

Bosetti, Valentina; Colantone, Italo; de Vries, Catherine E.; Musto, Giorgio

Working Paper

Green backlash and right-wing populism

Working Paper Series, No. 26

Provided in Cooperation with:

Bocconi University, GREEN – Centre for Research on Geography, Resources, Environment, Energy and Networks

Suggested Citation: Bosetti, Valentina; Colantone, Italo; de Vries, Catherine E.; Musto, Giorgio (2025) : Green backlash and right-wing populism, Working Paper Series, No. 26, Bocconi University, Centre for Research on Geography, Resources, Environment, Energy and Networks (GREEN), Milan

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/315123>

Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

Terms of use:

Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.

You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.

If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.

GREEN BACKLASH AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM

Valentina Bosetti

Italo Colantone

Catherine E. De Vries

Giorgio Musto



Green Backlash and Right-Wing Populism*

Valentina Bosetti[†]

Italo Colantone[‡]

Catherine E. De Vries[§]

Giorgio Musto[¶]

February 20, 2025

Abstract

This narrative review delves into the politics of climate policy, with specific focus on the so-called “green backlash”. That is, rising resistance by voters, parties, and governments to the climate transition. We start by reviewing the literature on the political consequences of climate policies. The evidence points to a green backlash among citizens negatively affected by the decarbonization transition. Populist right forces emerge as main beneficiaries of the backlash. They tend to be more skeptical regarding anthropogenic climate change and less supportive of climate policies. Their electoral success has negative implications for countries’ climate policy making and performance. Finally, we draw insights from the literature to reflect on what can be done to improve the political sustainability of climate policies.

Keywords: Climate policies; green backlash; right-wing populism.

*The authors are grateful to Maria Carmela Attolini, Iorgus-Serghei Cicala, and Elisa Dini for excellent research assistance, and to Hans-Georg Betz and participants at the workshop on Political Dynamics and Consequences of Climate Policy at Bocconi University for useful comments. Financial support from the Bocconi Institute for European Policymaking (IEP) is gratefully acknowledged. The usual disclaimer applies.

[†]Bocconi University, IEP, GREEN Research Centre, RFF-CMCC European Institute of Economics and the Environment, Euro-Mediterranean Center on Climate Change, Lecce, via Roentgen 1, 20136 Milan, Italy. Contact: valentina.bosetti@unibocconi.it.

[‡]Bocconi University, IEP, GREEN Research Centre, Baffi Research Centre, CESifo and FEEM, via Roentgen 1, 20136 Milan, Italy. Contact: italo.colantone@unibocconi.it.

[§]Bocconi University, IEP, GREEN Research Centre, Baffi Research Centre, Dondena Research Center, via Roentgen 1, 20136 Milan, Italy. Contact: catherine.devries@unibocconi.it.

[¶]Bocconi University, via Roentgen 1, 20136 Milan, Italy. Contact: giorgio.musto@unibocconi.it.

1 Introduction

Responding to climate change requires effective policy action (Dubash *et al.*, 2022). In democracies, enacting climate policies requires broad public support and chiefly electoral backing for parties and candidates proposing ambitious climate action (Gaikwad *et al.*, 2022; Abou-Chadi and Kayser, 2017). Understanding the politics of climate change is thus crucial to ensure successful mitigation action that is politically sustainable in the long term (Bechtel and Scheve, 2013). Recently, we have witnessed cracks in popular and political support for the climate transition. A growing body of work on disaffection with climate policy stresses two key types of factors: (1) *economic* ones relating to the distributional consequences of climate policies themselves (Colantone *et al.*, 2024; Gaikwad *et al.*, 2022; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018); and (2) *cultural* ones connecting to a broader process of growing skepticism towards political and scientific elites (Dalton, 2005; Gauchat, 2012; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Lunz Trujillo, 2022). On the economic side, climate policies, by generating winners and losers in the labor market and by imposing unevenly distributed costs on citizens, may trigger a backlash that rewards climate-skeptic parties and candidates, leading to the election of policymakers that are less sensitive to climate issues. On the cultural side, a shift away from parties backing climate policies may be the result of a broader process of reduced trust in politicians and scientific elites. Regardless of its drivers, a so-called “green backlash” can undermine the political sustainability of climate transition over time and prevent the enactment of climate mitigation policies down the line. In particular, this backlash is likely to breed support for right-wing populists¹, who have been very effective at leveraging political discontent (Norris, 2020) and weaponizing it against the climate transition (Dickson and Hobolt, 2024).

¹The term populist right is used as an umbrella concept including radical right and extreme right parties that combine anti-immigration, nationalist and anti-elite rhetoric. We use “populist right” rather than “extreme right” because factions within these parties straddle the continuum of being critical of the state of democracy, to wanting major reform, to being anti-democratic (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017).

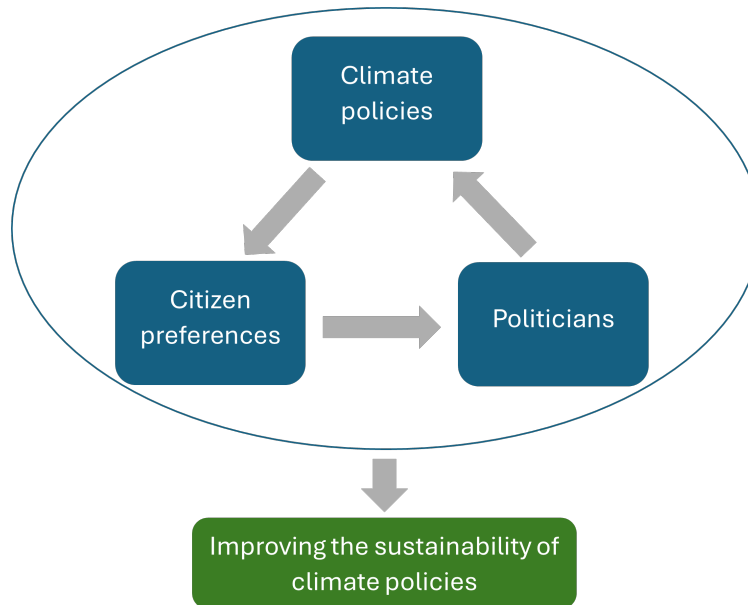
In this article, we provide a narrative review of research dealing with the politics of climate policy along the conceptual map depicted in Figure 1. Climate policies, through their economic and cultural repercussions, have an impact on citizens' preferences in terms of climate attitudes and voting behavior. In turn, the shift in preferences has an impact on election outcomes. Finally, elected politicians have implications for future enacted policies. Shedding light on these feedback-loop dynamics is key to improving the political sustainability of climate policies. Our review is structured around this overarching conceptual framework.

In particular, with this review we aim to improve the understanding of the green backlash. While this term is frequently employed in popular discourse, no clear consensus exists on its definition in scientific literature. For the purpose of this review, we conceptualize the “green backlash” as resistance by a significant number of actors within a political community (e.g., voters, political parties, and governments) to the climate transition, which can result into a substantial push to resist, repeal or rollback climate policies (Patterson, 2023; Biber, 2008).

To compile the corpus for this literature review, we employed a comprehensive search strategy aimed at ensuring the inclusion of relevant and high-quality studies. Initially, we conducted keyword searches on Google Scholar using combinations of terms including “climate change”, “climate policy/policies”, “green backlash”, “backlash”, “populism”, and “populist”. This initial search was meant to capture a broad spectrum of research intersecting these themes. We then used a snowballing technique to refine and expand our selection of papers, based on the reference lists of the contributions identified in our initial search.

We start in Section 2 by reviewing studies investigating the political consequences of climate policies and the role of individual interest related to positioning in the labour market as the decarbonization transition progresses. The main findings emerging from this literature are consistent with the existence of a green backlash among specific constituencies. That is, voters who are negatively affected by the climate transition, or fear that they will be negatively affected in the future, tend to show diminished support for green parties

Figure 1: Conceptual map



and, more broadly, for mainstream incumbent parties responsible for the design and implementation of climate policies. At the same time, right-wing populist parties and candidates emerge as the main beneficiaries of the backlash. We then ask what makes populist right forces particularly attractive to losers of the decarbonization transition. To answer this question, in Section 3 we review the literature on the skeptical positioning of populist right parties on climate change and policy. Then, in Section 4, we review the evidence on the substantive consequentiality of the green backlash in terms of climate policy making and performance. Finally, we derive insights from the literature to reflect on what can be done to address the green backlash. To deal with this issue, in Section 5 we delve deeper into the mechanisms that may link climate policies to shifts in voting behavior. The main message is that fostering climate action requires a broad range of policy interventions in multiple domains. These encompass policies aimed at compensating the losers of the climate transition and broader efforts to increase trust in political elites and institutions as well as science, for instance by stepping up civic and scientific education.

2 The Political Consequences of Climate Policies

In this section, we provide an overview of studies that have investigated the political consequences of climate mitigation policies. We begin by considering studies that examine policies favoring renewable energy technologies, the main alternative to fossil fuel technologies. Then, we move to studies on policies that penalize fossil fuels. Finally, we review studies on the role of people’s positioning in the labor market and how it might evolve as a result of climate policies.

Renewable energy policies might generate citizens’ discontent due to their negative externalities, leading to reduced electoral support for parties that are responsible for their implementation. For instance, the installation of wind turbines generates negative externalities related to noise, impact on the landscape, and effect on house prices ([Stokes, 2016](#)). This may lead to local opposition as per the “Not In My Backyard”, also known as NIMBY effect. An energy policy that liberalized the installation of wind turbines in the Canadian province of Ontario, by eliminating the veto power of local communities, led to significant political backlash ([Stokes, 2016](#)). In electoral precincts with a proposed or operational turbine, the vote share for the governing party responsible for the policy dropped by 4 to 10 percent at the next elections, compared to similar precincts without a turbine. This effect is estimated to account for around 6,050 lost votes by the incumbent party, and may have determined the election outcome, as the governing party lost its majority by just one seat. A moratorium on new wind turbines then followed to appease protests of active anti-wind campaigners. A similar backlash has been observed with respect to wind turbines installed in Sweden ([Isaksson and Gren, 2024](#)), and with respect to both wind and solar developments in Germany ([Mitsch and McNeil, 2022](#); [Germeshausen et al., 2023](#)). That said, this electoral effect quickly fades with increasing distance to the renewable energy installations, and is mitigated in areas where more tax revenues from energy generation accrue to local authorities ([Germeshausen et al., 2023](#)). Evidence in line

with anti-incumbent effects of climate policy is also found at the macro level in a study covering 30 countries between 2001 and 2015 (Furceri *et al.*, 2023).

Besides the anti-incumbent effect of renewables, studies also provide evidence for a polarizing effect. For instance, in German municipalities where wind turbines were installed, both support for the Green party, the main proponent of wind energy development, and support for the right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), the main opponent, increased (Otteni and Weisskircher, 2022). This happened as policy supporters vs. antagonists were increasingly mobilized in opposite directions in contexts where the issue of green energy became more salient. Along somewhat similar lines, focusing on regional elections in Southern Italy, a study finds that the installation of wind turbines generated a strong and significant premium for prorenewables left-wing regional administrations, and a mild, not statistically significant electoral backlash against right-wing regional administrations (Daniele *et al.*, 2024).

At the broader electoral district level the positive economic and environmental implications might win out against local resistance. In fact, next to negative externalities, green energy projects also generate positive economic effects at the local level, for instance in terms of job and firm creation or inflows of government subsidies. This could aid the incumbent or pro-renewable political forces. Such positive effects may not necessarily outweigh the negative externalities at the very local level, but this may be more likely the case as one considers larger geographic areas. In line with this intuition, a study investigating the political effects of wind turbines in the US at the level of congressional districts finds that the installation of turbines increased the vote share for pro-renewables Democratic candidates, while not significantly affecting incumbent vote shares (Urpelainen and Zhang, 2022). Another US study instead finds that wind turbine developments had a positive impact on the electoral performance of incumbent parties, with Republicans benefiting as much as, or more than Democrats (Bayulgen *et al.*, 2021).

Next, we review studies examining the political consequences of policies penalizing

fossil fuels. A first kind of such policies is traffic restrictions on polluting vehicles. These restrictions may generate public opposition among affected groups of citizens, with significant political implications. For instance, a traffic ban on relatively more polluting cars in the city of Milan generated a sizable political backlash benefiting the right-wing populist party Lega (Colantone *et al.*, 2024). The ban had regressive implications, as affected cars were relatively older, and thus more prevalent among lower socioeconomic segments of the population. The populist right strongly opposed the policy, criticizing its distributional consequences. This position-taking turned out to be politically rewarding. Among affected individuals who had not voted for Lega in previous elections, the likelihood of switching to Lega in the elections following the policy's introduction more than doubled compared to the baseline switching rate among Milan citizens. Importantly, affected car owners who received some form of compensation from the municipality—e.g., money contributions to buy a new or second-hand car, or public transport subscriptions—were not more likely than unaffected car owners to shift their support to Lega. This result, although specific to the city of Milan, supports the idea that setting up compensation schemes can be an effective strategy to enhance the public acceptability of climate policies.

A second kind of policy penalizing fossil fuels is related to carbon taxes. Similar to traffic bans, they can generate a political backlash through their distributional consequences. In line with that, cross-country evidence shows that carbon taxes tend to be lower in political contexts characterized by higher levels of electoral competition among parties (Finnegan, 2023). A Dutch study investigated the political implications of a policy that increased taxes on household natural gas consumption while redistributing the revenues as renewable energy subsidies (Voeten, 2024). The policy resulted in a 46 percent increase in gas prices, and around 20 percent of home owners installed rooftop solar panels. The policy had regressive implications and triggered fierce opposition from populist right parties, which obtained significant electoral gains among penalized groups. In particular, the backlash was particularly evident for individuals classified as “energy poor”, that is to say spending

at least 10 percent of their household income on energy, or struggling to pay their utility bills or to heat their homes. Along similar lines, a solar panel subsidization program in Belgium has been found to reduce support for government parties while increasing vote for anti-establishment parties (De Groote *et al.*, 2024). This result is mainly driven by non-adopters of solar panels, on average poorer than adopters, who were subject to regressive electricity surcharges imposed to finance the subsidies. Speaking to the interaction between material and cultural concerns, studies have found evidence of lower support for carbon taxes among individuals displaying lower trust in politics (e.g., Umit and Schaffer (2020)). Interestingly, individuals with low political trust tend to be against carbon taxes even when they believe in anthropogenic climate change (Fairbrother *et al.*, 2019).

The third kind of policy aimed at penalizing the use of fossil fuels is related to the phasing out of coal. The move away from coal may generate political opposition in affected communities due to localized distributional consequences. In Germany, for example, closures of coal plants and mines between 2007 and 2022 were found to determine lower vote shares for the Social Democratic Party, a long-standing proponent of coal phasing out, as well as higher abstention rates in affected municipalities (Stutzmann, 2024). In the Appalachian region of the US, 54% of coal mining jobs (32k out of 60k) were lost between 2011 and 2016. A study at the county level showed that the loss of coal mining jobs resulted in an increase in the Republican vote share by approximately 4 percentage points in the Presidential elections of 2012 (Egli *et al.*, 2022). This effect persisted in 2016 and was equivalent to a vote shift of around three times the number of jobs lost. The approach to coal became politically very salient over this period, with the Democratic party being strongly in favor of phasing out coal, and the Republican party strongly opposing it. “Bring back coal” was one of the key slogans of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign in 2016, when he promised to cut back anti-coal regulations imposed by the Obama administration. Trump emphasized the tangible and immediate costs of the energy transition vis-à-vis potential future gains that may ultimately prove immaterial to those that reject the idea of

human-driven deadly climate change altogether.

However, the political consequences of coal phasing out may not be uniform across countries. A similar phasing out process in Spain, for example, was accompanied by a Just Transition Agreement put forward by the governing Socialist party shortly before the national elections of 2019. The agreement was negotiated with both the trade unions and companies involved, and entailed support for affected workers and investment plans for affected municipalities. Pointing to the effectiveness of this agreement, a study finds that support for the Socialist party increased by 1.8 percentage points in coal mining municipalities, compared to relatively similar non-coal mining municipalities that were not subject to the agreement (Bolet *et al.*, 2023). The study suggests that this result is likely due not only to the compensatory content of the agreement, but also to the process by which it was designed and negotiated, which increased public awareness and support.

A final type of policies penalizing fossil fuels relates to the transition toward electric vehicles (EV). Companies and workers specialized in the production of internal combustion engines and related parts are vulnerable to this transition. The same applies, in turn, to geographic areas where employment in such production activities is concentrated, as the transition towards electric vehicles may lead to significant job losses. The actual, or feared, impact of this transition has the potential to become politically consequential. In the US, the Republican Party gained a significant amount of votes (2.5 percentage points) in counties more exposed to the EV transition in the presidential elections following the 2013-2016 period, when policies concerning electric vehicles became politically salient (Gazmararian and Krashinsky, 2023). Along similar lines, another US study found that counties witnessing higher shares of employment related to the green economy displayed higher support for the Democrats since 2016 (Kim, 2025). This electoral shift was mostly driven by Republican incumbent districts with a high proportion of green employment that did not receive any government support for green investment after 2016.

While the studies on coal phasing-out and EV vehicles speak to the importance of labor

market concerns related to decarbonization policies for workers employed in polluting industries, the transition towards a decarbonized economy may also create labor market opportunities for workers that are complementary to the transition itself. Perceptions of economic threats vs. opportunities stemming from the transition may turn out to influence elections. In line with this intuition, a European cross-country study investigated the role of material interest related to individual positioning in the labor market (Cavallotti *et al.*, 2023). For each individual in their sample, the authors of the study computed a score of predicted greenness and one of predicted brownness that capture the extent to which individuals are expected to benefit vs. lose out as a consequence of the climate transition.² The starting elements of the analysis are occupation-specific scores of greenness and brownness, reflecting how demanded vs. penalized each occupation is expected to be in a greener economy (Vona *et al.*, 2018, 2019). Each individual then gets a predicted greenness (brownness) score which is an average of the occupation specific greenness (brownness) scores, weighted by the individual probabilities to be employed in each possible occupation. The results suggest that individuals with higher predicted greenness scores, i.e., greener occupational profiles, vote more for environmentalist and green parties, while the opposite pattern emerges for people with browner profiles, who are also significantly more likely to support radical right parties. A study of AfD support in Germany also found a link between employment in brown occupations and populist right support (Heddesheimer *et al.*, 2024). These findings chime with earlier evidence connecting individual industries or occupations of employment to stances on climate policies. Studies showed that individuals employed in polluting industries or emission-intensive activities are in general less supportive of climate cooperation and stringent climate measures, and more sensitive to cost considerations when evaluating climate policies (Bechtel *et al.*, 2019; De Sario *et al.*, 2023).

²In the literature, green and brown jobs are often classified based on the broader environmental impacts of either the production processes or the goods produced by the associated industries. While this classification includes various forms of pollution beyond greenhouse gases, it largely overlaps with pollution related to climate change.

Taking stock of the evidence presented in this section, two main messages emerge. First, the distributional implications of climate policies tend to be politically consequential, generating a backlash among citizens who are negatively affected by these policies, or fear to be negatively affected in the future. Second, this backlash often benefits right-wing populist parties and candidates. In the next section, we investigate why the green backlash tends to take this form, focusing on the positioning of populist right parties on climate issues.

3 Populist Right Positioning on Climate

What makes populist right parties particularly attractive to voters and communities that are adversely affected by the decarbonization transition, or fear future negative impacts? To address this question, this section reviews the literature on populist right parties' positioning regarding climate change and climate policies, as well as how this fits their broader political strategy.

Several contributions to the literature document a consistent pattern of skepticism towards climate policies among populist right parties in Western Europe. An analysis of their party manifestos shows that these parties strongly emphasize the trade-off between environmental protection and economic development; they are skeptical about man-made global warming, and overwhelmingly opposed to environmental taxes ([Gemenis *et al.*, 2012](#)). In fact, populist radical right forces constitute the only group of parties showing a clear negative stance on climate protection, although climate issues have gained prominence in their manifestos, particularly since 2019 ([Schwörer and Fernández-García, 2023](#)). Other work shows that radical right parties adopt an oppositional climate policy rhetoric that diverges strongly from the mainstream consensus ([Dickson and Hobolt, 2024](#)). This is consistent with a political strategy aimed at politicizing “wedge issues”, i.e., issues that cut across party lines, in order to split existing social coalitions. Survey data show that climate

skepticism is widespread among voters across the political spectrum, so the mobilizing potential of opposition to climate policy looms substantial. In this respect, populist right stances on climate change complement their strong positions on other wedge issues like immigration and EU integration, as identified in earlier work (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020).

A climate skeptic stance fits the political narrative of the populist right particularly well. A defining feature of populist parties is a Manichean view of the world as a clash between “pure people” vs. “corrupt elites” (Mudde, 2004). Against this backdrop, the rhetoric of right-wing populists portrays climate change as a concern of the urban elites and cosmopolitan climate activists, who then design and implement decarbonization policies that impose disproportionate costs on common people. In this respect, populist right forces stand out as main opponents of climate policies, insisting on their unfair and regressive implications. Moreover, studies suggest that climate policies are increasingly identified with scientific expertise, technocratic management, and the influence of multilateral institutions on domestic policy making. These are all frequent targets of right-wing populist resentment (Colantone *et al.*, 2024). The stances of right-wing populists may fuel hostility to climate policy as part of the liberal and cosmopolitan elite agenda, opposed by populist right forces in virtue of authoritarian and nationalist values (Lockwood, 2018). Climate scientists and environmentalists are identified as part of a corrupt elite driven by special interests at the expense of the common people. In addition, the complexity of climate issues provides fertile ground for conspiracy theories, which tend to be popular within the populist right camp (Cremaschi *et al.*, 2025).

Looking beyond the general finding of populist right opposition to the green agenda, there is some differentiation in discursive patterns and rhetorical strategies adopted by specific parties. For instance, studies find that the German AfD tends to frame its opposition to climate change policy more in terms of “response skepticism”, i.e., a criticism of the initiatives proposed and enacted to fight climate change, rather than outright denial of scientific findings (Küppers, 2022; Oswald *et al.*, 2021). Similar evidence is found for

the French party Rassemblement National (RN), which appears to be also somewhat less climate skeptical than AfD in general (Oswald *et al.*, 2021). As for the main Scandinavian populist right forces—i.e., the Danish People’s Party in Denmark, the Finns Party in Finland, and the Sweden Democrats in Sweden—these parties have in common a strong criticism of what they call “climate hysteria” and “alarmism” (Vihma *et al.*, 2021). Beyond this commonality, the Danish People’s Party seems to have shifted over time from climate science denialism to “climate policy conservatism”, which entails acknowledging the existence of climate change but only supporting action when costs are minimal. The positions of Sweden Democrats and the Finns Party are closer to “climate policy nationalism”, which entails arguing that climate change is due to actions of other countries and generally refusing calls for their own countries to act. This is close to response skepticism but incorporates a nationalist rationale as justification, emphasizing concerns that other countries may free-ride on domestic climate efforts. This said, all three parties do share a more favorable attitude towards more traditional environmental issues, entailing national nature conservation and the protection of countryside landscapes.

A nationalist call for safeguarding a country’s rural areas, the beauty and the integrity of the national environment, symbolically linked to the nation’s culture, identity and pure people, is actually not uncommon among right-wing populist parties (Alarcón Ferrari, 2020; Forchtner and Kølvråa, 2015; Lockwood, 2018; Lubarda, 2020). This approach emphasizes the right of native people to land and water resources, as well as the economic interests of rural communities. These communities stand to benefit significantly from effective climate change mitigation in the long run (Bednar-Friedl *et al.*, 2022). However, in the short to medium term, they may face adjustment costs, such as the need to modify farming practices or adopt new technologies. Owing to such costs, opposition to climate action in support of rural and agrarian interests may be politically rewarding. This is likely to be the case even in contexts where the share of employment in farming and fishing is actually low. In fact, this type of rhetoric has been shown to resonate with broader segments of the electorate,

as citizens may sympathize more with farmers than with climate activists (De Kleer *et al.*, 2024). Finally, the nature conservation stance of right-wing populist parties also aligns with skepticism toward climate change mitigation measures that could impact landscape aesthetics, such as the installation of wind turbines.

4 The Consequences of the Green Backlash

Having discussed the electoral consequences of climate policies and the positioning of populist right forces on climate issues—which makes them particularly likely to benefit from the green backlash—we now turn to the question of the extent to which this backlash is consequential for policy making and environmental performance. Specifically, in this section we review the available studies investigating what happens to countries where the influence of right-wing populist forces on legislatures and executives grows.

Arguably, the most evident climate policy effects of the electoral success of right-wing populists have been observed in the US, under Donald Trump’s first presidency. Several studies document and analyze in detail the various initiatives of Trump’s administration in this domain (Bergeson, 2017; Bomberg, 2017, 2021; Jotzo *et al.*, 2018; Selby, 2019). The withdrawal of the US from the Paris Agreement, the cancellation of the Climate Action Plan initiated by the previous president, Barack Obama, the defunding of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the liberalization of oil and gas drilling even within national nature reserves were some of the most visible policy moves. They are consistent with Trump’s skepticism over anthropogenic climate change and his aversion towards any measures that may, in his view, harm the economy and the broader American interest, especially when it comes to restrictions stemming from multilateral agreements. In this respect, Trump’s approach constitutes a quintessential example of the populist right positioning on climate issues described in the previous section.

Turning the attention to Europe, the literature shows a consistent pattern of adverse

impact of the strength of populist right parties on climate mitigation action. For instance, two cross-country studies find that greater influence of populist right parties on executives weakens climate action, specifically relating to greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets, renewable energy targets, and phasing out of conventional energy production (Ćetković and Hagemann, 2020; Huber *et al.*, 2021). The impact is stronger when populist right parties directly control a relevant ministry, and mitigated when international commitments become more relevant, for instance after the Paris Agreement of 2015. Other work finds that greater presence of right-wing populist parties in executive institutions leads to higher greenhouse gas emissions per capita (Jahn, 2021). In contrast, the opposite holds for populist parties of the left, at least in Southern Europe. A study documents how the climate skeptical approach of populist right parties is not shared by populist parties of the left, which tend to display more pro-environment stances (Huber *et al.*, 2021). This is another illustration of the fact that, despite sharing populist rhetoric, left and right populist parties are fundamentally different when it comes to ideological stances and policy proposals in many domains (Colantone and Stanig, 2019; Guriev and Papaioannou, 2022).

Interestingly, in some cases greater presence of populist right parties in parliaments may have a positive indirect impact on climate action (Ćetković and Hagemann, 2020). This happens if shrinking mainstream parties are forced to form broader government coalitions with smaller environmentalist parties, excluding the populist right. Importantly, research also suggests that the influence of populist right parties on climate action may vary across different political contexts (Lockwood and Lockwood, 2022). There is evidence of stronger negative effects of populist right influence on climate policy in majoritarian systems than in proportional systems. In fact, in majoritarian contexts, populist right forces may become dominant factions within mainstream political parties—a phenomenon known as “majoritarian populism”—thus acquiring stronger policy influence. The trajectory of the US Republican party under Trump is a case in point.

Overall, the evidence reviewed in this section suggests that—by increasing the promi-

nence of right-wing populists within executives and legislatures—the green backlash could have significant implications for climate action. In light of this, it is crucial to reflect on what can be done in order to address the backlash and improve the political sustainability of climate policies. This is the question we address in the remaining of this article.

5 Mechanisms: Material Concerns and Culture

In the previous sections, we have reviewed literature findings shedding light on: (1) how voting behavior changes in response to climate policies; (2) how right-wing populist forces capitalize on grievances associated with the decarbonization transition, and on general distrust in the elites, to secure electoral gains; and (3) how the growing legislative influence and executive participation of populist right parties may undermine climate mitigation actions. Now we turn to the question of what can be done to break this vicious circle and address the green backlash.

To answer this question, in this section we delve deeper into three mechanisms that may link climate policies to shifts in voting behavior among relevant segments of the electorate. The first mechanism relates to the unequal material consequences of these policies. The second mechanism involves negative impacts of other structural economic changes, such as globalization, which may fuel negative attitudes toward climate change and climate policies. The third mechanism is related to more general cultural dynamics of rising anti-establishment sentiment and diminishing trust in institutions.

First, the green transition may invoke material concerns that affect political behavior. Individuals negatively affected by the transition—due to worsening labor market outcomes and direct actual or feared costs implied by specific climate policies—are more likely to turn to populist right parties that oppose such policies by criticizing their distributional consequences. The decarbonization transition poses a significant challenge, as the economic and social costs of industrial restructuring, such as job losses and obsolescence of skills, often

disproportionately affect workforce segments that do not directly or immediately benefit from these changes. A “just transition” requires leading this transformation in a way that is as fair and inclusive as possible. To achieve this, it is essential to design transition strategies that minimize negative impacts on vulnerable workers and communities by ensuring access to necessary skills training, developing competences for emerging industries, and providing robust social protection measures (Stavis and Felli, 2015). As documented in Section 2, compensation of the losers and broader policy approaches aimed at a just transition may foster both the public acceptability of specific policies and the general political sustainability of climate action (Colantone *et al.*, 2024; Bolet *et al.*, 2023).

Second, the literature suggests that material interests may matter beyond the distributional effects of climate policies (Vona, 2019). The decarbonization transition is a dimension of structural change in the economy akin, and related to, other facets of structural change, such as globalization and technological progress. All these phenomena tend to produce aggregate welfare gains but with winners and losers, at least in relative terms. Losers of globalization and technological progress, having to deal with pressing economic grievances, may de-prioritize climate change and, therefore, reduce their support for environmentalist parties. For instance, a study focusing on both Europe and the US shows that higher exposure to import competition leads to lower support for environmentalist parties and to more skeptical attitudes about climate change (Bez *et al.*, 2023). Among the possible mechanisms for these findings, the study emphasizes how globalization losers, just like losers of the climate transition, are more likely to turn to populist right parties. This may worsen the environmental attitudes of voters who get closer to populist right parties for reasons unrelated to climate policy—e.g., economic distress driven by globalization or automation—and then tend to adopt the populist right environment-skeptic cues.

In fact, the literature documents a strong association between populist and nationalist beliefs and worse attitudes about climate change and environmental policies. For instance, research focusing on the UK finds that people holding more populist beliefs are more likely to

display climate change skepticism and lower support for environmental protection (Huber, 2020). Other work using cross-country European data finds that holding nationalist beliefs, a characterizing trait of populist right supporters, is associated with climate skepticism and opposition to fossil fuel taxes (Kulin *et al.*, 2021). In line with this, supporters of the populist right are found to be more skeptical of climate change, more opposed to climate policies, and less trusting of climate experts, both in Europe and in the US (Fisher *et al.*, 2022; Yan *et al.*, 2022).

Finally, from a cultural perspective, research across several countries shows a consistent link between anti-establishment sentiment, low institutional trust, and opposition to climate policies. For populist supporters, diminished trust in political and scientific institutions becomes an important channel through which people-centrist and anti-elitist beliefs fuel positions against climate action. Studies from Canada, Norway, Austria, and the Netherlands find that lower trust in institutions, including political and environmental bodies, is associated with climate change skepticism and resistance to climate policies (Kitt *et al.*, 2021; Krange *et al.*, 2021; Huber *et al.*, 2022; Meijers *et al.*, 2023).

Overall, ensuring the political sustainability of climate action requires not only addressing the distributional consequences of climate policies but also, more broadly, dealing with rising inequalities generated by other phenomena of socio-economic change (Bez *et al.*, 2023). Ultimately, the fight against climate change is also a fight for a more inclusive society. Inclusive policies may help not only by addressing material concerns, but also by improving trust in the elites. In fact, as we have seen, the drivers of the green backlash reach beyond economic concerns and encompass cultural attitudes. In this respect, waning support for climate action may be part of a broader process of rising skepticism towards the elites. The sustainability of climate policies also hinges on efforts to increase trust in political elites and institutions as well as science, for instance by investing in civic and science education.

6 Conclusion

Political support for climate action is essential for a successful decarbonization transition. In this article, we have reviewed the existing literature on the politics of climate policy, with a particular focus on the green backlash. Climate policies can trigger a backlash by creating winners and losers. While the distributive impacts of these policies are often smaller than those of climate change itself—which may be even more unequal (Gilli *et al.*, 2024)—they tend to be far more politically salient. Rising inequalities due to other dimensions of structural economic change, and broader cultural shifts entailing declining trust in elites and institutions, may pose additional challenges. Prioritizing the mitigation of distributional impacts from both climate change and climate policies is essential. Equally important is adopting compensatory mechanisms and embedding participatory processes in the design of climate policy portfolios. In addition to these practical measures, it is critical to reshape the narrative surrounding climate policies, emphasizing their potential to promote fairness and shared benefits in people’s perception (Dechezleprêtre *et al.*, 2022). Together, these steps are key for ensuring that the green backlash does not lead to general climate inaction.

This review focused mostly on European and North American countries, which are at the forefront of experimenting with climate policies. As many other national policies are rolled out globally, possibly incorporating some of the lessons learned so far, future research should uncover whether and in what form a green backlash emerges in other geographical and political contexts. An emerging stream of literature is also starting to investigate the political implications of climate adaptation and disaster relief policies, which are characterized by concentrated benefits and diffuse public costs (Cremaschi and Stanig, 2024). This research will provide useful insights into the public acceptability of this type of policies, which will increasingly be part of the climate change policy portfolio.

References

- ABOU-CHADI, T. and KAYSER, M. A. (2017). It's not easy being green: Why voters punish parties for environmental policies during economic downturns. *Electoral Studies*, **45**, 201–207.
- ALARCÓN FERRARI, C. (2020). Contemporary Land Questions in Sweden, Far-Right Populist Strategies and Challenges for Inclusionary Rural Development. *Sociologia Ruralis*, **60** (4), 833–856.
- BAYULGEN, O., ATKINSON-PALOMBO, C., BUCHANAN, M. and SCRUGGS, L. (2021). Tilting at windmills? Electoral repercussions of wind turbine projects in Minnesota. *Energy Policy*, **159**, 112636.
- BECHTEL, M. M., GENOVESE, F. and SCHEVE, K. F. (2019). Interests, norms and support for the provision of global public goods: the case of climate co-operation. *British Journal of Political Science*, **49** (4), 1333–1355.
- and SCHEVE, K. F. (2013). Mass support for global climate agreements depends on institutional design. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, **110** (34), 13763–13768.
- BEDNAR-FRIEDL, B., BIESBROEK, R., SCHMIDT, D. N., ALEXANDER, P., BØRSHEIM, K. Y., CARNICER, J., GEORGOPOULOU, E., HAASNOOT, M., LE COZANNET, G., LIONELLO, P., LIPKA, O., MÖLLMANN, C., MUCCIONE, V., MUSTONEN, T., PIEPENBURG, D. and WHITMARSH, L. (2022). Europe. In H.-O. Pörtner, D. C. Roberts, M. Tignor, E. S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegría, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Löschke, V. Möller, A. Okem and B. Rama (eds.), *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on*

- Climate Change*, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1817–1927.
- BERGESON, L. L. (2017). The trump administration and likely impacts on environmental law and policy. *Environmental Quality Management*, **26** (4).
- BEZ, C., BOSETTI, V., COLANTONE, I. and ZANARDI, M. (2023). Exposure to international trade lowers green voting and worsens environmental attitudes. *Nature Climate Change*, **13** (10), 1131–1135.
- BIBER, E. (2008). Climate Change and Backlash. *NYU Envtl. LJ*, **17**, 1295.
- BOLET, D., GREEN, F. and GONZALEZ-EGUINO, M. (2023). How to Get Coal Country to Vote for Climate Policy: The Effect of a “Just Transition Agreement” on Spanish Election Results. *American Political Science Review*, pp. 1–16.
- BOMBERG, E. (2017). Environmental politics in the Trump era: an early assessment. *Environmental Politics*, **26** (5), 956–963.
- (2021). The environmental legacy of President Trump. *Policy Studies*, **42** (5-6), 628–645.
- CAVALLOTTI, E., COLANTONE, I., STANIG, P. and VONA, F. (2023). Green collars at the voting booth: Material interest and environmentalist voting. *Unpublished manuscript*.
- ĆETKOVIĆ, S. and HAGEMANN, C. (2020). Changing climate for populists? Examining the influence of radical-right political parties on low-carbon energy transitions in Western Europe. *Energy Research & Social Science*, **66**, 101571.
- COLANTONE, I., DI LONARDO, L., MARGALIT, Y. and PERCOCO, M. (2024). The Political Consequences of Green Policies: Evidence from Italy. *American Political Science Review*, **118** (1), 108–126.
- and STANIG, P. (2019). The surge of economic nationalism in Western Europe. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, **33** (4), 128–151.

- CREMASCHI, S., BARILETTO, N. and DE VRIES, C. E. (2025). Without roots: The political consequences of collective economic shocks. *American Political Science Review*.
- and STANIG, P. (2024). Voting and climate change: How an extreme weather event increased support for a radical-right incumbent in Italy. *Journal of Politics*, forthcoming.
- DALTON, R. J. (2005). The social transformation of trust in government. *International review of sociology*, **15** (1), 133–154.
- DANIELE, F., DE BLASIO, G. and PASQUINI, A. (2024). Is local opposition taking the wind out of the energy transition? *Unpublished manuscript*.
- DE GROOTE, O., GAUTIER, A. and VERBOVEN, F. (2024). The political economy of financing climate policy—Evidence from the solar PV subsidy programs. *Resource and Energy Economics*, **77**, 101436.
- DE KLEER, D., VAN TEUTEM, S. and DE VRIES, C. E. (2024). Do Disruptive Climate Protests Work? Public Support for Pro-Climate and Counter-Climate Protests. *Unpublished manuscript*.
- DE SARIO, G., MARIN, G. and SACCHI, A. (2023). Citizens' attitudes towards climate mitigation policies: The role of occupational exposure in EU countries. *Kyklos*, **76** (2), 255–280.
- DE VRIES, C. E. and HOBOLT, S. (2020). *Political entrepreneurs: The rise of challenger parties in Europe*. Princeton University Press.
- DECHEZLEPRÊTRE, A., FABRE, A., KRUSE, T., PLANTEROSE, B., SANCHEZ CHICO, A. and STANTCHEVA, S. (2022). Fighting Climate Change: International Attitudes Toward Climate Policies. *Working Paper no. 30265, National Bureau of Economic Research*.
- DICKSON, Z. P. and HOBOLT, S. B. (2024). Going against the grain: Climate change as a wedge issue for the radical right. *Comparative Political Studies*.

- DUBASH, N. K., MITCHELL, C., BOASSON, E. L., CÓRDOVA, M. J. B., FIFITA, S., HAITES, E., JACCARD, M., JOTZO, F., NAIDOO, S. and ROMERO-LANKAO, P. (2022). National and sub-national policies and institutions. In *Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change. Contribution of Working Group III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Cambridge University Press.
- EGLI, F., SCHMID, N. and SCHMIDT, T. S. (2022). Backlash to fossil fuel phase-outs: the case of coal mining in US presidential elections. *Environmental Research Letters*, **17** (9), 094002.
- FAIRBROTHER, M., SEVÄ, I. J. and KULIN, J. (2019). Political trust and the relationship between climate change beliefs and support for fossil fuel taxes: Evidence from a survey of 23 European countries. *Global Environmental Change*, **59**, 102003.
- FINNEGAN, J. J. (2023). Changing Prices in a Changing Climate: Electoral Competition and Fossil Fuel Taxation. *Comparative Political Studies*, **56** (8), 1257–1290.
- FISHER, S. D., KENNY, J., POORTINGA, W., BÖHM, G. and STEG, L. (2022). The politicisation of climate change attitudes in Europe. *Electoral Studies*, **79**, 102499.
- FORCHTNER, B. and KØLVRAA, C. (2015). The Nature of Nationalism: Populist Radical Right Parties on Countryside and Climate. *Nature and Culture*, **10** (2), 199–224.
- FURCERI, D., GANSLMEIER, M. and OSTRY, J. (2023). Are climate change policies politically costly? *Energy Policy*, **178**, 113575.
- GAIKWAD, N., GENOVESE, F. and TINGLEY, D. (2022). Creating climate coalitions: mass preferences for compensating vulnerability in the world's two largest democracies. *American Political Science Review*, **116** (4), 1165–1183.
- GAUCHAT, G. (2012). Politicization of science in the public sphere: A study of public trust in the united states, 1974 to 2010. *American sociological review*, **77** (2), 167–187.

- GAZMARARIAN, A. F. and KRASHINSKY, L. (2023). Driving Labor Apart: Climate Policy Backlash in the American Auto Corridor. *Available at SSRN 4633502*.
- GEMENIS, K., KATSANIDOU, A. and VASILOPOULOU, S. (2012). The politics of anti-environmentalism: positional issue framing by the European radical right. In *62nd Annual Political Studies Association Conference 2012*.
- GERMESHAUSEN, R., HEIM, S. and WAGNER, U. J. (2023). Support for renewable energy: The case of wind power. *Discussion Paper CRC TR 224*.
- GILLI, M., CALCATERRA, M., EMMERLING, J. and GRANELLA, F. (2024). Climate change impacts on the within-country income distributions. *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management*, **127**, 103012.
- GURIEV, S. and PAPAIOANNOU, E. (2022). The political economy of populism. *Journal of Economic Literature*, **60** (3), 753–832.
- HEDDESHEIMER, V., HILBIG, H. and VOETEN, E. (2024). The Energy Transition and Political Polarization Along Occupational Lines: Evidence from Germany. *Unpublished manuscript*.
- HUBER, R. A. (2020). The role of populist attitudes in explaining climate change skepticism and support for environmental protection. *Environmental Politics*, **29** (6), 959–982.
- , GREUSSING, E. and EBERL, J.-M. (2022). From populism to climate scepticism: the role of institutional trust and attitudes towards science. *Environmental Politics*, **31** (7), 1115–1138.
- , MALTBY, T., SZULECKI, K. and ĆETKOVIĆ, S. (2021). Is populism a challenge to European energy and climate policy? Empirical evidence across varieties of populism. *Journal of European Public Policy*, **28** (7), 998–1017.
- ISAKSSON, Z. and GREN, S. (2024). Political expectations and electoral responses to wind farm development in Sweden. *Energy Policy*, **186**, 113984.

- JAHN, D. (2021). Quick and dirty: how populist parties in government affect greenhouse gas emissions in EU member states. *Journal of European Public Policy*, **28** (7), 980–997.
- JOTZO, F., DEPLEDGE, J. and WINKLER, H. (2018). US and international climate policy under President Trump. *Climate Policy*, **18** (7), 813–817.
- KIM, J. (2025). The electoral consequences of the political divide on climate change. *Kyklos*.
- KITT, S., AXSEN, J., LONG, Z. and RHODES, E. (2021). The role of trust in citizen acceptance of climate policy: Comparing perceptions of government competence, integrity and value similarity. *Ecological Economics*, **183**, 106958.
- KRANGE, O., KALTENBORN, B. P. and HULTMAN, M. (2021). “Don’t confuse me with facts”—how right wing populism affects trust in agencies advocating anthropogenic climate change as a reality. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, **8** (1).
- KULIN, J., JOHANSSON SEVÄ, I. and DUNLAP, R. E. (2021). Nationalist ideology, rightwing populism, and public views about climate change in Europe. *Environmental Politics*, **30** (7), 1111–1134.
- KÜPPERS, A. (2022). ‘Climate-Soviets,’ ‘Alarmism,’ and ‘Eco-Dictatorship’: The Framing of Climate Change Scepticism by the Populist Radical Right Alternative for Germany. *German Politics*, pp. 1–21.
- LOCKWOOD, B. and LOCKWOOD, M. (2022). How Do Right-Wing Populist Parties Influence Climate and Renewable Energy Policies? Evidence from OECD Countries. *Global Environmental Politics*, **22** (3), 12–37.
- LOCKWOOD, M. (2018). Right-wing populism and the climate change agenda: exploring the linkages. *Environmental Politics*, **27** (4), 712–732.
- LUBARDA, B. (2020). ‘Homeland farming’ or ‘rural emancipation’? The discursive overlap between populist and green parties in Hungary. *Sociologia Ruralis*, **60** (4), 810–832.

- LUNZ TRUJILLO, K. (2022). Rural identity as a contributing factor to anti-intellectualism in the us. *Political behavior*, **44** (3), 1509–1532.
- MEIJERS, M. J., VAN DRUNEN, Y. and JACOBS, K. (2023). It's a hoax! The mediating factors of populist climate policy opposition. *West European Politics*, **46** (7), 1288–1311.
- MITSCH, F. and MCNEIL, A. (2022). Political implications of 'green' infrastructure in one's 'backyard': the Green Party's Catch 22? *Working Paper no. 81, International Inequalities Institute, LSE*.
- MUDDE, C. (2004). The populist zeitgeist. *Government and opposition*, **39** (4), 541–563.
- and KALTWASSER, C. R. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- NORRIS, P. (2020). Measuring populism worldwide. *Party politics*, **26** (6), 697–717.
- and INGLEHART, R. (2019). *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. Cambridge University Press.
- OSWALD, M. T., FROMM, M. and BRODA, E. (2021). Strategic clustering in right-wing-populism? 'Green policies' in Germany and France. *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*, **15** (2), 185–205.
- OTTENI, C. and WEISSKIRCHER, M. (2022). Global warming and polarization. Wind turbines and the electoral success of the greens and the populist radical right. *European Journal of Political Research*, **61** (4), 1102–1122.
- PATTERSON, J. J. (2023). Backlash to climate policy. *Global Environmental Politics*, **23** (1), 68–90.
- RODRÍGUEZ-POSE, A. (2018). The revenge of the places that don't matter (and what to do about it). *Cambridge journal of regions, economy and society*, **11** (1), 189–209.

- SCHWÖRER, J. and FERNÁNDEZ-GARCÍA, B. (2023). Climate Sceptics or Climate Nationalists? Understanding and Explaining Populist Radical Right Parties' Positions towards Climate Change (1990–2022). *Political Studies*, **72** (3), 1178–1202.
- SELBY, J. (2019). The Trump presidency, climate change, and the prospect of a disorderly energy transition. *Review of International Studies*, **45** (3), 471–490.
- STEVIS, D. and FELLI, R. (2015). Global labour unions and just transition to a green economy. *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics*, **15**, 29–43.
- STOKES, L. C. (2016). Electoral backlash against climate policy: A natural experiment on retrospective voting and local resistance to public policy. *American Journal of Political Science*, **60** (4), 958–974.
- STUTZMANN, S. (2024). *The electoral consequences of the coal phase-out in Germany*. Tech. rep., Working Paper Series of the Cluster The Politics of Inequality.
- UNIT, R. and SCHAFFER, L. M. (2020). Attitudes towards carbon taxes across Europe: The role of perceived uncertainty and self-interest. *Energy Policy*, **140**, 111385.
- URPELAINEN, J. and ZHANG, A. T. (2022). Electoral Backlash or Positive Reinforcement? Wind Power and Congressional Elections in the United States. *The Journal of Politics*, **84** (3), 1306–1321.
- VIHMA, A., REISCHL, G. and NONBO ANDERSEN, A. (2021). A Climate Backlash: Comparing Populist Parties' Climate Policies in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. *The Journal of Environment & Development*, **30** (3), 219–239.
- VOETEN, E. (2024). The energy transition and support for the radical right: Evidence from the netherlands. *Comparative Political Studies*, **58**, 394–428.

- VONA, F. (2019). Job losses and political acceptability of climate policies: why the ‘job-killing’ argument is so persistent and how to overturn it. *Climate Policy*, **19** (4), 524–532.
- , MARIN, G. and CONSOLI, D. (2019). Measures, drivers and effects of green employment: evidence from us local labor markets, 2006–2014. *Journal of Economic Geography*, **19** (5), 1021–1048.
- , —, — and POPP, D. (2018). Environmental regulation and green skills: an empirical exploration. *Journal of the Association of Environmental and Resource Economists*, **5** (4), 713–753.
- YAN, P., SCHROEDER, R. and STIER, S. (2022). Is there a link between climate change scepticism and populism? An analysis of web tracking and survey data from Europe and the US. *Information, Communication & Society*, **25** (10), 1400–1439.

This paper can be downloaded at

www.green.unibocconi.eu

The opinions expressed herein

do not necessarily reflect the position of GREEN-Bocconi.

GREEN

Centre for Geography, Resources, Environment, Energy and Networks

via Röntgen, 1

20136 Milano - Italia

www.green.unibocconi.eu

© Università Commerciale Luigi Bocconi – February 2025