

The Populist Revolt Against Climate Policy

How the Culture War Subsumed Efforts to Curb Global Warming

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Few analysts studying the West's political landscape saw a populist earthquake coming a decade ago. But then, with the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom in 2016 and the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States later that year, the earthquake hit. Observers were quick to see the rise of a new "silent majority" in the West, one bent on repudiating an out-of-touch elite that was either oblivious to the suffering their policies had caused or entirely indifferent to it. The effects of globalization, deindustrialization, and the financial crisis fueled the discontent at the heart of the populist wave. But other forces drove upheaval in particular countries, including concerns relating to immigrants, tax increases, budget cuts, regulatory excesses, and the general view that government programs unfairly favored the ruling class.

Now, a new populist front is opening in Western politics. Anti-establishment leaders are singling out for scorn efforts to avert global warming. Attempts to curb climate change make an almost perfect target for populist rhetoric and conspiracy theories because policies to forcibly reduce carbon emissions rely on expert knowledge, raise costs for ordinary people, require multilateral cooperation, and rest on the hard-to-prove counterfactual that such policies would stave off disasters that would otherwise happen.

Skeptics of climate policies object to the costs of the transition away from fossil fuels, which in relative terms will weigh more on poorer people and on places where fossil fuels play a significant role in the local economy, and to the often-exaggerated claims made by the promoters of the green revolution about the tremendous potential of future "green jobs." But, as is often the case with populists, critics also frequently cite misinformation and wild conspiracy theories. Before entering the White House in 2017, for example, [Trump](#) tweeted that climate change was a hoax "created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive." Spain's far-right Vox party has labeled the UN climate agenda as "cultural Marxism." Germany's far-right Alternative für Deutschland has regularly accused mainstream parties of "climate dictatorship." Few populist leaders better epitomize the turn against climate policy than Nigel Farage, the British agitator who led the campaign to leave the European Union. In 2022, he lambasted the Conservative government's net-zero plans. "During the past decade, the people forced the political class to allow us a Brexit vote," he said. "The same needs to happen again in relation to Net Zero." In elections this July, he won a parliamentary seat for the far-right Reform UK party after he spent much of his campaign railing against climate policies.

This second anti-elite revolt is already in the making. In the June 2024 European Parliament election, even if the center largely held, far-right parties that are skeptical of the battle against climate change gained seats and influence, while green parties lost votes and seats. Europe's signature Green Deal, which aims to make the EU climate neutral by 2050, is likely to be scaled back. In the [United States](#), a Trump win in the 2024 presidential election could further undermine efforts to fight climate change. And political disruptions will likely intensify as the deadlines to meet net-zero targets loom ever closer—plans call for the world to move away from coal by 2030, from oil by 2045, and from gas by 2050.

Rational arguments are unlikely to either persuade those convinced of the perfidy of the green transition or allay the grievances that fuel the populist ferment in the West. Only economic incentives will convince doubters of the merits of climate policies. If green technologies are

cheaper than brown ones, then people will adopt them. The costs of the green transition need to be reduced through more open trade in the short run and more innovation in the long run. But economic incentives alone will not be enough. Mainstream leaders need also to better mobilize their citizens through more engaging political strategies, more emotional narratives, and more bottom-up and participatory policy approaches. Governments can win backing for climate policies when those measures promise to make a tangible difference to people in the present, not simply save the planet in the future.

A PROBLEM OF HORIZONS

The rise of climate populism poses a historic test for Western liberal democracies, as short electoral cycles make it hard for politicians to sell long-term agendas. That is why former U.S. Vice President Al Gore deemed global warming in 2009 the “greatest failure of democratic governance in history” and the British scientist James Lovelock once stated that to tackle climate change “it may be necessary to put democracy on hold for a while.”

To try to convince voters of the urgency of the issue, policymakers in Western countries have framed the crisis as an imminent emergency that requires policies that should not be litigated through the normal processes of democracy. Those seeking to combat climate change often pitch this struggle as a sober obligation, an imposition that all societies must bear because science tells them to do so. Populist leaders, by contrast, succeed by espousing the politics of volition over that of necessity. Anti-establishment parties gain popularity precisely because they promise agency to their voters, often questioning the accuracy of the empirical evidence marshaled by experts and policymakers and characterizing efforts to combat climate change as an elitist project to deprive people of both power and money.

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With climate-related shocks rising across the world, how do populists manage to downplay the urgency of combating global warming? They do so by leveraging the propensity of humans to prioritize immediate rewards and satisfaction over future benefits. In behavioral economics, this psychological bias is known as hyperbolic discounting. That people do not worry about the future as much as their present shapes how they respond to the prospect of a warming world. To win votes, opportunistic politicians can pander to this impulse by dismissing calls for immediate climate action and decrying the costs of such policies. This is how economic populism works: through the adoption of shortsighted policies that turn out to be highly damaging in the medium and long term.

But climate populism is not a homogeneous phenomenon across the political spectrum in terms of intensity and claims. Left-wing populists, such as the Five Stars movement in Italy, Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France, and Bernie Sanders in the United States, support climate action because they see such measures as necessary to rein in greedy corporations that use fossil fuels and pollute the environment to the detriment of ordinary people. By contrast, right-wing populists see climate policies as driven by transnational political elites who want to impose taxes and regulations no matter the burdens they place on working-class people. Left-wing populism is traditionally more cosmopolitan, while right-wing populism is frequently nationalist. Conservative voters often oppose climate policies because they see them as forms of market regulation and state activism that limit the freedom of citizens and firms. Lobbyists from carbon-intensive industries often have a hand in fomenting conservative arguments against the green transition. And climate denialism on the far right is also associated with religious beliefs: some Christian conservatives reject climate science for the same reason they oppose evolutionary theory or [COVID-19](#) vaccination.

These views have all coalesced into polarized political positions: according to a 2024 Pew survey in the United States, 59 percent of Democrats believe dealing with climate change

should be a top priority, whereas only 12 percent of Republicans do. In Europe, where unlike in the United States climate populism is chiefly the preserve of nontraditional parties, only two of the nearly 20 right-wing populist parties—Hungary’s far-right Fidesz and Latvia’s National Alliance—explicitly support the scientific consensus on the climate crisis. Some parties, including the far-right Alternative for Germany and the Dutch Party for Freedom, reject altogether the idea that humans are responsible for global warming.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

To be sure, the green transition has stirred real concerns about how it may place unfair costs on poor and middle-class families. The disquiet with new regulations that drove the “yellow vest” protests among rural populations in [France](#) in 2018 flared again in 2023 in farmer protests in most major European capitals. Demonstrators decried the taxes that raise the costs of fuel, fertilizers, and pesticides. The protests forced several governments to delay the implementation of measures that are part of the green transition. In June 2023, protests in Bavaria forced the German government to water down its phaseout of gas heating systems. Similar protests have erupted in Belgium, Italy, and Spain and are still going on across Europe in different forms. Going forward, a major source of discontent in the European Union will be the application of its carbon pricing system to transportation and heating, which will invariably raise energy prices for millions of households.

In the United States, climate policies, such as they exist, have a smaller effect on prices because they emphasize subsidies and incentives over taxes. The Inflation Reduction Act, for instance, uses subsidies to encourage the development of renewable energy, not punitive taxes. But the IRA has irked many on the right because it increases government spending by close to \$400 billion, according to official estimates (or, according to some analysts, by over \$1 trillion). As climate policies raise U.S. debt levels, the fights over how such measures should be financed will become increasingly bitter. The IRA also promotes unions and seeks to support disadvantaged communities whose populations often consist heavily of people from racial and ethnic minorities. Such favoritism has also incurred the opprobrium of the right. The climate battle between Democrats and Republicans is also taking place at the local level. Republican-controlled legislatures in Montana, Idaho, North Dakota, and South Dakota have blocked cities from banning natural gas hookups in new buildings. In Texas, a new law will effectively prevent cities from enshrining climate policies in their charters. Should Trump return to the White House in 2025, he has promised to expand oil drilling “on day one,” eliminate the IRA, and withdraw again from the Paris climate agreement.

People protest against energy price hikes in Madrid, Spain, March 2022

Susana Vera / Reuters

U.S. President [Joe Biden](#) has insisted on several occasions that climate policy is directly related to sound economic policy. “When I hear ‘climate,’” he said in 2021, “I think ‘jobs’—good-paying union jobs.” The Biden administration claims that the IRA could create around 1.7 million jobs. But U.S. climate policies also threaten the jobs of at least 730,000 workers who work in fossil-fuels extraction, refining, and power generation, and they also affect many others who work in industries, such as chemicals and cement, that have high carbon dioxide emissions. Many of these workers lack the skills for the jobs associated with the green transition. They also may not be able to move to where those jobs will be created. The bitter auto strikes in 2023 in the United States were motivated partly by fears that the transition to electric vehicles would produce major job losses and force workers to relocate.

The green transition also threatens to exacerbate the urban-rural divide. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has found that green jobs tend to be concentrated in

already prosperous cities or urban regions, such as Helsinki, London, Paris, Stockholm, and Vilnius. Remote rural regions have a much smaller share of these jobs. Rural areas in the United States and parts of Europe also tend to host renewable facilities that require space, such as solar panels and windmills, and deal with how such facilities disrupt the landscape of the countryside and reduce property values—factors that often offset the economic benefits of hosting these facilities, at least in the minds of local people. In response, 24 percent of U.S. counties have started restricting the use of land for renewable energy facilities. All the main right-wing populist leaders, from Trump to Farage to Marine Le Pen in France, have their electoral strongholds in rural areas. With the battle lines drawn, it is not hard to see in the future a concerted transnational campaign by populist parties to snub scientific elites and boycott global climate cooperation.

TELLING THE RIGHT STORY

Widening polarization in Western countries makes it all the harder to convince opponents to change their positions. But most of the public now believes in the necessity of climate change policies. According to a recent global survey conducted by the UN Development Program, 80 percent of respondents want their countries to strengthen commitments to address climate change. And according to the 2024 Pew poll, even 54 percent of Republicans in the United States say they support their country participating in international efforts to help reduce the effects of global climate change. Leaders who want to grapple with climate change head-on must find ways of better mobilizing popular support for such policies. Rather than framing the green transition as a technical problem with technocratic solutions, those promoting climate policies need to spin more compelling narratives, emphasizing how global warming threatens peoples' traditional ways of life, their health, and the places where they live.

As explained so powerfully by the Nobel Prize-winning economist Robert Shiller, stories help propel economic events. The Biden administration has not convincingly told the story of its climate agenda. Most Americans are unaware that the IRA is designed to combat global warming, as its major climate measures are hidden behind the bill's efforts to tamp down inflation. That was a mistake. Voters, even the most informed and politically aware, often think and act with their hearts. Proponents of climate policy should not leave playing on people's emotions to the populist right. Instead, they should tell compelling and energizing stories about the consequences of climate inaction. Green transition advocates should highlight the health and quality-of-life benefits that would come from successful climate adaptation. They should emphasize that the most radical solutions for the green transition will not come from government intervention but from entrepreneurial genius in its purest form. And they should remind people that they have a responsibility to meet the needs of their children and grandchildren, offering voters in the present the prospect of a rosier future if only they recognize the urgency of combating climate change—even in those cases where policies might lead to increases in the cost of living.

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The problem of short-termism should be mitigated by setting short-term intermediate targets. Hitting those targets will make progress more evident. Many climate activists invoke the prospect of calamitous conditions in 2050, but that is too distant a prospect for many people to take seriously. Even 2030 is too far away to induce today's governments to adopt bold but politically costly climate policies. It is politically expedient to set climate goals beyond the natural duration of a legislature, so as not to be held accountable if the goal is missed. But the milestones embedded in climate policies should if possible be timed to coincide with each electoral cycle. This is certainly easier in the United States, where the presidential and congressional mandates have a fixed duration, than it would be in parliamentary systems that are predominant in Europe, where parliaments can bring down governments at any time. But

even in these countries, intermediate goals should have shorter time horizons to build momentum—and even optimism—when these targets are met and people see that tangible progress is underway. In this way, governments can tackle the problem of hyperbolic discounting at the heart of populist opposition to climate policy.

They should also empower communities to have greater leeway in adopting measures, such as public-private partnerships, that develop solutions to address local challenges and opportunities, thus moving away from a politics of necessity toward one of volition. Top-down, technocratic approaches can easily trigger a populist backlash. Citizens need to feel heard and engaged in the decision-making process. A bottom-up approach that increases their political participation can make democratic systems more nimble and effective at dealing with climate change.

Of course, all these measures may not be enough. Many skeptics will be convinced by climate policies only if they offer material and financial benefits. That requires making climate-friendly technologies in energy, transportation, industry, and agriculture cheaper than their carbon-intensive alternatives. In turn, the sensible path here is to not let national security concerns get in the way of a green transition that would work for all people. Some technologies do have serious national security implications, but many associated with the green transition do not. Take, for example, solar panels. China already subsidizes their production. Western governments should take advantage of that fact to speed their installation and adoption. Similarly, tariffs on steel and aluminum make domestic production of wind turbines more costly. At a minimum, special exemptions from these tariffs should be granted for renewables production. In addition, the mix of green subsidies should be shifted toward more spending on R&D to accelerate the pace at which the price of decarbonizing falls. Over time, access to cheap green technologies will likely activate a virtuous process of domestic innovation in areas where the country has a true comparative advantage. In sum, more open trade in the short run and more innovation in the long run are needed to reduce the costs of the green transition.

Governments need to keep doing what science tells them to do. But they need to better activate the majority of people who believe in the urgency of reining in climate change. And they need policies that reduce the costs of the climate transition, so that even climate skeptics can be persuaded of the merits of going green.

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