

**“A Green-Pink Climate Hysteria!”: Institutional Distrust and the Relationship between
Right-Wing Populism and Climate Change Scepticism in Switzerland**

Master’s Thesis

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between right-wing populism (RWP) and two forms (evidence and response) of climate change scepticism (CCS) in Switzerland. Two hierarchical regression models and two subsequent mediation models were computed. Data from the 8th wave of the European Social Survey (ESS) was used. Both hierarchical models used common predictors of populism: social status indicators (gender, income, age, education), self-appraisals (material risk, political inefficacy, social distrust), institutional distrust, as a proxy for anti-elitism and party identification as a last step. The first model ($N=699$) studied the effects of these predictors on response scepticism (doubting policies on climate change), the second ($N=689$) on evidence scepticism (doubting climate change's anthropogenic causes). Hypotheses were that for both forms of CCS, negative self-appraisals would increase levels of scepticism and that institutional distrust would have the same effect while controlling for other variables. Gender (male), education, institutional distrust and RWP identification were linked with higher levels of response scepticism. Regarding evidence scepticism, education, political inefficacy and RWP identification were associated with higher levels of scepticism. Mediation models showed that the relationship between RWP party identification and response scepticism was partly explained by institutional distrust. This exploratory research shows that different forms of CCS may be linked differently with RWP, but that institutional distrust could be a key link between response scepticism and RWP. Future research should further explore this relationship by using discourse analysis, longitudinal and qualitative methods.

Keywords: Right-Wing Populism, Climate Change Scepticism, Switzerland, Institutional Distrust

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I opened my letterbox one fine summer morning of 2019 to find the *Édition Spéciale* of the SVP, (June 2019), the ‘current party affairs’ sent to all Swiss households by the SVP¹ and entitled: “Reason must replace ideology” (own translation). This booklet’s (newspaper format) theme was climate change, and moreover the “green-pink climate hysteria” (sic) and its potential deleterious effects, according to the right-wing populist (RWP) party, on immigration or the economy.

The SVP has been at the forefront of Swiss politics for some years, and is currently the most strongly represented party in parliament (admin.ch, 2017). It is thus an unusual case of a governing populist party that shifted from a more traditional conservative standpoint to RWP discourse over the last two decades. Research on populist parties in Europe found that the “SVP engages in blame-shifting arguments presenting socialism as the cause of all pollution” (Gemenis, Konstantinos, Katsanidou, Alexia, & Vasilopoulou, Sofia, 2012:15) and that, more generally, RWP uses climate change as a means of positively presenting the nation by its natural beauty that should be protected for the people it belongs to (Forchtner & Kølvråa, 2015). Thus, this research will focus on Switzerland where RWP is a significant part of the political landscape through the SVP (Ennsner, 2012).

Climate change is one of if not the most pressing issue of the times and its significant impact can already be witnessed around the globe and should worsen in the coming decades (Jorgenson et al., 2019). Humans are impacting multiple systems on the planet and are in turn impacted by these changes (Dietz, 2017). Reports and research indicate a consensus amongst climate scientists on these changes and their anthropogenic causes and consequences (Cook et al., 2016; IPCC, 2018; Stern, 2011; Swim et al., 2011). Nevertheless, consensus on the

¹ Swiss People’s Party, Switzerland’s RWP party, formerly known as the Party of Farmers

anthropogenic causes of climate change is not always observed in the public, as a third of Americans for instance think that it emerges from natural causes (Leiserowitz et al., 2019).

Indeed, growing scientific contributions and research consensus have shifted climate change sceptics discourse from criticising the lack of consensus to criticising its certainty (Nerlich, 2010). Research for instance pointed out that “conservative and traditional values” were linked with scepticism about climate change (Hornsey et al., 2016; Poortinga et al., 2011). This was also observed among individuals who were endorsing free-market views (Lewandowsky et al., 2013) and conspiracy theories (Fernbach et al., 2013). More recent research indicated that voters of right-wing populist parties were more susceptible to be sceptical about the anthropogenic causes of climate change (Jylhä & Hellmer, 2020; Lockwood, 2018). Nevertheless, the link between right-wing populism and climate change scepticism remains little explored. Switzerland’s SVP’s recent discourse shift on climate change thus makes for a compelling study material.

1.1. Right-Wing Populism and the SVP

In recent years, right-wing populism has surged across Europe and the Americas (Postill, 2018). Populist parties or politicians have won elections in various settings and their influence has thus grown steadily, as well as the body of research on the subject (Rooduijn, 2019). Populism has been described as a ‘thin’ ideology borrowing its concepts, ideas and policies from other ideologies (Stanley, 2008). Scholars from a variety of fields have researched the core factors of populism. RWP was found to depend in part on the proclamation of an allegedly homogenous group: ‘the people’ (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) and on the opposition of this group to an antagonist one: ‘the elites’ (Kriesi, 2014). The SVP does not

make an exception to the rule and regularly criticises so-called political, cultural and scientific elites².

Moreover, the materialisation of populist parties across Europe as mostly right-wing (Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012) brought anti-immigration policies and attitudes to the forefront of the research. In Switzerland, the SVP strongly advocated for strong limitations on immigration, and famously won a nationwide vote in 2014 that called for such restrictions. Scholars pointed out that these attitudes were linked to self-appraisals such as relative deprivation or material risk (Greitemeyer & Sagioglou, 2017, 2019; Jetten et al., 2015; Mols & Jetten, 2016), prejudice (Crawford & Brandt, 2019), negative self-identity (Spruyt et al., 2016), political inefficacy and social distrust (Staerklé & Green, 2018) or civilisationism (Brubaker, 2017), but could for instance be reduced through intergroup contact (Green et al., 2010; Pehrson & Green, 2010; Sarrasin et al., 2012). Therefore, RWP research has so far focused on a tripartite relationship – or lack thereof – between an ingroup - the *people* - and two outgroups - the *elites* and the *immigrants*. Indicators of social status, and self-appraisals such as material risk, social distrust and inefficacy were found to be linked with negative attitudes towards these two outgroups (Staerklé & Green, 2018).

In sum, research pointed out that populism was usually built around a centration on ‘the people’ as a homogenous group, criticism of ‘corrupt elites’ and the proclamation of a ‘serious crisis’ (Rooduijn, 2014). But more recently, some right-wing populist parties in the Western world have produced discourse on climate change, doubting its anthropogenic causes through climate change scepticism (Forchtner, 2019a; Forchtner et al., 2018) or using it as a means to promote an anti-immigration agenda (Aufrecht, 2012).

² For more information on the subject, the party’s political program (available in French, German and Italian) makes for a compelling read (SVP, 2020)

1.2. RWP and Climate Change Scepticism (CCS)

Research so far has for the most part been focused on climate change scepticism in the “mainstream” political spectrum (Jylhä & Hellmer, 2020). Even though the scientific community reached consensus on the anthropogenic causes of climate change, some politicians and communities oppose these facts, or don’t *believe* in them (Hulme, 2017).

Climate change scepticism and its conceptualisation are debated in the field and its definitions are sometimes criticised and discussed. Scholars have worked towards a typology that would cover its different manifestations (Capstick & Pidgeon, 2014; Gemenis et al., 2012; Lockwood, 2018; Poortinga et al., 2011; Van Rensburg, 2015). Van Rensburg (2015) offers a compelling conceptualisation of the different forms that climate change scepticism (CCS) may take around three key concepts: evidence, process and response scepticism. In short, evidence scepticism (CCES) entails challenges made to “the scientific evidence of anthropogenic climate change” (p.3). Process scepticism is centred on doubts on the funding of climate change research and usually revolves around suspicion that politicians and scientists alike promote a hidden agenda. Lastly, response scepticism (CCRS) can be summarised as scepticism aimed towards policies designed to harness climate change. Research so far has shown some trends in results on the underlying conditions allowing climate change scepticism but seldomly uses the same conceptualisations of CCS.

Scholars so far found that people with lower socio-economic status (Poortinga et al., 2011) and conservatives were more likely to be sceptic about climate change (Forchtner, 2019a; Tranter, 2017), and more particularly conservative white males (McCright & Dunlap, 2011) as climate change and action directed towards harnessing it may clash with traditional conservative values (McCright et al., 2016). Moreover, individuals identifying with the far-right rather than the left or centre-right tend to hold more sceptic views (Whitmarsh & Corner, 2017) regarding climate change, which was for instance found in Norway to merge with

broader nationalist thought patterns (Krange et al., 2019). Regarding climate change scepticism and RWP, individuals identifying to the latter in Germany were rather sceptical, their scepticism depending on the emphasis attributed to the “homeland” and the link between its protection and ecology (Forchtner et al., 2018). Following this research, authors concluded that RWP could also seek to protect the local environment in order to protect the integrity of the “homeland” (Forchtner, 2019b). Moreover, some scholars have argued that European RWP parties “do not reject [climate] science outright, but instead seek to marginalise the climate agenda in order to concentrate on border control and immigration” (Jeffries, 2017). I would argue that recent social movements such as the climate strikes where significant numbers have protested (Taylor et al., 2019) have brought the issue at the centre of the political debate.

In sum, RWP appears to harness nationalist thought patterns as well as conservatism in order to challenge climate change scientific evidence or political response. Nevertheless, this relationship seems to be multidimensional as RWP parties need to navigate between rejecting policies from other parts of the political spectrum all the while pushing for the protection of the ‘homeland’ and its natural riches through, for instance, anti-immigration policies. This wide array of findings strongly points in the direction of a psychosocial approach to climate change scepticism. The literature does so far not contain a large amount of research on populism and climate change (scepticism), but an exploratory article by Lockwood (2018) examined the linkage between climate change discourse and right-wing populism. They pointed out that RWP voters and leaders tended to be sceptical about climate change and policies intending to harness it. Furthermore, they argued that an ‘ideological approach’ should be used while exploring the link with “climate change and policy occupying a symbolic place” in the contrast between ‘the people’ and a cosmopolitan elite.

1.3. The ‘Elites’ and CCS

The study of the relationship between RWP and climate change scepticism should consider one of populism’s core factors, anti-elitism, or institutional distrust (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Kriesi, 2014; Rooduijn, 2014). Recent results concluded that anti-establishment feelings did not significantly predict climate change denial (Jylhä & Hellmer, 2020), but I argue that institutional distrust can be used both as a proxy of anti-elitism as theorised in the literature on RWP (Bos et al., 2020) and as a means to encompass rejection of both political and scientific elites. Following Fairbrother (2017), I argue that institutional distrust is a prolongation of negative attitudes towards political elites to negative attitudes towards political elites *and* science in a conspiracist mentality which was found to be linked with RWP (Silva et al., 2017). This relationship is interpreted as a rejection of the recommendations made by scientist to policymakers *and* as a rejection of policies themselves.

As Mudde and Kaltwasser (2018) suggested, research on populism should build on existing findings in order to ensure continuity in a growing and varied field. Moreover, recommendations by Rooduijn (2019) pointed out that scholars should become “more and less focused”, which means that research on populism – while using concepts and prior work from different fields – should remain concise and employ a strict conceptualisation adapted to the research in hand. This compelling argument translates in the present paper through a thorough definition and delimitation of its key concepts: social status, self-appraisals, institutional distrust and climate change scepticism.

1.3.1. Climate Change Scepticism(s)

Following recommendations made by Forchtner et al. (2018) and given the available data, I will focus on evidence scepticism (from denying climate change to denying its anthropogenic causes) and response scepticism (questioning policy responses) which are defined more precisely in a previous paragraph.

1.3.2. Social Status and Self-Appraisals

Social status is used through measures and categories of age, gender, education level and income. These have been widely used in research both as control and predictors of RWP attitudes (Goodwin & Heath, 2016; Hobolt, 2016). Self-appraisals are central to the social representational approach of this research. These self-evaluations are centred on material risk, political inefficacy and social distrust and were found to be core factors explaining RWP attitudes in prior research (Staerklé & Green, 2018). I argue that material risk may lead to consider that harnessing climate change could be costly and thus not be wanted by individuals which feel deprived. One could also suggest that identifying oneself to a more deprived group may lead to defend this group's interests (which may be under-threat low-income industrial jobs for instance) and hence reject restrictions on certain industrial activities. Political inefficacy may give people the sense that politics do not take them into account and thus lead them to rejecting climate change policies which are conceived by policymakers as a means to protest them. Finally, social distrust may play a negative role in the collective action against climate change. Individuals may reason that others would not act in any case and thus not act themselves (e.g. voting behaviours). Following this reasoning, negative self-appraisals should lead to a higher level of climate change response and evidence scepticism.

1.3.3. Institutional Distrust

Significant levels of institutional distrust should be linked with climate change scepticism in the models presented in this paper. As said before, political institutions are usually rejected by RWP and the SVP's *Édition Spéciale* does not make an exception to the rule. Moreover, the party's discourse doubts scientific facts on climate change and seems to present its own "alternative facts". Hence, the party may be shifting from rejecting political elites to rejecting these *as well as* scientific and cultural ones by presenting them as one homogenous entity, which may lead to climate change scepticism in its supporters.

I argue that institutional distrust as a central component of RWP explains the link between populism and CCS by holding a central part in the relationship between social status, self-appraisals and climate change scepticism. Thus, higher levels of institutional distrust should lead to higher levels of climate change scepticism (CCS) while controlling for social status and self-appraisals.

1.3.4. Party Identification

A final measure of party identification will be used in this research. This will allow to test whether SVP identification relates to measures of institutional distrust, CCRS and CCES. Identifying to the SVP should relate to higher levels of all three concepts.

There is considerable research on RWP populism and climate change scepticism as separate matters of interest, but few research has explored their link (Forchtner, 2019a; Jylhä & Hellmer, 2020; Lockwood, 2018). Thus, it appears particularly compelling to explore this relationship in Switzerland where the SVP is the most represented party in parliament and appears to have adopted a climate change scepticism direction. Additionally, adopting a social representations approach allows to consider multiple psychosocial factors and thus offer a broad explanation of the phenomenon. Hence, I will test two hierarchical model predicting climate change response or evidence scepticism using common and accepted predictors of RWP: Social Status, Self-Appraisals and Institutional Distrust as explanatory factors, and will add party identification in order to answer this research's question on the link between CCS and RWP. Moreover, additional mediation analyses will be provided in order to test the link between RWP and CCS through institutional distrust as theorised in this introduction.

2. Method

2.1. Sample and Procedure

Data from the European Social Survey (ESS) round eight (2016) was selected for its rotating module on “Attitudes and climate change”. The ESS is a cross-national European survey that has been conducted once every two years from 2001 on. Face-to-face interviews are conducted with individuals 16 years old and over on various topics, and a new rotating module is implemented each round³. The sample selected for this study was restricted to participants from Switzerland, which represented a subsample of $n=1,525$ respondents. Data was analysed using SPSS version 25, and the PROCESS macro v.3.4 (Hayes, 2019)

The age distribution from this subsample was 47.8 years ($SD = 18.8$). Regarding gender distribution, *Female* respondents were 48.3%, with most respondents (81.3%) of Swiss nationality.

2.2. Measures

Income level was measured by household total net income (all sources) and categorised in deciles ($n = 1,251$).

Education level ($n = 1,520$) was considered using the ES-ISCED classification in seven levels ranging from 1 (*less than lower secondary*) to 7 (*higher tertiary education, Masters level or higher*). Both education and income distribution are shown in Table 1.

³ Additional information on the ESS can be found on the European Social Survey Website: <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/#>

Table 1

Frequency Table for Household Income and Respondent Education Level

Household Income Level [%]												
Deciles	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Missing	
	4.4	8.0	9.4	10.0	9.6	10.1	11.0	7.8	5.6	6.2	18.0	
Education Level (ISCED) [%]												
Highest	<Lower Sec.	Lower Sec.	Lower Tier Upper Sec.	Upper Tier Upper Sec.	Advanced Vocational	Lower Tertiary (BA)	Higher Tertiary (>=MA)					Missing
	3.3	17.4	35.6	8.0	14.8	7.5	12.9					0.3

2.2.1. Self-Appraisals

Perceived *political inefficacy* was measured on respondents’ subjective ability to participate in politics. Three items were selected and reversed: *Political system allows people to have a say in what the government does; Political system allows people to have influence on politics; Confident in own ability to participate in politics*. Responses were recorded on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*a great deal*) to 5 (*not at all*), with higher scores indicating political inefficacy. Preliminary principal component analysis (PCA) showed that the three items loaded on a single factor. Reliability analysis of the constructed item produced a Cronbach’s α of 0.69.

Perceived *social distrust* was assessed by selecting three items assessing respondents’ perceived general trust in other people: *Most people can be trusted or you can’t be too careful; Most people try to take advantage of you, or try to be fair; Most of the time people helpful or mostly looking out for themselves*. Answers were reversed and represented on a scale from 0 (*most people can be trusted*) to 10 (*you can’t be too careful*) with higher scores indicating a higher level of social distrust. Preliminary PCA resulted in one underlying factor for these three items. Cronbach’s α was 0.69.

The last self-appraisal dimension, *material risk*, was measured by choosing two items representing household financial stability: *Feeling about household's income nowadays*; *How likely not enough money for household necessities next 12 months*. A preliminary PCA on three items resulted in one common factor, but one item (likelihood of unemployment over the next 12 months) was abandoned as it had too many missing cases. Thus, *material risk* was built using a composite score of two items ($r = .47, p < 0.001$) on four-point scales with higher scores indicating more perceived financial difficulties.

2.2.2. Institutional Distrust

The anti-elitism section of this research - one of RWP's core components - had to be measured at the local and global level as climate change has both implications. Thus, trust in and satisfaction with local and global institutions (e.g., legal system, government, politicians, political parties) was assessed on eight items: *Trust in the legal system/in politicians/in the European Parliament/in the United Nations/in political parties/in country's parliament*; *How satisfied with the national government*; *How satisfied with the way democracy works in country*. Answers were recorded on an eleven-point scale (reversed) from 0 (*extremely*) to 10 (*extremely not*) on measures of trust and satisfaction. Higher scores indicated less satisfaction/trust in the institutions. Preliminary PCA indicated that eight items loaded on a single factor. Cronbach's α was 0.89.

2.2.3. Climate Change Scepticism

Response Scepticism (CCRS) was assessed by three items measuring adhesion to climate change policies, such as taxes or bans on fossil fuels or subsidies for green energies: *Favour ban sale of least energy efficient household appliances to reduce climate change*; *Favour increase taxes on fossil fuels to reduce climate change*; *Favour subsidise renewable energy to reduce climate change*. Scales went from 1 (*in favour of taxes, bans or subsidies*) to 5 (*not in favour*). A principal component analysis yielded a single common factor for the three

items with an alpha of 0.75. CCRS can be summarised as scepticism aimed towards concrete responses to climate change, such as policies, restrictions or practical changes implemented by governments or organisations.

Evidence Scepticism (CCES) was evaluated by four items measuring respondents' opinion on climate change, namely its anthropogenic causes and consequences: *Do you think world's climate is changing; Climate change caused by natural processes, human activity, or both, reversed; How much thought about climate change before today, reversed; How worried about climate change, reversed*. As scale ranges differed, scores were standardised. Higher scores indicated a greater tendency towards evidence scepticism towards climate change. Preliminary PCA resulted in a single underlying factor for the four items. Cronbach's α was 0.61. It must be noted that most respondents (>94%), when asked whether they thought that climate change had natural or anthropogenic causes responded closer to the latter, but plotted distributions still showed varying tendencies in the sample. CCES is thus more abstract than CCRS and should relate more to education or information levels on climate change.

2.2.4. Party Identification

One item was used for *SVP Party Identification* and recoded into a new variable. The original item asked respondents which Swiss party they felt closest two. After recoding, the new SVP identification was 1 (*Other party*) or 2 (*SVP*).

2.3. Correlations

Table 2 shows Pearson's correlations for the study variables. Several statistically significant relationships were noted. First, income was negatively associated with political inefficacy ($r=-.22$, $p<.01$), material risk ($r=-.44$, $p<.01$) and institutional distrust ($r=-.12$, $p<.01$) and education was negatively correlated with all indicators of self-appraisals, institutional distrust and CCS. Second, self-appraisals correlated positively among themselves,

albeit without passing the threshold of .70 described by Tabachnick & Fidell (2007) and which may indicate multicollinearity (correlations ranged from $r=.15$ to $.25$, $p<.01$). Third, institutional distrust positively correlated with all indicators except for gender and evidence scepticism and notably with social distrust ($r=.29$, $p<.01$), material risk ($r=.14$, $p<.01$) and response scepticism ($r=.20$, $p<.01$).

Response scepticism additionally negatively correlated to education ($r=-.14$, $p<.01$), and positively with political inefficacy ($r=.14$, $p<.01$), social distrust ($r=.13$, $p<.01$), material risk ($r=.10$, $p<.01$) and evidence scepticism ($r=.39$, $p<.01$). Regarding evidence scepticism, its strong positive correlation with response scepticism and lack of other significant correlations except for education ($r=-.21$, $p<.01$) and political inefficacy ($r=.17$, $p<.01$) indicated that this form of CCS could yield different results. SVP identification negatively correlated to education ($r=-.22$, $p<.01$), and positively to social distrust ($r=.10$, $p<.01$), institutional distrust ($r=.21$, $p<.01$), evidence scepticism ($r=.21$, $p<.01$) and response scepticism ($r=.29$, $p<.01$).

Table 2

Pearsons' Correlations for Study Variables

Group	Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
<i>Social Status</i>	1. Gender (a)	-										
	2. Age	-0.03	-									
	3. Income (b)	0.07*	-.18**	-								
	4. Education	.12**	0.00	-.38**	-							
<i>Self-Appraisals</i>	5. Political Ineff.	-.10**	0.04	-.22**	-.29**	-						
	6. Social Dist.	0.04	-.13**	-0.03	-.15**	.15**	-					
	7. Material risk	-0.02	-.05*	-.44**	-.19**	.25**	.24**	-				
<i>Instit. Distrust</i>	8. Instit. Dis.	0.04	.12**	-.12**	-.05*	.22**	.29**	.14**	-			
	9. Evidence Sc.	-0.03	.07**	-0.04	-.21**	.17**	0.02	0.00	0.02	-		
<i>CCS</i>	10. Response Sc.	.06*	0.01	-0.04	-.14**	.14**	.13**	.10**	.20**	.39**	-	
	11. SVP Id. (c)	0.07	- 0.06	-0.05	-.22**	0.04	.10**	- 0.00	.21**	.21**	.29**	-

a 1 Female, 2 Male

b Income in deciles

c 1 Other Party, 2 SVP Identification

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

2.4. Design

The main aim of this study – exploring the link between RWP and CCS – requires testing two four stage hierarchical regression models predicting evidence and response scepticism respectively before testing a more specific mediation analysis on the relationship between SVP identification and CCRS/CCES through institutional distrust. First, variables of social status (age, gender, household income and education level) serve as control and first-step predictors. Political inefficacy, social distrust and material risk, the three subdimensions of self-appraisals are then added, before entering institutional distrust, the proxy used for anti-elitism, and party identification as a last step in the model. Outcomes vary from response scepticism in the first model to evidence scepticism in the second.

I argue that both relationships are mediated by institutional distrust as a proxy for anti-elitism. Thus, two mediation analyses will be conducted to test the link between SVP identification and CCRS or CCES through institutional distrust.

2.5. Data Analysis

First, t-tests were computed to test the mean differences between institutional distrust, CCRS and CCES levels by SVP identification. As computed items for climate change evidence scepticism had different scales, standardised scores were used for both models to ensure coherence throughout the study. Scores varied from low to high levels of RWP and CCS for each model. Potential issues of multicollinearity were checked using VIF (variance inflation factor). Second, two hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to analyse the explanatory path between social status (step 1), self-appraisals (step 2), institutional distrust (step 3), party identification (step 4) and CCS (outcome). Outcome variables were response and evidence scepticism. Finally, two additional mediation analyses tested the link between SVP identification and CCRS/CCES through institutional distrust.

3. Results

3.1. Mean Differences for Institutional Distrust, CCRS and CCES by SVP Identification

Since all variables were standardised, the following table (Table 3) describes mean differences for SVP identification versus other party identification for institutional distrust, CCES and CCRS. Higher means for distrust and scepticism were found in the sample for SVP identification versus other party identification. This suggests that individuals identifying with SVP may be more distrustful of institutions and hold more sceptic views. All means were statistically different at the .01 level.

Table 3

Means Table and t-test results for Institutional Distrust, CCES and CCRS for Party Identification (z scores)

	Institutional Distrust	CCES	CCRS
SVP (N=226)	0.315**	0.320**	0.401**
Other (N=586)	-0.151**	-0.160**	-0.251**

*Note: Higher means indicated higher levels of distrust or scepticism, N=808; **p<.01*

3.2. Hierarchical Regressions

Table 4

Hierarchical regressions predicting climate change response and evidence scepticism

Variables	CCRS				CCES			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Gender	.14**	.14**	.14**	.12**	-.01	0.01	0.01	-.01
Age (a)	-.02	-.01	-.01	0.01	0.07	0.05	0.05	0.07*
Income	-.01	-.01	0.03	0.02	0.06	0.04	0.04	0.04
Education	-.17**	-.15**	-.16**	-.10*	-.26**	-.23**	-.23**	-.18**
Political Inefficacy		0.08	0.05	0.05		.15**	.15**	.15**
Social Distrust		0.05	0.02	0.02		0.00	0.00	0.00
Material Risk		0.05	0.05	0.06		-.06	-.06	-.05
Institutional Distrust			.12**	0.07			-.01	-.05
Party Identification (b)				.23**				.19**
F	(4, 695)=8.13**	(7, 692)=6.04**	(8, 691)=6.49**	(9, 690)=10.24**	(4, 685)=12.24**	(7, 682)=9.39**	(8, 681)=8.21**	(9, 680)=10.31**
R2	0.03	0.05	0.06	0.11	0.06	0.08	0.08	0.11

a 1 Female, 2 Male

b 1=Other, 2=SVP

Standardised scores, No multicollinearity (all VIFs comprised between 1 and 10)

*p < .05. **p<.01

3.2.1. Climate Change Response Scepticism (CCRS)

The hierarchical regression predicting climate change response scepticism (CCRS) according to social status, self-appraisals, institutional distrust and party identification is displayed in Table 4. At step 1, gender (males) and education (lower education level) were both significantly linked with CCRS, but age and income were not. Social status measures explained 3% of the model’s variance [$F(4,695)=8.13, p<.001$]. Step 2 measured the impact of self-appraisals while controlling for social status and further explained 2% of the model’s variance [$F(7,692)=6.04, p<.001$]. At this stage, gender and education remained significant, while

added variables were not. The next step included all predictors but party identification and accounted for 1% more [$F(8,691)=6.49, p<.001$] of the total variance. All prior predictors remained stable and institutional distrust was found to be positively and significantly correlated to CCRS. The last step [$F(9,690)=10.24, p<.001$] included SVP party identification and accounted for 5% of the total variance (11%). Gender and education remained statistically significant, while institutional distrust did not. SVP identification was found to be positively linked with CCRS.

3.2.2. Climate Change Evidence Scepticism (CCES)

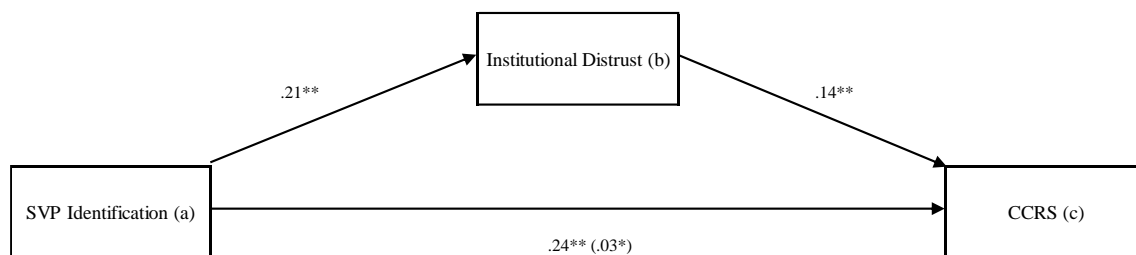
The second hierarchical regression of this study (Table 4) kept the same predictors as the first one but used climate change evidence scepticism (from denying climate change to denying its anthropogenic causes) as an outcome. Step 1 explained 6% of the variance and was significant [$F(4,685)=12.24, p<.001$]. Education was the only indicator of social status to be significantly correlated to climate change evidence scepticism (CCES), with lower education levels correlating to higher levels of CCES. While controlling for social status measures, step 2 added indicators of self-appraisals into the equation. Political inefficacy was the only measure positively and significantly linked with CCES. This step accounted for 2% more of the total variance [$F(7,682)=9.39, p<.001$]. The third model, albeit statistically significant [$F(8,681)=8.21, p<.001$] did not account for any additional variance ($\Delta R^2=0.00$). Thus, institutional distrust was not found to have any impact on CCES and education and political efficacy remained significant predictors. The complete model [$F(9,680)=10.31, p<.001$] added SVP identification which was positively and significantly correlated with CCES and accounted for 3% more of the total variance (11%) while other predictors remained stable, except for age which became significant and positively correlated with CCES.

3.3. Mediation Analyses: SVP Identification and CCR/ES through Institutional Distrust

In order to test whether RWP is indeed linked with CCS through institutional distrust, two additional mediation analyses were conducted. The first analysis used SVP identification as a predictor, CCRS as an outcome and institutional distrust as a mediator.

Figure 1

Standardised Regression Coefficients for the Relationship Between SVP Identification and Climate Change Response Scepticism (CCRS) as Mediated By Institutional Distrust while Controlling for Education Level.



a 1 Other Party, 2 SVP Identification

b From Less to More Distrust

c From Less to More Scepticism

N=808

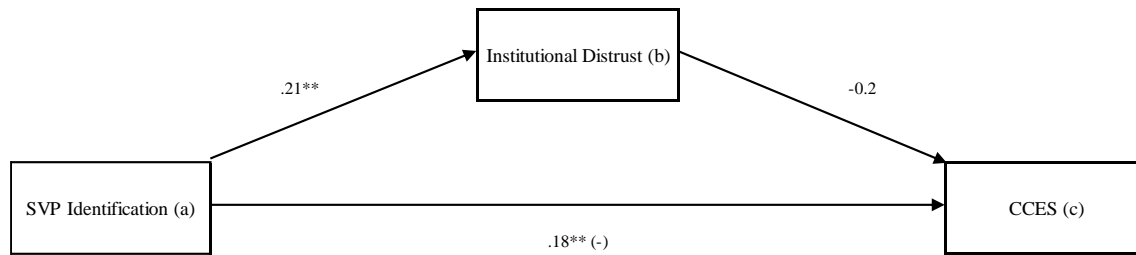
*p < .05. **p<.01

In parentheses: The standardised regression coefficient between SVP identification and CCRS, controlling for education level..

The relationship between SVP identification and CCRS was mediated by institutional distrust. As Figure 1 illustrates, the standardised regression coefficient between SVP and CCRS was significant (.24, $p < .001$), as well as the coefficient between SVP identification and institutional distrust (.21, $p < .001$). Both relationships stated that SVP identification led to higher levels of distrust and scepticism while controlling for education level. Institutional distrust, in turn, was significantly related to CCRS (.14, $p < .001$). The standardised indirect effect was .03 and was tested using 5,000 bootstrapped samples. The 95% confidence interval ranged from .01 to .05 and the effect was thus significant. Moreover, the mediation effect accounted for 11% of the relationship between SVP identification and CCRS.

Figure 2

Standardised Regression Coefficients for the Relationship Between SVP Identification and Climate Change Evidence Scepticism (CCES) as Mediated By Institutional Distrust while Controlling for Education Level.



a 1 Other Party, 2 SVP Identification

b From Less to More Distrust

c From Less to More Scepticism

N=792

*p < .05. **p<.01

In parentheses: The standardised regression coefficient between SVP identification and CCRS, controlling for education level..

The relationship between SVP identification and CCES was not mediated by institutional distrust. As Figure 2 illustrates, the standardised regression coefficient between SVP and CCES was statistically significant, as well as the coefficient between SVP identification and institutional distrust. Both relationships stated that SVP identification led to higher levels of distrust and scepticism while controlling for education level.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the link between right-wing populism (RWP) and climate change scepticism (CCS) in Switzerland. This seldomly researched but apparent relationship called for exploratory analyses. In sum, hypotheses were that indicators of lower social status, negative self-appraisals (i.e. higher levels of inefficacy for instance) and higher levels of institutional distrust and SVP party identification should lead to higher levels of scepticism. Moreover, an additional hypothesis stated that institutional distrust mediated the relationship between RWP identification and both forms of CCS.

Mean differences were tested for institutional distrust, CCRS and CCES by party (SVP) identification. Individuals identifying to the SVP, Switzerland’s RWP party, showed statistically significantly higher levels of distrust and climate change scepticism. This validates the overlapping hypothesis of this research that stated that individuals feeling close to the SVP could show more distrust in the institutions but could also be more sceptical towards evidence and responses to climate change. This first result falls in line with the party’s discourse on climate change. It is compelling to note that the data from this research predates the recent shift in the party’s stance on climate change which could indicate that the SVP took a space its voters were leaning towards.

4.1. Response Scepticism

The first model of this study yielded statistically significant results. Each step of the model accounted for more variance and showed that gender, education, institutional distrust and SVP identification correlated with CCRS. More precisely, male respondents tended to hold sceptic views, as well as lower-educated individuals, but age or the level of income had no effect. This finding falls in line with other research that pointed out that indicators of social status could yield various results (McCright & Dunlap, 2011; Poortinga et al., 2011). In accordance with the non-significance of income level, material risk did not appear to have any effect on response scepticism levels. Hence, material predictors (subjective and objective) did not structure the climate change responses. This result could be partly explained by Switzerland’s prosperous economic situation. Indeed, response scepticism being mostly based on opinions on policies such as taxes on fossil fuels or subsidies for renewable energy sources, citizens of ‘rich’ countries could be more inclined to absorb such changes given their general wealth. Indeed, it may also be that other determinants (relational and institutional) are more structuring not only in Switzerland but anywhere across the world.

Institutional distrust was significantly associated with response scepticism while controlling for social status and self-appraisals. These findings are in accordance with McCright et al., (2016), who argued that adherence to policies directed towards slowing climate change may clash with more conservative values, but do not fall in line with Jylhä & Hellmer's (2020) who found that anti-elitism feelings were not connected to CCS. The diverging results may be explained by the conceptualisation of scepticism in the present study. In other words, differentiating between different forms of scepticism may produce contrasting results. Bearing in mind that statistically small effects were found in this model, these results nevertheless indicate that at least one form of CCS may be connected to some common predictors of RWP, namely social status indicators and institutional distrust, a proxy for anti-elitism.

In sum, response scepticism appears to be linked with at least some indicators of RWP which partially confirms the hypothesis that common predictors of RWP also relate to CCRS. Perhaps most importantly, the mediation analysis further indicated that SVP identification was linked with response scepticism and that this relationship was at least partly explained by institutional distrust.

4.2. Evidence Scepticism

As mentioned above, studies on climate change scepticism may be at least in part, form dependent. In other words, CCS is a complex notion that entails multiple facets and underlying factors. Nonetheless, unexpected results emerged from this study's second model. Most notably, institutional distrust, material risk and social distrust were not found to be significantly associated with evidence scepticism. I expected both common predictors of RWP and institutional distrust to be strong predictors of evidence scepticism as previous research pointed out that RWP voters were more likely to hold conspiracist views and have negative attitudes towards science (Silva et al., 2017). It must be noted for instance that most respondents (>94%), when asked whether they thought that climate change had natural or anthropogenic

causes responded closer to the latter. Thus, one could argue that evidence scepticism may have only been ‘niche’ in this study’s sample. Still, some social status predictors had a statistically significant impact on the outcome. Older individuals were associated with scepticism, as well as less educated ones. The effect of education could be due to a lack of information on the matter of climate change may lead to false beliefs. It could also be explained by group identification as members may not discuss the matter in their social circles and thus be more penetrable to conspiracy theories. Higher levels of political inefficacy significantly correlated with a tendency to doubt the anthropogenic causes of climate change, which relates to RWP. This is a somewhat surprising result as political inefficacy is the sole predictor to be impactful in this model and does not conceptually directly relate to CCS. This will be discussed later on. Finally, SVP identification positively related to CCES while controlling for other variables which may indicate a link between supporting the SVP and doubting climate change’s anthropogenic causes.

To sum it up, evidence scepticism does not seem to relate to RWP or institutional distrust as well as response scepticism as the mediation analysis shows as well. This points towards the fact that different forms of scepticism may be held by different persons and motivated by discrete factors. The following part will attempt to explain and understand these results.

4.3. Implications

This exploratory research provided a few compelling results. It appears that climate change response criticism is linked with lower indicators of social status, institutional distrust and RWP identification in Switzerland. Indeed, policy attitudes are complex opinions, and public responses to climate change can be influenced for instance by both socio-cultural and psychological factors (Leiserowitz, 2006). It appears that social status indicators (e.g. education level) and attitudes (e.g. institutional distrust) shown to be linked to RWP correlate well with

negative responses to policies tailored to harness global warming. The additional mediation analysis confirmed the link between SVP party identification and response scepticism through institutional distrust.

4.3.1. Response Scepticism’s Paradox

Other studies have hinted at the prevalence of sceptic discourse in populist parties (Forchtner, 2019a; Forchtner et al., 2018). Compellingly, other authors have argued that RWP may use climate change as a means to protect the ‘nation’ or ‘heartland’ (Forchtner & Kølvråa, 2015). This could at least partly explain this research’s varying results as populist parties have to balance their discourse between anti-elitism - one of their core factors (Kriesi, 2014; Rooduijn, 2014) – and the link between climate change mitigation and protection of the ‘heartland’ (Forchtner et al., 2018). Moreover, these results could be further complexified by the idea that people were found to be more likely to support policies having national (which falls in line with RWP’s suggested “national homogeneity”) consequences (e.g. energy production shift) than taxes on individuals’ usage of fossil fuels (Dietz et al., 2007). The relationship between institutional distrust and response scepticism can be understood further by considering the fact that response scepticism is conceptually linked with policy making. Thus, individuals which tend to doubt the government, politicians or institutions may consequently question any policy change, including policies directed towards climate change. Another interpretation relates to institutional distrust as a proxy for anti-elitism. One could argue that anti-elitism entails political elites, but also cultural and scientific ones. Hence, the opposition between the ‘people’ and the ‘elites’ that RWP invokes may concern any type of elite rather than just political ones as the mediation analysis for CCRS showed.

4.3.2. Evidence Scepticism, an Educational rather than Political Issue?

The results from the second hierarchical model first and foremost suggest, as other authors stated (Capstick & Pidgeon, 2014; Gemenis et al., 2012; Lockwood, 2018; Poortinga

et al., 2011; Van Rensburg, 2015), that climate change scepticism is indeed multidimensional. As written above, the relationship between CCS and RWP may be more complicated than it seems as climate change may be at a crossroads between rejection of the elites and protection of the ‘beauty of the heartland’. Still, the impact of the education level on the denial of global warming’s anthropogenic causes is a compelling result and emphasises the importance of information on climate change from a young age on for policy makers. This also indicates that further communication on the matter is needed in order to allow people to understand the phenomenon. On the other hand, the impact of political inefficacy and the lack of impact of institutional distrust are more complex to analyse. An eventual explanatory path could lead one to understand this result through the lens of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) for instance. Denying climate change could be a means of creating a group identity that would not be available through political efficacy, thus producing what some authors cunningly called ‘cool dudes’ (Kränge et al., 2019; McCright & Dunlap, 2011). Nevertheless, given the small number of respondents that declared themselves to be ‘evidence sceptics’, these results should be mitigated.

These results - which are to my knowledge and at time of writing only the second ones on the topic – have practical implications. First, policymakers should consider this link when designing global interventions to address climate change. The surge of right-wing populism in recent years took most politicians, pundits and scholars by surprise and its consequences, including on the global effort to harness global warming, should not be understated. More practically, these groups of voters should be included and kept in mind when designing new policies. Secondly, I argue that these results call for more research on the topic by populism scholars. I used a social representations approach to study the link between RWP and CCS to include as many variables as possible in an exploratory manner. As this does not allow for a precise analysis of the phenomenon, I added a mediation analysis based on the results of the

first two regressions which yielded significant results and emphasized that more targeted research is called for. Finally, this research underlines at least in part the growing divide between ‘doubters’ and ‘believers’ in climate change. The current state of affairs allows the use of such words on a topic on which the scientific community has reached an overwhelming consensus. This is an urgent matter and understanding more widely the reasons why individuals still do not adhere to its existence is just as urgent if global change is to happen.

4.4. Limits and Ideas for Future Research

First, this research used secondary data and was cross-sectional. If secondary data permitted the use of bigger samples, items were not tailored to suit the conceptual framework used in this study. Principal component and reliability analyses addressed this flaw and this design was satisfactory given the explorative nature of the models, but future research should use experimental designs which allow for a more precise operationalisation. Moreover, the cross-sectional nature of this study does not allow to infer any causality between the variables. This was mitigated by using hierarchical regression models which focus on the explanatory power of each variable, but longitudinal analyses are undoubtedly called for. It would be particularly compelling to use data with a first wave predating the recent global movements of the ‘school strikes for climate’ and other demonstrations in order to study their effects. I would argue that these movements may have cemented some more radical views but also shifted individuals that were more ‘on the fence’.

Second, this research did not account for the other core factor of RWP, anti-immigration. This was purely due to a decision to focus on two different forms of CCS rather than two different core factors of populism. Nonetheless, the *Édition Spéciale* of the SVP mentioned at the beginning of this paper presents climate change as an opportunity to reduce immigration in its discourse and furthermore states that immigration itself is responsible for climate change. This calls for research on the relationship between immigration and global

warming in populist discourse. Such studies could use discourse analyses and qualitative methods in order to unveil more underlying factors. Third, the present research solely focused on a Swiss sample, which may not be representative of other European or World countries given both its economic and political situation. Fourth, the relatively small amount of variance explained by independent variables in each model should be kept in mind when reading this research's results. This indicates that future research should consider more dimensions of both RWP and CCS in order to produce more comprehensive explanations of their relationship.

Finally, the data used in this study is from the 8th wave of the ESS which was published in 2016. This predates recent social movements for climate justice as well as the discourse shift from certain populist parties or leaders. It thus would be compelling to replicate these models on more recent samples in order to paint a clearer picture of an ever-evolving and fast-changing climate situation.

5. Conclusion

These findings suggest that RWP attitudes are linked at least partly with climate change response scepticism in Switzerland and that SVP supporters may hold sceptic views. Moreover, it appears that institutional distrust, one of populism's core factors, holds a role in this relationship as a mediator between SVP identification and response scepticism. Evidence scepticism was found to have a link with political inefficacy and SVP identification but did not relate to RWP predictors. Thus, the results indicate that if rejecting policies directed towards harnessing climate change may be part of populist representations, doubting its anthropogenic causes may not use the same pathways and could relate more to education and information than anything else. This further shows that populism and climate change are multidimensional and should be studied as such.

As other research showed, RWP holds a complicated relationship with climate change, sometimes using it as a means of calling for more protection of the ‘heartland’ natural beauty for the ‘people’ (Forchtner & Kølvrå, 2015) and other times as a rejection of the ‘elites’ by negating it (Forchtner et al., 2018). In brief, right-wing populism may be sceptical about climate change, but strategically rather than by denying it outright.

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