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Canton Ticino and climate change

EMOTIONS, REACTIONS, AND CLAIMS OF THE RESIDENTS FACING
THE CHALLENGE OF OUR TIMES

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Executive summary

From the green wave to the Covid-19 pandemic: is climate change still a priority in Ticino?

2019, the year of Greta Thunberg, climate strikes, and success of green parties in Switzerland and in the European Union was followed by the Covid-19 pandemic, that is shifting the spotlight on the pressing problems of limiting the spreading of the virus and the negative impact of the lockdown measures on the economy. What is the sensitivity of people living in Ticino to the issue of climate change in the year of the pandemic? What are their reactions toward the individual and collective actions available to reduce greenhouse gas emissions? The Observatory on Public Finance and Energy (O-FPE) has addressed these questions through an on-line survey, whose results are described in this Report.

Contents of the survey and data collection process

The questions included in the survey were developed drawing from the “10th consumer barometer of renewable energy” conducted in the French- and German-speaking regions of Switzerland from the Institut für Wirtschaft und Ökologie (IWÖ-HSG) of the University of St.Gallen, and from the survey “Erneuerbare Energien in Österreich - Der jährliche Stimmungsbarometer der österreichischen Bevölkerung zu erneuerbaren Energien” conducted in Austria by Alpen-Adria Universität Klagenfurt, Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien, Deloitte Österreich, and Wien Energie. The survey was distributed between October and November 2020 through three electricity retailers active in Ticino, ALL, AMB and SES, who kindly forwarded an invitation to participate to the residential customers who had subscribed to their newsletters. A sample of 1'975 residential consumers filled in the entire survey: their responses provide a picture of climate sensitivity in Ticino that is useful per se and as a reference to compare the Canton with the other Swiss regions.

Climate change is already here, eliciting empathy and sadness

Climate change is already a reality for Canton Ticino and its inhabitants. The majority of the respondents already feel the impact of climate change in their region (65.1%) and in their daily life (52.1%), and has personally experienced extreme weather events, particularly in the form of heavy rains and heat waves. Most of the respondents think that climate change is due only (7.1%) or mostly (63.3%) to human actions. The thought of climate change evokes two kinds of emotions: on the one hand, a sense of empathy with future generations (67.5% of respondents) and nature (57.9%) and a desire to act (52.2%), on the other hand sadness (36.7%), anger (35.8%), and fear (25.0%).

What do the inhabitants of Ticino think about the Swiss strategy against climate change?

The results suggest that most respondents would welcome more ambitious and effective policies aiming at reducing greenhouse gas emissions, as well as a stronger cooperation at the international level. 67.1% of the respondents think indeed that the Swiss energy transition is too slow, whereas only 4.1% is convinced it is too fast. Moreover, 63.2% of the respondents think that the measures introduced in Switzerland will not harm the national economy. On the other hand, 56.6% of the sample is convinced that any action undertaken in Switzerland will be of no use if the leading world emitters do not commit to an emissions' reduction path.

Fridays for Future: involvement, reactions, and perceived effectiveness

The survey investigated the reactions of the respondents toward the Fridays for Future movement, founded in 2018 by the Swedish activist Greta Thunberg to raise public awareness on climate change. Almost 3% of the sample has participated regularly or occasionally in the climate strikes. The feelings evoked by Fridays for Future are similar to those kindled by climate change: the respondents feel empathetic with future

generations (53.8%) and with nature (41.1%), and determined to act (32.8%). However, the thought of Fridays for Future also elicits feelings of enthusiasm (20.6%) and happiness (17.7%), whereas sadness, fear and sense of guilt are only felt by a small minority of the respondents.

Despite the positive emotional reactions, only a small percentage of the sample is convinced that climate strikes will be effective in the medium term. More in detail, only 10.4% think that in the next few years Fridays for Future will have a larger impact as compared to the Fukushima nuclear accident, and an even smaller 6.4% think that it will have a larger impact than the Covid-19 epidemic.

Individual responsibilities, collective actions, and drivers of change

The last part of the survey focussed on the role and adoption of “green” behaviour and “green” choices in everyday life. Indeed, 51.0% of the sample declare that they feel personally responsible to contribute to the fight against climate change, but only 13.0% are convinced that many people will voluntarily reduce their energy consumption to avoid emissions. Generally speaking, respondents think that consumer behaviour (77.0%), technological innovation (73.8%) and large corporations (73.0%) will be the strongest drivers of the energy transition.

Individual behaviour: “green” habits and the reluctance to avoid private cars and flights

Several respondents state they are already always or often engaging in “green” habits, such as switching off lights and electric appliances (90.7%), buying local and seasonal products (87.4%), and lowering the heating (82.0%). Other actions implying a deliberate decision are instead less common: among these avoiding flights to reach holiday destinations (50.6%), choosing a low-carbon transport option for commuting (45.7%), raising awareness about climate change among friends and relatives (45.1%), voting based on the political parties’ stance on climate change (42.8%), and finally avoiding meat, fish, and dairy products (33.1%). Flying to holiday destinations is particularly common in the sample: only 34.3% of the respondents declare they never take flights, whereas 10.6% declare that they fly for leisure purposes three or more times per year. 70.3% of the participants think however that they fly less than other people. The respondents are generally aware that any avoided flight is a step in the right direction (60.3%), but more than half of them underestimate the real impact of aviation on total greenhouse gas emissions in Switzerland. When the Covid-19 epidemic will be over, 33.9% of the respondents expect they will fly less than before, 39.7% as much as before, 0.8% more than before; the remaining 25.6% declare they will continue to avoid flights.

Environmental awareness and the claim for strategies and framework conditions enabling the “green” transition

The results suggest that the people living in Ticino show a good environmental awareness and are somewhat available to personally contribute to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, particularly through “green” habits in everyday life, rather than by shifting to low-carbon transport modes for commuting or leisure travels. Nonetheless, the respondents are pessimistic about both the probability that the society as a whole may spontaneously engage in emission reductions, and the effectiveness of climate strikes. The results suggest instead that the population would welcome a more ambitious climate strategy at the national level, and an intense cooperation with the leading emitters on the international level. Finally, the respondents trust consumer behaviour, technological progress, and corporations as the main drivers of the ecological transition.