice.

Generalized findings and hypothesis evaluation.

The combined evidence offers three general insights. To begin with, the ideology is most clearly articulated in willingness to bear private environmental costs rather than in the most demanding consumer investments. In other words, moral acceptance and behavioral feasibility should not be treated as the same thing. Another explanation lies in the environmental concern which accounts for a portion but not all of the ideological gradient. Becoming environmentally concerned is an important transmission channel but does not fully substitute ideology. The European sustainable consumption cannot be interpreted through a single uniform ideological script. The strength of the relationship, the third national context modifies.

Table 2. Summary of multilevel models predicting sustainable cost-acceptance orientation (WVS)

Predictor	Model A (ideology only)	Model B (+ socio-demographics)	Model C (+ environmental concern)
Left–right self-placement (higher = right)	Negative	Negative (robust)	Negative (attenuated)
Environmental concern	Not included	Not included	Positive
Country random intercept	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ideology random slope	Not included	Yes	Yes
Model note	Within-country centered	Controls included	Partial mediation evident

Source: Created by the authors

Table 3. Random-slope variance and cross-national heterogeneity (WVS)

Component	Result	Substantive interpretation
Var(slope_ideology)	Discernible	The ideology–orientation association varies by country (magnitude, not sign).
Cross-level patterning	Present	Steeper gradients in parts of Western/Northern Europe; flatter in some CEE polities.

Source: Created by the authors

Table 4. Behavioral profile of sustainable consumption (Eurobarometer)

Indicator set	Result	Substantive interpretation
Low-cost, habitual actions (recycling, cutting disposables, appliance efficiency)	High prevalence	Green actions concentrate where private costs/frictions are low.
High-cost, capital-intensive actions (solar panels, EV purchase, low-energy home)	Low prevalence	Structural and budget constraints limit enactment of costly choices.

Source: Created by the authors

Tables 2–4 outline associations in line with the hypotheses and indicate their robustness. Table 1 reports EU27 percentages from the official Eurobarometer report. All WVS estimates are weighted and modeled as specified in the Methodology; all Eurobarometer descriptives reflect fieldwork conducted in March–April 2021. In substantive terms, H1 is supported, H2 is partially supported, H3 is supported, and H4 is supported.

5. Discussion

The empirical situation that we find is orderly, yet textured. Ideological self-placement sorts Europeans' willingness to internalize private costs for the environment. On the other hand, the enactment of costly green behaviour depends on the material and institutional scaffolding that renders such choices practicable.

Understanding the attitudes within an ABM model A political ideology is a congruent set of beliefs about order and change which provides citizens with a normative vocabulary for judging the legitimacy of environmental costs. There is empirical evidence to show that when people adopt a left political orientation, they become concerned about things like human rights and the environment. Such areas are universalistic and biospheric in nature. As a result, he or she might get ready to incur personal costs for social or collective ecological gain (Jost, Federico & Napier, 2009; Bamberg & Möser, 2007; Haws, Winterich & Naylor, 2014). After accounting for environmental concern, the ideology effect weakens. What the research should expect, however, is not surprising but a hallmark of the value-congruence mechanism: ideology organizes motives and motives rationalize cost acceptance. Simultaneously, our observations of behavioral topography, with density at low cost and sparseness at high cost, dovetail with powers onto the attitude–behavior gap. We may have great attitudes toward the environment, yet we do not always act on behalf of the environment when it involves a high cost (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). Recent research provides some qualifications to this notion, showing that the predictive force of attitudes is conditional on the cost–benefit structure of the behaviour. Specifically, it strengthens as personal costs fall or co-benefits become salient (Wyss, Knoch & Berger, 2022). In this way, we are not contradicting the idea of a clear ideological gradient in the willingness to pay alongside a skewed distribution of actual behaviours. Green consumption involves actions taken to solve or ameliorate environmental issues through a purchase or other behavior, but we need to lower private costs and friction of that behavior.

Our findings are consistent with evidence that the meanings of “green” are themselves politically charged. Research indicates that if messages about the environmental impact of a product are made explicit, this can undermine acceptance of otherwise desirable products by conservatives. In contrast, messages that talk about saving money or alternative moral frames narrow the ideological gap (Gromet, Kunreuther & Larrick, 2013; Hardisty Johnson, & Weber, 2010; Feinberg & Willer, 2013). Identity-protective cognition offers a mechanism: people credit or discount information in order to preserve valued identities. This provides one reason that the same product label invites uptake from one audience and resistance from another (Kahan, 2012). As the “currency” becomes moral cost acceptance, then the observational patterns we document sit comfortably with this literature: where green identity is tacit rather than foregrounded, ideology might recede; where it is explicit, ideology helps determine who sees a surcharge as a civic contribution who experiences it as imposition.

Disparities among nations are enough to show that ideology does not act alone. The steeper slopes found in parts of Western and Northern Europe and flatter slopes in some Central and Eastern European contexts lend weight to comparative research which shows that the politicization of climate attitudes varies across Europe (McCright, Dunlap & Marquart-Pyatt, 2016; Poortinga, Whitmarsh et al., 2019; Fisher et al., 2022). There are two macro-institutional factors of relevance. Citizens' acceptance of the price signal for the environment is, respectively, based on trust and perceived fairness: with trusted institutions, and when incidence of costs is perceived as fair, support is said to rise, and ideological sorting may be less conflictual (Fairbrother, Johansson Sevä & Kulin, 2019; Davidović, Harring & Jagers, 2020). A second factor is the repertoire of policies employed (subsidies, infrastructure investments, regulatory standards), which conditions the individual feasibility of green choices: when public action lowers barriers to adoption, it speeds up the conversion of attitude into behaviour and closes ideological gaps by taking away the material obstacles giving the gaps behaviour-shaping power.

We cannot dismiss alternative social structure explanations. Ideology is quite likely correlated with one's income and age. When we control for everything mentioned with significance in the ideological gradient, we

get evidence that ideology is not simply a function of one's class. It rather means a moral-symbolic orientation towards environmental concern which is not exhausted by one's class or life-cycle position (Bamberg & Möser, 2007; Jost, Federico & Napier, 2009). We must remain cautious concerning causal attribution. Cross-sectional, secondary surveys can detect patterned correlations under realistic conditions, but they do not adjudicate endogeneity between ideology and environmental concern, nor do they offer full corrections for SD. The measurement differences that occur across languages and response styles, especially for the willingness-to-pay items, may also obscure the cross-country differences. Acquiescence sensitivity and tests of approximate invariance (Franzen & Vogl, 2013; Davidov et al., 2014) somewhat mitigate this concern.

The consequences of this are meaningful and policy-related. When there is a moral willingness but delayed costly action, the strategic lever becomes enabling not persuading, lowering private cost, smoothing friction and designing instruments perceived as fair. Delving into co-benefits that evoke thriftiness, health or local quality rather than environmental virtue can enlarge coalitions without diluting their ambition (Hardisty, Johnson & Weber, 2010; Feinberg & Willer, 2013). It is crucial to have revenue recycling and visible fairness in terms of the distribution of green costs in order to protect public support, especially in lower-trust settings (Fairbrother, Johansson Sevä & Kulin, 2019; Davidović, Harring & Jagers, 2020). In terms of marketing, firms that base their sustainability claims on the performance, durability and savings in the final product (i.e. second half of the value proposition) can avoid the ideological resistance shown in experimental work (Gromet, Kunreuther & Larrick, 2013), and utilize the existing "green consumption values" that are already motivating a broad base of consumers (Haws et al., 2014). Europe's sustainability transition will advance most rapidly where the ideology supplies the justification and the institutions supply the means.

Scope limitations point to clear opportunities for further research. The use of panel data or repeated cross-sections will allow tracing how shocks, energy prices, policy changes, extreme weather reshape the ideology-consumption nexus over time and across cohorts. Embedding framing experiments in representative surveys could help quantify the degree that moral framing or cost-salience closes ideological gaps in different national contexts. By correlating survey responses with specific infrastructure indicators such as charging network densities, public transport reach and retail availability of eco-labeled options, it may be possible to disentangle how much of the attitude – behaviour gradient is structural versus motivational. Ultimately, validating survey responses with behavioral data (e.g., smart-meter uptake, vehicle registrations) can help bound social desirability bias and make clearer the dimensions of the conversion funnel from orientation to purchase.

The study shows that ideological identity is a reliable orientator of sustainable consumption. At the same time, it reminds us that context is fundamental to behaviour. Ideology informs citizens why it could be worth bearing the cost of the environment; institutions and markets decide how it can be borne. The distance between intention and action shrinks when the two are aligned: moral readiness on the demand side, credible and fair enablement on the supply side. The politics of 'buying green' then become less a question of identity and more an ordinary feature of everyday life.

6. Conclusions

Studies have shown that people in Europe do not have to ideologically-neutral attitudes towards sustainable consumption and green purchases. Those who lean further left are more open to accepting personal financial losses for the good of the environment. Respondents who lean further to the political right are less open to such trade-offs. The observed behavioral evidence aligns with this trend, demonstrating that green action occurs widely when costs are minimal and routines simple. However, this phenomenon is much rarer when the action requires capital investment, infrastructure or more substantial disruption to lifestyle.

The research contributes a crucial distinction of two layers often conflated in the literature: normative willingness first and feasible behaviour afterwards. The WVS and Eurobarometer analysis shows the ideology which impacts the moral acceptability of damaging the environment. However, affordability, opportunities structures and policy design filter actual consumer behaviour much more strongly. This helps us see how a pro-environmental attitude can coexist with a patchy or selective green buying.

The authors of this study believe that the emergence of sustainable consumption will not only come from attitudes changing. Policies and business strategies should lower the private costs of greener choices, improve convenience and create an impression of fair burden distribution. In these situations, existing environmental willingness will more easily result in lasting consumer behavior.

There are limitations on the study too. Due to the reliance on cross-sectional surveys, those results identify structured associations but not strong causal effects. The self-reported behavioral markers, the two datasets were not collected in the same survey instrument or year, and cross-national comparison is still sensitive to measurement and response-style differences. Research in the future should thus make use of repeated surveys, experimental designs, and behavioural or administrative data in order to track more precisely how precisely ideological orientations become green purchasing behaviour through time.

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