

‘Climate-Soviets,’ ‘Alarmism,’ and ‘Eco-dictatorship’: The Framing of Climate Change Scepticism by the Populist Radical Right Alternative for Germany

Anne Küppers

ORCID: 0000-0001-6192-8919

Department of Political Science, University of Jena, Germany

Carl-Zeiss-Str. 3, 07743 Jena, Germany

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in *German Politics* (April 2022) <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2022.2056596>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anne Küppers is a research fellow at the Department of Political Science at the University of Jena. She holds a PhD from the University of Bonn. Her current research focuses on climate change scepticism, Covid-19 scepticism, populist radical right-wing parties and attitudes towards democracy.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Word count 8,282 (with tables, figures and references)

‘Climate-Soviets,’ ‘Alarmism,’ and ‘Eco-dictatorship’: The Framing of Climate Change Scepticism by the Populist Radical Right Alternative for Germany

This article conducts a case study of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) to explore the link between ideology and climate change scepticism. Employing qualitative data analysis on a sample of texts from the party’s membership magazine, this article studies the AfD’s climate change communication. My goal is twofold: (1) I explore which frames are used by the most visible sceptic voice in Germany; (2) I investigate how the sceptic frames reflect the AfD’s populist radical right ideology. Overall, my findings reveal that the AfD frequently connects its climate change scepticism to its host ideologies, especially radical right-wing and free-market ideology. Accordingly, climate change mitigation policies are often attacked because they are claimed to harm Germany’s national interest or economy. In contrast, populism does not play a prominent role, although, the AfD frequently uses people-centrism, and the ‘core people’ appear to be at the heart of its framing strategy.

Keywords: climate change scepticism, far-right, radical right parties, populism, political ideology, party communication

INTRODUCTION

In contrast to the US or several East European states, where a sizable share of the population does not believe in climate change, the share of climate change deniers in Germany is (still) relatively small (see Poortinga et al. 2019 for an overview). The number of attribution sceptics, i.e., people that do not believe in the human causes of climate change (see Rahmstorf 2004 for conceptual distinction), amounts to five per cent in Germany and 34 per cent in the US. Additionally, only four per cent of the German population are trend sceptics, i.e., people who do not believe in a warming trend at all (Poortinga et al. 2019; Gallup 2021). There is, however, the risk that the climate change sceptic views of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) will ‘trickle down’ into its electorate as voters have been shown to follow the cues of political elites (McCright and Dunlap 2011; Brulle, Carmichel, and Jenkins 2012). Through the parallel developments of an increasing salience of climate change for electorates and the increasing popularity of (often) climate change sceptic radical right-wing parties (see Schaller and Carius 2019) throughout Europe, climate change sceptic arguments could become a vital strategy to mobilise specific voter segments. This is problematic because denying climate change and its anthropogenic causes or belittling its consequences provides no (or little) ground for action and can limit progress on the route to carbon neutrality (Kulin, Sevä, and Dunlap 2021; Hornsey et al. 2016).

This study will address an important gap in the literature and systematically examine the climate change sceptic frames of populist radical right parties (PRRPs) in Europe, taking the German AfD as a case study. Previous works on the link between climate change scepticism and ideology have either focused on the English language sceptical community (Björnberg et al. 2017) or on the demand side (i.e., voters) (e.g., Krange, Kaltenborn, and Hultman 2019; Huber 2020; Jylhä, Strimling, and Rydgren 2020; Kulin, Sevä, and Dunlap 2021), or analysed far-right magazines (Forchtner 2019;

Forchtner, Kroneder, and Wetzel 2018). Parties – the crucial actors in the climate mitigation policy-making process at the national level – have mostly been left out of the picture (but see Forchtner and Kølvraa 2015). Also, whereas previous works have analysed manifestos, this article strives to give a more nuanced picture of the AfD’s climate change communication by looking at its membership magazine. Hence, the article has two goals: (1) To explore which sceptic frames are used by the AfD; (2) and to shine a light on how these sceptic frames reflect the AfD’s populist radical right ideology. The scientific contribution of this article goes beyond the case of the AfD and will contribute to the ongoing academic debate were, e.g., Huber (2020) claims that the populist radical right’s climate change scepticism derives from populism, while Kulin, Sevä, and Dunlap (2021) argue that nationalism is more important. The relevance of this contribution is twofold: it adds to the emerging scholarship that aims to disentangle the ideological roots of populist radical right climate change scepticism, and it addresses the so far neglected area of PRRP climate change communication. My analysis is based on a qualitative content analysis of more than 200 articles published in the AfD’s membership magazine over a four-year period, from October 2016 to October 2020, following the party’s leadership change, and thus, its ideological turn towards the radical right. Overall, I find that response scepticism is employed more frequently than outright denial of the scientific evidence. My findings reveal that the AfD frequently connects its climate change scepticism to its ideological cores: Although full-fledged populism, i.e., the combination of anti-elitism and people-centrism, only plays a subordinate role, the ‘core people’ appear to be at the heart of the AfD’s framing strategy. While a core radical right topic (defence of national culture) only plays a marginal role, other topics pointing to a link between nationalism and scepticism (e.g., national sovereignty and national interest) are mentioned frequently. Sometimes, the

party also employs far-right connotations such as ‘climate guilt’ as a reference to Germany’s ‘historical guilt.’ The dominant group of arguments in the party’s climate change communication are, however, of economic nature – despite the secondary importance of the socio-economic dimension to PRRPs.

THE CASE OF THE AFD: FROM ENERGY TRANSITION SCEPTICISM TO CLIMATE CHANGE SCEPTICISM

The AfD was founded in 2013 as a reaction to Angela Merkel’s decision on the Greek bailout during the Great Recession (Grimm 2015; Art 2018). It started as an ‘ordo-liberal’ (Grimm 2015) and soft-Eurosceptic (Arzheimer 2015) party. The first election it campaigned for was the federal election in 2013, in which it achieved 4.7 per cent and narrowly missed the five per cent threshold to enter national parliament. At that time, the party did not yet have a xenophobic or Islamophobic position. Political scientists would not yet describe it as a populist radical right party (see, e.g., Franzmann 2014).

This changed with the regional elections in Eastern Germany in autumn 2014 when a ‘turn toward “cultural issues”’ arose (Art 2018, 80). The topic of immigration became the party’s unique selling point. As the ‘moderate’ members around its former leader Bernd Lucke abandoned it, the party started to transform into a PRRP even before the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ (Art 2018; Arzheimer and Berning 2019). The AfD won 12.6 per cent of the vote in the 2017 federal election and became the strongest opposition party. Its radicalisation has continued since, and ‘moderate’ and extremist figures are vying for influence in the party.

This radicalisation of the AfD’s position on immigration and its general ideological stance, is paralleled by a radicalisation of its position on climate change. The manifesto for the federal election in 2013 did not even mention the issue. The two-

page document was mainly focused on fiscal and European policy. In a short paragraph, the AfD criticised the energy transition (AfD 2013). Over the following years, the AfD would transform its opposition to the energy transition into outright denial of the scientific evidence base of climate change. This started under its relatively moderate leader Bernd Lucke with the 2014 European election manifesto in which the AfD claimed that evidence for anthropogenic global warming (AGW) was uncertain (AfD 2014, 19). The party did not (yet) completely deny AGW, nor did it vehemently oppose the need for policy action. Instead, it was argued that following the precautionary principle, one could work towards achieving a gradual reduction of CO₂ emissions, but only as part of an international climate agreement and only if these policy measures were market-based (*ibid.*).

At its Stuttgart Congress in 2016, the AfD would adopt its ‘Program of Principles’ which now disseminated a sceptical message:

The climate changes as long as the earth exists. Climate protection policy is based on hypothetical climate models based on computer-aided simulations by the IPCC [...]. Carbon dioxide (CO₂) is not a pollutant but an indispensable part of all life. (AfD 2016, 79)

This position on climate change would remain unchanged and was repeated in similar terms in the manifestos for the 2017 and 2021 federal elections. The radicalisation of its stance on climate change adopted at the Stuttgart congress was mirrored by a formal radicalisation of its programmatic position: It marked the formal consolidation of the AfD’s transformation into a PRRP. Furthermore, the AfD maintains close ties to the think tank EIKE (*Europäisches Institut für Klima & Energie*), which

has been identified as one of the ‘most relevant disseminators of contrarian climate change messages’ (Almiron et al. 2020) in Europe.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies distinguish between trend, attribution, and impact sceptics (Rahmstorf 2004), ‘based on whether people think climate change is occurring, is human-induced and is harmful’ (Kulin, Sevä, and Dunlap 2021). Next to this core meaning of climate change scepticism, which van Rensburg (2015) terms ‘evidence scepticism’, he identifies two further forms of scepticism: ‘process scepticism’ criticises the processes behind knowledge production and distribution in climate research (e.g., the media is seen as alarmist and scientists as biased). Opposing climate change mitigation policies because these are, e.g., seen as too costly, is referred to as ‘response scepticism’ (van Rensburg 2015, 4; see also Forchtner 2019, 169). Process and response sceptics do not necessarily doubt the evidentiary basis of man-made climate change.

Climate change scepticism and ideology

This paper aims to unpack how the AfD’s ideology is linked to its climate change sceptic stance. In the following, I will formulate my expectations on which climate sceptic arguments could possibly derive from the AfD’s ideology. It is clear from previous research that climate change scepticism is mainly found on the right side of the ideological spectrum (see, e.g., McCright and Dunlap 2000; Hornsey et al. 2016). The close relationship between (populist) radical right ideology and scepticism that we find in Europe has so far been much less studied compared to the links between scepticism and conservative ideology in the US context (noteworthy exceptions being: Forchtner and Kølvraa 2015; Forchtner, Kroneder, and Wetzel 2018; Lockwood 2018; Huber

2020; Jylhä, Strimling, and Rydgren 2020; Kulin, Sevä, and Dunlap 2021). While the exact ideological roots of PRRP climate change scepticism remain contested, existing scholarship on the intersection between radical right ideology and scepticism indeed points to PRRP-specific explanations. On the one hand, it is suggested to be driven by populism or, more specifically, anti-elitism (Lockwood 2018; Huber 2020; Huber, Greussing, and Eberl 2021). On the other hand, it is suggested to result from the PRRPs host-ideology (Huber et al. 2021), or more specifically nationalism (Forchtner and Kølvraa 2015; Kulin, Sevä, and Dunlap 2021), or anti-egalitarianism (Jylhä and Hellmer 2020; Jylhä, Strimling, and Rydgren 2020; Krane, Kaltenborn, and Hultman 2019).

First, the AfD's stance on climate change and climate policies might be linked to its radical right ideology. Nationalism is argued to be the 'master concept' (Bar-On 2018, 17) of the radical right. The radical right thus promotes the defence of the cultural identity and sees immigration as a threat to the monocultural state (Mudde 2007). Therefore, climate refugees are perceived as a threat (Kulin, Sevä, and Dunlap 2021), and I expect this issue to feature prominently among the AfD's sceptic frames. Further, nationalism may motivate attitudes towards renewable energies. While PRRPs may criticise the destruction of the national landscape, e.g., through wind turbines, they can, nevertheless, be in favour of renewables because these provide energy independence (Forchtner and Kølvraa 2015, 215; Lockwood 2018). Forchtner and Kølvraa (2015) point to another link between nationalism and climate change scepticism. Climate change as a global problem that needs a transnational solution is seen as undermining national sovereignty (see Kulin, Sevä, and Dunlap 2021 for a similar argument). In Germany, a country with coal reserves, I expect renewables to be framed as a threat to the security of supply and energy self-sufficiency. Climate change mitigation is,

furthermore, opposed because it requires cooperation on an international or European level which is seen as a threat to national sovereignty.

Next to this, several studies show a link between pro-market attitudes and climate change scepticism either at the individual level (e.g., Hornsey et al. 2016; Panno, Leone, and Carrus 2019) or for conservative think-tanks (CTTs) in the US (McCright and Dunlap 2000; Bohr 2016; Cann and Raymond 2018). The economic position of PRRPs in Europe is, however, peculiar. Many PRRPs used to have a free-market stance (old ‘winning formula’ according to Kitschelt and McGann 1995), but later moved to the centre on the economic dimension as they started to attract a more working-class electorate (‘new winning formula’ according to de Lange 2007). The AfD was founded during the Great Recession as an ‘ordo-liberal’ party (Grimm 2015), and its economic policy matched that of the ‘old winning formula.’ The party still pursues neoliberal policies in its manifestos (Havertz 2020; Franzmann 2019). However, its economic position is essentially ambivalent, reflecting an increasing focus on social issues (Havertz 2020). That is why I – on the one hand – expect to find market-radical arguments, similar to those of the US conservative movement (see, e.g., Bohr 2016), in the AfD’s climate change communication. Additionally, climate change policies have previously been labelled as leading to a loss of freedom and a planned economy in far-right communication in Germany (Forchtner, Kroneder, and Wetzel 2018).

The *völkisch*-nationalist faction around the Thuringian party branch leader Björn Höcke, on the other hand, adopts a welfare-chauvinist stance. Mirroring other PRRPs, this faction argues for policies of national preference that would give welfare benefits to ‘natives’ only (Havertz 2020; Butterwegge 2019). In line with this ‘natives first’

argument, Fraune and Knodt assume that populist radical right parties could support climate policies that ‘benefit their core people directly or even exclusively.’ (2018, 2).

Lastly, I expect the AfD’s populist core to be reflected in its climate change communication. Populism portrays a conflict between two antagonistic camps, a homogeneous people versus an corrupt elite (Mudde 2007). For populists, climate change and climate policies present ideal targets for harsh criticism because these are constructed as projects by a cosmopolitan elite and are detached from the everyday life of the ‘common man’ (Lockwood 2018, Huber 2020; but see, for example, Jylhä and Hellmer 2020 questioning the role of populism as an important driver of climate change scepticism). In public climate change debates, a variety of populist arguments are used, such as that climate policies harm the ‘little guy’ and are used to squeeze money out of the taxpayer. The elites (e.g., in the media and the EU) are criticised as well (Forchtner, Kroneder, and Wetzel 2018, 597). Importantly, scientists in their ‘ivory towers’ are considered to be part of the elite (Huber, Greussing, and Eberl 2021). With the evidentiary basis for climate change becoming more and more certain, populist frames attacking the integrity of climate scientists might become increasingly popular and replace science frames (see, e.g., Cann and Raymond 2018 for the US).

METHODOLOGY

Terkildsen and Schnell propose that ‘[f]raming is important whenever an issue can be presented in multiple ways which may potentially influence how people think about an issue’ (1997, 881). Thus, how a party frames climate change and climate policy could presumably influence how its supporters understand the issue. A frame is – according to one of the leading definitions – a ‘central organizing idea [...] for making sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue’ (Gamson and Modigliani 1989, 3). Framing

is a concept that has been widely used in the study of climate change communication (for an overview, see Schäfer and O'Neill 2017). Hence, my work can be added to the current body of research on frames used by climate change sceptics.

Sampling of documents

I studied the sceptic frames based on a qualitative content analysis (see, e.g., Saldaña 2015) of articles published in the AfD's membership magazine *AfD Kompakt* (<https://afdkompakt.de/>). According to Pauwels and Rooduijn, analysing data from membership magazines allows for a more fine-grained analysis of the party positions than manifesto data because the magazine appears more frequently (2015, 97). It further tells us how a party articulates its positions to its core constituency. The AfD's magazine is published online, and articles are usually rather short (150-400 words). Usually, several articles on different topics are published per day. Articles were analysed for a four-year period from October 2016 to October 2020. This means that the post-Stuttgart populist radical right AfD, rather than the liberal-conservative AfD, under its former leader Bernd Lucke was studied. This time period encompasses some crucial climate-related events such as the decision on the coal phase-out by 2038, the introduction of a carbon price, the *Fridays for Future* demonstrations, and, lastly, the presentation of the European Green Deal, which would make Europe climate neutral by 2050. The membership magazine's digital archive was searched for the term climate ('Klima'; including terms such as climate change ['Klimawandel'] and climate-alarmism ['Klima-Hysterie']). This search produced 352 articles. All articles were assessed manually to ensure that only relevant articles were included. Approximately 150 articles were deemed to be irrelevant by the researcher (they talked about the

‘societal climate’ or a ‘hostile climate’ against the AfD produced by the mainstream parties). Thus, 204 articles were used in the final analysis.

The coding scheme: climate sceptic frames and populist radical right ideology

First, the coding scheme was inspired by existing coding schemes studying climate change sceptic frames (see McCright and Dunlap 2000; Bohr 2016; Cann and Raymond 2018). However, a review of the existing literature suggests that these existing coding schemes might only be of limited value for the study of the AfD as they do not allow to capture the intersection between radical right ideology and climate change scepticism. That is why the coding scheme was amended to capture these ideological aspects. This initial coding scheme was then used to code a random sample of 40 articles (20 per cent of the sample). This led to a revision of the initial coding, which was then used to code the whole sample while still remaining open to amendments. This strategy of ‘provisional coding,’ whereby one starts with an initial ‘start list’ of codes but remains open to codes that emerge, decay, or change during the research process, is a frequently used approach in qualitative data analysis (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2019). The coding scheme and the descriptive results are displayed in table 1. The information on the detailed coding rules for each frame is available in the codebook (see supplementary online material).

Next to the climate change sceptic frames, populism was coded as consisting of both people-centrism and anti-elitism. People-centrism refers to an understanding of ‘the people’ (or such terms as citizens, the ‘little guy,’ etc.) with a positive connotation, as a homogeneous entity, or as victims of the ‘corrupt’ elites. Criticism of the elite in general (but not of a single party or politician) was coded as anti-elitism (Rooduijn, de Lange, and van der Brug 2014; Pauwels and Rooduijn 2015).

EXPLORING THE AFD'S CLIMATE CHANGE SCEPTIC FRAMES

As is evident from table 1, policy frames (response scepticism) and, to a lesser degree, process scepticism clearly dominate over science frames in the AfD's communication on climate change. One plausible explanation for this is that the AfD is a political party and not a think tank. Thus, providing scientific output might be left to EIKE with which the AfD maintains a close relationship (Tagesspiegel, February 26, 2019). Another possible explanation is that for response sceptic (but also process sceptic) arguments, less scientific expertise on climate change is needed, which makes these forms of scepticism more accessible for politicians (see also van Rensburg 2015). Opposing the transition to renewable energies (as well as electric cars) is the main topic of the AfD's communication running through 80 per cent of the sampled documents. Whereas some frames clearly derive from the AfD's populist radical right ideology (e.g., references to the 'core people,' the destruction of the native landscape, or accusations against the 'old parties'), other frames remain unconnected to the AfD's ideology (e.g., the critique that wind turbines are harmful to the peoples' health, or that green policies are futile).

TABLE 1: Climate change sceptic frames in the AfD's membership magazine 2016-2020

	N*	%
Evidence scepticism	33	16.2
E1 Scientific evidence of climate change is uncertain	31**	15.2
E1.1 There is no scientific consensus	6	2.9
E1.2 Climate change is not happening and there is no warming	0	0
E1.3 Climate change is a function of natural cycles and unrelated to human activity	22	10.8
E2 Climate change is good or not bad	1	0.5
E3 Mainstream climate research is 'junk' science	5	2.5
E4 Climate change is a myth or scare tactic by environmentalists and bureaucrats	2	1.0
Process scepticism	56	27.5
P1 The IPCC intentionally altered its reports to create a 'scientific consensus'	1	0.5
P2 Climate change dissenters are unfairly treated	3	1.5
P3 Climate change is a political tool of the 'Altparteien'	22	10.8
P3.1 Climate change is a political tool to squeeze money out of the taxpayer	14	6.9
P3.2 Climate change is a political tool to force Germany to accept 'climate refugees'	4	2.0
P4 The media or 'Altparteien' are alarmist	37	18.1
Response scepticism	161	78.9
Policy would...		
R1 ...harm the national economy	119	58.3
R1.1 ...economically harm the 'core people'	49	24.0
R1.1.1 ...harm low income and elderly consumers	18	8.8
R1.2 ...economically harm industries	38	18.6
R1.3 ...harm national economy overall	48	23.5
R1.4 ...lead to socialism	23	11.3
R1.5 ...harm the welfare state	4	2.0
R2 ...threaten national sovereignty	6	2.9
R3 ...harm the environment and destroy the native landscape	29	14.2
R4 ...harm countries in the developing world	7	3.4
R5 ...harm energy security	18	8.8
R6 ...harm health	7	3.4
R7 ...threaten individual freedom	21	10.3
R8 ...be unrealistic, not possible	10	4.9
R9 ...have no measurable effect	35	17.2
R10 ...be unnecessary because climate change is not a priority	5	2.5
Articles not coded	16	7.8
N=204		

Notes: *N = number of articles in which code was found; % = share of articles in which code was found. **Parent code # also aggregates # of child codes.

When (between 2016 and 2020) were the sceptic articles published in AfD

Kompakt?

Figure 1 shows the number of articles mentioning ‘climate’ published in *AfD Kompakt* for each quarter. The data indicate that the AfD paid a rather constant amount of attention to that topic between autumn 2016 and summer 2018 with approx. four to ten articles published each quarter. In the third quarter of 2018 and then again in 2019, the number of articles suddenly increased, with the largest number of articles (N=48) being published in the third quarter of 2019. We then see a decline in the number of published articles for the year 2020, which is most likely due to the decreased salience of the topic since the COVID-19 pandemic overshadowed all other issues. As can be seen from a comparison with figure 2, which illustrates the *Google Trends* data for Germany for the search term ‘Klimawandel’ (German for climate change) from October 1, 2016 to December 31, 2020, the frequency of publications in *AfD Kompakt* on climate change and climate policy seems to match the trends of public interest in that topic among the German public. While in 2018 a heatwave and drought period likely sparked the interest in the topic, in 2019, the issue rose to the centre of public attention following several mass strike events organised by *Fridays for Future*, the European Parliament election, and the presentation of the ‘climate package’ by Merkel’s so-called climate cabinet in September 2019 proposing – amongst other measures – a price on carbon.

FIGURE 1: Number of articles on ‘climate’ published in AfD Kompakt

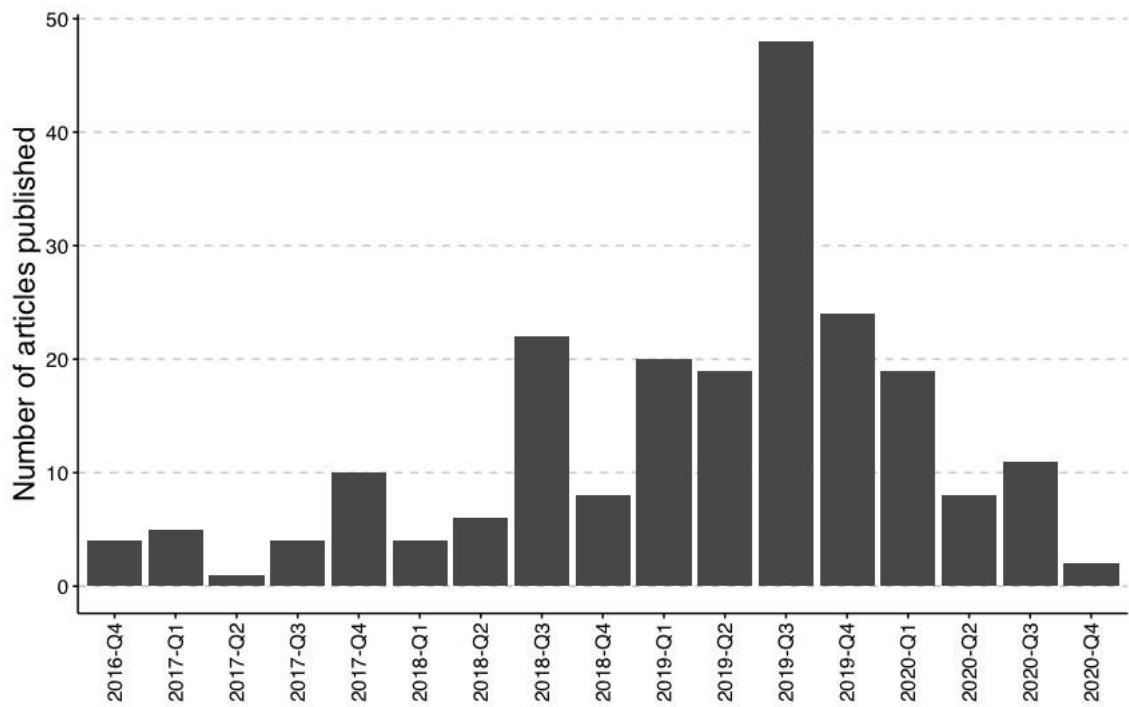
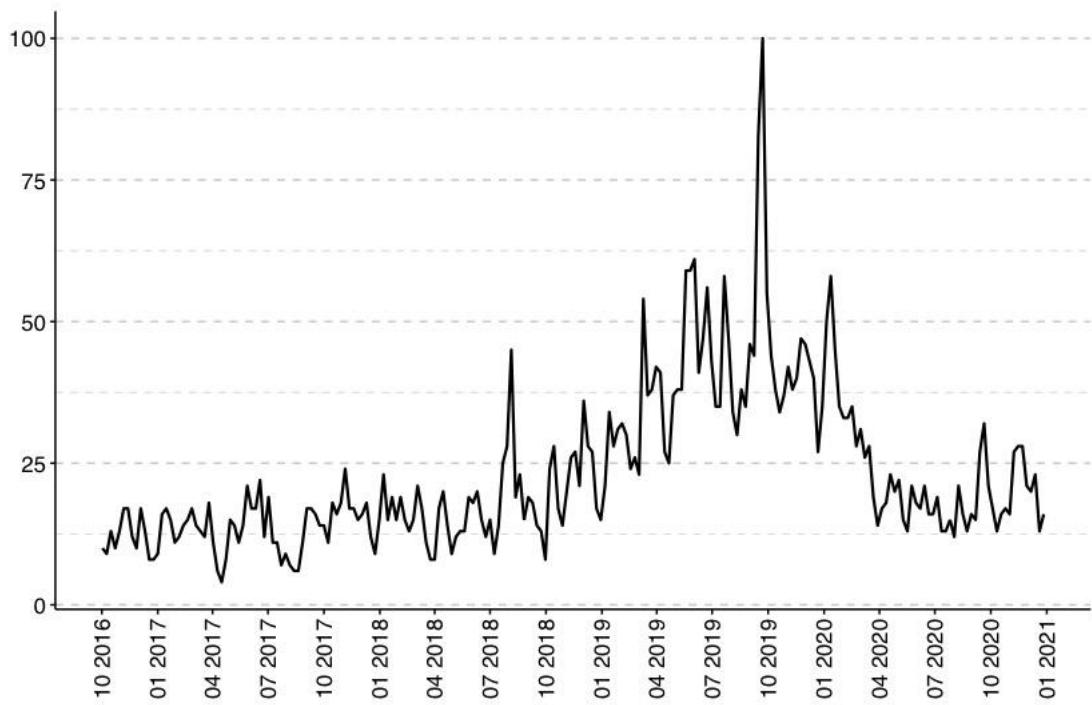


FIGURE 2: Google Trends data for Germany for the search term ‘Klimawandel’ (climate change)



Frames unconnected to the AfD's ideology

The frames referring to the scientific evidence base are largely unconnected to the AfD's ideology. The AfD adopts an attribution sceptic position, which means it acknowledges the existence of a warming trend. In contrast to the US (see McCright and Dunlap 2000; Bohr 2016; Cann and Raymond 2018), trend scepticism could not be detected. However, the party repeatedly challenges that climate change is mainly or entirely human-caused (found in 10.8 per cent of the sample). There are some instances where the AfD explains its position on AGW in more detail, e.g., it claims that climate change is a natural process (caused by the sun, cosmic rays, or water vapour in the atmosphere), that the earth's climate has always changed, that there were periods in human history where it was warmer than nowadays. Nevertheless, the AfD frequently refrains from explaining its denialism in more detail and simply uses terms such as 'hypothetical man-made greenhouse effect' or 'CO2 climate fairy tale'.

Another recurrent frame unconnected to the party's ideology (in 17.2 per cent of the documents) is found in the claim that climate policies would have no measurable effect because Germany's share of worldwide emissions is too small or that Germany's efforts would be futile because other big polluters (e.g., China) keep increasing their emissions (R9). Therefore, it is supposed, there is no need to take action. Importantly, not all articles published in *AfD Kompakt* deny the evidence base of climate change, and a marginal fraction of articles even acknowledge AGW as this statement illustrates:

The overall carbon footprint of electromobility is significantly worse than that of combustion engines and thus even harms the global climate. ('Deutschland und Europa können Weltklima nicht retten', 26.08.2018)

That the party's youth wing also publicly urged its 'mother party' to stop spreading climate change sceptic messages (ZDF, May 28, 2019) points to a potential source of internal conflict.

CLIMATE CHANGE SCEPTICISM AND THE AFD'S HOST IDEOLOGIES

The most common policy frame is that climate mitigation policies harm the national economy (58.8 per cent of the sample). Most of the AfD's criticism centres around a neoliberal point of view. Climate mitigation measures are portrayed as socialism (e.g., 'eco-socialist transformation,' '(E-car)-planned economy') in various instances (11.3 per cent of the sample). In a related argument, the AfD warns of an 'eco-dictatorship' and a 'totalitarian system' (found in 10.3 per cent of the documents) and sees the citizens' individual freedom being curtailed by climate policies:

The people are already being sufficiently patronised, educated and ripped-off by the red-red-green 'people's educators' ('Volkserzieher'). The citizens alone are to decide whether a means of transport is used and not the climate soviets from the Berlin House of Deputies ('Berlin prüft ÖPNV-Zwangsticket: Freiheit statt Verkehrs-GEZ!', 12.06.2020)

The second and third most-used response sceptic frames are that climate policies damage industries (usually, the car industry) (R1.2) or harm the German economy overall (R1.3) (in 18.6 per cent respectively 23.5 per cent of the sample). Time and again, the AfD highlights how the energy transition affects the people economically (R1.1; 24 per cent of the sample), e.g., when it repeatedly warns that the energy transition will harm low-income households or that the transition to renewables is socially unjust (R1.1.1). This could be explained by a welfare chauvinist concern for the 'native people,' (see Kaiser 2020 for an example) pointing to a previously not theorised link between PRRP ideology and scepticism. Tellingly, frames criticising the economic

harm done to minority consumers (see Cann and Raymond 2018 for the US) are absent from the AfD's climate change communication. Following its economic 'strategy of ambivalence' (Havertz 2020), the AfD uses neoliberal as well as social populist arguments in its climate change communication.

The topic of climate refugees (P3.2) and direct links to immigration are only present in a handful of texts (2.9 per cent of the sample). For example:

They want to restrict the individual mobility of millions of citizens through bans, penalty taxes, and planned economy measures, but illegal immigrants can continue to move freely and unhindered across our borders. ('Pseudo-Klimaschutz ist ein Programm zur Industrie- und Arbeitsplatzvernichtung', 11.09.2019)

In addition, the German population should be inoculated to so much climate guilt that they are finally ready to take in so-called climate refugees, in addition to war, economic and other refugees ('NABU und Grüne: Deutsche Bauern sind Sündenbock des Klimawandels', 10.08.2018).

Whereas the first statement portrays a conflict between the 'core people' and immigrants, the second statement highlights connections to the extreme right. 'Climate guilt' is a reference to Germany's 'historical guilt,' which the AfD wants to supplant (Nadel 2020). The few mentions of 'climate refugees' contradict the assumption by Kulin et al. (2021) that the link between climate change scepticism and nationalism is rooted in a desire to protect cultural homogeneity. The underrepresentation of this issue is, however, in line with earlier findings by Forchtner et al. (2018), who found that the topic was barely mentioned by far-right magazines. Based on the AfD's anti-immigration stance and its law-and-order positions, one could have expected the party to invoke the argument that climate change is not a pressing concern compared to the 'real' threats of immigration and criminality. This is, however, not the case.

Whereas Forchtner and Kølvraa (2015) found that the British National Party and the Danish People's Party – based on their nationalistic ideology – supported renewables not as a means to save the climate but as an instrument to achieve energy self-sufficiency, the AfD adopts a different perspective. As expected, it views renewable energy as a danger to the security of supply and warns of potential energy blackouts (R5, 8.8 per cent of the sample). Instead, coal (and, to a lesser extent, nuclear power) is seen as guaranteeing energy security and self-sufficiency, as the following example illustrates:

Lignite is the only domestic energy source that can be used as a baseload, and that is available to us independently of foreign policy conflicts. ('Linke wollen zehntausende Braunkohlejobs vernichten!', 01.06.2018)

Coal and nuclear energy are repeatedly defended in the AfD's texts (in 8.8 per cent of the sample) – sometimes on nationalistic grounds – lending support for the mechanism suggested by Lockwood (2018).

The topic 'energy transition' is, however, also discussed on non-nationalistic grounds, e.g., when the environmental harm done by wind turbines is moaned (that forests are cut down to install wind turbines, and the killing of birds, bats, and insects). By using these 'green' arguments to oppose wind energy, the AfD copies a strategy of local anti-wind initiatives to 'invert the moral burden' (Arifi and Winkel 2020). Whereas Forchtner and Kølvraa (2015) assume an ideational explanation for the far-right's opposition to wind power (that it spoils the national landscape), in the case of the AfD, a strategic (vote-seeking) explanation seems plausible: wind power is a controversial issue in many rural regions where the AfD is strong, and by establishing links to local initiatives against wind power, the party could strengthen its voter base.

This idea is supported by Otteni and Weisskircher (2021), who find that the construction of wind turbines increases electoral support for the AfD on a local level. Likewise, the AfD's defence of lignite (see above) might be opportunistic rather than nationalistic (i.e., a vote-seeking strategy in regions such as Lusatia).

Another topic that deserves attention is the portrayed threat to national sovereignty (not very frequently employed, though) that is in line with a mechanism linking nationalism and climate change denial proposed by Kulin et al. 2021 (Forchtner and Kølvraa 2015 make a similar argument). All instances where the AfD invokes a threat to national sovereignty refer to the EU. Thus, climate policy becomes another field where its powers can be attacked – which is in line with the AfD's Eurosceptic position (Rosenfelder 2017). We will now turn to a closer examination of the link between populism and climate change scepticism in the AfD's party communication.

CLIMATE CHANGE SCEPTICISM AND THE AFD'S POPULIST CORE

In a handful of texts, mainstream climate scientists are labelled 'pseudoscientists' and climate science is attacked for producing flawed results (E3). An example is:

Patrick Frank, a scientist at Standford [sic!] University [...], shows in a detailed scientific study [...] that climate models are flawed. The errors are so large that climate models cannot predict the temperature development, not for 1 year and not for 100 years. ('Wissenschaftler bestätigt – Klimavorhersagen sind Hysterie', 16.09.2019)

Contrary to what to expect from an anti-establishment way of framing, ad hominem attacks on the integrity of climate scientists and frames suggesting a lucrative climate industry are largely absent from the AfD's climate change communication. Both

frames invoke the populist theme of a self-serving elite and are frequently employed in the US or Austrian context (e.g., Forchtner 2019; Cann and Raymond 2018; Bohr 2016; Boussalis and Coan 2016). Neither does the AfD employ conspiracist arguments (e.g., scientists manipulate evidence) frequently found in Austrian far-right media (Forchtner 2019). Further process sceptic frames ('sceptics' are unfairly treated [P2], criticism of the IPCC [P1]) are – in contrast to CTTs in the US (Cann and Raymond 2018 found this frame in 24 per cent of their documents) – basically absent from the AfD's rhetoric as well.

The dominant process sceptic frames employed by the AfD is, that the mainstream parties (called 'Altparteien,' German for 'old parties'), the government, and the media are alarmist and use scare tactics (P4) (found in 18.1 per cent of the sample):

On the occasion of the terrible forest fires that rage in Sweden, the colleagues from heute journal [one of Germany's main news programs] [...] deemed it appropriate to once again produce a panic program on (man-made) climate change and to broadcast it at prime time. ('Sind die Waldbrände in Schweden Folgen des Klimawandels?', 24.07.2018)

Further, the AfD criticises the symbolic decisions by many German towns to declare a climate state of emergency as 'scare tactics.'

Populists perceive climate change and climate policies as a project of a cosmopolitan elite that is detached from the everyday life of the 'common man' (Lockwood 2018, Huber 2020). As pointed out before, especially when the AfD blames climate policies for economically harming consumers, we can detect people-centrism: the AfD frequently refers to the 'citizens' who have to pay higher energy prices, higher prices for meat, or will be forced into buying electric cars. The overall topic here is that

the people are ‘ripped off’ (‘geschröpft’). Usually, the authors refer to the people in the countryside, the ‘tax-citizen,’ the voters, or the population. The people are – which is a key characteristic of populism – sometimes clearly portrayed in a positive way when they are being referred to as the hard-working people. An example of this is:

While more and more money is being pulled out of the pockets of the hard-working people [‘Leistungsträger’], electric cars are to be subsidised. (‘AfD lehnt Forderung nach ‘Pkw-Maut für alle’ ab’, 06.11.2017)

Another frequently occurring topic is that people will be re-educated (‘umerziehen’) or that they are patronised – mainly by the Green party. The elite is criticised for destroying the wealth of ‘our’ country and for being alarmist. Negative terms such as the ‘old parties’ are recurrently used when the political elite is mentioned, and all mainstream parties are portrayed as a single entity.

However, as studies on populism point out, to code a chunk of text as ‘populist’, it needs to display both dimensions of the concept of populism: people-centrism *and* anti-elitism (Rooduijn, de Lange, and van der Brug 2014, 567). This is found much less frequently (in only five per cent of the articles; see table 2). The most frequently used populist frame is that the political elites have lost touch with reality and that they do not act in (or even against) the interest of the people – as can be seen from the following quote:

With the plans to deliberately increase the price of the staple food meat, the old parties show that they are out of touch with the ‘little guy.’ (‘Grundnahrungsmittel Fleisch nicht zum Spielball von Klimahysterikern machen’, 17.09.2019)

Furthermore, the people are repeatedly pitched against the political elites when the AfD uses process sceptic frames where the ‘old parties’ are portrayed as using climate change as a tool to squeeze money out of the taxpayers (P3.1):

The federal government’s climate cabinet will meet on Friday to once again decide on additional financial burdens for the citizens of Germany under the guise of saving the climate (‘AfD startet Kampagne: Grüne stoppen - Umwelt schützen!’, 16.09.2019).

The AfD does, however, not only portray a conflict of interest between the people and the political elite. There are sporadic examples where the ‘rich’ cosmopolitans living in the cities are juxtaposed against the ‘little guy’ or the ‘hard-working’ people:

The family of five [...] who is dependent on a minivan, can subsidise the noble electromobile cosmopolitans. (‘AfD lehnt Forderung nach ‘Pkw-Maut für alle’ ab’, 06.11.2017)

The bill is not paid by the urban left-green milieus but by the hard-working people in the rural areas. (‘Klimapakt – Zeche zahlt die hart arbeitende Bevölkerung im ländlichen Raum’, 24.09.2019)

TABLE 2: Populism in the AfD’s membership magazine’s articles on ‘climate’ 2016-2020

	N*	%
People-centrism	44	21.6
Anti-elitism	28	13.7
Populism (both people-centrism & anti-elitism)	11	5.4
N=204		

Notes: *N = number of articles in which code was found; % = share of articles in which code was found.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to explore how the AfD frames its climate change scepticism and to understand how the sceptic frames are connected to the AfD's populist radical right ideology. In order to do so, I performed a qualitative content analysis of more than 200 articles published in the AfD's membership magazine between October 2016 to October 2020. Anti-science frames appear to be subordinate to energy transition scepticism (a.k.a. response scepticism). This means, although science frames are a crucial part of the AfD's climate change framing, the question of 'who pays?' for climate change mitigation (the AfD's answer being 'the core people') appears to be at the heart of its framing strategy. Process sceptic arguments such as a criticism of the established parties for being alarmist and using climate change as a political tool to pursue a hidden agenda are also more frequently employed by the party than science frames. Overall, my findings help to understand how populist radical right ideology and scepticism are interlinked. In contrast to what one could expect, attacks against climate scientists are almost absent from the AfD's climate change communication (general attacks on the political establishment, however, are occasionally present). Likewise, a conflict between 'rich' cosmopolitans and the 'little guy' is only sporadically invoked. Even process sceptic claims are only sporadically communicated in a populist fashion. Although climate mitigation policies are often opposed on the grounds that they harm the 'core people,' this cannot be counted as evidence of populism since populism consists of both people-centrism *and* anti-elitism (Mudde 2007; Rooduijn, de Lange, and van der Brug 2014, 567), hardly lending support for the populism/scepticism relationship suggested by, e.g., Lockwood (2018) and Huber (2020).

Typical radical right topics, such as immigration, are mostly absent from the AfD's climate communication. However, response sceptic arguments frequently claim

that climate policies harm Germany's national interest or national sovereignty, lending some support for the mechanism proposed by Lockwood (2018) and Kulin et al. (2021). Sometimes, the party even employs extreme right connotations, such as when the term 'climate guilt' is used as a reference to the preservation of Germany's Holocaust memory across generations (i.e., Germany's 'historical guilt.').

Even though economic policies are only a 'secondary feature' in PRRP programmes (Mudde 2007, 119; similarly, Jylhä, Strimling, and Rydgren 2020) and Kulin et al. (2021) find that nationalism is a stronger predictor of climate policy opposition than traditional left-right ideology, economic arguments dominate the AfD's climate change communication. Probably reflecting the party's internally disputed stance on the socio-economic dimension, the party employs neoliberal arguments but also voices criticism of a socially unjust transition. This abundance of economic arguments in PRRP climate change communication could be a German peculiarity, reflecting the still high fossil fuel dependency of Germany's economy as well as its many employees in industries affected by a transition to a 'green' economy (e.g., the car industry). It remains to be seen, whether the frequency of economic arguments will decline after the resignation of Jörg Meuthen from the party, weakening the party's economic wing.

It needs to be noted that, although the AfD's different ideological roots (e.g., nationalism, pro-market economic position) might be present in its climate change communication, these parts of the party's ideology need not necessarily be the cause for its climate change scepticism. One could propose that the AfD strategically uses the frames that are thought to resonate best with its voters.

Some limitations regarding this research need to be acknowledged. First, the available data from the party's membership magazine does not allow us to explore how

the AfD's position on climate change evolved along with the party's ideological radicalisation as data from *AfD Kompakt* is not accessible prior to October 2016 – that is, *before* the party's turn towards the radical right. Second, I only analysed one type of data (articles in the membership magazine). Further studies could triangulate the findings with other data (e.g., from parliamentary speeches). Third, not all PRRPs share the climate denialist positions of the AfD. A few parties within this party family even accept AGW as a problem (Schaller and Carius 2019), raising the question to what extent the results from a single case study can be transferred to other PRRPs.

The findings suggest several avenues for future research. First, Huber (2020) was able to show a link between populist attitudes and climate change independent of voters left-right ideological placement. The unique role of populism could, thus, be further explored by comparing right-wing/radical right, left-wing, and valence populist parties (for the conceptual distinction, see Zulianello 2020; for a first attempt, see Huber, Maltby, Szulecki, and Cetcovic 2021). Second, further research should also explore differences and similarities in the climate change communication within the populist radical right party family, especially in order to uncover the potentially divergent frames of 'old winning formula' vs 'new winning formula' PRRPs.

SUPPLEMENTAL DATA

The codebook for this paper can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/JF7TKF>.

REFERENCES

- AfD. 2013. "Wahlprogramm der AfD zur Bundestagswahl 2013".
- AfD. 2014. "Mut zu Deutschland. Programm für die Wahl zum Europäischen Parlament am 25. Mai 2014".

AfD. 2016. "Programm für Deutschland. Das Grundsatzprogramm der Alternative für Deutschland".

Almiron, N., M. Boykoff, M. Narberhaus, and F. Heras. 2020. "Dominant Counter-Frames in Influential Climate Contrarian European Think Tanks." *Climatic Change* 162: 2003–2020.

Arifi, B. and G. Winkel. 2020. "Wind Energy Counter-Constructs in Germany: Understanding a New Wave of Socio-Environmental Grassroots Protest." *Environmental Politics*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/09644016.2020.1792730.

Art, D. 2018. "The AfD and the End of Containment in Germany?" *German Politics and Society* 36(2): 76–86.

Arzheimer, K. 2015. "The AfD: Finally a Successful Right-Wing Populist Eurosceptic Party for Germany?" *West European Politics* 38(3): 535–556.

Arzheimer, K. and C. Berning. 2019. "How the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and Their Voters Veered to the Radical Right, 2013–2017." *Electoral Studies* 60. Advance online publication. doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2019.04.004.

Bar-On, T. 2018. The Radical Right and Nationalism. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right* edited by J. Rydgren, 17–41. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Björnberg, K., M. Karlsson, M. Gilek, and S. O. Hansson. 2017. "Climate and Environmental Science Denial: A Review of the Scientific Literature Published in 1990–2015." *Journal of Cleaner Production* 167: 229–241.

Bohr, J. 2016. "The 'Climatism' Cartel: Why Climate Change Deniers Oppose Market-Based Mitigation Policy." *Environmental Politics* 25(5): 812–830.

Boussalis, C. and T. G. Coan. 2016. "Text-Mining the Signals of Climate Change Doubt." *Global Environmental Change* 36: 89–100.

Brulle, R., J. Carmichel, and C. Jenkins. 2012. "Shifting Public Opinion on Climate Change: An Empirical Assessment of Factors Influencing Concern Over Climate Change in the U.S., 2002–2010." *Climatic Change* 114: 169–188.

Butterwegge, C. 2019. Antisozialer Patriotismus: Die Rentenpläne der AfD. In *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 9/19.

Cann, H. and L. Raymond. 2018. "Does Climate Denialism Still Matter? The Prevalence of Alternative Frames in Opposition to Climate Policy." *Environmental Politics* 27(3): 433–454.

De Lange, S. 2007. "A New Winning Formula? The Programmatic Appeal of the Radical Right." *Party Politics* 13(4): 411-435.

Forchtner, B. and C. Kølvraa. 2015. "The Nature of Nationalism: Populist Radical Right Parties on Countryside and Climate." *Nature and Culture* 10(2): 199–224.

Forchtner, B., A. Kroneder, and D. Wetzel. 2018. "Being Sceptical? Exploring Far-Right Climate-Change Communication in Germany." *Environmental Communication* 12(5): 589–604.

Forchtner, B. 2019. Articulations of climate change by the Australian far right. In *Europe at the Crossroads*, edited by P. Bevelander and R. Wodak, 159–179. Lund: Nordic Academic Press.

Franzmann, S. 2014. "Die Wahlprogrammatik der AfD in vergleichender Perspektive." *MIP* 20: 115–124.

Franzmann, S. 2019. "Extra-Parliamentary Opposition within a Transforming Political Space: The AfD and FDP under Merkel III between 2013 and 2017." *German Politics* 28(3): 332-349.

Fraune, C. and M. Knodt. 2018. "Sustainable Energy Transformations in an Age of Populism, Post-Truth Politics, and Local Resistance." *Energy Research & Social Science* 43: 1–7.

Gallup. 2021. "Environment", <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1615/environment.aspx>.

Gamson, W. and A. Modigliani. 1989. "Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power: A Constructionist Approach." *American Journal of Sociology* 95(1): 1–37.

Grimm, R. 2015. "The Rise of the German Eurosceptic Party Alternative für Deutschland, Between Ordoliberal Critique and Popular Anxiety." *International Political Science Review* 36(3): 264–278.

Havertz, R. 2020. "Strategy of Ambivalence: AfD between Neoliberalism and Social Populism." *TRAMES* 24(4): 549-565.

Hornsey, M., E Harris, P. Bain, and K. Fielding. 2016. "Meta-Analyses of the Determinants and Outcomes of Belief in Climate Change." *Nature Climate Change* 6(6): 622–626.

Huber, R. 2020. "The Role of Populist Attitudes in Explaining Climate Change Scepticism and Support for Environmental Protection." *Environmental Politics* 29(6): 959–982.

Huber, R., T. Maltby, K. Szulecki, and S. Cetcovic. 2021. "Is populism a challenge to European energy and climate policy Empirical evidence across varieties of populism." *Journal of European Public Policy*. Advance online publication.

Huber, R., E. Greussing, and JM. Eberl 2021. "From populism to climate scepticism the role of institutional trust and attitudes towards science." *Environmental Politics*. Advance online publication.

Jylhä, K. and K. Hellmer 2020. "Right-Wing Populism and Climate Change Denial. The Roles of Exclusionary and Anti-Egalitarian Preferences, Conservative Ideology, and Antiestablishment Attitudes." *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 20(1): 315-335.

Jylhä, K., P. Strimling, and J. Rydgren. 2020. "Climate Change Denial among Radical Right-Wing Supporters." *Sustainability* 12(23). doi: 10.3390/su122310226.

Kaiser, B. 2020. *Solidarischer Patriotismus. Die soziale Frage von rechts*. Schnellroda: Verlag Antaios.

Kitschelt, H. and A. McGann. 1995. *The Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Krangle , O., B. Kaltenborn, and M. Hultman. 2019. "Cool Dudes in Norway: Climate Change Denial Among Conservative Norwegian Men." *Environmental Sociology* 5(1): 1–11.

Kulin, J., I. Sevä, and R. Dunlap. 2021. "Nationalist ideology, rightwing populism, and public views about climate change in Europe." *Environmental Politics*, Online First.

Lockwood, M. 2018. "Right-Wing Populism and the Climate Change Agenda: Exploring the Linkages." *Environmental Politics* 27(4): 712–732.

McCright, A. and R. Dunlap. 2000. "Challenging Global Warming as a Social Problem: An Analysis of the Conservative Movement's Counter-Claims." *Social Problems* 47(4): 499–522.

McCright, A. and R. Dunlap. 2011. "The Politicization of Climate Change and Polarization in the American Public's Views of Global Warming, 2001–2010." *The Sociological Quarterly* 52(2): 155–194.

Miles, M., A. Huberman, and J. Saldana. 2019. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. 4th ed. Los Angeles et al.: SAGE.

Mudde, C. 2007. *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nadel, J. 2020. “Revisionist Memory: How the Far-Right Alternative for Germany Is Seeking to Reshape the Nation’s Collective Memory to Promote a Eurosceptic, German-Centric Foreign Policy Agenda.” *The Yale Review of International Studies*, <http://yris.yira.org/essays/4039>.

Otteni, C. and M. Weisskircher 2021. “Global warming and polarization. Wind turbines and the electoral success of the greens and the populist radical right.” *European Journal of Political Research*. Advance online publication.

Panno, A., L. Leone, and G. Carrus. 2019. “Attitudes towards Trump Policies and Climate Change: The Key Roles of Aversion to Wealth Redistribution and Political Interest.” *Journal of Social Issues* 75(1): 153–168.

Pauwels, T. and M. Rooduijn. 2015. Populism in Belgium in Times of Crisis: Intensification of Discourse, Decline in Electoral Support. In *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession*, edited by H. Kriesi and T. Pappas, 91–108. Colchester: ECPR Press.

Poortinga, W., L. Whitmarsh, L. Steg, G. Böhm, and S. Fischer. 2019. “Climate change perceptions and their individual-level determinants: A cross-European analysis. In *Global Environmental Change* 55, 25–35.

Rahmstorf, S. 2004. “The climate sceptics”. In: Munich Re (Ed.) Weather catastrophes and climate change.

Rooduijn, M., S. de Lange, and W. van der Brug. 2014. “A Populist Zeitgeist? Programmatic Contagion by Populist Parties in Western Europe.” *Party Politics* 20(4): 563–575.

Rosenfelder, J. 2017. “Die Programmatik der AfD: Inwiefern hat sie sich von einer primär euroskeptischen zu einer rechtspopulistischen Partei entwickelt?” *Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen* 48(1): 123–140.

Saldaña, J. 2015. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. 3rd ed. Los Angeles et al.: SAGE.

Schäfer, M. and S. O’Neill. 2017. Frame Analysis in Climate Change Communication: Approaches for Assessing Journalists’ Minds, Online Communication and Media Portrayals. In *Oxford Encyclopedia of Climate Change Communication*, edited by M. Nisbet et al. New York: Oxford University Press.

Schaller, S. and A. Carius. 2019. *Convenient Truths*. Adelphi.

Terkildsen, N. and F. Schnell. 1997. "How Media Frames Move Public Opinion: An Analysis of the Women's Movement." *Political Research Quarterly* 50(4): 879–900.

Van Rensburg, W. 2015. "Climate Change Scepticism: A Conceptual Re-Evaluation." *SAGE Open* 5(2).

Zulianello, M. 2020. "Varieties of Populist Parties and Party Systems in Europe." *Government & Opposition* 55: 327–3.