

# The Ideological Roots of Populist Radical-Right Climate Scepticism

## A Qualitative Data Analysis of the Case Vlaams Belang

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### Abstract

*The study of populist radical-right parties has boomed in recent years. Analyses of the discourse of these parties have gone beyond the focus of immigration policies and have turned to their climate communication. Previous research identified populism and the radical-right host ideology as key ideological drivers of their climate scepticism. This study questions which of these ideological features are dominant in the climate discourse of the Belgian populist radical-right party Vlaams Belang. A qualitative data analysis shows that their ideology is most aptly described as conservative and authoritarian. Populism is not salient, in contrast to what previous research has found for other populist radical-right parties. The presence of nationalism is confirmed, but nativism is irrelevant. The results indicate that Vlaams Belang adapts and transplants its core ideology to its climate discourse, but we cannot take the prevalence of populism or nativism in their climate discourse for granted.*

**Keywords:** populism, climate skepticism, Vlaams Belang, ideology, radical-right.

### 1 Introduction

What are the dominant ideological features of the climate discourse of Vlaams Belang? While the views of populist radical-right parties have been thoroughly analysed with respect to migration policy, their ideas about the increasingly salient issue of climate policy have recently attracted scholarly attention as well. It has been established that populist radical-right parties are very likely to hold a climate sceptic position, raising questions about the ideology behind this position (Gemenis et al., 2012; Lockwood, 2018; Schaller & Carius, 2019). Recognising that individuals with radical-right beliefs are also more likely to be climate sceptic, a better understanding of how populist radical-right parties play a part in the opposition against more ambitious climate policies is crucial (Duijndam & Van Beukering, 2021; Jylhä & Hellmer, 2020; McCright et al., 2016; Stanley et al., 2017). If radical-right parties are able to successfully preserve and employ their core ideology when climate policy becomes salient, it would imply that shifting the

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debate away from immigration to climate change could become less rewarding for their political opponents than previously anticipated. Furthermore, this would question the popular belief that radical-right parties simply oppose unpopular climate measures taken by governing parties to make electoral gains without having a clear ideological justification for their climate sceptic stance. In general, it would make efforts to convince their voters about the need to pursue more ambitious climate policies much more difficult.

Previous research suggests that nationalism, populism and conservatism are present in the discourse of populist radical-right parties in Europe (e.g. Forchtner & KØlvraa, 2015; Forchtner & Özvatan, 2019; Huber et al., 2021; Kyriazi, 2019). In this article, I build on this body of literature by asking whether certain ideological features are more salient than others. In contrast to older studies, I do not focus on a single ideological feature nor do I simply report that some ideological traits are present. Instead, I compare the salience of a variety of ideologies and investigate their compatibility. Furthermore, conservatism and authoritarianism have been identified as important features of a climate sceptic discourse before, but an operationalisation of these dimensions grounded in theory and their subsequent application in the study of climate discourse is currently lacking. By remedying this gap in the literature, the present study provides a fine-grained overview of the ideological structure of the discourse of a populist radical-right party.

To answer the research question, I look at Vlaams Belang, one of the oldest and most resilient populist radical-right parties in Europe (van Haute et al., 2018). After years of decline culminating in their electoral defeat of 2014, Vlaams Belang bounced back in the polls and became the second largest party in Flanders in 2019. They have been found to express climate sceptic beliefs in the recent past, though the current political climate lends itself particularly well to incorporate even more of these beliefs in their populist radical-right argumentation (Gemenis et al., 2012; Oswald et al., 2021; Schaller & Carius, 2019). Before the outbreak of the coronavirus, climate action was on top of the political agenda in Belgium and Flanders because of the student strikes for climate. The Green party also did well in the polls back then, and while the 2019 Federal election was not as successful for the greens as expected, they became a member of the federal government with control over federal climate and energy ministries. Based on Oswald et al. (2021), we would expect the populist radical-right party to argue against everything the Green party proposes. At the same time, Vlaams Belang competes with the Flemish-nationalist and conservative party N-VA for the vote of right-wing citizens. With N-VA also being in charge of the Flemish climate ministry, this adds additional incentives for Vlaams Belang to double down on its climate scepticism.

Therefore, Vlaams Belang presents an excellent case to explore the dominant ideological features of radical-right parties' climate discourse. The combination of qualitative content analysis (QCA) and thematic analysis of official party sources between 2017 and 2021 allows to differentiate between populism as a 'thin ideology' (i.e. a narrow range of ideological concepts (Mudde, 2004)) on the one hand, and the different aspects of the radical-right host ideology on the other.

I find that Vlaams Belang indeed rejects current climate policy goals and criticises the way these policies are decided. The party does refrain, however, from

outright evidence scepticism. They do not deny the existence of climate change, nor the role of humanity in global warming. The main contribution of this article is that it shows that in contrast to expectations from the literature, the discourse of Vlaams Belang cannot be described as populist but that its radical-right host ideology is dominant. However, and this is a second key insight, the radical-right ideological features do not play out in exactly the same way that we see in radical-right parties' discourse regarding migration policy. Conservatism, authoritarianism and nationalism are the most salient features of Vlaams Belang's climate discourse, but nativism is almost irrelevant. The present study shows that we cannot take the presence of specific features of populist radical-right ideology for granted in every political context. The case of Vlaams Belang demonstrates that it is possible for a radical-right party to adapt its core ideology to new policy areas. This finding implies that they might be able to appeal to their voters, even outside the context of migration policy, which may undermine efforts to convince voters about the need to have more ambitious climate mitigation policies.

## 2 Literature Review and Theory

Cas Mudde's seminal work (2007), discussing the operationalisation of populist radical-right ideology, is one of the most widely cited contributions to the field. In his book, Mudde identifies three distinct ideological features: nativism as a radical version of nationalism, authoritarianism and populism (see also Norris & Inglehart; Rydgren, 2017 and others). The meaning and extent of these three concepts is still heavily debated, which is why I have adopted widely (although not universally) accepted and mutually exclusive definitions for these ideological features. *Nativism*, which Mudde calls the core ideological feature of populist radical-right discourse, can be defined as follows: "that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ('the nation') and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state" (Mudde, 2007, p. 19). Even though nativism can either be ethnically or culturally inspired, depending on the context, it always grants certain cultural or economic rights to the natives (Guia, 2016).

*Authoritarianism* is the second feature of Mudde's typology. While this concept has long been used in political science to describe the lack of democracy in a political system (e.g. Freedom House democracy index), Mudde (2007) and later also Norris and Inglehart (2019) tap into a long line of psychological research (e.g. Adorno et al., 1950; Altemeyer, 1996). Three authoritarian dimensions or values stand out: submission towards a strong leader who protects the in-group; conventionalism, or conformity towards the rules, norms and customs of the group; aggression against those who do not conform to these norms or those who do not submit to the leader(s), or as Karen Stenner (2009, p. 142) put it: "intolerance and punitiveness toward dissidents and deviants". Later, Norris and Inglehart (2019) also identified the importance of security against risks and threats as an authoritarian value.

Recently, the study of *populism* has gained immense popularity. Definitions of the term vary widely, with researchers calling it either a strategy (Weyland, 2001), a logic (Laclau, 2005) or a political style (Moffitt & Tormey, 2013). In the so-called ideational approach to populism, the concept is treated as “a set of ideas that can be combined with other ideological features” (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 514). Mudde (2004, 2007) speaks of a thin ideology because populism does not stand on its own, but appears alongside a ‘host’ ideology. This study will draw on this ideational approach for its definition of populism, because it wants to categorise the content or the ideas found in Vlaams Belang’s discourse. Furthermore, it can be easily operationalised and it is by far the most common approach in the literature (Moffitt & Tormey, 2013). In this definition, populism is people-centred, with ‘the people’ being a pure, morally virtuous and homogenous group. This group is confronted with a morally corrupt elite that does not have the best interests of ‘the people’ at heart. Such a moral, Manichean distinction between people and elite, between Good and Evil, is central to the ideational approach to populism. Lastly, populism also entails people’s sovereignty: as the elite illegitimately governs ‘the people’, ‘the people’ must stand up and rule itself, through direct democracy methods such as plebiscites. For the purposes of this study, all three elements (people-centrism, anti-elitism and people’s sovereignty) must be identifiable in a document for populism to be considered present.

By adhering to nativism and authoritarianism, populist radical-right parties (PRRPs) are not completely different from mainstream (right-wing) parties, but they hold more ‘purified’, more radical positions (Mudde, 2010). This means that the conservative element of the host ideology must also be defined and operationalised. Like the other concepts, conservatism is again a contested term and difficult to delineate. Instead of providing a full description of all features of a conservative ideology, I turn to *conservative argumentation* instead. Albert Hirschman published a book titled *The Rhetoric of Reaction* in 1991. In this work, he explores three arguments typically used by conservatives over the last 200 years. From the comments made by Burke on the French Revolution to Hayek’s critique of the welfare state, the same (three) arguments pop up across space and time in conservative rhetoric. The *perversity thesis* claims that so-called progressive policies might be well-meaning, but will cause perverse effects. The *futility thesis* argues that political action is totally and utterly pointless. The *jeopardy thesis* states that policies will eventually endanger prior achievements of society (Hirschman, 1991).

### 2.1 Populist Radical-Right Ideology in Climate Scepticism

Lockwood (2018) was one of the first scholars to explicitly stress the value of ideology in understanding the position of PRRPs regarding climate policy. He argued that ideology is a better explanation for the existence and behaviour of PRRPs than structural factors such as the presence of many losers of globalisation in society, the ‘left behind’. At that time, Forchtner and KØlvraa (2015) had already discussed the nationalist ideology as a crucial driver of PRRPs’ views on the environment and the climate. They proposed three dimensions of nationalism as the explanation for the ecological views of PRRPs: an aesthetic, a symbolic and a materialistic one. The aesthetic dimension of nationalism could explain the

populist radical-right's love for the preservation of traditional landscapes, which would explain their opposition against windmills. The symbolic dimension of nationalism covers the sovereignty of the nation. According to PRRPs, climate activists, elites and foreigners must not impose unwanted climate policies upon 'the people'. Thirdly, the material dimension of nationalism covers a nation's self-sufficiency in terms of energy supply. Symbolic nationalism is arguably the broadest dimension of the three, as it includes the vertical relationship between people and elite, commonly captured by the term populism. For conceptual clarity, Rooduijn (2019) and Rydgren (2017) warn against conflating populism and nationalism. Furthermore, aggressive language targeting 'climate activists' could easily be considered as an example of authoritarian aggression against those who threaten society, which is one dimension of authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1996). In a recent volume edited by Forchtner (2019b), several authors yet again explore the connection between (romantic) nationalism and environmentalism across many political contexts. They conclude that the radical-right appears to be invested in local environmental problems, as the nation must take care of its green countryside: 'blood and soil' politics. However, this connection between 'the people' and their ancestral lands is not present in the context of climate policy, a transnational and cosmopolitan issue par excellence (see also Lockwood, 2018). Nationalism could be a powerful ideological reason not to care for ambitious transnational climate policy targets.

Some empirical studies also confirm Lockwood's expectations about the presence of populism in certain forms of climate scepticism (Kyriazi, 2019). Hatakka and Välimäki (2019) argue that the Finns Party's rhetoric against windmills is a clear example of populist performance and rhetoric. Forchtner and Özvatan (2019) indicate that far-right media in Germany together with the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) show all elements of Mudde's definition of populism. Vihma et al. (2020) also identified populist narratives in the Nordic countries.

Populism and nationalism appear to be crucial elements in the climate discourse of populist radical-right actors. However, even though nationalism and a 'thin' ideological feature like populism are emphasised in the empirical literature, the host ideology consists of multiple elements and they must be taken into account as well (Lockwood, 2018). Authoritarianism has been identified as an important element in far-right ecology (Olsen, 1999), and conservatism could also play a role. Forchtner et al. (2018) find arguments among the far-right that also appear in mainstream conservative discourse. Huber et al. (2021) compare right-wing and left-wing populists, analysing their discourse for populist markers, while finding that right-wing populists are more likely to oppose European climate policy. They also report concisely on the presence of a conservative host ideology. Hess and Renner (2019) studied conservative parties and far-right ones, but focused more on their positionality rather than their ideology. Finally, Vihma et al. (2020) speak of climate policy conservatism, but this concept also reflects a policy position rather than an ideological framework. Even though mainstream conservatism appears to play a role in populist radical-right party discourse on climate policy, a more specific analysis identifying the salience of the most

important conservative arguments is missing. The adoption of Hirschman's take on conservatism can remedy this issue. Recent empirical analysis of populist radical-right climate discourse also tends to either overlook authoritarianism or to provide no clear operationalisation of that concept. An analysis of the ideology of populist radical-right parties is incomplete if it does not include the search for elements that might appeal to voters with authoritarian values.

### *2.2 Populist Radical-Right Climate Scepticism as an Electoral Strategy*

Most studies devoted to climate scepticism among the populist radical-right discuss individual psychological traits; many examples can be found in Fraune and Knodt (2018) or Forchtner (2019a). Political scientists and psychologists alike have pondered the question whether voting for PRRPs is related to climate scepticism (Duijndam & Van Beukering, 2021; McCright et al., 2016) and if climate scepticism of individuals can be linked to other traits associated with populist radical-right ideology, such as authoritarianism (Jylhä & Hellmer, 2020; Stanley et al., 2017), social dominance orientation (Jylhä & Hellmer, 2020), populism and anti-establishment attitudes (Huber, 2020; Huber et al., 2019), masculinity and industrialisation (Anshelm & Hultman, 2014), or political trust (Fairbrother et al., 2019). Negative individual attitudes regarding global warming indeed appear to correspond to conservative and populist radical-right ideology. For Vlaams Belang, heavily emphasising its populist radical-right ideology might therefore prove to be a fruitful electoral strategy. New research should aim to bridge the gap between psychological or voter-oriented research on the one hand, and the analysis of political discourse on the other, by looking for discursive elements that might appeal to voters.

The political context is also likely to play a role in the electoral strategy of populist radical-right parties. Oswald et al. (2021) argue that there was a political opportunity for the German AfD to oppose climate measures by promoting radical-right ideas. Its position is both the inverse of what the Greens propose, and an attempt to distance itself from mainstream parties, such as CDU and SPD. Similarly, the French Rassemblement National criticises current president Emmanuel Macron and the broader political establishment for its environmental policies. To establish the difference with mainstream right-wing parties, the populist radical-right uses typical radical-right tropes. According to Forchtner et al. (2018), this entails combining conservative arguments and far-right ideas (collectivism, references to WWII, etc.), but the authors emphasise that in contrast to mainstream conservatives, the far-right most often uses collectivist (and thus far-right) tropes instead of individual (conservative) themes in their climate discourse. The relevant political opportunity structures as identified by Oswald et al. (2021) are also present in the period under study, which includes the Youth for Climate marches, a national and European election campaign with global warming as an important topic and a big political debate about closing nuclear power plants in Belgium. All of these events were highly topical and have drawn much media attention ever since, providing an opportunity for Vlaams Belang to show its unique position. As Vlaams Belang has to compete for votes with the conservative N-VA, it is even more important for the populist radical-right party to distinguish



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itself from its closest competitor (see also Berker & Pollex, 2021). In other words, there seems to be ample opportunity for Vlaams Belang to appeal to the attitudes of voters by emphasising its core ideological features.

Independently from the literature about PRRPs, a series of studies developed a classification system for climate sceptic statements. Rahmstorf (2004) provides the first structural attempt at distinguishing between three types of climate scepticism. *Trend sceptics* question the very existence of global warming. *Attribution sceptics* differ from trend sceptics in their belief that global temperature is indeed rising, but they do not attribute it to human behaviour and its CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. *Impact sceptics* accept the notion of anthropogenic global warming, but argue that its positive effects outweigh any negative consequences. More recently, Van Rensburg (2015) provides a more extensive classification system. Rahmstorf's typology is here fully included in one category: *evidence scepticism*. *Process scepticism* is a new category encompassing doubt about scientists and their methods, as well as about politicians, activists and organisations advocating measures to counter 'the climate hoax'. Lastly, *response scepticism* entails doubt about the efficacy of current climate policy instruments and style and what alternatives should look like. This partly overlaps with Rahmstorf's impact scepticism, as it involves uncertainty about the cost-effectiveness of mitigation policies. In their comparative study of different far-right parties in the European Parliament, Forchtner and Lubarda (2022) found that evidence scepticism is far less common in radical-right ideology, compared to process and response scepticism. Therefore, we would expect the populist radical-right party Vlaams Belang to also disregard evidence scepticism.

**Table 1** Overview of climate scepticism according to Van Rensburg (2015).

Evidence scepticism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Trend scepticism</li> <li>– Attribution scepticism</li> <li>– Impact scepticism</li> </ul>
Process scepticism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Policy decision-making process</li> <li>– Scientific knowledge generation process</li> </ul>
Response scepticism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Policy instruments</li> <li>– Policy style</li> </ul>

### 3 Data and Methods

Inductive qualitative content analysis (QCA) as described by Schreier (2012) is used for data selection, data segmentation and guidelines on building the coding framework. QCA is supplemented with elements of thematic analysis by Boyatzis (1998) in order to shed light on the big themes used by Vlaams Belang to justify its opposition against climate policy. These methods are executed using the NVivo software. Both methods partially overlap, find their roots in the same pragmatist epistemology and could reasonably be combined (see Ogresta et al., 2021).

This study makes use of press statements published online. Vlaams Belang owns a website where it has gathered press releases on topical issues for more than a decade. Party members holding a parliamentary mandate get the opportunity to express their views in online articles. As such, the party offers the reader an idea of what they stand for. In this study, every statement included on the website is treated as the view of the party as a whole. Statements made by an individual are explicitly allowed to appear on the party website, often in a modified shape, so it would be nonsensical to consider them as views solely belonging to these individuals. These statements are thus considered to reflect the party's stance regarding the topic of interest: climate policy. The articles regularly appear in an interview format (with 'the party' acting as interviewer) or as an account of the intervention of an MP in a parliamentary debate.

As customary within QCA, not all data are used in the analysis, but only those relevant to the research question (Schreier, 2012). In a preparatory phase, relevant articles on Vlaams Belang's website were collected by using the following queries: 'klimaat'; 'broeikasgas'; 'opwarming van de aarde'<sup>1</sup>; CO<sub>2</sub>; Green Deal. All articles rendered by these queries were thoroughly read to ensure there was at least one section about climate change and policies addressing it. For example, articles about energy or transport that did not explicitly refer to climate policy or climate change in general, as well as articles referring to 'the political climate' or 'the social climate' were not included in the sample. Articles about environmental issues or animal welfare without specific references to climate change were also excluded. Too often, climate policy is only treated as a subset of 'environmental politics', and not as a profoundly distinct policy area, an important distinction that was already made by Forchtner and KØlvraa (2015). When, on the other hand, an article is only partially referencing climate policy (e.g. only one paragraph in a larger article about transportation), the entire article was included. This approach yielded 57 files to be used in the analysis in the five-year period 2017-2021. This five-year period largely incorporates the period before and after the coinciding regional, national and European elections in May 2019, including both the election campaigns and the start of new governments at these three levels. Additionally, it is also the period for which the largest amount of useful information is available.

The following phase saw the segmentation of the collected data into coding units by using a thematic criterion. This means coding units can differ in size, but all of them should incorporate only one idea. Afterwards, the open coding was executed until saturation was reached at 50% of all files. The open coding phase generated many descriptive codes, labels that were meant to stay as close to the text as possible. Codes were already reused across files whenever possible to prevent duplication. After finishing the open coding, remaining duplicates were removed and codes sharing similar content were grouped under higher order interpretive codes. These second-level codes were provided with a definition, a description (when the code is found in the data), clarifying examples and decision rules on how to decide which code a coding unit belongs to (Boyatzis, 1998; Schreier, 2012). Thus, a codebook meeting the criteria of unidimensionality,<sup>2</sup> mutual exclusiveness<sup>3</sup> and exhaustiveness<sup>4</sup> was developed to allow for a second coder to code 20% of the



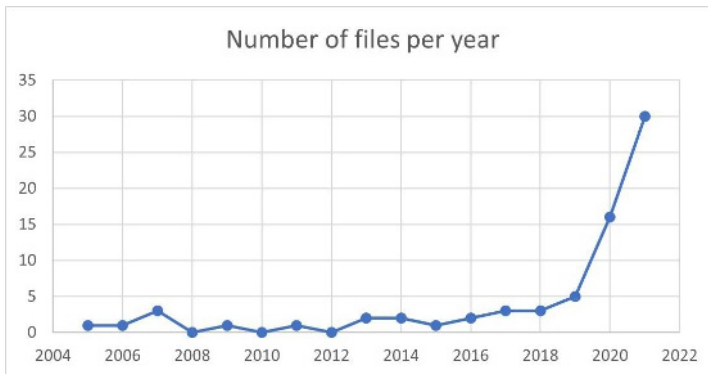
total amount of files. A more detailed discussion of the method can be found in the Appendix.

As is common in QCA and in order to increase our reliability of the analysis, I checked intercoder reliability on a subsample as a percentage agreement (Schreier, 2012). The coders discussed the units of coding that caused disagreement to reach an even higher level of agreement. Testing for intercoder agreement improves the reliability of coding decisions, as a second researcher can bring in a different interpretation to challenge possible prejudices of the principal researcher (Graneheim et al., 2017). Eventually, intercoder agreement stands at 87.05%, which is sufficiently high to obtain reliable results (Garrison et al., 2006). Afterwards, all selected data are coded according to the coding framework.

After completing the data reduction process through data coding based on QCA, the data are analysed with the implementation of thematic analysis in line with Boyatzis (1998). The goal is to elicit the main ideological dimensions present in the data. First, a quantitative translation is provided through scoring techniques (how many references can be connected to a certain theme) and clustering (showing how codes co-occur and bringing them together into a higher level construct). Using a matrix coding query, a cross-tabulation was created to show how many times each code appears in the data files. Establishing which codes co-occur within the same files allows to cluster them into third-order categories (see the codebook in the Appendix). Secondly, an interpretative discussion of these relationships will be presented. To improve the reader's understanding of the data, a clarifying verbal description of each important ideological theme will be provided through quotes. This approach allows to provide conclusive evidence for the existence of populist radical-right ideological dimensions in the climate discourse of Vlaams Belang.

#### 4 Results

Before presenting the results of this study, the nature of the collected data needs to be briefly discussed. Even though climate policy received only limited attention by Vlaams Belang before 2020-2021, since then they have published an ever increasing number of press statements and articles addressing this issue. This clearly indicates that Vlaams Belang has recently opted to pay more attention to the subject, although, admittedly, the number of online articles has increased in general. This large increase reflects a political context in which the closing of Belgium's nuclear energy plants, as well as the announcements and decisions made within the framework of the European Green Deal were hotly debated. Almost half the corpus of 57 online publications related to climate policy, dating to 2017-2021, consists of primarily energy-related (on the (sub-)national level) articles, followed by articles primarily focusing on the policies needed to meet climate targets, both on the European and the (sub-)national level (Figure 1).

**Figure 1** Evolution of climate-related articles and press statements

Harsh criticism of current climate policies is indeed ubiquitous throughout the corpus, as it can be found in all (57) selected files. Only on one occasion does Vlaams Belang explicitly support a carbon neutral future by 2050, but only in passing while actually defending nuclear energy. In just five files, it either explicitly mentions a decrease in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions as a policy goal (but only gradually and in the long term) or supports renewable technologies (but only as a minor energy source). It is clear that Vlaams Belang doubled down on its climate sceptic statements during a period when the topic of climate change was highly salient.

#### 4.1 Type of Climate Scepticism

Using Van Rensburg's (2015) climate scepticism framework to analyse the corpus shows that his first category, 'evidence scepticism', only rarely appeared in Vlaams Belang's discourse. The party doubted both human-made climate change and the impact of global warming only on one occasion, and no explicit denial of global warming was found. "*The climate does change, whatever the cause may be*" (file 1). The existence of climate change is thus not a bone of contention for Vlaams Belang, which corroborates the findings of Forchtner and Lubarda (2022) in other countries.

However, 863 coding units mention relevant actors in the climate policymaking process and 208 statements refer to problems in the political decision-making process. Given these numbers, it is remarkable that the party never criticises the scientific knowledge generation process directly when Van Rensburg's (2015) typology includes it as a part of process scepticism. Even when Vlaams Belang states that the views of ambitious climate policy proponents are hysterical, scientists and their methods are not questioned. This could be due to the fact that criticism of scientists and their methods implies distrust of scientific findings, also called evidence scepticism. Because the party does not espouse any evidence sceptic ideas in these data, it also makes sense not to delegitimise the scientists themselves. Secondly, Vlaams Belang attacked climate policy decisions because of their content (743 separate mentions of 'response scepticism'). This proves that Vlaams Belang's climate scepticism found by Gemenis et al. (2012) or by Schaller and Carius (2019)

is continued to this day. Thus, we can proceed with the analysis of the main ideological arguments Vlaams Belang uses to uphold its views in terms of process and response scepticism. The codebook can be found in the Appendix and includes a detailed definition and description of the codes, the number of files in which the codes appear and the number of coding units coded under each code.

## 4.2 Process Scepticism

### 4.2.1 Nativism/Nationalism

Not a single code could be attributed to nativism. At best, Vlaams Belang admits on a mere two occasions that they would rather discuss immigration policy than climate policy, without elaborating on that subject. The party does not link climate policy and immigration as climate refugees are not discussed, potentially because they could be seen as a reason to pursue more ambitious climate policy. Nationalism is a bit more salient, particularly because the European Green Deal is seen as a loss of national sovereignty. Supranational climate policies are believed to create a European government outside national democratic control. The following quote illustrates this idea: *“The European Green Deal is nothing short of a coup d’état ... The Commission must carry out what the Council decides, not the other way around”* (file 7).

### 4.2.2 Authoritarianism

Even though the authoritarian nature of a party or politician is often claimed, the presence of this dimension in their discourse is only seldom the subject of analysis. Nevertheless, the presence of authoritarianism in Vlaams Belang’s climate communication can be determined by applying the theoretical dimensions of authoritarianism as described by Altemeyer (1996), Mudde (2007) and Norris and Inglehart (2019): loyalty, conventionalism/conformity and aggression.

In this study, loyalty and conformity are analysed together because they both entail the submission to the climate policy narrative shared and defended by Vlaams Belang. References to political loyalty and conformity can be measured in two ways. Firstly, prompting submission to the party in its discourse is measured by the number of times Vlaams Belang refers to itself. Not only does Vlaams Belang consistently refer to itself to inform ‘the people’ about what is going on, it also claims to personally defend the population against harm: *“Vlaams Belang will fight tooth and nail”* (file 12).

Unsurprisingly, the party appeals to the reader, often implicitly, to support its cause in all files. Secondly, I, therefore, analyse the concept of loyalty to the own tribe and conformity to its norms and beliefs (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). In the context of climate policy, tribal loyalty is primarily based on political beliefs rather than on perceived membership of either ‘the people’ or ‘the elite’. This is true because Vlaams Belang positively refers 60 times to elitist international organisations such as *“the IAEA”* (file 16) or experts like *“environmental economist Johan Albrecht”* (file 30) to back up its claims. The party clearly has no problem with perceived elitist actors as long as they share the same views. Submission to the beliefs of the party and its ‘allies’ is a common thread in Vlaams Belang’s process scepticism. However, standing on their own, these utterances are not unique to the

discourse of Vlaams Belang, and they could theoretically be found in the discourse of all parties. Therefore, they only get an authoritarian meaning in combination with the verbal aggression towards the threatening other.

In no less than 120 instances, Vlaams Belang lashes out at ‘irrational and dogmatic’ climate policy proposals. *“Ideological daydreaming”* (file 2), *“the climate religion”* (file 8) or *“green fundamentalism”* (file 14) are but a few examples of terms used in its discourse. In 47 cases, specific groups are subject to its verbal aggression; those who do not submit to Vlaams Belang’s ‘realistic’ views on climate policy are considered a threat and, therefore, subjected to insults and mockery. In this way, the party delegitimises its opponents. The party accuses green politicians, activists such as the Climate Youth and those who facilitate green ideas and politics of holding irrational views. Culprits include *“leftist-activist newspapers”* (file 1), the *“green left mob”* (file 9) or *“green navel-gazers”* (file 35). Leftists are considered to be traitors; teachers and media must be ‘neutral’ and promote Vlaams Belang’s views and issues; and competitors such as the right-wing N-VA claim to be ‘tough’, but submit to the climate agenda: *“[They are] masters of opportunism and power hunger ... N-VA’s treason ... knows no limits”* (file 3).

Therefore, regardless of the adversary, Vlaams Belang will step forward as the saviour of the people, mobilising against the ‘dogmatic’ beliefs of those who, in their naivety or stupidity, pose a threat to society’s well-being. Threat in the guise of the *Jeopardy thesis* is present in all these files (see below). In no less than 40% of all files, process scepticism takes the form of authoritarianism.

In sum, the most important dimensions of authoritarianism can be found in this dataset. The prevalent themes in Vlaams Belang’s discourse clearly converge in an ‘us versus them’ dichotomy, based on political beliefs.

#### 4.2.3 Populism

A specific manifestation of the ‘us versus them’ rhetoric is described by the ideational approach to populism. In this line of thought, a moral distinction is made between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ in a society. First, Vlaams Belang indeed mentions ‘the people’ in its discourse, but in more than half of the relevant coding units (74), they only refer to ‘the people’ in socio-economic terms: *“firms and employees”* (file 27), *“motorists”* (file 9) or *“the consumer”* (file 38). They also refer to ‘the people’ as a homogenous entity 71 times: *“the average Flemish person”* (file 17), or *“the citizen”* (file 57). Homogenous or not, ‘the people’ are portrayed as the victims of climate policy, who can only be saved by Vlaams Belang itself. The party does not allow ‘the people’ to take matters into their own hands. Even though ‘the people’ are sometimes described as ‘hardworking’ (four times) or ‘down-to-earth’ (one time) and are, thus, deserving our sympathy, Vlaams Belang’s climate discourse provides no other clue as to why ‘the people’ are specifically morally virtuous.

Secondly, anti-elitism is not the main issue here, but rather the belief that ‘the others’ hold naïve or dangerous views. Or both. Only on a few occasions does the party criticise others for their elitist nature (23 times in 11 files), so it is far less common than the occurrences of authoritarian aggression discussed earlier in this

study. Furthermore, elites sharing the party's views are looked upon favourably. Anti-elitism is therefore not dominant in this party's climate discourse.

Thirdly, populism implies the current lack of the *volonté générale* as the basis for any policy (Mudde, 2017). The party does indeed claim that no democratic scrutiny or transparency is present on any of the policy levels. Furthermore, Vlaams Belang criticises the supposed undemocratic nature of climate policymaking in a third of all files (42 times).

Because populism is a multidimensional concept, all three dimensions should be present in the files at the same time. However, the threshold to accurately determine the presence of populism within these files is met just five times. While people-centrism is fairly commonly used in Vlaams Belang's climate discourse, the other components of populism are not equally represented, causing this remarkable result. Even if we were to drop the requirement that the *volonté générale* must inform climate policy (as in Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011), a 'people versus elite' dynamic is only visible in eight files, which means that the use of populism is lagging far behind the prominence of authoritarianism in the party's discourse.

#### 4.2.4 Other Themes

Even though traditional ideas about the ideology of populist radical-right parties certainly have a role to play in the realm of process scepticism, they cannot capture all themes in the data. It was already mentioned above that Vlaams Belang claims to defend the interests of a socio-economic subgroup of the population, something which cannot be coded under one of these ideological dimensions. Furthermore, Vlaams Belang most often pits itself against the government (134 times in 72% of all files), whether this is on the regional, federal or European level, reflecting a typical government-opposition dynamic. Thus, its climate policy critique is framed as a struggle between the government with its 'hypocritical' and 'pointless' policies and the 'realism' of the opposition. These statements are authoritarian nor populist because any opposition party could be sceptical about new government plans: "Sam Van Rooy, MP in the Flemish Parliament, pleads for more pressure on the federal government" (file 20).

Secondly, Vlaams Belang claims the lack of the necessary scientific support of current climate policy (e.g. through impact studies of the proposed policy measures) in 27 instances. In a quarter of the files, Vlaams Belang also argues that climate policies are mostly guesswork and generally ill-considered, and, therefore, likely do not align with the interests of the people. However, any other opposition party could, in theory, also use this theme to criticise the government.

Lastly, Vlaams Belang mentions its political competitors in 65% of all files, but not in a particularly antagonistic or aggressive way. Just like the traditional government-opposition dynamic, criticism of political opponents and their ideas is part of everyday political behaviour in a democracy. While these three themes are not of particular interest to the ideological analysis undertaken in this study, they contextualise the presence of ideological features in Vlaams Belang's climate discourse. The party does appeal to authoritarian attitudes and incorporates nationalism and populism in its discourse to a lesser degree, but these features are embedded in the everyday practices of a 'normal' opposition party.

### 4.3 Response Scepticism

#### 4.3.1 Nationalism

In 30 data files, a nationalist sentiment is found. The most salient nationalist idea in the data corpus is environmental awareness (see Forchtner & KØlvraa, 2015). The party claims to be environmentally aware in very general remarks: “*Vlaams Belang is indeed an ecological party*” (file 1) or “*Green policy must be good for the environment*” (file 38). Furthermore, nuclear energy is believed to be “*sustainable*” (file 33) and “*better for the environment*” (file 39). Vlaams Belang pays lip service to ecological issues, but fails to embed these claims in a comprehensive climate plan. Even though the party’s approach to environmentalism on the local level falls outside the scope of this article, its main view on the relationship between climate and environment is simple: focus on local pollution instead of the big and complex problem that is global warming: “*Vlaams Belang favours environmentally friendly alternatives, but it rejects the Green Deal climate hysteria and its very expensive consequences*” (file 6).

These ideas align well with traditional nationalist thought (see Forchtner & KØlvraa, 2015 for a more detailed discussion).

Secondly, energy independence and autarky are fairly common nationalist themes, also in Vlaams Belang’s climate discourse. The party conveniently connects the reduction of expensive imports to less transportation and its side effect of lower carbon emissions. By promoting the local generation of nuclear energy, the party offers an alternative to the supposedly perverse effects of current climate policy that involves too much dependence on foreign goods: “*If we only want to use renewable energy sources, we will need to import half of our energy from abroad. This crazy gamble will mortgage our future*” (file 51).

Like environmentalism, economic protectionism fits a nationalist framework well. Furthermore, the proposed climate policies potentially threaten the nation’s current way of life: “*[The European Climate Law] will negatively affect our way of life, living, working and our freedom*” (file 17).

These sociocultural concerns are, however, only a minor feature in Vlaams Belang’s climate discourse, because it appears only five times.

#### 4.3.2 Conservatism

The ideological features typically found in the discourse of populist radical-right parties are usually accompanied by conservatism. Albert Hirschman (1991) sums up three types of arguments typical for ‘reactionaries’ over the last two centuries: the *perversity thesis*, the *futility thesis* and the *jeopardy thesis*. The use of these three arguments is not restricted to contemporary radical-right actors as they appear time and again in the discourse of conservative actors (Hirschman, 1991). In this study, 557 coding units in 95% of all files fall under one of these arguments, which are, thus, the most common reason for Vlaams Belang to reject current climate policy decisions.

*The perversity thesis* claims that so-called progressive policies might be well-meaning, but will prove to be counterproductive. In the context of this study, climate policies are indeed called counterproductive by Vlaams Belang (48 coding



units). In Belgium, nuclear energy production has been a bone of contention for many years, with the radical-right supporting the continued use of this energy source (Gemenis et al., 2012). The party now links the closure of these plants with carbon dioxide reduction goals. Electricity production through nuclear fission must be continued because it emits a relatively low amount of greenhouse gases (GHGs). Vlaams Belang considers the nuclear exit by 2025 to be one of the most counterproductive decisions to effectively deal with climate mitigation. Similarly, it criticises any future investments in gas power plants, plans the Green party supported at the time. Vlaams Belang calls the decision to use gas power plants during the transition to sustainable energy production hypocritical because it emits carbon dioxides. Thus, Belgium's energy policy will result in the opposite of the intended situation: “[*Banning carbon neutral nuclear energy*] will only increase carbon emissions in our energy supply” (file 18).

Hirschman's second argument, *the futility thesis*, also frequently reoccurs in the data (45 coding units). Climate policies will yield no discernible effects. Transportation regulations are merely symbolic and miss their goal, climate goals on the European or national level will have little to no impact on the global climate, partially because the rest of the world has adopted less ambitious policies. As such, climate policy is ineffective and becomes totally and utterly pointless: “*The EU is only responsible for 9.8% of global carbon emissions so the impact of meeting emission reduction targets will be small*” (file 26).

*The jeopardy thesis*, the third ‘reactionary’ argument, refers to the claim that proposed policies endanger earlier achievements. In general terms, the party never ceases to emphasise the unrealistic character of climate policy (444 times in 93% of the files). In its discussion of the energy transition, Vlaams Belang argues that replacing current nuclear plants with gas plants or renewables will only impose unacceptable financial, economic and social costs on society, and especially on its most vulnerable part, endangering the material status of the lower and middle class. The proposed policies are a threat to the stability of the energy supply. Taxes or red tape to change people's behaviour will have dire social consequences: “*The EU is engaged in self-flagellation. The strong greenhouse gas reduction in particular will be a scourge on our economy*” (file 26). “*Those who blindly follow climate dogmas, ... will drag even more people into energy poverty*” (file 44).

In addition to these socio-economic considerations, Vlaams Belang also warns against problems on the sociocultural level. Threats to the traditional way of life are also counted as examples of the *jeopardy thesis*. Windmills might spoil traditional landscapes, whereas taxes and regulations might change people's way of life. Put differently, climate policy is at odds with prior achievements on both the socio-economic and sociocultural level.

These three reactionary arguments are typically used by (Burkean) conservatives (Hirschman, 1991), and, indeed, it is clear that there is a conservative undertone in Vlaams Belang's critique of climate policy. In Van Rensburg's scheme, the party's arguments can be categorised as ‘response scepticism’. Some nationalism can also be identified in Vlaams Belang's policy alternatives, but this ideology cannot explain all its socio-economic arguments for criticising current climate policy.

### 4.3.3 Other Themes

Similar to the results for process scepticism, some response sceptic utterances do not neatly fit into an ideological framework. Until now, I have exclusively discussed Vlaams Belang's critique on current climate policy, but they suggest alternative policy goals as well. Vlaams Belang labelled its own climate views *ecomodernist* in one file, and the party explicitly explains its meaning of the term (file 6). Instead of focusing on climate mitigation, it argues that policy (and particularly energy policy) must become more 'realistic'. According to Vlaams Belang, this entails the provision of a cheap, stable and environmentally friendly energy supply, reached by continuing and expanding the production of domestic nuclear energy, autarky and environmental awareness. As such, this theme crystallises around the belief that climate mitigation is overly ambitious and more 'down-to-earth' targets and policies are needed to ensure a cheap, stable and environmentally friendly energy supply.

The term *ecomodernism* is usually attributed a somewhat different meaning. It specifically entails a belief that technology can solve climate-related problems. Even though the number of references to climate adaptation based on technology is limited to two (file 19) and Vlaams Belang explicitly mentions technological innovation related to climate mitigation only once (file 33), nuclear power plants are treated as a silver bullet to solve all issues. By insisting on the use of *nuclear energy* 117 times in 56% of all files, this technology is by far the most emphasised policy alternative Vlaams Belang has to offer. The main benefit lies not in its role for climate mitigation, but in the promise that it will ensure a cheap and stable energy supply: "*For the moment, nuclear energy remains necessary to ensure affordable energy*" (file 29).

Nuclear power not only fits into an *ecomodernist* discourse, it is also compatible with Hirschman's conservative arguments. Nuclear energy supposedly remedies the socio-economic problems caused by climate policy (see *jeopardy thesis*). It is also linked to environmental awareness and climate policy: "*Investment in nuclear energy is sustainable!*" (file 54). However, climate mitigation is not the main objective here, signalling that it is more important for the energy supply to be cheap and stable, than to be 'clean'. Lower carbon emissions are just the happy side effect of a switch to nuclear energy production. As the industry is less carbon intensive than fossil energy production, Vlaams Belang can easily argue against the 'hypocrisy' of original plans to close all nuclear plants. Nuclear energy is the alternative to avoid the alleged *perverse effects* of current climate policy. It can be a good example of an *ecomodernist* discourse and fits perfectly in a traditional conservative framework. There is no better alternative, as other options have perverse effects or jeopardise earlier achievements.

In sum, Vlaams Belang's alternative policies are characterised by a desire to be realistic. Reducing carbon emissions can never be their main objective, and the party has no plans to actively pursue climate mitigation. Any alternative policy options must first and foremost consider the achievements jeopardised by current climate policy. Protectionism and nuclear energy production can help to reduce carbon emissions, and environmental awareness is fine, but mitigation must never be the main or only rationale for policymakers.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusion

This study analysed the dominant ideological dimensions of the climate discourse of Vlaams Belang, one of the oldest and most resilient radical-right parties in Europe. A combination of content analysis and thematic analysis shows that Vlaams Belang rejects current climate policy initiatives. The party remains silent on evidence scepticism and focuses its opposition on process and response scepticism instead. Interestingly, populism and nativism, identified in the literature as key ideological building blocks of the (climate) discourse of radical-right parties, have been found to be mostly absent in Vlaams Belang's climate discourse. Conservatism, authoritarianism and nationalism are (much) more salient. Hence, instead of populism, the radical-right host ideology is the key determinant of the climate discourse of Vlaams Belang.

With regard to populism, Vlaams Belang's anti-elitist rhetoric is much less central to the party's climate discourse than what would be expected from a populist party (Forchtner & Lubarda, 2022; Hatakka & Välimäki, 2019; Lockwood, 2018). Vlaams Belang does not systematically argue against elites, let alone because they are supposedly morally corrupt. A broader definition of populism could change this perspective, but then the concept risks being conflated with other labels, something several authors have warned against (Rooduijn, 2019; Rydgren, 2017). I also show that dropping the third requirement (*volonté générale*), something other authors have also done in the past (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011), does not change the findings. Populism is still not a dominant factor in the data, appearing only in eight files out of 57. Climate activists and leftists are 'the other' in the discourse of Vlaams Belang (see also Forchtner & Lubarda, 2022), but neither of these are necessarily part of the elite. The fact that Vlaams Belang has no problem at all with experts and other political elites who agree with their own views makes populism an even less useful category. The antagonism vis-à-vis the greens is a testament of the same logic that applies to foreigners in immigration policy debates. Immigrants are treated as 'the other', but it has been well established that this does not reflect the anti-elitist behaviour that we would expect in a populist discourse. Populism should be reserved to describe the vertical relationship between the people and the elite.

While populism is not the best way to describe Vlaams Belang's discourse, nativism, defined as the wish to live in an ethno-cultural homogenous society, is close to irrelevant. Vlaams Belang does not speak of climate refugees but focuses on the supposedly negative consequences of climate mitigation policy instead. It is not exactly clear why nativism is not present, but it could be that an emphasis on migration caused by global warming is a reason to pursue more ambitious climate goals, which would conflict with their climate sceptic stance. Nativism is well suited to understand anti-immigration or Islamophobic views, but the concept appears to travel less well to other domains (Rooduijn, 2019). These findings show that a combination of ideological features that is found in the discourse of radical-right parties in one policy domain should not automatically be expected to be salient in their discourse in another domain. With the concept of nativism being tailored to interpret radical-right anti-immigration views, it is difficult to use it in a different

policy field without risking conceptual overstretch. Populism as a concept is prone to the same problem (Rooduijn, 2019; Rydgren, 2017), and I have demonstrated that the process sceptic statements in Vlaams Belang's climate discourse could be better characterised as authoritarian rather than as populist.

While populism and nativism do not fit the bill, the radical-right host ideology is ubiquitous in the climate discourse of Vlaams Belang. Overall, conservatism is the best term to describe this populist radical-right party's engagement with climate policy. The use of Albert Hirschman's list of conservative arguments worked particularly well in this study, with the *jeopardy thesis* being the most common argument in the party's climate discourse. Scholars have made sporadic use of this work when analysing political discourse, but the present study is to our knowledge the first to do so regarding a party's climate communication. Nationalism also plays a supportive role in Vlaams Belang's criticism vis-à-vis the EU Green Deal and in its demand to respect local environmental concerns. However, while nationalism is indeed important, there is always a conservative twist to these arguments. The sovereignty of the nation is not a tool to gain better results, i.e. increased climate mitigation, but a shield to hide behind and to shirk responsibility.

Conservatism is by far the most salient aspect of its rhetoric, but Vlaams Belang is not an ordinary conservative party because of its constantly recurring authoritarianism. Interestingly, conservative argumentation, and the *jeopardy thesis* in particular, can be introduced in an authoritarian discourse. By identifying potential dangers due to ambitious climate policies, Vlaams Belang discursively creates a feeling of threat, which can help foster authoritarian attitudes (Stenner, 2005). In other words, the fact that the out-group's plans are called out as a danger to society's well-being could be read as an appeal to authoritarianism (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). The party constantly promotes itself as the defender of society against threats and it divides politically relevant actors based on political beliefs. It reflects the desire for obedience to the political leadership offered by the party, rather than to grant an active role to 'the people' itself. The combination of conservatism and authoritarianism also illuminates the punitive and antagonistic behaviour against ideological deviants. In short, the moralistic claims-making, the verbal aggression and the intolerance of (political) difference are all testament of the appeal to authoritarian values by Vlaams Belang.

The combination of conservatism with authoritarianism indicates that Vlaams Belang is able to adapt its core ideology, most well known from its anti-immigration views, to a completely different policy field. Where nativism was defined by Mudde (2007, p. 24) as an authoritarian type of nationalism, we see the combination of conservatism and authoritarianism in the context of climate policy. Vlaams Belang successfully blends the dimensions of its radical-right host ideology and adapts them to the climate policy area. Knowing that climate sceptic beliefs on the individual level have been connected to radical-right attitudes, the results of this study help to understand how citizens can be swayed by political parties like Vlaams Belang. This finding suggests that researchers must not overlook authoritarianism and conservatism in their own study of populist radical-right (climate) discourse. Radical-right parties actively try to influence those who are most wary of climate mitigation by promoting a slightly adapted core ideology that

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has been very successful in mobilising those who are concerned about immigration. It illustrates the difficulty policymakers have and will continue to have to rally citizens behind the need to support more ambitious climate policies.

This article also raises new questions. As this is a single case study, whether the combination of conservatism with authoritarianism is dominant in the discourse of other populist radical-right parties in Europe as well remains to be tested. Moreover, if radical-right parties successfully adapt their core ideology to the climate policy field, could they repeat the same trick in other policy areas as well? Researchers could hereby implement Hirschman's list of conservative arguments and give due attention to authoritarianism. Additionally, it would be interesting to know how conservative competitors behave. Does Vlaams Belang act as the only authoritarian party in the Flemish political system regarding climate policy, and more generally, is authoritarianism in climate sceptic discourse a unique feature of radical-right parties? Or does the mainstreaming of the radical-right extend to the climate policy field, implying that conservative parties also use authoritarian statements in their climate communication? Perhaps the radical and mainstream right have grown towards each other in the competition for votes. An analysis of the climate discourse of conservative parties, such as the N-VA in Belgium, could shed more light on this matter.

## Notes

- 1 These Dutch words translate to 'climate', 'greenhouse gas' and 'global warming' respectively.
- 2 Unidimensionality means that a subcategory can only belong to one main category within the codebook.
- 3 Mutual exclusiveness entails that subcategories need to be mutually exclusive in terms of their content.
- 4 Exhaustiveness refers to the idea that each coding unit must be coded to at least one subcategory.

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## Appendix

### The Coding Process

The data reduction process started with a round of open coding. I manually selected statements dealing with arguments against climate policy and gave them a label that remains close to the text. This open coding phase continued up to the point of saturation, where no new codes could be found. Afterwards, the codebook was built, providing each code with a definition, description and examples. A traditional approach in QCA to increase trust in the reliability of the analysis is to check intercoder reliability or intercoder agreement on a subsample of approximately 20% of all files, 11 files in total (Schreier, 2012). These files were selected because the open coding round showed they contained the most information for testing

the codebook (Schreier, 2012). A second coder with previous experience in qualitative content analysis was trained to use the codebook by explaining its creation and contents to her, and by letting her try out the coding on a small excerpt of text, where she could ask additional questions about the coding rules.

The coders used a thematic criterion for the segmentation of the data files so that every coding unit fits the definition of one (sub)category, something that is not possible when using some formal segmentation criterion like sentences (Schreier, 2012). Following the example of Campbell et al. (2013), the segmentation of files into coding units was not done independently but through negotiated agreement. A unit of meaning might get the same label from different coders, but if they segment the text differently, intercoder reliability would plummet, although not because the codebook is not sound. As the NVivo software offers coding comparison on the character level, coding units that differ in one letter, punctuation mark or space will negatively influence these measures even if they convey the same message. A completely independent coding done by a second coder, therefore, artificially lowers intercoder reliability levels (Garrison et al., 2006). Measures like Cohen's Kappa or Krippendorff's Alpha would be significantly lower because coders might create segments slightly differently, having no formal criterion such as punctuation to distinguish between coding units. To solve this issue, the principal investigator (PI), who is most knowledgeable regarding the topic, segments the data first. To minimise the risk of the second coder looking only at those segments that were pointed out by the PI, she checked the segmentation before the start of the actual coding (Campbell et al., 2013). The second coder checks if she agrees with his decision, and has the opportunity to suggest a different way of segmenting the text. Afterwards, the coding is done independently. A Cohen's Kappa is calculated for illustrative purposes, alongside intercoder agreement, the percentage of data the two coders agree upon.

Originally, the analysis was based on a period excluding 2021. Because of the increase in climate statements that were released by Vlaams Belang in 2021, it was decided to expand the analysis to the end of that year to update the results with the most recent data. However, this meant that intercoder agreement should be recalculated to check whether the codebook remains reliable when analysing the latest data. It is also a general rule to check intercoder agreement/reliability for 20% of all files (Schreier, 2012), illustrating the necessity of a second round of trial coding.

In the first round, the coding comparison yielded a percentage agreement of 99.37% and a Cohen's Kappa, for illustrative purposes, of 0.90. However, we must take into account that the segmentation happened through negotiated agreement, meaning that irrelevant parts of the text are a priori excluded from the coding process. Even when only those fragments that were indeed coded are considered, the percentage agreement is 83.14%, which is sufficiently high (Garrison et al., 2006, p. 6). Afterwards, any remaining discrepancies were discussed and resolved in a meeting, focusing mostly on one category ("Wrong rationale for climate policy") that consistently yielded a lower percentage agreement. In the second round however, a percentage agreement of 87.05% was reached for the coding units that were actually coded (Cohen's Kappa increased to 0.92). The results show that the

coders are even more in agreement than before, and it is clear that the codebook continues to perform well when faced with new data. No new (sub)category had to be created, and no existing (sub)category had to be changed in any significant way. Therefore, these results confirm the reliability of the codebook. In conclusion, by slightly relaxing the condition of independence, most crucially in terms of unitisation, it was possible to greatly increase the level of (negotiated) intercoder agreement which would otherwise be lost due to a technical issue. Disabling non-relevant disagreements and overcoming remaining differences increases trust in the reliability of the codebook to help interpret the views of the Vlaams Belang. The codebook is therefore ready to be applied to all data. In the context of this qualitative explorative research, it is therefore acceptable to implement a negotiated agreement approach (Belotto, 2018; Campbell et al., 2013; Garrison et al., 2006).

After finishing the second round of coding, I started the process of determining connections between themes and their respective ideological dimensions. This analysis was twofold. First, several codes could be treated as direct manifestations of a specific ideological feature. These themes were coded under their respective ideological dimension (e.g. 'loss of national sovereignty' under 'nationalism'). Second, authoritarianism and populism are multidimensional concepts, requiring the presence of multiple themes in the same file. A matrix coding query was created in NVivo where the necessary dimensions co-occurred. In the case of populism, this was sufficient to get a final score, whereas in the case of authoritarianism, the relevant coding units in these files were coded again to determine in how many files this ideology is actually present. Additionally, I was confronted with two minor issues. First, no coding units can be categorised under nativism because the party does not use this ideological feature to reject climate policy. However, I noticed that in two instances, the party claimed they would rather focus on the threat of immigration than on climate change. I chose to include these utterances under nativism, but it remains clear that the value of that concept remains negligible in this context. Second, several codes could not be attributed to a single ideological dimension, which is why I created a category called 'other (non-ideological) themes' for both process and response scepticism.

Category	Definition	Description	Examples	# of Files (% of Total)	# of Coding Units
<b>Nationalism (process)</b>	<b>Loss of national sovereignty</b>	<b>Every statement coded under 'Loss of national sovereignty'</b>		<b>5 (9%)</b>	<b>19</b>
Loss of national sovereignty	Climate policy involves a transfer of authority and sovereignty from the state to supranational bodies	Statements involving the transfer of power to the European level or complaints about international organisations imposing climate policy, thereby undermining the nation's sovereignty to choose its own policies	The Member States lose these competencies Enforce coercive measures upon the Member States. The Commission uses the Green Deal to extend its power	5 (9%)	19
<b>Authoritarianism</b>	<b>(The party OR Allies) AND Verbal aggression AND (Government OR Other political competitors) AND Jeopardy thesis</b>	<b>Statements where the party or its allies are antagonistically pitted against some 'other' under the condition of threat</b>		<b>23 (40%)</b>	<b>47</b>
The party	Vlaams Belang, its members, affiliates and activists	Statements involving the party or people working for the party	Vlaams Belang, our MEP The chairman of the party	57 (100%)	338
Allies	Elitist actors who share the views of the party	Statements involving the name of a category of people, usually experts, who allegedly support the party's views	The extended use of nuclear plants is supported by prof. Van Ypersele. The IEIA agrees with Vlaams Belang	19 (33%)	60
Verbal aggression	Insults and slurs based on political beliefs	Statements claiming someone has dogmatic or irrational views, or is unwilling to accept other positions, or is accused of political correctness	Green messianism Climate religion Dogmatism, political correctness Madness; Megalomania	40 (70%)	120

(Continued)

Category	Definition	Description	Examples	# of Files (% of Total)	# of Coding Units
The other	Government and other political actors attacked	Antagonistic references to specific political actors	The Green mob The traitors	23 (40%)	47
<b>Populism (full)</b>	<b>People-centrism AND Anti-elitism AND Volonté Générale</b>	<b>Files where people-centrism, anti-elitism and Volonté Générale co-occur</b>		<b>5 (9%)</b>	
<b>Populism (short)</b>	<b>People-centrism AND Anti-elitism</b>	<b>Files where people-centrism and anti-elitism co-occur</b>		<b>8 (14%)</b>	
People-centrism	The people as one and indivisible bloc	(Positive) references to the people, without making a distinction between types of people. References to the common man	The Vlaming, the citizens The (ordinary) people The hardworking common man	33(58%)	71
Anti-elitism	Anti-establishment and elitist feelings	Statements involving negative views the political, economic or social elite because of their elitism, their moral corruption or for being out of touch with the common man. Politicians as a self-serving class. Extreme lobbying favouring special interests	The European elite Unfair political appointments to well-paying jobs	11 (19%)	23



(Continued)

Category	Definition	Description	Examples	# of Files (% of Total)	# of Coding Units
Volonté Générale	The democratic quality of the decision-making process for climate policy must be upheld	Statements denouncing the undemocratic manner in which decisions are taken; calls for a more inclusive policymaking process; calls for climate policy to reflect popular demand	Supported by the Flemish people A fair debate	19 (33%)	42
<b>Other themes</b>					
People in socio-economic terms	A subset of the people with reference to social or economic class or position	References to an explicit group of people that does not include everyone, or references that specify the socio-economic status of the persons involved	Firms; the poor; employers; employees; drivers; singles; families	28 (49%)	74
The government	Government and public institutions	Governmental bodies on all polity levels	The government, the European Commission, the energy minister	47 (72%)	134
Scientific backing for policy measures	No scientifically proven reason exists to justify climate policy	Statements claiming science has not found anything prompting the need for climate policy	That is unscientific Responsible policy taking into account all scientific variables	14 (25%)	27
Other political competitors	Political actors	All other political actors and parties	Groen, the greens, N-VA, the liberals, socialists	37 (65%)	116
<b>Nationalism (response)</b>	<b>Loss of way of life OR Environmental awareness OR Autarky</b>	<b>Every statement coded under 'Loss of way of life' or 'Environmental awareness' or 'Autarky'</b>		<b>28 (49%)</b>	<b>65</b>

(Continued)

Category	Definition	Description	Examples	# of Files (% of Total)	# of Coding Units
Environmental awareness	The environment is deemed important	Statements claiming the party values the environment and its conservation	Vlaams Belang an ecological party. We are environmentally friendly	20 (35%)	38
Autarky	The country needs to be self-sufficient (economically and in terms of energy)	Statements defending protectionism and denouncing import of energy or other resources. Socio-economic competition and promoting investment in own national R&D	Energy importation Reducing our dependence on the import of foreign energy	13 (23%)	22
Loss of way of life	Climate policy has negative effects on how people live and on traditions	Statements about how climate policy hinders 'normal' activities enjoyed by many people	Vlaams Belang will never accept that the European Climate Law will alter our way of life	4 (7%)	5
<b>Conservatism</b>	<b>Perversity thesis OR Futility thesis OR Jeopardy thesis</b>	<b>Every statement coded under 'Perversity thesis' or 'Futility thesis' or 'Jeopardy thesis'</b>		<b>54 (95%)</b>	<b>557</b>
Perversity thesis	Investments in fossil fuels OR Counterproductive	Every statement coded under 'Investment in fossil fuels' or 'Counterproductive'		18 (32%)	68
Counterproductive	Current climate policies are counterproductive	Statements where it is argued that policies are hypocritical or are likely to cause the opposite of what was intended	Renewable energy is not that green Going against the carbon targets	18 (32%)	48

*(Continued)*

Category	Definition	Description	Examples	# of Files (% of Total)	# of Coding Units
Investments in fossil fuels	Engagement in fossil fuels with a negative impact on the climate	Statements involving the denouncement of gas or other fossil fuels as a part of climate policy for being counterproductive	Extra emissions caused by gas plants, big investment in fossil fuels in Brazil is hypocritical	12 (21%)	20
<i>Futility thesis</i>	<i>Ineffective</i>	<i>Every statement coded under 'Ineffective'</i>		16 (28%)	45
Ineffective	Current climate policies are unfit to ensure adequate climate mitigation	Statements where policy measures or even policy targets are deemed ineffective, including statements saying a policy has adverse effects on the global climate	The EU is only responsible for 9.8% of global carbon emissions, so the impact of such a reduction will be meagre As if the global climate will change because of what happens in Flanders	16 (28%)	45
<i>Jeopardy thesis</i>	<i>Energy supply OR socio-economic costs OR unrealistic climate goals OR red tape</i>	<i>Every statement coded under energy supply or socio-economic costs or unrealistic climate goals or red tape</i>		53 (93%)	444
Unrealistic climate goals	Reaching climate policy goals and implementing climate mitigation measures is unfeasible	Statements where climate policy goals or aspects to reach the targets are deemed unfeasible, too ambitious and fantastical. Either they cannot be met, or only at great cost	Can the climate goals be met? Recklessness Too ambitious goals	26 (46%)	61

(Continued)

Category	Definition	Description	Examples	# of Files (% of Total)	# of Coding Units
Socio-economic costs	Financial costs, welfare loss and social consequences related to climate policy	Statements denouncing the material, financial or economic costs and social consequences caused by climate policy. This includes taxation and transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich	Energy must be affordable How much will this climate policy cost? A Green Deal of 1 billion euros. Employers go broke A socio-economic bloodbath	51 (89%)	280
Energy supply	Energy policy should focus on stable energy supply	Statements stressing the value of a stable energy supply and denouncing the negative effects climate policy has on the matter	Energy stability Windmills are instable energy sources. A guarantee for our energy supply	27 (47%)	68
Red tape	Climate policy renders many rules, obligations and paperwork that must be dealt with	Statements arguing that climate policy leads to many rules and administrative work	Overregulation Too many rules	8 (14%)	35
<b>Other themes</b>					
Ecomodernism	Statements claiming to be ecomodernist	Passages pleading for an 'ecomodernist' alternative	Instead we need an ecomodernist policy	1 (2%)	2

*(Continued)*

Category	Definition	Description	Examples	# of Files (% of Total)	# of Coding Units
Climate adaptation	Moderating the potential damages or to benefit from opportunities associated with climate change	Statements addressing the possibility and potential for adopting measures or technologies that will diminish the impact of climate change	Adapt to changing climatological circumstances Building dykes in case of raising sea levels	1 (2%)	2
Climate policy based on nuclear energy	Nuclear energy is the best way of reducing carbon emissions	Statements promoting nuclear energy as the basis of any climate policy intent to reduce greenhouse gas emissions	We need carbon neutral nuclear energy	32 (56%)	117