

New research into threat posed to climate change policies by the rise of the populist right

April 14 2022



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Climate policies could be the next target for right-wing populist parties as the cost of energy soars, researchers into the links between climate

policy and political parties warn.

Newly published research from the University of Warwick and the University of Sussex Business School reveals that the influence of left-of-center parties increase the strength of a government's climate policy score by about 22% relative to the average score while the influence of right-wing populist parties leads to a 24% reduction relative to the same average.

In the study, "How Do Right-Wing Populist Parties Influence Climate and Renewable Energy Policies? Evidence from OECD Countries," the researchers carried out a quantitative analysis of the effects of right-wing populist parties' representation in the legislature and executive on climate and renewable [energy](#) policy for a number of OECD countries between 2007 and 2018. They combined data on the quality of policies with established datasets on right-wing populism and on parliaments and governments.

The study found that while right-wing populist parties in governments of countries outside the EU have a strong negative impact on climate policy, they had no significant influence on average when operating within the governments of EU countries.

Dr. Ben Lockwood, Professor of Economics at the University of Warwick, said: "Our paper provides some of the first quantitative evidence on how right-wing populism is negatively associated with progress on climate policy, at least among OECD countries. Interestingly, membership of the EU and proportional representation rules seem to mitigate this effect. These findings are relevant, as right-wing populism has not gone away: while Trump is (for now) out of power in the US, in Hungary and Poland 'strongmen' continue to rule unchallenged and in the European Union far-right populists are the fourth largest parliamentary group."

The study, co-authored by Dr. Lockwood, reveals that countries within the EU with proportional representation (PR) voting systems are better protected against the threat of right-wing populist parties and leaders ripping up climate policy than countries outside the EU with first-past-the-post elections such as the U.S., Canada and Australia.

The research also highlights the huge impact a dominant right-wing populist party could have on climate policy. In strongly majoritarian systems, when both the head of government and all the cabinet posts are held by right-wing populist parties, the score given for the strength of climate policy is 58% lower than in comparison with a right-wing non-populist government.

However, the researchers did not find that the participation of right-wing populist parties in governments had any significant impact on renewable energy policies, according to the newly published paper.

The research, published today in the journal *Global Environmental Politics*, explains that nationalist parties may be accepting of at least some forms of renewable energy if it can help relieve energy security issues and limit reliance on energy supply from other countries, particularly for governments without domestic fossil fuel reserves.

Dr. Matthew Lockwood, Senior Lecturer in Energy Policy in the Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU) at the University of Sussex Business School and Co-Director of the Sussex Energy Group, said:

"Conventional center-right [political parties](#) have always been more reluctant to adopt strong [climate policies](#), but the rise of right-wing populist parties and movements represents a threat of a different order. Our research suggests that while right-wing populists taking over mainstream center-right parties is relatively rare, when they have done so, as with Donald Trump in the US, the impacts on climate policy have

been strongly negative. Soaring energy prices potentially create a new opportunity for populists to attack policy, despite the fact that concern about climate change is at record levels."

The academics believe the existence of climate and renewable energy targets at the supranational level muted the influence of right-wing populist parties on climate change policies in EU member states.

The influence of right-wing populist parties on climate policy is weaker in countries with PR electoral systems than those with majoritarian first-past-the-post systems, the study found.

The researchers explain that in countries with PR, right-wing populist parties typically enter government as junior coalition partners with limited numbers of cabinet seats and prioritize their portfolios towards issues such as immigration rather than climate and renewable energy policy. Of 43 cabinets containing right-wing populist parties in European countries since 1993, their representatives have only held the environment portfolio in nine cases—with five related to Poland's current ruling Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) party.

In majoritarian electoral systems, the usual route into government for right wing populists is via an internal capture of the existing center right party, as seen with Donald Trump and the Republican Party in the US. With a populist takeover in a two-party political system, their influence through both executive and legislature to stymie climate policy is stronger than in a PR system, the study found.

While accounting for other factors impacting climate policy within the study, the researchers also found:

- Rising unemployment levels reduces the quality of climate policy as other policy priorities become more important during

recessions.

- Higher local air pollution increases the quality of climate policy in response to citizen demand for environmental improvement.
- High levels of CO₂ per unit of GDP has a negative effect on climate policy indicating a level of resistance to decarbonisation from producers.
- Countries with high levels of fuel exports also surprisingly had increased quality in climate policies.
- Varying levels of per capita GDP and tertiary education within a population had no significant effect on climate policy.

More information: Ben Lockwood et al, How Do Right-Wing Populist Parties Influence Climate and Renewable Energy Policies? Evidence from OECD Countries, *Global Environmental Politics* (2022). [DOI: 10.1162/glep_a_00659](https://doi.org/10.1162/glep_a_00659)

Provided by University of Warwick

Citation: New research into threat posed to climate change policies by the rise of the populist right (2022, April 14) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-04-threat-posed-climate-policies-populist.html>

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