



Right-Wing Populism and Climate Change Policy

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Populist parties are often hostile to climate change policy. But there has been relatively little attention paid by researchers to links between populism and climate scepticism.

The rise of what is usually called right-wing populism has become one of the defining features of politics in the post-financial crash world. The election of Trump and the 2016 Brexit referendum result in particular have come to symbolise the shattering of the mainstream consensus. Though their rise may seem sudden, populist parties have been building their presence in continental Europe over a much longer period, and made further inroads, albeit not a breakthrough, in the [European Parliament elections](#) last month. The main preoccupation of most right-wing populists has been immigration or minorities. However, [it is also the case](#) that populist party platforms are often hostile to policy designed to address climate change, and their leaders and supporters express forms of climate scepticism that place them outside the political and scientific mainstream.

This pattern can be seen in settings as diverse as the US, where the Trump administration is withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, [seeking to restrict climate science](#) and even trying to [bring back incandescent light bulbs](#), and Finland, where the populist Finns Party [recently accused mainstream politicians](#) of "climate hysteria" and argued that environmental measures would "take the sausage from the mouths of labourers". A recent [study](#) by German consultancy group Adelphi shows that right wing populist parties have consistently voted against climate legislation in the European Parliament. Despite this pattern, and the threat to progress on mitigating climate change

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that it poses, there has been relatively little attention paid by researchers to links between populism and climate scepticism, and why such a relationship exists.

Climate scepticism and the 'left behind'

One potential explanation rests on an analysis of populism as a response to structural change in the global economy. In this approach, emphasis is given to the fact that right-wing populist parties have had particular appeal amongst those – especially male, industrial and manufacturing workers and those in less skilled white collar occupations – whose jobs, incomes and wider economic security have been most eroded by processes of globalisation, automation and de-unionisation. Political scientist Hans-Georg Betz has called this group the ‘losers of modernisation’, and more recently they have been referred to in the media as the ‘left behind’. This group have not only been unable to benefit from the rise of the knowledge economy, but they have also lost their political voice, as mainstream political parties have become more technocratic and converged on a policy agenda aimed at middle-class voters, creating a ‘cartelisation’ of politics. On this view, the ‘left behind’ have disproportionately rallied around populist parties precisely because they stand outside the consensus.

Certainly, some of the characteristics of those who are more likely to express climate scepticism in surveys, i.e. being older, male, working class, fit this account of the populist base. But why would the ‘left behind’ be hostile to the climate agenda specifically? One argument is that many of the sectors most affected by structural change – manufacturing, heavy industry and mining (especially coal) – are also the most carbon intensive, so climate policies pose a further threat to livelihoods. This is a hard argument to assess, as there are

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relatively few [studies](#) of attitudes to climate science and policy amongst specific occupational groups . However, one challenge to this view is that the number of people working in core high-carbon industries is actually very small. For example, coal miners often play an iconic role in right wing populist narratives, but direct employment in the coal industry even in major producers is tiny, making up at most 0.5% of [total employment](#) even in countries such as Poland and Australia, and much less in the USA. This casts doubt on whether the experience of such a small group could in itself have such a decisive effect in the positioning of populist movements on climate change.

Perhaps a more plausible argument is that climate policies ‘threaten to pile new burdens’, as [Martin Sandbu has recently put it](#), on a group that already feels economically insecure and politically excluded. On this view, levies on electricity bills to subsidise the growth of renewable energy, carbon taxes and other policies are resented, in part because they are highly regressive in their incidence. The most obvious and dramatic example of this is the ‘[gilets jaunes](#)’ revolt in France, sparked by a climate-driven [tax on diesel](#). Because many of those unable to benefit from the knowledge economy are concentrated outside of metropolitan cities, and rely more on cheaper, older cars for mobility, road transport fuel taxes seem to be especially politically toxic.

However, these accounts are insufficient on their own

These ‘structuralist’ explanations, which focus on material interests, are undoubtedly important, but have limits. Support for populism is not limited to poorer voters – the mean household income of Trump supporters in the 2016 Presidential election was actually [higher](#) than that for Clinton supporters (although the reverse is true for populist supporters in the [UK](#) and [France](#)). At the same time, while the structuralist account might explain why populist voters

and parties dislike some climate policies, it does not by itself offer a compelling explanation of why they embrace a wider scepticism about and hostility to climate science. For this, I would argue that we must also look at the ideological content of populism for such an explanation.

The role of ideology and hostility to elites

Several related dimensions of right-wing populist ideology are relevant here. One is the importance of socially conservative and nationalist [values](#) for right-wing populism. These values arguably produce hostility to the climate agenda because it is seen as being espoused principally by a socially liberal, cosmopolitan elite, counter to national interests, rather than an engagement with the issue of climate change itself. Climate change is seen as the cosmopolitan issue par excellence, often identified by populists in [Europe with the European Union](#) and by those in the US with [the United Nations](#), and bound up their hostility to those institutions. While not the primary target of current populist concern in most cases, the climate agenda can in this sense be seen as suffering a form of ‘collateral damage’.

Another relevant feature of populism here is the idea that the link between ‘the people’ and political elites has been broken. Modern representative democracy promises to place power in the hands of the people but is often necessarily complex and opaque in its workings, and [the tension between the promise and the reality can undermine its legitimacy](#). Populism promises a simpler vision of direct democracy with government by the people, rather than politicians, bureaucrats or experts. Climate policy is particularly vulnerable on this terrain: policy making in most areas means technical complexities, distributional trade-offs and compromises between different groups, but climate policy also involves high levels of uncertainty, long-time frames, impacts across multiple

sectors, international collective action problems and diffuse benefits, all of which add to the opaqueness of the relationship between actions and outcomes. These features arguably make it particularly aggravating for socially conservative nationalist populists already ill-disposed to such policy on values grounds.

A final aspect of populist ideology potentially at work is the theme that elites are corrupted by special interests, what the Chilean scholar [Pierre Ostiguy](#) has argued are seen by populists as 'nefarious minorities'. The primary targets of hostility are typically immigrants, but within the sphere of climate change they are environmentalists and climate scientists, who are often [accused](#) of pushing a false agenda to further their own interests. A related issue is that populist movements have been fertile ground for conspiracy theories regarding climate change. As the result of an invisible, highly complex, global set of processes, climate change is ideal material for [conspiracy theories](#). This can be, for example, in the framing of the 'Climategate' case, in which a leaked set of emails by climate scientists about publishing data was seized on as evidence for a conspiracy to gain political influence and [funding](#).

Conclusion

Our understanding of the links between the drivers of populism, populist world views and climate scepticism is still at an early stage. More systematic evidence is needed to test some of the arguments discussed here. But for those who are concerned about climate change, this should be an urgent agenda. Any effective response to the populist challenge will need to rest on such an understanding.

Image credit: Flickr.

About the author

Matthew Lockwood is a Senior Lecturer in Energy Policy at the University of Sussex. He has worked previously at the University of Exeter, the Institute of Development Studies and the Institute for Public Policy Research, as well as for national and London governments, and a number of non-governmental organisations. He has a long-standing interest in the politics of climate and energy policy, and has published research on a range of issues including the implications of Brexit for energy policy, the political sustainability of the 2008 Climate Change Act and the politics of lobbying in the electricity sector.

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