Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Environmental Politics

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fenp20

Climate change doesn't win you a climate election: party competition in the 2021 Norwegian general election

Fay Madeleine Farstad & Marianne Aasen

To cite this article: Fay Madeleine Farstad & Marianne Aasen (2022): Climate change doesn't win you a climate election: party competition in the 2021 Norwegian general election, Environmental Politics, DOI: 10.1080/09644016.2022.2144019

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2022.2144019

Published online: 11 Nov 2022.

ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS
https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2022.2144019

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Climate change doesn't win you a climate election: party competition in the 2021 Norwegian general election

Fay Madeleine Farstad and Marianne Aasen

(CICERO Center for International Climate Research), Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT

The 2021 Norwegian General Election was hailed as a 'climate election', yet the Greens only won three seats. What explains the centrality of climate change and why did this not translate into more success for the Greens? The academic literature emphasises the valence nature of climate change, meaning it is a consensus issue and that parties compete on competence. Presenting original voter data, we demonstrate this not to be the case. The Greens faltered not because of a perceived lack of competence, but because of fierce competition which fragmented issue ownership. Moreover, we show that fragmented issue ownership is not the result of voters' differing views of competence, but the policy options presented by the parties. Our article therefore questions the valence nature of climate change and makes a significant contribution to the literature on the party politics of climate change, as well as on the (re)politicisation of climate politics.

KEYWORDS Climate policy; political parties; Green parties; issue ownership; valence; politicisation

Introduction

Climate change was the issue that concerned the most voters and gained the most media attention in the 2021 Norwegian General Election. Moreover, for the first time, the question of the future of the country's oil and gas sector was connected to the climate issue and placed firmly on the political agenda, also gaining significant international media attention. However, despite being hailed as a 'climate election', this did not translate into success for the Green Party. Traditional party politics literature tends to define climate change as a 'valence' issue (e.g. Volkens *et al.* 2021), meaning it is a 'consensus' issue whereby parties agree on the desired outcome and so only compete on competence. The valence nature of climate change is being increasingly questioned, however (e.g. Farstad 2018). As evinced by countries such as the US and Australia, political parties clearly do take positional and in some cases 'anti' positions on climate change (Tranter 2013, Dunlap *et al.* 2016).

CONTACT Fay Madeleine Farstad fay.farstad@cicero.oslo.no

Parties do not always agree on climate change, and the issue can be more or less salient. Carter and Little (2021) therefore present four ideal-typical structures of issue competition on climate change: *competitive consensus* (where there are low levels of disagreement between parties and high salience); *passive consensus* (low levels of disagreement between parties and low salience); *passive disagreement* (high levels of disagreement between parties and low salience); and *competitive disagreement* (high levels of disagreement between parties and high salience). The structure of issue competition has important implications for efforts to mitigate climate change. *Competitive consensus* can lead to a 'race to the top' and be critical for passing climate policies. *Passive consensus* is beneficial to sustaining policies, though the low salience is likely to prevent ambitions from being ramped up. *Passive disagreement* is likely to result in maintaining the status quo, as despite the disagreement between the parties, the low salience of the issue means it is not beneficial for one party to challenge the other and make it an issue of party competition. *Competitive disagreement* and the high salience of the issue can result in ambitious climate policies, yet there is a high risk of policies 'ping-ponging' between governments. The different structures of issue competition can be seen in different countries and at different points in time, though there is scant research on the reasons behind and effects of the different structures.

Our article feeds into this debate. By presenting original voter data,[1] we show that the climate issue was a positional, not a valence, issue during the 2021 election. We demonstrate that the Greens' result was not due to a perceived lack of competence, but a consequence of fierce party competition across the political spectrum which fragmented issue ownership. Importantly, we reveal that the fragmented issue ownership is not because of voters' differing views of competence, but rather the alternative policy options presented by the parties. We therefore question whether the structure of party competition is better described as *competitive disagreement* rather than *competitive consensus*. As such, our article makes a significant contribution to the burgeoning literature on the party politics of climate change, and in particular the debate about the 'valence' nature of the issue, as well as literature on re-politicisation of climate politics (Paterson *et al*. 2022).

The rise and fall of the Greens

In the months running up to the election, the Greens' prospects were looking promising. The Working Group I report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was released early August 2021, two weeks before the election campaign officially started, placing climate change firmly on the political agenda. Moreover, a few months earlier, the publication of the International Energy Agency (IEA) 'Net Zero by 2050' report, showing

there is no space for new oil and gas in their 1.5-degree scenario, gained significant attention, both in Norway and globally. The 'Norwegian Paradox', whereby Norway pertained to be a climate leader on the one hand, and a major oil and gas exporter on the other, was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. The Greens benefitted from these developments, reporting that their membership increased by 10% in the days following the publication of the IPCC report. They were also predicted to get around 7% in national opinion polls at the time, which would have earned them 13 out of 169 seats in parliament and made them an electoral force to be reckoned with in a country dominated by coalition governments. Furthermore, in a country where ambitious climate goals have largely been met through flexible mechanisms and emission cuts abroad, the Greens presented a protest voice responding to the IEA report, calling for an end to oil production by 2035 and emphasising domestic emissions reductions.

Yet despite the centrality of the climate issue, record-breaking membership and promising early opinion polls, the Greens ended up narrowly missing the electoral threshold of 4%, which would have won them nine seats. The Greens gained 3.9% of the vote and only three parliamentary seats (see Table 1). Although this is an increase of two seats from the 2013 and 2017 elections, and demonstrates that the Greens are now an established (and growing) mainstream political party (see Farstad 2014), the result was nonetheless a disappointment for the party and voters wanting the election dominated by the climate issue to result in significant change. Was the 2021 election not a 'climate election' after all?

Climate in the 2021 general election

There are several reasons why the 2021 election could still be labelled a 'climate election' despite the poor performance of the Greens. Firstly, according to both the Norwegian National Election Study (Aardal and Bergh 2022, Bergh *et al.* 2022) and our data, the issue of climate change

Table 1. General election results by party and change since the previous (2017) election.

Party	Share of vote (%)	Difference from 2017 (%)	Seats	Difference from 2017
Labour Party	26.3%	−1.1%	48	−1
Conservatives	20.4%	−4.7%	36	−9
Centre Party	13.5%	3.2%	28	+9
Progress Party	11.6%	−3.6%	21	−6
Socialist Left Party	7.6%	1.6%	13	+2
Red Party	4.7%	2.3%	8	+7
Liberal Party	4.6%	0.2%	8	0
Green Party	3.9%	0.7%	3	+2
Christian Democrat Party	3.8%	−0.4%	3	−5
Patient Focus	0.2%	0.2%	1	+1

and the environment was ranked as the number one issue for voters, with a whole third of the electorate ranking it as their top issue. The issue has not ranked this highly since the 'environmental election' of 1989, and not since 2009 has a third of the electorate agreed on the same issue (see Table 2). Moreover, even though the issue was somewhat more important for younger voters and women, it nonetheless ranked as the most important issue across age groups and gender (Bergh *et al.* 2022, p. 8).

Although the climate issue is combined with the environment in both data sources referred to here, there are reasons to believe that the high score of the combined issue category relates more to the former issue than the latter. For example, we find in our data that those mentioning climate change explicitly accounts for about two thirds of the combined category. Moreover, looking at the news media coverage in the month before the election, climate change and the environment dominated the agenda and made up 6% of the coverage. This number includes extensive coverage of the IPCC and IEA Net Zero reports. If you add coverage of the green transition of the oil- and gas sector, around 10% of news coverage was linked to climate change. This is significantly higher than the second most covered issue – the war in Afghanistan and foreign affairs – at 5% (Bergh *et al.* 2022, pp. 14–15).

Importantly, the increased salience of the climate issue did not just benefit the Greens. In a country where climate change is generally a salient issue amongst the electorate, the issue has been incorporated into the programmes of all mainstream political parties (although less so for the right-wing Progress Party), making it hard for the Greens to create or enter a climate change niche. The increased salience particularly boosted the performance of the more traditional environmental parties, the Socialist Left and Liberal parties. It is worth noting that collectively, the three 'environmental' parties (Greens, Socialist Left and Liberal) gained 16.1% of the vote, which is more than the third largest party (the agrarian Centre Party at 13.5%) and an increase of 2.5% from the previous election.

Table 2. Issue ranking at general elections 2001–2021 (Bergh et al. 2022, p. 6).

Issue	2001	2005	2009	2013	2017	2021	'17-'21
Environment & Climate	8	8	20	14	19	30	+11
Taxes	34	17	15	14	17	18	+1
Inequality	5	6	3	3	4	16	+12
Health	22	15	19	23	12	15	+3
Rural Policy	7	9	5	7	12	14	+2
Economy, Industry and Employment	4	13	12	7	13	12	−1
Education	34	32	29	22	17	11	−6
Immigration	4	6	16	12	23	7	−16
Care for the elderly	16	23	17	13	12	7	−5
Childcare and Family policy	14	13	6	8	5	6	+1
Transport	-	3	8	15	8	3	−5
Public-Private	2	4	3	5	4	2	−2
N	1753	1774	1573	1573	1628	1356	

Percentage of people who mention the issue as one of the two most important issues

As such, the description of the Norwegian 2021 General Election as a 'climate election' is a fair one. However, it is puzzling how the salience of the climate issue did not boost the performance of the traditional environmental parties more than it did, raising the question of issue ownership and the valence nature of the issue.

Issue ownership and climate policy positions

Looking at which issues were important for the voters of the different parties, we can see from Table 3 that climate and environment was the most important issue for the voters of the Green, Socialist Left and Liberal and parties. It was the second most important issue for Red, Labour, Centre and Christian Democrat voters, and the third most important issue for Conservative party voters. Even 11% of right-wing Progress Party voters ranked it as their top issue, despite the party's record of embracing sceptical or adversarial policies on climate change. These results mark a difference from the previous election, as a larger proportion of voters, and especially red-green party voters, emphasise the issue.

On the question of issue ownership, or rather which party voters think has the best policies on climate change and environment, we see a fragmented picture (Table 4). Issue ownership is more evenly distributed amongst the parties than during previous elections, particularly amongst red-green parties. The Greens lost a significant amount of issue ownership from the previous election (down from 20% to 15%), whilst the Socialist Left and Labour parties increased theirs. Similarly, we find in our voter data that the latter two parties increased their issue ownership on climate change specifically (i.e. not including the environment) from the spring of 2021 to the election in the autumn, whereas the Greens did not. Interestingly, we also

Table 3. Top issue by party voters (Bergh et al. 2022, p. 9).

	Red	SL	Lab	Cen	Gre	CD	Lib	Con	Prog	All
Environment & Climate	43	71	28	19	96	16	68	17	11	33
Taxes	13	7	11	15	3	2	16	37	37	18
Inequality	44	39	29	8	22	14	0	1	0	18
Health	21	13	20	11	6	6	8	16	13	15
Rural Policy	1	1	10	72	5	0	5	3	3	14
Economy, Industry & Employment	4	3	9	7	2	2	19	30	30	13
Education	6	10	14	4	8	11	35	16	1	11
Immigration	4	11	3	3	9	0	3	4	33	8
Care for the elderly	0	0	7	5	0	0	1	7	17	6
Childcare & Family policy	1	4	6	2	5	42	2	4	4	5
Transport	0	1	1	1	4	2	0	8	12	3
Public-Private	6	2	4	2	3	4	2	3	0	3
N	77	129	267	158	44	43	57	189	88	1081

Percentage of people who mention the issue as one of the two most important issues. Party abbreviations SL = Socialist Left, Lab = Labour, Cen = Centre, Gre = Green, CD = Christian Democrat, Lib = Liberal, Con = Conservative, Prog = Progress

Table 4. Issue ownership (Bergh et al. 2022, p. 11).

Issue*	Env/Clim	Tax	Ineq	Health	Rural	Empl	Educ	Immig	Elder	Child	Tran
Red	3	5	7	5	2	3	3	3	3	3	2
SL	14	8	10	8	5	4	10	10	6	12	5
Labour	13	26	27	27	11	29	23	19	24	20	17
Centre	9	5	5	5	41	5	4	4	5	4	9
Green	15	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3
CD	1	1	2	2	1	1	2	4	6	14	1
Liberal	7	2	2	2	2	2	7	3	1	3	2
Con	11	19	13	18	9	19	21	14	10	10	14
Prog	5	9	4	6	3	3	3	22	8	4	15
Other	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	1	1
N/DK	22	24	30	28	26	33	27	21	34	29	32
N100%	1624	1625	1622	1623	1623	1624	1622	1622	1622	1622	1622

Percentage of people who think the party has the best policies. Party abbreviations SL = Socialist Left, CD = Christian Democrat, Con = Conservative, Prog = Progress, N/DK = No party/Do not know
* Issue categories abbreviated, see Tables 2 and 3.

find that only 13% of the voters reporting climate change and environment as the most important issue actually voted for the Greens (11% in Aardal and Bergh 2022). The climate concerned voters split their vote between several parties. These results partly help explain why the Greens performed worse than expected. Importantly, the other parties also had ownership on other issues, and voters seldom vote based on a single issue.

However, it is curious that different parties score similarly highly on issue ownership of climate change. Could the explanation be the valence nature of the issue? However, if this is the case, it remains puzzling how different parties score similarly highly on competence on the issue. Through our survey, we can delve deeper into the underlying reasons for the significant fragmentation of the climate vote. Our survey asks a range of questions on topics that defined the Norwegian climate policy debate running up to the election, such as whether voters support increasing the price on fossil fuels, whether Norway should reduce its oil production, and their support for onshore wind power and export of renewable energy. The results for these questions are shown in Figures 1–4 respectively.

These results reveal significant variation in the climate policy preferences of voters. When it comes to increasing the price on fossil fuels (Figure 1), we can see that the voters of the 'environmental', and particularly the Green and Socialist Left, parties are very supportive, with around 80% and 65% supporting the measure respectively. This contrasts sharply to the support reported by Labour (28%), Christian Democrat (22%), Conservative (13%), Centre (12%) and Progress (8%) party voters.

Similarly, on the contentious question of whether Norway should decrease its oil production, the majority of Green (82%), Socialist Left (72%) and Red (61%) party voters support this, whilst the majority of Progress (80%), Conservative (65%) and Centre (55%) party voters are

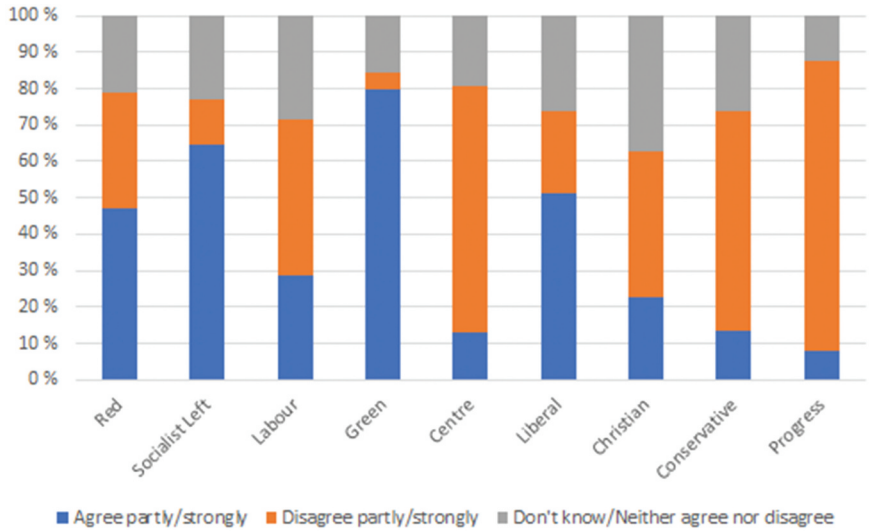

Figure 1. Response to the statement 'We should increase the price on fossil energy such as oil, diesel and gasoline' (N = 1886).

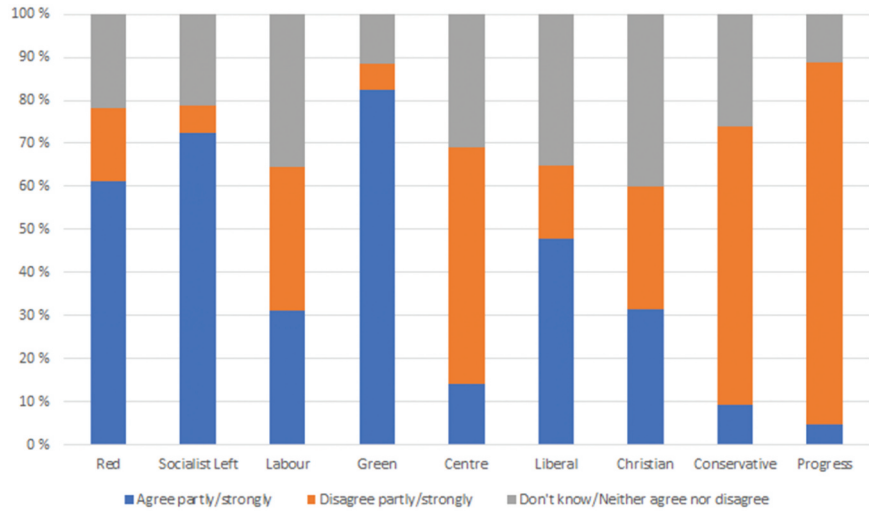

Figure 2. Response to the statement 'Norway should decrease its oil production' (N = 1879).

opposed (Figure 2). It is also interesting to notice the nearly symmetrical split in Labour Party voters, with almost the same amount of voters being opposed as in favour. This finding highlights a key dilemma facing most social democratic parties in developed countries – trying to satisfy both the industrial and left or green wings of the party.

The development of onshore wind has been controversial in Norway, as local populations question the need to establish wind farms in untouched nature when the country's domestic energy supply is essentially already renewable. As seen in Figure 3, the majority of Progress (55%) and Centre (55%) party voters are opposed to the development of onshore wind. Opposition is also high amongst Red (48%), Conservative (38%), Labour (35%) and Christian Democrat (32%) party voters, though – perhaps reflecting the heated domestic debate – is not unsubstantial even amongst Green (28%) and Liberal (19%) party voters.

Renewable energy exports has also been a contested issue. Figure 4 reveals pretty stark opposition to exports amongst Centre (74%), Red (74%) and Progress (70%) party voters, with Labour (51%), Conservative (48%) and Socialist Left (48%) party voters not far behind. Opposition is less pronounced amongst Christian Democrat (37%), Green (33%) and Liberal (21%) party voters, though given the high share of voters who are either 'neither for or against' or unsure, only amongst Liberal Party voters is a majority (57%) in favour of renewable energy exports.

The different meanings of a 'climate election'

The above results reveal significant variation in the climate policy preferences of Norwegian voters. Climate policy is clearly an important issue for most voters, yet when they express that their chosen party has the 'best' climate

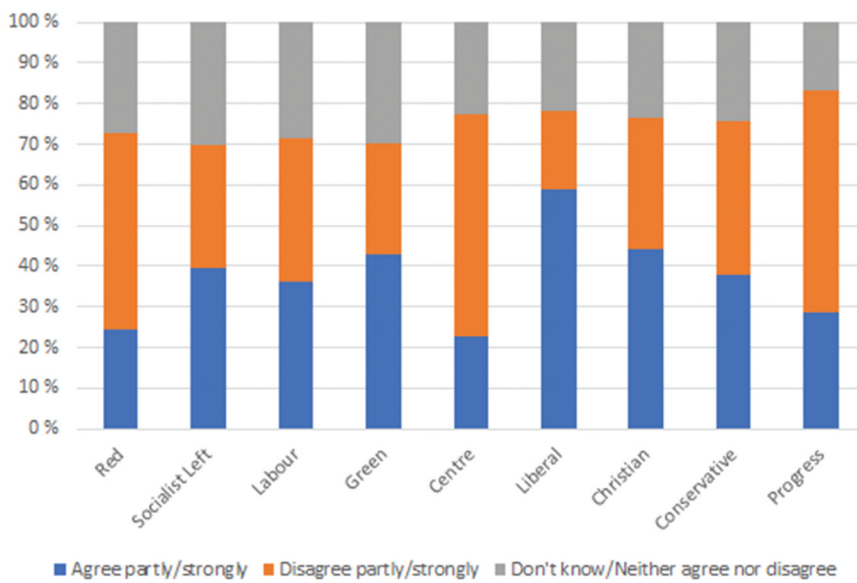

Figure 3. Response to the statement 'Norway should increase its wind power production on land' (N = 1885).

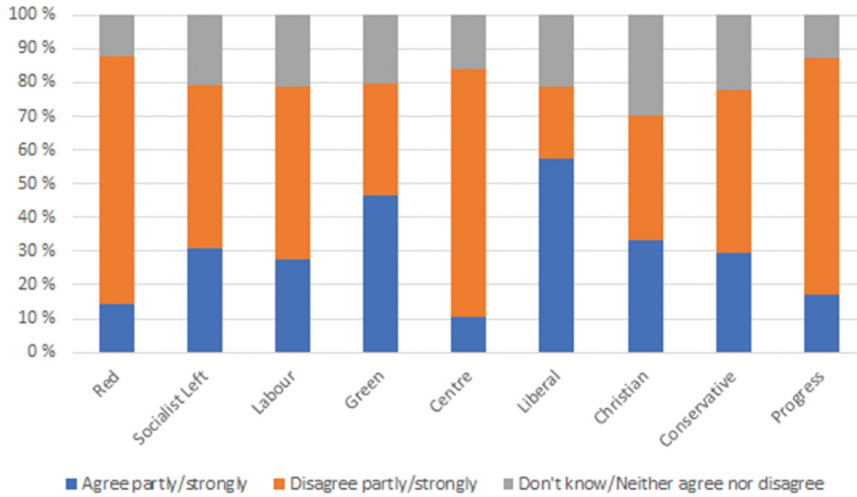

Figure 4. Response to the statement 'Norway should increase the production of wind power on land to increase the energy export to Europe' (N = 1725).

policies or competence on the issue, they appear to mean different things. Evidently there is significant disagreement as to how Norway should reduce its emissions. This disagreement is perhaps understandable. Whereas Norway has so far focused on cost-effective emission reductions abroad and 'picking the low hanging fruit', it is now faced with having to increase domestic action. Reducing domestic emissions will entail expensive measures and policies that regulate people's behaviour or increase people's costs (such as the price of fuel). Hence, as measures start to bite, climate policy is increasingly likely to bring existing conflicts and cleavages in the party system to the fore.

In terms of cleavages, the Red Party is an interesting case. This far-left party is a relatively new entrant to national politics, gaining its first seat in the 2017 election. Given the party's close ties to working class and industrial voters, it is perhaps surprising that climate change is the second-most important issue for its voters and that 60% support reducing oil production. Moreover, breaking with the internationalist or cosmopolitan tendencies of most left-wing parties, it is strongly opposed to renewable energy exports which would help European neighbours reduce their emissions. Their opposition to onshore wind also reveals a more general cleavage in Norwegian politics between the environment and climate change. The conflict between the two issues (sacrificing nature for the sake of reducing emissions) underlines the distinctness and positional nature of the two issues (see Farstad 2018).

Lastly, one would expect the structure of issue competition on climate change in Norway, and especially during a 'climate election', to be described as *competitive consensus*, i.e. with high levels of agreement and high salience,

with the parties trying to 'out-green' each other (Carter and Little 2021). Interestingly, though there is of course general consensus on Norway's overall climate goals, we have revealed significant disagreement on the *means of achieving those goals*. Although we here only present disagreement amongst the different party's voters as opposed to amongst the parties themselves, we can assume a certain level of correspondence. Not only does this finding underline the positional as opposed to the valence nature of climate change, but it also raises the question of whether *competitive disagreement* (high levels of disagreement between parties and high salience) might be a more apt description of the structure of issue competition in this case. Furthermore, although it is too early to tell whether any *competitive disagreement* will lead to the 'ping-ponging' of climate policies and thus challenge overall progress, such disagreement potentially offers voters alternative policies to choose from and thus might enhance democratic quality. In line with recent debates around the merits of re-politicisation of climate politics (Paterson *et al.* 2022), Norway will consequently be an interesting case to follow in the coming years.

Note

1. The CICERO Climate Survey is an annual survey of a representative sample of Norwegians regarding their opinions on climate related issues. The 2021-wave includes 4876 respondents, of which a random half received the policy questions (Aasen *et al.* 2022), and is collected during the spring. In addition, we collected follow-up data the week post-election (N = 1007).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Norwegian Research Council [268201].

ORCID

Fay Madeleine Farstad http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4190-6899

References

Aardal, B. and Bergh, J., 2022. The 2021 Norwegian election. *West European Politics*, 45 (7), 1522–1534. doi:10.1080/01402382.2022.2062136.

Aasen, M., Klemetsen, M., and Vatn, A., 2022. [CICERO Climate Survey] Folk og klima: utvikling i nordmenns oppfatninger om klimaendringer, klimapolitikk og eget ansvar 2018-2021. *CICERO Report 2022:07*. [Online]. Available from: https://

pub.cicero.oslo.no/cicero-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2995382/Report%2007-%20web2.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y [Accessed 04 Jul 2022].

Bergh, J., Hesstvedt, S., and Karlsen, R., 2022. Dagsorden og sakseierskap ved stortingsvalget 2021. *Institutt for samfunnsforskning. Notat 2022*. [Online]. Available from: https://samfunnsforskning.brage.unit.no/samfunnsforskning-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2985690/Notat_Dagsorden_og_sakseierskap.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y [Accessed 11 May 2022].

Carter, N. and Little, C., 2021. Party competition on climate policy: the roles of interest groups, ideology and challenger parties in the UK and Ireland. *International Political Science Review*, 42 (1), 1–17. doi:10.1177/0192512120972582.

Dunlap, R.E., McCright, A.M., and Yarosh, J.H., 2016. The political divide on climate change: partisan polarization widens in the U.S. *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, 58 (5), 4–23.

Farstad, F.M., 2014. The Norwegian Greens: coming in from the cold? *Environmental Politics*, 23 (6), 1096–1100. doi:10.1080/09644016.2014.929830.

Farstad, F.M., 2018. What explains variation in parties' climate change salience? *Party Politics*, 24 (6), 698–707. doi:10.1177/1354068817693473.

Paterson, M., Tobin, P., and VanDeveer, S., 2022. Climate governance antagonisms: policy stability and repoliticization. *Global Environmental Politics*, 22 (2), 1–11. doi:10.1162/glep_a_00647.

Tranter, B., 2013. The great divide: political candidate and voter polarisation over global warming in Australia. *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 59 (3), 397–413. doi:10.1111/ajph.12023.

Volkens, A., *et al*., 2021. The Manifesto Data Collection. Manifesto Project (MRG/CMP/MARPOR). *Version 2021a*. Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB). https://doi.org/10.25522/manifesto.mpds.2021a.