

M A S A R Y K

U N I V E R S I T Y

CLIMATE CHANGE DISCOURSE IN A DIGITAL ERA: A CASE STUDY OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT'S SELF- LEGITIMATION PRACTICES IN ITS ONLINE COMMUNUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

- **Aim:** Investigate the use of fear-based self-legitimization strategies by the European Parliament in the context of climate change.
- **Research question:** How does the EP use fear-based self-legitimization strategies in the context of climate change in its online discourse?
- **Rationale for research and relevance:**
 - Insight into the EP's communicative strategies.
 - Intersection of discourse, policy and emotion in environmental governance.
 - Language's role in framing global challenges.
 - Ethical considerations of fear appeals.
- **EP as an actor in climate change** (EU as a green normative power [Falkner 2007]), leading by example [Çelik 2022; Delreux 2021; Dupont, Oberthür, and von Homeyer 2020; Vogler 2005; Baker 2006; Wunderlich 2020]).
- **Contribution to the literature**

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

- **Discursive institutionalism** (Schmidt 2008, 2020)
- **Legitimation**
 - Political legitimation conceptualized in a Weberian sense as a **social activity that can be empirically observed and tested** (Hurrelmann, Gora & Wagner 2013: 515)
 - **Discursive strand** of legitimation research (Bäckstrand & Söderbaum, 2018); actor-oriented, top-down
 - Legitimation as a discursive process “through which actions and actors are bestowed with legitimacy or marked by their illegitimacy, which in turn are based on socially constructed and communicated values and norms” (Bennet 2022, 370–371).
 - **Legitimacy**: beliefs of audiences that the actor’s authority is appropriately exercised
 - **Legitimation**: strategic practices that aim to stabilise and enhance such a belief (Hall, Lenz & Obydenkova 2021)
 - **Self-legitimation**: actor’s own strategic attempts at legitimation (in a sense of practices employed by the actor to positively influence the legitimation process) (Hall, Lenz & Obydenkova 2021)

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

- Fear in political messaging (politics of fear)
 - Impact of fear on **information processing, decision-making, societal engagement** (Tannenbaum et al. 2015).
 - Triggering of **heightened attention, urgency** due to perceived threats (Altheide 2002; Tannenbaum et al. 2015).
 - Important role in **political communication strategies** (Mattes and Redlawsk 2015; Nai, 2021; Van Spanje and De Vreese 2014; Ventsel et al. 2021; Walton 2000; Wodak 2020).
 - Exaggeration of threats.
 - Highlighting of negative consequences.
 - Creation of urgency around issues.
 - → Shaping of public perception towards desired direction.
 - Fear as the **emotional currency** of much of the climate change debate.

DATA

■ Press releases

- Communicating EP's viewpoints in its **'pure' form** – without the constraints by media's (and other channels') gatekeeper rules and conventions (Lassen, 2006)
- Timespan: 1 Dec 2019 – 11 May 2024

■ Twitter

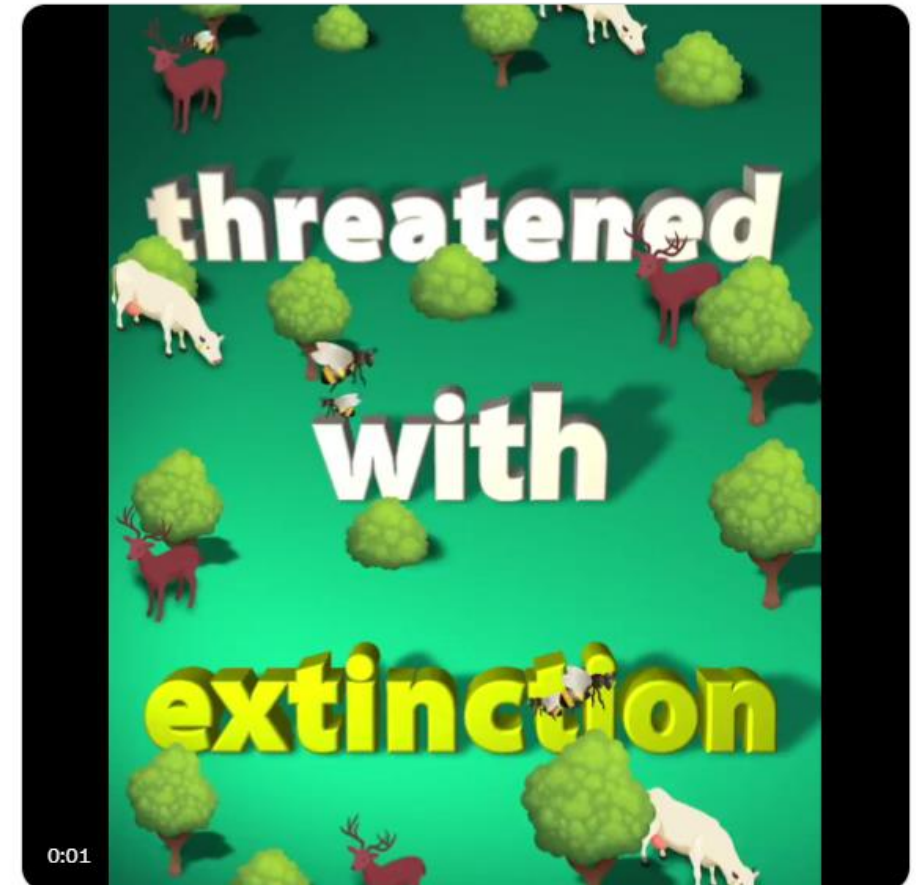
- **Twitter as one of the most prominent tools of political communication today** (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2020, Theocharis et al. 2020, Ionso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés 2023, Zahradnickova and Šerek 2023).
- @Europarl_EN
- Timespan: 1 Dec 2019 – 21 May 2023



European Parliament
@Europarl_EN



One million species are at risk of extinction world-wide Find out how the EU wants to preserve biodiversity on the continent to safeguard endangered animals and plants and protect human life @
eptwitter.eu/q2aX



METHODS

- **Qualitative content analysis** (Neuendorf 2017)
 - Fear-based tweet: incorporation of specific language that suggests imminent and severe negative consequences of climate change.
- **Discourse-historical approach (DHA) in critical discourse studies** (Fairclough & Wodak 1997; Krzyżanowski 2019; Reisigl & Wodak 2001; Wodak 2011)
 - DHA considers discourse analysis “not just to be a method of language analysis, but a multidimensional project incorporating theory, methods, methodology and empirically based research practices” (Reisigl 2018: 48).
 - Focus not on language per se, but on “linguistic and discursive elements, and the character of the social practices and their thorough in-depth examination using linguistic and related analyses” (Krzyżanowski 2010: 72).
 - **Krzyżanowski’s (2010) analytical operationalization of DHA:** two levels of analysis:
 - 1) **thematic analysis** (focus on discourse topics)
 - 2) **in-depth analysis** (focus on rhetorical and linguistic devices).

RESULTS

	Press releases	Tweets
Number of data items on climate change	235	486
Self-legitimizing data items on climate change: total	219	387
Self-legitimizing data items: % of total	93.2 %	79.6 %
Fear-based data items: total	116	70
Fear-based data items: % of self-legitimizing total	52.4 %	18.1 %

KEY DISCOURSE TOPICS

■ Discourse topic of a crisis

- Elements of the topic:
 - The current state of climate change as a crisis demanding urgent response.
 - The breakdown of ecological and social systems due to climate impacts.
 - The necessity of immediate, decisive action.
- Linguistic features:
 - **Crisis terminology:** Explicit use of the word "crisis" along with related terms (e.g., "emergency," "critical").
 - **Urgency markers:** Words and phrases that create a sense of immediate need (e.g., "urgent," "now more than ever").
 - **Hyperbolic language:** Amplifies the immediacy and severity of the threat (e.g., "unprecedented," "catastrophic," "emergency").
 - **Temporal markers:** Highlighting the closing opportunity for effective action (e.g., "now," "before it's too late").
 - **Exemplification:** Providing specific examples of crises induced by climate change to illustrate the topic.
 - **Modal verbs of necessity:** (e.g., "must," "need to") to emphasize the urgent need for intervention

KEY DISCOURSE TOPICS

■ Discourse topic of a loss and degradation

- Elements of the topic:
 - Centers on the loss (mostly of biodiversity and ecosystems) due to climate change.
 - Portrays the gradual degradation of the natural world and human livelihoods.
 - Highlights how climate change exacerbates vulnerabilities across societies, economies, and ecosystems.
- Linguistic features:
 - **Language of loss:** Utilizing terms such as "loss," "degradation," and "decline" to highlight the deteriorating conditions.
 - **Irreversibility tropes:** Language that underscores the point of no return (e.g., "irreversible," "permanent").
 - **Vulnerability lexicon:** Terms like "vulnerable," "at risk," and "exposed" to emphasize susceptibility.
 - **Comparatives and superlatives:** Used to show increasing degrees of vulnerability (e.g., "more vulnerable," "most at risk").
 - **Inclusivity language:** Phrases that underline the universal nature of vulnerability
 - **Past vs. present comparisons:** Contrasting the past richness of biodiversity and ecosystems with their current threatened states.
 - **Evocative imagery:** Employing vivid descriptions to paint a picture of what is being lost or degraded, fostering a sense of loss.

KEY DISCOURSE TOPICS

- Discourse topic of future peril

- Elements of the topic:

- Projects forward to imagine the future implications of unchecked climate change.
 - Emphasizes the peril that future generations face if current trends continue.

- Linguistic features:

- **Future-oriented discourse:** Predominant use of future tense to discuss potential outcomes and dangers.
 - **Predictive language:** Phrases like "will face," "are set to experience," to forecast future scenarios.
 - **Intergenerational appeals:** References to future generations, children, and grandchildren to underscore the long-term stakes.
 - **Topos of authority.**
 - **Conditionality:** Using conditional structures (e.g., "if...then") to outline the potential for averting damage through timely action.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

- Next steps in my research
- Limits
- Policy implications
 - Potential affectiveness of fear-based self-legitimation in short term (Mattes and Redlawsk 2015; Tannenbaum et al. 2015) X
 - Potential undermining of rational debate and creation of disengaged public (Daddow 2016; Galpin, 2016).
 - Risk of polarizing public discourse and fostering societal divisions through habitual use of fear (Walton 2000; Wodak 2020).
 - Potential neglect of nuances necessary for comprehensive understanding and informed decision-making considered (Galpin 2016).
 - Potential erosion of democratic engagement principles (Galpin 2016).