

# THE GERMAN CLIMATE CHANGE DEBATE AFTER HAMBURG

A VIEW FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH



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STIFTUNG**  
WEST AFRICA OFFICE

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## **A VIEW FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH**

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Living conditions in Dakar, the capital of Senegal, are becoming increasingly difficult. The city of four million, which has experienced a construction boom for years due to the influx of people from the countryside—including those fleeing the chaos in the Sahel—heats up ever faster. Urban green spaces, which could naturally cool the city with trees, are scarce in Dakar. There is less than 1 square meter of green space per resident. In Hamburg, there are 114 square meters of green space per resident.

In Dakar, anyone who can afford it buys an air conditioner - the only shield against the unbearable, health-hazardous humidity. From June to December, day-time temperatures reach up to 35°C with humidity higher than 80%, nights hover between 25°C and 30°C, and the elderly, women, and small children suffer most. If temperatures continue to rise, more heat-related deaths are expected in Dakar and across the country.

Exactly how many lives are threatened by rising heat in Dakar, or in other words, when parts of Dakar will become uninhabitable without adequate technical cooling because people cannot endure the overheated apartments or cannot move on streets and squares without air-conditioned transport, is difficult to determine. What can be said, however, is that prospects for improvement are low. This is partly because the majority of people in Dakar are preoccupied with daily survival, and man-made climate change, despite the threat from heat, is not a topic in their everyday lives. It is also because politicians are not addressing the issue, partly due to the fact, that Senegal is really not responsible for climate change. Senegalese people emit only 0.67 tons of carbon dioxide per capita, leaving room for growth.

In Hamburg, 4,200 km away, climate change and its impacts are clearly a topic – every citizen of Hamburg emits 7,4 tons of carbon dioxide per year. That climate change has not left the agenda was demonstrated by the clear approval of citizens (53,3 %) in the referendum on October 12, 2025, for the Climate Protection Initiative.

The initiative, supported by many NGOs such as Fridays for Future, NABU, and BUND, successfully convinced Hamburgers of the necessity for stricter climate legislation. The law stipulates that Hamburg must become climate-neutral by 2040—five years earlier than planned and just 15 years from now. Achieving this will require significant efforts, including changes in household behavior like a city ban on combustion engine vehicle and a rapid phase out of gas and oil heating.

Citizens were likely aware of this when they voted yes.

By voting yes, Hamburgers rejected the claims of politicians, scientists and media who continue to assert that public interest in climate protection has vanished, and that the pro-climate mood, which fueled major protests between 2017 and 2019, had dissipated.

The rollback in climate policy under the new CDU/CSU-SPD federal government in Berlin is not a reflection of public opinion. This claim is a convenient smokescreen. Climate protection in Germany is not failing because of citizens, but because of politicians and economic lobby interests clinging to outdated business models.

The “traffic light coalition” (SPD, FDP and Greens; red, yellow and green) has not failed because citizens opposed the so-called heating law,

a law intended to switch away from gas and heating oil, but because politics succumbed to the fossil lobby in industry and media, with the FDP driven to sabotage policies that ultimately led to its political downfall. Citizens were never central in this dispute—they were used as a cheap tool to justify anti-climate policies under the motto: “We would like to act, but ordinary people are just not ready.”

There is no single population with a unified and clear understanding

of what is feasible. In a representative democracy like Germany’s (and Senegal’s), responsible politicians in the parliament matter. Citizens are not failing at climate protection and biodiversity conservation—the far more difficult challenge amid the global collapse of ecosystems. Politicians, and certainly executives in major industrial and media companies, bear responsibility, many of whom have clearly decided they would rather burn the world than change their business models.<sup>2</sup>

Social sciences are also mistaken in claiming that the rollback in climate policy is due to societal fatigue. Rolling back achievements—from Germany’s Climate Protection Act, which the coalition weakened, to suspending climate- and biodiversity-relevant reforms in agriculture, to the attempted phase-out of combustion engines—is not the result of societal exhaustion. Sometimes it is even argued that Germany has done “too much” climate protection, although German emissions (8,2 tons per capita and year) remain significantly higher than those of France (5,5) or Italy (6,5).

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<sup>2</sup> Christian Stöcker: Männer, die die Welt verbrennen. Der entscheidende Kampf um die Zukunft der Menschheit. Berlin 2024.

The rollback in Germany is politically driven. It results primarily from the factor, that the progressive camp (Greens, Left, SPD) has failed to make the narrative of green capitalism widely accepted. The FDP's exit from the coalition was simply a declaration that only a parliamentary minority—not necessarily a minority of the country—believes in green growth.

The weakness of this belief in green growth is evident in the debate over the EU's 2035 ban on combustion engines. Even within the SPD and the Baden-Württemberg Greens, the temptation is strong to somehow save combustion engines and the associated jobs.

This action blatantly ignores what is clearly known: further sales of combustion cars beyond 2035 will make climate targets unattainable, and German combustion cars are being bought less and less in China. From a psychological perspective, it makes sense: instead of acting now, politicians hope for a later miracle, dress it up as 'technology neutrality,' and berate electric mobility advocates - an almost comical ideological soliloquy.<sup>3</sup>

The debate over the combustion engine vehicle ban is not about citizens and their preferences. While polls show a majority of Germans oppose the 2035 ban, public opinion cannot justify inaction. Countless polls never shape policy. Even when 85% of Germans supported an EU nature restoration law in October 2025, it was ignored.<sup>4</sup>

Responsible politics does not bow to moods, feelings, or polls. When politics hides behind emotion, riding waves of public sentiment or outrage - as is often the case with migration policy - governance becomes little more than theater. This may work temporarily for leaders and citizens, but it is not necessarily sustainable and, in any case, not healthy for our Democracy.

True political leadership is in a representative democracy essential,<sup>5</sup> in Hamburg

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<sup>3</sup> One can probably already understand here why more far-reaching demands to transform our patterns of production and consumption—i.e., demands that go beyond green capitalism, such as the concept of "green shrinking" (Ulrike Herrmann) or de-growth and post-growth approaches—find almost no resonance in party politics.

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.dnr.de/aktuelles-terminen/aktuelles/umfrage-zum-naturwiederherstellungsgesetz-parteiuebergreifend-pro?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.dnr.de/aktuelles-terminen/aktuelles/umfrage-zum-naturwiederherstellungsgesetz-parteiuebergreifend-pro?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

<sup>5</sup> Richter/Ulrich: Demokratie und Revolution: Wege aus der selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit. Berlin 2024.

or Dakar, Germany or Senegal. *“Lead from the front — but take others with you. Leadership is not about being in charge. It is about taking responsibility for those who are in your care.”* **(Nelson Mandela)**