

Cross-party agreement on decarbonization but no master plan for electricity system

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Which political parties have the most ambitious climate and energy policies? The answer, according to a new study, is surprising. In Germany, France, Spain and Italy, parties across the political spectrum, from the Greens to the Liberals, show a similar level of ambition on this score. However, researchers have also identified a major impediment to the energy transition: none of the investigated parties has a convincing idea for a technology mix that would ensure grid stability despite weather-related fluctuations in wind and solar energy.

The researchers analyzed climate policies in the EU's four largest [electricity](#) markets. In the case of Germany and Spain, representative citizen polls were also considered in the investigation. As lead author Richard Thonig from the IASS explains, the political parties were categorized according to three distinct [energy](#) transition strategies or pathways: "In the state-centered approach, the task of planning the energy transition is left to experts, who prescribe how exactly grid expansion or the nuclear and coal phaseout should proceed. In the market-centered [strategy](#), market actors are trusted to determine the specifics of the future

energy system and the government's role is limited to defining the boundary conditions of the transition. Grassroots-centered strategies, by contrast, aim for a decentralized, citizen-led [energy transition](#)." The study shows how the three approaches manifest in national climate targets, renewable electricity targets, and the flexibility preferences of government and opposition [political parties](#).

Flexibility options are required to deal with the challenge of intermittent renewable electricity. To ensure an uninterrupted electricity supply, electricity generation and consumption need to be balanced. This can be achieved through cross-border electricity trading, the development of storage facilities, or the installation of additional generation capacities, based, for example, on biomass or concentrated solar power.

Strong goals, weak strategy

Across the [political spectrum](#), researchers found a similar level of ambition with regard to decarbonisation and the expansion of renewables among parties and citizens alike. Thus, contrary to their expectations, the different political ideologies had hardly any effect on energy policy preferences. All three pathways foresee more stringent decarbonisation targets over time, ranging from 75% to 100% by 2050 (compared to 1990). While there is no significant ideologically motivated difference in overall ambition, the decarbonisation targets set by the market-centered strategy are somewhat lower (75% to 80% by 2050) than those of the grassroots-centered (85% to 95%) and state-centered (75% to 100%) pathways.

However, to have any chance of meeting these targets, governments now need to make up for lost time. "Regardless of the strategies they pursue—grassroots, state-centered or market-centered—none of the parties has a plan that is even remotely clear about how they intend to ensure a stable and reliable future supply of

electricity in the absence of sunshine or wind," summarizes co-author Johan Lilliestam. "Climate targets that are compatible with the Paris Agreement call for the decarbonisation of the European electricity system well before the year 2050. To allow for that possibility, governments now urgently need to adopt plausible policy pathways for achieving that goal." For the rapidly emerging renewable electricity system, flexibility is an issue that needs far more political attention.

More information: Richard Thonig et al, Does ideology influence the ambition level of climate and renewable energy policy? Insights from four European countries, *Energy Sources, Part B: Economics, Planning, and Policy* (2020). DOI: [10.1080/15567249.2020.1811806](https://doi.org/10.1080/15567249.2020.1811806)

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