

A Changing Democratic Climate: The current rise of right-wing populism and its implications on environmental democracy in the U.S. and Germany

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Abstract

While there is a parallel rise of right-wing populism in the U.S. and Germany, not all right-wing populism is the same. The policy proposals and choices of *Alternative für Deutschland* versus President Donald Trump are helping to advance environmental democracy in Germany but limiting environmental democracy in the U.S. I employ a social linguistic discourse analysis to answer the question: why do right-wing populists in Germany have a policy agenda that advances environmental democracy, while right-wing populist policy in the U.S. restricts environmental democracy? The first step determined what meanings the AfD and Trump administration ascribe to energy issues by evaluating politician's statements, party publications, campaign statements, and administration publications. These understandings were then assessed against the policy proposals and decisions made by the AfD and Trump Administration to uncover the links between the understandings and policy choices. The findings are then situated into the broader historical narrative of right-wing movements in the U.S. and Germany. The findings are that AfD policy proposals advance environmental democracy because the AfD understands energy issues in terms of giving voice to the German middle class; whereas, policies of the Trump administration limit environmental democracy because the Administration understands energy issues in terms of the federal government restricting economic growth. Conducting this discourse analysis to determine why two seemingly similar populist movement have very different impact on a populations ability to participate in environment decision making, reveals the scope of policy options available in each context to mitigate environmental issues. It is then up to us to creatively work within or push the bounds of each scope for the sake of overcoming detrimental environmental dilemmas.

Keywords: Environmental Democracy, Right-wing Populism, Energy Policy

1. Introduction

The world is in a unique political moment with the election of President Donald Trump in 2016 and the success of Germany's right-wing party in 2017.¹ While these two right-wing populist movements are occurring almost simultaneously, each movement has its distinctive agendas, policies, and implications on the citizens within the movement's context. These divergent implications of each movement is particularly peculiar in respect to environmental democracy, or the extent to which a public can participate in environmental decision making. It would be expected that both the AfD and Trump Administration would pose a threat to environmental democracy because the political right is often associated with minimal concern for the environment and right-wing populism is often seen as a threat to liberal democracy.² However, the policy proposals of the AfD lend themselves to the advancement of environmental democracy by promoting greater public participation in environmental decision making, yet the policies of the Trump Administration restrict environmental democracy by eliminating avenues for public participation in

environmental policy.³ The differing impacts of seemingly similar right-wing populist movements have on environmental democracy is the puzzle that will be illuminated by answering the research question: why do right-wing populists in Germany have a policy agenda that advances environmental democracy, while right-wing populist policy in the U.S. restricts environmental democracy?

The findings are that AfD policy proposals advance environmental democracy because the party's conception of energy issues is situated in the larger German right-wing narrative of giving voice to the middle class; whereas, the Trump Administration's policies limit environmental democracy because its understanding of energy issues is embedded in the larger U.S. right-wing narrative of limited government for the sake of unrestricted economic growth. To analyze this question, the literature review will first define environmental democracy then analyze the literature relevant to the junction of right-wing populism and environmental democracy. This includes three key bodies of literature: 1. Deliberative Democracy and Environmental Policy, 2. Right-wing Populism and Liberal Democracy, and 3. Right-wing Movements and Environmental Policy. Although these literatures do not address the relationship between environmental democracy and right-wing populism explicitly, the literature provides the scholarly foundations that support the issue area this paper's research will explore. Following the literature review is a justification for employing a social linguistic analysis as the methodology for unpacking the research question. The analysis answers the research question by exploring how the AfD and Trump Administration understand energy issues, the implications those understandings have on their policy positions/actions, and the historical threads present in each movement's understandings. The analysis is followed with a discussion of the broader applications of this paper's research and a conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Environmental Democracy Defined

At its core, environmental democracy is a quality of governance that allows for "meaningful public participation" to "ensure that" environment-related decisions "adequately and equitably address citizens' interest."⁴ The extent to which a government successfully achieves environmental democracy is based on three key pillars: access to information, public participation, and access to justice.⁵ This definition from the World Resources Institute and The Access Initiative's Environmental Democracy Index is the most recent definition of environmental democracy.⁶ This normalized definition is rooted in a longer history of collective choice and public participation for advancing environmental objectives which came with the early environmental movements of the 1970s and 1980s.⁷ Since then, "[c]itizen participation in environmental decision-making has...become accepted as...the ultimate safeguard of people's environmental needs and rights," according to the Centre for Science and Environment.⁸ This was first recognized and codified at the international level in Principle 10 of the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development under the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development.⁹

In 1998, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe's Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, also referred to the Aarhus Convention, officially addressed environmental democracy. The Aarhus Convention is a binding international agreement for implementing Principle 10 of the 1992 Rio Declaration.¹⁰ Subsequently, the 2010 Bali Guidelines for Developing National Legislation on Access to Information, Public Participation and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, developed by the United Nations Environment Programme, set standards for evaluating a country's performance regarding environmental democracy.¹¹ Environmental democracy is now seen as a significant necessary condition for achieving successful, comprehensive environmental policy as it considers the interests of various actors through the process of deliberation. Without advancing environmental democracy, the ability of environmental policy to successfully meet the concerns of a public are jeopardized as policy will not comprehensively consider all stakeholder deliberations.

2.2 Deliberative Democracy and Environmental Policy

Environmental democracy is rooted in the deliberative democratic principles of collective choice and participation.¹² The core of deliberative democracy, as a political theory, is to put "communication at the heart of politics" to foster policy that has critically considered the values and ideologies of those involved.¹³ To ensure deliberative democracy, John Rawls' argues that citizens must have two key principles of justice: 1. protection of the most robust set of basic

rights and 2. ability to be a freely and fully engaged member of society.¹⁴ According to Barber and Bartlett, these two principles allow for the public reasoning necessary to address environmental concerns by ensuring public has the rights, and abilities, necessary to participate in deliberative decision making.¹⁵ Barber and Bartlett continues to explain that Habermas moves a step beyond Rawls in by arguing that a deliberative democracy must also allow for “subordinate” groups to partake in “free and open” collaboration so that consensual decisions are determined only on the merits of an argument.¹⁶ In essence, Barber and Bartlett demonstrate that Rawls sets the pre conditional aspects of justice and Habermas sets to political capacity building necessary for a deliberative democracy to exist and lend to robust environmental decision-making.

Jänicke and Poloni-Stauding, Dryzek and Stevenson, and Sherman and Smith all move beyond the definition of deliberative democracy set by Rawls and Habermas by directly arguing that deliberative democracy is a key precondition for comprehensive environmental policy.¹⁷ Martin Jänicke and Lori M. Poloni-Stauding argue that institutional openness and a culture of consensus building is essential for environmental policy building.¹⁸ Dryzek and Stevenson move a step further by determining the four mechanisms of deliberative democracy necessary for successful environmental policy: integrating various perspectives, prioritizing public/general interests, encouraging “positive sum discourses”, and allowing for “consensus and contestation.”¹⁹ While the scholars here agree that deliberative democracy leads to successful environmental policy, Dryzek and Stevenson add that this is only possible if the elite and public spaces are “at a critical distance.”²⁰ Sherman and Smith also stipulate that because deliberative democracy must take the time to consider all viewpoint, which may not always be in favor of environmental consciousness, it may be less effective in achieving successful environmental policy.²¹ It is important to make clear here that deliberative democracy and its relationship with environmental democracy is seen as one of the best ways to achieve environmental policy that is just for everyone involved; however, that does not necessarily mean it always breeds the environmental policy that is best for the environment. On the whole, deliberative democracy and its perceived benefits for environmental policy is this theoretical foundation of this paper’s research. The findings of this paper will explore the implications right-wing populist movements challenge or advance the capacity for deliberation in the U.S. and Germany.

2.3 Right-wing Populism, Liberal Democracy, and Environmental Dilemmas

Environmental democracy mirrors the values (i.e. transparency, minority right, civilian participation, etc.) and can be a characteristic of a liberal democracy as environmental democracy can be one of the many qualities that make up a form of government. Thus, analyzing how scholars discuss the implications of right-wing populism on liberal democracy can provide insight into the relationship between right-wing populism and environmental democracy.²² The main conclusion to be drawn in assessing this body of literature is that some scholars stipulate that populism can advance liberal democracy, but it ultimately erodes liberal democracies.²³ Mudde and Kaltwasser state that populism can enhance liberal democracy by giving voice to and mobilize “excluded sectors of society” as well as by “support[ing] popular sovereignty and majoritarian rule” in political decision-making.²⁴ However, if the excluded sector of society is a very small in that it does not represent majoritarian rule, populism that gives more weight to this excluded group’s voice can threaten the voice of other groups. The result is a threat to liberal democracy in that pluralism and minority rights (of groups not part of a populist movement) are rejected.²⁵ In this paper’s research, Mudde and Kaltwasser’s qualifications for a populist movement advancing versus threatening liberal democracy provided the broader foundation for determining if the AfD and Trump Administration threaten environmental democracy at the higher level of abstraction of liberal democracy.²⁶

At a lower level of abstraction, the literature unpacking ramifications of right-wing movements on environmental policy provides a historical farming for contemporary right-wing positions on environmental issues. Scholars in this camp focus on one of two areas: 1. right-wing desires for secure property rights and 2. right-wing tendencies to favor consumerism.²⁷ Scholars also posit that political orientation is much more impactful on environmental policy decision in the United States as opposed to other nations.

McCarthy and Goldstein and Hudak best exemplify research on right-wing desires to secure property rights.²⁸ McCarthy unpacks the motives of the Wise Use Movement, which was a 1980s U.S. right-wing movement opposed to environmental conservation policies, by arguing that the movement opposed such policies because they saw them as a federal threat by political elites to their individual rights to control their property.²⁹ Goldstein and Hudak expand upon this research by assessing right- and left-wing party positions on environment policy and finding that right-wing parties in the U.S. wished to overturn environmental initiatives due to their perceived threat in property rights; in contrast, right-wing parties in the EU had little concern over the relationship of property rights and sustainability initiatives.³⁰

Beyond property rights, Ziegler and Rinfret both argue that political orientation plays a significant role in environmental policy positions in the U.S. as there is a strong right-wing opposition to anthropogenic climate change due to conservative values of individual economic freedom and free market principles, but this is not the case in EU countries and China.³¹ Rinfret's argument is in line with Ziegler in that ecological modernization has caught-on in Europe but not the U.S. partially due to a right-wing and, even, populist interest in consumerism.³² Ultimately, the conclusions of this camp of literature will be built upon by this research paper as the U.S. right-wing notion of limited government for individual economic freedom will be revealed as the core underpinning of the Trump Administration's position on energy policy but the same will not be applicable outside the U.S.

3. Methodology

A social linguistic discourse analysis is employed because this approach allows me to analyze the relationship between right-wing populist understandings of environmental issues and their relationship with tangible policy proposals and decisions as well as the resulting implications on environmental democracy.³³ This approach is useful because it is a constructivist, text focused mode of discourse analysis that is used "to understand how texts work to organize and construct other phenomena."³⁴ This research analyzes texts to explain why the AfD advocates for enhanced public participation in environmental policymaking, which advances environmental democracy, while the Trump Administration's policies limit environmental democracy by eliminating avenues for public participation in environmental decision making. This research also considers the deeper, historical roots of each movement's understanding of environmental issues for the most comprehensive answer to the research question.

The first of three analytical steps was to determine the meanings the AfD and Trump administration ascribe to energy issues. Energy issues were chosen specifically (as opposed to other environmental issues, i.e. conservation, air pollution, etc.) because energy policy is the solution to the environment's greatest threat, which is climate change. This is because mitigating climate change requires the steep reduction of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, primarily carbon dioxide, which primarily comes from fossil fuels used for energy generation. To determine how the AfD ascribes meaning to energy issues, I coded official AfD pamphlets and statements from politicians between February 6th, 2013 (its date of establishment) and December 31st, 2017 (a few months after the party won 13% of the national vote) for the words *Energie* (energy), *Klima* (climate), and *Umwelt* (environment). For the Trump Administration, I analyzed President Trump's presidential announcement speech from June 16th, 2015, the 2016 Republican primary election debates, Trump's Republican nomination speech, Trump's general elections debates, Trump's inauguration speech, and White House publications regarding the Trump Administration's position on energy and environmental issues (until November 3rd, 2017 when the Administration acknowledged the existence of anthropogenic climate change) by coding them for energy, climate, and environment. I then looked for patterns in the way in which these terms were discussed and mapped their representations. In particular, I searched for how the AfD and Trump administration associated energy, climate, and environment, the terms often used to describe those three concepts, and the general context in which they were discussed. For example, in the Second Presidential Debate, Trump stated, "The EPA is so restrictive that they are putting energy companies out of business."³⁵ I coded EPA under environment and noted its association with 'restrictive'. Then coded energy companies under energy and noted its association with out of business. I mapped or uncovered the linked association between the content in the environment node and energy node as environmental policy limiting economic growth and this then presents itself as a reoccurring pattern throughout the Trump Administrations rhetoric.

In the second step, I assessed the patterns that emerged against the EDI's indicators to better understand how the meanings made by each case implicate their policy decisions and, consequently environmental democracy. For the final step, I took the meanings mapped in step one and evaluated the historical roots of right-wing values in the U.S. and Germany to determine why the current meanings exist in a larger historical narrative. Overall, I analyzed 90 documents, 45 of which were German texts. Throughout the research process I made an effort to insure the credibility of this interpretivist research by considering my cultural competence and conducting extra research and learning from my faculty advisor to expand my cultural competence. Regarding reflexivity, I am aware of my biases toward climate change mitigation and my favorable position toward current German environmental policy. I was able to work toward overcoming these biases by having a mentor with minimal knowledge or stake in climate policy and extensive peer review by professors and fellow students who do not work in climate related fields. With these evaluative standards in mind, I was able to conduct a more reliable analysis.

4. Analysis

After conducting a discourse analysis with a structural linguistic approach, it is found that AfD policy proposals advance environmental democracy because the party's understanding of energy issues is rooted in the German, historical right-wing narrative of giving voice to the middle class. On the other hand, policies from the Trump Administration limit environmental democracy because the Administration's understanding of energy issues is rooted in the larger U.S. conservative narrative of limited government for the sake of economic growth.³⁶

4.1 Historical Narratives

The characteristics of a particular right-wing movement are highly dependent on its context. Thus, it is necessary to look at the broader, historical right-wing narrative in which the current Germany and U.S. right-wing populism is situated. There are distinct threads of a historical, German right-wing appeal to the middle class in the AfD's discussion of energy issues. Whereas in the U.S., there are clear connections between how the Trump Administration understands energy policies and the traditionally conservative interest in limited government for the sake of economic freedom. While these two right-wing characteristics are highlighted in this paper, the characteristics are not exclusive or the only major characteristics of right-wing movements in Germany or the U.S.

The German narrative of the government creating safeguards to ensure middle class political activity has tricked though the Germany political right's identity over the last 200 years. The emergence of *der Mittelstand* (or the middle class) in right-wing politics came during the European Enlightenment where the bourgeois became dissatisfied with traditional, monarchical governments that did not always represent middle class concerns.³⁷ With the Weimar Republic in Germany, *der Mittelstand* entered into the political discourse of the right through Social Conservatism. During this time, the middle class experienced numerous setbacks, both social and economic.³⁸ In response, the Weimar Republic saw itself as a force for ensuring political participation of *der Mittelstand*.³⁹ *Der Mittelstand* was then a distinct part of the Nazi political platform as point 16 in the 25 Points of Hitler's German Workers Party advocated for "the creation and maintenance of a healthy middle class."⁴⁰ The link between the middle class and environmental democracy will be expanded upon in section 4.2 where the AfD speaks of energy in terms of its economic and environmental burdens on the middle class.⁴¹

In the U.S., there is certainly an appeal to middle class citizens throughout the Trump campaign, but the dominant discourse surrounding energy issues is one of limited government for the sake of economic growth. This notion has been a key part of the American political right's identity throughout the history of the U.S., beginning with the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights.⁴² These two documents protect individual liberties for citizens to act with limited government interference.⁴³ These ideals emerged as a constant throughout various conservative movements, as explained by Immanuel Ness.⁴⁴ Moreover, the desire for limited government intervention for unrestricted economic freedom was present in right-wing opposition to environmental regulations seen in the literature review's discussion of McCarthy's and Goldstein and Hudak's work.⁴⁵ With the historical themes of the U.S. and German right-wing in mind, the next step is to see how these themes have manifested themselves in the discourse surround energy issues.

4.2 Understandings of Energy Issues

While both the AfD and Trump Administration are considered right-wing populists, they understand energy issues in two distinct ways.⁴⁶ The AfD speaks about energy issues in terms of its relationship with the German middle class. Energy reform is seen as an unnecessary economic and environmental burden placed on the middle class by the German political elite. This understanding is mapped in Figure 1. To begin, the AfD sees energy reform as unnecessary because the AfD denies the existence of climate change. AfD publications and members make the argument that energy policy and targets are made based off unreliable science coming from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). This is indicated through language that doubts the IPCC's climate science, such as *nicht bestätigt* (not confirmed), *können...nicht erklären* (can...not explain), and *nicht abbilden können* (cannot indicate).⁴⁷ Since the AfD denies the existence of climate change, they render energy reform as unnecessary. Furthermore, because the AfD sees energy reform in as in place for no necessary reason, it is placing an unnecessary burden on the middle class.

The first unnecessary burden is by economic harm and the second is an environmental threat to the middle class. The AfD argues that energy reform raises energy prices, threatens international competition, creates high taxes, and limits small-business competitiveness. One textual example of this position is, "*Die EEG-Umlage belastet nicht nur das Handwerk, sondern die gesamte mittelständliche Wirtschaft in Deutschland weit überproportional.*"⁴⁸ In this

quote, words such as *belasten* (to strain) and *überproportional* (disproportionality high) explain the economic burden on Germany's middle class. The AfD also sees that energy reform as placing environmental burdens on the middle class because the placement of wind turbines is not always done with the public's interest in mind. On the whole, these are burdens that are placed on the middle-class due to idealistic, utopian objectives of the political elite who wish to mitigate climate change. This is made clear when the AfD describes Germany's climate objectives as *utopisch* (utopian), *unerrichbar* (unattainable), and *abgehoben* (aloof).⁴⁹ These characterizations of climate policy are all from the viewpoint of the middle class.

While both the AfD and Trump Administration oppose existing energy policy in their respective contexts, the Trump Administration speaks of energy policy in terms of limited government intervention for the sake of unrestricted economic growth. In essence, the Trump Administration sees current energy policy as in place for combating climate change and environmental issues; however, these policies are placing unnecessary restriction on the economic benefits of energy that come from American energy dominance and energy independence. These representations are mapped in Figure 2. The clearest depiction of the Trump Administration's conception of energy is the Administration's Unleashing American Energy campaign. Here, energy is seen in terms of its potential for economic growth, particularly in amount of money America's untapped energy will bring to the U.S. (ex. "Current estimates suggest that we have 20 percent more oil than Saudi Arabia, valued at over \$13 trillion, if prices average at \$50 a barrel.")⁵⁰ Moreover, President Trump sees tapping U.S. energy potential as "critical to an American economic boom", which is discussed using language such as "hiring", "employing", and "adding jobs."⁵¹ Ensuring this economic boom requires energy dominance and energy independence.⁵² However, current regulations on energy due to climate change mitigation and environmental concerns are restricting energy dominance and independence which intern limited economic growth.

President Trump frames environmental and climate policy as constraining economic growth most clearly in his remarks at the Unleashing American Energy Event. This can be seen in President Trump's comment on environmental regulations stating, "We're ending intrusive EPA regulations that kill jobs, hurt family farmers and ranchers, and raise the price of energy so quickly and substantially."⁵³ Here, President Trump uses charged language such as "intrusive" and "killing" to describe the burden EPA regulations are placing on jobs and energy prices, which indicated a limiting of economic growth. A similar argument is made in President Trump's statement on the Paris Agreement, "In order to protect American jobs, companies and workers, we've withdrawn the United States form the one-sided Paris Climate Accord."⁵⁴ President Trump see's the Paris Agreement as damaging to American jobs and workers, and to lift this restrictive burden he has decided to pull out to the agreement. It is the removal of these restrictions that implicates the extent of environmental democracy in the U.S.

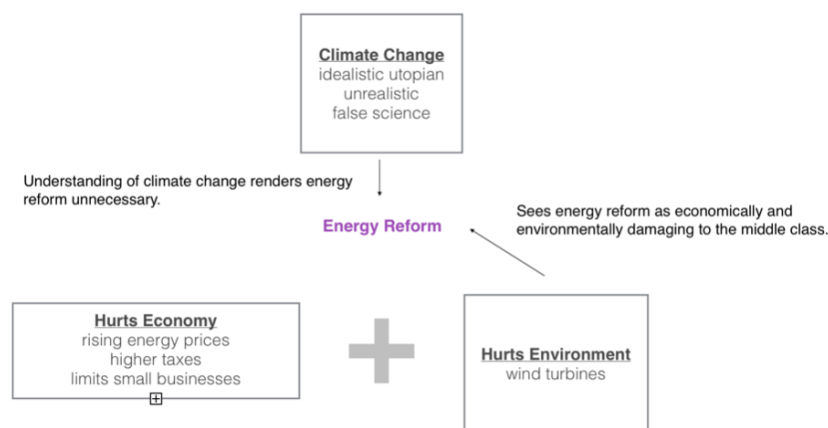


Figure 1: Alternative für Deutschland's understanding of energy reform

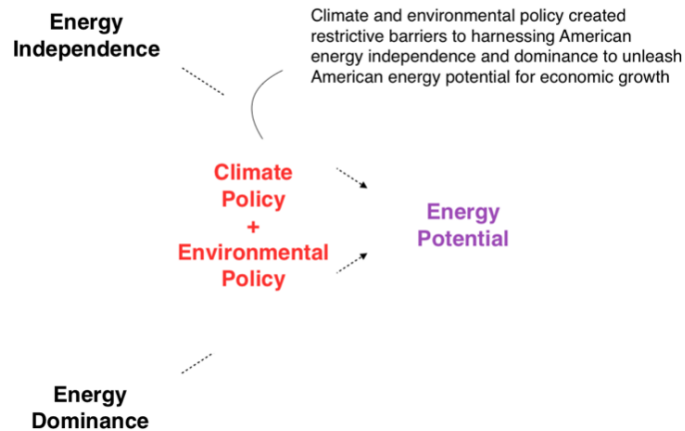


Figure 2: Trump Administration's understanding of American Energy policy

4.3 Constructed Meanings as an Explanation

Significant overlap exists between the AfD and Trump Administration's speech around energy issues. However, because the AfD seeks to give voice to the middle class, a large and excluded sector of society, the AfD is a right-wing populist party that advances environmental democracy. This was made clear in section 4.2 and is present in the AfD policy proposals such as "*Ersatzloses Streichen von EEG, EnEV und EEWärmeG*" (delete without replacement the German Renewable Energy Sources Act and Energy Savings Ordinance) and "*Ausweis von Vorrangflächen für Windenergieanlage nur mit Zustimmung der Bürger*" (identification of priority areas for wind farms only with consent of the citizens).⁵⁵ While these policy objects may not lead to successful environmental policy (because the AfD is advocating for the elimination of climate friendly energy policies and making it more difficult to construct wind farms), these policy proposals advance environmental democracy because they are voicing concerns of the middle class. Because the AfD is voicing the concerns of the middle class, a very large portion of the German population, with regard to environmental issues, the AfD is advancing Pillar 2: Public Participation and Pillar 3: Access to Justice of the EDI.⁵⁶ It is necessary to note that even though the AfD maintains a climate denialist platform, it can still advance environmental democracy because it is creating avenues for public participation in environmental decision making with its policy proposals.

The Trump Administration, on the other hand, is limiting environmental democracy in nearly all respects because it is abolishing all policies that are seen as restrictive to American energy independence and dominance. Because the Trump Administration adheres to the traditional conservative narrative of limited government for economic growth, it understands current environmental policies as restrictive to the economic potential of America's energy industry. This value of limited government is eliminating dozens of policies that safeguard public justice, participation, access to information regarding environmental concerns. For example the Presidential Memorandum Regarding Construction of the Keystone XL Pipeline waives a variety of mechanisms for consulting various agencies and public bodies mandated in Executive Order 13337 Issuance of Permits with Respect to Certain Energy Related Facilities and Land Transportation Crossing on the International Boundaries of the United States, and Presidential Executive Order on Promoting Energy Independence and Economic Growth revokes 19 regulations related to greenhouse gas emission and carbon pricing.⁵⁷ Overall, the meanings made around certain policy issues provide insight into the tangible implications of policy.

5. Conclusion

It is found that because the AfD discusses energy reform in terms of the middle class the party advances environmental democracy; however, the Trump Administration is limiting environmental democracy understands energy in the

context of limited government for economic growth. The largest limitation was that the AfD does not have implemented environmental or energy policies. Future research could conduct a similar study to this paper's but with the AfD policies in mind rather than just policy proposals. One could also study if the policy proposals of the AfD truly lead to an advancement in environmental democracy given its yet to be seen policies.

Determining why the understandings of these right-wing movements either advance or limit environmental democracy in the U.S. and Germany not only adds to literature on right-wing movements and democracy but it also gives us insight into many broader understandings of our global society operates. This research points to how right-wing movements of today are still tied to historical narratives from hundreds of years ago. It reminds us that not all right-wing populism is the same and to determine its effects on a society one must consider the context in which the movement is situated. This discourse analysis also unveils how a meaning around energy issues can limit the policy options available under certain leadership. And most importantly, scholars concerned with saving our globe from dangerous anthropogenic climate change must critically think about the abilities of different governmental systems in completing such an arduous task. When assessing the Trump Administration, slashing environmental policies that create space for public participation threatens the ability of environmentally conscious voices to be heard in future policy choices. Thus, it is necessary to safeguard public participation within environmental policies to best combat climate change in the U.S. However, the opposite case is present in Germany, where encouraging public participation seemingly would hinder environmental progress as public participation in Germany would prevent energy transition friendly choices, as seen in the case of the AfD. This dichotomous relationship calls into question the ability of environmental democracy and domestic policy choices in the U.S. and Germany to combat climate change. Meaning, there is no single paradigm for policymakers to overcome climate change and the policy frameworks/ choices must be dealt with on a contextual basis.

6. Acknowledgements

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