How to make climate policies electorally popular

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A major challenge facing progressive governments is implementing ambitious climate mitigation policies without triggering electoral backlash from those negatively impacted. This research brief draws on recent research by the authors and others to show that even stringent climate policies can gain electoral support, including from unlikely groups such as coalmining communities.



Introduction

Given the urgency of the climate crisis, progressive governments are facing growing pressures to implement stringent climate policies that align with the

Paris Agreement goals and the European Green Deal. Yet, these policies are not without political consequences and it is difficult for governments to undertake climate action without risking political backlash. The challenge is especially acute for progressive governments, which tend to be ideologically inclined to promote both socioeconomic justice and environmentalism. In this brief, we elaborate on this challenge and draw lessons from the Spanish case on how climate policies can be designed, packaged, negotiated and framed in ways calculated to increase their electoral popularity, with a particular focus on fossil fuel communities.

Challenges to climate policy

Building voter support for stringent climate change mitigation policies remains politically challenging due to the high immediate costs and the long-term, uncertain nature of benefits. Voters often undervalue climate mitigation because its primary aim of reduced global warming, appears distant and uncertain. Moreover, the direct financial impacts of the energy transition—such as higher costs for consumer goods like electricity and fuel—further alienate voters, making these aspects of climate action especially contentious.

The geographic concentration of climate policy costs profoundly shapes public support and voting patterns. Carbon-dependent communities—such as those reliant on fossil fuel production—face disproportionate economic burdens and it is typically electorally important for progressive governments to address voter discontent in those regions, whereas opposition parties often exploit this dissatisfaction to mobilise against climate initiatives with a view to electoral gain (Egli, Schmid and Schmidt 2022).

The Spanish case

We draw on our research on the phaseout of coalmining in Spain to derive insights into how policymakers can mitigate political backlash in fossil fuel-dependent communities. Under the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE), which came to power in 2018, addressing the coalmining issue became a priority, with a strong focus on implementing a just transition policy. This just transition concept, emphasizing both distributive and procedural justice, aims to ensure that affected workers and communities have financially secure and dignified pathways to alternative, sustainable livelihoods.

Three months before the 2019 general elections, a Just Transition Agreement was reached through a tripartite social dialogue involving coal businesses, unions, and local and national political actors. The agreement mandated the closure of targeted coalmines by December 2019 and included a €250 million investment package for affected municipalities. Key measures included early retirement schemes for miners, social assistance for younger miners, and community-level investments in economic diversification, business initiatives, and environmental restoration.

Redistribution to affected groups

Our Spanish analysis shows that policy packages that bundle climate policies with redistributive measures can be attractive to especially affected workers

and communities in fossil fuel industries and regions (Bolet, Green and González-Eguino 2024a). We found that the Just Transition Agreement contributed to increase support in coalmining municipalities for PSOE, the incumbent, in the subsequent election, suggesting that a just transition policy can prevent political backlash in adversely affected communities. Given the fact that coal mining municipalities are traditionally more supportive of PSOE, the closing of a key regional industry should have led to a loss of support. Instead, we found that the coalmining communities rewarded PSOE for implementing the Just Transition Agreement.

Our findings complement survey evidence showing that redistributive policy packages can be popular. However, it must be recognised that mere promises of accompanying redistribution by politicians and political parties are unlikely to be sufficient to garner popular support for ambitious climate measures. The Spanish case resonates with wider research suggesting that popular support for stringent climate measures can be more effectively built where policy packages are designed through inclusive processes and carefully communicated to the public.

Inclusive processes and strategic communication

In the Spanish case, unions representing coalmining workers played a key role as trusted intermediaries, helping to secure popular legitimacy for the negotiated Just Transition Agreement. Throughout and after the negotiations, the unions organised local assemblies to inform members about the negotiations, the content of the deal, and the unions' position on it. We found that highly unionised coalmining municipalities were more likely to register higher PSOE support in the 2019 elections than less unionised coalmining municipalities, a finding conclusive with the results of a follow-up survey in the same communities conducted a week before the 2023 general elections on the support of the package measures (Bolet, Green and González-Eguino 2024b).

Despite strategic communication on the need for a just transition, stringent climate policies also have potential impacts on consumers—and disproportionate effects on low-income consumers—throughout the economy. The increasing politicisation of concerns about the effects of climate policies means that progressive parties need not only to respond to the underlying distributive and procedural fairness concerns expressed in response to climate policy, but also to better understand and respond to the rhetorical and informational strategies employed by radical right parties to exploit those grievances.

Radical right parties frame climate policies as economic burdens that hurt ordinary people and/or as ideologically-driven projects of international actors and elites who seek to control ordinary people's lives. A study we conducted in the UK shows that individuals exposed to the former, economically focused kind of anti-climate messages were more opposed to climate policies than those exposed to anti-climate messages framed in anti-elitist terms (Bolet, Gomm and Green 2024). We also tested whether a counter-frame highlighting that climate measures would be accompanied by compensating benefits mitigated the negative effects of exposure to the negative, 'cost-

of-living' framing; it did not. However, further research on the framing of climate policy is needed before firm conclusions can be drawn about the effectiveness or lack thereof of such progressive counter-frames.

Conclusion

The studies reviewed here overall suggest that the electoral challenges posed by climate policymaking, though substantial, are not insurmountable, even in fossil fuel-producing communities. Just transition strategies– combining stringent climate policies with sector and place-specific redistribution, negotiated through social dialogue–can be electorally popular in such communities.

Progressive parties can use these strategies to build supportive coalitions for stringent climate policy packages that unite their more climate-conscious, urban, and professional constituents with their traditional working-class base. In short, climate policy can be politically popular if incorporated into wider packages of progressive reforms and thoughtfully scaffolded with appropriate forms of social dialogue and public engagement.

Based on

Bolet, D., F. Green, and M. Gonzalez-Eguino. 2024a. "How to get coal country to vote for climate policy: The effect of a "Just Transition Agreement" on Spanish election results." *American Political Science Review*, 118(3), 1344-1359.

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Reference

Egli, F., N. Schmid, and T. S. Schmidt. 2022. "Backlash to fossil fuel phase-outs: the case of coal mining in US presidential elections." *Environmental Research Letters*, 17(9), 094002.

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