

# Ecology and climate: what are the French ready to accept?

## AN INSIGHT BASED ON OPINION AND RESEARCH INTO THE ACCEPTABILITY OF PUBLIC CLIMATE POLICIES

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### SUMMARY

Recent opinion polls and experimental economic studies have shown that the perceived fairness and effectiveness of climate policies are the two major conditions that determine their social acceptability. Revisiting the Yellow Vests crisis in the light of these two factors gives us a better understanding of the underlying causes of the movement. This article thus contributes towards the consideration of the necessary democratic process regarding the characteristics and conditions needed for long-term climate policies.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Political authorities are today reluctant to implement certain measures in favour of the transition, for fear of generating and reinforcing social tensions.<sup>1</sup> There are several reasons for this apprehension, but the main source is the general conception that "the French are not ready" for proactive measures.

To achieve progress, in the view of the authors, it seems necessary to move beyond the idea of acceptability, as this gives the impression of citizens being simply "for" or "against". Instead we should think in terms of the trio of desirability, feasibility, and the conditions of realization,<sup>2</sup> to better understand the characteristics of public climate policies, actual or perceived, which determine their level of public support. This is the process adopted by the 150 members of the Citizens Convention for Climate<sup>3</sup>. To help elucidate this issue on the conditions of realization, in this article we analyse what we can learn from opinion polls, from research in experimental economics, and from the precedent of the Yellow Vests crisis.

### 2. A FAIR DISTRIBUTION OF EFFORT, THE KEY TO GAINING SUPPORT FOR THE ECOLOGICAL TRANSITION

Since 2015, in its annual survey ADEME has asked a question about the acceptability of lifestyle changes.<sup>4</sup> Participants can select from five responses.

The response that consistently predominates is that major changes, to be considered acceptable, must be shared fairly among all members of society.<sup>5</sup> Every year since its inception, 45% or more of respondents have selected this response related to the fairness of how changes are distributed. This question, which is asked in similar ways by other institutes, systematically leads to the same conclusion: the main condition for the acceptability of major changes to our lifestyles is their fair distribution throughout society.<sup>6</sup> These results are confirmed by qualitative interviews which show that the desirability and feasibility of the transition depend on a fair sharing of effort.<sup>7</sup>

NOTE

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1 Matthieu Goar, 2022, *Le Monde*

2 Patrick Jolivet, 2022, Ademe

3 Mathieu Saujot, 2020, IDDR I

4 The exact wording (translated from French) of the survey question was: "If major changes in our lifestyles were necessary, under what conditions would you accept them?"

5 The exact wording (translated from French) of the most popular answer was: "That they are shared fairly among all members of our society".

6 Elabe for Veolia and La Tribune, 2019; Elabe for Banque des Territoires, 2021; Kantar for Parlons Climat, 2022

7 Sarah Thiriou, 2022, Ademe

### 3. PERCEIVED FAIRNESS AND EFFECTIVENESS AS KEYS TO SUPPORTING PUBLIC POLICY

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A number of seminal studies in experimental economics reveal similar findings to those of opinion surveys.<sup>8</sup> A paper published in *Nature* in 2022 showed that out of 15 characteristics tested, the perceived fairness and effectiveness of a given public policy are the two features that have the greatest impact on public support for such measures.

Contrary to many preconceived ideas about how policy debates should be conducted, these factors have a much stronger impact than age, education level or political orientation.<sup>9</sup> Other studies have confirmed that the perceived effectiveness and fairness of policies are among the key aspects that have a positive influence on public support for any given measure.<sup>10</sup>

Regarding France more specifically, the authors of a note by the French Council of Economic Analysis (CAE) found similar results: “the variation in support for climate policies is primarily explained by perceptions of their redistributive effects [...] and their environmental effectiveness.” Perceived redistributive impacts and effectiveness exert a stronger influence on people’s opinions than effects on one’s own household.

In summary, international research, similarly to that specific to France, shows that support for a climate policy is much less dependent on who we are, our relationship to ecology, or our ideological orientations and values, but more on our perception of whether a policy is fair and effective.

This calls for a more structured political debate on these issues. But also to make a special effort to inform the public about these two aspects, which have direct positive effects on support for the measures concerned. These effects are much stronger than just providing information on climate change in general, as shown by the CAE study.<sup>11</sup>

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8 We base our analysis here on two reference studies, published in peer-reviewed scientific journals, which compile published research (meta-analyses) and a recent work by the CAE, specific to France. The purpose of these three articles is to identify the most important reasons for supporting a given climate policy.

9 Study conducted on the basis of 89 datasets, from 51 published articles, covering 33 countries | Bergquist, Nilsson, Harring and Jagers, 2022, *Nature*

10 Ejelöv and Nilsson, 2020, *Sustainability*

11 Study conducted on the basis of work carried out by the OECD | Dechezleprêtre, Fabre and Stantcheva, 2022 CAE

### 4. DO PERCEPTIONS OF FAIRNESS AND EFFECTIVENESS UNDERLIE THE YELLOW VESTS MOVEMENT?

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The example of the Yellow Vests crisis may suggest that a climate policy such as a carbon tax, or more broadly an economic incentive tool, has become impossible to implement in the current context.<sup>12</sup>

However, the Yellow Vests are not in fact opposed to state action for the environment, but they expect this to be done by “a state that regulates, protects, redistributes, and asks for a greater tax effort from the wealthiest categories of the population”.<sup>13</sup>

Understanding the shortcomings in terms of equity and effectiveness enables us to go beyond this fallacy and to understand this crisis differently, by finding new routes for political action.

**Fairness:** lack of compensation to address the system’s regressiveness. As energy generally represents a greater proportion of the budget of the least affluent (in %), a carbon tax without compensation is regressive (Berry, 2018): it has a greater impact on the poorest people and, conversely, provides less incentive for the most affluent households, who are more able to pay extra tax without requiring a change of lifestyle.

The absence of a financial compensation tool was coupled with a lack of understanding on whether or not the tax revenue would be earmarked for the environment: its incorporation into the State budget, in line with the principle of non-allocation, gave the impression that the tax was implemented simply to boost the tax yield, rather than to fund climate-related action,<sup>14</sup> especially given that its perceived effectiveness was low.<sup>15</sup>

Inconsistencies in climate policies, such as the kerosene exemptions, also contributed to this feeling of inequity. Since then, a number of studies have proposed compensation schemes that would make a revitalized carbon tax more equitable<sup>16</sup> and would more broadly enable a strategy for confidence, equity and efficiency in carbon pricing.<sup>17</sup>

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12 It should be remembered that the European ‘Fit for 55’ package provides for the creation of a carbon market for road transport and buildings from 2027, in order to aim for a reduction of at least 55% in net greenhouse gas emissions in 2030 compared to 1990 levels.

13 See the analysis of the online contributions to the *Vrai Débat*: ADEME (Patrick Jolivet, Solange Martin, Anaïs Rocci), CREDOC (Sandra Hoibian, Romain Gauthier, Pauline Jauneau-Cottet), 2019. Study on contributions to the “*Vrai Débat*” in relation to taxation and the environment, 28 pages.

14 Note that the announcements on 15 September suggested that a proportion of renewable energy revenue will finance the energy tariff shield.

15 This perceived tax inefficiency is well established in the literature | Thomas Douenne and Adrien Fabre, 2022, *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*

16 Berry and Laurent, 2019, OFCE

17 Pour un contrat social de transition | Emmanuel Combet and Patrick Jolivet, 2022, Ademe

**Effectiveness:** lack of low-carbon alternatives prior to taxation.<sup>18</sup> It is clear that the practical application of the carbon tax, which is ideal in theory, raises difficulties that highlight the importance of the availability of low-carbon alternatives.

However, the public policies necessary to publicize, promote, organize, and to offer solutions (active mobility, low-emission cars, building renovation, etc.) were not sufficiently advanced to make the tax effective, i.e. to enable a shift in behaviour in response to the price signal.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, these limitations stemming from the lack of alternatives led to a demand for a rebalancing of efforts to be made between citizens, but also between citizens and companies or activity sectors.

There are deeper reasons behind the outbreak of this crisis. Aspirations for greater equity have gone beyond the carbon tax and transition issues alone: the reaction to the withdrawal of public services,<sup>20</sup> a feeling of powerlessness and lack of respect,<sup>21</sup> labour market changes (individualization, workforce casualization), and, more broadly, a crisis in our social contract,<sup>22</sup> have led some of the middle and working classes to demand another, fairer social pact.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> At the time of the start of the crisis, it should be noted that tax increases in France had already had a significant impact on fuel prices, bringing them above other countries that are often cited as examples of a successful carbon tax.

<sup>19</sup> Mathieu Saujot et al., 2019, IDDRI

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<sup>20</sup> Yann Algan et al., 2020, CAE

<sup>21</sup> Destin Commun, 2019

<sup>22</sup> David Guilbaud, 2018, AOC

<sup>23</sup> Zakaria Bendali, Aldo Rubert, 2020, Politix

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