

Opinions

# If even France can't figure out a climate policy, what hope is there for the U.S.?

By Catherine Rampell

PARIS

If *your* country can't figure this out, what hope is there for mine?

I kept wondering this as I met here with Notre Affaire à Tous, one of four organizations [suing](#) the French government for failing to keep its Paris climate accord commitments.

In France, unlike in the United States, politicians actually want to lead on this existential crisis. Their constituents know climate change is real, and they are genuinely alarmed by it: Eighty-three percent think climate change is a “major threat” to their country, according to [Pew Research Center](#). In the United States, the share is just 59 percent.

Here, climate marches are frequent and well attended. Here, the Green Party recently became the country's third-largest contingent in the European Parliament. Here, needless to say, the Paris climate accord was negotiated.

And yet.

When the French government recently attempted to expand its carbon tax — the tool economists consider [most effective](#) at curbing use of carbon-intensive technologies and jump-starting green innovation — it failed spectacularly.

Last fall, shortly before a fuel-tax increase was set to take effect, protests and riots erupted. Demonstrators donned the reflective vests all French motorists must keep in their cars, earning them the name [gilets jaunes](#), or yellow vests. Yellow vests viewed raising the fuel tax as callous, regressive, elitist.

“Macron is concerned with the end of the world,” one slogan puts it, referring to French President Emmanuel Macron. “We are concerned with the end of the month.”

Macron eventually capitulated, not only suspending the tax but also offering other concessions, such as more generous pensions.

And so the country's more ambitious climate plans got put on the back burner. Meanwhile, many of its other climate actions have proved relatively inconsequential.

The government has banned [drilling and fracking](#) in French territories by 2040, for instance. Sounds impressive, until you realize 99 percent of the country's hydrocarbons are already imported.

The government has proposed a plan to make the country carbon-neutral by 2050. But that, too, fudges how “carbon neutrality” is calculated and [puts off](#) some of the most politically unpopular measures.

Hence that climate lawsuit, dubbed [l'affaire du siècle](#) — the case of the century.

Announced in December, the suit accuses the government of violating the climate accord, as well as other domestic and international laws requiring more action.

“In France, we are famous for this, to talk and have many discussions and to not advance in one way or another,” said Paul Mougeolle, a project coordinator and jurist at Notre Affaire à Tous. “Of course it's difficult, and we don't have enough time, but that's why we're trying to sue the state and the companies in order to force them to make change more rapidly.”

But to give you a sense of how politically toxic those more ambitious climate actions are, note that even Notre Affaire à Tous has not endorsed a carbon tax.

Mougeolle says the timing of the legal action, just days after Macron caved on the fuel tax, was coincidental; Mougeolle's organization, too, has reservations about the distributional impact of such a tax, at least as currently designed.

Given all this, it's easy to become demoralized about whether the United States, with a much larger carbon footprint and a much less climate-concerned populace, can make progress. But the better response is to study where France went wrong and adapt.

For example, there's the flawed design of France's carbon tax.

The government chose to use most of the tax revenue to pay down the budget deficit. Instead, it should have rebated the money to the public, most generously to those least able to either absorb the tax (the poor) or reduce their carbon emissions (those in suburbs and rural areas).

Additionally, there's the broader policy context and political framing to consider.

Macron, recall, has backed tax cuts for the rich and safety-net cuts. In a country as *égalité*-obsessed as France, this combination of policy changes was almost inevitably going to play into an angry narrative that the former investment-banker president disdains the common man.

Which is presumably one reason the yellow vests have [persisted](#), long after the government tabled the fuel tax. The movement was never just about carbon taxes; it's more a primal scream, with a nebulous agenda based on populism, nationalist nostalgia and frustration with income stagnation.

There's no way around it: Some of what's necessary to curb climate change will cause pain, especially in the near term. But there are ways to reduce that pain, economically and politically — especially relative to the economic and political pain sure to come from doing nothing.

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