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Climate Backlash and Policy Dismantling: How Discursive Mechanisms Legitimised Radical Shifts in Swedish Climate Policy

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ABSTRACT

Climate backlash and policy dismantling, that is, the reversal of existing decarbonisation policies, can be observed in an increasing number of countries. Typically, policy change tends to be slow, while climate backlash can unfold quite fast. How is such rapid political change made possible? Here, we investigate the case of Sweden, where a newly elected government significantly revised and changed existing climate policies. This change was forecast to increase carbon emissions rather than reduce them and included the abolishment of existing policies. While this process, in hindsight, could thus be seen as policy dismantling, it was characterised by a highly ambiguous debate that portrayed the new climate political approach as superior and much more effective than previous governments' approaches, and there was little, if any, opposition to these changes. To understand how such radical political change was possible, we examine policy documents and political debates and identify the discursive mechanisms employed in its legitimation. Our findings suggest that the parties in government used a set of discursive mechanisms to speak to different climate political discourses—welfarism, liberalism and nationalism—simultaneously. This created an effect that we call discursive flipping, which is qualitatively different from discursive blending, and that appeased potential opposition from both the left and right. As part of this, the creation of epistemic confusion seemed particularly effective in disarming opposition. We argue that discursive mechanisms are useful conceptual tools to examine the discursive legitimation of radical policy change, here realised by rendering discourses so ambiguous that opposition became discursively difficult to uphold.

1 | Introduction

Climate policy dismantling and climate backlash are increasingly observed phenomena (Schaub et al. 2024) and tend to be described as part of anti-net zero populism, that is, explicit campaigns against strong decarbonisation policies (Atkins 2022; Paterson et al. 2023). Climate populist rhetoric can find expression in, for example, anti-elitist and anti-cosmopolitan arguments, and presidential election campaigns in the United States, Brazil and the Philippines have been put forward as examples of climate populism supporting policy change (Marquardt

et al. 2022). However, policy dismantling might be much more difficult to identify and label when it is not accompanied by an unequivocal anti-decarbonisation discourse. In this study, we examine a process of rapid but ambiguously framed climate political change as it was unfolding over time.

In autumn 2022 and early 2023, the newly elected Swedish Government, consisting of ideologically diverse parties, implemented significant policy changes related to decarbonisation and climate change mitigation at a rapid pace directly after taking office (Box 1). These changes were presented by the government

as a new ambitious climate political strategy which was more effective than and superior to those of previous governments (Kristersson et al. 2022). However, as a package, these policy changes were forecast to *increase* emissions rather than reduce them (Swedish Climate Policy Council 2023) and could be seen to translate the concerns of previously extra-parliamentary resistance movements that criticised existing policy (Boonstra and Söderberg 2024) into democratically sanctioned national-level policy.

While in hindsight, it seems obvious to interpret this as one of the many recent cases of climate backlash (Vihma et al. 2021), the Swedish case was unusual in that the government still maintained that Sweden was highly committed to the mitigation of climate change. The speed of the unfolding policy change against the backdrop of an extremely ambiguous debate and the seeming absence of the usual, time-consuming negotiation processes were striking—not least because the opposition still had nearly half of the seats in parliament (Riksdagen 2023) and a broader debate and explicit opposition to the unfolding policy changes could have been expected.

This raises central questions about the nature of political change and under which circumstances relatively fundamental, democratically legitimised change can be implemented at high speed. In this study, we use the Swedish example as an 'extreme' case (Flyvbjerg 2006) to investigate rapid climate policy dismantling. In particular, we examine how the climate political changes instigated by Sweden's new government in 2022 were argued for and discursively legitimised. To do so, we conduct an argumentative discourse analysis of the political debate following the elections, exploring how ideologically conflicting discourses were made to relate to each other in such a way that any potential opposition did not manage to delay the process.

In the remainder of this article, we first contextualise our study in the literatures on climate backlash, policy dismantling (Section 2.1) and discursive change (Section 2.2). We then introduce the present study, including an overview of ideal type discourses we could expect to feature in the Swedish climate policy debate (Section 3), and describe our methods (Section 4). Section 5 examines how these ideal type discourses were used and adapted in political debate during our study period, and how, through a combination of discursive mechanisms, speakers moved between different discourses to back up and legitimise rapid and significant change in climate policies—a phenomenon we describe as 'discursive flipping'. Section 6 concludes with a discussion of the findings against the backdrop of the literature on discursive dynamics and anti-net zero populism.

2 | Background: Climate Backlash and the Discursive Legitimation of Policy Change

2.1 | Climate Backlash and Policy Dismantling

A growing body of literature examines the rise of anti-net zero populism, that is, political moves that claim representation of 'the people' against a political elite in the fight over concerns such as high electricity prices that are attributed to policies that aim to mitigate climate change (Atkins 2022; Paterson et al. 2023),

and the increasing focus of right-wing populist politicians on environmental and climate politics (Marquardt et al. 2022). This literature portrays climate change policies as a rewarding target for populism given the global, abstract and technical nature of climate change, which lends itself to the presentation of climate governance as an elite-driven agenda detached from citizens' everyday needs (Lockwood 2018; Huber 2020). As researchers argue, backlash—strong, forceful and abrupt attempts to reverse a policy—which can result in policy dismantling (Niederle et al. 2023; Paterson et al. 2023), that is, the 'cutting, diminution or removal of existing policy' (Jordan et al. 2013, 795), can be seen as part of a re-politicisation of climate governance (Marquardt and Lederer 2022). However, the advent of populist parties critical of climate governance does not always lead to a weakening or dismantling of climate policies as it can instead mobilise opposing parties (Ćetković and Hagemann 2020).

Such phenomena can be studied from many different perspectives (Abromeit 2017; Lockwood 2018; Marquardt et al. 2022). To investigate the Swedish case, we chose a discursive approach, not least because during the months following the election, the rapidly unfolding policy change largely took place and was made visible at the discursive level, in public and political debate. Our research thus follows a well-developed discourse analytical tradition in the study of climate and environmental governance (e.g., Zannakis 2015; Atkins 2022; Paterson et al. 2023; Fischer et al. 2023).

2.2 | Understanding Discursive Dynamics: Argumentative Discourse Analysis

To study discursive legitimation of policy change, we draw here on Hajer's (1997) argumentative approach to discourse analysis (ADA), understanding discourse as 'a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorizations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities' (Hajer 1997, 45). We are particularly interested in how discourse use relates to political change and how this relationship is situated in the interplay between structure and agency. Much of the environmental discourse literature foregrounds the structuring role of discourses that facilitates the reproduction and persistence of existing arrangements (Leipold and Winkel 2017; Leipold et al. 2019). However, some of this research also highlights discursive agency (Leipold and Winkel 2017), identifying social, indigenous and intellectual movements as drivers of discursive change that precedes institutional change: 'discursive change paves the way for new political solutions' (Leipold et al. 2019, 455). In the context of our study, we are concerned with politicians as key actors in policy change (Schaub et al. 2024) and its discursive legitimation, which both happen simultaneously—and even though these changes have discursive antecedents (see, e.g., Zannakis 2015), these are not the subject of this study.

ADA emphasises social interaction and argumentation, and the discoursing subjects are central in the constitutive role of discourse in political processes. At the same time, ADA accounts for the social structures that both enable and constrain the agency of those subjects: '…society is reproduced in this process of interaction between agents and structures

that constantly adjusts, transforms, resists or reinvents social arrangements' (Hajer 1997, 58). Against this backdrop, we aim to analyse the use of different discourses of climate governance (Section 3.2), using the concept of storylines as an analytical tool. Hajer (1997) describes storylines as discursive tropes and symbolic references that reduce discursive complexity and allow actors to unite around what they take to be a shared understanding and a coherent discourse (see also Zannakis 2015). However, for Hajer (1997), storylines are by nature ambiguous, and discourses not necessarily coherent—features that are explored by Foucault (1976, 100) as 'tactical polyvalence', that is, the idea of 'discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform or stable' and that actors can use strategically (Hajer 1997). Such segments, or storylines, while simplified and concise, can thus come to invoke entire discourses and create and modify discursive spaces through which change can happen.

Hajer (1997) also introduces the concept of discourse coalition, describing how actors might unite around a set of storylines, even though their positions and interests are vastly different. As we will see, discourse coalitions might help us to understand a small part of our observations in the Swedish case; however, they are not sufficient to make sense of the discursive phenomenon we identified. We, therefore, also draw on Hajer's (1997) work on discursive mechanisms, a set of 'practices of micro-power' (Hajer 1997, 268) with which meaning is discursively created, upheld or transformed, and that influence processes of social change.

2.3 | Discursive Mechanisms: Shaping Social Change

The concept of discursive mechanisms, while not in itself implying an actor's intention to change a discourse, operationalises discursive agency: It allows the identification of recognisable practices, that is, recurring discursive patterns independent of the *content* of the storylines to which they are being applied. Leipold and Winkel (2017) call such mechanisms 'strategic practices' and describe them as co-constituted by discursive and institutional structures. In the present study, the discursive agency of the actors whose strategic practices we investigate arose from their roles as high-level politicians (Section 4).

Hajer (1997) identifies a range of mechanisms that he found helpful in his analysis of discourses of acid rain. While Hajer (1997) uses these to understand how discourses change, we will employ these mechanisms as conceptual tools to examine the discursive legitimation of radical policy change, specifically how discourses are made to relate to each other, combined or rendered so ambiguous that opposition becomes discursively difficult to uphold. Six mechanisms (Table 1) proved particularly useful to understand this phenomenon, which we will come to call 'discursive flipping' (Section 5.1).

These were, first, *black boxing*—a mechanism that Hajer (1997), inspired by Callon and Latour (1982), considers an almost trivial characteristic of any discourse: To be effective and manageable, storylines *have* to be simplifications of the much more complex relationships they represent. However, examining where and

TABLE 1 | Mechanisms for discursive flipping and the legitimation of policy change.

Label	Definition
Black boxing	Making things appear as fixed, natural or essential (and thus steer away from latently opposing forces) (Hajer 1997, 272)
Symbolic politics	Concrete policy measures are taken as solutions to an entire (large) problem and suggest 'order and control over physical and social developments' (Hajer 1997, 270)
Positioning—creating relationships	Actors are being positioned through discourse (Hajer 1997), thereby creating relations, similarities and differences between the speaker themselves, the listener and other actors
Creating macro-actors	A macro-actor becomes the main reference point for whose rationality counts (adapted from Hajer 1997)
Structured ways of arguing	Historically specific, well-established, recognisable ways of arguing a case which add credibility to the current statement (adapted from Hajer 1997)
Epistemic confusion	Using recognisable storylines in a way that seems compatible with two different discourses although the listener might consider the facts behind these storylines as incomplete, untrue or contradictory, but cannot necessarily pinpoint how. This mechanism renders things obvious (similar to black boxing or structured ways of arguing) but includes an evaluative component that seems intractable and not contestable (authors' construction)

how complex issues are reduced to short hands that are closing down further debate is deeply instructive for an analysis of the legitimation of policy change (see, e.g., Clement 2010).

Second, Hajer (1997) refers to *symbolic politics* not only as a descriptor of a policy approach but also as a discursive strategy: A specific policy measure is portrayed as the key solution to a problem,

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BOX 1 | Selected elements of Swedish climate policies with direct relevance for the present study (Government Offices of Sweden 2017; Swedish Climate Policy Council 2023; Tidöavtalet 2022).

Climate policy framework: Adopted by a broad majority in parliament in 2017, consisting of the Climate Act, climate goals and a Climate Policy Council.

Swedish climate goals: Overarching goal of net zero GHG emissions by 2045, followed by negative emissions. Three interim goals are to be achieved by 2020, 2030 and 2040, as well as a specific interim target for 2030 for emissions from domestic transport.

EU climate goals: According to the 2021 climate law, the EU should be climate neutral by 2050. By 2030, net emissions should be reduced by 55% compared to 1990.

Reduction obligation: Sweden's "reduktionsplikt" policy was introduced in 2018 following an EU framework as a central part of Swedish mitigation efforts. It refers to a gradual increase in the percentage of biofuels in fuel and diesel. After the 2022 election, the government decided to suspend the increase scheduled for 2023 and restrict the reduction obligation to the minimum levels required by the EU, resulting in a decrease from 12% to 6% biofuel content in 2024 (announced 18 October 2022, effective 1 January 2024).

Bonus on electric cars: Abolishment of a policy instrument introduced in earlier legislatures that provided a bonus for buyers of 'climate efficient' vehicles (announced 7 November 2022, abolished 8 November 2022).

Tax on petrol and diesel: A temporary reduction of the energy tax on petrol and diesel until 2026 (announced October 2022, effective 1 January 2023).

Commuters' travel allowance: Abolishment of a reform that aimed to make travel allowances transport-neutral in order to encourage public transport and climate-friendly options. Instead, the government increased the allowance for travel by private car (announced 20 October 2022).

Nuclear energy: After previous governments' decisions to phase out nuclear energy, the collaboration agreement's section on climate and energy focuses on increased electrification, mainly through nuclear energy (Tidöavtalet 2022). Collaboration parties announced several initiatives to promote nuclear energy, such as enabling the expansion of nuclear power installations in new locations and an increase in the Government's green credit guarantees of SEK 400 billion specifically for new nuclear power.

Wind energy: Abolishment of the current reduction of the fee for connecting offshore wind power to the grid (announced 17 October 2022, effective 1 January 2023).

Merger of ministries: The Ministry of the Environment, responsible for climate and environmental issues, was abolished and merged into a new ministry, the Ministry of Climate and Enterprise (announced 18 October 2022, effective 1 January 2023).

showing that an actor has taken their responsibility seriously and addresses the challenge in the most effective way—thus suggesting that no further elaboration or other measures are needed.

Positioning and *the creation of macro-actors* both reflect how players in the political arena are being discursively placed vis-à-vis each other and the issue at hand. Such positioning can, for example, work to make certain actors stand above any critique, whereas the abilities of other actors are called into question and their choices and actions delegitimised. Macro-actors are positioned as authorities whose judgement counts, which makes reliance on other actors' perspectives and knowledge unnecessary or even unacceptable, thus again closing down further debate (Hajer 1997).

Structured ways of arguing, then, are described by Hajer (1997, 273) as actors using discursive 'formats that can count on a certain respectability' and can easily be recognised—in the case of acid rain the allusion to some form of apocalypse.

Finally, for our analysis, we draw on a sixth mechanism, which we identified in a grounded way from our material and call *epistemic confusion*. This mechanism works by referring to notions that do not seem plausibly combinable and constructs this implausible argumentation in a way that disorients and confuses, making it difficult to openly and clearly dispute and express disagreement with this argument. Rietdijk (2024), in her analysis of political debate, describes such discursive practices as 'collective gaslighting' and shows how they can very effectively undermine the audience's epistemic self-trust—thus potentially having impacts well beyond the discourses and processes of policy change that they are a direct part of.

3 | The Present Study

3.1 | Sweden as a Case

The Swedish case is interesting for two reasons. First, Sweden's aspirations to be a leader in climate politics (Government Offices of Sweden 2017; see Hysing (2014) for a review of the early 2000s) make it a highly relevant subject for an analysis of policy change. Surveys show that about 75% of Swedes consider climate change the biggest challenge for humanity in the 21st century and would be in favour of stricter government measures to reduce GHG emissions, figures that are at the top level in international, EU and also Nordic comparison (European Investment Bank 2021; Tapia et al. 2023).

Second, Sweden has historically been categorised as a consensus democracy, characterised by the dominance of the Social Democratic party (S) and political structures that have remained relatively stable over the entire last century (Möller 2021). However, over the last 15 years, the political landscape has become more dynamic, and the formation of majority governments has become increasingly difficult, not least due to the rise of a right-wing nationalist party, the Sweden Democrats (SD), which altered the historic balance between social democrat and conservative voices. This has resulted in new collaborations between parties with differing ideological backgrounds (Hellström and Lindahl 2021). After the election in September 2022, three traditional centre-right parties—the Moderates (M), Christian Democrats (KD) and Liberals (L)—opened up for collaboration with the nationalist party (SD). The subsequent collaboration agreement, called Tidöavtalet (October 2022), made SD a

formal collaboration partner, but not a member of the government coalition. This agreement enabled M, KD, and L to form a minority government supported by SD, with all four parties together occupying approximately 50.2% of the seats in parliament (Riksdagen 2023).

Among other topics such as gang crime and healthcare, the election campaign 2022 had focused heavily on fuel prices, with protest movements (Boonstra and Söderberg 2024), conservative parties such as M and KD, and the nationalist SD demanding the rollback of climate-related policies that aimed to increase the percentage of biofuel mixed into fossil fuels including diesel (Box 1), thereby increasing their price. Much of the argument centred on the concerns of Sweden's rural population (Fischer et al. 2023), which heavily relies on car-based transport. Following the passing of the collaboration agreement, significant policy changes were carried out within the span of just a few months (Box 1). The policy resistance of the pre-election protest movement had thus become mainstream governance, and while this might have been ambiguous at the time, in hindsight, this process appears to be a clear case of policy dismantling.

While these political dynamics echo developments elsewhere (Section 2.1), Sweden's previously self-assumed role as a role model and leader of the climate transition makes it an extremely relevant case to investigate this process of change. In particular, we are interested in how policy changes were argued for and justified, apparently in a way that was so discursively powerful that any opposition—although still represented by about 49% of the parliamentary seats—was rendered ineffective. To examine the use of discourses and discursive legitimation of policy change, we juxtapose ideal-type discourses as described in the literature that politicians, dependent on party affiliation, could be expected to align with (Section 3.2) to the storylines and discourses used in practice (Section 5.1) and the mechanisms used to combine and move between different discourses (Sections 5.2 and 5.3).

3.2 | Ideal-Type Discourses of Climate and Environmental Politics

Political debate on climate and environmental issues can be seen to reflect distinct discourses (Section 2.2). Here, we draw on the literature on such discourses in Western Europe, complemented with studies on discourses of global climate and environmental governance, to create a canvas against which we analyse the Swedish debate following the 2022 elections. To make sense of and situate the storylines used by Swedish political actors, we constructed a framework of simplified, ideal-type discourses of environmental governance. Ideal types are abstractions of complex phenomena condensed into a number of distinctive characteristics with the purpose of classification and comparison of social reality (Blaikie 2007). We distinguish here four discourses that we label *social-green*, *welfarist*, *liberal* and *nationalist*. Table 2 depicts these ideal types organised into cross-cutting themes or building blocks, chiefly inspired by Dryzek's (2005) 'Questions to ask about discourses' and Fischer et al.'s (2018) components of social representations of transition governance.

The *social-green* discourse (Clapp and Dauvergne 2011), sometimes described as ecosocialism, climate justice (Schlosberg and Collins 2014), or civic environmentalism (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand 2016; Zannakis 2015), centres on global justice as a key value of concern and highlights existing power structures such as capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism, with the implication that those who can act have a moral duty to do so. Environmental and social problems are seen as inseparable (Clapp and Dauvergne 2011).

Liberalism builds on a market logic and the combination of economic progress with environmental management, a rationale that is typically presented as 'win–win'. In discourse studies, related paradigms are often referred to as ecological modernisation (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand 2016; Hajer 1997; Zannakis 2015) and are described as hegemonic and pervasive, functioning as a normative governing order that determines the available room for action (Hatzisavvidou 2020). The legitimacy of environmental action rests on what can be described as the three tenets of neoliberalism: (1) economic valuation, (2) competitiveness and (3) efficiency (Hatzisavvidou 2020).

The discourse of *welfarism* is not as established in the environmental discourse literature as the social-green or liberal discourses, but it is important for the Swedish case. It centres on the welfare state, emerging from a blend of social-green and liberal discourses, and characterises Swedish politics up to 2022, making it possible for Sweden to position itself as an international climate political leader (Zannakis 2015). The welfarist discourse combines notions of economic opportunity with values of ecological justice and argues that Sweden should lead on climate issues because it is morally right to do so, but also because this will be economically beneficial for Sweden as a welfare nation in the long run (Haikola and Anshelm 2023).

The *climate nationalist* discourse differs from the others in that it legitimises inaction on climate issues or offers arguments of 'delay' (Lamb et al. 2020), for example, by arguing that climate action comes with too large economic costs (Vihma et al. 2021). Closely connected to right-wing populist discourses, climate nationalism puts the 'pure people' of the nation centre stage and argues that personal well-being should take precedence over global concerns of climate change mitigation. Such nationalist discourses tend to be inherently in conflict with liberal ideas such as cosmopolitanism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). A characteristic feature is also the notion that the problem of climate change is exaggerated, or not real, and that people concerned about climate change are emotional and irrational (Lamb et al. 2020; Vihma et al. 2021). At the national level, this discourse is relatively new for Sweden.

These four ideal-type discourses (Table 2) served as a framework for our analysis of discourses-in-use in the Swedish debate.

4 | Methods

We conducted a qualitative document analysis to examine political actors' climate political argumentation. The material included documents published between 14 October 2022 (the date of the collaboration agreement) and 10 February 2023,

TABLE 2 | Ideal-type discourses (Section 3.2) and sample storylines in the Swedish debate 2022–2023 (Section 5.1) on climate change politics and the governance of the low-carbon transition. Ideal type descriptions based on Bäckstrand and Lövbrand (2016), Clapp and Dauvergne (2011), Hatzisavvidou (2020), Lamb et al. (2020), Vihma et al. (2021) and Zannakis (2015). Storylines in the Swedish debate based on own data analysis; see Section 4.

Themes/ discourses	Social-green		Welfarist		Liberal		Nationalist	
	Ideal type	Swedish debate	Ideal type	Swedish debate	Ideal type	Swedish debate	Ideal type	Swedish debate
Overall discourse	Climate change: a global problem Rich countries have obligation to act	Rollback of climate- and welfare policies reinforces inequality and serves interests of the rich	It is morally right to act but also economically beneficial	Transition as opportunity Rollback of climate policies harms Sweden's competitiveness and its reputation as an international climate leader	Transition if it is economically beneficial Compatibility of economic growth and environmental protection	Our new climate policies are superior, ambitious and effective The transition can only happen through electrification Electrification can only happen through expansion of nuclear power	Climate change governance is a cosmopolitan agenda driven by the elites National sovereignty and preservation of the nation is key	There might be climate change, but there is no crisis. It is unnecessary to do more Climate change policies are designed to torture people for no reason, both financially and in constraining freedom of choice

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

Themes/ discourses	Social-green		Welfarist		Liberal		Nationalist	
	Ideal type	Swedish debate	Ideal type	Swedish debate	Ideal type	Swedish debate	Ideal type	Swedish debate
Roles and responsibilities	Unjust structures in society imply that states that have the capability ought to act	We have a duty to future generations and to the most vulnerable in society Vulnerable people should not have to carry the burden of the transition The government is in league with climate deniers	The state should lead the transition and be a role model for other states and actors to follow An exceptional country like Sweden should lead	Sweden needs to lead the transition, by being a normative role model and to ensure competitive advantage of its industry We won't be able to look our children in the eyes if we don't transition Government is in the clutches of the nationalists like a dog on a leash	Market actors drive the transition and should be prioritised Lead through businesses and technological innovation	Sweden can lead through technological innovation and export Business sector: the new climate movement. The future is bright. It should be fun and beneficial to transition The opposition is naive and irrational	Countries that have already done their part should not have to do more The elites do not understand or care about ordinary people	Ordinary, honourable, hardworking Swedes are burdened and tormented by climate policies Climate change policies are unjust The elite is made up of urban socialists and liberals who don't understand people in the countryside
Time and speed	There is an urgent need to act	If we do not act now it will have catastrophic consequences	To achieve a global transition, someone has to go first, to set standards	It is crucial to reach national and international goals	Being first is good if it brings competitive advantage	Sweden's main aim should be to reach international and long-term goals	Being overly ambitious will only harm regular people Focus should be on deregulation or minimal cost strategies	It is not important for Sweden to reach the goals
Values	(Global) justice	Distributive justice, solidarity	Welfare, security	Leadership, reliability	Competitiveness, freedom	Cost effectiveness and efficiency	National sovereignty, conservatism	People first, then climate change policies

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and encompasses both material where politicians unilaterally address the public, such as newspaper debate articles, press releases, and transcripts of press conferences, and material where politicians discuss with each other in a public-facing way, such as parliamentary debates and transcripts of TV debates. Transcripts of parliamentary debates ($n = 21$) were retrieved from the publicly accessible parliament database (https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/) and included in our material if they met one of three different criteria: (1) the debate included a session on climate change, environmental or energy policy as a main theme, (2) the debate was thematically broad, for example, a general debate between the party leaders, on the EU or the budget or (3) it included the term 'klimat' (climate).

Our data further consisted of media material ($n = 40$), notably interviews and debate articles published in Swedish newspapers, where these featured relevant ministers or other prominent, national-level politicians working with climate and environmental issues, and where these were published in one of the major Swedish news outlets, *Dagens Nyheter* ('independent liberal') or *Svenska Dagbladet* ('independent conservative'). Other established media sources such as Expressen, SVT Nyheter and Altinget were also considered, albeit more selectively, for complementary debate articles and interviews. In addition, we included policy documents ($n = 16$), press releases from the governmental offices ($n = 36$), and press conferences and TV debates ($n = 2$).

Our analytical process, using NVivo to manage the data, was iterative. First, we coded the data deductively against the backdrop of the ideal-type discourses presented in Section 3.2, identifying the arguments used to argue for or against the new government's climate policies and mapping the emerging storylines used by the different speakers in relation to the four different discourses. Thereby, we reconstructed the discourses-in-use in the study period, which, as we will see, diverged to a certain extent from their ideal types (Section 5.1; Table 2). While we initially assumed that speakers would employ these discourses according to their party affiliations (e.g., a member of the liberal party would employ the liberal discourse), we were open to the possibility that storylines as well as entire discourses might be used more flexibly. This openness was not least also required as certain parties, such as the Moderates and Christian Democrats in government and the Centre party in the opposition, did not have an obvious 'home discourse'.

This first step of the analysis suggested that storylines were indeed used in a very flexible way and could sometimes invoke two discourses at the same time. We propose the term *discursive flipping* to describe this phenomenon, which is distinct from discursive shifts or blending as described by Zannakis (2015). To further examine such discursive flipping, in a second step, we coded the data, moving between inductive and deductive analysis to identify the ways in which these effects were achieved. We took Hajer's (1997) description of discursive mechanisms as a starting point, refining and adding to these (Table 1) to help us make sense of our data.

Our presentation of the results begins with a brief overview of the storylines and discourses used in the material to argue for or against the new government's climate policies (Section 5.1).

Section 5.2 summarises the different ways in which discursive flipping, that is, pivoting a statement towards two or more discourses simultaneously, could be achieved. However, the focus of our analysis, demonstrated and illustrated by means of extensive empirical detail, lies on the discursive mechanisms and how the parties in government used these to speak to multiple climate political discourses at the same time, effectively disarming potential opposition (Section 5.3).

5 | Findings

5.1 | Discourses-In-Use: Mapping Storylines in the Swedish Debate Against Ideal Type Discourses

In the Swedish debate on climate governance 2022–2023, three of the four ideal type discourses were particularly prominent, albeit with modifications that reflected the ongoing political and discursive dynamics: the welfarist, the liberal, and the nationalist discourses. Table 2 provides a non-exhaustive sample of some of the most prominent storylines.

The welfarist discourse, previously dominant in Swedish politics, was still present, and speakers were generally very critical of the new direction of Swedish climate policy, mainly on the grounds that this change damaged Sweden's credibility and ability to lead international climate efforts, and put the Swedish industry's competitiveness and export at risk. Such storylines were typically used by the parties now in opposition, notably the Social Democrats and the Centre party.

The liberal discourse was mainly drawn on by parties belonging to the traditionally conservative wing of the political spectrum, both those in government (notably the Liberal party, but often also the Christian Democrats and Moderates) and those in opposition (e.g., Centre). It rested on storylines focusing on positive notions such as faith in technological solutions and entrepreneurship. Critique towards the new climate policies was met by storylines saying that the restructuring did not dismantle, but rationalise climate policy through technological innovation and electrification, enabled by the expansion of nuclear energy, and that the political ambition to reduce carbon emissions remained the same: The only change was that the perspective was now long- rather than short-term.

The nationalist discourse claimed that while climate change might be an empirical fact, it did not matter whether or not it was a crisis, and either way, this was not something that could be effectively addressed by Sweden. Therefore, it was both unnecessary and unjust to torment regular, hardworking Swedes with climate policies, resulting, for example, in high fuel prices. The previous government was argued to be the culprit behind people's current socio-economic hardships.

Storylines representing the opposition's discourse at the more radical end, notably the social-green discourse, were essentially rendered extra-parliamentary. In the material investigated, only very few speakers from the Left or Green parties used storylines that seemed to represent this discourse—instead, representatives from these parties tended to use welfarist storylines. At the same time, the welfarist discourse became during the study

period less connected to social justice arguments than its ideal type (Table 2) and leaned more heavily on storylines putting the industry and competitive advantage of Swedish green technology, and the reputation of Sweden as a climate leader internationally, centre stage.

While the liberal and nationalist discourses as ideal types (Table 2) can be seen as ideologically incompatible, our data show that speakers' overall argumentation supporting the new government's policy change drew on storylines stemming from both liberal *and* nationalist discourses, in spite of their seeming incompatibility.

In the following statement, for example, the speaker alluded simultaneously to concerns over carbon emissions, the economic viability of Swedish companies, and Swedish identity:

> Sweden has pursued a political approach that has led to more and more companies moving their production away from Sweden to other places. This contributes to heavily increased emissions and risks continuing to do so if "Made in Sweden" becomes something one has to search for at auctions and in antique shops. Because "Made in Sweden" and taking care of the production in Sweden are among the most important CO_2-reducing measures that exist. This is why the level of reduction obligation that we have had has been so damaging. This has made it far too expensive both to be Swedish and to be a Swedish company.
>
> (Christian Democrat-M-2022-PD[1])

This statement thus brought together welfarist, liberal and nationalist storylines, arguing that the previous government's reduction obligation (Box 1) was entirely counterproductive to decarbonisation, and that, as such, strengthening the Swedish economy was a powerful way to reduce emissions.

Speakers did thus not necessarily confine themselves to the discursive camp that could be expected given their party affiliation. Rather, speakers 'borrowed' storylines from other discourses, thereby building bridges between discourses that conventionally appeared difficult to reconcile. Politicians, especially those from the Christian Democrat and Moderate government parties whose ideal type discourses were less obvious, but also key figures within the Liberal party and others, thus actively moved between discourses, which, as we will argue, was qualitatively different from the blending of storylines (Zannakis 2015), and supported significant policy change to happen in a short period of time and without meeting any effective opposition. We label this process *discursive flipping* and, in the following sections, investigate the mechanisms with which such flipping was achieved.

5.2 | Discourses-In-Use: 'Discursive Flipping'

In our analysis of the ways in which rapid policy change was being argued for by the collaboration parties, and of the discursive reactions of the opposition, we found that discursive flipping emerged from the combination of (i) content-based links, that is, storylines that connected different discourses through their content (Section 5.2.1) and (ii) discursive mechanisms that facilitated moving between different discourses (Section 5.2.2). Together, as we will show (Section 5.3), these increased the potential for the overall argumentation to speak to a wide range of citizens by making seemingly incompatible discourses work together, and at the same time appealing to competing discourses to a sufficient extent to dissuade too harsh protest.

5.2.1 | Content-Based Links: The Role of Connecting Storylines

One way in which discourses were made compatible was by using storylines that could be seen to straddle two discourses. For example, the idea that individual households should not be made to carry the burden of climate policy—neither by strict regulations nor by unduly high fuel prices—was compatible with both liberal and nationalist discourses, even though the interpretation of this storyline differed. While a liberal speaker might interpret the storyline to mean that climate action should instead be guided by more effective market mechanisms, for a nationalist speaker, the storyline might express that climate policies were going too far and should be scaled back. This can be seen as a mobilisation of discourse coalitions: Actors united around arguments that they recognised as belonging to their own discourse, even though this recognition might be superficial, and their views might, upon closer look, significantly diverge.

More interesting, perhaps, was the use of individual storylines that spoke to the supporters of a specific discourse in situations where this storyline was *not* a part of the discourse the speaker would usually invoke, but where it was sufficiently compatible not to raise protest among the supporters of this second discourse. For example, a storyline repeatedly picked up by government parties, including the Liberals, to justify a rollback of governance instruments such as fuel taxes was that 'people need to be able to manage their everyday life'. This was a storyline stemming from the nationalist discourse, and while it was not always taken as far as to claim that climate policy instruments were tormenting people (Table 2), it still implied a dichotomy between personal welfare and environmental policies. Sometimes this dichotomy was also articulated explicitly, by adding storylines that rhetorically confirmed the importance of decarbonisation and thus connected to liberal and welfarist discourses, even though this importance was then immediately qualified:

> We have a very strong obligation to work together towards reducing emissions. But we also have an obligation to work, in difficult times with a war in our vicinity and high inflation, towards people being able to manage their everyday life. These are goal conflicts.
>
> (Moderate-M-2022-N)

Such statements can be seen as a move of government politicians to speak to the followers of the nationalist discourse without having to fully reproduce this discourse. At the same time, this

'borrowing' of a storyline might get accepted by the followers of the liberal discourse, which means that the speaker can speak to two discourses at the same time. By using statements, that is, content, that could be regarded as meaningful or, at a minimum, acceptable by proponents of different discourses, speakers thus flipped, or moved, between discourses—an effect similar to seeing two different pictures in a lenticular print: an image changing depending on the viewing angle.

5.2.2 | Moving Between Discourses: Mechanisms for Discursive Flipping

When analysing such processes of discursive flipping, we identified recurring mechanisms that were used to segue between different discourses, thus argumentatively legitimising policy change. Such discursive mechanisms were rhetorical moves and patterns that can be described independently of their content (Table 1), even though, as we will see, these often occurred in specific combinations together with key storylines. With the government as the reference point, this flipping happened in two directions: between liberal and nationalist discourses (Section 5.3.1) and between liberal and welfarist discourses (Section 5.3.2).

5.3 | Discursive Flipping Between Climate Political Discourses

5.3.1 | Discursive Flipping Between Liberal and Nationalist Discourses

One of the most prominent mechanisms used in the discursive flipping between liberal and nationalist discourses was *positioning* (Table 1). Both liberal and nationalist speakers created relationships and identities through comparison with other actors, concurring that they were more rational and less emotional than the opposition and extra-parliamentary actors such as climate activists, and that they had a better sense of what was realistic. Such statements were often made in passing and woven into a longer argumentation, but they could also be more elaborate:

> The climate question is not an easy question. Sometimes when you listen to political parties, especially the extreme, almost religious parties such as not least the Centre party, you get the impression that this here is a really simple thing. It isn't. It is very complicated. It requires a certain knowledge and competence to understand the relationships between different events.
>
> (Sweden Democrat-MP-2022-PD)

However, liberal and nationalist speakers differed on what this positioning exactly entailed. For example, speakers from both discursive backgrounds expressed understanding of and support for 'the ordinary people'. This aligned with the liberal discourse (Table 2) in that it gave industry actors and technological innovation such as fossil-free steel production a crucial role in the green transition (and thus, by implication, relieved individual households of the burden to change their behaviour). For the nationalist discourse, support for 'the ordinary people'

could easily be extended into an argument that was highly critical of the urban elites, which were pictured as financially well-off, removed from reality, mainly concerned with being the world's conscience, and who imposed their values and standards on people in rural areas. By positioning themselves in a space that allowed movements between storylines regarding societal actors' roles and responsibilities that connected to both discourses, speakers thus could flip between liberal and nationalist discourses.

Black boxing was another mechanism that seemed to unite the collaboration parties—and could also be seen to reduce the space for the opposition's potential criticism. One key instance of black boxing was particularly prominent in our material, recurred in many variations, and interestingly, consisted of two steps. In a first step, speakers defined climate politics as energy politics, to then argue for the development of nuclear power plants as the only solution to the energy issue:

> ... climate politics and energy politics are important. I don't live on a pretend planet where you can decouple energy politics from climate. I live where you can't just want things that don't exist, but where you have to work in a targeted way to create what needs to exist, and this is fossil-free energy production. This is where climate politics starts and ends. You [directed to the Green party] have never wanted to accept this; you just hope it's sufficient that the wind blows when it blows—and then it is done. You hope that Germany is an example, where they phase out nuclear energy (...). We are not going to go that way. We are going to go another way...
>
> (Moderate-M-2022-PD)

This equated Swedish climate politics to the urgent need to build more nuclear power plants, which, especially during the first part of our study period, seemed not to evoke any critical questions, effectively closing down the debate. The recurrent argument that Sweden had a strong, 'effective and ambitious' approach to climate policy—by focusing on energy, which meant focusing on expanding nuclear energy production—was aligned with the liberal discourse, but could also be accepted by those supporting the nationalist discourse. While the nationalist discourse did not place weight on the climate part of the nuclear electrification argument, and rather stressed the need for reduced electricity prices, this act of black boxing allowed all collaboration parties to claim that they were actively pursuing the mitigation of climate change. Phrases representing the idea of cheap, reliable and abundant electricity were repeatedly employed: 'A lot of electricity, masses of electricity, cheaper electricity going forward' (Christian Democrat-M-2022-TV), 'stable, inexpensive, fossil-free electricity is the basis for managing the climate goals' (Moderate-M-2022-PD)—often in conjunction with the argument that this was only achievable through nuclear power, and that previous governments had dismantled existing nuclear energy plants and thus caused the current problem for Sweden and its citizens:

> We will reach these goals, but it is much, much more difficult to reach the goals now that we don't have a big part of the clean, Swedish energy production anymore. Let us be honest with this. If we had 12 nuclear reactors today instead of six, it would have been much, much easier for Sweden to manage the goals than it is today.
>
> (Moderate-M-2022-TV)

The long-term nature of such plans and the large financial investments required allowed concrete action to be postponed. The blame that was repeatedly put on the Social Democratic and Green parties[2] (e.g., 'the failed green-party energy politics', Moderate-MP-2023-N) might have further contributed to discursive closure. Towards the end of our study period, however, the black boxing effect of this argumentation was scaled back as voices pushing for a debate of the complexities of building nuclear power plants, including financial scenarios and price calculations, became louder.

The debate around building new nuclear power plants can also be seen as an example of *symbolic politics* (Table 1)—a policy intervention that was portrayed to solve multiple large and complex problems at the same time. Promising the provision of large amounts of electricity acted as a catch-all that offered the vision of a future with cheap and unlimited energy for the Swedish people, who would neither have to change their lifestyles nor put up with wind power, which was discursively associated with the opposition parties. The drastic scaling back of the 'reduction obligation', which required a progressive increase in the amount of biofuels mixed into fossil diesel and petrol (Box 1), was used in a similar way, depicted as a solution to many, if not all, contemporary problems with living in the countryside.

Such catch-all solutions were compatible with both nationalist and liberal discourses, could be integrated into different discursive contexts, including also welfarist argumentation (see Section 5.3.2) and constituted an argumentative pattern that we found across our entire material, whether stemming from parliamentary debate or news items.

Overlapping storylines (Section 5.2.1), positioning, black boxing and symbolic politics thus allowed the collaboration parties to speak to the entire range of their supporters while catering to the diverse views within this collaboration. While this helps us to understand how the radical changes in climate policies directly after the 2022 election (Box 1) were legitimised towards parts of the political actors, it does not explain why there was not more overt and effective opposition from the parties that were not part of the collaboration. We will explore this question in the next section.

5.3.2 | Discursive Flipping Between Liberal and Welfare State Discourses

In the period after the 2022 elections, the social-green discourse (Table 2) was not very present in the public debate, even though the Left and Green parties together still occupied 12% of the seats in parliament (Riksdagen 2023). The main discursive space occupied by the parliamentary opposition was therefore delineated by the welfarist discourse, which shared storylines about the role of the industry and Sweden's international leadership with the liberal discourse.

The combination of *symbolic politics* and *black boxing* of climate politics as energy politics, which we identified as constitutive of the discursive flipping between nationalist and liberal discourses (Section 5.3.1), also enabled movement between the welfarist and liberal discourses. Where the opposition criticised the government for a lack of policy measures that reduced carbon emissions immediately, this was met by the argument that the large-scale development of nuclear power was the only way to ensure that the huge industrial projects supported by the previous government, such as the electrification of the steel sector, could go ahead.

> Sweden is in a good position to lead global climate work. Ore, forest and free entrepreneurship made Sweden rich. Today, once more, ore, forests and the free businesses drive technological developments. The clean and stable provision of electricity contributed substantially to making us a modern industrialised nation and put us even today—although we lost six nuclear reactors—in a better starting position for the electrification of industry and transport than many other countries. (...) Sweden needs to re-establish a reliable, safe, and cost-effective electricity provision to enable electrification. (...) During spring, further proposals will also be presented to facilitate the building of new nuclear energy. (...) Climate change is a serious threat. But climate politics also include great opportunities.
>
> (Moderate/Christian Democrat/Liberal-M-2022-N)

By connecting to core welfarist ideas and previous Social Democrat-led governments' political projects—such as the "green industrial revolution", which Social Democrat speakers continued to express ownership of—the speakers bridged liberal and welfarist discourses.

Looking across the three main discourses—nationalist, welfarist, and liberal—the expansion of nuclear energy was presented as a promise to act on climate change, without upsetting actors vocal in their resistance to the previous government's climate policies. Interestingly, the complexity-reducing effect of this black boxing might have been supported by the welfarist discourse, which increasingly emphasised the economic importance of the transition while (in comparison to its ideal type; Table 2) playing down its moral dimensions. This focus on economics thus removed argumentative layers that could have made the presentation of nuclear energy as a catch-all solution less widely acceptable.

Another important mechanism that allowed flipping between the liberal and welfarist discourse was the *creation of macro-actors*. This was done, first, by emphasising the centrality and

leadership of Swedish business and industry in the green transition, reflecting key elements of both the liberal and the welfarist discourses (Table 1). Swedish industry was represented as a key reference point for the main actor in the climate transition. While this argument was not necessarily an active part of the nationalist discourse, it seemed to be tolerated as long as positioning industry as a macro-actor did not imply any concrete burden for Swedish industry or taxpayers. By contrast, speakers from both liberal and the welfarist camps actively employed references to this macro-actor position to argue that they were doing what Swedish businesses wanted and needed:

> The Swedish industry is a greenhouse of prosperity and innovation, but nowadays also an important environmental movement—globally leading in sustainability and the green transition. The government is going to be an active partner in this work.
>
> (Moderate-M-2022-P)

> And it's not only me who wants that Sweden does what it needs to do in the climate transition; the whole industry is standing up, with one voice, and demands that the government does more to take the yellow jersey [literally: the leader's shirt] in the climate transition because it creates jobs and investment in Sweden.
>
> (Democrat-MP-2022-TV)

Positioning the industry as a macro-actor, while not necessarily uniting speakers from welfarist and liberal backgrounds around a shared understanding of the role of the government, did thus allow all speakers to take the burden of responsibility for the transition off the individual, while maintaining the argument that the transition was now in good, namely powerful, hands. Alternative views—which could, theoretically, have come from the social-green side of the discursive spectrum and challenged the central role given to this macro-actor—were not very pronounced.

The European Union (EU) was discursively constructed as a second macro-actor and increasingly used as a reference point for reconciling welfarist and liberal discourses—a reference point whose authority the collaboration parties knew was well accepted by the opposition parties. Interestingly, at the same time as hailing the EU's strong role in international climate politics, the government used EU policies to justify the *reduction* (rather than an increase) of climate political ambitions and requirements for biofuels (Box 1):

> In a bit over a year, 1st January 2024, carbon reduction requirements will therefore be lowered for the rest of the electoral term so that they are in line with EU requirements. The EU is the world's largest environmental organisation. Therefore we're negotiating just now about where the lowest level should lie.
>
> (Liberal-M-2022-PD)

This type of argument seemed to manage the split between acknowledging Sweden's alignment with a strong environmental actor as the EU—which was compatible with liberal, welfarist and social-green discourses—and the promise to reduce ambition in carbon reduction and thus fuel prices—which reflected the nationalist discourse. While representatives of the latter were generally critical of EU influence over Sweden, the fact that this macro-actor was discursively used to legitimise a policy change that corresponded to their views appeared to make this argument compatible also to the nationalist discourse. At the same time, and similar to the use of the industry as a macro-actor, this externalised responsibility for climate action to an actor who could not directly be held accountable by Swedish citizens.

A particularly important mechanism for moving between liberal and welfarist discourses was *structured ways of arguing*. This mechanism was frequently employed to emphasise that the significant changes in climate policies after the elections maintained Sweden's high aims and ambitions in terms of climate policy, while making its implementation more effective and socially acceptable. Such structured ways of arguing could consist in the reference to Sweden's climate goals and EU policies, in invoking Sweden's role as a world leader, as well as in the use of well-established phrases such as 'ambitious and effective' (Section 5.3.1) and 'strong and ambitious' to describe the government's approach to climate politics. Such tropes had already been used by the previous government and were central to the welfarist discourse. They were thus difficult to question by a large part of the opposition, even where they legitimised governance changes that were seen as concerning by some actors, such as the decision to merge the Ministry of the Environment with the Ministry for Enterprise.

However, our analysis also showed how such structured ways of arguing were taken a significant step further, discursively supporting what could be seen as logically conflicting and thus creating what we call here *epistemic confusion* (Table 1)—a discursive mechanism that was not among the ones that Hajer (1997) identified: At the same time as they emphasised Sweden's continued high climate ambitions, Sweden's ministers were casting doubt on the realism of these ambitions and beginning to draw national climate goals into renegotiation.

Journalist: You have earlier said that you believe that the world understands that Sweden is in a difficult situation right now. Do you think that these countries understand why Sweden increases its emissions?

Minister: I think the most important thing is to highlight (...) that the EU continues to show global leadership in the negotiations. There are no reduced ambitions related to the 1.5° aim in practice or implementation. (...) At the same time, we see that we have a different economic situation that gives us fewer possibilities to finance the transition in our own countries, and an energy war that heavily affects many countries. I think there's understanding for that. This doesn't mean that we should have reduced ambitions ... (Liberal-M-2022-N)

Such discursive moves allowed speaking to the nationalist, welfarist and liberal discourses at the same time, and could also be

seen to soothe worries on the social-green end of the spectrum: Using tropes (e.g., 'global leadership') that were appreciated by some parts of the spectrum, maintaining that ambitions to act were unwavering, while implicitly reassuring the nationalist listener that these commitments were quite loose and could be adapted. When asked for concrete examples of action taken in the short term, the government recurrently referred to the climate action plan to be published in December 2023 (a rhetoric move that could also be seen as black boxing), and where speakers tried to confront the government by highlighting inherent contradictions in their argument, these were met with a repetition of the same affirmation that had caused the confusion. For example, in one of the parliamentary debates, the government's argumentation, maintaining that Sweden was still on track to reduce carbon emissions all the way down to net zero by 2045, was challenged by several MPs of the opposition parties, pointing out concrete incongruities in the government's statements and policy decisions, and summarising:

> ... I must say that what the minister said was very contradictory and, at large, illogical. Is it so that pretty words are meant to cover up the fact that the government is weakening the climate work? It is obvious that Sweden will, in all likelihood, not reach its climate goals.
>
> (Left-MP-2022-PD)

In response, the minister explained the government's climate political approach once more and concluded by reiterating:

> This is thus about driving climate politics that are ambitious and effective. This is not my personal opinion, but something stated in both the Declaration of Government Intention and [the collaboration agreement].
>
> (Liberal-M-2022-PD)

We found that the use of such easily recognisable tropes even in the face of explicitly expressed doubts, which reproduced for the argumentation central notions that, in principle, connected to multiple discourses (here: concerns about the climate crisis that were a constitutive part of the social-green, welfarist and also liberal discourses; Table 2), was characteristic of the political debate in our study period. Such statements were supplemented with arguments that the current government's approach to climate policies was superior to the previous government's approach precisely *because* it was different. Such evaluative claims rendered the argumentation intractable and made it difficult for the opposition to move the discussion forward, as all that seemed to be left for the critics of the government's climate policies was to reiterate what they had already said.

Overall, our analysis suggests that a combination of discursive mechanisms worked in a way that gave also those actors that would not usually support the collaboration parties the possibility to recognise crucial parts of their own climate political views in the government's discourse. Even where inherent contradictions and the effect of discursive flipping left them confused and this confusion was articulated (as in the parliamentary debate

mentioned above), the flexibility in the government's argumentation, moving between discourses and combining storylines that might otherwise be regarded as ideologically incompatible, seemed to have a stifling and debilitating effect on the capacity of the opposition to influence the rapid policy change unfolding in the year after the election.

6 | Discussion

6.1 | Discursive Flipping: Mechanisms Supporting Policy Dismantling

In this study, we examined the discursive dynamics accompanying a process of rapid policy change that, in hindsight, could be regarded as policy dismantling and climate backlash, and showed that climate backlash does not have to come accompanied by a strong, unequivocal anti-net zero populist discourse, as in Paterson et al.'s (2023) or Marquardt et al.'s (2022) analyses. Instead, our case illustrates how such radical policy change can be legitimised through more subtle discursive means. We identified a range of discursive mechanisms that enabled speakers to 'flip' between discourses in their argumentation backing up the climate political changes instigated by Sweden's new government in 2022. These discursive mechanisms entailed more than discursive change (Leipold et al. 2019) or blending to create a new discourse (Zannakis 2015): Storylines could be used as pivots around which the interpretation of the storyline as representing a larger discourse could swing in different directions. The policy changes argued for were thereby made acceptable to adherents of otherwise divergent climate political discourses. This could be achieved with the help of mechanisms such as black boxing and the creation of macro-actors (Table 1), and the resulting ambiguity seems to have made it difficult for any remaining opposition to contest this argumentation.

This difficulty became particularly visible in what we in our analysis call epistemic confusion (Section 5.3.2). Such confusion was produced by speakers making evaluative claims that, at the time of the discussion, were intractable: As the government parties maintained that Sweden's ambitions to combat climate change were unwavering, they did not align with established patterns of climate backlash and policy dismantling that tend to explicitly build on an anti-net zero stance (Atkins 2022). Rietdijk's (2024, 231) analysis of what she calls post-truth rhetoric and compares to gaslighting, 'an epistemically dysfunctional type of discourse which is unconcerned with objective facts', offers a useful perspective to understand the interactions between the speakers making such ambiguous claims and their audiences: '[S]upporters can get what they want from the ambiguous communication, while opponents have nothing to grab on' (Rietdijk 2024, 239). As part of this rhetoric, speakers might also discredit their critics (Rietdijk 2024)—and indeed, the storylines critical of the urban elites we identified as part of the nationalist discourse (Table 1), together with the blame that was put onto the Social Democratic and Green parties for having caused an energy crisis (Section 5.3.1) could be seen as examples of such discrediting efforts. As Rietdijk (2024) highlights, such rhetoric can lead to audiences doubting their ability to judge the validity of their own knowledge and who to trust, and thus to epistemic isolation and a suspension of judgement.

In the meantime, some of the speakers' claims have been assessed and contested through more formal means, such as the Swedish Climate Policy Council's evaluation of the national climate action plan published in December 2023, concluding that the 'government's goal of an ambitious and effective climate policy is not reflected in action' (Swedish Climate Policy Council 2024, 6). However, such assessments—which might have helped those doubting their own judgement to regain confidence in their epistemic abilities (Rietdijk 2024)—were available to neither politicians nor other actors at the time during which the rapid policy change took place.

6.2 | Discursive Flipping in Parliamentary Debate

The discursive mechanisms we identified here are, in terms of political debate and rhetoric, an intriguing phenomenon as they exemplify what Ilie (2016, 134) calls the 'double-sided nature of parliamentary rhetoric' that tries to construct both consensus *and* confrontation—and does so within the institutionalised logics of parliament (Ilie 2016) and political media debate (Ekström 2008): Speakers engaging in discursive flipping have to balance speaking to a broader and diverse audience, thus aligning with other actors' discourses, with developing an own profile that they can get recognition for. In much of our material, as typical for political debate, speakers were openly confrontational, positioning their own party in opposition to other parties. However, our analysis shows the central role that discursive flipping played in the legitimation of climate political change during our study period. It was predominantly used by the parties in government, in whose interest it was to achieve broad agreement with and support of the new climate policies—or, at a minimum, an absence of dissenting voices, which could be expected from the opposition parties but also from the Sweden Democrats as the collaboration party not in government. While there was some critical debate in the media and in parliament by actors affiliated to the opposition, the Social Democrats, who as a large party constituting the previous government might have had the political weight to distance themselves from discursive flipping that pivoted towards the welfarist discourse (see Section 5.3.2), did not seem to express much opposition to such discursive co-optation.

6.3 | Conclusion

Our study was framed in a way that foregrounded speakers' agency in the use of storylines and discursive mechanisms to show how single storylines could be used to speak to several climate political discourses at the same time, thus being able to garner support—or at least tolerance—by multiple societal groups. While our study was not designed to examine causality, our findings suggest that analysing the discursive mechanics and the ways in which storylines can come to stand for multiple discourses, thus creating ambiguity that makes space for multiple allegiances, can help us to better understand the relationship between discourses and policy change, and thus the process of policy dismantling. This still leaves the question open how groups in society concerned about climate backlash and policy dismantling could address such discursive developments. Rietdijk (2024) describes how post-truth rhetoric, employed by

political actors, works through confusion and disorientation. These effects are amplified through epistemic isolation, for example, by discrediting those that could otherwise by mobilised for support (here, e.g., the 'green, urban elite', see e.g., Table 1). However, being able to name and describe this confusion and isolation (Rietdijk 2024, 242) can be a first step of empowering those who feel disoriented, taking back control over their epistemic autonomy and calling out climate backlash while it occurs.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are in the public domain and available either through (i) the Swedish parliament's database 'Dokument & Lagar' at https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/ or (ii) the Retriever media archive.

Endnotes

[1] Sources refer to the documents analysed: Speaker's party affiliation—speaker's role (M: minister; MP: member of parliament; P: other politician)—year—type of text (P: policy document; PD: parliamentary debate; TV: TV debate; N: news/debate article).

[2] It should be added that the decisions to close down some of the Swedish reactors were taken in a complex, iterative process, involving, in various stages, other political parties (including those in government now) as well as the energy companies themselves (see, e.g., https://historia.vattenfall.se/stories/i-hetluften/motstand-mot-karnkraft/; https://www.nwt.se/2022/12/12/vem-lade-egentligen-ner-karnkraften-ae1b2/).

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