

Nationalising the Climate: Is the European Far Right Turning Green?

Article by Alexander Ruser, Amanda Machin

September 27, 2019

With the issue of climate now on the political centre stage, parties across the spectrum can no longer afford to ignore it and must position themselves, the far right included. Looking to Germany, Austria and Italy, researchers Amanda Machin and Alexander Ruser bust the myth that far-right parties across Europe share a stance of climate denialism and examine the rise of 'climate nationalism', asking what the far right's surge in the 2019 European elections might mean for climate politics. Studying the positions of far-right parties on climate, they argue, helps us to move beyond a technocratic framing to put the politics back into the discussion.

If climate change was once only a matter of concern to Green parties and uncompromising environmentalists, it is no longer. Today, climate change unquestionably occupies a prominent place on the political stage. According to recent polls, 82 per cent of Democratic-leaning voters in the U.S. identified climate change as the most important issue in the run up to the presidential election, and in Europe, global warming was an important concern for 77 per cent of potential voters across 11 countries in the 2019 European elections. Political parties ignore climate change at their peril.

This is not to say that the implications are straightforward. An agreement that climate change is an important issue does not translate into an agreement on climate policy.[1] Like many political concerns, climate change functions as a prism through which parties and actors reflect their own agenda. This is certainly true of far-right parties. Against any conventional assumption to the contrary, at least some of these parties are actively engaging in climate politics.

Research shows that sweeping claims that the far right is characterised by a uniform disinterest or unreflective denial of climate change are dangerously inaccurate. Such claims undermine both the diversity of positions within the far right and the powerful way in which some of these parties utilise the issue to support their nationalist agendas in the rise of 'climate nationalism'. Understanding this aspect of the differentiated and shifting positions of far-right parties is crucial at a time when they are gaining influence at both national and European level.

Changing Climates

The elections of May 2019 saw a surge of the far right into the European Parliament. The newly formed Identity and Democracy (ID) group of far-right parties has nearly double the number of members of its predecessor, Europe of Nations and Freedom. [2] ID is the fifth-largest group in the European Parliament and may well influence environmental policymaking. What then are the positions held by this group of parties on climate change? Will there be implications for climate politics in Europe? How might this issue fit within the agendas and ideologies of the far right?

A common assumption seems to be that the far right is characterised by a uniform denial of the scientific evidence

and political demands regarding anthropogenic climate change.[3] But this assumption is simply not accurate. A widely cited report from the environmental think tank Adelphi finds that attitudes towards climate science in European right-wing populist parties range from explicit rejection [4] to an “affirmative” attitude held by parties who “support the scientific mainstream” [5] and that a number of parties remain “disengaged/cautious”. [6] Although ideologically similar in many ways, then, far-right parties display significant differences in their attitudes towards climate change.

Like many political concerns, climate change functions as a prism through which parties and actors reflect their own agenda.

At the same time, however, whether it is acknowledged as “real” and “dangerous”, or forcefully denied as a matter of “degenerate fear-mongering”, climate change is an issue that is highly politicised by the far right.

Take three prominent parties that have done well both at a European and domestic level: Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), The Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the Italian Lega (League). Although unified by anti-immigration and Eurosceptic perspectives that have allowed them to come together under the ID alliance, these three parties have distinct positions on the issue of climate change. Not only are there considerable differences *between* but also *within* these parties on this issue. Moreover, their positions seem to be changing. Amongst other reasons, the challenge of attracting younger voters can put pressure on leaders to rethink their positions on climate change. Despite their successes in the European Parliament, both the AfD and the FPÖ did rather badly with young voters. The AfD youth organisation Junge Alternative demanding in an open letter a “change of course” in climate politics to attract younger, more “concerned” voters.

The following snapshot of the climate politics of the AfD, the FPÖ and Lega highlights their different and shifting positions and their politicisation and nationalisation of the climate. It becomes clear that whether they deny or accept the science, these parties are fully engaged with the politics of climate change; not only do they reject the formation of climate policy at a supranational or global level, but they are using the issue to strengthen their nationalist agendas.

AfD: “Save Diesel”

The AfD, who only recently made significant gains in crucial state elections in eastern Germany, have long been characterised by strong climate change denial. The 2019 party manifesto for the European elections, for example, boldly states: “We doubt that human actions can affect the climate and that they are related to current climate change... climate protection policy is a mistake”. Such statements seem to originate in the discourses of the well-funded climate denial industry in United States – some of the claims made by a renowned United States climate-sceptic think tank are directly reiterated in the manifesto.

It is noticeable that, unlike the previous 2017 manifesto, the ‘preamble’ of this 2019 manifesto explicitly selects the climate policy of the current German government as a target for attack, claiming that it will deprive people of cheap energy. Its denial of climate change is something that sharply demarcates the AfD from the other political parties in Germany. This denial and its opposition to climate protection policies is something it is continually emphasising: a leaflet sent out to voters just before the 2019 European elections clearly reiterates the alleged negative consequences of rising energy costs for German consumers and the competitive disadvantage for the German economy.

*Climate protection policy is equated by the AfD with a loss
of national sovereignty.*

Climate protection policy is equated by the AfD with a loss of national sovereignty. In the run up to the election, AfD party leader Alexander Gauland tellingly warned of the possibility of a “United States of Europe” that he depicted as “a de-industrialised settlement covered in wind turbines” in which not only would all cars be electric but they would be “only available via car-sharing.” [7] The aforementioned campaign leaflet opposes what they call the “aberration” of European climate politics and in particular the “meddling” of the EU in setting national emission targets. European and German climate politics as defamed as a ploy to build an “ecological authoritarian planning state”. The AfD argues in favour of national “energy autarchy”, re-investment in nuclear power and a reclaiming of national sovereignty in environmental politics.

The AfD therefore strongly opposes investment in renewables, the German Energiewende and the UNFCCC Paris Agreement and has promoted ‘diesel demonstrations’ arguing that the ban on diesel vehicles threatens Germany’s car industry. The AfD rejects climate science and actively opposes climate protection policies, offering a distinct alternative to mainstream parties in Germany.

FPÖ: “The Blues will turn Green”

Until recently, the FPÖ in Austria held a similarly sceptical position on climate science to their German counterpart. In an interview in December 2018 with Der Standard, for example, the former party leader (and until recently vice chancellor of Austria) Heinz-Christian Strache stated that “Whether humans can affect the climate is an open question. Climate has changed for thousands of years. The Sahara desert once was the bread basket of the Roman Empire.” (The fact that the climate has always changed does not, of course, disprove human-caused climate change.) As with the AfD, it seems that US climate denialism is influential; there are close ties between the FPÖ, the influential Friedrich Hayek Institute in Vienna, and the climate-sceptic Heartland Institute in the US.

However, after Strache was forced to resign in May 2019 (due to the infamous “Ibiza scandal”), this position has changed. The new party leader, Norbert Hofer, declared in an interview that he wants the FPÖ to be “the” climate protection party. It is explicitly declared on their website that “climate change is reality and cannot be denied”.

Referring to FPÖ’s party colour, Hofer has gone so far as to declare that “the blues will turn green”, though he advocates “sensible” environmental protection without what he calls ‘*Klimahysterie*’ – a ‘climate hysteria’ which he contrasts to “concrete measures”. This has meant that, for example, the FPÖ did not align with the other Austrian Parties who, after an official all-party-meeting with the with leaders of Austria’s Fridays for Future movement in July 2019, supported the declaration of a “climate emergency” in order to “make curbing the climate and environmental crisis the top political priority”.

While stating their support of policies to combat climate change, the FPÖ reject any policy that clashes with the interest of ‘*Kleinenmannes*’ (or ‘the ordinary guys’) and that “punishes” commuters and diesel drivers and profits only the few: “The FPÖ is committed to climate and environmental protection and has already presented numerous policy proposals. We are not supporting ‘cheap climate populism’ however”. [8] They argue that reducing CO₂ emissions without a concomitant effort from the USA and China is futile.

The form of climate protection the party articulates does not take place at the global or European level but rather corresponds to ‘*Heimattreue*’ – which translates roughly as ‘fidelity to one’s home land’. Among the measures they support are investments in public transport or the scrapping of premiums for old cars. In Hofer’s words: “Many people keep their old car simply because they cannot afford a new one. An environmental bonus

(‘*Umwelprämie*’) would increase the chances that low-paid workers could switch to low-consumption vehicles which helps the climate and also reduces monthly fixed costs”. [9]

Lega: “What is the ‘Climate Migrant’?”

The Italian *Lega* (formerly *Lega Nord*) – articulates a distinct position to the two other parties. A section in their [2018 manifesto](#) dedicated to the environment does not only clearly articulate the existence of anthropogenic climate change but states a commitment to tackling it and transitioning to ‘a more sustainable economy’. The section starts with the statement “Man and environment are two sides of the same coin. Those who do not respect the environment do not respect themselves” and calls for greater knowledge of environmental issues. The manifesto then lays out various climate policies including the strengthening of public transport networks, the phasing out of high emission petrol and diesel cars, the creation of incentives for consumers to buy electric and hybrid cars, and the monitoring of emissions from power plants, with the aim of decreasing of greenhouse gas emissions and increasing energy efficiency and renewables.

Although, according to the manifesto, “environmental issues are *universal*”, climate change is presented by Lega as a matter for *national* policy making. They state the intention to draft a “national climate change adaption plan” and to prioritise the establishment of a “national fund for energy transition”.

Although, according to the manifesto, “environmental issues are universal”, climate change is presented by Lega as a matter for national policy making.

The clear acknowledgement of climate change science does not translate in Lega’s discourse into acceptance of the global institutions such as the Paris Agreement, [rejected by the party President Gianluca Pini](#) for being a “downward compromise” that allowed developing countries to compete unfairly with Italian companies that were compliant in environmental regulations. Indeed, nation-state borders become *more* crucial in Lega’s presentation of climate change as an issue that can only be tackled at the national or regional level.

If climate change must be tackled at a national level, then it does not have to contradict the notorious stance of Lega’s leader. [Matteo Salvini](#) (who, until recently, held a powerful position in the Italian government) has complained on Twitter about the recognition of the figure of the ‘climate migrant’ and that ‘serious’ environmental reasons should not be used to justify illegal immigration, asking: “Is someone from Milan who doesn’t like fog also a climate migrant?”

The Rise of Climate Nationalism?

There are numerous examples of the far right articulating a green agenda. Many contemporary right-wing populist parties express a concern about environmental issues and hazards and advocate policies for tackling pollution and conserving resources [for more on green populism, [click here](#)]. For example, according to their manifesto, the FPÖ “are dedicated to protecting our homeland of Austria, our national identity and autonomy as well as our natural livelihood”.

Although often fiercely protective of the ‘national’ environment, the far right is generally less concerned with ‘global’ phenomena. What is interesting at the moment is the diverse ways that far-right parties are navigating the growing emphasis on climate change in the European political arena. While the AfD strongly rebuffs any science or policy on climate protection, both the FPÖ and Lega accept the science and advocate climate protection. But

either way, this coincides with a rejection of policymaking at the supranational level and renewed affirmation of national borders that are seen not as hindering climate policy but rather as aiding it. Concern over climate change is reclaimed as an element of right-wing nationalism and thus may actually strengthen that project. There is an intriguing ‘climate nationalism’ at play here.

It is surely unlikely that the ID group will vote for resolutions aligned with the Paris Agreement, that seemingly further the project of European integration and undermine national borders.

With its strong claim that “every nation has the right to protect, control and supervise its own borders”, the ID group in the European Parliament clearly articulates a common nationalist position. It is surely unlikely therefore that the ID group will vote for resolutions aligned with the Paris Agreement, that seemingly further the project of European integration and undermine national borders. However, crucially, this does not mean that the ID group would be able to present a united front in parliamentary debates. If faced with a communication from the Commission offering a long-term vision or strategy on climate change, for example, Lega might object to the European co-optation of the climate issue, whereas the AfD might object because it simply does not agree that there is an issue.

And yet, climate change denial may soon find itself in an embattled position within the ID group. Should this be a welcome change by those promoting the prioritisation of climate change in the European Parliament? To welcome this may actually be to misunderstand the relationship between science and policy. Acceptance of the scientific data indicating human-caused climate change should not be equated with any particular political agenda. It’s possible for parties to accept the reality of global warming while rejecting mainstream policy approaches. Proponents of strong climate policymaking, however, often present climate politics as if it is a matter of acceptance or denial of the facts: climate change is commonly depicted as an issue that should transcend the petty squabbles of messy politics and simply heed the science. This technocratic framing promotes the foreclosure of any real political discussion over climate change, one that might bring into sharp relief the differentiated impact of environmental policies. If no opposition to the established climate regime is expressed by any other party, then it is left open for the far right to reclaim it as a national issue that demands the strengthening of borders.

While pushing climate into politics, mainstream environmental activism simultaneously *takes the politics out of climate*. The climate nationalism of the far right *puts the politics back in*. This might result in a situation of polarised impasse. What remains to be seen is whether the politicisation of climate change provokes a discussion on alternatives.

Footnotes

[1] See Amanda Machin. 2013. *Negotiating Climate Change*. Zed Books.

[2] Led by Marco Zanni, ID encompasses 73 MEPs from Italy’s Lega; the French National Rally; Germany’s AfD; Austrian FPÖ; Belgium’s Flemish Interest; the Danish People’s Party; the Conservative People’s Party of Estonia; the Finns Party of Finland and the Freedom and Direct Democracy party of the Czech Republic.

[3] See for example the following articles in [Friends of the Earth Europe](#) and [Buzz Feed](#).

[4] Germany’s AfD, the Austrian FPÖ, the Danish People’s Party; the Conservative People’s Party of Estonia, UKIP, the Dutch Party for Freedom and the Swedish Democrats.

[5] The Hungarian Fidesz, the Finns Party and the Latvian National Alliance.

[6] The French National Rally; the Belgian *Vlaams Belang*, the far-right Czech *Freedom and Direct Democracy*, the Italian *Lega*; the Greek *Golden Dawn* party and the

Norwegian Progress Party.

[7] Speech given by Gauland at the official start of the European election campaign in Offenburg, 7 April 2019. See <https://afdKompakt.de/2019/04/07/die-europawahl-entscheidet-ueber-die-zukunft-der-nationalen-demokratie/>.

[8] See <https://www.fpoe.at/artikel/klimaschutz-konkrete-projekte-statt-klimahysterie-gefordert/>

[9] See <https://www.fpoe.at/artikel/fpoe-plant-einfuehrung-der-umweltpraemie/>



Alexander Ruser is Professor of Sociology at the University of Agder in Kristiansand, Norway. After earning a Ph.D. in political Sociology from the Max-Weber-Institute at Heidelberg University and research stays in Japan and South Korea, he worked on European Climate Politics as a Dahrendorf Fellow at the Hertie School of Governance Berlin and the London School of Economics and Political Science.



Amanda Machin is currently an interim Professor of International Political Studies at the University of Witten/Herdecke in Germany. Her research focuses upon the politics of citizenship, nationalism, ecology and embodiment and she is particularly intrigued by the implications of the recent diagnosis of the Anthropocene for models and institutions of democracy. Her books are *Society and Climate: Transformations and Challenges* (World Scientific 2019, co-authored with Nico Stehr) *Against Political Compromise: Sustaining Democratic Debate* (Routledge 2017, co-authored with Alexander Ruser) *Nations and Democracy: New Theoretical Perspectives* (Routledge 2015) and *Negotiating Climate Change: Radical Democracy and the Illusion of Consensus* (Zed Books, 2013).

Published September 27, 2019

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/nationalising-the-climate-is-the-european-far-right-turning-green/>

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe.

In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space.

Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.