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POLICY BRIEF

THE NEW CLIMATE BATTLE: FIVE DEALS TO RECHARGE THE GREEN TRANSITION

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SUMMARY

- The European Green Deal was designed in an era of relative political stability and built on a shallow technocratic consensus.
- Today, climate policy has become a political battleground shaped by questions of identity, class, national sovereignty and economic security.
- This shift reflects a broader transformation of European politics, in which volatility, fragmentation and populism are changing policymaking in all areas.
- In order for the green transition to remain durable in this new environment, this paper proposes five new “deals”: bringing climate policy closer to voters; delivering visible benefits sooner; distributing costs more fairly; broadening the pro-climate coalition; and reframing decarbonisation as a project of European sovereignty and prosperity rather than moral sacrifice and austerity.

NEW POLITICS PROJECT

Introduction

The European Council summit of October 2025 was not supposed to be so dramatic. EU leaders had gathered in Brussels to discuss, among other topics, a climate target they had already endorsed: cutting emissions by 90% by 2040. Instead, their meeting descended into a bitter row.

Donald Tusk, Poland's prime minister, warned that "overly ambitious climate policies" were fuelling extremism, his fragile government still reeling from the election of nationalist, coal-championing president Karol Nawrocki. German chancellor Friedrich Merz, under pressure from the climate-sceptic Alternative for Germany (AfD), declared existing plans unacceptable. Italy's prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, joined in. Ursula von der Leyen, European Commission president, was left doling out concessions diluting the 2040 target in what Viktor Orban, then Hungary's prime minister, called "a heated and fiercely abrasive" series of exchanges.

EU officials later confirmed the description, describing the summit as a turning point for the bloc's climate policies.[1] As one puts it, "we have been in crisis mode ever since."[2]

The scene stood in stark contrast from another turning-point council summit six years previously. In December 2019, EU leaders emerged from their discussions effusive and united, endorsing the Paris Agreement's ambition to limit the global temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and committing to EU climate neutrality by 2050. Angela Merkel, then German chancellor, declared there had been "no division". French president Emmanuel Macron tweeted that Europe would be "the first carbon neutral continent".

The contrast captures something important about Europe's green transition, the bloc's generational project of shifting its economy from fossil fuels to zero-carbon electricity. In 2019, leaders treated decarbonisation largely as a technocratic project: ambitious and complex, but mostly consensual. By 2025, it had become a raw political battleground riven with questions of identity, sovereignty, class, economic security and geopolitical power.

This paper argues that this shift is part of a broader transformation in European politics. Across the continent, political volatility, fragmentation and populism are reshaping policymaking in everything from migration to trade to defence. Climate policy is no exception. The European Green Deal, conceived in a more stable era, is succumbing to the "New Politics": an age of permanent crisis management, unstable coalitions and increasingly polarised electorates.

Yet the paper also starts from a second conviction: that the green transition remains firmly in the interests of a more secure and sovereign Europe. Electrification is a global technological revolution and is breaking old geopolitical dependencies. European reticence in embracing it would only serve its rivals and adversaries. In recent weeks, Brussels has illustrated this point with its newfound, pro-electrification confidence in the face of the crisis in the Gulf.

As the first policy brief of ECFR's New Politics Project, this paper sets out a path to adapt climate action to an age of greater politicisation—and make it thrive not despite it, but thanks to it.

The authors have spent several months interviewing politicians, policy experts and thinkers on the frontier of the New Politics and climate policy (see methodology below). Their analysis is that in the permanent turbulence of the Trumpian age, climate action must learn to speak—as the US president does but as his predecessor Franklin D. Roosevelt did too—the language of "deals". The core of the paper thus comprises five proposed deals: political and policy packages designed to make the green transition work in the current era. They are:

1. The *Heimat* deal: Rooting green policy closer to voters
2. The "better today" deal: Frontloading the benefits of the green transition
3. The class deal: Mediating the economic conflicts of the transition
4. The big-bad-world deal: The transition as global realism
5. The bigger-tent deal: Broadening the green coalition

Each deal spans the EU, national and sub-national levels of government. None relies on the others to function, though each reinforces the effectiveness of the rest. All attempt to reconcile the ambition of 2019 with the realities of 2026 and beyond. Together, they could form the basis of a tougher, more politically resilient social contract for the green transition.

The evolution of Europe's climate politics

To understand climate policy today, it is essential to understand how it has advanced since the Paris Agreement—and how that story is intertwined with the rise of the New Politics.

From Paris to Kyiv: April 2016 to February 2022

The Paris Agreement, concluded at the COP21 summit in December 2015 and signed in April 2016, marked a high point of European influence on the global climate agenda. It committed signatories to pursue efforts to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.

In 2019, the EU adopted the goal of climate neutrality by 2050—a voluntary commitment meant as its contribution to the global efforts. It also went about translating this goal into policy. Already in 2018, it had effectively increased industrial carbon prices in its pre-existing Emissions Trading System (ETS1); imposed binding emissions targets on each EU member state; and channelled some ETS1 revenues into green investments. The publication that same year by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) of the alarming Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5 °C also helped to sharpen the sense of urgency.

Much of this unfolded as simply technocratic policymaking. Yet the political battles that now define climate debates were already beginning to emerge. In 2018, France saw the birth of the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests), a rural protest movement against climate-linked increases in fuel taxes. The same year also brought Fridays for Future, the global pro-climate youth movement personified by Sweden's Greta Thunberg. The 2019 European election bore the traces of this shift, with gains for populist parties, but also for pro-climate parties of the political mainstream—particularly in the liberal and Green political families (see chart below).

Under the influence of the powerful Macron-Merkel duo, the European Commission appointed by Ursula Von der Leyen in 2019 had a strong climate dimension. With a mandate to drive through the European Green Deal, it became the EU's policy expression of the Paris Agreement's ambitions.

Greta Thunberg participates in a "Fridays for Future" demonstration in Berlin, Germany, March 2019. [picture alliance /dpa | Michael Kappeler]

"Yellow vests" demonstration in Marseille, France, December 2018. [picture alliance/AP Photo | Claude Paris]

Following the European Council summit of December 2019, the EU introduced the European Climate Law, which entered into force in 2021. It raised the 2030 emissions-reduction goal from 40% to 55% and introduced the interim 2040 target. From this flowed a series of policies: expanding carbon pricing into household electricity and transport (under Emissions Trading System II, or ETS2), import tariffs on high-emissions goods (the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, or CBAM), and tougher emissions standards for transport, including an effective ban on sales of new petrol and diesel cars from 2035.

Several wider political developments reinforced this momentum. The covid-19 pandemic heightened the European public's sense of systemic risks generated by humanity's relationship with nature and of the importance of societal resilience. Mario Draghi's government in Italy and Olaf Scholz's centre-left coalition in Germany both pushed climate ambition further in major EU states.

Yet even amid the centrist and broadly pro-climate Macrons, Von der Leyens, Draghis and Scholzes, the New Politics was on the rise. Britain had voted to leave the EU. France's once-dominant Gaullists and Socialists had crumbled. Poland and Hungary were going through rule-of-law crises. And the pandemic had unleashed inflationary pressures that would soon become worse.

The greenlash: February 2022 to June 2024

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022 shook European climate policy. Energy prices soared as the EU sanctioned the Kremlin and Russian fossil fuels. Governments scrambled for emergency energy supplies, reopening coal power plants and sourcing new LNG imports. Some leaders, including Macron, called for a "pause" on the green agenda. Voters felt squeezed by the increased cost of living. And some populist parties, under pressure over their ties to Moscow, found a convenient bogeyman in climate policies.

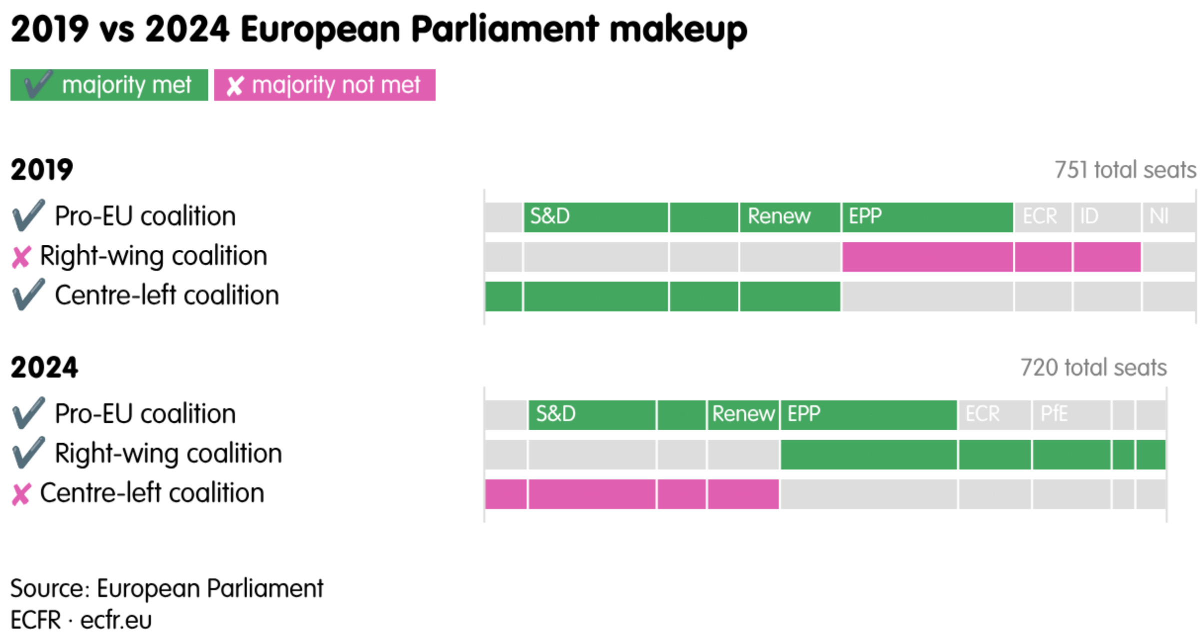
The result was the "greenlash": a political snapback against what critics framed as a technocratic, Brussels-led agenda embodied by the European Green Deal. Dutch farmers protested at nitrogen-emissions restrictions. The Scholz government's attempt to phase out gas heating in favour of electric heat pumps became politically toxic. Poland resisted giving up coal subsidies. And while the Ukraine crisis intensified these conflicts, their roots lay in the ambitious net-zero targets Europe had adopted in the preceding years.

The backlash exposed a central weakness of the European Green Deal: it had been built on a shallow technocratic, expert consensus rather than a deeply democratic one. Voters had supported it in principle but the subject had been relatively low-salience. In an ECFR survey of climate experts in November 2020, more than half reported that "there is no debate on the European Green Deal in the national media".

Meanwhile, the New Politics continued to change Europe. Marine Le Pen and her far-right National Rally (RN) party achieved record support in France's 2022 elections. Later that year, Giorgia Meloni, leader of a party descended from post-fascists, became Italy's prime minister. Britain cycled through four different prime ministers in less than two years.

In parts of the continent, anti-lockdown and anti-masks attitudes fused with climate scepticism into a broader anti-establishment movement—a so-called "diagonal" politics that blended elements of the radical right and radical left. European electorates were splintering into what one ECFR poll found were five "crisis tribes", each animated by a different emergency: the pandemic, climate, global economic turmoil, migration or Russia's war.

The khaki deal: June 2024 to today



These trends crystallised in the European Parliament election of June 2024. Whereas the 2019 vote had generated a broadly pro-climate majority (spanning the centre-right European People's Party (EPP), the centre-left Socialists and Democrats (S&D), the liberal Renew and the Greens), the 2024 election produced two shifts that seemed incremental but ultimately proved transformational.

First, losses among S&D, Renew and Greens, combined with gains for all three families of the nationalist right—Patriots for Europe (PfE), European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), and Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN)—changed the parliamentary arithmetic. The EPP became kingmaker, able to choose between a centrist majority and a right-wing one with the nationalists.

Second, and just as importantly, much of the EPP interpreted the result as a straightforward "greenlash" vote against the European Green Deal and in favour of economic competitiveness, necessitating slowing or even halting the European Green Deal. While today parts of the Christian democrat family defend the climate ambition of von der Leyen's first commission, they have become somewhat marginal within their own political camp. [3]

Similar trends were playing out in the European Council. Macron responded to his party's rout at the European election by calling snap legislative elections that generated no stable majority and plunged French politics into chaos. That summer of 2024 also saw Scholz's coalition in Germany reach an intractable budgetary crisis from which it would never recover. The crux of the German disagreement was the financing of the green transition. Europe's old, stable pro-climate majority had broken down. The EPP was dominant, and much of its leadership had concluded that climate policy was the problem.

The results soon became clear in policymaking. Leaders and legislators muddied the European Green Deal into a green-brown "khaki deal". Under the banner of simplification, they loosened emissions-reduction requirements for industry, cars and firms. The showdown in the October 2025 European Council summit meeting was a prominent example of this new phase: leaders watered down the 2040 emissions target and delayed the implementation of ETS2 from 2027 to 2028.

These same trends were visible within national governments. Arithmetically weak and transfixed by the rise of the AfD, Merz's coalition in Berlin has not only challenged EU-wide targets but has also curbed some climate measures at home. For example, on May 13th 2026, it dropped the national push for electric heat pumps just as the technology was gaining momentum in German homes.

The New Politics of climate in 2026

One might not guess it from the behaviour of Europe's leaders, but the European public has not turned against climate goals. Polling shows that large majorities (81% in 2025 Eurostat polling) remain supportive of the green transition. That is particularly striking as it is probably reasonable to assume that, half a decade into the European Green Deal's implementation, Europeans now have some sense of the costs the transformation entails.

The challenge is converting that underlying support into effective policymaking—all while the New Politics complicates this. The political trends of the past decade have intensified, constraining climate policy in several ways. Any realistic plan for driving forward Europe's green transition must start by recognising and responding to these constraints.

Volatility

The "metabolism" of European politics continues to accelerate. Since the cost-of-living shock that followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the average lifespan of a governing party has been three years and six months, EU-wide and population-weighted. In the preceding decade, it was five years and nine months.

There are several explanations for this. Social media has accelerated news cycles and enabled new forces to rise more quickly—Tisza, the new governing party of Hungary, was irrelevant as recently as 2024. There is an anti-incumbent mood linked to general gloom about the future, economic stagnation and the distorting effects of social media. The speed of global events and the "polycrisis" buffets governments from one emergency to another with little time to recover.

This inevitably poses difficulties for climate policymaking. The climate transition is the work not of a single government but of generations. It involves steep upfront costs, from both governments and the private sector, with benefits that will only fully materialise in the long term. Climate policy is also technically complex, rewarding those (including ministers and legislators) who remain in office long enough to master the details.

A solar power plant in Beneixama, Valencian Community, Spain. [picture alliance / imageBROKER | Jochen Tack]

Political volatility undermines both conditions. The lurch away from earlier climate ambitions has thrown up significant uncertainties for businesses planning their long-term investments. When exactly will the internal combustion engine be phased out? What will implementation of ETS2 look like and when will it begin? How will CBAM distribute revenues? Can energy-intensive new data centres rely on clean electricity? European leaders staggering between crises are poorly placed to answer such questions confidently.

At the national level, volatility has produced similar effects. In France, budget deadlock has slowed climate investments, with the 2026 electrification plan repackaging existing money rather than providing new funds. Germany's recent turn away from heat pumps is an example of new governments abandoning climate policy approved by previous ones. Meanwhile, in some places, the sheer turnover of governments and ministers has hindered consistency: France, for example, has had five climate ministers in the past six years.

Fragmentation

Across much of the continent, big-tent parties that once dominated politics have declined. That process reflects long-term social changes: the retreat of mass institutions like religions and trades unions, a greater emphasis on individual over collective identities, and the growing salience of cultural politics that cuts across old economic divides.

Take Germany, where the combined vote share of the Christian Democratic Union and its sister party, the Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) fell from 66% in 2013 to 45% in 2025, and has since slipped closer to 40% in polling. In France, the collapse of the traditional parties has been even more drastic. In this volatile environment, new forces can emerge and rise faster than ever. But climate policies need broad, long-term buy-in, as well as mechanisms for internalising and balancing trade-offs. The fragmentation complicates that at all levels of government in Europe.

In the European Parliament, the EPP's choice of majorities has allowed it to play off the centre against the radical right, sometimes voting with the latter—such as in November 2025, when the combined weight of the moderate and radical right drove through the deregulatory "omnibus simplification package", which weakened some green rules. At the national level, fragmentation more often produces paralysis. France's post-2024 legislative chaos brought cuts to green spending and enabled ad-hoc parliamentary coalitions to pick apart pro-climate policies like low-emissions zones. In Spain's rural Extremadura region, a fragmented regional election prompted the conservative People's Party (PP) to form a government with the far-right Vox, which opposes renewable energy projects on agricultural land.

Populism

The past years of volatility and fragmentation have been a boon for populists. Today, the populist right either leads or is part of national governments in seven EU countries (Belgium, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Finland, Lithuania, Italy and Slovakia), and is on the cusp of power in several others. It tops polls in Europe's four largest democracies (Britain, France, Germany and Italy), and now secures a larger average vote share than any other political family. While the populist left is much weaker, it has made notable gains in some places, from Rumen Radev's Progressive Bulgaria (PB) and The Left (Die Linke) in Germany to Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France (La France Insoumise).

Populism is not inherently anti-climate. Even among the populist right, the voices that outright deny climate change or want to tear down every wind turbine or solar panel are relatively few. Such parties are, by definition, highly sensitive to public opinion, which, as this paper has noted, remains broadly supportive of climate policies. Some left-wing populists are in fact more ambitious on the topic than the political mainstream.

Nonetheless, certain of populism's innate traits pose challenges for the climate agenda. It tends to portray society as a monolithic "people" betrayed by elites, sometimes in league with an external "other".[4] This creates tensions with the way climate policy has been pursued in Europe so far. It is easy to frame the green transition as an establishment- and expert-led project, not least because, in significant respects, it is one. It is highly technical and inherently transnational, when this is an age of emotive and identity-based politics. And amid falling trust and increasingly zero-sum thinking, sustaining the broad social contract such a transition requires is far harder.

Those tensions are visible above all in the rise of the right-wing variety of populism. Parties of the "new right", as ECFR's Mark Leonard has argued, have become successful "crisis entrepreneurs", nimble at exploiting moments of stress or disruption. The economic shocks of recent years, from the covid-19 pandemic to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the geopolitical upheavals brought by Trump 2.0 (especially the Iran war), have supplied them with fertile ground for anti-climate politics.

Belchatow Power Station, Europe's largest coal-fired power plant, in Belchatow, Poland. [picture alliance / REUTERS |KACPER PEMPEL]

These parties denounce climate policy as a globalist, metropolitan imposition (Spain's Vox, for example, speaks of "a new religion with new commandments"). They claim it damages local culture and identity (Poland's right-wing trade union Solidarnosc proclaims: "we don't want to become slaves on our own land") and that it is blind to material and social inequality ("we can't incapacitate our own households", argue the far-right Sweden Democrats). They also say that it amounts to "woke" European naivety in a world still dependent on fossil fuels (a Czech right-populist industry minister put it bluntly: "I do not want to be a doormat for China and I do not want our companies leaving for the United States").

Where such parties come to power, whether joining governments or propping them up from the outside, these positions often translate into direct policy influence. Even where they do not, the sway of right-wing populists on the political mainstream, which continues to shape Brussels and national politics, has been sweeping and significant. At the EU level, the clearest example of the populist pressures is the EPP. Having supported the European Green Deal in Von der Leyen's first term, the party's leadership interpreted the 2024 European election results as a warning against climate ambition and has since turned back on parts of the agenda.

A new turning point?

As of June 2026, Europe may be approaching another inflection point.

First, the Iran war has pushed energy prices sharply higher. Europe must now decide whether to slow the transition, diverting green investment towards compensating consumers for high fossil fuel costs, or to accelerate it in pursuit of greater energy independence. Evidence points in both directions: Merz, under pressure from a surging AfD, has slowed Germany's move away from fossil fuels, while France's government is pushing more aggressively towards electrification. The European Commission's AccelerateEU communication in April 2026 also argued in favour of speeding up electrification.

Second, although the European Green Deal could survive the dilution of the past two years, it may yet face outright dismantling. The coming years will test some of the bloc's most politically sensitive climate policies, above all ETS2, which will extend carbon pricing into household energy use and transport. Mishandled, its rollout could generate a backlash far larger than anything seen so far. Were that to produce a widespread rollback of climate targets and mechanisms, undermining private-sector confidence in the European transition, the whole project could be at risk.

Third, Europe is approaching technological and political tipping points. Subsidies and other regulations have pushed green technologies beyond early adopters and into the mainstream. Average consumers and investors appear increasingly willing to embrace electric vehicles (EVs), heat pumps and electrification infrastructure. The years between now and the next European election in 2029 could determine whether these technologies become too economically embedded and popular to be reversed. But they could also decide whether Europe can build up its own green tech industries before they are flattened by Chinese competition.

Five deals to recharge the European climate agenda

At this pivotal moment, European policymakers need approaches that respond to the realities of the New Politics. If climate policy has become more contested and overtly political, then both policy design and messaging must adapt accordingly. Based on their research, the authors propose five interlocking "deals". All span the EU, national and sub-national levels; all are mutually reinforcing, but all can also work as standalone projects.

Each address one or more of the core elements of the New Politics—volatility, fragmentation, populism—as they affect climate policymaking at European, national and sub-national levels. They all embrace this more politicised context, and seek to turn it into a chance to make the green transition more resilient as it enters a decisive decade. The aim is not to replace the substance of the European Green Deal, but rather to provide a communication and delivery framework for it in the new political environment.

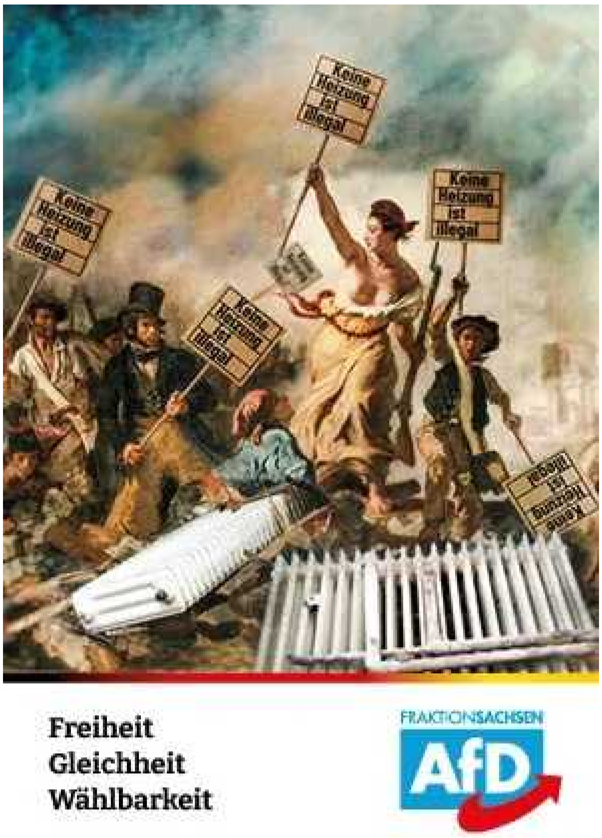
The Heimat deal: Rooting climate policy closer to voters

Problem

The perception that climate policy is a one-size-fits-all agenda imposed from above can be politically toxic. It easily feeds the narrative of elites working alongside external forces against the interests of ordinary people. The conservative philosopher Roger Scruton captured this perspective: "The [environmental] agenda has been set by the globalisers. Global problems, we are told, require global solutions, and global solutions are trans-national solutions, involving the loss of sovereignty and the surrender to treaties that tie our hands".

One does not have to agree with Scruton to observe how Europe's radical right has weaponised what he called *oikophilia*, the love of home, against the green transition. Hervé Juvin, a French essayist credited with shaping RN's thinking on the topic, described the green transition as "at the service of globalism". He adds: "It is intrusive, abolishes essential liberties, including threatening the idea of private property". The RN rails against what it calls a "punitive ecology" directed from Brussels.

In 2023 and 2024, the AfD used similar rhetoric to campaign against legislation promoting electric heat pumps in Germany. It portrayed the measure as discriminatory against poorer eastern states that are more dependent on fossil heating systems, campaigning under the slogan "no heating is illegal". The local CDU in Thuringia joined in, referring to the law as "energy Stasi".



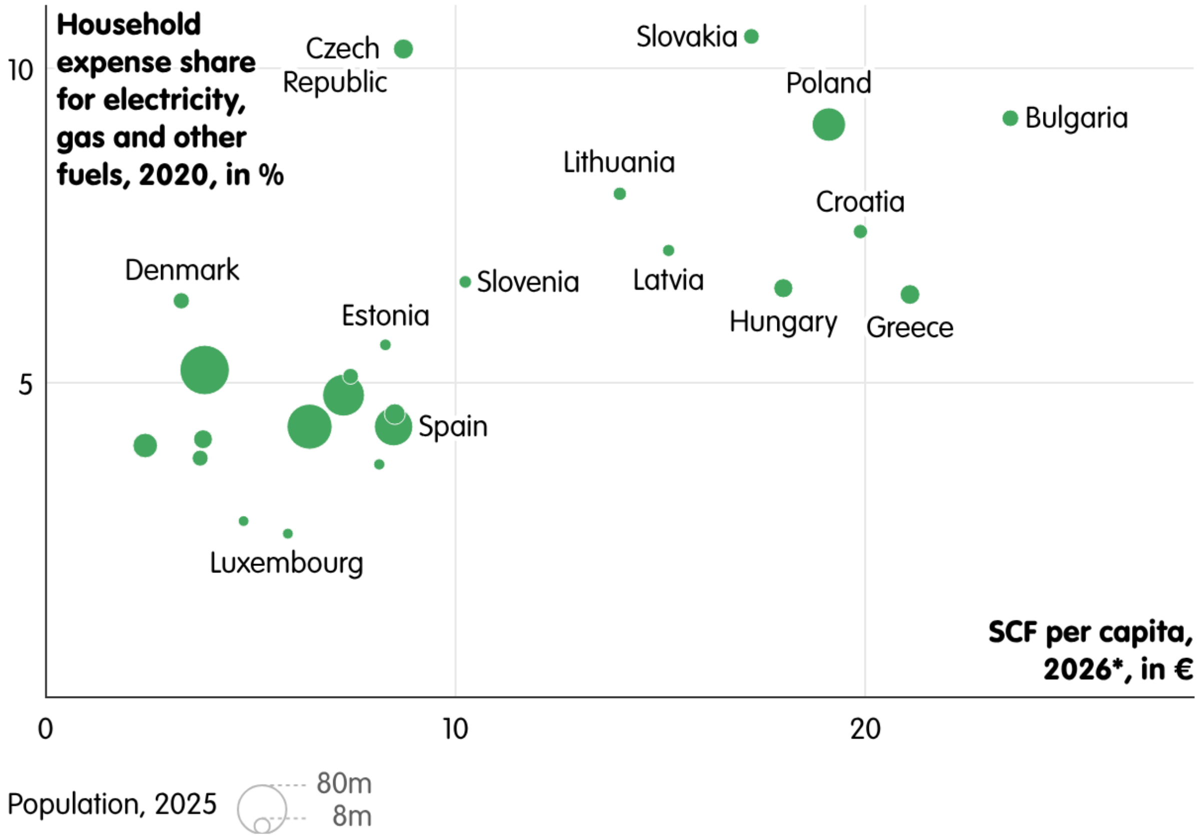
2023 poster from AfD fraction in the state parliament of Saxony, Germany. Slogans read: "No heating is illegal" and "Freedom, equality, electability". [Source: AFD]

2024 social media advert from official X account of the National Rally ahead of European Parliament election. Slogan reads: "No to Macron's Europe (above) / degrowth (below). Yes to the people's Europe (above) / Progress (below)". [Source: Rassemblement National]

The green transition will inevitably disrupt old industries and habits. But in the era of New Politics, it will be harder to sustain if it appears blind to local realities.

Decarbonisation does not look the same everywhere. A rainy, hilly coal-mining region built around fossil fuels and attached to its native landscapes will experience the transition very differently from a fast-growing settlement blessed with ample free land and a sunny climate. Energy costs are a more sensitive topic in places with harsh winters and extreme summers. The affordability of technologies such as a heat pump varies significantly across the EU; household income in Severozapaden in Bulgaria, the bloc's poorest region, is just 18% of that in Upper Bavaria in Germany, the richest.

Does the Social Climate Fund target countries with higher household energy burdens?



* Based on 2025 population data

Source: European Commission; Eurostat

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Yet many corrective mechanisms fail to reflect these nuances. As the above chart shows, the Social Climate Fund, intended to cushion the social effects of the transition across the EU over 2026-2032, does not allocate payments precisely according to need—with, for example, the high-cost Czech Republic receiving relatively low per-capita funding.

This creates fertile ground for the perception of a green transition being imposed by remote technocrats in Brussels. The looming ETS2 rollout is particularly risky in this respect: a single carbon price reaching directly into homes, cars and neighbourhoods across vastly different societies.

The deal

The more the green transition can be made compatible with, or at least respectful of, *oikophilia*, the more politically resilient it is likely to be. That means not merely reframing the climate cause around security, public health or long-term competitiveness, valuable though such arguments can be—but also rooting it more deeply in local identities and circumstances.

A German term could be useful in this context. *Heimat* is hard to translate precisely, but evokes an emotive mix of "homeland", "home" and "roots". Generally associated with the nationalist right—the AfD uses it frequently—*Heimat* has increasingly been reclaimed by some politicians from the Green party family, like Austria's Alexander van der Bellen and Germany's Cem Özdemir. The latter won a difficult state election on a pro-climate campaign built around *Heimatverbundenheit*, or "attachment to Heimat".

The Heimat deal therefore means pursuing ambitious climate goals while allowing for greater flexibility between places and situating decisions closer to people's everyday lives.

Policy options

Measure	Rationale	Actions	New Politics salience	Indicative case studies (if applicable)
Make ETS2 more flexible	ETS2 could prompt a backlash for being too top-down or intrusive. Regions should have more flexibility over the pace and sequencing of their energy transition. The system should better reflect local income differences.	Lower carbon price for coal in exchange for faster phase-out commitments. Or: Index price of emissions to local GDP per capita so poorer countries face lower carbon costs during the transition.	Weakens populist claims of Brussels diktat that punishes poorer areas. Encourages local buy-in and broad coalition-building.	The EU has used differentiated approaches elsewhere, for example in the cohesion policy where the level of financial support is determined by the local GDP per capita and other factors.
Promote national success stories	There is a perception that climate policy serves distant goals rather than national or local communities.	Public communication should showcase examples of countries or regions benefitting economically or socially from the green transition.	Challenges the populist narrative equating the green transition with globalism.	N/A
Increase local decision-making and ownership	People are less likely to see the green transition as a foreign imposition if they have more control over it.	Require renewables developers to offer a share of projects (perhaps 20%) to local municipalities, ideally at a discount. Hold citizens' assemblies, especially at the local and regional levels, to deliberate on the trade-offs of the energy transition.	Overrides volatility and fragmentation at national level by rooting decisions in local consent.	Local co-ownership schemes in north-east Germany and Norway have helped to build support for renewables. Backlash against Germany's heat-pump law eased after reforms gave local authorities greater discretion and added protections for the elderly and low-income households.
Honour differences between states	Giving national governments more discretion over their paths to net-zero would blunt accusations of Brussels diktat.	Give national governments more flexibility over their path to net zero, including their choice of energy mix and the sequencing of their policies. Permit temporary use of high-emissions fuels where it helps regions leapfrog "transition fuels" to renewables.	Challenges populist accusations of heavy-handed EU.	The inclusion of nuclear energy in the EU's list of transitional clean energies, reiterated in the AccelerateEU communication of April 2026 , points in this direction.
Reduce disparities between EU regions	The green transition risks deepening divisions in the EU, potentially fuelling a backlash against its goals and undermining its viability. Companies in wealthy (and fiscally frugal) countries benefit disproportionally from EU support for green transition and clean technologies.	Extend and means-test the Social Climate Fund beyond its current 2032 expiry date. Allocate part of the EU Competitiveness Fund, Innovation Fund and Industrial Decarbonization Bank lending to each member state if projects fulfil certain minimum quality criteria. Prioritise cross-border projects or initiatives tailored to technologies being developed in central and eastern Europe, such as district heating. Create a special economic zone for the automotive sector that links these countries with Germany. Earmark part of Horizon Europe funding to strengthen innovation ecosystems in lagging regions, conditional on increased investment in research and innovation.	Refutes the populist claim that the green transition ignores local conditions and economic interests.	Social Climate Fund National envelopes in EU cohesion policy.

The "better today" deal: Frontloading the benefits

Problem

The green transition is an innately long-term project. It demands intense upfront investments in exchange for gains that may only become fully visible many years later. But political volatility, in which parties and governments rise and fall quickly, and political systems are in flux, can make that bargain hard to sustain.

German chancellor Olaf Scholz, finance minister Christian Lindner and economy and climate minister Robert Habeck attend a session of the Bundestag in Berlin, Germany, March 2024. [picture alliance / REUTERS | Liesa Johannssen]

Voters who mistrust incumbents and expect governments to be quickly replaced are less likely to trust promises that today's sacrifices will pay off long after current leaders are gone. Unsurprisingly, populist climate policies often revolve around stopping or reversing existing measures: "Stop the Green Deal", proclaims the Czech Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) party; "Dutch people will be number one, again" demands the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands (PVV) as it seeks to cut climate spending.

Fundamentally, this challenge is one of time horizons. The coalition needed to sustain the green transition is necessary now, whereas many of the benefits will gradually mount over decades. Policymakers must therefore find a way to frontload the benefits and offer voters not just a better tomorrow but a better today.

The deal

The "better today" deal would focus on narrowing the gap between the short-term political costs of the transition and its long-term rewards.

Across Europe, there are numerous examples of renewable energy and electrified infrastructure improving people's lives, cleaning the air and making cities safer and quieter today. Rybnik, a town in the Polish coal-mining region of Silesia now finding new life as a hydrogen hub, is one of many examples of how green investment can improve lives. And EU countries with higher shares of renewables in their energy mixes often enjoy lower electricity prices per household overall, though taxation structures can mask this connection.

However, these benefits are not always well advertised. Without explicit efforts to promote the successes, the broader story of progress risks being drowned out by short-term anxieties.

Charismatic voices weaving such individual examples into compelling stories can help give voters faith in benefits to come—New York City's mayor Zohran Mamdani's pro-climate urbanism is one example. But as his strategists hurry to point out, his appeal rests on substance as much as presentation. His policies offered improvements that voters could see and feel, rather than vague promises of better times to come. Crucially, they addressed everyday issues that voters care about, such as affordable public transport and green spaces for school children, not technocratic goals such as reducing carbon emissions.

The answer, then, is to frontload tangible benefits—and make them as visible as possible to voters. That means deploying resources faster and, if necessary, borrowing against the future financial benefits to realise improvements now.

Policy options

Measure	Rationale	Actions	New Politics salience	Indicative case studies (if applicable)
Use ETS2 revenues to deliver visible and direct benefits to citizens	Governments often use green revenues to fill general budget gaps rather than delivering direct benefits. Especially under ETS2, voters will immediately feel the costs but only some of the benefits. It is important to create a more direct and immediate "retail" incentive to shift to low-carbon behaviours, as a complement to ETS2.	Direct monthly ETS2 revenues into rebates on household electricity bills , clearly listed on bills to ensure visibility. Or: Return ETS2 revenues to all citizens in the form of a climate tax allowance or climate bonus payment. Or: Legally require, at the EU level, all ETS2 revenues to be spent on the green transition, and establish enforcement mechanisms.	Gives ordinary voters an immediate stake in rolling out carbon pricing, widening the coalition of support for green policies. Lower electricity prices are among the most popular forms of compensation for Europeans.	ETS2 requires, in principle, all revenues to support the green transition, but its enforcement remains weak. The Klimageld (climate money) schemes in Switzerland and Austria operate on the principle of returning carbon-pricing revenues to citizens. In 2022, Spain and Portugal decoupled electricity prices from gas costs in view of their heavy renewables use and low reliance on Russian gas. As a result, consumer prices were 32% lower than the EU average in the first half of 2025.
Frontload more ETS2 and CBAM revenues by borrowing against future proceeds	Citizens should experience the benefits of the transition sooner.	Enable the European Investment Bank (EIB) to provide greater upfront financing for green transition projects with broad benefits, to be repaid from future ETS2 revenues.	Shrinks the "leap of faith" required from climate-sceptical voters.	In February 2026, the EIB approved a €3bn facility backed by future ETS revenues to finance low-carbon energy solutions for low-income households and small businesses.
Introduce dual interest rates	This would accelerate the reallocation of capital towards the green transition.	Mandate the European Central Bank (ECB) to offer preferential lending rates to banks investing in green infrastructure.	As above.	The ECB has trialled dual interest rates under its TLTRO II scheme.
Expand EU common borrowing for green investment	It would increase the pool of EU resources available for member states—and combine green transition projects across the union to reduce costs.	Renew NextGenEU with a narrower focus on "shovel-ready" green projects capable of generating rapid and strong social benefits. Debt could be linked to future ETS and CBAM revenues.	As above, besides reducing economic fragmentation within the EU and increasing support for climate policies in poorer states and regions.	NextGenEU was largely a success. Its expiry at the end of 2026 will leave a gap.

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The class deal: Mediating the economic conflicts of the transition

Problem

The story of European political fragmentation is also that of the decline of class as the organising category of political life.

In post-war Europe (west of the Iron Curtain, at least), big-tent parties mediated between major economic interests. In Britain, France or Germany, the pattern of a mass party for the middle class and another for the working class structured politics. When societies faced major changes, these big and broad-based forces negotiated between major societal groups. Today, that mediating function has weakened. Identity conflicts have eclipsed old material ones, and, in fact, the very term “class” has become much less prevalent.

In many ways, the state of climate politics in Europe today reflects that transformation. Support for ambitious climate action tends to cluster among progressive and wealthier voters, while scepticism is more prevalent among more conservative and disadvantaged groups. That dynamic has fuelled what Leonard describes as the “new class coalition” of the transatlantic radical right: an alliance of culturally right-wing and economically left-wing voters.

The deal

Pro-climate policymakers cannot simply wish away that fragmentation. But they can try to emulate some of the old bargaining mechanisms and the old big-tent politics that once mediated economic conflict. That means designing policies that mitigate the material costs of the transition and distribute the gains towards the groups most exposed to disruption. This is the essence of the class deal: building consent for decarbonisation by ensuring that its burdens and rewards are shared more fairly.

Policy options

Measure	Rationale	Actions	New Politics salience	Indicative case studies (if applicable)
Introduce an EU-wide windfall tax on energy firms	The fossil fuel industry benefits from global turmoil with supercharged profits. Firms profiting from geoeconomic chaos should share some of those gains with citizens facing higher costs.	Use the emergency provisions in Article 122(1) TFEU to empower the Council of the EU to impose a windfall tax on energy firms profiting from the Strait of Hormuz blockade, with revenues earmarked for electricity subsidies and green transition investments.	Responds to the lack of mediation between class interests. Disarms populist accusations that the green transition benefits elites.	The EU's 2022 "solidarity contribution" windfall tax generated €28.7bn in 2022-2023. Individual states raised even more over that period through similar mechanisms.
Preserve and enhance the Just Transition Fund	Killing one of the leading instruments for managing the social costs of the transition, as the proposed EU 2028-2034 Multiyear Financial Framework does, would further weaken support for green policies.	Maintain the Just Transition Fund in the new budget or replace it with a more ambitious successor.	As above.	The Just Transition Fund has helped coal phase-outs and strengthened regional buy-in in countries such as Poland.
Create new bargaining structures between "fossil" and "electric" interests	The emerging fossil-versus-electric divide in Europe could become as significant as the labour-versus-capital divide of past generations and requires new mechanisms of negotiation.	National governments should normalise negotiations between trade unions, employer organisations and regional or local governments when designing major green-transition policies.	Helps build resilient and broad coalitions in a time of volatility and fragmentation.	Spain's 2020 "just transition" agreements, through public investment and job banks, brought together unions, the coal industry, and local and regional authorities to manage the phase out of fossil-fuel extraction in the industrial north. Denmark's 2024 tripartite framework brought together government, agriculture and industry around a decarbonisation consensus.
Expand affordable and electrified public transport	Public transport remains an underused tool for reducing emissions, particularly in rural areas.	Introduce low-cost, flat-rate public transport subscriptions across Europe, making low-emission travel cheaper and simpler.	Anti-incumbent voters want agency, and the choice this policy provides will deliver it. Populists thrive on the anger of car-dependent voters. Reducing that dependence would move the dial across Europe.	Germany's "Deutschland Ticket" and Austria's "KlimaTicket" provide near-total public transport access for moderate prices and have boosted rail use significantly. Germany's policy directly reduces the country's CO_2 emissions by 2.5 million tonnes per year.
Make ETS2 more progressive	Wealthy individuals generate more emissions than ordinary citizens, making a case for differentiated treatment.	Create a free emissions quota corresponding to basic everyday needs of an average European citizen. Low-emitting households could even sell unused units.	Broadens support for ETS2 in fragmented electorates sensitive to cost-of-living concerns.	N/A
Introduce a frequent flyer levy	As above. One study of western European citizens showed that almost 70% of households in the lowest income group do not fly in any given year. An escalating ticket tax could raise €63.6bn annually in revenues across Europe (for comparison, the annual value of the Social Climate Fund is €12.3bn on average). These revenues could subsidise public transport or EV social leasing schemes.	Introduce a ticket tax that increases the more flights an individual takes.	Counters populist claims that the green transition benefits elites by placing a greater share of its costs on a small minority of high emitters.	This follows the same logic as emissions-banded vehicle taxes, but with more majoritarian appeal (some low- and middle-income Europeans have old cars, but frequent flying is concentrated among the richest).

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The big-bad-world deal: The transition as global realism

Problem

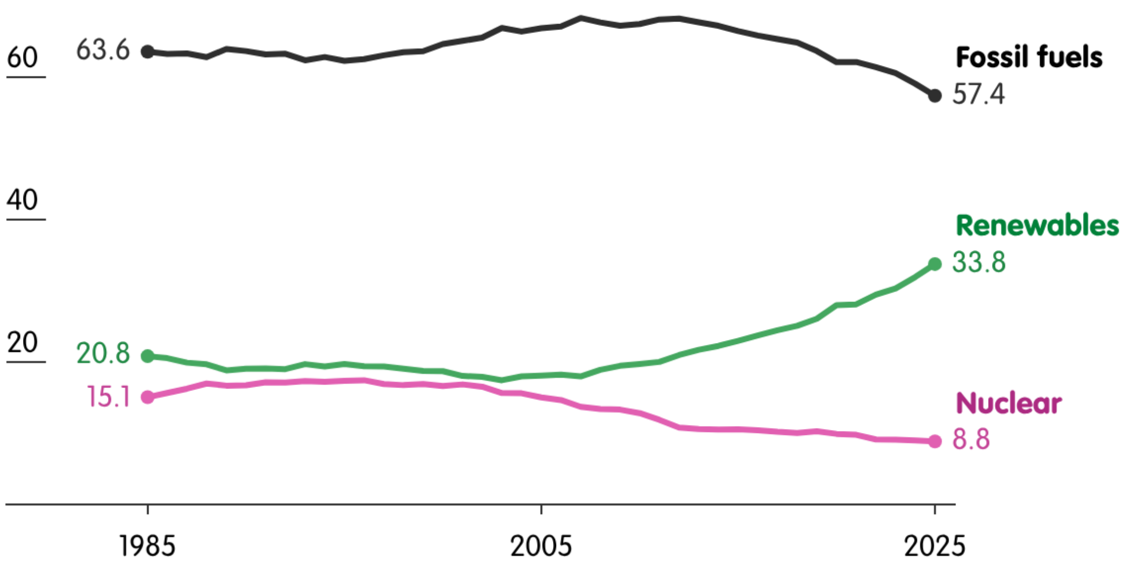
European populists do not just seek to bash elites. They also accuse these elites of mishandling Europe's relationship with outside forces. Sometimes the charge is of betrayal: political leaders serve foreign interests rather than their own citizens. More often it is one of naivety: they underestimate how ruthlessly other powers pursue their interests while Europe makes gullible and lonely self-sacrifices.

Climate policy is an especially fertile terrain for both arguments. For Alice Weidel, co-leader of the AfD, "so-called 'climate protection' is nothing more than a programme of deindustrialisation and job destruction". For Italy's Matteo Salvini, "the ideological fundamentalism of [EVs] alone is suicide and a gift to China". The implication is the same: Europe is hurting itself through green policies while its rivals press ahead.

Parts of the political centre have increasingly echoed this language. Amid concerns over lagging growth, some mainstream politicians have seized on notions of an unfair European contribution to the global green transition. Wopke Hoekstra, the EU's climate commissioner, has stressed that "without others, we are not going to solve this"—implying that the rest of the world is dragging its feet on the transition.

The very language around the Paris Agreement, with countries making "contributions" to global targets, leaves the door open for opponents of climate policy to perpetuate the impression that climate action involves sacrificing national and local interests in the name of lofty global goals. In reality, it is national governments which are setting their own nationally determined contributions, and all too often falling short of collectively meeting globally agreed targets.

Share of global electricity generation from fossil fuels, renewables and nuclear, in %, 1985-2025



Measured as a percentage of total electricity produced in the country or region. Fossil fuels include coal, oil and gas. Renewables include solar, wind, hydropower, bioenergy, geothermal, wave and tidal.

Source: Ember (2026); Energy Institute - Statistical Review of World Energy (2025) – with major processing by Our World in Data

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The real picture could hardly be more different. Countries as diverse as Morocco and Indonesia are pushing ahead with green projects—like the production of sustainable ammonia—not out of altruism but because they see them as commercially beneficial. Brazil is excelling at sustainable aviation fuels. EV sales are surging in Thailand and Vietnam. China, the rising superpower, has rushed towards electrification with ruthless pragmatism; indeed, the fact that it is now flooding European markets with cleantech is grist to the European populists' mill. There is a grim irony in Europe risking technological and industrial decline in the alleged interest of its own competitiveness while the rest of the world races ahead.

However, there is a hard truth that Europe must confront: the transition will deepen its dependency on a range of other countries for critical raw minerals (CRMs) and some green technology. Policymakers will need to persuade increasingly inward-looking electorates that investing in external partnerships is in Europe's interest.

The graphic below highlights the top five countries that the EU depends on for the top five CRMs it will need for the green transition.

Major CRM suppliers to EU, 2024 imports

CRM	Supplier	Share	in US$m
Lithium	Chile	75	147.72
	United States	13	24.59
	Argentina	6	12.59
	Britain	4	8.26
	China	1	1.57
Copper	Chile	39	2,580.6
	DR Congo	26	1,742.4
	Congo	8	554.4
	Peru	7	481.8
	Serbia	7	462
Nickel[1]	Norway	33	820
	Canada	18	455
	Russia	13	320
	Britain	11	265
	Australia	8	210
Cobalt[2]	United States	21	58.0
	China	20	55.0
	Canada	17	46.87
	Japan	10	26.71
	Britain	9	23.71
Graphite[3]	China	47	57.54
	Madagascar	13	15.66
	Mozambique	9	11.41
	Brazil	9	11.29
	South Korea	7	8.0

[1] HS 750210 ("class 1" nickel) is the largest single nickel-related import for the EU. The data understate Indonesia's role in global nickel supply chains. Indonesia's EU exposure mostly sits in ferro-nickel (HS 720260, #3 at 23.5%) and nickel oxide sinters/intermediates (HS 750120, #2 at 35.2%). Most Indonesian nickel feeds Asian stainless/battery supply chains via China/Korea/Japan.
[2] The DRC produces ~70–75% of raw cobalt globally, but it is invisible in EU data — the DRC ships cobalt hydroxide to China for refining, and the EU then imports refined product from Chinese processing hubs.
[3] Natural graphite only; for synthetic graphite (HS 380110) China's share is far higher (~95%).

Source: WITS/UN Comtrade, HS 1988/92 (H0)
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The deal

Even in the age of New Politics, Europe's pro-climate forces can still tell a compelling story: one in which a big, bad world requires realism and defence of national interests, and in which those very imperatives demand a faster green transition. Ultimately, decarbonisation and clean technologies are investments in sovereignty and independence. The European big-bad-world deal therefore means embracing the logic of the "green global race" and aggressively championing European vital interests in negotiations over access to critical raw materials and key technology.

Policy options

Measure	Rationale	Actions	New Politics salience	Indicative case studies (if applicable)
Introduce a national-interest check	Many voters remain sceptical that climate action serves national interests, and mainstream politicians lack the confidence or authority to challenge this.	Submit all climate measures to national boards comprised of experts and ordinary voters to determine whether they support the national interest.	Addresses low trust in institutions and anti-incumbent mood.	Ireland's Citizens' Assemblies have informed policy on biodiversity loss, abortion and drug use.
Mobilise new pro-climate messengers	European businesses and unions often back the climate agenda in private but are fearful of doing so in public.	Encourage business associations, firms and unions to speak up more confidently about the costs of uncertainty for business planning.	As above.	Recent business leaders' advocacy against watering down of the green agenda; the International Trade Union Confederation's promotion of investment in green infrastructure and the green economy.
Replace the sacrifice narrative with a prosperity narrative	Governments often frame climate action as a loss. They also present Europe as the frontrunner to be followed by others. This plays into the populist anti-climate narrative that Europe is alone in its "idealistic" pursuit of a zero-emissions future.	Communicate the green transition's benefits more confidently; emphasise the costs of stasis when other powers are rushing towards electrification. Show how Europe is very often not leading but rather lagging in several sectors crucial for the green transition. Pursue robust safeguards to help European industry compete with China, especially in frontier industrial sectors like biosolutions.	Counters the perception that climate policy requires sacrifice without reward.	The EU's rush towards clean and transitional energy following Trump's war on Iran illustrates the positive, self-interested case for green investments.
Promote a narrative of realist pride	For the next decade, Europe will depend on other countries for its green supply chains, but this need not be framed as a weakness.	Introduce a "European preference" in supply chains. Deepen partnerships with trusted middle powers in tech and CRMs. Harness Trump's unpopularity by associating fossil fuels with him ("Trump fuels"). Frame the green transition as a smart bid for sovereignty and independence.	As above.	Europe already boasts numerous cleantech success stories: the European Battery Alliance; European wind companies like Siemens Gamesa, Orsted, Vesta; Vaillant and other European heat pump manufacturers; even cutting-edge innovators like battery maker Basquevolt.
Anti-disinformation measures	Climate disinformation and conspiracy theories prevail on social media platforms, many of which are not European.	Strengthen and better enforce existing EU anti-disinformation measures, especially within the framework of the Digital Services Act (DSA), as part of wider action against hybrid threats to European democracies.	Counters the notion of shadowy elites conspiring against the national interest, which is especially amplified by social media algorithms.	Past fines of social media giants like X under the EU's DSA.

The bigger-tent deal: Broadening the green coalition

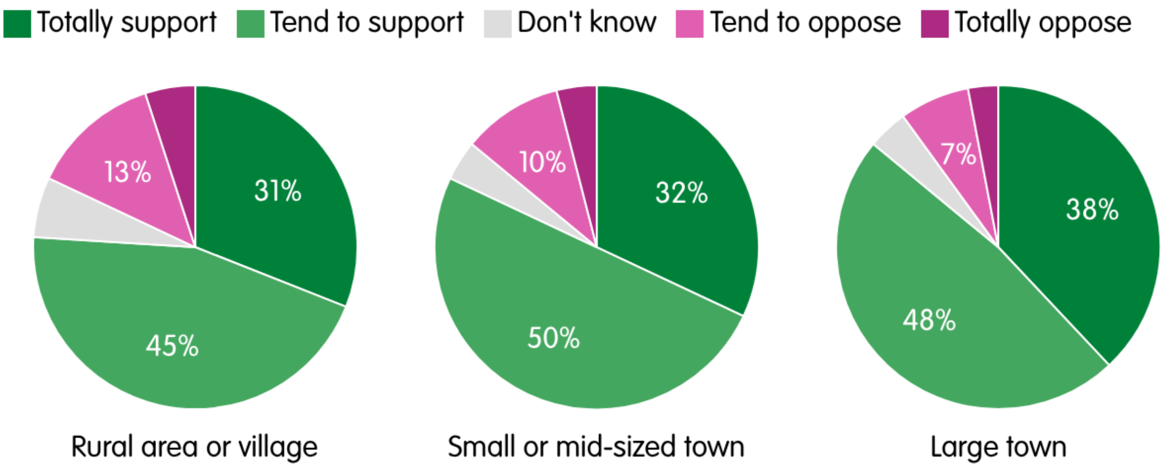
Problem

In a fragmented political landscape, climate policy cannot rely indefinitely on support from young, white-collar, urban and progressive electorates alone. It must inspire broad majorities that can survive shifts in power.

Consider the urban transit revolution of recent years in Paris. Left-of-centre mayor Anne Hidalgo won mandates for ambitious climate action from an entirely metropolitan electorate (the city's administrative limits stop short of the suburbs) willing to trade road space and automotive access for cleaner air and safer streets. Yet such voters make up a small share of France's population. Hidalgo won just 1.75% of the vote in the 2022 French presidential elections.

Successful climate policies do not need to remain the preserve of urban progressives. As this paper has already noted, many other social groups have material interests and values aligned with the green transition. The graphic below shows that levels of support for climate neutrality remain high in both rural and urban areas across the EU.

The EU has the objective to be climate neutral by 2050 — an economy with net-zero greenhouse gas emissions. To what extent do you support or oppose the EU objective of becoming climate neutral by 2050?



Source: Eurostat
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Nonetheless, the fact remains that scepticism about the green transition is strongest in more traditionalist parts of European society. This is not simply a matter of ideology. Communities most dependent on cars will be most exposed to the short-term disruptions of, for example, ETS2. In Slovakia, only 7% of the population overall is at high risk of transport poverty, while in the rural regions of Presov or Banska Bystrica fully half of the population is affected—a story of concentrated need.

This pattern is particularly true for the agricultural sector, which accounts for 1.3% of the EU's GDP but 11% of its emissions. So far, it has largely escaped climate instruments applied to industry, transport or heating. That is set to change as part of the EU's 2040 goal, a prospect that already alarms politicians and officials.[5]

The deal

The bigger-tent deal seeks to broaden the social coalition behind climate action. One target group comprises societal "traditionalists": industrial workers, socially conservative voters and military communities. Another includes rural and climate-sceptic constituencies, typified by France's *gilets jaunes* protesters and the Dutch farmers of the "nitrogen wars".

Research show that the more people are concerned about their financial situation, the more they are also sceptical about action to stop climate change. Low-density regions cannot easily replace cars with public transport, and some agricultural jobs remain carbon-intensive. People there thus see green taxes and industrial transformation as deepening regional decline and depopulation.

The challenge is not only better communicating with these voters but aligning the transition with their interests and everyday needs.

Policy options

Measure	Rationale	Actions	New Politics salience	Indicative case studies (if applicable)
Focus on industrial workers and those in "decarbonisable" sectors	Volatility and fragmentation make it essential to broaden the pro-transition coalition.	Communicate the benefits of the green transition to workers in these sectors more effectively; accelerate these sectors' transition through policy and investments.	Old industrial regions are often bastions of the New Politics in all its forms.	Germany's 2019 Net Zero Law helped mobilise industry and trade unions around fiscal support for decarbonisation.
Engage and challenge conservative voices on ecology	Environmental concerns can resonate with conservative values such as national pride and intergenerational responsibility. Yet many figures of the European right do not always live up to their environmentalist credentials.	Seize on nationalists promoting aspects of the green transition to widen the pro-climate camp. Highlight examples like Meloni, who claims that "there is no more convinced environmentalist than a conservative" while seeking to slow European climate measures.	This expands the transition's ideological appeal, bringing in constituencies associated with the New Politics.	Nicola Procaccini, an influential MEP from Meloni's Brothers of Italy (FdI) party, has recently published a book championing "conservative ecology". Polish "green conservatism" too provides an illustration of this politics.
Engage military communities	European armed forces increasingly view climate change as a security risk. Their influence reaches populations often sceptical to the climate movement.	Allow greater flexibility to exempt some defence spending from ETS2 (currently a limited option for national governments). Encourage military figures to speak out for the green transition. Link climate spending with security objectives, such as rail upgrades that serve zero-carbon consumer transport and military mobility.	Reframes climate action as a sovereignty issue, which is a central theme of the New Politics.	Recent call by defence experts and retired military leaders to accelerate the green transition in the interests of European security.
Strike a green bargain for the countryside	Rural voters have strong reasons to back the green transition but perceive climate policies as urban-centred and culturally alien. The countryside needs its own comprehensive package, equivalent to what Hidalgo did for big cities.	Roll out an EV social leasing scheme. Develop affordable, nimble, European-made, low-dependency EVs suitable for winding country roads and rough terrain (a Citroen 2CV or Fiat 500 for the electric age). Expand electric bus coverage for rural areas. Use ETS and CBAM to increase incentives for lower-emissions farming practices, like crop rotations, variation and "cover crops" over monocrops, agroforestry, small-pasture farms and electric farm vehicles. Redirect agricultural subsidies into electrifying rural areas; support self-sufficiency through "micro-generation" (small solar and wind farms owned by and serving local communities). Build fibre optic and satellite internet coverage in rural areas to promote remote working. Set up a dedicated temporary Just Transition Fund for Agriculture.	Helps build a broader pro-climate coalition beyond metropolitan areas.	France's successful experience of EV social leasing schemes.

Embrace the politics

The world of 2026 is fundamentally different to that of 2019, when the European Green Deal was forged. Then, European leaders focused on the management of interdependence in an increasingly competitive world. Today, geopolitics has become far more about managing conflict and chaos. Likewise, the impacts of climate change are ever-more visible in the EU, yet the centrist consensus that once underpinned climate action has broken down. The technical, Brussels-led model of the European Green Deal is faltering in this new environment.

This paper has thus offered a more political approach to decarbonisation. At its core is making the benefits of the transition more visible through national, regional and local governments. In a sense, this represents a sharp departure from the target-based, commission-driven, member-state-endorsed model of the European Green Deal.

National governments will need to adapt these ideas to their own political contexts. It will be up to them to decide how to combine coalition building, targeted redistribution and, crucially, closer engagement with the groups most affected by the transition. National governments will also need to ensure that the next EU budget provides the resources needed to support the "*Heimat*" and the "better today" deals in a way that aligns with the "class deal".

Local and city governments will also play a vital role. Many of the transition's most inspiring examples have emerged locally, where policymakers are closest to voters' concerns. As the green transition becomes more political and more tightly bound to the economic case for electrification, local and city level authorities will increasingly drive its delivery. They will be central to making the "bigger-tent" deal real through dialogue with industry and civil society, just as international politicians and opinion-shapers will help forge the "big-bad-world" deal.

Electric car on charging spot in front of office buildings. [picture alliance / ZUMAPRESS.com | La Nacion]

However, while the transition must necessarily be tailored to local and national realities, what this paper proposes should add up to a new social contract for Europe. The five overlapping deals respond to the drivers of the New Politics and seek to show how the green transition can directly speak to voter concerns, working with the political current rather than against it. The task before European policymakers is therefore to create the enabling framework: rolling out the next phase of the ETS, expanding the European electricity grid and deepening partnerships with third countries.

The deals demonstrate that change, and materially beneficial change at that, is both possible and a likely outcome of the green transition. They challenge the narrative of the far-right which presents decarbonisation purely as sacrifice and austerity. Many voters are not opposed to change in principle—they are opposed to bearing its costs. Germany's experience with heat pumps is instructive. Initial attempts to phase out gas and oil heating met fierce resistance, yet demand for heat pumps surged once households saw the practical benefits. This shows that opposition to green policies is driven less by ideological zealotry than by narrowly defined self-interest.

For the architects of the European Green Deal in Brussels, the grassroots approach of this paper's proposals may feel uncomfortable. But the five deals should be seen as a coming of age, not a regression. In a decarbonising world, the economic logic of the green transition is becoming increasingly self-evident, and this understanding is spreading across all levels of European society. At the same time, the fossil-electric divide may become one of the defining political cleavages in Europe in the coming decades, as the much as the labour-capital divide was in past generations. Managing it will require not just new technology but new forms of negotiation.

Like parents watching their young fly the nest, the progenitors of the European Green Deal must trust that the framing and institution-building of the last decade has sufficiently laid the building blocks for decarbonisation to continue with less reliance on a centralised, targets-based model. The social contract that emerges in the age of New Politics may look less centred on net zero than policymakers envisaged in 2019. But the green transition should nonetheless remain woven into the fabric of the European project.

Lastly, reorienting the European green transition around the five-deals model is not a challenge for the next decade. It is a challenge for the next two years. European policymakers do not have the luxury of time.

To be sure, the European Green Deal may survive the dilution of the past years. But a successful green transition, one that commands public legitimacy and ensures Europe's long-term economic competitiveness, faces a double threat. Politically, the 2029 European Parliament election could produce a further rise of the far right, making the dismantling of the green deal a realistic possibility. Economically, China's rapid advance in clean technologies and its growing presence in the EU market pose a fundamental threat to European industries.

Together, these pressures could make the adoption of this paper's recommendations much more challenging. Europe can still avert climate-industrial calamity. But it requires a sense of urgency commensurate with the speed of the change that defines the New Politics.

Methodology

This paper is based on an array of conversations over February-May 2026 with politicians from across the political spectrum (spanning the EPP, S&D, Renew, Green and PfE party families), senior officials working on climate policy in the EU and national governments, and civil society voices and campaigners. It draws on roundtables in Paris and Amsterdam, meetings in Brussels, Berlin, Madrid and Warsaw, and analysis of speeches, polling and academic literature.

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NEW POLITICS PROJECT

[1] Senior EU official, Brussels, April 2026.

[2] Ditto.

[3] Authors' meetings with MEPs in Brussels, April 2026

[4] Müller, Jan-Werner. *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016

[5] Discussions in Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam and other European cities, April-May 2026

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