

Right wing populism and climate change: Exploring the linkages

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Abstract

The rise in right wing populism (RWP) across Europe and Anglo-phone countries poses a major challenge for climate policy. RWP parties are almost always hostile to climate policy, and their leaders, and indeed supporters, often express forms of climate scepticism in ways which place them (as on other issues) outside of the political mainstream. However, despite the strength of the relationship between RWP and hostility to the concept of climate change and to climate policy, there is a surprising dearth of research that investigates its nature and causes. Yet such research is essential for better understanding populist hostility and a response to it that preserves some form of public policy to mitigate climate change. Study of the relationship first requires clarity about definitions of populism, and about its disentangling from the traditional left-right ideological dimension. Given this foundation, the paper then explores three broad types of explanation of why RWP parties and movements are so hostile to action on climate change. One of these is an interest-based explanation, based on the apparent tendency for populist leaders in resource-rich countries to form close relationships, and draw on the support of, fossil fuel industries. However, this cannot be a sufficient explanation, since populist parties in countries with no significant domestic fossil fuel resources are also hostile to climate policies. A second approach draws on structuralist accounts of the roots of contemporary populism in economic marginalisation amongst those 'left behind' by the effects of globalisation and technical change on labour markets, and in political marginalisation as parties become more technocratic and cartelised. A third approach focuses on the ideological content of right wing, typically nationalist populism, especially its counter-posing of 'the people' with a cosmopolitan corrupted elite, with climate change and policy occupying a symbolic place in this contrast. This approach may also draw on the observation that populist movements are prone to conspiracy theories. The paper concludes with some implications for what kind of responses might be made to populist attacks on climate science and policy.

Right wing populism and climate policy: Theorising the linkages

1. Introduction

Mitigating climate change remains the most important collective action problem for humanity as a whole, at once urgent and long-term, and requiring major transformations in economies and societies. While some progress has been made, and greenhouse gas emissions growth has stalled, the most recent evidence that the effects of warming may be accelerating is alarming.¹ At a global level, the achievement of the Paris Agreement is a positive step, but as is widely recognised, commitments under the Agreement do not yet come near what would be required to have a good chance of avoiding what is seen as dangerous climate change. Indeed, the Agreement is premised on the expectation of a bidding up of effort over time. At the same time, these commitments – which are effectively commitments to domestic public policy – have not yet been delivered.

The current political context makes this delivery deeply challenging. Following a widespread issue-attention cycle in the 2000s and a burst of policy and legislative effort, the politics of climate policy have become more fragile in the 2010s (Lockwood 2013). At the best of times, climate change remains a fairly low salience issue, and economic depression experienced in many countries following the financial crisis in 2008 drove the issue further down the list of voter priorities (e.g. Scruggs and Benegal 2012).

In this context, the rise in right wing populism across Europe and Anglo-phone countries poses a major challenge for climate policy (Meyer-Ohlendorf and Görlach 2016). Right wing populism (RWP) is a long standing feature of continental European politics (Mudde 2004,

¹ <https://nsidc.org/arcticseaicenews/>; <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/mar/21/record-breaking-climate-change-world-uncharted-territory>

Zaslove 2008, Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008) and in Anglophone countries (Wear 2008, Mead 2011, Snow and Moffitt 2012, Skocpol and Williamson 2012). In recent years the phenomenon has both gained strength and reach in some countries, most dramatically in 2016 with the Brexit referendum (where a major role was played by the UK Independence Party) and the election of Donald Trump in the USA (Eiermann 2016). The Front National is also likely to show a strong performance in the 2017 Presidential election.

RWP party platforms are almost always hostile to climate policy, and their leaders, and indeed supporters, often express forms of climate scepticism in ways which place them (as on other issues) outside of the political mainstream. In the current wave of European and American RWP, the core preoccupation is immigration, but hostility to climate change policy is a part of party programmes. In Australian RWP, climate change has been a more central issue (Beeson and McDonald 2013, Tranter 2013). Where RWP parties have attained power in European countries, they have sought (as far as they can within the constraints of the EU) to scale back on climate policies. The Trump administration is seeking to reverse carbon related EPA regulations and support for Obama's clean energy programme (may even withdraw the US from the Paris Agreement) (Weaver et al 2017). Even when not formally part of government, RWP parties have had influence in weakening policy, such as in Denmark.

Despite the strength of the relationship between RWP and climate scepticism, there is a surprising dearth of research that investigates its nature and causes (Forchtner and Kølvråa 2015). 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. The aim of this paper is contribute to this endeavour by mapping out the terrain, exploring

some of the possible reasons why these two phenomena may be related. The paper draws on the literature on climate scepticism and on that on populism more broadly.

Using the category of RWP requires a definition of ‘populism’. There have been various attempts at definition in terms of leadership style and party organisation, but probably the most widely accepted definition is now based on Mudde’s (2004, 2007) approach, which identifies a minimal, core definition of populism as an ideology in which a basic cleavage in society is identified 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. However, it is also widely argued that populism is a ‘thin’ ideology that rarely stands alone; instead being easily combined with other political values and ideologies (Freedman 1998, Canovan 1999, Stanley 2008). As discussed further below, it is thus in principle possible to distinguish, for example, between right wing populism, which is typically seen as constituted by nativism, populism and authoritarianism (e.g. Mudde 2007) and generally climate sceptical and hostile to climate policy, and left wing populism,² which is not. The point of labelling parties, movements and supporter world views as ‘populist’ lies in drawing attention to their difference from their conventional, mainstream left- and right-wing versions, in which politics is understood not so much in terms of people-elite contrasts as in terms of social class, values, or religion.

It is also helpful to define the other side of the relationship, i.e. climate scepticism and policy. 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

² Recent frequently cited examples being Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Momentum/Jeremy Corbyn in the UK and Bernie Sanders in the US.

change exists but it is not having or will not have a significant impact) (Rahmstorf 2004, Poortinga et al 2011). I take the main elements of climate policy to be some form of carbon pricing, whether by tax or cap-and-trade scheme, and support for renewable energy.

The next section briefly reviews the evidence for a relationship between RWP, climate scepticism and hostility to climate policy. This evidence is quite consistent, but is somewhat complicated in some Anglophone countries by the phenomenon of ‘mainstream populism’ in which RWP does not emerge in the form of a separate party, but rather as a wing within established right-of-centre parties. In Section 3 I then consider three types of explanation for the RWP-climate relationship, interest-based, structuralist and ideological. Section 4 concludes, and briefly considers implications for responses.

2. Right wing populism, climate scepticism and climate policy: evidence for a relationship

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 a relationship more systematically. Most studies still focus on the effects of partisanship in terms of mainstream parties, or of self-identified left-right political ideology. Both of these variables are problematic from the point of view of capturing RWP influence; the former because they either ignore RWP parties or conflate different wings of mainstream parties, and the latter because populism does not neatly fit onto the conventional left-right ideological dimension (Kresi et al 2006, Hooghe et al 2002).

One exception to this picture is Gemenis et al (2012), who recently surveyed manifesto positions for 13 “‘radical’, ‘populist’ or ‘extreme’ right” parties from 12 countries in

Europe.³ They found that ‘party positions on this issue [anthropogenic global warming] are clearly anti-environmental’ (ibid: 15), with only the Greek LAOS accepting climate science. The BNP’s position is trend sceptical, while the Danish People’s Party and Italian Northern League are attribution sceptical. The positions of such parties are explicitly contrasted by the authors with the treatment of climate change as a valence issue amongst mainstream parties.

These radical or populist right–wing parties also tend to be unsupportive to renewable energy, preferring nuclear power (although the Danish People’s Party and Austrian Freedom Party are exceptions). The majority of the manifestos surveyed were also overwhelmingly against environmental taxes, with only the Swedish Social Democrats accepting them as incentives for environmental actions.

Amongst West European publics, McCright et al (2016) find an association between trend scepticism, perception of the seriousness of climate change, and willingness to pay to fight climate change on the one hand, and self-identified left-right political ideology on the other, with those on the right being more sceptical, less inclined to see climate change as serious, and less willing to pay. This is consistent with, but not direct evidence for a relationship specifically between RWP and climate scepticism.

While European PR electoral systems facilitate the formation and representation of RWP in the form of separate parties, Anglophone countries’ majoritarian systems produce a tendency for RWP to form wings *within* the mainstream right-of-centre party (Bawn and Rosenbluth

³ The Austrian Freedom Party (FPO), the Belgian Flemish Interest (VB), the Danish People's Party (DF), the True Finns (TF), the French Front National (FN), the German Die Republikaner (REP) and the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), the Greek Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS), the Italian Northern League (NL), the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), the Swiss People's Party (SVP), the British National Party (BNP) and the Swedish Democrats (SD).

2006). As most studies in these latter countries focus on differences associated with traditional left-right ideology and partisanship, it is harder to distinguish the role of populist ideology.⁴

The US has seen increasing polarisation between Republican and Democrat voters, and between self-identifying conservatives and liberals since the late 1990s, in a range of issues, including in the area of trend climate scepticism (McCright and Dunlap 2011, Hamilton 2011). Importantly, there was also a lack of consensus amongst mainstream political elites in the US on climate science and policy in the 2000s, again unlike as in Europe. This was reflected in policy terms, with the Bush administration resistant to international agreements on climate and to carbon pricing and renewable energy support. Climate scepticism at the elite level was also clearly fed by an extensive network of think-tanks (Jacques et al 2008).

However, it is also the case that polarisation on climate change amongst voters jumped at the end of the 2000s, driven by a sharp increase in trend scepticism amongst Republicans, just at the time of the emergence of the populist Tea Party movement (McCright and Dunlap: 176). This movement emerged at the fringes of the Republican Party (Skocpol and Williamson 2012) but ended up by remaking the leadership in its image, and laid the ground for the emergence of Trump. Dunlap and McCright (2008) and McCright and Dunlap (2011) interpret greater trend and attribution scepticism amongst Republican voters and self-identified conservatives as the product of a defensive counter-revolution in response to liberal critique of industrial capitalism (and therefore closely bound up with the conservative think

⁴ I argue below that, in many Anglophone countries, there is a sharp polarisation on climate change between supporters of mainstream right and left of centre parties in part because voters attracted to RWP remain within right-of-centre parties. This would imply that in European countries with PR and party fragmentation, one would expect to see less polarisation amongst voters supporting mainstream parties, since party sorting would apply to a greater extent. This expectation is largely confirmed by Tvinnereim (2015).

tanks funded by fossil fuel interests). However, as Skocpol and Williamson (2012) make clear, Tea Party activists (as Trump supporters and Trump himself more recently) were not straightforward free-market conservatives, but rather combined authoritarian values on social issues with some interventionist views on the economy, quite common to contemporary RWP.

It is therefore possible that the sharp movements toward greater scepticism in the Republican Party from the late 2000s onwards were as much to do with populist ideologies as traditional left-right positions or partisanship. This view is supported by two recent studies which distinguish between Republican supporters in general and Tea Party supporters in particular. Both Hamilton and Saito (2015) and Shao (2017) find that the latter group are significantly more likely than non-Tea-Party Republican supporters to be trend, attribution and impact sceptics, controlling for other factors.

The same set of issues also apply in Australia and Canada. In the former case, 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 Party (Canovan 1999, Wear 2008). In Canada, there are also strong partisan contrasts between self-identified Conservative and Liberal supporters in trend climate scepticism (although scepticism is in general lower than in the US) (Lachapelle et al 2012). But at the same time Sawer and Laycock (2009) and Snow and Moffitt (2012) draw parallels between Howard and Canada's Conservative Party leader Stephen Harper, who they see as pursuing a similar strategy of what they label 'market populism' and 'mainstream populism' respectively. 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 UK Independence Party (UKIP), which while it has not achieved meaningful Parliamentary representation has enjoyed considerable voter support, media attention and policy influence in the last 2-3 years. With an attack on mainstream political parties and culture as a continual theme expressed by its leaders, UKIP is clearly a populist party. At the same time, opposition to climate policies has been a feature of the party's platform since 2006 (Ford and Goodwin 2014: 72) and repeal of the 2008 Climate Change Act was a manifesto pledge in the 2015 general election.⁵ The manifesto also included commitments to withdraw support for wind and solar, discontinue the carbon floor price and to seek ways to 'assist and rejuvenate the coal industry.' For some years, UKIP's head of policy⁶ was a prominent climate sceptic and senior party figures frequently make sceptical remarks (refs.). Such openly sceptical and hostile anti-climate change positioning distinguishes UKIP from the treatment of the environment as a valence issue by all the other main parties in Britain.

Beyond party leaders, there is some evidence suggesting that UKIP supporters are also more sceptical about climate change than supporters of other parties, although it is not particularly consistent over time or even within surveys. Cross-breaks of views on climate change by voting intention have only recently started to include UKIP voters. A 2013 YouGov survey showed 44% of those intending to vote UKIP were trend sceptics, compared with less than

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<https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/ukipdev/pages/1103/attachments/original/1429295050/UKIPManifesto2015.pdf?1429295050>

⁶ Christopher Monckton, who was chief spokesperson on climate change from 2009 to 2013 and head of the policy unit until 2012.

30% for Labour and Conservative voters. Only 17% of prospective UKIP voters attributed warming to human causes, less than half the proportion of Conservative voters at 37%. By 2015 a repeat survey showed that all respondents had moved towards greater acceptance of climate change, and the UKIP differential with the Conservatives had disappeared, although those who had voted UKIP in the 2015 general election still included the highest proportion of trend sceptics. The 2015 survey also showed that 29% of UKIP voters agreed with the statement that: “It is not yet clear whether climate change is happening or not – scientists are divided on the issue. I don’t believe climate change is happening at all – it’s simply scare mongering and we should ignore it”, as compared with 19% of Conservative voters and 6% of Labour voters. There is also some evidence that UKIP supporters are more hostile towards renewable energy, especially wind power, than others.⁷

Overall, most of the evidence we have on political differences in attitudes towards climate change and climate policies focuses on self-identified left-right political ideology and mainstream partisan identification. There is a paucity of studies directly examining populism, especially of those who identify with or vote for populist parties. Given the rising influence of RWP movements, leaders and parties over the last fifteen years, this is a major research gap. What evidence there is does indirectly lend some support to the view that there is an association between RWP parties (or mainstream parties with RWP wings) and voters on the one hand and climate scepticism and hostility towards some climate policies on the other.

3. Theoretical directions

Why should this be the case? Taggart (2000) argues that populism is mainly a reactive phenomenon, arising in response to perceived crises. This suggests that its main

⁷ [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;](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://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/gxvihxoixc/SundayTimesResults_150515_Website.pdf

preoccupations should vary across time and space with the nature of those crises. In fact, at present the main focus for many populist movements and parties is opposition to immigration, reflecting the widespread common experience of greater movement of people that has come with globalisation. By contrast, climate change is thus rather peripheral to the RWP agenda and one might perhaps expect to see greater variation in the positions of RWP parties. Yet, subject to the limitations on evidence discussed in the previous section, it appears that the attitudes of RWP leaders, and to some extent supporters, are fairly consistently hostile across Anglophone countries and Europe. Here I suggest that there are three broad types of explanations that could be considered to explain these patterns: these are: an interest-based approach; a structuralist approach, and an approach based on populist ideology.

3.1 An interest-based approach

The first type of explanation is interest-based, drawing on the apparent tendency for populist leaders in resource-rich countries to have or form close relationships with, draw on the financial support of and deliver policy benefits to fossil fuel industries. Such an approach is found less in academic studies, but is more prevalent as an implicit theory in the work of environmental organisations, journalists and bloggers. Such analysts have placed emphasis on the close links of Trump and senior administration figures to oil and coal interests in the US,⁸

⁸ 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>; <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/12/donald-trump-environment-climate-change-skeptics>

the backing of John Howard's Conservatives by the coal industry in Australia⁹ and Stephen Harper's close relationship with mining and tar sands companies in Canada.¹⁰

The existence of such relationships is not in doubt; nor is the probability that they play a significant role in shaping policy where populists come to power. However, as a specific explanation for the tendency for RWP leaders and parties to adopt climate sceptic positions and policies that favour fossil fuel industries over low carbon industries, an interest-based approach faces a number of problems.

First, this cannot on its own be a sufficient explanation, since populist parties in countries with no significant domestic fossil fuel resources are also hostile to climate policies. For example, UKIP is keen on coal but the UK has a weak coal lobby. Second, where strong fossil fuel interests do exist, lobbying is not confined to populist parties, but is fairly widespread. The existence of a fossil fuel lobby by itself cannot explain why RWP parties and leaders might be especially inclined to embrace that lobby. Third, and again as with other political parties and movements, 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 and job creation have now invested heavily in climate action.¹¹ The question is why RWP parties and movements seek one particular set of relationships over another.

⁹ Taylor (2014); Hamilton (2007); Pearse (2007)

¹⁰ Engler (2012); http://www.huffingtonpost.com/washington-spectator/stephen-harpers-petrostate-tar-sands_b_6745776.html

¹¹ This can be seen most recently in companies publicly opposing the recent reversal of policy on clean energy in the US – see <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/mar/29/climate-change-companies-challenge-trump-mars-staples-gap>

Potential answers to this question are likely to have to appeal to one or another of the other two types of explanation considered below. One is an essentially structuralist argument that RWP has stronger support amongst potential voters working in ‘old’ industries, including fossil fuels, rather than in the ‘new’ economy, including low carbon industries. The other is an essentially ideological argument that the existence of fossil-fuel (and other) resources in the national territory lend themselves to a mobilising nationalist sentiment of self-sufficiency which sits well with RWP symbolism (Forchtner and Kølvråa 2015: 206).

3.2 A structuralist approach

A second potential approach to explaining the link between RWP and climate scepticism and hostility to climate policy draws on accounts of the roots of contemporary populism in the marginalisation of sections of society through the changing structure of the economy and politics. This argument has both economic and political dimensions.

The economic dimension of the structuralist approach argues that RWP parties have had particular appeal amongst those – especially industrial and manufacturing workers and those in less skilled white collar professions – whose jobs, incomes and wider economic security have been most eroded by processes of globalisation, automation and de-unionisation (e.g. Betz 1994, Ignazi 2003).¹² Ford and Goodwin (2014) make this argument in relation to support for UKIP amongst working-class disaffected Labour voters, characterising this group as the ‘left behind’, a category that has become a major meme in the media, and has also been applied widely to the constituency supporting Trump in the 2016 Presidential elections.¹³

¹² As Englehart and Norris (2016) point out, these arguments are not new, and were deployed by an earlier generation of sociologists such as Lipset and Bell to explain the appeal of fascism in the 1930s.

¹³ E.g. <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/02/why-donald-trump-and-bernie-sanders-were-inevitable-213685>

Certainly, there is good economic evidence for a hollowing out of lower-skilled labour markets due to technological change (Autor et al 2003, Goos and Manning 2007, Goos et al 2009) and to globalisation (Autor et al 2016), and of wage stagnation and polarisation in recent years (especially in the US and UK) not only at the bottom of the income distribution but also in what has been termed the ‘squeezed middle’ (Gregg et al 2014, Autor 2010). Moreover, these trends have happened in an era of growing inequality (Picketty 2013, OECD 2012), implying a sharp increase not so much in absolute, as relative deprivation and insecurity. There is also evidence that those working class voters in ‘left behind’ groups are aware of these inequalities (Evans and Tilley 2017).

At the same time, the options for political representation of such groups have closed down as 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 (Mudde 2004, Ford and Goodwin 2014, Blyth 2003). This argument that the working class has been politically excluded of has perhaps been most fully spelled out recently by Evans and Tilley (2017). Parties that operate outside of the political mainstream can then be seen as having an appeal to ‘left behind’ working class voters, because they are authentically different in nature. Right-wing variants of populism tend to offer a mix of economic interventionism, authoritarian social values and anti-immigrant nationalism (see below) that resonate with many working class voters, and so have particular appeal.

The structuralist reading of RWP suggests interpretations of the links with hostility to climate change and policy that have economic roots. One is that the relative hardship felt by the ‘left behind’ and the ‘squeezed middle’ generates a hostility to any form of tax, including

environmental taxes (direct or indirect). Lockwood (2016) notes the way in which the UK print media has used a ‘green’ tax framing to try to mobilise opposition for support for renewable energy, and how concerns about the political sensitivity of renewable energy policy costs on energy bills have led to an approach that limits the budgetary envelope for such costs. MacNeil (2016) deploys a ‘varieties of capitalism’ approach to argue that it is where these changes have gone furthest, i.e. in liberal market economies, that there has been ‘an explosion of antitax, antigovernment, anti-immigrant, and anti-“liberal elite” politics from...working class communities’, and that it is this context that has led to the failure of carbon taxation in these economies (especially Canada, the US and Australia), as opposed to the coordinated market economies of North Western Europe. As noted above, another potential argument here is that those sectors most affected by technical change and globalisation, including manufacturing, heavy industry and mining, which are the most carbon intensive, so that the ‘left behind’ constituency from which RWP draws its support is inherently ill-disposed to climate policies.

It is also the case that studies of climate scepticism (e.g. Leiserowitz 2005, Whitmarsh 2011, Poortinga et al 2011) show correlations between climate scepticism and socio-demographic characteristics (older, less well educated, male) which would fit the ‘left behind’ group, suggesting that such correlations may be due to social origins and labour market experiences rather than left-right ideology.

However, there are limits to structuralist approach, especially in relation to its explanation of populism, with one recent study rejecting it in favour of a cultural explanation (Inglehart and Norris 2016). One issue is that while RWP may appeal to some of the ‘left behind’ group, the populist vote rarely consists *solely* of this group. While Ford and Goodwin’s (2014) analysis

did show that UKIP was drawing some working class support away from Labour, it remains the case that it has drawn more on former Conservative voters, and in fact the main political response of the 'left behind' is to withdraw from voting altogether (Evans and Tilley 2017). Likewise, while Trump may have had appeal to the 'left behind' in the Rust Belt states, it is also clear 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-Rosell 2016). Another problem for the structural argument is that, despite the lesser wage polarisation and 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 (including Scandinavia) as well, *pace* MacNeil (2016).

3.3 An ideological approach

A third kind of explanation for a link between populism and climate change focuses on the ideological content of RWP. This content has been constructed not along traditional left-right ideologies as measured by attitudes towards economic intervention or public spending, but rather along the lines of the cultural cleavage in the so-called 'new politics' (Kitschelt 1994), i.e. between authoritarian and libertarian (or liberal) values (Heath et al 1994). These include contrasts in attitudes towards authority, law and order, social tolerance, homosexuality etc. This cleavage is most strongly associated not so much with class (although there is some relationship) but rather with education (e.g. Stubager 2008). Education, and again to some extent class, is also related strongly to the other common element in RWP, i.e. cultural nationalism, involving hostility to immigration and, in Europe, to the EU (McClaren 2007). Nationalism and authoritarian values also tend to be correlated (e.g. Hooghe et al 2002).

Similarly to the economic and political marginalisation thesis discussed above, an important contextual factor here is that the proportion of people who have low levels of education has fallen over time in all post-industrial states, so that there has been a general drift in average social values, and in the politics that reflects the majority position, in a socially liberal direction (Evans and Tilley 2017).

These cultural and social value dimensions specific to RWP are important because they fill out the ‘thin’ ideology of populism, and give substance to the categories of that ideology. Most crucially, all populism is anti-elitist, and all populists direct their ire at elites. However, while *left* wing populist can be internationalist and constructs elites as consisting of interlinked business and conservative political groups, *right* wing populism constructs elites as ‘liberal’ and cosmopolitan. Cosmopolitanism is thus, Taggart (2000: 105) argues, ‘anathema’ to RWP parties, movements and supporters.

On this view, the climate scepticism expressed by supporters of populist movements and parties is an expression of hostility to liberal elites and anti-cosmopolitanism rather than an engagement with the issue of climate change itself (especially given the low salience of climate change as an issue in itself). Although it is not the primary target of current populist concern, climate change is the cosmopolitan issue *par excellence*. There is support for this approach from Forchtner and Kølvråa (2015)’s analysis of the symbolic framing of the climate agenda as a threat to national sovereignty by British and Danish RWP parties. Gemenis et al (2012) also find the common use of nationalism and hostility to the EU as frames for treatment of climate change amongst their survey of 13 RWP parties in Europe. It is also clear from both studies that there is a striking difference between the treatment of local environmental issues (where there is a strong element of conservation and attachment to

landscapes) in RWP party manifestos and literature, framed by a romantic nationalism and hostility to immigration.¹⁴ There is also again support from studies of climate scepticism in the social psychological literature, where scepticism is significantly associated with authoritarian values (Leiserowitz 2005, Whitmarsh 2011, Poortinga et al 2011).

Also potentially relevant here is the populist idea that the link between ‘the people’ and political elites has been broken by the capture of the latter group by special interests with a corrupting influence (Taggart 2000), where such special interests would include environmentalists, and even climate scientists. In addition, populist movements have been fertile ground for conspiracy theories (Brown 2014). Given the *modus operandi* of professional climate sceptics, sometimes associated with RWPs or leaders, the relevance of these tendencies in the case of climate change is obvious. Climate change, the result of an invisible, highly complex, global set of processes, is ideal material for conspiracy theories, where attempts to dispel such theories through the presentation of scientific evidence ‘is likely, for a conspiracy theorist, to be at best ineffective and at worst in collusion with the conspiracy’ (Taggart 2000: 106).

The cultural ideology of RWP matters for the broadening of its political support. Certainly, many in the group ‘left behind’ by the economic changes discussed in the previous section have authoritarian and socially conservative values (Kresi et al 2006). But importantly, such values are also held more widely amongst parts of the middle class,¹⁵ who as noted in the previous section provide an important part of RWP’s support. As voting for RWP parties is often unstable and varies considerably over time, support for their agendas may be bigger

¹⁴ A perusal of the UKIP 2015 manifesto shows the same characteristics

¹⁵ Evans and Tilley (2017) use a category they label the ‘old middle class’, consisting of groups like managers, small business owners, self-employed workers, farmers, etc., who often have middling levels of education. This group is socially more conservative than professionals with high levels of education (ibid: pp. 80-81).

than is often thought.¹⁶ This is one explanation that has been put forward for the Brexit referendum result and the election of Trump.

4. Conclusions and implications

Casual observation shows that RWP parties and leaders often express climate scepticism and hostility to climate policy elements such as carbon pricing and renewable energy subsidy, but there is surprisingly little academic research on this relationship. Most studies of climate scepticism amongst individuals to date have used conventional left-right ideological position as political variables. The phenomenon of ‘mainstream populism’ in Anglophone countries with majoritarian electoral systems complicates the picture. However, what evidence there is does suggest a fairly consistent relationship.

Here I have considered three kinds of explanation for this relationship. One is based on interests, following from the attention given, often by campaigners and journalists, to the tendency of RWP leaders to have close relationships with fossil fuel companies. These relationships are important, especially for policy where RWP leaders attain power, but they cannot by themselves explain a link between RWP and hostility to climate policy and climate scepticism. Indeed, it is the pre-disposition to be hostile to the climate agenda, and therefore open to fossil fuel interests, that give the latter their opportunity.

A second 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. It

¹⁶ Jonathan Mellon and Geoffrey Evans note that while the UKIP vote in the 2015 general election was only 12.6%, those who have voted for UKIP at least once in local and European elections between 2014 and 2016 together with those who said it was likely that they would vote for UKIP aggregated together – a group they label the ‘UKIP curious’ – make up almost 40% of the electorate (Mellon and Evans 2016).

is widely argued that some have seen their living standards stagnate as a result of these changes, and lost out in relative terms as inequality has increased, creating a group labelled as the ‘left behind’, who are particularly drawn to populist parties. Such an approach would place emphasis on the hostility of such groups to any form of tax, and hence resistance to climate policies that can be framed as such. A structuralist approach may capture some important dynamics in the relationship with climate scepticism and policy, but it is unlikely to be sufficient in itself, since while some support for RWP does come from the ‘left behind’, it also draws on other kinds of groups.

A third kind of explanation focuses on the ideological content of RWP, especially the way 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. It also lends itself well to conspiracy theories, which some have also tied to populism.

This review of evidence and arguments on the link between RWP and climate change shows the need for a new research programme, designed to provide evidence better tailored to the problem, and to test potential explanations. I would argue that there is a need for more quantitative and qualitative studies of populist parties, carefully defined and delineated, not only in their treatment of climate change in manifestos and party communications but also in terms of the attitudes of party members and activists. There is also a particular need for wider sample surveys that gather data on and allow analysis of populist ideology on the one hand and climate scepticism and attitudes to climate policy on the other.

A final issue of interest is what kind of responses might be made to populist attacks on climate science and policy. One response might be to do nothing, since many analyses of populism argue that it is a self-limiting, episodic phenomenon that has a tendency to splinter, being averse to political organisation, and that once populists actually achieve office and have to face the complexities and compromises of modern government, they lose their *raison d'être* and wither away (Taggart 2000). Others, however dispute this; Albertazzi and McDonnell (2015), for example, examine a number of cases in Europe where populist parties have formed part of or given support to governments, and have endured both as party organisations and as effective conduits for policy for over a decade. Mudde (2013) also argues that, whilst RWP parties have had limited direct effects on policy in Europe to date, it cannot be expected that they are 'destined for success in opposition and failure in government' (p. 1) and their influence may be expected to increase in future. Hoping that populist parties and movements will simply disappear might therefore not be an effective strategy.

A diametrically opposed alternative is offered by those who argue that a complex challenge like climate change cannot be met merely through representative politics but requires a more deliberative democracy (Bäckstrand et al 2010, Held and Hervey 2009, Kahane 2016), building on the work of Dryzek and others (Dryzek 2000, Dryzek et al; 2013). The turn to deeper forms of democracy can be seen as a reaction against what some perceive as a fundamentally technocratic approach to climate policy, relying on consent (e.g. Swynedouw 2013), as part of the kind of politics that helped create populism in the first place.

This approach can perhaps best be seen as nested within the debate between proponents of ‘stealth’ and ‘sunshine’ models of politics. The ‘stealth’ model (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002) posits that citizens do not want active engagement in politics as long as they can vote, and is supported by evidence from the US and elsewhere. The stealth model is associated with populism, and Mudde argues that calls for deliberative or more participatory democracy could be counter-productive in addressing the populist challenge to the institutions of liberal democracy. He argues that supporters of the current wave of populism want ‘more leadership and less participation’; they want responsive government i.e. politicians who ‘know (rather than “listen to”) the people’ (Mudde 2004: 558).¹⁷ By contrast, critics of the stealth model propose an alternative ‘sunshine’ model which also finds empirical support for the idea that citizens have a positive orientation to democracy, understand the need for compromise and debate (Neblet et al 2010).

Stoker and Hay (2017) have recently sought to resolve this dispute by arguing that publics work with both models at the same time. However, their conclusion is that the appropriate response to disengagement from democratic processes is not more participation per se, but rather effective reforms to representative democracy to make it more transparent, accountable, responsive and informed.

These wider debates are important because, as discussed above, there are reasons to believe that in most cases RWP attitudes to climate change and climate policy are of secondary order importance in the rise of RWP as a political phenomenon. This suggests a direct response on scepticism and climate policy itself may be unlikely to be as effective as a broader response

¹⁷ There is also evidence specifically on climate scepticism that deliberative exercises have limits in getting sceptics to change their minds permanently (Hobson and Niemeyer 2011)

to populism. This is a reason for those who are concerned about the future of climate policy to pay more attention to the nature of populism, and to engage in the debates about such wider political responses.

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