What makes climate a populist issue?

Jonathan White

September 2023

The Centre for Climate Change Economics and Policy (CCCEP) was established by the University of Leeds and the London School of Economics and Political Science in 2008 to advance public and private action on climate change through innovative, rigorous research. The Centre is funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council. Its third phase started in October 2018 with seven projects:

1. Low-carbon, climate-resilient cities
2. Sustainable infrastructure finance
3. Low-carbon industrial strategies in challenging contexts
4. Integrating climate and development policies for 'climate compatible development'
5. Competitiveness in the low-carbon economy
6. Incentives for behaviour change
7. Climate information for adaptation

More information about CCCEP is available at www.cccep.ac.uk

The Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment was established by the London School of Economics and Political Science in 2008 to bring together international expertise on economics, finance, geography, the environment, international development and political economy to create a world-leading centre for policy-relevant research and training. The Institute is funded by the Grantham Foundation for the Protection of the Environment and a number of other sources. It has 13 broad research areas:

1. Biodiversity
2. Climate change adaptation and resilience
3. Climate change governance, legislation and litigation
4. Climate, health and environment
5. Environmental behaviour
6. Environmental economic theory
7. Environmental policy evaluation
8. International climate politics
9. Science and impacts of climate change
10. Sustainable public and private finance
11. Sustainable natural resources
12. Transition to zero emissions growth
13. UK national and local climate policies

More information about the Grantham Research Institute is available at: www.lse.ac.uk/GranthamInstitute

What makes Climate Change a Populist Issue?

Jonathan White
Professor of Politics, London School of Economics
orcid.org/0000-0002-4668-698X

Migration, identity and the distribution of wealth and power were some of the key mobilising themes for movements classed as populist over the 2010s. This paper examines the potential of climate change to be drawn into populist politics, as a factor that aggravates existing concerns and one that raises new questions. Populism, the paper suggests, finds resonance in the critique of political necessity, and prospers in emergency settings where policy is rationalised in these terms. As global warming comes to be framed as an emergency, it becomes a natural target for populist critique. The paper's aim is to shed light on the politics of climate change, as well as to revisit what populism is and how much utility the concept retains.[1]

In considering the relations between populism and climate change, there are at least two paths one can take. The more ambitious one treats climate change as something that increasingly permeates all aspects of politics, whether openly referenced or not. From this perspective, it is in no sense a standalone issue, and its political effects are irreducible to the positions explicitly taken on it. Migration, economics and geopolitics are all in some sense 'climate change issues', and the implications for populism should be examined in the round. While there is much to be said for this comprehensive approach, more in tune with the discourse of political actors themselves is to treat climate change as a theme in itself. Approaching it as an independent reference-point in political discourse, one can examine what appeal it holds for the movements and parties we tend to classify as populist. This is the sense in which I engage the question 'what makes climate change a populist issue?'

In some ways the answer is clear. The constitutive features of populism – anti-elitism, appeals to 'the people', the celebration of ordinary wisdom – would seem to find plenty of traction here. Climate change tends to be publicly discussed as a technical issue that depends on expert knowledge, a transnational issue that requires globalist thinking, and an issue that invites alternative ways of living and post-material values (sustainability, diversity etc). As in some sense the very opposite of a populist issue, it presents a perfect target for those wanting to assert the importance of commonsense, the welfare of a bounded people, and traditionalist outlooks

over the unconventional lifestyles of an elite. In the form of a negation, it would seem to fit smoothly into the populist imaginary, as others have observed (Buzogány and Mohamad-Klotzbach 2022; Marquardt, Oliveira & Lederer 2022).

But such a reading misses something important. One of the stand-out features of climate change today is that it is approached as an emergency – something necessitating an urgent response. It is framed as such in media discourse, and increasingly also by governments setting deadlines to reduce carbon emissions (albeit their rhetoric tends to exceed their actions). This emergency framing is significant: it casts politics as about responding to external demands, as a politics of *necessity* rather than choice. As I shall argue, what goes by the name of populism tends to be something presenting itself in contra-distinction as a politics of *volition*. Recent history suggests populists have often prospered by promising agency, i.e. the capacity to choose freely between options, in emergency contexts where others disavow that agency.

In the paper's first section, I present an account of populism in these terms, coming at the question as a scholar of European politics. I suggest we should be wary of assuming parties conventionally labelled as populist gain the bulk of their appeal *because* of their populist features. In political contexts characterised by the widespread denial of agency, one of the features that makes so-called populist parties stand out – their repudiation of the politics of necessity – is a secondary one neither historically nor conceptually unique to populism. What matters are tendencies in democracy and political representation more generally: I depart, in other words, both from structural accounts of populism that focus on socio-economic or cultural change, and from ideological accounts that focus on features unique to populism (Lockwood 2018).

The second section traces this interplay between the politics of necessity and volition in connection with climate change. As the latter comes increasingly to be cast as an emergency, demanding a swift and science-driven response, contrarian voices query either the existence of an emergency or the justification of policy in these terms. The sceptical case against climate-change action is developed by populist actors as a critique of the disavowal of agency – of the

willingness of mainstream political actors to embrace discourses of functional necessity, the absence of political choice, and what to sceptics appears as a form of 'alarmism'. Nigel Farage's recent efforts to politicise Net Zero targets on greenhouse gas emissions, and the likeminded interventions of parties such as the German *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), offer useful illustration. If the existing scholarship remains thin on the exact mechanisms by which climate change becomes a populist issue (Meijers, van Drunen and Jacobs 2022, p.2), here I suggest lies one of the most important.

The third section explores what this implies for populist prospects in the coming years, and in particular why it is important – analytically and politically – to look beyond the core features of populist ideology. The disavowal of agency in the face of emergencies, and the countervailing desire for agency that so-called populists capitalise on, both seem unlikely to disappear anytime soon. Less clear is whether those who benefit need be the right-wing formations that have prospered in recent years. A critique of the disavowal of agency can be developed from progressive perspectives too, including by those committed to adequate and just forms of climate-change mitigation. This potential to recast the critique in less reactionary forms is one reason why identifying and analysing it is crucial.

Populism and the critique of necessity

The concept of populism has been widely used in recent years to describe mobilisations against the political establishment. Typically the term describes a combination of features that include an anti-elitist stance, an insistence on the category of 'the people', and an anti-pluralist assertion that the good of the people is incontestable (see *i.a.* Müller 2016; Rovira Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa Espejo, and Ostiguy 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Brubaker 2017). Additional features such as an hostility to procedure, and a nativist definition of where the

boundaries of the people lie, also tend to figure prominently. Some observers emphasise that these elements are logically interconnected and form a minimally coherent outlook (Müller 2016); others observe the political 'style' that goes with them, adopted selectively by political actors according to their changing circumstances and agendas (Moffitt 2016).

A key question is whether the features typically identified as definitional of populism are the principal drivers of its political support. This is an assumption commonly made, with voters said to be attracted by resentment of the establishment, the seductive idea of a primordial community, or the certainties of ethical monism. There is much to be said for such readings, and we shall return to elements of them shortly. But as others have observed, it is important to consider the political context in which populism finds resonance, which may confer on it connotations that go beyond its core ideological features.

Often this context has been one of 'constrained democracy' (Müller 2011), in which political choices are narrowed, either by non-majoritarian authorities and external powers or by political actors themselves. In western Europe, this has been connected in part with the constraints posed by European integration. In post-communist Europe, it has been to do with the constraints posed by preparations for EU accession. In North America, one may highlight the constraints posed by an anti-majoritarian constitution, and by a two-party system whose parties have converged on the fundamental socio-economic questions. In South America, these constraints intersect with post-colonial dependency. And across all these sites in recent decades one may point to the ascendancy of neoliberal economics and the 'TINA' narratives used to support it (Séville 2017). These conditions give rise to a tendency that can be called the *disavowal of political agency* – to policy-making pursued and publicly rationalised as responding to necessity.[2] The everyday encounter with powerlessness under conditions of precarious employment and the weakening of collective bargaining means such ideas also find their place in lived experience.

The politics of necessity is a longstanding feature of many contemporary democracies,

but it is amplified in conditions of emergency of the kind seen around the world after 2007.[3] What are emergencies, after all, if not situations in which executives cast themselves as lacking alternatives and acting in ways determined by external constraints. While emergency rule entails frenetic decision-making, its decisions are rationalised as unchosen and unavoidable in substance and timing. Authorities adopt far-reaching measures not so much on the grounds that they are intrinsically desirable as that they help ward off a threat. Whether in the form of socio-economic or political constraints, policy-makers present their hands as largely tied: emergency management is a reactive mode of policy-making. What we may call their *doings* – the sheer enactment of measures responding to events – is something governments may be keen to proclaim. But to express agency is not just to accept authorship but to say the actions were freely chosen. It is to say that other options – including perhaps inaction – were available, and hence that what was done was done of volition.

The mobilisations studied under the heading of populism gather, I suggest, a good portion of their wider appeal from the promise to restore political agency. They involve a rejection of the discourse and performance of necessity that emergency politics puts centre-stage. Expressions of anti-elitism resonate not just because of some general dislike of elites but because of how political and technocratic elites conduct themselves – specifically, their disavowal of political agency. From Europe to North America, Latin America and beyond, evocations of *the people* and popular will are a way of repudiating establishment notions of necessity and presenting a collective subject guided by its own volition, willing to decide its own hierarchy of values and its own ideas of what should be done.

In the contemporary analysis of populism, this basic claim to political agency tends to be downplayed or overlooked. The emphasis falls instead on the familiar touchstones – anti-elitism, monism, lay wisdom, and so on. Perhaps few would dispute that the question of agency is central – the history of political appeals in the name of 'the people' is, after all, bound up in the history of popular sovereignty (Kelly 2017; Rummens 2017; Canovan 2005) – but its significance tends

to be neglected. No less problematic is to treat the idea of acting on the people's will as part of the definition of populism, implying thereby that a reference-point shared by a much wider field of democratic ideologies is unique to just one (Mudde 2004, pp.541–63; cf. Ochoa Espejo 2017, p.623). My suggestion is rather the following: that the promise of agency is *not* conceptually distinctive to something called populism, yet is central to the contemporary appeal of the parties we tend to class as such. Further features typically ascribed to populism, such as an impatience with procedure and mediation (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti 2021; Finchelstein and Urbinati 2018), are consistent with this concern with agency, as things which may obstruct it or retard it.

This rejection of the politics of necessity has been visible in many of the mobilisations of recent years commonly classed as populist. In the 2016 Brexit referendum, the Leave campaign set itself explicitly against the ideas of impending threat and emergency it identified in the Remain campaign – against 'project fear', as it came to be known. It cast itself as the only political group willing to act decisively, while others stressed only what the country could ill afford to do. Such themes recurred in the discourse of European populists in the economic crisis of the 2010s (White 2019, ch. 6). Mixed in with the aspects typically characterised as populist were denunciations of the determining influence of economics, the EU as an emblem of *Diktat*, and the need to regain 'control'. The French Front National / National Rally and the Italian *Lega* were notable cases in point. Likewise the German AfD, whose name is a repudiation of the *Alternativlosigkeit* embodied by the Grand Coalition, was founded as an effort to challenge the discourses of economic necessity invoked in eurozone crisis management. In Latin America, left-populist mobilisations against neoliberal policies in the early 2000s were cast in much the same terms.

Similar motifs would then be visible over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic (White 2021). An aversion to necessity and 'doing' is one way to understand the slow, dismissive reactions to the Corona-crisis of governments led by such figures as Boris Johnson, Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro and their unwillingness to be cajoled into an emergency response by

the World Health Organization (WHO). Partly one may assume this was materially motivated – a desire to keep economies running and to retain the support of those most invested in them. But it also reflects a political outlook, one that entails hostility to being told how to respond to an emergency. 'I want' was apparently Johnson's verbal expression of choice in this period, in direct contrast to the preference of more centrist politicians for 'we need'.[4] To these contrarian voices, embracing a merely reactive mode of politics would be a capitulation, an expression of weakness, fear, or lack of ambition. This is also a way to understand a range of libertarian uprisings beyond the electoral arena, including anti-lockdown, anti-mask and anti-vaccination protests. Rather than just the efforts of individuals to avoid the constraints imposed on them, these were movements intended to dispute the governing response as a whole, seeking the 'end of the emergency regime'.[5]

Though they may invoke the value of democracy, certainly not all such political movements advocate mass involvement in decision-making. Nor is it always the will of 'the people' they invoke. Think of the irreverent personas of Johnson and Trump. Though sometimes talking the language of 'the people', such figures do not merely present themselves as responsive to popular will. They present themselves as acting as much on their *own* will, and invite their audience to identify with them for exactly that. In contrast to those elusive officials who rationalise their decisions by things external – socio-economic forces, the demands of peers – the Johnsons and Trumps of this world imply, by their words and a more general non-conformism, 'I make my own decisions'. There is alpha-male egotism as well as a sense of social superiority at play. Though very much a repudiation of necessity and a performance of agency, it is not quite an assertion of *popular* agency – voluntarism would be the better description.

To embrace the importance of choice and volition need not mean to abandon the language of compulsion altogether. One can cite the need to do something in a normative sense, as what follows from a certain set of values. To do so is to reiterate the importance of commitments freely embraced, of being guided by what one believes in. The critique of necessity we are

interested in is the critique of a style of governing in which these normative aspects are glossed over, in which technocrats and politicians rationalise their decisions as essential for stability and functionality. Their critics cast themselves as those willing to take a stand in a world where so much is said to be inevitable, as those willing to do what they *want* to do.

Populists are well placed then to draw support by defining themselves against the necessity-centred discourses of the national and supranational mainstream. A context of emergency provides them with the ideal conditions, since emergency politics puts ideas of necessity to the fore. To be sure, contemporary dissent is expressed in many registers, of which this is only one. Alongside this brand of '*anti*-emergency-politics', there is a pronounced strand of what one may call '*alter*-emergency-politics', in which challengers castigate authorities not for their preoccupation with an emergency but their preoccupation with the *wrong* emergency – for worrying about the pandemic, for instance, when they should be worrying about demographic decline (White 2024). Sometimes these currents may intersect. But varied as the contemporary landscape may be, the critique of necessity is a central feature. In a context of 'constrained democracy', disclaiming constraints is one way to stand out.

Climate populism

What then does climate change offer to populism? A number of studies have looked at the ways in which motifs of anti-elitism, people-definition and boundary-construction have been applied to climate change (Lockwood 2018, Huber *et al* 2020; Forchtner 2019; Meijers, van Drunen and Jacobs 2022; Buzogány and Mohamad-Klotzbach, 2022). These studies rightly highlight the mobilisatory potential that the topic holds for populism and adjacent formations such as nationalism and the radical right. That such attitudes as generalised scepticism towards experts and elites account for a significant part of their appeal seems plausible. First and foremost,

however, what climate change would seem to offer is fresh material with which to continue the themes outlined in the previous section. As the emergencies of the 2010s and early 2020s fade from view or lose their novelty, climate change provides an alternative context in which the promise of agency can be articulated.

The facilitating context is the increasing tendency for climate change to be framed in public debate as an emergency. While the actions of governments and other public authorities on climate change may still leave much to be desired, rhetorical commitment to the existence of a climate emergency is widespread. One major stimulus was the report of the UN's IPCC in October 2018 suggesting there were 'twelve years left' to act on de-carbonisation if the worst scenarios are to be avoided.[6] A climate emergency has been declared by public authorities around the world, and years such as 2030 and 2050 have acquired the status of critical deadlines for action. This scientific consensus on timescales, translated at Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings into negotiations over emissions targets, establishes a domain of public policy in which the politics of necessity is to the fore. While the material pressures are very real, their framing in these terms is a choice with implications. The language of emergency encourages a focus on political constraint and non-negotiable demands, often expressed in quantified form (Hulme 2019; McHugh, Lemos and Morrison 2021). Value choices do not go away – what counts as an emergency and as a viable response depends ultimately on what parts of the status quo one wants to preserve – but they tend to become latent or subordinate, all the talk instead being of functional pressure. The emergency framing accentuates a longer tendency towards depoliticization in environmental discourse, in which policies are justified less as extensions of normative priorities than as objective responses to external natural forces (Swyngedouw 2010; Invernizzi Accetti 2021).

Climate change has also been publicised as an emergency by social movements. One sees a kind of 'bottom-up' emergency politics, led by groups such as Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future, and others inspired by Greta Thunberg. Despite their movement status, these

groups are anything but populist (Zulianello and Ceccobelli 2020). Their reasoning resembles in many ways that of expert authorities, with an emphasis on policy needing to respond to the pressures identified by climate science. They too tend to articulate a politics of necessity, with the understandable goal of pressing authorities to act more rigorously.[7] Their actions come with some unintended consequences. As others have observed, the increasing salience of climate politics for right-wing populism in recent years, in particular since 2019, overlaps closely in time with the emergence of these movements and their climate-emergency politics (Schwörer and Fernández-García 2023, p.2). By bringing climate change further up the political agenda, and specifically by cultivating its appraisal as an emergency, they help establish a new reference-point for the critique of the politics of necessity.

In its simplest guise, this critique is expressed as a form of *denialism*. The reality of global warming, or the reality that it is manmade, or that it constitutes a bad thing, is rejected.[8] These are the standard positions associated with far-right populism in recent years, some variants being more prominent in some places than others (Küppers 2022; Forchtner 2019). Collectively they amount to a voluntarist dismissal of the existence or political relevance of determining environmental constraints, and an assertion of the right to pursue priorities independent of these. The critique of 'fear-mongering' and 'climate hysteria' tends to be prominent here (Forchtner 2019, p.313; see also Huber et al 2020; Lockwood 2018). Such language echoes the anti-emergency politics of previous years, notably the critique of 'project fear' in the Brexit context. In the present period, such views would seem to resonate with the preconceptions of a sizeable minority of the public. While there are important variations in opinion globally, a recent survey suggests 34% of people either reject the reality of climate change or do not believe it is manmade (a figure that has recently risen).[9] To such people, fretting about climate change will seem like fretting about uncontrollable forces, and efforts to highlight its political significance as inevitably misguided or politically motivated.

A second kind of rejoinder to the climate-emergency discourse is focused less on the natural world and more on climate *policy*. It is a repudiation not so much of the climate emergency itself as of the response to it.[10] One of the advantages of this line of critique is that it need not set the speaker directly against a scientific consensus, indeed need not require great engagement with that consensus and the specialist knowledge associated with it. It is a perspective compatible with a recognition that underlying problems may exist, and indeed with localist forms of environmentalism and 'patriotic ecology'. It takes its inspiration from an evaluation (of government action) rather than a dubious factual proposition (about the reality of manmade climate change).

A notable example of this kind of appropriation of climate change in the service of populism is Nigel Farage's effort to develop a critique of 'Net Zero'. After the UK Parliament declared a climate emergency in May 2019,[11] MPs passed legislation in June 2019 committing the country to net zero carbon emissions by 2050.[12] Farage's campaign is intended to polarise opinion on the topic, as previously with Britain's EU membership. His interventions bear many of the features conventionally associated with a populist campaign, as one sees in his March 2022 launch piece in the *Daily Mail* (Farage 2022). This is not primarily a climate-denialist text. Climate change is acknowledged,[13] but the policy response is presented as expressing the priorities of a social and political elite, at odds with those of 'ordinary people'. The latter are presented as likely victims of policy in material terms. They are also presented as a repository of common sense in the face of the perversity and fanaticism of an elite and a 'mainstream media following obediently behind'.

Spliced with this anti-elitism and invocation of the people is something very much in keeping with what I have termed the promise of agency. The stated goal of his campaign is to bring about a referendum. Farage observes:

‘During the past decade, the people forced the political class to allow us a Brexit vote. The same needs to happen again in relation to Net Zero. Citizens of a free country deserve a free choice. …. We intend to provide people with the means to make their voices heard in this most vital debate.’ (Farage 2022)[14]

The denial of choice is emphasised at various points throughout the piece: 'the political class in Westminster has made a decision on behalf of the rest of us without any public debate being held …'. It is also suggested that authorities are slavishly in the thrall of a narrow set of goals: 'our leaders seem happy to outsource industrial production just as long as they can say it reduces Britain's CO2 emissions.' The campaign slogan, somewhat awkward but conveying this focus on agency, is 'Vote power, not poverty'. In this text and others, Net Zero goals are criticised not just for being costly or unrealistic but undemocratic – as things imposed as technical necessities when they should have been a matter of political volition (cf. Atkins 2022).

It is noticeable here the ease with which figures associated with earlier forms of anti-establishment politics – the contestation of EU membership, the contestation of lockdown measures[15] – can switch to a new one, redeploying familiar motifs. The cumulative aspect is important: it allows each episode to be presented by analogy with another, building on emotions previously generated. Each set of policies, coming on top of earlier ones, can be presented as in some sense the 'final straw'. Each conflict with the establishment can be framed as the latest in a series, and perhaps also as a dress rehearsal for a still-greater one to come.[16] By denouncing policy-makers who present their actions as responses to necessity, figures such as Farage can cast themselves as offering a politics of choice and volition. A context of emergency allows them to magnify the contrast and the distinctiveness of their stance. While there is clearly a strategic aspect to this, it would be a mistake to see it as mere opportunism. There is a degree of ideological continuity across these different moments of contestation – as well as some likely material interest in resisting the interventions of authorities that might interfere with profit-making. 'Britain Means Business' is another of the banners under which Farage seeks to contest Net Zero (Farage 2022).[17]

While Farage provides a stark example – one whose success it is too early to assess – one can find similar patterns elsewhere in Europe. In Germany, the AfD has regularly accused the media and the 'old parties' of the political mainstream of being alarmist and using scare-tactics to legitimise their energy policies (Küppers 2022, p.14). The denunciation of 'climate dictatorship' (*Klima-Diktatur*), i.e. of authorities imposing constraining measures as non-negotiable demands under the guise of emergency management, has been a regular theme. A multi-country study from 2021 confirms that notions of 'eco-dictatorship' are widely invoked, and observes how climate detractors are increasingly taking up the mantle of 'freedom-fighters' (Counterpoint 2021, p.4). Environmentalists are charged with being 'miserabilists'[18] – a term that seems to capture well the idea of their being moved by necessity, by forces of nature and anonymous socio-economic demands rather than priorities of their own choosing. Beyond Europe, and this time from a position of governing power, the Amazon policies of former Brazilian President Bolsonaro would seem to lend themselves to a similar interpretation – an assertion of the primacy of political will over the constraints posed by nature and by competing authorities.

If climate change becomes a 'populist issue' then, clearly it is not because those labelled as such necessarily embrace a green agenda. While there may be such a thing as right-wing populist environmentalism, it tends to focus on more local concerns than climate change (e.g. pollution or the desecration of land). Climate change tends to be met more negatively with an accent on contesting its existence or the appropriateness of the response. Nor though, I argue, should one approach climate populism with a narrow focus on how anti-elitism and appeals to 'the people' are drawn into these contestations. While these elements are certainly present, so too is the promise of agency. As with the populisms of the 2010s, what one sees is not just the condemnation of detached and corrupt elites, but a critique of the genuflection of authorities before external demands – a critique of political acquiescence.

As climate change unfolds, maintaining the conditions for a politics of emergency, so it would seem the prospects for a populist critique will be maintained. Both the macro-emergency that is global warming itself, and the range of local emergencies by which it comes to be expressed (floods, famines, storms etc), seem likely to encourage forms of rule and discourse that can be challenged in these terms. Climate change will provide the conditions of upheaval and of governing by necessity that allows critics to define themselves in contradistinction by their voluntarism – as those refusing to have their actions dictated by external forces.

The promise of agency articulated by such figures may of course be quite insincere. There is a strongly reactive character to these interventions – they are defined in opposition to the positions taken by others. Generally they amount to voluntarism rather than the development of a policy programme. It is often suggested that climate change is becoming increasingly politicised, as the (in)actions of governments are challenged by dissenting groups (Marquardt and Lederer 2022). But politicisation in any constructive sense means more than simply an issue's rising salience and contestation: it means groups promoting principled commitments and acting in ways that plausibly advance them. Insofar as politicisation takes the form of a clash between the technical politics of necessity and a populist politics of volition, this condition seems unlikely to be met.

Nothing prevents populists from coupling their critique of necessity with a little emergency politics of their own. To do so can heighten their relevance, fostering the sense that only their extraordinary solutions will do (Lorimer forthcoming, ch. 5). One option, for instance, is to denounce the politics of necessity whilst suggesting that the one true emergency lies in the measures being taken by authorities. The emergency is thereby located not in the conditions they are responding to but in the cumulative effect of their actions – an executive power grab, encroachment on rights, opacity of rule, the weakening of sovereignty etc (all themes present in

Farage's text). Such rhetoric recalls the perversity thesis identified by Albert Hirschman as characteristic of reactionary politics (Hirschman 1991). In such ways, taking distance from one notion of emergency while endorsing another, it is possible to ride both wagons, adding further urgency to the message.

I have put some emphasis on the point that climate populism, like the populisms of preceding years, includes a promise of agency, in addition to the features more usually treated as constitutive of populism. Why though does this matter – why broaden the focus in this way? Because, I suggest, it is important to avoid casually attributing the success of such movements to their least desirable features. There is a natural tendency when studying populism to ascribe whatever gains its protagonists make to the features that are unique to populism. In practice this tends to mean highlighting some unsavoury things: exclusionary or nativist definitions of peoplehood, value monism, anti-intellectualism, hostility to institutions and procedures, etc. The risk is that this encourages the view that those who gravitate towards populist parties are irredeemably illiberal and / or undemocratic, when for a sizeable proportion this may not be true.

To be sure, no one can be really certain, outside experimental conditions, which parts of a political message are decisive. For some supporters of populist parties, it is no doubt exactly the most reactionary aspects that appeal – and climate change will offer plenty of material for their further development, including with fascist and racist themes (Lubarda 2020).[19] As the debate moves further beyond 'climate change, true-or-false', we can expect some populist far-Right parties to embrace ideas of emergency with relish, invoking them as a context for making 'hard choices' about whom to protect. Emergencies are promising conditions for those wanting to make distinctions – to separate the deserving and undeserving, the clean and the dirty, those who belong and those who do not. Ideas of threat, urgency and scarce time can be embraced as ways to assert social hierarchies, to define a collective 'we' and to exclude others from membership – e.g. with heightened immigration control, or targeted disincentives on reproduction (Moore and Roberts 2022, p.16). All this will be compatible with an emphasis on

agency – the talk will be of tough choices, of the brave interventions of leaders, etc. – but with increasingly dark themes attached. And it may be that such messages will prove electorally attractive.

But for the very reason that it is hard to tell which parts of a message are decisive, we need to recognise that the appeal of parties and movements that tend to be classified as populist may have only so much to do with these reactionary features. In a political setting where the scope for agency is constrained and disavowed, 'populists' happen to be those taking a stand, rhetorically at least, for a politics of volition rather than necessity. For a portion of their supporters, this will be exactly the source of their appeal. That they should draw some support on this basis is consistent with one of the recurrent findings of empirical research on support for populist parties – that it cuts across class lines, extending to both middle and working classes (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Given the shared experience of democratic evisceration, the promise to restore an agency denied, and with it a sense of self-worth, is likely to find cross-class appeal. There will be a sizeable constituency for it, well beyond the circles of xenophobia, racism and anti-politics, for as long as governing in major policy areas proceeds by the principle of necessity.

One implication of the argument concerns then the longevity of such groups. Some saw Trump's removal from office in 2021 as drawing the populist era to a close. Others, especially in Europe, saw Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine as a turning-point, with populists expected to suffer for their real and perceived links to Vladimir Putin. It seems quite possible that there are troubled times ahead for particular parties and leaders associated with populism. But even if so, one can assume that their brand of politics will retain plenty of potential. Climate change – particularly to the extent that it is approached with a technocratic emphasis on deadlines and functional adaptations to necessity – will provide fertile conditions for it. Whether we will continue to use the label 'populism' to describe such groups is another matter. To dwell on the

prospects of populism as conventionally understood may be a distraction, since it overlooks how an equally enticing promise of agency can be made by considerably more dangerous groups.

But another implication of the analysis is more positive. If we see a significant driver of support for these parties and movements as lying in their suggestion of political empowerment, then there may be those who can tap this desire *without* coupling it to the more reactionary features of exclusionary populism. For it is by no means only in this form that the promise of agency can be articulated. If progressive parties were to base their arguments less on notions of necessity than on principled visions of a future worth defending, they would draw some of this support to themselves. Such parties would need to embrace transformational programmes based on clear normative ideals, and present themselves as the means to achieve them. They would need to make, in other words, their own promise of agency.

On climate change specifically, this would probably mean a shift in policy and communication away from approaches based on quantified targets, deadlines and emergency frames, and efforts instead to connect it to new forms of ideology. Politicising and pluralising green thought, and widening participation in defining its ends and means, offer ways to strengthen the sense of agency attached to it. There are major debates to be had about what kind of societies are to be built in the process of responding to climate change – debates which currently exist largely on the margins of political discourse. There is nothing *inherently* technocratic about climate change as a topic – the problems arise when it is treated as such. Technocratic forms of environmentalism foster the politics of necessity on which sceptics are liable to thrive.

Conclusion

Populism is a child of democracy and its ideals of self-determination. The promise of political agency, though in no sense unique to populism, is a key part of its ideological formation. It becomes all the more so in a context where other parties are reticent in their normative commitments. A politics of no-alternatives has been one of the dominant themes of the neoliberal era. Recent years marked by emergency governance have made the logic of necessity more central than ever, allowing populists to define themselves by contrast as conduits of agency and volition. As climate politics too becomes framed as an emergency, it becomes ripe for contestation in these terms.

This pattern seems likely to continue, though there are ways in which it might be disturbed. One would be a shift in how other parties behave. Climate change becomes a populist issue especially when it is cast as a matter of responding to functional demands, allowing populists to present themselves in contradistinction as those who do what they *want* to do, not what they *must*. Nothing about climate change requires that it be cast merely as a constraint in this way. If progressive actors focused more on the normative questions at stake and the potential to transform societies in positive ways, they could potentially weaken the appeal of those who appropriate the issue in this way, as well as make progress on climate mitigation itself. As ever, the prospects for populism would seem to depend significantly on the actions of non-populist parties.

There is another way in which climate change might cease to be a populist issue – when the impacts of climate change become more severe and felt closer-to-home. It may be that the critique of necessity works best in a context where material hardship is still somewhat contained – one reason it may be more prevalent in the global North. When popular suffering is acute and unmistakeable – e.g. in the form of displacement, malnutrition or unemployment – there may be more political gain in embracing the logic of emergency than refuting it. *Alter*-emergency-

politics may have more resonance then than *anti*-emergency-politics, and may pair with more extreme policy demands than we tend to associate with the label of populism, from open racism to calls for authoritarian rule. To the extent that parties of the left fail to develop a convincing position, climate change can be a fascist issue too.

References

Atkins, Ed (2022), ''Bigger than Brexit': Exploring right-wing populism and net-zero policies in the United Kingdom', *Energy Research & Social Science*.

Bickerton, Chris and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti (2021), *Technopopulism* (Oxford: OUP).

Brown, Wendy (2015), *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (MIT: Zone Books).

Brubaker, Rogers (2017), 'Why populism?', *Theory and Society* 46, pp.357–385.

Buzogány, Aron and Christoph Mohamad-Klotzbach (2022), 'Environmental Populism', in M. Oswald (ed.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Populism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan), pp.321–340.

Canovan, Margaret (2005), *The People* (Cambridge: Polity).

Counterpoint (2021), 'Green Wedge?: Mapping Dissent against Climate Policy in Europe', London: https://counterpoint.uk.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Green_Wedge_Counterpoint_OSEPI.pdf

Farage, Nigel (2022), 'The Net Zero zealots are the same elitists who sneered at Brexit and don't have to worry about paying their gas bills', *Daily Mail*, 6th March: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-10581281/NIGEL-FARAGE-Net-Zero-zealots-elitists-sneered-Brexit.html

Finchelstein, Federico and Nadia Urbinati (2018), 'On Populism and Democracy', *Populism* 1, pp.15-37.

Forchtner, Bernhard (ed.) (2019), *The Far Right and the Environment: Politics, Discourse and Communication* (London: Routledge).

Hirschman, Albert O. (1991) *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard).

Huber, Robert A., Lukas Fesenfeld and Thomas Bernauer (2020), 'Political populism, responsiveness, and public support for climate mitigation', *Climate Policy* 20(3), pp.373-386.

Hulme, Mike (2019), 'Climate Emergency Politics Is Dangerous' *Issues in Science & Technology* 36 (1), 23–25.

Invernizzi Accetti, Carlo (2021), 'Repoliticizing Environmentalism: Beyond Technocracy and Populism', *Critical Review* 33 (1), pp.47-73.

Kelly, Duncan (2017), 'Populism and the History of Popular Sovereignty', in Rovira Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa Espejo and Ostiguy, *Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: OUP).

Küppers, Anne (2022), '"Climate-Soviets," "Alarmism," and "Eco-Dictatorship": The Framing of Climate Change Scepticism by the Populist Radical Right Alternative for Germany', *German Politics*, online early.

Lockwood, Matthew (2018), 'Right-wing populism and the climate change agenda: exploring the linkages', *Environmental Politics* 27(4), pp.712-732.

Lorimer, Marta (forthcoming), *Europe as Ideological Resource: European integration and far Right legitimation in Italy and France* (Oxford: OUP).

Lubarda, Balša (2020), 'Beyond eco-fascism? Far right ecologism (FRE) as a framework for future inquiries', *Environmental Values* 29 (6), 713-732.

Malm, Andreas and the Zetkin Collective (2021), *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism* (London: Verso).

Marquardt, Jens and Markus Lederer (2022), 'Politicizing climate change in times of populism: an introduction', *Environmental Politics* 31(5)*, pp.735–754.

Marquardt, Jens, Cecilia Oliveira and Markus Lederer (2022), 'Same, same but different? How democratically elected right-wing populists shape climate change policymaking', *Environmental Politics* 31(5), pp.777-800.

McHugh, Lucy, Maria Lemos and Tiffany Morrison (2021), 'Risk? Crisis? Emergency? Implications of the new climate emergency framing for governance and policy', *WIREs Climate Change* 12(6).

Meijers, Maurits, Yaël van Drunen and Kristof Jacobs (2022), 'It's a hoax! The mediating factors of populist climate policy opposition', *West European Politics*.

Moffitt, Benjamin (2016), *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford: SUP).

Moore, Sam and Alex Roberts (2022), *The Rise of Eco-Fascism: Climate Change and the Far Right* (Cambridge: Polity).

Mudde, Cas (2004), 'The Populist Zeitgeist,' *Government and Opposition*, 39 (3), pp.541–63.

Mudde, Cas and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: OUP).

Müller, Jan-Werner (2016), *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).

Ochoa Espejo, Paulina (2017), 'Populism and the Idea of the People', in Rovira Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa Espejo, and Ostiguy (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: OUP).

Rahmstorf, Stefan (2004), 'The Climate Sceptics', in *Weather Catastrophes and Climate Change* (Munich: Munich Re Group), pp.76–83.

Rovira Kaltwasser, Cristobal, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (2017), 'Populism: An Overview of the Concept and the State of the Art', in Rovira Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa Espejo, and Ostiguy (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: OUP)

Rummens, Stefan (2017), 'Populism as a Threat to Liberal Democracy', in Rovira Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa Espejo, and Ostiguy (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: OUP).

Schwörer, Jakob and Belén Fernández-García (2023), 'Climate Sceptics or Climate Nationalists? Understanding and Explaining Populist Radical Right Parties' Positions towards Climate Change (1990–2022)', *Political Studies*.

Séville, Astrid (2017), *"There is no Alternative": Politik zwischen Demokratie und Sachzwang* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus).

Swyngedouw, Erik (2010), 'Apocalypse Forever', *Theory, Culture and Society* 27 (2-3), pp.213-32.

Van Rensburg, Willem (2015), 'Climate Change Scepticism: A Conceptual Re-Evaluation', *Sage Open.*

White, Jonathan (2024), *In the Long Run: the future as a political idea* (London: Profile).

White, Jonathan (2021), 'Emergency Europe after Covid-19', in Gerard Delanty (ed.), *Pandemic, Politics, and Society: Critical Perspectives on the Covid-19 Crisis* (De Gruyter: Berlin), pp.75-92.

White, Jonathan (2019), *Politics of Last Resort: Governing by Emergency in the European Union* (Oxford: OUP).

Zulianello, Mattia and Diego Ceccobelli (2020), 'Don't Call it Climate Populism: On Greta Thunberg's Technocratic Ecocentrism', *The Political Quarterly* 91 (3).

Endnotes

[1] The author acknowledges support in publishing this paper from the Grantham Foundation for the Protection of the Environment and the Economic and Social Research Council through the Centre for Climate Change Economics and Policy, as well as the editorial assistance of Gregor Singer and Georgina Kyriacou, and the support of a Leverhulme fellowship in facilitating the research. A revised version is expected to appear in *Still the Age of Populism?*, eds. Michael Bernhard, Carlos de la Torre, and Amie Kreppel (London: Routledge, 2024).

[2] As Wendy Brown puts it, 'in the neoliberal political imaginary … we are no longer creatures of moral autonomy, freedom, or equality. We no longer choose our ends or the means to them.' Brown 2015, pp.41-2.

[3] The following argument linking populism to emergency politics is developed in White 2019, ch. 6. On the place of crisis in populist thought, see also Moffitt 2016, ch. 7.

[4] http://www.sussex.ac.uk/broadcast/read/52112#.XtEk5m7lIz4

[5] On *Widerstand2020*: https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/covid-19-wie-widerstand-2020-die-corona-krise-in-frage.1939.de.html?drn:news_id=1137796

[6] More precisely: limiting global warming to 1.5°C this century depends on reducing CO_2 emissions by 45% by 2030. 2018 IPCC report: https://www.ipcc.ch/2018/10/08/summary-for-policymakers-of-ipcc-special-report-on-global-warming-of-1-5c-approved-by-governments/

[7] See e.g. Extinction Rebellion's 2018 'Declaration of Rebellion'. Note, however, that such movements tend to have many different strands within them, not all of them science-focused in the sense highlighted here.

[8] These positions correspond to the notions of *trend*, *attribution* and *impact scepticism* developed in Rahmstorf 2004.

[9] https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2021-12/ObsCOP-2021-report.pdf, pp.20ff.

[10] See here the notions of process and response scepticism developed by Van Rensburg 2015.

[11] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-48126677

[12] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-becomes-first-major-economy-to-pass-net-zero-emissions-law

[13] Indeed, alternative policies based on fracking are advocated on the grounds they are 'far more environmentally friendly' and could allow the country to develop 'a sovereign wealth fund for future generations' (Farage 2022).

[14] Farage's remarks were later echoed by Richard Tice, current head of Farage's old party Reform UK (a.k.a. the Brexit Party), who complained that 'voters didn't have a choice' at the last election regarding the adoption of net zero goals: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-60572049

[15] 'Nigel Farage: Brexit Party to focus on fighting lockdown', *BBC News,* 2nd November 2020: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-54777346

[16] On lockdowns being contested as rehearsals for more dramatic incursions on rights still to come with the climate emergency: https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/21/climate-denial-far-right-immigration

[17] On the intersection between climate scepticism and capitalism: Malm et al (2021).

[18] https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/21/climate-denial-far-right-immigration

[19] Although one cannot exclude also the opposite tendency: that populists develop more constructive positions on climate change. Greenwashing would be one obvious political motivation – i.e. using environmental concern as way to present an acceptable profile, offsetting more outrageous views in other areas.