

> Climate Disruption, Populism, National, and Retrenchment

By David M. Driesen, *University Professor at the College of Law at Syracuse University*

Internationally, nationalist populism usually leads to retrenchment on immigration issues and to some extent on trade. Brexit did not feature any rebellion against environmental protection, nor for that matter did the populist candidacy of Bernie Sanders. So, retrenchment on environmental issues does not automatically come from populism and nationalism.

Yet, Donald Trump has clearly led a retrenchment on climate disruption, repudiating the Paris Accords outright. I plan to first say what Trumpism in this broader international context teaches us about the relationship between populism, nationalism, and retrenchment with respect to climate disruption. I will then briefly outline Trump's effects on climate policy. And finally, I will introduce a forthcoming paper on fighting climate retrenchment in this new populist context.

POPULISM, NATIONAL, AND RETRENCHMENT TRUMP STYLE

Political scientists do not agree upon the meaning of the term, populism.¹ Certainly, opposition to addressing global climate disruption does not reflect the kind of grass roots uprising that gave birth to the populist agrarian and worker's movement from which the term gets its name.² On the other hand, most political scientists also use the term "populism" to refer to authoritarian fanning of resentments against elites.³ Trump's top-down populist stance on climate disruption relies to a great extent upon rejection of intellectual elite's thinking. By contrast, Bernie Sanders' populism attacks business elites and embraces vigorous climate disruption policy.

While nationalism strongly suggests opposition to immigration and perhaps to free trade, Brexit shows that it need not denote opposition to action on global climate disruption. Britain has been a leader on climate disruption policies, imposing carbon taxes to make up for deficiencies in weak EU policies and making massive

investments in energy efficiency a cornerstone of its program to recover from the financial crisis of 2008. Those calling for Brexit have not called for a retrenchment on climate disruption policy. For that matter, China has supported the Paris Accords, because it sees an alignment between its global interests and the national need to clean up local air pollution, which it sees as imperative lest bottom-up populism seeking reduced air pollution take hold in China.

Trump's climate retrenchment stems, in part, from his decision as to how to characterize the national character he's fighting to defend. For some reason, his definition of nationalism makes a thriving coal industry a defining feature of our nation.

But retrenchment on climate policy is not new. President George W. Bush rejected the Kyoto Protocol outright and the U.S. government as a whole has never fully participated in the international regime. In the U.S. the degree of participation in international institutions reflects domestic politics, which is often ambivalent about international engagement. President Obama won election pledging to address global climate disruption and thereafter advanced the global regime by persuading China and other countries to support the Paris Accord with pledges of greenhouse gas emission reductions. Obama's own commitment to U.S. action made that possible.

While we might consider Trump's retrenchment a product of his own distinctive brand of populism and nationalism, Bush's retrenchment primarily reflected a defense of business elites largely uncomplicated by broad populist appeal.⁴ Thus, there is no inevitable link between populism, nationalism, and retrenchment on climate policy. That said, elites tend to value international regimes more than many citizens and a prolonged global resurgence of populism and nationalism may produce retrenchment across a lot of domains.

THE EFFECTS OF TRUMP'S CLIMATE RETRENCHMENT

Trump's retrenchment has produced a limited impact on the global climate regime so far. In a victory for proponents of path dependence theory over those who see concern about free riding as the key driver of international relations, we have not seen a slackening of commitment to the Paris Accords outside the U.S.

Retrenchment's effects within the U.S. may also prove less formidable than liberal proponents of government regulation may think. To a large extent, U.S. greenhouse gas emissions have come down because of technological advances permitting price decreases in natural gas, which have led to closure of coal-fired power plants. Furthermore, spurred by targeted policies in Europe and progressive U.S. states, renewable energy prices have become cost competitive and so have cars with little or no tailpipe emissions. Climate disruption needs urgent action of great scope, so weakening federal climate policy causes long term concern, but federal policy is a marginal factor even in the amount of domestic emissions compared to the cumulative effects of technological advancement, state policies, and other countries' policies at the moment.

The biggest threats to U.S. climate policy involve not so much the weakening of Obama-era policies, many of which were tepid to begin with, but long-term damage to U.S. institutions and international free trade. In true authoritarian fashion, Trump has marshalled populist forces in support of an attack on democratic institutions, including the scientific and standard setting capacity of the federal government. If we retain our democracy in spite of this assault, we may succeed in rebuilding these institutions, but only slowly and with great difficulty. Furthermore, some aspects of the technological revolution that is making lowering greenhouse gas emissions much less costly than predicted involve technologies from abroad. Collapse of free trade could make solar panels from China and other technology more expensive and impede progress.

CLIMATE POLICY IN A POPULIST AGE

The success of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the 2016 election suggests a resurgence of populist sentiment—meaning distrust of elites. This populism may have roots in growing economic inequality, making business elites and immigrants its most likely targets. While public opinion polls show that most people do not think climate science a hoax and support addressing global climate disruption, they also show that few

consider climate disruption a top priority. Climate disruption policy is likely to be a collateral beneficiary or casualty of efforts by politicians to marshal populist sentiment behind their preferred programs. While the fate of Trump's broad retrenchment and particular nationalism remains uncertain, the populism so evident across the political spectrum seems likely to endure.

At the same time, strongly ideological Republican leadership and Trump's divisive approach to governance have made constructive legislative compromise on climate, or any other issue, less likely than ever before. Compromise on climate disruption may prove impossible when the President and prominent members of his party declare a broad international scientific consensus on the issue's nature and importance a hoax.

Our thinking about climate policy has not yet caught up with populist reality. In particular, thinking about instrument choice—the choice between carbon taxes, emissions trading, and traditional regulation—has been based largely on what I call the “political economy of compromise.” Analysts' conception of sensible climate policy stems from their perception of what sorts of measures will likely appeal to current federal officeholders across the ideological spectrum. For example, they tend to recommend “revenue neutral” carbon taxes, which use revenues from carbon taxes to pay down the deficit or return a dividend to the taxpayers. By denying the federal government any increase in revenue, they hope to make climate policy palatable to Republicans. Grandfathered emissions trading, where allowances are handed out for free, also conforms to this model. Clinton pursued this policy domestically and internationally in the hope that the use of a market-based instrument would make meaningful climate policy palatable to regulated firms and their Republican allies.

If the political order that made such compromise plausible has disintegrated, however, we may have to think about a new political economy—call it a populist political economy. A populist political economy requires policy proposals designed to excite voters to show up and vote for proponents of the proposal, thereby ousting those blocking progress from office.

Since climate policy does not figure prominently among voters' priorities, a populist political economy would demand proposals that generate important non-climate benefits. This is not exactly a new idea. Only one European country has succeeded in almost completely eliminating carbon dioxide emissions from the utility sector—the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions

in most countries. That country, France, accomplished this miracle by building nuclear power plants as part of a nationalist program under Charles De Gaulle. Brazil has lower carbon dioxide emissions in its transport sector than just about any large industrialized country. It achieved this through nationalist efforts to insulate itself from oil price shocks and benefit local farmers by creating of a biofuels industry. Around the world, the most successful climate policies achieve important non-climate objectives.

In the U.S., all of the leading Presidential candidates in 2016 agreed that we need to rebuild our infrastructure. Perhaps we should advocate a carbon tax designed to fund a massive infrastructure program. Carbon taxes provide a nice opportunity to fashion populist proposals, because revenue can be directed to whatever most excites voters. Indeed, this approach can be tied to nationalism, as Trump has shown through his rhetoric on infrastructure.

If politicians advance proposals with broad populist appeal and win elections based on those proposals, they will gain the power to enact meaningful climate disruption policies. Once they do that, retrenchment on climate policy will likely die, just as it did when President Obama decided to use the Clean Air Act to make progress on the issue.



Trump's retrenchment on climate disruption policy stems from his particular brand of nationalism and populism. If populist politicians embrace proposals designed to make climate disruption policy salient to voters and otherwise redirect populist sentiment, retrenchment in this realm may lose its grip. Nevertheless, resurgent nationalism and populism across the globe over a prolonged period time would pose a risk to all sorts of international institutions.

ENDNOTES

¹ See LAURA GRATAN, POPULISM'S POWER: RADICAL GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA, 8 (2016) (noting that the term "populism" has been "notoriously difficult to define"); POPULISM: ITS NATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS 1 (Ghita Ionescu & Ernest Gellher eds. 1969) [hereinafter NATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS] 1 (stating that no one is clear about what populism is)

² See RICHARD HOFSTADTER, THE AGE OF REFORM: FROM BRYAN TO F.D.R. (1989).

³ See Ben Stanley, The Thin Ideology of Populism, 13 J. POL. IDEOLOGIES 95, 95 (2008) (discussing the "centrality of elite/popular antagonism to populism"); see, e.g., NATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS, supra note 1, at 29 (identifying populism with Péron in Argentina and Vargas in Brazil)

⁴ Cf. MICHAEL KAZIN, THE POPULIST PERSUASION 1 (1995) (noting that "scores of politicians. . .vow to fight for 'middle class taxpayers' and against...'bureaucrats,' 'fat cats,' and 'Big Men').