

**A study of the rise of anti-climate change narratives in Western countries:
Prioritizing economics over environmental security?**



Hichem Daoud EL-GHANDJA

Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Sciences Politiques, Algeria, hichemdadoud.el-ghandja@enssp.dz

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Abstract:

Climate change is considered one of the most important priority issues in the environmental security agendas of developed countries. However, in recent years, especially after US President Trump took office in his first term, there has been a discourse hostile to the thesis that measures must be taken to combat climate change, and even questioning the existence of climate change and global warming. Many countries followed Trump's approach to eliminating the burden of climate change. This trend has spread to European countries such as Hungary, and Poland. In this article, we attempted to examine this issue related to the emergence of a right-wing trend in many countries, especially the U.S. We found that the anti-climate change trend is on the rise and gaining momentum, especially with the Trump presidency in the United States. And that the climate change skeptic narrative is mainly fueled by parties that are both libertarian, populist, and conservative nationalist in nature.

Keywords: Climate change; Right-wing; U.S.; Environment; Energy.

* Corresponding Author: Hichem Daoud EL-GHANDJA, Hichemdadoud.El-Ghandja@Enssp.Dz.

Introduction:

In recent years, a renewed trend has emerged within Western countries, particularly among conservative and right-wing parties, calling for the adoption of conservative policies and libertarian approaches to various issues.

This trend has adopted an anti-climate change narrative promoted by progressive parties in particular, arguing that the focus on global warming and climate change is nothing more than a conspiracy and exaggeration, as repeatedly emphasized by US President Donald Trump, for example, along with other leaders such as Javier Meli, the Argentine president, and Viktor Orban, the Hungarian prime minister, among others.

Their argument is that the media's exaggerated focus on climate change has come at the expense of other issues that should be prioritized, such as economic growth and development, demographic growth, and the exploitation of energy resources. In other words, the focus on environmental considerations has become a threat to the economic interests of many Western countries, they argue.

This article explores this problematic, and the main hypothesis is that the rise of right-wing parties in various countries around the world, especially in Europe and Latin America, in addition to the United States of America, is the main factor driving the anti-climate change discourse. This is the central hypothesis that the study seeks to examine.

This study employs an integrative mixed-methods approach that combines secondary quantitative analysis with qualitative critical discourse analysis to examine the intersection between public attitudes and political rhetoric on climate change. The methodological design was developed to address the complex relationship between measured partisan attitudes and their discursive manifestations in political communication.

For the quantitative component, we utilized rigorously collected secondary data from the Pew Research Center's 2016 study "The Politics of Climate." This dataset provides reliable, nationally representative measurements of U.S. Democratic and Republican attitudes toward climate change, offering a robust empirical foundation for our analysis.

The qualitative component applies a critical discourse analysis framework to examine political speeches from the same period. Our speech selection process employed random sampling from a comprehensive corpus of climate-related addresses by political leaders.

This methodological approach is particularly suited to uncovering how measurable public attitudes shape and are shaped by elite political discourse, while maintaining scientific rigor through transparent analytical procedures and systematic data collection.

Populism, Denialism, and Neoliberalism: a theoretical approach to anti-climate trends:

In this study, we adopted a theoretical analysis that combines three theoretical approaches in order to better explain anti-climate trends. This approach includes some theories of populism, environmental denialism, and environmental neoliberalism:

Populism includes several theories, most of which help explain the environmental denial of some political leaders. Ideological populism is the most prominent populist approach that helps explain this, and this theory considers society ultimately separated into two opposing homogeneous groups, the 'pure people' versus the 'corrupt elite', which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people." Populism can relate to other "grand" ideologies such as liberalism or socialism, and act as a modifier .(Erhardt & and Filsinger, 2024).

The populism-as-strategy approach is one of the most prominent theories. This view focuses on populism as a political strategy used by leaders or parties to gain and maintain power. Populist rhetoric, with its focus on the people versus the elite, can be a successful means of mobilizing support, especially in contexts of widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo. That is, it uses rhetoric such as anti-environmentalism for political purposes.(Voleti, 2023)

Additionally, **environmental denialism**, especially regarding climate change, can be used strategically in politics to advance specific agendas by rejecting or misrepresenting the scientific consensus on environmental issues. Driven by economic and political interests, this denial takes the form of outright rejection, selective acceptance, or undermining of scientific evidence, and is spread by individuals, think tanks, media, and policymakers. The result is reduced public understanding and support for environmental policies, which delays critical climate action.(Mendy et al., 2024)

Environmental neoliberalism applies neoliberal economic principles to environmental issues, emphasizing market-based solutions, privatization of natural resources, deregulation, and the commodification of ecosystem services. It prioritizes economic efficiency and individual responsibility, creating markets for

environmental goods, transferring resource management to the private sector, and reducing government intervention in favor of market-driven approaches.(Lahiri, 2024)

This tripartite theoretical approach will help us understand and analyze discourses related to environmental issues not only based on quantitative and qualitative methodological analysis, but also based on theories used by some political leaders, especially with regard to their narratives about the environment.

1. America's right-wing anti-climate movement:

There has been a recent trend in the United States, spearheaded by Republican Party rhetoric, to be anti-climate, to prioritize the economy, and to adopt a narrative that believes that climate issues are being exaggerated in favor of certain parties.

a. A Statistical Comparison of Democratic and Republican Party Attitudes on Climate Change:

Some quantitative studies have emphasized the large disparity between the attitudes of Republicans and Democrats, for example, in the United States, toward climate change issues. While progressive Democratic approaches to climate change emphasize these issues as top priorities in various policies, Republican approaches are more economic and non-environmental in nature, as shown by many studies and statistics. A study comparing Democratic and Republican attitudes on climate change highlighted the following findings:

Nearly 70% of Democrats express high confidence in climate scientists to provide accurate information about climate change, while only 15% of conservative Republicans feel the same way;

%54 of Democrats believe that climate scientists have a strong understanding of the causes of climate change, compared to only 11% of conservative Republicans;

Democrats perceive greater consensus among scientists about climate change, with 55% believing that almost all scientists agree on its causes, while only 16% of conservative Republicans share this view;

%55 of Democrats believe that climate research reflects the best available evidence most of the time, while only 9% of conservative Republicans share this view;

An international agreement to reduce carbon emissions (similar to the Paris Climate Agreement): 71% of Democrats and 27% of conservative Republicans say this could make a big difference, a difference of 44 percentage points;

Stricter fuel efficiency standards for cars and trucks: 67% of Democrats and 27% of conservative Republicans say this could make a big difference, a difference of 40 percentage points;

Corporate tax incentives to encourage businesses to reduce the "carbon footprint" of their activities - 67% of Democrats say this could make a big difference, while 23% of conservative Republicans agree, a difference of 44 percentage points.

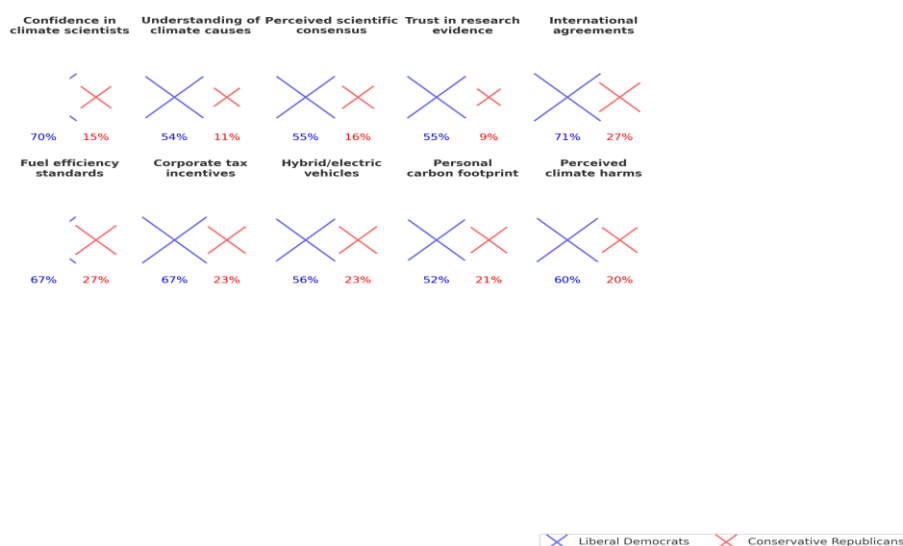
Increasing the number of people driving hybrid and electric vehicles - 56% of Democrats say this could make a big difference, while 23% of conservative Republicans agree, a difference of 33 percentage points. (Kennedy, 2016).

Regarding this point, we would like to emphasize that the interests of Donald Trump, who supports this narrative, are completely different from those of his most prominent supporter, businessman Elon Musk, who owns one of the largest electric companies in the world, Tesla, which may pose a future disagreement between them on this issue.(Fonseca, 2024)

Other statistics also suggest that efforts by individuals to reduce their own "carbon footprint" in their daily lives - 52% of Democrats say this can make a big difference compared to 21% of conservative Republicans, a difference of 31 percentage points.(Kennedy, 2016)

The stakes in the climate debate are particularly high for Democrats because they are more likely to believe that climate change will lead to damage to the environment, with nearly six in ten saying that climate change is very likely to bring more droughts, more severe storms, harm to animals and plants, and damage to coasts as a result of sea level rise. By contrast, no more than about two-in-ten conservative Republicans consider any of these potential harms "very likely"; about half say each is either "not very likely" or "not at all likely." (Kennedy, 2016)

Figure 1: Partisan differences on climate change issues (Kennedy, 2016)

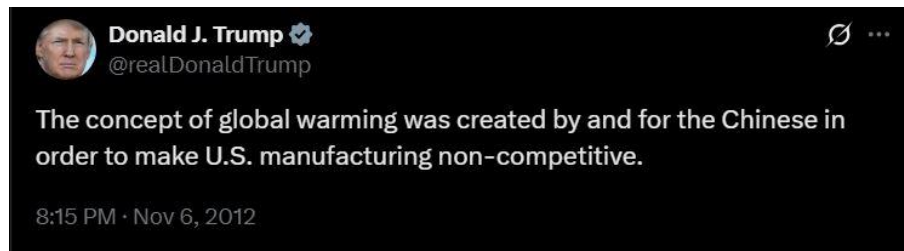


Kennedy's (2016) visual depiction of American partisan views on climate change demonstrates a clear and persistent gap between Democrats and conservative Republicans. This divide encompasses trust in climate science, perceived environmental dangers, and willingness to support policy solutions. The scaled circles effectively showcase this disparity, indicating that Democrats have considerably more faith in climate scientists, are more worried about the effects of climate change, and are more supportive of international agreements, regulations, and changes in personal behavior. Conversely, conservative Republicans show less trust in the scientific consensus, are doubtful of climate risks, and offer limited backing for environmental policies, a position influenced by an ideology that prioritizes economic factors and questions government involvement in climate solutions. The graphic emphasizes the extent of polarization and highlights the difficulties in political and public communication related to addressing climate change in a society with such strong divisions.

b. Prioritizing economic interests over environmental considerations:

On the other hand, Donald Trump has always considered climate change and global warming to be a big lie, and even considered that this lie mainly serves the interests of China, in order to prevent the United States from becoming a competitive economic power. On November 6, 2012, Trump actually posted this on his Twitter account: "The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese to make American industry uncompetitive." (Samuelsohn, 2016)

Figure 2: Trump's tweet on climate change



Source: <https://x.com/realDonaldTrump/status/265895292191248385>

Trump has repeatedly stated that he prioritizes economic growth over environmental protection concerns, especially with regard to his support for the extraction of fossil energy resources, regardless of the environmental consequences. For example, Trump administration systematically dismantled environmental regulations through executive actions and legislative obstruction, such as the Clean Power Plan, an Obama-era policy aimed at reducing carbon emissions from power plants, claiming that it harmed the coal industry. (*Clean Power Plan aux États-Unis*, 2016)

Trump signed an executive order in 2017 to boost offshore oil drilling and coal mining on federal lands, which previous Democratic administrations had opposed on the grounds that it harmed the environment. Trump reaffirmed this after taking office again in 2025. (Noor, 2025)

The Trump administration has aggressively sought to minimize federal regulations that support climate change issues, arguing that they impede economic growth and job creation. For example, Trump repealed methane emissions regulations, which forced oil and gas companies to monitor and repair methane leaks. (Brady, 2020)

In June 2017, Trump announced that the US would withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement, claiming that it would cost the US \$3 trillion in GDP and 6.5 million jobs. (*Paris Climate Deal*, 2017)

Upon assuming the presidency again on January 20, 2025, Donald Trump signed dozens of executive decrees, most notably the one to withdraw again from the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, which Joe Biden had rejoined after winning the 2020 election. (Bearak, 2025)

All these policies and this narrative in general fall within the framework of a general trend within the United States of America, rooted in decision-making and financial centers, which is strongly hostile to environmental considerations, and is supported by well-known think tanks, such as the Heritage Foundation, the Heartland Institute, the Energy Research Institute, and the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, and its great role in promoting skepticism about climate change issues, which influenced Trump's policies, and its influence extends beyond the United States of America, where this narrative finds great support in many European and American countries as well. (*Global Warming Skeptic Organizations / Union of Concerned Scientists*, 2013)

2. Anti-climate change trends in other Western countries:

On the other side, many political trends hostile to climate change issues are emerging in Europe and Latin America, perhaps mainly driven by the rise of the right and extreme right in these countries, we will try to study the most prominent countries in which this trend is manifested.

a. Brazil:

In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, who served as Brazil's president from January 2019 to December 2022, was widely criticized for his stance on climate change and environmental policies. His administration has been characterized by significant cuts to environmental protection and increased deforestation in the Amazon, as well as an indifferent attitude towards global climate concerns mainly related to global warming. In 2019, Bolsonaro accused non-governmental organizations and foreign governments of exaggerating deforestation rates in the Amazon in order to undermine Brazil's sovereignty. He claimed that environmental concerns were a ruse or conspiracy to hinder Brazil's economic development. (*Jair Bolsonaro Claims NGOs behind Amazon Forest Fire Surge – but Provides No Evidence / Jair Bolsonaro / The Guardian*, 2019)

Figure 3: Bolsonaro Suspects NGOs for Fires

Asked on Thursday who was responsible for starting the fires, he responded: "The Indians, do you want me to blame the Indians? Do you want me to blame the Martians?... Everyone is a suspect, but the biggest suspects are NGOs."

Asked if there was any proof of this, he replied: "Did I accuse NGOs directly? I just said I suspect them."

Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-49433437>

Bolsonaro has long prioritized economic development over environmental preservation, particularly by subsidizing commercial agriculture, mining and other industries. His policies have encouraged the expansion of agricultural land into protected areas, which has increased the rate of deforestation. In 2020, deforestation in the Amazon reached its highest level in 12 years, with an estimated 11,088 square kilometers of forest lost. Bolsonaro's policies have been widely blamed for this rise. (*Brazil's Amazon*, 2020)

b. Argentina:

Since taking office in December 2023, Argentine President Javier Milei has emphasized the same anti-climate change sentiment. During his presidential campaign, Milei called climate change a "socialist lie" and argued that it was being used as an excuse to impose regulations on Argentine companies. (*E&E News*, 2023)

In addition to threatening to pull out of the Paris Climate Agreement with the former Brazilian president, Milei has consistently supported the expansion of Argentina's fossil fuel industry, especially its huge shale oil and gas reserves in the Vaca Muerta region. Milei sees fossil fuels as a key driver of economic growth and energy independence, not the renewable energies promoted by some progressive parties. He has pledged to accelerate fracking and shale oil extraction in Vaca Muerta, despite concerns about its environmental impact, including water pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. (*Argentina's Milei Reshapes Oil and Gas Sector | Energy Intelligence*, 2025)

Figure 4: Vaca Muerta: A Triumph of Private Enterprise in Argentina's Energy Sector according to Milei

The development of Vaca Muerta is an example of the power of private initiative in Argentina. This ecosystem of national and multinational companies has managed to reverse our historical energy deficit: from almost 7 billion dollars 10 years ago to a surplus of 4 billion dollars starting this year, and we are aiming for much more. It is, in fact, the best result in our energy balance in the last 22 years.

Source: translated from

<https://www.casarosada.gob.ar/informacion/discursos/50604-discurso-del-presidente-javier-milei-en-el-acto-conmemorativo-por-el-primer-trillon-de-pies-cubicos-transportados-de-gas-natural-a-traves-de-la-cordillera-por-el-gasoducto-gas-andes-en-santiago-de-chile>

c. Hungary:

Hungary under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is the country that poses the greatest threat to European unity. Orbán has long positioned himself as an opponent of common European policies, advocating a nationalist policy for Hungary. Orbán has repeatedly expressed skepticism towards the EU's climate initiatives. In October 2021, he dismissed the EU's climate action plans as a "utopian fantasy," arguing that they could lead to increased energy prices and economic challenges for member states. ("Utopian Fantasy," 2021)

Figure 5: Orbán criticizes EU climate measures

"Raising the prices, having a new regulation, rocketing the prices to the sky, destroying the middle class," Orbán said, referring to proposed EU climate measures, on his arrival to a summit of EU leaders.

"Common sense on one side and fantasy on the other one. And utopian fantasy kills us - that's the problem with energy prices as well."

Source: <https://www.euronews.com/2021/10/22/us-eu-summit-orban>

In September 2023, during the Budapest Demographic Summit, Orbán criticized "Western elites" for prioritizing climate issues over Europe's demographic decline. He emphasized that Europe should focus more on addressing declining birth rates rather than being preoccupied with "carbon quotas," arguing that Europe needs more children, not a better climate. This is particularly sensitive, given that many European countries such as Italy and Germany are suffering from severe declines in births and fertility in general. (*Hungary's Orbán Calls for Less Climate Panic, More Babies*, 2023)

Figure 6: Orbán Slams "Western Elites" for Ignoring Demographics, Focusing on "Carbon Quotas"

"Western elites" were ignoring the question of demographics, and were instead busy with "carbon quotas."

"They require people to live in fear of an approaching Armageddon," he said.

Source: <https://www.politico.eu/article/hungary-viktor-orban-climate-change-panic-babies-birth-rate/>

d. Poland:

Historically, Poland has always relied on coal as its main source of energy, deriving about 70% of its electricity from coal in recent years. This has made the transition to clean energy sources difficult for the country. (*Katowice Climate Change Conference – December 2018 | UNFCCC, 2018*) Poland is not the only country that still relies on coal to generate energy, especially electricity, as there are several other countries where coal is still the most important source of energy, such as China, India, Australia, South Africa, Indonesia, Vietnam, and others.

Poland hosted the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP24) in Katowice in 2018, where it emphasized the need for a "just transition" to ensure that regions and workers who rely on coal are not left without power. Poland has been a major beneficiary of the EU's Just Transition Fund, which supports regions that rely heavily on fossil fuels in transitioning to a green economy. Poland is set to receive €3.5 billion from the fund to support coal regions like Silesia in diversifying their economies and retraining workers in renewable energies. (*Just Transition Fund - European Commission, n.d.*)

Based on the analysis of the four countries, we can draw the following conclusions and comparisons:

Commonalities:

All four countries exhibit skepticism or opposition to mainstream climate change policies.

National sovereignty and economic interests dominate over environmental concerns in Brazil, Argentina, and Hungary.

Fossil fuel reliance is a major economic and political factor in all cases, but expressed differently.

Key Differences:

Brazil and Argentina emphasize climate denial rhetoric tied to populism and industry expansion.

Hungary frames climate issues within nationalist and demographic concerns, rejecting EU-imposed policies.

Poland is less denialist, focusing on a pragmatic, EU-supported economic transition while maintaining coal reliance due to social/economic factors.

Classification:

Brazil, Argentina, and Hungary can be categorized within nationalist/populist resistance to global climate governance narratives.

Poland fits a pragmatic, economically constrained transition discourse shaped substantially by EU policies and coal dependency.

Contextual Specificities:

Brazil's Amazon narrative and anti-NGO rhetoric are unique.

Argentina's shale oil/gas focus reflects local natural resource and energy politics.

Hungary's demographic framing of climate talks is specific to its socio-political context.

Poland's deep coal dependency and use of EU funds reflect its unique historical-economic trajectory.

This does not mean that climate change skepticism is limited to these countries only. Still, it extends to other countries, such as Germany, especially after the recent elections in which the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) won a significant percentage, especially with the close relationship between the party and other right-wing parties. The same goes for France, and the National Rally Party, which is widely expected to play a major role in the upcoming elections. The same goes for many other countries in Europe and beyond. This raises deep questions about the climate change agenda, which is witnessing a significant decline among these parties.

Conclusion:

From the above, it can be said that the trends related to the environmental impacts of certain phenomena, as well as climate change, are not agreed upon among Western elites, and this leads us to the following conclusions and recommendations:

- The anti-climate change trend is gaining momentum, especially with the Trump presidency in the United States.
- The climate change skeptic narrative is fueled primarily by parties that are both libertarian and right-wing in nature.

- Economic issues such as growth, development, and the exploitation of fossil fuels are at the forefront of their rhetoric, while environmental issues are seen as media hype and even an organized conspiracy.

- Since this debate is unresolved within Western countries themselves, Arab countries should prioritize their own economic interests and not be forced to follow specific environmental policies.

- Many countries, such as Poland, are calling for a so-called just transition, i.e. taking into account their internal economic specificities.

If governments prioritize their economic interests at the expense of environmental considerations, the reality proves the relative limitations of this argument, especially if we witness the recent manifestations and disasters caused by global warming, such as the fires in California, the floods in Valencia, and others. This poses a real issue if major countries adopt policies that are fundamentally hostile to climate change issues.

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