

“Social acceptability” via deservingness: Promising avenue or cul-de-sac?

Ariadne Workshop | EU Climate and Energy Policy in a Polarising World

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Overview of the argument

Starting point: Using *deservingness* – whether operationalised in objective or subjective terms – as the central criterion for targeting compensation may allow policymakers to reconcile normative aspirations with political feasibility.

Overarching argument: When the electorate's deservingness perceptions diverge significantly from those of the “climate base”, pro-climate forces face a **progressive dilemma** – compensating those perceived as deserving by many voters conflicts with the normative principles these forces rely on to mobilise activists and broaden the pro-climate coalition via issue bundling.

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Two ways of dealing with this dilemma:

- ignore activists, impinge on mobilisation, and compromise broader normative commitments
- ignore deservingness perceptions and sacrifice electoral support.

Is there a third way? Tentative suggestion: **Unbundling the blame** (Edenhofer and Hardy, 2026).

Outline

Theoretical preliminaries

The progressive dilemma

Conclusion and outlook

Deservingness: responsibility vs. constraint

Responsibility-based deservingness:

- Individuals should contribute based on how much they have contributed to causing the problem.
- Some version of the “polluter pays” principle: deservingness is about **responsibility for emissions** (Sommer, Mattauch, and Pahle, 2022).

Constraint-based deservingness:

- Individuals should not be penalised when they have no feasible ways to reduce their emissions, provided these constraints could not have been *reasonably* avoided.
- Deservingness is about **adjustment capacity** and structural constraints.

These two logics can converge or diverge in who they consider unfairly burdened.

When do these deservingness logics overlap or diverge?

Voter type	Responsibility-based deservingness	Constraint-based deservingness	Implication
Rural low-income driver (no transit access, heating oil)	High emitter → should pay more	Constrained → should pay less	Divergence: deservingness logic yields opposing burden allocations
Affluent “green” household (EV, heat pump, urban)	Low emissions → should pay less	Unconstrained → should pay more	Divergence: low under responsibility, high under constraints
Low-income renter (poor insulation, no control)	Low emissions → should pay less	Constrained → should pay less	Convergence: both logics imply reduced burden
High-income frequent flyer (easily reducible air travel)	High emissions → should pay more	Unconstrained → should pay more	Convergence: both logics support higher burden

Take-away: Divergence is sharpest when high emitters are structurally constrained, or low emitters are privileged.

But what constraints should matter?

Constraint-based deservingness rests on the idea that individuals should not be penalised for emissions that they *cannot reasonably avoid*. The definition of 'reasonable' can be the object of political contestation.

Types of constraints commonly invoked:

- **Material constraints:** limited income, high switching costs, poor housing insulation.
- **Infrastructural constraints:** lack of public transport, district heating, or EV charging.
- **Institutional constraints:** tenancy rules, landlord inaction, planning regulations.
- **Occupational constraints:** dependence on carbon-intensive jobs or firm-level technologies.

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Some constraints are not only **immaterial**, but also derive from value systems/social hierarchies that are themselves contested.

- place-based attachments (Hegewald, 2024; Mitchell Elder and Lueders, 2025),
- occupational identities/status.

Normative contestation about deservingness: Climate policy and the loss of *masculinity* as an illustrative example

- Many carbon-intensive occupations (e.g. heavy industry, construction, parts of transport) are associated with **traditionally masculine forms of status**, such as physical risk → Climate policy can simultaneously reduce employment, earnings, and access to these sources of status.
- Climate policy also targets several **masculine Veblen goods**: high-emissions consumption that carries prestige for some men (e.g. large cars, performance driving, certain meat-based diets, high-carbon leisure).
- For some, these job- and consumption-related losses constitute **legitimate constraints**: they cannot be easily relaxed while meaningfully affecting individuals' lives. For others, this is not the case: they regard such losses as **relics of patriarchal status hierarchies** that should be dismantled.

My two cents on the climate–masculinity nexus

- Losses in **masculinity-coded occupations** generate both material and non-material costs, specifically related to the occupational component of occupational status or prestige
- Perceptions of deservingness are moderated by **education and gender among unaffected**
- Low-educated men most sympathetic to these losses

Green Transition, Brave New Feminine World? Masculinity and the Demand for Climate Compensation

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Abstract

Garnering public support for climate policy is essential to the viability of the green transition. A central obstacle is the climate gender gap: women consistently express more support than men. We focus on the male side of the gap and argue that it is not uniformly lower support that drives the pattern, but the reactions of one group—low-educated men—to a specific loss: the erosion of masculinity-coded occupations. Our framework emphasises that occupational displacement generates material and non-material losses, and that responses of unaffected individuals depend on views of masculinity, beliefs about deservingness, and their interaction with education and gender. In this pre-analysis plan, we outline a pre-registered survey experiment in Germany that varies whether displaced coal workers transition into male- or female-coded jobs, holding income and status constant. This allows us to isolate the role of masculinity-coded occupational loss in shaping support for compensation and climate policy.

Figure: Abstract of our PAP ([Link](#))

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The progressive dilemma

The normative views, especially judgements about who deserves compensation, of the climate base and the broader electorate (the “median voter”) often differ sharply.

When these judgements diverge, pro-climate forces, particularly green parties, face a dilemma:

- **Prioritise the median voter's deservingness views** → risks alienating activists (detrimental to campaign effort) and weakening the climate coalition (less room for issue bundling), or
- **Prioritise the climate base's deservingness views** → risks losing support among pivotal voters who bear the costs.

Dilemma: Compensation cannot satisfy both constituencies when their deservingness judgements point in different directions → [special case of the swing vs. core voter debate](#) in political economy (Cox, 2010; Cox and McCubbins, 1986; Dixit and Londregan, 1995, 1998; Lindbeck and Weibull, 1987; Stokes, 2013). See [my slides](#) for a detailed explanation

When does the progressive dilemma arise? An example

A particularly clear instance arises around **masculinity-related status losses**, where the climate base and pivotal voters hold *opposing* deservingness judgements. Examples:

- **High-carbon, male-dominated occupations**

Some voters: dependence on such work → legitimate constraint.

Climate base: high-emission + status rooted in patriarchy → should not be privileged.

- **Masculine Veblen goods (e.g. large cars, performance driving, meat-heavy diets)**

Some voters: restrictions on these goods → meaningful losses deserving compensation.

Climate base: such consumption → not a legitimate basis for support.

Common pattern: Where losses are tied to masculine occupations, consumption, or status, deservingness judgements diverge sharply.

Unbundling the blame: A third way?

Purpose: Divide the anti-climate coalition: drive a wedge between workers and fossil-fuel firms.

Strategic logic (Riker, 1986): Introduce a new policy alternative that some workers prefer to opposing climate policy *and* that fossil-sector firms cannot credibly support.

Three components (Edenhofer and Flachsland, 2025):

- **Programmatic:** type of compensation (Edenhofer and Genovese, 2024).
- **Institutions:** composition and temporal rigidity
- **Rhetorical:** Causal narrative (Kfir Eliaz, Galperti, and Spiegler, 2023; Kfir Eliaz and Spiegler, 2020) of exposed people's role in the decarbonised economy that takes into account self-selection of news sources (Carnes and Henderson, 2025) and counter-framing (Chong and Druckman, 2007).

Can unbundling trump the appeal of negative- or zero-sum policies?

For this to be convincing, such an unbundling strategy must be **more appealing** than negative- or zero-sum policies. Easy?

No, especially when voters feel like they have long lost out, they are prone to supporting policies that **make everyone worse off while hurting the 'usual' winners more than the 'usual' losers** (Alabrese et al., 2024; Chinoy et al., 2026).

Unbundling becomes attractive when separating workers from fossil-fuel firms leads workers to expect that climate policy will credibly reduce their losses (e.g. via siphoning off revenue from fossil fuel firms), yielding a higher net material payoff than **under a bundled-blame scenario** where they anticipate bearing the brunt of adjustment themselves.

When is unbundling the blame *possible*?

Unbundling requires conditions under which workers and exposed consumers *revise* the belief that “climate elites think we are the problem.” These conditions are narrow.

1. **Focusing events that weaken fossil-fuel companies:** Corporate scandals, cover-ups, or safety failures involving fossil-fuel firms, e.g. “Exxon knew scandal” → undermines their structural + instrumental power (Culpepper and Lee, 2026)
2. **Availability of credible messengers:** Use (local) unions, mayors, and others with ‘descriptive characteristics’ that are an informative signal of shared interests with workers (Druckman, 2022; Little, 2023) as messengers.
3. **Climate as a cultural or economic issue:** When climate policy is primarily an *economic* (Longuet-Marx, 2024) issue, the risk of lumping together everyone associated with the ‘dirty’ sector is higher; undermines credibility of redistributive promises.

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Conclusion: Implications of the progressive dilemma

Central claim: Deservingness-based compensation confronts pro-climate forces with a dilemma when the climate base and pivotal voters hold diverging judgements about whose losses are legitimate.

Implication: No compensation package can simultaneously satisfy mobilisation needs *and* maximise electoral support when these deservingness views conflict. This is a classic tension between core voters and swing voters in distributive politics.

When *might* unbundling work: Politicians mustn't be in the stranglehold of the 'dirty' sector, they must be able to co-opt credible messengers for their redistributive promises, and operate in a policy space where it is possible to frame climate policy in distributive terms.

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