



# Populism and Sustainability Policies: Frames, Causes and Effects

17th ESDN Workshop 23-24 May 2019 Berlin:  
Transformation towards Sustainability in Times of  
Rising Populism

# Background and Question

Globally rise of populism and authoritarianism

Priority issues so far:

- Economic integration
- Migration and security

Climate, environment, sustainability: less attention so far

- How does the environment and sustainability fit to the frames and narratives of populists?
- What are possible conclusions and strategies for environment policies against the analysis of populism?

# What is populism?

- Ideology? Strategy? Style of communication?
- Mudde 2004: populism [is a thin-centred] ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (p. 543).
- ⇒ No substantial ideological core of populism
- ⇒ Right-left dimension of limited explanatory value
- ⇒ High degree of flexibility of positions implied in general will of the people
- ⇒ Importance of nation and populace (and exclusion)
- ⇒ Heartland as imagined territory with emotional ties and collective identity (Taggart 2004)
- ⇒ Neither critique of elites/establishment nor simplification is sufficient to qualify as populism, in addition postulate of unitary populace and will of people

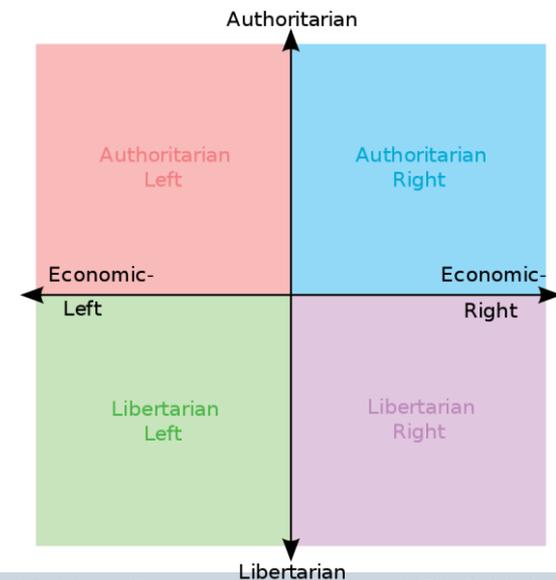
# Populism and Politics

Critique of the political process:

- liberal, rational, pluralistic model of decision making does not reflect the will of the people, but instead dominated by an elite and dysfunctional
- Left populism: social democratic parties fail to represent interests of employees
- politics denounced as „dirty business“=> anti-politics
- Media and science perceived as part of elite/establishment
- Neglect of scientific findings as source for legitimization
- Ambiguity regarding participatory processes

⇒ Call for effective leadership

⇒ dramatic, emotional and personalized political communication



# Populist ideology and the environment

Environment policy feeds the narratives of populists:

- Environment policies as consensus of established parties as response to ‚objective‘ necessity
- Disregard of scientific findings / imbalanced consideration, e.g. benefits of climate change
- Environment policies do not meet own objectives
- Processes of participation are part of an elitist project
- Protection of global common goods and multilateralism ↔ nativism
- ⇒ Environment / sustainability policies are not considering will of people
- ⇒ Protecting environment and sustainability as postmaterialist, cosmopolitan and urban project

# Causes for the emergence of populism

- Economic causes: unemployment, inequalities, economic insecurity, retreat (or failure) of the state to protect precarious groups => supporters are underprivileged
- Cultural causes: increasing estrangement of people and governing, differences in language, single vs. plural identities, security vs. self-realisation, backroom deals
- Populism as instrument: a) extremists parties make use of populism b) financially powerful interests make use of populism

# Causes for populism and environment policies?

- Economic loser: Environment policies may impose additional costs, and increase inequalities
- Cultural estrangement: Environment policy as expression of postmaterialist values, questioning of life-styles (automobiles, meat consumption, suburban single family house, tourism)
- Loss of statehood and security: by delegating responsibility to European or international level
- Lack of political debate: inter- and intra party conflicts on the environment, domination by government (instead of parliament) contribute to backroom policies
- Anti-environment lobbying via populists parties?

# Impacts of Populism

- Coalition governments become difficult: anti-political, taboo-breaking, unwillingness to compromise. Inclusion in government does not necessarily lead to loss of credibility
- Positions of parties change: populist demands are taken up by other parties; political spectrum moves from centre to the extremes
- Political culture, agenda and media change: as a result of provocative communication and use of social media and mass media
- Abolition or weakening of democratic institutions and gravedigger of democracy?
- Mobilization and self-assurance of liberal movements
- Pathologic (but curable and temporary) phenomena?

# Options for strategies

- Dedicated counter-position: as the core of environment/sustainability is contested, mobilization of social groups in support of the environment (civil society, supporter of European integration, science)
  - Focusing on social aspects of environment policies: emphasis on distributional impacts of non-action, mitigate distributional/income effects, support social practices of populist milieus
  - Integration of compatible positions: Environment policy to protect homeland, nature protection, community based activities
- ⇒ Competition between concepts for environment policies?
- ⇒ Re-politicize the environment?