

CEP Reports: On Citizen-Expert Panels in Italy and Czechia

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**Climate, Inequality & Democratic Action:
The Force of Political Emotions**



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Climate, Inequality, and Democratic Action: The Force of Political Emotions

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Executive Summary

This deliverable reports on the findings from citizen-expert panels (CEPs) or deliberative focus groups (hereafter used interchangeably) conducted in Italy and Czechia as part of the CIDAPE project. The results show that participants generally recognize climate change as a serious societal issue but differ in how they assign responsibility and evaluate appropriate responses. While some emphasize structural causes related to corporations and governments, others highlight individual behavior and consumption patterns. Participants tend to support climate action but critically assess protest strategies, favoring those that are communicative, targeted, and socially legitimate over disruptive or confrontational actions. The findings also underline the importance of emotions, socio-economic inequalities, and deliberative dialogue in shaping public attitudes toward climate activism.

The aim of the study was to explore how citizens perceive climate change activism and how these perceptions are shaped by emotions, socio-economic inequalities, and gender dynamics. The deliberative focus group method enabled participants to engage with fictional protest scenarios, reflect on their emotional and political responses, and collaboratively redesign forms of climate activism. This approach allowed for the examination of how opinions are formed, negotiated, and potentially transformed through collective discussion. Overall, the study demonstrated the value of deliberative methods in capturing the complexity of public perceptions and informing more inclusive and effective climate engagement strategies.

1 CEPs in Italy and Czechia

CEPs or deliberative focus groups were conducted as part of the CIDAPE research project in order to explore how citizens perceive climate change activism and how emotions related to inequality and political identity influence these perceptions. The deliberative format allowed participants to reflect collectively on climate-related protest scenarios and to exchange views on the legitimacy, effectiveness, and emotional impact of various forms of environmental activism.

The focus groups functioned as mini-publics (Curato and Farrell 2021), bringing together participants with diverse socio-demographic backgrounds to deliberate on the topic of climate change activism. Participants were encouraged to share their perspectives, evaluate fictional protest scenarios, and collaboratively redesign a protest event that they considered more effective or legitimate. This deliberative process allowed researchers to observe how citizens negotiate different viewpoints and how their emotional responses evolve through discussion (Císař et al. 2025).

Figure 1 Photos from deliberative focus groups in Italy and Czechia



Mini-publics are widely regarded as valuable tools of political deliberation, attracting attention not only for their outputs but also for the internal processes that shape them. Scholarship highlights how these processes are structured by power asymmetries and social inequalities. As Curato et al. (2019) argue, mini-publics can



redistribute power by equalizing participation, reducing knowledge gaps, and challenging established authority, thereby enabling even marginalized groups to exercise voice and engage in deliberation. At the same time, they may also reproduce existing hierarchies. Their empowering potential ultimately depends on how they are designed, implemented, and embedded within broader a deliberative arrangement.

Following the introduction based mainly on the expertise of social movement studies, the discussions addressed several key themes, including how participants define the problem of climate change, who they perceive as responsible for it, and which strategies they consider appropriate for addressing it. Particular attention was given to the role of emotions, socio-economic inequalities, and gender identities in shaping citizens' interpretations of climate activism.

The deliberative format also enabled participants to move beyond individual reactions and engage in collective reflection. In many cases, discussions evolved from initial skepticism or pessimism toward more constructive dialogue about potential solutions and forms of civic engagement. Through this process, the focus groups provided valuable insights into how ordinary citizens interpret environmental activism and how democratic deliberation can influence political attitudes toward climate action.

2 Research Design

The research design involved the organization of multiple deliberative focus groups across different regions of Italy. In total, five focus groups were conducted, each representing distinct socio-economic and geographical contexts. Participants were recruited using quota sampling to ensure variation in gender, age, and educational background, thereby approximating the composition of a representative mini-public.

The selected locations were chosen to capture different social and territorial contexts and to explore how perceptions of climate change activism vary across urban, industrial, and rural areas. The focus groups were conducted in the following locations:

- Rome, Italy – representing a large metropolitan capital area
- Livorno, Italy – representing a port and industrial area
- Abruzzo, Italy – representing a rural and agricultural region
- Brescia, Italy – representing a rural and industrial region
- Naples, Italy – representing a socio-economically disadvantaged urban area
- Prague, Czechia – representing a large metropolitan capital area
- Most, Czechia – representing a socio-economically disadvantaged industrial region

The selection of these sites allowed the research to capture potential urban–peripheral differences as well as variations linked to local economic structures. This approach enabled a comparative analysis of how climate change activism is interpreted in different social environments.

Each focus group lasted between approximately 1.5 and 2 hours and involved between 5 and 11 participants. During the discussions, participants were presented with fictional protest scenarios related to climate activism and asked to evaluate them collectively. The deliberation included several stages: introduction to the topic, discussion of protest scenarios, voting on the least acceptable scenario, and collaborative redesign of a new protest event.

All discussions were audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis. To ensure confidentiality and ethical research standards, participants were guaranteed anonymity and are therefore referred to using pseudonyms throughout the report.

While all focus groups followed a shared organizational structure, the specific wording and selection of questions were adapted to reflect national contexts and cultural specificities. The questionnaire presented below corresponds to the Italian case and is included for illustrative purposes.



TABLE 1: Questionnaire used for the deliberative focus groups
Part 1: Introduction
- What comes to your mind when you hear the term “climate change”?
Part 2: Presentation of the Protest Scenarios
Based on the expertise of social movement studies, participants are presented with several protest scenarios for discussion and interpretation.
Part 3: Voting on the Worst Scenario
Participants individually vote for the protest scenario they consider the worst in terms of legitimacy, acceptability, or effectiveness.
Part 4: Discussion on the Worst Scenario and Re-designing of the Scenario
- Why did you vote as you did? - What is your own interpretation of the “worst” scenario? - Imagine you are passing by this protest — what do you think of it? - Is there anything about this protest that makes you feel uncomfortable? - If you were confronted with the activists, what would you tell them? - Why did the protest receive so much or so little attention on social media? - Is there anything about this protest that makes you feel good or hopeful? Redesign of the protest event scenario: - What made an impression on you during the discussion we just had? - How did you feel about the protest event we just redesigned? - How do you feel about the new version of the protest event? - Thinking back to the presentation about basic facts of climate change — did anything stand out to you? - How did you feel during the presentation? - What will you take away from today?
Part 5: Broader Reflection Questions
- Do you think that people experiencing economic difficulties have specific positions on climate change (e.g., pro/contra restrictive measures, or finding the issue less salient)? If yes, why? If not, why not? Which position in particular? - Do you think that left-wing and right-wing people differ in their positions on climate change (e.g., pro/contra restrictive measures, or issue salience)? If yes, why? If not, why not? Which position? - What comes to your mind when you hear the terms “climate change” and “green transition”? (Does anybody know or imagine what that means?) - What do you believe has caused the problem of climate change? - Some people participate in protests to express their demands. Have you ever taken part in a protest? If so, what issues motivated you to join? - What measures or changes do you think are essential or most important to address the issues caused by climate change (political, economic, social, or cultural)?

3 Results

The deliberative focus groups provided insights into how citizens understand climate change activism, evaluate protest strategies, and connect environmental issues with broader social dynamics. Across the discussions, participants reflected not only on climate change itself but also on the political, emotional, and socio-economic dimensions of environmental activism. The analysis below presents the key findings across several analytical dimensions.



3.1 Framing: Collective Action Frames across Italy and Czechia

Across all focus groups in Italy and most focus groups in Czechia, participants generally recognized climate change as a serious issue, although the ways in which they framed the problem varied considerably depending on social context, regional background, and gender identity. In several discussions in Italy, climate change was not treated solely as an environmental problem but rather as part of a broader structural crisis linked to economic inequalities, consumerism, and political responsibility. Participants frequently connected environmental degradation with systemic factors such as industrial production, capitalism, and the behavior of large corporations.

In urban contexts in Italy, such as Rome and Naples, climate change was often interpreted as a structural problem rooted in broader socio-economic systems. Participants in these focus groups frequently attributed responsibility to large corporations and governments that, in their view, prioritize economic growth over environmental protection. In these discussions, participants also expressed skepticism toward corporate sustainability narratives, describing them as forms of “greenwashing” designed to maintain consumer trust rather than produce meaningful environmental change. Several participants argued that companies promote environmentally friendly branding while continuing environmentally harmful production practices.

In addition to corporate actors, governments were also frequently criticized for transferring responsibility for climate action to individual citizens. Participants in Rome, Prague, and Most, for example, highlighted the perceived contradiction between policies encouraging individuals to adopt environmentally friendly behaviors and the lack of structural reforms targeting industrial emissions or improving public infrastructure. Some participants noted that individuals are encouraged to purchase electric vehicles or adopt greener lifestyles while structural problems such as inadequate public transportation systems remain unresolved. In other focus groups, particularly in Brescia and Abruzzo, participants emphasized more individual and cultural explanations for climate change. These participants highlighted the role of consumerism and individual behavior, arguing that societal patterns of consumption and everyday lifestyle choices contribute significantly to environmental degradation. In these discussions, climate change was often framed as a collective responsibility that requires changes in personal behavior, including consumption habits and awareness of environmental consequences.

Despite these differences, a shared theme across the discussions was the perception that climate change requires both structural and behavioral responses. Participants often combined systemic critiques of corporations and governments with reflections on the role of everyday consumption practices, suggesting that environmental action must occur at multiple levels simultaneously.

3.2 Perceptions of Action Repertoires

The focus groups revealed complex attitudes toward different forms of climate activism and protest strategies. Participants evaluated the fictional protest scenarios primarily in terms of effectiveness, legitimacy, and communication clarity. Across most discussions, participants emphasized that the success of a protest action depends not only on the cause it promotes but also on the way the message is communicated to the public. A central concern across focus groups was whether protest actions are capable of gaining public support. Many participants expressed the view that certain disruptive tactics, such as blocking traffic or causing economic damage, risk alienating ordinary citizens rather than mobilizing them. Participants argued that actions that interfere with everyday life may create frustration among the public and shift attention away from the environmental message. For example, participants in Rome, Prague, and Most were particularly critical of actions that disrupt traffic or daily mobility, noting that such actions often generate irritation among residents. In these discussions, participants argued that protests should focus on actors directly responsible for environmental harm, such as corporations or political institutions, rather than targeting spaces that primarily affect ordinary citizens.

Similarly, in Brescia and Abruzzo, participants expressed strong reservations toward violent protest actions. Violence was widely perceived as counterproductive because it risks delegitimizing environmental movements and attracting negative media coverage. Participants argued that violent confrontations shift the



public focus from the environmental cause to the protest tactics themselves. Across several focus groups, participants emphasized the importance of targeted, symbolic, and communicative actions. Many participants suggested that protests should take place in locations directly associated with environmental harm, such as corporate headquarters or industrial facilities. In addition, participants emphasized that effective activism should communicate clear information and raise awareness rather than simply generate disruption. Overall, the discussions revealed that participants evaluate protest strategies using pragmatic criteria. Actions are considered legitimate when they are perceived as well-organized, clearly communicated, and capable of influencing public debate without unnecessarily harming ordinary citizens.

3.3 Emotions and Affective Dynamics

Building on the theoretical framework of political emotions developed in the CIDAPE project (see Durnová et al. 2025), we focused on participants' emotional responses. Emotions played a central role in shaping participants' perceptions of climate change and activism. As increasing scholarship interest on power of political emotions suggests, participants expressed a wide range of emotional responses, including anger, anxiety, frustration, guilt, and hopelessness. These emotions were often connected to broader feelings about social injustice, political responsibility, and uncertainty about the future. In Italy, many participants described experiencing climate anxiety, particularly when discussing the long-term consequences of environmental degradation. In both countries, participants expressed concern about future generations and the potential impact of climate change on children and grandchildren.

At the same time, several participants expressed feelings of frustration or helplessness regarding the effectiveness of individual actions, or the efficacy of the protest events discussed. Some participants argued that while individuals are encouraged to adopt environmentally responsible behaviors, the actions of economic and political elites ultimately have a much greater environmental impact. This perceived imbalance between individual responsibility and structural power contributed to feelings of injustice, discouragement, and powerlessness. However, the deliberative nature of the focus groups also revealed important emotional dynamics within the discussions themselves. In several cases, participants initially expressed pessimistic or negative emotions when describing their perceptions of climate change. As the discussions progressed and participants began collaboratively designing new protest scenarios, these emotions gradually shifted toward a more constructive and optimistic tone.

This shift suggests that deliberative discussion can play a role in transforming emotional responses to environmental issues since emotions can also be relational. By providing a space for dialogue and collective reflection, the focus groups enabled participants to move from feelings of individual frustration toward a more collective sense of agency.

3.4 Socio-Economic Inequalities

Socio-economic inequalities emerged as one of the most significant themes shaping participants' interpretations of climate change and environmental activism. Many participants argued that economic inequalities influence both the causes of environmental degradation and the capacity of individuals to respond to environmental challenges. In Italy, participants frequently noted that sustainable consumption often requires financial resources. For example, environmentally friendly products, renewable energy technologies, and energy-efficient appliances are often more expensive than conventional alternatives. As a result, participants argued that environmentally sustainable lifestyles may be more accessible to individuals with higher incomes. In Czechia, resource precarity (in terms of money and time) of working-class people was frequently formulated as a justification for why participants engage in behaviors that they realize are environmentally harmful, such as driving a car every day.

Along these lines, several participants emphasized that individuals facing economic insecurity often prioritize immediate material needs over long-term environmental concerns. In this context, environmental responsibility was sometimes described as a form of "privilege," accessible primarily to individuals who already enjoy economic stability. In this sense, participants in Czechia also made clear distinctions between themselves



and climate activists, who were perceived as part of the “other” along with politicians. Participants also linked environmental degradation to global economic inequalities.

Despite these structural critiques, Italian participants also acknowledged that inequalities operate at multiple levels. In some discussions, participants argued that both the wealthy and the economically marginalized may lack incentives to adopt environmentally sustainable practices, albeit for different reasons. While affluent individuals may maintain environmentally harmful lifestyles due to convenience or consumption patterns, economically disadvantaged individuals may lack the resources necessary to adopt greener alternatives. These discussions highlight the importance of considering socio-economic inequalities when designing climate policies and activism strategies. Participants consistently emphasized that environmental transitions must account for economic realities and avoid placing disproportionate burdens on vulnerable populations.

3.5 Gender Dynamics

Gender dynamics were not always explicitly addressed by participants, yet the discussions revealed several patterns related to gender roles and participation in environmental debates. In general, participants tended to describe climate change as an issue affecting everyone equally, emphasizing that environmental degradation transcends gender differences. However, subtle gender dynamics emerged during the focus group interactions.

In Italy female participants in urban focus groups, particularly in Rome, were often more active in the discussions and frequently expressed strong emotional engagement with environmental issues. These participants emphasized themes such as responsibility toward future generations, ethical consumption, and the social dimensions of environmental justice. In contrast, some rural focus groups displayed more traditional interaction patterns in which male participants dominated the discussions more frequently. Although women actively participated in the discussions, male participants occasionally interrupted or redirected the conversation.

In Czechia, participants reproduced gender stereotypes in their behavior in the discussions. Female participants were focused on the task at hand, whereas male participants were at times unsure whether to take the discussion seriously, attempting to ridicule the topic. Male participants also articulated conspiracy theories and engaged in the erasure of climate change as an issue.

Participants also reproduced certain gender stereotypes when discussing environmental behavior. For example, some participants suggested that women may be more attentive to environmentally sustainable consumption practices, while men were associated with environmentally harmful behaviors such as driving high-emission vehicles. These observations were not universally accepted, however, and several participants emphasized that environmental awareness is shaped more by cultural and economic factors than by gender.

3.6 New Protest Scenarios

One of the key components of the deliberative focus groups involved asking participants to collaboratively redesign protest scenarios that they considered more legitimate and effective. This exercise allowed participants to reflect critically on existing activist strategies and propose alternative forms of environmental mobilization. Across the focus groups, participants generally favored protest strategies that combine symbolic visibility with constructive communication. Many participants proposed peaceful demonstrations that incorporate artistic or creative elements in order to attract public attention while avoiding unnecessary confrontation. Many protest events were designed with an implicit intent to build collectivity and mutuality among participants and the public.

Several groups suggested that protests should target specific actors responsible for environmental harm or holding significant power, such as corporations or political institutions. Participants emphasized that clearly identifying responsible actors can increase the perceived legitimacy of protest and help communicate the underlying message effectively. Participants also highlighted the importance of information and public dialogue. Many groups proposed that protests should include informational materials, public discussions, or participation by experts who can explain the scientific and social dimensions of climate change. These elements were seen as essential for transforming protest events into opportunities for public education and engagement.



Another recurring suggestion involved improving communication strategies. Participants emphasized that effective protests should be carefully organized, clearly communicated to the media, and designed to generate constructive public debate. In several discussions, participants suggested that environmental protests should avoid actions that cause unnecessary harm or disruption and instead focus on symbolic gestures that communicate urgency while maintaining moral legitimacy. The redesigned protest scenarios, therefore, tended to emphasize peaceful, creative, and informative forms of activism.

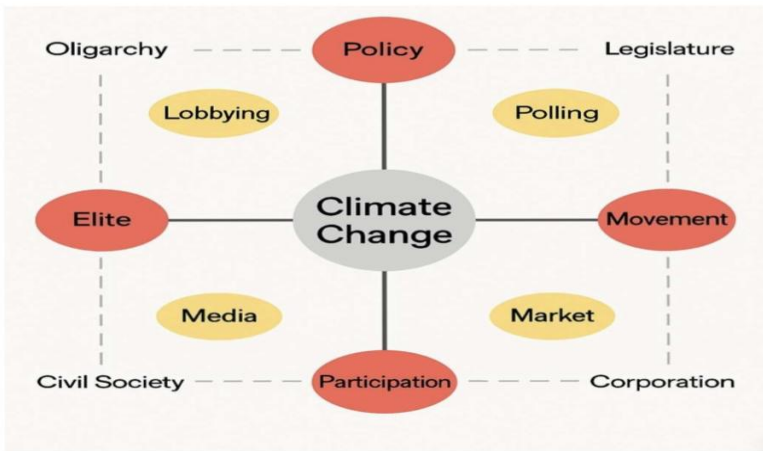
3.7 Feedback from Participants

Across the focus groups, participants consistently described the sessions as a valuable opportunity to exchange ideas and articulate viewpoints that are rarely expressed in everyday contexts. Participants also expressed intrigue with the content of the discussion, formulating that they had never had an opportunity to reflect so deeply on the issue of activism.

The deliberative setting was perceived as a safe and inclusive space in which participants could openly discuss complex and sometimes sensitive issues, including their emotional responses to climate change. In Italy, several participants emphasized that the discussions enabled them to articulate emotions and perspectives that are often marginalized or overlooked in public debates. In particular, participants highlighted the importance of dialogue and deliberation for addressing complex political and societal challenges such as climate change. Some suggested that similar deliberative formats should be more widely implemented in educational settings, local communities, and public institutions, arguing that such spaces are essential for fostering democratic engagement and collective understanding. In Czechia, participants shared enthusiasm with their ability to find a common ground among each other, and highlighted that it was nice they didn't have anyone too radical among them. This shows that participants in Czechia view public discourse as deeply polarized, and even though they have been pleasantly surprised by the mutuality they were able to reach through the deliberative process, they still imagined 'radical other' as a faceless, disruptive element in their mutuality.

An especially noteworthy form of feedback emerged after the completion of one of the focus groups, when several participants articulated motivation to engage with climate change as an issue. One participant in Italy voluntarily shared a visual representation inspired by the discussion. The diagram conceptualizes climate change as situated at the center of a broader political and social system, illustrating its connections to key actors such as elites, civil society, governments, markets, and movements. This contribution reflects how participants engaged critically and creatively with the topic, extending the deliberative process beyond the focus group setting itself. It also highlights how climate change is understood not as an isolated issue, but as embedded within complex networks of power, participation, and communication.

Figure 2 Participants' graph



This type of engagement demonstrates that deliberative focus groups can generate impacts that go beyond data collection. While the methodology enables researchers to capture participants' views as they emerge through interaction, it also appears to foster reflexivity among participants themselves. The focus groups provided a space in which individuals could reconsider their assumptions, connect different dimensions of the issue, and develop more nuanced understandings of climate change as a political and social phenomenon.

In addition, several participants explicitly noted that the deliberative format encouraged them to reconsider their initial positions. Through interaction with others, participants were exposed to diverse perspectives and were prompted to reflect more critically on their own views. Overall, the feedback suggests that deliberative focus groups function not only as a research tool, but also as a form of civic engagement that can support dialogue, learning, and the co-production of knowledge.

4 Conclusions

This report presented the findings from deliberative focus groups conducted as part of the CIDAPE project to explore how citizens perceive climate change activism and how these perceptions are shaped by emotions, socio-economic inequalities, and gender dynamics. The discussions demonstrated that participants generally recognize climate change as a serious societal challenge, yet their interpretations of responsibility and appropriate responses vary across different social and regional contexts. While some participants emphasized the role of corporations and governments in driving environmental degradation, others highlighted the importance of individual consumption patterns and cultural change.

The findings also show that citizens evaluate climate activism not only in terms of its environmental goals but also through considerations of legitimacy, effectiveness, and fairness. Participants often expressed support for climate action while simultaneously criticizing protest tactics that disrupt everyday life or target ordinary citizens rather than political or economic decision-makers. At the same time, the deliberative discussions revealed that emotions—such as anxiety, frustration, and concern for future generations—play an important role in shaping attitudes toward environmental activism.

Finally, the deliberative exercise demonstrated the value of collective dialogue in addressing complex environmental issues. Through discussion and collaborative reflection, participants were able to reconsider initial assumptions and propose alternative protest strategies that emphasize communication, inclusiveness, and constructive engagement. These findings suggest that deliberative forums can provide valuable insights into public perceptions of climate activism while also fostering democratic debate about environmental challenges and potential pathways toward more socially legitimate climate action.



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