



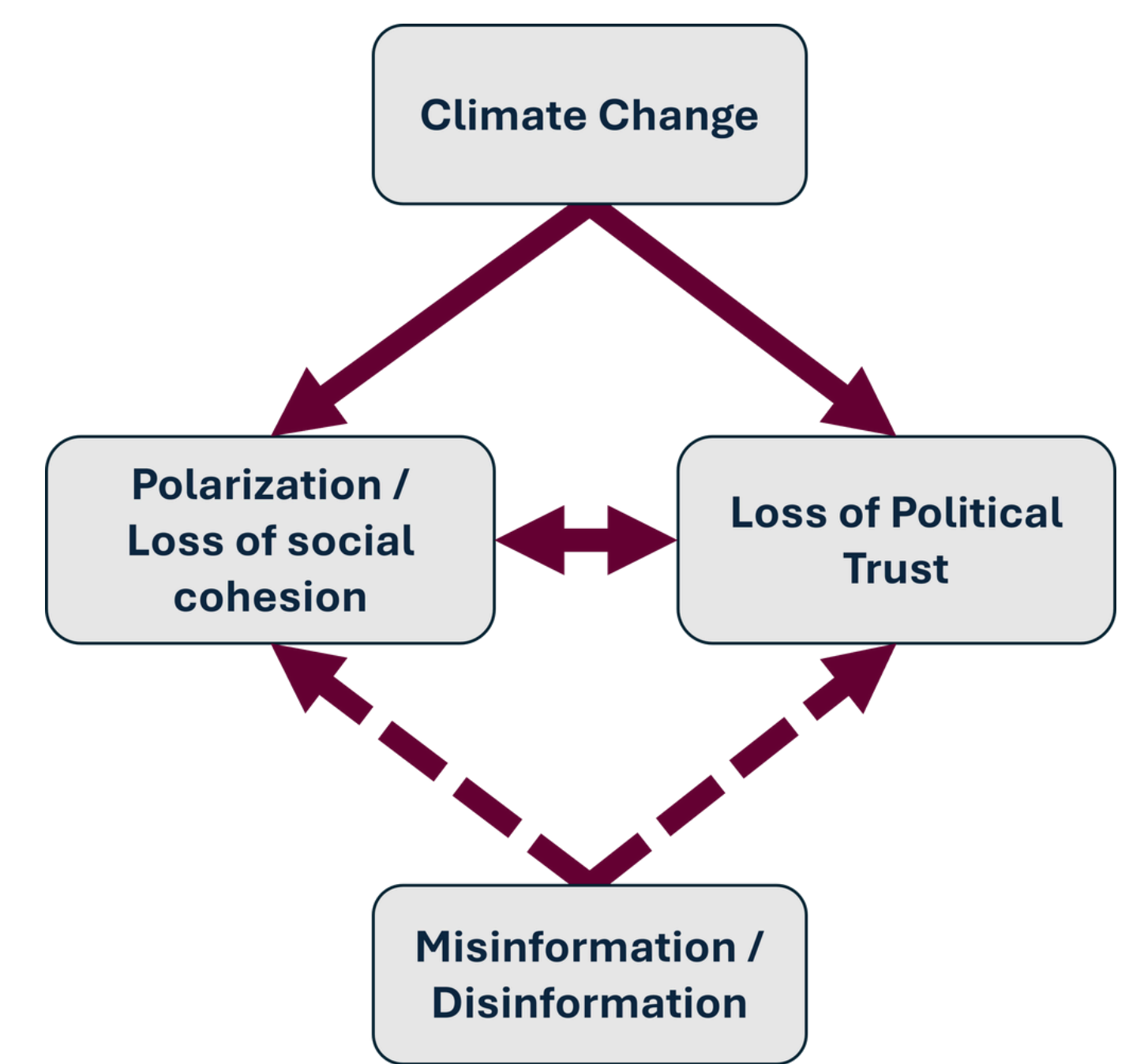
# Trust, Democracy & Climate Change

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**“A disaster is not a physical happening, it is a social occasion.” (Quarentelli, 1993)**

Climate change, widely regarded as an “existential threat”, entails crises that can profoundly affect our health, livelihoods, and ways of life. In theory, climate-induced disasters share core characteristics with other crises: they involve an unexpected or sudden threat that demands an urgent response [1]. Based on projections, climate-induced disasters will be the most frequent and most harmful in the future, impacting populations and ecosystems at scale [2]. Climate shocks will test not only the resilience of local communities but also critical sectors of the economy and human activity, including healthcare, transportation, energy, supply chains, and the operations of the military and emergency responders. They will entail casualties, property and economic losses, job losses, food/water/resource scarcity, forced displacement, psychological stress, and disruptions of everyday routines and community life.

Climate change risks are typically defined by the interplay of hazard, exposure, and vulnerability. Increasingly, however, focus has shifted toward mitigating factors—namely, the capacity of societies to prevent, prepare for, and adapt to these threats, and to strengthen resilience over time. Climate-related disasters can reveal the fragility of unprepared governments and communities, eroding public trust in institutions, weakening social cohesion, and fueling polarization. These dynamics pose significant risks to democratic systems and can be amplified by misinformation and disinformation on social media, as well as by existing political divisions over climate policy. This poster explores some of the broad societal implications of climate change.



## Polarization

From a psychological viewpoint, many factors explain the lack of action against climate change: the difficulty to grasp the cause and effect relations between human activities and weather patterns, the global nature of the threat (everyone’s problem therefore no one’s problem), the cost of short-term sacrifices to be made (which will not compensate the lack of global policies), and also lack of trust in governments, which blunts public’s willingness to support climate-friendly policies [3]. Climate inaction can also be formulated in terms of 3 sources of distance: distance in time, distance from the self, and distance from the ingroup [4].

Risk perception and beliefs about climate change are mediated by social identities [5], social norms [6], education, ideology and values [7], and stance towards institutions and political partisanship [8,9], among other factors. Although support for climate action is growing—especially among younger generations—climate skepticism and denial persist in various forms—ranging from rejecting the existence of climate change altogether to downplaying or denying its human causes and harmful impacts [9].

Also, climate-friendly policies are sometimes contested by people, not because of their beliefs regarding the phenomenon itself, but out of fear that these policies could negatively impact their livelihoods. In 2022, in France, carbon taxes poured more than 100,000 demonstrators to the streets, while in the Netherlands, demonstrators asked their center-right government to abandon plans to cut greenhouse gas emissions by forcing farms to keep fewer livestock [10]. Climate change is one of the most complex social dilemmas, opposing short-term interests and long-term collective interest [4].



Climate change has been shown to be one of the most polarizing issues [11,12], especially in the United States where partisan affiliation is a strong predictor and driver of climate change attitudes [13].

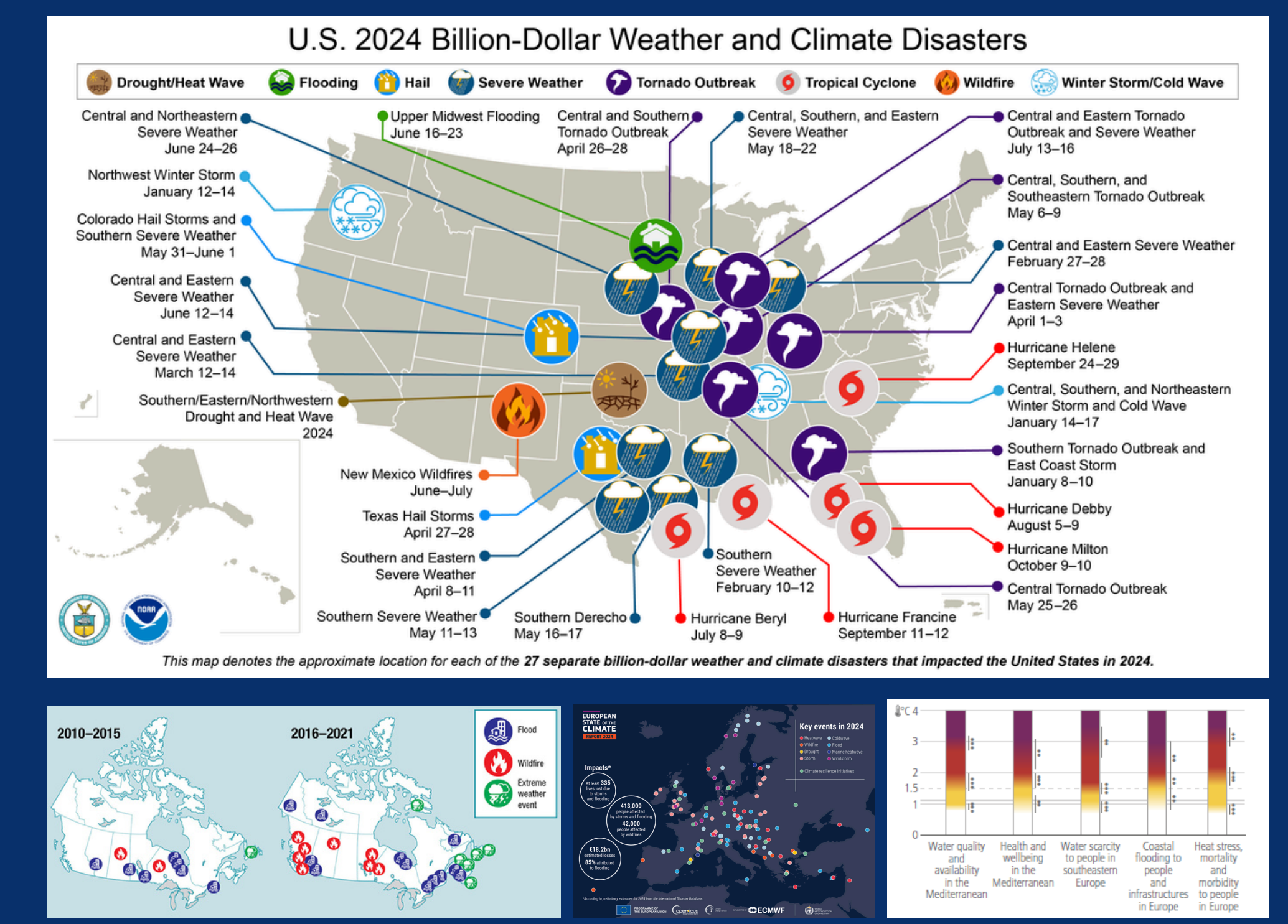
Polarization can be measured by levels of extremism and partisan division [14]. The former indicates the erosion of the common ground on which people can agree, and the latter refers to the disappearance of cross-cutting cleavages that are the backbone of stable democracies [15]. Given the highly polarized nature of climate change, some researchers [8] have argued that examining its unique characteristics and the challenges it poses can advance broader scientific understanding of political polarization.

In climate science, a tipping point is a ‘critical threshold that, when crossed, leads to large, accelerating and often irreversible changes in the climate system’ [16]. A study [14] has made the ‘disturbing’ observation that there are tipping points beyond which shared interests can no longer offset the self-reinforcing dynamics of increasing division, even in the face of a common threat such as climate change.

## Loss of political trust

The disruptive impacts of climate change in the fragile regions of the Global South have been extensively studied. In countries with weak governance and institutions, climate crises exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, fuel resentment toward central governments, and in some cases, drive communities to seek sustenance and protection from non-state actor groups [17]. In the Sahel, alongside climate and conflict stresses, the region has suffered major democratic regression.

The destabilizing effects of climate change are often underestimated in developed and democratic nations. Yet, extreme weather events are becoming increasingly common in Europe and North America, disrupting lives and causing significant economic losses.



Severe climate events often prompt public calls for strong government action to support recovery efforts. Yet, the magnitude, frequency, and duration of extreme weather events can strain the capacity of governments and emergency services, undermining citizens’ sense of safety and trust in institutional protection. As evidenced by recent events in Greece and Spain, communities affected by storms, wildfires, and devastating floods, felt abandoned and betrayed by their governments.

Resilience is defined as “the ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate, adapt to, transform and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner” [18].

When governments lack sufficient resilience and fail to respond effectively—especially in democratic and developed countries with high public expectations—their institutional legitimacy can be seriously undermined. Such failures can erode political trust—citizens’ belief that political institutions, systems, or leaders will act as promised and serve the public interest. Loss of political trust is a threat to democracy and political stability because trust is a cornerstone of democratic political systems, granting governments the legitimacy to lead, maintain stability, and uphold the rule of law.

Disillusioned citizens may turn to right-wing authoritarian leaders, perceived as more capable of restoring order. In such moments of institutional weakness, populist figures often capitalize on the vacuum left by national authorities. Simultaneously, some may grow impatient with democracy’s slow response to climate change and advocate for eco-authoritarianism [19]—supporting strong, centralized action to confront environmental crises. Together, these dynamics risk deepening societal divides and political polarization.

Comparative studies of political regimes show that while decentralized decision-making in democracies may slow immediate responses, these systems—by promoting public trust through transparency, accountability, and civil society engagement—tend to be more capable and better equipped for both effective disaster response and long-term resilience [20,21].



## Misinformation/Disinformation

Social media operate as echo chambers that exacerbate polarization and extremism [22].

Fake news is widespread on social media and often widely believed [23]—spreading faster than comparable factual information [24]. While fear and anger are common drivers, such content is also frequently shared because it generates higher engagement [24].

The social instability and uncertainty caused by climate shocks can bring about waves of disinformation. Conspiracy theories offer seemingly coherent ‘explanations’ for unexpected and destabilizing events, giving individuals a sense of cognitive closure amid uncertainty [25].

The floods in Spain and the wildfires in Los Angeles and Canada sparked widespread mis- and disinformation, with some individuals going so far as to accuse governments of intentionally causing these events to advance their climate agendas.

Governments may also spread disinformation about climate disasters—either domestically, to downplay severity and avoid public unrest (e.g., China 2021 Henan floods), or internationally, to further geopolitical, economic, or ideological objectives (e.g., Russian disinformation targeting renewable energy in Europe).



Climate disasters can either encourage cooperation or deepen social divisions within and between groups and communities. While our focus has been on the latter, such crises may also present opportunities for the emergence of new political parties and activist movements capable of driving behavioural and policy change, thereby strengthening democratic institutions. Realizing this potential, however, depends on sustained public trust in institutions, societal resilience in the face of repeated shocks, and the ability to resist extreme polarization.

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