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Right wing populism and the climate change agenda: Exploring the linkages

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Right wing populism (RWP) is a longstanding feature of politics in continental European (Mudde 2004, Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008) and Anglophone countries (Wear 2008, Snow and Moffitt 2012, Skocpol and Williamson 2012). In recent years the phenomenon has gained both strength and reach in some countries, most dramatically in 2016 with the Brexit referendum in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in the USA, and in 2017 with strong performances by the Front National in the French Presidential election and Alternative für Deutschland in the German general election. At the same time, RWP 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 mainstream. Where RWP parties have attained power in European countries, as in Poland and Hungary, they have sought to scale back climate policies (as far as they can within the constraints of the EU). The Trump administration is reversing carbon-related EPA regulations and support for Obama's clean energy programme, and withdrawing the US from the Paris Agreement. Even when not formally part of government, RWP parties have had influence in weakening policy, as in Denmark.

Despite this congruence between RWP and climate scepticism there is a surprising dearth of academic research that investigates its nature and causes. Yet such research is essential for better understanding populist hostility, and a response to it that allows the continuation and acceleration of public policy to mitigate climate change. This is particularly the case since

conventional responses, such as wider dissemination of climate science, may not work (e.g. Hobson and Niemeyer 2011).

My aim here is to contribute to this understanding by mapping out the terrain, exploring some of the possible reasons for why RWP supporters and parties so frequently express hostility to the climate agenda, drawing especially on the existing literature on populism. In particular, I explore two approaches. One draws on accounts of the roots of contemporary RWP in the economic and political marginalisation of those ‘left behind’ by the effects of globalisation and technical change. This focus produces a set of essentially interest-based explanations. However, I argue that for reasons of both internal coherence and empirical support such an account is not satisfactory, and that a second, more convincing explanation would draw on an understanding of the ideological content of RWP. This content combines authoritarian and nationalistic values with anti-elitism, producing hostility to climate change as a cosmopolitan elite agenda, along with a suspicion of both the complexity of climate science and policy and of the role of climate scientists and environmentalists.

Using the category of RWP requires a definition of ‘populism’, a term with a long and somewhat confused history (Jäger 2016). A widely accepted approach identifies a core definition of populism as an ideology in which the basic cleavage in society is between a ‘pure people’, and a ‘corrupt elite’, and where there is a belief that politics should be an expression of the will of the people (Mudde 2004, 2007). As Canovan (2001: 27) puts it:

the message is, ‘this is our polity, in which we, the democratic sovereign, have a right to practise government by the people; but we have been shut out of power by corrupt

politicians and an unrepresentative elite who betray our interests, ignore our opinions, and treat us with contempt'.

However, this definition has been challenged by those who argue that the structure of antagonism in populism involves not simply elites and 'the people', but is in fact triadic, also involving what Ostiguy and Casullo (2017) argue are constructed as 'nefarious minorities'. These are seen as the source of corruption of elites, drawing the attention of the latter away from the 'deserving' but neglected people. In much of contemporary RWP, the 'nefarious minority' is primarily constructed as consisting of immigrants.

At the same time, it is also widely observed that populism has a 'thin' ideology that rarely stands alone. Instead, it tends to be combined with elements and values from other political ideologies, including classic left- or right-wing views depending on positions on distributive conflicts, and nationalist vs. cosmopolitan world-views (Canovan 1999, Stanley 2008). It is thus in principle possible to distinguish, for example, between right wing populism, which is typically nativist and socially authoritarian, while often also economically interventionist (e.g. Mudde 2007, Golder 2016, Rodrik 2017), and left wing populism (LWP), which is more socially liberal and universalist. In the current context it is also important to note that RWP is generally climate sceptical and hostile to climate policy, whereas LWP is not; it is the former on which I focus here.

In what follows, I first review the evidence for the view that RWP supporters and parties express climate scepticism and hostility to climate policy, before considering competing structuralist and ideological explanations for why this pattern is found so widely. In conclusion, I argue that whilst the structuralist approach struggles to account for a number of

phenomena associated with the presence of RWP, ideological explanations are more persuasive in drawing links between climate scepticism and nationalism, authoritarianism, and anti-elitism, so that climate change features as a kind of 'collateral damage'. Finally, I consider some of the implications of this discussion for future research on the relationship between structural and ideological accounts of RWP climate positions.

Right wing populism, climate scepticism and climate policy: patterns of association

While casual observation suggests a strong tendency for RWP parties and leaders to express climate scepticism and hostility to climate policies, there are few studies that directly seek to test this hypothesis systematically. Most existing research on climate scepticism and attitudes to climate policy at the level of individuals focuses on associations with mainstream partisanship (i.e. major left- and right-of-centre parties) or self-identified left-right political ideology, but both of these variables are problematic from the point of view of capturing RWP influence. First, they exclude or fail to separate out overtly populist parties. Second, since mainstream right-of-centre parties in some countries have developed populist wings, there is a danger that such research conflates the views of populist and more conventional supporters or voters; this issue is discussed further below.

A fairly consistent finding from US studies is that people who are more right-wing are more likely to be climate sceptics and less supportive of action on climate change (McCright and Dunlap 2011, McCright et al. 2016). Such findings are consistent with but not direct evidence for a link specifically between RWP and climate scepticism. This is because while populism does often take on right- or left-wing values and elements, the core populist ideology does not fit neatly onto the conventional left-right ideological dimension. As a result, studies of how

climate attitudes vary along this spectrum do not necessarily yield much information about the specific effects of a populist worldview.

At the level of party positioning on climate change and climate policies, most studies do not specifically distinguish RWP parties (e.g. Whitmarsh 2011, Poortinga et al 2011, Tranter and Booth 2015, Schaffer and Bernauer 2014, Knight 2016). One exception is Gemenis et al. (2012), who surveyed manifesto positions for 13 RWP parties from 12 countries in Europe from the late 2000s. They found that ‘party positions on this issue [anthropogenic global warming] are clearly anti-environmental’ (*ibid*, p. 15), with four parties in their sample explicitly expressing scepticism and another seven silent or ambiguous on the issue, with only Greece’s LAOS overtly accepting climate science. The British National Party’s position was trend sceptical, while the Danish People’s Party and Italian Northern League were attribution sceptical.¹ These RWP parties also tended to be unsupportive of renewable energy (for example the Swiss People’s Party²), preferring nuclear power. The majority of the manifestos surveyed were also overwhelmingly against environmental taxes.

Some other important European RWP parties not in Gemenis et al.’s (2012) sample also show similar positions. In opposition, Poland’s Law and Justice Party (PiS) was pro-coal while hostile to renewable energy and wider climate policy (Fuksiewicz and Klein 2014). Since it came to power in 2015 PiS has had to maintain some form of renewable energy policy under EU pressure but has overseen the weakening of an already dysfunctional programme inherited from the previous government (Szulecki 2017). Germany’s relatively recently formed Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has a platform that includes climate change denial (Cantoni et al 2017), repealing the country’s energy saving ordinance and its renewable energy support laws, while also being pro-coal and pro-nuclear (Jeffries 2017).

While European proportional representation electoral systems facilitate the formation of separate RWP parties, Anglophone countries' majoritarian systems produce a tendency for RWP to form wings *within* the mainstream right-of-centre party. For example, the US has since the late 1990s seen increasing polarisation on climate change between Republican and Democrat voters, and between self-identifying conservatives and liberals (McCright and Dunlap 2011, Hamilton 2011). This has been interpreted as being the consequence of conventional left-right ideological differences. However, there was a major surge in Republican supporter climate scepticism at the end of the 2000s (McCright and Dunlap 2008: 176). It is likely that this shift was driven by the emergence of the populist 'Tea Party' movement (Skocpol and Williams 2012), since Hamilton and Saito (2015) and Shao (2017) find that Tea-Party supporters are, after controlling for other factors, significantly more likely than non-Tea-Party Republican supporters to be trend, attribution and impact sceptics.

In Australia, there is clear partisan polarisation in attitudes to climate change amongst political leaders (Fielding et al. 2012) and voters (Tranter 2013), but Liberal Party leaders (especially John Howard and climate sceptic Tony Abbott) have appropriated elements of populism since the mid-1990s, in part to counter the threat of Pauline Hanson's One Nation (e.g. Wear 2008). In Canada, there are also partisan contrasts between self-identified Conservative and Liberal supporters in trend climate scepticism (Lachapelle et al 2012). But under Stephen Harper, the Conservative Party also adopted a strategy of what Snow and Moffitt (2012) call 'mainstream populism'. One element of Harper's approach was a strong attack on the Liberal's proposals for carbon pricing, which played a significant role in the 2008 election (Harrison 2012).

The UK provides an interesting exception to the Anglophone rule with the rise of the RWP UK Independence Party (UKIP). This was in part because of the particular context of the European Union, but mainly because the leadership of the centre-right Conservative Party, having moved the party in a more liberal and cosmopolitan direction in the 2000s, was resistant to adopting mainstream populism in the 2010s, thereby opening up a space on the right (Ford and Goodwin 2014). Opposition to climate policies has been a feature of UKIP's platform since 2006 and repeal of the 2008 Climate Change Act was a manifesto pledge in the 2015 general election, along with commitments to withdraw support for wind and solar, discontinue the carbon floor price and support the coal industry. There is also some evidence suggesting that UKIP supporters tend to be more sceptical about climate change than supporters of other parties³ and more hostile towards renewable energy, especially wind power.⁴

Variations and caveats

Within this general picture there are some variations and caveats. One type of variation is in the specific content of RWP party platforms. For example, as Gemenis et al. (2012) show, most European RWP parties are hostile to renewables and supportive of nuclear power, but there are important exceptions to the latter, including the Austrian Freedom Party and the Danish People's Party, while Hungary's Jobbik movement also appears to be supportive of renewables in general.⁵ Both the *Front National* in France and the Law and Justice Party in Poland have been virulently opposed to wind power, while being supportive of smaller scale renewables such as solar PV and the idea of 'prosumers' (Timperley 2017, Szulecki and Ancygier 2015).

A second issue is that, even within the constituencies of RWP parties, there are sometimes divisions about the status of climate science and related policies. For example, Mudde (2016) noted that agreement on climate policies could not be reached at the Alternative für Deutschland party's 2016 congress due to conflict between factions. Paradoxically, some RWP parties have environmentalist groups within them – for example the Front National's New Ecology movement set up in 2014 (Neslen 2014) – although these tend to be focused on local and national conservation and landscape issues (see also section 3.2 below).

A third kind of variation may be between Anglophone and continental European RWP, with hostility to climate science and policy being stronger and more marked in the former. Jeffries (2017) argues that unlike right-wing populists in the US, most European RWP parties 'do not reject [climate] science outright', but instead seek to marginalize the climate agenda 'in order to concentrate on border control and immigration' (Jeffries 2017: 469). Certainly, it is the case that many continental European RWP parties, including the Austrian Freedom Party, Hungary's Fidesz and Jobbik, Norway's Progress Party and Finland's Finn Party tend to avoid mentioning climate change or are careful to express scepticism rather than outright denial. By contrast, more robust scepticism or denial has played a particularly central role in Australian RWP, and was a visible feature of the Tea Party core agenda.

An earlier comparative study of climate scepticism in the media in six countries drew special attention to the role of some Anglophone media in giving a platform to populist views, arguing that climate scepticism 'is predominately an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon' and drawing a distinction 'between countries like the USA, the UK, and Australia, where it has often been present in parts of the media, and the developing world and continental Europe where it has been largely absent.' (Painter 2011: 1).

However, other evidence suggests that the contrast may not be so clear cut. Farstad (2017), drawing on the Comparative Manifesto Project data, finds that, for a wide sample of countries, including the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the UK, nationalist parties across all countries are less likely to mention climate change in party manifestos than other parties, with no clear difference between Anglophone and continental European countries.

The examples raised here are merely suggestive; however, they are enough to point to the need for more systematic research not only for a general association between RWP and hostility to the climate agenda, but also for variations in that association across country contexts. They also point to the theoretical challenge, not only of explaining the general picture but also accounting for those variations. It is to potential theoretical frameworks that we now turn.

Theoretical Directions

An obvious starting point for exploring potential explanations of why RWP is hostile to the climate agenda (and also why there might be variations in this pattern across contexts) is the literature on RWP itself. Two themes here are of particular interest: one concerns the structural roots of RWP, particularly its growth in recent years, while the other concerns the ideological content of RWP. These two themes offer distinct kinds of explanation. Here I argue that an approach based on the ideology of RWP is the more convincing, but that the exact role of each of these elements will only be resolved through more systematic and focused research.

A Structuralist Approach

One potential approach would draw on explanations of contemporary populism as arising from the marginalisation of specific groups in post-industrial societies through structural change in the global economy. In this approach, which may be termed ‘structuralist’, emphasis is given to the fact that RWP 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 (e.g. Bornschier and Kriesi 2012, Ford and Goodwin 2014, Rodrik 2017). This argument is perhaps most associated with Betz (1994), who calls this group the ‘losers of modernization’, while they have more recently been characterised in the media as the ‘left behind’.

Certainly, there is strong evidence for the hollowing out of labour markets and for stagnant real wages in low and mid-skilled employments in both the US and Europe, driven by both technological change and globalisation (Autor et al 2003, Goos and Manning 2007, Autor 2010, Autor et al 2016, Gregg et al 2014, Oesch 2015). At the same time, the conventional options for political representation of such groups have closed down. Unions have become weaker, and mainstream political parties have become more technocratic and converged on a centre-right policy agenda aimed at middle-class voters, creating a cartelisation of politics (Blyth 2003, Ford and Goodwin 2014, Evans and Tilley 2017). As a result, economic ‘losers have disproportionately rallied around right-wing populist parties’ (Oesch 2015: 130).

The structuralist reading suggests reasons for RWP hostility to climate change and policy that are directly related to structural changes that have also produced RWP (Figure 1). That is, supporters of RWP have suffered from the economic effects of globalization and

modernization, of which climate policy now forms one element, and which worsens their plight.

Figure 1 about here

A structuralist explanation

There is some support for such a view in survey-based studies of climate scepticism, which show significant correlations between scepticism and the socio-demographic characteristics that fit the 'left behind' group (e.g. Leiserowitz 2005, Whitmarsh 2011, McCright and Dunlap 2011, Poortinga et al 2011, Tranter and Booth 2015, McCright et al 2016). However, other studies show no link between type of employment and scepticism (e.g. Engels et al 2013), while Metag et al (2015) found that in Germany, sceptics have as high income and education as do climate activists.

Where they do exist, such associations beg the question of what the specific mechanisms producing hostility to the climate agenda might be. One potential argument is that many of the sectors most affected by technical change, globalisation and de-unionisation, including manufacturing, heavy industry and mining (especially coal), are also the most carbon intensive, so that the 'left behind' constituency from which RWP draws its support is materially threatened by climate policies.

There are few direct studies of whether workers in high carbon industries are more hostile to the climate agenda, but two do lend some support to this view. Bechtel et al (2017) found that

people working in more carbon-intensive sectors across four countries are significantly less supportive of global cooperation to reduce emissions and are less willing to pay for such measures. However, they use very broad categories of carbon intensity (for example the ‘high’ category includes all workers in ‘transportation’), rather than specific groups such as steel and coal workers. By contrast, Tsvinnereim and Ivarflatsen (2016) focused on the oil and gas sector in Norway, and found that those working in this sector are less in favour of constraints on fossil fuel production than the average, but are not more opposed to renewables.

A related but distinct argument highlights the tendency for RWP leaders in resource-rich countries to have close relationships with fossil fuel industries: Trump and senior administration figures with oil and coal interests in the US,⁶ the backing of John Howard’s Conservatives by the coal industry in Australia (e.g. Taylor 2014, Pearse 2007), Stephen Harper’s close relationship with mining and tar sands companies in Canada (Engler 2012), and Poland’s Law and Order Party close links to the country’s coal industry (Jeffries 2017). These relationships may provide an explanation for a pattern of more aggressive RWP climate scepticism in Anglophone countries, which tend to have more fossil-fuel reserves, than in most of Europe.

Yet another structuralist argument works not through threats to employment for the ‘left behind’ but rather through their living standards. This is that the relative hardship felt by this group generates a hostility to any form of tax, including environmental taxes (direct or indirect). For example, MacNeil (2016, p. 26) argues that it is where these changes have gone furthest, i.e. in Anglophone liberal market economies, that there has been ‘an explosion of antitax...politics’, and that it is this context that has led to the failure of carbon taxation in

these economies (especially Canada, the US and Australia). He contrasts these cases with the countries of north-western Europe (especially Scandinavian) countries with more generous welfare provision and more labour market protection. This again might provide an explanation of more aggressive hostility to climate science and policies found in the Anglosphere.

However, there are also some difficulties with the structuralist approach. One is that there are limits to the degree to which support for RWP correlates with the 'left behind' group. The populist vote rarely consists *solely* of this group, but instead typically encompasses both manual workers and the self-employed, who have different economic interests and who are drawn from different previous political affiliations (Ivarsflaten 2005, Ford and Goodwin 2014). Trump may have had appeal in the Rust Belt states, but there is also evidence that he drew on a wider base of support, and the mean household income of Trump supporters was actually higher than that for Clinton supporters (Rothwell and Diego-Roswell 2016).

Another problem for the structural argument is that, despite the greater economic protection afforded low- and semi-skilled workers in north-west European coordinated market economies (e.g. Thelen 2014), populism has nevertheless emerged in these places as well as in Anglophone liberal market economies. Equally, while economic loss and political exclusion might explain why working class voters might turn to populism, these factors cannot in themselves explain why such voters have so frequently turned to *right-wing*, as opposed to left-wing, populism. Such a phenomenon suggests that values and ideology must also play an essential role (Inglehart and Norris 2016).

There are also questions about the idea that the climate scepticism found in RWP is driven by defensiveness amongst those in high-carbon industries particularly threatened by global action on climate change. First, there is little evidence that domestic climate policies have in fact led (or would lead) to the relocation of such industries, (i.e. ‘carbon leakage’) (e.g. Grubb et al 2009). The threat to employment in such industries has come more from technical change and globalisation. Indeed, as a result of these factors, employment in fossil fuel industries in OECD countries is now very small. For example, coal miners often play an iconic role in RWP economic 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. In some cases, miners are in any case relatively well-paid and so qualify as ‘left behind’ only in a purely symbolic sense. These factors cast doubt on whether the experience of such a small group could have such a decisive effect in the positioning of RWP parties and movements on climate change.

There are also problems for the related view that RWP parties have been captured by fossil fuel industry interests. The existence of such relationships is not in doubt; nor is their role in shaping policy where populists come to power. However, this cannot on its own be a sufficient explanation, since RWP parties in countries with no significant domestic fossil fuel resources are also hostile to climate policies. Moreover, where strong fossil fuel interests do exist, their lobbying is not confined to RWP parties, but is far more widespread. For example, in Poland support for coal and a close relationship with the coal industry is not confined to the current Law and Justice Party government but was also found in the previous Civic Platform administration (Jeffries 2017). Finally, fossil fuel interests no longer provide the only (or possibly even the dominant) option for financial and political rewards. Many large corporations potentially offering financial support to political parties, as well as wider job

creation, have now invested heavily in climate action. The question is why RWP leaders and parties seek one particular set of relationships over another.

All of these considerations suggest that the structuralist approach is problematic, both in terms of internal coherence and empirical support.

An Ideological Approach

A second kind of explanation for why populists are so often climate sceptics and hostile to climate policy would work fundamentally through the ideological content of RWP. Such a position would still be consistent with a view that structural factors have fuelled the rise of RWP over the last 30 years, but it would see these factors as having an effect on attitudes to climate change and policy as being mediated through the ideological nature of RWP (Figure 2).

Figure 2 about here

An ideological explanation

In particular, this approach would draw on literature that explores two dimensions of RWP ideology. One is the importance of socially conservative and nationalist values for RWP, which produce hostility to the climate agenda because it is seen as being espoused principally by a liberal, cosmopolitan elite, counter to national interests. The other is the desire for a closer, simpler relationship between ‘the people’ and political elites, to which climate change, as a complex, often opaque problem demanding complex solutions, poses an unwelcome

challenge. This dimension also encompasses the idea that elites are corrupted by special interests, here represented by climate scientists and environmentalists.

An important element in the ideology of RWP relates to cultural and political values. Conventionally, fundamental political differences are often seen on a traditional left-right ideological spectrum, where positions are determined through preferences for economic redistribution and intervention. However, this approach misses other important dimensions of political cleavage in post-industrial societies, of which the cultural dimension has become increasingly relevant (Hooghe et al 2002). Häusermann and Kriesi (2015: 204-205) posit two waves of cultural cleavage. One starting in the 1960s involved the emergence of liberal values on attitudes towards authority, law and order, social tolerance, women's rights and homosexuality, which came into conflict with more traditional authoritarian values (Heath et al 1994). A second wave, overlaying and partly transforming the first, has been associated with processes of globalisation, including greater immigration, and involves a cleavage between those holding universalistic or cosmopolitan values and those strongly attached to the idea of nation (and therefore ideological hostility to immigration and supra-national institutions such as the EU). Differences in attitudes in these dimensions are most strongly associated not so much with class (although there is some correlation) as with education (e.g. Stubager 2008).

The authoritarian, socially conservative and nationalist value dimensions of RWP are important because they fill out the 'thin' core ideology of populism, and give substance to the populist categories of 'the people', elites and 'nefarious minorities' (see above). However, while all populism is anti-elitist, and all populists direct their ire at elites and minorities, *left wing* populism tends to be universalist and constructs elites as reactionary conservative

political groups captured by business leaders, whereas *right* wing populism constructs elites as ‘liberal’ and cosmopolitan, and frequently as captured by immigrants. Cosmopolitanism is thus, Taggart (2000, p. 105) argues, ‘anathema’ to RWP movements and supporters. On this view, the climate scepticism expressed by supporters of RWP movements and parties can be seen as an expression of hostility to liberal, cosmopolitan elites, rather than an engagement with the issue of climate change itself. Although it is not the primary target of current populist concern in most cases, climate change is the cosmopolitan issue *par excellence*.

There is support for the importance of values for climate scepticism in the social psychological literature, which often uses liberal-authoritarian values scales and where scepticism is significantly associated with authoritarianism (Leiserowitz 2005, Poortinga et al 2011), in some cases being the most significant factor (Whitmarsh 2011). There is also evidence that nationalist values matter. For example, Forchtner and Kølvraa (2015) show that British and Danish RWP parties symbolically frame the climate agenda as a threat to national sovereignty. Gemenis et al (2012) also find the common use of nationalism and hostility to the EU as frames for treatment of climate change amongst the 13 RWP parties in Europe that they surveyed. It is also clear from both studies that there is a striking difference between climate change and the treatment of local and national environmental issues, where there is often a strong element of conservation in RWP party manifestos and literature, framed by a romantic nationalism and hostility to immigration. A romanticisation of national landscapes may explain why some European RWP parties apparently abhor wind power while welcoming the less intrusive solar power.

The nationalist, anti-universalist ideology of RWP also introduces some complexity into party positions on energy policy. Generally, we can expect that nationalist RWP parties and supporters will have particular concerns about dependency on energy imports. Where

countries have domestic fossil fuel resources, national energy independence will be framed in terms of maintaining and developing those resources, and these have typically played a role in RWP party symbolism and policy in places such as Australia, the US and Poland.

However, where countries do *not* have such resources, they can be expected to frame energy independence in terms of finding alternatives to fossil fuels, while at the same time resenting the idea of climate policy imposed by supra-national bodies. This situation may explain why, as discussed above, some European RWPs apparently display some ambivalence about renewable energy.

A second relevant element of populist ideology 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. This dynamic can create fertile ground for populism, which promises a simpler vision of direct democracy with government by the people, instead of by politicians, bureaucrats, or experts (Canovan 2001). Taggart (2000) similarly argues that the scale of modern societies, and hence the need for intermediate institutions between voters and outcomes, reinforces the sense of distance between rulers and ruled, again fuelling the desire to have a set of populist leaders who are close to the people; i.e. a ‘politics of simplicity’ (Taggart 2000: 112).

In modern societies, policy making in most areas involves technical complexities, distributional trade-offs and compromises between different groups. However, climate policy not only involves all of these, but also has additional features of 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 RWPs already ill-disposed to such policy on values grounds. Moreover, the over-arching framework for climate policy is constructed by distant international processes of science (the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) and complex negotiation (the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change) (Bäckstrand and Kuyper 2017), and in some cases through delegation to technocratic bodies (such as the Committee on Climate Change in the UK, or the Environmental Protection Agency in the US).

These kinds of institutions may also connect with the element in populist ideology that sees political elites as captured by what Ostiguy and Casullo (2017) call ‘nefarious minorities’, i.e. special interests with a corrupting influence (see also Taggart 2000). In contemporary RWP the primary targets of hostility are typically immigrants, but within the sphere of climate change, these ‘social other’ groups would be environmentalists and climate scientists. There is some evidence from the US that this is indeed the case (Leiserowitz et al 2012, Dunlap 2013, Brown 2014, Cann and Raymond 2018).

A related issue is that populist movements have been fertile ground for conspiracy theories (Taggart 2000). As the result of an invisible, highly complex, global set of processes, climate change is ideal material for conspiracy theories. Given the *modus operandi* of professional climate sceptics, the relevance of these tendencies in the case of climate change is obvious, especially in the framing of the ‘Climategate’ case (Powell 2011, Nerlich 2010). However, in both of these areas, evidence on the role of RWP remains suggestive rather than definitive, and there is a rich potential for further research.

Conclusions and Implications

There are well-developed bodies of research both on right-wing populism (RWP) and on climate scepticism, but these have remained largely unconnected, and there has been surprisingly little attention given to why right-wing populist (RWP) supporters, parties and leaders in particular so often express climate scepticism and hostility towards climate policy. My contribution here has been to map out how these two areas of study might be bridged, and to review evidence both for and against specific hypotheses. Some initial conclusions can be drawn, but the review also shows that, since most existing research does not directly address populism and the climate agenda, there are large and important gaps in our understanding.

Most existing research on politics and climate scepticism is of limited value for the specific study of RWP because of it ignores RWP parties and supporters, and relies on conventional left-right ideological position rather than measures identifying a populist world view. The phenomenon of ‘mainstream populism’ in Anglophone countries with majoritarian electoral systems also complicates the picture. However, what evidence there is does suggest a fairly consistent correlation, with RWP parties and their supporters in Europe and in Anglophone countries being more strongly inclined to express climate scepticism of different forms, and to be more hostile to carbon taxation or pricing and to renewables. However, there are some variations within this general pattern that any fully successful explanation must account for. Some RWP parties in Europe are supportive of some kinds of renewable energy, and, more generally, there is some evidence that American (and maybe Australian) RWP is more aggressively climate sceptic than European RWP.

The literature on RWP itself suggests two kinds of potential explanation for this pattern. One is based on the argument that the rise of populism is attributable to structural changes across

all post-industrial states, driven by technological change and globalisation. These developments have eroded the incomes and status of a group effectively ‘left behind’ by globalisation, and who are particularly drawn to populist parties. This structuralist argument suggests that hostility to climate change and policy may be directly related to structural changes that have also produced this RWP, including job losses concentrated in high-carbon industries and a hostility of such groups to any form of tax, and hence resistance to climate policies that can be framed as such.

However, the structuralist approach is based on an account of RWP that struggles to account for a number of phenomena, including the presence of strong RWP movements even where workers are relatively well protected from the effects of globalisation and the fact that the constituency of RWP goes far wider than the ‘left behind’. I have argued that a more compelling kind of explanation is based on the ideological content of RWP, especially the ways in which nationalism and authoritarianism combine with anti-elitism to construct a world view in which ‘the people’ are ruled by a corrupt and illegitimate liberal, cosmopolitan elite. While the main targets here are immigration (and, in Europe, the EU), the climate change agenda fits in well as collateral damage. These elements sit well with survey evidence on climate scepticism and with the ways in which RWP parties construct environmental and energy challenges. The ideological nature of RWP also creates an attraction to conspiracy theories, which is a consistent facet of climate scepticism. This ideological approach is not inconsistent with some elements of the structuralist approach, and understanding how they might be articulated with one another is part of the research agenda raised here. However, it does imply that an account of why RWP supporters and leaders are hostile to climate science and policy that has no reference to ideology will be inadequate.

Because this is a new research agenda, more definitive analysis requires evidence collected and organised in ways better tailored to the questions raised, and these conclusions must be initial and tentative. However, this agenda is of great importance, since whether we understand the hostility of RWP supporters and leaders to climate science and policy as a structural or as an ideological phenomenon (or what precise articulation of both) has implications for responding to the challenge to climate science and policy posed by the rise of RWP. Essentially, one account implies a response based on greater economic and political inclusion, while the other implies a response based on engagement with underlying ideologies. It is for this reason that, while there is a varied and rich set of research agendas within each approach, a key implication is that we need work that seeks to test them against each other.

Notes

¹ Here I follow the distinctions drawn in the literature on scepticism between *trend* scepticism (a view that the climate is not changing), *attribution* scepticism (a view that climate change exists but is not due to human influence), and *impact* scepticism (the view that climate change exists but it is not having or will not have a significant impact) (e.g. Poortinga et al 2011).

² https://www.svp.ch/de/assets/File/Parteiprogramm_SVP-englisch.pdf

³ http://d25d2506fb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/4ua4utkfr8/YG-Archive-Pol-Sunday-Times-results-200913.pdf;

https://d25d2506fb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/sgflio97to/Internal_Results_150618_Climate_Change_W.pdf

http://d25d2506fb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/krdxq5r9hq/YouGov-results-Oxford-University-Climate-change-and-the-environment-151211.pdf

⁴ <http://www.renewableuk.com/en/news/press-releases.cfm/2014-07-24-investing-in-renewables-top-priority-for-energy-security-irrespective-of-voting-intention-poll-finds>;

https://d25d2506fb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/gxvihxoixc/SundayTimesResults_150515_Website.pdf

⁵ http://www.jobbik.com/jobbik_dedicated_to_environment_protection

⁶ E.g. <http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/in-case-you-were-wondering-donald-trump-has-multiple-ties-to-the-dakota-access-pipeline/>; <https://wilderness.org/blog/trump-opens-lands-coal-leasing-puts-fossil-fuels-climate-action>; <https://www.desmogblog.com/2016/11/08/donald-trump-s-victory-major-win-fossil-fuel-interests-and-climate-science-deniers-countries-gather-un-talks>; <https://www.desmog.uk/2017/01/17/trump-s-dirty-secrets-aired-channel-4-documentary-climate-science-denier-network>;

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Figure 1

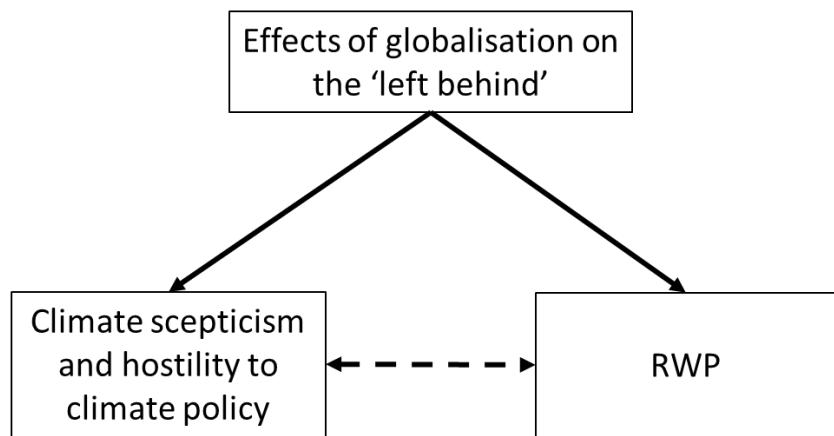


Figure 2

