

BORSE DI STUDIO DI DOTTORATO DI RICERCA SU TEMATICHE
INNOVAZIONE E GREEN

(AZIONI IV.4 e IV.5) D.M. 10 agosto 2021, n. 1061
Anno Accademico 2021/2022

Dottorato di Ricerca in Global Studies. Economy, Society and Law
(Thematic Area: International Economic Policy, Business and Governance)
Ciclo XXXVII

Tematica Vincolata “Green”

Title: “Climate change, Capitalism and Political polarization.”

Candidate: dott. Filippo Cicoli

State of the art.

Mark Fisher in *Capitalist Realism* wrote, quoting Fredric Jameson, that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism." Thinking about the pop culture of recent decades, Fisher noted how within our collective imagination the vision of a planetary apocalypse rather than that of a radical transformation of the economic and social system was present in an ever more consistent and solid way. Hence the question: Is the neoliberal capitalist system compatible with sustainable development capable of offering a solution to the impending climate crises?

The question was raised in the Davos "World Economic Forum" in January 2021 and on August 9, 2021, the Sixth Assessment Report of the IPCC was published, a report in which the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is pronounced on the maximum urgency of having to put all the energies at the disposal of humanity to save the planet.

The international community and the entire scientific world have raised an alarm to recall those who see activism and politics as an instrument that arises from collective needs to identify collective solutions.

To get out of the emergency it would be necessary to radically transform the dominant economic systems by shaking their hierarchies: putting the needs of humanity above any particular issue, any partisan interest. For 1% of the population, however, it means questioning, privileges, assets, power. Already in 2014 Naomi Klein in *This Changes Everything* described how we found ourselves in a strange situation - unique in history - in which it was enough to perpetuate exactly the things we have done so far to make the world reach collapse: it was enough to do nothing.

After decades of denial, a long work of environmental movements and the continuous succession of natural disasters had led over 190 countries gathered in Paris at the COP21 Conference of 2015 to sign an agreement in which they committed themselves to putting in place all the measures necessary to maintain the 'increase in the earth's temperature below the threshold of 1.5 degrees. No sanctioning mechanism was envisaged, because the necessary economic transformation was not foreseen and because the commitments made individually by the states were not ambitious enough and would have brought the temperature rise well beyond the critical threshold of 2 degrees.

Instead, already at the Cop22 in Marrakech, the following year, the new US president Donald Trump announced the US exit from the Paris accords.

The populist right that is advancing around the world is joining great anti-environmental economic interests starting with the will of the Bolsonaro government to eliminate the protections for the Amazon. Everywhere it is noted how, when populism becomes the extreme attempt of the elites to defend their interests, the ecological issue escapes the omnivorous political voracity of the new social right.

This economic and political failure, however, has given new credit to the sworn enemy of neoliberalism: state interventionism.

During the covid-19 pandemic, we have witnessed an unprecedented state mobilization characterized by lockdowns, mass vaccinations, investments in infrastructure and refreshments that have helped to change the political imaginary on which neoliberalism was based.

This return of statism is even more evident on the front of the fight against climate change, an enormous "negative externality" produced by global capitalism. After decades of inactivity, the advent of the pandemic has triggered large public investment plans for the purpose of mitigating global warming (reducing emissions) and adaptation (protecting population centers, infrastructure, human habitats).

Of all the changes we are seeing in climate policy, perhaps the most significant is the return of planning. Several politicians in Western countries seem to have begun to accept that only a return to strong state interventionism can support the colossal effort and ensure the speed necessary to avoid the darkest scenarios outlined by the IPCC report.

The political split.

The ecological transition represents the attempt to reconcile, as much as possible, environmental sustainability with the current economic system. The governments of Western countries, generally with liberal traction, are convinced that a radical transformation of the energy system would have devastating consequences on industry and other sectors on which economic recovery depends. The point is precisely this: ecological conversion is not compatible with the idea of unlimited growth. The transition from fossil fuels to renewable ones presupposes a profound change in the way of production and consumption, and in lifestyles. The "transition" cannot be reduced to a ploy to postpone the moment of strategic and decisive choices. Politics is therefore the primary form of agency or compliance to facilitate the transition process.

In the conservative camp there is a bitter confrontation between the proponents of classical liberalism, who continue to believe in the thaumaturgical virtue of the free market, and the liberal democrats, who propose a policy of mitigating the environmental impact and mitigating social inequalities.

The more radical left seems accommodated in the critical conscience role of liberal thought. It is struggling to become the protagonist of an autonomous and mass initiative that places the irremediable contradiction between the logic of profit and the need to safeguard the planet at the center. We are therefore in a stalemate as to how we can get out of the impending crisis.

But if international politics is made up of faces and thoughts, it seems at least legitimate to insinuate that we are faced with a polarization of political opinion taking place among those who argue that the climate crisis can be overcome through the construction of alternative economic models, or that the answer is inherent within the neoliberal capitalist thought and the rhetoric of "there is no alternative", in fact.

Research objectives.

A problem of affective polarization?

In contrast to ideological polarization¹, which mainly considers differences in political views, affective polarization is more of an identity-based confrontation between groups within and without². As such, it is defined as emotional attachment to partisans in the group and hostility to partisans outside the group³. Therefore, supporters of right-wing populist parties strongly oppose partisans of green or left parties and vice versa, while both strongly favor their own fellow partisans. It is important to underline that this animosity is based on a strong identification within the group and on a negative bias with external groups and not necessarily on a strong political disagreement. In large part, affective polarization has increased in recent decades mainly due to an increase in animosity outside the party and no longer strong affection for one's own party⁴, since it has become widely acceptable to denigrate supporters of other political parties⁵.

Although there are a multitude of factors that increase polarization, transformation processes play a particular role in shaping the social order and the animus outside the group. Rapid social change and economic rise and cultural competition has transformed societies so that they are now divided between two groups:

¹ The distance that separates the relevant parties that occupy the extremes along a left-right continuum.

In the presence of high ideological polarization, parties emphasize their ideology to the detriment of cooperation. Therefore, the greater the ideological distance between the parties, the greater their irreconcilability with possible repercussions for the stability of the current political system (Sartori, 1982).

² (Iyengar et al., 2012)

³ (Hobolt et al., 2020)

⁴ (Iyengar et al., 2019)

⁵ (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015)

1) the "winners" of globalization who we find mostly among the most educated and who are described as cosmopolitan, more tolerant towards the out-groups and inclined towards environmentalism and the left wing;

2) the "losers" of globalization who are often found among the less educated or within the working class and who are considered more closed-minded and susceptible to right-wing populist parties.

Affective polarization has therefore led not only to more negative perceptions between citizens and parties but also between partisans in their daily lives. In particular, the attitude of out-party is stronger than antipathy towards different ethnic groups and is also asymmetrical: supporters of traditional parties dislike supporters of right-wing populist parties much more strongly than vice versa. Ultimately, affective polarization can shape individual political beliefs and politicize even neutral or apolitical issues⁶.

The first step to take is in the direction of understanding whether or not the emotional polarization towards climate change and the implementation of green policies can slow down the international policy of transition towards more sustainable economic models. From here one wonders:

- What is the level of polarization in Italy on the various solutions to the problem of the climate crisis?
- Is political polarization an actual obstacle to the ecological transition?

Methodology.

This research seeks to adopt a hybrid approach, in which new and old media logics compete and integrate. At first, a CAWI-panel modality will be used which allows a low-cost quantitative survey in two waves (one year apart) to guarantee a quantitative and longitudinal approach with the aim of also understanding whether the different forms of polarization changes over time, as economic and political conditions change.

This approach will be integrated with a face-to-face methodology to overcome the methodological difficulties (CAWI) of those who, for personal or economic reasons, have no access to the web and to offer a qualitative observation point complementary to the investigation.

What we want to explore (CAWI Panel and face-to-face), in order to verify the degree of cohesion of citizens, are their opinions on some dimensions of economic policy detected through the surveys inspired by the World Value Survey (WVS) which uses the multiple-choice question method.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the ongoing discussion regarding the way affective polarization operates in green economics and the way to get out from the climate change crisis.

For example, some policy dimensions divided into groups will be selected: values, political, economic. In particular for the values group, citizens will be asked for their position on the success factors, on income equality, on the responsibility of the government, on what is the most serious problem in the country, on immigration policy; for the political dimensions, the opinion of citizens on the decision-making role of experts and the appreciation for strong leadership will be asked; for the economic dimensions, the questions will concern what is the goal for the country, state property versus private property and competition. It should also be added that the various dimensions analyzed do not exhaust all the most relevant ones; in particular, some remain outside, such as social security and tax policies, which could be particularly divisive. The goal is to identify the distance or the ideological proximity of the interviewees to particular political, social or economic phenomena and, last but not least, the propensity to converge in opposing ideologies, providing a picture that shows the state of polarization of political opinion in Italy how this affects and manifests itself within the public space.

⁶ (Druckman et al., 2020)

Year	1	2	3
Activity	Formulate the survey and measures. Test the survey First wave panel+ftf	Data analysis (first wave) + second wave panel+ftf	Data analysis (second wave) and conclusions

Expected results.

What is expected to be obtained through this field study is to confirm what is attested by the line of research cited, namely: that polarization makes compromise, consensus, interaction, and tolerance increasingly costly and tenuous for individuals and political actors on both sides of the divide. In the specific case, in the event of a marked level of polarization around green issues and economic transition policies, in order to favor the fight against the climate crisis, there will be difficulties in implementing effective policies in a short time.