



Populism and Anti-Populism in Climate Politics: Conflict Line, Contingent Relation, or Tacit Alliance in Climate Obstruction?

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Abstract Denial and far-right *populism* are regularly blamed for the inability of liberal democracies in the Global North to address climate change properly. But what is the nexus of populism and climate obstruction? In this article, I explore how ideational and discursive approaches to populism illuminate mechanisms of climate obstruction. While ideational approaches erroneously imply that there is a line of climate political conflict between “bad” populism and “good” anti-populism, discursive approaches suggest a contingent and relational character of populism, anti-populism, and climate obstruction. They not only enable raising awareness of the strategic–authoritarian character of far-right obstruction and the prevalence of obstruction beyond the far right but also prompt that anti-populist responses qua anti-populism contribute to obstruction by depoliticising climate politics. Eco-populist responses to obstruction that feature a political–strategic proximity to discursive approaches to populism, however, overlook an unresolved tension between agendas of inclusion via economic growth and agendas of ecological limitation. By ignoring this tension, they fail to capture societal boundaries of transformation, and they spread unwarranted strategies to break through climate obstruction politically. Therefore, I argue that instead of establishing a conflict line or a contingent relation, far-right obstruction, anti-populist, and eco-populist responses result in a tacit alliance in climate obstruction. To overcome this deadlock, I suggest research on (far-right) climate obstruction to focus on multiple entanglements of authoritarian defences of an unsustainable and imperial mode of living.

Keywords Climate change denial · Climate change delay · Far-right populism · Anti-populism · Ecologist populism · Unsustainable and imperial mode of living

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Populismus und Antipopulismus in der Klimapolitik: Konfliktlinie, kontingente Relation oder stille Blockade-Allianz?

Zusammenfassung Klimawandelleugnung und Rechtspopulismus werden regelmäßig für das Verhindern klimapolitischer Erfolge liberaler Demokratien im Globalen Norden verantwortlich gemacht. Aber wie ist das Verhältnis von Populismus und der gegenwärtigen Blockade in der Klimapolitik? In diesem Artikel zeige ich auf, dass ideelle Ansätze der Populismusforschung implizit zur Reproduktion einer klimapolitischen Konfliktlinie zwischen „bösem“ Populismus und „gutem“ Antipopulismus beitragen, die aus der Perspektive diskursiver Ansätze der Populismusforschung bedenklich erscheint. Letztere legt einen kontingenten und relationalen Charakter von Populismus, Antipopulismus und Blockade nahe. Damit schärft sie nicht nur ein Problembewusstsein für den strategisch-autoritären Charakter rechtsradikaler und -extremer Klimapolitik, sondern deutet auch darauf hin, dass antipopulistische Antworten *qua* Antipopulismus durch Entpolitisierung zur Blockade beitragen. Ökopopulistische Antworten, die eine politisch-strategische Nähe zu diskursiven Ansätzen der Populismusforschung aufweisen, lassen wiederum den grundsätzlichen Widerspruch zwischen sozialer Inklusion durch wirtschaftliches Wachstum und ökologischer Begrenzung unberücksichtigt. Indem sie soziale Grenzen der Transformation ignorieren, verbreiten sie unplausible Strategien, um rechtspopulistische und antipopulistische Blockaden zu durchbrechen. Daher enden rechtsradikale und -extreme Blockaden, antipopulistische *und* ökopopulistische Reaktionen – entgegen den verbreiteten Thesen einer Konfliktlinie oder kontingenten Relation – in einer unausgesprochenen Blockade-Allianz. Um dieser Sackgasse zu entkommen, schlage ich vor, die vielfältigen Verstrickungen autoritärer Verteidigungen der nicht-nachhaltigen und imperialen Lebensweise analytisch in den Blick zu nehmen.

Schlüsselwörter Klimawandelleugnung · Rechtsradikale und rechtsextreme Klimapolitik · Antipopulismus · Ökopopulismus · Nicht-Nachhaltigkeit · Nicht-nachhaltige und imperiale Lebensweise

1 Introduction

More than anybody else, former and future U.S. President Donald Trump seems to personify the connection between two of the most pressing phenomena of crises haunting liberal democracies of the Global North today: the *autocratic–authoritarian turn* (Blühdorn 2022a) and the transgression of planetary boundaries. He is not only one of the most prominent protagonists of the fourth wave of the far right but is also a notorious climate change denialist, once tweeting that climate change is a Chinese hoax and retreating from the Paris Agreement on climate political obligations. In far-right discourses, this coincidence of authoritarianism and climate denialism is widespread. Hence, it seems only reasonable to regard the far right as a major cause of climate political failures and ongoing *climate obstruction* (Ekberg et al. 2023). In particular, *populism* is commonly blamed for the inability of the far right to address climate change properly. Lockwood (2018), for example, argues that narratives of

denial and scepticism prevail since the complex and global character of climate change provokes right-wing populists to portray transnational climate policy and expert-based climate science as an agenda of corrupt cosmopolitan elites. Huber (2020) suggests that empirical evidence offers “ample support for the claim that individuals who strongly exhibit populist attitudes also tend to be more sceptical concerning climate change” (p. 975). Hence, a broad anti-populist alliance of party and movement actors across the political spectrum has emerged that—in opposition to the perceived irrationality and irresponsibility of far-right denial—demands to “follow the science” and to act in accordance with the Paris Agreement. Climate politics, it seems, is characterised by a conflict line between denialist populists and responsible antipopulists.

To represent the relation between denialist populism and rational anti-populism as a climate political conflict line is puzzling for at least three reasons. First, Ekberg and colleagues (2023) convincingly diagnose a “conceptual deadlock of ‘denialism’” (p. 8; see also Blühdorn 2017). Climate obstruction, they argue, goes beyond the *denial* of scientific evidence and includes *delay* and *inaction*. As the notion of *inaction* suggests, climate obstruction as a form of *sustained unsustainability* (Blühdorn 2013) or *social inertia* (Brulle and Norgaard 2019) is a problem of late-modern societies in the Global North in toto. In any case, climate obstruction is not limited to far-right populism. Second, far-right ideas do not seem to lead to the denial of scientific evidence, an opposition to transnational scientific knowledge production and policymaking per se. For instance, in line with a long history and present standing of far-right environmentalism (Olsen 1999; Dannemann 2023), the far right regularly endorses eco-authoritarian solutions to biodiversity loss, which are no less reliant on transnational expert knowledge and global political agreements than the mitigation of climate change is (Forchtner 2019a). Additionally, the far right is not limited to denial of scientific evidence. In the European Parliament, for example, “evidence scepticism is on the wane [...]. Instead, opposition to climate policies prevails via process/response scepticism” (Forchtner and Lubarda 2023, p. 62). Third, there are many different populisms in environmental and climate politics (Buzogány and Mohamad-Klotzbach 2022; Sconfienza 2022). Populism does not necessarily need to be identified with the far right and climate obstruction but, rather, can be embraced in the very name of ecologist climate politics, as a long history of populist criticism by environmental movements and theorists suggests (Meyer 2008). Questioning elitist decision-making in climate politics and the embeddedness of elitist scientific knowledge production into unjust relations of power, scholars increasingly follow this tradition and argue for forms of ecologist climate populism to counter (far-right) obstruction and enable more effective and just climate politics (Mouffe 2022; Meyer 2024a).

These observations point to an unsettled relation between (far-right) populism and climate obstruction. Does the *populism/anti-populism divide* (Moffitt 2018) actually constitute a climate political line of conflict? And what is the promise of anti-populist and eco-populist responses to (far-right) obstruction? The basic assumption underlying this article is that answers to these questions depend on how we understand populism. As highlighted frequently by critical theorists, almost any concept in social science has descriptive-analytical and normative-political implications (Strecker

2009; Blühdorn 2022b). Hence, specific conceptualisations of populism in the research field of (far-right) climate obstruction have fundamental consequences for the analysis and evaluation of obstruction and potential responses. Different understandings of populism elucidate some facets while disregarding others. Although explicit and thorough discussions about the descriptive–analytical and normative–political consequences of different approaches to populism shape populism research beyond climate politics (Hunger and Paxton 2022; Kim 2022), they are largely missing in research on (far-right) populism and climate obstruction. This absence also applies to approaches that point in particular to the need to consider the discursive and social conditions of populism. Therefore, the aim of this article is twofold: I reflect on the (potential) descriptive–analytical contributions and normative–political implications of different approaches to populism in research on climate obstruction. In addition, I highlight the discursive and social conditions of climate obstruction by the far right and beyond that are not often taken into consideration but that have fundamental consequences for analysing and evaluating (far-right) obstruction and potential responses.

In this article, I argue that *ideational approaches* to populism instructively highlight how different constructions of elites and “the people” in far-right climate politics contribute to denial and delay. Although these accounts explore far-right climate politics mostly as an isolated phenomenon, they at least imply that there is a *line of climate political conflict* between rational and responsible climate politics and a populist backlash of obstruction generating a climate political conflict line between “bad” populism and “good” anti-populism. By introducing the concept and critique of anti-populism, I show how *discursive approaches* can demonstrate the limits of this assumption. By bringing the strategic and authoritarian nature of far-right obstruction to the fore as well as the significance of anti-populist obstruction and post-political inertia, this perspective suggests emphasising how obstruction unites far-right populist and anti-populist discourse in climate politics. Therefore, from the perspective of discursive approaches, anti-/populism and climate obstruction do not result in a line of conflict but rather appear to have a *contingent relation*, whereas ecologist populism seems to be a promising response to obstruction. However, both premises, that of a line of conflict and that of a contingent relation, miss that a *tacit alliance in obstruction* is forming behind the actors’ backs. While discursive approaches rightly suggest emphasising the intersections of far-right and anti-populist obstruction, proposals for ecologist populism underestimate the societal boundaries of transformation. Considering the growth dependence of broad parts of late-modern societies of the Global North, the potential resonance of the defence of *sustained unsustainability* (Blühdorn 2013) and an *imperial mode of living* (Brand and Wissen 2021) goes far beyond the far-right electorate. Because they deny these societal boundaries of transformation, claims for ecologist populism end up being implausible and having the unintended consequence of obstruction. I argue, therefore, that research and public discourse on climate obstruction should leave the *populist hype* (Glynos and Mondon 2016) behind and turn to analysis and contestation of authoritarian defences of an unsustainable and imperial mode of living.

To unfold this argument, I proceed in three steps. First, in Sect. 2, I reconstruct ideational approaches, according findings on far-right obstruction, and their implicit diagnosis of a line of conflict. Subsequently, I shed light on the beneficial analytical insights and consequences of discursive approaches to populism in Sect. 3, suggesting a contingent relation between populism and obstruction as well as an eco-populist response to obstruction. Consequently, in Sect. 4, I critically reconsider the promises of ecologist populism and show how it becomes part of a tacit alliance in obstruction. Finally, in concluding remarks in Sect. 5, I argue for further analyses of the authoritarian defence of sustained unsustainability by and, especially, beyond the far right.

2 The Climate Political Conflict: The Ideational Account of a Populist Backlash

Although populism occasionally serves only as a vague label in populism research (Hunger and Paxton 2022), research on far-right obstruction regularly adopts an ideational approach, referring to Mudde's definition in his work on *populist radical right parties in Europe*.¹ Emphasising the importance of ideas and ideology, Mudde (2007) defines populism as a thin-centred ideology that represents society as a Manichean separation of “two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (p. 23). The identification of Manicheanism leads him and others to characterise populism pejoratively as intrinsically moralist (Müller 2016; Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2019). Additionally, because of its supposed construction of “the people” and “the elite” as homogeneous entities, populism is criticised as anti-pluralist. In contrast to rather ambivalent accounts of the relation between populism and democracy (see, for instance, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013), this association of populism with anti-pluralism leads Müller (2016) to the conclusion that populism is inherently anti-democratic. Mudde (2007), however, emphasises that *radical right* is the central descriptor for his research object, predominantly shaped by the ideological components of nativism and authoritarianism.

2.1 The Far-Right Antagonism of “The People” and Green Climate Elites

Mostly following this ideational approach, research on far-right climate obstruction is not always explicit about the specific role of populism, in contrast to that of authoritarianism, in far-right climate obstruction.² Either obstruction is directly

¹ This is the case in Lockwood (2018), Fraune and Knodt (2018), Forchtner (2019b), Huber (2020), Žuk and Szulecki (2020), Buzogány and Mohamad-Klotzbach (2022), Marquardt et al. (2022), and Küppers (2024).

² In contrast to Mudde, Stavrakakis, and others, I understand authoritarianism as the core ideology of the far right determined by the naturalisation of social inequality and a hierarchical social order. This implies not only a fixation on charismatic leaders but also ethnonationalism, classism, misogyny, and racism, as well as organicist imaginaries of society–nature relations.

linked to populism or populism remains analytically rather vaguely differentiated from authoritarianism. Both accounts perceive far-right *populist* ideology in several respects as hostile to promising climate politics. Essentially, this is attributed to the abstract, complex, and global character of climate change itself, which is hardly experienceable, in contrast to weather, and invites populist obstruction. As Lockwood (2018) argues, “RWP [right-wing populism] constructs elites as ‘liberal’ and cosmopolitan. [...] Climate change is the cosmopolitan issue par excellence” (p. 723). Indeed, the far right seems to follow this fundamental hostility, as the honorary chairman of the German far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) affirms: “In short, environmental protection is conservative, climate protection is left-wing” (Gauland 2020, p. 2, own translation). If emphasising the populist nature of far-right obstruction, ideational accounts demonstrate how far-right constructions of “the people” lead to climate obstruction. It is constructed as being fundamentally deceived by climate elites pursuing their interests at the expense of “pure” people knowing and doing better. However, as different ideational accounts have shown, accentuations in constructing “the people” and elites vary about the societal sphere addressed leading to specific obstructive stances. Addressing various social spheres, such as science, politics, economy, media, and culture, these different dimensions of far-right obstruction can be systematised in an ideal–typical way as follows.

The most broadly debated facet of far-right obstruction is its *science-related populism* (Mede and Schäfer 2020) that constructs climate scientists as untruthful academic elites and know-it-all conspiratorially pursuing their interests at the expense of “the people.” “The people,” in contrast, are constructed as being equipped with common sense and superior lay knowledge that is accompanied by contrarian counter-experts (Marquardt et al. 2022). This leads the far right to *primary obstruction* (Ekberg et al. 2023), i.e., the outright *denial* of climate scientific evidence by denying that climate change is happening, or denying its anthropogenic origin and negative impacts. While many far-right actors increasingly accept the anthropogenic nature of climate change, the German AfD remains a prominent advocate of far-right denialism today (Forchtner 2019b).

In addition, far-right obstruction is characterised by mistrust of democratic institutions, political opponents, and climate movements. They are constructed as selfish elites shutting “the people” out of power. Presenting the general will of “the people” and national sovereignty in danger, the far right pursues *discourses of climate delay* ranging from “redirecting responsibility” to “pushing nontransformative solutions,” “emphasising the downsides” of climate policies or “surrender” (Lamb et al. 2020). In general, the far right interprets climate political agendas, on global governance level in particular, as cosmopolitan, alarmist, and excessive, in stark contrast to its own “realist” strategies struggling for *real* democracy (Fraune and Knodt 2018; Blühdorn and Butzlaff 2019). One prominent example is the misogynist framing of Greta Thunberg and female politicians as irrational scaremongers spreading hysteria (Vowles and Hultman 2021).

When emphasising the downsides of climate policies, the far right repeatedly warns against the economic consequences of climate change mitigation. Contrary to Lockwood’s (2018) claim that “*left wing populism* [...] constructs elites as [...] captured by business leaders” (p. 723) rather than right-wing populism, the far right

Table 1 Ideal–typical dimensions of far-right obstruction by constructing “the people” and “the elites” in various social spheres

	Science	Politics	Economy	Media	Culture
Construction of elites	Untruthful transnational climate scientific community	Power-crawling and hysterical political institutions and actors	Subsidised and greedy global green capital	Alarmist and partisan traditional media	Lifestyle police of <i>anywheres</i> , enforcing political correctness and cancel culture
Construction of the people	Equipped with rational common sense and counterknowledge	General will and national sovereignty	Honest workers, especially in fossil fuel industry	Critical followers and alternative media	Rural <i>somewheres</i> and culture warriors
Dimension of obstruction	Denial	Delay	Delay	Delay	Delay

portrays green business as greedy elites seeking to profit from ecological modernisation. They are accused of depriving the “hardworking people” of their fair share, exposing the people to economic hardship and putting the privileged competitiveness of the national economy at risk (Ottens and Weisskircher 2022; Küppers 2024). Fatefully tying the wealth of “the people” to fossil energy production, the far right contrarily frames business models of fossil capital as desirable free-market enterprise.³

If it does not support far-right agendas, the far right also frames traditional media as elitist, spreading “fake news” or being alarmist about climate change (Zuk and Szulecki 2020). Consequently, the far right frequently falls back on its own alternative media infrastructures to distribute its oppositional countervisions (Forchtner et al. 2018). Additionally, a more comprehensive urban and cosmopolitan elite is portrayed as being responsible for progressive cultural change at “the people’s” expense. Linking them to an allegedly unbounded “political correctness” and “cancel culture,” climate change mitigation agendas are portrayed as elite projects that restrict people “from living the lives they want to lead” (Atkins 2023, p. 2). Commonly being hostile to vegetarian or vegan diets, climate-friendly technologies, and speed restrictions on motorways, the far right presents itself as a rebellious culture warrior against green heteronomy (Blühdorn and Butzlaff 2019; Boykoff 2024).

2.2 The Anti-Populist Response and the Climate Political Line of Conflict

In sum, ideational approaches to populism show that far-right constructions of “the people” and “the elites” contribute to climate obstruction by framing agendas of climate mitigation as orchestrated projects of detached elites in various social spheres to deceive “the people” and the common good. As the tentative summary in Table 1 indicates, ideational accounts are able to highlight how far-right ideologies advo-

³ In fact, the origins of the climate change countermovement have been repeatedly identified in fossil capital, conservatism, their think tanks, and astroturf organisations (Dunlap and McCright 2011).

cate denial and delay. What is mostly missing, however, is how far-right obstruction relates to obstruction beyond the far right, its political discourse and social conditions, and what Ekberg et al. (2023) identify as *tertiary obstruction*, i.e., inaction and social inertia.

Additionally, although Huber (2020) argues that populist attitudes are closely related to obstructionist attitudes on the demand side, research on the supply side of far-right obstruction occasionally remains rather opaque regarding whether populism or authoritarianism drives climate obstruction by far-right actors. This is evident in the case of Lockwood (2018), for example, exploring “why RWP [right-wing populist] supporters and parties so frequently express hostility to the climate agenda” (p. 713). On the one hand, he notes that left-wing populism is not hostile to climate policy and makes a conceptual distinction between “socially conservative and nationalist value dimensions” and the “‘thin’ core ideology of populism” (p. 723). Along this distinction he highlights that both nationalism as well as the populist critique of opaque policymaking by political and scientific elites cause far-right obstruction. On the other hand, these dimensions seem to conflate in the identification of a “hostility to liberal, cosmopolitan elites” (p. 723), so that in the end it remains unclear whether nationalism or populism is ultimately responsible for far-right obstruction. At least the terminology of a “*populist hostility*” (p. 713; emphasis added) seems to suggest that populism is ultimately to blame. Hence, he and others—subscribing to ideational approaches to populism—extend the pejorative understanding of far-right populism by suggesting that it is not only moralist and anti-pluralist but also “hostile to the climate agenda” (Lockwood 2018, p. 718). Far-right populism appears irrational considering denial and irresponsible considering delay in presenting simplistic and retrotopian solutions to a complex and global problem.

Consequently, ideational accounts implicitly or explicitly suggest that the far right is causing climate political polarisation (Fraune and Knodt 2018) that is resulting in a climate political conflict line between the populist backlash against the climate agenda and the defence of rational and responsible climate political consensus (Ottani and Weisskircher 2022). If the ideological basis for far-right obstruction is identified in populism rather than authoritarianism, this not only descriptive-analytically implies location of the climate political line of conflict between populism and anti-populism, but it also normative-politically implies an anti-populist response to far-right obstruction. Extending Kim’s distinction between “thick” and “thin” anti-populism, anti-populism can be understood in unspecific, thick, or thin ways. An unspecific concept of anti-populism perceives it as a mere opposition or response to (far-right) populism, remaining indifferent to the question of whether the main problem with the political opponent is due to populism or to its host ideologies such as racism, authoritarianism, or others. Caiani and Eren (2023), are, for example, rather unspecific in this regard, considering anti-populism as “antagonistic language” opposing “populism on the core aspect of the construction of the people, proposing a different one” (p. 378; see also Jörke and Selk 2015). While this conceptualisation remains unspecific about this response being anti-, non-populist, or populist itself, the thick conceptualisation of anti-populism by Stavrakakis et al. (2018) suggests to understand it as the very antithesis of populism that presents *populism* as “the synecdoche of an omnipresent evil and associated with irresponsibility, demagoguery,

immorality, corruption, destruction, and irrationalism” (p. 19) and delegitimises the appeal to the people via elitism and meritocracy. Adding further nuance, Kim (2018) distinguishes between “thin” and “thick” anti-populism. While the former limits its scope to specific policy fields or specific actors, the latter rejects populist challenges as such. Ideational approaches to the relation of far-right ideologies and obstruction largely keep silent about specific responses as well as discursive and social context conditions. However, all three varieties of anti-populism can be observed in climate political discourse.

3 The Hypocrisy of Anti-Populist Obstruction: The Discursive–Relational Account

Discursive approaches to populism seem to be better equipped to analyse and critically evaluate responses to far-right obstruction, since they—in contrast to the rather isolating perspective of far-right obstruction by ideational approaches—emphasise that populism cannot be understood in isolation but only in a discursive–political context in light of the mutual constitution of populism and anti-populism (Stavrakakis 2014; Moffitt 2018; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2019). They are a reminder that populism today primarily takes the form of a pejorative external attribution, the rejection of which contours liberal–democratic self-descriptions in public debates (see also Séville 2021). Discursive approaches to populism are, however, largely missing in accounts of climate obstruction.⁴

Building on the discourse theory developed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and Laclau’s (2005) theory of populism, discursive approaches reject the assumption that populism is determined by preexisting ideologies and emphasise the primacy of meaning-making in the contingent process of constructing social reality and “the people” in articulations unifying particularity (de Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). Accordingly, populism is understood as strategic discourse, one possible *form* of struggle contesting hegemony and as “something that is *done*” (Moffitt 2016, p. 23). Consequently, discursive approaches argue, in contrast to ideational approaches, that populism is not necessarily problematically moralist and anti-pluralist, let alone anti-democratic, but is normatively neutral (Katsambekis 2022). Rather, non-populist elements, they highlight, are decisive for the normative assessment of populism (de Cleen et al. 2018; Kim 2022). Emphasising the relational mutual co-constitution of populism and anti-populism, discursive approaches stress that the potential of populism to contest post-political hegemony triggers anti-populist responses. In fact, “populists are not the only ones engaging in blame attribution, simplistic solutions and moral condemnation” (Stavrakakis et al. 2018). Presenting populism as a pathological deviation from the normality of rational and responsible policymaking, the hegemonic bloc can present itself as the only viable solution to crises and as a bulwark against the populist challenge (Stavrakakis 2018). By suppressing political conflict and “neglecting the elite exclusions that have always been core preoccupations of populism” (Meyer 2024b, pp. 259–260), thick anti-populism abandons

⁴ Exceptions are Blühdorn and Butzlaff (2019) and Paterson et al. (2024).

pluralism, popular sovereignty, and claims to equality to stabilise the status quo qua depoliticisation. Against this backdrop, advocates of discursive approaches have rightly warned that anti-populism fuels a “conflation of populism with nationalism” (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, p. 303). In addition to the analytical problem that this conflation makes it more difficult to identify “the specificity of the populist dimension of populist politics” (p. 304), it generates the normative problem that it condemns counter-hegemonic struggle as such. Therefore, anti-populism contributes to a *populist hype* that—as Glynos and Mondon (2016) and others have repeatedly highlighted—euphemises authoritarian and racist politics as well as legitimises the mainstreaming of the far right by associating its agendas with the general will while simultaneously concealing authoritarian discourse beyond the far right.

3.1 The Strategic–Authoritarian Character of Far-Right Climate Obstruction

What does this mean for understanding the relation of populism, anti-populism, and climate obstruction? First, climate obstruction does not appear to be intrinsically linked to specific ideologies, be they populist or far-right ideologies, but rather is something that is *done* in a wider context of hegemonic struggle. Considering the presence of ecologist populism (Meyer 2008), it is evident that populism does not necessarily advocate obstructionist thought and practice; rather, populist intentions appear to be normatively neutral in this regard. Against this backdrop, discursive approaches to populism caution against analytically conflating populism with authoritarianism and signal that far-right obstruction might originate in authoritarianism rather than populism. In contrast to left-wing populism, advocates of discursive approaches argue, the far right constructs “the people” based on the nodal point of *people-as-nation* rather than “the people” as *underdog* (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). Indeed, on the demand side, studies diverging from Huber (2020) suggest that authoritarian rather than populist attitudes are much more predictive of obstructionist attitudes (Jylhä and Hellmer 2020; Kulin et al. 2021). Also on the demand side, several dimensions of far-right obstruction (systematised in Table 1) indicate that the construction of “the people” and elites by far-right obstruction is continuously linked to ethnonationalism. The climate scientific community is opposed by the far right not only because it holds epistemic power but also because it is identified as transnationally organised, denying *ethnationally grounded* common sense and counter-knowledge. The same applies to the construction of political elites and institutions. They are questioned not only because they pursue their vested interests but also because they are accused of pursuing *uprooted cosmopolitan* interests and *transnational* cooperation that threaten national sovereignty and the self-determination of an ethnicised *demos*. Furthermore, green capitalism and its actors are described as *globalists* operating against the economic interests of ethnicised workers and the national economy, which is competing against other national economies in the global market. “Green culture” is attacked as detached and degenerate, also based on claims of liberation and self-determination for a “native” section of the people rather than a struggle for the emancipation of all who are affected by inequality and alienation (Blühdorn and Butzlaff 2019).

On the one hand, there are, therefore, some indications that authoritarian ideas regarding, for instance, masculinity and ethnic superiority are strongly linked to fossilism (Daggett 2018; Malm and The Zetkin Collective 2021). On the other hand, by conceptualising populism as a strategic discourse, discursive approaches to populism point to the strategic dimension of far-right denial (Buzogány and Mohamad-Klotzbach 2022). As the far right presents itself as a democratic liberator of “the people” in opposition to liberal governments—which is occasionally maintained in office, although democratic institutions are potentially dismantled towards electoral autocracies—denial and delay seem to offer the far right the opportunity to singularise and distance itself from political competitors. Supposedly representing the only viable opposition against an alleged climate political consensus, the far right can strategically profit from discursive opportunity structures (Paterson et al. 2024) and opportunistically pick up denialist and sceptical climate change beliefs and policy attitudes in the electorate (Kulin et al. 2021). Highlighting this strategic dimension offers a potential explanation of the heterogeneity of far-right climate discourse (Selk and Kemmerzell 2022) and shifts of far-right discourse from denial to delay (Forchtner and Lubarda 2023), as well as the pursuit of far-right climate political agendas of authoritarian resilience such as *ecobordering* (Turner and Bailey 2022) and eco-fascist scenarios of *batteries, bombs, and borders* (Moore and Roberts 2022).

3.2 Anti-Populist Climate Obstruction

In addition to the strategic–authoritarian character of far-right obstruction, discursive approaches to populism suggest that anti-populist responses to far-right contestations of the so-called climate political consensus must be considered in order to understand climate obstruction. Although empirical evidence is hardly available yet, an anti-populist alliance clearly has emerged enabling liberal-democratic self-descriptions as climate-politically realistic and responsible by moralising against far-right *denial* (Meyer 2024a, 2024b). As the supposed antithesis to far-right populist obstruction, anti-populist responses present populist climate politics as polarising, irrational, irresponsible, and retrotopian solutions to complex and long-term problems (Fraune and Knodt 2018; Selk and Kemmerzell 2022). Being by its very nature abstract, uncertain, and technical, it is argued that climate change “increases the social distance between ordinary citizens and environmental politics” (Böhmelt 2021) and puts elites in a privileged position to mitigate and adapt to climate change. Therefore, anti-populist counter-strategies include demands to “follow the science,” transnational cooperation of the political class to steer but also deliberate with “the people,” ecological modernisation of the economy towards green growth, rebuilding of trust in traditional media providing information about climate politics and moralisation.

Most prominently, the portrayal of far-right *denial* as post-truth politics evokes anti-populist responses that advocate for climate politics based on scientific evidence and advice. While an anti-populist response to *science rejectionism*, Meyer (2024a) convincingly argues, may have its merits, it all too often comes with a demand for elitist and technocratic solutions. Considering expert knowledge about facts as

the ultimate yardstick for evaluating policies, such solutions are “dangerously misleading, careless by design, and exclusionary” (p. 14). Against this backdrop, anti-populist climate discourse ultimately contributes to climate obstruction itself (Zulianello and Ceccobelli 2020). The populism/anti-populism divide gets even more blurry when considering *delay*. The very actors insisting on allegedly rational and pragmatic solutions bring forward discourses of delay in line with the dimension of far-right obstruction by economic nationalism, such as emphasising the economic downsides of climate policies for national economic growth or strategic appeals to social justice and well-being. Claiming that prohibitive laws and regulations, as well as moralism, are means of green elites who are detached from the ordinary people, some liberal elites even adopt populist strategies while presenting themselves as realist anti-populist opponents of both far-right denial and radical climate movements (Lamb et al. 2020). Enabling intended or unintended *discourse coalitions* (Hajer 1997) of far-right and “mainstream” obstruction, the anti-populist alliance against far-right obstruction, therefore, seems to be based on a “thin” anti-populism (Kim 2018): opposing far-right denial on an anti-populist basis while occasionally adopting populist discourses of delay.

As the notion of post-truth indicates, these considerations about anti-populist discourse contributing to climate obstruction point beyond denial and delay towards climate obstruction as inaction and comprehensive *socio-political inertia*. Serving to shift the debate about climate political alternatives in the direction of a true/untrue dichotomy, anti-populist obstruction stabilises the *post-politics* of climate change that is comprehensively debated in environmental political theory (Swyngedouw 2010, 2022; Blühdorn 2013; Machin 2013). Swyngedouw (2022) has argued repeatedly that climate change and ecology have become “the new opium for the masses” (p. 907), enabling a post-political condition in which political conflicts and pluralism have been replaced by agendas of neoliberalism, ecological modernisation, and green growth. This perspective acknowledges that although climate change may be abstract, complex, and uncertain, so are most social and socio-ecological problems. Instead of being a scientific-technological problem, climate change should be understood as inescapably political. In contrast to political conflict, however, climate political discourse focuses on an externalised enemy (CO₂) threatening a presumed harmonious climate-society relation (Swyngedouw 2022). Furthermore, by lacking a privileged political subject because of the logic of a “universal humanitarian threat” (Swyngedouw 2010, p. 221), the hegemonic environmental and climate discourse does not aim at a comprehensive transformation of the existing socio-ecological order but, rather, puts responsibility on the individual and anticipates a *socio-technical fix* by ecomodernist elites.

All these elements play significant roles in the anti-populist response to far-right obstruction that is deeply inscribed in post-political agendas of ecological modernisation.⁵ While making populism responsible for climate obstruction, it posits climate change as a threat to humanity to be fixed by expertocratic and technocratic elites

⁵ Swyngedouw (2010, 2022) has repeatedly associated this postpolitical discourse with a populist logic. Meyer (2024b, p. 11), however, convincingly argues that Swyngedouw’s approach to populism seems to conflate populism with anti-populism.

(Meyer 2024b). By linking expertocratic knowledge to a signifier of complexity, it externalises the simplifying political critique of a supposed climate political consensus to the irrational beyond politics. Accordingly, the anti-populist response can be evaluated as ambivalent as far-right obstruction itself. Far-right obstruction, on the one hand, contests the post-political consensus on climate change while closing the debate by *science rejectionism* (Meyer 2024a) and *ethnonationalist reductionism* (Kim 2018). Anti-populism, on the other hand, accepts the necessity to reject science rejectionism while depoliticising climate change by moving political conflict into a true/untrue dichotomy, emphasising a logic of “we are all in this together” market-oriented and technocratic solutions, as well as moralisation and individualisation of responsibility (Meyer 2024b). Hence, the root causes of climate change remain unaffected, and by the moralist response to far-right obstruction, anti-populism becomes obstructive itself. Ultimately, the supposed conflict of populist obstruction and anti-populist response resolves itself in a post-political condition causing comprehensive *socio-political inertia* rather than denial or delay.

In sum, going beyond ideational accounts, discursive approaches to populism suggest a strategic-authoritarian nature of far-right denial and delay that has to be considered within its discursive-political context. Against this backdrop, one could ask, in line with Glynos and Mondon (2016), whether nationalist reductionism and economic and political nationalism also play significant roles in climate discourse beyond the far right, where demands of national energy security and global market advantages become ever more prominent. By introducing the concept of anti-populism, discursive approaches point to the importance of considering anti-populist delay and its relation to far-right obstruction. From this perspective, the relation between populism, anti-populism, and climate obstruction turns out to be a contingent one rather than a conflict line of denialists and responsible climate political agents, as common good-versus-evil narratives in public debates all too often assert. Most importantly, a discursive perspective on populism transcends the ideational focus on denial and delay by revealing how anti-populist responses contribute to post-political inertia. These structures of climate obstruction and inequality beyond the far right, however, are concealed by a *populist hype* in climate discourse that, on the one hand, condemns far-right populist obstruction and presents anti-populism as a viable response against the populist challenge, but on the other hand legitimises far-right obstruction by associating it with the general will.

3.3 The Viable Road of Ecologist Populism?

Descriptive-analytically, discursive approaches, therefore, enable to highlight how thin anti-populism occasionally overlaps with far-right obstruction and how anti-populist discourse contributes to obstruction via post-political inertia and implies understanding of the relation of populism, anti-populism, and climate obstruction as contingent. Since the populist challenge reveals the depoliticisation of climate politics, it can be argued with Laclau (2005) that populism is “the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution” (p. 67) of climate politics as such. Considering its normative-political dimension, it seems misguided to accuse discursive approaches of a normativity that identifies populism with the

political as such since the “royal road” argument may also be interpreted in ways that “populism simply takes on a metaphorical character for the political insofar as the ingredients of the latter emerge in exemplary fashion in populism” (Kim 2022, p. 500). Therefore, populism appears to be just one of various forms of climate political struggle. However, since Laclau, Mouffe (2018), and Stavrakakis (2014) come out in favour of a populist strategy as the most viable—although perhaps not the most desirable—strategy to contest current post-democratic conjuncture in diverse political interventions, it seems fair to attest discursive approaches at least a strategic proximity to populist means for radical-democratic and emancipatory ends (Kim 2022).

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that Mouffe (2022) herself and others recently called for an ecologist climate populism (Beeson 2019; Bosworth 2022a; Meyer 2024a, b). Claiming that populism and far-right obstruction are “two different problems for political ecology” (Bosworth 2022b), ecologist populism is portrayed as a strategic capacity to undermine both far-right obstruction and post-democratic inertia. Since the diversity of many new environmental and climate justice movements converges around a “desire for deeper democracy” (Bosworth 2022a, p. 4), it is argued that they can possibly be united in an emancipatory populist strategy. Considering the popular appeal of populist demands, it is assumed that the adoption of a populist discourse enables ecologism to resonate with everyday lives of broader majorities of the people and is more successful in contesting far-right obstruction and fossil hegemony (Bosworth 2022a, b; Meyer 2024b). Academic proponents of an ecologist climate populism note that populist reasoning can be identified in existing environmental and climate justice movements, emphasising both “the people” as the central point of reference and the problems of exclusionary, elitist, and technocratic climate policies. While this populist nature of climate movements remains controversial (Zulianello and Ceccobelli 2020; Kemmerzell et al. 2021), academic advocates of eco-populism, such as Beeson (2019), derive that populism is a promising strategy to “win the support of those who feel marginalized rather than empowered by globalization and the transformation of the old order” (pp. 73–74), since it reveals “how the ‘real people’ around the world are affected by environmental degradation while globalized elites reap profits by using carbon-intensive technologies” (Buzogány and Mohamad-Klotzbach 2022, p. 322). Hence, academic proponents for an ecologist populism link popular sovereignty to the most marginalised, most vulnerable, and least resilient constituents of society that are least responsible for causing climate change (Bosworth 2022a; Meyer 2024b). Rejecting the anti-populist temptation, advocates for an ecologist populism insist on opening science to counterknowledge, opening policymaking to bottom-up participation and mobilisation, politicising inequality, experimenting with alternative ways of consuming and producing, establishing emancipatory media channels, and politicising culture and unsustainable lifestyles. Ecologist populism, it is argued, ultimately paves the way for the advancement of emancipatory, equality-focused climate politics.

Table 2 Discursive struggles in a tacit alliance: far-right, anti-populist, and eco-populist climate obstruction

	Science	Politics	Economy	Media	Culture
Far-right climate obstruction	Untruthful transnational climate science vs. counter-knowledge of ethnicised people	Power-craving transnational politicians vs. general will and national sovereignty	Greedy globalist green capital vs. honest workers in fossil fuel industry	Alarmist and partisan traditional media vs. alternative media	Cosmopolitan lifestyle police vs. culture warriors of rural “somewheres”
Anti-populist climate obstruction	“Follow the science”	Steering of the political class and deliberation in a climate emergency	Green growth and ecological modernisation	Rebuilding of trust in traditional media	Moralisation against climate-unfriendly lifestyles
Ecologist populism	Open to popular counterexpertise	Bottom-up mobilisation	Politicising inequality and experimentation	Controlling function of alternative media	Politicising culture

4 Societal Boundaries of Eco-Populism and the Tacit Alliance in Obstruction

But how fertile is the social soil on which eco-populism falls? How promising are current social conditions for eco-populism? What are the chances that the transformative potential of eco-populism will actually unleash widespread support for emancipatory climate politics in competition with other discursive offers—tentatively summarised in Table 2? When asking these questions, one does not necessarily fall into speculation or the objectivist trap of reducing populism to a mere symptom of social change, which has been repeatedly criticised (de Cleen et al. 2018). The populist supply side meets its potential demand at a specific historical juncture, and the political subjectivities populism seeks to construct are not situated in a “society as a totally open discursive field” (Hall and Grossberg 1986, p. 56). Rather, “socio-economic and socio-cultural developments are crucial in explaining the evolution and success or failure of populist (and other) political projects” (de Cleen et al. 2018, p. 651). Therefore, any advocacy for eco-populism requires explicit justification, as Kim (2022) argues, of “why populism, of all the possible forms of politics, is the most suitable one in a given context” (p. 501).

At present, reasonable doubts are justified. So far, the fourth wave of the far right has gained much broader resonance in late-modern societies of the Global North than left-wing and ecologist populism. One reason for this might be found in far-right climate obstruction. In Germany, for instance, Reusswig and Küpper (2023) highlight that almost half of the population “(also) favour regressive climate policy positions,” and a quarter are ambivalent, taking a progressive stance “but at the same time agree[ing] with positions of delay” (p. 311; own translation). Consequently, they conclude that via climate politics, “people well into the centre [...] can be seduced into supporting political violence by populist-authoritarian-rebellious to extreme-

right offers” (Reusswig and Küpper 2023, p. 313; own translation). Based on their empirical analysis of the distribution of social-ecological mentalities in the German social space, Eversberg and colleagues (2024) come to a similar conclusion:

“In the current political climate, all this amounts to a rapid withdrawal of support for any steps towards an ecological (let alone social) transformation that involves additional costs for the economy and private households. [...] Those parties that, at least rhetorically, stick to the need for far-reaching transformation now represent only a minority of the population” (p. 190; own translation).

These empirical findings on the distribution of attitudes and mentalities in the present indicate that late-modern subjects do not seem to wait for the possibility of supporting an eco-populist agenda. In addition to attitudes, which are potentially relatively open to discursive influence, more fundamental processes of social change can be observed. *Sustained unsustainability* is not limited to the far right but describes late-modern societies in their totality. Late-modern subjects are deeply embedded in these sociopolitical conditions of unsustainability (Blühdorn 2013; Brulle and Norgaard 2019). Hence, climate obstruction is far more integrated in late-modern subjects to be reduced to the current electorate of the far right, suggesting massive *societal boundaries of transformation* that ecologist populism may face. First, Decker et al. (2022) have pointed out that the integration of subjects in late-modern societies no longer takes place mainly through being subjected to the rule of a personalised authority but rather through *secondary authoritarianism*, i.e., the identification with an “abstract object-like idea, an institution or something else” (Decker 2019, p. 208). Taking post-war West Germany as an example, they show that a strong national economy fills the void left by a personalised authority and enables a sense of community and national pride: “Followers agree to align their actions and lives to the needs of a growth economy. They agree to subordinate any other of their desires and wishes under the rule of the authority, no matter how high the costs may be” (p. 210). This identification with national economic growth stands in stark contrast to the agendas of ecologist populism, which mostly assume very plausibly that a shift away from growth and towards a degrowth society is necessary to tackle the causes of climate change. Far-right climate obstruction and the anti-populist response of green growth, in contrast, do not seem to encounter the same obstacles of resonance.

Second, Lessenich’s (2019a, b) work on the *externalisation society* points in the same direction, as he emphasises that not only ruling elites but also all other members of society benefit from mechanisms of externalisation like expropriation, exploitation, devaluation, closure, and deliberate ignorance. Externalising societal and ecological costs, these mechanisms enable the wealth of late-modern societies but are responsible for global inequality and the climate crisis. To realise their legitimate claim to social participation and maintain their everyday practices and standard of living, late-modern subjects are inevitably forced into *subaltern domination* (Lessenich 2019b, p. 65; own translation) and a “necessary act of complicity” (Lessenich 2019a, p. 143) enabling the reproduction of externalisation. Driven by the “collective fear of the end of the ‘good life’ at the expense of others,” a “tacit agreement between political elites and the people” emerges to push discourses of

“collective self-deception” (Lessenich 2019a, p. 124–125). In this constellation, eco-populist agendas presumably encounter massive resistance beyond anti-populist elites. The agenda of the far right, however, is precisely in favour of defending this *imperial mode of living* (Brand and Wissen 2021), even if these self-illusions can no longer be maintained (Eversberg 2018).

Third, these signs of societal boundaries of the potential resonance of eco-populism are further confirmed by Blühdorn (2013, 2017). He highlights that not only denial and delay, but also the origin of the *post-democratic turn* cannot be reduced to elite interests but, rather, lies in the transformation of the norm of the autonomous subject, i.e., a *second-order emancipation* in the course of ongoing individualisation. Pushed also by emancipatory agendas that have never managed to mediate contradictions between the promise of material participation through growth and redistribution on one side and ecological limitation on the other, late-modern subjects, he argues, have emancipated themselves from the burden of social responsibility for the sake of consumerist self-determination (Blühdorn 2022a). Since “prevalent forms of self-determination and self-realisation are more firmly than ever based on steadily expanding and accelerating consumption,” the far right should be interpreted as an expression of a transmuted project of emancipation that democratically organises *sustained unsustainability* and “politics of exclusion, which for contemporary aspirations and expectations of self-realization is *conditio sine qua non*” (Blühdorn and Butzlaff 2019, p. 206).

The character of currently prevailing late-modern subjectivities bound to *secondary authoritarianism*, *subaltern domination*, and *second-order emancipation* poses a fundamental “problem of sacrifice” (Kemmerzell et al. 2021; own translation) to ecologist climate populism. From this perspective, climate obstruction might indeed be understood not only as an unintended consequence of a postpolitical condition in favour of elites. Although they rightly highlight the contingent nature of the relation between populism and climate denial and the ethnonationalist nature of far-right obstruction, discursive approaches fail to address this fundamental climate political problem of a socially widespread prescription to the defence of an unsustainable mode of living by suggesting that an effective climate populism finds natural resonance with “the people.” In fact, climate obstruction proves to be a “pathological normalcy” (Mudde 2010) rather than a normal pathology of the far right. How does a self-proclaimed emancipatory eco-populism resolve the tension between a promise of material improvement of “the people”—by economic growth and redistribution—and the ecologist desire for limitation, sufficiency, and sacrifice (Blühdorn 2022a)? As long as it does not resolve this tension, the popularity of ecologist climate populism will be highly limited. Against this backdrop, a form of climate obstruction becomes visible that goes beyond strategies of the notorious climate political “bad guys,” i.e., the far right and fossil capital, their discourses of denial and delay, and ecomodernist postpolitical inertia. Other party families and social movement organisations pursuing ineffective strategies might also contribute to delay and inaction. If academic advocates of ecologist climate populism stay in the “post-Marxist comfort zone” (Blühdorn 2022b) by leaving societal boundaries of transformation and the problem of sacrifice unaddressed, they will unintentionally contribute to climate obstruction by idealising “the people” and spreading unwar-

ranted responses to far-right and anti-populist obstruction. Even if these different forms of obstruction are located at different analytical levels, far-right obstruction, anti-populist, and eco-populist responses, therefore, end up in a tacit alliance in climate obstruction instead of establishing a conflict line or a contingent relation.

5 Moving Beyond the Populist Hype

The aim of this article has been to explore the nexus of anti-/populism and climate obstruction by means of a discussion of the potential descriptive-analytical contributions and normative-political implications of different approaches to populism in research on (far-right) climate obstruction. *Ideational* approaches to populism analytically illuminate how far-right denial and delay relate to different constructions of “the people” and “the elites” in various social spheres. By default, I have argued, their pejorative understanding of populism leads to the implicit assumption of a climate political conflict line of obstructive populism and anti-populism and a normative-political partisanship for anti-populism. *Discursive* approaches to populism, which are largely absent in research on (far-right) climate obstruction, raise awareness about the limitations of ideational approaches by suggesting to analytically highlight the strategic-authoritarian character of far-right obstruction. Due to the explicit conceptualisation of populism and anti-populism as mutually co-constituted, they have also allowed me to show that anti-populist responses qua thin anti-populism contribute to climate delay, as they oppose denial but advocate populist discourses of delay and qua thick anti-populism by depoliticising climate politics. Therefore, they suggest that populism and climate obstruction is rather a contingent relation. Normative-politically, discursive approaches not only lead to emphasise how the populist hype problematically euphemises and legitimises authoritarian obstruction but also show a strategic proximity to eco-populist agendas. Finally, I have argued that an *social-theoretically informed* perspective on the social resonance conditions of eco-populism points analytically to massive societal boundaries of transformation that fuel the mainstreaming and normalisation of the far right but are mostly ignored in the academic praise of eco-populist strategies. Without addressing its unresolved tension between agendas of inclusion through the redistribution of economic growth and agendas of ecological limitation, these praises of eco-populism raise suspicions that they contribute to delay themselves by promoting unwarranted or even ineffective climate political strategies to overcome climate obstruction—ultimately being part of a tacit alliance in obstruction.

If far-right populism, anti-populism, and ecologist populism result in a tacit alliance in obstruction, what follows for research on climate obstruction? On the one hand, the observation of this tacit alliance demands further empirical description and analysis of discursive similarities and differences of far-right and non-far-right climate obstruction. Additionally, it draws attention to how non-populist and anti-populist reactions to far-right obstruction contribute to the eclipse of obstruction beyond the far right. On the other hand, what follows is not the realisation of the need to drop the label *environmental populism*, as Sconfienza (2022) suggests, but, as suggested by critiques of the populist hype, to leave the populist hype behind

for good. This means continuing to analyse the strategic–authoritarian character of far-right climate obstruction. Additionally, research on climate obstruction would do better to focus on the commonalities and contradictions within a tacit alliance in climate obstruction and how it mutually stabilises the defence of an unsustainable and imperial mode of living rather than disputing the good or bad climate political nature of populism. This applies not only to far-right and liberal actors but also to emancipatory actors and their discursive strategies to counter climate obstruction. In the context of ongoing mainstreaming and normalisation of the far right and increasing debates about the risks of consequences of climate change, such as the occurrence of extreme weather events, the commonalities of far-right and non–far-right obstruction might increasingly come to the fore, enabling surprising climate political discourse coalitions in favour of an authoritarian defence of an unsustainable and imperial mode of living. This coalition may focus not on mitigation but on adaptation and resilience, with potential social resonance well beyond the far right (Dannemann 2023). Now more than ever, the analytical task of research on climate obstruction seems to be to shed light on these multiple entanglements and go beyond the notorious climate political “bad guys.”

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