



## Original research article

## Sustainable energy transformations in an age of populism, post-truth politics, and local resistance

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## ABSTRACT

The increase of right-wing populist parties, post-truth politics, and local resistance challenges the policies and politics of sustainable energy transformation. The contributions of this Special Issue address at least one of these political phenomena in the context of sustainable energy transformation. They show that populism, especially right-wing populism, and post-truth politics indicate rising political polarisation on climate and energy policies while local resistance indicates the political nature of sustainable energy transformations. More research is needed to explore the causes, nature, and consequences of the increase in extreme positions on climate and energy policies across political parties and individuals.

## 1. How right-wing populism, post-truth politics and local resistance challenge sustainable energy transformations

Right-wing populist parties challenge sustainable energy transformations by advocating positions on climate change policies that “place them outside the political mainstream” [1, p. 1]. Moreover, they blame mainstream political parties and elites to subordinate the national authority and national interest in international cooperation in the context of climate change policies. According to such parties, climate-change-related policies such as the transformation of national energy systems to low-carbon are only legitimate if they benefit the nation and their core people directly or even exclusively [2]. In particular, climate change policies and climate change science have been subject to another political phenomenon, specifically, post-truth politics. In this context, the notion of truth can be described as a “common factual basis for deliberation” [3] that is challenged: “But for conservative critics of the global economic and political order, it was not truth per se that needed to be challenged. Instead, their quarrel was with particular truths that liberals and experts accept as self-evident, especially the devastating reality of climate change and the economic merits of global free trade” [3].

It has been argued that right-wing populist parties’ positions on climate policy reveal that climate policy is no longer a valence issue but has become a positional issue [4–7]. The differentiation between valence and positional issues within democratic-party competition was introduced by Stokes [8]. A valence issue is characterised by a high level of consensus about a societal problem and the required solution. Party competition is reduced to the question of which party is most

likely to provide the best problem-solving policy. In contrast, a positional issue is characterised by alternative perceptions of a societal problem, and party competition yields a set of alternative policies to tackle the problem. The definition of a policy issue as a valence or positional issue is not determined by its nature but by the socio-political context. Therefore, the definition can change over time [8].

The positional nature of sustainable energy transitions was revealed much earlier in the context of the transformation processes of energy production systems or energy infrastructures at the local level [9–11]. The contributions of this Special Issue address at least one political phenomenon in the context of sustainable energy transformation: populism, post-truth politics, and local resistance. They show that populism, especially right-wing populism, and post-truth politics not only indicate the political nature of sustainable energy transformations but in this context indicate rising political polarisation.

The term political polarisation refers to the increased division of political parties at the elite level or individuals at the public mass level “into distant ideological camps at the extremes” [12, p. 221]. Political polarisation is a matter of judgement rather than a matter of measurement: “In contrast to judging *levels* of polarization, identifying *trends* in polarization is an easier task. [...] Movement away from the center towards the extremes would seem to be a noncontroversial definition of polarizing, even if judgements about how to characterize the starting and ending points remain disputable” [13]. In the following, the polarisation of political positions on climate and energy indicated by the increase of right-wing populist parties and post-truth politics will be explored. Moreover, the differences and links between these two political phenomena and local resistance will be analysed.

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In the next section, we outline the concept of this Special Issue by presenting the research on right-wing populist parties, post-truth politics, and local resistance in the context of sustainable energy transformations. First, we explain how right-wing populist parties take up issues such as climate change and energy policies by mixing right-wing ideologies with populist features. Then, we exhibit the nexus between right-wing populism and post-truth politics in the context of energy and climate change policies. Finally, we explore the political nature of sustainable energy transformations revealed by local resistance.

### 1.1. Right-wing populist parties' ideology and sustainable energy policies

The rise of right-wing populist parties is not a new political phenomenon; however, in light of the so-called Brexit, i.e., the vote of the British people to leave the European Union, and the election of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States, “2016 was the year in which populism went primetime” [14]. Lockwood [1] argues that the opposition of right-wing populist parties towards climate change policies is explained by ideology rather than by structuralist accounts that draw on the detrimental economic effects of globalisation and modernisation<sup>1</sup> [1]. This argument is undergirded by empirical findings showing that variance in parties' salience given to climate change policies is explained by party ideology rather than by party economic or policy preferences [7]. Here, we focus on right-wing populist party's ideology since right-wing populist parties are generally more adverse towards climate change policies than left-wing populist parties [1].

Although populism is not a well-defined theoretical concept, there is some scientific consensus about its main features. In general, populist political forces attack the established structure of power by claiming to represent the interests of the ‘pure people’ [17–19]. Therefore, populist politics are not marked by a common ideology but rather by a common legitimating framework as well as a political style and mood [17]. Moreover, populism is a thin-centred ideology since it is always attached to another, more pronounced, ideology [17,20]. These features characterise both left-wing populism as well as right-wing populism. Left-wing populist parties also exist in Western democracies, especially in Europe [21]. We focus only on right-wing populism in this paper because the links between right-wing populist parties and climate and energy policies are better-explored than those between left-wing populism and climate and energy policies [1]. In the following sections, we analyse how right-wing populist parties take up issues such as climate change and energy politics by mixing right-wing ideologies with populist features.

Radical right-wing parties<sup>2</sup> are often labelled populist [16]. The demarcation between radical right-wing parties and radical right-wing populist parties is as much a scientific challenge [23] as the demarcation between populist right parties and populist left ones [21]. Radical right-wing populist parties are characterised by the following features: “They also tend to be populist in accusing elites of putting internationalism ahead of the nation and of putting their own narrow self-interests and various special interests ahead of the people. Hence, the new radical right-wing parties share a core of ethno-nationalist xenophobia and anti-establishment populism” [2]. The populist anti-establishment strategy differentiates populist right-wing parties from radical right ones while right-wing populist parties' ideology and economic preferences differentiate them from left-wing populist parties

[2,21,24]. It has been argued by Inglehart and Norris [21] that populism is characterised by ideological cleavages rather than by socio-economic ones. According to Inglehart and Norris, the populist values revealed by anti-establishment attitudes, an emphasis on strong leaders and/or popular will, nationalism, and traditional values represent one pole of a cultural continuum, while the cosmopolitan liberal values revealed by a pluralistic democracy, tolerant multiculturalism, multilateralism, and progressive values, represent the other pole [21].

According to Rydgren [2], radical right parties build upon the idea of ethno-pluralism stating that different peoples must preserve their unique national characteristics. Therefore, immigration is the most salient issue for these parties. By promoting the idea of national preference, ethno-pluralism also has an effect on other socio-economic policies [2]. Since the concern of this contribution is to explore right-wing populist parties' positions on climate and sustainable energy policies, we focus on the links between right-wing populist parties' positions on socioeconomic and sociocultural politics and climate change and energy policies. Right-wing populist parties differ in their positions on climate change. The specific positions range from denying that climate change exists at all over challenging human-caused climate change to accepting the mainstream view on anthropogenic climate change [1]. However, right-wing populist parties are united by blaming mainstream political parties and elites to subordinate the national authority and national interest in international cooperation in the context of climate change policies [2]. Through international cooperation, the cosmopolitan political elite promote homogenisation and universalisation and therefore threaten the values of ethno-pluralism. Moreover, international agreements on climate change policies are commitments to national policies that require fundamental restructuring of the economy and human behaviour and whose benefits do not necessarily accrue to the nation and its core people directly or even exclusively<sup>3</sup> [2,7,23].

Climate policies' imperative to transform national energy systems to low-carbon [26] is also a concern of right-wing populist parties since it refers their economic policy preferences, which are characterised by a focus on benefits for the core people rather than by economic right- or economic-left cleavage [2]. The values of the social market economy, that is, inclusion, redistribution and the levelling of differences among different social groups and classes, are a threat to right-wing populist parties' ethno-pluralism. Therefore, they support the underlying regime of the neoliberal market economy, which is characterised by property rights, contracts, and consumer choice and therefore yields only a modest level of state intervention [22,27]. However, such values “mitigate support for a market economy with *populist justice*” [22]. According to the idea of a populist justice state, interventions into the economy are necessary and legitimate to protect “in-group” people harmed by market forces [22,28].

In the context of sustainable energy transition policy, right-wing populist parties also oppose the restructuring of the energy economy. On the one hand, they seek an economic policy based on a traditional economy that benefits the core people by providing jobs and maintaining social cohesion through community-building [23]. On the other hand, maintaining the provision of energy needs of the core people is given higher priority than climate change mitigation efforts [22]. Although climate and energy policies are not the most salient issues for right-wing populist parties, they challenge both climate policy and sustainable energy transition policies by advocating political positions that differ compared to those advocated by the parties of the political mainstream [1,29,30]. The increase of right-wing populist parties, therefore, involves a polarisation of the climate and energy positions among all political parties.

<sup>1</sup> The empirical evidence on the predictors of voting support for right-wing populist parties is inconclusive in this regard. Inglehart and Norris [21] provide empirical evidence that voting support for populism is determined by cultural cleavage rather than by economic cleavage, while Oesch's [15,16] findings indicate that economic cleavage is an important predictor for voting support for right-wing populist parties [15,16].

<sup>2</sup> These parties are labelled as radical since they “challenge liberal democracies, especially through their opposition to pluralism” [22]; however, in contrast to right-wing extremism they are not anti-constitutional [2,22].

<sup>3</sup> Some right-wing populist parties include environmentalist groups [1]. It is not claimed here that right-wing populist parties challenge sustainable policies per se but that they support only those that benefit their core people directly or even exclusively [25].

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