

ARTICLE

# Climate Change: Bad News for Populism? How the *Rassemblement National* Used COVID-19 to Promote Its Environmental Agenda

Lluís de Nadal 

Glasgow University, Scotland, UK  
Email: lluis.denadal@glasgow.ac.uk

## Abstract

This article uses the French *Rassemblement National* (RN) as a case study to examine how the populist radical right (PRR) prepares for a world after COVID-19 dominated by climate change concerns. Research suggests that certain measures introduced to contain the virus – such as the establishment of strict border and travel restrictions – may legitimize the PRR’s protectionist and anti-immigration agendas, yet few have examined whether or how PRR parties have used COVID-19 to promote their environmental agenda. If anything, the expectation has been that the pandemic would hurt the PRR precisely because its effects, unlike climate change, cannot be dismissed as a “hoax.” This view overlooks not only the “environmental turn” recently taken by several PRR parties but also the possibility that public awareness of the causal link between climate change and COVID-19 may work to their advantage. The analysis presented in this article highlights this possibility, showing that the RN used COVID-19 not only to capitalize on anti-immigrant sentiment but also to bolster its self-image as a champion of environmental protection.

**Keywords:** populism; environmentalism; nationalism; *Rassemblement National*; COVID-19

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, which at the time of this writing is still raging in much of the world, scholars have been debating whether this catastrophic event will bring about the “death” of populism, or if, on the other hand, it might make it more attractive than ever. This debate has largely centered on the populist radical right (PRR), whose electoral gains in the past decade represent one of the most formidable challenges to liberal democracy. Some contend that the pandemic has laid bare the incompetence of PRR parties in power and that those in opposition face an uphill battle, not least because of the concerted effort by governments worldwide to avert another populist wave like the one that followed the 2008 financial crisis (Betz 2020a; English 2020). Others, in contrast, anticipate that the PRR will emerge from the crisis fairly unscathed because, contrary to the impression one gets based on the cases of former US President Donald Trump and a few others, most PRR leaders actually responded to the crisis in a relatively responsible way (Wondreys and Mudde 2020). It has also been suggested that the pandemic, by exposing some of the dangers of globalization, may add legitimacy to the PRR’s protectionist and nativist stances (Ivaldi 2021). The imposition of strict border controls and travel restrictions to contain the spread of the virus certainly foreshadowed the kind of closed society long advocated by populists, providing them with the opportunity to proclaim “we told you so” (Vox 2020a).

Here in this article, I would like to draw attention to the possibility that the pandemic may also add to the appeal of the *environmental* agenda of the growing number of PRR parties that denounce

globalization not only on nativist or protectionist grounds but also on the grounds that it is contributing to climate change, the degradation of natural resources, and, more recently, the emergence of zoonotic diseases (those spread from animals to humans), as exemplified by COVID-19. This possibility remains largely unexplored, probably due to the common stereotype of environmentalism as the preserve of progressive politics and of PRR parties as climate change deniers. This is the view that informs Hans-Georg Betz's (2020a, 47) prediction that the PRR will be hurt by the pandemic because, unlike climate change, "the rising death toll [...] cannot be dismissed as a hoax." But leaving aside that climate change has become more and more difficult for anyone to ignore, research shows that a growing number of PRR parties are responding to the growing salience of climate change by incorporating green politics into their agenda (Oswald, Fromm, and Borda 2021; Ruser and Machin 2019; Turner and Bailey 2021). Given that the existence of a causal link between the environmental crisis and COVID-19 has been widely discussed and recognized since the early days of the pandemic (see below), we might expect some PRR parties to use the pandemic as an opportunity not only to promote their usual anti-immigration policies but also to showcase their environmental commitments.

The French *Rassemblement National* (RN) (formerly the *Front National*),<sup>1</sup> provides a particularly relevant case study for examining this hypothesis. Always a reference point for the European PRR (Rydgren 2005; Betz 2020b), the RN is a major force behind the recent and ongoing spread of an environmental discourse – alternatively called "climate nationalism" (Ruser and Machin 2019), "ecobordering" (Turner and Bailey 2021), or "green patriotism" (Schaller and Carius 2019) – that blends nativist and environmental themes into a seemingly coherent whole (see Malm and The Zetkin Collective 2021). A few observers have noted that the pandemic provides favorable conditions for this discourse to flourish (e.g., Berteloot 2020), but we still lack a systematic investigation of how PRR parties are preparing for a post-pandemic world in which climate change is poised to be at the center of public attention.

As a first step towards filling this gap in the literature, I conducted a qualitative analysis of the RN's discourse in relation to COVID-19. This analysis identified four main frames by which the RN has attempted to weaponize the crisis to advance its environmental agenda. The first frame suggests that the pandemic, by highlighting the advantages of living in the countryside as opposed to the big city, will serve as a catalyst for a new relationship with nature; the second presents the pandemic as a "disease of globalization" that urges us to rethink the foundations of modern society; the third presents it as an experiment in social control that paves the way for future climate change-related restrictions on personal freedoms; and the fourth as legitimizing the RN's "localist" approach to achieving a sustainable future. We will see that this approach presents borders as mechanisms of environmental protection – necessary to protect both cultural and natural diversity from foreign "pollutants" – and pits the virtues of a life rooted in the local community against the destructive and uniformizing effects of globalization. Therefore, insofar as the pandemic has exposed the fragility of our globalized world to dramatic events of natural origin and raised concerns about the long-term sustainability of our way of life, it would be no surprise if the RN's environmental agenda – and that of the other PRR parties that have taken an "environmental turn" in recent years (Aronoff 2019) – gains greater legitimacy as a result of it.

I will begin with an overview of the debate about the pandemic's potential impact on the PRR. Next, there is a discussion of the rise of green nationalism in Europe and the possibility that the parties behind it might benefit from public awareness of the link between the pandemic and climate change. This discussion is followed by an analysis of how RN's environmental communication and policy positions have evolved over the party's half-century of existence and, most significantly, under the leadership of Marine Le Pen. Finally, I will present the results of my examination of the RN's discourse on COVID-19. These results provide further evidence against the perception that PRR parties uniformly deny climate change and are disengaged from green politics. The more promptly this "dangerous myth" (Ruser and Machin 2019) is put to rest, the

more attention can be directed to the PRR's environmental agenda and its potential to shape the post-pandemic world.

### Populists: Victims of the Pandemic?

The concept of populism is far from having a well-established widely accepted definition among academics. This has led some to question the analytical usefulness of the concept (see Panizza 2005, 1), while others stress the need for a “complexity-oriented” perspective that accounts for the different historical and geographical guises in which populism has appeared (De la Torre and Mazzoleni 2019). In Latin America, where populism has been historically linked to the mobilization of mass constituencies from above by a dominant personality, scholars often place plebiscitary authority at the center of their definitions (Roberts 2015). One common approach defines populism as a political strategy by which a personalistic leader seeks to gain or exercise power through the top-down, plebiscitarian mobilization of poorly organized mass constituencies (Weyland 2001). In Europe, by contrast, where the study of populism developed at the turn of the 21st century to explain the rise of some ideological, radical right-wing parties on the fringes of the political system, populism is commonly understood in “ideational” terms, that is, as a distinct discourse or ideology based on a Manichean struggle between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite” (Hawkins 2018; Mudde 2004).

In recent years, often drawing inspiration from Ernesto Laclau's (2005) seminal defense of populism as the essence of democratic politics, there are a few left-wing European parties that have attempted to tap into mass discontent with austerity policies by emphasizing the divide between common people and neoliberal elites (see Mouffe 2018). In general, however, while cases of left-wing populism are common in Latin America and the United States (Kazin 1995), European populism has been dominated by right-wing variants (March 2007). For this reason, and because of the “existential” threat to global climate action it poses (Buzogány and Mohamad-Klotzbach 2021), the focus of this article is on the PRR. The following discussion reviews mainly literature examining the PRR's response to the pandemic, although occasional reference is made to notable works that, while explicitly addressing the broader phenomenon of “far right” politics, focus on roughly the same parties examined in the populism literature.

With the “recent obsession with ‘populism’” (Wondreys and Mudde 2020, 1), the COVID-19 pandemic has fueled a flurry of speculation about its potential impact on the PRR. A question at the heart of this debate is whether the PRR will be able to capitalize on the many crises spurred by the pandemic, or whether it will be relegated to the political sidelines (Betz 2020a). Initially, most observers found the latter scenario more plausible, to the point that it became “received wisdom” that the pandemic had revealed the incompetence of populists in power and that those in opposition would be among its main “victims” (Wondreys and Mudde 2020, 1).

Of the main reasons given for why the pandemic is likely to “kill” populism, three concern parties in opposition (Spilimbergo 2021). The first is the classic “rally round the flag” effect (Mueller 1970), which causes a temporary surge in approval for political incumbents in response to a perceived foreign threat (Wondreys and Mudde 2020). Second, it has been suggested that the pandemic distracts public attention from immigration and other traditional populist issues while uniting “the people” in the fight against an “enemy” that is none of populism's common targets – e.g., migrants, foreign countries – but an “indiscriminate virus” (Bieber 2020, 1). And finally, the third reason is related to the “whatever it takes” economic policy response to the pandemic adopted by many governments and supra-national institutions to cushion its economic impacts (Ivaldi 2021). A major objective behind the implementation of ambitious stimulus packages was indeed to address issues that are known to cause populism, such as unemployment and inequality. As French President Emmanuel Macron put it, “If we can't do this today, I tell you the populists will win” (quoted in Mallet and Khalaf 2020).

A few observers have turned to the nature of populism itself to explain why they think PRR parties, both in opposition and in power, face a bleak future in the wake of the pandemic. For instance, Hans-Georg Betz (2020a) regards the strong currents of nativism running through this family of parties as antithetical to the attitudes and values required for overcoming the health crisis and its economic fallout. The “inanity” of nativist slogans such as “[France/Austria/Hungary/Italy] first,” he argues, has been laid bare by a situation that requires “nothing more than international solidarity and cooperation” (Betz 2020a, 47). Betz also considers populism’s characteristic disdain for scientific expertise as ill-suited to deal with the complexity of the pandemic:

Populism’s appeal crucially hinges on stirring up latent resentment against those who pretend to know better. In the current situation, those who pretend to know better actually do. (Betz 2020a, 49)

Similar arguments are that the demands of the present situation are out of step with the “crowd-pleasing politics” of populist politicians and that the populist playbook is of little use in the midst of a pandemic that calls for “complex” analyses rather than “quick-fix solutions” (English 2020). From this perspective, “the death of populism” seems a likely outcome (English 2020).

Although it is obviously too early to determine the political consequences of a crisis that is still very much with us, available data show that populists in power have indeed been hurt by the pandemic. According to the annual study on global populism by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, the number of populists in power at the beginning of 2022 fell to 13 from a peak of 17 in the previous year, the lowest number since 2004 (Meyer 2022). The report suggests that, by calling attention to “the importance of seriousness and expertise in policymaking,” the pandemic has been a major driver of this decline (Meyer 2022, 13).

Also true, however, is that not all populists have downplayed the dangers of COVID-19 or seen a decline in support during the pandemic. For example, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who won another two-thirds majority in the April 2022 parliamentary election in Hungary, has recognized the destructive power of the virus and imposed strict health measures to protect the population (Meyer 2020; Wondreys and Mudde 2020). Similarly, RN leader Marine Le Pen, who recognized the seriousness of the health crisis and observed the government’s self-isolation requirements when she came into close contact with a COVID-19 positive individual (Froio 2022), led her party to its best result ever in the 2022 French Presidential Election. Of course, more research is needed to establish the effects of the pandemic on Orbán’s and Le Pen’s electoral performances. That said, their responses to the health crisis show that Trump’s dismissive approach has not been uniformly followed within the PRR, and their positive results at the ballot box caution against sweeping generalizations about the fate of populism in the world after COVID-19.

Also important to mention is that minimizing the health and safety impact of the pandemic is not necessarily a recipe for political defeat. Take, for instance, the case of Spanish Conservative leader Isabel Díaz Ayuso, whose highly successful strategy for capitalizing on popular discontent over lockdown restrictions was hailed by Italian populist leader Matteo Salvini as a model to follow (Jones 2021). Head of Madrid’s regional government since 2019, Ayuso seemed an unlikely candidate to benefit from the pandemic given that, in part due to her mishandling of the health crisis, Madrid is one of the European regions with the highest excess mortality rates (Hernández-Morales 2022). And yet, by running a populist campaign that accused the national government of imposing draconian lockdown measures that wrecked the region’s economy and took away its unique way of life, she was able to deflect enough attention from her own government’s failures to win a landslide victory in the Madrid snap election in 2021.

These counter-examples complicate optimistic predictions about the pandemic’s effect on the PRR by spotlighting the potential of pandemic-related frustrations and anxieties to provide fertile ground for the anti-establishment, “us-vs-them” discourse that defines populism (see Ivaldi 2021). Research on the PRR’s response to COVID-19 indeed shows widespread use of “sharp populist

rhetoric” to rally against stringent lockdown measures and other preventive restrictions such as face masks and social distancing (Wondreys and Mudde 2020, 12). Claiming to represent the interests of ordinary people against an “out-of-touch elite,” several PRR parties called for a faster loosening of restrictions and reopening of the economy to avoid further economic collapse (Wondreys and Mudde 2020, 12).

While true that the PRR was unlikely to gain points in a historic moment that demanded expertise and international cooperation, other consequences of the pandemic may be advantageous for this party family. One example of these is the erratic and confused messages coming from many governments in the early days of the pandemic, which created the kind of atmosphere of doubt and suspicion that populism is known to thrive in (Bock 2021). Predictably, Marine Le Pen attempted to profit from the situation by presenting Macron’s administration as the “biggest purveyor of fake news since the beginning of the crisis” and the most “responsible for the loss of confidence in public statements” (quoted in Betz 2020b, 75). The potential appeal of this rhetoric at a time of widespread political cynicism has raised concerns about the possibility of a “vicious circle” developing in the coming years if the pandemic further erodes people’s trust in political institutions and leaders:

While physicians are concerned with the problem of ‘long covid’ as a medical condition, we believe that economists and political scientists should be concerned with a different type of ‘long covid’ associated with a decline in political trust that could potentially trigger further waves of populism in the future. (Bottasso, Cerruti, and Conti 2022a; see also 2022b)

In the longer run, the repercussions of the pandemic may also legitimize some key issues on the populist agenda in the eyes of voters. Most notably, the pandemic has brought to the fore questions of national sovereignty in the face of global threats and highlighted the central role of borders in protecting populations from the spread of disease. Betz may be right that nativist approaches have been discredited by a public health crisis that calls for international cooperation, but it is also true that some of the measures taken by governments worldwide to contain the virus, which have indeed slowed contagion down in many cases, have given populist parties the opportunity to claim vindication for their longstanding emphasis on immigration controls. It is no wonder that the Spanish VOX, for which anti-immigration is a foundational ideology, resorted to the classic refrain “We told you so” and intensified its signature xenophobic rhetoric to stoke fear about “infected illegal immigrants” crossing the border (Vox 2020b). The RN similarly combined nativism and populism in a familiar Eurosceptic discourse accusing EU elites of using the pandemic to “try to implement their globalist and federalist vision of Europe” (quoted in Wondreys and Mudde 2020, 5).

There is yet another aspect of the pandemic that the PRR may benefit from: its connection to the current environmental crisis. For reasons to be discussed here, however, this possibility has not received the attention it deserves.

### The PRR and the Environment

For reasons examined below, the lack of attention to how PRR parties have used the pandemic to advance their environmental agenda was to be expected. This lack of attention is unfortunate, given that there exist “obvious parallels” between the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis that the PRR should logically explore (Segalov 2020). From early on, experts emphasized that human-caused environmental degradation played a role in the emergence of COVID-19 and will make future pandemics more likely unless the effects of climate change are mitigated. For instance, a study noted that “rampant deforestation, uncontrolled expansion of agriculture, intensive farming, mining and infrastructure development, as well as the exploitation of wild species have created a ‘perfect storm’ for the spillover of diseases” (Settele et al. 2020; see also Rodó et al. 2021). In parallel, there is a short film posted on social media by Greta Thunberg that insists that issues such as the

destruction of wild habitats and increasing global consumption of animal products are “creating the perfect conditions for diseases to spill over from one animal to another and to us” (Telegraph Video 2021). Pope Francis also stepped in, arguing that the pandemic is one of “nature’s responses” to humans ignoring the current ecological crisis (quoted in Gallagher 2020), while “Gaya” theory author James Lovelock (2021) framed COVID-19 as an attempt by nature to protect itself.

These statements may have contributed to an increased awareness of the impact of environmental degradation on this and possibly future pandemics. According to a study commissioned by the International Monetary Fund, a positive outcome of the pandemic is that it has reminded us of our vulnerability to nature and prompted us to make bolder demands for climate action, even if not everyone is willing to bear the cost of the energy transition (Mohammad and Pugacheva 2022). The study finds that the degree of public concern for the environment and willingness to support policies to mitigate climate change have significantly increased during the pandemic among those whose health has been directly affected by it. The financial shock in the wake of COVID-19, which has hit millions of households with job loss or income reductions, has also led people to worry more about climate change, although in this case support for green recovery policies involving economic sacrifices has waned (Mohammad and Pugacheva 2022).

We will see in what follows that the PRR may very well benefit from the association in the public’s mind between COVID-19 and climate change, even more so when the economic cost of sustainable transitions is foregrounded. And yet, save for a few notable exceptions (e.g., Berteloot 2020), this possibility remains largely unexplored. Two reasons may explain this oversight. One is the common misconception that environmental issues are of concern only to progressive movements and parties. It is true that, in recent decades, the fight for environmental sustainability and justice has been led by progressive forces, but this view ignores that environmental concerns have long been invoked in the service of social reaction. Notable examples from what has come to known as the “eco-fascist” tradition are the idealization of rural life and the national landscape, the condemnation of industrial modernity’s assault on nature and the use of nativist tropes to justify protecting the “homeland” from the polluting presence of foreigners (Zimmerman and Toulouse 2016). Carried to the extreme, some of these ideas underpinned the Nazi slogan “blood and soil,” a phrase symbolizing the mystical tie between German blood and the land. Contrary to common belief, there is a long tradition of reactionary environmentalism available for today’s PRR parties to draw on.

The second reason is the familiar identification of the PRR with the phenomenon of climate denial (Lockwood 2018), which logically leads to the conclusion that increased public awareness of the negative effects of climate change is “bad news” for populism. The PRR’s environmental agenda, however, is more nuanced and diverse than given credit for. As shown by a widely cited report by the environmental think tank Adelphi, no common denominator exists within the PRR in terms of environmental communication and voting behavior (Schaller and Carius 2019). Although some PRR parties do question the scientific consensus on climate change, others accept the reality of human-induced global warming and acknowledge the dangers it presents. A number of them, such as the French *Rassemblement National*, the Italian *Lega*, and the Freedom Party of Austria, are characterized by a type of “green patriotism” that is hostile to climate action yet strongly supportive of environmental protection “for nationalist not global interests” (Schaller and Carius 2019, 39). Turner and Bailey (2021) similarly find that, although denialism remains a “prominent” position within this party family, an “alternative” discourse has emerged that blames immigration for ecological degradation and casts border controls as a solution to the climate crisis. Strong or moderate manifestations of “eco-bordering” appeared in the environmental communication of 15 of the 22 parties examined in their study, occasionally coexisting but more often “displacing” denialist positions (Turner and Bailey 2021). The cross-national spread of this exclusionary pro-environmental discourse, documented in emerging literature (Audikana and Kaufman 2021; de Nadal 2021; Machin and Wagener 2019; Oswald et al. 2021), provides further evidence against the common identification of the PRR with climate denial.

The environmental turn recently taken by some PRR parties lines up perfectly with the strategic need to respond to growing public concerns about the environment. Political parties across the political spectrum can no longer afford to ignore an issue that has become a top priority for voters (Ruser and Machin 2019). A recent Eurobarometer survey shows that Europeans view climate change as the single most serious problem facing the world today, with almost 80 percent of respondents considering it to be a “very serious problem” (European Union 2021). Young people in particular are becoming afflicted by “eco-anxiety” as a result of climate change and the feeling that governments are failing to do enough to avoid climate catastrophe (Hickman et al. 2021; see also UNESCO 2021). Without denying the sincerity of their environmental convictions, the urgency that climate change has assumed in recent years helps to explain why more and more PRR parties have made it a priority to “capture ‘green issues’” (Oswald et al. 2021, 187).

In this context, with climate change set to become one of the main “wedge issues” dividing the European public (Counterpoint 2021), it is essential to direct our attention to how PRR parties are positioning themselves for a post-pandemic world dominated by environmental concerns.

### The *Rassemblement National*

The *Rassemblement National* provides an excellent case study to examine how the PRR is using the pandemic to advance its environmental agenda. Founded in 1972 by Jean-Marie Le Pen, the RN is one of the most successful European PRR parties that have never been at the head of the national government (see Froio 2022). Over the course of the past half-century, the RN has moved from the fringes of French politics to the mainstream, recently establishing itself as a serious contender to the presidency. Since Marine Le Pen took over from her father in 2011 and pursued a “de-diabolization” strategy to distance herself and the party today from the antisemitism that stained it in the past, the RN has enjoyed increasing electoral success, winning the 2019 European Parliament elections in France with almost one-fourth of the vote and narrowly losing to incumbent Emmanuel Macron in the second round of the 2022 French Presidential Election. The RN is particularly relevant here because of its status as a role model for many of the PRR parties that have come after it. In the late 1970s, as research on the transnational spread or “contagion” of populism shows, the RN initiated the process of cross-national diffusion of the ethno-nationalist and anti-political populist frame that gave rise to the European PRR (Rydgren 2005; van Huawaert 2019). Even if the RN may have “lost some of its lustre” in recent years, it remains a “point of reference” for many of its counterparts (Betz 2020b, 74).

One way in which the RN’s influence on the PRR manifests today is in the spread of green patriotism. Yet again, the RN is behind the development and cross-national diffusion of a new “master frame,” this time one that combines anti-immigration and anti-elitism with a nationalist, identity-based vision of environmentalism (Malm and The Zetkin Collective 2021, chp. 5). As more and more PRR parties employ this frame in their environmental communication, the RN is moving from being an outlier to being a “typical case” (Gerring 2017). As such, it can be used to illustrate broader patterns within the European PRR. Even if the diversity that characterizes this party family makes generalization hazardous, investigation of the RN promises to shed light on how at least some PRR parties may benefit from public awareness of the link between climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly when other issues at the core of their agenda may be pushed aside.

It is back in the early 1990s when we see the RN’s first significant foray into environmental politics (Davies 1999). Under the impulse of party representative Bruno Mégret, the RN articulated an environmental agenda rooted in the far-right tradition that presented the protection of living beings and cultural/ethnic equilibrium as the bedrock of true environmentalism (*Le Monde* 1991). The notion of “rootedness,” which, as we will see, dovetails with many elements of the RN’s current environmental agenda, was already central to its early concern for nature. In Mégret’s words, “a nation must be rooted in its soil, in its earth, in its regions, because the rural world is the bearer of

traditional values” (quoted in Davies 1999, 108). Although the RN’s ideology revolved around the themes of nationalism and anti-immigration, it was supplemented with references to an idealized rural life and the symbiosis between nation and nature. Drawing on eco-fascist tropes, the RN marked industrialization, globalization, and cosmopolitanism as threats to national “purity” and promoted a conception of nationhood “linked to a synthesis of blood, culture and territory” (Boukala and Tountasaki 2020, 72).

Environmental causes were largely “set aside” after Mégret split from the party in 1998 (François 2016), but they were never completely dropped. The programs for the 2002 and 2007 Presidential Elections, Jean-Marie Le Pen’s last two presidential bids, include a section devoted to “The Environment” in which the RN continues to frame environmental issues using anti-modern, nationalist, and xenophobic language (Front National 2002; 2007). For instance, in 2002, the RN denounced the environmental movement as a globalist plot aiming to impose a “dictatorship of the planetariat,” while the 2007 program promises to protect the environment from the dangers of “industrialisation” and “immigration” (Front National 2002; 2007). Aside from these efforts to reclaim ecology for nationalist ends, Le Pen’s environmental legacy is defined by his climate denialism. Indeed, he is often remembered for his infamous remarks denying human-driven climate change and ridiculing ecology as the “new religion of the bobo,” or bohemian bourgeoisie (quoted in Onishi 2021).

Since Marine Le Pen stepped to the front of the party in 2011, environmental issues have increasingly taken center stage in the party’s communication and platform. Initially, following in her father’s footsteps, she downplayed the risks of climate change by pointing out that “the world has experienced changes in the climate that had nothing to do with human activity” (Terra Eco 2012). Yet the growing public salience of climate change, along with other factors such as the competitive weakness of the French environmentalist party Europe Ecology – The Greens (EELV), prompted her to substantially revise the party’s environmental agenda.<sup>2</sup> Starting in 2014 with the creation of the patriotic environmental movement *Nouvelle écologie* (New Ecology), she has been moving away from the skeptical stance and replacing it with a pro-environmental agenda that, while hostile to multilateral climate action, accepts the reality of climate change and the need to address it (Oswald et al. 2021). Today, far from dismissing ecology as a “bobo” pastime, the RN promises to turn Europe into “the world’s first ecological civilisation” (2019a, 62; see also Bardella 2022).

The leading figure behind the RN’s about-face on the environment is Hervé Juvin, an essayist and long-time advocate of ethno-nationalist ecology who joined the party in 2019 to run as a candidate in the European elections (Baléo 2020). Juvin’s (2018) own manifesto entitled *France, le moment politique: Manifeste écologique et social* (*France, the Political Moment: Ecological and Social Manifesto*) made such an impression on Le Pen that she decided to use it as “the foundation” of the RN’s future program (de Calignon 2019). One of the core ideas of the manifesto is precisely that of building an “ecological civilisation.” By this Juvin essentially means reversing globalization – which he condemns for subordinating natural resources to the “religion of growth-at-all-cost” (Juvin 2018, 15) – to restore a more harmonious relationship with nature:

An ecological revolution is coming. [...] It will restore the integrity of the common good, enhance progress and quality of life, and put an end to the destruction of natural resources and living systems caused by industrial modernity. (Juvin 2018, 14)

The cornerstone of Juvin’s environmental philosophy is the notion of “localism.” Originally formulated in the 1970’s by the far-right political movement *Nouvelle Droite* (New Right), this notion juxtaposes the “destructive” effects of globalization to the perceived benefits of living a life rooted in the local (François 2016). Juvin (2018) maintains that protecting nature begins with living and working in the local community, producing and consuming locally, and revitalizing local

industry. There is a strong nationalist and nativist dimension to Juvin's localism, which is apparent when he mentions questions of ecology, immigration, and national identity in the same breath: "Our emphasis on strengthening borders is key to building an ecological society that respects every identity, every social model, every economic organisation" (Juvin 2018, 21). The loss of biodiversity caused by climate change, he adds, is no less serious a problem than the "extinction of human diversity" caused by multiculturalism (Juvin 2018, 52).

Shortly after the publication of Juvin's manifesto, the RN adopted many of its ideas as the backbone of its environmental discourse and policy agenda. In the 2019 European elections campaign, Le Pen described environmentalism as "the natural child of patriotism" and referred to localism as a necessary dimension of ecology: "If you're a nomad, you're not an environmentalist" (quoted in Adler 2019). The RN's program explicitly proposed "localist" policies such as "overtaxing anti-ecological global imports" to boost the local economy (Rassemblement National 2019b, 13). Localism played an even more prominent role in the program for the 2022 Presidential Election. In a thematic booklet entitled "Ecology," the RN contrasts the vision of a prosperous France built according to localist principles with the threat to the environment posed by globalization, open borders, and "infinite individual mobility" (Rassemblement National 2022a, 17). In a nod to the Yellow Vest movement, which erupted over Macron's plan to raise fuel taxes, the RN rejects mainstream solutions to the climate crisis in favor of a localist approach that "turns the page on punitive environmental policies and bad conscience" and enables a green transition without further eroding people's purchasing power or endangering France's local cultures and traditions (Rassemblement National 2022a, 5).

For the most part, the RN's voting patterns and policy priorities in recent years have been consistent with its localist approach, with all its blatant contradictions. Analysis of the RN's voting record in the European Parliament over the past decade shows that it has regularly supported policies to protect the local environment at the same time as it has opposed multilateral climate action (Schaller and Carius 2019). For instance, while the RN has endorsed legislation to reduce air and plastic pollution, it voted against the 2021 landmark law approved by the European Parliament to make the EU's greenhouse emissions targets legally binding (European Parliament 2021). The RN's flagship environmental initiative at the national level has been that of a "counter-referendum" in response to Macron's plan to enshrine the fight against climate change in the Constitution (Rassemblement National 2021). This counter-referendum initiative included several "localist" proposals such as banning the construction of "big-box" retail superstores and preventing low quality imports from entering France. Unlike Trump, Le Pen has not called for withdrawing from the Paris climate agreement, but she did promise that, if elected president in 2022, France would meet its commitments at its "own pace" (Rassemblement National 2022a, 9). Her position regarding the EU Green Deal is more unequivocal: France should "pull out" of it because it endangers "national independence" and the "standard of living" of the French people (Rassemblement National 2022a, 5).

As this discussion has made clear, the RN poses a major threat to international climate cooperation. Any effort to smooth the path for the EU to achieve its ambitious climate plans would thus benefit from an investigation of how the RN has adapted its discourse to the exceptional circumstances that come in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. To this we now turn.

### The RN's Environmental Discourse in Relation to COVID-19

This section presents the results of my analysis of the RN's environmental discourse in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. This analysis is based on a thorough examination of a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including all the articles on the RN's website on the topics of environmentalism and COVID-19, public statements on these topics by RN leaders and representatives, electoral programs and manifestos, press reports, and magazine articles. These data were analyzed to gain insight into how the RN imagines the world after COVID-19 and how the

pandemic provided a context to promote its environmental agenda. What follows is the presentation and discussion of the four main frames that emerged from the data.

The *first* frame can be summed up with the saying “every cloud has a silver lining.” For all its devastating consequences, the RN sees an upside to the pandemic crisis, suggesting that it creates optimal conditions for localism to resonate with the public and offers new opportunities for a genuinely sustainable society to emerge. This frame can be found in a “pro-localism manifesto” co-authored by Juvin that describes the urban exodus to the countryside during the strict nationwide lockdown in the spring of 2020 as an event that opened many city residents’ eyes to the wonders of rural life (Juvin and Kotarac 2021). Juvin anticipates that, as a consequence of the pandemic, localism will be able to find new adherents among “those who, confined away from the city, experienced for the first time since their childhood the birds chirping in the spring, those who, thanks to remote work, discovered the characteristic happiness of the French countryside and felt the pleasure of living in a place with a high quality of life” (Juvin and Kotarac 2021, 7). He is hopeful that the pandemic, its devastating consequences aside, will inspire many to reconsider their way of life and relationship with nature.

Another environmental silver lining from COVID-19, according to the RN, concerns the public’s willingness to support local industry. RN regional councilor Thibaut de La Tocnaye (2020) maintains that the pandemic, by revealing the danger of dependence on foreign imports, has persuaded “the majority of French people” of the need to “re-localise” strategic sectors of the economy. He expects this shift in public opinion to have a big impact on French politics, leading to a massive process of re-industrialization and re-localization that will not only increase France’s economic independence from foreign powers but also reduce existing disparities within its territory in favor of deindustrialized and “desertified” regions. This development, he concludes, will pave the way for the development of an “authentic ecology” – that is, an ecology that focuses as much on the protection of ecosystems as it does on the protection of territorial sovereignty (de La Tocnaye 2020).

The *second* frame portrays the pandemic as a “disease of globalisation” (Juvin 2020; 2022, 156) and insists on the incompatibility between globalization and sustainable development. A good example of this frame is a remark Le Pen made during the public presentation of her counterproposal to Macron’s climate referendum. After portraying globalization and free trade agreements as “enemies of ecology,” Le Pen pointed to the environmental impact of globalization as one of the factors behind the pandemic:

[The COVID-19 pandemic] has revealed the health risks that we face, which stem from issues such as pressure on ecosystems, forced population concentration in metropolitan areas, and unrestrained human mobility across continents. (Quoted in Berteloot 2021)

Likewise, several RN representatives suggest that the pandemic has exposed both the “hubris” behind the project of globalization (Bertolini 2020) and the “hypocrisy” of those who advocate saving the planet but continue to champion open markets and free trade (Beigneux 2020; see also Diaz 2020). Much of the criticism is aimed at the EU, which the RN condemns for promising a “green recovery” from the pandemic without addressing some of the conditions that led to it in the first place. For instance, in response to the EU’s announcement of a new trade agreement with Mexico, RN MEP Nicolas Bay (2020) emphasized the discrepancy between advocating environmental protection and promoting international trade: “Brussels wants us to believe it is taking pro-climate action, but in fact globalized trade is – in essence – the least environmentally friendly system that exists.”

The *third* frame warns that the pandemic has opened “Pandora’s Box” regarding the State’s limitation of personal freedoms and its call for personal sacrifices in the name of the common good. According to another RN MEP, Mathilde Androuët, the logical next step after the introduction of health and vaccine passes to access public spaces – a measure denounced by the RN a “backward step for personal freedoms” (Belouezzane and Carriat 2021) – will be the introduction of an

“environmental pass” forcing individuals to stay within a quota of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and kWh energy consumption (Androuët 2022). Androuët contends that the imposition of freedom-curtailling restrictions for health reasons illustrates the risks posed by the “system of generalized surveillance” that has been put in place over the past decades and is a harbinger of new restrictions to come “under the pretext of environmental protection” (Androuët 2022). In line with the RN’s position that ordinary people should not be shamed for their consumption habits or forced to bear the cost of climate change mitigation, Androuët opposes the imposition of an “environmental pass” as a threat to democracy and freedom (Androuët 2022).

Finally, the *fourth* frame claims that the pandemic “legitimises” the RN’s environmental agenda in general and its localist project in particular. Several studies have already noted that many PRR parties pointed to the pandemic as evidence in support of their protectionist and nativist positions (e.g., Wondreys and Mudde 2020). In this regard, the RN has not been an exception. As Marine Le Pen (2021) stated at the RN’s 17th Congress, in Perpignan: “The Covid crisis has shown that we were right about the protective nature of borders.” Much less attention has been paid, however, to how the RN has portrayed the pandemic as an endorsement of its nationalist brand of eco-localism. This frame was present in a speech Le Pen delivered during the March 2020 municipal elections campaign, where she argued that “localism is good for the economy, good for the environment and, as we are seeing, reassuring in the face of a health crisis” (quoted in AFP 2020). Le Pen insisted that the RN’s “localist perspective” was “vindicated” by a pandemic that has demonstrated the “pressing need to re-localise [French industry] and re-examine our blind allegiance to unfettered globalization.” In the same vein, in an interview with conservative daily *Le Figaro*, she argued that the “best” solution to overcome the current crisis and prevent future ones is to cast aside the current “ultra-liberal” economic model in favour of “localism and economic patriotism” (Le Pen 2020).

This frame featured prominently in the campaign for the 2022 Presidential Election. The RN manifesto, for example, points to the need to reorient France’s economy “towards the principle of localism and economic patriotism” and argues that the pandemic has underlined the urgency of this need: “in the aftermath of a health crisis that has glaringly exposed the dangers of globalism and our country’s dependence on foreign imports, localism is more than ever a necessary choice to ensure future employment, sovereignty and a sustainable development” (Rassemblement National 2022b, 21). Likewise, in a new book that focuses extensively on the world after COVID-19, Juvin (2022) predicts that the importance of several themes at the core of localism, such as the harmful consequences of technological expansion (178), the life-saving role of borders (215) and the virtues of life in the countryside (392), will become self-evident as a result of the pandemic. Hence his insistence that, to overcome the many challenges that the pandemic has brought and/or exacerbated, “our answer is localism” (Juvin 2020, 10).

For the RN, in short, the pandemic has not only provided them with the opportunity to capitalize on anti-immigrant sentiment but also to bolster their self-image as a champion of environmental protection. An important and thus far largely overlooked dimension of its response to the pandemic is the repudiation of globalization in favor of an environmentally responsible way of life rooted in the homeland and in nature.

## Conclusion

Given the diversity and heterogeneity that characterizes the PRR, not to mention the importance of country-specific factors, it is challenging to make generalized predictions about whether the pandemic will “kill” populism or strengthen it. In this article, I have emphasized the importance of challenging the “received wisdom” that the pandemic is “bad news” for populism, as this view fails to recognize the many opportunities that it has created. Perhaps the most evident one is the mobilizing potential of the PRR’s anti-establishment discourse in the face of the many uncertainties,

anxieties, and frustrations that the pandemic has brought about. Another obvious opening for PRR parties stems from the link between their nationalist and anti-immigrant agenda, on the one hand, and a pandemic that has highlighted the role of borders as a public health tool and exposed the vulnerability of our globalized economic system, on the other. But there is yet another potential advantage for the PRR that has yet to be investigated. As this article has shown, the environmental failures of globalization, of which COVID-19 is both a consequence and a vivid illustration, provide additional fodder for the PRR parties that, like the RN, have switched from outright climate denial to various flavors of environmental patriotism.

To find out whether and how the RN used the pandemic to promote its “localist” agenda, I analyzed the party’s environmental discourse in relation to COVID-19. This analysis identified four main frames by which the RN has tried to take advantage of the current crisis. The first holds that an event as dramatic as the pandemic may have unexpected environmental silver linings, such as raising awareness about the benefits of re-localizing industry and prompting city residents to re-discover the wonders of life in the countryside. The second frame attributes the cause of the pandemic to globalization and condemns as hypocritical the ambition to save the planet without advocating at the same time a radical overhaul of the global economic system to make it compatible with the protection of nature. The third frame presents pandemic-related restrictions on personal freedoms as an elitist and anti-democratic model for tackling global threats that will soon be used in the fight against climate change to punish individuals for their lifestyle and consumption habits and force them to shoulder the burden of environmental mitigation. And finally, the fourth frame claims that the pandemic has legitimized the RN’s identity-based eco-localism, which the party champions as the only viable option for ensuring a sustainable future.

These results underscore the importance of dispelling the myth that populists uniformly deny anthropogenic climate change and ignore environmental concerns. It is an inaccurate portrait that not only ignores the diversity of positions that exist within this party family, as has already been noted (Ruser and Machin 2019), but also blinds us to the possibility that the PRR might come out stronger from the pandemic precisely because of its link to climate change. In this article, I have called attention to this possibility, and in so doing hope to encourage more research on how PRR parties are positioning themselves for a post-pandemic future in which climate change is set to be one the main issues – if not the main one – on the global political agenda. Having a clear grasp of the phenomenon of post-denial, post-pandemic populism is important both for understanding the challenges facing international climate action and for designing effective strategies to respond to them.

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## Notes

- 1 In 2018, Marine Le Pen renamed the party from *Front National* (National Front), with its anti-semitic and neo-fascist associations, to *Rassemblement National* (National Rally) in an attempt to broaden its appeal. For simplicity, only the new name will be used in this article.
- 2 Based on an analysis of the political opportunity structure that has defined French politics in recent years, Oswald et al. (2021) identify several factors behind the RN’s environmental turn. They note that, while environmentalism has become “extremely salient for the [French] public,” the EELV has remained in a weak competitive position (2021, 201). This combination of factors created an opening that both Le Pen and Macron, and the leftist candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon, have endeavored to exploit by “extending” their core policy agenda to include environmental issues.

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