Norwegian University
of Life Sciences

Bachelor's Thesis 2023   15 ECTS
Faculty of Landscape and Society

Why understanding the post-truth condition is crucial in the fight against climate change

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Abstract

In an era characterized by information overload and polarized perspectives, the discourse surrounding climate action has become deeply entwined with the phenomenon of post-truth. This thesis focuses on how current approaches of forwarding climate policies are met by significant resistance from the post-truth perspective and, therefore, prove to be inefficient. The problem lies in the lack of understanding of the post-truth condition and the complexity of the individuals at the receiving end of the policies. The discontent of 'post-truthers' with authorities and their truth claims especially plays in the hands of populist right-wing parties, whose influence is rising. Those parties are, however, constraint by their ideology to effectively fight or even acknowledge climate change. The main argument of this paper is that current climate policies clash with the post-truth condition in a way that fosters an increased popularity of populist parties and, therefore, do not result in effective climate change action. As a solution, I propose more participatory bottom-up approaches and the inclusion of plurality and discussion on climate policies and the truths they are based on.

Contents

1. Introduction

Trust in national governments is falling. Populism is on the rise. The fight against climate change seems lost. Topics are increasingly polarized as opinions get solidified on either of two sides. This is clearly reflected in debates around vaccination or climate change: see Vaxxer vs. Anti-Vaxxer, Climate truther vs. Climate denialist/sceptic. Additionally, fake news spread. In the US, a president was elected whose strategy is to "[flood] the zone with shit" (Heath, 2021, p. 301). Social media is on the rise and increasingly integral to people's daily lives. It provides one with a massive amount of information and the possibility to extract whatever one likes, to puzzle together one's own truth, and to find like-minded ones to back it up (Heath, 2021).

In the scientific literature most of the discussion around the above-mentioned phenomena revolves around the term 'post-truth'. The 'post-truth condition' is, arguable, referred to as the state (an increasing part of) western society has entered. Indicators are, as above mentioned, the election of Donald Trump, polarized discussions, fake news, and the rise of populism. The Oxford dictionary defines post-truth – the word of the year 2016 – as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Flood, 2016). The post-truth condition is in its essence a struggle over finding common grounds for establishing truth. While the Oxford definition has been revised, critiqued, and extended in the literature, it persists in providing the starting point for discussions around post-truth. The term 'post-truth' itself has also been questioned regarding whether its literal meaning actually reflects the phenomena it describes. To say that we are post-truth implies that there was once a state of truth that we are now past. However, when applying a historical analysis, that assumption does not hold. Truth has always been contested (see f.ex. Rosenfeld 2021, Fuller, 2018,…). Fuller (2018) even claims that there already existed post-truthers in antiquity. So what is new or different to this modern post-truth condition? "[T]he only historically new feature among the phenomena dubbed post-truth" (Braun, 2019, p. 434; see also Fisher, 2020) is social media. It should, however, not be granted all-overarching importance as it is just one among many aspects (Braun, 2019). A more comprehensive approach to understand the emergence of the current post-truth condition is a historical one like Rosenfeld's (2021). She traces the roots back to the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment marked a move away from the authority of monarchs and the church and their monopolistic claim on truth towards a truth-seeking, informed, deliberative, and open public. Truth was no longer said to be in the hand of the secular and clerical authorities but should be formed and debated among the citizens themselves rendering them active truth

seekers rather than mere truth 'obeyers'. "[T]ruth is not revealed in private to a select few but discovered in public, through observation, dialogue and critique" (Farrell, 2020, p. 330). This entails an understanding that neither an individual nor an institution has the single right to claim truth. (see Rosenfeld, 2021; Farrell, 2020)

> "[W]hat that [means]—if we turn to political practice as opposed to theory—is that most kinds of truth, under the conditions of what we call democracy, have never actually been 'self-evident' at all. Rather, they have always been something to fight over in terms of what can claim the status of truth" (Rosenfeld, 2021, p. 274).

Believing, however, that every truth is found trough a deliberation that involves every citizen, is quite far from reality. What happened instead, according to Farrell (2020), after detaching the truth monopoly from the 'old' authorities, was a shift towards "organized science" as the new authority (p. 333). This seems like a step back as the mere replacement of one knowledge monopoly with another one does not address the core issues of having a knowledge monopoly in the first place. However, science in a way reflects the Enlightenment ideas of collaborative and deliberative truth seeking which is assured through critical debate on scientific findings and peer-review. It only poses a problem when science is taken out of its pluralistic context (see Fisher 2019) or as Fuller (2018, p. 50) called it: its "juridical comfort zone of peer review". This happens when it is used as the basis for political decisions or when scientific experts are granted a knowledge monopoly in the form of an "epistemocratic oligarchy" (Fuller, 2021, p. 352; see also Fisher, 2019; Rosenfeld, 2021; and section 5).

Fuller argues that the dragging out of the scientific context especially happens to the kind of scientific findings that include one or both of the following aspects: "(1) they are inherently interdisciplinary and (2) they are policy relevant. Think climate change, evolution, anything to do with health" (p. 50). This century has already provided us with two examples, namely Covid-19 and climate change. These crises are unique. They share the characteristics of being global and complex in their origins as well as their solutions. They affect everyone – even though to different degrees – and they heavily rely on science for them to be discovered, explained, and solved. Science, however, does not deliver one and just the one perfect answer. There is always contestation, peer-review, disagreement, and revising. However, such complex crises need fast and clear answers in the form of policies. Politicians then draw on the available scientific findings to base those policies on. 'This is what the science tells us, therefore we have to act in that and that way'. Often the majority scientific consensus is taken and portrayed as 'the truth' without acknowledging that there are more opinions and stands within science.

With that politization, 'the truth' is forced upon the public without creating space for plurality and deliberation. Clearly the Enlightenment ideas are not reflected in that undertaking which portrays scientific consensus as objective, straightforward and undebatable. The post-truth condition is a symptom of the simplistic politization of science.

This paper especially focuses on the politization of the climate crisis and the 'post-truth' reaction on it, resulting in fuelling climate change rather than reducing it. I will argue that climate policies that promote "a singular sense of climate change, dominated by an 'information deficit model' [… that] leaves out certain perspectives" (Hochachka, 2020, p. 519) will not be successful in promoting climate action in the long run. Those policies instead fuel the mobilization of opposition against the elites that implemented them, which plays in the hands of populists. Populist parties, however, are constraint by there often nationalistic ideologies that do not allow for solutions of a cross-border issue such as climate change. With those parties on the rise, the fight against climate change seems even more hopeless. The illustration below depicts my argument in a very simplistic manner.
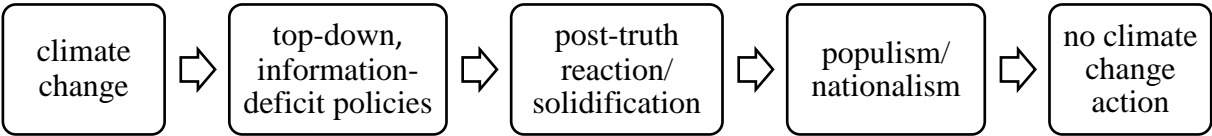

| climate change | ⇨ | top-down, information-deficit policies | ⇨ | post-truth reaction/ solidification | ⇨ | populism/ nationalism | ⇨ | no climate change action |

Figure 1 - depiction of the main argument

The need for climate change action is the starting point of my argument. The focus will then lie on political attempts to propose a way forward in the form of policies. The majority of current policies is characterized by a top-down, overruling, information-dumping and information-deficit approach. When those policies are implemented in a post-truth society, they will be met with resistance. The outcome can both manifest in a further solidification of the post-truth condition and an increased attraction of populist right-wing parties. Those parties in turn do not and – for the most part – also *cannot* deal with climate change. In the end, no climate change action comes out of the whole process. Of course, this is a very simplistic depiction and I will further elaborate on the possibility of exactly such a sequence and the reasons why it might not always play out like that.

2. Methodology

The argument that climate action is urgently needed is the very basis of this thesis. The fact, that – despite enormous amounts of evidence, strategy proposals, protests, agreements, and targets – CO2-Emissions are still on the rise, raises the question where the roots of climate inaction lie. This thesis traces the roots to the post-truth condition. While there are many ways and settings in which opposition to climate action arises and can be researched, putting particular focus on the post-truth condition provides for an especially comprehensive approach. It is a way to get a picture of a larger part of society's approach to climate change without depicting climate sceptics as stupid or misinformed. The post-truth approach rather shows that reasons behind climate scepticism and climate inaction are various and complex and often rooted elsewhere than in science denial. Understanding the backgrounds and ways of argumentation of climate sceptics is crucial in understanding where their scepticism comes from and in what way climate change policies need to be adapted.

Clearly, I side with 97% of scientists that "believe in" climate change (Fisher, 2019). The reality of climate change is therefore a truth accepted by me prior to the argumentation in this paper. As I, however, will argue that truth is not self-evident but always contested, it might seem counterintuitive and contradictive to nevertheless declare some truth and even place it at the core of the argumentation. I am aware of the contradiction, though I am also convinced that complete objectivity is close to impossible to achieve. My approach will therefore be to lie out my biases, be clear of my siding, and acknowledge that not everyone has accepted climate change as a truth. To be most open and least judgemental towards diverging opinions and stands I will adopt the 'symmetry principle' which provides me with an approach to evaluate all stands equally.

"The symmetry principle […] basically involves representing all agents from their standpoint and then turning the clash of perspectives into a research problem" (Fuller, 2021, p. 396). I interpret the principle as that there are no right or wrong, no better or worse views and standpoints, they all should count equally. However, I will not argue for a standpoint epistemology that concludes that just acknowledging that someone has a different standpoint is sufficient and that discussion and deliberation between the standpoints is useless (see Hochachka, 2022). I argue for a will to understand every perspective without judgement and provide the ground for argumentation and discussion between the standpoints. This symmetry approach is, however, contested in the literature. Lynch (2021), for example, points out that "an epistemologically symmetrical analysis of a controversy is almost always more useful to the

side with less scientific credibility or cognitive authority" (Scott, Richards, and Martin 1990, 490 in Lynch, 2021, p. 369). However, if the symmetry principle does not build the basis, what does instead? How can you justify excluding or downplaying a certain standpoint? Who gets to decide who is allowed to participate in the truth-seeking process and to what extend? Arguing outside the symmetry principle runs, according to my view and interpretation, counter the Enlightenment ideas of deliberative truth-seeking.

This paper is roughly divided into three parts: firstly, the manifestation of the post-truth condition and how we can/should understand it (section 4 and parts of section 5), secondly, the connection between post-truth and climate policies (section 5, 6 and 7) and thirdly, solutions to the challenges outlined in the first two parts (section 8).

The first part provides a discussion of the literature on post-truth with the goal of making sense of and grasping the aspects of the post-truth condition before reflecting on the way climate change policies are formulated and implemented. In the second part, I will back up the arguments from the first one, based on two case-studies. The last part is an attempt to outline solutions that break the sequence of the main argument depicted in Figure 1. The data for the first part constitutes of philosophers', historians', and political scientists' accounts of making sense of the post-truth condition. The argumentation in the second part is based on secondary literature on the two case studies. The solutions in the third part embody approaches that have emerged from a range of different disciplines, e.g. psychology, political ecology, and resilience research.

That outline does not exactly mirror the sequence in Figure 1 as I will talk about post-truth before I elaborate on climate change policies. The reason why I chose to elaborate on post-truth first, is, that understanding the post-truth condition is crucial for the whole argument. The argument is basically set in the post-truth condition and post-truth therefore constitutes the overall frame in which the analysis takes place.

3. Bias and Scope

As already mentioned, I align with the 97% of researchers that agree on the existence of human-induced climate change and the extensive evidence that climate change threatens human life on Earth as we know it. The selectional bias of focusing on policies results out of the assumption that policies have a disproportional power in forwarding climate action. Whether policies should be seen as the biggest driver in promoting climate action and to what extend for example

education, overall climate change communication, or individual action contribute can be argued but will not be a focus in this paper. Policies are an easy target for critics and sceptics, especially due to the way they are produced and implemented. They are often debated and concluded behind closed doors and without transparency about possible lobbyism and stakeholder interest. At the same time, they provide an obligation or at least a guidance for the targeted population. As policies are meant to concern everyone they address, interpretations and opinions on them are omnipresent in public and/or the media. The focus on policies is also driven out of the observation that the complexity of the individuals on the receiving end is often overlooked or not at all taken into account.

Using the post-truth condition as the lens trough which to look at the causes of climate inaction, also bears some constraints and challenges. As post-truth is primarily researched in Europe and the US, this paper does not make any claims about happenings outside of "the west". Furthermore, post-truth – its definition and scope – is still highly debated in the literature. I would agree with Rider (2021) that there is a possibility that up until now, the post-truth condition has not yet been fully grasped and understood. Discussion in literature, for example, still revolves around the degree to which the post-truth condition may or may not be informed by science itself (see f. ex. Fisher, 2020; Kuklick, 2021). Debated is also to what degree different stands and claims arising in the post-truth era should be awarded credibility (see f. ex. Waisbord, 2018) and if a symmetry analysis of all the stands and claims as Fuller (2021) proposes – and I adopt – is appropriate.

Regarding the definition of post-truth, most of the literature mentions the Oxford dictionary definition, though, mostly only as a starting point for further reflection and critique. Therefore, the Oxford dictionary definition will also not be the final definition of post-truth in this paper. Overall, I will approach post-truth in line with Waisbord (2018) as the contemporary struggle of finding and defining truth or – as he puts it – as "the absence of conditions in the public sphere for citizens to concur on objectives and processual norms to determine the truth as verifiable statements about reality" (p. 20).

When it comes to the historical roots of the post-truth condition, many authors trace them back to the Enlightenment (see for example Rosenfeld, 2021; Fisher, 2020). They, however, pick out different aspects and have different ways of reasoning and come to somehow different but related conclusions (see Meyer, 2023; Rosenfeld, 2021; Fuller, 2018; Farrell, 2020; Wight, 2018; Fisher, 2020). For this paper I adopted Rosenfeld's interpretation of the connection between the Enlightenment and post-truth.

When having to identify with either the 'truth' or the 'post-truth' side, I would find myself on the truth-end of the spectrum. There are flaws and implications to that distinction that I, however, will not further elaborate on in this paper. Instead, I take the existence of that distinction as the basis for my argumentation in which I try to analyse its emergence and its implications. I acknowledge, however, and point out that the transition between 'truthers' and 'post-truthers' is blurred and that the groups are not homogenous.

Regarding the application of my analysis, one could, for instance, argue to what degree my argumentation is suitable for societal groups that have no will in participating in a truth-seeking process at all. As my argument builds on the assumption that truth is best established if as many standpoints as possible are integrated in its deliberation, non-willingness to participate poses a problem. Another prerequisite for deliberative truth-seeking is that everyone formulates their arguments comprehensively and in a way that they can be countered. Just making claims without intending to argue them or arguing in a way that does not open for discussion also presents a challenge for my analysis. Examples would be hard-core conspiracism (see for a definition f. ex. Cassam (2023)) or the "new" conspiracism that Rosenblum & Muirhead (2020) describe as "conspiracy without a theory". To what extend these, however, fall under or should be counted to post-truth is debatable (see f. ex. Waisbord, 2018).

4. Making sense of the post-truth condition

As the term already suggests, in the discussion around the post-truth condition the question what constitutes *truth* cannot be omitted. According to the label the contemporary struggle around truth has been assigned, we had truth before we entered this state of 'post-truthness', we are post/past a previously existing state of truth. But how did/do we conceive of truth before post-truth? One possibility is to look at definitions of post-truth. Especially the one from the Oxford dictionary also inherently bears a definition of truth, namely "objective facts". I will repeat the whole definition here, so it is placed next to its analysis: In the post-truth condition "objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". The definition suggests that reasoning based on objective facts was overruled by reasoning based on emotions and personal beliefs. Taking this further, the production of objective facts is in this definition most likely assigned to science. One can therefrom discern that (the former) 'truth' is related to scientifically proven objective facts. Post-truth is then often defined as a countermovement to a trust in those scientifically proven objective facts. In that sense it seems that before post-truth arose there was trust in a way of finding truth, namely science, which is now increasingly contested. However, there are flaws inherent in this definition and its interpretation. Firstly, are scientific facts really objective? Secondly, can emotions and personal believe be completely detached from truth seeking (see Braun, 2019, p. 433)? And thirdly, to what extend is the post-truth condition really about objection to science?

4.1. Objectivity

The assertion of the existence of mere objective facts and of evidence being detached from the individual and the authority claiming it, is an idea that only took shape in the middle of the nineteenth century (Fuller, 2018, p. 25) and seemed to solidify from then onwards. For example, the believe after the Second World War and during the Cold War was especially shaped by the "notion that moral and political loyalty was irrelevant to scholars; their work was 'value free' or 'value neutral.' Science was objective" (Kuklick, 2021, p. 310). This assumption has, however – also in science – been overthrown by now (see f. ex. Kucklich, 2021).

4.2. Emotions

Concerning emotions and personal believes, they are arguably inherent to a more or lesser extent to all truth-seeking, politics, and decision-making (Braun, 2019, p. 433) and not

exclusively to post-truth reasoning. A more comprehensive approach of the role emotions play in the post-truth condition is, therefore, to look at the particular emotions that are raised in light of contemporary struggles and (the handling of) previous and current crises. The post-truth condition

> "is anchored [sic!] the anxieties that have emerged around the world over the past decades, thanks in significant part to the destructive consequences of neoliberal globalization, the hardships created by the financial crisis of 2008, the waves of migration threatening some peoples' rising levels of social and economic security, and the worrisome implications of climate change, just to mention the most obvious sources of angst" (Latour 2018; McIntyre 2018 in Fisher, 2020, p. 126).

A rising number of people, nowadays, has troubles making sense of the world around them. We are confronted with an overwhelming amount of information – often completely contradictive – through media as well as in our daily lives. Reading or hearing something that seems to be major, as for example the implications of climate change, but having too little knowledge to put it into perspective or even guess the degree of trustworthiness of such information, makes it hard to make sense of what you hear and read and what conclusions you should draw from it. In a setting where everything seems to be possible it is tempting to question everything you read and get the feeling not to be able to distinguish between right and wrong anymore. Feelings of insecurity, fear and loss of control can arise (see also Fisher, 2020; Norgaard, 2019). The wide-spread feeling that "the world has become too big" (Wilson, 2021, p. 3) for us to make sense of it adds to the insecurity and hopeless. Additionally, the Covid crisis contributed to many people feeling "afraid, lonely, and bored all at once which is to say, not just in a mood for distrust, but ripe for conspiracy thinking of all kinds, which can create its own sense of agency, community, and life purpose when they are otherwise in short supply" (Rosenfeld, 2021, p. 276). Social media plays an important role in that context through, for example, spreading misinformation or just spreading completely opposite information at the same time (Heath, 2021).

Social media and its algorithms have a huge potential in spreading (mis)information. This can be seen as the Enlightenment at its best, as the public has never been so literate and the conditions for public participation in truth-seeking are unprecedented (Fuller, 2021). It can, however, also lead to serious problems regarding the difficulty to distinguish fact from fake as they can stand right next to each other. Not only are algorithms configured to feed you with information that fits your worldview they also favour content that is emotionally loaden. As

opposed to print media, in online media the possibility exists to write about an issue in completely contradictive ways, release both statements, see which one proves to be more popular, and then delete the other one. This is a tactic called A/B testing (Heath, 2021). Furthermore, conspiracy theorists were a fringe group in an analogue world, unlikely to find enough of their likes to really have political influence. With social media, however, it is possible to look for likeminded ones in a wider geographic area and therefore find enough partisans to get public attention (Heath, 2021; Wilson 2021).

Additionally, a lot of the illegal undertakings of politicians have been recently brought to daylight, see for example the corruption going on in Austria under the ÖVP-FPÖ government. This has led to the accusation that "[t]he gamemasters are […] not playing by their own rules. Indeed, the post-truth condition is normatively animated by a quest for fairness in an admittedly unpredictable world" (Fuller, 2021, p. 354).

4.3. Post-truth and science

Partly, due to its appeal to "truthiness", post-truth is often associated with science denial. However, "[e]ven hardcore climate change deniers draw on science to bolster their case, only that they just draw on science that confirms their views and values" (Braun, 2019, p. 434). A more accurate description of the post-truth condition is therefore as a phenomenon of anti-elitism or anti-intellectualism rather than a denial of science in general. Post-truth aims at the production of the scientific facts and the processes behind it rather than at the existence of the same (Braun, 2019). Or as Fuller (2018, p. 41) puts it: "It is worth stressing that a 'post-truther' does not deny the existence of facts, let alone 'objective facts'. She simply wishes to dispel the mystery in which the creation and maintenance of facts tend to be shrouded". This wish finds significant support when policy decisions are based on scientific facts as was the case during the Covid pandemic and is now in the light of climate change.

Summing up, objectivity is neither inherent to a 'truth-' nor a 'post-truth'-world. Therefore, instead of insisting that the post-truth condition is a move away from and an undermining of the good old truth we must rather acknowledge that truth has always been and will ever be a matter of contestation (Fuller, 2018). Furthermore, rather than denying science, the post-truth condition plays out as anti-intellectualism and anti-elitism. In the light of a world that has gone through and is in the grip of major crises, discontent towards crisis management of the elites has increased and insecurity and hopelessness manifested.

5. The politization of science

I have now lined out an understanding of the post-truth condition and will move on to problematizing current climate change policies, the politization of science, and the rule of experts.
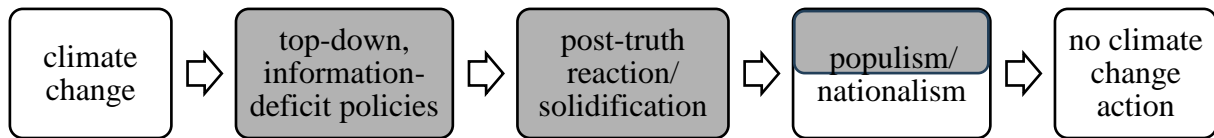

Figure 2 – aspects of the main argument which are outlined in this section (section 5)

We have already established that with the transfer of scientific findings to the public and their use as basis for political decisions, science enters a sphere where it is not subjected to scientific counterarguments and peer-review anymore. Rather, particular scientific findings are extracted and portrayed as truths (e.g. simplistic politization of science) and experts are granted a position close to an intellectual monopoly. I will first elaborate on the role experts have gained and then take a closer look at the politization of science. Both have implications for the emergence and solidification of the post-truth condition and incite objection in a post-truth society.

Experts are given the license to claim truth based on their knowledge and expertise on a certain topic which can be interpreted as an "'argument from authority'" (Fuller, 2018, p. 26) or as a "technocratic 'rule by experts', an epistemocratic oligarchy" (Fuller, 2021, p. 352), which is exactly the truth claim that the enlightenment theorists wanted to rule out.

> "They [the experts] can at times […] insist […] upon the validity of their own knowledge in isolation, that is, without the leavening effect of ordinary people's basic, more experiential sense of the world, not to mention without announcing its always-provisional status or admitting mistakes" (Rosenfeld, 2021, p. 274).

Effects of such knowledge authority can lead to discontent towards scientific elites, a widening gap between scientific "facts" and personal experience or a feeling of being overruled. The lesser the reasoning process is tangible and understandable the less trust and credit will be given to those findings and assertions. This alienation between what an individual non-expert might reason compared to a scientist that has expertise in the particular field, I argue, is a major reason for the emergence of the post-truth condition which is acting as a self-proclaimed movement to

shed light on the conditions in which truth claims are made. "The post-truth condition rejects this epistemic privileging of current science" (Fuller, 2021, p. 399).

Concerning the politization of science, especially climate change is often dragged into the political discourse and taken "outside of its juridical comfort zone of peer review" (Fuller, 2018, p. 50). The problem with taking scientific findings outside of that zone is, that the plurality of opinions and findings that existed in the scientific community gets lost on the way. The result is that a particular view is extracted and presented as the scientific truth. However, one could argue that especially in the case of climate change there is a very high consensus in the scientific community (97%) and it can therefore be legitimate to claim this consensus as true and use it as the basis for policies. However, there is still a difference between scientific findings and their politization, namely that scientific facts do not inherently bear political implications (Fisher, 2019). For example, the scientific finding that there is too much CO2 in our atmosphere and that no more should be added does not contain how exactly the CO2 reduction should look like and whose responsibility it is. That is a connection and interpretation that politicians make. The contestation of exactly that connection and interpretation and the motivations behind it are at the core of post-truth.

Current climate change policies are characterized by both the referring to experts and the simplistic extraction of claims out of the scientific context. Furthermore, they are implemented top-down, rarely including the population in the deliberation process but dumping the final policy on them. "Climate policy seeks to forge a singular sense of climate change, dominated by an 'information deficit model' that focuses on transferring climate science to the lay public" (Hochaka, 2022, p. 519). Critique especially arises around the lack of pluralism and the "hiding behind numbers" (Fisher, 201, p. 149) which refers to the lack of transparency of the policies' exact implications for the individual. On the one hand, it is legitimate to be sure of the sources behind life-altering policies as climate policies often are. On the other hand, focusing on the form and the emergence rather than the content of climate change claims and policies is an easy way to not have to deal with climate change itself. As it plays out in the political sphere, accusing political opponents of their motivations is simpler than having to come up with own solutions.

Populism is the political movement that probably mirrors the post-truth arguments and claims as well as the reaction to top-down climate policies best. Populists place themselves at the side of the 'ordinary' people that are perceived to be overruled and patronized by the ones in power

who 'force' the policies on them. Populism thrives, such as post-truth, in the conditions of social anxiety and unresolved global crises (Waisbord, 2018). Furthermore,

> "[p]opulism […] thrives in the context of wide-ranging challenges to elite definition of truth and reality. Populism's anti-elitism is also manifest in its opposition to facts and truth determined by knowledge-producing elites such as scientists and experts" (Waisbord, 2018, p. 18-19).

This does neither mean that populism cannot exist independent of the post-truth condition, nor does it mean that it is the necessary consequence of it. Waisbord (2018) just claims that the post-truth condition is not in the way of the thriving of populism, rather the opposite. Currently, we see both post-truth and populism on the rise.

With the rise of populists that place themselves counter the scientific experts, a societal divide has taken shape and progressively solidified. "[B]oth [expert and populist impulses] have been intensifying in recent years and, in effect, trying to fully stifle the other" (Rosenfeld, 2021, p. 275).

> "Polemically speaking, we see the latest version of good vs. evil, and one where Liberals, academics, scientists, the enlightened, the progressives and the educated find themselves conveniently placed on the side of the good with no further need to question their own, respectively our, own biases and blind spots, our knowledges and our truths" (Braun, 2019, p. 432).

The attitude of "we are right" and "you are wrong", "we know everything" and "you know nothing" is inherent to both sides. Both accuse each other of either being the source of manipulation or oblivious to it. On the one side, when it comes to climate change, scientist's efforts to get the message across in a way that reflects its content has caused uproar. The example of the leakage of emails of climate scientists of the East Anglia University has gained prominence in that regard. Those emails reveal communications ahead of the Copenhagen Environmental Summit where the scientists discussed how to best present their findings and whether to "[hide] or [obscure] findings that did not fit the standard climate change scenario" (Fisher, 2019, p. 147). On the other side, populist parties are accused of shaping a narrative with a clear enemy by distorting and misrepresenting facts. Both side's criticism does not aid a convergence of the two sides or a more pluralistic debate but rather results in a greater divide. Both sides interpret what they find and argue within their already established view and setting,

adding significant fuel if not laying the ground altogether for the post-truth condition we find us in today (Braun, 2019, p. 433).

In the following section I will back up the claims made in this section with data from case-studies and elaborate on the role of nationalism in that context.

6. Climate inaction in the light of post-truth

This section comprises two case studies and an elaboration on them. The first one focuses on the meaning-making process of individuals around climate change. Understanding that process is core to be able to foresee how climate change policies are/will be received and made sense of. The second case study draws on the argument from section 5, that the post-truth condition plays out politically through populism. One issue with populist parties increasing influence is that they can and will not deal with climate change in a way that leads to climate action. The study lines out how populist right-wing parties are constraint by their ideology to dealt with and battle climate change. In this section almost all the steps in the Figure are addressed.
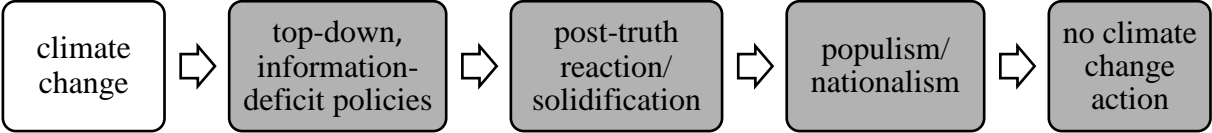

climate change ⇨ top-down, information-deficit policies ⇨ post-truth reaction/ solidification ⇨ populism/ nationalism ⇨ no climate change action

Figure 3 – aspects of the main argument which are elaborated on in this section (section 6)

6.1. Individual meaning-making around climate change

Hochachka (2022) critiques the prevailing "information-deficit" (p. 519) approach of climate policies and argues for more incorporation of diverse perspectives through participatory methods. She introduces a framework outlining psychological reasons for the difficulties in understanding and collectively interpreting climate change. The results of the study indicate that a psychosocial approach acknowledging the varied interpretations of climate change among individuals, while fostering collective agreement, can enhance the effectiveness of climate change action. In this section I will use Hochachka's approach and findings and knit it to examples and cases from other literature.

Understanding most of the aspects of climate change these days, including its combatting, requires a deeper understanding than simple day-to-day experience and knowledge. This is why US-Senator Inhofe's attempt to support his argument against the consensus on human-induced climate change by bringing a snowball to the Senate (Magrini, 2016) is of little scientific relevance for the matter. It is, however, an indication of his meaning-making process around climate change which is shaped by his "self-identity, culture, values, ideology and beliefs" (Hochachka, 2022, p. 519), as well as his "political loyalties and […] worldviews" (p. 520). Disregarding the psychological complexity of individuals and their meaning-making process by just dumping the only right answer on them has not proven to be effective as we still see a huge "'value-action' gap between what people say and what people do regarding climate change" (Hochachka, 2022, p. 520; see also Swyngedouw, 2022). I argue, that the leaving out of plurality in the political climate change discourse and the forcing of pre-made conclusions and decisions on people as if they had no previous stands, thoughts, or knowledge on the topic – as Hochachka oulines – have a significant impact on the emergence of the post-truth condition and in the end do not promote climate change action.

The current (still) pre-dominate top-down approach to battle climate change relies on "green capitalist technological fixes" and neglects the confrontation with "the degree of systemic change" that would be required (Norgaard, 2019, p. 439). Overall, there are still only very few attempts to solve the climate change problem outside the current capitalistic paradigm (Neimark, et al., 2019). Though, already Einstein stated that "problems can never be solved by the same way of thinking that created them" [own translation from German] (Isenberg, 2014).

Furthermore, the top-down policies counteract their goals by their way of implementation. As fighting climate change needs collective effort, raising a significant large crowd that undermines the necessary undertakings is counterproductive. However, exactly that is happening right now in the case of climate change. I argue that the way climate change policies are currently forwarded and implemented significantly contributes to their ineffectiveness and the solidification of the post-truth condition. When top-down policies clash with individual meaning-making, resistance is sure to follow. Let us take the example of vegetarianism. The Scientific Group of the UN Food Systems Summit concludes that more plant-based diets are crucial to maintain planetary health (Herrero et al., 2021). The reasons behind it are complex and not self-evident if you are not further engaged in the issue. If a country now promotes a general meat reduction policy, or even forces that new diet on its population, uproar is bound to occur. Meat is an integral part of many traditional diets and for many people, eliminating it

from their diet or even just reducing it seems like a major intervention in their way of living. Resentment towards politicians and elites from who this policy is forced upon is likely to arise paired with notions on whether that statement is actually true or if it is misrepresented in a way that manipulates the public for some kind of hidden intention of the elites. Here climate change "is *contested in relation to clashing narratives, values, and interests*" (Hochachka, 2022, p. 521).

6.2. Climate change, right-wing populism, and nationalism

The second case study focuses on populist-right wing parties and their dealing – or rather their 'not-dealing' – with climate change. Populism builds on a two-dimensional opposition which not only manifests in 'the popular' versus 'the elite' but generally in 'we' against 'the others'. Brubaker (2020) breaks this divide down into a vertical and a horizontal dimension while the opposing groups can be put on either of these axes and, as he argues, also on both simultaneously. 'The others' are "economic, political and cultural elites [that] are represented as being 'outside' as well as 'on top'" (Brubaker, 2020, p. 44). The horizontal dimension is often realized in a nationalistic manner. Brubaker points out that populism and nationalism should be understood as partly rather than completely overlapping. Furthermore, nationalist parties are not necessarily to the same extent or even populistic (Stavrakakis et al. 2017, in Brubaker, 2020, p.45). However, we see that there is a certain share of parties in Europe that feature populistic as well as nationalistic characteristics. Forchtner & Kølvraa (2015) claim that a nationalist ideology is inherent to right-wing populist parties in Europe such as the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), the British National Party (BNP) and the Danish People's Party (DPP). In their case-study they focus on the latter two and their stance on environmental issues and climate change. I will argue – drawing on that case-study – that these populist parties, to a major extent due to their nationalistic ideology, are not able to solve climate change. Furthermore, I will show that they mirror an extensive share of post-truth aspects in their acting and policies.

Forchtner & Kølvraa divide their analysis of environmental and climate discourses of the British National Party (BNP) and the Danieh People's Party (DPP) in two sections: First, they argue that environmental problems that have to do with national landscapes and can be dealt with within national borders do not pose a threat to the party's nationalistic identities, meaning that they have solutions for them at their hand. However, protecting national landscapes and nature is not necessarily driven out of a sustainability concern, if even. It is more a sign of enhancing and maintaining national sovereignty over the nation's landscapes and resources.

Energy-sufficiency is therefore, for instance, a major concern of those parties which, however, can clash with the concern of windmills destroying the nation's people's beloved landscape. The problem of climate change on the contrary does not fit so easily into their nationalist ideology, which is the second section Forchtner & Kølvraa focus on.

Interestingly, there is not only evidence that climate change as a transnational issue is not solvable through a nationalist ideology as it "would require accepting transnational responsibility, and thus demand an internationally organized effort to combat, regulate, and control CO2 emissions " (Forchtner & Kølvraa, 2015, p. 219), we also find quite a lot of post-truth aspects in populist right-wing party's dealing with climate change.

The common answer to the transnational problem of climate change from populist right-wing parties seems to be its denial and, in a very post-truth manner, the questioning of the 'elites' that phrase, research, and forward the issue. The 'elites' in question range from the IPCC to governments to other ruling elites. Here again, one can see that this is not about a general science denial but about being suspicious of the undertakings of the elite. The main concern are the hidden interests behind climate change claims and the notion of an elite that "is seeking to establish its hegemony at the expense of 'scientific truth' and the 'common people'". In that sense "global warming appears to be less about climate than about developing international political power structures aimed at eroding the sovereignty of the nation state" (Forchtner & Kølvraa, 2015, p. 214). Populist parties discern a problem to their ideology in the climate change issue. It is transnational, highly complex, and merely aesthetically visualizable as for example national landscapes are. Their answer is denial, spreading doubt, and undermining the authority of institutions concerned with climate change like the IPCC or governments in general.

However, as we have seen, the post-truth condition and with it the rise of right-wing populism, did not materialize out of nowhere. One major shortcoming was that discourse around topics as Covid and climate change was politically narrowed down to one truth, not mirroring the scientific discussion and plurality behind it. That creates an easy target for right-wing populist and nationalist parties. The DPP, for example, draws on that lack of plurality and claims "that there are remaining doubts over the man-made nature of global warming and climate change, and […] the unwillingness […] to admit this is itself suspicious" (Forchtner & Kølvraa, 2015, p. 214). Even more catchy is another DNP statement: "'We are not hiding anything—what are the others hiding?'" (Forchtner & Kølvraa, 2015, p. 215)

Not everyone, however, who finds themselves on the post-truth spectrum is necessarily a supporter of right-wing populist parties. Neither does everyone who is critical towards elite institutions find themselves on the 'post-truth side' (see Neimark, et al., (2019) on the distinction between political ecology and post-truth). I merely direct attention to the fact that there are certain parallels and overlaps between post-truth thinking and right-wing populist party's policies. Furthermore, given their rise of popularity in the era of post-truth further suggests that 'post-truthers' are attracted to those parties.

7. Conclusion

Post-truth, populism, and nationalism pose serious risks to climate change action. In this thesis I have outlined how their interrelations can be understood and what that means for climate change action. First and foremost, the post-truth condition did not emerge out of nowhere. Its causes lie in insecurity and social anxiety as well as in opposition to the claim of science to be an intellectual monopoly, the lack of plurality in climate policy discussions and the lack of transparency of what implications climate change action will have on the individual. Furthermore, developments towards globalisation, the problems that arose by earlier crises and their dealings have all contributed to the emergence of the post-truth condition. This post-truth condition poses serious risks towards climate change actions as it undermines the authorities that forward those actions and provides the conditions for populism and nationalism to thrive, movements that are unable to solve climate change constraint by their ideology. Not understanding these interrelations and instead dismissing the concerns of post-truthers as stupid and invalid, as is often the case, will, however, neither stop the solidification of the post-truth condition nor the further rise of right-wing populist parties. In contrary, it will add further fuel. If we strive for effective climate change action, we have to understand that this cannot be achieved with a rising part of the population being critical or even in denial of its existence and the institutions connected to it. Therefore, understanding the underlying causes of the post-truth condition is crucial to deal with it, and not further fuel it. In the best case we find a solution that eliminates the "truthers and post-truthers divide" completely, understanding that the fight against climate change can only be tackled as a collective effort and is weakened by every attempt to split society apart.

In the last section I will provide some suggestions how that can be achieved.

8. Solutions

I argue that the most important measures to turn the post-truth condition in favour of climate change action lie in participation and bottom-up approaches and pluralist discussions. Participation is one of the main principles of resilience. "Resilience thinking embraces learning, diversity and how to adapt to a wide range of complex challenges" (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2015). The complex challenge at stake discussed in this paper is climate change. Nowadays you will find that most people (in Europe) have some understanding on climate change, at a minimum they know about the existence of the topic. There is, however, still little to no consultation of the public concerning climate change issues. This runs counter to the evidence that decisions where the public was engaged in have a potential of being more resilient, sustainable, and accepted. One example comes from the re-zoning of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. The authority concerned with the matter decided to consult the public for assistance. Public will for participation was enormous. The project ended in an expansion of no-take areas which was only possible due to raised awareness of sustainability through the meetings and the coming-together of multiple stakeholders which debated and compromised (Lebel, et al., 2006). Another try of consulting the public are the so-called "climate-councils" where citizens come together to discuss how to proceed in the matter of climate change. Austria, Denmark, France, Germany and some other European Countries have already implemented them (see BMK, 2023). How influential they are in policymaking is, however, questionable as long as their recommendations are not binding.

Hochachka's (2022) suggestion for a bottom-up meaning-making process takes the participation idea further. She proposes that there are certain psychological obstacles in the individual and collective meaning-making process of climate change. Her proposed solution is a bottom-up approach that suggests that first every individual makes sense of climate change themselves before debating that view with others. There is no single view on climate change, and it is therefore important to acknowledge that one's "own view of the matter at hand isn't shared by all, or that there isn't a single meaning to which others need to simply get behind" [I did not take over italics] (p. 523). Hochachka's argumentation overlaps with the discussion of the Enlightenment ideas. Her collective meaning-making process that succeeds the individual one can be compared to the deliberative truth-seeking put forward by Enlightenment philosophers.

Political ecology also provides valuable insights and suggestions through its approach to participation. Neimark, et al. (2019) outline participation in political ecology as, on the one

hand, education and "the coproduction of knowledge with people outside academia" (p. 618). On the other hand, they suggest policy labs which "bring together political actors and sectoral specialists" (p. 619).

Overall, a general effort towards more pluralistic communication and the bridging of gaps that emerge due to different worldviews, values, history, and knowledge is needed. Plurality needs to be included in the climate policy discourse as well as concreteness over the implications of those policies – no more "hiding behind numbers" (Fisher, 201, p. 149). Furthermore, the public needs to be granted participation options in order to combat climate change in the necessary way.

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