Sonnberger *et al.*
Energy, Sustainability and Society (2024) 14:40
https://doi.org/10.1186/s13705-024-00472-1

Energy, Sustainability and Society

RESEARCH

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"It's just politics": an exploration of people's frames of the politics of mobility in Germany and their consequences

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Abstract

Background The decarbonization of the mobility sector is one of the main challenges in the context of climate mitigation. In Germany, as in many other countries, policy measures aiming to make the mobility system greener frequently fail to produce substantial results, not least due to a lack of support by large sections of the general public. Policy measures directed at reducing car traffic in particular are often met with indifference and resistance. The question thus arises: what basis do citizens use to form their (often negative) opinions about sustainable mobility policies? As a conceptual starting point for our empirical analysis, we draw on the frame concept and focus on people's frames of the politics of mobility. With "politics of mobility" we refer to everything people could consider as political with regard to mobility. We understand frames as culturally mediated patterns of interpretation that ultimately motivate and guide actions.

Results Based on interviews and focus group data gathered in the region of the city of Stuttgart (Germany), we identify two dominant frames as well as combinations of these frames by which people make sense of the activities of political actors in the field of mobility. In one frame, which we labeled "politics-as-actor", mobility politics are interpreted with reference to politics as some kind of monolithic abstract actor. In the other, which we labeled as "politics-as-staged-process", mobility politics are portrayed as an interest-driven, opaque process that only purport to being democratic.

Conclusions In terms of policy recommendations, we use our findings to derive suggestions for how to increase support for green mobility policies: transparent implementation of policy measures, pragmatic policy styles and the involvement of intermediaries.

Keywords Public perception, Mobility transitions, Politics of mobility, Policy support, Framing

Background

For a long time, mobility policy in Germany remained a fairly apolitical field without any major societal conflicts over what constituted a desirable mobility system or "good" mobility policies. Economic and social policy were much more contested areas ([1], p. 165). However, this has changed in recent years. In urban contexts in particular, conflicts have arisen over the negative social, environmental and health-related impacts of existing mobility systems. These negative impacts are increasingly problematized by citizen initiatives, civil society organizations and urban activists [2]. A prominent example of this was the diesel emissions scandal [3], which spurred protests both in support of and against more restrictive policies for reducing vehicle exhaust emissions, namely

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driving bans for older diesel cars [4]. The political project of decarbonizing mobility, often referred to as the mobility transition (German: *Verkehrswende*), focuses on the electrification of cars to meet carbon emission targets. The mobility transition has caused major controversy, in particular with regard to its consequences for the domestic automotive sector [5, 6]. Due to these developments, the hegemony of combustion engine automobiles as the central means of transportation—famously described by John Urry as "the system of automobility" [7]—eventually became socially contested, and the structures of present mobility systems along with it.

In this context, collective actors frame desirable mobility futures and how they can be achieved in different ways [8]. Citizens are confronted with these framings via mass media and social media, as well as ultimately through the implementation of policies that affect their everyday lives. Conflicts relating to mobility and changes in mobility systems have become part of their lifeworld, putting them in a position to subjectively assess these changes and conflicts and possibly forcing them to adapt their everyday mobility practices—as it is the case, for example, for diesel car owners facing driving bans for older diesel cars. This paper focuses on people's frames towards the changing politics of mobility, which have direct consequences for the governance of mobility transitions. Our research question is: what frames do people hold about the politics of mobility? To answer this, we draw on empirical data gained from focus groups and semi-structured interviews with residents of Stuttgart (Germany) and the Stuttgart region in the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg. Both interviews and focus groups were thematically centered around different aspects of change in the field of mobility in Stuttgart. With "politics of mobility" we thereby refer to everything people could consider as political with regard to mobility and not only to the activities associated with the assertion of interests, as is the case in the English language. While in English there are three nouns that describe different aspects of the adjective political (politics, polity and policy), many other languages such as French, Swedish and German only have one (in German: *Politik*) ([9], p. 171). In our opinion, gaining a deeper understanding of people's frames of the politics of mobility is crucial to understanding support for and opposition to mobility policies, since frames structure perceptions about what is at stake and what is problematic and ultimately motivate actions based on the respective interpretations of reality. Thus, support for and opposition to certain mobility measures and policies can be traced back to the frames people hold. We, therefore, also aim to draw conclusions from our findings that relate to the governance of mobility transitions.

In the following, we introduce and elaborate on the conceptual basis of our analysis, drawing on the frame concept as well as its roots in different strands of the sociological and cultural understanding of cognition. We then go into detail about our methodological approach and data. After that, we present the findings of our analysis and discuss them with particular reference to their implications for the governance of mobility transitions. We end with some final conclusions, in particular with regard to future avenues of research.

Conceptual basis

Discursive approaches are gaining in prominence in the field of research on sustainability transitions [10–12]. In this context, it can be argued that debates about a city's public space and mobility system are always at the same times debates about desirable ways of living and are thus inherently political (see, e.g., [13, 14]). This means that ideas about what politics is and should be can implicitly or explicitly be found in ideas about the restructuring of cities, where mobility infrastructures play a major role in the cityscape. There is also a growing number of studies and articles that focus in particular on experts' and stakeholders' visions for future developments in the mobility sector, as well as on narratives surrounding current and future transformation processes in cities and beyond. On the basis of a systematic literature review, Loyola et al. show that narratives have become more relevant in real-world mobility policymaking [11]. With regard to sustainable mobility, Holden et al. identify three dominant narratives that shape current mobility transitions—low mobility societies, collective transport 2.0 and electromobility [12]. Bergman shows how specific frames and narratives spread by different stakeholders influence the development of electric vehicles and car clubs [15]. In similar vein, Graf and Sonnberger explore how stakeholders imagine future users of autonomous driving and how these imaginations affect policymaking [16]. With regard to Germany, Drexler et al. show that crucial stakeholders in the mobility sector frame a mobility transition as a necessity in their public communication [17]. However, there seems to be no common problem framing and thus different innovations are promoted and supported. Focusing on the relationship between land use and mobility, Honeck finds that stakeholders and experts hold competing narratives with regard to policies in the two German cities of Berlin and Stuttgart [18].

What one can see from this quick overview of recent studies on discursive representations of mobility policies and mobility transitions is the focus on stakeholders' and experts' views. However, understanding citizens' interpretations of the politics surrounding mobility transitions is also crucial for a deeper understanding of public

controversies. As already stated above, this is what our study aims to achieve.

The frame concept is one of the most prominent discursive approaches for exploring the perceptions of different actors. This concept is multifaceted and has been further developed in different strands of theorizing and empirical research. Drawing in particular on William James [19], Alfred Schuetz [20] and Gregory Bateson [21], Erving Goffman provided one of the most influential elaborations of the frame concept in his book "frame analysis" [22]. Most later elaborations and applications of the concept, especially in the fields of social movement research (e.g., [23]), policy analysis (e.g., [24]), and media studies (e.g., [25]), are explicitly informed by Goffman's fundamental work. A basic and broad definition of frames on which most scholars would agree is that frames are culturally mediated patterns of interpretation that help actors give meaning to objects, events, actions, situations, etc. According to Goffman, they provide answers to the question: "What is it that's going on here?" ([22], p. 8). Thus, they are some kind of meaning-making devices. Objects, events, actions and so on only gain relevance in the social world through their ascribed meanings. According to Schuetz, these meanings are structured as "abstractions, generalizations, formalizations, idealizations specific to the respective level of thought organization" ([20], p. 5). People's perceptions of reality are always filtered through these meanings. In other words, perceiving reality means interpreting reality. People thus live in different (social) realities that are based on their own interpretations. Goffman adopts this idea from Schuetz ([20], p. 340–346) and James ([19], p. 515–522). However, frames do not only render occurrences meaningful, they also motivate and guide actions [26, 27]. Frames are "both a reading of the context of an act and an anchoring of an act in a context" ([28], p. 63). In the latter sense, they enable an actor to render a situation meaningful, since the frame indicates what is relevant in the situation and what is not. Here, frames literally function as picture frames. The different strands in frame research can be distinguished with regard to their emphasis on the cognitive or interactional aspects of frames [29]. By focusing on the exploration of people's interpretations of the politics of mobility, we locate our understanding of frames within the cognitive paradigm of frame research. Within this paradigm, frames are understood to capture what people believe is reality ([29], p. 163). In Goffman's words, frames enable people "[…] to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms" ([22], p. 21). This means that the same frame can be applied to different situations and phenomena to make sense of them. They are transferable. Frames are also shared within groups of individuals ([22], p. 10). Within these group boundaries, they are intersubjectively understandable. They are thus social in the sense that they are derived from a common knowledge stock.

According to Merlijn van Hulst and Dvora Yanow, framing not only contains sense-making as elaborated above but also "selecting, naming, and categorizing" as well as "storytelling" [30]. Thus, a frame contains a selection of a wide range of possible features of an occurrence and thereby ignores others. It names these features with reference to other similar occurrences. Metaphors thereby play a crucial role. The act of naming things is also categorized, i.e., things are identified as a typical case of X and not of Y ([30], p. 99–100). Storytelling as part of framing refers to the integration of selected, named and categorized features into a larger storyline or plot ([30], p. 100–101). These storylines explain "[…] what is wrong and what needs fixing" ([31], p. 144). Due to their reconstructive character, qualitative methods are particularly suitable for making such selections, namings and categorizations visible and comprehensible.

We now briefly summarize the takeaways from this short examination of the cognitive variant of the frame concept for the purposes of our analysis of people's frames of the politics of mobility. When trying to identify frames of the politics of mobility, one should pay close attention to the extent to which they are shared and recurring in the data. Since interpretations of the world are intersubjective to a certain degree, they can be expected to emerge in different places in the data in a similar form. Furthermore, interpretations of the same facts are also likely to differ between individuals and groups of individuals when they draw on different knowledge stocks. We can, therefore, expect that empirically identified frames of the politics of mobility will be internally consistent (i.e., be shared by different individuals in a similar way), but also delimitable from each other. They can be understood as islands of knowledge, of which several exist. Frames also contain acts of selecting, naming and categorizing specific features of an occurrence or situation as well as storylines that summarize what is perceived as a problem. Ultimately, since people apply different frames to the same occurrences and situations, they interpret them differently [24]. Since people's interpretations of reality form the basis of their actions—which has been most famously formulated in the Thomas theorem [32]—competing frames applied to phenomena, occurrences, situations, etc. can give rise to conflicts and controversies. For example, mass automobility can be framed both as the cause of social and ecological problems such as urban sprawl and harmful emissions and also as a symbol of freedom, flexibility and modernity. Both frames capture a specific part of the reality of mass automobility and disregard the other one. Thus, these contrary frames

cause tensions between the actors who hold them. A reconstruction of frames can, therefore, help to understand the origins of conflicts and controversies, whether they are discursive controversies or actual protests. However, what has to be emphasized, there is no deterministic relationship between frames and individual actions. In particular, as practice theoretical approaches highlight, processes of (collective) meaning-making are one factor among others that shapes the conduct of everyday life [33]. Thus, frames do not automatically translate into respective actions but are nevertheless a major factor in the formation of societal conflicts and controversies [23].

Methods

Exploring people's attempts to make sense of the world means rooting our research within the interpretive paradigm. To identify and investigate different frames, we decided to use an open and qualitative approach. Our empirical data was gathered during a research project on the sustainable transformation of urban mobility. Within this project, we were interested in questions such as the extent to which people feel impacted by mobility transitions in their everyday lives, how these transitions affect everyday practices as well as which processes of meaning-making are taking place with regard to mobility policies and politics. We conducted both focus groups and a series of semi-structured interviews. The data material had already undergone a previous analysis with a focus on the perception of driving bans [4] as well as on the performance of everyday practices. During our work on the project, we noticed some similarities within the different empirical materials when it came to the way people talked about politics. Although we had different analytical focal points, we identified parallels in the way people make sense of political action in terms of how they select, name and categorize respective actors and processes. We thus decided to conduct a secondary analysis with regard to the varying frames of the politics of mobility. Specifically, we combined material from focus groups (FG) [34, 35] conducted with residents of Stuttgart and the Stuttgart region and semi-structured interviews (I) [36] with car-owners living in Stuttgart. The focus groups had a thematic focus on everyday mobility and, in particular, driving bans on older diesel cars that were implemented in Stuttgart in 2019. We thereby integrated both residents as well as commuters from the Stuttgart region into the sample. The interviews were part of a dissertation project and were conducted between the summer of 2020 and the spring of 2021. Here, the focus was on everyday mobility practices and car use routines within the city of Stuttgart. Both data sources thus share the same thematic interest and were conducted by one or more of the authors.

The focus groups were based upon thematic guidelines and two researchers moderated the discussion, made sure that everybody's voice was heard, and balanced the impact of so-called opinion leaders. However, there were also times when the discussion departed from the thematic guidelines and the participants conversed in a more self-regulated mode. Each focus group consisted of eight to ten participants and lasted three hours. The participants in each focus group were heterogeneous in terms of age, gender, level of education and family situation, and each group had a specific focus on certain forms of mobility. The seven focus groups were divided into three groups of car-users, two groups of public transport users, one group of cyclists and one group of parents who did not own a car. We decided to involve different types of respondents as we assumed that the patterns of perception and argumentation might differ according to their respective everyday mobility practices. For example, a cyclist within the city of Stuttgart could hold a more health-oriented opinion towards driving bans than a car owner who is directly affected by these bans. Having a broad variety of respondents within our sample that differed across urban scales and specific mobility practices ensured that we could analytically identify commonalities as well as differences. The 14 semi-structured interviews lasted 87 min on average and were conducted exclusively with people that frequently use their own cars, since the primary focus of the interviews was on the specific practices of car use. Here, sampling was heterogeneous in terms of age, gender, family situation and occupational status.[1] The focus groups and interviews were all recorded and transcribed, resulting in 411 pages of material that was available for analysis.

Our triangulation of the focus groups and interview material needs some further clarification: we chose to combine these two sources as both approaches are, to some extent, discursive formats. Collectively shared frames, whilst also inherent to interview data, tend to appear more easily within situations of discourse, since discussion needs mutual references and reciprocity. As people explain their opinions and worldviews to each other, they agree on common assumptions, which serve as the cornerstones of the frames. Thus, the focus groups opened the way into the analysis, then in a second analytical step we were able to identify the same types and patterns of interpretation within the interviews. In a sense, the interview data thus also served as a corrective and a way of validating our interpretations derived from the focus group material.

[1] More information on the sampling and sociodemographic characteristics of the research participants is provided in Appendix 1.

Our analytical approach combined four stages of qualitative data analysis, which were based on both content analysis and grounded theory coding [37]. We decided to combine these coding strategies, because although we had an overall interest in frames, we wanted to reconstruct the specific substance of these frames in an inductive way. Content analysis thus gave us the general structure of relevant aspects, whereas grounded theory coding facilitated analytical openness. In the first step, we screened the material with regard to relevant aspects of the politics of mobility, with the aim of systematically collecting general impressions of the material. This step was particularly relevant due to the fact that both data sources had already been previously analyzed with slightly different focal points. We roughly validated our impressions during the primary analysis and searched for overarching thematic issues regarding the phenomenon of different framings of the politics of mobility.

Next, we brought these first impressions and interpretations together and started to inductively develop a coding system for structuring our further analysis. For this purpose, we agreed on common interpretations of the impressions gained so far and structured the following analysis in terms of jointly developed categories. In this phase, we agreed on the overall thematic categories of "use of metaphors", "suspicion of ideology" and "role of powerful/powerless policymakers". However, at this point we did not have any further insights into the relationship between these categories.

In a third step, this coding system was applied to the material, tested and either further differentiated or standardized. This process particularly helped to take into account the multidimensionality of the perspectives found in the material while also abstracting them towards different frames. The third step was carried out by means of a cyclical and communicative validation process.

In the fourth and final step of the analysis, the categories were systematically linked to one another. This step used mapping strategies as a heuristic tool [38]. The resulting visualization enabled us to distinguish between different analytical dimensions and to conceptually condense the results into two frames. In the process, it became clear that the categories we had identified could be seen in a mutual and triangular relationship, in which the "use of metaphors" remained overriding and informed the other categories. In the following, we will show how these interrelated categories build different frames of the politics of mobility.

Results

Based on our analysis of the data, we were able to identify prototypical frames that people use when they try to make sense of political processes and policies in the field of mobility. There were two dominant frames in the material, which particularly refer to conflicts and controversies within the mobility transition and the politics of mobility. The frames we identified were: (a) politics-as-actor and (b) politics-as-staged-process. As further illustrated below, these frames can also occur in combination as an expression of particularly deep-rooted disapproval. When used, the frames function as an abstraction of the real-world examples and refer to general, phenomenon-independent or overarching schemas of interpretation and perception. In this respect, they inform the interpretations of the politics of mobility by taking the form of "a typical case of X", whereby they are continuously updated and, therefore, stabilized by concrete examples. People switch between the frames according to the concrete phenomena they want to interpret and ground their argument upon. As we will show, each frame implies a specific type of function and serves argumentative strategies.

The frames we identified are collectively shared since, in the case of the focus group discussions, they produced approval from other participants in the form of nodding and interjections. The fact that the same frames and types of metaphors also appear within the interview material reveals that these interpretations of the politics of mobility are prevalent in the public discourse as well as within the interpretive repertoire of the frames in use.

Both of these two frames are deployed through different uses of metaphors that people draw on when explaining their views about the politics of mobility. These metaphors can be understood as a crucial part of people's attempts to make sense of phenomena in the world ([39], p. 34), as elaborated on above. According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" ([39], p. 5). Speaking in metaphors thus means that a given phenomenon is interpreted through the ascribed properties of another. In the following, we unpack and describe the two identified prototypical frames of the politics of mobility, while thereby also addressing this use of metaphors.

Politics-as-staged-process

This first way of framing the politics of mobility is mainly characterized by an understanding of politics as a process that can be described, yet is not fully understandable nor transparent. As a kind of modus operandi, the politics of mobility are portrayed as a specific way of making decisions with regard to mobility issues. This form of decision-making, which is transferable to politics in general, deviates from formal democratic processes in that it is influenced by the lobbying activities and (vested) interests of the automotive industry:

Julian: Politics is only the executive, and if the economy wants us to have a mobility transition, for whatever reason, then it will basically be pushed through. […] There are economic interests, and in the end, they will be pushed through. [I-Julian: 107–109]

An interviewee, Melly, describes this way of doing politics with the metaphor of a role-play:

Melly: I think it's just a big role-play, the economy, because we're a car city, and that sort of thing, yes. So, that's where I think perhaps influence comes in [...]. [I-Melly: 313]

Framing politics as a kind of staged process is reminiscent of Goffman's dramaturgical perspective [40]. Politics as well as politicians are portrayed as nameless and contourless subjects that, being "on stage", play their role in the big play, while being faced with powerful actors from the automotive industry who force their ideas upon them "backstage". This relationship can be described as some sort of "cuddling with the industry" [Astrid: 33, 41]; the outcome of a negotiation process in which industry actors dictate their will upon politicians and through which politicians personally benefit. This kind of interpretation is found in various versions in our data material and serves to generalize and abstract the interpretations:

Nina: Right now, it's just politics, and politicians are using this to feather their own nest. [FG02: 256].

Although this respondent is talking about politicians here, their statement is not personalized with regard to a specific party or person but is instead a general interpretation of how decisions are made and how politics is done. Being a specific modus, politics is interpreted as a power-driven form of decision-making that is serving economic interests rather than finding factual solutions:

Peter: It's just the money, it influences politics every day. You can influence politics every four years as an ordinary citizen, but they do it every day. [I-Peter: 81]

This perception of politics as influenced by external actors and detached from citizens' interests culminates in the interpretation that politics is in fact a self-referential mode:

Klaus: One feels fooled by politics somehow. They're not really looking for solutions, it's all just retouching, compromises. [FG02: 209]
Tarik: I also think, just as Mia said, it is more about politics. Making investments in electric vehicles and so on. [FG03: 248]

The interpretation that politicians do not care about people's actual problems and do not search for solutions is at the very heart of this frame. Framing the politics of mobility as a staged process and a specific way of doing things is (also) compatible with different ideological orientations. With regard to mobility transitions, this modus is specifically dealing with the automotive industry and accusations of lobbyism, but is also transferable to other issues or 'doing politics' in general, as one of our interviewees points to:

Klaus: These are political things and they stink to high heaven. They stink just as the fine dust does. This is about politics and, to be clear, one does not like to hear that, but it's about capitalism, dear people. (FG02: 272)

Being "a case of capitalism" thus opens up the interpretive field, so that the way politics deals with various real-world problems can be interpreted as simply another form of this staged process of doing politics in capitalist societies.

Politics-as-actor

The frame politics-as-actor reflects the aforementioned fundamental suspicion of ideology prevalent within the frame of politics-as-staged-process and combines it with a subject that can be addressed but which is still abstract. In this frame, political action is portrayed as both powerful and encroaching on the lives of citizens. Instead of describing a diffuse process of doing politics (the 'how'), this frame focusses on the subject of the action (the 'who'). This subject is endowed with a far-reaching level of agency, prominently expressed by the perception of a clear political will, which, however, is itself not explicitly named and rather vaguely expressed. As this ascription of will and agency needs an agent, a subject to address, speaking vaguely of "the politics" serves this purpose within this frame. Again, vagueness and abstraction to some extent ensures compatibility with other topics and issues and thus a transferability of interpretation. Speaking of "politics" as if it was some kind of monolithic actor is an abstraction of nameable political actors, as well as from political organs or functions. As a monolithic block, politics appears here as a collective actor in which all politicians and parties ultimately become subjects of criticism or accusations:

Melly: But I think that this is a bit of an obstacle and influences the politicians, who allow themselves to be influenced. And I think it doesn't matter which party it is. [I-Melly: 313]

This suspicion that politicians are influenced by lobbying activities, often expressed in very vague terms,

enables diverse references, which do not require further explanation and are often presented as common sense through phrases such as "of course" and "it is clear that":

> *Angelika: I don't know much about the economy and its relation to politicians, but it's obvious that politicians often sit on boards of big corporations. [FG01: 246]*
> *Martin: Then, of course, because of their power, they can also force politics to do what is good for them, let's say within the framework of the law. [FG01: 244]*

The real-world foundations of this frame are concrete, partly first-hand examples through which the suspicion of ideology is justified:

> *Heiner: Or, let's say pharmaceutical industry, quite typical. I have been a fan of homeopathic remedies. I took only homeopathic pellets for over 30 years, including treating my horses and everything. I swore by it. [...] But, they do not even want that, you cannot make big money with it. That's how it is with pharmaceuticals, that's how it is in the car industry, in other industries that exist. Politicians have a say, there are a few professors who have a say and then a decision is made and that's how it goes. But it's all because of the money (FG04: 269)*

This quote vividly shows how the interpretation of political action and interaction with industry and the economy is (a) grounded in personally experienced events and (b) interchangeable between specific topics and issues.

A special type of this frame that deals with issues of environmental protection is addressed as "green politics", which is directly linked to the governments of both Stuttgart and Baden-Wuerttemberg.[2] Talking about green politics can be seen as a sub-type of the frame of politics-as-actor as it also uses an abstracted version of politics to imply political will:

> *Karl: Green politics wants that, quite clearly. With the installation of chicanes in parking spaces, for example. It's all intentional. [FG04: 268]*

It is important to note that, most of the time, people do not simply speak of "the greens" and thus of a political party, but of green politics as a generalized and abstracted type. Green politics tends to be used as a code which equates green with ideology, power and lacking a basis in scientific facts—an attribution that expands the subjects of criticism beyond the Green Party:

> *Heiner: That's the next topic, speed reduction. Here in Gablenberg it's always 40 and that makes no sense to me. Instead of doing other things, [...]. It's a catastrophe there. But nothing is being done. But three new trees get planted so that there are four fewer parking spaces. That's the idea of the Greens. Have they gone mad? [FG04: 122]*

The interest in ecological measures over and above factors such as parking spaces and speed limits reinforces the suspicion that politics is not equally interested in all problems:

> *Karl: The parking spaces will be eliminated because trees will be planted there instead. Very important. They couldn't care less that people live there, that they have to go to work and need a car. It doesn't matter at all, the main thing is that the number of parking spaces is halved again. [FG04: 184]*

It is no surprise that the image of planting trees is used to emphasize this suspicion of ideology and combine it with the delegitimization of ecological measures. The planting of trees to the detriment of parking spaces serves as a prototypical metaphor for the indifference towards what is constructed as the "ordinary people". This construction embraces social figures such as the working-class men, tradespeople and parents who need their cars and thus parking spaces to be "normal" citizens. Calling upon such constructions of the "normal" and "ordinary" shows the degree to which measures of environmental protection affect everyday routines and are thus interpreted as a threat towards established normalities. It has to be noted that "green politics" was seen negatively by the vast majority of our participants. However, there were differences within this perspective: some participants were in favor of ecological measures in principle but emphasized that the implemented measures were "hitting the wrong people" (FG05: 165), that is, the ordinary people constituted by the aforementioned social figures. In a more negative interpretation, some participants stated that there was not only a lack of interest in the problems of "ordinary people", but that "green" or "ideological politics" also lack a basis in facts, scientific findings or expertise—although the extent to which counter-expertise is also integrated into the suspected ideologies remains unclear:

> *Arnold: Yes, I think the Greens have lost their way in Stuttgart. They're doing ideological politics now, without data and facts. Without thinking holistically. Micro, they're into micro-politics, yes. [I-Arnold: 142]*

[2] At the time of the empirical investigation, the city of Stuttgart and the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg had a government led by the Green Party. In both cases, this was the first government under green leadership in the history of the city and the state.

In addition to lacking a basis in scientific facts, the suspicion of ideology is also increasingly expressed with reference to comprehensibility and people's own perceptions: measures, justifications and objectives are regarded as poorly thought-out or lacking an overall context if they do not correspond to people's own ideas.[3] Politics goes beyond its assigned purpose, enters "foreign territory" and should instead limit itself to establishing framework conditions. In this case, the accusation of ideological politics is in part linked to a desirable policy, which is somewhat liberal and relies on incentives instead of prohibitions:

> *Kevin: I can understand the development, that politics now feels called upon to act, but what is currently happening is in completely the wrong direction in my opinion. At the moment, drivers are being punished. However, change really is needed. But one that is based on logical, common-sense thinking. [FG06: 260]*

Synthesis

We consider the frames of politics-as-actor and politics-as-staged-process as closely connected or as two sides of the same coin. The framing of politics as an actor enables people to address politics as a subject, however, blurry, who is endowed with a certain degree of agency. This agency is far-reaching in the sense that politics as an actor is able to enforce its interests in the face of opposition by industry actors or citizens. Agency is also driven by purely ideological motivations, mainly concretized here as "greening the mobility system". The framing of politics as a staged process, by contrast, portrays politics as an opaque form of decision-making that is influenced by lobbying activities. Here, politicians are seen as rather powerless and serving the interests of lobbying groups, in particular the automotive industry. Politics-as-staged-process is thus not about finding factual solutions to specific mobility issues but about economic interests, which are deliberately concealed.

Put briefly, the frame of politics-as-staged-process informs about the 'how', whereas the frame of politics-as-actor gives information about the 'who'. In this sense, the frames are interchangeable, depending on the specific situation of interpretation. This means that, as seen in our material, the same people can use different frames to address the broader topic of the mobility transition, depending on the concrete issue and the purpose their interpretation serves: expressing dissatisfaction with the process of decision-making, characterizing this process as obscure or accusing some abstract subject of inappropriate and undemocratic conduct. As the following example shows, it is even possible to switch between both frames within one claim:

> *Heiner: I just think there is a lot of politics. It's not about the issue, it's politics. [...] There, they are allowed to continue to drive and here they might make small businesses—an electrician, plumber or something else—who have had a kind of bus for four years, close their business. [...] They are starting again with the common citizen and then saying "Okay, you are no longer allowed to drive your diesel car." [FG04: 331]*

To address dissatisfaction with the process of decision-making, Heiner states that "It's not about the issue, it's politics", whereas to accuse politics of closing businesses and restricting ordinary citizens, he uses an abstract "they". We thus find a switch from the frame of politics-as-staged-process to the frame of politics-as-actor. In combining these frames, dissatisfaction with both the subjects of politics and the policy process is expressed. From this follows that neither policy actors nor processes of decision-making are perceived as legitimate which creates a strong cognitive barrier of disapproval.

As shown above, the two frames of the politics of mobility can be understood as a thematic structuring of people's efforts to make sense of political phenomena in the context of ongoing mobility transitions. These frames make phenomena easier to classify cognitively and ensure connection with and integration into existing interpretations. These frames help to stimulate and inform the formulation of a coherent storyline for people, i.e., to make sense of mobility transitions as "a case of (politics)" that is perhaps already known from other thematic issues: the pharmaceutical industry, capitalism, financial market policies, etc. By framing these issues as part of the bigger picture, as scenes and actors within in the "big role-play" [I-Melly: 313], things are sorted while at the same time gaps or inconsistencies within the storyline are bridged.

Conclusions and discussion

In this paper, we have investigated frames of the politics of mobility. In doing so, we have empirically identified two frames that can be considered as hindering sustainable mobility policies: politics-as-actor on the one hand, and politics-as-staged-process on the other. These frames mainly comprise of views about what powerful policy actors are like and how policies are made. From the perspective of the people applying these frames (and in

[3] Prominent examples are air quality measuring stations that are (depending on the respective perspective, illegally or at least intentionally) installed at places with high traffic rates so that negative values are deliberately collected, as well as speed limits that negatively influence cars' engine performance and produce more fine dust.

particular combinations of these frames), they are demarcating deviations from a normative ideal of how (mobility) politics should work. Since, as elaborated above, these frames inform and guide the actions of individuals, the crucial question in the context of the governance of mobility transitions is how to ensure policy support from people who hold such views. This is all the more important since mobility transitions create winners and losers and are thus inherently political, controversial and publicly debated [41]. A transition to sustainable mobility, therefore, cannot be achieved by simply implementing new mobility alternatives such as Mobility-as-a-Service [42]. Sociocultural contexts matter as much as technological options since mobility transitions intervene in people's lifeworlds [43]. For the success of mobility transitions it is thus vital that they are viewed as desirable by a crucial part of the affected citizenry [8]. Inclusive, transparent and participatory decision-making processes are at the center here [44]. In the following, we, therefore, derive and discuss three implications of our research for the governance of mobility transitions.

First, from our research we can infer that when it comes to policy implementation and enforcement, pragmatic policy styles that are transparent and inclusive may be more effective than the top-down implementation of ready-made solutions [45]. To meet these demands in terms of policy and programs of action, one strategy may be to develop pragmatic narratives of change and connect them to impactful meta-issues [46]. Research on activating pragmatic engagement in the context of mobility transitions could show that this can be achieved with the help of "soft" transformative governance styles [47]. The "muddling through" policy modes prevalent in German transport policy would have to be abandoned, or at least be heavily modified to form a new anticipatory, proactive and participative soft governance model [48, 49]. Such styles might have the potential to open up the "black box" of policymaking, which resonates with the frames both of politics-as-actor and politics-as-staged-process. This is in particular crucial with regard to the above discussed combination of the frames in the perception of mobility transition policies. For example, research on local conflicts over the expansion of renewable energies has prominently shown that citizens' perceptions of procedural justice are crucial for the local acceptance of energy infrastructures (see, e.g., [50–52]). In addition, in the field of urban transformation, inclusive and participative governance approaches have proven to be a tool for developing shared framings and narratives, which then enable effective transformative processes [53]. Therefore, active influence through pre-figurative politics in advance of agenda-setting could prove helpful [54, 55]. Particularly when it comes to achieving social change in sustainability transitions, research indicates that pre-figurative politics may be a promising approach [56]. Pre-figurative politics is capable of generating a kind of unifying community spirit [57] which can become an effective driver in the development of concrete policies and decision-making processes as part of the formation of visions, perspectives and scenarios for the future [58]. Generating this kind of community spirit also appears promising as a method for overcoming dichotomist thinking, such as the idea of "abstract politics" vs. "the common citizen" that we identified in our research. However, these intervention strategies are usually rather nonspecific and can sometimes lack a concrete plan and be essentially inconsequential, and thus not necessarily lead to an identifiable, measurable outcome [59]. In other words, it can be difficult for them to replace a well-balanced, concerted and coordinated political strategy [60]. Nevertheless, as one essential tool among others in the toolbox of transport policy, the idea of asserting a targeted influence on pre-figurative politics could be given greater consideration by public, governmental and political institutions, as well as by civil society and private sector actors. In this way, some of the distrust and reservations regarding the present politics of mobility could potentially be overcome.

Second, given the negative framings of politics we identified, our findings can also be seen to point towards a need for trustworthy intermediaries who are able to co-create mobility policies. These intermediaries could mediate between different positions [61]. Research shows that in the context of urban sustainability transitions, different collaborative intermediary organizations have the ability to balance and harmonize different positions [62]. In the context of mobility policies, too, intermediation is indispensable when it comes to mobility transitions. These processes are difficult to control, however, due to the high degree of complexity, tension and ambiguity [63]. It is, therefore, essential for research to decipher the role of technology, leadership, governance and collaborative capacities in inter-agency collaborations, to make transition processes more transparent and thus to avoid in particular the negative frame of politics-as-staged-process [64]. So far, different types of intermediaries have been identified in sustainability transitions, such as cluster organizations, agencies and project development companies [65]. However, the impact on policies and the scope of intermediation are difficult to measure, and it is hard to determine where the boundaries between actor- and system-level intermediation lie [65]. We, therefore, see a need for further research on the role of intermediaries in sustainable mobility transitions. Intermediaries could be a key factor, for example, in the formation of an advocacy coalition, and could establish essential narratives as a framework for future transportation policy.

Starting with influencing pre-figurative politics, this could initiate a profound change based on widespread public support for policy. In addition, the mechanisms of inclusion and closure in network governance arrangements relating to mobility transitions are crucial for the success of mobility policies, because without the inclusion, acceptance and consent of relevant stakeholders and social groups, the development of transition strategies is doomed to failure [66, 67].

Third, we cannot answer the question of whether more transparency and greater participation would ultimately lead to more broadly supported political decisions about policies, planning procedures and concrete measures. If more actors would be involved in decision-making processes, this would create new constellations and multiple input streams with manifold potential outcomes. For example, governance arrangements including more actors from civil society could trigger opposition by incumbent actors in the mobility system with specific interests, such as automobile manufacturers. However, if such voices are not integrated in policy processes and governance structures, they will find other channels to express their opinions and influence the agenda-setting process more indirectly. If we look at veto player constellations, we can observe a loss of control among the established members of the formal policy process. Therefore, advocates of open and participatory policy processes argue that the only way to generate (democratic) legitimacy—and this means mainly acceptance of the process and outcomes—lies in the proactive involvement of all voices, intensified negotiation processes and thus the building of a consensus that is acknowledged by the majority of all participants, affected communities and the public [68].

Our research also has two limitations and shortcomings that need to be mentioned here. First, our analysis is based on secondary data that were initially gathered for a similar purpose but are not tailored to our research objective. However, since we could derive our findings from two different data sources, this can be seen as a sign of the validity of the results. Moreover, processes of meaning-making which are condensed in mental constructs such as frames are mainly unconscious, which means such mental constructs are also accessible through the analysis of secondary data. Second, the empirical data were only gathered in the city of Stuttgart. The data, therefore, reflect public debates, circumstances and issues around mobility politics that are specific to the city of Stuttgart and the Stuttgart region. On the one hand, the identified frames are abstract enough that people can apply them to a wide range of political phenomena. Thus, it could be assumed that our results have little spatial and temporal specificity. On the other hand, it has to be kept in mind that, given the data we used, no definite statement on the generalizability of our results can be made. Future research on the prevalence of the two identified frames in other contexts is, therefore, necessary.

The essential policy implications of our findings include the need for a new architecture when it comes to intermediary governance arrangements, as these are a key factor in building a common basis of understanding. Such a basis can be used to bring different positions together on the one hand and, on the other hand, to develop new mobility policies collaboratively and consensually, which could in turn have concrete practical effects. The mobility transitions of the future will be composed of several practical governance- and policy-related tools. One element of this should be the construction of connectable narratives that can be deployed within soft governance arrangements in a constructive way to uncover activating and connecting potentials, for example, by forging new alliances that connect businesses, civil society and government institutions and set new innovative practices in motion. The transformation of mobility in the broader sense of a deeper transformation process within society as a whole is still only in its early stages. Based on our findings, we advocate for the creation of inclusive, activating and anticipatory intermediating policy strategies that can help to overcome the negative framings of the politics of mobility that we have identified here.

Appendix 1: Sampling and sociodemographic characteristics of research participants

Focus Groups

Age	Gender		Education
	male	female	
18–20: 1 21–30: 12 31–40: 22 41–50: 13 51–60: 13 61=<: 2	33	30	University degree (*Hochschulabschluss*): 29 Higher education entrance qualification (*Abitur*): 12 Intermediate school-leaving certificate (*Mittlere Reife*): 16 Lower secondary school-leaving certificate (*Hauptschule*): 6

Interviews

Age	Gender		Education
	male	female	
21–30: 2 31–40: 1 41–50: 7 51–60: 2 61=<: 2	8	6	University degree (*Hochschulabschluss*): 5 Higher education entrance qualification (*Abitur*):4 Intermediate school-leaving certificate (*Mittlere Reife*): 2 Lower secondary school-leaving certificate (*Hauptschule*): 3

Acknowledgements
The authors would like to thank the four anonymous reviewers for their comments that helped to improve the paper, Prof. Dr. Kathrin Braun for commenting on an early version of the paper as well as Brianna Summers for the careful language editing.

Author contributions
M.S. and M.L. designed the analysis, collected the data and analysed the data. M.S., M.L. and J.R. wrote the paper.

Funding
Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL. Marco Sonnberger and Matthias Leger thank the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) for supporting this work [Grant Number 01UU1605A].

Availability of data and materials
Available upon request.

Declarations

Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethics approval and consent to participate
Not applicable.

Received: 20 July 2022 Accepted: 30 June 2024
Published online: 10 July 2024

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