

CLIMATE CHANGE AND POPULISM

COMPARING THE POPULIST PARTIES' CLIMATE POLICIES IN
DENMARK, FINLAND AND SWEDEN

**Antto Vihma, Gunilla Reischl,
Astrid Nonbo Andersen, Sofie Berglund**

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INTRODUCTION

The rise of populism has disrupted long-established patterns of party competition in many Western societies. A crucially important theme for the new decade is the connection between populism and climate change, as resistance to climate change policies “has become a feature of the populist agenda”.¹

The most dramatic event – both from the perspective of climate policy and otherwise – was the election of Mr. Trump to the White House. President Trump uses populist rhetoric to legitimize his style of governance, while promoting authoritarian values that challenge some key norms underpinning liberal democracy.² Although his climate change policy was initially unclear and characterized by contrasting statements, it did not take long for President Trump to initiate the process of leaving the Paris Agreement. In June 2017 he announced the US withdrawal, presenting the Paris agreement as being against US interests, too soft on other countries, especially China, and generally harmful for the industrial heartland of America, “I was elected to represent the citizens of Pittsburgh, not Paris”.³ Another recent example concerns Brazil, where President Jair Bolsonaro has engaged in powerful anti-climate policy rhetoric in the debates on deforestation in the Amazons. Both presidents have moved quickly and with vigour to dismantle existing climate and environmental policies in

1 Nick Butler, “It is populists the climate change activists need to convince”, *The Financial Times*, 26 August 2019.

2 For a seminal study, see Norris and Inglehart 2019.

3 Statement by President Trump on the Paris Climate Accord, 1 June 2017, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-paris-climate-accord/>

their respective countries.⁴ Their deregulatory activism is accompanied with symbolic bluster and populist, nativist rhetoric on climate change.

This report investigates the same topic – populist resistance to ambitious climate policy – from a Nordic perspective. It is particularly interesting to explore the broader patterns of authoritarian populism and climate policy in the Nordic context: the respective countries have sought to assume global leadership on climate politics, they have projected an overall “green” image, and they have attracted considerable public support for climate action. Populist parties all over Europe have advocated positions against ambitious climate policies that place them outside the political mainstream, and the Nordic countries are no exception. Nordic populist parties challenge the “politics of consensus”, or what they perceive as “political correctness” in the context of climate change, and they use the topic to distance themselves from the established political parties. According to a recent report by German think-tank Adelphi, opposing ambitious climate policies merges with the broader patterns of authoritarian populism and nationalism in European politics.⁵

The current debates in the US, Brazil and the EU indicate that empirical science on climate change has become intensively politicized in the contemporary political landscape. This is happening notwithstanding the mounting evidence confirming its certainty, and the disastrous consequences of a two-degree rise in the global mean temperature, as highlighted in the recent IPCC report.⁶ The “hoax” framing of climate change has become a political tool for several populist movements.⁷ It can also be framed as a highly ideological issue, in which “big government”, for example, seeks greater authority to regulate every aspect of the economy and to curtail individual liberty.

There is considerable scientific literature on climate change denialism, in particular in the US,⁸ and a growing body of work focusing on climate change denialism in populist platforms and among right-wing extremists.⁹ Although existing scholarship covers many dimensions and categorizations of science denialism, there is a need for both conceptual and in-depth empirical work to improve knowledge of the broader argumentation on climate change put forward by authoritarian populists.¹⁰

4 For the US, see Mehling and Vihma 2017.

5 Schaller and Carius 2019.

6 IPCC 2018.

7 Eriksson and Reischl 2019.

8 See e.g. Dunlap 2013; Tranter and Booth 2015.

9 See e.g. Fraune and Knodt 2018.

10 See e.g. Lockwood 2018; Skoglund and Stripple 2019.

As posited in this report, there is currently a gap in the literature on populism that concerns strategies and *political messaging beyond science denialism*. Endorsement of the basics of climate science, and even acknowledgement of the urgency of the climate crisis, may well be coupled with other established ways of arguing against climate policy. On a contextual level, not many studies have focused on the opposition to ambitious climate policies in the Nordic countries, and there is a dearth of cross-country comparisons.

This FIIA report investigates and analyses three populist parties in Denmark, Finland and Sweden. Does climate change feature regularly in the campaigns and talking points, and is there a qualitative shift towards more assertive positions on climate policies? Are the politicians turning to the climate science denialism that is familiar from the US debates? Alternatively, do Nordic populist parties campaign more subtly, highlighting nationalism and/or policy costs? By analysing these questions the report seeks to enhance understanding of how climate change is politicized by the main authoritarian populist parties in the three Nordic countries. On the conceptual level, the study takes first steps in addressing a gap in research through the introduction of an analytical framework of various political strategies aimed at opposing ambitious climate policies. The framework sets out three ideal types of opposition to such policies, namely *climate science denialism*, *climate policy nationalism* and *climate policy conservatism*. Furthermore, empirical evidence is discussed concerning the intersection of populist parties and climate change at the time climate change became a major theme in the national parliamentary elections of 2018 and 2019. The data includes electoral programmes, public debates, press releases and party newspapers, the aim being to identify the positions and communicative strategies of populist parties on climate policy (see Appendix 1).

The report is structured as follows. Chapter 1 below introduces and defines the key terms, outlines the scope of the study, and constructs the framework of ideal types that guides its interpretation in the following sections. Chapters 2–4 briefly present the case studies of the latest parliamentary elections in Denmark, Finland and Sweden. The main empirical findings are compared and analysed in the conclusions chapter.

/ 1

1. CLIMATE CHANGE THROUGH POPULIST LENSES

As defined by Oxford Dictionaries, populism is an anti-establishment, anti-elite ideology and a political strategy.¹¹ It claims that legitimate power belongs to “the pure people” and not “the corrupt elites”.¹² Leading scholars have further defined and analysed populism as a “thin ideology” attached to right-wing or left-wing host ideology,¹³ a discursive strategy,¹⁴ or a practical toolkit for political movements.¹⁵ This report applies and emphasizes the strategic perspective.

The term “authoritarian populism” is also adopted, reflecting the work of Norris and Inglehart.¹⁶ Authoritarian is more analytically sound as a prefix than the commonly used “right-wing”, given that the economic policies promoted by authoritarian populists may well be interventionist and oriented towards social policy programmes. However, it is worth pointing out that the word “authoritarian” does not imply fascism. On a much broader level it means that the populist movement in question challenges the norms underpinning liberal democracies, such as the separation of powers, the protection of minorities and a free media ecosystem. An authoritarian populist seeks to turn a “failing” liberal democracy into a more illiberal variant. These traits are visible in the Nordic context, albeit the parties in question are more subtle than the alt-right movement in the

¹¹ Bustikova and Guasti 2020.

¹² Müller 2017.

¹³ Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017.

¹⁴ Laclau 2005.

¹⁵ Ylä-Anttila 2017.

¹⁶ Norris and Inglehart 2019.

US, for example. The term and the definition also help to narrow the focus of this report and exclude other types of populist parties, for example Movement Now (*Liike Nyt*) in Finland, inspired by the Five Star Movement.

Authoritarian populism challenges the legitimate authority of “the establishment” and the pluralist ideas of the rightful location of power and authority in the state. Its targets typically include the journalistic media, the election system, public-sector bureaucrats, the judicial system, intelligence services, international organizations and academics – in other words the non-majoritarian institutions underpinning liberal democracy. The argument goes further than blaming the establishment for alienation, bad governance or other mistakes, rather it implies that the elites are morally wrong in their core values.¹⁷ Populism could also be described as authoritarian in as far as it claims that the legitimate source of political and moral authority rests with “the people”, who are exclusively represented by the populist. This tendency is frequently present in President Trump’s rhetoric (“*most people say...*”), for example. The voice of the “ordinary citizen” is considered the only truly democratic voice – even and especially when it is contrasted with the expert judgement of elected representatives, the legal system, scholars, or journalists. The *vox populi* is perceived as unified, authentic and morally right.

According to this definition, populism remains remarkably silent about second-order principles, such as what should be done, what policies should be followed and what decisions should be made.¹⁸ Where, then, does climate policy fit in? It is suggested in recent empirical research that the authoritarian populist parties in Europe typically oppose ambitious climate change policies.¹⁹ Some earlier studies have analyzed the broader issue of anti-environmentalism in European right-wing parties, noting that active opposition to environmental protection has been practised by many of these parties in Western Europe.²⁰

This question also touches upon the main drivers of contemporary populism. According to the material explanation, the success of authoritarian populism is rooted in grievances related to the economy and social justice. The ideological explanation, on the other hand, emphasizes the backlash against liberal-democratic values embedded in populist movements. The former explanation would suggest that climate policies, when designed to be fair and effective, could well be *supported* by populist

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Schaller and Carius 2019.

20 Gemenis et al. 2012.

parties – something that the recent Adelphi report also recommends.²¹ The latter suggests that opposing climate policies may be a symbolic strike against the elite, and it would not matter much whether the tax on petrol were to be raised by 0.01 or 0.3 percent, for example.

The material explanation of populism, which emphasizes economic anxiety and political marginalization, may be of limited value in explaining the climate politics of populist parties. According to recent research, the ideological driver of populism is the defining factor in populist positions on climate change policy.²² It does not seem to matter a great deal whether an environmental tax is raised marginally or substantially – a similar populist backlash follows. However, this is an observation that stems from climate politics, and it does not imply that all material reasoning would be irrelevant in broader analyses of the root causes of populism.

Climate policy is closely linked to international cooperation, especially to the governance of the European Union (EU) and the United Nations global climate negotiations (UNFCCC). Authoritarian populist parties typically have a nationalist streak and are critical of the preconditions of shared international sovereignty and the perceived cosmopolitan or globalist ideology of the elite. International compromises achieved in the EU with the coal-dependent Poland, for example, as well as in the UN climate negotiations with China and India, are an easy target for a populist framing in which the elite betray the true interests of the people.

There is broad agreement among the main populist parties that Denmark, Finland and Sweden should not strive for ambitious climate policies. Indeed, climate policy is perceived and presented as an elitist agenda, driven by the mainstream parties that populist parties are set to challenge. However, this broad agreement on opposing ambition and leadership in climate change does not translate into strategic unanimity. There is a need for more detailed investigation into their strategic communication on climate change.

Three somewhat caricatured ideal types have been constructed to facilitate analysis of the diversity of positions and arguments among Nordic populist parties, and the strategic implications of this diversity. The distinctions set out below are ideal-typical in a Weberian sense. Following this line of thinking, it is acknowledged that the complexity and contextuality of the real-world politics do not exactly correspond to these ideal types, and that politicians will often combine different elements in their rhetoric. However, the types could be taken as “reference models”, and they may be helpful for analytical purposes in terms of identifying and

21 Schaller and Carius 2019.

22 Lockwood 2018.

describing political ideologies and rhetorical devices. They could also be useful in the construction of political strategies to engage and challenge populist narratives.

In sum, the following three broad arguments against implementing ambitious climate policies stand out in contemporary debate – and all of them have featured in climate policy since the issue was first thoroughly politicized in the early 1990s:

- 1) *There is no evidence to act, climate change is not real*
- 2) *We are not the ones who should act*
- 3) *We should only act if the cost is minimal*

It is suggested in this report that these three positions are currently pronounced in climate politics in general, and among Nordic populist parties in particular. They are labelled *climate science denialist*, *climate policy nationalist* and *climate policy conservative* (Table 1).

Climate science denialist	Climate policy nationalist	Climate policy conservative
<i>Climate change is not real.</i>	<i>Climate change is real, caused by human activity, and is a serious threat...</i>	<i>Climate change is real, caused by human activity, and it is a serious threat...</i>
<i>Climate change is real, but the role of human activity is unclear.</i>	<i>... but national / EU policies are not worth it, only major economies (or China) can have an impact.</i>	<i>...but current policies and especially technological innovations will take care of it.</i>
<i>Climate change is real, caused by human activity, but it is not a threat, in fact, it may also be a good thing.</i>	<i>Our state produces only xx of global emissions.</i>	<i>National governments / the EU should perhaps, with certain conditions, do a bit more, but only by some means that carry minimal costs to the economy.</i>

Table 1. Three ideal-type positions opposing ambitious climate policies

These ideal types are constructed from the literature on the politicization of climate change. Participatory observation by the authors in their past fifteen years of working with climate change in different fora also contribute to the framework.²³

23 Vihma has participated in more than 20 UN climate meetings in different capacities; as a member of the Finnish delegation, writer/editor of *Earth Negotiations Bulletin*, and an independent analyst. Reischl has participated in the Swedish delegation to several UN environmental negotiations, EU internal negotiations, and different international meetings on sustainable development.

First, *the climate science denialist position* has attracted substantial scholarly interest over the years, in particular in the US context.²⁴ Climate science has been subjected to organized denial campaigns and this has affected the public discourse.²⁵ Recent studies also show how disorganized “climate sceptics” seek an underdog position in the debates in order to “speak truth to power”.²⁶ According to Fischer, for example, climate science deniers are convinced that climate scientists are part of the political strategy of a “left-wing truth regime that promotes planning and regulation of the economy, strictures on social and economic freedoms, and more top-down (if not authoritarian) forms of government”.²⁷ Similarly, studies have analysed and confirmed the link between a far-right ideology and climate science denialism in the German context, for example.²⁸

Second, *the climate policy nationalist position* has been vocally promoted in recent years in many countries as well as in the international context. As Dubash notes, “[a] turn toward nationalism in multiple countries has created a short-term, look-out-for-our-own mentality that is inimical to the global collective action needed to address climate change”.²⁹ The argument is typically centred on China, which is presented as the crucial actor, the only country whose emissions and actions really matter in the big picture. A remarkably similar argumentation has been outlined by politicians in the US and Europe, as well as in developing countries. In developed countries, the case is often made that the domestic industries already are cleaner than those in third countries, and that “we have already done our share”, whereas other countries are free-riding.

Third, *the climate policy conservative position* questions the economic and political measures proposed to deal with the threat of climate change.³⁰ The emphasis is on the costs and risks of the policies, not on the costs of inaction via climate impacts. Hopes are typically pinned on innovation and technological progress, which will curb emissions at a later stage. In a similar vein as in the nationalist position, the climate conservative position emphasizes realism and cool judgement, and argues against the perceived emotionality (“panicking”, “hysteria”) of those who support ambitious climate policies. However, unlike the climate denialists and the nationalists, they do not deny the meaningfulness of all climate

24 See for example Boussalis and Coan 2016; Cann and Raymond 2018; Capstick and Pidgeon 2014; Jacques et al. 2008; Lahsen 2013; McCright and Dunlap 2011; Schmid-Petri 2017.

25 Lewandowsky et al. 2015.

26 Skoglund and Stripple 2019.

27 Fischer 2019.

28 Forchtner et al. 2018.

29 Navroz Dubash, “The Nationalist Hindrance to Climate Actions”, *The Hindu*, 23 September 2019.

30 See e.g. Hoffman 2011.

action. Proponents of the conservative position might acknowledge and support current levels of policy ambition, and the co-benefits of climate action such as improved air quality, increased energy efficiency and new business opportunities for sustainable entrepreneurship. Climate conservatives may even be open to new policies if they do not entail significant costs, although the main narrative is to keep ambition at current levels.

Many current studies focus on different forms of science denialism, whereas this report considers the wider politicization of climate change, including non-natural-science-based argumentation in the study of contemporary populism and climate change. Some scholars have recently called for this kind of broader and “politicized” perspective, which presents different options that are openly ideological.³¹ The framework is a step in this direction, although the focus is only on authoritarian populism. Table 2 summarizes the similarities and differences in these strategic perspectives derived from the ideal types discussed above.

The ideal types thus translate into different strategic perspectives, with different policy implications. However, this is clearly not an exhaustive listing of the positions authoritarian populist parties may take on climate policies. As emphasized throughout this report, the populist framing is flexible when it comes to substance. Several experienced theorists in the

	Climate denier	Climate nationalist	Climate conservative
Position on science	<i>There is no scientific consensus on climate change</i>	<i>Science is real; some uncertainties persist</i>	<i>Science is real</i>
The big picture	<i>“Climate change” is a conspiracy of the liberal elite</i>	<i>Opponents are panicking; we have realism</i>	<i>Opponents are panicking; we have realism</i>
Domestic agenda	<i>Deregulation</i>	<i>Deregulation</i>	<i>Maintain current ambition / support new, efficient minimal-cost policies</i>
International position	<i>Globalists are conspiring; trying to curb individual liberties; China benefits</i>	<i>Industrial competitiveness; small countries can do nothing, only China can</i>	<i>Cautious cooperation; emphasize national sovereignty</i>
Motto	<i>Climate change is a hoax!</i>	<i>Our industry is already cleaner than that of other nations!</i>	<i>Technological development will fix this!</i>

Table 2. Three strategic perspectives on opposing ambitious climate change policies

31 Timo Harjuniemi, “Denialisteja ja ilmastopaniikkia”, 30 October 2019, available at: <https://timoharjuniemi.wordpress.com/2019/10/30/denialisteja-ja-ilmastopaniikkia-ilmastonmuutoskeskustelu-keskitty-liaksi-tieteeseen-ja-viestii-poliittisen-mielikuvituksen-kriisista/>

field, including Ernesto Laclau as early as in the 1970s, have drawn attention to this kind of flexibility. According to Laclau, the basic populist framing of “the elites” and “the people” is applicable to a wide range of ideological content.³² Neither is authoritarian populism inherently limited to science denialism or rigid versions of climate nationalism and climate conservatism in the context of climate policy. Recent research on beliefs about climate change in the US supports this notion of flexibility, and challenges the claim that climate change is a partisan issue on which beliefs on both sides are firmly held and polarized.³³ In fact, it seems that partisans on the political right – overlapping authoritarian populism in the terminology used in this report – are much more unstable in their beliefs about climate change and policy than partisans on the left.³⁴

Let us now turn to the Nordic countries. The following chapters present empirical findings from case studies conducted in Denmark, Finland and Sweden, focusing on the two latest rounds of parliamentary elections in 2014/2015 and 2018/2019. The Danish People’s Party, the Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats became major players in their respective countries during the 2010s (Figure 1).

The reports first briefly outlines the roots of the respective parties, and then move on to their climate change positions in the context of the

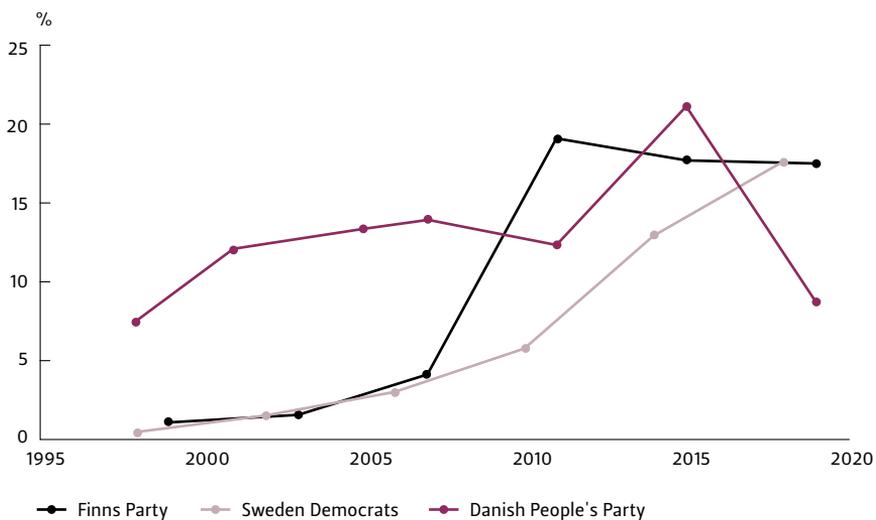


Figure 1. Support for the Danish People’s Party, the Finns Party and Sweden Democrats in Parliamentary elections, 1998–2019

32 Laclau 1977.

33 Jenkins-Smith et al. 2020.

34 Ibid.

2014/2015 parliamentary elections. In all three countries, these elections were dominated by themes other than climate change. However, climate policy became a central issue in Denmark, Finland and Sweden alike in the following parliamentary elections of 2018/2019. The debates differed in each country, as did the positions and strategies of the main populist parties. In spite of these pronounced variations, however, some common elements emerged, which are analysed through the framework described above. As climate change became a significant and politicized issue, the populist parties moved away from open science denialism to more nationalist and conservative positions, while sometimes reverting to denialist rhetoric or strategy.

1/2

2. DENMARK

2.1. BACKGROUND: THE DANISH PEOPLE'S PARTY

There has been an authoritarian type populist party in the Danish parliament since the early 1970s, when the ultra-liberal Progress Party (*Fremskridtspartiet*) won 15.9 per cent of the votes in the 1973 elections.³⁵ The party never gained much political influence, but it paved the way for the Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*, abbreviated to DF), which was founded in 1995 as a result of internal rivalry within the Progress Party. The founder of DF, Ms. Pia Kjærsgaard, was previously considered the crown princess of the Progress Party. The newly established DF positioned itself with an anti-Islamic, anti-immigration agenda, and emphasized social policies over the anti-tax focus of the Progress Party.³⁶ Unlike the Progress Party, it was quick to exclude members with Nazi sympathies, and one of its top figures, Mr. Søren Espersen, is known for his pro-Israel leaning. The party's core base comprises senior citizens and lower-middle-income voters, especially outside of the larger cities, and a considerable proportion of its members are former Social Democrats frustrated with immigration. The party has successfully campaigned using welfare-state and protectionist rhetoric, and over the years it has slowly moved towards the political mainstream.

The party has had a significant political influence on Danish politics, especially since former Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen of the Liberal Party of Denmark (*Venstre*) opened the doors to cooperation

³⁵ "Folketingsvalget den 4. december 1973", Danmarks Statistik, available at: <http://www.dst.dk/pubpdf/20206/valgi1973>; See also Andersen and Bjørklund 1990.

³⁶ See Rydgren 2004.

in 2001. DF functioned as the parliamentary backing of the Liberal-Conservative governments in the years 2001-2011 and 2015-2019.³⁷ Despite the fact that the party has continuously been growing in size and support, culminating in the 2015 elections in which it received more votes than the governing Liberal Party, it has repeatedly refused a place in government: its strategy of providing non-responsible parliamentary backing gives it more leverage to pursue its politics. The Danish People's Party has been successful in manoeuvring as a support party, having had a high impact with its relatively sparse list of key issues over the years. It has primarily focused on anti-immigration/anti-refugee policies, national sovereignty/anti-EU/anti-international conventions, welfare rights for senior citizens, care for vulnerable citizens, the public healthcare system, the police force and animal rights. The last-mentioned is a curious exception among European populist parties. To some extent, the party has succeeded in softening the liberal economic politics favoured by the governments it supports, especially in terms of tax reductions.³⁸

Before the changes in 2018, the party largely ignored the issue of climate change. The Danish Conservative Party has traditionally focused on environmental protection, distinguishing it from other right-leaning parties in the Danish parliament. The Danish People's Party, on the other hand, began to rebrand itself as a more mainstream conservative party after the change in leadership from Ms. Pia Kjaersgaard to Mr. Kristian Thulesen Dahl in 2012, but neither the environment nor concern about climate change played a significant role. Climate-science-denialist views have occasionally been aired by various party members, such as in 2007 when the climate spokesperson, Mr. Morten Messerschmidt, denounced Al Gore as a "chiseller" (*fupmager*).³⁹ However, unlike many other populist parties internationally, DF has not adopted a climate-denialist position as an active political strategy on a larger scale.

Until recently, the party's most visible contribution to the discussions on climate policy was its longstanding campaign against large inland windmills in Denmark. However, this was not a campaign against wind power as such – the Danish windmill industry is an important part of the national export market. It was rather an attempt to side with residents in

37 Denmark has been governed by minority governments since 1968. This necessitates parliamentary support that backs up the government without being a part of it. In line with an innovation introduced by the Anders Fogh Rasmussen government in 2001, the government coordinates its politics in close collaboration with the Danish People's Party, whereas previous governments had a looser and more uncoordinated connection with their parliamentary backing parties.

38 See also Bjørklund and Andersen 2004; Andersen and Bjørklund 2009.

39 "Intellectually it is a totalitarian view that arguments contradicting the CO2 theory are not welcome [...] Al Gore is a chiseler, who is damaging the climate debate. He confuses it all by his one-sided, almost religious rhetoric. He is making it into a religious phenomenon, where people are either good or bad", Mr. Messerschmidt quoted in Ritzau, 30 November 2007.

rural areas, a key part of the party's voter base, who had voiced concerns over having large mills as neighbours.

2.2. THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF 2015

Climate change did play a certain role in the 2015 parliamentary elections, albeit not a leading one. The elections brought about the fall of the Social Democratic-led coalition government that had been in power since 2011, and the return to power of former Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen and his Liberal (and later Liberal-Conservative) government, backed in parliament by the Danish People's Party.

However, these elections did not simply represent a return to the old routine. It was the first time in Danish politics that social media had been widely used in the campaigning. This could, to some extent, explain the fragmentation: more than one third of voters opted for parties that were defined as alternatives to the established ones.⁴⁰ Amongst these was a brand new party aptly named The Alternative (*Alternativet*), which campaigned on the platform of introducing a new political culture to Danish politics. It has a green-liberal agenda, and brands itself as the only real green party in parliament. The Alternative celebrated a remarkable success with 4.8 per cent of the votes.⁴¹ However, to some extent its colourful style stole the limelight from its climate policy agenda.

Climate change was not included when the party leaders met for the final discussion rounds organized by the two national broadcasting services. The news channel of the Danish People's Party, *Dansk Folkeblad*, only touched upon the topic of climate change once in the run-up to the 2015 election, in a feature article about the controversial climate scientist Bjørn Lomborg, whom the party had invited to give a lecture at Christiansborg.⁴²

The main themes in the 2015 elections were welfare and labour-market policies, as well as refugee and immigration policies. Moreover, many politicians and parties targeted the rural regions of Denmark with centre vs. periphery campaigns, and the Danish People's Party won over many voters on this account. The party received a record 21.1 per cent of the

40 "Folketingsvalg 18. Juni, 2015: Resultat hele landet", Danmarks Statistik, available at: <https://www.dst.dk/valg/Valg1487635/valgopg/valgopgHL.htm>.

41 Ibid.

42 "Klimadebat: Drop dommedag", *Dansk Folkeblad* 1 (19), February 2015, pp. 8-9. Other than this one article, *Dansk Folkeblad* did not publish anything about climate change for at least ten months before the 2015 elections.

votes in the 2015 elections, and 37 seats in parliament. The populist Danish People's Party thus ended up being the largest party on the right wing.⁴³

2.3. THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF 2019

The 2019 elections, in contrast, stood out as the first election campaign in Danish politics in which the issue of climate change dominated the discussions. This seems to have come about as a combination of the strengthening international focus on the urgency of climate change, and the unusually severe and long draught in the summer of 2018 that hit the important Danish agricultural sector hard.

Despite the long preparation time and the increasing attention to climate change, the Danish People's Party came unprepared to the climate discussions. Overall, it reacted defensively, denouncing climate activists as "idiots", but without presenting any concrete alternatives. The party tried to shift the focus back to immigration and refugee issues, but also had to realize that this space had been occupied by two new far-right parties, *Nye Borgerlige* (New Right) and *Stram Kurs* (Hard Line). The latter in particular was so extreme that it ran away with the headlines and made the Danish People's Party seem "soft" on the immigration issue.

The party started to renew its position on climate change in the summer of 2018. In a statement true to its older climate-change-denialist line party's spokesperson on transportation, Mr. Peter Dalgaard, stated: "there is no-one in the DF who believes that today's changes in the climate are created by humans."⁴⁴ A few days later, DF Mayor of Hvidovre, Mr. Mikkel Dencker, pointed out that climate change was a matter of belief:

*"Well, I cannot exclude the thesis that they [changes in the climate] are created by humans. However, if there are reliable researchers who say one thing and then some others who say something else, I do not feel completely persuaded that one explanation is truer than the other. Then it's more a question of belief, and I think that that belongs to the Church more than to politics."*⁴⁵

Mr. Dencker further explained that although humanly created climate change was a "likely explanation", the earth had previously seen changes in the climate that could not be attributed to human behaviour.

43 See also Kosiara-Pedersen 2016, pp. 870-878; Arndt 2016, p. 771.

44 Peter Dalgaard on *Radio 24syv*, 9 August 2018.

45 "DF: Menneskeskabte klimaforandringer er et spørgsmål om tro, og tro hører til i kirken", *Information*, 11 August 2018.

He added that technological development meant that sustainable energy was becoming fully competitive with fossil energy, and for this reason political action was not necessary. However, the party leadership no longer welcomed this type of climate denialism after the draught of 2018. One of its top spokespeople, parliamentary group leader (gruppeformand) Mr. Peter Skaarup, rejected both Mr. Dalgaard's and Mr. Dencker's comments:

*"I speak on behalf of the party and say what we think: Human beings impact the climate [...] we have to do something. And we must do some things that will change the everyday life of Danes in order to protect the environment and the climate. But we have to do it in communality with the Danish people and make the Danes understand what we do and why we do it and make them understand the pace at which it has to happen."*⁴⁶

Shaky climate communication and a historic defeat

Although the party leadership had sensed the need for a new line on the climate in the autumn of 2018, the party came notably unprepared to the 2019 elections. An article on the coming election campaigns in *Dansk Folkeblad* warns party members against believing rating agencies and opinion polls showing that climate change would be a major theme in the campaign debates, predicting that refugee and immigration policies would probably overshadow other concerns, as had previously been the case.⁴⁷ This unpreparedness is also clear in an interview conducted in the early stages of the EP election campaign, in which the journalist teases out answers from an unusually hesitant Mr. Skaarup:

- Can you say a little more – what does climate politics mean to the DF?

"We have a situation, where I experience that the climate changes quite quickly. What is most apparent is that the ice cap [in Greenland] is melting. That means that there is more water. We have become so many human beings that consume madly. Those things are probably connected. The task is to limit the effects of all that [...]"

- When action is required?

"I think it is a continuous process where there is already action. Where you grip something and say 'yes', now we have developed an even better windmill. Or, now we have developed a model that

⁴⁶ "Gruppeformand slår DF-linjen fast: Klimaforandringer er menneskeskabte", *Altinget*, 2 September 2018.

⁴⁷ "Nedtælling", *Dansk Folkeblad* 1(29), February 2019, p. 2.

means you can drag CO₂ out of the atmosphere and park it in trees and biomass, or whatever it is. However, we still have not found what can really make a difference. Really, a lot. [...] In addition, I think we must look for that absorption thing.”⁴⁸

As a result of this shaky communication the Danish People’s Party was depicted in the press as “the only party in Christiansborg without a climate policy”,⁴⁹ and the reluctant response proved insufficient for voters. The European Parliamentary elections gave the first indication of the party’s falling support, as it lost three of its four EP members.⁵⁰ The initial reactions of the party leaders was to criticize the climate activists. As Mr. Skaarup explained a few days before the election results were clear:

*“There is some climate hysteria in this election campaign. I am sick and tired of the fact that this campaign has ended up in green, greener and greenest. But we forget where we come from as a country, and I think this has ended up in unhealthy competition.”*⁵¹

Referring to the Danish agricultural sector, which plays a key role in the Danish economy, he argued that he would not want to see a country in which people shamed others for eating beef and drinking milk. In a similar vein, on election night, after the results were clear, party founder Ms. Pia Kjærsgaard launched the term climate fools, which she probably hoped would reshuffle the cards for the next elections, “maybe it is because of all those – what should we call them – climate fools [*klimatosser*]”.⁵² The following day the party leader Mr. Kristian Thulesen Dahl commented in a somewhat more moderate tone:

*“Climate has come in as an important issue and that has maybe been difficult for us to handle. There are many unresolved questions, which we need to think more about. I can’t give a real answer or recipe right now.”*⁵³

48 “Dansk Folkeparti vil investere meget mere i grøn forskning: ‘Vi ved ikke, hvad der virker endnu’”, *Information*, 1 April 2019.

49 “Alle på Christiansborg har en klimaplan – men ikke Dansk Folkeparti”, *Berlingske Tidende*, 28 March 2019.

50 In 2014, the DF had 26.6 per cent of the votes, going down to 10,8 per cent in 2019, see “Europa-Parlamentsvalg, Søndag d. 26. Maj, 2019. Resultat: Hele Landet”, Danmarks Statistik, available at: <https://www.dst.dk/valg/Valg1684426/valgopg/valgopghL.htm>.

51 “DF-formand er dødtæt af klimahysteri og taler landbrug op”, *TV2 Nyheder*, 14 May 2019, available at: <https://nyheder.tv2.dk/politik/2019-05-14-df-formand-er-dodtraet-af-klimahysteri-og-taler-landbrug-op>.

52 “Dansk Folkepartis bagland savner klima-fokus”, *Jylland-Posten*, 27 May 2019.

53 “Thulesen Dahl efter det ‘totale nederlag’: Vores klimapolitik har kostet vælgere”, *Altinget*, 27 May 2019.

The support base also reacted. Local chair of the party in Holstebro, Mr. Richardt Graakjær Bostrup Møller said he could see why Mr. Thuesen Dahl called the debate “hysterical” and Ms. Kjærsgaard used the term “climate fools”, but he also saw why voters might see things differently:

“I miss a general, larger focus on climate change from the party and its spokespersons on the issue area, in collaboration with the party leadership [...] We must listen to the currents in the society. Climate is a focus amongst others.”⁵⁴

Similarly, local chairperson of DF Guldborgsund, Mr. Jesper Tang Pedersen, commented:

“We should have made it clear that we are willing to cooperate on an ambitious environmental and climate policy and actively contribute with what can be done [...] Why would we be against that?”⁵⁵

However, even though party leader Mr. Thuesen Dahl saw that the party needed a climate policy, and a new message to communicate, the realization came too late for the party to change direction for the 2019 elections. In the two major party-leader discussions transmitted on the two national TV channels a few days before the elections, Mr. Thuesen Dahl only commented on climate policies when asked directly. The defensive strategy was noticeable, given that the majority of the other right-wing parties presented various ideas on how to reduce CO₂ emissions, such as green taxes, smart consumption, and energy efficiency.

Mr. Thuesen Dahl attempted to formulate a conservative line on climate policy that would address DF voters’ concerns about climate change, while also appealing to those who worried about radical changes in their daily lives. Contending that Internet streaming was equally CO₂-heavy as flying, he argued that just as no-one would ban the use of the Internet, he did not think that similar taxes making daily commodities expensive to low-income families was the answer. Likewise, he maintained that Denmark would need both the agricultural sector and North Sea oil for a considerable time to come, and that it was better to produce oil in Denmark than to leave it to what he referred to as “dictator states in the Middle East”.⁵⁶

54 “Dansk Folkepartis bagland savner klimafokus”, *Jyllands-Posten*, 27 May 2019.

55 “Dansk Folkepartis bagland savner klimafokus”, *Jyllands-Posten*, 27 May 2019.

56 “Demokratiets aften”, *DRI*, 3 June 2019, 20:00 – 21:43; “Valg 2019: Det sidste ord”, *TV2*, 4 June 2019, 20:06 – 21:48.

The Danish People's Party lost 21 of its 37 parliamentarians in the 2019 elections, and attracted only 8.7 per cent of the vote – the largest defeat in Danish parliamentary history since 1918.⁵⁷ One of the conclusions drawn by DF itself was that the party had lost votes because it had no policy or message in response to climate change. It insisted during the weeks after the national elections that the party had always had a serious climate policy, but that it had been hard to sell because it was quite similar to that of other parties. The party newspaper *Dansk Folkeblad* repeated its criticism of what it called “climate hysteria”.

*“And it was an example of climate hysteria when on June 19 the red parties agreed on a 70-per-cent reduction in Danish CO2 emissions. They refer to the Paris Agreement, but that agreement does not demand such extensive reductions.”*⁵⁸

Turning the page on climate policy

However, during the summer a younger DF politician, Mr. Morten Messerschmidt (born in 1980), returned as the party's climate spokesperson, this time with a line that differed substantially from his previous position. This move also seemed to underscore a generational pattern differentiating the older generation of DF members with no particular interest in climate issues from the younger ones, which had begun to see the need for a proactive approach. In August 2019, Mr. Messerschmidt began testing new ideas for a DF climate policy, such as making public transportation free.⁵⁹ This idea did not make it to the new DF strategy document on climate policy that was launched in September. Confronted with the statement that Mr. Dencker had previously called climate change “a matter of religious belief”, Mr. Messerschmidt responded:

*“What we have realized is that it is no longer so important politically speaking if the human contribution is one or 99 per cent. It is not so decisive because there are so many obvious advantages with the green transition that it makes sense in any case.”*⁶⁰

57 In 1918 *Venstre* went from 62.8 per cent to 29.4 per cent of votes, see: “Folketingsvalg, 1901-1939”, Aarhus Universitet Danmarkshistorien, available at: <https://danmarkshistorien.dk/leksikon-og-kilder/vis/materiale/folketingsvalg-1901-1939/>.

58 “God stemning”, *Dansk Folkeblad* 3 (23), June 2019, p. 2.

59 “Dansk Folkeparti overvejer gratis kollektiv trafik”, *TV2 ØST*, 19 August 2019.

60 “Nu fremlægger DF en klimaplan: Vi er 100 procent tilhængere af en grøn omstilling”, *TV2*, 13 September 2019.

The new 12-page climate document was entitled “A Green Denmark with the Citizen in the Centre” (*Et grønt Danmark med borgeren i centrum*). It describes climate and the environment as a matter of moral and national leadership:

“In the Danish People’s Party we first and foremost understand environmental and climate politics as a moral question. Just as we have a duty to safeguard the Denmark we inherited from the generations before us, we also have a moral duty to hand it on to the next generations in a cleaner and better shape than it was when delivered to us. Denmark must be a leading nation in green transition, and we have the best preconditions [...] The central thing is thus not if Denmark should be a green leader nation, but how. Not least, this is important to avoid repeating past mistakes.”⁶¹

In the light of what other European populist parties postulate, this is a strong statement.⁶² A core argument in the new climate policy is that Denmark should return to the line it was following in the 1990s, but it should also learn from its mistakes. These mistakes, according to The Danish People’s Party, concerned the fact that the climate policies of the 1990s hit the poorest groups the hardest:

“And we don’t want to be part of the smear campaign, which certain groups conduct towards the goods of everyday life. Green transition is not about having a bad conscience if one travels south or eats a red steak. It’s not at all about producing or consuming less, but rather to consume in a smarter way”.⁶³

Stressing that low income groups should not be hit hardest by the green transition, the action plan also states that the party is against a ban on diesel and petrol cars, arguing that electric and hydrogen-fuelled cars are still too expensive. Instead, it prefers the market to take care of the transition so that technological development would phase out fossil-driven cars on market premises. The party also proposes both a change in the registration tax that would make sustainable cars cheaper, and the inclusion of a climate charge in the production phase. There is also a proposal to make public transport fossil-free and cheaper to use,

61 Dansk Folkeparti 2019, p. 2.

62 Schaller and Carius 2019.

63 Dansk Folkeparti 2019, p. 3.

and thereby a real alternative for everyone. The party argues against taxes on meat and flights on the premise that such taxes would be socio-economically biased.⁶⁴

As far as the politically and economically important agricultural sector is concerned, the plan stresses the need to protect Danish agriculture by seeking “simple but effective measures to reduce the climate impact of the agricultural sector”. It also calls for the strengthening of research on carbon capture, including planting more trees and re-establishing eelgrass and stone reefs.⁶⁵

Presumably addressing voters who have not previously taken much interest in climate policies, the plan explains why action is necessary. It refers to the need to secure independence from other countries in terms of energy supplies, further stating that sustainable energy is to be preferred because it is cheaper.⁶⁶ Moreover, referring to the successful export of Danish windmills, it also states that the green transition can “create good export opportunities, just as both the environment and our society benefit from new technologies”.⁶⁷ The plan thus emphasizes the co-benefits of climate policies with a nationalist twist.

The action plan also refers to the party’s aim that Denmark will become climate-neutral in 2050, stressing that the party is “very open to binding partial aims before that”.⁶⁸ However, the emphasis is still on continued economic growth in terms of considering new geopolitical changes and challenges from China and India, as well as facing new challenges in its security policy. These led the party to conclude that growth and sustainability should go hand in hand: “It is thus essential, that the green transition does not hinder our economic and technological growth but sustains and enhances it”.⁶⁹

Environmental party dynamics

To understand the significance of the Danish People’s Party’s climate plan, including the indirect reference to the heyday of the Social-Democratic-led government in the 1990s, one has to know something about the previous relations between the party and the Social Democrats. The environment was the top priority in the Social Democratic governments of Mr. Poul Nyrup Rasmussen in 1993–2001. Mr. Rasmussen appointed

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid, p. 2.

67 Ibid, p. 2. See also “Climate” on the DF homepage, available at: <https://danskfolkeparti.dk/politik/klimapolitik/>.

68 Ibid, p. 3.

69 Ibid, p. 2.

his rival, Mr. Svend Auken, Minister of the Environment – a position Mr. Auken embraced enthusiastically, branding Denmark as a world-leading green nation. This policy line was revoked in the 2000s, when Mr. Anders Fogh Rasmussen (Liberals) formed a government in 2001. Reflecting the break with the political heritage of the former Social Democratic government, and with Danish political culture in general, the Fogh Rasmussen government of 2001 de-emphasized the environment, with Danish People's Party's backing. During this period the government made massive cuts to the environmental administration, which continued under Mr. Fogh's successor Mr. Løkke Rasmussen.

The tense relations between the Danish People's Party and the Social Democrats culminated when former Prime Minister Nyrup Rasmussen called out DF as “extremists” in an often-cited speech in Parliament: “You will never become house-trained!” (*Stuerene, det bliver I aldrig!*).⁷⁰ According to DF leader Ms. Pia Kjaersgaard, this criticism inspired her to seek more parliamentary power.⁷¹

A novelty in the 2019 elections was the more relaxed and accommodating tone in communications between the Social Democrats and DF. Despite the fact that DF supported the right-wing Løkke Rasmussen government, it also made it clear that it would be open to future collaboration should Social Democrat Ms. Mette Frederiksen win, which she did. DF's climate action plan is thus another example of this new hesitant, yet conciliatory relationship between the two parties: the plan sets out its position *vis-à-vis* the new Social Democratic government at a time when the two parties have begun to show more and more similarities on a number of key political issues.

2.4. DISCUSSION

Overall, the new climate policy aims to incorporate many of the sentiments expressed by top DF politicians after the summer of 2018, and marks a clear break from former climate change denialism. In part it is a response to a changing political agenda, which is typical of populist parties concerned with trending topics. However, it also points to a generation gap within the party. Whereas the party leadership came unprepared to the elections, before the campaigning even started the leader of the DF youth organization, Mr. Chris Bjerknæs (born in 1989) stated that the climate crisis was one of the biggest challenges of his generation:

70 Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, Opening Speech of the Danish Parliament, October 1999, available at: http://www.stm.dk/_p_7628.html.

71 Meier 2013.

“We think it [climate] is high on the agenda. We consider migration and climate as the two large challenges of our generation. None of them are solely Danish problems nor European for that matter. It is a global challenge, which takes global solutions. Migration also happens because of climate changes.”⁷²

The link between migration and climate challenges was something the party did not discuss very much at that time. Mr. Bjerknæs’ line certainly resonates with Mr. Skaarup’s thinking, who explained in 2018 that it was important to get all Danes on board in terms of the green transition:

“And then we should stop individualizing guilt and being moralistic towards one another and instead get everybody on board [...] This has to be something that everybody is part of because they want to be and because they realize that it makes sense to hand on the earth to future generations in a better shape than we found it. Not because they feel forced into it.”⁷³

Mr. Bjerknæs also stated that he ate organic food – which is interesting given that segments of the party’s voters are outspoken anti-organic consumers – that he bought locally produced food, commuted by bicycle, and tried to stay in Denmark when on vacation.

Whereas the Danish People’s Party has moved from a largely disinterested, sometimes science-denialist position towards climate conservatism, The New Right (*Nye Borgerlige*), a newcomer to the Danish parliament with four seats in 2019, has assumed a sharp climate-nationalist stance. It positions itself to the right of both the former Danish right-wing government and the Danish People’s Party – reflecting in some sense how DF previously positioned itself in opposition to “the system” and “politicians”. However, whereas DF has always campaigned on a platform of anti-elitist populism, appealing to lower-income voters, the New Right is explicitly elitist, with a stronghold in the affluent regions north of Copenhagen.

In light of the most recent moves towards more binding and ambitious climate goals endorsed by all other parties in the Danish parliament, the New Right has taken on an outspoken climate policy nationalist position, sometimes bordering on climate science denialism. The party tends not to deny that climate change takes place, but it does sometimes dispute the degree to which human beings contribute to it. The New Right’s core argument is that the Danish contribution to CO₂ emissions on a global

72 “DFU: Forskning er den vigtigste klimasag”, *Dansk Fjernvarme*, 21 February 2019.

73 Ibid.

scale is miniscule and that ambitious climate goals are nonsensical.⁷⁴ In addition, in a climate conservative vein, the party has argued that growth and wealth in Denmark are prerequisites for finding technological and scientific solutions to climate change.⁷⁵ It accuses all other Danish parties of being “climate populists” and presents its climate politics as “climate realism”, which it defines as a non-populist, rationalist, and responsible stance.⁷⁶ Its position outside consensus is used strategically to capture voters who are frustrated with the more direct consequences of climate policies that include lifestyle changes. This target group probably includes parts of the DF voter base.

To summarize recent developments, the new climate plan of the Danish People’s Party is one indication among many that the party is moving away from its former single-issue, authoritarian populist roots and has begun acting more like an established conservative party. However, staying true to its populist heritage, its position on climate change might shift again in the future – and the challenge from the New Right might come to play a part in this.

74 For example, “Derfor tilslutter Nye Borgerlige sig ikke en klimalov med et reduktionsmål på 70 %”, *Peters blog*, available at: <https://nyeborgerlige.dk/derfor-tilslutter-nye-borgerlige-sig-ikke-en-klimalov-med-et-reduktionsmaal-paa-70/>

75 See the New Right homepage, available at: <https://nyeborgerlige.dk/politik/klimapolitik/>.

76 *Ibid.*

/ 3

3. FINLAND

3.1. BACKGROUND: THE FINNS PARTY

Finland has a remarkable tradition of rural populism. The Finnish Rural Party (SMP), founded in 1959, had two peaks in popularity in parliamentary elections, in 1970 (10.5 per cent) and 1983 (9.7 per cent), and made it to the government coalition on the latter.⁷⁷ This could be considered a rarity in European party politics. The rise in SMP's fortunes was characterized by rapid urbanization and structural change in Finnish society and the economy. The former agrarian society quickly became much more urban, liberal and industrial, and the mass media played a crucial role in the public debates. The charismatic SMP leader, Mr. Veikko Vennamo, addressed classical populist themes, speaking on behalf of "the forgotten people", victims of urbanization and especially small-scale farmers.⁷⁸ The target was, naturally, the corrupt political and economic elite of the cities.

The Finns Party, founded in 1995, is a direct descendent of the Rural Party, and linked its early legitimacy to carrying the torch in defence of the "small people" of the countryside. The party founder and long-time Chair (1997–2017), Mr. Timo Soini, was a former Vice-Chair and Party Secretary (1992–1995) of the Rural Party. The Finns Party remained marginal for the first 15 years, before establishing itself as a major contender in the 2011 parliamentary elections, with a landslide victory and a 19.1-per-cent share of the votes.⁷⁹ Its support remained stable in the

⁷⁷ For a historical overview of the SMP, see e.g. Virtanen 2018.

⁷⁸ Ylä-Anttila 2017, p. 25.

⁷⁹ "Suomen Keskusta vaalien voittaja eduskuntavaaleissa 2015", Statistics Finland, 30 April 2015, available at: https://www.stat.fi/til/evaa/2015/evaa_2015_2015-04-30_tie_001_fi.html

following parliamentary elections, at 17.7 and 17.5 per cent in 2015 and 2019, respectively.⁸⁰ However, a notable change in its profile and policy-making has occurred during the last ten years: the old rural-populist ethos of the Party, as well as its leftist welfare leanings, have gradually been replaced with a more vocally nationalist, anti-immigration agenda. As several analysts have noted, over the years the Finns Party has joined the “mainstream” of European, modern, right-wing populist parties with immigration as the number-one theme.⁸¹

It is argued in a recent study that the core of the Finns Party’s ideology is “that of populism; a defence of the common people against the corrupt elite”. This core has been complemented with both (i) a leftist defence of the underprivileged against the policies of the elite and (ii) a nationalist defence of the sovereignty and unity of the Finnish people against immigration and the EU.⁸² The latter framing was growing in significance during the timespan of the study, from 2007 to 2012. The pinnacle of this continuous evolution was the election of Mr. Jussi Halla-aho, the most prominent anti-immigration figurehead in Finnish politics, as the Party’s Chairman in June 2017. The strong anti-immigrant voices in the party were not only tolerated, as was the case in Mr. Soini’s era, they were now being heard among the new party elite and were controlling its policymaking.

Whereas Mr. Soini’s political roots lie in the tradition of Finnish rural populism, Mr. Halla-aho is a quintessentially contemporary authoritarian populist. A Helsinki-based intellectual with a PhD in linguistics, he was an Internet star before he became involved in party politics. He achieved national recognition via his anti-immigration blog *Scripta* (“Writings from the sinking West”). The blog inspired an online movement and a lively discussion forum (*Hommaforum*) that remains the main Finnish anti-immigration platform.

3.2. THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF 2015

Between 2011 and 2015 the Finnish political landscape was recovering from the landslide victory of the Finns Party in the 2011 elections. A government was formed without the Finns Party, mainly due to differences concerning EU politics, and the broad six-party coalition government had

80 Ibid.

81 See e.g. Ylä-Anttila 2017.

82 Ylä-Anttila and Ylä-Anttila 2015.

trouble in functioning. Both main parties in the government, the Coalition Party and the Social Democrats, changed their leadership.⁸³

Among the major themes in the elections were the sloppy recovery of the Finnish economy and the need for structural and regional changes in the healthcare and social-security system. According to a big-data study, economic themes dominated both journalistic media discussion and Facebook campaigns.⁸⁴ Another study analysed articles on the elections published in spring 2015 by the major media outlets Helsingin Sanomat (144 articles) and the Finnish News Agency (479 articles). Only eight (8) had an environmental focus.⁸⁵ Similarly, the study concluded that all main parties campaigned on economic issues.⁸⁶ Each of them promised export-led growth and new jobs, but they differed in their approaches to public spending and debt. Similarly, an extensive poll conducted in March 2015 implied that climate change was not a major factor for a large majority of voters in their selection of a candidate in the elections.⁸⁷

Neither climate change nor climate policy featured independently in the election material or the programmes of the Finns Party in the 2015 parliamentary elections. The party's five main themes were outlined under bullet points in a one-page manifesto.⁸⁸ Climate policy is referred to under theme four, "Enhancing competitiveness and entrepreneurship", with two bullet points, "a reverse in climate and energy policy" and "no to green taxes that undermine competitiveness". Climate change is also referred to in the party's economic programme on page four, but even in this context, climate policy is not mentioned in the summary or bullet points on the front page.⁸⁹

Points relevant to climate policy in the economic programme concerned the competitiveness of the export sector, which should be secured by lowering taxation on energy. Furthermore, the EU's 2030 climate targets could, in the worst-case scenario, cost "billions to Finnish industries and consumers", and Finland should not agree to any EU targets without fair burden sharing.⁹⁰ The economic programme also stated that taxation and subsidies should encourage the use of domestic energy sources

83 Hämäläinen 2016.

84 Villi and Turpeinen 2016.

85 Railo and Ruohonen, 2016, p. 79.

86 Ibid, p. 85-87.

87 Finnish Ministry of Environment 2015, p. 2.

88 Perussuomalaiset 2015a.

89 Perussuomalaiset 2015b.

90 Ibid.

such as peat and woodchips, and that promoting non-centralized energy production would potentially create “tens of thousands of jobs”.⁹¹

Similarly, a Google search specifying “The Finns Party” and “climate change” for 2015 yielded virtually no results: neither the party nor its leading politicians were active on climate change issues. One rare news item can be found in the list of budget cuts to public spending that Party Chairman Mr. Soini published in March 2015.⁹² It included cutting unspecified green taxes, getting rid of the tax on peat and aiming to disengage Finland from the EU’s climate and energy targets.

3.3. THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF 2019

In December 2018, in the run-up to Finland’s EU presidency as well as the 2019 parliamentary elections, eight Finnish parties announced their common climate change policy objectives.⁹³ The Finns party was the only party represented in Parliament that did not sign up to this common position. The climate objectives endorsed by the other parties included limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees, achieving carbon neutrality in the EU by 2050, and a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions to at least 55 per cent of 1990 levels by 2030. On the national level, Finland would “reach a situation where our greenhouse gas emissions are clearly negative in the 2040s”.⁹⁴ The new near-consensus, among all parties except the Finns party, was a notable new development in Finnish climate-related policymaking. During the 2010s, Finland had generally been critical about the EU’s ambitious climate policy targets and measures by the EU.⁹⁵

The negotiations among the Finnish parties, led by then Prime Minister Mr. Juha Sipilä (Center Party), lasted for one month. The Finns party left the negotiations during the final week, claiming that the other parties were “setting ambitious goals without a step-wise approach or price tags for policies”.⁹⁶ Target-setting was described by the Finns Party as “a politically easy move”, which avoided discussion on the “huge price tag” that climate policies would entail.⁹⁷ The main counter-argument,

91 Ibid.

92 “Perussuomalaiset julkaisi leikkauslistan”, *Kauppalehti*, 9 March 2015.

93 “Eight parties in Parliament decide on common climate policy goals”, Finland’s Government Communications Department, 20 December 2018.

94 Ibid.

95 Finland had, for example, been hesitant to increase the ambition of 2020 targets, or to tighten the Emissions Trading System (ETS).

96 “Perussuomalaiset lähtevät yhteisistä ilmastoneuvotteluista: ‘Tavoitteet ovat utopistisia eikä kukaan puhu maksajista’”, *Suomen Uutiset*, 17 December 2018.

97 Ibid.

as articulated by the representative of the working group and current vice-chair of the party Ms. Riikka Purra, was a climate nationalist one: the Finnish targets would be unfair compared to the efforts of other EU countries, including Germany, Romania, Bulgaria and Poland, and they would lead to carbon leakage in third countries. If achieved, they would result in “unemployment in Finland, more production in China, and an increase in total emissions”.⁹⁸

The Finns Party becomes the climate policy opposition

The 2019 parliamentary elections were frequently characterized as the first “climate elections” in Finland.⁹⁹ As one prominent expert observed, the climate theme was perhaps not as dominant as economic recovery was in 2015, but it was certainly a major theme in the Finnish elections.¹⁰⁰ Helsingin Sanomat and The Finnish Broadcasting Company, the leading journalistic media, organized climate change themed debates among the parties. The discussion was inspired by both the IPCC report on a 1.5-degree target published in October 2018, as well as the everyday politics concerning the climate such as including youth climate activism and Greta Thunberg, meat consumption and public dietary choices, as well as transportation and energy politics.

The manifesto of the Finns Party for the 2019 parliamentary elections, entitled “Vote Finland Back”, echoes the heightened public focus on climate change.¹⁰¹ The short document has two main themes. The first one is that the needs of Finnish people should be prioritized, not those of immigrants, because the Finnish people “must always come first and foremost in [government’s] policies and actions”. The second theme focuses on enhancing the competitiveness of Finnish industries. Here, climate and energy policies emerge as the primary concern: climate policies should be relaxed in order to enhance industrial competitiveness. The main argument follows climate nationalism:

“For the Finns Party, the existence of an industrial chimney in Finland is actually a positive control on negative climate change effects, as that chimney will be ‘cleaner’ than if the same chimney is forced to be ‘transferred’ abroad.”¹⁰²

98 “‘Poliittisesti helppoa, posketon hintalappu’ – Perussuomalaiset lähti kävelemään puolueiden ilmastoneuvotteluista”, *Uusi Suomi*, 17 December 2018.

99 Tiihonen and Vadén 2019.

100 “Tekivätkö kampanjat eduskuntavaaleista ilmastovaalit vai jotkin muut? Tutkijat arvioivat, mitä teemoja puolueet korostivat”, *Helsingin Sanomat*, 12 April 2019.

101 The Finns Party 2019a.

102 Ibid.

The key message in the manifesto for the next parliamentary election term is “no additional costs for industry or the consumer”.¹⁰³ Furthermore, energy taxes for the industry should be lowered to the minimum allowed under the EU Energy Taxation Directive. Energy-related taxes should be lowered to the minimum for private persons as well, as “ordinary people” should not face such costs. Finland’s special circumstances are also mentioned: as we are a Northern country heating requires a lot of energy, and distances are long given the small population and the large area.¹⁰⁴ Mr. Jani Niikko, current Chair of the Foreign Affairs Parliamentary Committee, outlined the Finns Party position on transportation during an electoral debate:

*“All the other parties are for biofuels, electric cars, natural gas fuelled cars, and now also road tolls. People need to go to work and take their kids to day care. We do not want to punish private car driving, driving and mobility cannot only be for the chosen few.”*¹⁰⁵

In the debate televised by *Helsingin Sanomat*, Mr. Niikko followed the main arguments of the party position papers. Finland’s climate actions were framed as useless, even damaging, and expensive for “ordinary people”.

The Finns Party published its first ever party programme for energy and the environment in January 2019. The programme is not strictly anti-environmental, and highlights the beauty and value of Finnish nature, especially the forests and clean waters. However, the section on energy and climate is strongly critical of climate change policies. Any such policy should be based on “technical and economic realism”, not “blind idealism and moralism” as is currently the case.¹⁰⁶ In line with the climate policy conservative argument, the emphasis in all climate policies should be on the economic impacts throughout the production chain, and “ineffective solutions should not be pursued on ideological grounds”.

The position of the Finns Party underscores and reiterates the risks – and claims of actual adverse effects – of climate policies. Climate policies are based on idealism rather than realism, they are expensive, the costs hit “the people” or “ordinary Finns”, and harm Finnish competitiveness. A theme that is rarely mentioned, on the other hand, is climate change

103 Ibid.

104 Perussuomalaiset 2019, p. 6.

105 “Puolueet ottivat yhteen HS:n ilmastotentissä”, *Helsingin Sanomat*, 3 April 2019.

106 Perussuomalaiset 2019.

impacts. The chosen framing of the Finns party acknowledges climate change as a phenomenon that is happening but has virtually no impact in Finland or Europe: it is not portrayed as a real political problem, or a threat to the economy and well-being of citizens.

The main substantive arguments against climate change policies are in line with climate nationalism – they concern Finland’s role in the international realm. First, climate policies cause carbon leakage and relocate industries to deregulated, polluting countries. Second, Finland has been treated unfairly in EU climate policymaking.

Carbon leakage and international justice

Finns Party documents, news items in *Suomen Uutiset*, the party’s press releases, and MPs’ argumentation in the debates frequently criticize regulatory climate change policies from a nationalist perspective. The critique is typically based on the assumption that the regulatory apparatus causes industrial production to move away from Finland, to pollution havens with less regulation. According to the argument, industrial relocation renders climate policy in Finland meaningless, or harmful, as total emissions would increase.

When the Finns Party broke away from negotiations aimed at establishing common climate targets among Finnish political parties in late 2018, their representative declared:

*“Finnish ambition will turn to suicide if emission reductions are not dependent on what others are doing, in Europe or elsewhere”.*¹⁰⁷

According to the party, unilateral target setting leads to the “outsourcing of the last Finnish industries, unemployment, more Chinese production and more emissions”. Its chief negotiator also identified China as the main concern, pointing out that in global climate politics, “China is treated like a developing country, although its economy is the world’s biggest”.¹⁰⁸ The more ambitious climate policy targets for Finland proposed by other parties become an issue of national and international injustice. As Mr. Niikko stated in a debate on climate policy:

“Who promises most is the greatest hero. Everything is to be banned, flying, peat, coal. This hurts the ordinary consumer most, but also businesses, industry and agriculture. The Finns Party

107 “Perussuomalaiset lähtevät yhteisistä ilmastoneuvotteluista: ‘Tavoitteet ovat utopistisia eikä kukaan puhu maksajista’”, *Suomen Uutiset*, 17 December 2018.

108 Ibid.

stands for a rational policy that invests in innovation in renewable energies but does not want a timetable that is only for Finland. Finnish citizens and businesses pay the bill, while the rest of Europe and the world free-ride."¹⁰⁹

The Finns Party's programme for energy and environment emphasizes the insignificance of Finnish emissions in the big picture, pointing out that a sense of proportion should prevail: Finland accounts for only "about 0.1 per cent of global CO₂ emissions".¹¹⁰ Climate change is described as a systemic problem that primarily requires "structural changes in energy production and world trade". The biggest causes of emissions on the global level, accordingly, include the population explosion, the rapid growth in the consumption of fossil fuels in developing countries, and the relocation of industrial production to these fossil fuel intensive developing countries, as discussed above. The programme also questions the effectiveness of "international climate agreements" and criticizes the demands they impose.¹¹¹ They are being negotiated and implemented inconsistently: where investment in abatement would be relatively cheap (in developing countries) only minimal cuts are suggested, but where it is relatively expensive (in developed countries), maximal cuts are advocated.

The conclusion on climate policy and the response to climate change in Finland is that "up to now, Finland has done more than its fair share".¹¹² The CO₂ emissions per capita are on par with the European average, although Finland needs more heating than most European countries and travelling distances are long. Therefore, securing the competitiveness of Finnish industry is the main concern and the main political message:

*"Ensuring Finland's competitiveness by any means available is good climate and environmental policy – as long as we keep up the low emissions of Finnish energy production in international comparisons."*¹¹³

If Finland were to implement more ambitious climate policies it might be good for the climate statistics, "that would give a short-sighted

109 Mr. Niikko quoted in a climate debate by *Helsingin Sanomat*, available at: <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-200006057432.html>

110 Perussuomalaiset 2019.

111 Ibid.

112 Ibid.

113 Ibid.

reformer a good conscience”, but on the global scale, “emissions will stay the same or get worse due to carbon leakage.”¹¹⁴

The programme further points out that Finland has energy intensive export-industries, including pulp, metallurgy and paper, which serve the consumption needs of other countries. This point strengthens the narrative of the unfair treatment of Finland. The programme criticizes the fact that Finland’s exports contribute to Finnish emission figures but no mention is made of emissions that are embedded in Finnish imports.

The EU’s flawed and unfair climate policy

The second recurrent theme in the Finns Party material and debate is that the EU climate policy treats Finland in an unfair manner. This is in line with the party’s traditional EU-critical or even anti-EU stance, which has been an important way for the Finns Party to profile itself among the major parties.

According to the Finns Party programme for energy and the environment, Finland has “one of the heaviest loads, while many polluting countries are free-riding” in EU effort-sharing.¹¹⁵ Other Finnish parties have been guilty of softness and failing to stand up for Finnish interests, and as a result, Finland has been “fawning” in the EU meetings, bringing home climate policies that are expensive for the Finnish taxpayer.¹¹⁶ This theme was also apparent when the party representatives walked away from the interparty negotiations for a common position in 2018: as its negotiator stated: “Finland seems to be willing to let Germany, Romania, Bulgaria and Poland continue coal production.”¹¹⁷

According to the party material concerning the 2019 EU elections, EU countries with the cleanest production, Finland included, were currently subsidizing the biggest polluters.¹¹⁸ These countries should carry the responsibility first and foremost, and the EU’s Structural and Investment Funds should be channelled to those who are willing to clean up their act. Akin to the argumentation on the national level, the EU should be careful in its target setting, and pursue a “sensible” climate policy:

“We should be critical of the targets and timetables approach (‘let’s give up all fossil fuels by 2040’) [...] the target setting should put

114 Ibid.

115 Ibid.

116 Ibid.

117 “Perussuomalaiset lähtevät yhteisistä ilmastoneuvotteluista: Tavoitteet ovat utopistisia eikä kukaan puhu maksajista”, *Suomen Uutiset*, 17 December 2018.

118 The Finns Party 2019.

more emphasis on what other countries [outside the EU] promise and actually implement.”¹¹⁹

The party’s EU electoral manifesto from 2019 also calls for “a completely new way of thinking” to avoid the harmful effects of “globalization and the China syndrome”.¹²⁰ The suggested initiative is an EU-level carbon tax on imported goods:

“This globalization and free movement of goods must be stopped; this can be done by imposing a ‘climate tax’ on imported goods in general, and an additional tax on products from the worst polluters.”¹²¹

The programme also pointed out that the Finns Party has been critical of the EU emissions trading system from the start. As an alternative, it proposes “a sectoral mechanism with a specific emissions system”, in which polluting facilities would pay a fee if they polluted above the agreed benchmark.¹²²

“Climate panic” and media critique

The Finns Party’s programmes and other electoral material do not engage in science denialism on the level of questioning the scientific basis of climate change, or highlighting uncertainties related to scientific inquiry. Chairman Halla-aho has stated several times that “climate change is real”.¹²³ The arguments in the climate denialist’s toolbox – which are widely accessible in the international networks of authoritarian populists – are rarely explicitly applied by the party leadership. This has also been noted internationally. A recent report by Adelphi on the comparative positions of European right-wing populist parties, for example, places The Finns Party among the few populist parties in Europe that are “affirmative” about climate change.¹²⁴

In 2019, the party also published a climate change related book, an edited volume via think-tank *Suomen Perusta*, which it founded and finances. One of the authors and editors is the current Party Secretary Mr. Simo Grönroos. The publication, entitled “The Handbook of the

119 Ibid.

120 Ibid.

121 Ibid.

122 Ibid.

123 “Halla-aho peräänkuuluttaa suhteellisuudentajua ilmastohysteriaan: Vaikka suomalaiset lakkaisivat hengittämästä, sillä ei ole vaikutusta ilmastonmuutokseen”, *Suomen Uutiset*, 29 March 2019.

124 Schaller and Carius 2019.

Environmental Realist”, reinforces the party line of acknowledging climate change, but also being sharply critical of the most ambitious policy initiatives.¹²⁵ The early chapters introduce the theme of climate change. It is not denied as a phenomenon – and even some of the negative impacts of climate change are discussed. Several of the following chapters criticize the perceived hypocrisy and scaremongering of the Green movement, and the different forms of “climate panic” in Finnish society. The contribution of Mr. Matias Turkkila, editor in chief of *Suomen Uutiset*, also introduces conspiratorial elements in his criticism of the media. He claims that the mainstream media have lost status due to the increasingly strong presence of the Internet and social media, and are now invoking climate panic – and this is no coincidence. Climate alarmism allows mainstream media organizations to reclaim their lost authority “like a shaman in an ancient Indian village” because they know more about the higher powers than the rest of us.¹²⁶

The Party newspaper, *Suomen Uutiset*, frequently publishes news on climate change. In 2019, until mid-November, a total of 84 original news items were tagged with “climate policy” as a key word.¹²⁷ A further 19 were identified from a “climate change” tag.¹²⁸ This was in stark contrast to the situation in 2015 when the previous parliamentary elections were held. According to the online archives of *Suomen Uutiset*, only two news items tagged “climate policy” were published.

The typical framing in the newspaper’s climate policy news in 2019 was that the mainstream media and other parties were “panicking” or “hysterical”, there was a lot of “climate fuss” (“vouhotus”) that was not based on rationalism or reason. Climate panic and climate anxiety were being used by other parties and the media to promote a left-green worldview. Several articles are about Greta Thunberg, the young Swedish climate activist, with multiple unflattering pictures. Ms. Thunberg is described as a creation of the liberal mainstream media, and “a human shield for climate activists”.¹²⁹ Another recurring theme is that “climate sceptics” are being silenced in the debate. The mainstream media does not give these “sceptics” a platform, but promote the views of alarmists among the scientists. According to the updated and applied populist narrative, climate change is being used as a political tool by the media and other parties (“the elite”) to induce panic (among “the people”).

125 Hamilo and Grönroos 2019.

126 Turkkila 2019, p. 125.

127 *Suomen Uutiset* web archives, available at: <https://www.suomenuutiset.fi/tagi/ilmastopolitiikka/>

128 *Suomen Uutiset* web archives, available at: <https://www.suomenuutiset.fi/tagi/ilmastonmuutos/>

129 “Tutkija Hankamäki: Greta Thunberg on ilmastosodan ihmiskilpi”, *Suomen Uutiset*, 13 November 2019.

In January 2020, after elaborating on the party's position on climate change in a Finns Party briefing, Halla-aho answered questions on whether the party had recently become more climate friendly. He elaborated on what he saw as a coherent and continuous policy line:

*“We repeated in all the debates before the elections [of 2019] that we do not deny that the climate is warming and that it is likely that humans are the cause”.*¹³⁰

The official line is akin to climate nationalism, with a pronounced industrial twist. However, climate denialism is also tolerated within the party ranks – denialism is still flirted with by high-profile parliamentarians. Even party leader Mr. Halla-aho phrases in the above quotation that it is “likely” that climate change is caused by human activity. Early in 2020, he commented on Australian forest fires:

*“The forest fires are not due to climate change. Canada, for example, is no hotter than Finland [...]. Climate fuss is dangerous to the economy, to the people and to nature alike.”*¹³¹

During the most recent election campaign, and thereafter, several prominent and visible Finns Party figures have engaged in denialist messaging – contrary to the party strategy as that may be. Member of the European Parliament Mr. Teuvo Hakkarainen stated in the summer of 2019 that “it is our heavenly Father who controls the weather”.¹³² Mr. Mauri Peltokangas, a new Member of Parliament, observed immediately after the elections that “climate change is a fact, but in which direction it is changing – that no human can know”.¹³³

3.4. DISCUSSION

The Finns Party did not actively campaign on climate change issues in the 2015 elections. This was in line with the general campaigning in these elections, given that the dominant theme was the recovery of the Finnish

130 “Jussi Halla-aho kiistää perussuomalaisten täyskäännöksen ilmastonmuutoksessa: ‘Suhteellisuudentaju unohtuu’”, *Uusi Suomi*, 25 January 2020.

131 Jussi Halla-aho, Facebook update, 8.1.2020.

132 “Teuvo Hakkarainen toi ikkunalleen Mannerheim-patsaan, Silvia Modig kyselee tyhmiä – Seurasimme kahden parlamentaarikon ensiaskelia Brysselissä”, *Yle Uutiset*, 10 August 2019.

133 “Yhdet vaalit, kaksi puolta: Mauri Peltokangas tuli tunnetuksi maahanmuuttokriittisistä videoistaan ja on nyt huolissaan ilmastokeskustelusta”, *Helsingin Sanomat*, 16 April 2019.

economy and climate change was not high on the agenda. The Finns Party was still led by its old rural-populist wing at the time. On the other hand, the parliamentary elections of 2019 were widely considered the first climate elections in Finland. Although less radical in their climate change stance than the denialist UKIP in Britain, the Lega in Italy, and the AfD in Germany, The Finns Party, now under the leadership of Halla-aho, made opposing climate policies a political priority.¹³⁴ Climate policy was a new way to break the perceived elite consensus, similarly as had been the case with immigration policy.

Over the years the Finns Party has targeted the Green Party as its main ideological opponent. This has been visible in its political campaigning, featuring a caricature of an alienated, multiculturalist city-dwelling liberal, filed under the term “green left” (*vihervasemmisto*).¹³⁵ According to Mr. Halla-aho:

“The Finns Party is the only counterforce to the liberal cluster, in which the Greens are setting the agenda and have the upper hand over others.”¹³⁶

Science denialism is not present in the party’s official party documents, nor does it typically feature in the recent statements of its current leader Mr. Halla-aho. The official party communications in 2019 and beyond acknowledge that climate change is happening and that it is caused by human activity. However, statements by MPs, articles in the party’s newspaper, and seminars it hosts also flirt with a harder line. Here, climate science is questioned and denied, and the mainstream media are blamed for silencing the debate, unreasonably favouring “alarmist” scientists and shutting out “critics”.

Almost 45 per cent of respondents to a poll conducted by Helsingin Sanomat in September 2019 agreed that the impacts of climate change were being exaggerated in public debates.¹³⁷ Among the Finns Party supporters the figure was 85 per cent. It seems that as climate change has moved to the top of the political agenda, there has been a backlash among the Finnish public. It is likely that the Finns Party sees a political opening

134 “Perussuomalaisten kannatus nousi taas roimasti – näin tutkijat ja puolue itse kommentoivat ennätysmäistä suosiota”, *Helsingin Sanomat*, 28 November 2019.

135 There are some examples in the party’s Media and Culture programme. See also “Tällainen on perussuomalaisten media- ja kulttuuriohjelma: Maalittamista ei saa kieltää, Ylen tv-ohjelmat maksukortin taakse – ja jotain rajaa vihervasemmistolaiseen kakkataiteeseen”, *Iltalehti*, 30 January 2020.

136 “Jussi Halla-aho: ‘Vihreillä on suvereeni yliote’ – Ennustaa paniikkireaktioita hallituksessa”, *Uusi Suomi*, 30 July 2019.

137 “HS:n kysely: Lähes puolet suomalaisista epäilee ilmastopuheita”, *Helsingin Sanomat*, 25 September 2019.

here and is set on becoming a prominent discussant on climate policy, presenting its nationalist alternative.

The current official party line is outspoken climate nationalism: climate change is real, and caused by human activity, and a serious problem, but it does not require ambitious policymaking or regulation *in Finland*. Party communications contain virtually no mentions of the adverse impacts of climate change itself, but frequently emphasize the adverse effects of ambitious climate policies. The Finns Party advocates environmental deregulation and favours the promotion of industrial competitiveness. According to the party line, moreover, the implementation of climate policy in Finland and the EU would most likely be detrimental because of carbon and industrial leakage to third countries. The main rationale for opposing climate policy are international: the relatively small amount of Finnish CO₂ emissions, the perceived free-riding of China and the developing countries, and unfair burden sharing in the EU. The economic burden on the ordinary citizen is also frequently cited.

The Finns Party argumentation on carbon and industrial leakage makes no reference to the numerous studies on the topic, or to specific cases. It remains a general common-sense-based. The matter has been on the EU's climate-policy agenda for decades, and little evidence of carbon leakage has been found in empirical studies – at least as defined in the Emissions Trading System (ETS) Directive as production relocation due to the ETS.¹³⁸ Changes in EU industrial sectors have been driven by other forces, including global demand changes and input price differences. The question about future carbon leakage remains open, however, especially if the EU were ambitiously to update its 2030 targets.

138 For a discussion on ETS and the risks of carbon leakage, see European Commission, Commission Staff Working Document, 15 February 2019, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/10102/2019/EN/SWD-2019-22-F1-EN-MAIN-PART-1.PDF>

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4. SWEDEN

4.1. BACKGROUND: THE SWEDISH DEMOCRATS

Whilst the other major Nordic populist parties can be traced back at least to the 1970s, Sweden did not have an authoritarian populist party in parliament until 2010.¹³⁹ With the partial exception of the 1991 election, when the newly formed *New Democracy* garnered 6.7 per cent of the vote, no Swedish populist party had thus far come close to winning a parliamentary seat.¹⁴⁰

The Sweden Democrats (SD) was founded as a political party in 1988, uniting voices from existing nationalist and racist movements.¹⁴¹ Unlike in the other Nordic countries, the founders had ties to openly racist platforms: some of them had a history in the Nazi Nordic National Party, and several of the members of the executive committee were linked to the neo-Nazi movement between 1989 and 1995. The SD has since then undergone a significant political transformation and has reformed its ideology, excluding members with open Nazi sympathies, rejecting ideals of racial purity and dismissing support for the death penalty, for example.¹⁴² This strategy has been successful. The party has gained support over the years, and has been able to influence the political debate on several topics, most obviously immigration.

¹³⁹ Widfeldt 2018.

¹⁴⁰ Rydgren and van der Meiden 2019.

¹⁴¹ "Sverigedemokraterna – historia och ideologi", *Dagens Nyheter*, 26 November 2011.

¹⁴² Towns et al. 2014.

The SD received only 1.4 per cent of the votes in the 2002 election, but this more than doubled to 2.9 per cent in 2006. It won seats in parliament for the first time in 2010, when it received 5.7 per cent of the vote following a campaign based primarily on restricting immigration.¹⁴³ Four years later, it became Sweden's third largest party with 12.9 per cent of the votes, establishing that Sweden was no longer the exception among the Nordic countries in not having an electorally successful authoritarian populist party.¹⁴⁴ Its position as the third largest party was further cemented in 2018 when the SD received 17.5 per cent of the votes.¹⁴⁵ Mr. Jimmie Åkesson has been the party leader since 2005.

4.2. THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF 2014

The Swedish general election took place in September 2014, one year before the UN climate meeting in Paris. Climate change did not receive much attention in the debates in the run up to these elections, however. The major themes included employment and education, and even if climate change was a concern among some voters, it did not have a real impact on the elections.

The SD's 2014 electoral manifesto did not explicitly mention climate change. The opening text referred to the environment in terms of pride in the national cultural landscape and the "countryside idyll".¹⁴⁶ It contained a short section focusing on the environment and energy, nature conservation in particular. The need to take global responsibility was mentioned, however, and it was also explicitly stated that Sweden could not resolve all global issues alone. This should not be interpreted as encouraging international cooperation: it rather stresses that Sweden should do its part but no more than that.

The manifesto made just one reference to greenhouse gas emissions: the party wanted to increase support for the poorest developing countries in reducing them. It opposed domestic policies such as the expansion of wind power, which it dismissed as an ineffective energy source with a negative impact on the environment, society and the landscape. The harmful qualities were not further defined, however. The SD furthermore

143 Valmyndigheten, "Valresultat 2010", available at: <https://www.val.se/valresultat/riksdag-region-och-kommun/2010/valresultat.html>

144 Valmyndigheten, "Valresultat 2014", available at: <https://www.val.se/valresultat/riksdag-landsting-och-kommun/2014/valresultat.html>

145 Valmyndigheten, "Valresultat 2018", available at: <https://www.val.se/valresultat/riksdag-landsting-och-kommun/2018/valresultat.html>

146 Sverigedemokraterna 2014, p. 3.

encouraged research on and investment in nuclear energy, and the expansion of the national nuclear reactor programme.¹⁴⁷

The topic of climate change was not discussed at all in some of the interviews with the party leader held in 2014. Accordingly, a Google search for “The Swedish Democrats” and “climate change” for this year generates virtually no hits. Even though climate change was not a popular discussion topic in general, it was brought up on some occasions in debates and interviews. When Mr. Åkesson discussed climate policy in one of the debates, he emphasized the importance of channelling resources where they were most useful. In the party’s view, this meant increasing international climate finance and focusing domestically on nuclear power. He pointed out Sweden’s small contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions, and stated that the country was practically “climate neutral”. Finally, he criticized the Green Party’s energy policies, claiming that they would require Sweden to import coal-produced power.¹⁴⁸

“The worst-case scenario for Swedish climate policy is that the Green Party is given influence over energy policies. Because then, when they have put up their wind turbines and closed nuclear power plants, we will need to import coal energy instead and that does not favour any climate, anywhere.”¹⁴⁹

This criticism recurred in another debate among party leaders in which climate policy was discussed. In this case, however, Mr. Åkesson did not limit his criticism to the Green Party: he disagreed with the way all the other parties were debating the matter, “[...] as if we were to change the world by doing one thing or another”.¹⁵⁰ He stressed the importance of approaching climate change from a global perspective and channelling efforts accordingly, once again specifically pointing out Sweden’s minor contribution to global emissions.¹⁵¹

The argumentation in these interviews frequently returned to Sweden’s small share of greenhouse gas emissions globally, and the unrealistic climate and energy policies of the other parties. The implication that the party was more realistic than the others and the emphasis on Sweden’s minimal contribution resembled the climate nationalist position.

147 Sverigedemokraterna 2014, p. 15.

148 “Agenda Partiledardebatt”, SVT 2, 4 May 2014.

149 Ibid.

150 “Debatt om miljön och klimatet - Nyheterna”, TV4, 11 September 2014.

151 Ibid.

The SD's environmental spokesperson in 2014 was Mr. Josef Fransson. In an interview concerning the party's environmental position he elaborated on two policy areas in particular: nuclear energy and the Baltic Sea. Protecting the Baltic Sea was one of the SD's top three priorities in its environmental thinking, along with redirecting the emphasis in energy policy from renewables to nuclear, and making more effort to support "traditional" agriculture such as small-scale farming. The party wanted to stop issuing green electricity certificates to new renewable energy production, arguing that they were expensive, resource inefficient, and would put a strain on the environment.¹⁵²

4.3. THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF 2018

The September 2018 election followed an unusually warm and dry summer.¹⁵³ Sweden had extremely high temperatures in July 2018, and there were widespread forest wildfires. This created a surge of anxiety, and the impacts of climate change were widely discussed in the media. Climate activist Greta Thunberg started her school strike outside the Swedish Parliament and called for stronger actions on climate change.¹⁵⁴ "Flygskam", in other words social pressure to avoid flying, became a buzzword and gained political momentum. The Government introduced a tax on air travel in June 2018, which drew fierce criticism from the opposition. These developments stirred the political debate in the months leading up to the parliamentary elections.

The SD aspired to achieve a 20-per-cent share of the votes and had planned for an election focused on immigration. The party did well, but not as well as it had hoped, with a 17.5-per-cent share. The election resulted in a hung parliament, as neither political bloc, the traditional left or the right, could claim a clear victory. Difficult negotiations on forming a new government continued until January 2019, when the Social Democrats, the Greens, the Centre Party and the Liberals agreed to allow Social Democrat Prime Minister Mr. Stefan Löfven to form a government.¹⁵⁵

Even though the SD's electoral manifesto for 2018 devoted slightly more space to climate and environmental issues than its previous manifestos, it did not reflect the general strengthening political focus on climate change, which had never been a priority for the SD. The 2018 manifesto

152 "Här är Sverigedemokraternas miljöagenda", *Aktuell Hållbarhet*, 1 July 2014.

153 "Statistik juli - lufttemperatur och vind", Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute, available at: https://www.smhi.se/pd/klimat/pdf_stats/month/smhi_vov_temperature_wind_jul18.pdf

154 "The Swedish 15-year-old who's cutting class to fight the climate crisis", *The Guardian*, 1 September 2018.

155 "Sweden gets new government four months after election", *The Guardian*, 18 January 2019.

contains three chapters relating to the issue: *Infrastructure, Climate and energy* and *the Countryside*. The wording in the chapter on climate and energy is similar to that in the 2014 manifesto, although it emphasizes international rather than national efforts to combat climate change, which it argues is the most cost-effective alternative.

The manifesto underscored that the SD wanted to restore and expand the Swedish nuclear programme. The paragraph on halting the expansion of wind turbines from the previous manifesto was removed. The SD also supported discontinuing the subsidy of biofuels and lowering the tax on diesel.¹⁵⁶ Another goal was to abolish the tax on air travel imposed by the government in June 2018, as well as keeping Stockholm Bromma Airport open.¹⁵⁷ Although the party did not elaborate on the arguments behind either suggestion, it emphasized the need for different means of transportation throughout the country in the introduction to the chapter, hinting at an appeal to voters in rural areas. It insisted, however, that there were no ideological reasons behind its infrastructure policies.¹⁵⁸ There is a similar appeal in the chapter on regional policy, pointing out that environmental efforts cannot be at the expense of people living in rural areas, or undermine their livelihood. The suggestions include lowering the tax on diesel for agriculture and forestry, loosening environmental regulations for rural areas, and making efforts to resolve environmental issues by means of technology and innovation.¹⁵⁹ This line of argumentation, in other words looking after the interests of “the common people” laced with some anti-elite rhetoric, reflects traditional rural populism. The implication that climate change can be addressed through technological development without much policy intervention also connotes climate conservatism.

Climate policies and measures

During the debates the SD often dismissed the climate policies of the other parties as expensive, ineffective or even useless. When Mr. Åkesson was pressed about what measures could be taken nationally, for example, he pointed out that emission targets and equivalent goals set up by the other parties were empty words as they “[do] not believe it themselves”.¹⁶⁰ In this debate he also stated that the SD would do more for the environment

¹⁵⁶ Sverigedemokraterna 2018.

¹⁵⁷ Bromma Airport is centrally located in Stockholm. The debate on whether or not to close it has been heated, with different political parties promising to keep the transport hub open, while others promise to shut it down to make way for housing and to reduce emissions.

¹⁵⁸ Sverigedemokraterna 2018, p. 11.

¹⁵⁹ Sverigedemokraterna 2018, p. 24.

¹⁶⁰ “Val 2018: Utfrågningen - Jimmie Åkesson (SD)”, SVT 1, 2 September 2018.

than the current policies, sarcastically pointing out subsidies on electric bicycles and courses to deal with climate anxiety as particularly ineffective. He would not say by exactly how much his party's climate policies would cut emissions.¹⁶¹

The SD does not want sectorial or national targets; its focus is rather on curbing emissions in other parts of the world, which it claims is easier, cheaper and more effective.¹⁶² Mr. Åkesson stated before the 2018 election that Sweden had to reduce fossil fuel emissions, but that it was even more important to adapt to the challenges ahead. He once more emphasized international efforts, as well as research, particularly in the field of nuclear energy.¹⁶³ The exact nature of SD's preferred international efforts is not clear. Mr. Åkesson added that there were many options, and many organizations working quite effectively on climate finance, including under the UN.

This amounts to an original type of climate nationalism. The emphasis on international action in climate policy is interesting, given that the party is not known to favour international cooperation in other policy areas. The SD's approach to the Paris Agreement is also noteworthy: it states that it does not oppose the 2015 Paris Agreement, despite voting against its ratification in the Swedish parliament.¹⁶⁴ According to Mr. Åkesson, this was not because the party was against the agreement in principle, but because the ratification would cede too much decision-making power to the EU.¹⁶⁵ This position was seconded by Mr. Martin Kinnunen (the SD's environmental spokesperson succeeding Mr. Josef Fransson), who argued for the need to know the exact terms before entering into an agreement.¹⁶⁶ Åkesson also called the Paris Agreement a "PR product",¹⁶⁷ claiming that the SD feared Sweden would be allocated disproportionate responsibility compared to other EU member states, which is exactly what happened.¹⁶⁸

Finally, the SD suggested that one way to lower CO₂ emissions per person would be to reduce the import of foodstuff by improving the economic situation of Swedish farmers to make them more competitive. To achieve this they proposed lowering the tax on diesel, which according to Mr. Åkesson would eventually reduce greenhouse gas emissions, as

161 Ibid.

162 Ibid.

163 "Jimmie Åkesson: 'Extraval är väldigt sannolikt'", *Dagens Nyheter*, 15 August 2018.

164 Sverigedemokraterna, "Klimat och växthusgaser", 13 March 2019; See also "Godkännande av klimatavtalet från Paris", available at: <https://data.riksdagen.se/fil/E7F015D1-7ABC-41B4-BB2C-52707892F7B3>

165 "Jimmie Åkesson (SD) frågas ut inför valet 2018", *Sveriges Radio P1*, 16 August 2018.

166 "Hätsk stämning i SVT:s klimatdebatt", *Expressen*, 19 August 2018.

167 "SD säger klimatdebatten: 'Vänstervriden'", *Aftonbladet*, 15 May 2019.

168 "Jimmie Åkesson (SD) frågas ut inför valet 2018", *Sveriges Radio P1*, 16 August 2018.

less food would be shipped across the globe.¹⁶⁹ On air travel he pointed out that, given the country's size, Swedes needed to fly, and measures to make it more expensive such as imposing a flight tax would limit the possibilities for people to live in the countryside.¹⁷⁰ On whether municipalities should have the right to ban diesel and fossil fuel cars, Mr. Åkesson claimed that on the global level it would lead to neither improved air quality nor lowered emissions. He referred to it as symbolic politics, repeating his argument that climate efforts needed to be addressed in places where they would have the most effect.¹⁷¹ He was seemingly intent on presenting his party as the realistic option, as the other parties were getting carried away and showing "alarmist" tendencies.

The newspaper *Samtiden*, which is sympathetic to the SD,¹⁷² published a number of articles promoting the party's view on climate change. Notably, the paper had no articles containing the word "climate" before the year 2015.¹⁷³ In the months leading up to the elections, editor-in-chief Mr. Dick Erixon wrote several pieces on the topic. Among other things, he criticized the proposal for new high-speed trains as ineffective spending.¹⁷⁴ With regard to the extensive forest fires affecting Sweden throughout the summer of 2018, Mr. Erixon wrote that if journalists wanted to connect the fires to climate change it would be to the SD's advantage in the elections. He went on to accuse the government of spending public money ineffectively on electric bicycles and closing down nuclear reactors, which would, according to him, lead to increased greenhouse gas emissions.¹⁷⁵ Mr. Erixon also claimed that, in fact, it was the mainstream media that was trying to shift the focus of the elections onto climate change.¹⁷⁶

Denying denialism

Even though climate change was not as substantial a theme in the elections as many expected, it attracted considerably more attention in the debates in 2018 than in 2014. The summer characterized by extreme heat and forest fires raised questions of climate vulnerability in Sweden. Climate change had not been a priority for the SD, which was repeatedly

169 Ibid.

170 "Agenda Partiledardebatt", *SVT 2*, 6 May 2018.

171 Ibid.

172 *Samtiden* is a newspaper published by Samtid & Framtid AB, a subsidiary company within the Sweden Democrats' corporation Sverigedemokraterna AB. For background and criticism, see "Jan Sjunnesson om Sverigedemokraternas tidning Samtiden: 'Inkompetent, valhänt och amatörmässigt'", *Dagens Media*, 19 February 2015.

173 See *Samtiden* web archives, available at: <https://samtiden.nu>

174 "Höghastighetståg dränerar all annan form av järnväg", *Samtiden*, 20 April 2018.

175 "Så gynnas SD om bränderna blir valfråga", *Samtiden*, 25 July 2018.

176 "Agendasättande medier: klimat, klimat, klimat!", *Samtiden*, 13 August 2018.

labelled climate denialist by other parties, but now it had to create its line on climate policy.

Mr. Åkesson stated in several pre-election interviews that he was indeed worried about climate change.¹⁷⁷ He repeatedly affirmed his view that climate change was ongoing and was caused by human activity, while also stressing the importance of “not politicizing the weather of one single summer”.¹⁷⁸ However, he also questioned the interviewer’s wording when she referred to climate change as “a threat”, and stated that climate change had always been present.¹⁷⁹

According to Mr. Åkesson, the SD perceived climate change as a defining question for the future. When met with accusations of being a climate change denialist and using the same rhetoric as Donald Trump in one of the party leader debates, he rejected both claims, pointing out that the SD was the party willing to spend the most on international climate cooperation in its budget.¹⁸⁰ He was further asked if he believed in the science behind the recent climate reports. He replied that he did, pointing out that there was hardly a consensus on the probable scenarios they presented.¹⁸¹ This acknowledgement of the science was interestingly hesitant: the use of the word “believed” and the directing of attention to the lack of scientific consensus contain an element of climate denialism.

Positioning his party against the others, Mr. Åkesson responded to climate denialist claims in stating that he assumed the role of “the evil one” in climate debates because it was the responsible thing to do:

“The climate debate in Sweden is skewed and very narrow. If you say something that in any way strays outside the very narrow span of politically correct opinions in the climate debate you are evil. I have assumed that role, unfortunately, but I am not evil. I want to lower emissions [...] but that doesn’t mean that the current government’s policies are good or effective because they are completely ineffective.”¹⁸²

Mr. Martin Kinnunen took part in several debates and press conferences, and authored several articles arguing for new kinds of environmental policies. Despite being ranked last by the Swedish Society for Nature

177 “Val 2018: Utfrågningen - Jimmie Åkesson (SD)”, SVT 1, 2 September 2018.

178 “Jimmie Åkesson: ‘Extraval är väldigt sannolikt’”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 15 August 2018; “Jimmie Åkesson (SD) frågas ut inför valet 2018”, Sveriges Radio P1, 16 August 2018.

179 “Jimmie Åkesson: ‘Extraval är väldigt sannolikt’”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 15 August 2018.

180 “Debatten 2018”, *Expressen TV*, 14 August 2018.

181 “Utfrågningen Val 2018 - Del 2”, TV4, 4 September 2018.

182 “Val 2018: Utfrågningen - Jimmie Åkesson (SD)”, SVT 1, 2 September 2018.

Conservation regarding ambitious climate policies, he pointed out that the SD was, in fact, the leader in environmental and climate policy. He did not think that the environment was the most important question for the party's voters, however.¹⁸³ Echoing Mr. Åkesson's statement referred to above, he also said that he found the debate on climate change "very narrow", and claims that the SD stood for climate denialism "ridiculous".¹⁸⁴

*"We all agree that greenhouse gas emissions need to be reduced globally, but that does not mean you are not allowed to tell the truth. It does not mean you have to buy electric bikes with taxpayers' money [...] that does not make you a climate denialist. You need to put the money where it is most effective."*¹⁸⁵

During the pre-election debates the SD representatives often referred to the climate policies of other parties as "symbolic politics", "alarmism", and "climate populism". In one interview Mr. Åkesson dismissed the 2017 Climate Act as "symbolic", for example, stating that the law was impossible to uphold.¹⁸⁶ He was not against the act as such, but he did not believe it to be of any importance whatsoever.¹⁸⁷ Here again, it is clear how the party spiced its climate nationalism with some denialist elements. Explaining the term "climate populism", used by SD party members to describe other parties' politics, Mr. Åkesson repeated that it was populist to politicize the weather of one summer.¹⁸⁸ Mr. Kinnunen seconded this statement:

*"You can't draw conclusions from individual weather events. The populist argument is that you need to pursue different policies because of the fires."*¹⁸⁹

The party communicated these views in numerous pre-election debates, interviews and articles. In one of the debates, for example, in reply to the Green Party's spokesperson Mr. Gustav Fridolin, Mr. Åkesson pointed out that Mr. Fridolin's passion for environmental matters

183 "SD: 'Miljön är en jätteviktig fråga'", *SVT Nyheter*, 4 June 2018.

184 "Hätsk stämning i SVT:s klimatdebatt", *Expressen*, 19 August 2018.

185 *Ibid.*

186 The new climate policy framework Sweden adopted in 2017 consists of the Climate Act, climate targets and a policy council. The country's long-term target is to have zero net greenhouse gas emissions by 2045 at the latest. The Climate Act entered into force on 1 January 2018. It states that the Government's climate policy must be based on the climate targets and specifies how the implementation is to be carried out.

187 "Jimmie Åkesson (SD) frågas ut inför valet 2018", *Sveriges Radio P1*, 16 August 2018.

188 "Utfrågningen Val 2018 - Del 2", *TV4*, 4 September 2018.

189 "Agenda: Klimatspecial", *SVT 1*, 19 August 2018.

was misdirected, and claimed the Green Party's policies did not help the climate very much but they made living in the Swedish countryside impossible.¹⁹⁰

Samtiden journalist Mr. Tomas Brandberg, also political adviser for the SD, wrote several articles directed primarily at the Green Party, but also at the climate policies of the other parties.¹⁹¹ In an article claiming that the development of biofuels is a waste of money, he states:

*“The fundamental problem is that [all the other] parties, including the centre-right, have gotten obsessive thoughts on their ambition to quickly phase out Sweden’s use of fossil fuels by 2030. It will of course not succeed, but in order to go to bed with a good conscience they apparently have to waste these billions of taxpayers’ money, regardless of the effect. That is directly irresponsible.”*¹⁹²

In climate politics, the SD seemingly aims to disassociate itself not only from the left-wing parties, but also from all other parties in the Swedish parliament.

In a co-authored article on gasoline prices, Mr. Kinnunen and the party's finance spokesperson Mr. Oscar Sjöstedt claim that the government was working hard to make mobility by private car impossible. They also pointed out that not everyone can travel by bicycle or bus as easily as in Stockholm, and claimed that the government did not seem to take into account the number of people protesting about the raising of petrol prices, which they refer to at the end of the text as “symbolic political hysteria”.¹⁹³ Mr. Kinnunen and Mr. Sjöstedt published a similar article in *Dalarnas Tidning*, criticizing the gasoline price raise and stating that Swedes should not feel climate anxiety and stop flying as long as people in countries such as China and India “throw plastic bags into the sea”.¹⁹⁴ The SD wants to see an increase in funding for international climate efforts, such as the Clean Developed Mechanism under the Kyoto Protocol, instead of “symbolic but costly” climate policies. On the national level, the party emphasizes the role of nuclear power.¹⁹⁵

190 “Partiprogrammet”, *Aftonbladet TV*, 27 August 2018.

191 See also “Vi i SD välkomnar alla moderater till oss”, *Expressen Debatt*, 4 January 2017.

192 “Miljösvindleri i miljardklassen”, *Samtiden*, 8 April 2018.

193 “Symbolpolitisk hysteri att höja bensinpriset”, *Aftonbladet Debatt*, 13 September 2019.

194 “DEBATT: Vi kommer aldrig acceptera att miljönotan skickas till alla som bor eller arbetar utanför storstäderna”, *Dalarnas Tidning*, 4 October 2019.

195 Ibid.

4.4. DISCUSSION

There is a considerable difference in the amount of attention given to climate change leading up the elections of 2014 and 2018. The party leaders, who did not have climate change on their own agenda, were asked very few questions about it during the interviews and debates in 2014. Indeed, it appears to have been easier for politicians to avoid climate issues altogether – which was a seemingly less feasible strategy in 2018. For the SD, climate change was not a political priority. Its environmental focus in both 2014 and 2018 was rather on nature conservation and nuclear energy. In 2018, the party activated on climate change, although still did not see it as a top priority.

The Adelphi report on European right-wing populist parties and climate change characterizes the SD as “denialist/sceptical”.¹⁹⁶ This position would have been difficult to uphold in the 2018 elections without losing voters, however. Instead, the party acknowledged climate change as a problem, but rejected “alarmism”, criticized the climate policies of other parties, and pointed to the economic burden they carried, particularly for people in rural areas. The populist framing of people (in the countryside) versus the elite (with electric bikes) was applied in the debate on climate policy. The party also mentioned uncertainty with regard to scientific reports, criticized the Paris Agreement, constantly mentioned “alarmism” and “climate populism”, and voted against several climate targets in parliament. Furthermore, both Åkesson and Kinnunen have pointed out the potential benefits to Sweden of a warmer climate.¹⁹⁷

On some occasions the party retreats to the rhetoric of climate denialism. A recent Novus poll echoes this: 12 per cent of Sweden Democrat’s voters claim not to believe that climate change is occurring, compared with between one and two per cent in the other parties.¹⁹⁸ An even larger percentage of SD voters do not view climate change as an urgent issue. Thus, in its strategy the party is still apparently a party for voters with more “sceptic” views, but to increase and broaden its support the party avoids being labelled denialist. Its position on climate science seems to vary depending on the forum. In some debates it strongly acknowledges that climate change is ongoing and needs to be stopped, whereas in others the party seems to engage in question the facts and promotes the opinions

¹⁹⁶ Schaller and Carius 2019.

¹⁹⁷ “Jimmie Åkesson: ‘Extraval är väldigt sannolikt’”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 15 August 2018; “Det har plockats bort från SD:s klimatmotioner”, *Expressen*, 8 August 2018.

¹⁹⁸ “En majoritet anser att klimatfrågan är akut men inte att politikerna agerar som den vore akut”, *Novus*, 1 December 2019, available at: <https://novus.se/nyheter/2019/12/en-majoritet-anser-inte-att-politikerna-agerar-som-att-klimatfragan-ar-akut/>

of “sceptical” scientists. In most of its argumentation the Sweden Democrats purports to communicate a nationalist position, according to which climate change is a problem for other countries, but not for Sweden. The SD strategy since 2018 has applied a strategy of denying being a climate denialist party, but simultaneously positioning themselves as an alternative to the climate policies of all other parties in the Swedish parliament. The party seeks to benefit from the polarization of climate change politics, and to present itself as an alternative to “alarmists” and “scaremongers”.

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5. ANALYSIS: FROM DENIALISM TO WHERE

The three case studies illustrate how the climate-policy positions of the Nordic populist parties are constantly evolving – they are not fixed or set in stone by parties with a populist agenda and authoritarian leanings. This is visible in the policy shifts of the Danish People’s Party (DF), The Finns Party (PS), and the Sweden Democrats (SD) in the context of the latest rounds of parliamentary elections in 2018 and 2019, in which climate policy became a major issue in the political debates in each country.

The Danish People’s Party came to the elections underprepared and could not communicate effectively on climate change. The party’s defensive line on climate action illustrates how a dismissive stance in general may become a problem for a populist framing of politics: the populist party itself may seem “alienated”, out of touch with the concerns of the people. The DF response was to move away from dismissive, denialist rhetoric and to initiate a more progressive position on climate policy than held by most European populist parties. One factor seemed to be the new-found *rapprochement* with its old political competitor, the Social Democratic Party.

The Finns Party, in contrast, quickly embraced the politicization of climate change, and saw it as an opportunity to raise its profile. It did this by breaking the consensus concerning the relatively ambitious climate policies of other parties, especially in the process of long-term target setting. The Finns Party also looks to benefit from polarization in traditional populist terms, by positioning itself against the Green Party: the opponent is framed as elitist, urban, alienated from the people, naïvely

cosmopolitan, and “bicycle-communist”. Accordingly, the party claims that green policies would disproportionately harm the common, morally upstanding people in industrial and rural communities.

In its climate policy the Sweden Democrats currently bears a resemblance to the Finns Party, despite their otherwise different political trajectories and history. While moving towards the Swedish political mainstream in several ways, such as by clearing openly racist elements from its ranks, the Sweden Democrats is willing to play the opponent to ambitious climate policies. The party does not believe that the environment is an important topic as far as its voters are concerned. Akin to the Finns Party, it seeks to benefit from polarizing identity politics, criticizing the hypocrisy and “hysteria” of other parties, and ironizing support for electric bicycles. In Denmark, the recently founded New Right party, although not populist but openly elitist in its orientation, is actively opposing climate policies and using this stance to distance itself from other parties.

In terms of the ideal types laid out in the framework introduced in Chapter 1 above, all three populist parties are moving away from a categorical *climate science denialist* position. They believe that the term “denialism” carries negative connotations, seeing it as a term primarily applied by the liberals and greens as a political tool. However, the expression of doubt about climate change is still present and is still tolerated. The party leaders, the official documents, and spokespersons frequently rally against “climate alarmists”, currently especially in Finland and Sweden, but they do not typically deny the existence of climate change, its human causation, or the problems it causes globally.

The Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats have both advocated an active *climate policy nationalist* stance. After the most recent round of parliamentary elections it became evident that this was a well-prepared and articulated position and a communicative strategy. Climate change is already a priority in the Finns Party, as recently noted by its secretary: “Immigration and climate change in particular are themes that the party wants to talk about”.¹⁹⁹ At the core of the climate communications of these parties is the argument that ambitious national action does not matter globally, or even that it is detrimental in the big picture due to carbon leakage. International decision-making is framed as particularly susceptible, and the EU and UNFCCC are considered dubious platforms on which the elite – represented by other parties – betrays the national interest and the good of the people.

The talking points of the Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats imply that other parties are reacting emotionally, in a state of panic and

199 “Perussuomalaisten kannatus nousi taas roimasti – näin tutkijat ja puolue itse kommentoivat ennätysmäistä suosiota”, *Helsingin Sanomat*, 28 November 2019.

fuss, whereas they are rational and cool-headed. Both parties also air suspicions of bias in the mainstream media, claiming that the main news outlets favour “alarmist” voices and silence the critics. According to the Sweden Democrats, the national debate on climate policy is very narrow and they would wish to expand it, and to stand for a more sound and reasonable approach.

An interesting complementary element of the Sweden Democrats’ climate policies is the stated willingness to increase spending on international climate financing. The argument is that increasing funding for international efforts is more effective than the symbolic and costly domestic climate action the other parties pursue. Authoritarian populists typically criticize public spending on third countries. When the Finns Party became part of the government for the first time in 2015 the budget for development cooperation was cut dramatically, and further large reductions are on the party’s agenda.²⁰⁰ International climate financing has been extremely unpopular within right-wing republicans in the US.²⁰¹ However, the Sweden Democrats face a more climate-conscious public than most populist parties, and in all likelihood the party perceives international spending as a way to soften its nationalist criticism of domestic climate policy.

The Danish People’s Party has taken a seemingly less climate policy nationalist route recently, too. The party did some soul-searching after its losses in the 2019 elections and is currently looking towards a moderate *climate policy conservative* position: it will advocate both a domestic and an international climate policy, in which co-benefits and technological development play a key role. This is in sharp contrast to the previous party line, which was dismissive, and included science denialism and referring to climate change as a matter of personal belief. Currently, even wording such as “leadership”, and taking national pride in being a green leader, are invoked in the party’s communications on climate change.

There are some common elements in all three parties’ current positions and strategic communication, in spite of the differing national political contexts. All the parties have continuously framed climate policy in terms of “the urban elite” versus “the people” outside the city centres, in the most typical populist tradition. The positions also give a nod to “the common people” in general, who should not be burdened by the excessive

200 “Perussuomalaiset esittää jättileikkauksia maahanmuuttoon ja kehitysapuun – turvapaikoista halutaan tehdä määräaikaisia”, *Ilta-Sanomat*, 14 November 2019.

201 Mr. Trump also cites the Green Climate Fund as one of the key reasons for leaving the Paris Agreement, as “the Green Climate Fund is costing the United States a vast fortune”. See statement by President Trump on the Paris Climate Accord, 1 June 2017, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-paris-climate-accord/>

cost, or shamed for their lifestyle choices. All three criticize “climate hysteria” and “alarmism”, and argue strongly against the youth climate activism personified by Greta Thunberg. Realism is a key word for them all, although what it means in practice differs notably. All three emphasize that their respective Nordic country should already be considered clean and environmental on the international level. They also frequently make a point of noting the small percentages of their respective country’s emissions in the global total.

As this report emphasizes, however, there are many obvious differences among the three parties and their climate policies. The Danish People’s Party promotes ambitious national climate targets, whereas the Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats strictly oppose them. The Danish People’s Party is also the only one talking positively about international leadership in climate policy and the green transition. The Finns Party, on the other hand, has taken the perspective of industrial competitiveness to heart, a topic that does not engage the other parties anywhere near as strongly. The Finns Party promotes the industrial argument and the discourse on carbon leakage as a potentially feasible strategy to challenge both the centre-left and the centre-right, which can be accused of neglecting the core of the Finnish economy and its workers. The party also promotes the view that “sceptical” climate scientists are being silenced through their party newspaper and think-tank publications. The Danish People’s Party used this framing, too, but since the 2019 elections it has steered away from this type of populist critique of the mainstream media. Finally, the impacts of climate change have entered the political discussion in Denmark and Sweden, but remain marginal in Finland. The melting ice cap in Greenland and droughts in the agricultural Denmark, as well as the forest fires in Sweden, are tangible topics that connect everyday experiences to climate politics. This has yet to take place in the Finnish context.

From a theoretical standpoint, if populism is more akin to a framing than an ideology, authoritarian populism can be used to express many ideological positions in climate change politics. For instance, it would not be too difficult to imagine a populist argument that advocates more ambitious climate policies: the alienated elite is corrupt, it has betrayed the people by bowing down to multinational industrial interests, and we need to protect the earlier, simpler lifestyle, and thereby save the planet for our children.²⁰² Although this is a speculative position, it is shown in this report that remarkably different content can be inserted into an authoritarian populist campaign on climate policy in the Nordic countries. The findings thus support the notion of flexibility, which from a positive

202 Similarly, see Bonikowski 2017.

perspective indicates that there is the potential to shift towards broader acceptance of ambitious climate policies.

This is not to say that authoritarian populism is a positive phenomenon in climate politics, or that it is easily compatible with an ambitious climate policy. First, as is already evident in the definition of authoritarianism as outlined by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, populism undermines political institutions. It questions the integrity and motives of other political parties, bureaucracy, the courts, and journalism in its project of returning political power to “the people”.²⁰³ By contrast, a successful and ambitious climate policy requires a considerable level of trust in political leaders across parties, bureaucrats, and judges. For example, the state apparatus needs to make meaningful and effective interventions in order to achieve a functioning carbon market.

Second, populist arguments are typically reductive, and promote moral outrage. This may well limit the possibilities of having an informed, fact-based public debate. Conspiracy theories of elite betrayal may flourish in contexts such as climate science and media reporting. Partisan positions and moral polarization have led to widespread obstructionist behaviour in the US House of Representatives and the Senate. Even though the populist rhetoric is more benign and polarization less severe in the Nordic countries, it seems that the authoritarian populist message draws on collective resentment rather than policy nuances. This is evident in the nationalist arguments in Finland and Sweden, for example, as well as in the identity political slurs such as “climate fools”, “climate hypocrisy”, and “climate panic” in all three countries.

203 Norris and Inglehart 2019.

CONCLUSIONS

Populism is a persistent current in the politics of Denmark, Finland and Sweden. The recent successes of authoritarian populism underscore the need for an increased understanding of populism and climate change, with its different manifestations and political consequences.

This report reveals both communalities and interesting differences among the main Danish, Finnish and Swedish populist parties in terms of their positions on climate policy. These parties have clearly moved away from a single-issue (immigration) agenda and are currently actively campaigning on other policy issues including climate change. Their positions on climate policy were also subject to change within the brief period under study, covering two parliamentary elections. These nowadays rather established Nordic populist parties under investigation, the Danish People's Party, the Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats, were all distancing themselves from a strict climate science denialist position, albeit to varying degrees. This conclusion is far from definitive, however, given that the populist framing of climate change is flexible. The climate policy positions of these parties may look very different again after a few more elections.

One key aspect emerges from the analysis. The stated hypothesis of the report, supported by the literature survey, was that the intersection of climate change and populism is typically analysed with regard to climate change science. In short, denialism and "scepticism" have been subjected to a significant amount of scholarly attention over several decades. This has shed light on various interesting phenomena that are relevant beyond climate politics – the nature of populist knowledge, the preferred arguments, authorities and sources of knowledge, and the organized

production of counter knowledge. However, currently this line of inquiry needs to be complemented with a broader perspective. Many populist parties – including all those in the Nordic countries studied in this report – engage in potentially powerful arguments that are not science denialist, at least in the conventional sense. In terms of the ideal types introduced in this report, it would be beneficial to bring climate nationalist and climate conservative argumentation to the forefront in further analyses of populism and climate change.

It would also be beneficial to identify and analyse political strategies beyond science denialism from a policy-oriented perspective. How could one engage with and challenge the different arguments? What kind of political coalitions could work in practice? Where are the key differences within an authoritarian populist movement? Questions such as these should be on the lips of those who actively participate in contemporary climate change politics. There is a need seriously to engage with the climate nationalist argument, for example, so as to avoid simple and general “consensus” versus “alternative” positioning.

It is also worth noting that, unlike science denialism that goes against the tenets of evidence-based policy, reason and enlightenment, climate nationalism and climate conservatism are potentially legitimate arguments. In the “bottom-up” system envisioned in the Paris Agreement, countries will prepare and present their national contributions, which are then implemented taking into account the national circumstances.²⁰⁴ The level of ambition in the climate policies of major economies will inevitably vary in the coming decades. Questions concerning carbon leakage, and the excessive cost of some national actions, should not be dismissed as “denialist” but should rather be considered and countered with evidence-based argumentation. This clearly requires that all parties follow the basic rules of factual political debate. Claims of carbon leakage should be based on real events, not abstract repetition, misinformation, or sheer propaganda. Thus far, research evidence has shown little justification of the argument that climate policy or environmental standards are causing polluting industries to move between countries and across continents.

Now is the right time to analyse the positions and strategies of authoritarian populist parties in their climate change policies. Such research should be based on well-defined concepts that are politically relevant. The analysis and conclusions presented in this report are tentative given the short time period and the numbers of parties and elections analysed. Further research is needed, involving more elections in which climate change is a key topic – and including more countries with diverse political

204 Vihma 2019.

contexts. A thorough qualitative and comparative study including 10–15 European countries, for example, would be another step in the right direction. In addition, this analysis hints that the positions and strategies related to climate change policy vary among the parties concerned depending on the forum and the audience. The data analysed in this study largely comprise extracts from official texts and statements from party leaders targeting a broad audience. Further research is needed on the interlinkages between authoritarian populist parties and anti-climate policy activism in social media platforms and the counter-media landscape. This would enhance understanding of how these parties mobilize support and exploit political polarization.

APPENDIX 1

METHODS AND DATA

This FIIA report comprises an extensive review of academic and grey literature, covering the emerging analysis of contemporary populist movements and their campaigns on climate and energy policies, focusing on but not limited to Anglo-American literature.²⁰⁵ We noted many in-depth analyses of science denialism, but found the literature lacking in broader political strategies. We also consulted reports, policy briefs and popular analyses from different think tanks, institutes, and experts.

As described in Chapter 1, we introduce three ideal-type positions drawn from literature on the politicization of climate change and from the authors' previous experience of debates on climate change in the Nordic countries. We constructed a framework consisting of three strategic perspectives on opposing ambitious climate policies, which builds on the three ideal types: *climate science denialist*, *climate policy nationalist*, and *climate policy conservative*. The ideal types serve to clarify the main features of the parties' messaging,²⁰⁶ and allow for a structured analysis of different positions and strategies in the debates.

The framework supported our reading and analysis of the empirical material and allowed us to structure the political messaging embedded in campaigns, talking points and debates. We were interested in both structuring and analysing the messaging, and in clarifying the parties'

205 Recent examples include a special issue "Sustainable energy transformations in an age of populism, post-truth politics, and local resistance" in *Energy Research & Social Science* (2018).

206 Eriksson 1989.

conceptions, hence we found qualitative text analysis a useful tool.²⁰⁷ When we analysed the empirical material we associated the text material with keywords and positions from our framework in order to systematize and clarify the parties' conceptions and strategies in the debates. To improve the transparency of our analysis and interpretation we quote directly from the text material at times. The empirical material is almost exclusively in Danish, Finnish and Swedish, and all the quoted material was translated into English by the authors.

Original data was collected from Denmark, Finland and Sweden. We selected only the main populist parties for our study: the Danish People's Party (DF), the Finns Party (PS), and the Sweden Democrats (SD). These parties have disrupted politics-as-usual in their respective countries with successful authoritarian populist messaging. As we point out in the respective chapters, they each have a different history and political trajectory, but they share a great deal in successfully applying populism in the Nordic context. The main unit of analysis in our study is the parties and how they position themselves on climate change. We have not included think-tanks, message boards, or other actors and platforms that are loosely associated with the parties, and we have not studied any of the links that might exist between them and the broader climate science denialist landscape. Thus, this study shows how the parties expressed themselves on climate change in the chosen election debates.

The empirical material includes official party positions as outlined in their respective programmes and electoral manifestos, election debates among the party leaders, and interviews with party leaders or spokespersons on climate change and environmental issues in particular. Most of the debates and interviews were televised or radio broadcasts. The televised interviews were accessible either on the TV channels' websites or in their archives. We used the transcripts of several interviews with party leaders and spokespersons collected from the national news media, and we also included statements by party officials and parliamentarians in national media and other news sources. Further, we consulted the parties' own media outlets or newspapers closely linked to the parties, particularly *Suomen Uutiset* in Finland and *Samtiden* in Sweden. We conducted searches at their websites using the search strings "climate policy" and "climate change".

The data collection focused mainly on pre-election debates, and to lesser extent on post-election debates after the two latest parliamentary elections that took place in Denmark and Finland during 2015 and 2019, and in Sweden during 2014 and 2018. We included material in a time span that covered the six months leading up to these elections.

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CLIMATE CHANGE AND POPULISM

COMPARING THE POPULIST PARTIES' CLIMATE POLICIES IN DENMARK, FINLAND AND SWEDEN

The rise of populism has disrupted established patterns of party competition in many Western societies. Related to this development, the current debates in the US and EU illustrate how empirical science on climate change may become intensively politicized, and all ambitious climate policies challenged, in the contemporary political landscape. This may take place notwithstanding the mounting evidence on the certainty of climate change and its disastrous consequences.

This FIIA report investigates populist resistance to ambitious climate change policy in the Nordic context, where countries have sought to assume global leadership on climate politics and have considerable public support for climate action.

In an analysis of the positions of authoritarian populist parties in Denmark, Finland and Sweden the report sheds light on how climate change is currently politicized. It also sets out an analytical framework of various political strategies for opposing ambitious climate policies: climate science denialism, climate policy nationalism and climate policy conservatism. /