

‘Just transition’ policy strategies, a solution to climate indifference? Evidence from a survey experiment in Italy

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Do ‘just transition’ policies combining long-term environmental action with short-term economic compensation for lower-income households influence concern about climate change and climate action? This article adds to a growing body of literature pointing to the interdependence between climate change concerns and inequality concerns by bringing forward new empirical evidence from Italy. Building on previous literature that looks at support for climate change policies (Maestre-Andrés et al., 2019), this article posits that the inequality and fairness perceptions of environmental policies influence the prioritisation of climate change in Italy, as well as the willingness to act for climate through political participation. In other words, ‘just transition’ policy programmes combining environmentalism with economic compensation should promote climate change politics, making climate change action more likely. The methodology relies on an empirical analysis of a novel survey experiment conducted at the individual level in May 2024. The expected results suggest that ‘just transition’ policies might be able to increase support for environmental action in those segments of the population which are generally not interested in climate change, thus promoting climate change politics, and making climate change action more likely.

As climate change policy implementation has sometimes led to political backlash and climate scepticism, researchers have debated how to make climate policies more palatable to voters. Overall, the distributional effects of climate policies are a concern of most voters, who are worried about how new environmental regulation would affect income and jobs (Dechezleprêtre et al., 2022; Maestre-Andrés et al., 2019). Furthermore, individuals at higher risk of poverty or unemployment are generally less concerned with climate policies and politics, as they tend to focus on short-term economic issues (Cronert et al., 2023; Scruggs & Benegal, 2012). Hence, research conducted in Italy and Spain suggests that the political consequences of green policies hinge upon the distributional elements of climate policies, i.e., whether environmental policies increase economic inequalities or not (Bolet et al., 2023; Colantone et al., 2023).

This article argues that the perceived distributional fairness of climate policies influences attitudes towards participation in climate political action. If climate policies are perceived as effective and fair, these should foster a more optimistic attitude towards whether a solution to the effects of climate change is feasible, which in turn leads to greater political support for actors fighting for more effective climate

change policy. Furthermore, environmental policies combining environmentalism with economic redistribution should increase support for climate action from people who are generally not interested in environmental issues and would rather focus on short-term economic policy.

The research tests these arguments by designing a novel survey experiment. The research design involves an information-provision treatment in Italy to test whether environmental policies combined with job and income compensation measures affect the climate change preferences of Italian residents. The treatment manipulation provides some people with information on environmental policies and redistributive measures, while the control group is presented with an environmental policy package without any reference to the distribution of its costs. The research looks at how different information changes the prioritisation of climate change policy, as well as attitudes towards climate change protests, environmentalist associations, and political participation. Furthermore, the experiment tests whether the treatment effect varies depending on the respondents' perception of economic status and their previous information about climate change.

By leveraging empirical data from a novel sample of 1000 respondents in Italy, the article expects to find that not only are climate policies more successful with the Italian public when they combine carbon reduction with economic compensation for lower-income households, but climate change policies, in general, are deemed more acceptable, urgent, and feasible. In addition, the perceived fairness of climate policies should significantly influence the support for environmentalist groups and associations. The survey experiment is currently running, and the data collection will be completed in early June 2024. Preliminary results based on a subset of the final dataset appear to confirm the research expectations.

The survey experiment is registered on the AEA RCT registry with the following ID: AEARCTR-0013635.

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