



Rethinking the political challenges of the mobility transition through a “social contract” approach

Mathieu Saujot and Marion Bet (IDDRI), Simon Louédin and Jean-Philippe Hermine (IMT)

1. MOBILITY, THE CORNERSTONE OF LIFESTYLES AND A SOCIAL CONTRACT, IS AN INHERENTLY POLITICAL ISSUE

In today's societies, mobility is not merely a technical or environmental issue, but a cornerstone of our lifestyles and societies. Historically shaped by land-use planning choices, public policies promoting home ownership, and the spread of private cars, it has become the material expression of fundamental promises: autonomy, access to employment, consumption, public services, and social recognition.

The notion of a social contract,¹ and of a *Mobility Pact* more specifically, which we propose in this study, refers to the implicit compromise forged over decades between the state, households and businesses: a promise of social and economic integration and security, conditional on the ability to move around freely. The widespread use of private cars has enabled large sections of the middle and working classes to become homeowners, particularly in suburban areas, in exchange for demanding commuting patterns.

However, this pact is now being put to the test, as the mobility of certain social groups is being undermined (or perceived as such) by rising financial pressures and infrastructure challenges (e.g. congestion). These groups are also faced with recurring calls to adopt more sustainable mobility practices, even when viable alternatives are often unavailable. This heightens the perception of an unfair or unbalanced transition, contributing to the political sensitivity of the mobility issue.

¹ The analysis proposed here is therefore based on a renewed reading of the social contract, understood not as an abstraction, but as a set of arrangements, pacts and promises — sometimes fulfilled, often under strain. See our full body of work: <https://www.iddri.org/en/project/towards21-st-century-eco-social-contract>

As a result, transition policies in this sector—particularly those perceived as restrictive or unfair (carbon taxes, Low Emission Zones (LEZs), electrification, etc.)—can provoke rejection, revealing a deeper crisis: that of a damaged or eroded social contract. The Yellow Vests movement and tensions surrounding LEZs are examples of social backlash that do not necessarily challenge the ecological objective itself, but rather the way in which the transition is being implemented, the groups it penalizes or overlooks, and the perceived imbalance in how the burden is distributed.

The mobility transition cannot therefore be viewed as a purely technical or economic adjustment. It touches on implicit norms, deeply rooted aspirations and collective identities, whose cornerstone may well be a lifestyle centred around the car and its unrestricted use. If poorly designed and insufficiently supported, the mobility transition risks triggering protests and counterproductive political consequences, including a weakening of climate ambition. We must therefore better equip ourselves to implement these policies successfully.

2. OUR FRAMEWORK FOR BETTER ANTICIPATING THESE RISKS AND BUILDING THE LEGITIMACY OF TRANSITION POLICIES

To avoid the pitfalls of social rejection, it is essential to move beyond a technical or purely economic interpretation of mobility policies. This requires dedicated work, which is currently underinvested. There is little evidence of social and political impact analysis conducted upstream in the development of public policy proposals, and both policy design and debates suffer as a result. Nonetheless, a body of scientific research and published work provides a valuable foundation for addressing these issues and developing an analytical framework.

2.1. What backlash are we talking about?

First, it is important to distinguish between the different possible meanings of the term “backlash”—a shift in opinion, divisive politicization, and protest mobilization—as these do not all reflect the same reality. While the first—a growing disinterest in climate action—has not been empirically confirmed, the other two are particularly concerning. The ecological transition, and mobility policies in particular, are now vulnerable to political instrumentalization and negative social reactions, often fuelled by a sense of social stigmatization. It is this risk of protest that forms the focus of this paper.

2.2. Analysing the design challenges of each measure

Second, numerous studies in the humanities and social sciences examine how the design and combination of public policies can generate support for environmental reforms, and therefore represent a resource to be drawn upon. We have identified four key lessons here.

Perceived fairness and effectiveness are essential conditions for support. A policy may fail not because it is objectively unfair or ineffective, but because it is perceived that way. Anticipating this requires going beyond any single criterion of fairness (such as income or geography) and adopting a differentiated approach to the contributions expected from different social groups. It also involves acknowledging the diversity of perspectives, social positions and lifestyles among those affected.

Symbolic effectiveness plays a crucial role. Measures perceived as targeting the “privileged” (e.g. private jets, SUVs) can enhance the acceptability of other constraints, even if their environmental impact is relatively small. Citizens also judge the moral consistency of a policy, not just its technical outcomes.

Policy packages are more robust. Combining binding instruments with compensatory or structural support (such as alternative options or infrastructure) is essential to reduce conflict and ensure the social viability of reforms.

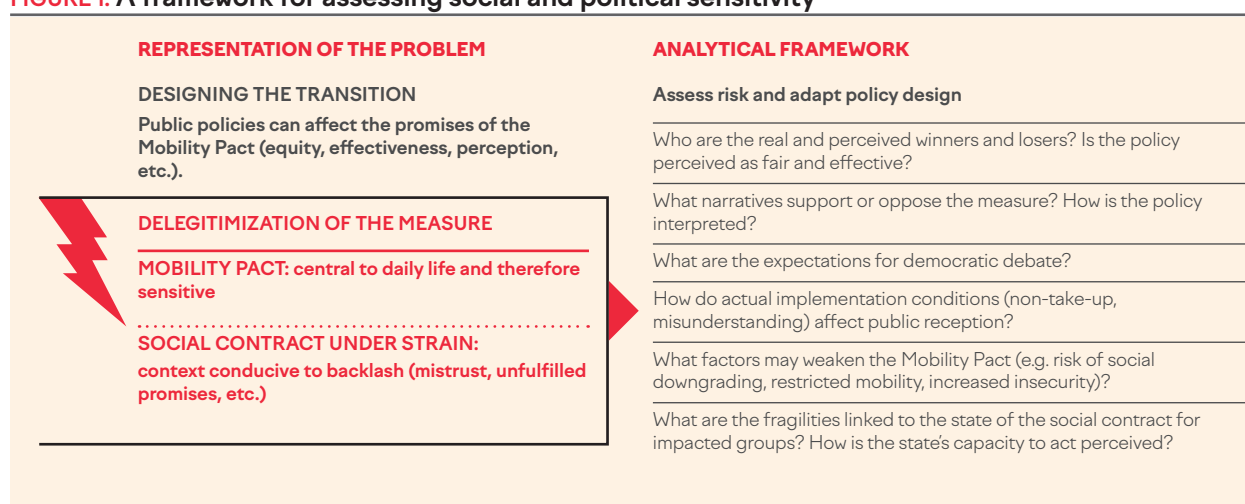
Finally, political representations shape how transition measures are received. Institutional mistrust, narratives of betrayal or manipulation, or perceptions of social downgrading can radically alter the way a policy is understood, regardless of its technical basis.

These lessons offer valuable guidance, but applying them effectively to public policy requires further case-by-case work (for example, identifying when compensation works or fails within a policy package, or how responses differ across social groups), while also accounting for the practical constraints of implementation.

2.3. Reframing through the social contract

To move from theory to practice, it is essential to go beyond a measure-by-measure analysis and the prism of acceptability, in favour of a more comprehensive understanding. A transition policy is never received in a social vacuum. The context in which a policy proposal is made—including existing tensions and divisions, perceptions of a failing social contract, and pre-existing mistrust and

FIGURE 1. A framework for assessing social and political sensitivity



Mobility policies can reshape the Mobility Pact, a pact that has become central to collective life, particularly in a context of a weakened social contract. Backlash represents a tipping point, when the perceived impacts on the Mobility Pact begin to call the legitimacy of public action into question.

resentment—plays a decisive role in how that policy is received, mobilized and interpreted.

The Yellow Vests crisis offered a stark and unfortunate illustration of this. The dysfunctions of the social contract created a context conducive to backlash (a sense of lost political voice, unfulfilled promises of equality through consumption in a context of financial pressure, insufficient recognition of workers, broken pathways to social mobility, and the feeling that one's way of life is under threat). Our work highlights the need to pay close attention to the impact of transition policies on two fundamental promises of the modern social contract: the ability to lead an autonomous life and access to a secure existence.

We use the concept of the Mobility Pact to examine how public policies can disrupt existing arrangements and promises in the specific domain of mobility, arrangements that may have shaped individual life trajectories. Our hypothesis is that when people feel this pact has been broken, when they experience a symbolic betrayal, this can lead to a process of delegitimizing the measure. And when a policy measure is stripped of its legitimacy, a “standard” political debate over the effectiveness of public policy can transform into a deeper and more volatile form of opposition. Schematically, the Mobility Pact has historically been based on enabling mobility as a means to ensure the fluidity of residential and professional life, and to guarantee access to public services. It has largely been embodied in the private car, which has also become a powerful status symbol for many, particularly those without access to educational qualifications or other means of distinction or social advancement. This leads us to focus attention on the design phase of public policy: to what extent do the policies under consideration disrupt the functioning of this pact? Do they contribute

to a risk of symbolic downgrading or heightened insecurity in people's life trajectories?

2.4. An analytical framework to be tested and refined

On this basis, we propose an analytical framework (summarized here) to support the ex-ante design of mobility policies and the assessment of potential risks of contestation. It cross-references elements of policy design with the challenges linked to the Mobility Pact and the broader context of the social contract.

3. CASE STUDY AND EMPIRICAL SURVEY

The next step is to use this analytical framework in an empirical (qualitative and quantitative) survey of citizens and social groups, to gather valuable data to inform political debates in France and Europe. Below are the case studies of interest and the main policy questions they raise.

The extension of the carbon market (ETS-2) to the transport and housing sectors is a key mechanism in Europe's decarbonization strategy, with the achievement of the Fit for 55 target largely depending on this measure. Given the precedent of the carbon tax in France, the nature of the instrument, the distribution of its impacts, and the wider European political context, the measure carries a high potential for backlash. Treating the Social Climate Fund as an obvious solution is risky, as compensation mechanisms, while effective on paper, may

encounter significant limitations in practice (perceived stigma in receiving aid, implementation challenges, or limited economic efficiency). Applying the analytical framework could shed light on the extent of this risk and help identify how offsetting mechanisms might support broader acceptance of the policy (particularly by engaging with those most affected).

A package of solutions: establishment of express road services (services express routiers, SERs) in underserved areas and social leasing for electric vehicles. The IMT has analysed these two measures, both of which aim to transform the material conditions of mobility, from a technical and economic perspective. Key policy questions include: what role can these solutions play in demonstrating that a new model of mobility is being proposed, one that does not solely rely on individual change? How might they offset new constraints, such as those linked to the carbon market? And under what conditions could these measures help bridge social and territorial divides, thereby strengthening cohesion?

Taxation: towards a viable, resilient and fair system. A comprehensive analysis of the tax instruments related to the road transport sector, conducted by the IMT, highlights current shortcomings in terms of fairness, fiscal resilience, and support for the transition. Based on this analysis, what options exist for reforming a tax system that plays a central role in the state budget and is highly

sensitive in the eyes of citizens? Should the system be completely overhauled, or could a new instrument (e.g. vehicle tax discs) help to establish new principles?

Renewal of motorway concessions: from management model to social use. The renewal of motorway concessions, currently the focus of a dedicated workshop at the Ambition France Transport conference, is a sensitive issue both economically and symbolically. Under what conditions could this renewal become a political opportunity to reform the Mobility Pact and implement the transition?

Far from setting technical rationality and public perception in opposition, the approach outlined in this study seeks to understand the conditions under which a policy becomes acceptable, even mobilizing, or, conversely, divisive and a source of backlash. It also calls for moving beyond a technical, "measure-by-measure" focus, situating each reform within a broader transition narrative, with its tensions, contradictions and potential realignments. In short, anticipating backlash is not a matter of communication, but of engaging in serious, in-depth work on the fairness, coherence and clarity of public policies, work that is grounded in a nuanced understanding of social and political contexts. It is not simply about refining technical measures of public policies, but about contributing to democratic debate on mobility and helping shape how the transition is negotiated.

Saujot, M., Bet, M., Louédin, S., Hermine, J.-P. (2025). Rethinking the political challenges of the mobility transition through a "social contract" approach. *Policy Brief N°03/25*, IMT.

jeanphilippe.hermine@sciencespo.fr

simon.louedin@sciencespo.fr

marion.bet@iddri.org

mathieu.saujot@iddri.org

Institut des mobilités en transition
41, rue du Four – 75006 Paris – France

institut-mobilites-en-transition.org