

Beyond compensation: Climate politics, mobilization, and transformative statecraft

Benjamin Braun

LSE

Leah Downey

King's College London

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Abstract

Governments have pursued decarbonization through a combination of subsidies for capital and compensation for people. Political scientists have identified the compensation of those who incur losses from climate policies as the central challenge in building green coalitions and achieving a just transition. However, a decarbonization path aimed at limiting global warming to 2 degrees Celsius entails transformative change for virtually everyone. We argue that, under such conditions, a compensation-based approach reduces green backlash to pocketbook concerns; citizens to bundles of fixed preferences; and evaluation to policy-by-policy assessment. Proposing to move beyond compensating existing preferences, we contend that transformative statecraft reshapes preferences through political mobilization. From this perspective, a technocratic approach—focused on calculation and compensation—constitutes a binding constraint on green statecraft. We defend this mobilization-based approach against the objections of manipulation and deprivation of freedom and suggest that a democratic version of transformative statecraft is possible.

Keywords: Technocracy, preferences, green transition, just transition, economic planning.

The world's remaining carbon budget has shrunk to the point where avoiding catastrophic climate change requires a green transformation of unprecedented speed, scale, and scope.¹ Policies that stand a chance of limiting global warming to under 2 degrees Celsius would bring rapid change to virtually all areas of life, segments of society, and sectors of production (Paterson, 2020). In our estimation, the implications of this for climate politics are not adequately reflected in contemporary political science, nor the dominant approach to climate policy in most large democratic states. The dominant paradigm, what we refer to here as technocratic statecraft, remains premised on a conception of politics concerned with who gets what where and how (Lasswell, 1936). Seen through this theoretical lens, building political support for climate policies is about compensating those who incur losses under those policies. Challenging this approach, we contend that sustaining change at the scale and speed called for by climate change requires a level of economic and political support from citizens that compensation-based, technocratic statecraft cannot generate or sustain.

Instead, we contend that *mobilization* constitutes a forgotten dimension of transformative statecraft. How “political entrepreneurs” mobilize voters by amplifying group identities and political cleavages has seen resurgent interest in political science (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020; Westheuser & Zollinger, 2025), as has the disappearance of the institutional infrastructures enabling sustained political mobilization (Jäger, 2026). This perspective remains underrepresented, however, in the literature on climate politics, which is divided into an electoral politics strand focused on compensating losers and a political economy strand focused on the technocratic capacity to mobilize *capital*. By contrast, we argue that transformative statecraft also hinges on political actors' capacity to mobilize *citizens* in support of collectively agreed goals. As noted by Bartolini (2000, p. 11) in his study of the European left, ‘mobilization’ carries a dual meaning, referring to “a complex process of self-mobilization and heteromobilization—of ‘being mobilized’ and of mobilizing.” In our definition, transformative democratic statecraft is characterized by a fluid boundary between state-led

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“hetero-mobilization”—carried out by political parties or governments, with the goal not merely of assembling coalitions but of shaping preferences and forging collective political identities—and bottom-up “self-mobilization.”² The most common connotation of such state-led mobilization is, of course, with war, and with the transformation of civilians into active soldiers. However, societies can be mobilized for other causes, from national independence to economic development (Beissinger, 2002; Kadiyar, 2018). Our focus here is on peacetime mobilization only.

Our contribution provides support to the view that a successful green transformation needs to be “fighting off the technocratic temptation” (Landemore, 2023, p. 37). This is not, of course, an argument against scientific expertise. Rather, our purpose is to challenge the idea that policy design centered on calculation and compensation suffices to build political coalitions sufficiently robust to sustain the profound social and economic transformation called for by climate change. We develop this argument in four sections. The first develops our critique of technocratic statecraft, which we describe as based on calculation and compensation. We argue that this approach focuses on pocketbook politics, treats citizens as merely the source of fixed preference data, and assesses policies at the margin rather than as a wholistic political program. The upshot is that technocratic statecraft cannot support the sort of transformation that the climate crisis requires. The second section is dedicated to developing the concept of transformation statecraft. In this section we introduce the concepts of incommensurable futures and malleable preferences and highlight their importance when it comes to engendering transformations through policy. Section three defends the possibility of democratic transformative statecraft, responding to two common objections to a mobilization-based politics—the charges of manipulation and incursions on individual freedom. Turning to transformative statecraft in practice, section four draws on the successes and failures of the US *Inflation Reduction Act* to emphasize the importance of experimentalism, ambition, and visibility. Section five concludes.

²For a definition of ‘being mobilized’ that equates social mobilization with the historical *process* of transformative change, see Deutsch (1961, p. 494): “the process in which major clusters of old social, economic and psychological commitments are eroded or broken and people become available for new patterns of socialization and behavior.”

Technocratic statecraft

Political science used to operate with a *diplomatic* conception of climate politics that regarded emission reduction as an economic burden that sovereign states were keen to avoid, preferring to free ride on other countries' efforts. When the accelerating energy transition highlighted the availability of economic gains in renewable energy and cleantech manufacturing, political scientists developed a *distributional conception* of climate politics (Aklin & Mildenerberger, 2020; Colgan et al., 2021).³ Here, governments seeking to implement climate policies need to overcome resistance from producers and consumers who would lose from those policies (Finnegan, 2022; Gaikwad et al., 2022; Mildenerberger, 2020; Schaffer, 2024). From this perspective, the primary challenge for climate policy is not free-riding in international relations but the distribution of gains and losses among domestic constituencies. The "justice" of the green transition, hitherto considered primarily an ethical question, was recognized as the central political question posed by climate change (Aklin, 2025).

This re-framing of decarbonization as a political economy problem marked an important forward. And yet, by conceptualizing climate politics as a distributional 'problem' to be solved—albeit a "super wicked problem" (Levin et al., 2012, p. 124)—this approach continues to frame climate politics as a question of reform, as opposed to a question of transformation. If the problem to be solved is distributional, as this approach suggests, then the appropriate approach to policy construction will be technocratic one focused on calculating and compensating. The thinking is thus: governments seeking to implement reform are likely to face opposition from groups who expect to lose from the new policy. Lindvall (2017) distinguishes two possible strategies to overcome such opposition. Where political power is concentrated and faces no significant veto players, the government can choose to *ignore* losers.⁴ By contrast, where power is shared and where organized interest groups can therefore block reform, the government has the option to *compensate* losers via side payments.

³For an early contribution emphasizing this point, see Newell and Paterson (1998).

⁴For a discussion of coercion in the context of green industrial policy, see Downey (2025).

For compensation to be an option, the reform needs to meet the Kaldor-Hicks criterion of social welfare, which requires the policy to generate a societal surplus large enough to allow for the redistribution of a part of it to the losers, without erasing the winners' gains (Lindvall, [2017](#), pp. 14–15). In practice, governments frequently use compensation as a political instrument. The literature on international trade, for instance, has assembled robust evidence that welfare states have compensated citizens for the increased risks associated with economic openness (Rodrik, [1998](#); Walter, [2010](#)).

Building on these ideas, political science has focused on climate policies' distributional consequences as the key determinant of political support. Actors whose status or income derives from sources that are hurt by climate policies will oppose such policies. Carbon taxes, with their straightforward distributional consequences, offer a particularly clear example (Beiser-McGrath & Bernauer, [2024](#); Beiser-McGrath & Busemeyer, [2024](#)).⁵ Observing the ubiquity of political and electoral backlash against climate policy (Patterson, [2023](#); Stokes, [2016](#)), the literature has converged on compensation as the central element of successful green coalition-building. For any climate policy that makes society as a whole better off it should be possible to partially redistribute the surplus to compensate the 'losers' via side payments (Aklin & Urpelainen, [2013](#); Finnegan, [2022](#); Meckling & Nahm, [2022](#)).

Using design-based empirical approaches, students of climate politics have produced ample evidence that compensating losers increases support for climate policies. Using survey-based methods, Gaikwad et al. ([2022](#)) have shown that those particularly vulnerable to phase-out policies—residents in coal mining areas in the United States and India—are particularly supportive of targeted compensation for losses. At the population level, progressive compensation policies targeting households rather than firms have been found to increase support for German election candidates promoting energy transition policies (Mares et al., [2025](#)). A second empirical approach uses causal inference designs to capture the impact of real-world compensation policies. Policies that have been found to increase support for climate measures include

⁵On the broader role of carbon taxes in a just transition, see Mintz-Woo ([2024](#)) and Broome ([2024](#)).

unemployment benefits for workers in adversely impacted sectors in the United States (Kono, 2020); and a negotiated settlement with trade unions in a coal-mining area in Spain that included community investment provisions (Bolet et al., 2024). Colantone et al. (2024) have shown that it was the absence of targeted compensation that increased the far-right vote share among owners of cars that were banned from the city of Milan.

Far from being only of theoretical interest, technocratic, compensation-based statecraft has become a key organizing principle for climate policymaking. This is particularly evident in the European Union, where the European Commission has frequently pledged that its European Green Deal was designed to “leave no one behind” (Crespy & Munta, 2023, p. 236). The EU’s Just Transition Mechanism relies on several funding sources to invest in fossil-fuel dependent regions or sectors impacted by phase-out policies or industrial transformation (Ergen & Schmitz, 2025). Given the EU’s commitment to matching its transformative policies by “equally extended forms of compensations”, Fifi and Gao (2025) have identified the emergence of a European “compensatory state”. According to the dominant view in the climate politics literature, this increase in the EU’s capacity to identify and compensate climate-policy losers should improve the prospects for ambitious green statecraft. However, as Rodríguez-Pose (2026, p. 6) has observed for *Cohesion Policy*, the EU’s framing of it has been characterized by a “creeping losers’ compensation terminology” that framed the policy “as reactive and palliative rather than proactive and structural.”⁶ This shift towards what Rodríguez-Pose calls a “defensive” posture is emblematic of climate policymaking at large. From our perspective, it is governments’ weak capacity for political mobilization that limits their capacity to pursue *transformative* political programs.

To view climate politics as centered on distribution, as a matter of “who gets what, when, how” (Lasswell, 1936), lends itself to a particular approach to statecraft. We call this technocratic statecraft as it is dominated by policy reforms that rest on calculation and compensation. The state is engaged in technocratic statecraft when it treats citizens as the source of data (preferences, interests, patterns). It harvests this data

⁶Note that Rodríguez-Pose made this observation during his tenure as chair of the ‘High-Level Group on the future of Cohesion policy.’

from citizens in order to calculate the compensation necessary to make desired policy politically possible. As we argue in the remainder of this article, however, such an approach to statecraft is limiting as it fails to permit truly *transformative* policy changes. A rejection of technocratic statecraft is by no means a rejection of expertise or administration. It is a rejection of technocratic *decisiveness*. What we seek to show in this article is that limiting climate statecraft to calculation and compensation will be insufficient to secure the transformations required to overcome climate crisis.

This technocratic approach to statecraft is reductionist in three notable ways. It reduces anti-system change aversion to pocketbook concerns; it understands citizens primarily as a source of fixed preference data; and it relies on policy-by-policy evaluation. Each of these reductionist moves, as we argue, contributes to the inability of the technocratic approach to deliver truly *transformative* policy change.

Reducing green backlash to pocketbook concerns

By focusing on compensation, the existing literature effectively centers on climate policies' material impact on personal income. Given the all-encompassing nature of the transformation needed for decarbonization, a narrow focus on 'pocketbook' considerations risks being reductionist. For instance, perceived climate policy losses may stem from a broader sense of disenfranchisement (Dolšák & Prakash, 2022). Indeed, change itself can be construed, and perceived, as a 'loss'. This is particularly relevant in a context of pervasive "anti-system politics", in which far-right political entrepreneurs have successfully framed climate policy as a key component of an expert-governed system removed from, and even opposed to, the interests of ordinary citizens (Hopkin, 2020, p. 51). From a sociological perspective, any change to a community's environment or way of living constitutes a 'loss' (Elliott, 2018). The importance of a more general "change aversion" for climate policy is well understood in environmental psychology (Gifford et al., 2018) and arguably is one factor underpinning right-wing parties' success in mobilizing against climate policies (Arend et al., 2025; Kulin et al., 2021; Lockwood & Lockwood, 2022; Vihma et al., 2021). This ubiquity of 'loss' under transforma-

tive change points to the crucial importance of framing climate policies as milestones towards collectively shared visions of alternative futures. After all, it is not climate policy as such that causes backlash—coal mining communities have been found to shift to the right even when they are displaced not by renewables but by the shale gas industry (Gazmararian, [2025](#)).

Reducing citizens to bundles of fixed preferences

The compensation-based approach assumes that citizens are “units with enduring attitudes, preferences, and identities” (White, [2024](#), p. 79). If the preferences of reform-opposing constituencies are fixed, a reformist government can indeed only choose between ignoring losers and compensating them. While this assumption might be justifiable for social affairs or trade, where policymaking is often incremental, it is harder to justify for climate policy, where change needs to be faster and wider in scope—in other words, where it needs to be transformative.⁷

Transformative decisions are just that; they *transform* the decision maker or the choice environment. Transformative decision making is a familiar topic in the philosophical literature where scholars argue that when individuals decide to have children or get married or move to a new country, we cannot consider them to be the same person before and after the choice point (Chang, [2017](#); Ullmann-Margalit, [2006](#)). In other words, such decisions are fundamentally transformative. Consequently, calculative decision theory does not apply to such “big decisions” (Ullmann-Margalit, [2006](#), p. 158). Weighing the pros and cons of having children based on one’s current preferences is to ignore the transformative consequences on one’s circumstances and preferences that such a decision could have. In the same vein, technocratic statecraft, by extrapolating gains and losses from policies based on existing preferences, reduces the universe of feasible options by ignoring scenarios of preference-altering, transformative change. If rapid decarbonization requires a transformation of how we live, consume, and produce, it makes little sense to hold individual preferences constant.

⁷Note that Lindvall ([2017](#)) applies his theory of reform capacity to multiple policy areas but *not* to climate policy.

Reducing the scope of policy evaluation

The third critique is that technocratic statecraft adopts a policy-by-policy approach to evaluating alternative futures. The implicit *ceteris paribus* assumption is justifiable in a context of reform politics and incremental change but is questionable in a context of transformative politics in which other things are *not* equal. Although theoretically grounded in historical institutionalism and the idea that policies have cumulative political consequences (Pierson, 2004), in practice, the methodological prevalence of survey experiments and causal inference designs means that the empirical focus is almost always on individual policies, as opposed to comprehensive visions for alternative futures.⁸ The upshot is a ‘transition’ conception of decarbonization under which individual gains and losses can—indeed, can *only*—be calculated on a policy-by-policy basis (White, 2025b). If instead climate policies are conceived as amounting to transformative change, the question is no longer about the marginal impact of each individual policy but about how people assess the desirability, and credibility of the broader political vision guiding those policies. In a context of continuous and transformative change, “policy feedback loops” re-shape the social, institutional, and political terrain on which preferences are formed and articulated (Hacker & Pierson, 2019; Hertel-Fernandez, 2020).⁹ The transformative change called for by the climate crisis offers political actors significantly greater scope to mobilize support for comprehensive visions of the future.

Lastly, there is the overarching point that the scale and scope of the green transformation introduce a level of uncertainty that far exceeds ‘normal’ politics (Eich, 2025; Scoones, 2024). This uncertainty extends to both the policy pathways to decarbonization and to citizens’ preferences. Recent empirical work in political science has highlighted the uncertainty surrounding citizens preferences, and the tendency of politicians to underestimate the level of public support for climate mitigation policies. A

⁸Note that while conjoint survey experiments do allow for the comparison of policy alternatives across multiple dimensions, they are deployed primarily to compare variations of the same policy.

⁹As argued by Hertel-Fernandez (2020), policies “shift the political views or actions of the mass public ... change the capacities of government agencies [and] help interest groups, movements, and businesses gain material or political clout.”

recent cross-national study of politicians' theories of voter behavior shows that politicians are significantly more likely than citizens "to see voters as [...] retrospective rather than prospective, egocentric rather than sociotropic, focused on single issues rather than multiple issues, [and] concerned about the short term rather than the long term" (Lucas et al., 2025, p. 2). This is all the more important in light of evidence that knowledge of the urgency of bringing down global greenhouse gas emissions is as deficient among members of parliament as among voters (Kenny & Geese, 2025). Similarly, an analysis of public opinion and politicians' views in Belgium, which points to a pattern of politicians not only underestimating public support for climate policy, but being less supportive of climate policy than the broader public (Walgrave & Soontjens, 2025). These findings suggest that politicians tend to overestimate public opposition to climate mitigation policies, while underestimating the potential of re-shaping preferences through political mobilization.

Technocratic statecraft, as described here, cannot support *transformation*. The act of transforming seeks to make the future different from the past. It requires letting go of the status quo. The future being uncertain, letting go of the status quo inevitably requires taking risks that cannot be precisely calculated. At the same time, a transformative policy agenda offers significantly greater scope for persuasion. If rapid decarbonization requires a transformation of how we live, consume, and produce, it makes little sense to hold individual preferences constant. Instead, transformative statecraft seeks to bring about a future and a citizenry with a preference set that are fundamentally unlike the present.

Transformative statecraft

We have argued that technocratic statecraft envisions its task as designing and implementing reforms, and in compensating those upon whom those reforms inflict material losses. Under such a regime, the government views citizens as bundles of fixed preferences and interests, on the basis of which losses can be calculated and compen-

sated. The policy changes that are possible within a technocratic approach are thus those which are calculable using citizens' existing preferences. By contrast, we want to suggest here, that the sort of policies required to meet the climate challenge are those that will engender a *transformation* in society—those that will so fundamentally change citizens and their environment, that they are *not* amenable to a calculation and compensation approach. Consider, to meet the climate challenge we will need to completely revamp how societies generate and consume energy, upending the way people relate to transportation, household heating, and even food consumption. These are not marginal reforms. Should we succeed, they will collectively constitute a major *transformation*.

A rejection of technocratic statecraft, and in particular the decisiveness of compensation and calculation, is a call for an injection of *politics* into the policymaking process. We conceptualize politics here using the concept of mobilization. The dominance of a demobilized form of statecraft has long been critiqued as “depoliticized democracy” or “post-democracy” (Crouch, 2004; Mair, 2000).¹⁰ On this account, political leaders have retreated from civil society and party democracy into “the world of government and the state” (Mair, 2006, p. 46). The reduction of politics to ‘good governance’, defined as the competent solving of problems, differs fundamentally from the traditional function of parties, which was “to integrate and, if necessary, to mobilize the citizenry” (Mair, 2006, p. 48). Technocratic statecraft may be capable of governing a more or less stable status quo, enabling the occasional reform, but is ill-suited to producing the sort of transformational political programs called for by climate change.¹¹

Charles Maier has identified mobilization as a crucial element of what he calls the “project state”, whose definitive feature is that its ambition goes “far beyond ordinary administration” and instead seeks “to transform the nonpolitical institutions of society” (Maier, 2023, pp. 16, 22). In contrast to developmental and regulatory states, whose functioning depended on economic governance via calculation and compen-

¹⁰Our understanding of technocratic green statecraft has much in common with the concept of ‘depoliticization’. See, for instance, Burnham (2001), Fawcett et al. (2017), and Halikias (2026).

¹¹For a related critique of promoting decarbonization through policy “stability” as opposed to through politicization, see Tobin et al. (2025).

sation, project states purposely politicize developmental goals in order to mobilize citizens.

We define mobilization as the purposeful activation of power and resources to pursue transformative change. This is, in a sense, one definition of politics—certainly according to a recent literature that understands politics as a choice between alternative futures (Beckert, 2016; Benanav, 2025; Cordelli, 2025; Eich, 2025; White, 2025a). Admittedly, moving away from statecraft rooted in calculation and compensation means entering a world characterized by greater uncertainty. The technocratic approach has proliferated in democratic states because calculation and compensation is one approach to securing the support of citizens for a given policy change. Indeed, it is a straightforward, predictable approach to democratic politics. Transformative statecraft relies instead on mobilizing citizens. What is required to mobilize citizens to support the choice of one potential transformative future over another is not calculable in the same way that compensation is. While technocratic statecraft suggests that the success of a policy rests on distributional transfers, transformative statecraft's success rests on its ability to spark enough support from citizens to realize the desired outcome. Consequently, while the promise of compensation might be enough to mobilize some citizens some of the time, it is unlikely to be able to be sufficient to mobilize most citizens in pursuit of transformative change. Furthermore, it is far from the only available mechanism to mobilize citizens, when they are conceptualized as dynamic participants in the transformation, rather than static sources of data. As successful historical examples will show, mobilizing citizens in a democratic context can arise through a combination of political judgment, convincing narratives, powerful rhetoric, strong leadership, the capacity to build coalitions, and the ability to tap into the power of numbers (Abizadeh, 2021). What this looks like will be different in states with different histories, values, and priorities. Indeed, mobilization need not be democratic at all, a point we will return to below.

In what follows we introduce two notions common to ecological economics and the economic planning literature: *incommensurability of alternative futures* and of the

malleability of preferences. The need for political science to engage with these ideas stems from the transformative impact of climate mitigation and adaptation policies, which will change social and economic life in ways that will render the numerical calculation of gains and losses across alternative policy paths impossible, while fundamentally reshaping individual preferences.

Incommensurable futures

Compensating someone who loses out from a specific policy means redistributing just enough resources to turn the loss into a gain. Such calculation is only possible when all the relevant factors—all the benefits and all the costs—are known and comparable on a common scale—in other words, commensurable. By contrast, choosing between alternative, incommensurable futures requires political decisions based on some form of subjective judgment. In other words, shifting between commensurable futures does not constitute a *transformation*.

The concept of commensurability is at the heart of the intellectual tradition of ecological economics. It refers to the existence of a “common measure of the different consequences of an action based on a cardinal scale of measurement” (Martinez-Alier et al., 1998, p. 278). The pioneering theorist of incommensurability is Otto Neurath (1973). In addition to promoting the use of physical metrics such as energy units, rather than monetary metrics, in economic policy decision making, Neurath rejected wholesale the use of a single unit, monetary or otherwise. Comparing coal and hydropower, for instance, economists in the early twentieth century insisted that calculating the benefits and costs of the alternatives “required a common unit of measurement.” (O’Neill, 2004). Rejecting this view, Neurath argued that no single metric, let alone a single measurable metric, could capture all the relevant factors needed to make a decision between possible future energy systems. The same insight applies to moral values more broadly, which “cannot be reduced to a single scale of value without a serious loss of ethical texture” (Bronk & Beckert, 2022). Therefore, instead of trying to make alternative futures commensurable by expressing them in seemingly

common units, such as money or hours, “[o]ne must directly judge the desirability of the two possibilities” (Neurath, [1973](#), p. 146).

Statecraft that seeks to *transform* the existing state of affairs, whether that be the energy system or not, requires more than calculation. This doesn’t mean, of course, that expertise and administration are not beneficial, or even required for successful statecraft. When it comes to transformation, they simply cannot be decisive.

Under a technocratic regime, policymakers sidestep this problem by folding all measurable aspects of alternative futures into a single metric—usually gross domestic product (GDP). A monetary metric for national economic success, GDP is not, of course, a comprehensive measure—it does not capture economic activities that lack price tags, such as unpaid care work, nor the value of the natural world (Stiglitz et al., [2010](#)). There have been many attempts to achieve more comprehensive metrics, of both economic well-being and well-being more generally (Coyle, [2025](#); Dynan & Sheiner, [2018](#); Menand, [2022](#)). Better indicators, however, will not solve the fundamental problem that “[n]o matter which metric is chosen, the result is always a radical simplification of the multi-dimensional problems we face” (Benanav, [2025](#), p. 4). Advocates of democratic economic planning have long emphasized the importance of converting “things which figure as ‘data’ in the static problem [...] into ‘variables’ in a dynamic framework” (Adaman & Devine, [1996](#), p. 528).

Taking incommensurability seriously leads away from a policy-by-policy compensation calculus. Instead, comparing incommensurable futures is to compare them in all dimensions that we care about—which requires a political process that allows for what ecological economists have called “multicriteria evaluation” (Martinez-Alier et al., [1998](#)). Although experts have an important role to play here, decision-making cannot be delegated to them (Benanav, [2025](#)). Technocratic evaluation is part of the process but cannot capture all criteria to which people assign value, which is why multicriteria evaluation of alternative futures requires political deliberation, contestation and, therefore, mobilization. It is through this mobilizing effect of engaging with alternative futures that citizens can form new preferences.

Malleable preferences

A second problem to which technocratic statecraft cannot provide a solution is that once the ideological dimension of ‘losing’ is acknowledged, climate politics confronts the question of the malleability of people’s personal preferences and political commitments. Key to the functionality of technocratic statecraft is the possibility of *calculating* what policies are in the public interest. Hence the commitment of technocratic statecraft to commensurability and fixed preferences, which enable just this sort of calculation. Technocratic statecraft lacks transformative potential because it is limited to building electoral coalitions based on peoples’ existing preferences. Citizens, and more specifically their existing preferences, are the central focus of public policy, as they provide the necessary data, but not its authors. Consequently, citizens are bound to experience any true transformation as a loss of the previous arrangement—even if a desirable one. If ‘loss’ is defined narrowly as resulting from a specific policy, and if compensation is required for all individuals who ‘lose’ as a result of that policy, then transformative political visions are off the table.¹²

Recently, political scientists have shown renewed interest in the instability of individual preferences. For instance, public opinion about the existence of a trade-off between economic growth and environmental protection shows high variation and uncertainty (McNeil & Barnes, 2025). More generally, and regardless of the policy area, preference intensity is highly sensitive to measurement approaches (Cavaillé et al., 2025).¹³ This uncertainty, we argue, stems from the underlying malleability of individual preferences. Consider the case of fuel taxes, which have frequently been associated with climate policy backlash (Driscoll, 2023). A fuel tax imposes a monetary loss on car owners and users. According to a compensation-based approach to statecraft, these voters would need a side-payment to get on board with such a policy. By contrast, imagine an approach that focused on the capacity of the state to transform

¹²On this view, technocratic statecraft is about designing and delivering the compensation required to turn Kaldor-Hicksian gains into pure Pareto gains.

¹³Relatedly, preferences are unpredictable—a point emphasized by Hayek in the context of the socialist calculation debates, see O’Neill (2004).

people's transportation environment—to offer better public transportation, reducing the cost of travel as well as the need for costly car ownership. If we assume citizens' preferences for travel are fixed, then this would be a very hard sell. However, if we take citizens' preferences to be malleable, for them to be open to a future in which public transportation was preferable to the existing arrangement, then more futures become possible and more potential coalitions emerge.¹⁴ In focusing on compensating individuals based on their existing preferences, the technocratic approach to statecraft limits the possibilities for the sort of transformative change called for by the climate crisis.

A further problem arising from the dependence of technocratic statecraft on existing preferences is that those preferences are constrained by the material, environmental, social and political environment within which citizens form them.¹³ It is widely recognized that citizens form preferences through the process of decision-making, rather than preferences pre-existing choices. Consequently, the technocratic approach to statecraft does not permit citizens to have preferences over potential futures. More specifically, as Wootton (1945, p. 125) has argued, it permits citizens to form preferences over available consumption goods—such as theater tickets—but not over potential states of affairs—such as full employment. Hers remains a powerful critique of the limitations technocratic statecraft imposes on freedom. We all have consumptive preferences within our given political and economic context. But these preferences are not determinatively related to our preferences for what that context should be. In other words, we cannot read a person's political preferences off the preferences revealed by their consumption decisions (Hebenton & O'Neill, 2024). An individual might, in a context in which plane tickets are cheap and readily available, choose to fly regularly. This does not mean that the same individual would not support political change that would make flying much more difficult. To assume this is to presume that individuals' consumptive preferences are fixed and that they are the basis for her political prefer-

¹⁴For an example of conflict at the elite level—in this case, between the government and a judicial body over air pollution in New Delhi—changing mass policy preferences and perceptions of the causes of pollution, see Beiser-McGrath (2023).

ences, rather than the other way around.¹⁵ But this is, at the very least, not obvious. After all, we cannot have a consumptive preference for a good that does not yet exist. And it is the political process that influences the scale and direction of investment, and thus which goods will be invented, produced, and brought to market.

Normative challenges

Accepting the view that citizens' preferences are malleable has long garnered criticism, for two main reasons. One is the historical association of transformative political projects with autocratic forms of government. Charles Maier has identified mobilization as a crucial element of what he calls the "project state", whose definitive feature is that its ambition goes "far beyond ordinary administration" and instead seeks "to transform the nonpolitical institutions of society" (Maier, 2023, pp. 16, 22). Project states purposely politicize developmental goals in order to mobilize citizens in support. This can, but need not necessarily take democratic forms. Notorious examples include Stalin's push for collectivization and industrialization and Mao's 'great leap forward', which pursued developmental goals via coercive mobilization from above, usually directed against perceived "enemies" or "slackers" (Maier, 2023, pp. 5–6).

The second reason why mobilization by political elites is regarded with suspicion is the view that a democratic state should distill and enact the pre-existing, rational preferences of its citizenry. While many democratic theorists "allow that political elites can shape constituent preferences", such preference shaping reaches its normative limit in "strategic action by [self-interested] elites" (Disch, 2011, p. 101). In other words, mobilization is seen as perilously close to manipulation, defined as the "intent to deceive or create conditions of choice leading others to make a choice not in their interests" (Mansbridge, 2003, p. 519).¹⁶ Consequently, to move away from an approach to state-

¹⁵This view likely has roots in social choice theory, with its approach to political analysis rooted in a view of citizens as rational and largely self-interested, making decisions on how to vote based on comparing estimated incoming streams under different governments. See Downs (1957, p. 49).

¹⁶For a related argument specifically on climate politics, see Garcia-Gibson (2022) on "undemocratic climate protests."

craft rooted in a view that citizens preferences are to be harvested and adhered to, to one in which those preferences are considered dynamic objects of political transformation, is to open the door to a manipulation objection and a freedom objection. In this section, we engage with, and refute, both objections.

Manipulating preferences

Treating individual preferences as malleable need not open the door to manipulation. Citizens do not walk through life with a set of pre-existing preferences for every possible choice hidden deep within them. Rather, our preferences are formed through our experiences of making decisions, our social environment, and our exposure to political leadership, argument, and rhetoric. Consequently, while the malleability of individual preferences might leave individuals open to manipulation, it also leaves them open to the influence of leadership, organization, social norms, and other less sinister forms of social dynamism.

To that end, we contend that democratic transformative statecraft is possible. While we cannot defend the claim here that a democratic path to decarbonization will be more effective than a non-democratic one, there are good reasons to think this may be the case. As a “powerful collective process for solving problems” and a higher capacity for learning than either the price mechanism or hierarchical bureaucracies, democracy is well suited to long-term planning (Farrell & Shalizi, 2015, p. 212). Given the challenges associated with planning and orchestrating an orderly green transformation, democracy offers possibilities for bottom-up cooperation, informational efficiency, and burden sharing that purely market-based or autocratic governance systems lack (Ban & Hasselbalch, 2025; Durand et al., 2023).¹⁷ What we do assume here is that if an effective democratic green transformation is possible, it would be preferable to one that suppresses democracy. In the remainder of this section, we defend this possibility by suggesting that transformative statecraft can indeed be democratic as it need

¹⁷For an alternative view, see Mittiga (2022), who argues that democratic government is at a disadvantage, compared to authoritarian government, regarding transformative green statecraft. For more on the authoritarian response to climate change, see Shen (2024).

not entail the manipulation of citizens or the undermining of their freedom.

Joseph Schumpeter (2012) famously argued that the popular will is “manufactured”—a product of political action, rather than its motive. He warned of the potential for political and economic elites to manipulate the public’s beliefs, likening political persuasion to consumer advertising. This parallel was echoed in Jane Mansbridge (2003, p. 518) likening “the customer/entrepreneur relation in the marketplace” to the “voter/representative relation [...] as one of reciprocal power and continuing mutual influence.” This argument—that because our political beliefs are not fixed and can be influenced, we cannot be authors of our collective political life—seems implausible. First, corporate advertising influencing consumers, with the aim of making a profit by encouraging people to buy particular goods, is different from democratic politicians offering citizens political promises with the aim of being elected. The corporation-consumer relation is not a democratic one in any meaningful sense of the term. Second, there is a long line of scholars who have recognized the malleability of citizens’ preferences in a less negative light, emphasizing the embedded, organic, constructed nature of citizens’ preferences and even rationality itself (Pildes & Anderson, 1990).

Once we drop the assumption of fixed individual preferences, any form of engagement in political life should be assumed to have a significant impact on preferences. Our approach is consistent with a conception of political representation that “neither simply reflects nor transmits demands ... [but] creates them as it actively recruits constituencies” (Disch, 2011, p. 102). This “mobilization conception of representation” defines mobilization as political activity and messaging that solicits “individuals to identify with a larger group or principle” (Disch, 2011, p. 107). Such solicitation is precisely what Mair (2006, p. 48) regarded as the traditional function of political parties, namely “to integrate and, if necessary, to mobilize the citizenry.” An example would be parties politicizing socio-economic inequalities to activate class divides and increase electoral participation among poor voters (Ares, 2022; Jungkunz et al., 2023).

Impinging on freedom

The literature on freedom, too, tends to regard the malleability of preferences with suspicion. Many scholars agree that freedom cannot be defined by appealing to an individual's existing preferences. If one were free if her existing preferences were fulfilled, the argument goes, this would leave open the possibility of an individual being understood as free even if she had adapted her preferences in a context of unfreedom, such as slavery. Although this argument implicitly recognizes the malleability of preferences, the latter is generally regarded as a threat to freedom. Some even define adapting one's preferences in situations of asymmetric power as a case of structural domination (Ypi, 2014). This, however, seems questionable. How should we understand cases in which democratic agents, even agents of *equal* power, act together through an established political system to reshape preferences?¹⁸

Consider the example of political organizing, whether via unions, political parties, or some other collective. Such organizing is not a process of merely 'discovering' citizens' or workers' existing preferences and beliefs, nor is it merely a site of rational deliberation. Instead, organizing often seeks to mold a set of collective preferences, and thus to 'manufacture' a political will.¹⁹ Another example of preference-reshaping collective political action is economic planning. Whereas the conventional liberal perspective views such planning as a *threat* to freedom, its advocates have often understood it as an *exercise* of it. As Scharpf (1973, p. 169) argued with regard to Europe's postwar system of indicative economic planning, such planning "increases the possibility of collective action and expands the range of goals that can be chosen by collective decision." This understanding of planning was not limited to rich countries. In 1947, Indian Prime Minister Nehru, focused on establishing a post-independence economic system, said that "though inevitably bringing about a great deal of control and coordination and interfering in some measure with individual freedom, [planning] would [...] lead to a vast increase in freedom" (Menon, 2022, p. 3). Similarly, devel-

¹⁸On one view, this is just an expression of democratic autonomy (Adams, 2024).

¹⁹This view finds support in recent writing on Ella Baker's theory that organizing needs to start with people's existing views with the aim of re-shaping them in the process of organizing (Inouye, 2022).

opmentalist thinkers and practitioners in Latin America embraced a “collective and political vision of freedom as nondependency”, achieved through ambitious and interventionist industrial policy (Ahumada, 2023). In all of these examples, the authors took it for granted that economic planning expanded the realm of collective economic possibility, reshaping individual preferences in the process.

And yet, skeptics may rightly point out that even in these historical examples, the institutional conditions for transformative statecraft to be freedom-enhancing were contingent and, in some cases, short-lived. We concede the basic observation that existing structures of power in society tend to favor organized, often privileged, groups of citizens who are able to clearly articulate their collective interests and mobilize their members. It is therefore reasonable to worry that transformative statecraft might unfairly or unjustly benefit already powerful citizens over the powerless (S. E. Bagg, 2024). The freedom objection thus raises the question of the institutional conditions under which transformative statecraft can be democratic.

Students of industrial policy have long considered this question. Industrial policy, which usually operates by offering corporations investment incentives (‘carrots’), carries the risk of exacerbating economic inequalities and, more generally, reinforcing the constraints capitalism imposes on political democracy. Indeed, the “administrative power” required to implement ambitious industrial policies has not, historically, been exercised “in ways easily called democratic” (Kapczynski & Michaels, 2024, p. 282). Hence the need to build what legal scholars and political theorists—using a concept introduced by Kenneth Galbraith (1952)—have called “countervailing power” (Andrias & Sachs, 2020; S. Bagg, 2021; Kapczynski & Michaels, 2024).²⁰ Based on the diagnosis that organized power exists—from corporate interests to lobbying groups—these authors emphasize the “ability of mass-membership organizations to equalize the political voice of citizens who lack the political influence that comes from wealth” (Andrias & Sachs, 2020, p. 551). In a democratic context, well-funded special interest groups should not have undue capacity to tilt the exercise of state power in their favor. Fos-

²⁰In a similar vein, Steven Klein (2022) has written about “organized collective power.” See also Abizadeh (2023, p. 16); and Andreoni et al. (2021) on “collective capabilities.”

tering countervailing power is one way to prevent that.

Countervailing power tends to come from the establishment of large membership organizations aimed at mobilizing people, often as citizens, but sometimes as workers or members of a religious organization, for example. Historically, the key institution enabling organized collective power in the realm of work and production has been the trade union, but other forms of politically motivated coordination are possible. The New Deal involved significant mobilization by organized labor (Goldfield, 1989); as did state planning in postwar Western Europe, where “for a certain period individuals preferred to think of their own lot in terms of the lot which they imagined or desired for the collectivity” (Pizzorno, 1964, p. 201). It was precisely the highly organized nature of peak labor organizations that allowed them to participate in developmental bargaining over state power.²¹

Our argument in favor of mobilization-based statecraft rests on the premise that decarbonization will involve transformative changes across most areas of social and economic life. If we assume preferences to be fixed, then virtually *everyone* will ‘lose’ from the green transformation. Not because material living standards will decline as a result of climate policies—the opposite is likely true (Stern, 2025)—but simply because those policies will transform our lives, causing us to ‘lose’ the previous arrangement. With ‘justice’ defined as ex-ante compensation for losses, climate policymakers find themselves fighting an uphill battle.²² While the state can compensate some of the people some of the time, it cannot compensate all of the people all of the time. Fortunately, transformative statecraft opens up the possibility that people can form preferences for future social arrangements that do not currently exist (White, 2025a). For statecraft to become transformative, however, politicians, and political scientists, need to treat peoples’ preferences as endogenous to the political process. Doing so, we suggest, does not entail a violation of key prerequisites of political democracy.

²¹We recognize that these arrangements excluded large groups—especially women and racial minorities—and subjected civil society actors to state control. At the same time, Klein and Lee (2019, p. 66) have a point when they note that “anxieties about social democratic corporatism” have been overblown in the literature, and that the success of postwar indicative planning regimes was rooted to a large extent in the “democratizing effects of such social-democratic interpenetration.”

²²Not to mention deploying a paltry conception of justice.

Transformative statecraft in practice

Successful strategies for transformative statecraft will vary depending on the institutional infrastructure for mobilization present in a society. For instance, the state's ability to involve trade unions in decision-making has been shown to be a critical factor in successful phase-out policies. The active participation of trade unions in negotiations with the Spanish government allowed the ruling party (PSOE) to improve its vote share in regions for which agreements to close coal mines had been concluded (Bolet et al., 2024). More broadly, countries in which peak associations for capital and labor are present, climate policy stringency tends to be higher (Finnegan, 2022). Where governments can bargain with a limited set of well-organized, credible counterparts it becomes easier to cut "decarbonization bargains" (Kupzok & Nahm, 2024) or "compensatory bargains" (Finnegan et al., 2026).²³ A complete typology of forms of transformative statecraft is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, in this section, we emphasize the importance of three broader principles for successful transformative statecraft in practice—experimentalism, ambition, and visibility.

Experimentation is a core element of a pragmatist approach to policymaking. Pragmatists regard the process of policymaking as an opportunity to learn about what is technically feasible, and for citizens to form new beliefs and preferences in the process (Dewey, 1917). Dewey recognized the importance of administration and expertise but sought to avoid the dominance of technocracy (Richardson, 1998). Whereas a technocratic approach evaluates potential policy paths by calculating benefits, costs, and compensation schemes, pragmatists encourage more a more wholistic approach based on "judgment". A pragmatist approach to policymaking favors action in the face of uncertainty without wholesale ideological implementation. Policies should be "treated as working hypotheses, not as programs to be rigidly adhered to and executed" (Dewey, 2012, pp. 151–152). Change, from this perspective, does not entail loss, but presents the opportunity for people to update their beliefs, goals, or values.

²³However, even where governments combine material compensation and political participation via trade-union involvement, coal phase-outs still can lead to significant losses for the issue-owning party (Stutzmann, 2025).

Such a pragmatist, experimentalist approach to policymaking is consistent with transformative statecraft, as we have described it here. Both eschew a calculating approach in favor of something more creative and experimental. As we have argued above, a technocratic approach to statecraft limits the possibilities for state action to those that are calculable based on existing preferences, and furthermore, to those for which compensation of losers is possible. By contrast, a pragmatist approach to transformative statecraft emphasizes not only creativity over calculation, but further encourages action, even in the face of uncertainty.

As Sabel and Victor (2022) have argued using the case of the Montreal Protocol, which succeeded in solving the ozone problem, experimentalism lowers the threshold for action. Whereas technocratic statecraft requires robust consensus on its compensatory policy goals and instruments from the outset, an experimentalist approach “starts with a thin consensus” among a small group of policymakers that “thickens” over time, through the process of experimentation (Sabel & Victor, 2022, p. 7). A willingness to “try something”—as in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s famous maxim to “above all, try something”—in incremental steps, with a view to reassessment and iteration, is a crucial element of transformative statecraft under conditions of Knightian uncertainty, which is pervasive in climate policymaking (Eich, 2025; Scoones, 2024).

For a successful example experimentalist, transformative statecraft from a different context, consider China’s economic opening during the reform period. In contrast to post-Soviet shock therapy in Eastern and Central Europe, which entailed top-down liberalization of the price system and wholesale ideological implementation, “China pursued an experimentalist approach that used given institutional realities to construct a new economic system” (Weber, 2021, p. 7). China’s policymakers recognized that for the transformation to succeed, citizens’ views of the market would need to change, which dictated gradual, transformative reform rather than calculated, technocratic shock therapy.

The second pillar of transformative statecraft in practice is the articulation of an *ambitious vision* for the future that can mobilize citizens in support of collective goals. By

articulating a coherent vision, political actors can elevate the stakes beyond individual policy measures, allowing citizens to evaluate alternative, incommensurable futures against each other. It is through this process that citizens can form new preferences. This need not happen ex-ante, nor in a top-down way—what matters is to avoid a scenario in which individual measures loom larger than the broader vision, triggering demands for policy-by-policy evaluation and compensation.

An instructive example is provided by the *US Inflation Reduction Act* (IRA), which was the outcome of an extended process of mobilizational and legislative activity. Following significant mobilization across the progressive spectrum of civil society, academia, and the Democratic party, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey introduced the *Green New Deal* resolution to the US Congress, which spoke of a “10-year national mobilization” and framed its priorities in terms of front-line communities and social movements (Aronoff et al., 2019). Policies aimed at transforming the state’s productive infrastructure—for instance, in the form of unionization rights, works councils, and constraints on shareholder power—were at the center of the Green New Deal (Green, 2024).

Although it did never embraced the Green New Deal resolution, the Biden administration crafted the extraordinarily ambitious Build Back Better package, a slimmed-down version of which passed the House of Representatives in late 2021. In the Senate, conservative Democrats opposed key elements of the BBB. Its economic policy pillar, the *American Jobs Act*, underwent further trimming in what Hacker et al. (2024, p. 622) have called a “torturous journey”, and morphed through reconciliation into the *Inflation Reduction Act*. The resulting IRA has been described as “world-changing industrial policy with robust targets and roadmaps in 27 sectors backed by powerful fiscal measures” and constitutes a major initiative in transformative statecraft (Allan & Nahm, 2025, p. 431). The legislation constituted a bold vision for the future, shaped by a democratic political process.²⁴ In economic terms, the IRA was successful—clean energy investment increased by 92 percent in the three years following its passage,

²⁴Democratic in a broad sense. It must be noted that the legislative process in the US is marred by un- and even anti-democratic elements that were at play in the formation of the IRA as well.

compared to the prior three-year period; manufacturing investment grew fivefold; and greenhouse gas emissions by 2035 were projected to decline by 39–48 percent below 2005 levels, versus 27–35 percent without the IRA (Bistline et al., 2026).

The IRA successfully mobilized capital in the renewable energy and cleantech sectors. However, the Biden administration arguably failed to mobilize citizens to support a broader decarbonization effort. Beyond contingent political factors, an important reason was a structural lack of *visibility*. Rooted in a broader pattern of US state power being “submerged” (Mettler, 2011), this has been particularly pronounced in the area of industrial policy where a “hidden developmental state” purposely concealed its operation from public view (Block, 2008). Naturally, a developmentalism that dare not speak its name and that seeks to minimize its visibility so as to avoid backlash is inconsistent with democratic mobilization on a societal scale.

The Biden administration failed to overcome this problem of visibility. For one, it called this historically ambitious green industrial policy legislation the ‘Inflation Reduction Act’—despite it having little bearing on combating inflation, which at the time of the IRA’s passing had reached 9 percent. More importantly, although the IRA succeeded in that it generated a boom in corporate investment, to the extent these investments improved local economic conditions, few voters connected those to the Biden administration’s climate legislation. By the spring of 2024, 39 percent of registered voters had heard “nothing at all” about the IRA (Leiserowitz et al., 2024, p. 21). Using geolocated survey data, Gazmararian et al. (2026) have shown that although proximity to new renewable energy and green manufacturing sites made people more likely to notice IRA-related investments, credit was more likely to be attributed to state governors, who sustained their credit-claiming messaging far longer than the federal government. What is more, to the extent that the Biden administration sought to mobilize public opinion in support of the IRA, it did so through a narrative centered on international competitiveness, security, and great power conflict with China. While potentially effective in generating buy-in from political and economic elites, this strategy—which reflected a broader geopolitical turn in climate politics (McNamara,

2024; Riofrancos, 2023)—effectively downplayed the “meaningfulness” of green investments for people’s own lives. The result was a “fragmented information environment” (Gazmararian et al., 2026, p. 1) that allowed firms to claim IRA subsidies and advanced on climate goals quietly, under a strategy that has been dubbed “greenhushing” (Economist, 2025). In this “fog”, Gazmararian et al. (2026, p. 2) conclude, “green investments are visible but not traceable, limiting their ability to create climate coalitions.” The political backlash that ensued in the 2024 Presidential election brought to power a second Trump administration whose stated goal was to repeal the legislation and which, upon entering office, proceeded to eliminate most parts of the IRA “quickly and unceremoniously” (Aronoff, 2025).

Conclusion

Imagined, alternative futures are of fundamental importance to democratic politics, especially during periods of transformative change. Political parties that develop and communicate ambitious visions for the future provide frameworks that render visible trade-offs, thus allowing voters to sharpen or realign their preferences in relation to those trade-offs. It is therefore concerning that “future-regarding politics is an ever-diminishing feature of democratic life” (White, 2025a, p. 1).²⁵ The gradual eviction of the future from politics poses a fundamental challenge for democracies’ capacity to orchestrate an orderly green transformation.

As noted by Mann and Wainwright (2018), it is reassuring for politicians and policymakers to believe “that a renovated version of what we already have is a solution.” After all, if that is true, it makes their jobs much easier. The same holds for political scientists, who have overwhelmingly focused on compensation-based statecraft because it takes as its units of analysis individual preferences as impacted by individual policies—units that existing methodologies can deal with. This amounts to a reform-politics framework characterized by incremental change and *ceteris paribus* as-

²⁵An important contributing factor is age—older legislators speak less about the future than their younger colleagues (Hanretty et al., 2025).

sumptions. We have argued that this approach fails to appreciate just how socially and economically transformative climate policy aimed at limiting global warming to 2 degrees Celsius will have to be. Our critique would have carried less weight two or three decades ago, when carbon budgets may still have allowed for more gradual emission reduction paths. Today, however, when greenhouse gas emissions need to reach zero within 20 years, decarbonization will require transformation on a scale that means that few aspects of private and collective life will remain ‘the same’.

One likely critique of our position is that an embrace of transformative statecraft is an embrace of state power, and that good reasons exist to worry about the “big green state” (Gabor & Braun, [2025](#)). Powerful states have been the vehicles for fascism and totalitarianism, and have committed terrible atrocities. It is with considerable concern, therefore, that we note the growing securitization of climate policy (Riofrancos, [2023](#); Warner & Boas, [2019](#)). However, the state remains the one vehicle we have to enact transformational change. In facing the climate crisis, the answer is not to turn away from the power necessary to meet it, but instead to harness it and deploy it democratically.

Technocratic statecraft is effective at achieving given, clearly articulated aims by designing policies that shift who gets what when and how. However, we are unconvinced by the idea that the super-wicked climate problem can be ‘solved’ via super-clever compensation policies. To achieve a green transformation, societies need to mobilize around collectively shared visions for the future, fundamentally reshaping preferences in the process. Future research on transformative green statecraft will need to consider how such infrastructures for collective political mobilization can be revived or rebuilt; how societies can form collective political visions for the future; and how they can harness state power in their pursuit.

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