

The Backlash Against the Net-Zero Transition: The Global Greenlash, Its Causes, and Taiwan's Policy Response

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Carbon reduction was once a consensus that few openly opposed. However, as the costs of the net-zero transition have begun to materialize, a backlash known as “greenlash” has swept across the world. Most protesters do not deny climate change. Instead, they object to the inequitable distribution of costs. This distinguishes greenlash from climate denial and climate delay. The real drivers of greenlash are the tangible effects of climate policies on livelihoods, industries, and ways of life, rather than doubts about climate science. Scholar Nathalie Tocci introduced the term in 2023 to describe phenomena such as farmers’ protests against the European Green Deal, disputes over transition costs, and the rise of right-wing parties.

This article identifies five key factors behind the global rise of greenlash. The first is cost. Carbon-reduction policies that raise living expenses and distribute the burden unevenly often provide the initial spark. The second is interest groups. Policies are most likely to provoke a strong backlash when they affect entrenched interests represented by groups with a strong capacity to mobilize. The third is politics. Changes in government can cause energy policy to swing like a pendulum. The fourth is the Global North-South divide. Developing countries may not be able to keep pace with decarbonization schedules set by wealthy nations. The fifth is trust. At the corporate level, the anti-ESG movement, greenwashing, and the politicization of ESG are eroding public confidence in transition commitments.

The backlash in Taiwan remains sporadic, but points of friction are emerging. The first is political polarization over the country’s energy pathway. Unit 2 of the Third Nuclear Power Plant ceased operations in May 2025, making Taiwan the world’s second country to complete a nuclear power phaseout. However, rapidly rising electricity demand from AI data centers and semiconductor manufacturing raised concerns about power supply stability. This prompted the Legislative Yuan to amend the law and relax limits on the operating lives of nuclear power plants. A referendum on extending the Third Nuclear Power Plant’s operations was subsequently held in August 2025. Although 74% of valid votes supported the proposal, it failed because the



number of affirmative votes did not meet the statutory threshold. This outcome clearly illustrates the distinctive nature of Taiwan's greenlash: support for the carbon-reduction objective coupled with concerns about the stability of the chosen pathway.

The second issue involves local conflicts over renewable-energy projects and a crisis of confidence caused by so-called “green-energy profiteers.” Offshore wind development has clashed with fishing interests, while agrivoltaics and solar projects on agricultural land have prompted accusations of “farming in name but generating power in practice.” Typhoon-damaged solar panels have also raised concerns about recycling and disposal. A deeper problem is the erosion of legitimacy caused by corruption. Previous studies have found that renewable-energy corruption cases are concentrated among frontline civil servants and at the township level, reflecting longstanding weaknesses in local governance. Opinion polls also show that public understanding of net-zero targets and the carbon fee system remains generally limited. Coupled with the spread of disinformation, this has subjected renewable energy to a degree of stigma far exceeding the scale of its actual problems.

The third issue is the combined pressure of carbon fees and supply-chain requirements. Taiwan began levying carbon fees in 2025. Together with the European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism and international customers' RE100 requirements, these fees have placed small and medium-sized enterprises with relatively limited resources in a form of passive greenlash: they are willing to transition but lack the means to do so. The fourth issue is the institutional gap in the just transition. Taiwan must strengthen the advance participation of affected groups, benefit-sharing arrangements, and access to transition support.

Based on this analysis, the article offers five recommendations for Taiwan. First, as Taiwan adjusts electricity prices and expands renewable energy, policymakers should prioritize distributive justice and provide targeted subsidies to vulnerable households, easing their cost burden and reframing energy poverty as a matter of social welfare. Second, they should ensure policy stability by codifying net-zero targets in law and establishing a bipartisan climate-governance mechanism. Third, the government should help small and medium-sized enterprises conduct carbon inventories and procure renewable electricity to prevent passive resistance. Fourth, policymakers should address energy security directly, adopt a pragmatic approach to rising electricity demand from AI and semiconductor manufacturing, and strengthen grid resilience and energy-storage infrastructure. Fifth, the government should rebuild institutional trust by replacing fixed feed-in tariffs with competitive bidding mechanisms while strengthening information disclosure and third-party verification.