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The 2035 Initiative | Research Policy Brief

Policy bundling fails to improve decarbonization support

Decarbonization policies are often bundled with other policies to boost support or address related issues, but this can be counterproductive by alienating one side of the electorate without gaining approval from the other.

Based on Renae Marshall, Sarah E. Anderson, Leaf Van Boven, Laith Al-Shawaf, and Matthew G. Burgess. Springer Nature. Neutral and negative effects of policy bundling on support for decarbonization. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-024-03720-7 (2024).

The Policy Problem

Addressing climate change requires broad public backing for decarbonization policies across the political spectrum. In the United States, liberals generally express stronger approval for these measures than conservatives. To expand support, policymakers often bundle emissions-reduction policies with measures designed to appeal to conservatives and moderates, such as pausing EPA regulations or investing in infrastructure. They also pair these policies with social-justice measures to increase liberal buy-in. However, these strategies frequently fall short. Research indicates that bundling decarbonization with a pause on environmental regulations lowers overall approval. This approach reduces polarization by decreasing liberal approval without increasing conservative backing. Economic bundles have no significant effect on approval or polarization. Social-justice bundles lower approval and increase polarization by reducing conservative support without raising liberal endorsement. Consequently, policy bundling can undermine public backing for decarbonization by excluding one side of the political spectrum without securing meaningful support from the other.

Key Findings and Proposed Solutions:

- Policy bundling did not increase overall support. None of the policy bundles examined in the study generated greater public support for decarbonization than presenting the decarbonization policy alone.
- Reduced polarization does not imply higher support. In cases where polarization decreased, it occurred because one ideological group's support declined, not because the other group's support increased.

- Bundling can activate negativity bias. Adding a secondary policy that some individuals dislike, even when they support decarbonization on its own, can trigger negative reactions and reduce overall support for the bundle.
- Bundling carries strategic risks. Although policy bundling is often used to broaden coalitions, it can instead alienate segments of the public. In practice, bundling may backfire by reducing support without expanding the coalition.

What We Found

We found that policy bundling either has no impact or decreases overall support for decarbonization policies across all bundle types. The bundles produced distinct effects: pairing decarbonization with a pause on EPA regulations decreased support and reduced polarization by lowering liberal approval; bundling with economic redistribution or infrastructure investments had no significant effect; and bundling with social-justice policies lowered support and heightened polarization by further reducing conservative approval without increasing liberal backing. We also found evidence of negativity bias: when respondents encountered a bundle that included a disliked policy, their reaction was driven by the disliked component. This focus reduced overall support even when respondents favored decarbonization on its own. Overall, the study suggests that policy bundling can be counterproductive, risking the loss of support from one ideological group without generating gains from the other.

What We Did

We conducted a survey experiment with 2,521 adults in the United States, randomly assigning participants to different conditions to test how policy bundling affects public opinion. Each respondent viewed a decarbonization policy either on its own (the control condition) or bundled with one of four additional policy types: pausing EPA regulations, investing in infrastructure, expanding economic redistribution, or adopting social-justice policies. After reading their assigned scenario, participants rated their support for the proposal. We then compared support across conditions and examined differences between liberals and conservatives to measure ideological polarization. Statistical analyses assessed whether the bundled scenarios significantly changed support or polarization relative to the decarbonization-only condition, and whether different bundles produced different effects across ideological groups. We also drew on psychological mechanisms, such as negativity bias, to help explain why adding a disliked policy can reduce support even when individuals back decarbonization itself.

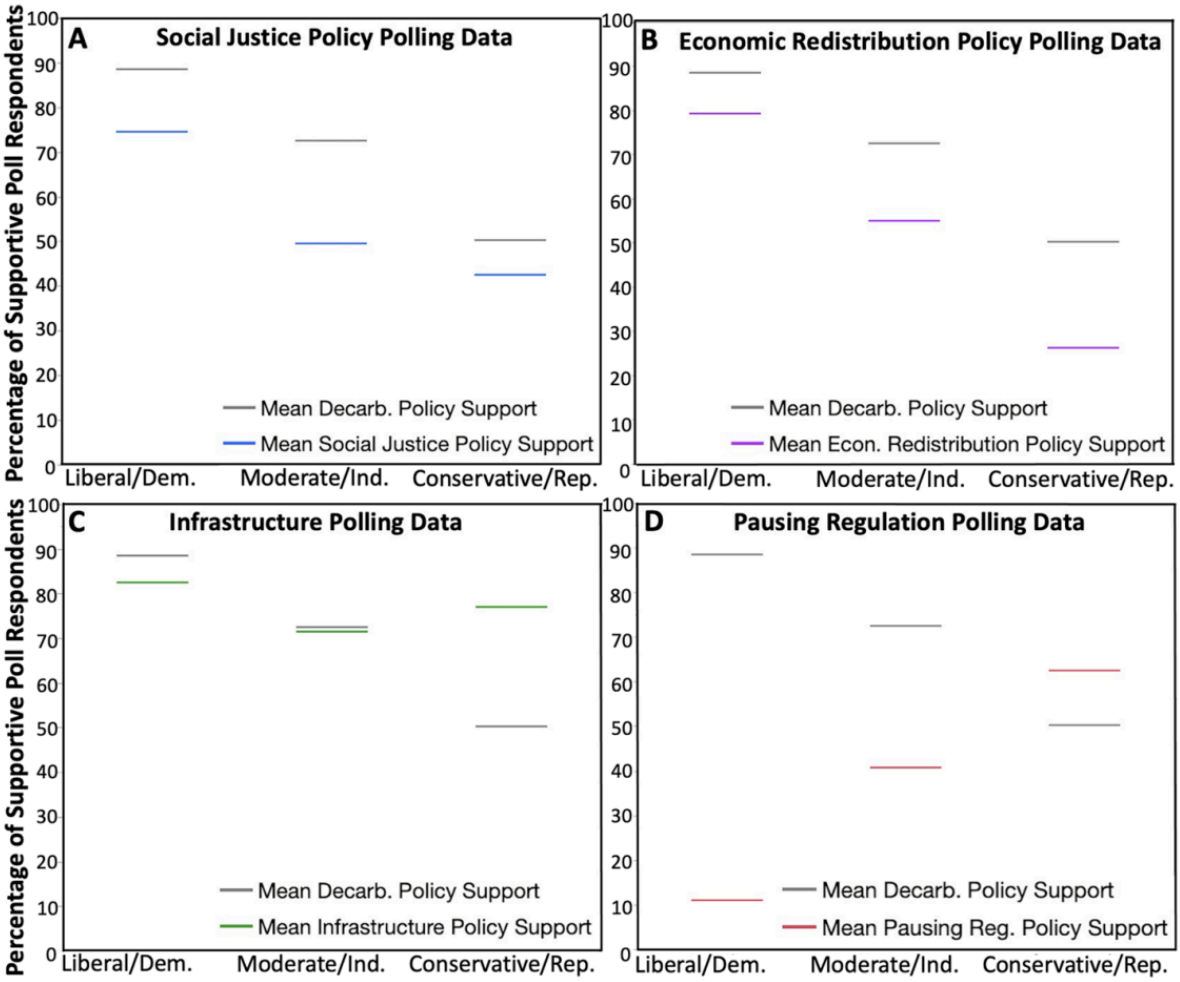

Fig. 1. Polling data on United States voters' support for decarbonization policies (gray lines in each panel) and for the additional policies considered in this study: (A) social-justice policies, (B) economic redistribution policies, (C) infrastructure investment policies, and (D) pausing environmental regulations. The x-axis shows political ideology (Liberal/Democrat, Moderate/Independent, Conservative/Republican), and the y-axis indicates the percentage of respondents who expressed support for each policy.