Populism and nature—the nature of populism: New perspectives on the relationship between populism, climate change, and nature protection

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1 Introduction

Two existential challenges have emerged for contemporary democracy over the last decade: populism and climate change. Since the 2008–2009 Global Financial Crisis populist parties of different feathers have gained vote shares in many parts of the world, including Western and Eastern Europe, the United States, and Latin America (Manow 2018). During the same decade, climate change has become a salient political issue due to failures to find common solutions towards mitigation on the global level and increasingly frequent extreme weather events. These failures have led to the strengthening of political forces calling for more climate action and environmental protection and towards the end of the 2010s, the emergence of the “new climate justice movement” and massive climate protests by *Fridays for Future*, *Extinction Rebellion*, and the German anti-coal movement *Ende Gelände* has made climate and environment one of the most important political discourses in Western democracies (Evensen 2019; Fischer 2017, 2019; Marquardt 2020; Scherhauser et al. 2021; Kocyba et al. 2019).

Both the rise of populism across Europe and the increasing salience of climate policy in political debates have been widely acknowledged in various fields of political science. However, the interlinkages between these two fields are rarely addressed comprehensively (but see Lockwood 2018; Radtke et al. 2019). Populist and/or radical right leaders, parties, and movements around the globe often mobilize against

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far-reaching climate policies and sustainability transitions. They either deny man-made climate change altogether (e.g. Trump in the United States) or prioritize economic issues before ecological ones (e.g. Bolsonaro in Brazil). While attacking the most important components of the liberal order, including democratic institutions, multilateralism, and the values associated with them, such as civil rights, pacifism, feminism, or environmentalism, populists have emerged as important forces defending the incumbent “imperial lifestyle” (Brand and Wissen 2017; Eversberg 2018) that characterizes Western political systems. At the same time, contemporary right-wing populism is often associated with science skepticism and stands in strong contrast to the markedly (and rather uncritically) pro-science attitude of the new climate movement (Evensen 2019; Zulianello and Ceccobelli 2020). The growing polarization on the epistemic dimension of climate change and environmental policies is reflected also in increasing partisan polarization and backlashes against sustainability transitions by popular movements, such as the *Gilets Jaunes* in France (Kinniburgh 2019). Taken together, these developments suggest that public support for far-reaching climate and environmental policies is not as uncontested as pro-climate mobilization discourse suggests and that social aspects and participation related to these policies must be considered (Lockwood 2018). The tensions between populism and climate-related policies are reflected in three main discussions in the literature, which we briefly introduce below (for a more detailed version of the next section, see Buzogány and Mohamad-Klotzbach 2021).

2 Varieties of climate and environmental populisms

The first discussion concerns the empirical variety of populism and its relation to nature and climate change. How different populist movements incorporate nature and integrate climate change-related issues into their discourses and policies is historically predetermined and has much to do with traditions of regional resource conflicts regarding land use, agriculture, or industrialization. Historically-informed work in this tradition shows how, in the case of early populist movements such as the Russian *narodniks* or US-American agrarian populists, opposition to ruling elites and populists’ classic Manichean “us vs. them” dichotomy has also influenced populists’ relation to nature. A particularly rich scholarship on far-right parties shows that these are often supportive of “green patriotism” and environmental conservation when this concerns the protection of “homelands” (Forchtner 2019b; François and Nonjon 2021). Nature protection-related discourses often emerged in parallel to nation-building processes of the 19th century, showing a strong association between the people and the landscapes they inhabit. These connections remain relevant today, as overlaps often exist between right-wing ecology and populist identity politics, including inheritances from agrarian populism and a rural voter base (Forchtner 2019a, b; Vihma et al. 2021).

While most of the current literature focuses on right-wing populists, the relationship between populism and environmentalism also has a left-wing heritage. This concerns not only branches of agrarian populism or the early environmental movement in the United States (Meyer 2008). More recently, activists and scholars such

as Chantal Mouffe (2020) have advocated that the new climate movement should embrace pro-environmental populism both to counter anti-environmental populism and to broaden democracy (Beeson 2019; Bosworth 2020; Davies 2020). While disagreeing on the content, left and right-wing populist environmental discourses often overlap when it comes to anti-elitism, the critique of the establishment, and Manichean worldviews. At the same time, whether left-wing or right-wing discourses of “resource populism” (Lyall and Valdivia 2019) predominate is determined not only by national heritages but also by the embeddedness of different regions into the world economy.

Another aspect that contributes a further facet to the diverse landscape of populists’ environmental and climate-related discourses concerns the difference between the themes they focus on. While nature protection has an important historical heritage on the radical right, this often goes together with opposition to climate policies that are usually opposed because of their internationalist cross-boundary character or the threat they imply to traditional lifestyles (Schaller and Carius 2019; Tosun and Debus 2021; Vihma et al. 2021). Relating this perspective back to classic readings in the study of populism, one can see that climate policies affect populists’ “heartland” (Taggart 2000) in a more intrusive way than nature protection policies ever have. But even if “climate skepticism” or the denial of man-made climate change is undisputedly one of the most common positions of the “far right” (Lamb et al. 2020), there are also more ambivalent and even some affirmative positions due to populist radical right-wing parties’ need to rejuvenate and attract younger voters (Ruser and Machin 2019). This raises the question about the ideological underpinnings, or alternatively, the strategic considerations populist parties and their leaders make concerning their stances on climate change and environmental policy.

3 Drivers of climate and environmental populism

A second discussion thus concerns the drivers of populist parties’ environmental and climate change-related discourses. The scholarly debate hitherto differentiates between three main explanations. According to the interest-based account, economic challenges related to climate change and sustainability transitions lead to substantial and often painful structural changes in core industrial sectors and reinforce inequalities (Lockwood 2018). The *Gilets Jaunes* protests in France by the economically and geographically marginalized part of the population illustrate the importance of grievances related to social justice for those feeling “left-behind” on climate policy and sustainability transitions (Kinniburgh 2019).

An alternative explanation relates to (right-wing) populism’s anti-elite, socially conservative, and nationalist values and their aversion to globalism, liberalism, and the loss of national sovereignty (Lockwood 2018). This ideology-based account explains populist parties’ opposition to energy transitions as a conflict between the “detached urban elites” and the “ordinary rural citizens” (Eichenauer et al. 2018, p. 645; Fraune and Knodt 2018; Selk et al. 2019). Ruling elites are often thought to undermine sovereignty and propagate postmaterialist values that collide with

national and local interests. Here populists offer protection, be it against foreign-minded neoliberal elites or immigrants.

Finally, a third perspective on the driving forces behind environmental populism points to the strategic nature of populists' framing of issues. Climate policies, which are often delegated to experts, bureaucrats, or international bodies, can easily be exploited by populists to attract new voters or to react to the increasing success of competitor parties. At the same time, populist parties are particularly responsive to popular moods and might also easily adapt to climate change discourse if that seems a strategically convenient alternative, for instance when it comes to maximizing votes.

4 Effects of climate and environmental populism

The third discussion concerns the impact of populist parties on climate and environmental policies. A number of recent studies have analyzed both the output and the outcome dimensions, but this remains a less explored yet promising field of research (Huber et al. 2021; Petri and Biedenkopf 2021; von Homeyer et al. 2021). The few studies that focused on the output dimension of policies propagated by populist parties show that, against expectations, energy and climate policy efforts do not always weaken when populists are strong. Rather, and indirectly, populist electoral successes can contribute to policy improvements because the polarization of the political arena strengthens the government influence of smaller progressive parties (Četković and Hagemann 2020). Huber et al. (2021) find substantial differences in the climate change policy discourses, positions, and actions across and within different populist parties. The authors suggest that these differences are explained by left-right cleavages of host-ideologies, but not by populism per se. While left-wing governments tend to produce more climate policies on the aggregate level (Schulze 2021), Latin American case studies show that left-wing populist governments rarely break with extractivism and resource exploitation even if they campaigned against these policies initially (Andreucci 2018; Lyall and Valdivia 2019). When it comes to policy outcomes, research by Detlef Jahn (2021) argues that populists in government office produce more greenhouse gas emissions and are also linked to lower environmental performance in general (Böhmelt 2021).

This brief overview of the literature along the three main lines of discussion help to structure the climate-nature-populism nexus and shows that important work has been carried out in this field over the last few years. At the same time, we are left with several research gaps. Perhaps the most important gap concerns the uneven regional distribution of the analysed cases, which tend to concentrate on Western Europe and North America. We know less about cases located beyond these regions, on the periphery of the global economy. A second shortcoming is the strong focus on radical right-wing populism and its relationship to nature or to climate policy, which has received increased attention due largely to developments in the United States over the last decade concerning climate scepticism and denialism. However, how different party families deal with nature and climate-related issues is highly diverse and more could be done to explore where the differences come from and

where they lead to. This also points to a third and final shortcoming in the current literature regarding the policy effects of populists, which is mostly focused on easily measurable technical indicators, but has paid less attention to more complex changes in the governance systems that underpin populist rule.

5 Contributions of the special section

The five contributions of this special section address several research gaps concerning the relationship between populism and environmentalism. The articles offer exciting new viewpoints that expand and deepen the current focus in the literature on populism and climate policy in that they 1) extend the analysis beyond Western European examples (Riedel 2021; Menezes and Barbosa 2021; Solorio et al. 2021), 2) focus on differences between populist parties' handling of environment and climate change-related issues (Oswald et al. 2021), 3) analyze the impact of the climate change movement on different parties at the sub-national level (Berker and Pollex 2021), and 4) investigate the policy impact of populist parties on environmental and climate governance (Riedel 2021; Menezes and Barbosa 2021; Solorio et al. 2021). (Table 1).

The papers included in this special section share a three-pronged understanding of populism that is characterized by anti-elite discourses, people-centrism, and Manicheism at its ideational core (Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2018). At the same time, following the categorization of the DEMOS project (Kubát et al. 2020), the case studies focus on different types of populist parties, such as radical right-wing populism, illiberal populism, and left-wing populism. In terms of policies, they focus on climate and environmental questions understood broadly. Three papers are single case studies on Poland, Mexico, and Brazil, and two studies are most similar systems designs with a comparison at the country level (Oswald et al. 2021: France, Germany) or the subnational level (Berker and Pollex 2021: six German Länder). The area focus of the papers lies on Europe and Latin America, which are important

Table 1 Overview of the articles in the special section

	Empirical focus	Varieties	Drivers	Effects
Berker and Pollex (2021)	German parties' reaction to FFF	Subnational level, relational focus on all parties	Ideology	–
Oswald et al. (2021)	Radical right populist parties' frames of climate change	Differences between two PRR parties	Strategy	–
Riedel (2021)	Policy effects of populist government in Poland (PiS)	Right-wing populism	Ideology	Institutional dismantling
Menezes and Barbosa (2021)	Policy effects of populist government in Brazil	Right-wing and left-wing populism	–	Dismantling and resource extractivism
Solorio et al. (2021)	Policy effects of populist government in Mexico (AMLO)	Left-wing populism	–	Resource extractivism

regions where environmental populism has recently been witnessed (Buzogány and Mohamad-Klotzbach 2021). Regarding methodology, the contributions use various approaches of qualitative content analysis.

The collection of articles begins with the contribution by *Lars E. Berker* and *Jan Pollex* (2021), which addresses one central question related to the rising popularity of the new climate change movement worldwide: How will this movement be able to influence established parties and their policy positions related to climate change policies? This empirical focus speaks to two larger literatures: on the one hand, the recently resuscitated scholarship dealing with parties' stances on climate and environmental policy (Carter et al. 2018; Farstad 2018); on the other hand, to the rich research tradition that deals with party-social movement interactions (Hutter et al. 2019). By focusing on the ideological affiliation of parties and various aspects of party competition in the German Bundesländer, the contribution by Berker and Pollex (2021) shows that political parties' reactions to *Fridays for Futures* differ on the national and subnational level in Germany. In explaining the variance found in party reactions to the movement, they argue that party ideology explains positionality. Altogether, they find a clear left-right divide and lesser importance of party competition and polarization on the climate issue, with especially the Green Party aligning with positions of the *Fridays for Future* movement, while the Alternative for Germany (AfD) positions itself against the ideas of the movement.

While the contribution by Berker and Pollex (2021) highlights the role of ideology as a driver of parties' positions on climate change policy, the next article by *Michael Oswald*, *Meike Fromm* and *Elena Broda* (2021) emphasizes the role of strategic considerations of populist parties when dealing with environmental and climate change issues. Their contribution analyzes the different strategies of right-wing populist parties towards environmental policies by comparing France's Rassemblement National (RN) and the German Alternative for Germany (AfD), which both choose different strategies to engage with environmental policy issues. In broader terms, this research relates to the literature that is interested in populists' "secondary policy positions". It goes beyond the rather short-sighted view on primary policy issues, such as migration, which capture most of the attention (Elias et al. 2015; Enggist and Pinggera 2021). At the same time, it also challenges important accounts concerning radical right-wing parties' environmental positioning. According to an influential piece by Lockwood (2018), radical right-wing parties' positions toward climate change action can either be traced back to structural determinants or ideology. By comparing two important radical right-wing parties in France and Germany, the contribution argues that these parties act strategically and can change their positions regarding climate policies beyond climate denialism.

The next three papers look at populists in power. In contrast to the AfD in Germany or the RN in France, which did not have the opportunity to realize their policies, populist parties and their leaders in Poland, Brazil, and Mexico have had this opportunity and made use of it. The first study by *Rafał Riedel* (2021), analyses the nexus between Poland's carbon dependency and the climate and energy policies of the "illiberal populist" Law and Justice (PiS) governments. Sovereignty, localism, authenticity, and indigenous ways of "doing things"—goals upheld by PiS and essentially compatible with environmental protection, all turn out to be backward-

looking and anti-modernist. Using a conceptual framework that unites theories of populism and nativism, this contribution reveals the deeply ideological nature of the PiS government's "environmental conservatism". Climate change and nature protection could find a rightful place in PiS's conservative worldview, as references to clerical and nationalist concepts of nature protection show (Scruton 2014). The turn towards what Riedel (2021) calls "environmental nativism" highlights the full extent of negative effects on Poland's environmental governance system, the prospects of its energy transition away from coal, and the fulfilment of its international obligations related to climate change mitigation (Buzogány and Cetkovic 2021; Četković and Buzogány 2020; Huber et al. 2021).

The paper by *Roberto Goulart Menezes* and *Ricardo Barbosa, Jr.* (2021) offers a similar analysis of the transformation of Brazilian environmental governance and the policy effects of the right-wing populist government led by Jair Bolsonaro since 2019. Following the left-wing's neo-developmental ecological modernization agenda, the Bolsonaro government has reintroduced the traditional extractivist resource exploitation regime that has marked Brazil for centuries. The authors identify two features that delineate the dismantling of environmental governance under the Bolsonaro government. First, structures of participatory decision-making, which had played an essential role in formulating environmental policies, were made obsolete. This was followed by denigrating and attacking environmental NGOs, scientists, indigenous and traditional peoples, and other environmental defenders. Based on their assessment, the authors show that the dismantling of environmental governance in Brazil is not merely rhetorical, but a political tactic meant to legitimize the promotion of "total extractivism" while maintaining a populist appeal. At the same time, the article provides important insights to understand the sequencing of institutional dismantling performed by populists in government office and witnessed in other world regions (Bauer and Becker 2020).

The contribution by *Israel Solorio*, *Joel Ortega*, *Raúl Romero* and *Jorge Guzmán* (2021) complements the view on Latin American populist governments' environmental record by presenting the case of the left-wing inclusive populism of Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO). Using theories of framing, the article by Solorio et al. (2021) shows how left-wing populists in Latin America, initially supported by indigenous environmental movements, struggle to solve the inherent conflict between environmentalism and extractivism. The article makes use of frame analysis of López Obrador's discourse on the Proyecto Integral Morelos large-scale energy project to conclude that he has been incapable of integrating the indigenous environmental opposition into his national project.

6 Concluding remarks

Research on environmentalism, climate change, and populism is growing at a fast pace. Scholars in the field have looked at varieties, drivers, and effects of climate and environmental populism. The contributions of this special section help to close some of the remaining gaps in this research area. They all provide evidence that the relationship between populism and nature can enrich more general research on

populism with new insights and offer case studies on how populist parties adapt and reshuffle their environmental positions in line with ideological and strategic considerations and make these part of their “thin-centered ideologies” (Mudde 2004, p. 544). Through the case studies we also find that a deeper look at the relationship between populism and capitalism is informative because the environmental and climate policies of populists of different leanings in power tend to prioritize incumbent economic interests no differently than mainstream parties have done.

As climate change will continue to produce severe challenges for mankind around the world (e.g. floods, heatwaves, earthquakes, tsunamis, colder winters), transitions toward sustainability become crucial. At the same time, sustainability transitions have in many parts of the world reached a level of importance where they have begun to openly collide not only with incumbent energy systems and the industries that are built on these, but also with lifestyles and cultures made possible by fossil energy (Markard 2018; Mitchell 2011). Many of the changes are met and will be met with strong resentments by citizens who are afraid or simply do not want to change their lives substantially. Questions of climate justice will most likely remain a gateway for populists to exploit and capitalize on these fears. Research on strategies of populist and non-populist parties’ environmental politics will thus remain a highly important field of research for political scientists in the coming decades.

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