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Same, same but different? How democratically elected right-wing populists shape climate change policymaking

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ABSTRACT

The Paris Agreement expresses far-reaching commitments to combat climate change, but its translation into national contexts faces severe confrontation by populist movements and individuals worldwide. We unpack and compare how differently right-wing populist leaders translate rhetoric into climate policymaking and institutional change. We do so by investigating three areas of contestation: (1) the economic marginalization of the left behind, (2) conflicts between globalism and nationalist priorities, and (3) tensions between universalized science and situated experiences. We offer an analytical framework to study how right-wing populist leaders shape climate policymaking and test the approach with empirical observations from three democratically elected right-wing populists in the US, the Philippines, and Brazil. Populists severely affect climate policies in the long run, but these effects are highly context-specific. Engaging with populist climate politics needs to more seriously respond to local contexts and distinguish between the economic, anti-elitist, and knowledge foundations it is intertwined with.

KEYWORDS Climate governance; ideology; knowledge-making; democracy; right-wing populism; the people

1 Introduction

Over the last years, not only new social movements but also political parties and their leaders from left to right have turned to climate change as a major public concern. Even those parts of the political spectrum that have either denied climate change or opposed action against global warming are engaging more and more with the issue. Right-wing politicians of all sorts have learned that the policy field is too important to ignore and have started tackling it head-on (Forchtner 2019). Scholars have quickly criticized their

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Supplemental data for this article can be accessed here

approach towards climate change as populist. Yet, we know relatively little about a populist climate change agenda and the implications for established political institutions (see the introduction to this special issue as well as Buzogány and Mohamad-Klotzbach 2021 for an overview). Here, we compare climate change-related right-wing populism in three democratic contexts to identify differences and commonalities through a qualitative approach.

Our contribution is twofold: First, we propose an analytical framework to capture populist rhetoric and political change in the context of climate politics triggered by right-wing populist leaders. Recent work on conceptualizing climate-related right-wing populism has concentrated on how populists delegitimize climate action (Lockwood 2018), thereby focusing on either party politics (Ćetković and Hagemann 2020, Vihma *et al.* 2021) or public perceptions (Duijndam and van Beukering 2021; Kulin, Sevä, and Dunlap 2021). They explain climate change-related populism as a result of economic and structural marginalization of specific groups in industrial societies and nationalistic ideological arguments. We further unpack and specify the ideological dimension by showing how right-wing populist leaders mobilize not only anti-elitist and anti-cosmopolitan arguments to justify their political agenda but also how they put forward competing forms of knowledge and experiences (Jasanoff 2010, Edwards 2017). While both dimensions are related, they do not always align with each other. Second, we apply this framework by comparing how three democratically elected right-wing populists position themselves towards the Paris Agreement (PA), shape climate policymaking and disrupt established environmental institutions in somewhat different ways, reflecting their specific domestic struggles. We unpack how climate change-related right-wing populist rhetoric during presidential campaigns translates into political decisions and institutional change once in office to provide a comparative test of the conceptual framework.

We focus on three distinct right-wing populist leaders who gained power through democratic elections: Donald Trump in the United States, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. These cases are relatively similar concerning their political constitutions but also ensure a geographical diversity with insights from the global North and South. While such a qualitative approach has clear limitations, it contributes to a field dominated by quantitative studies on Europe and North America (e.g., Huber *et al.* 2020, Kulin *et al.* 2021, Yan *et al.* 2021).

In what follows, we first present our analytical framework to compare right-wing climate populism (Section 2) and explain our methodology (Section 3). We then outline the climate change-related rhetoric employed by Trump, Duterte, and Bolsonaro and provide examples for their policies and institutional change (Section 4). We summarize our results in a comparative discussion (Section 5) and conclude with key take-aways (Section 6).

2 A framework to compare right-wing populism

The term *populism* is defined here along the lines of political theorists like Mudde (2004) and Stanley (2008) as a 'thin-centered ideology' that rests upon the fundamental societal cleavage between the 'pure people' and a 'corrupt elite' (see also the introduction to this special issue). Although populists construct these antagonistic groups differently depending on the specific context, they all constitute their power based on 'the antagonism between the unified people and its external enemy' (Žižek 2006, p. 557). Populist politics in such a setting expresses the people's will against an external enemy that could be societal elites, scientific experts, or a global decision-making body. Rather than standing on its own, populism is usually combined with values and worldviews from other political ideologies such as socialism or right-wing nationalism (Canovan 2001). Here, we focus on right-wing populism.

In contrast to post-Marxist theorists like Laclau (2014) and Mouffe (2018), who defend left-wing populism as a strategy to give voice to marginalized groups, right-wing populism is often described as a threat to liberal democratic institutions in conjunction with a failure of established modes of representation (Taggart 2004, McCarthy 2019). Translating these theoretical reflections on populism into the variables that compose and re-shape climate change politics under right-wing populism, scholars like Lockwood (2018) and Huber *et al.* (2020) highlight at least two central entry points for right-wing populists to shape climate policymaking. They bring forward arguments related to (1) the economic marginalization of the left behind (structural argument) and (2) the conflicts between globalism and nationalist priorities (ideological argument) to disrupt established norms and institutions. However, we argue that the ideological argument should be further divided between an anti-elitist and anti-cosmopolitan component on the one hand, and the contestation of established knowledge on the other. Indeed, both aspects often fall together in populist arguments, e.g., when skepticism towards universalized climate science and resistance against global climate governance elites is juxtaposed against local knowledge and personal experiences. Yet, the role of competing knowledge foundations populists' arguments rest upon have received less attention so far. We therefore distinguish between economic positionality, anti-elitism, and knowledge foundations as the three distinct dimensions to conceptualize climate-related right-wing populism.

Economic positionality: According to Lockwood (2018, p. 713), populists aim to mobilize the 'economic and political marginalisation of those "left behind" by the effects of globalisation and technical change.' This structural approach or interest-based argument explains climate change-related populism resulting from marginalizing specific groups in post-

industrial societies through structural changes in the global economy. Processes of globalization, automation, and de-unionization have eroded the job basis for industrial and manufacturing workers (Bornschier and Kriesi 2012, Rodrik 2018). Consequently, these 'losers of modernization' (Betz 1994) have turned away from liberal or social democratic parties towards right-wing nationalist populists. They frame climate change mitigation plans as a threat to carbon-intensive industries and traditional jobs in the manufacturing sector.

Anti-elitism: This more ideologically driven explanation 'combines authoritarian and nationalistic values with anti-elitism, producing hostility to climate change as a cosmopolitan elite agenda' (Lockwood 2018, p. 713; see also Mudde 2017). While the economic or 'structural' approach rests upon direct links between climate politics and the political/societal/economic marginalization of particular social groups, anti-elitism deals with anti-cosmopolitan attitudes and a general skepticism towards societal elites (Jylhä and Hellmer 2020). Expressing strong forms of victimization, right-wing populists and climate change deniers frame themselves as silenced in societal debates (Anshelm and Hultman 2014). Anti-elitism reflects non-material factors of power, institutions, worldviews, and norms attached to climate politics and lays the foundation for nationalist climate change agendas. For example, Forchtner and Kølvraa (2015) show the strong influence of nationalist attitudes, especially when climate action is framed as a threat to state sovereignty. Anti-elitism in combination with climate change skepticism and uncertainty is also significantly associated with authoritarianism (Poortinga *et al.* 2011) and contributes to populism (Yan *et al.* 2021).

Knowledge foundations: Values and beliefs underpinning the anti-elitist argument are closely related to competing knowledge foundations in general, and a rejection of global climate science in particular. Right-wing populists challenge the universalized knowledge claims made by (global) scientific bodies like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). They contest what Jasanoff (2010, p. 235) calls 'an impersonal, apolitical, and universal imaginary of climate change, projected and endorsed by science,' which is detached from subjective, local and therefore situated experiences. As a result, climate science and knowledge-making becomes highly political and socially contested, as it reflects broader worldviews and understandings of social life (Bremer and Meisch 2017). Right-wing populists strategically intensify the tensions between different epistemic worldviews (Jasanoff and Simmet 2017): While scientists adopt an objectivized 'view from nowhere,' based on decontextualized data and peer-reviewed publications, international policymakers tend to base knowledge claims on an inclusive 'view from everywhere,' seeking to represent all affected positions. In opposition to both, right-wing populists tend to privilege a rather peculiar 'view from

somewhere' that rests on knowledge located in individual experiences and first-person narratives. Personal experiences thus constitute knowledge that is valued higher than any potentially contradicting and highly abstract scientific consensus. This is often supported by institutional strategies that harm the capacity of national experts to produce objective and inclusive knowledge. Finally, such production of populist counter-knowledge and the resulting opposition to accepted scientific consensus bolster economic and anti-elitist arguments.

3 Methodology

To investigate how Trump, Duterte, and Bolsonaro mobilize economic, anti-elitist, and knowledge-related arguments and thereby potentially translate populist rhetoric into practice, we focus on three units of analysis: First, we analyze the presidential candidates' social media channels (Twitter and Facebook, depending on their preference) and selected campaign speeches. These represent their most unfiltered personal views on climate change and the most direct way of how these leaders communicate with 'the people.' Second, we highlight their respective positions on the PA through selected policy proposals, executive orders, and press releases. The PA is the most representative symbol of international cooperation and national obligations that the 'global elite' aims to implement. Finally, we investigate exemplary critical institutional interventions by the respective administrations in the field of climate change. This allows us to evaluate if these leaders actually 'walk the talk' and how they use economic, anti-elitist, and knowledge-related arguments to justify changes.

Regarding the analysis of the campaign trail and the specific focus on the PA, we considered all relevant and publicly available statements with an explicit mentioning of climate change or global warming. We limited ourselves to the analysis of one important and domestically salient policy intervention and one representative attempt to change the institutional landscape that did or did not take up the campaign's promises. For each country, we thus provide a snapshot of the role of the respective populist leader that we can then use for a comparative discussion. Table A.1 in the supplemental online materials to this article provides an overview of the material used for this study.

We acknowledge the danger of a potential selection bias concerning our choice of one particular policy intervention and one example of institutional change. We, therefore, chose policy interventions and institutional changes that gained salience, at least within the domestic policy arenas. They function as illustrative cases for climate-related populism. While the material is highly selective, it serves well the purpose of applying the analytical framework and identify patterns and differences across the three cases. Rather than providing a comprehensive picture for all three countries, this approach allows us to

develop context-specific storylines. The comparative perspective enables us to reflect on the analytical value of the three categories presented above. In conclusion, our objective in applying the analytical framework is not to prove that one can identify one cause or one mechanism that explains the eventual policy or institutional development. Instead, we aim to show that all three arguments are present but in different forms and that the individual mix allows us to understand the different national developments.

Following a deductive approach, we first scanned the abovementioned sources to collect relevant material referring to climate change. We then compiled the material and selected exemplary statements, policies, and institutional interventions. Finally, we coded the material manually along the three argument dimensions of climate change-related populism outlined in section 2. Table A.2 in the supplemental materials summarizes the coding process and gives examples for each dimension for every political leader.

4 How right-wing populist leaders engage with climate change

4.1 Donald Trump in the United States

Populist movements and parties have been relevant political factors in the US since the 1890s (Goodwyn 1978, Savage 2019). The country has witnessed right-wing populist leaders from prairie populists in the 19th century to Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s, to representatives of the Tea Party movement in the 1990s, and beyond. US politics has thus famously been described as featuring both anti-intellectualism and a 'paranoid style' (Hofstadter 2012). Nobody excels in this more than the 45th US president, Donald J. Trump, who was elected in 2016 as 'the populist par excellence' (Oliver and Wendy 2016, p. 190)(see also Fiorino, this SI).

4.1.1 Populist rhetoric

Trump's views on climate change are at the very core of his populism. They can be understood as part of a larger climate change denial movement within the US, with Trump characterized as the 'Denier-in-Chief' (De Pryck and Gemenne 2017). During his 2015/2016 presidential campaign, Trump did not make climate change a major issue but built on the arguments he had conveyed the years beforehand. Actually, Trump started to engage with climate politics before he entered politics and posted 61 tweets mentioning 'climate change' and 105 with the words 'global warming' until becoming president, stressing that cold weather is proof against climate change, warning against Chinese profits from any potential US climate action, and criticizing President Barack Obama's climate policies as misguided (see table A.1 in the supplemental materials for a list of illustrative tweets).

Focusing on economic positionality, Trump's opposition to climate change policies was to a large extent part of a broader anti-globalist agenda that tries to protect those losing out from globalization against an elite that benefits from globalized and impersonal market forces. China, the United Nations, and others served as enemies that had to be weakened for the US to grow. Trump wanted to put an end to other states' benefiting from American self-denial, arguing that global warming was invented by the Chinese to undermine US competitiveness (see table A.2 for examples). Trump thereby catered to the 'predominantly conservative white male social profile of climate change denialism' (Selby 2019, p. 484) as it is found in the extractive industries and traditional manufacturing. Trump's tweets showed clear anti-elitist tendencies, and he was more than joyful when climate scientists were discredited (e.g., during the so-called 'Climate Gate' scandal in 2009 that he covered on Twitter in 2010 and 2011). He also claimed that scientists and consultants lie to the American people when it comes to global warming (table A.2) and called climate change a 'hoax' numerous times (e.g., three times in 2013 and twice in 2014). Instead, Trump relied on the knowledge of having 'alternative facts,' engaging wholeheartedly in post-truth politics, where feelings and beliefs are more relevant than science (De Pryck and Gemenne 2017). During his campaign, Trump reached out to the 'common sense' by making use of a 'populist syntax' of simple language, short phrases, and a minimal variety of words (Oliver and Wendy 2016, p. 193). He referred to local knowledge and everyday experiences as evidence against climate change, sarcastically framing cold weather as a result of global warming (table A.2).

4.1.2 From populist rhetoric to political change

Trump's rhetoric became performative as he walked the talk of climate politics and followed up on his campaign promises (MacNeil and Paterson 2020). When Trump, on 1 June 2017, announced the withdrawal of the US from the PA, he stressed that it 'disadvantages the United States . . . leaving American workers – who I love – and taxpayers to absorb the cost in terms of lost jobs, lower wages, shuttered factories, and vastly diminished economic production' (Trump 2017). According to the president, 'no responsible leader can put the workers – and the people – of their country at this debilitating and tremendous disadvantage' (Ibid.). Trump thus presented himself as fighting against an elitist global project defending American workers, businesses and 'the people.' He neither cited any climate science nor any personal insights. Still, he alluded to various business reports that show that at the time, the US economy is growing and that any obligations under the PA would enormously diminish growth in the US.

An important instance of institutional change marks the appointment of climate change skeptics to executive positions, including at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and the Council on Environmental Quality (Trump 2016). The announcement of budget cuts accompanied these institutional changes (Office of Management and Budget 2018), although the reductions were much more modest than announced due to opposition from Congress (EPN 2018). Funding was also cut for international climate projects, the IPCC, the Green Climate Fund, and the UNFCCC (Ibid., Meade 2018). The budget proposal was entitled 'America First,' highlighting the unfair conditions American workers have to suffer and Trump stating in the preamble that the new US Budget puts 'the needs of its own people first' (Office of Management and Budget 2018, p. 1). The role of personal knowledge again became obvious in justifying these efforts, as Trump kept his position on climate science, commenting 'I don't believe it' when 13 government agencies presented him with scientific evidence in a summary report that builds on insights from the IPCC in 2018 (Byrne 2020, p. 48). Trump approached climate change issues – in his own words – with his 'natural instinct' (quoted in Morin 2018).

Following up on the promise to strengthen 'the people,' Trump's policy and institutional changes aimed at weakening federal capacities. Although action at the state and city level could counterbalance Trump's decisions to some extent (Trachtman 2019; Aldy 2017), and although US climate politics have 'always been extremely dysfunctional, complex, and grossly inadequate' (MacNeil and Paterson 2020, p. 3), Trump's climate-related right-wing populism proved highly destructive by combining structural, anti-elitist and knowledge-related arguments. Table 1 summarizes the populist arguments mobilized by Donald Trump during his campaign, in relation to the Paris Agreement and with regard to institutional interventions.

Table 1. Populist arguments mobilized by Donald Trump.

	Campaign statements	Paris Agreement	Institutional intervention
Economic positionality	Defending those left behind (cars and coal)	PA disenfranchises workers and taxpayers	Cuts necessary to put 'America First'
Anti-elitism	Climate change as a lie of consultants and scientists	Unfair global treaty that disfavors American worker leading to gains in China and India	'own people' will gain through budget cuts
Knowledge foundations	Cold temperature disproves science	Insights into small business practices and the American economy more important than climate science	Natural instinct more relevant for policymaking and institutional interventions than science

4.2 Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines

Despite his father's career as a politician in Mindanao, Duterte portrays himself as an opponent to established dynasties, political clans, and patronage in the Philippine 'elite democracy' (Heydarian 2018). In 1988, Duterte became mayor of Mindanao's capital Davao City, which he ruled for 22 years. During that time, Duterte built up a strongman reputation with radical anticrime tactics. Although human rights groups made Duterte responsible for more than 1,000 extrajudicial killings, he enjoyed sizable popular support and won the presidential election on 9 May 2016, with 39% of the popular vote. Scholars characterize his six months-long campaign as highly populist, politically disruptive, rude, and anti-elitist, with solid support from large parts of the population (Curato 2017). Although climate change was not a central issue during Duterte's campaign, his later skepticism towards the PA has resonated internationally (King 2016).

4.2.1 Populist rhetoric

Despite Duterte's preference for public events over Twitter and Facebook (Aim *et al.* 2020), his presidential campaign benefitted from 'a social media apparatus unlike that of any other candidate in the race' (Etter 2017). Duterte did not mention climate change in his first campaign speech but emphasized the role of climate adaptation measures at various campaign visits, acknowledging the country's high vulnerability and exposure to devastating weather-induced disasters (Ranada 2016; see table A.1 for examples). Duterte and his running mate Alan Peter Cayetano promised to build disaster-resilient communities. They envisioned a Philippine archipelago that would be 'prepared and equipped in dealing with climate change' (Golajer 2016) while protecting the poorest and most vulnerable from climate impacts. Since gaining office in 2016, Duterte reframed climate change as a matter of adaptation and resilience with the aim to 'bolster our resilience to the impact of natural disasters and climate change' (Lagman 2018).

Duterte and his cabinet highlighted economic disadvantages related to climate politics by linking climate change to questions of inequality and social injustices. Employing anti-elitist rhetoric, Duterte constructs vulnerable groups as 'the people' compared to a wealthy elite. Duterte paints the Philippine people as vulnerable victims on a global scale. He acknowledges climate changes as real but blames major greenhouse gas emitters like China, the US and Europe as most responsible for the climate crisis, while the Philippines has the right to develop (Duterte 2021). Duterte's offensive rhetoric against foreign nations has since become a central part of his administration's climate policy agenda. Duterte called UN climate

conferences a 'waste of time and money' with a lack of commitment from the global North (Ranada 2019). He urged 'countries to act, rather than just meet' (Mercado 2019), aiming to make developed economies more accountable.

Duterte followed a clear anti-elitist and anti-cosmopolitan agenda by juxtaposing the national interests of the Philippine people against elites in the global North. He rejects climate mitigation measures as bad for economic development and harmful to industrialization, which is urgently needed in the Philippines. Duterte fosters political polarization along the North-South divide and expresses his skepticism towards the PA with anti-Western notions and nationalist rhetoric, for example, concerning renewable energy development (Tordecilla 2016). Duterte calls the UN hypocritical as the international climate regime urges small nations to ratchet up their carbon emission-reduction commitments but fails 'to impose sanctions on the worst environmental culprits' (Albano 2016). Instead, Duterte calls for a fair agreement that does 'not stymie our industrialization' (Placido 2016).

Regarding knowledge-related arguments, Duterte uses both personal experiences and a strong belief in science. Duterte argues that typhoons and heavy rain in the Philippines have made him 'believe' in climate change (Valente 2021). He and his Climate Change Commissioner also strongly support climate science and technological innovations to solve the climate crisis (Ranada 2015, de Guzman 2018).

4.2.2 From populist rhetoric to political change

In a critical remark about US foreign policy, Duterte raised skepticism towards the politically driven debate about climate change, framing the issue as 'just another way to perpetuate colonialism' (Gatehouse 2018). Not surprisingly, Duterte first refused to sign the 'stupid' PA, which he described as harmful to the Philippine economy (Placido 2016). Yet, Duterte later used the same economic arguments to argue in favor of the PA. In his first State of the Nation Address, Duterte described the fight against climate change as a " top priority" side by ide with development and industrialization (Duterte 2016). He later announced to sign the PA by reminding industrialized countries to 'honor their financial commitments,' thus pointing at the global injustices concerning climate change (GOVPH 2016). This argumentation against global elites was combined with an economic narrative to protect the poor and most vulnerable people in countries like the Philippines who 'suffer the most' Duterte (2020) explained in a statement to the UN General Assembly. By signing the PA, the Philippines gained access to the UN Green Climate Fund, which approved funding for a multi-hazard forecasting and early warning system in the Philippines as proposed by Duterte (Salaverria 2017).

The Philippine long-term development plan reflects Duterte's aim to prioritize climate adaptation and resilience. The plan outlines various climate-related policies to 'achieve inclusive growth, a high-trust and resilient society, and a globally competitive knowledge economy' (NEDA 2017). Measures include promoting climate-resilient infrastructure, energy-efficient technologies, forest rehabilitation, and improved health services for disaster and climate-related illnesses. Initially, the Duterte administration tried to reduce spending on climate change mitigation and adaptation, but the Philippine Congress prevented deep cuts by overturning the president's proposal (Gregorio 2019). Duterte also announced his intention to fast-track renewable energy projects, advance renewable energy deployment, and reduce the country's dependency on coal (CCC 2019).

Regarding institutional changes, Duterte neither actively dismantled nor delegitimized established climate change institutions. Yet, he paid little attention to these bureaucracies, especially at the beginning of his presidency, causing inactivity and delays. For example, the Climate Change Commission (CCC) cannot move forward without the president's attendance as its chairperson. Duterte restructured and renamed the Cabinet Cluster on Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation in 2016, emphasizing adaptive capacities, resilient infrastructures, and resource management (GOVPH 2017) while simultaneously removing the goal to adopt mitigation measures from the cluster's mandate. The new focus on resilience and disaster risk reduction translated into respective programs and initiatives coordinated by the CCC.

Despite Duterte's reputation as a right-wing authoritarian leader particularly concerning his war on drugs, his climate change positions have been less disruptive. While the Philippine government concentrates on resilience and adaptation measures, any attempts to mitigate climate change are linked to global injustices and an unfair global regime. Duterte mobilizes arguments of economic marginalization and injustices in combination with an anti-elitist narrative to justify this shift, thereby leaving science-based knowledge claims largely unchallenged. Table 2 summarizes the populist arguments mobilized by Rodrigo Duterte during his campaign, in relation to the Paris Agreement and with regard to institutional interventions.

Table 2. Populist arguments mobilized by Rodrigo Duterte.

	Campaign statements	Paris Agreement	Institutional intervention
Economic positionality	Vulnerable people in contrast to the rich elite of the country	PA first refused, later adopted and reframed (climate justice)	Shift from mitigation to adaptation to protect the poor
Anti-elitism	Global climate change regime manifests neocolonialism	Global North needs to support developing countries	
Knowledge foundations	Global warming affects everyday life	Scientific facts show the Philippines' vulnerability	Experience with devastating typhoons nationwide

4.3 Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil

Jair Messias Bolsonaro had an unexpected political trajectory, moving from a military officer to a parliamentary backbencher before becoming president. Scholars consider him 'the most populist president' since Brazil's return to democracy in 1985 (Tamaki and Fuks 2020). Bolsonaro consistently builds his politics on demonizing external enemies, such as 'communists,' left parties, cultural elites and mainstream media, international organizations, and foreign leaders interfering with Brazilian sovereignty, especially over the Amazon rainforest (Casarões and Flemes 2019). Under the motto *Brazil above everything, God above everyone*, Bolsonaro promised to recover the economy, value the family, fight corruption, and tackle crime. Against this background, Bolsonaro's presidential campaign and politics also transformed and eroded Brazilian climate change policies.

4.3.1 Populist rhetoric

Bolsonaro's critical campaign period was from early July 2018, when he officially appeared as the presidential candidate for the hitherto minuscule Social Liberal Party, until 28 October 2018, when he contested the second turn of the presidential election against Fernando Haddad of the Worker's Party. Bolsonaro was the only candidate not to submit official policy proposals concerning environmental protection and climate change. Instead, his strategy was to attract the agribusiness sector, which is historically reluctant towards any regulation of agricultural expansion or the use of pesticides (Gielo 2018). Bolsonaro won the support of the Agriculture Parliamentary Front (FPA), one of the most influential cross-party interest groups in the bicameral National Congress (Hunter and Power 2019). Governing the Amazon region became a touchstone for Bolsonaro's populist rhetoric against climate change. He openly supported deforestation and intensive agriculture in the area, which is the main contributor to Brazil's carbon dioxide emissions since the 1990s (Viola and Franchini 2018).

Economic positionality played a crucial role during Bolsonaro's populist campaign. To create jobs and integrate minorities into carbon-intensive industries, he rejected environmentalism and promised to expand agribusiness and the extractive industry in the Amazon region. Bolsonaro vowed to invest in infrastructure projects to support private land rights, facilitate environmental licensing, and suspend the demarcation of indigenous lands (Fearnside 2019). He announced policies and institutional changes benefitting agribusiness interests, which he claimed would save jobs threatened by aggressive climate policies.

The Amazon and the PA are recurring themes in Bolsonaro's *anti-elitism* to refuse climate change measures. These build on a combination of nationalism, militarism, and authoritarian nostalgia for an 'orderly past' under the

civil-military dictatorship (Nogueira 2019). Long-standing nationalist rhetoric and sovereigntist discourses construct the Amazon as an important site of national integration and identity (Oliveira 2020), often directed against political groups, elites, and experts promoting climate policies. During a public campaign speech, Bolsonaro portrayed the PA as a communist and 'globalist' trap, that would undermine Brazil's 'national sovereignty' over 136 million hectares of the Amazon (Bolsonaro 2018).

Finally, Bolsonaro mobilized a range of *knowledge foundations* to discredit climate science. Shortly after Donald Trump announced his intention to leave the PA, Bolsonaro shared an article entitled 'the greenhouse fables' that defended Trump's decision (Darby 2019). His son Eduardo Bolsonaro, a Federal Deputy for Sao Paulo, posted a personal video of snowfall in the US to cast doubt on climate science based on 'many theses that confront global warming' (@Bolsonaro 2018). While Jair Bolsonaro mobilized a highly situated 'view from somewhere' typical of populist knowledge foundations, he did not engage in outright climate change denial, but he mobilized other forms of climate knowledge, too. He invested considerable energy in discrediting the 'view from nowhere' taken by international scientists and expert bodies such as the IPCC by countering it with emissions and deforestation data. This strategy was enabled and enhanced by subsequent policies aimed at dismantling expert institutions and institutionalizing competing activism and scientific channels by a "counter-knowledge production (Oliveira and Siqueira 2022)

4.3.2 From populist rhetoric to political change

Unlike Trump, Bolsonaro has not been affiliated with a strong political party. To implement political change, he needed to win sectorial support from three conservative hard-liner groups, the so-called BBB Caucus: Beef (agribusiness sector), Bullets (Brazil's security forces), and Bible (Pentecostal evangelical churches) (Almeida 2019). Bolsonaro selected political appointees from these groups to lead the ministries of Foreign Affairs, Environment, and Agriculture, thereby integrating anti-climate change policy interests into the very institutions meant to mitigate climate change. At the same time, dependence on these interest groups also limited his room for maneuver.

As a prominent example, Bolsonaro appointed the convinced anti-globalist Ernesto Araujo as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who withdrew Brazil's offer to host the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP 25) in 2019. Bolsonaro's Minister of Environment also sought to cancel the Latin America and Caribbean Climate Week, also organized by the UNFCCC (Phillips 2019). Faced with international pressure and boycott threats, Bolsonaro ultimately did not withdraw from the PA to protect Brazilian agricultural exports. Instead, he adopted a strategy of non-compliance that subverted institutional capacity to implement the national NDC and monitor compliance. This approach tied in with Bolsonaro's aim to

dismantle climate science infrastructure and provide knowledge based on a peculiar truth regime (Oliveira and Siqueira 2022). He used official speeches and channels to attack the credibility of government scientists, research institutions, and universities (See table A.2 knowledge foundations, for examples). Bolsonaro imposed financial cuts and dismissed staff, for example, at Brazil's National Institute for Space Research, which uses satellite observations of the Amazon to track deforestation (Tollefson 2019). Subsequently, he appointed military staff to lead research positions and institutions, and misrepresented scientific data on deforestation (Lodono 2019). Besides, Bolsonaro used military satellite data to provide alternative data that mimicked objective 'views from nowhere.'

In a bid to regain 'national control' of the Amazon territory, Bolsonaro implemented the Law-and-Order Guarantee decree in response to control the wildfires in August 2019. The maneuver gave permanent control to the Armed Forces over environmental agencies for deforestation control, despite clear evidence of the inefficiency and limited action of the military and the declared ruin of environmental inspection (Dolce 2021). Bolsonaro also implemented institutional changes that facilitated infrastructure projects, agricultural expansion, and extractive industries in the Amazon region (Fearnside 2019). He did, however, not abolish the Ministry of Environment, as announced in his campaign. Instead, Bolsonaro appointed a minister known for his anti-environmentalist leanings. Ricardo Salles dismantled previous environmental and climate policies and specialized administrative bodies involving civil society and experts. Respective budgets were cut to prevent the functioning of the ministry and the implementing agencies. Public spending for implementing the national climate change program was reduced by 95% in 2019 (Maris 2019). Salles also abolished the Secretariat for Climate Change and Forest, which managed national climate policy, including Brazil's Nationally

Table 3. Populist arguments mobilized by Jair Bolsonaro.

	Campaign statements	Paris Agreement	Institutional intervention
Economic positionality	Expanding agribusiness and extractive industry	Announced withdrawal from PA but remained to protect agribusiness exports	Institutional facilitation of economic activities in Amazon, dismantling of environmental enforcement
Anti-elitism	Sovereignty over the Amazon, globalism as communist trap	PA threatens sovereignty, non-compliance strategy, regain national control	Militarized governance of the Amazon deforestation
Knowledge foundations	Discrediting climate science	Subvert compliance monitoring, political control of NDC emission data	Dismantling knowledge infrastructure related to climate change enforcement, creation of 'counter-knowledge'

Determined Contribution. Table 3 summarizes the populist arguments mobilized by Jair Bolsonaro during his campaign, in relation to the Paris Agreement and with regard to institutional interventions.

5 Discussion

The three right-wing populists reframe climate politics through conservative localized views on climate change and they interpret action against it as 'a cosmopolitan elite agenda' (Lockwood 2018, p. 713) in three distinctive ways. They highlight not only the economic marginalization of the left behind, and the conflict between nationalist priorities and cosmopolitism, but also reveal the tension between universalized climate science and situated knowledge foundations. The knowledge dimension is of particular concern as it shapes and modifies both economic and anti-elitist arguments. Such a distinction helps us to demonstrate how Trump, Duterte, and Bolsonaro construct a particular climate change policy in favor of 'the people'. Yet, it became evident that they do so in very different ways. The framework allows us to explore *how* populist attempts to exploit climate change as a political topic vary across countries and cultural settings.

Economic positionality: All three populists portray themselves as defenders of those who are economically marginalized and would be further discriminated against by stricter climate mitigation measures. Trump, Duterte, and Bolsonaro claim to represent the common people. Yet, they construct fundamentally different images of 'the people' and 'the external enemies' when it comes to climate change. Trump and Bolsonaro argue that climate mitigation efforts put a burden on economic growth. While Trump portrays this burden as a threat to millions of ordinary workers, Bolsonaro rather refers to unemployment threats and the inclusion of minorities in specific industries such as agribusiness to not offend his middle-class constituency. Duterte criticizes any emissions reduction measures as oppressive tactics to prevent industrialization and prosperity in developing countries like the Philippines which would primarily affect the poor. Nevertheless, he declares climate change as a real threat to vulnerable communities across the archipelago. All three leaders connect these economic threats not only to domestic political opponents and 'corrupt elites', but also to the international climate change regime. They construct these as external enemies, against which they protect the people and defend national interests.

Anti-elitism: Related to the economic arguments put forward by Trump, Duterte, and Bolsonaro, all three oppose multinational efforts to tackle climate change, denouncing globalist institutions and multilateralism as

the main barrier for a nationalist reawakening, industrialization, and development. They challenged the formalized UNFCCC process, with Trump revoking the US signature from the PA, Bolsonaro canceling Brazil's offer to host the climate negotiations in 2019, and Duterte describing the international pressure for emissions reduction targets in the global South as a form of neocolonial rule. The three leaders' apparent distaste for any form of global regulation is mirrored by a strong nationalist agenda. All three cases demonstrate how populism works as a thin-centered ideology that is filled by nationalist and nativist ideas, which in this particular case run against global climate governance elites. In parallel, domestic institutions like the US EPA are also constructed as elites that work against the interest of 'the people'. Such a rationale justifies budget cuts and a dismantling of established climate change institutions.

Knowledge foundations: The three leaders differ most significantly when it comes to the role of science and knowledge-making. While Trump and Bolsonaro aim at discrediting international scientific expertise and stress the value of local 'everyday' knowledge, Duterte embraces climate science, emphasizing that climate politics should be guided by the best available science and technology. Duterte mobilizes scientific facts on global emissions trajectories to support his claim that the global North owes the Philippines the right to develop. All three leaders put different emphasis on the role of marginalized or denied knowledge. Trump relies on his personal experiences and a simplistic instinct referring to weather phenomena. Bolsonaro adopts institutional policies that target established climate science and institutionalize 'alternative' climate facts and populist counter-knowledge, mimicking a purportedly objective view from nowhere. Duterte argues for a form of strongman pragmatism, claiming that he knows what is right for the people affected by climate change. What counts as truth or facts and who decides over legitimate knowledge is heavily contested.

Our cases reveal that not all dimensions of populist argumentation are equally mobilized or deployed by right-wing populists. Convergence seems to be strongest with respect to anti-elitist and anti-cosmopolitan arguments against global regulations and commitments. The relative importance of economic positionality and knowledge foundations seems to vary with contextual factors, such as the respective constituencies the populists seek to cater to and whether they focus more on internal or global distribution. Particularly the different attitudes to knowledge underline the need to further unpack and specify the 'ideological' dimension of climate populism put forward by Lockwood (2018) and others. Despite the obvious connection between anti-elitism and knowledge foundations, both dimensions can be mobilized in very different ways ranging from blatant science denial

(Trump), to a complete endorsement of climate science (Duterte). The three types of arguments applied here thus provide a useful categorization for analyzing democratically elected right-wing populists across a heterogenous set of cases.

6 Conclusion

Through their unconventional ways of policy making, right-wing political leaders like Trump, Duterte, and Bolsonaro quickly gained a reputation as populists and disruptive forces in their respective political systems. They walked their respective talk after their successful presidential campaigns, challenging climate governance at the national and global level. Whereas Trump actively dismantled environmental institutions and climate change related policies, Bolsonaro used a strategy of sabotage and infiltration, and Duterte mobilized climate change for his nationalist agenda. In all three cases, the attack on an elitist climate change agenda was, however, from the outset a part of the more general skepticism towards existing liberal democratic institutions. However, our analysis suggests that we should handle the populist label with care. In fact, the vague concept tends to overshadow critical differences that go beyond simple nuances.

Empirically, our qualitative comparison has revealed three very different ways of how populist leaders act and navigate through their political careers during their campaigns and in office. While Trump translated his climate skepticism into the withdrawal from the PA, Bolsonaro strategically undermined the agreement's integrity. Duterte eventually signed the PA, but also reframed it in populist terms through a strong connection to global justice and fairness. Acknowledging the shortcomings of these empirical snapshots, we encourage scholars in environmental politics to contest a fixed notion of populism by taking such a procedural perspective and investigate more closely how individual leaders turn their populist rhetoric into political action and institutional change. The analytical framework we propose here provides a first step to do so as it points at the three key areas of contestation mobilized by populists. While previous research on populism has long stressed ideological and structural arguments, we argue for a distinction between the role of competing knowledge foundations in contrast to aspects of anti-elitism and anti-cosmopolitism.

As the tensions between competing forms of knowledge have emerged as a contested field in climate politics more broadly, this dimension seems particularly relevant in times of 'post-truth' and 'alternative facts' beyond blatant science denial. In response, scholars should engage more with the intertwined nature of societal structures, ideologies and knowledge foundations in climate politics. We consider concepts on the

social construction of knowledge (Eyal 2019, Hulme 2020), local experiences and situated knowledge (Haraway 2015) as useful conceptual contributions to expand and deepen debates around climate change related populism.

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