

## Painting Populist Landscapes? How Do Right-Wing Populist Parties Frame Environmental Issues?

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Citizens across Europe are increasingly concerned about the impact of climate change: but this is fuelled predominantly by social movements, not party politics. For mainstream parties, the environment remains a valence issue: addressed through a tacit acknowledgement that it is good to do something, but that getting into a fight for this space is collectively detrimental. Until recently, populist radical-right parties followed this, often choosing to ignore environmental issues entirely. Now, they sense an opportunity. They can no longer ignore the environment, so instead have utilised its heightened salience to challenge the mainstream. I examined the role of populism in their portrayal of environmental issues but found that rather than attacking elites directly the environment is framed predominantly in nationalist terms. Radical right parties also portray environmental policy as a cost to the consumer, however it is chiefly used as a vehicle through which romanticist language can be used to reinforce calls for increased national independence.

Populism provides the perfect vehicle to fight this cause. It offers a thin ideology that adjusts to context, taking advantage of a variety of social cleavages. Essentially, this incorporates a dichotomy between a corrupt 'elite' and pure 'people' coupled with a desire for increased popular sovereignty to represent the general will. Right-wing populists have also utilised 'nefarious others' as a scapegoat: groups they feel contribute to the disconnect between the people and elite. The radical right often assign this status to immigrants, for example, blaming them for a weakened welfare state.

My exploratory study examines the influence of populism in radical right framing of environmental issues. There is little contemporary research which assesses how they change the terms of the debate. Using qualitative content analysis, I searched for three potential populist frames:

1. Anti-elite rhetoric
2. Calls for increased sovereignty
3. Targeting of nefarious others

This analysis was performed on the most recent federal manifesto of three parties: AfD (Germany), FPÖ (Austria), and SVP (Switzerland), coding sections relating to energy, climate change and the environment. These parties were identified using the [2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey](#), with each

scoring at least one standard deviation above the mean on both anti-elite rhetoric and position on political right. Including the non-EU SVP also provides added value: examining supranational frames directed at the EU. The EU has taken a leadership role in environmental policy, setting targets and monitoring progress. This, alongside historic radical-right Euroscepticism, makes it a likely scapegoat.

Interestingly, these parties tend not to criticise European elites. Instead, parties take aim at specific directives, such as the privatisation of water management. This continues at a national level, where blame is apportioned at policy. There are also other references to nefarious others: SVP frame the green belt destruction as a consequence of uncontrolled immigration, demonstrating ability to transfer rhetoric from other issues.

The parties also refer to individual monetary and health costs of environmental policy, a frame similarly found in [Cann and Raymond's \(2018\)](#) study on climate denialism in the US. They do this in a fashion which frames environmental protection as disadvantageous to the consumer, equating it with a need for increased citizen input. However, this frame, alongside that of the nefarious other, does not dominate.

Rather, these parties primarily emphasise nationalist rhetoric. They repeatedly reinforce the need for national independence in environmental policy and utilise romanticist language. They refer to the beauty and biodiversity of a 'homeland,' and criticise the destruction of 'our country's asset of natural beauty.' This is the dominant frame for radical right parties. Environmental issues are framed by European radical right parties in a nationalist fashion, not a populist one.