

Public Opinion Foundations of the Clean Energy Transition*

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Abstract

The attitudes and behaviors of citizens are central to the clean energy transition. However, there is often theoretical ambiguity about the role of publics, which has consequences for understanding decarbonization trajectories and the conditions that enable political reforms. Departing from previous debates, we argue that citizens are neither irrelevant nor omniscient. We use the recent turn to green industrial policy to illustrate three ways public opinion affects the clean energy transition through the ways politicians anticipate the public's responses to policies, the types of leaders elected into office over time, and the consumption decisions individuals make. Our intervention identifies new avenues for public opinion research necessitated by the transformation in climate policy approaches worldwide.

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1 Introduction

2 Solving the climate crisis will require active participation by the public in their roles as citi-
3 zens and consumers. Yet, while debates over climate and energy reform usually acknowledge
4 the importance of publics, the conditions under which voters support or resist climate policy
5 are too often delegated to amorphous concepts like political “will”. This theoretical ambigu-
6 ity has implications for researchers such as those who have invested considerable energy in
7 modeling the technological and economic conditions under which decarbonization trajecto-
8 ries can be met. The public role in structuring these trajectories is complex and requires the
9 integration of a mature social science literature on public attitudes and behaviors (Beckage,
10 Moore, and Lacasse 2022; Peng et al. 2021).

11 Publics are neither irrelevant nor omniscient. Instead, diverse publics are structured by
12 competing interests and values, which condition how and to what effect they mobilize within
13 policymaking debates. We argue that the recent turn to green industrial policy in the United
14 States and Europe offers an opportunity to reconsider the role of public opinion in the clean
15 energy transition and unpack the notion of “political will”.

16 We identify three aspects of public opinion that affect policymaking by constraining
17 how interest groups can mobilize: the visibility of an issue, an individual’s prioritization of
18 an issue, and the public’s understanding of policy benefits and costs. Rather than public
19 opinion being irrelevant, politicians anticipate the public’s responses to political reforms and
20 the potential electoral benefits or costs. Rather than being omniscient, people are uncertain
21 about the objective costs and benefits of policies, a reality that provides latitude to interest
22 groups to frame issues at public and elite levels. Our intervention advances a more nuanced
23 understanding of individual climate policy preferences and the foundational role of public
24 opinion in the clean energy transition, showing how we can replace amorphous appeals to
25 the importance of publics with clear statements of the conditions and mechanisms through
26 which public opinion shapes decarbonization trajectories.

27 This perspective proceeds by clarifying the role that public opinion plays in climate policy
28 with the new turn to green industrial policy. We use the landmark US Inflation Reduction
29 Act (IRA), passed in late 2022, as an illustrative case, identifying how the bill side-stepped
30 public opinion barriers that stymied previous reform attempts. Then we outline a research
31 agenda on climate opinion, identifying urgent questions raised by the new politics of climate
32 change.

33 **Reconsidering the Role of Public Opinion in Climate** 34 **Politics**

35 When pollsters ask Americans whether they believe global warming is happening and are
36 worried about its impacts, for the last decade, a majority of the public consistently attest
37 that climate change is happening and they are worried (Leiserowitz, Maibach, Rosenthal,
38 and Kotcher 2022; Krosnick and MacInnis 2020), though like many issues there are patterns
39 of partisan polarization (Egan and Mullin 2017). Still, these beliefs correspond with stated
40 policy support: 69 percent of registered voters support transitioning the US economy from
41 fossil fuels to clean energy by 2050 (Leiserowitz, Maibach, Rosenthal, Kotcher, et al. 2022).

42 Despite this national consensus, leaders have largely failed to respond to public opinion
43 with meaningful climate policy. What explains this apparent disconnect (at least before the
44 IRA) between measured climate policy preferences and national policymaking actions?

45 US public opinion on climate issues has alternatively been characterized in a number of
46 ways. At one extreme, citizens are framed as irrelevant. In this account, public opinion
47 rarely influences the Congressional legislative agenda. Instead, elites and interest groups
48 dominate (Gilens and Page 2014). To the extent that the public holds coherent opinions,
49 they follow rather than lead their elected officials (Lenz 2012). Alternatively, public opinion
50 may matter but only in a very generalized fashion, such as a general public mood that can
51 thermostatically reorient elite behavior but is unlikely to shape specific policy proposals or

52 designs.¹

53 In popular debates, public opinion is often collapsed into the abstract concept of “public
54 will”. Yet, the concept of public will typically remains undefined or defined tautologically
55 as the presence of conditions under which action is possible. This account highlights the
56 importance of publics, but leaves unspecified the conditions and pathways through which
57 public opinion matters.

58 We suggest that energy and technical assessments of the energy transition will benefit
59 from engagement with a sophisticated literature on public opinion that has carefully specified
60 the mechanisms through which voters matter in supporting or resisting policy change. These
61 accounts move beyond debates over public opinion as negligible or omniscient factors in
62 shaping political “will” to instead describe the conditions that mobilize the public into
63 contentious politics.

64 There are at least three reasons why what the public thinks matters for the emergence of
65 political coalitions in support of the clean energy transition. First, the objective distribution
66 of public preferences is, at a minimum, an important input into elite incentives to act. What
67 elites think the public wants is consequential for their decision-making (Arnold 1990), so the
68 relationship between elite politics and public opinion needs careful consideration, including
69 how these perceptions are constructed. Interest groups, for example, invest considerable
70 sums to distort elite perceptions of public opinion, which contributes to inaction (Hertel-
71 Fernandez, Mildemberger, and Stokes 2019).

72 Objective public opinion is also a critical input into elite perceptions. Elite perceptions
73 of public preferences are not only constructed by interest groups. A simple fact of politics
74 is that people are sensitive to costs—and lawmakers know this. Thus, whether directly or
75 indirectly, public opinion is critical in shaping the incentives political leaders have when
76 deciding to make long-term investments to address the climate crisis.

¹Another possibility is that apparent public support for climate policy reflects a failure of measurement strategies. Here, the public appears to support action but only in poorly designed questions that don’t properly frame the costs of action.

77 Second, the public’s climate policy preferences can affect their voting behavior, which
78 shapes the type and priorities of elected leaders over time. A foundational claim on the
79 electoral connection in Congress is that incumbents are extremely sensitive to how their
80 constituents react to their votes, influencing how they vote and the policies they propose
81 (Mayhew 2004). Lawmakers who cast votes out of step with their constituents generally lose
82 re-election (Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002), and publics adjust their preferences in
83 response to policy decisions (Wlezien 1995). One study of state-level support for 39 policies
84 across eight issues found that politicians are highly responsive when citizens have policy-
85 specific opinions on salient issues, though policy may not always be congruent with these
86 opinions due to institutions and interest groups (Lax and Phillips 2012). Studies of climate
87 policy in particular show signs of responsiveness (Bromley-Trujillo and Poe 2020; Schaffer,
88 Oehl, and Bernauer 2022). Public opinion matters for policy outcomes.

89 Third, the energy transition requires that communities accept new clean energy projects
90 and that members of the public make consumption choices aligned with decarbonization
91 goals, such as transitioning from gas furnaces to heat pumps or buying an electric vehicle.
92 Public opinion directly shapes these community-level development and individual-level con-
93 sumption decisions (Carley et al. 2020). If people are uncertain about the benefits of green
94 energy projects or sustainable consumption choices, that will slow the necessary steps for
95 the energy transition.

96 Consequently, the design of policies must account for the dynamics of public opinion. If
97 not, pro-climate policymakers risk deepening polarization that could undermine the energy
98 transition (Kallbekken 2023). Reformers could inadvertently empower fossil fuel interest
99 groups that can exploit certain policy designs to undermine public support (Mildenberger
100 2020), or they could generate a political environment that elevates policy opponents into
101 office (Cooper, Kim, and Urpelainen 2018).

102 The turn to green industrial policy, as with the IRA, sidesteps several features of public
103 opinion that frustrated earlier climate policymaking efforts. Previous climate reforms were

104 either low-salience efforts with minimal efforts by opponents to politicize incremental actions
105 (e.g., Rabe 2004) or shaped by prevailing economic theory without consideration of political-
106 economic considerations. For example, US climate policymaking from around 2001 through
107 2012 fixated on putting a price on carbon pollution, and so too has public opinion research
108 on climate policy (Fairbrother 2022). Opponents, and at times proponents, framed policies
109 as generating costs and involving sacrifices. As we review, policies that increase costs (or
110 that can generate an intuitive perception of increased costs) are often a losing political
111 proposition, even when coupled with well-intentioned designs to mask those costs. Learning
112 from the pitfalls of attempts like the Waxman-Markey cap-and-trade bill, the IRA focused
113 on creating salient benefits, which likely contributed to its success.²

114 **Cost Sensitivity and Policy Support**

115 An accumulation of evidence shows how support falls when voters focus on the costs of
116 climate policies (e.g., Drews and van den Bergh 2016; Bergquist, Konisky, and Kotcher
117 2020).³ For instance, Bechtel and Scheve (2013) conducted large-scale survey experiments in
118 France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the US that randomly varied information about
119 how much a global climate agreement would cost households each month in higher energy
120 prices. They find that an increase in costs from one to two percent of GDP reduces support
121 for climate action by 20 percentage points.⁴ Surveys estimating the willingness of citizens to
122 pay for reductions in GHG emissions find that households would spend around \$80 annually
123 (Kotchen, Boyle, and Leiserowitz 2013). These estimates would imply that carbon prices are
124 politically constrained to as low as \$2 to \$8 per ton of CO₂ (Jenkins 2014), a far reach from
125 recent estimates that put the social cost of carbon at \$185 per ton (Rennert et al. 2022).
126 Likewise, Beiser-McGrath and Bernauer (2023) show how when individuals learn about the
127 costs of a carbon tax, their support drops. These public opinion findings correspond with

²Proposals like cap and trade are not impossible, as the 1990 CAA Amendments and regional efforts demonstrate. However, these successes relied on political conditions not present recently.

³Factors like perceived fairness and effectiveness also affect public support (Bergquist et al. 2022).

⁴However, Borick and Rabe (2010) find Canadians have a greater willingness to pay costs.

128 political behavior such as Washington state’s failed carbon pricing referendum (Anderson,
129 Marinescu, and Shor 2023) and the “Yellow Vests” movement in France (Douenne and Fabre
130 2022). While the public will incur some costs, political support drops as the costs rise.

131 While climate policy inaction also entails significant costs, these are more extreme in
132 the future, often outside the political time horizons of current elected leaders. Nonetheless,
133 a growing literature finds that direct experience with climatic extremes shapes support for
134 climate policy and climate science acceptance (Howe et al. 2019; Borick and Rabe 2014,
135 2010). However, these effects are often ephemeral (Egan and Mullin 2012, 2017), or remain
136 mediated by partisan politics (Hazlett and Mildemberger 2020). In other words, as the costs
137 of climate change manifest, the salience of policy costs has not been overtaken.

138 Conversely, consumers like clean energy, which the IRA seeks to expand dramatically.
139 Ansolabehere and Konisky (2014) amass a wealth of public opinion data on what energy
140 people want to use and why. They show that the attributes of energy, namely its price
141 and environmental harms, are the most important determinants of support, more so than
142 partisanship and social values. In other words, people want their electricity to be cheap
143 and clean, which reflects an openness to the clean energy transition but also reiterates the
144 public’s sensitivity to costs.

145 Reformers recognize the salience of climate policy costs and have sought strategies to
146 reduce the visibility or offset the magnitude of these costs (e.g., Arnold 1990). For example,
147 carbon pricing proposals often propose to rebate revenue to citizens (Carattini, Kallbekken,
148 and Orlov 2019). However, these proposals face two challenges. First, the newly salient policy
149 benefit (a rebate) is not the most important policy objective: the real benefit is mitigating
150 the catastrophic future effects of climate change. Setting this aside, a growing set of survey
151 experiments have shown that rebates increase public support for carbon pricing both in
152 the United States and globally (Beiser-McGrath and Bernauer 2019; Jagers et al. 2021).
153 Yet, there is little evidence that these rebates—as implemented in practice in Canada and
154 Switzerland—have reshaped political support for climate policy in the face of coordinated

155 interest group opposition (Mildenberger et al. 2022). Moreover, even simple partisan frames
156 can erase the apparent positive effect of rebates on climate policy support (Fremstad et
157 al. 2022). This emphasizes the importance of considering the gap between objective and
158 subjective policy costs. It matters not only if benefits are flowing to the public but whether
159 politically active constituents perceive these benefits. In turn, opponents often work to
160 distort these perceptions to align the public with their interest group’s preferences.

161 The IRA took a different approach to side-step the cost-sensitivity challenge. Instead of
162 imposing costs on fossil energy consumers or producers, the law focused on creating benefits.
163 Primarily, the law will make massive investments to lower the cost of clean energy and
164 encourage the electrification of cars and buildings. Of course, these investments must be
165 paid for, which could burden the public. However, the political reformers behind the IRA
166 chose to raise funds partly by closing tax loopholes. The law is also forecasted to reduce
167 deficits in the future (CBO 2022), so voters are unlikely to be saddled with debt that would
168 risk creating pressure for reversal (Gazmararian and Tingley 2023b).

169 **Local Economic Benefits**

170 In addition to making clean energy technologies cheaper, the IRA also generates local eco-
171 nomic benefits such as jobs to construct renewable energy, build batteries, and install energy-
172 efficient products.⁵ Many of these new economic opportunities are being created in Republi-
173 can states, traditional opponents of action on climate change, which could have implications
174 for the coalitions that support the energy transition in the future (Egan and Mullin 2023).
175 What does the public opinion literature say about how these local economic benefits will
176 influence the reception of the IRA?

177 Studies of Americans find that framing the benefits of the clean energy transition in terms
178 of jobs (Bayulgen and Benegal 2019) or cost savings (Gustafson et al. 2022), even among
179 Republicans who are otherwise more skeptical of the clean energy transition (Stokes and

⁵Energy transmission infrastructure is also crucial for decarbonization, and here local benefits are also important (Bergquist et al. 2020).

180 Warshaw 2017). Another survey experiment focused squarely on the local benefits, such as
181 jobs assembling electric vehicles, finds that these benefits can lock in support for the energy
182 transition (Gazmararian and Tingley 2023b). In a study of 24 countries, Bain et al. (2016)
183 find that emphasizing the economic and scientific benefits of the clean energy transition
184 can motivate individual support for actions to combat global warming, even among those
185 skeptical of human-caused climate change.⁶ In a review of studies on public acceptance of
186 energy projects, positive perceptions of benefits consistently correlated with support (Carley
187 et al. 2020).⁷

188 However, these benefits must materialize and appear credible to people on the ground.
189 Gazmararian and Tingley (2023b) present evidence from national, regional, and targeted sur-
190 veys that reveal concerns about the local benefits of green industries, such as the share of jobs
191 that go to local workers. They also show how policy solutions such as transparency around
192 investment could lessen these worries. In practice, there will also be counter-arguments that
193 try to neutralize arguments emphasizing local economic benefits, so local economic benefits
194 may not automatically translate into greater climate policy support (Bernauer and McGrath
195 2016).

196 **Policy Bundling**

197 The IRA also bundled social programs in a way that public opinion studies predict should
198 increase national support. For example, one study used a “conjoint” survey experiment that
199 independently varied the attributes of a climate policy, such as whether it is bundled with
200 social and economic reforms like affordable housing. The study found that bundling climate
201 policy with broader social reforms can build support for climate action in the US, especially
202 among people of color and Democrats, but not Republicans (Bergquist, Mildemberger, and
203 Stokes 2020). These partisan reactions to policy bundling reflect the political coalitions

⁶Other benefits from mitigation policy like public health improvement from air pollution reduction can also increase support (Myers et al. 2012).

⁷Perceptions of environmental harm also shape public support for power plants (Ansolabehere and Konisky 2009).

204 that formed around the IRA, with party-line support from Democrats and opposition from
205 Republicans.

206 Gaikwad, Genovese, and Tingley (2022) find similarly that the public prefers a bundle
207 of spending across multiple programs. Starting with the presumption that the government
208 had raised money through a price on carbon, the study considers how individuals allocate
209 spending across adaptation spending, transition assistance for impacted workers, renewable
210 energy infrastructure, and dividends for taxpayers. Individuals made allocations across the
211 categories. Further, using geographically targeted polling, the pattern of these allocations
212 reflects different priorities depending on how climate change and the energy transition will
213 impact their locality.

214 **Priorities for Future Public Opinion Research**

215 **Durability**

216 Even when climate policy passes, its long-term durability is never guaranteed. Policy losers
217 mobilize to repeal or retrench even modest climate policy efforts as has been seen in places
218 like Ontario, Canada in 2018 or Australia in 2014. Many fossil-fuel-aligned politicians in the
219 US have already begun laying the groundwork for the repeal of the IRA, accompanied by
220 government investment in expanded fossil fuel production.

221 Whether the public perceives the benefits of the IRA, such as new jobs and local tax
222 revenue, as durable will matter for the law's implementation. The possibility that a new
223 government will come to power and reverse the legislative accomplishments of its predecessor
224 or that economic circumstances might change and hinder investment is not theoretical. Gaz-
225 mararian and Tingley (2023b) show how this credibility challenge is salient in the public's
226 mind: 71 percent of the national public is uncertain that the government would keep its
227 promises to invest in their communities. Their polling of local officials across the country re-
228 veals a similar pattern, where these reversibility concerns are even more acute. If the public
229 does not view the law's benefits as durable, communities might be less willing to embrace

230 the clean energy transition. Community opposition has real costs. Their acceptance is nec-
231 essary to build battery assembly plants, install transmission lines, and deploy wind energy.
232 Local opposition has already emerged to large solar projects, such as in Williamsport, Ohio
233 (Gearino 2022).

234 Optimistically, there is initial evidence that the national public believes the benefits from
235 the IRA may stick. Gazmararian and Tingley (2023b) show in an opinion poll fielded the
236 month after the IRA passed that the public thinks that most companies and politicians are
237 unlikely to try to reverse the law. The one exception is fossil fuel companies and Republicans,
238 which about half of the public thought would be likely to try to reverse the IRA. However,
239 among Republican respondents, they were less likely to think that their party would reverse
240 the law, even though survey takers from other political parties were more skeptical.

241 This mixed picture suggests that the public is hopeful about the longevity of the law but is
242 not yet convinced that the benefits will last. Other national surveys show that few think the
243 IRA will accomplish its goals. For example, only 34 percent of the public think the law will
244 reduce global warming or the cost of electricity (Leiserowitz, Maibach, Rosenthal, Kotcher,
245 et al. 2022). This pessimism may reflect concern about the durability of benefits, potentially
246 because interest groups might try to water down the law’s implementation (Stokes 2020).

247 At least two other factors may contribute to policy durability. The first is bipartisanship.
248 The IRA passed along partisan lines—no Republican voted for it. A partisan climate law
249 may be better than no law at all, but how might the public’s perceptions of the bill’s partisan
250 passage impact the implementation and durability of the law?

251 The public opinion literature documents that voters generally prefer bipartisan policies
252 (e.g., Bergquist, Mildemberger, and Stokes 2020).⁸ This public preference for bipartisanship
253 reflects many dynamics, including an aversion to partisan extremism (Westwood 2022). Im-
254 portantly, new research shows that the public sees bipartisan laws as more durable, which
255 uniquely leads to greater support for climate policy since voters think it would last and be

⁸But see Harbridge, Malhotra, and Harrison (2014) who show that partisans may have a preference for policies supported by their own party.

256 more effective (Gazmararian and Tingley 2023b). Thus, the lack of bipartisanship could
257 create concerns about the durability of the IRA, while other features of the law’s design
258 could help to counterbalance these worries.

259 Given growing polarization in the United States (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006),
260 bipartisanship might appear as a nonviable pathway to build a political coalition for climate
261 policy. However, this defeatist view can often be a self-fulfilling prophecy. For example,
262 the public tends to underestimate the extent to which other people think climate change is
263 happening (Mildenberger and Tingley 2019). One study shows that when people learn of
264 the true level of bipartisan support for emissions mitigation, this shift in expectations can
265 lead to greater support for the clean energy transition (Gazmararian and Tingley 2023b).

266 Instead, the political logic of the IRA, which used benefits to create allies, may hinge on
267 whether the public recognizes those benefits and, therefore, politicians receive an electoral
268 reward. There is a well-documented challenge in American politics where the public does
269 not always recognize the benefits provided by the government, what Mettler (2011) calls the
270 “submerged state.” The lack of traceability can paradoxically lead citizens to oppose policies
271 of which they are beneficiaries.

272 In the context of the IRA, politicians should have incentives to try to claim credit.
273 However, the allocation of credit is difficult, especially in a federal system where the imple-
274 mentation of the IRA will involve local, state, and federal actors (Arceneaux 2006; Konisky
275 2011). Democrats who ushered through the law will want to take credit for the local benefits.
276 However, they might need to share the credit with Republican governors, for example, to
277 encourage them to accelerate the clean energy transition in their state. Some politicians
278 may even deny the IRA’s role despite benefiting because of fear of electoral consequences.
279 Who the public ultimately rewards will shape the incentives of political elites to advance or
280 forestall decarbonization.

281 **Consumer Demand for New Technologies**

282 Implementing the IRA and successfully driving a society-wide energy transition will require
283 more than climate-friendly politicians and decision-makers. The public will also be critical
284 since there must be rapid consumer uptake of household-level clean energy technologies.
285 The IRA subsidizes many of these technologies, partially through grant programs and often
286 via uncapped tax credit provisions. In the latter case, the speed of consumer technology
287 adoption will determine the overall size and impact of the legislation.

288 Some research has been done on consumer sentiment towards solar PV and electric ve-
289 hicles. However, even here, our understanding of public opinion is incomplete. And when
290 it comes to US attitudes towards other electrification technologies promoted by the IRA,
291 like heat pumps, induction stoves, and household energy storage, we know almost nothing
292 systematic (Gromet, Kunreuther, and Larrick 2013; Lesic et al. 2019).

293 In general, we still require a more nuanced understanding of how price, comfort, and
294 health considerations shape consumer sentiment. What are the optimal ways to engage the
295 public in the clean energy transition and combat misinformation about new technologies
296 that incumbent fossil fuel interests are disseminating? We also need to understand how
297 consumer sentiment toward household electrification will interact with partisan politics. To
298 date, clean energy uptake has often been bipartisan, structured by costs and not ideology
299 (Mildenberger et al. 2022). The dynamics of IRA implementation will depend on whether
300 this trend continues or whether ideological considerations dominate, as we may be seeing
301 with gas stove politics at the current moment.

302 **Environmental Justice**

303 The IRA has provisions that begin to address the decades of environmental pollution that
304 have disproportionately fallen on Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities.⁹ Interestingly,
305 there exists little systematic work on public opinion and environmental justice. Existing

⁹See Carley and Konisky (2020) on the justice and equity implications of the clean energy transition.

306 polling finds nominal support from most Americans to increase funding for low-income com-
307 munities and communities of color that are disproportionately harmed by pollution (Carman
308 et al. 2022). However, we suspect that as with support for climate mitigation policy, actual
309 support for climate justice policies might be lower if survey-takers had to consider the costs
310 of these initiatives. Indeed, one study shows that Americans do not know much about en-
311 vironmental inequalities and only exhibit marginal support for policy tools that could begin
312 to address environmental racism (Bugden 2022).

313 When it comes to the IRA, an obvious starting point is to understand whether individuals
314 whom the IRA hopes to help perceive the law’s provisions as having a positive impact over
315 time. Do they see more opportunities for employment in new green sectors? Do they notice
316 improvements in environmental quality in their community? How do objective measures of
317 changes in environmental quality map onto self-reports of daily conditions? What are the
318 next steps that members of environmental justice communities think should be taken?

319 Another line of inquiry departs from the IRA and asks about additional approaches to
320 attempt to solve inequities highlighted by environmental justice scholarship. For example,
321 Gazmararian and Tingley (2023a) are exploring how to overcome historical racial and wealth
322 inequities in rooftop solar adoption. Specifically, they are examining a potential program
323 to enable households with excess electricity from rooftop solar to donate their net-metering
324 proceeds to build renewable energy in under-served communities. The hypothesis is that
325 this policy design could create support for addressing inequitable access to rooftop solar.

326 **Globalization, Green Industrial Policy, and Carbon Border Adjust-** 327 **ments**

328 Policy designs to win public support for the energy transition at home will also have inter-
329 national ramifications that could spill over to affect public opinion in unforeseen ways. For
330 example, provisions in the IRA like “Buy America” incentives that are popular domestically
331 run up against long-standing commitments to global free trade. Many of the US’ trading

332 partners have pursued similar industrial policies. Globalization itself has It will be crucial to
333 understand how the public weighs the benefits from the clean energy transition versus the
334 gains from free trade.¹⁰

335 At the same time, there is a growing move by nations that have taken ambitious actions
336 on climate change to level the playing field at home for domestic businesses. Specifically,
337 these countries are imposing so-called “carbon border adjustments” and related tools to
338 make foreign businesses pay an equivalent price for the carbon dioxide emissions embedded
339 in their goods. Otherwise, there is a fear that domestic businesses will shift to locations where
340 they would not have to comply with more stringent climate protections. However, relatively
341 little is known about how the public will respond to trade policies. On the one hand, they
342 could be supportive because these policies would level the playing field for domestic firms.
343 On the other hand, these policies would increase costs for domestic consumers. These are
344 consequential trade-offs to understand. The large literature on public opinion and trade
345 policy will serve as a helpful launching point.

346 **Conclusion**

347 Public opinion is crucial for the policies elites support, the types of leaders and their priorities
348 over time, and the clean energy decisions of consumers. This perspective reflects on how
349 scholarship about climate change and public opinion illuminates the prospects of the turn to
350 green industrial policy. Notably, these efforts, such as the IRA, heeded the public’s sensitivity
351 to the costs of policies and focused primarily on creating local benefits.

352 Scholars should also be attentive to the ways in which the nascent energy transition itself
353 further transforms climate politics. As citizens experience the economic benefits from the
354 IRA, will support grow for more ambitious climate policy? The strategy of the law is to
355 provide local economic benefits from renewable energy production and reduced energy costs,

¹⁰There is initial evidence for EV subsidies that the public does not support restricts on automaker eligibility for these credits (Lim et al. 2022), which would suggest that economic nationalism may not be an effective messaging strategy.

356 with many of these benefits going to areas that historically opposed action on climate change.

357 A rigorous approach to understanding change in preferences would be to establish a
358 survey panel—repeated surveys of the same individual—that could track changes over time
359 at the individual level. Scholars could pair this panel data with high-resolution spatial data
360 on the distribution of benefits from the IRA to study in real time how the benefits of the law
361 shape public opinion or not. The idea of policies shaping public opinion has a long tradition
362 in the study of so-called “feedback effects” (e.g., Campbell 2012).

363 The longevity and success of green industrial policies will depend on whether the public
364 and interest groups embrace their benefits. This may not be automatic in the case of efforts
365 like the IRA due to the bill’s partisan nature, credibility challenges faced by all political
366 reforms, and the dynamics of credit claiming. Yet, much remains to be studied, including
367 the law’s environmental justice provisions, and the public’s preferences when it comes to the
368 tension between green industrial policy and the international trade regime. These mecha-
369 nisms and conditions offer a more clear statement of the importance of public opinion than
370 existing amorphous appeals to public opinion’s importance.

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