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

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The mobility sector offers a particularly vivid illustration of the social and political challenges posed by the ecological transition. Its environmental footprint is substantial, and reducing it requires a sustained combination of technical innovation, investment, and changes in practices. Mobility also plays a central role in daily life, making related issues (public policies, taxation, etc.) highly sensitive. At the same time, questions of justice are central to this sector. Measures affecting mobility involve issues of resource distribution and therefore equity: distribution of access to infrastructure, use of public space, sharing of financial costs, and allocation of public funding. As such, the evolution of mobility inevitably gives rise to political debate. Current controversies around low-emission zones (LEZs) are a case in point (Loisel et Rio, 2025; Braud, 2025). Tackling these challenges requires medium-term work that supports policy debate on the mobility transition through complementary data and analytical methods—an area in which the Institut Mobilités en Transition is actively engaged.

For several years, IDDRI has developed an approach centred on the idea of social contracts and on lifestyles, aimed at better understanding the social and political conditions for a successful ecological transition. This work rests on two key observations. First, the ecological transition, given its scale, is disrupting an established set of rules on collective life, and it is unfolding in a context already marked by inequality. The concept of a social contract reflects this reality and points to the need to renegotiate new arrangements. Second, the lifestyle changes required by the ecological transition (how we eat, travel, etc.) demand that we pay close attention to the conditions and people's capacity to change, as well as differences in capabilities, resources and aspirations between different social groups. We recently applied this differentiated approach in a novel food transition scenario (TRAMe2035).

This article marks the beginning of a collaboration between IMT and IDDRI on these themes. It proposes a method for understanding the social pact for mobility and offers an analytical framework for identifying the risks of controversy, resistance and setbacks in the implementation of mobility transition policies. By combining sociological and political insight with technical and economic analysis, this approach aims to enrich and refine current assessments. It seeks to strengthen the capacity to implement the ecological transition while contributing to the development of a more equitable mobility system.

IDDRI

KEY MESSAGES

Mobility, central to both lifestyles and a social contract based on the ability to move freely, is a politically and socially sensitive issue. A transition project that fails to assess its impacts properly or is poorly designed in this respect risks sparking controversy, opposition, and setbacks.

Better anticipating these risks and strengthening the legitimacy of transition policies requires targeted efforts, often underfunded today, that combine a range of insights from across the humanities and social sciences. This involves broadening the perspective beyond the analysis of the specific public policy.

The social and political context in which a policy is proposed—including existing tensions and divisions, broken state promises, and mistrust of representatives—plays a decisive role in how the policy is received, contested or interpreted. In light of this, we focus our work on the social contract and propose revisiting the idea of a "Mobility Pact" to better understand how mobility is embedded in people's lives and in the organization of society—factors that ultimately shape its political sensitivity.

We propose an analytical framework for assessing the *social impacts* of mobility policy measures before they are implemented. This framework integrates several dimensions relating to the challenges of policy design; the actual conditions for implementation; the social context shaping interpretation and perception; the factors that undermine the Mobility Pact; and the place and role of citizen participation.

We also outline a work agenda for applying this framework to several case studies (including the revision of the road transport tax policy, the impacts of ETS-2, and redistribution of the Social Climate Fund and the deployment of *services express routiers* (express road services, SER)).

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1. IS THE TRANSITION AT RISK OF A BACKLASH?

Today, there is a widespread perception—among decision-makers, sections of the public, and the media—that transition policies are politically too costly to pursue. The broad consensus that seemed to have emerged around the need for ecological transition just five years ago has given way to an era of growing resistance to the transition. This backlash could lead to, in the case of mobility (a particularly sensitive issue, as shown by controversies over low-emission zones and fuel taxes), a renewed crises reminiscent of the Yellow Vests movement. But what exactly is happening?

1.1. Backlash: what are we talking about, and what are we seeing?

With the term "backlash" on everyone's lips, it is important to clarify what it actually means. Originally used to describe societal pushback following major advances in minority rights,[1] the notion of a reversal has since been extended to the ecological field, though not all backlashes share the same basis in reality.

— One possible interpretation is a reversal of public opinion, with environmental concerns and the ecological transition being increasingly downplayed. However, this does not seem to be the case today. Levels of concern about environmental issues and support for climate policies remains high in France (ADEME, 2024; Parlons Climat, 2025) and across Europe.[2] In France, for instance, the *Parlons Climat* study shows strong general support for thirteen tested public policies. In Europe, a study by the Jacques Delors Institute finds that calls for stronger political action on climate change are supported by the majority in almost all electoral segments in Poland, Germany and France. However, the current context means that these issues are slightly less of a priority today than others (purchasing power, insecurity, health, immigration) (Parlons Climat, 2025; Bruegel, 2025). But this shift does not necessarily mean that individuals have fundamentally changed their attitudes (or beliefs?) regarding climate and the ecological transition.

— The term "backlash" can also refer to a reversal within political discourse and shared norms among political actors. In this sense, there has indeed been a shift—a repoliticization and even instrumentalization of this issue, particularly by the populist right[3] which creates new risks for the transition project. This repoliticization of the environmental issue may lead to setbacks, as illustrated by challenges to the European Green

1 Lemoine, M. (21 September 2022). Le backlash ou le retour de bâton conservateur. Le Monde. https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/21/09/2022/le-backlash-ou-le-retour-de-baton-conservateur_3232_6142513.html

2 Eichhorn, J., & Grabbe, H. (2025) Europeans still want climate action, but don't trust governments to deliver (Policy Brief 2025/08), Bruegel. https://www.bruegel.org.
Abou-Chadi, T., Janssen, E., Kollberg, L., & Redeker, N. (2024). Debunking the backlash: Public opinion on climate and the cost of living (Research Paper). Jacques Delors Centre. https://www.delorscentre.eu/fileadmin/2_Research/1_About_our_research/2_Research_centres/6_Jacques_Delors_Centre/Publications/20240307_Debunking_the_Backlash_Abou-Chadi_Janssen_Kollberg_Redeker.pdf

3 Fondation Jean-Jaurès. (28 January 2025). Backlash écologique : quel discours pour rassembler autour de la transition ? https://www.jean-jaures.org/publication/backlash-ecologique-quel-discours-pour-rassembler-autour-de-la-transition/
Goar, M. (28 January 2025). Dans le sillage de Trump, la lutte contre la transition écologique devient un nouveau levier du populisme. *Le Monde*. https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/28/01/2025/dans-le-sillage-de-trump-la-lutte-contre-la-transition-ecologique-devient-un-nouveau-levier-du-populisme_3244_6519446.html

Deal. As political scientist Jean-Yves Dormagen (2023) observes, the populist right has moved from tacit acceptance of a weak consensus to a strategy of polarization: "ecology can become highly polarizing and divisive when it is embodied in public policies that create winners and losers". This polarization often draws on the belief, among some parts of the electorate, that the severity of climate change is overstated and that responding to it should not be a political priority.[4] It also raises more fundamental questions about how transition policies are design and managed.

— Finally, backlash can refer to a form of social protest triggered by public policy, as defined in the social sciences. According to Patterson (2023), it is an "*abrupt counteraction involving strong negative political feedback that erupts in unconfined ways in response to grievance.*" In this sense, backlash results when a disagreement and mobilization converge (Anisimova and Patterson, 2024), as seen during the Yellow Vests crisis in France. Retrospective analyses in OECD countries suggest that such episodes of backlash are relatively rare and have mostly occurred in response to carbon tax policies (Anisimova and Patterson, 2024). However, when they do arise, they are especially serious: they carry high social costs and often lead to a retreat or delay in transition policy implementation.

In conclusion, there has been no real shift in opinion, but rather clear risks of manipulation and social tensions linked to the ecological transition project. It is important to bear these threats in mind, both to avoid creating a performative effect around this idea of a reversal (Parlons Climat, 2025), to assess the real risks of protest and backtracking more accurately, and to question, more broadly, the design of public transition policies. The level of "general" support that we have noted certainly constitutes a context conducive to environmental action. Nevertheless, the design of public policies, their impact in the real world and their mobilization in political debates can lead to protest movements and setbacks.

1.2. Avoiding backlash: what are the key factors for ensuring support and acceptability?

Much work in the humanities and social sciences has examined how the *combination* and *design* of public policies can help generate support for environmental reforms. This research is grounded in the concept of policy attitude, i.e. how people respond with approval or disapproval to a public policy proposal or implementation (Kyselá et al., 2019).[5] What insights does this work offer?

Perceived fairness and effectiveness are key to supporting public climate policy (Francou and Saujot, 2022),[6] an observation that also holds true in the mobility sector (Thaller et al., 2023[7], Mehdizadeh et al., 2024). This initial finding offers useful criteria for designing public policies that are likely to be accepted, while also opening up possibilities for exploring different understandings of equity and strategies for ensuring that policies are widely seen as effective. For example, while the carbon tax is widely endorsed by experts, it is often viewed by citizens as ineffective (Douenne and Fabre, 2022).[8] Conversely, recent studies have shown that symbolic measures (such as restrictions targeting privileged groups, such as bans on private jets) can improve acceptance of more everyday transition policies among the rest of the population, such as motorway speed limits (Tallent et al., 2024).[9] Furthermore, studies reveal differences on how public policy is perceived, depending on various social criteria (income level, but also educational attainment, professional background, car dependency, lifestyles, etc.). It is important to take these specificities into account and to develop ad hoc typologies for each policy and theme, rather than assuming uniform perceptions. This approach makes it possible to design fairer systems that are more likely to gain broad support (Souche, Raux and Croissant, 2012).[10] These examples illustrate both the need for case-by-case analysis and the potential for developing a method to assess public support for transition policies.

4 It should be noted, however, that in all segments studied by Cluster 17, environmental concerns should rank among the highest priorities (cited by over %50).

5 Kyselá, E., Ščasný, M., & Zvěřinová, I. (2019). Attitudes toward climate change mitigation policies: A review of measures and a construct of policy attitudes. Climate Policy, 892–878 ,(7)19. https://doi.org/14693062.2019.1611534/10.1080. The authors distinguish between four different attitudes: passive logic, acceptability (upstream) and acceptance (in response to an existing measure); and a more active logic, support and potential support.

6 Dechezleprêtre, A., Fabre, A., Kruse, T., Planterose, B., Sanchez Chico, A., & Stantcheva, S. (2022). Fighting climate change: International attitudes toward climate policies (OECD Economics Department Working Paper No. 1714). OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/3406/10.1787f29a-en

7 Thaller, A., Fleiß, E., Brohmer, H., Köstenbaumer, D., Posch, A., & Athenstaedt, U. (2023). When perceived fairness and acceptance go hand in hand: Drivers of regulatory and economic policies for low-carbon mobility. PLOS Climate, 5)3), e0000157. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pclm.0000157

8 Douenne, T., & Fabre, A. (2022). Yellow Vests, pessimistic beliefs, and carbon tax aversion. American Economic Journal: Economic Policy, 110–81 ,(1)14. https://doi.org/10.1257/pol.20200092

9 Tallent, T., Jan, M., & Sattelmayer, L. (17 September 2024). More than Symbols: the Effect of Symbolic Policies on Climate Policy Support. https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/qjg85

10 Souche, S., Raux, C., & Croissant, Y. (2012). On the perceived justice of urban road pricing: An empirical study in Lyon. Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice, 1136–1124 ,46.

Another lesson that emerges from the literature is the value of combining different public policies to increase support for the transition. Several studies show that adding social measures (whether compensatory or investment-based) can strengthen public backing for climate policies.[11] In the mobility sector, research has examined how acceptability can be improved by combining restrictive or regulatory measures with supportive ones (such as new charging infrastructure, expanded public transport or cycling development).[12] Other studies go further by analysing the varying degrees of acceptability or opposition among different social groups, using socio-economic variables and attitudes toward mobility policies (Mehdizadeh et al., 2024), or by exploring the interaction between policy design, trust in government, and the proximity of affected groups to the issue at stake (Huber and Wicki, 2021). While the complexity of these dynamics calls for a case-by-case approach (particularly through detailed analysis of the groups most affected), this body of research offers useful insights (appeal of pull measures; resistance to push measures, particularly taxes; and the importance of integrating policy design with trust in public authorities and the relevance of the issue to the population concerned).

Other studies provide insights into the impacts and political costs of transition measures. Ex post analyses are particularly valuable for developing a more nuanced understanding of how fairness, effectiveness, or combinations of measures were perceived, and what political consequences followed. For example, the case of the Milan congestion charge reveals that perceived unfairness did not generate mistrust in the environmental measure itself, but rather in the approach and positioning of the decision-makers. This, in turn, contributed to a stronger vote for the far-right party, which had positioned itself to capitalize on the discontent. The introduction of a congestion charge in Milan thus presented a paradox: while it raised environmental awareness among those affected, it also provoked a sense of injustice, driven by the belief that it is businesses and not individuals who should bear the primary responsibility. Although the policy included financial compensation, this was only available to those who applied for it, and many did not do so, often due to a lack of information or difficulties with administrative processes, which meant that these groups were penalized. In a similar vein, but in a different sector, Voeten (2024) shows how a package of energy transition measures (gas price increases, subsidies for solar panels and energy efficiency) led to an increase in votes for the far right among tenants who were directly responsible for paying their own energy bills. This voting shift was not accompanied by changes in their ideological stance. These two examples confirm the importance of the equity criterion, while also highlighting the need for further analysis. Finally, on the industrial policy front, Gazmararian and Krashinsky (2023) examine the electoral effects of industrial policies in the US automotive manufacturing sector. They highlight the negative impact of the uncertainty experienced by workers and unions as a result of job changes linked to the shift to electric vehicles.

Finally, it is also essential to draw on research that focuses on the political representations associated with mobility. This helps shed light on the political clichés through which policies will be received and debated—offering valuable insights into how controversies surrounding mobility may arise and evolve. In Germany, an original study[13] examined the implicit analytical frameworks that individuals use to interpret political decisions in the mobility sector. It identified two recurring lines of interpretation: the first imagines that industrial actors are pulling the strings behind the scenes, while decision-makers merely occupy the public stage; the second sees decision-makers as driven by ideological convictions that are out of touch with the everyday concerns of ordinary citizens. In the same vein, the recent Parlons Climat (2025) survey reminds us that the car remains a contentious topic. The anti-electric car narrative (framing it as an "economic and ecological scam") has been widely expressed and enjoys substantial support (61% and 55% of respondents agree with this narrative, respectively). This shows that perceptions of electric vehicles, a key symbol of the transition, go far beyond questions of affordability or practicality. These kinds of representations play a central role in fuelling opposition. They can trigger resentment across a range of social groups and may even help to forge new protest coalitions—potentially leading to a crisis similar to the Yellow Vests movement (Patterson, 2022). Moreover, this dynamic is not limited to the issue of mobility. Dormagen (2023) highlights the widespread appeal of conspiracy narratives

11 Baute, S. (14 November 2024). How to foster public support for European climate policies: Evidence from the German population (Policy Paper No. 17). Das Progressive Zentrum.
Douenne, T., & Fabre, A. (2022). Yellow Vests, pessimistic beliefs, and carbon tax aversion. American Economic Journal: Economic Policy, 110–81 ,(1)14. https://doi.org/10.1257/pol.20200092
At the same time, Douenne and Fabre show the limitations of this in a certain political context: in this case, the post-Yellow Vests era. This calls for a case-by-case analysis. In particular, it is important to differentiate between the perception of the general population and that of those most affected by the aid.

12 For a review of this body of work on push and pull measures, see Thaller, A., Fleiß, E., Brohmer, H., Köstenbaumer, D., Posch, A., & Athenstaedt, U. (2024). Pushing low-carbon mobility: A survey experiment on the public acceptance of disruptive policy packages. Climate Policy and Eriksson, L., Garvill, J., & Nordlund, A. (2008). Acceptability of travel demand management measures: The importance of problem awareness, personal norm, freedom, and fairness. Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice, ,(8)42 1125–1114. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tra.2008.03.005

13 Marco Sonnberger, Matthias Leger & Jörg Radtke, ""It's just politics": an exploration of people's frames of the politics of mobility in Germany and their consequences" in *Energy, Sustainability and Society*, volume 2024 ,14.

("the climate crisis is a pretext used by world governments to limit individual freedoms") particularly among segments[14] of the population already marked by distrust. In this context, the recent strategy of certain European car manufacturers is worth noting. By conducting media and political campaigns against environmental regulation, they succeeded in securing a relaxation of climate targets. While this may have boosted their short-term financial performance, this strategy has come at a cost. By sowing doubt about Europe's technological and regulatory direction, they have undermined public confidence in the transition to electric vehicles. In the medium term, this scepticism is likely to prove damaging, forcing manufacturers to work harder to rebuild public confidence, which is essential for the success of the transition to which they are committed.

In short, an analytical framework is gradually emerging, combining ex ante and ex post analyses with a range of impact criteria. Assessing the risks and conditions of a mobility transition necessarily involves this kind of cross-referencing. As Anisimova and Patterson (2024) summarize, while a growing body of literature attempts to identify, ex ante, the determinants of public support for climate policies, such anticipation has its limitations. It does not always align with the public's actual reaction once the costs of the measure are experienced. Indeed, the design of the envisaged public policy may be suboptimal, its meaning may shift in the course of political debate and opposition, and external events may alter its impacts or its relative priority. Similarly, opinion polls have clear limitations when it comes to assessing social acceptability (representative samples do not always reflect the lived reality of the groups concerned, polling results are static whereas acceptability is a dynamic process, and the aggregation of individual responses does not necessarily reflect a shared or collective perception).[15] But how can this work be extended to move from theory to practice?

2. TAKING CONTEXT INTO ACCOUNT: THE SOCIAL CONTRACT AND THE MOBILITY PACT

We apply our social contract approach with a dual objective: to account for contextual effects and to better understand the mechanisms by which public policies are delegitimized. Indeed, the social and political context in which a policy is proposed—including existing struggles and divisions, perceived failures of the social contract, mistrust, and the strength or weakness of intermediary bodies—plays a decisive role in how that policy is received, mobilized and interpreted.[16] A process of delegitimization of public action may emerge. However, when the legitimacy of a measure is challenged—by social movements, or by groups or coalitions of social groups—what might begin as a "classic" political debate about the efficiency of a public policy can escalate into a deeper and more volatile form of opposition. The drivers of such legitimacy challenges stem both from class interests (perceived costs and benefits) and moral judgements (in the sense of a moral economy):[17] public action may transgress what is considered acceptable and justifiable in light of shared social norms (Patterson, 2022). In other words, a measure loses legitimacy when it appears to violate the framework of what we refer to as the social contract. This, in turn, creates fertile ground for political contestation. Finally, it is essential to adopt a differentiated approach. As noted above, there is no single uniform perception of public policy.

2.1. A failing social contract and perceptions of state capacity

Over the course of a year and a half, IDDRI stepped back to reflect on the concept of the social contract, a way of representing our social and political life through arrangements, pacts, rights and duties, and promises kept or broken. Four pacts play a particularly structuring role in socio-economic life, as they shape the constraints and benefits central to our daily experience: the Work Pact, the Security Pact, the Democracy Pact, and the Consumption Pact. However, analysis based on our historical study, literature review, and qualitative interviews suggests that many of the arrangements underpinning this social contract are no longer functioning, have been broken, or are under unprecedented strain. As a result, two core promises of our modernity are now

14 With very high levels among the "Social-patriotic", "Identitarian" and "Eurosceptic" segments of Cluster 17.

15 6T - Bureau de recherche. (2024). Acceptabilité des mesures de réduction de la place de la voiture (Collection ADEME). https://librairie.ademe.fr/societe-et-politiques-publiques/-7593acceptabilite-des-mesures-de-reduction-de-la-place-de-la-voiture.html

16 We need a contextual approach to the backlash, one capable of linking social explanatory factors with broader institutional and political dynamics. See James J. Patterson, "Backlash to Climate Policy" in *Global Environmental Politics*, 23:1, Feb. 2023.

17 According to Samuel Hayat's definition, moral economy encompasses all moral perceptions of the economy that vary by social class (for example, views on redistribution or the principles of a fair economy vary between groups) and the demands that arise from them. These moral demands and principles regarding the economy may be violated by ruling elites, potentially sparking revolts or social movements. Moral economy is thus particularly expressed when norms perceived as fundamental are threatened and it can act as a driving force for collective mobilization, as seen during the Yellow Vests crisis. See Hayat, S. (5 December 2018). The Yellow Vests, moral economy and power. Samuel Hayat—Political science—Labour movement, democracy, socialism. https://web.archive.org/web/20190212192820/https://ediciones-ineditos.com/11/12/2018/moral-economy-power-and-the-yellow-vests/

in question: the ability to live one's life autonomously, and access to security (understood here in a broad sense: social security, health security, industrial security, etc.).

The Yellow Vests movement is particularly symptomatic of this crisis.[18] Their demands touched on all four pacts: a loss of political voice, broken promises of equality through consumption, the impact of budget cuts, fears for the future linked to rising fuel costs, insufficient recognition[19] for workers, and penalties for travel undertaken in service of the national productive effort, implicitly challenging the meritocratic promise. Add to this the impacts of limited social mobility and a sense that one's way of life is under threat, and the conditions for a backlash were in place, contributing to the broader crisis we are now experiencing.

A broader climate of mistrust toward the state also plays a significant role, undermining, for many, the ability to envisage the co-benefits of the transition. As shown by the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation (2024), while some citizens associate the ecological transition with opportunities for economic growth and the creation of sustainable jobs, many others anticipate negative impacts (on the economy, employment, the cost of living, etc.). Perceived confidence in the state's ability to address national challenges is currently low. This significant mistrust prevents many citizens from believing that the state will act in their interest. Moreover, some social groups see transition measures as a loss of autonomy: the ECCO[20] study, conducted across several European countries, highlights growing concern over the affordability of electric vehicles and the obligation to adopt alternative forms of transport. In a context marked by the destabilization of the middle classes, such measures often struggle to generate consensus and contribute to a diminished sense of agency, i.e. people's ability to act. This brings us back to the question raised by Parlons Climat (2025): how can we envisage a successful transition when the state, although central to its implementation, is widely viewed with mistrust and scepticism about its capacity to take action?

18 On this subject, see Joseph Confavreux (dir.), *Le fond de l'air est jaune. Comprendre une révolte inédite*, Paris, Seuil, 2019; Zakaria Bendali et al. "Les sciences sociales en gilet jaune: deux ans d'enquêtes sur un mouvement inédit", *Politix*, 4/2020 no. 2020 ,132, p. 215-177; Pierre Blavier, *Gilets jaunes, la révolte des budgets contraints*, Paris, PUF, 2021; Pierre Blavier, "Que nous apprennent les sciences sociales sur les Gilets jaunes, et ceux-ci sur la société française? Une entrée par les enjeux socio-économiques", *Revue Française de Socio-Économie*, 1/2020 no. 2020 ,24, p. 229-219.

19 Bèque, M., Kingsada, A., & Mauroux, A. (2019). Reconnaissance, insécurité et changements dans le travail (Synthèses Stat/Éval' No. 29). Direction de l'animation de la recherche, des études et des statistiques (DARES). https://dares.travail-emploi.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/pdf/dares_synthese_stat___reconnaissance_insecurite_changements.pdf

20 Colafrancesco, G. (December 2024). My car, my home, my job: How to reconcile climate policies with people's needs and how to generate consensus (Policy Document). European Climate and Clean Energy Organization (ECCO). https://eccoclimate.org/wp-content/uploads/12/2024/Policy-Document_My-car-my-home-my-job.pdf

There is a high level of mistrust and our social pacts are fragile. This highlights the number of volatile situations that exist at the socio-economic level. Managing the transition in such a context, especially when it involves changing lifestyles (such as reducing dependence on the car, for example), presents a number of challenges and risks. This is even more difficult when these lifestyles (and often the car itself, which has become an emotional and symbolic object, as well as a status symbol) are the foundation of a group identity, or represent the only intangible and tangible asset available to households with limited mobility and tight budgets.

2.2 Redefining the Mobility Pact

As mentioned at the end of the first part, we believe it is important to approach the acceptability of the mobility transition from a different angle. It is not only a question of how policies are designed and implemented, or of assessing the level of support for each individual measure. Drawing on the method we use to identify the pacts that structure our socio-economic life and the types of arrangements underpinning our daily lifestyles, we propose the concept of a Mobility Pact[21] as a way of better understanding what mobility represents in the lives of different social groups and in the organization of society, an understanding that ultimately helps explain its political sensitivity.

In France, this Mobility Pact reflects two broad dynamics: first, it mirrors the way in which public authorities and policies have shaped the territory—beginning in the 1960s and 1970s with development policies that led first to suburbanization and later to metropolitanization (understood as the concentration of population, activity, and value in large cities);[22] and second, it reflects the needs of the economy, which have generated a form of dependence between urban centres and what is now referred to as the "peri-urban" area.[23]

A pact structured by land use planning

To describe this phenomenon, it is useful to look back at a few key features of how the French territory has histor-

21 The concept of a social mobility pact was used by the Climate Action Network and Transport & Environment during a conference organized at the French National Assembly by MP Gérard Leseul in 2024.

22 We refer to the definition given by *Géoconfluences*: "Metropolization refers to the process of concentration of populations, activities and value in large cities. It can be to the detriment of lower-level cities, and we often see a strengthening of the upper levels of the urban hierarchy." Géoconfluences. (n.d.). Metropolisation. Accessed on 3 March 2025, at https://geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr/glossaire/metropolisation. See also Lacour, C. (2024), "Métropoles et métropolisations : les unes et les autres", *Revue d'Économie Régionale & Urbaine*, Février (1), p. 185-167.

23 Peripheries of urban areas, according to the INSEE classification (2020), in the zoning of urban areas.

ically been organized. In France, nine out of ten people live within the catchment area of a city.[24] More specifically, 51% of the population lives in urban centres, while 43% live in the suburbs.[25] This distribution is striking in itself, as it shapes specific residential and professional dynamics, particularly in the form of daily commuting (home-work) and even triangular mobility (home-third place[26]-work).[27] This pattern has led to a growing disconnect between where people live and where they work:[28] in 2013, two out of three workers left their municipality of residence each day to go to work.[29]

The Mobility Pact is thus the legacy of an old spatial and economic configuration rooted in the history of our social contract. This configuration involved concentrating economic activity in urban centres, placing peri-urban areas—and their residents—in a position of dependence on these centres. This trend is especially pronounced in the Île-de-France region, where around ten major urban centres, located at the heart of the metropolitan area, account for approximately 75% of all urban centre-based jobs.[30]

This territorial organization in the 1960s and 1970s was, in many ways, shaped by public authorities. In collaboration with private actors, they encouraged middle-class investment in peri-urban areas. New road and motorway infrastructure facilitated commuting,[31] measures were introduced to enable households to borrow and become solvent (notably the 1977 law), and the French Ministry of Public Works (Ministère de l'Équipement, created in 1966 and responsible for regional planning) encouraged developers and builders to construct standardized housing estates on the outskirts of cities, which were cheaper to produce.[32] The implicit compromise, made possible by easy access to cars, was to allow the middle classes, for the most part, to become homeowners without losing access to jobs concentrated in urban centres. This model created a relationship of dependency between moderately dense areas and the cities that provide employment, one that relies, in particular, on daily car use. Unless the surrounding municipality offers a sufficiently developed public transport system to accommodate these commutes, which is rarely the case in France, car dependency remains the norm. Paris is a notable exception.[33]

Mobility as both a guarantee and an instrument of the core promises of the social contract: autonomy and security throughout life

Initially, for a significant proportion of the middle classes, this new lifestyle, built around the internal combustion engine (and the ease of use it offers), represented both increased independence and higher social status. It enabled people to choose where to live, broaden their consumption horizons (through access to a lifestyle in which basic needs were less expensive, especially in the context of the post-war economic boom that established the model of mass consumption),[34] take control of their mobility (provided they owned a vehicle, or even several), and shape their living environment in their own image, thus supporting a process of individualization.[35] Practical activities such as DIY (including repairs and decorating), gardening and repurposing contributed to the creation of a private, stable and familiar space, a form of safe haven that could compensate for the uncertainty of a professional life that might not be align with one's aspirations.[36] This way of life also reinforced a sense of security. Homeownership reduced the vulnerability to which

24 Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (INSEE). (2025). Tableau 3 : Répartition de la population active par sexe et par catégorie socioprofessionnelle en 2023. https://www.Insee.fr/fr/statistiques/#4806694tableau-figure3

25 According to INSEE, a city's catchment area is defined by the extent of its influence on surrounding municipalities. An area consists of an urban centre, identified based on population and employment variables, and a periphery made up of municipalities in which at least %15 of the working population is employed in the centre. The most populous municipality in the centre is called the "central municipality".

26 Third place refers to a location that is neither home nor work—for example, a school, supermarket, etc.

27 Géoconfluences. (2 July 2024). Mobilités domicile-travail (pendulaires, triangulaires). https://geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr/glossaire/mobilite-pendulaire

28 The average commuting distance has increased from 3 km in 1960 to 13 km in 2023 (La Fabrique de la Cité, 2025).

29 An increase of 6 percentage points compared to 1999. National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE). (March 2019). More and more people are working outside their municipality of residence (INSEE Première No. 1605). https://www.Insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2019022

30 Dubujet, F., Musiedlak, Y., Mohrt, F., & Virot, P. (January 2014). In Île-de-France, *39 urban centres structure the regional economy* (INSEE Île-de-France, page no. 417). https://www.apur.org/sites/default/files/documents/39_poles_emploi_ile_de_france.pdf

31 This significant investment in road infrastructure continued until recently: 280€ billion was spent on roads between 1995 and 2018, compared with 130€ billion on rail, for example. Rudolph, F., Riach, N., Kees, J. (2023). *Development of Transport Infrastructure in Europe: Exploring the shrinking and expansion of railways, motorways and airports*. T3 Transportation Think Tank/Wuppertal Institute.

32 We reproduce here the full historical account by François Cusin, in "*Habitat et consommation des classes moyennes: entre périurbanisation et gentrification*", *Constructif*, 2/2021 No. 2021 ,59, pp. 61-57.

33 Gabriel Dupuy "Cities and automobile dependence" revisité : les contrariétés de la densité". *Revue d'Économie Régionale & Urbaine*, 2002/1 February, 2002, p. 141-156.

34 Although the democratization of consumption progressed during this period, it should not be overstated: not all social classes gained access to the same goods at the same time during the thirty-year post-war boom. See our study "Towards a 21st Century Social Contract" (IDDRI & Hot or Cool, 2024).

35 François Cusin, "Habitat et consommation des classes moyennes: entre périurbanisation et gentrification", *Constructif*, 2/2021 No. ,59 2021, pp. 61-57.

36 Anne-Claire Davy, Lucile Mettetal, "La maison individuelle en Île-de-France: je t'aime… moi non plus" in *Note rapide de l'Institut Paris Région*, no. 841, March 2020. Online.

the middle classes are often exposed[37] and provided a clearer outlook on the future, notably through the prospect of passing on assets.[38] Some sociologists suggest that this vision has become even more entrenched since the 2020 pandemic, a period marked by health insecurity which helped establish the status of the detached house, for those who can afford to live a fulfilling and comfortable life there, as a protective space, a shelter and a base for activities conducive to "self-care".[39] While the Mobility Pact structures the territory as a whole, it has also come to represent a specific kind of transaction for suburban residents and, by extension, for those living in peri-urban and rural areas.

Making car use easy: a central feature of the pact

This history helps explain why the car remains the most commonly used means of transport in our societies.[40] The Mobility Pact was built around car use and can be summarized as follows, particularly for middle-class workers: in exchange for easier access to mobility[41] and home ownership, both of which provide multidimensional autonomy, they agree to spend significant time each day travelling (to work, shops and public services), while continuing to benefit from economic activity concentrated in urban centres. Even today, if we consider the links between central urban municipalities and suburb municipalities, 89% of journeys are made by car (with average distances of 15 km).[42] In rural areas, 87% of commutes are made by car, compared with 54% in densely populated municipalities, where 28% of commutes are made by public transport.[43] However, car use is by no means limited to suburban residents. Among those living in central urban municipalities, the modal share for car travel is lower than average (63%), but still stands at 53%.[44]

Many French people continue to view the car as a symbol of freedom,[45] an attachment that, while varying across social classes, reflects the deeply embedded nature of the historical Mobility Pact. Even among those who express strong concern about environmental issues, the car often remains an indispensable asset:[46] not owning a car, or sharing one between two adults in a household, is more commonly associated with financial constraints or deprivation than with a deliberate pro-environmental choice. The SVEN survey highlights this apparent paradox: households with a car tend to express greater environmental awareness than those without.[47] This dependency is reinforced by the so-called "club effect" or network effect[48]—the idea that the more people use a car-based system, the more infrastructure is developed to support it, making it more attractive, while also increasing the cost of opting out.[49] As a result, calls to adopt alternative modes of transport, when not accompanied by a substantial transformation of living environments and infrastructure,[50] quickly reach an impasse because choosing to forgo car use for environmental reasons means, in very practical terms, accepting a disadvantaged position under the Mobility Pact, or at least forfeiting full membership benefits (unless this choice concerns only the second car in a household).

37 See our report "Inside the minds of citizens" (Iddri & Hot or Cool, 2024) and Louis Chauvel, *Les classes moyennes à la dérive*, Seuil, coll. "La république des idées", Paris, 2006.

38 On this subject, see Nicolas Duvoux, *L'Avenir confisqué*, Paris, PUF, 2023.

39 Hervé Marchal, Jean-Marc Stébé, *Le pavillon, une passion française*, Paris, PUF, 2023.

40 SDES & INSEE. (22 December 2021). Detailed results of the 2019 survey on personal mobility. French Ministry for Ecological Transition. https://www.statistiques.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/resultats-detailles-de-lenquete-mobilite-des-personnes-de2019-

41 "We must remember that the 1990s were the era when Charles Pasqua was Minister of the Interior, with his slogan: 'No part of the French territory should be more than 20 minutes from a motorway'." Millénaire 3) .3 October 2012). Infrastructure is not responsible for mobility problems [Interview with Jean-Marc Offner]. https://www.millenaire3.grandlyon.com/Interview/2012/les-infrastructures-ne-sont-pas-responsables-des-problemes-de-la-mobilite

42 SDES & INSEE. (22 December 2021). Detailed results of the 2019 survey on personal mobility. French Ministry for Ecological Transition. https://www.statistiques.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/resultats-detailles-de-lenquete-mobilite-des-personnes-de2019-

43 Vie Publique. (2 May 2024). Trajets domicile-travail: la voiture mode de transport privilégié. https://www.vie-publique.fr/en-bref/-293981 trajets-domicile-travail-la-voiture-mode-de-transport-privilegie

44 SDES & INSEE. (22 December 2021). Detailed results of the 2019 survey on personal mobility. French Ministry for Ecological Transition. https://www.statistiques.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/resultats-detailles-de-lenquete-mobilite-des-personnes-de2019-

45 Kaufmann, V., et al. (2024). "La voiture, c'est la liberté." In Idées reçues sur l'automobile : individualité, mobilité, société (pp. 120-115). Le Cavalier Bleu.

46 Pruvost, G. (2024). Tuesday, 5 March 2013. In La subsistance au quotidien. Conter ce qui compte (pp. 78-43). Paris : La Découverte.

47 According to the SVEN survey, "individuals belonging to households without a car have a median overall environmental score on the NEPS of 56, compared to 58 for individuals living in households with a car." See Demoli, Yoann., et al. "Conversion écologique vs dépendance automobile. Une analyse des dissonances entre attitudes environnementales et usages de l'automobile auprès de ménages populaires en zone périurbaine et rurale". *Flux*, 1/2020 No. ,120-119 2020. p. 58-41.

48 For Gabriel Dupuy's analysis, see interview with G. Dupuy, conducted by C. Gallez, (2018) "La dépendance automobile. Retour sur la genèse du concept et ses enjeux politiques", *Flux*, 1)112-111), p. 110-104; "Cities and automobile dependence" revisité: les contrariétés de la densité. *Revue d'Économie Régionale & Urbaine*, 1/2002 February, 2002, p. 156-141.

49 And conversely, the more attractive the system becomes, the more users it draws, and so on. Consequently, this gradually widens the gap between the mobility capital of motorists and non-motorists. Not being able or willing to drive a vehicle in a space where everything is designed and facilitated for cars entails a significant loss or handicap in terms of mobility.

50 On this point, see the lifestyle-based approach developed by IDDRI: IDDRI (September 2024). "Where there's a way, there's a will". Social conditions for achieving the ecological transition: a lifestyle approach. https://www.iddri.org/en/publications-and-events/issue-brief/where-theres-way-theres-will-social-conditions-achieving

Distrust and symbolic exclusion

The transition is also difficult to embrace for those experiencing financial insecurity and lacking trust in institutions (a sentiment that is particularly pronounced in rural areas). According to a CNLE report based on a survey of LEZs, those opposed to such schemes tend to be in precarious situations (58% reported often not having enough to eat), isolated (51% said they never received visitors at home) and distrustful of institutions (49%). The Yellow Vests, as previously mentioned, were not opposed to the transition itself, rather they perceived it as a breach of a broader pact—one that shaped many aspects of their lives, including their sense of democratic and social inclusion. The social groups that formed the Yellow Vests movement were doubly likely to feel that the pact had been broken: they were particularly dependent on cars (and therefore acutely affected by fuel taxes). While such taxation also reinforced their material or symbolic exclusion from other pacts (consumption, democracy, work) and designated them as responsible for collective pollution. This stood in contrast to how they viewed themselves—as deserving workers contributing to the national productive effort.

A pact that underpins others

The Mobility Pact is all the more sensitive because it underpins the functioning of the other pacts, and because cars represent a key source of independence for many social groups. The link between the Mobility Pact and the Democracy Pact lies in the fact that access to public services became a major driver of social democratization in the 20th century, especially for the middle classes, through measures such as free access to hospitals for example. However, many of these public services are now in crisis, already generating social tensions. These tensions are particularly acute because the growing remoteness of public services now means longer journeys and greater travel times for users, and thus higher fuel costs.[51] This interaction between mobility and democratization therefore introduces a third factor, namely security, because unhindered access to essential services (healthcare, social services, justice, etc.) is a prerequisite for feeling like a protected citizen fully integrated into society, and for being able to plan for the future.[52] Tellingly, 66% of French people say they would feel isolated without their car,[53] and 79% of respondents in a rural survey said they rely on their vehicle to do their shopping or attend medical appointments.[54] The sense of security is also closely tied to the certainty of having control over one's housing situation, mobility budget, and potential job changes.

With regard to the Consumption Pact, access to individual home ownership, and even the associated possibility of passing on wealth, also stems directly from unhindered mobility. The car also serves as a powerful status symbol, particularly for those without access to educational or cultural capital. Social distinction or advancement can even be achieved within a group through the acquisition of a private vehicle, a personalized object, imbued with symbolic status-related and emotional meaning. This is especially true when the broader social contract is failing to provide expected improvements or autonomy. Consumerist logic has clearly taken hold of this space of freedom associated with the car, linking it with notions of identity and social status, reinforced by decades of advertising.[55] As we highlight in our historical study, the Consumption Pact plays a central role in our social contract (Saujot et al., 2024). The development of the car has, in a sense, brought fluidity to people's lives, while also producing a kind of social "rigidity", in the sense that the multifaceted attachment to the car now seems difficult to undo. Car ownership—or the lack of it—is far from a neutral fact. It reflects dynamics of social self-esteem and perceived downgrading that must be taken into account.

An ongoing breach of the pact?

Are we experiencing a reversal, a shift from autonomy through car ownership to a sense of frustrated dependence? It is difficult to draw firm conclusions at this stage, but several factors appear to contribute to this trend among parts of the population. These factors tend to produce a feeling that the pact has been broken, particularly when they involve a loss of autonomy, increased financial vulnerability associated with perceived insecurity, or a sense of social downgrading.

Putting the brakes on mobility?

Restricted or less convenient mobility, whether due to congestion on roads[56] or public transport, recurring breakdowns (such as those affecting the RER in the Paris region), restrictions on car use (bus lanes, tramways,

51 Algan, Y., Malgouyres, C., & Senik, C. (14 January 2020). Territoires, bien-être et politiques publiques (Note no. 55). Conseil d'Analyse Économique. https://cae-eco.fr/Territoires-bien-etre-et-politiques-publiques

52 On the link between social insecurity and the inability to plan for the future, see Duvoux, N. (2023). L'avenir confisqué. Paris: PUF.

53 Harris Interactive survey for CNPA and France Bleu in 2020. Harris Interactive. (14 January 2020). Les Français et la mobilité au niveau local [Survey for France Bleu and CNPA]. https://harris-interactive.fr/opinion_polls/les-francais-et-la-mobilite-au-niveau-local/

54 IFOP. (20 February 2024). The French, their cars and the make-do economy [Survey for Roole]. https://www.ifop.com/publication/les-francais-leur-voiture-et-leconomie-de-debrouille/

55 More than 2€ billion is spent in France every year (Kantar Media). Ultimately, these advertisements primarily target the wealthiest segment of the population, i.e. those who purchase new vehicles in France, while fostering aspirational fantasies among the wider public.

56 Between 2008 and 2019, travel times on radial routes from peri-urban or rural areas increased by %10, while distances increased by only %2. Part of this %8 difference may be due to congestion (SDES, INSEE, 2019-2008).

cycle lanes), or even the prospect of such measures, can contribute to a growing sense of lost independence. The deterioration of commutes is felt as particularly unfair, since this form of mobility is part of the Work Pact, which requires everyone to contribute to the national productive effort. "It's not normal to pay so much to go to work," said a Yellow Vest worker quoted by sociologist Pierre Blavier.[57] Such conditions can give rise to what sociologists call relative frustration, i.e. a feeling of dissonance between what people believe they are entitled to (such as the right to work, freedom of movement, equal treatment, etc.) and what they actually receive, or feel is denied to them.[58] In this context, the issue of fairness between urban and rural areas,[59] particularly in terms of how public money is spent on mobility infrastructure, is becoming increasingly sensitive.

A reversal that manifests economically

At the global level, the share of transport expenditure in final household consumption rose significantly over the second half of the 20th century, rising from 11% in 1960 to 18% in the 1990s through to 2007 (INSEE, 2009). This increase reflects the evolution of the Mobility Pact. Indeed, while the increase in consumption volumes (driven by the growing rate of car ownership) initially explains the rise in the budget share, inflation in usage-related expenses (first the oil crises, then the rising cost of fuel since the 2000s) has contributed just as much in a second phase. These figures can be further supplemented by data from household budget surveys, as noted by Demoly and Schweitzer (2020). When insurance costs are included, the share of consumer spending devoted to transport rose from 17% in 2000 to 20% in 2017.[60] Looking beyond national averages, the period from 2011 to 2017 shows that budgetary pressure varied considerably depending on where people lived within metropolitan regions. In small urban areas, the share of household budgets allocated to transport rose from 20% to 30%, and in medium-sized urban areas from 19% to 24%.[61] Conversely, this share fell (by between 1 and 4 percentage points) for households in the centres (including the central municipalities) of these same urban areas.[62] Cross-referencing this data with income levels helps to clarify why mobility has become such a prominent issue in public debate. Indeed, budgetary constraints increased for the lowest income deciles living in the suburbs, while they eased for those in the highest deciles living in urban centres. Between 2011 and 2017, the share of household spending devoted to transport rose by one percentage point to 22% for suburban households in the first three deciles. In contrast, it fell by two percentage points to 13% among households in urban centres belonging to deciles 8 to 10.

Added to this are the effects of fuel price volatility and rising repair costs, which can contribute to a broader sense of insecurity, particularly for households already operating close to their financial limits (e.g. those with high debt ratios from home purchases), and in a context where suburbanization has occurred in the most peripheral areas. Today, eight out of ten French people perceive the car as a "financial drain".[63] More broadly, 28% of people entering the labour market report abandoning a job or training opportunity due to mobility-related difficulties.[64] The shift toward vehicle electrification may further reinforce this sense of insecurity, not only through a loss of financial control, but also through reduced capacity for self-repair.[65]

Questioning the role of the car and the end of the Fordist model

Long a cornerstone of household lifestyles and a symbol of social status, the role of the car is increasingly being challenged, whether through the introduction of LEZs or through perceptions that funding for alternative solutions benefit only certain areas. These developments can reinforce feelings of unfairness and social decline.

57 Blavier, P. (2021). Chapter 2. Trucs et astuces pour boucler le budget. In *Gilets jaunes. La révolte des budgets contraints* (pp. 196-183). Presses Universitaires de France.

58 Corcuff, P. (2020). Frustrations relatives. In *Dictionnaire des mouvements sociaux* (pp. 269-264). Paris: Presses de Sciences Po. Louis Chauvel uses this analytical framework to interpret the Yellow Vests crisis, see Bendali, Z. and Rubert, A. (2020). Les sciences sociales en gilet jaune. Deux ans d'enquêtes sur un mouvement inédit. Politix, 215-177 ,(4)132. https://doi.org/10.3917/pox.132.0177.

59 A European study highlights lower levels of political trust in rural areas. Mitsch, F., Lee, N., & Morrow, E. R. (2021). Faith no more? The divergence of political trust between urban and rural Europe. Political Geography, 102426 ,89. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102426

60 The figures cited are drawn from INSEE's 2011 ,2006 ,2000 and 2017 household budget surveys. See: Enquête Budget des familles (BDF) - 2001-2000, INSEE (producer), ADISP (distributor) doi:10.13144/lil00704-/lil0365-; Budget des familles - DOM - 2006, INSEE (producteur), ADISP (distributor) doi:10.13144/lil0477-; Enquête Budget des familles (BDF)—2011, INSEE (producer), ADISP (distributor) doi:10.13144/lil0831-; Enquête Budget des familles (BDF) - 2017, INSEE (producer), ADISP (distributor) doi:10.13144/lil1416-.

61 A less marked increase was also observed in the transport budget share for households in multi-polarized municipalities in small urban centres (from %23 to %24) and for those living outside the influence of urban areas (from %21 to %22).

62 This trend is particularly striking given that, over the same period, the transport budget share remained fairly stable on average, and even declined slightly when measured as a share of gross disposable income or per consumption unit relative to standard of living.

63 Destin Commun. (April 2023). Mobilités et transition: comment faire bouger les Français ? [Survey conducted with Kantar Public France and spintank]. https://www.destincommun.fr/que-faisons-nous/mobilites-et-transition-comment-faire-bouger-les-francais/

64 Laboratoire de la Mobilité Inclusive. (January 2017). Mobilité inclusive: enjeux et actions pour une mobilité accessible à tous [Press pack]. https://www.mobiliteinclusive.com/wp-content/uploads/11/2015/DP_corporate-_LMI.pdf

65 Pierre Blavier, "Chapitre 2. Trucs et astuces pour boucler le budget". In *Gilets jaunes. La révolte des budgets contraints*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2021, p. 196-183.

Finally, while at the end of the post-war boom, the people who produced cars were also the ones who bought them (illustrating a broad sharing of the benefits of the Fordist pact), this is no longer the case. Today, new vehicle purchases are more concentrated among the affluent: 22% are made by individuals in the highest income decile (top 10%, D10), and over half by those whose standard of living is above the 8th decile.[66]

Conclusion

These factors highlight the extent to which a particular territorial policy (one that concentrates economic activity in urban centres), along with its associated dynamics (urban centre-suburb dependency, urban-peri-urban dependency, commuter mobility) and the tools that sustain them (private vehicles), lies at the heart of our Mobility Pact. They have also helped shape the moral economy of the social groups concerned, giving rise to a set of practices, norms, feelings and relationships with other pacts (Security, Democracy, Work, Consumption), as well as to expectations of benefits, (self-)constraints and specific ideals. These expectations and values may come into conflict with ecological transition measures. Such expectations, norms and pact effects have become embedded in particular lifestyles and trajectories (residential, social, economic, professional, etc.) to which social groups remain strongly attached. This is also why mobility constitutes a pact in our framework: it informs other practices (job choices, attitudes towards security and property, etc.), shapes collective narratives, and is intertwined with everyday "transactions". This "arrangement" remains largely uncontroversial so long as access to the car, seen as key to autonomy, is not significantly restricted or penalized.

These factors help us understand the political and social sensitivity of any perceived breach of the Mobility Pact. This does not mean that a transition in lifestyles and mobility practices is impossible, but rather that it must be designed in line with the principles of the social contract and the core promises of modern history (autonomy, democratization of living conditions, recognition of diverse lifestyles, and access to a good life, etc.). Adhering to this methodological principle is also key to avoiding a "backlash", which is particularly likely when the material conditions needed to achieve a shared ideal (such as the ecological transition) are not available to all social groups, or when public action is perceived as especially illegitimate (Patterson, 2022).

66 Ministère de la Transition écologique. (1 March 2023). Achats automobiles en 2022: moins de motorisations thermiques et des véhicules plus récents pour les ménages les plus aisés. Données et études statistiques. https://www.statistiques.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/achats-automobiles-en-2022-moins-de-motorisations-thermiques-et-des-vehicules-plus-recents-pour-les?rubrique=&dossier=1347

3. BUILDING A TOOLKIT TO ANALYSE CASE STUDIES

Our approach is to develop a toolkit for better understanding the social and political stakes of mobility policies, whether to prevent them from creating future risks or, conversely, to ensure they contribute to greater equity in mobility over the medium term. The toolkit should also help identify key points for discussion. To this end, we need a clearer understanding of the combinations and interactions between three elements shown in the figure. This will enable us to assess the factors that shape reception, mobilization and interpretation.

FIGURE 1. Understanding and anticipating the backlash: a representation of the problem.

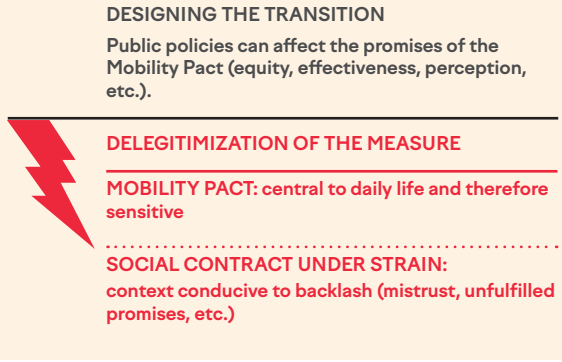

Figure 1 offers a clear representation of the social and political dynamics at stake. It shows how mobility policies can affect the Mobility Pact, a pact that has become central to collective life, in a context where the social contract is under strain. The backlash represents a tipping point, especially when perceived impacts on the Mobility Pact call into question the legitimacy of public action. The diagram also illustrates the different dimensions of the analytical framework and highlights the tools needed to assess political and social sensitivity. These tools must not only consider how public policies are designed, which is the primary focus of the literature, but also examine how those policies interact with the other two levels.

3.1 An analytical framework for new political and social impact assessments

We propose an initial set of questions that can be used ahead of any mobility policy project to assess its potential social and political sensitivity and help guide its design.[67] While this line of questioning has a technical dimension, we also see it as relevant for contributing to the political debate, as illustrated in the following section on case

67 This work builds on the approach taken by -6T and ADEME on social acceptability. See p. 20 and following, op. cit.

TABLEAU 1. In most instances, answering these questions requires dedicated empirical research

Design	**Existing experiences and ex ante perceptions**	• What experience or precedents exist for this type of measure in France or elsewhere in Europe? • Is the policy perceived as effective?	• How do perceptions vary across population groups? • Which policy packages are likely to receive the most support?
	Model of justice	• What model of fairness does this measure rely on (e.g. universal contributions, polluter pays principle, etc.)? What fairness narrative is associated with the measure? • What different perceptions of fairness may exist concerning the issue at stake? • Who are the real and perceived winners and losers (also taking into account other current or planned public policies)?	• What sense of injustice might it generate? • If tax revenue is collected, what is the proposed allocation/non-allocation of these funds
	Anticipation of real-world application	• Is there an empirical analysis that breaks down impacts by different social groups and practices (habits, behaviours, constraints, etc.)? • What are the risks if the scheme is misunderstood or if available support is not taken up? • How will the gains and costs be distributed in practice?	• What are the practical barriers to implementation? How might the measure be amended during parliamentary debate, and what would be the consequences?
	Place and role of consultation and deliberation tools	• What political voice will citizens have in the policy-making process? Will there be a consultation or citizens' panel? • How will social diversity be reflected (what role for the most affected groups)?	• What is the objective: to debate the necessity of the measure or its design?
	Interpretation of the mechanism	• Who is proposing the measure (political party, expert group, foreign precedent, EU directive, etc.)? • What narrative will accompany the measure? What civil society actors (trade unions, etc.) are involved in supporting, informing, or communicating it?	• To what extent is the rationale for the measure understood and trusted ("why this measure")? How much trust do people have in the messengers? • Which actors might offer alternative interpretations that delegitimize the measure? What role might the media play?
Factors weakening the Mobility Pact		• What precedents exist for this type of measure? What is the historical sensitivity of the issue? • What are the risks of symbolic downgrading, restricted mobility, or increased insecurity (assessment of the extent)? • How will the burdens and efforts be shared (e.g. private cars vs. private jets)?	• How might this impact other social pacts (e.g. access to public services)? • Does the availability of alternatives help shape a new Mobility Pact? • Ultimately, how high is the risk in terms of social sensitivity and contested legitimacy?
Fragilities linked to the state of the social contract		• In which situations are different social classes affected in relation to the social contract? • How is the state's ability to meet its commitments perceived?	• Can processes of delegitimization be fuelled by precedents (e.g. broken promises)?

studies. In most instances, answering these questions requires dedicated empirical research.

3.2 What policy issues should be explored in each case study?

Through the description of the measures considered and the issues identified for each case study, we aim to show the importance of examining both the supply of public policies and their interaction with public demand, i.e. how these policies are received. It is at this intersection that we can shape the conditions and design needed to support a trajectory of mobility transformation. In line with the rest of our analysis, these case studies should be discussed not only in terms of their specific characteristics, but also in relation to the broader context of the mobility transition and its surrounding public debates.

ETS-2

The expansion of the carbon market is a key mechanism in Europe's decarbonization strategy and plays a central role in achieving the Fit for 55 target. By covering emissions from fuel consumption, the system is expected to raise prices for petrol, road diesel, alternative fuels, marine and aviation fuels, non-road diesel, and LPG used for transport. Given the current variation in household fuel consumption based on living conditions (INSEE, 2017), the market's impact is likely to be uneven, regressive and could aggravate existing inequalities.

However, compared to the carbon tax experience, the design of ETS-2 indirectly addresses the socio-economic dimension. In addition to the price cap mechanism for emission allowances,[68] the revenue generated

68 If the price is not known in advance, once it exceeds 60€/tCO_2, a quota release will be triggered to stabilize it.

from allowance auctions are intended to mitigate the scheme's impact—notably through the Social Climate Fund, which will come into effect in 2026. As a result, the debate on the market's acceptability now centres largely on how the fund's redistribution mechanisms are designed. More specifically, key questions concern the fund's role, whether it is meant to neutralize the effects of ETS-2, provide compensation, or support investment to reduce household exposure, as well as the distributive principles (e.g. targeting households, budget allocations). The analytical framework proposed in this *Study* aims to deepen and broaden this debate.

The experience of the 2019 carbon tax increase offers valuable insight into the challenges likely to emerge (Saujot, Berghmans and Chancel, 2019; Chiroleu-Assouline, 2022). From this perspective, both the nature of the instrument (internalization of externalities via price signals) and its effects (regressive impact relative to living standards) appear to undermine its acceptability. In the current political context, characterized by the rise of far-right parties which fuels growing mistrust of European institutions ahead of the 2027 presidential elections, the legitimacy of the implementing body—the European Commission—is also being contested. This raises a number of concerns. Could the nature of the instrument, its effects, and the institution behind it be seen as dismissing past mobilizations and failing to address unresolved problems (e.g. the lack of accessible and useable levers for households facing such price signals)? Might an instrument based on price signals be perceived as unfair, given the deep-rooted inequalities that shape living conditions? How will the measure be interpreted—including its actual effectiveness in reducing emissions—at a time when the car market is dominated by a strategy of raising margins on electric vehicles in the C-SUV and D-SUV segments, placing them beyond the reach of many working and middle-class households? In short, is redistribution via the Social Climate Fund enough, and will other non-distributive concerns ultimately cast doubt on the measure's legitimacy?

Several questions arise regarding the design of the Social Climate Fund's redistribution mechanisms. Should the impact of ETS-2 be fully neutralized, even if this creates a challenge for public finances? What proportion of revenues should go towards direct compensation versus investment? How much of this compensation should go to households? Through which policy packages? How can support be targeted to reach the most affected households and achieve both social and ecological redistribution? What criteria and tools are needed to do this effectively? These questions also raise broader issues about how this measure should be coordinated with other public policies. Is there not a case for beginning this work now (for example, through the Ambition France Transport conference) to implement supporting measures and secure financing, to limit the burden on households?

A package of solutions: express road services (Services Express Routier, SER) and social leasing

Alongside the implementation of binding instruments such as ETS-2, public policies must also support a transformation in the material conditions of citizens' mobility. The IMT has analysed two measures—SERs and social leasing—that contribute to this goal[69] from a technical and economic standpoint. These analyses were structured using a cost-benefit approach, which nonetheless provides only a partial view of the socio-political impacts of the measures. The use of the analytical framework proposed in this *Study* addresses this by introducing new lines of inquiry.

SERs, i.e. combining express coaches routes and carpooling, offer an alternative to private car use (retaining flexibility, speed and network coverage) without requiring major infrastructure changes or significant investment. Since they can be deployed quickly, SERs provide a short-term option for encouraging modal shift and reducing household exposure to the effects of ETS-2.

First, while the design of these measures can be informed by precedents and both ex ante and ex post analyses,[70] it is important to consider how they are perceived. Are they seen as responses to restrictive instruments and, conversely, can they help improve the acceptability of such restrictions?[71] More specifically, is their nature and scope perceived as sufficiently aligned with the constraints they are intended to address? Do the effectiveness criteria used to design these measures match those used by social groups to evaluate them?[72] Moreover, if these measures serve different purposes and operate at different levels, are they perceived as complementary or conflicting?[73] Put simply, do they represent, for the target audiences, "a coherent and sufficient package of solutions"?

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69 More specifically, social leasing aims to green the vehicle fleet, while SERs tend to encourage modal shift and even lead to demotorization.

70 The first social leasing scheme was implemented in 2024. In parallel, several policies supporting infrastructure for modal shift have already been implemented in urban areas. For an ex-post analysis of social leasing, see IDDRI (2024). "Social leasing" pilot scheme: Lessons learned from an unanticipated success: https://www.iddri.org/en/publications-and-events/blog-post/social-leasing-pilot-scheme-lessons-learned-unanticipated-success

71 These measures can be deployed quickly and may therefore have short-term effects that help reduce household exposure to restrictive instruments such as ETS2-.

72 For example, are the modal choice criteria commonly used in the literature sufficient to explain what a shift from individual to collective transport modes represents, given the historical context of the Mobility Pact?

73 Social leasing is a nationally coordinated scheme aimed at greening the vehicle fleet, while SERs are implemented locally and seek to promote modal shift or even reduce the number of vehicles in circulation. Take, for example, the introduction of express coaches routes: implementing a VRTC (dedicated coaches lane) outside the emergency lane involves reducing space available to private cars. In this context, is a measure promoting modal shift still perceived as complementary to one that encourages energy substitution in private transport?

Second, in terms of the model of justice, these policies aim to address the inequalities that structure everyday mobility.[74] However, it is also important to consider how they are financed and how this financing is perceived in the political arena. For example, take two possible approaches to financing SERs: one option is reforming mobility payments, thereby socializing the economic output of a territory; another is to draw on the Social Climate Fund, which would redistribute household losses at the national level. These alternatives involve different actors and operate on different scales. The question, then, is how these financing choices shape the perceptions of different social groups, their level of support, and their capacity to mobilize either in favour of or against the measure.

Finally, the question of the ultimate objective arises, and with it the criteria for evaluating projects. Should SERs primarily aim for economic efficiency, or should their focus be on improving access and encouraging modal shift?

Taxation: towards a viable, resilient and fair system

A comprehensive analysis of the tax mechanisms linked to the road transport sector has been conducted by the IMT as part of a multi-year research programme soon to be published. The findings highlight an uneven distribution of the tax burden, both between different types of actors (households, businesses) and among households with varying living conditions (income levels, place of residence, etc.). Furthermore, the current tax structure presents several limitations, particularly in terms of budgetary resilience, alignment with the ecological transition, and its visibility and planning. This raises the question of how to redefine the tax doctrine for road transport—an issue that concerns not only the Mobility Pact but also a key element of the social contract, given the substantial contribution of these taxes to public finances. How should the burden be shared between taxation on vehicle use, purchase and ownership? What principles should guide the design *of* transition-specific measures? Given the scale of these issues, both technical and political, there is a clear need to explore the condition under which such reform could gain support, as well as the democratic processes required to implement it. Our analytical framework offers a starting point for this exploration.

Renewal of motorway concessions: from management model to socialization of use

The renewal of motorway concessions is the focus of a dedicated workshop at the Ambition France Transport conference, which began on 5 May 2025.[75] The issue involves multiple technical and economic challenges: financing maintenance in a context of the gradual phase-out of the TICPE (domestic consumption tax on energy products); internalizing the externalities of road freight transport; anticipating road and rail investments that cannot rely solely on annual budgetary allocations, and meeting the investment needs required to adapt infrastructure to the impacts of climate change. These challenges are closely tied to the future of the concession model itself: whether public or private management, the size of the sections operated under concession, and the methods and levels of pricing. Yet these questions cannot be separated from public acceptability of the future model, given that tolls can be a powerful symbol of discontent (e.g. as seen during the Yellow Vests blockades) and are linked to diverse mobility practices that vary by user (tourism, daily travel, freight transport, etc.).

First, it seems essential to take actual mobility practices into account when setting prices, given that some households rely on motorway links for their daily travel. Should we therefore consider differentiated pricing or subscription models based on usage, geographical location, and household income? Alternatively, can a pay-as-you-go system, on which current pricing is based, still be considered the fairest model?

These questions also raise the issue of how the concession model is perceived. Is there a tension between this form of management and the idea of motorways as a public good? Is reforming the pricing model enough to address concerns about fairness, or must it be accompanied by a rethink of how toll revenues are allocated? How can pricing structures and budgetary allocations be coordinated in a way that supports, rather than undermines, the Mobility Pact? And to what extent does this coordination matter to citizens? Ultimately, debates about the public or private nature of infrastructure management or the continued existence of tolls should not prevent a broader reflection on the socialization of motorway infrastructure, i.e. on how the economic burden is distributed according to the living conditions of users or budgetary allocations.

74 Both social leasing and SERs offer practical modal shift solutions or substitution for people who rely on cars for long daily commutes.

75 Most motorway concession contracts are set to expire between 2031 and 2036.

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

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