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# Is populism a challenge to European energy and climate policy? Empirical evidence across varieties of populism

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## ABSTRACT


Despite the burgeoning literature, evidence on how right-wing populists frame and act on energy and climate issues is limited and even more scarce for other types of populist parties. We address this gap by exploring the policy discourses, positions and actions of six European populist parties from Austria, Czechia, Greece, Italy, Poland and Spain belonging to different types of populism. We argue that there is substantial and largely neglected variation among different populist parties in their approach to and effects on EU energy and climate policy (ECP). We find support for the notion that right-wing and right-leaning valence populist parties are at odds with ambitious EU ECP. On the contrary, the analysed left-wing and left-leaning valence populists rely on populist discourses to demand more ambitious ECP measures. Furthermore, our analysis suggests that participation in government decreases the role of populism in parties' ECP discourse and dilutes parties' positions and actions.

**KEYWORDS** Climate policy; energy transitions; European Union; populism

## Introduction

At least since President Trump announced the US' withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement in June 2017, conventional wisdom holds that populists threaten ambitious and far-reaching climate policy. Although populism remains a contested concept (Rooduijn, 2018), the burgeoning literature has advanced our understanding of its core ideological traits, empirical manifestations, and consequences for policy-making and the liberal democratic

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order (Huber & Schimpf, 2017; Otjes & Louwse, 2015). With their 'anti-elitist' and 'people-centred' worldviews populists are associated with Eurosceptic and 'post-factual' political attitudes (Castanho Silva et al., 2017; McDonnell & Werner, 2018). Thereby, rising populism has been linked to several crisis trends in Europe and arguably poses a threat to its legitimacy and governance capacity, the latter understood as the ability to adopt effective policies (von Homeyer et al., 2021). This is particularly important while the EU is discussing maintaining its global climate leadership role (Oberthür & Dupont, 2021).

Yet, populism is not a unified movement. Based on the most broadly accepted definition, populism is a thin-ideology which often comes in combination with different 'host' ideologies producing a variety of types of populist actors (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Populists are found across the political spectrum, from far-left to far-right, and populist parties' seats in national parliaments across Europe increased significantly in the last decade, from around 15% in 2009 to more than a quarter by 2019 (Rooduijn et al., 2019). In this contribution, we build on this literature by investigating the effects of different populist political parties on the EU's energy and climate policy (ECP).

The central question of our inquiry is: do different types of populist parties equally endanger EU ECP? Specifically, we ask whether and how energy and climate policy discourses, positions and actions at national and EU level differ across different types of populist parties and whether any populist-specific threats to EU ECP can be identified. To answer these questions, we conduct in-depth qualitative assessments of the energy and climate discourse and political behaviour of six prominent populist parties; from Austria (FPÖ), Czechia (ANO 2011), Greece (Syriza), Italy (M5S), Poland (PiS), and Spain (Podemos) in the period of the eighth European Parliament 2014-2019, during which the EU ECP 2030 targets and long-term 2050 goals have been shaped. The case selection allows comparing left-wing, 'valence' and right-wing populist parties which feature both in government and opposition.

Our analysis shows that populist discourse on ECP is present among some but not all examined populist parties and that levels of populism tend to decrease as parties move from opposition to government. Furthermore, we find substantial differences in policy discourses, positions and actions across, and even within, different populist party variants thereby demonstrating that it is not populism but left/right host-ideology, in combination with the party system and other country factors, that significantly shapes parties' impact on EU ECP (see also Jahn, 2021). The study contributes to three strands of literature. First, it advances the understanding of the relationship between populist parties and ECP by extending beyond the narrow focus on right-wing populism (Četković & Hagemann, 2020; Lockwood, 2018; Schaller & Carius, 2019; Zuk & Szulecki, 2020; but see Huber, 2020;

Huber et al., 2020). Second, it adds to the broader literature on the relative importance of host-ideology vs. populism (March, 2017) and the commonalities and differences in policy positions among different varieties of populist parties (Huber & Schimpf, 2017; Otjes & Louwse, 2015; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017). Third, the study contributes to the literature on the policy impact of populist parties and the extent to which populists' policy decisions are affected by their government status (Akkerman, 2012). In terms of policy relevance, our study provides valuable insights into ideological and strategic motivations behind populists' positions and discourses on energy and climate issues and the nature of threat that this poses to EU ECP.

## Theory

### *The definition and varieties of populism*

Scholars of comparative politics have used different theoretical lenses to define and characterize populism. Recently, the literature converged on the prevailing 'ideational approach' defining populism as a set of ideas based on two key postulates: 'anti-elitism' and 'people-centrism' (Mudde, 2004; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017). 'Anti-elitism' refers to populists' negative perception of elites as evil and corrupt, and includes the critique of the 'establishment'; established parties, bureaucrats at different levels, the mainstream media or big capital. The elite serves as the antagonist to the people and thus 'people-centrism' constitutes the second central dimension of populism. Populists claim to be the true champion of 'the upright and good people', a glorified and homogeneous group with a general will. As an extension of the first two core ideas, populism proclaims popular sovereignty 'as the only legitimate source of political power' (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013, p. 151).

Given that the concepts of 'the elite' and 'the people' are essentially empty vessels, populism is typically attached to a 'thick' host-ideology. This host-ideology provides important benchmarks on how to construct 'the people' and 'the elite' and shapes the underlying ideas and policy positions of different populist forces (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Hence, most typologies of populist parties have used the host-ideology as the key classification criterion differentiating between right-wing and left-wing populist actors (March, 2017; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). More recently, another type of populist political party has been identified which relies on populist appeals but cannot be easily located on the traditional left-right scale; 'centrist' (Stanley, 2017) or 'valence' (Zulianello, 2020) populists. Since the term 'centrist' can be misleading by suggesting that these populist parties have a middle-ground ideological profile, we refer to them as 'valence' populists.

Left-wing populist parties (LWPPs) define the ‘people’ in class terms and commonly emphasise the problem of economic exploitation while supporting stronger state intervention in the economy and wealth redistribution (Hopkin & Blyth, 2019; March, 2017). Right-wing populist parties (RWPPs) define the ‘people’ based in cultural terms (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). Thus nativism, nationalism combined with xenophobia, is a primary ideological base of RWPPs (Mudde, 2007). However, LWPPs may vary on how progressive they are on cultural issues (March, 2017), and RWPPs can take different economic positions from neo-liberal to more interventionist aimed at protecting the national economy, native workers and other ‘insiders’ from economic globalization (Hopkin & Blyth, 2019). Although all varieties of populist parties are critical of the global political and economic establishment, left-wing populists are generally supportive of international cooperation whereas right-wing populists champion national sovereignty and are sceptical, if not openly rejectionist, towards supranational institutions (March, 2017). The research on valence populist parties has found that these parties do not have a clear ideological profile (Mosca & Tronconi, 2019). They criticize the dominant political and economic caste but define ‘the people’ vaguely without an explicit inclusionary or exclusionary rhetoric towards certain groups (Font et al., 2019). Critique of the mainstream media is a common ‘anti-elitist’ element among populists. However, right-wing populism has been particularly associated with attacks on official information channels questioning the factual evidence and even the established scientific knowledge produced by ‘the elites’ (Fraune & Knodt, 2018).

Next, we outline expectations about populists’ approach to EU ECP. To unpack the populists’ role, we differentiate among three levels of influence: policy positions, discourses and actions. While the extant studies mostly focus on one of the three dimensions, we seek to provide a more comprehensive account by tracing how populists’ behaviour unfolds from a general rhetoric to specific policy positions and decisions.

### ***Populists’ policy positions, discourse and actions: expectations and consequences for EU ECP***

#### ***Populists’ policy positions***

If host-ideology is key to explaining differences across varieties of populism (March, 2017), populists’ policy positions in the area of energy and climate should also be shaped by their host-ideologies. Policy positions are defined as declared preferences of parties concerning specific ECP goals and measures. Given that left-leaning parties tend to attach more salience and exhibit higher ambition on ECP (Neumayer, 2004), we expect LWPPs to advance an ambitious ECP agenda as opposed to reluctant or dismissive positions of RWPPs (Lockwood, 2018). Direct government intervention and public

ownership are also likely to be advocated by LWPPs. RWPPs may try to justify the support for low-carbon technologies as an instrument for enhancing economic growth and energy security but they should in principle object to any coercive measures, such as environmental taxes, seeing them as unnecessary burden for the economy and the 'people' (Lockwood, 2018). Nationalist and nativist attitudes of RWPPs are at odds with transnational efforts to combat climate change (Forchtner & Kølvråa, 2015) making these parties less likely to support international climate agreements (Lockwood, 2018). LWPPs, on the contrary, may be in favour of international climate agreements given their more cosmopolitan and internationalist views (March, 2017).

However, even populists who broadly belong to the same type of populism can vary in their positions on specific policy issues, also influenced by the party history and national origins. Falkner and Plattner (2019) demonstrate that RWPPs do not display homogeneous positions across EU policy areas. The variation in policy positions is something we might also observe in ECP, particularly given the diversity in national contexts and the related energy and climate interests and concerns. Generally, the more coherent populists are in their rejection of ambitious ECP goals and specific policy measures, the higher threat they pose to EU governance capacity.

### *Populists' discourse*

A party's discourse on energy and climate illustrates how a party frames the nature of energy and climate issues and their preferred solutions. If populist appeals feature prominently, we expect to find both populist elements ('anti-elitism' and 'people-centrism') in a party's ECP discourse. The more pronounced these elements are, the more we can say that populism influences that area.

The 'anti-elitism' of RWPPs will likely challenge the global scientific consensus on climate change associated with the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. In addition, RWPPs may employ 'anti-elitist' messages to discredit the energy and climate efforts of the UN and EU as an orchestrated attack on the material and cultural base of 'ordinary people'. If so, this would signal a threat to EU legitimacy, governance capacity, and knowledge-based decision-making on ECP. LWPPs are equally likely to criticize the EU and global elites but their critique may be directed towards demanding more, not less, ambitious and fair energy and climate policy to protect vulnerable people and offer new employment opportunities. As regards 'people-centrism', RWPPs can be expected to challenge ECP by emphasising collective identity of and economic consequences for the negatively affected individual groups or even the entire country (Lockwood, 2018). LWPPs, on the other hand, may mobilize 'the people' who suffer from uneven distributional impacts of climate change and climate action to demand more ambitious and just ECP. Little can be said about the expectations for valence populist parties, given the lack of host-ideology and available studies.

### **Populists' policy action**

Populists can advance radical language and extreme policy demands, but what is also important is whether these parties are willing and able to follow through their rhetoric when they vote in parliament or adopt policies when holding executive power.

Populists have been found to not compromise on their core issues (e.g., immigration for RWPPs) (Meyer & Miller, 2015), and their policy effect in those policy areas is likely to be greatest (Huber & Schimpf, 2017). It is less clear, however, how RWPPs and possibly some valence populists may affect ECP given that it typically does not belong to their core issues. Četković and Hagemann (2020) established that government participation of RWPPs across consensual Western European democracies in most cases has not led to the deterioration of national ECP. This is because these parties are only junior coalition partners and rarely control relevant energy and climate ministries. In Central-Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, populist parties dominate and (co)lead governments. Their influence on ECP can thus be expected to be greater. LWPPs which advocate a strong ECP agenda may generally be expected to positively affect national and EU ECP when in power.

Extant research shows that far-right populists predominantly vote against EU energy and climate legislation in the European Parliament (EP) (Schaller & Carius, 2019). Yet, little is known about the underlying reasons and differences behind the voting behaviour within and across populist party families as well as across different ECP issues (Buzogány & Četković, 2021). Generally, we expect that opposition populist parties will insist on their extreme demands on ECP nationally and in the EP while government participation may cause them to moderate their policy action. Taggart and Szczurbiak (2013, p. 34) found that 'government participation has the effect of tempering the policy of Eurosceptic parties', though it has a less consistent moderating effect on rhetoric. The more persistent populists are in their (negative) policy action, and the more successful they are in scaling down policy ambition nationally and in the EU, the higher threat they can be said to pose to EU energy and climate governance capacity.

### **Research design and methods**

The objective of this research is twofold: to evaluate the extent to which populists' discourses on ECP relies on populism (*vis-à-vis* thick ideology) and to assess how populists position and act on national and EU ECP. To do so, we compare six populist parties (see Appendix Table A1). We selected two LWPPs, two RWPPs and two valence populist parties, both in government and in opposition, representing three regions (Southern, Central-Eastern and North/Western Europe), allowing us to investigate different factors affecting populists' ECP rhetoric, policy preferences and actions. Case selection covers variation across

the political spectrum and follows a most-similar-systems-design logic. We rely on the existing literature to identify populist parties (Rooduijn et al., 2019; Zulianello, 2020). We analyse the 2014–2019 period and explore how the six parties framed their positions and influenced EU and national ECP.

To explore parties' ECP discourse and positions, we analysed all European Parliament and national elections manifestos. Additionally, we analysed press releases, party websites and articles reporting on party statements and actions. We define populism as parties using 'anti-elitism' and people-centrism in their discourse (for illustrations see Table A2). We coded 'anti-elitism' as criticism of elites in general (e.g., EU elites, national elites), accusing them of wrongdoing in the area of ECP. 'People-centrism' was coded if parties made statements referring to homogenous people in the context of ECP employing the terms such as 'our country', 'the people', 'citizens' or 'our consumers'. The analysis of ECP discourses serves to establish how parties frame ECP issues and to what extent they rely on populist appeals. Policy positions include specific party statements on preferred ECP goals and measures, such as emission reduction targets and support measures for renewable energy sources. Policy action is assessed both on the EU and domestic level. EU policy action is measured by the voting record on the major ECP decision in the EP (Figure A1) together with the national positions in the European Council and the Council of Ministers (Figure A2). Nationally, the policy action is assessed by exploring the parties' ECP decisions in government and/or opposition and the expert assessments of those policies (Table A2).

## Analysis

We present our empirical evidence in the following section. More detailed information on government positions and EP voting patterns is available in the Appendix.

### ***Right-wing populist parties: Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and Law and Justice (PiS)***

#### ***Context***

The FPÖ in Austria joined the government in 2017 as a junior partner to the centre-right Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), before leaving government in June 2019. In government, the FPÖ controlled the Ministry of Transport, Innovation and Technology (BMVIT), but the coalition partner ÖVP held the Ministry of Sustainability and Tourism (BMNT). In Poland, PiS secured the presidency and a majority in Parliament (together with two junior parties) in 2015 and proclaimed a new era in which PiS rules in the interest of the popular 'Sovereign'. PiS controlled the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Energy.



### *Policy positions*

The FPÖ has traditionally paid little attention to climate change, at least in its official election programs (Müller et al., 2017). The 2017 election manifesto makes only one reference to climate change criticizing a malfunctioning CO<sub>2</sub> certificates system (FPÖ, 2017). PiS displayed an openly hostile position to climate policy while in opposition (Szulecki & Ancygier, 2015). Its 2014 program called the EU's climate policy 'the largest obstacle in the area of electricity production' (PiS, 2014, p. 89), and 'opt-out' from the Climate and Energy Package was among the top three priorities for EU politics (PiS, 2014, p. 158). With time, both parties have moderated their positions and acknowledged the need for a common ECP. PiS positions changed by the time of the 2019 program, which mentioned climate change extensively (PiS, 2019). The FPÖ's 2019 national election manifesto acknowledged the problem of climate change and proclaimed the transport decarbonization as a key political priority (FPÖ, 2019a). The FPÖ has also been known for being supportive of renewable energy (Ćetković & Hagemann, 2020) and argued against all 'interventionist' coercive government ECP measures such as a carbon tax or ban of diesel cars (FPÖ, 2019b). In practice, however, both parties continue to oppose ambitious and broad-ranging ECP (CCCA, 2019; Szulecki, 2020).

### *Discourse*

The ECP discourse of both parties has been shaped by the parties' economic, nationalist and conservative views. Both parties emphasise negative economic effects for the domestic industry associated with ECP and are sceptical of supranational energy and climate decision-making which intrudes into national sovereignty. PiS further employs socio-cultural reasons to protect the negatively affected economic sectors, emphasising the special role of coal in Poland.

We find strong use of populist rhetoric in the case of the FPÖ. The anti-elitist rhetoric of the FPÖ has included the rejection of the scientific consensus on human-induced climate change and the use of conspiracy theory arguments, e.g., attributing climate change to the sun (Kurier, 2017) or calling it a web of lies invented by the (liberal) media (der Standard, 2015). Post-factual rhetoric declined since the FPÖ participated in government and particularly after the change in the party's leadership in 2019. The FPÖ has made references to 'the people' as being negatively affected by ECP, stressing the negative impact of carbon taxes and diesel bans on Austrian citizens and consumers (FPÖ, 2019b).

PiS' ECP discourse has only limited elements of populism, as the party relies on 'anti-elitism' but not 'people-centrism'. In opposition and during its first years in government, PiS' discourse was 'anti-elitist', casting the

previous liberal-agrarian government in the role of the detached elite acting against ‘the Polish interest’ due to its own ‘euro-enthusiastic outlook’ (PiS, 2019, p. 173). PiS’ ‘people-centrism’, visible in other policy areas, is not as clear in climate policy, apart from the emphasis on ‘just transition’ and a cultural narrative against decarbonization as a threat to popular lifestyles and customs (Szulecki & Ancygier, 2015).

### ***Policy action***

The ÖVP-FPÖ government 2030 strategy sets ambitious goals of reaching 100% renewable energy in electricity and accelerating the coal phase-out (BMNT & BMVIT, 2018), though objectives were criticized by the opposition as insufficient (ORF, 2018). In the transport sector, one of the central election pledges of the FPÖ to increase the motorway speed limit (FPÖ, 2019b) was adopted by the government risking increasing emissions. The FPÖ was the only party which opposed the declaration of climate emergency in the Austrian Parliament in 2019. In the EP, consistent with its positions, the FPÖ supported the EU Renewable Energy Directive but rejected the Paris Agreement (see Appendix, Figure A1). During the FPÖ’s participation in government, Austria took a moderate position in the EU’s 2030 climate target negotiations. However, it supported 2050 net-zero and 100% EU renewable energy goals (Appendix, Figure A2).

PiS’s MEPs voted against the 2030 Framework and organized a post-vote protest (European Parliament, 2014). In government, however, PiS did not deliver the promised opt-out. Instead, it began to employ a dual strategy, assuring domestic audiences that Poland champions its climate policy while focusing only on narrow issues – most importantly electric vehicles and forestry (Szulecka & Szulecki, 2019). PiS fulfilled election promises made to anti-wind energy protest groups, which stalled previously impressive onshore wind deployment. However, by 2019 and the emergence of a new Climate Ministry, it embraced small-scale PV and introduced plans for offshore wind development (Renewables Now, 2020). Poland, under PiS, initially blocked the 2050 carbon neutrality goal in the European Council and the increased renewables and EE targets were unanimously rejected by PiS MEPs. They abstained from both the Emissions Trading System (ETS) reform and the renewable energy Directive votes (see Figure A1).

### ***Left-wing populist parties: The Party of the Radical Left (Syriza) and Podemos***

#### ***Context***

Greece’s Syriza governed with the radical right Independent Greeks between January 2015 and July 2019 when it became an opposition party to the New Democracy government. The party controlled the Ministries of Environment and Energy, Infrastructure and Transport, and Finance. Spain’s Podemos

was formed in 2014. In the 2016 national elections, Podemos achieved a 21.5% vote share but failed to reach an agreement to join the government.

### *Policy positions*

Both Syriza and Podemos have attached high salience and policy ambition to ECP. Syriza's 2015 national election manifesto stressed an 'ecological crisis', environmental protection as a priority, improving energy efficiency and 'a radical change in the current energy balance' (Syriza, 2015b, p. 80). However, in both its 2015 manifestos coal was mentioned only once, in the context of upgrading to more efficient coal power plants. Climate change and renewables were two of the four pillars of the 2019 national election manifesto (Syriza, 2019b). For Podemos, ECP featured prominently in the campaign for the EP elections in 2014 (Podemos, 2014) and the national elections in 2015 (Podemos, 2015). The ECP issues gained salience in the election manifestos for the 2019 national (Podemos, 2019a) and EP elections (Podemos, 2019b). The 2019 national election manifesto highlighted the importance of 'drastically and promptly reduc[ing]' emissions (Podemos, 2019a, p. 9).

Proposals in the 2019 Podemos manifestos included the creation of a public electric utility which should invest in renewable energy sources, a minimum share of community-owned renewable energy projects and the demand for replacing every job lost in the fossil fuel industry with two new jobs in the low-carbon energy sector, in the same region (Podemos, 2019a, 2019b). In June 2019 the Syriza manifesto/government programme advanced an objective of 'renewables developed by local communities for local need' (Syriza, 2019a), and a 'radical shift to green energy' matching the EU renewable (32%) and energy efficiency (32.5%) targets within Greece by 2030.

### *Discourse*

The ECP rhetoric of Syriza is typical of a left-leaning party, for example being internationalist in outlook, with 'active participation in international negotiations to tackle climate change in terms of justice and solidarity between generations and countries' (Syriza, 2015b, p. 98). There are only weak references to 'people-centrism' in Syriza's ECP rhetoric. One example is that 'the new institutions of community control and popular participation will make citizens active in shaping the productive, social and environmental reconstruction of our homeland' (Syriza, 2015a, p. 19). Syriza's appeal to 'anti-elitism' is also weak, though with regard to the manifesto pledge on energy there is a statement on how 'the previous political system, based on selfish commitments and dependencies' was ill-suited to renewable technology and long-term planning (Syriza, 2015b, p. 77). Podemos' rhetoric has also been decisively shaped by its leftist ideology but with a strong presence of both 'anti-elitism' and 'people-centrism'. The party criticized the austerity-

based economic measures promoted by the European and Spanish ‘elites’ for failing to address some of the main global challenges such as climate change (Podemos, 2019b, p. 13). Podemos argued that economic policies and political institutions should be at the service of ‘the people’ and that corrupt elites in the country are wasting resources that could be used, among else, for investing in energy transition (Podemos, 2019a, p. 53). Podemos advanced ambitious ECP targets but emphasised that its support for the energy transition is conditional on social fairness (Podemos, 2019a, p. 10).

### *Policy action*

The Syriza government came to power in 2015 prioritizing economic growth over climate policy. The government supported the construction of a coal power plant, financially supporting existing plants while opposing a coal phase-out. A Syriza source stated that ‘One way or another Greek lignite will be exploited’ (The Guardian, 2015). In contrast, the new centre-right Prime Minister in September 2019 discussed the urgency of dealing with climate change, being an ECP leader, and in a reversal to prior policy announced a coal phase out by 2028 (Kathimerini, 2019). The Syriza government played an ambivalent role at the EU level, neither supporting nor opposing the more ambitious energy efficiency and renewable targets in the 2018 negotiations. Syriza MEPs were absent for the majority of key votes but supported a higher 40% energy efficiency target. While the country supported the final 32% target, it was neutral on anything more ambitious (ANA, 2018). Similarly, the government avoided taking a position on the net-zero emissions 2050 target until June 2019 (losing the election in July 2019).

Podemos, as an opposition party, proposed in July 2018 a Climate Change Law including the ambitious targets of a coal phase-out by 2025 and 40% of renewable energy by 2030 (Eldiario.es, 2018). Podemos’ MEPs voted for the ratification of the Paris Agreement and supported proposals for highly ambitious energy efficiency targets (see Figure A1). Podemos’ MEPs, however, failed to back the final compromise texts of renewable energy and energy efficiency directives approved by the majority in the EP as they considered them insufficiently ambitious.

### *Valence populist parties: ANO 2011 and M5S*

#### *Context*

Czechia’s ANO was formed in 2011 by a businessman Andrej Babiš. Its core pledge is breaking up the corruption and omnipresent elite influence by ‘running the state as a company’ (Kopeček, 2016). Debuting in the 2013 snap national elections, ANO achieved the second-best result (18.7%), after which it formed a governmental coalition with the Social Democrats and

Christian Democrats, making Babiš deputy PM. ANO filled seven ministerial posts, including Environment. Italy's M5S has been focused on environmentalism since its inception in 2009, as one of its five core values. M5S has been the major coalition partner in government since June 2018, with the RWP Lega until August 2019, and since then with the Democratic Party. It controlled the Economic Ministry, and the Transport Ministry between June 2018 and August 2019. The Environment Ministry was controlled by an Independent MP close to M5S.

### *Policy positions*

ANO's (2013) 'Resort Program' mentioned climate only once, linked primarily to the problem of recurring droughts. The 2017 programme does not explicitly mention climate change. ANO had no specific related policy preferences apart from expanding nuclear and renewable energy sources while reducing the use of lignite, and emphasising energy efficiency (ANO, 2017), however, without a clear climate change motivation. Similarly, M5S' 2013 manifesto made no reference to climate change other than improving the efficiency of electric power plants (M5S, 2013, p. 6). In contrast, the 2018 manifesto mentioned climate 36 times, and overall emphasised the urgency of climate change and climate policy and the 'great' opportunities for green economic growth (M5S, 2018d, p. 16); pledging a coal phase-out by 2020 and all fossil fuels by 2050. In 2019, the M5S MEP and EP vice president Castaldo stated that the party shared a common vision on environmental issues with the Greens (Euractiv, 2019).

### *Discourse*

ANO is a strongly personalist party; its positions on specific issues are often fluid and follow from the views of its leader, Babiš (Hanley & Vachudova, 2018, p. 281). In line with its current corporatist ideology, ANO claims to put the interests of the Czech industry first. Its 2014 EP election manifesto acknowledges the need for Europe to remain a climate leader but that current ECP undermines economic competitiveness (ANO, 2014). It is visibly advancing an environmental modernization agenda prioritizing industrial, and party interests e.g., the government was opposing ETS reform, until the state energy giant ČEZ expressed its preference for a more stringent ETS (Četkovič & Buzogány, 2019). Babiš dismisses climate action along strongly 'anti-elitist' lines, as a fad of detached domestic idlers and an imposition of international elites putting climate 'in the position of a religion' (Novinky.cz, 2019). While explicit 'people-centric' discourse is absent, there is a 'people-centric' logic in limiting domestic climate policy communication to the single most important climate-related issue in the eyes of the Czech general public, according to a 2019 survey: drought prevention (ČTK, 2019).

Climate action is justified on health grounds health and maintaining national 'food sovereignty' that is threatened by climate change (ANO, 2017, p. 16).

The M5S 2018 manifesto has elements of a left-wing host ideology. The importance of recognizing 'victims of climate change' is highlighted, and the manifesto also discusses the opportunity for ECP to drive economic growth. The Environmental Programme uses weak 'anti-elitist' rhetoric to propose 'concrete policies against climate change' which are 'independent from the various bureaucratic bodies and independent with respect to industrial and political interests' (M5S, 2018b, p. 51). The 'EU programme' also aims to devote 'more attention to the local market than the global' (M5S, 2018c, p. 6). However, the Energy Programme (M5S, 2018a) emphasises the importance for 'national and international' institutions to reduce energy consumption to tackle global environmental emergencies. The Environment Programme features weak 'people-centrism', for example, that offshore drilling is based on the 'principle of the interests of Italian citizens' (M5S, 2018b, p. 45).

### *Policy action*

ANO's domestic ECP record shows some progress in comparison to predecessors. The Ministry of Environment (2017) prepared the country's first-ever ECP strategy, proposing reduction targets for 2020-2050. However, the production of this is linked to EU obligations as well as techno-economic shifts, and ANO displays no clear ambition in emissions reductions or renewable energy expansion. On the same day the Environment Minister announced the formation of a 'coal commission' to plan a phase-out strategy, he also gave the first permission since 1991 for the expansion of a lignite pit-mine. Nuclear energy is seen as the key decarbonization measure (Osička & Černoč, 2017), with renewables playing an auxiliary role. The government, with ANO as a junior partner, was wary of ambitious provisions in the Clean Energy Package during the 2016 negotiations, supporting non-binding targets, lower renewables' goals, and no emissions thresholds in capacity markets. Similarly, ANO MEPs consistently voted against ambitious climate policy and abstained on agreed EU positions (Figure A1). Czechia, together with Poland and Hungary, initially blocked the EU's Net-zero 2050 initiative in 2019.

M5S had a major positive impact on Italy's and EU ECP ambition when it entered government. In May 2018 Italy opposed a target of 33% for renewables and energy efficiency. In June 2018, the new coalition government with a M5S Economy Minister and independent Environment Minister committed to accelerating the renewable energy transition (EDEM, 2018) and switched to supporting a 33% target for energy efficiency, and 35% for renewables, higher than the 32.5% and 32% targets finally agreed by the EU (Bocquillon & Maltby, 2020). Italy's government consistently supported ambitious ECP since June 2018 (see Figure A2).

## Discussion and conclusion

This article addressed how ECP discourses, positions and actions vary across different types of populist parties and what consequences this has for EU ECP. We argue that there is substantial heterogeneity in populists' ECP discourses, positions and actions, which is linked to their host-ideology and further influenced by their role in the party system. We conclude that the effects of populists on EU ECP are mixed and serve to both undermine and empower governance capacity, without causing a policy gridlock or questioning the EU's legitimacy to act.

Overall, we show that host ideology decisively shapes the parties' positions and discourse on ECP supporting the insight from the literature about the central role of host-ideology for populism (March, 2017; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). LWPPs clearly attach higher salience to ECP issues and declare more ambitious targets than RWPPs. These findings mirror earlier research on parties' ideology and their ECP positions (Neumayer, 2004). The two valence populist parties, ANO and M5S, make more ambiguous statements along the left-right ideological cleavage. ANO is closer to the RWPPs due to its modest ECP ambitions and emphasis on nationalist and corporatist interests whereas M5S, with its ambitious ECP agenda and the focus on international cooperation and humanitarian consequences of ECP, resembles the LWPPs. There are important variations in specific ECP positions even within the same types of populist parties. The FPÖ strongly supported the expansion of renewable energy. PiS, on the contrary, has been less ambitious on renewable energy and demanded a 'just' transition emphasising financial transfers to compensate economically less developed member states. Among the LWPPs, Podemos (and left-leaning M5S) have advanced ambitious coal phase-out plans, while Syriza rejected such a position. This speaks to the importance of national socio-economic contexts for populists' policy positions (Falkner & Plattner, 2019).

Concerning the discourse, RWPPs employ populist arguments to protect national sovereignty and shield their industry and consumers from decarbonization policies. In contrast, LWPPs underline the urgency of climate mitigation, blame the elites for failing to deal with climate change and call for more international cooperation, economic redistribution and citizen participation as part of ECP. The cases of PiS and the FPÖ lend support to the notion that RWPPs are more likely to advance post-factual 'anti-elitist' discourse whereas we do not find such messages among LWPPs. In our sample, two parties with opposite host ideologies, Podemos (LWPP) and the FPÖ (RWPP), most prominently rely on the combination of 'anti-elitist' and 'people-centric' ECP messages. This is in line with studies which find that the level of populism of parties is not ideology-specific (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017). For some cases, particularly Syriza and M5S, we find weak

populism. Our findings indicate that although parties can generally be populist, populist discourse may be only weakly present or completely absent in certain policy areas. We also find evidence that the frequency and intensity of populist messages decline as parties move from opposition to government. Further research is required to explore the form of rhetoric and whether overt climate denial has been simply replaced with other forms of climate scepticism (Van Rensburg, 2015).

On policy action, our findings show that populist parties do not behave significantly different from what is known about mainstream parties in that they do not exhibit anti-system behaviour and that they often moderate actions once in power. Syriza (LWPP) expressed strong commitment to environmental protection but made compromises on ECP in government. In contrast, as an opposition party, Podemos refused to support the EU ECP 2030 legislation based on its lack of ambition. The two RWPPs and ANO 2011 also failed to dismantle ECP nationally as governing parties, but consistently opposed some ECP measures.

With respect to the crisis trends and the implications for EU ECP (von Homeyer et al., 2021), our analysis shows that different variants of populism exploit the growing socio-political divisions differently to mobilize in favour or against more ambitious ECP. With their hard-line positions on certain issues, the two RWPPs and ANO 2011 illustrate that such populist forces do pose a governance challenge for collective EU ECP. When in power, they bargain hard to win concessions or opt-outs and attempt to limit the ambition of ECP, often in concert with like-minded non-populist governments. However, we do not find evidence that populists obstruct EU decision-making in the field of ECP. The lack of common positions on many issues among RWPPs undermines their potential to endanger EU ECP governance capacity and ambition. On the other hand, Podemos and particularly M5S have decisively strengthened the EU ECP governance capacity by shifting the political majority towards higher targets.

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