

## *Original Paper*

# The Complexity of Climate Positions of Right-wing Populist Parties in Europe

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### ***Abstract***

*The rise of anti-climate right-wing populist parties urgently threatens mainstream climate governance goals in Europe. However, it is an oversimplification to portray all right-wing populist parties as outright climate deniers. In reality, the climate positions of right-wing populist parties are complex. While some right-wing populist parties continue to deny climate science and oppose climate action, others acknowledge the evidence but distance themselves from mainstream climate policies. This complexity arises from the tension between these parties' ideological convictions and strategic considerations. On the optimistic side, the complexity of right-wing populist parties' climate positions could create openings for cross-party cooperation based on scientific consensus and help transform some right-wing populist parties into constructive actors on climate governance. However, most right-wing populist parties remain deeply hostile to climate action; it is hard to expect that the opportunism of such parties in their climate positions will prompt them to make real policy concessions.*

### ***Keywords***

*Right-wing Populism, Europe, Climate Change, Climate Skepticism*

## **1. The Current Positions of Right-wing Populist Parties on European Climate Issues**

### *1.1 The Current Situation of Climate Politics in Europe*

Scientific research indicates that anthropogenic climate change has become the most urgent and systemic threat facing human civilization since the Anthropocene, inflicting severe negative impacts on natural environments and socioeconomic development worldwide. As the first industrializers in the 19th century, developed European countries bear a specific moral responsibility to fulfill their emission reduction commitments under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), take the lead in achieving temperature control targets, and compensate developing countries for climate change damages to make tangible contributions to global climate justice. In this era of exacerbating climate crisis,

Europe is also actively participating in global climate governance initiatives and demonstrating strong climate leadership, such as the European Climate Law sets an interim target of at least a 55% reduction in greenhouse gas net emissions by 2030 (compared to 1990) and an objective of greenhouse gas net zero emissions for EU states by 2050. Although climate activists have criticized this plan for being insufficiently ambitious and tardy, if the climate action targets currently pledged by the EU members can be achieved on schedule, Europe could become “the first climate-neutral continent” as promised in the European Green Deal.

However, many shadows are still lurking in the process of European countries achieving their emission reduction targets. The rise of right-wing populist parties is undoubtedly an essential variable worth considering. Under the continuing impact of populist waves, it remains uncertain whether developed European countries that have previously demonstrated relatively strong climate leadership will be better able to fulfill their emission reduction responsibilities and realize their promised decarbonization targets in the future.

### *1.2 How European Right-wing Populist Parties Respond to Climate Issue*

While European society has broadly reached a consensus on the need to actively address anthropogenic climate change, the rapidly rising right-wing populist political forces in recent years are undoubtedly outliers that have not shown a sincere intent to join the climate consensus, constituting a significant uncertainty factor in Europe’s climate governance efforts. It is clear that right-wing populist supporters, parties, and leaders often express skepticism towards climate change and hostility towards climate policies (Robert Huber, 2023). Indeed, right-wing populist parties are arguably the political forces most hostile to the climate issue in Europe. However, recent research also reminds us not to overlook the internal divisions among these climate skeptics hastily nor to simplistically view these parties as uniformly denying all climate science and refusing any climate action.

Climate skepticism can be divided into “epistemic skepticism” and “response skepticism” (Capstick & Pidgeon, 2014). The former skepticism refers to the doubt about the authenticity of climate science, focusing on questioning climate science, and the latter is a view that questions the effectiveness of human action on climate governance and focuses on the rejection of climate action. Let us examine the current climate positions of right-wing populist parties in Europe based on this view. We can find that while there are still a small number of right-wing populist parties unwilling to accept the fact of artificial climate change, such as the Party for Freedom in Netherlands, the Alternative for Germany, and other parties that continue to attack climate science today. However, with the gradual improvement of European people’s climate awareness, “epistemic skepticism” is becoming more and more challenging to be accepted by European people. More right-wing populist parties have at least stopped openly denying climate science in their party manifestos. They have primarily stepped out of the influence of “epistemic skepticism” and turned their attention to questioning the rationality of the global climate governance system. For example, right-wing populist parties in Nordic countries have adopted a more moderate climate position; it is not proper to describe them as climate deniers (Vihma, Reischl, & Andersen, 2021).

Given this, to present the current complexity of the climate positions of right-wing populist parties in Europe, this paper argues that their climate positions fall into two categories. The first climate position is to continue adhering to epistemic skepticism and response skepticism, and we call it “Hard Climate Skepticism”; this article refers to this radical climate skeptic position. The second climate position is to give up epistemic skepticism but still adhere to response skepticism, remaining at arm’s length from the mainstream climate agenda; this article describes this attitude as “Soft Climate Skepticism,” referring to this moderate skeptic position.

**Table 1. Types of Current Climate Positions of Right-wing populist parties in Europe**

	Hard Climate	Soft Climate
	Skepticism	Skepticism
Attitudes towards Epistemic	Stick to Epistemic	Basically
Skepticism	Skepticism	Abandon
Attitudes towards Response	Stick to Response	Stick to Response
Skepticism	Skepticism	Skepticism
Attitudes towards Mainstream	Completely	Selectively Support
Climate Agenda	Oppose	

## 2. Different Climate Positions of European Right-wing Populist Parties

As shown in Table 1, the climate positions of right-wing populist parties are differentiated rather than entirely uniform; we cannot unthinkingly label all right-wing populist parties as climate denialists. This section will select some right-wing populist parties that hold the above two climate positions for analysis.

### 2.1 Hard Climate Skepticism: Alternative for Germany (AfD)

Right-wing populist parties that hold a “Hard Climate Skepticism” position consistently express their rejection of climate science and use this as a basis to hostile any form of climate action. In this article, Alternative for Germany (AfD) is considered to have this attitude due to its radical position of disregarding scientific evidence. In today’s issue prioritization of AfD, climate change is viewed as the third most important key issue after European integration and immigration and has been publicly rejected and frequently attacked.

However, if we look back at the past, there has been a more noticeable shift in the AfD’s attitude to climate science in the category of “climate skepticism.” In the phase of fiscal conservatism, the AfD has only vaguely expressed doubts about the causal relationship between human activity and climate change trends, arguing that the relationship between anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions and climate change is uncertain. Since its radical turn to right-wing populism at the 2016 congress in Stuttgart, the AfD has begun to claim in its official documents that human activity has nothing to do with climate change and that increasing concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere help restore ecological conditions on the planet (Boecher, Zeigermann, Berker, & Jabra, 2022).

In its 2021 election plan, the AfD advocates that Germany should abolish the “Climate Action Plan 2050”, combating “climate extremism” from the left and environmentalist forces, withdrawing from all climate change organizations, especially the Paris Agreement, and opposing the development of renewable energy sources. Today, the AfD seems to see opposition to climate action as an opportunity to strengthen its right-wing position and populist image. On the one hand, the AfD insists that the climate issue is nothing more than a lie invented by the Greens, the Left parties, and other international organizations, in essence, a desire to achieve an “ecological dictatorship” in Germany and worldwide. At the same time, AfD claims it would defend Germany’s national interests and sovereignty in this global conspiracy. On the other hand, the good and evil antagonism between the “elite” and the “people” also appears in the AfD’s climate narrative. By opposing elite-led climate actions that are contrary to the interests of the German people, the party seeks to use the growing climate issue to strengthen its image as the only genuine representative of the interests of the people—pitting the neoliberal elites and benefit from green policies against the little people they exploit. For example, Alexander Gauland, then a spokesman for the AfD, put it this way in an article in the party’s publication *AfD Kompakt*: The climate protection measures advocated by the self-righteous Green Party are not only ineffective but are also implemented at the expense of the people and are nothing more than a populist ideology devoid of sustainability (Alexander Gauland, 2019). Countless articles in this journal use a robust ideological narrative to discuss climate, and the content is highly similar. These articles are about Brussels bureaucrats, Greens party supporters trying to steal social wealth in the name of climate action, and hard-working Germans are the victims of their evil conspiracy, having to bear the higher cost of living for the climate lie, such as paying higher energy prices, higher meat prices, or being forced to buy new energy cars. And most importantly, AfD is the only option in this context to protect the German people from the threat of “climate terrorism.”

### *2.2 Soft Climate Skepticism: National Rally (RN)*

Right-wing populist parties that hold a “Soft Climate Skepticism” position are both acceptors of climate science and obstructor of climate action. Compared with “Hard Climate Skepticism”, this climate position is more subtle. Taking the National Rally in France as an example, after Marine Le Pen took over the party’s leadership in 2011, she implemented a series of measures to achieve a moderate transformation, and since then, began to “greenwashing” to a limited extent, genuinely trying to compete for discourse power in the field of environmental issues with other parties. In recent years, the National Rally has been working hard to avoid conflict with climate science evidence but has never placed climate governance at the core of its political blueprint. When mentioning climate science, compared with her father Jean-Marie Le Pen’s direct denial of global warming, Marine Le Pen abandoned the “climate denial” legacy left by her father, choosing to talk about climate science in the tone of an “outsider.” In 2017, she said, “I am not a climate scientist; I think human activities have contributed to this phenomenon to a certain extent, but I cannot measure the proportion,” and “Climate change is a threat to the French nation and nature,” ambiguously acknowledging the existence of climate change and its potential impact on

national interests (Astier, 2017). During the 2022 French presidential election, Marine Le Pen again denied in an interview that she is a “climate change skeptic.” (Moussu, 2022)

In the ecological plan book updated by the National Rally in 2022, the climate issue should have been systematically discussed as an independent unit. However, the program claimed that the National Rally would support “France to fulfill its commitments under the Paris Agreement in its own way, at its own pace and stages,” escape from the European Green Deal imposed on France by the EU and will not let “globalist lies” and “climate terrorism” threaten the living standards of French citizens, expressing rejection of international climate cooperation. Nevertheless, even so, in order to achieve France’s energy independence, the National Rally led by Marine Le Pen also strongly supports the development of clean energy, such as hydropower and geothermal energy, and even expressed support for the last two renewable energy sources - wind power and solar power - before realizing that the construction of wind and solar facilities would damage France’s natural and rural landscapes.

The climate attitude of the National Rally can be called typical “Soft Climate Skepticism,” this party no longer questions climate change from the aspect of scientific truthfulness but tries in every way to evade responsibility in international climate governance mechanisms or is only willing to accept climate policies that are beneficial and insist that national sovereignty and economic growth needs to take precedence over international cooperation in the formulation of climate policy.

### **3. How to Understand the Complexity of Climate Positions of Right-wing Populist Parties in Europe**

So why do right-wing populist parties exhibit such diverse climate positions today? There are two main explanations in academia for right-wing populists’ climate frameworks: the “ideological approach” and the “strategic approach.” (Buzogány & Mohamad-Klotzbach, 2022) Using these two approaches together to understand the climate positions of right-wing populist parties helps us to put the issue in perspective. The “ideological approach” systematized by Lockwood in 2018 tends to argue that right-wing populist parties and their supporters oppose climate agendas because globalist, elitist-led climate action clashes with their nationalism and populism (Lockwood, 2018). While this approach can explain right-wing populists’ resistance, it struggles to account for their complexity as similar ideologies yield different climate positions. Some scholars prefer to understand populism as strategies, arguing that populists will use economic and social policy as a tool to win and maintain power. Based on this understanding, we can better understand the complexity of right-wing populist parties’ climate positions by considering them as part of their campaign strategies rather than as undisputable “value-oriented” issues like immigration and identity. Right-wing populist parties tend to be strategic and opportunistic regarding climate issues, adjusting their positions to win votes and political support rather than out of genuine concern for the issue.

While it is easier for right-wing populist parties across Europe to gain support from climate skeptics, it is no longer wise for these parties to indiscriminately deny climate change and attack all climate action,

as they did in earlier years. Getting the climate issue right remains a formidable challenge. On the one hand, right-wing populist parties need to adhere to their radical right-wing ideology of dealing with climate issues in an unfriendly way, always opposing the mainstream climate agenda. On the other hand, as the public generally accepts man-made climatic change, many right-wing populist parties have realized they need to make more strategic changes on climate issues. By not questioning the reality of climate change, they can avoid upsetting most people too much; sustaining criticism of current climate action based on cost and feasibility can help them continue to attract support from moderate climate skeptics simultaneously. To succeed in the political arena, political parties must carefully adjust their positions to balance ideological purity with electoral viability. Right-wing populist parties are no exception. As the issue of climate change has become more noticeable in recent years, the existential threat of climate change makes this balancing act more precarious than ever. While dogmatic denial of climate science may appeal to their base, it risks alienating the moderate group. As a result, many populist parties have toned down their rhetoric and accepted the reality of climate change but criticized the proposed solutions as misguided or even evil globalist overreach. Walking the line between doubt and denial gives right-wing populist parties more room to maneuver, but the climate issue will remain an enduring challenge for these parties.

As the issue of climate change becomes more prominent, right-wing populist parties are likely to adjust their positions on the issue further, balancing their ideology by applying opportunism and becoming more flexible on climate positions. And navigating the tension between “ideology” and “strategic considerations” will determine the future performance of right-wing populist parties on climate issues - at what point does blame other countries for climate change help them play to their supporters, and at what point does it hinder stronger climate leadership at home? This is a question that all right-wing populist parties need to assess.

#### **4. How to View the Complexity of Climate Positions Among Right-Wing Populist Parties in Europe**

##### *4.1 Optimistic View*

Compared to the past, the climate positions of many European right-wing populist parties have become more moderate. For example, Research shows that the British National Party (BNP), Danish People’s Party (DF), Italian Northern League (Lega Nord), and Belgian Flemish Interest (VB) all opposed the scientific consensus of “global warming” earlier (Gemenis, Katsanidou, & Vasilopoulou, 2012). And today, these parties no longer openly question in their party manifestos whether climate change is happening. Even though right-wing populist parties remain the political forces least friendly to climate issues, seriously threatening the implementation of the European Green Deal, the diversification of these parties’ climate positions shows they are willing to abandon alarming extremist views on more “marginal” issues.

Even the motives of right-wing populist parties that hold “Soft Climate Skepticism” for adjusting their climate positions are quite suspect. Still, at least they have primarily abandoned combating climate

science to a considerable extent and are gradually moving away from “epistemic skepticism.” In this sense, even though the “politicization” of climate issues caused by right-wing populist parties in Europe is difficult to eliminate, seeking a genuine cross-party climate consensus based on scientific evidence remains a worthwhile goal. Although right-wing populist parties are unlikely to become reliable partners for global climate governance in the short term, they still have the potential to evolve from questioners and attackers of climate action to constructive participants, creating greater possibilities for the sustainable development of human civilization.

#### *4.2 Pessimistic View*

Müller tried to suggest that it is not wise to interact with populists and that “exclusion” methods are the best way to deal with populism, including avoiding forming political alliances with populists, not debating with populists without giving in to their policy needs, and so on (Müller, 2016). Müller’s insights may also apply to dealing with the involvement of right-wing populist parties in climate politics. In this sense, mainstream political forces and climate activists should continue to be wary of right-wing populist parties rather than intensify cooperation with these opportunists, which will only undermine the chances of gaining broad public support for effective climate policies.

While a significant number of right-wing populist parties have now chosen not to view climate issues from an anti-science perspective, even milder climate skepticism is having a devastating impact on long-term climate governance arrangements at all levels. For right-wing populist parties, acknowledging the scientific evidence of climate change is not the same as embracing any mainstream climate agenda. There is a high probability that any right-wing populist party will vote against a long-term, practical, and workable climate governance proposal. The difference may be the choice of justification: Parties with “Hard Climate Skepticism” are likely to portray their rejection of the relevant proposals as a firm rejection of “climate lies,” while parties with “Soft Climate Skepticism” will be more likely to label mainstream climate proposals as “climate hysteria” contrary to their own “rational” governance ideas, bringing anti-establishment, anti-elite positions into the climate discussion. It could be more conducive to the effective development of climate governance. The voting behaviors of members of the right-wing populist party family also demonstrate this: the majority of right-wing populist parties in the 8th European Parliament voted against energy and climate legislation, with only about 15% of the seats voting against nearly half of the votes in this parliament. Against this backdrop, it is hard to believe that right-wing populist parties will make real concessions and sacrifices for climate action.

The pragmatic shift in some right-wing populist parties’ position on climate demonstrates their willingness to politicize and exploit the looming climate crisis to promote their core anti-immigrant views for short-term political gain rather than the real potential to be constructive actors in climate action. What is more, in today’s Europe, the climate action mechanism also has its chronic disease: Affected by climate science’s abstract and complex nature, the decision-making power of European climate policy is often entrusted by mainstream political parties to elite groups such as scientists and technocrats. Although this model ensures the scientific rationality of climate policy, it is not easy to effectively obtain the general

recognition and acceptance of the public. The right-wing populist parties involved in climate action will certainly not miss this opportunity. Their Manichean worldview will undoubtedly intensify the conflict between the so-called “local interests” and “global action,” “hard-working people” and “climate elites,” creating more chaos and tear in European politics and society in the vortex of the climate crisis. Creating more tremendous obstacles to ambitious climate goals - as UN Secretary-General António Guterres put it before the 77th UN General Assembly, populist politicians often “pit people against one another, employing discrimination, misinformation, and hate speech.”

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, many right-wing populist parties have historically downplayed or ignored the risks associated with climate change, despite differences in their climate stances. However, with public concern over climate change rising, these parties may need to moderate their positions to avoid being seen as irresponsible. It is essential to understand the range of climate positions among right-wing populists, given their growing influence in Europe. This understanding can help engage them constructively in climate politics and pave the way for a greener, decarbonized future. While right-wing populists may prioritize sentiments against immigration and globalization over sustainability concerns, their moderate climate positions could eventually lead to active advocacy as public demands for climate action increase, albeit focusing on nationalist solutions rather than global cooperation. A deeper study of right-wing populist climate positions could expose entry points for constructive engagement and policy alignment to advance carbon-neutral goals.

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