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Beyond Persuasion: Policy Design, Fairness, and Public Support for Net-Zero

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Despite widespread public concern about climate change, opposition to net-zero policies has intensified across advanced democracies. This article examines why conventional approaches emphasising persuasion and framing have failed to overcome this resistance. Drawing on academic research from multiple countries, I argue that opposition to climate policy stems primarily from distributional consequences and temporal mismatches between costs and benefits, not from inadequate messaging. Framing effects – understood as attempts to repackage the same policy through different messaging – are consistently small to negligible, whilst policy design features, particularly revenue recycling mechanisms, show substantial impacts on public support. Evidence from carbon tax implementations demonstrates that majority support is achievable even at substantial price levels when revenues are recycled progressively. Critically, however, good design and clear communication are complements rather than substitutes: design features generate support only when citizens understand what policies do for them, and communication is effective only when there is substantive policy content to convey. Building durable coalitions for climate action therefore requires shifting focus from persuasion to policy design that addresses distributional concerns and provides tangible near-term benefits, whilst recognising that the political conditions enabling good design are themselves objects requiring analysis and reform.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A paradox haunts climate policy. Public concern about climate change has reached unprecedented levels globally, yet opposition to the very policies needed to address it has intensified. Transforming energy systems to achieve net-zero is becoming more vital (1), whilst the policy instruments best suited to bringing them about, such as carbon pricing, have stalled, with average effective carbon rates declining as governments respond to public resistance during cost-of-living crises (2). This disconnect between climate concern and policy support represents an abrupt negative reaction from significant numbers of actors seeking policy reversal through extraordinary means (3).

Conventional wisdom attributes this resistance to inadequate communication. The assumption persists that improved public understanding of climate science, or strategic framing around co-benefits like green jobs or energy security, would generate support. This information deficit model has driven countless communication campaigns and framing experiments – yet recent experience reveals a different pattern. The green backlash has been most visible in cases such as France's Yellow Vests, the Netherlands' Farmer-Citizen Movement, and the rollback of Canada's carbon tax. These movements emerged not from climate change denial or lack of information about climate change impacts, but rather from concerns about costs, fairness, and burden distribution – issues that strategic messaging alone cannot resolve.

The stakes could not be higher. Technical feasibility exists for achieving climate targets, but political obstacles remain paramount (4). Each year of delay locks in additional warming whilst making eventual transitions more disruptive and costly. In this way, approaches that focus primarily on communication and persuasion appear mismatched to the political economy challenges at hand.

This article argues that the emphasis on persuasion and strategic framing in climate policy advocacy, whilst well-intentioned, has distracted from more fundamental challenges. Drawing on evidence from academic research, I argue that opposition to climate policies stems primarily from distributional consequences – such as who pays costs and who receives benefits – rather than from messaging failures. The distinction advanced here is not between policy design and communication per se, but between two types of communication: persuasion that seeks to change minds about climate change, and explanation that clarifies what specific policies do for citizens. The former produces minimal effects; the latter, when paired with well-designed policies, can build majority support.

This argument carries implications for both policymakers and researchers. For policymakers, the evidence supports specific design principles – progressive revenue recycling, visible and universal benefits, strategic policy sequencing – over investment in communication campaigns and message testing. For researchers, the findings point towards a research agenda centred on understanding the interaction between policy design and communication, taking seriously the political and economic foundations of resistance to green policy, and the question of what optimal policy design looks like when political incentives are misaligned with social objectives. Both agendas are essential, because the path to building sustainable political coalitions for net-zero lies not in finding perfect frames but in designing policies that address material concerns about fairness, provide visible compensation to those bearing costs, and deliver tangible near-term benefits alongside long-term climate goals, and in understanding the political conditions under which such designs become feasible.

2. THE COMMUNICATION-FOCUSED PARADIGM IN CONTEMPORARY CLIMATE POLICY

Across the climate policy landscape, major institutions consistently diagnose public resistance as a communication problem requiring sophisticated messaging solutions. From domestic to international policymaking, a prevailing orthodoxy assumes that opposition to climate policies stems from inadequate communication and flawed framing rather than from substantive concerns about costs and distribution.

National governments often embed this approach within policy infrastructure and processes. In a report by the Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations (CAST) commissioned

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by the Climate Change Committee (CCC) to review the role of behavioural science, significant attention was put towards the role of communication and engagement in facilitating the green transition. Their 2023 report provides detailed prescriptions for co-benefit framing, health messaging, and strategic bundling to improve policy acceptability (5). Think tanks and advocacy organisations further reinforce these assumptions. Major organisations position communication strategy as central to climate policy success (6). Finally, political campaigns now routinely spend significant sums of money on climate message testing, treating public opinion as something to be shaped through optimal framing rather than addressed through policy design (7).

Major international institutions have also followed similar trends in embedding strategic communication into climate policy frameworks. The IPCC previously commissioned Climate Outreach to produce a communications handbook teaching scientists values-based framing and narrative techniques alongside scientific accuracy (8). Previous World Bank World Development Reports emphasised the role of communication to overcome cognitive biases and social norms and mitigate climate change (9). However, in line with the central arguments of this article, a more recent analysis by the OECD finds that increasing climate concern without presenting actionable routes of redress is insufficient for driving behavioural change. Public perceptions of the impacts of policy are instead seen as critical for environmental policy success (10).

The paradigm of conceiving climate (in)action as a communication problem amenable to framing, however, rests on three core assumptions. First, that climate inaction results primarily from communication failures rather than genuine conflicts over costs and benefits. Second, that public resistance can be overcome through strategic messaging without addressing underlying distributional concerns. Third, that behavioural nudges and framing interventions can substitute for more fundamental policy reforms.

Whilst there is certainly a place for such efforts in the portfolio to increase public acceptance of net-zero policies, the heavy focus on such approaches exists in tension with mounting empirical evidence about what actually drives policy support. As the next section demonstrates, academic research consistently shows that framing effects are minimal, whilst policy design features – particularly how costs and benefits are distributed – prove determinative. The gap between policy practice and academic evidence raises important questions about the efficacy of current approaches in building climate policy coalitions.

3. THE LIMITS OF FRAMING: EVIDENCE FROM EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH

The appeal of framing as a solution to climate policy resistance stems from the idea that issue presentation shapes understanding through individuals' mental structures (11). If climate action faces opposition, the logic follows, the problem lies with communication rather than with the policies themselves. This reasoning has inspired countless attempts to increase awareness about climate change and reframe climate action around economic opportunity, public health, national security, or moral duty.

Institutional interest in strategic communication exemplifies this approach. The World Health Organization developed comprehensive toolkits for health professionals to communicate climate-health linkages, acknowledging that even trusted messengers might lack full capacity for climate discussions (12). Governments and NGOs invest heavily in message testing, audience segmentation, and frame alignment, assuming that optimal messaging from trusted sources can shift opinion.

Yet this persistent focus overlooks crucial insights from framing theory itself. Frames achieve impact only when resonant with existing dispositions and affiliations whilst being delivered by trusted sources (11). Framing works best when it activates and reinforces existing beliefs, which means it is more effective at mobilising supporters and shaping public discourse over time than at instantly converting entrenched opponents.

Such concerns are mirrored in academic research, where experimental evidence on climate framing reveals consistent patterns of minimal impact. Well-powered studies find effects that are small at best and often statistically indistinguishable from zero. A prominent study

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testing whether reframing climate policy around co-benefits could increase support found no consistent or statistically significant effects compared to conventional climate risk messaging, with the added value of alternative frames remaining unclear at best and potentially nil (13).

Meta-analyses confirm these patterns more systematically. Reviews of experimental studies find overall small effects of framing on climate engagement, with frames showing no significant impact on climate concern and only modest effects on policy support (14). Meta-analysis of 76 US experiments found no clearly effective intervention type, with smaller effects in larger representative samples and among conservative participants (15). Additionally, a meta-analysis of 83 studies testing behavioural interventions found that they promote climate mitigation to very small degrees whilst the interventions last, with no evidence of sustained effects once they end (16). When adjusted for publication bias and restricted to large samples, the average effect in terms of probability of change was 2–3%. Second-order meta-analysis of field interventions found that adequately powered studies showed effects of approximately two percentage points, again casting doubt on the transformative nature of such interventions (17).

The pattern holds across diverse contexts and framings. Studies find no positive effects of national security, human rights, or environmental frames on perceived climate policy importance among Americans (18). Even basic terminology choices show minimal impact, with large-scale European studies finding little difference between different climate terminologies (19). Additionally, recent research shows that whilst frames may have a small impact on policy support, policy design features consistently have stronger effects in comparison (20).

These findings indicate that the problem is not primarily about finding the right words or emphasising the right co-benefits. Research acknowledges that citizen attitudes and concerns regarding climate change largely hinge on demographic backgrounds, worldviews, and political ideology – factors unaffected by climate communication per se. The consistent failure of frames stems from critical issues including citizen overexposure to competing climate-related frames in everyday life, making them resistant to experimental manipulations (13). This pre-treatment problem means that individuals encounter framing experiments or real-world communication campaigns after years of exposure to competing messages, political cues, and social influences that have already shaped relatively stable opinions.

An important methodological distinction clarifies the scope of this conclusion. The framing literature tests whether different *messages about the same policy* change support – for instance, whether describing a carbon tax as promoting 'energy security' versus 'environmental protection' shifts opinion. The policy design literature, by contrast, tests whether different *policy features* change support – for instance, whether recycling carbon tax revenue as dividends versus directing it to deficit reduction affects acceptability. These are not strictly parallel comparisons, because studies of policy design necessarily communicate the relevant design features to respondents, whereas participants must understand what a policy does in order to evaluate it. The evidence, therefore, establishes that changing how one describes the same policy matters little, whereas changing what a policy actually does matters a great deal – but the latter effect is conditional on citizens understanding the policy's distributional consequences. This points towards a complementary rather than substitutive relationship between design and communication, a theme developed in subsequent sections.

Resistance to climate policies, therefore, stems from deeper structural issues regarding distributional concerns and temporal mismatches between costs and benefits, which are unresolvable through messaging alone.

4. POLICY DESIGN AS THE KEY DRIVER OF SUPPORT

If framing cannot overcome opposition to climate policies, what can? Evidence points to policy design – specifically, how policies distribute costs and benefits across society. Whilst framing emphasises benefit perception, policy design creates actual benefits that change the material calculus of support. The difference represents a fundamental shift from persuasion to provision.

Research on carbon taxation best exemplifies these dynamics. A prominent study utilising conjoint experiments in Germany and the US found that revenue recycling could achieve majority

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support for carbon taxes of $50–70 per metric tonne, but only when specific design conditions were met (21). The key was not tax framing but revenue use: recycling for infrastructure, renewables, and low-income support maintained majority backing, whilst corporate tax cuts or deficit reduction triggered opposition. The importance of revenue recycling extends across multiple studies and contexts as one of the most important factors determining carbon tax acceptability (e.g., 22, 23).

Recent evidence from a German study provides additional corroboration. Fully incentivised experiments where participants made actual consumption decisions under carbon pricing and voted on policy continuation with real financial stakes overturn conventional wisdom (24). Interestingly, uniform carbon dividends (equal per capita transfers) received more support than targeted transfers to poor households or environmental earmarking, suggesting a growing need to provide broad-based, upfront, visible payments to achieve support.

This preference for universal, visible benefits reflects deeper political economy insights. Research in Spain found that combining climate projects with compensation for low-income households achieved high acceptability by addressing both effectiveness and equity concerns (25). This is mirrored by research showing that a Spanish 'Just Transition Agreement' was able to mitigate electoral backlash to the phasing out of coal (26).

Real-world implementations provide crucial evidence beyond experimental settings. France's 2018 fuel tax increase exemplifies how failures in policy design can generate societal backlash, in this case triggering the Yellow Vests protests. Although a majority of households would have benefited from carbon taxation with uniform redistribution, this was not reflected in popular support (27). The problem was that only a fraction of revenues generated by the fuel tax rise were earmarked for the green transition, with the remainder absorbed into general budgets. This occurred parallel to wealth tax reforms that narrowed their scope, so that the policy appeared to burden workers whilst exempting the wealthy (28). Crucially, the French case may illustrate not only a failure of design but a consequence of political choices: revenue allocation reflected the government's broader fiscal priorities – consolidating public finances and reducing capital taxation to attract investment – rather than considering the political dynamics of fuel taxation. Policies for a single issue may be badly designed not because policymakers misunderstand the issue, but because political incentives for other issue areas pull in a different direction. This distinction between design failure and design choice carries significant implications for how the academic community and policymakers should respond.

Policies that fail tend do so because they obscure benefits, advantage specific groups, or delay compensation. In contrast, successful climate policies make benefits visible, broadly shared, and immediate. Milan's congestion charge succeeded by exempting residents, providing alternatives, and visibly improving air quality (29), with compensation for more stringent policies such as low emission zones stemming green backlash (30). London and Stockholm's schemes worked by reinvesting revenues in public transport improvements citizens could observe (31). This is echoed in experimental research finding that communication clarifying the specific mechanisms of climate policy can increase support, whilst simply communicating climate risk fails to do so (32). Policy design, not communication strategy, is of primary importance for determining outcomes – but design features realise their potential only when citizens comprehend them.

Distribution matters fundamentally because meta-analyses reveal fairness perceptions as among the strongest predictors of climate policy support, often exceeding perceived effectiveness (33). People demonstrate acute sensitivity to payment and benefit distribution. Carbon pricing typically appears regressive as lower-income households spend larger budget shares on energy and transport. Without visible compensation, such policies violate deeply held fairness norms. Yet regressivity is not inevitable. Meta-analysis of 53 studies across 39 countries found that distributional outcomes of carbon pricing depend critically on design choices (34). Moreover, providing information about inequality in the distribution of carbon emissions can increase individuals' support for pricing carbon (35) without reducing individuals' behavioural intentions (36).

In this way, the evidence clearly demonstrates that policy design determines political feasibility. Policy designs not exclusively focused on reducing emissions, such as revenue recycling, form the foundation upon which political feasibility and public acceptance rest. The challenge is not

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convincing people that climate action matters but designing policies that make climate action compatible with material interests and fairness concerns.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND COMMUNICATION

Academic research points towards clear design principles for building sustainable climate policy support. First, visibility matters enormously. Benefits must be tangible, immediate, and clearly linked to climate policies. The rollback of Canada's carbon tax, which did contain rebates, may be attributed to a lack of visibility of these benefits and of public understanding as to where they came from (37). Switzerland's climate policy has faced similar issues, with carbon tax rebates arriving as line items on health insurance statements.

Second, universality often outperforms targeting. Whilst economists might prefer means-tested transfers for efficiency, evidence shows that universal dividends generate broader support (24). This reflects a deeper political economy logic: universal programmes create larger constituencies and avoid stigmatisation. Providing equal upfront payments to all, in the context of carbon taxation, appears to generate the highest support by giving everyone visible benefits from the start.

Third, timing sequences matter. IMF-OECD analysis emphasises that successful implementation requires ensuring that policies do not compromise energy affordability during transitions (38). Front-loading benefits through upfront payments or immediate tax cuts can build support before carbon prices bite. This reverses conventional economic logic prioritising efficiency but aligns with political reality.

Fourth, policy packages outperform single instruments. World Bank tracking shows that successful countries combine carbon pricing with regulations, subsidies, and public investment (39). These packages serve multiple functions: regulations ensure minimum standards, subsidies ease transitions, and public investment creates visible improvements. Each element addresses different constituencies and concerns, building broader coalitions than single policies could achieve.

These design principles, however, do not operate in a communication vacuum. The evidence reviewed in preceding sections establishes that design and communication are complements, not substitutes. Changing the description of the same policy – the domain of framing research – produces minimal effects. But changing what a policy actually does produces large effects only when citizens understand the change. The Canadian carbon tax contained progressive rebates, yet failed politically in part because citizens did not know the rebates existed or came from carbon pricing (37). Swiss carbon tax rebates arrived as obscure line items that citizens could not connect to climate policy. France's fuel tax was in fact progressive in its net distributional impact for most households, yet citizens systematically overestimated costs, underestimated environmental benefits, and wrongly believed progressive policies were regressive (27). These are comprehension failures, not framing problems.

The role of communication, therefore, shifts from persuasion to explanation. Effective communication should clarify actual policy mechanics: how will revenues be distributed, who qualifies for compensation, when will benefits arrive, and what alternatives exist. These concrete details matter more than abstract messages about green jobs or energy security. Research demonstrates that communication clarifying specific policy mechanisms can increase support, whilst simply communicating climate risk fails to do so (32). In this way, the appropriate model is not 'design versus communication' but 'design multiplied by communication': well-designed policies require clear explanation to realise their political potential, and clear explanation requires substantive policy content to convey. Behavioural insights remain valuable but should target comprehension rather than persuasion – simplifying complex rebate formulae, using salient household impact examples, and providing personalised calculations that help citizens understand what policies mean for them specifically.

6. ADDRESSING THE NET-ZERO BACKLASH: A WAY FORWARD

The emerging backlash against net-zero policies represents more than scattered local protests – it signals fundamental challenges to climate policy legitimacy. Anti-net-zero populism has

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evolved from climate change denial to attacking specific policies on economic grounds (3). Opposition to net-zero policies often does not deny climate change but instead mobilises around distributional concerns, rural-urban divides, and perceived elite impositions on working people.

Successfully addressing backlash requires acknowledging legitimate concerns whilst maintaining climate ambition. Evidence points towards several strategies. First, sequence policies strategically. Begin with measures generating visible benefits – public transport improvements, home insulation programmes, renewable energy projects creating local jobs – before implementing carbon prices. This builds constituencies supporting further action.

Second, ensure burden-sharing appears fair. Switzerland's 2023 Climate and Innovation Act passed by avoiding new taxes and focusing on innovation subsidies, akin to the logic advocated by Klenert et al. (40). After Switzerland's 2021 climate referendum failure, policymakers learned that visible benefits matter more than economic efficiency. This approach, providing upfront payments for heat pump installations and building renovations, increased the set of potential beneficiaries and built a broader constituency of support.

Third, create escape valves for genuine hardships. Temporary exemptions for specific sectors, longer transition periods for rural areas, and hardship funds for unexpected impacts can reduce opposition without undermining environmental integrity. Milan's congestion charge demonstrated how exempting residents initially whilst improving alternatives allowed policies to build support before expanding (29). Additionally, compensation provided to owners of high-emitting vehicles muted votes for right-wing anti-climate parties (30).

7. CONCLUSION

The evidence presented in this article challenges a widespread assumption in climate advocacy: that resistance to net-zero policies stems primarily from inadequate communication and misinformation. The belief that improved understanding of climate science or strategic framing around compelling co-benefits would generate support has driven countless campaigns, experiments, and message-testing exercises. Yet academic research consistently shows minimal effects from such efforts.

Reality proves more challenging yet also more tractable. Opposition to climate policies stems from genuine distributional concerns, economic insecurities, and temporal mismatches between costs and benefits. These political economy challenges require policy – not communication-based – solutions. The path forward lies not in finding perfect frames or message testing but rather in designing policies that address material concerns directly.

This recognition does not mean abandoning communication but refocusing its purpose. The analytical distinction advanced here – between persuasion that seeks to change minds about climate change and explanation that clarifies what specific policies do for citizens – resolves the apparent tension between design and communication. Good design and clear explanation are complements: design creates the substantive benefits, and explanation ensures citizens recognise them. People need to understand actual policy mechanics, such as who qualifies for compensation, and when benefits arrive. Behavioural insights remain valuable for reducing friction in well-designed policies rather than for selling poorly designed ones.

The article has also argued that effective policy design cannot be analysed in isolation from political feasibility. Policies may be badly designed not because policymakers lack evidence about what works, but because political incentives reward different choices. Acknowledging this constraint does not undermine the case for evidence-based design; rather, it refines the task. Research demonstrating that well-designed policies can command majority support provides policymakers with a credible electoral rationale for progressive design, thereby helping to reshape the very incentive structures that obstruct good policy.

For policymakers, the practical implications are clear: invest in policy design that delivers visible, universal, and immediate benefits rather than in communication campaigns and message testing, ensure progressive revenue recycling, front-load compensation, and build broad-based policy packages that create multiple beneficiary groups. For researchers, the agenda centres on continuing to develop our knowledge of three priorities: i) testing the interaction between

design and communication experimentally, ii) investigating the political economy of why some jurisdictions adopt well-designed policies and others do not, and iii) identifying what optimal design looks like under conditions of misaligned political incentives – which may differ from first-best economic design.

The climate crisis demands urgent action, but urgency alone does not create political feasibility. Building durable support for net-zero requires meeting citizens where they are – concerned about climate change whilst worried about costs, sceptical of government yet willing to support fair policies, wanting action whilst needing tangible benefits. The path to net-zero is indeed narrow, but navigable through careful policy design that prioritises substance over spin, and through the political conditions that make such designs possible.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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