The political viability of climate policies

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Implementing effective climate policies in a democratic and sustainable manner is one of the biggest challenges for Western democracies in the 21st century. Our knowledge of the policies needed to fight climate change has dramatically expanded over the last decades. Economists, for instance, agree that carbon taxation is an effective tool to reduce emissions for businesses and consumers. Green industrial policies have facilitated the development and diffusion of renewable energy sources, producing a dramatic fall in the prices of solar panels and onshore wind. The implementation of such policies, however, is often politically contentious.

Climate policies are contentious because they have substantial distributive

consequences, creating winners and losers. Typically, they involve short-term costs concentrated in certain regions or social groups, while generating long-term environmental and economic benefits that are more global and widely shared across society and even future generations. This cost-benefit distribution often generates substantial public resistance, as those fearing losses from a policy mobilize against it. Even when this mobilization comes from a numerically small group, it can galvanize broader public concerns. Accordingly, politicians seeking to address the growing climate crisis face considerable public backlash. This is evident from protests over local policies, for example those aimed at reducing traffic, decommissioning coal mines, or setting up wind farms, as well as resistance to more systemic policies such as carbon taxes or emissions standards. This poses a considerable challenge for elected leaders in liberal democracies who rely on voters' approval and popular support to implement climate policies. The ongoing 'greenlash' questions the political viability of climate policies and makes convincing the public of the importance of climate mitigation one of today's most urgent and central challenges.

This challenge is particularly urgent for progressive political actors, who often face a dilemma: On the one hand, they want to preserve a habitable world for present and future generations, which requires bold action to mitigate climate change. On the other hand, progressives are deeply committed to local democratic processes: bold climate mitigation must have at least the tacit support of the population. In many contexts, progressive political actors also rely on the electoral support of those segments of the electorate that bear the immediate costs of climate change mitigation, notably workers and firms in carbon-intensive industries. Losing electoral support from these groups can undermine the ability of progressives to implement and sustain climate action in the first place. Progressives then need to consider how to build climate policies that address the distributive consequences of the green transition *and* build broad and durable public support.

Existing research in social science provides an important contribution to both understanding (the obstacles to) the political viability of climate action and identifying possible solutions. Improvements in data quality and novel methodological tools have allowed social scientists to make critical advances in understanding public demands over climate policy and the conditions under which the public are likely to accept more ambitious approaches. This research has generated insights into how policies can be designed to enhance public support and minimize political backlash. Yet, these insights do not always reach public knowledge and inform public debates.

The aim of this series of research briefs from the Progressive Politics Research Network is to bring cutting edge research on the political viability of climate policies to a broader audience. Collectively, our briefs provide an overview of scholarly knowledge on the drivers, obstacles and implications of public support for these policies. By presenting careful, methodologically rigorous, data-driven research, we seek to contribute to a political debate that is rooted in cutting-edge social science research and inform policymakers' decisions when designing climate policies. The briefs share a focus on the distributive implications of climate policies and their

repercussions for the political viability of climate action rather than considering attitudes towards climate policies as an expression of value or identity-based political conflicts.

Collectively, the research briefs ask how climate policies can become more politically viable? They answer this question by examining five inter-linked components; (1) the role of compensation to those that lose from climate policies in reducing backlash; (2) how political trust shapes both attitudes towards climate policy itself but also the effectiveness of compensatory measures, (3) the propensity of voters to sanction or reward politicians for such policies; (4) broader social movement mobilization around climate change and (5) the difficulties to of the public investment in the green transition. (new)

The research brief by Jacob Edenhofer and Federica Genovese examines the political logic of a "just transition", which has become popular among progressive actors. At its core, a "just transition" entails compensatory mechanisms to support people who lose from green policies. Edenhofer and Genovese provide a theoretical framework for thinking about how to design compensatory packages that work both economically and politically. They draw on a range of empirical evidence to show that compensation can, indeed, be a winning political strategy. However, not all compensation is equally effective. Compensatory policies that are holistic, administratively feasible, visible to the public, and provide a long-run credible promise to be available in the future have more success at building support than more meagre, low-visibility, complex or easily changeable policies.

A second brief, by Diane Bolet and Fergus Green, focuses on the political consequences of climate policies for progressive parties. Drawing primarily on empirical evidence from Spain, where the government negotiated a coal phase-out deal with unions and businesses, they find that the governing centre-left PSOE largely avoided negative electoral consequences to a coal phase out – even in coal mining communities. This outcome was possible because the government provided financial support to affected communities and invested time and resources partnering with local unions to address the concerns of workers on the ground. Based on this case and additional survey evidence, Bolet and Green argue that there are three key elements to successfully building public support for costly climate policies, namely financial assistance and other support measures to affected groups, participation from trusted stakeholders such as trade unions, and strategic communication to explain the policies and redistributive measures.

Christina Toenshoff, in a third brief, shows that public trust in government is a key factor shaping support for climate policies. Trust in government influences how people perceive the fairness, effectiveness, and legitimacy of climate action. Survey evidence shows that higher trust in government correlates with stronger support for measures like carbon taxes and coal plant bans, as well as for compensatory policies aiding vulnerable populations. Toenshoff, therefore, reflects on policies that could increase trust in government, emphasizing that governments should prioritize anti-corruption measures and foster greater citizen participation in policymaking.

The fourth brief by Daniel Saldivia Gonzatti and Swen Hutter examines the effects of political mobilization by social movements on support for climate policies. Research shows that sustained mobilization, including large-scale demonstrations, can increase support for climate action among the broader public. Using evidence from a survey experiment in Germany they show that peaceful mass demonstrations have a larger positive impact on public support than confrontational tactics, but that confrontational approaches such as blockades do not harm public support for climate policies generally. Overall, their brief suggests that a diverse range of protest tactics can coexist without jeopardizing the movement's broader goals.

The final brief by Elsa Massoc deals with public investments in the green transition. Despite urgent climate calls, the EU's Green Deal and national policies fall short on green transition investments. This brief examines state investment channels, revealing that while public funding for green objectives has increased, it remains secondary to priorities like economic competitiveness and defense. The issue stems from institutional structures in advanced democracies, where officials tied to traditional industries favor strategic competitiveness over green goals. Investment decisions are often dominated by finance ministries, reinforcing this bias. The author advocates for institutional reforms, such as empowering citizens' councils, to enhance oversight and align public investment with climate objectives. (new paragraph)

Overall, the briefs provide three critical lessons. First, compensation can reduce political backlash to costly climate policies, including those that have highly localized consequences. Compensation works by directly addressing the short-term economic disruptions that such policies often cause, and can help build support among groups that fear negative consequences. However, for these policies to be effective, they need to be both visible and large enough to offset the economic costs for a diverse group of people.

Second, successful compensatory measures require public trust in government. Voter belief in a government's trustworthiness and the credibility of their longer-term promises increases the likelihood of sustained support for green policies, especially those implemented over extended timeframes. Building trust requires proactive engagement with local actors, such as labour unions, who can bridge the gap between policymakers and the public. Collaborative partnerships reinforce credibility and demonstrate the government's commitment to equitable policy design and implementation

Third, the mobilization of the public plays a crucial role in bringing or keeping climate policies on the political agenda. While confrontational or violent tactics may provoke backlash, they do not erode the legitimacy of the broader climate cause generally. But more importantly, non-violent, inclusive movements can build awareness and support among the broader public. This support can help policymakers act on climate issues, amplifying the momentum for change.

Overall, the research briefs show that the space for electorally and politically viable climate policy is broader than it might currently appear. However, to implement effective and durable policies, policymakers need to

build alliances with social movements and develop policies that address both voters’ short-term concerns over the disruptive effects of climate policies and their longer-term trust in the state.

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