




# Fueling the backlash: The Fuel Uproar 2.0 and the political re-articulation of legitimacy in Swedish climate politics

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## ABSTRACT

Popular backlashes against decarbonization transitions have attracted growing attention from scholars and policymakers alike. This article examines the articulation of backlash politics in Swedish climate governance through the lens of post-foundational political theory, drawing primarily on Laclau and Mouffe's writings on hegemony, articulation, and empty signifiers. Focusing on the digital protest movement "The Fuel Uproar 2.0" and the subsequent policy reversals in Swedish fuel politics following the 2022 election, the article traces how heterogeneous grievances were condensed into a chain of equivalence centered on the fossil fuel car as a nodal point, and how this articulation contributed to a broader rearticulation of legitimacy in Swedish climate politics. Rather than functioning as a delegitimizing force alone, the Fuel Uproar contributed to the production of new legitimacies, in which popular acceptance has increasingly become a precondition for, rather than an outcome of, climate policy. A central reflection is that populist mobilization and technocratic, market-oriented climate governance have operated not as opposing political projects but as complementary fronts within a shared hegemonic formation, a dynamic that sits uneasily with orthodox theoretical interpretations of the relationship between populism and technocracy.

## 1. Introduction

The task of establishing legitimacy for decarbonization transitions remains a key challenge for policymakers and scholars alike. Particularly as backlash politics seem to be omnipresent in the current political conjuncture, not least in the field of decarbonization governance (Patterson, 2023). As automobility remains a key sector in efforts to reduce emissions, automobility politics has been a fertile terrain for popular backlashes, and the combustion engine has emerged as one of many drivers of the so-called culture war (Loader, 2024). In both American (Bromley-Trujillo & Nolette, 2023) and European (Reitz & Jörke, 2021) contexts, the right to automobility has emerged as a recurring trope, predominantly among far-right parties. Posited as a symbol of personal freedom, juxtaposed against the authoritarian infringements of estranged urban elites, the car has taken on renewed importance in contemporary populist discourses (Verlinghieri & Schwanen, 2020). It is not a new phenomenon; the concept of petro-masculinities (Allen, 2022; Heiliger, 2021) and petro-industrial nostalgia (Berger, 2019; Petrović, 2017) are established concepts in academia. However, the price surges of the early 2020s have lent an intensified ideological ferocity to these discourses (von Uexkull et al., 2024).

The Russian-Ukrainian war has had a deep impact on gas and crude oil prices, causing price hikes on motor fuels (Zhang et al., 2024), thus

creating a perfect storm for automobility politics. Several European countries were quick to introduce subsidies on fuel. In comparison, price caps and temporary subsidies on certain food items were deemed unfeasible, even though these price changes often exceeded the rise in fuel costs (Amaglobeli et al., 2023). In the current political conjuncture, there seems to be a particular political salience around fuel and cars as symbolic battlegrounds. The right to automobility has often been based on arguments of freedom and liberty (Rajan 2006; Rajan 2007; Mattioli et al., 2020), and in the aftermath of the pandemic years, and the subsequent proliferation of libertarian critiques of "authoritarian" lockdowns, automobility as a signifier of personal freedom seems to have been given new lifeblood (Marquet et al., 2024). These combinations of crisis and transitional processes have created a fertile ground for backlash politics.

This article discusses the recent backlash in Swedish politics (Malm et al., 2025; Vowles & Ekberg, 2026) through the emergence of the digital protest group "The Fuel Uproar 2.0." In somewhat simplified terms, this article examines the rearticulation of legitimacy, and what is considered a "legitimate concern" (Metzger et al., 2017) in Swedish climate politics in general and fuel politics in particular. More precisely, I aim to critically examine the rearticulation of Swedish climate politics through the rise of the Fuel Uproar. To argue that the radical shift/backlash in Swedish climate politics has been brought about by the establishment of a digital interest group would require a substantial leap

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of imagination. This is not my intention. Rather, the article takes aim at exploring the role that the Fuel Uproar has played in this rearticulation, hypothesizing that the current articulation has been discursively pushed through Fuel Uproar's role as a "popular think tank" as postulated by Portinson Hylander et al. (2024). Whereas backlash insurrections have previously been discussed in the literature as processes of delegitimation (Patterson, 2023; Portinson Hylander et al., 2024), this article instead focuses on what new legitimacies are generated through these processes. Furthermore, this paper aims to enrich discussions on backlashes and legitimacy by situating them within a broader post-foundational framework for analyzing decarbonization policy and politics. Post-foundational political theory has previously entered planning studies, particularly through explorations of post-politics (e.g., Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012; Metzger et al., 2014; Metzger, 2017) and, in a similar vein, explorations of de-politicization and re-politization of contested infrastructural projects (Legacy, 2022), or mediatic representations of energy transitions (Weber, 2024). This article contributes to the burgeoning literature by applying the insights of post-foundational political thinking to issues of backlashes and legitimacy.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: First, I provide a definition of backlash politics and legitimacy as discussed in the existing literature, attending to emblematic cases and concepts, focusing in particular on "the losers of globalization"-hypothesis, in its various iterations, as an explanatory model for backlashes. I then briefly outline the central tenets of post-Marxist theories on hegemony as postulated by Laclau and Mouffe and to a lesser extent Stuart Hall, attending primarily to Laclau and Mouffe's concepts of articulation and empty signifiers. The focus is then turned to the case: The Swedish Fuel Uproar, and the backlash in Swedish climate politics. Zooming in on the discursive coalitions that have formed between these movements and political parties, I then present recent policy developments that have taken place in the field of fuel politics, opening up for a critical discussion on the connections between popular backlashes and legitimation processes. Thus, following the abductive approach, outlined in the methods section, the Swedish case provides a way to discuss the formation of backlash and the new legitimacies they influence.

### 1.1. Backlash Politics and Legitimacy

Often, the term 'backlash' is used in everyday language to refer to conservative political reactions against progressive social or political change. While this holds true for most scholarly explorations of backlashes, most academic definitions would rather be an abrupt and forceful negative response from several actors within a political system, regardless of their ideological orientation (Alter & Zürn, 2020; Madsen et al., 2018). This reaction, often volatile and unpredictable, seeks to reverse a particular political turn or policy development. It can involve various participants, ranging from citizens to political elites and organized interest groups. Backlash is a subcategory of the broader concept of "enactment politics" (Hacker & Pierson, 2019), which deals with how policies are contested after their initial passage. It represents a fundamental challenge to the policy itself and the authority of those who support it. Of course, disagreement within a shared framework of public authority is an inherent part of democratic decision-making. Backlash, however, goes beyond this by directly questioning the legitimacy of the policy action.

A well-established principle across many social science disciplines is that social opposition to decarbonization efforts is likely to emerge if they are not perceived as fair (Abrams et al., 2020). Such perceptions can be rooted in measurable, material injustices caused by the distributional effects of policies, for example, the uneven impacts of carbon pricing (Maestre-Andrés et al., 2019). Economic impacts often tend to be conceptualized as high individual costs, with lower-income households being especially vulnerable to the burden of unfair policies (Carattini et al., 2018; Povitkina et al., 2021). Another line of thought concerns

spatial disparities, which often focus on rural and *peri*-urban areas that may lack viable transportation alternatives, further exacerbating the economic strain (Arning & Ziefle, 2020; Douenne and Fabre, 2022). Other strands of thought worth mentioning concern issues of recognition and procedural justice. The former can be loosely defined as the recognition of differences in social groups and individuals, the cultural status order in which they find themselves, and how these orders and differences affect their ability to participate in society and politics (Fraser, 2008) and the latter as the fairness, or lack thereof, inherent in the governance processes. In the field of decarbonization backlashes, such perspectives tend to focus on the recognition, symbolic, and (non)participatory dimensions, not seldom focusing on the marginalized position of rural communities within transition governance (Radtke & Löw Beer, 2024). Numerous researchers have proposed ways to mitigate perceptions of unfairness through specific policy tools and governance models that emphasize new and enhanced approaches to public participation (Abrams et al., 2020; Bello-Bravo et al., 2022; Hügel & Davies, 2020).

As outlined above, the explanations as to why backlashes occur are, albeit often interrelated, nonetheless diverse. When it comes to the question of the possible detrimental effects of backlashes, however, the literature seems more unified in its reply: Decarbonization backlashes are either a manifestation of a legitimacy deficit (for instance, Wanvik & Haarstad, 2021), and/or as delegitimation processes in and of themselves (Portinson Hylander et al., 2024). Somewhat simplified, the central tenets of legitimacy theory would localize this to either problems of input (the formulation of the policy) or output (how citizens are affected by the policy). Later contributions to legitimacy theory add throughput (the quality of the decision process, for instance, the level of participation and transparency in the governance process) (Schmidt, 2013). Notwithstanding the merits of legitimacy theory, I argue that what is missing in this account is the complex battlegrounds of social and political meaning-making. If legitimacy theory aims at understanding what "people" accept or reject, then the post-foundational rebuttal would be that "the people" as a social category does not exist outside of the discourses in which they are mobilized. Rather than consult the people, Laclau argues that: "the task of radical politics is to construct the People" (2006).

Though recent contributions to the literature have highlighted the multifaceted drivers behind backlashes such as moral arguments (Portinson Hylander et al., 2024) and/or distrust in political institutions (Remme et al., 2022; Ewald et al., 2022), the question of how and in which ways backlashes influence new legitimacies largely remains unanswered. While previous studies of policy backlashes have been examined as manifestations of lacking legitimacy or alternatively as delegitimizing processes, this article proposes that they simultaneously contribute to shaping new forms of legitimacy. Moreover, the article adds to the small but burgeoning literature aiming to embed discussions about climate politics and legitimacy (or lack thereof) in explorations of hegemonic (in)stability (Vowles & Hultman, 2021; Arsel et al., 2021; Ward & Vieira, 2024).

### 1.2. Losers of globalization? Populism for the privileged?

Examinations of backlash communities frequently invoke varying iterations of the term "losers of globalization" (Hartmann et al., 2022). Put shortly, the term denotes groups of citizens who have seen their material well-being and possibilities of class mobility diminish as a result of globalization processes, financialization and the denationalization of industries (Teney et al., 2014). One paper invoking the "losers of globalization" thesis is Tatham & Peters (2023). They center their study on the concept of policy "support gaps" among the public. In a bold conclusion, they state that results indicate that: "If policymakers wish to avoid activating cleavages along the yellow vest-urban elite divide, then they should avoid high fuel taxes, green earmarking, and invoking citizens' personal responsibility" (ibid., p. 593).

Adding that more moderate tax spikes might be perceived as legitimate if coupled with economic distribution measures, the authors do not problematize the conflict lines of “urban elites” and ordinary citizens put forward by the protesters: climate policies run the risk of triggering social unrest if they do not cater to the preferences of some of the polity’s more neglected citizens. These are the peripheral, less qualified folk, who often tend to be the losers of globalization compared to highly educated white-collar city-dwellers. Other researchers have questioned this line of thought. Hartmann et al (2022), question the empirical validity behind the term and its applicability to ongoing populist surges. In their examination of populist surges in Germany, they conclude that there is no support for the “left behind”-argument as a determining factor for the rise of far-right AfD.

This speaks to a recurring rift in the literature, which somewhat simplified can be conceptualized as a gap between the “left behind”-hypothesis vis-à-vis the “populism for the privileged” hypothesis as coined by De Cleen and Ruiz Casado (2024). De Cleen & Casado argue that today, most political parties, if not all, must at least profess to be fighting for someone who can at least be claimed to be an “underdog.” This underdog position, in turn, must not necessarily reflect an objective, tangible injustice in material terms, but is nonetheless often articulated in such a way. A fruitful case to observe this binary can be found in the Norwegian social movement-turned-political-party “Nei Til Bompenger” (No To Road Tolls), in Norway, which has been conceptualized both as a potentially generative, populist rupture against modes of sustainable transitions that cater too much to higher income groups and city dwellers (Wanvik & Haarstad, 2021), and as a push-back from mostly relatively privileged car owners, packaged as a “people-driven” intervention against green elites (Aasen and Sælen, 2022) and as an example of elite capture (Remme et al., 2022).

## 2. Hegemony and the articulation of legitimacy

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe revisit and significantly expand the concept of hegemony. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci’s understanding of cultural and ideological reproduction of power, they argue that hegemony should not be understood as a phenomenon confined to class relations or economic structures. Rather, hegemony constitutes a general logic of articulation through which disparate social elements are linked together into temporarily stabilized formations of meaning and power. Politics, in this sense, is not primarily about the representation of pre-given social interests, but about the contingent construction of social objectivities themselves.

This theoretical move is grounded in Laclau and Mouffe’s post-foundational ontology. They begin from the premise that no social order is ever fully grounded or complete. What we commonly refer to as “society” is not a coherent totality that can be objectively articulated, but a fractured and conflictual terrain traversed by contradictions and antagonisms. Any apparent unity is therefore the outcome of political work. As Laclau (1996) argues, society is always the result of a laborious “suturing” of heterogeneous elements into a provisional whole. Importantly, this does not imply a rejection of universality as such. Rather, universality is understood as necessarily contingent: “The impossibility of a universal ground does not eliminate its need; it just transforms the ground into an empty place which can be partially filled in a variety of ways (the strategies of this filling is what politics is about)” (Laclau, 1996, p. 59). Hegemony, in Laclau’s framework, thus refers to the process through which particular demands, identities, or meanings come to occupy this empty place of universality, presenting themselves as expressions of “the whole” or of “the people” as such.

In this respect, Laclau, and, to a lesser extent Mouffe, differs from other post-Marxist thinkers. As noted by Colpani (2022), Laclau is often grouped together with Stuart Hall due to their shared engagement with hegemony and popular politics. However, there are important differences between their approaches. Whereas Hall’s (1988) analyses remain

closely tied to historically specific political conjunctures, Laclau elevates hegemony to an ontological level, treating it as a general logic of politics that operates across contexts. Hegemony, for Laclau, is not merely one political strategy among others, but the very condition of possibility for political order as such. Within this framework, Laclau and Mouffe’s political analysis centers on the emergence of “the people” as a socially constructed and potentially emancipatory political subject (Laclau, 2006, p. 656). Rather than grounding political agency in a specific class position, they focus on the contingent formation of collective identities through political articulation (Laclau, 2005). The central question, particularly for Laclau, is how “the people” comes to be articulated and re-articulated across different political projects. This makes their framework particularly well-suited for analyzing contemporary populist mobilizations (Katsambekis, 2017).

Articulation, in this context, refers to the practice through which meaning is connected or disconnected across discursive elements. Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 105) define articulation as “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified.” Through articulation, heterogeneous demands are linked together in what Laclau terms *chains of equivalence*. These chains do not erase difference but temporarily subordinate it to a shared antagonism. For instance, associations with “ordinary people” may be articulated as synonymous with democratic legitimacy, while climate activism – such as that associated with Fridays for Future or Just Stop Oil – may be disarticulated from the ordinary and instead framed as elitist, urban, or undemocratic disruptions of everyday life. Crucially, articulation is not merely a process of attaching fixed meanings to pre-existing identities. It is equally a process through which those identities themselves are transformed. To articulate popular anger as the voice of “ordinary people” is not simply to label a pre-given group, but to reconfigure what “ordinary people” comes to mean in relation to other social actors and political demands. From this perspective, “the People” (with a capital P) like any class or collective subject, is not an empirical given, but the outcome of hegemonic articulation. Such identities acquire a semblance of universality only insofar as discursive relations temporarily stabilize them as natural or self-evident.

In *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution* (Mouffe, 2022), Chantal Mouffe reiterates several core tenets of her and Laclau’s theory of populism. For Mouffe the task for progressive forces in the Anthropocene is to articulate “the people” through affective chains of equivalence capable of temporarily unifying heterogeneous demands into a shared narrative of domination and exploitation of the many by the few (2022; 2018). In these later works, Mouffe tends to conceptualize this terrain as structured by two analytically distinct political projects: on the one hand, a neoliberal establishment grounded in technocratic governance and post-political consensus; on the other, a populist far-right that mobilizes affects and antagonisms while directing them toward exclusionary and nationalist ends. The normative thrust of Mouffe’s intervention lies in arguing that progressive politics must reclaim the affective and antagonistic dimensions of democracy from the far-right, rather than ceding them to either technocracy or reactionary populism. It would be reductive to claim that Mouffe and/or Laclau have not tended to the populist logic *within* neoliberal projects. After all, they, and particularly Laclau, posit populism as a synonym for the political at large. Moreover, both have written about the populist elements in Thatcherism (Laclau, 2005, p. 78; Mouffe, 2018). Yet, by and large, post-political neoliberalism and the populist right are generally described as two distinct political projects which, as we will return to further on, has its implications for the analysis of the Swedish case.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that it is analytically unproductive to categorize political backlashes, such as those examined in this article, either expressions of the “losers of globalization” or as instances of “populism for the privileged.” From a Laclauian perspective, the crucial issue is not whether such categories accurately describe the social composition of a movement, but how grievances are articulated, condensed, and endowed with political

meaning. Social formations are always contingent, unstable, and overdetermined; their political significance lies in how heterogeneous demands are woven together into a temporary unity. Understanding legitimacy, backlash, and resistance to climate policy, therefore, requires attention to the discursive and affective processes through which “the people” is constructed and mobilized.

### 3. Methodology & methods

This research employed an abductive approach, as defined by [Alvesson and Sköldbberg \(2018\)](#). This method involves interpreting specific cases through the lens of a hypothetical overarching pattern, which offers a potential explanation for observed phenomena. In this approach, empirical evidence, or “clues,” can be considered alongside or even before existing theories. These theories, however, are not rigidly applied but rather serve as a source of inspiration for uncovering patterns that enhance understanding. The research process entails a cyclical interplay between (previous) theory and empirical evidence, with each informing and reinterpreting the other. As [Alvesson and Sköldbberg \(2018, p.5-7\)](#) describe, researchers engage with empirical data, guided by theoretical preconceptions, while simultaneously developing and refining the theory itself. In practice, abductive methods involve systematically confronting emerging data with existing concepts, while constantly remaining open to modifying or extending those concepts when they fail to adequately account for empirical complexity ([Timmermans & Tavory, 2012](#)).

The data subjected to the abductive method consisted of policy documents, government reports, and Swedish mainstream news outlets. The media material was gathered through systematic searches in the Swedish media archive using combinations of terms such as “Fuel Uproar” (Bränsleupproret), “protests,” and “fuel.” Searches for relevant policy documents were structured around concepts related to public authority, legitimacy, and citizen–state relations, including “legitimacy,” “citizens,” “acceptability,” “fuel,” “cars”, and references to “the people.” This approach ensured broad coverage of both public discourse and institutional framings surrounding Fuel Uproar. Inclusion criteria prioritized topical relevance, source credibility and explicit reference to events, discourses, or policy responses associated with Fuel Uproar 2.0, while non-verifiable or duplicate material was excluded. Interpretive notes were continuously revised as emerging patterns were confronted with existing concepts, allowing theory and empirical material to shape one another throughout the analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). All the material was publicly available, and no sensitive personal data was used. To deepen the understanding of the portrayal of the backlashes, media and journalistic sources, particularly generalist newspapers (e.g., Dagens Nyheter, Svenska Dagbladet, and Aftonbladet), were consulted.

The analyzed policy documents include, first, the Act (2017:1201) on the *Reduction of Greenhouse Gas Emissions from Certain Fossil Fuels* (Swedish Parliament, 2017), commonly referred to as the Reduction obligation. Second, the government proposal *Paused Increase of the Reduction Obligation for Petrol and Diesel 2023* (Swedish Government, 2022b) and the government proposal *Temporary Reduction of Tax on Petrol and Diesel* (Swedish Government, 2022a) together illustrate how fuel price pressures had already begun to reshape climate policy decision-making prior to the 2022 election, as the preceding Social Democratic government sought to dampen public debate around fuel costs. Third, the press release *The Climate Bonus Ends on 8 November* (Swedish Government, 2022c) documents the newly elected government's swift cancellation of the electric vehicle purchase subsidy. Fourth, the government bill *Reduction of the Reduction Obligation for Petrol and Diesel* (Swedish Government, 2023a) formalized the policy reorientation through substantial reductions of the mandated blending levels. Fifth, the accompanying press release *The Government Proceeds with Proposal to Lower the Reduction Obligation* (Swedish Government, 2023b) communicated this shift publicly and has been drawn on as a source for the government's stated rationale. Finally, the government's

Climate Action Plan, *All the Way to Net Zero* (Swedish Government, 2023c) outlines the broader strategic direction of Swedish climate policy and has been particularly relevant for the study due to its increased emphasis on legitimacy, cost distribution, and political feasibility.

In addition to these documents, the analysis draws on interpellation debates and written interpellations from the Swedish Parliament (2021–2022), including discussions on fuel prices, fuel taxation, the economic impacts of rising costs, and the right to demonstrate. These debates are treated as a material that captures the politicization of fuel prices, the construction of “the people” in parliamentary rhetoric, and the articulation of legitimacy claims during the period leading up to the 2022 election.

The case selection is motivated by the fact that Sweden has long been regarded – and self-described – as a frontrunner in climate politics. However, since the election of the new government in 2022, Sweden's greenhouse gas emissions have risen for the first time in 15 years, which several sources have connected to the reduction obligation discussed in this article ([SEPA, 2025](#)). Another telling reflection of the rapid decline of Sweden's “frontrunner” identity can be found in its trajectory on the Climate Change Performance Index, where it had reclaimed and maintained a leading position between 2018 and 2021, ranking second on the policy dimension in 2021, narrowly behind Finland. This trajectory shifted sharply thereafter: in 2023 Sweden fell to tenth place in the policy category, before plunging to thirty-fourth in 2024—the most dramatic decline recorded in the history of the index (2025) which underlines its relevance as a case study for the general trend of backlashes against decarbonization politics.

## 4. Sweden and the Fuel Uproar

### 4.1. The Fuel Uproar and the fuel election of 2022

The Fuel Uproar 2.0, established in 2019, rapidly ascended to become Sweden's largest Facebook group with over half a million members by 2022. Advocating for the reduction of fuel prices through online posts, campaigns and stickers, the Fuel Uproar effectively became a “popular think tank”, as formulated by [Portinson Hylander et al., \(2024, p.15\)](#), that developed and sharpened “arguments against mainstream energy- and climate policies.” Though the line of argumentation was geared towards any perceived unfair distribution of costs towards motorists (and particularly rural motorists), the reduction obligation policy<sup>1</sup> in particular came to be the group's most intensely criticized policy. According to the available data, the broad membership base of the group seems to be diverse in terms of demography, material standards, and political inclination ([Ewald et al., 2022](#)). However, the messaging and rhetoric put forward by the leadership and its most ardent online-posters is clearly right-leaning, underpinned by low trust in government and environmental institutions, as well as a more skeptical view of climate change ([Portinson Hylander et al., 2024](#)).

Before eventually losing momentum amid internal conflicts and public controversies, the Fuel Uproar played a significant role in elevating fuel prices to the top of the political agenda ahead of the 2022 national election. The group's rapid digital growth attracted extensive media attention, prompting several political parties to engage directly with its leadership. Representatives of the Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats, and the Sweden Democrats all held meetings with Fuel Uproar spokespersons ([Lund et al., 2022](#)), and the communication departments were quick to repost Fuel Uproar's online posts ([Vergara,](#)

<sup>1</sup> Sweden introduced its biofuel blending mandate in 2018, relatively late within the EU. Previously, Sweden employed a tax reduction for all biofuels, which, classified as “state aid” by EU regulations, required ongoing EU Commission approval, creating policy uncertainty. Seeking a long-term solution, the Swedish government opted for a mandate. The initial mandate levels were 2.6% for petrol and 19.3% for diesel (Swedish Parliament, 2017:1201).

2022). Within the conservative bloc, lowering fuel prices became a central campaign issue, and energy and fuel costs emerged as among the most salient topics in the 2022 national election campaign (Gadd et al., 2022). As one of Fuel Uproar's leading figures stated in a major Swedish newspaper: "Our biggest achievement is that we have made it legitimate to talk about fuel costs. Previously, you were just seen as a climate denier" (Lund et al., 2022, author's translation).

This reframing was also evident in parliamentary debates, where the Fuel Uproar was repeatedly invoked as a shorthand for popular dissent over fuel prices. In one exchange, the movement's spokesperson was explicitly referenced when opposition MPs questioned the Social Democratic finance minister about potential measures to reduce fuel taxes, noting that the opposition had discussed the matter with representatives from "both the Fuel Uproar and the fuel companies" (Swedish Parliament, 2022). Attempts by the Green Party to respond to such concerns—most notably through proposals to lower income taxes in rural and semi-rural municipalities—did little to stem the criticism directed at them. In the same parliamentary session, a Moderate Party MP, now chair of the Finance Committee, rhetorically asked: "How can it be that the Fuel Uproar—that is to say the people—are not allowed to demonstrate in an autocade on the first of May, when the Social Democrats are allowed to do precisely this?" (Swedish Parliament, 2021).

Similar dynamics were visible in the Sweden Democrats' election campaigns for both the 2022 national election and the 2024 European Parliament election. The party intensified its efforts to brand itself as explicitly car-friendly, using veteran car meetings as sites for grassroots mobilization and deploying slogans such as "The EU should not destroy Swedish car culture!" While the Fuel Uproar was not the origin of the Sweden Democrats' engagement with automobility politics – the party had previously established "SD-Motor," an internal interest group for car enthusiasts – the renewed media attention surrounding fuel prices, to a significant extent catalyzed by Fuel Uproar, reinforced this strategic orientation. Swedish media outlets later reported that the party had even sought to establish more formal links with members of the Fuel Uproar, allegations that the party subsequently denied (Hellerud & Ekström, 2023).

It is worth noting that the preceding Social Democratic government had already moved to dampen fuel price pressures prior to the 2022 election. In response to the price shock triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it proposed both a suspension of the scheduled 2023 increase in reduction obligation levels (Swedish Government, 2022b) and a temporary tax reduction on petrol and diesel (Swedish Government, 2022a). However, these measures proved insufficient to neutralize the growing public debate around fuel prices or to deflect opposition attacks on the government's climate policy.

#### 4.2. Developments after the 2022 election

Following the September 2022 election, the incoming government found itself facing substantial criticism of its own, not least from the new opposition, for failing to act as swiftly as its pre-election rhetoric had suggested it would. What the incoming government did move swiftly on, however, was the cancellation of the so-called climate bonus, a purchase subsidy for electric vehicles (Swedish Government, 2022c), which they announced just weeks after taking office. It is noteworthy that prior to the election, it had been the Sweden Democrats alone who actively pushed for a full cancellation of the climate bonus, whereas the other center-right parties had at most called for reductions in the subsidy level. The speed and scope of the cancellation thus serve as an illustration of the Sweden Democrats' considerable influence over the new government.

It was not until a year later that the new government managed to live up to its fuel cost-lowering ambitions. In November 2023, the Swedish parliament voted to reduce the mandatory fuel reduction obligation to 6 per cent from 2024 onwards (Swedish Government, 2023a). The reduction was motivated in part by the apparent harm the policy had

caused to the broader public acceptability of climate policy in Sweden: "The proposal was not designed in a way that contributed to popular acceptance of climate policy" (Swedish Government, 2023a, p. 13). According to the government's own estimates, this policy shift was expected to increase annual carbon dioxide emissions by between 4.8 and 8.7 million tons (Lundberg et al., 2023). The following response was indicative of the extent to which fuel politics had been reconfigured: the opposition parties that had originally introduced the reduction obligation now criticized the government for not having lowered it quickly enough. While the mandate had previously been set to increase progressively until 2030, it was now fixed at 6 per cent until 2027, with no clear plan thereafter.

Beyond its immediate policy effects, the fuel backlash has also left a discernible imprint on the broader discursive landscape of Swedish transition governance. As noted by Fischer et al. (2024), arguments invoking justice and legitimacy have increasingly been used to constrain or delay policy change rather than to accelerate it. In debates surrounding car-related policies in particular, appeals to social sustainability for rural populations are frequently mobilized as barriers to ambitious climate measures. This discursive shift is reflected in the government's revised Climate Action Plan (CAP), which places a markedly greater emphasis on legitimacy than previous versions. Whereas earlier CAPs referenced legitimacy only in passing, the revised plan presents it as a guiding principle for the transition, particularly in relation to household costs (Swedish Government, 2023c, p. 59). During the public presentation of the CAP, the Sweden Democrats' spokesperson on energy and climate issues stressed that "popular legitimacy" was now framed as a prerequisite for successful climate action. Such arguments have since become common parlance in the government's political discourse, particularly in response to criticism over declining climate ambitions. Both the Liberal Party's environment minister and the Moderate Party's finance minister have repeatedly referred to popular legitimacy to justify recalibrated climate policies, especially in the transport sector (Swedish Parliament, 2022). At the same time, it has become increasingly apparent which actors are excluded from this conception of "the people." Climate activists and organized civil society. In this sense, the political terrain of Swedish climate governance has been reshaped not only through policy retrenchment, but also through a redefinition of who is considered a legitimate participant in the transition.

Recent research has challenged the empirical foundations of this articulation of popular legitimacy. Survey-based studies indicate that there is widespread public support in Sweden for more ambitious climate policies, including higher carbon taxes, particularly when revenues are redistributed to economically vulnerable groups (Lindvall et al., 2024). Crucially for the present analysis, the same research finds that "value-based aspects, particularly environmental concern, ideological orientation, and trust in government" are more influential determinants of policy acceptance than "factual circumstances such as car ownership, rural residence, and income" (ibid., p. 13).

Sweden's long-standing reputation as a climate frontrunner has always been subject to criticism, particularly when assessed through the lens of consumption-based emissions (Hysing, 2014). However, the radical dismantling of climate policies in recent years has further eroded this already contested image (Malm et al., 2025). The prominence of the Fuel Uproar in 2022 stands in sharp contrast to the political landscape only four years earlier, when Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for Future movement dominated public debate. At the height of their mobilization, climate justice was primarily articulated as a global concern, centered on fairness towards globally disadvantaged groups. In contemporary Swedish politics, by contrast, climate justice—often reframed as "just transition"—has increasingly been mobilized in relation to national distributive concerns, focusing on perceived injustices within Sweden's own transition process (Fischer et al., 2024). Fuel costs have increasingly been positioned not merely as a technical policy issue, but as a marker of political identity. This rearticulation of legitimacy has had exclusionary

effects: while “the people” is invoked as a moral reference point, certain actors are rendered politically marginal. The rearticulation of legitimacy that has evolved in tandem with the establishment of the Fuel Uproar thus extend beyond specific policy outcomes, shaping the boundaries of legitimacy within Sweden’s contemporary climate transition. While invoking “the people” as a moral reference point, governmental actors increasingly dismiss climate activists and organized civil society as lacking representativeness or democratic salience, and even posing a threat to democracy (Forst, 2024; Malm et al., 2025). The political terrain of Swedish climate governance was thus reshaped not only through policy dismantling, but through a transformation of what, and who, could be considered legitimate participants in the so-called transition.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Constructing the people and re-articulating legitimacy

The Fuel Uproar 2.0 functioned as a crucial discursive node through which a particular construction of “the people” could be articulated and mobilized by the now incumbent Swedish government. This articulation hinged on narratives of rural and *peri*-urban exclusion, in which car use came to signify ordinariness. Within this framework, fuel costs were transformed from a technical policy issue into a marker of political identity and conflicting ideologies: climate measures that increased household fuel expenses were framed not merely as unpopular, but as fundamentally illegitimate. This articulation enabled the government to portray opposition to the reduction obligation, and to carbon taxation more broadly, as a homogeneous popular demand, despite evidence suggesting that public opinion was both divided and structured less by socio-economic status or rural–urban location than by ideological orientation, environmental concern, and trust in government (Lindvall et al., 2024).

Drawing on Ernesto Laclau’s theory of hegemony, the Fuel Uproar can be understood as a paradigmatic instance of the establishment of a chain of equivalence: a process through which heterogeneous grievances, ranging from rural marginalization and cost-of-living pressures to anti-establishment sentiment, were condensed into the signifier of disproportionate fuel burdens. As an empty signifier, fuel justice functioned as a nodal point around which discontent could be organized, allowing disparate social groups to coalesce without requiring internal coherence. The populist logic at work thus operated through affective unification rather than programmatic clarity, transforming an ostensibly economic concern into a social and political discourse centered on recognition, fairness, and legitimacy. Central to this process was Fuel Uproar’s success in redefining the boundaries of what could be legitimately articulated within Swedish energy politics. The movement’s claim that it had made it “legitimate to talk about fuel costs” exemplifies a hegemonic intervention in the sense that it reorders/re-articulates what is defined as common sense. Through memes, slogans, and repetitive online narratives, Fuel Uproar performed what Laclau (2005) describes as a re-politicization of the social, shifting debates over reduction obligations from technocratic considerations of emissions trajectories to moral and ideological struggles over belonging, sovereignty, and distributive justice. In doing so, the movement reactivated latent tensions between metropolitan centers and peripheral regions, situating climate policy within a broader antagonistic geography of center and periphery. Rural and *peri*-urban spaces were valorized as sites of authentic Swedish identity, positioned against the perceived cosmopolitanism of metropolitan elites. This spatialized articulation re-scaled the politics of climate transition, reframing global and national governance challenges through the everyday geographies of commuting, fuel stations, and car ownership. At the same time, survey evidence complicates this territorial narrative. While rural residence does exert some influence over policy acceptance, it is suggested to be far less decisive than factors such as environmental concern and political orientation

(Lindvall et al., 2024). This disjunction underscores the extent to which spatial identities function as symbolic resources within political articulation, rather than as straightforward reflections of material conditions and spatial injustice.

### 5.2. Winners and Losers?

This articulation overlaps with, but cannot be reduced to, the dynamics commonly captured by the “winners and losers of globalization” framework. Rather than positioning the Fuel Uproar straightforwardly as material “losers,” the movement’s discourse operated by clearly identifying winners elsewhere: in cities, universities, political institutions, and particularly within green parties and climate movements. In this configuration, the boundary between legitimate grievance and acceptable political demand became increasingly blurred. Underpinning the narrative around the Fuel Uproar and the perceived popular rejection of carbon taxing, is a neoliberal metric of injustice, in which political legitimacy is implicitly measured through household budgets and consumer costs. Climate policies that impose even modest individual costs are rendered temporarily illegitimate, while broader structural transformations recede from view. But why then would fuel prices and automobility-friendly policies more generally be the preferred means of alleviating perceived rural burdens, while alternatives such as income tax reductions gained little traction? From a Laclauian perspective, this apparent paradox could be explained through the symbolic centrality of the car as a political signifier. The car emerged as the primary site through which rural–urban antagonisms were articulated, condensing material concerns, identity claims, and moral evaluations into a single object of political struggle.

Importantly, within this articulation, the car functions not as a neutral object or a generic signifier of mobility, but as a condensed political figure embedded in a chain of equivalence linking “the people,” affordability, and perceived fairness in the energy transition. In practice, the car in Fuel Uproar discourse is never a fully specified category, yet it is consistently understood as the conventional petrol or diesel vehicle, which is to say, the fossil fuel-dependent car. This implicit stability is precisely what allows it to operate as an effective nodal point, condensing a wide range of heterogeneous grievances into a single, intuitively recognizable object of protection.

Within this articulation, electric vehicles occupy a structurally ambivalent position. In parts of the broader European debate, they are framed as insulated from fuel price volatility and therefore aligned with the logic of a fair transition. At the same time, they are also frequently problematized in terms of cost barriers, infrastructural inadequacy in rural contexts, and uncertainties surrounding second-hand markets and battery degradation (Ortar & Ryghaug, 2019). This ambivalence does not destabilize the central signifier but instead reinforces the salience of the fossil fuel car as the default referent in these sorts of political struggle.

The Swedish case further illustrates how this discursive hierarchy is politically institutionalized. Shortly after the formation of the current government, the climate bonus for electric vehicles was dismantled rapidly, a process that occurred significantly faster than the parallel efforts to reduce fuel prices at the pump. Notably, prior to the 2022 election, the removal of this subsidy had primarily been advanced by the Sweden Democrats, whose position subsequently became integrated into the governing coalition’s broader climate and transport agenda. This reflects a broader hegemonic reconfiguration in which the car, as lived and imagined in political discourse, remains anchored in fossil fuel automobility, while electrification is repositioned as secondary, contested, and politically reversible.

For many reasons, then, scholars and policymakers face the complex task of engaging with the perceptions of “left-behindness” without necessarily taking it at face value as crude reflections of material conditions, but as articulated sentiments that might or might not reflect material hardships, that are always mediated through the social. Whilst

its contributions to the field are priceless, this is one area where parts of the social justice/mobility justice literature seem to be stuck in a dead end. If it is presupposed that any backlash to the sort of policy described in this article must necessarily arise from spatial injustices of the kind that critical scholars are comfortable analyzing, then there is little explanatory room left for other forces. In the unjust world we inhabit, spatial injustices are omnipresent. Therefore, anyone setting out to explain the rise of backlashes solely through spatial injustices will inevitably find one. But that leaves little room for the influence of politics and political meaning-making, which draws meaning and gains momentum from material injustices, but ultimately tends to reflect a myriad of sentiments, visions, information, and misinformation. If we accept that humans on average seldom act only through rationality, then we must leave room for explanations that go beyond rationalistic accounts of backlashes as mere reflections of material injustices or failures of public participation.

### 5.3. Delegitimation and relegitimation

As [Förell and Fischer \(2025\)](#) note, the Swedish climate backlash differs from several recent international cases in that it has not been articulated through explicit anti-net-zero rhetoric. Instead, delegitimation has occurred through subtler discursive inversions, enabling policies that increase emissions to be framed as components of a long-term climate strategy, or even as continuations of Sweden's historically ambitious climate stance. What Sweden shares with other emblematic backlashes, however, is the centrality of claims that climate measures lack legitimacy among "ordinary people," particularly when they are perceived to impose economic burdens on households. This has placed the incumbent government in a difficult position. Having effectively delegitimized the previous climate policy framework, it must simultaneously sustain an image of Sweden as a climate frontrunner. The result is a peculiar political standstill: within the prevailing articulation of popular legitimacy, the only legitimate climate position becomes one that refrains from meaningful intervention. In this sense, delegitimation does not merely block specific policies; it constrains the very horizon of political possibility. In the Swedish case, populist appeals to "the people" coexist with a largely technocratic and techno-optimist approach to climate governance, illustrating how affective mobilization and technocratic, self-proclaimed rationality can be mutually reinforcing rather than antagonistic.

It is likely that the Fuel Uproar would not have received the level of media attention it did, nor gained access to central political arenas, without the effects of the Russian invasion in 2021 and the subsequent rise in global fuel prices. It is equally probable that fuel costs would have emerged as a salient issue in the 2022 election even in the absence of the Fuel Uproar. However, when fuel prices began to rise sharply in 2021, the Fuel Uproar had already established itself as a recognizable actor, functioning as a form of popular think tank with a degree of credibility as a single-issue civil society group. In this sense, it operated as a discursive node through which diffuse grievances could be articulated and amplified. The hypothesis advanced here is that the Fuel Uproar, as a signifier of the ordinary "people", played a central role in foregrounding democratic legitimacy as a pivotal argument for the emerging conservative bloc. In parallel, its articulation of fuel costs contributed to a broader reconfiguration of what constitutes a fair or just transition in the Swedish context. Rather than being framed primarily in terms of global justice and responsibility, questions of fairness have increasingly been recast as matters of domestic distribution and household-level burdens.

While the empirical material does not allow for any claims of causality, it is plausible that the Fuel Uproar contributed to lending democratic legitimacy to the political project that followed. What emerged was not a coherent ideological shift, but a partial suturing of grievances, identities, and policy positions into a formation in which appeals to "the people" became central to the rearticulation of legitimate climate

politics.

## 6. Concluding reflections

If one follows Chantal Mouffe's normative call for a "green" or democratic populism, a central question becomes how progressive projects might re-articulate "the people" through chains of equivalence grounded in domination and exploitation. The Swedish case does not contradict this premise, but it does foreground an important complication. Rather than demonstrating a monopolization of affective or antagonistic language by one political camp, it highlights how such articulations can be embedded within, and operate alongside, a largely technocratic and neoliberal policy framework. This points to a broader tension within populist theory itself. Because populism is conceptualized by both Laclau and Mouffe as a general political logic—rather than as a fixed ideological position—political outcomes depend less on whether antagonisms are articulated than on how they are articulated and within which broader hegemonic projects they are situated. From this perspective, the outcome of the 2022 Swedish election is perhaps best understood not as a profound ideological realignment of the electorate but as an instance in which the Right proved more effective at mobilizing affects, organizing grievances, and defining the boundaries of political legitimacy.

The Swedish case thus hints toward a limitation in theoretical frameworks that implicitly juxtapose populist mobilization against technocratic or neoliberal governance. Here, affectively charged rejection of specific climate measures, such as the reduction obligation, has not displaced technocratic reasoning, but has instead been articulated together with a techno-optimist, market-oriented vision of climate transition. Populist appeals to "the people" and technocratic claims of expertise have functioned in a complementary rather than antagonistic manner. In this regard, Stuart Hall's conception of hegemony provides a particularly fruitful analytical lens. Hall's framework accommodates the coexistence of multiple, and even contradictory, ideological elements within a single hegemonic project without presuming incoherence. The Swedish case demonstrates that technocratic neoliberalism and populist mobilization need not function as opposing political projects; rather, they can operate as two fronts of a shared hegemonic formation, unified through a common articulation of legitimacy, affect, and national identity.

More broadly, the Swedish case illustrates how relatively marginal and fragmented forms of dissent can exert disproportionate influence when they resonate with existing discursive structures and are taken up by powerful political actors. As [Portinson Hylander et al. \(2024\)](#) observe, social movements can transform diffuse dissatisfaction with mainstream climate agendas into full-scale de-legitimation. This study adds two further insights: first, that such transformations depend on the formation of strong discursive coalitions; and second, that delegitimation is always accompanied by the production of new legitimacies.

As long as the combustion engine continues to fuel both global heating and political antagonisms, scholars of climate transitions have little choice but to engage critically with how dissent is articulated, mobilized, and institutionalized. Doing so requires moving beyond simplified binaries of winners versus losers, rural versus urban, or technocracy versus populist affect, and towards a more nuanced understanding of the political logics through which climate transitions are contested and reshaped.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Joel Göransson Scalzotto:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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