



ECPS
EUROPEAN CENTER for
POPULISM STUDIES

ECPS-CASE COMPETITION

Populism and Climate Change:
COP30 Negotiations



Image: Rafa Neddermeyer / COP30 Brasil

ABOUT

Case competitions are a type of event in which teams of students or professionals compete against each other to develop and pitch solutions to a business, public affairs, political, or international relations problem. Teams are given a limited amount of time to research, analyze, develop, and pitch their solutions.

Real-world Problems

Case competitions are based on contemporary and relevant real-world problems that challenge participants to analyze and find innovative solutions.

Teamwork

Participants are divided into teams to work together on solving the case, allowing them to enhance their teamwork skills.

Expert Assessment

The proposals for the case competition will be evaluated by a panel of distinguished scholars and experts in the field based on a set of criteria such as creativity, feasibility, and presentation skills.

SAVE THE DATE!
7 - 11 July 2025

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OUR MAIN GOALS

Our main goal in carrying out a case competition in the field of political science and international relations is to provide a platform for students and professionals to showcase their analytical and problem-solving skills while addressing real-world issues relevant to the field. The competition will force participants to think critically and creatively as they research and develop solutions to a complex political or international relations problem.

The case competition will serve as a valuable learning experience for participants, helping them develop critical skills in high demand in today's fast-paced and ever-changing landscape. By contributing to the competition, participants will gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of global and European politics and international relations. They will be better prepared for their future careers. Participants will be able to apply their knowledge and skills in a competitive setting and will be evaluated by a panel of experts in the field.



**To Develop and Improve
Participants' Analytical and
Problem-solving Skills**



**To Boost Participants'
Professional Networks**

PRACTICALITIES

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- **Understanding the case:** You should fully understand the case, including the background, key stakeholders, and any constraints that may affect the proposed solution.
- **Using your analytical & problem-solving skills:** You will need to put into action your theoretical knowledge to develop creative and feasible solutions to address a complex real-life problem.
- **Presenting a feasible solution:** You should aim to present policy options/recommendations/solutions that are creative, feasible, and practical.
- **Maximising your time management:** Participants should manage their time effectively and prioritise their tasks.
- **Teamwork:** Working as a team is critical to success; you should work efficiently together to achieve the best results.
- **Learning and Development:** Come with an open mind and a willingness to learn new ideas and perspectives to deepen your understanding of the subject matter.

AGENDA OF THE WEEK

07.07.2025 Monday	Introduction to the Case Competition and Delivery of Case Instructions and Questions
08.07.2025 Tuesday	Definition of the key issues and how to deal with them. Task Distribution among the group members
09.07.2025 Wednesday	Collection of all information and data to structure the final proposal
10.07.2025 Thursday	Analysis of the gatherings and development of the solution.
11.07.2025 Friday	Performance of the Pitches. Assessment and Announcement of the Winners. Closing Remarks by the ECPS

ESSENTIAL MATERIALS

Remember to bring a **laptop** or **tablet** (participants will use their own devices to work on the case, access resources, and present their solutions), and **presentation materials**, such as slides and an active account in Google Drive

PRESENTATION FORMAT

Each team will have 4 minutes to present their ideas and proposals. Presentations must be created using provided Power Point template and will be reflected on the shared screen during the final session. ECPS staff will provide a brief training on effective pitching strategies, drawn from well-established approaches used in international case competitions. You are free to incorporate these techniques in your presentations

MOVING FORWARD

On the first day of the Summer School, ECPS will provide you with an information pack that includes documents and sources that outline the case and its context. This collection of articles will act as the basis of your research towards a policy solution.

CASE COMPETITION SCENARIO

What is the case?

In this case competition, students will act as advisors to governments participating in the COP30 Conference in November. The groups are expected to choose a specific country and act as advisors. Students will create a strategy to formulate feasible climate policies and negotiate an agreement among member states.

The groups will select a specific policy area that will arise at COP30. These may include (but are not limited to) mitigation, climate finance, loss and damage, and/or technological innovation. In formulating their pitch, groups must consider how their proposed policy might face pressures from populist forces domestically and from populist governments at the conference itself. Groups should conduct detailed research (the minimum requirement is to benefit from at least 15 resources) and suggest concrete, relevant, and applicable policies. Proposed policies should be detailed as comprehensively as possible. Proposals should address implementation, potential political constraints, and short- and long-term impacts.

Who are you?

- You are national delegates negotiating on behalf of a country (e.g., the EU, Brazil, or China).
- You are members of a negotiating bloc working to amplify your shared interests (e.g., Group of 77 and China, Least Developed Countries, Umbrella Group).
- You are representatives of the COP Presidency and Host Country guiding the negotiation process (e.g., the COP President from the host country setting priorities and mediating discussions).
- You are representatives of international organizations and UN agencies (e.g., UNEP, UNDP, World Bank, Green Climate Fund).
- You are scientific advisors providing research-based input to guide decision-making (e.g., national climate scientists, think tanks, or university-based research teams).
- You are observers from civil society aiming to shape the outcome of the COP. (e.g., NGOs, Indigenous organizations, and youth movements).

Your proposal must:

Address domestic concerns, including the views of political parties, voters, and economic sectors that may be skeptical of international climate action. You must also assess the strength of populist parties and their ability to take advantage of domestic discontent.

Prepare for interactions with other governments, including those led by populist leaders who may oppose strong climate commitments or challenge international cooperation.

Recommend a policy that is politically realistic, diplomatically credible, and aligned with both your country's overall climate targets and the overarching goals of the UNFCCC. Your final proposal should make the case for why your government should take this position and how it can defend and promote it during COP30.

Guidelines for Research

- Try to grasp the general picture of climate policy and see how your chosen issue is situated in it.
- Assess how your policy may be received domestically and by other governments at the conference (e.g. the US, China, Brazil, etc.)
- Demonstrate how your proposal benefits your domestic constituents and the other countries involved in negotiations
- Explain how your policy advances global climate policy objectives
- Explain why your proposal is needed and how it improves on past efforts
- Indicate your resources at the end of the presentation.

THE TOPIC

Climate Change and Multilateral Institutions: How to Balance Global and National Interests in the Populist Era

This literature review will examine the role of multilateral institutions in addressing climate change, with a focus on the structure of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and how populist politics influence negotiations at the Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings.

The Role of Multilateral Institutions

National carbon emissions carry negative externalities, affecting people across international borders. However, states have no incentive to address environmental degradation that occurs outside their borders (Strange, 1999). Some goods cannot be provided by nation-states alone, requiring the intervention of multilateral institutions. These are known as global public goods (Kaul et al., 2003). As states have no incentive to address the effects of rising emissions beyond their own borders, climate change prevention and mitigation thus become a global public good that must be provided by multilateral institutions (Grantham Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, 2023). The United Nations has attempted to fill this void through its Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its associated annual Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings.

While case competitions are widely used and popular in consulting, finance, and risk management, we firmly believe they can be effective tools for putting theory into practice in the fields of political science and international relations. Thus, ECPS has decided to launch the ECPS Case Competition Series, which will focus on different topics in the field of populism studies.

Our research has highlighted the numerous potential benefits of designing and hosting a case competition in this field, and we are confident that this series will be a valuable experience for all involved.

UN Climate Change Conferences (COPs): Evolution, Negotiations, and Conflicts

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is built upon five main pillars: mitigation, adaptation, finance, technology, and capacity development. Since its establishment in 1992, UNFCCC has evolved from a narrow focus on mitigation to a comprehensive framework built upon these pillars. Beyond these main areas, the climate regime has expanded to encompass other prominent issues, including loss and damage, fair transition, gender, indigenous peoples, youth, agriculture, and oceans, reflecting an increasingly comprehensive understanding of climate change's multifaceted impacts. However, all the elements mentioned are important precisely because they serve as supporting and enabling factors for the effective implementation of mitigation and adaptation. In other words, technology, capacity building, and finance are prerequisites for mitigation and adaptation, and must be considered in any climate change policy.

Learn more about populism on the website of ECPS:



Mitigation: The Starting Point and Continuing Core

Mitigation—the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and enhancing sinks (e.g., increasing the area of forests)—was the UNFCCC’s original focal point. The mitigation programs aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by promoting cleaner activities and discouraging those with high emissions. They include all sectors—such as energy, transport, buildings, industry, agriculture, forestry, land use, and waste—and include policies, incentives, and investments. Mitigation actions range from adopting renewable energy and new technologies (like electric vehicles) to behavioural changes (e.g., reduced driving or dietary shifts), expanding carbon sinks like forests (UNFCCC, 2020a).

However, mitigation policies have expanded significantly, moving from isolated initiatives in the 1990s to widespread implementation across regions and sectors since the mid-2000s. At the international level, key frameworks such as the Kyoto Protocol (1997) and the Paris Agreement (2015) have encouraged national and subnational action. The Kyoto Protocol (1997) established this focus by setting binding targets for Quantified Emission Limitation and Reduction Obligations (QELROs) for industrialised countries, using a strict Annex-based system. The Kyoto Protocol created legally binding commitments for 37 developed nations and transitioning economies, aiming for a total 5% reduction in emissions from 2008 to 2012 (UNFCCC, 1997). One of the main roots of the challenges between North–South tensions was formed in this period. Developing countries had no binding obligations under the Kyoto Protocol. Major polluters, such as the United States, later rejected the agreement. They cited economic disadvantages and the absence of commitments from emerging economies (Kuyper et al., 2018). Several studies have highlighted the widespread use of Business As Usual (BAU) targets in national climate pledges, especially among developing countries (Naiborhu et al., 2024; Wright & Nyberg, 2017). BAU targets commit to reducing emissions below projected future levels without new policies, offering flexibility. Tobin et al. (2018) found that over half of the INDCs (Intended Nationally Determined Contributions) submitted ahead of the Paris Agreement used BAU-based targets, which can be difficult to compare and sometimes allow emissions to increase, raising concerns about transparency and global progress tracking.

The United States' withdrawal from Kyoto posed a threat to global trust in the fairness and viability of the agreement and revealed a deep divide between the U.S. and Europe and Japan as they continued with ratification. However, multiple studies confirm that the Kyoto Protocol significantly reduced greenhouse gas emissions among participating industrialised countries by 7-14 per cent compared to scenarios without Kyoto (Hoppe et al., 2023; Maamoun, 2019). Yet, the Paris Agreement (2015) marked a turning point by shifting to a global ambition model through Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Signed by 195 parties, countries aim to keep warming "well below 2°C" and pursue efforts to reach 1.5°C. This was the first time all countries, including large emerging economies, had binding obligations to address climate change (UNFCCC, 2025d). This marks a shift from the "Quantified Emission Limitation or Reduction Objectives" (QELROs) of the Kyoto Protocol. A key feature of the Paris Agreement is that NDCs are climate target pledges each country submits based on its own situation. All nations, regardless of their level of development, now establish their own targets, and they are expected to raise their ambitions over time through regular global reviews. (Tobin et al., 2018) This agreement shifts from the Kyoto Protocol's top-down structure to a hybrid outcome that requires voluntary contributions from all countries. Also, it broadens the focus from solely mitigation to a triple goal comprising mitigation, adaptation, and finance (Kuyper et al., 2018).

A major category of mitigation policies over the last three decades has been carbon pricing targeting greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. These policies include over 70 initiatives by 2022, such as carbon taxes and emissions trading systems (ETS), which cover around a quarter of global GHG emissions.

Although all countries share a common goal of reducing emissions, their differing circumstances allow each to adopt specific policies tailored to its unique position. However, this flexibility also brings about certain challenges, particularly in ensuring fairness, maintaining ambition, and coordinating efforts at the global level. The European Union Emissions Trading System (EU ETS) remains the largest and oldest scheme of its kind. However, one of the primary challenges in global carbon pricing policy is the free-rider problem. Early adopters of carbon pricing bear the costs of reducing emissions, while countries that do not participate benefit without making any contributions. Creutzig (2019) suggests that forming a "climate club"—a coalition of countries implementing coordinated mitigation policies and enforcing trade penalties on non-members—would stabilise cooperation and lead to greater global emission reductions. The EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) is an example of such a policy; it places a carbon price on imports from countries that do not have equivalent climate policies, essentially acting as a trade penalty for non-members. While EU policies are seen as a key reform to reduce welfare costs and simplify policy design, the CBAM could also prevent carbon leakage. However, it may harm developing economies unless supported by exemptions or financial aid (Magacho et al., 2024; Parry, 2020). Moreover, price-based reforms like carbon taxes can stabilise markets but may unevenly impact EU member states, especially newer ones (Brink et al., 2016). A policy that even led Qatar to threaten to cut gas supplies to the European Union if the CBAM policy were implemented.

Beyond carbon pricing, mitigation policies have focused on important sectors using a mix of regulations and incentives. In energy and industry, governments have supported renewables and efficiency with subsidies, standards, and audits. Buildings have undergone numerous energy-saving regulations and retrofit programs. Meanwhile, the transport sector has implemented fuel standards, incentives for electric vehicles, and investments in sustainable mobility infrastructure such as public transit and cycling networks.

A comparative policy review by Fekete et al. (2021) reveals that, while global climate mitigation policies have gained traction, they still vary significantly in terms of ambition, implementation, and scope. The EU and Norway consistently lead with strict rules and vehicle electrification. In contrast, China focuses on large-scale renewable energy and reducing industrial energy use, which has led to significant cuts in emissions. India and Vietnam are making headway in solar energy and efficiency measures, but they fall short on deep structural reforms. The US presents a mixed picture, with state-level goals differing from uneven federal actions. Although there has been significant success in some areas, like forestry in Brazil and transport in the Netherlands, many economies continue to struggle in the industrial and building sectors (ClimateActionTracker, n.d.). Literature also highlights a gap in policy integration and implementation capacity, especially in emerging economies (Fekete et al., 2021). Overall, while global policy diffusion is evident, achieving Paris-aligned goals requires more transformative, cross-sectoral approaches. This issue also highlights the need for other climate policy frameworks and the necessity of paying attention to them in order to have a successful mitigation program.

Adaptation: From Peripheral Concern to Strategic Priority

According to the official definition provided by the UNFCCC, adaptation refers to the adjustments made in a country's economic, social, and ecological systems to cope with the impacts and consequences of climate change. These may include not only threats and damages but also emerging opportunities (UNFCCC, 2025a), particularly in vulnerable regions and less developed regions like Africa (Smith & Lenhart, 1996). While mitigation plans require mass global efforts, the Least Developed Countries Expert Group suggested formulating and implementing national adaptation plans (NAPs) in order to help developing countries reduce vulnerability and facilitate adaptation regarding future threats (UNFCCC, 2020b). With negotiations on the Paris Agreement, adaptation was elevated to equal status with mitigation (Article 2), mandating efforts to enhance resilience, reduce vulnerability, and build adaptive capacity (UNFCCC, 2025d). The IPCC (2001) views adaptation as dependent on the coordination of key elements, such as economic resources, technology, information, skills, infrastructure, institutions, and equity.

However, as attention to adaptation has increased among countries with the Paris agreement, the challenges of its successful implementation have also come into focus. Implementing adaptation policies is particularly significant because it requires long-term investment, strategic policymaking, and coordination across various decision-making bodies at local, national, and global levels (Dovers & Hezri, 2010; Howden et al., 2007). Numerous studies on adaptation plans within National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) indicate that their limited effectiveness often stems from a failure to engage multiple sectors and stakeholders, suggesting the need for a multi-departmental task force and inclusivity among diverse stakeholders to address the lack of coordination and participation.

Moreover, effective climate change adaptation is complicated by uncertainty about future climate conditions, their local impacts, and how ecosystems and societies will respond to these changes. Socio-economic inertia—especially in sectors with long-lived infrastructure—slows the pace of change and increases the risk of maladaptation (Pittock, 2011). In some cases, marginal adjustments become insufficient or too costly. This situation requires major changes, such as altering land use patterns or relocating communities, and can create serious social and economic challenges. All these factors and elements have contributed to the growing complexity of adaptation policy plans and the various dimensions that must be considered from strategy through to implementation.

Finance: The Engine of Climate Action

Today, significant economic and technological disparities exist between developed and developing countries. Developed nations produce a large portion of emissions, while developing countries feel the effects more heavily than others. Because of this, it is more important than ever for developed countries to support developing ones through climate finance. Climate finance is defined by the UNFCCC as “local, national, or transnational financing—drawn from public, private, and alternative sources of financing—that seeks to support mitigation and adaptation actions that will address climate change.” (UNFCCC, 2025c). Although COP negotiations have steadily aimed to build consensus on adaptation and mitigation, climate finance has remained a highly contentious issue. The idea of allocating \$100 billion annually to developing countries by 2020 was first proposed at COP15 in Marrakech (2009), but only gained formal approval six years later at COP21 in Paris (2015), marking a major milestone in COP history.

Nevertheless, finance remains a persistent concern with multiple dimensions. Climate finance brings together public support and market tools to fund climate action. Governments and development banks offer aid, loans, and guarantees (Bhandary et al., 2021). Meanwhile, tools like green bonds and carbon markets help to attract private investment (Bracking & Leffel, 2021). These initiatives benefit from policy incentives, such as tax credits and feed-in tariffs, to lower risks and promote clean technologies.

However, due to the absence of a universally agreed-upon definition of climate finance, many developed countries report market-rate loans, export credits, and only loosely related aid as climate finance. While the Paris Agreement reaffirmed the political target, it did not impose binding numerical obligations on individual countries. By 2020, only \$83 billion had been mobilised by developed countries—of which 60% was directed toward mitigation projects—prompting concern and criticism from developing nations (OECD, 2024). Although much of this funding has been allocated to Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs), a significant portion has been provided in the form of loans, raising serious concerns about increasing debt burdens for these vulnerable countries (Oxfam, 2023), inducing harmful effects for recipients with economic risks (Zhao et al., 2022), Dutch disease, rent-seeking, and corruption (Jakob et al., 2015), and reproducing relations of dependency (Ciplet et al., 2022).

Another aspect of the issue is that, due to the high costs of climate action and the UNFCCC's call for broad participation, many governments now seek to involve the private sector to bridge financing gaps. While on the one hand it is believed private sector catalyze investment in mitigation plans (Michaelowa et al., 2021), Bracking and Leffel (2021) argue that climate finance governance is increasingly shaped by a neoliberal, market-oriented approach, relying on tools like blended finance and green bonds that prioritize investor interests. The rise of non-state and sub-state actors is a step towards polycentric governance that has the effect of transferring power and responsibility to the financial markets. This pattern, especially in the Global South, deepens inequity, raising concerns over transparency, legitimacy, and the erosion of public welfare goals.

However, Bhandary et al. (2021) argue that every financing policy has its own strengths and weaknesses, and its effectiveness depends on the criteria applied and the specific context in which it is implemented. For example, mechanisms such as tax incentives and national development banks have proven to be successful in attracting private investment, unlike green bonds. In summary, climate finance is a complex and multifaceted field that involves various tools and faces challenges influenced by economic and political factors. Success relies on clear definitions, appropriate roles for the public and private sectors, and directing support to vulnerable countries while acknowledging their limitations.

Technology and Capacity-Building: Innovation, Transfer, and Enabling Climate Action

Technology and capacity building can be seen as the two operational pillars of climate policy implementation. Achieving climate objectives requires governments to invest in technologies and create incentives for various sectors to engage in research and development of climate-related solutions. Within the UNFCCC framework, climate technologies are categorised into three main areas: mitigation, adaptation, and enabling technologies. Mitigation technologies aim to reduce emissions, such as renewables, energy efficiency, and low-carbon transport. Adaptation technologies improve resilience, including climate-smart agriculture and water management. Enabling technologies, like ICT and climate forecasting tools, support both goals by helping to monitor, report, and evaluate policies and climate change.

The issue of technology is particularly important because the financial and scientific prerequisites it demands often exclude countries in the Global South from accessing it. Therefore, technology transfer serves as a major incentive for developing nations to participate in climate negotiations, offering both economic and social benefits (Sjöstedt & Penetrante, 2013). However, while the distribution of innovation is highly concentrated in countries such as Japan, Germany, and the United States (Dechezleprêtre et al., 2011) in the global North, developing countries follow diverse approaches to climate technology, balancing climate goals with industrial and developmental needs. To address this, institutional frameworks like the UNFCCC's Technology Mechanism and Technology Executive Committee support the development and dissemination of low-carbon solutions (Sjöstedt & Penetrante, 2013).

While in some cases, collaboration with developed countries like the U.S. and Germany boosts Newly Industrializing Countries (NICs) innovation in climate mitigation technologies, highlighting the importance of international cooperation (Herman, 2022). Case studies from South Africa, China, and India demonstrate that building local technological capabilities, rather than relying solely on imports, is also a sound approach to addressing technological dependency. Urban (2018) highlights China's transition from a technology follower to a key player in low-carbon innovation, especially in solar, hydropower, and wind energy. Once reliant on North-South technology transfer, China now actively engages in South-South and even South-North cooperation. Its success varies by sector—solar is shaped by export markets and strong domestic innovation, hydropower by longstanding state investment, and wind by industrial policy and joint ventures—reflecting the need for complex and multi-layered policymaking in terms of needs, capacities, and capabilities.

Beyond technology, the concept of capacity building serves as the key link between all climate elements as both Article 6 of the Convention and Article 10(e) of the Kyoto Protocol emphasize enhancing knowledge, skills, and institutional resources—through training, tools, and guidelines—to help countries effectively implement climate policies across areas like adaptation, mitigation, finance, and education (UNFCCC, 2025b). Moreover, the importance of capacity building lies in its ability to coordinate diverse stakeholders and foster inclusive climate policies, enhancing effective implementation, even though it has so far remained disparate and underfunded within the UNFCCC framework (Nautiyal & Klinsky, 2022). In response, the Paris Framework proposes shifting the core of capacity building to universities in developing countries, given their institutional longevity and ability to generate and disseminate knowledge.

Yet, most climate-related capacity development is concentrated among a few top donors—mainly Germany, the EU, and France—and primarily targets middle-income countries, while low-income nations and SIDS remain underfunded (OECD). According to Khan et al. (2018), despite substantial funding from global donors since 2001, past climate capacity-building efforts have largely been ineffective due to poor coordination, short-term programs, and minimal private sector involvement. To enhance climate-related capacity development, donors should focus on flexible and coordinated support that empowers local stakeholders. Building partnerships, promoting South-South cooperation, using digital tools, and strengthening climate data and monitoring are also key for effective capacity development (Casado Asensio et al., 2022).

The Role of Populism in Negotiations

Multilateral negotiations require states to negotiate on two levels: within their own domestic polities and with other states (Putnam, 1988). States must achieve results that satisfy both their domestic constituents and the states with which they negotiate. States may face conflicting domestic demands that could stall negotiations; meanwhile, points of agreement between states could prove unpopular domestically. Decisions made at the international level can then influence domestic politics (Gourevitch, 1978). With respect to climate change, states face pressure to come up with solutions that are internationally effective and domestically enforceable (Bechtel, Genovese and Scheve, 2019). These efforts can be complicated by the presence of populists at the domestic and international levels. At COP negotiations, then, states will have to consider their own domestic demands, as well as demands from other governments. The presence of domestic populism, as well as the presence of states with populist governments, may complicate the negotiation process.

Negotiations and Domestic Populism

Negotiators will have to address the role of domestic politics in influencing the outcome of multilateral negotiations. Domestic populists may view the results of negotiations as lacking democratic legitimacy. Supranational governance can suffer from a “democratic deficit,” as policymakers could be unelected technocrats presiding over opaque policymaking projects. These policymakers may act without accountability or popular input (Moravcsik, 2004). Populists can then use deficits in democratic representation to politicise the negotiation process. Using the ‘minimal’ definition of populism as a thin-centred ideology that pits ordinary people against corrupt elites (e.g. Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), populists can frame negotiations like the COP as examples of unaccountable elites negotiating with each other at the expense of the general public. Further, Nordensvard and Ketola (2022) argue that charismatic “truth-tellers” can use their platforms to sell this story of multilateral negotiation to the public, using the examples of Greta Thunberg (on the populist left) and Donald Trump (on the populist right). These “truth-tellers” could tell a particular story about climate action, with the power to move their large followers to pressure their governments into adopting their preferred positions. The attitudes of populist individuals and groups towards climate action are important factors in understanding how domestic populism can influence climate negotiations. Huber (2020, pp. 960-961) ‘argue[s] that individuals who exhibit strong populist attitudes feel under-represented in both climate and environmental politics.’ For example, voters on the populist right believe that climate action is part of a ‘cosmopolitan elite agenda’ that excludes them, undermining the popular will in favour of unaccountable climate scientists (Lockwood, 2018). This presents a constraint for states with strong right-wing populist movements. Supporters of these movements may view any concessions made at the negotiating table as violations of national sovereignty.

Meanwhile, left-wing populist parties like La France Insoumise (France Unbowed) construct the elite as an economic “oligarchy” that extracts profit from the people at the expense of the environment (Chazel & Dain, 2023) and place extensive pressure on governments to undertake large-scale climate action (Huber et al., 2021). Left-wing populist movements may then interpret any compromises made in negotiations as concessions to corporate power. As a result, states with strong right-wing populist movements may face domestic pressure to pursue weaker climate targets, while states with strong left-wing populist movements may face domestic pressure to pursue the opposite. States with strong populist movements on both sides, such as France, may face domestic cross-pressure, resulting in a muddled negotiating strategy.

Negotiations and International Populism

Populism in international relations can be defined by tensions between 'national sovereignty, popular authority and an established system of institutional and representational mechanisms and its elite members' (Löfflmann, 2022, pp. 406-407). This can take varying forms depending on the ideological orientation of the populists in power. Right-wing populists seek to assert national sovereignty against the constraints imposed by the institutional commitments that define the liberal international order (LIO) (Chrysosgelos, 2017; Kallis, 2018). States with right-wing populist governments demonstrate their hostility to the LIO by manipulating international environmental agreements to their benefit. They portray agreements as an elitist attempt to harm ordinary people, using these efforts to secure concessions designed to maximise domestic autonomy (Huynh, 2025). If they cannot secure concessions, they may withdraw from the agreement entirely, as Donald Trump has twice done with the Paris Agreement negotiated at COP21.

Meanwhile, left-wing populists are often strongly internationalist (Huber et al., 2021) but oppose the American-led LIO (Destradi & Vüllers, 2024). As left-wing populist governments argue for stronger international action on climate change, they may seek to form coalitions with like-minded states and/or with states from the Global South (such as the BRICS) to pose a credible alternative to American hegemony (Marquardt & Lederer, 2022). At the COP negotiations, this could result in an aligned bloc of Global South nations demanding concessions from the Global North, posing a complication to a coherent resolution.

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