

## **From Mockery to Moral Outrage: Affects and Relations of Power in Polarized Climate Change Discussions on Australian Twitter**

MARIIA ALEKSEVYCH<sup>1</sup>

Paris Lodron University of Salzburg, Austria

MARLEEN BUIZER

Wageningen University & Research, The Netherlands

TALES TOMAZ

Paris Lodron University of Salzburg, Austria

EHSAN DEHGHAN

Queensland University of Technology, Australia

This article investigates how affective polarization becomes discursively manifest in climate change discussions involving Australian politicians on Twitter during the 2019 and 2022 federal election campaigns. Drawing on the concepts of interactional and affective polarization on Twitter and employing Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory alongside Margaret Wetherell’s affective-discursive approach, we first examined the interactional dynamics of these discussions and then conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis of tweets to explore the construction of opponents’ identities and associated affective patterns. The results revealed a web of relations within competing affective discourses. Identifications—such as children, families, workers, farmers, and Australia—were frequently invoked in opposition to rivals, who were often portrayed as threats.

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Mariia Aleksevych: mariia.aleksevych@gmail.com

Marleen Buizer: marleen.buizer@wur.nl

Tales Tomaz: tales.tomaz@plus.ac.at

Ehsan Dehghan: e.dehghan@qut.edu.au

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The affective patterns of relating to these perceived threats varied, ranging from dismissal and mockery to blame and righteous anger, highlighting shifting power struggles within the discourses. We observe affective patterns linked to a deeper, historically ingrained anxiety about Australia's international standing.

*Keywords: affective polarization, climate action, discourse theory, affect, elections*

Affective polarization is one of the issues in democracies that has attracted scholarly attention in different parts of the globe (Borrelli, Iandoli, Ramirez-Marquez, & Lipizzi, 2021; Harel, Jameson, & Maoz, 2020; Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021; Neumann, Kelm, & Dohle, 2021; Nordbrandt, 2021; Yarchi, Baden, & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021; and others). Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) define affective polarization as "the extent to which partisans view each other as a disliked out-group" (p. 406), following social identity theory (Tajfel, 1970). The theory posits that individuals are prone to categorizing themselves into groups and discriminating against outgroups. Such group identifications can supersede political or partisan orientations in cases of highly salient issues (Hobolt, Leeper, & Tilley, 2021). One such issue is climate change, where opposing viewpoints occasionally spark negative affect in Twitter interactions (Tyagi, Uyheng, & Carley, 2021).

Social media are established research sites for affective polarization, although their role in its dynamics remains equivocal (Nordbrandt, 2021; Wilson, Parker, & Feinberg, 2020). Among these platforms, intergroup hostility is prominent on Twitter (Yarchi et al., 2021). Studies with advanced computational methodologies consistently find alignments between retweet network structures and affective polarization in both partisan and issue discussion networks (Falkenberg, Zollo, Quattrociocchi, Pfeffer, & Baronchelli, 2023; Lerman, Feldman, He, & Rao, 2023). Specifically, they show that more distantly located users in a retweet network express more negative emotions in interactions with their outgroups. This structural distance is also called interactional polarization. It denotes the tendency of discussion participants to interact with the like-minded while avoiding holders of opposing views (Yarchi et al., 2021).

We leveraged literature on affective polarization on Twitter<sup>2</sup> and examined communication involving Australian politicians during the 2019 and 2022 federal electoral periods to investigate how negative affects toward the other intertwine with competing climate change discourses. The context was chosen purposefully for two reasons. First, affective polarization increases with stronger issue salience, as in times of elections (Hernández, Anduiza, & Rico, 2021). Second, climate change action, policies, and institutions in Australia face a significant challenge due to the "extreme political polarization and uncertainty" (MacNeil, 2021, p. 164). Affective polarization is higher among elites (Enders, 2021), and elite polarization is a predictor of affective polarization in OECD countries (Boxell, Gentzkow, & Shapiro, 2024). We investigated utterances by politicians (potentially indicating elite polarization) and by other users mentioning them (potentially indicating polarization toward elites) to find patterns of affective discursive representation of opponents with differing opinions on climate change.

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<sup>2</sup> The research was conducted before Twitter was acquired by Elon Musk and renamed into X.

The guiding question of the study was as follows:

*RQ: How does affective polarization about climate change become discursively manifest on Twitter?*

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's (1985/2001) discourse theory and Margaret Wetherell's (2013; Wetherell, McCreanor, McConville, Moewaka Barnes, & Le Grice, 2015; Wetherell, Smith, & Campbell, 2018) theorizations of discourse and affect were applied to analyze retweet interactions and tweet contents to reveal communication dynamics and discursive-affective patterning of opponents' subject positions. Next, we briefly outline our application of discourse theories and elaborate on our methods. We then present and discuss the results, followed by the conclusion and limitations of our approach.

### **Discursive Struggles, Affect, and Twitter**

#### ***Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory***

Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory was introduced in the 1980s and developed in multiple works (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2001; Laclau & Zac, 1994; Mouffe, 1993, 2013, 2018). It argues that conflict and antagonism are inherent in society, making any social order contingent and exclusionary. The ever-present choice between competing alternatives in political decisions is one of Mouffe's core points of departure. The organization of a society emerges in the provisional exclusion of all other possibilities. It can always be challenged (Mouffe, 2013). This is where antagonism comes in as a productive force for social change, according to Mouffe (2013), because it reveals the presence of alternatives that struggle for but can never achieve ultimate domination. A social order can, at most, reach hegemony, and the struggle for hegemony occurs in what Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001) call a "discursive space" (p. 109).

Laclau and Mouffe's (1985/2001) discourse theory is all-encompassing and views the social world as a discursive space, where signs, material objects, and institutions are imbued with meaning (p. 109). When zooming into Twitter, this means that not only the linguistic content of tweets but also the built-in interactional structures and the materiality of the platform contribute to meaning-making. For example, Twitter allows users to like, retweet content, mention, or block anyone on the network and limits the posts' length. These affordances and constraints do not predict the outcome of the struggles but shape articulatory practices on the platform. Additionally, Twitter users discursively give specific meanings to these affordances through their calculated interactions with them.

In these practices, privileged signifiers are constructed (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2001). They anchor the meaning of other signifiers—concepts—within a chain by excluding alternative interpretations (signifieds). The unfixity of meaning in privileged signifiers allows for forming discursive alliances through chains of equivalence, which unite different discourses/identities by their shared distinction from a "constitutive outside." For example, "climate action" as such a signifier can attract groups with different views on specific actions to mitigate climate change in opposition to groups that doubt the reality of climate change or the usefulness of any climate action. Similar to affective polarization, the structural characteristics of retweet networks reflect discursive alliances (Dehghan & Bruns, 2022). The proximity of nodes (users) in a network points to the amplification of each other's discourses by users who multiply the number of

respective articulations. However, closely positioned users and user groups form alliances only when their constitutive outside is present. In other words, discursive alliances exist only in interactionally polarized networks that have links to affective polarization.

In discursive struggles, attractive collective identifications are offered (Mouffe, 1993). This is where Twitter takes control of such offerings due to its algorithmic curation of content. The platform's algorithms, which compile users' feeds, are proprietary, and their workings are not exactly known outside the corporation. In the context of polarization, scholarly debate has revolved around whether social media are conducive to forming heterogeneous or homogeneous informational environments and which of the two is more likely to boost polarization dynamics (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2023; Mason, 2018; Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017; Törnberg, Andersson, Lindgren, & Banisch, 2021). Empirical studies are mixed and reveal the presence of discussions between like-minded groups on Twitter (Castillo-de-Mesa, Méndez-Domínguez, Carbonero-Muñoz, & Gómez-Jacinto, 2021), but also higher heterogeneity of networks of social media users in general (Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2014). Twitter allows users to follow accounts with diverse opinions or identifications and block accounts to avoid seeing their activity. The recommended content is based on user activity data and similar users' activity, as the overview of the social network sites' algorithms by Ko, Lee, Park, and Choi (2022) suggests. Thus, the recommendations may depend on whether the user engages more with like- or different-minded content.

### ***Affect and Discourse***

Mouffe (2018) argues that strong collective identities are formed from affective investments and passions. Borrowing from Freud (1921/1949) and Spinoza (1677/1994, Part 3), Mouffe (2018) views affect as the qualitative expression of the energy of instincts. Drawing on Spinoza, she suggests that "an affection (. . .) is the state of a body insofar as it is subject to action of another body" (Mouffe, 2018, *Affects*, para. 3). These dynamics of bodies affecting other bodies are the basis for developing common affects and constructing identities. Nonetheless, this view of affects as merely corporal ignores affects' role in social ordering. Scholars increasingly conceive of affect as a productive part of discourses, since it influences others and is informative of how a subject relates to the world (Milani & Richardson, 2021).

Margaret Wetherell (2013; Wetherell et al., 2015, 2018) developed an approach that reveals patterns of power and structuring among various groups performed through affect in discourses, thus extending their analysis as some unspeakable bodily states to their role in social ordering. She rejects the idea that affect precedes discursive actions and argues for "the emergent, open-ended, intertwined affective-discursive patterns evident in social life" (Wetherell, 2013, p. 351) as a unit of analysis. Affect and discourse are intertwined in affective-discursive practices that involve, among others, identity work. These practices shape relationships between different identities by producing proximity, distance, and attachments or detachments (Wetherell et al., 2015). In affective-discursive practices, relationships with others and among others are established, and spatialities are formed. Meaning-making does not solely involve cognition, but also encompasses an affective dimension that positions actors in relation to meaning. As Wetherell et al. (2015) put it, "an affective-discursive social practice like righteous indignation or claiming victimhood, for instance, is how ideology functions" (p. 60). These practices are to be found in the situated activities and lived "small worlds," but also in memorial events, heritage sites, and news media that

demarcate national spaces and establish epistemologies around social actors' emotions (Wetherell, 2013; Wetherell et al., 2018). Within this approach, affect, despite being contingent, is regular, predictable, related to social dynamics, and bears social consequences.

Twitter and social networks in general are places of affective publics and affect cultivation (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012; Park, Strover, Choi, & Schnell, 2021). Different affects may circulate in the discursive spaces on the platforms. However, since we deliberately narrow our research to the space predictably imbued with a sense of conflict, with competing views on climate change, interactional and affective polarization, we focus on "the articulation of affective-discursive positions to speak and emote from, affected and affecting identities, and positions for others who are spoken about" (Wetherell et al., 2015, p. 60). While Wetherell's (2013; Wetherell et al., 2015, 2018) approach to studying affect offers more than this, our interest in affective polarization draws our focus to affected and affecting subject positions in the discursive competition to see how it transpires in the discursive dynamics. Therefore, we do not take on the ambition of uncovering how affective-discursive practices develop in certain communities or surveying emotional regimes intertwined with climate change discourse in Australian national spaces. We use this approach to study discursive-affective patterns involved in constructions of "others" in Twitter climate change discussions.

### **Materials and Methods**

We analyzed postings presenting climate change discussions on Twitter from data sets containing tweets by the candidates to the Australian Senate and House of Representatives in the 2019 and 2022 federal electoral campaigns. We also collected any retweets of those posts and tweets mentioning the candidates. The list of candidates and their respective Twitter accounts were compiled manually by the team at Queensland University of Technology's Digital Media Research Center (DMRC). The DMRC collected data using the Twitter API. Bruns, Angus, and Graham (2021) and Bruns and Moon (2018) detail the principles and tools used for data capture. Australian federal elections are held every three years, and the government has the discretion to set the polling date within a set timeframe. Therefore, the campaign timeframe for the two elections differed, as did the number of days of data collection. The data sets contained 1,346,016 tweets gathered from April 20 to May 17 in 2019 and 3,301,623 tweets gathered from April 20 to May 20 in 2022. They were filtered to keep only climate-related tweets containing keywords including "climate," "greenhouse," "warming," etc. The first list of keywords was adjusted after reading through the resulting 1,100 tweets in each of the data sets to check for erroneous results and identify possible additional keywords. This process was repeated on 600 tweets from each data set to check the data after the adjustment. Consequently, 26 keywords (see Appendix A) were applied to filter out the climate change debate in the electoral campaigns. The resulting corpora included 91,801 tweets (6.82%) from 2019 and 161,109 tweets (4.88%) from 2022.

Furthermore, social network analysis identified communities among the accounts contributing to the climate change discussion. Directed retweet network graphs were visualized using the Force Atlas 2 algorithm in Gephi (Jacomy, Venturini, Heymann, & Bastian, 2014). Groups within the graphs were identified iteratively using the implementation of the Louvain community detection algorithm in Gephi (De Meo, Ferrara, Fiumara, & Provetti, 2011).

After detection and qualitative verification of the communities in retweet networks, a random sample of original tweets by each group was selected for deep qualitative reading. The tweets were coded to identify emerging patterns, using affective polarization as a sensitizing concept that gives “a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances” (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). The objective was not to quantify the level of affective polarization but to uncover the underlying meaning-making processes. In total, 785 tweets from the 2019 electoral period and 800 tweets from the 2022 electoral period were analyzed qualitatively, of which 340 and 361 tweets, respectively, were identified as representative of affective polarization. With an orientation given by the theoretical framework, manifestations of affective polarization were explored in identifications of opponents constructed in competing discourses and affective patterning related to them.

## **Results and Discussion**

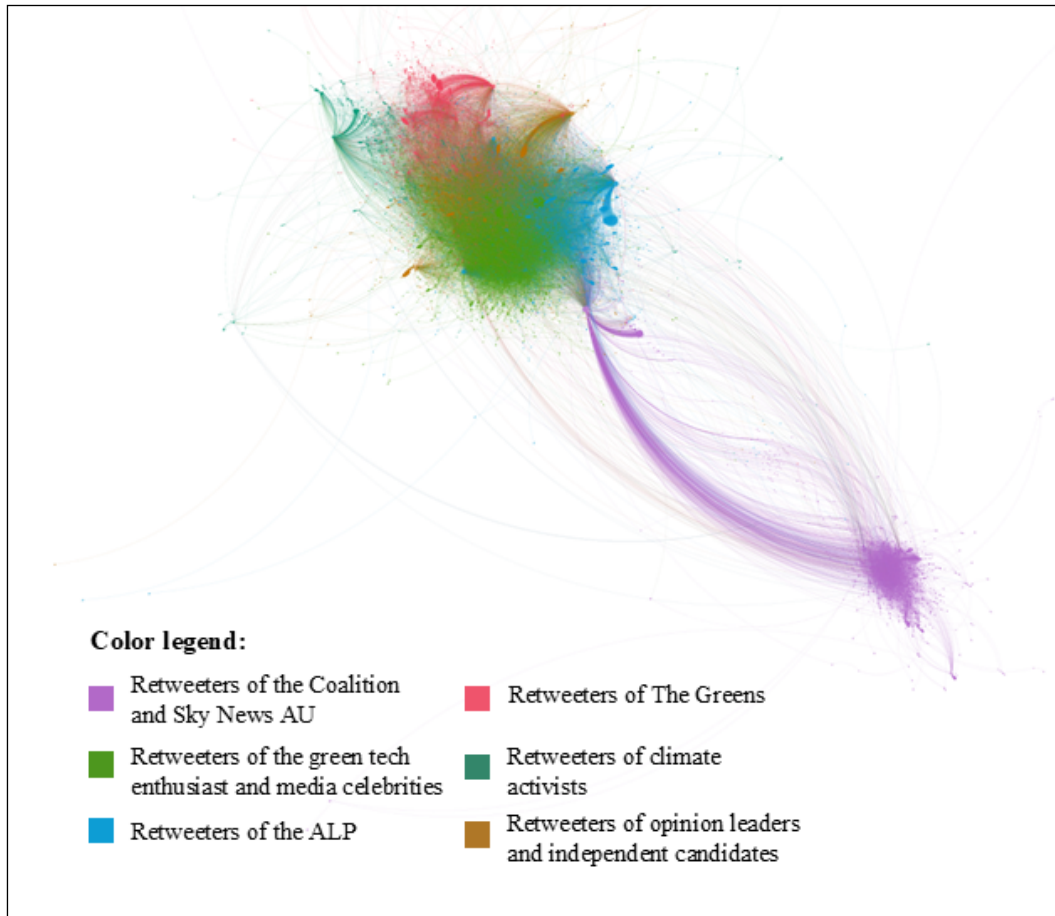
### ***Retweet Network Structures***

As the first step of the analysis, we built and qualitatively analyzed the retweet networks of the filtered climate change discussions. The retweet interactions comprised 32.16% (14,181 nodes and 52,852 edges) and 33.65% (20,411 nodes and 83,501 edges) of the overall climate change discussion network (mention and retweet connections together) in 2019 and 2022, respectively. The Force Atlas 2 algorithm, used to visualize the directed networks, rendered structural polarization for both years: two groups of nodes positioned at a distance from one another. The Louvain modularity algorithm with resolution settings at 1.0 detected 175 communities in 2019 and 162 communities in 2022. The six largest communities, comprising 11,629 nodes (82%) and 43,194 edges (81.73%) in 2019, and 15,553 nodes (76.1%) and 62,008 (81.73%) edges in 2022, were left for further analysis. The visualization of the communities (Figures 1, 2) revealed the interactional polarization of five groups positioned closer to one another, relative to another group at the periphery of the network in both electoral periods. The groups were labeled according to their most retweeted accounts (nodes with the highest weighted in-degrees).

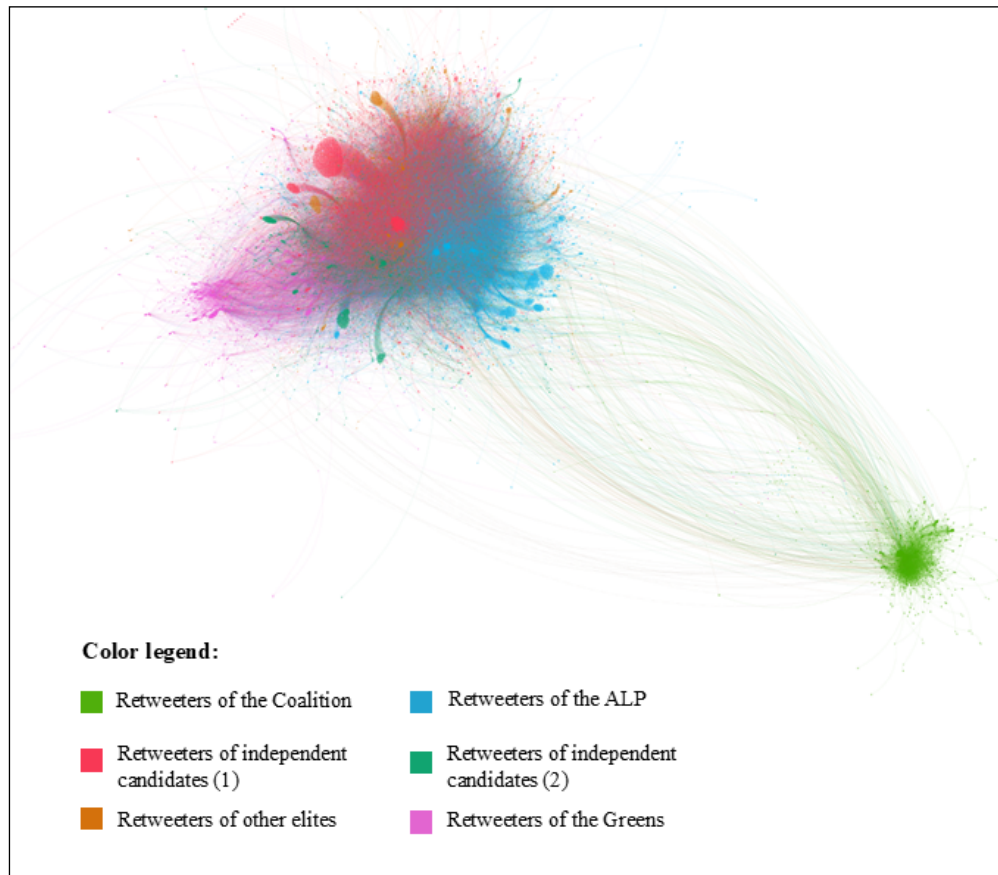
The peripheral group in both elections comprised users who retweeted accounts of the members of the Liberal and National parties (Coalition). The opposed constellations of groups consisted of retweeters of the two other main parties—the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and The Greens—as well as of users who retweeted independent candidates, climate activists, journalists, publicists, and other popular accounts. These “crowdsourced elites” (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012) indicate the fault lines in climate change discussions’ retweets. The parties’ positions on climate change vary along with the voters’ views on the issue (Bruns et al., 2021; Tranter, 2013, 2021). Voters of the Coalition were significantly less concerned about climate change compared with supporters of the ALP and The Greens (Colvin & Jotzo, 2021).

According to our theoretical framework, the observed interactional polarization of the retweet networks in both electoral periods present discursive struggles where retweeters of the ALP, The Greens, independent candidates, and other elites vocal in climate discussions formed a discursive alliance against the retweeters of the Coalition, which is their constitutive outside. Since the retweeters of the Coalition accounted for around one-fifth of the networks, the five groups achieved provisional hegemony in the discursive space of Twitter, as their identifications attracted more users who amplified them through

retweets. Notably, the retweeters of The Greens are positioned on the periphery of the discursive alliance, at some distance from the rest. That is, members of this community retweet or are retweeted by other groups to a lesser extent than the rest.



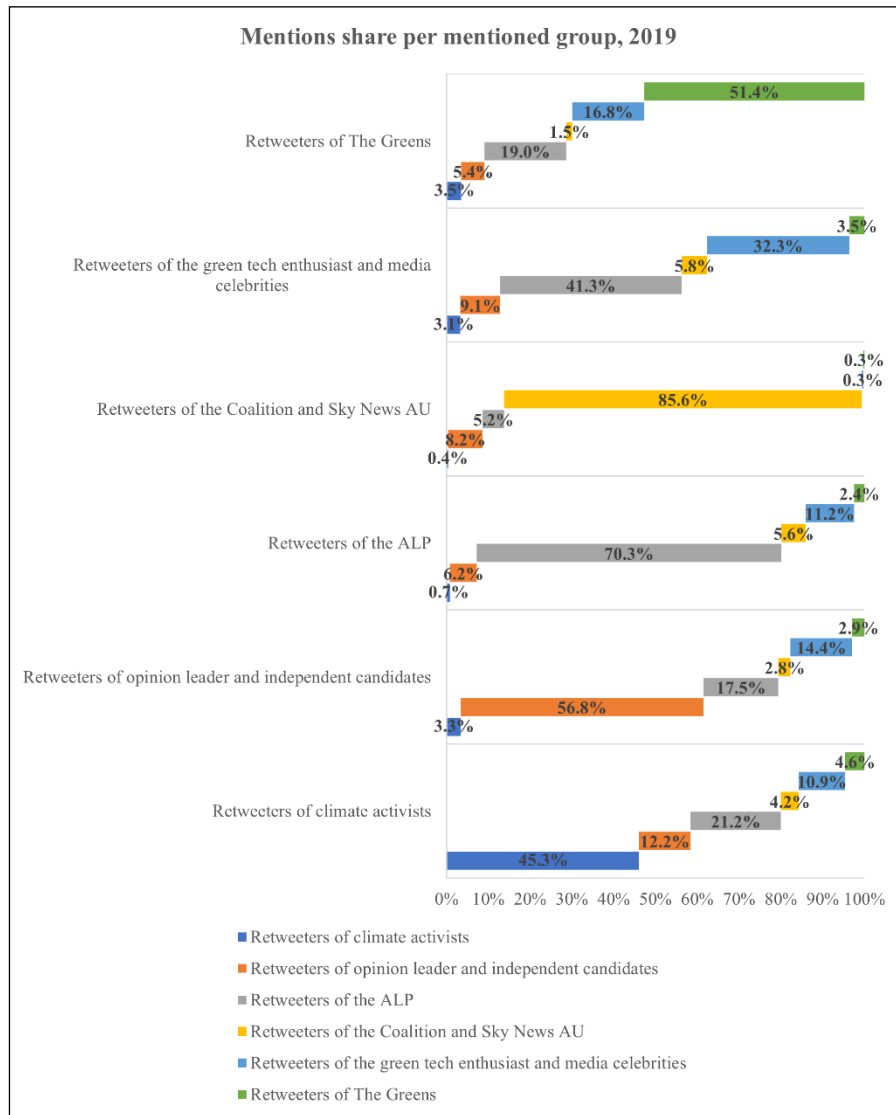
**Figure 1. Six biggest retweet network groups in climate change discussions on Twitter in the 2019 electoral period in Australia, as rendered by Force Atlas 2 and the Louvain modularity algorithms in Gephi. The given labels are based on nodes with the highest in-degree weight in each group.**



**Figure 2. Six biggest retweet network groups in climate change discussions on Twitter in the 2022 electoral period in Australia, as rendered by Force Atlas 2 and the Louvain modularity algorithms in Gephi. The given labels are based on nodes with the highest in-degree weight in each group.**

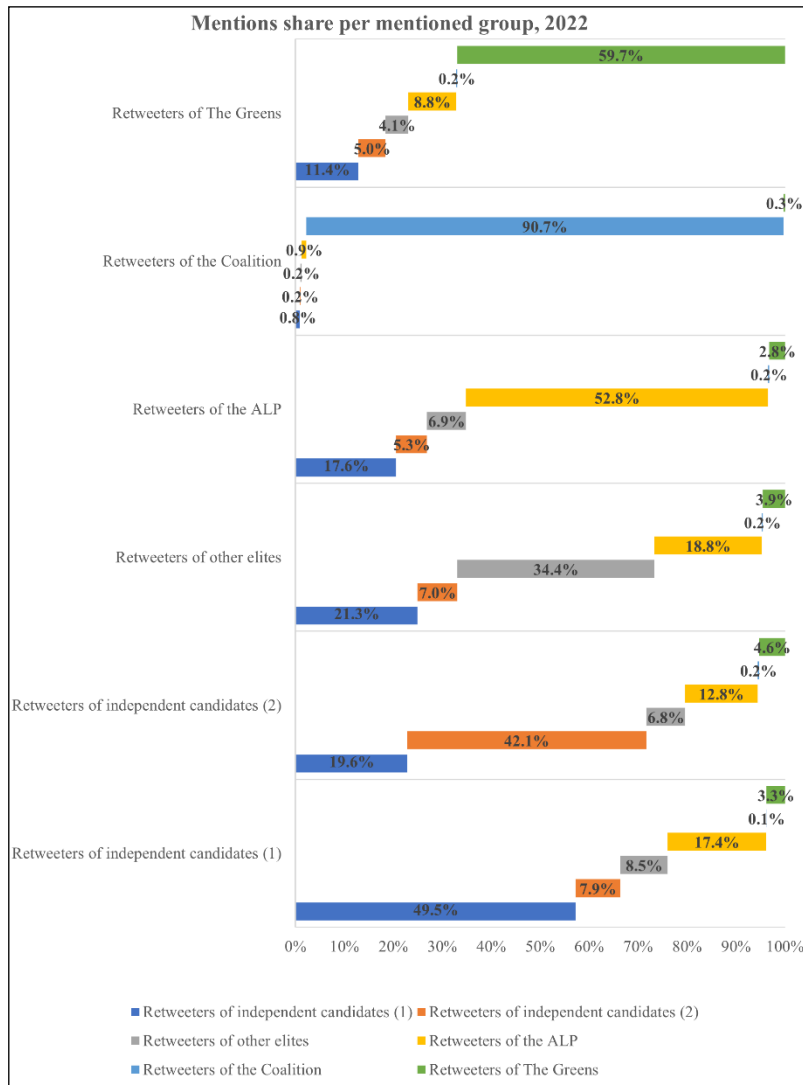
The six groups and their discursive alliances had a temporal and incidental nature and comprised predominantly different users and retweet interactions in each period. Of the 2,092 nodes that appeared within these groups in both electoral periods, only 716 maintained the same 905 retweet connections. When compared with the total number of users who retweeted about climate change within the six groups in 2022, 4.6% (N = 716) of users retweeted the posts from the same users they had retweeted in 2019. These repeated interactions accounted for just 1.5% of all retweets within the groups in 2022. The other thousands of users forming discursively resonant groups on Twitter were not consistent across both elections. Instead, they formed these clusters by retweeting those climate change positions they found discursively attractive. The attractiveness of different identifications for the same users might therefore be incidental and undesirable for actors who struggle for power and want to be distinguished.





**Figure 3. Cross-mentioning patterns among groups in the 2019 data set.**

Overall, our analysis of retweet networks shows that users preferred retweets to composing tweets with mentions of politicians. For each mention, there were 3.63 and 3.69 retweets in 2019 and 2022, respectively. The mentioning practices of the six groups show a tendency toward in-groups, though with some exceptions (Figures 3, 4).



**Figure 4. Cross-mentioning patterns among groups in the 2022 data set.**

Users grouped around nonpolitical or nontraditionally political forces—such as retweeters of green tech enthusiasts, media celebrities, and climate activists in 2019, and other elites and independent candidates in 2022—mentioned users from other groups within the discursive alliance more frequently (more than half of their mentions) compared with users grouped around political party members. The retweeters of the Coalition accounts appeared to be the least mentioned. In 2019, their portion of mentions by other groups did not exceed 5.8%. In 2022, it was at 0.2%–0.3%. They also mentioned their in-groups the most (85.6% and 90.7%, respectively). However, the differences in how this group was mentioned in 2019 and 2022 should not be interpreted as an indicator of increasing interactional polarization, since despite their

common label, the group of retweeters of the Coalition consisted of different users in 2019 and 2022, due to the incidental nature of the retweet relations described above.

Our qualitative analysis of the group discourses revealed competing views on climate change between proponents of stronger climate action and those who either dismissed climate concerns or were critical of available solutions. The former consists of a constellation of the five groups formed around accounts of the ALP, The Greens, independent politicians, media celebrities, and climate activists, while the latter comprises the retweeters of the Coalition. We further analyze how these competing discourses constructed their opponents—those who subscribed to different truth claims—and named them climate action and climate contrarian discourses, respectively. To contextualize the analysis, we add the relevant facts and results of other studies to the narrative.

### ***Affective Opponents' Identities in Climate Contrarian Discourses***

Three dominant subject positions of opponents could be identified in climate contrarian discourses: (1) climate action proponents as lacking a rational understanding of the climate issues, mis-prioritizing them, or miscalculating their consequences; (2) climate action proponents as hypocrites who merely pay lip service to climate concern; and (3) climate action proponents as selfish and motivated by their own economic interests, endangering Australia. We show below how the same positioning can be coupled with different affects, with a fuller array of discursive-affective patterns provided at the end of the section. The illustrative tweets presented below are close paraphrases of the original tweets, modified for ethical reasons to prevent users from being identified through reverse searches.

The irrationality of climate action proponents was conveyed with varying intensities and outcomes, with the most radical representations portraying climate action concern as a form of blind faith:

- (1) "‘Green religion’ must not be ahead of people’s jobs or families’ wellbeing. Damaging the economy will not improve the environment."

The "Green religion" label in this tweet excerpt (1) shifts climate concerns from the domain of science and society to the realm of faith. Without elaboration of the term, the signifier is empty (lacking the referent) so that anything could be articulated as a "Green religion." However, this signifier is associated with damaging the economy, jobs, and people’s well-being, contributing to a very specific meaning that creates opposition between environmental struggle and well-being. Green signifiers and meanings are labeled a "religion" and are thus constructed as beliefs, which are considered a private affair in liberal democracies protected by freedom of conscience. Placing "Green religion ahead of people’s jobs or families’ wellbeing" could be seen as imposing specific beliefs of a minority group on society as a whole. However, the discursive opponents are not simply illusioned believers; they harm people and the economy, deliberately or not. The author speaks from a position of authority regarding what we should and should not do, offering a prescription rather than a suggestion to dismiss climate concerns. The demonization of opponents marks the border between them and the workers, families, and ordinary people who need to be warned and saved:

(2) "Matt Canavan is going to Hunter to warn workers about losing their jobs if @AlboMP, and his ridiculous emission targets win with the help of climate fanatic independents."

In this excerpt (2), the subject positioning of the leader of the Labor Party Anthony Albanese and independent candidates follows the same logic. They affect workers because of their proposed emission targets. The discursive-affective pattern is used to demarcate the Labor Party and independent candidates from workers, for whom they form an existential threat. The independent candidates are labeled "fanatics"—not reasonable in their thinking or actions, fixated on an idea. Meanwhile, the National Party senator for Queensland, Matt Canavan, is portrayed as a friend of the workers who warns them about the potential danger. The tweet poster projects clear opposing affects to the different identities of those who harm, framing the one who warns against this as someone who prevents harm. Still, the author's position is that of a narrator who describes the reality: The possibility of job losses is conveyed as something that obviously and objectively exists following specific electoral outcomes. Additionally, the Labor Party and independent candidates are portrayed as responsible for the rising cost of living through implementing "carbon tax"—a term this discursive group extensively uses to refer to a carbon credit scheme. The most radical discursive disruption, though, is the attempt to break and rearticulate the chain of equivalences in which labor parties usually operate, where they associate themselves with the protection of workers' rights and welfare.

Similarly, the climate action proponents were often condemned as hypocritical, motivated by mercantile interests in tweets pointing to the use of private jets, the nonuse of renewable energy sources by their advocates, or perceived links to the renewable energy business (see Table 1). This subject positioning is intertwined with loathing and is often spoken from a superior position. Speakers appear as those who "did not buy it," managing to curtail and call out the deception. The discourses of hypocrisy of climate action proponents were also prevalent in climate contrarian tweets leading up to several UN Framework Conventions on Climate Change Conferences of Parties (Falkenberg et al., 2022, pp. 1114, 1115, 1118, 1119–1120).

The opposition and distance between workers, or "ordinary people," and climate action proponents are constructed by emphasizing the failure of the latter to prioritize among different issues, and their negligence of challenges more important than climate change, faced by ordinary people. Such subject positioning does not necessarily assume any threats to a social group, but are articulated from a superior position with indulgence:

(3) "Today I met a man who had to close his business because of lockdowns. His kids had to stop going to school and he could not even visit his dying father in another state. When I asked him about his biggest election worry, he looked at me with tears in his eyes, and said 'climate change and a federal ICAC.'"

Tweet (3) exemplifies the belittling of the platform of independent candidates advocating climate action and the establishment of a federal commission to investigate high-level corruption ("ICAC"). It creates an unrealistic portrayal of a male Australian who, despite facing economic difficulties and having a dying father and children without access to education, is primarily concerned with climate change and corruption. The image of a white, hard-working male who overcomes adversity to support his family is deeply ingrained

in Australian identity and has been celebrated in movies (Lloyd, 2002). The man's concern for climate change is ironically portrayed as indifferent to his family through the unexpected resolution of the story of his hardships. The man is forced to disregard his responsibilities to his children and late father due to economic difficulties. However, his struggles do not concern him, and the "tears in his eyes" prioritize climate action and anti-corruption efforts over demands for a job and income that would provide for his children's education and enable him to honor his demised father. Such articulation presents climate action as irrelevant to family values. It emphasizes the perceived disconnect between the advocates of climate action and anti-corruption measures and the hard realities faced by ordinary people, thus presenting climate action as a concern only for the well-off. This mockery portrayal acts as an indulgent condemnation of misplaced priorities, wherein climate prevails over immediate family. It adds a pattern of positioning the discursive opponents as objects of laughter, not to be taken seriously due to their affective or irrational discourse.

Finally, the same discourse of irrationality, impaired reasoning, and miscalculation invokes not only passive-aggressive mockery, but despair and a sense of helplessness in the attempts to bring the "truth" and reason to their consciousness:

(4) "Even if climate is really changing because of humans, why is it so hard for people to get that reducing our emission has zero effect on climate? What we reduce, India and China increase by twice as much each year. Waste of billions of dollars for absolutely nothing."

The tweet (4) "exports" the problem to China and India that "increase [emissions] by twice as much each year." The user, answering in a discussion thread about the importance and costs of climate action, engages with a common discursive frame. "China's emissions" are often used in Anglophone climate contrarian discourses as a referent to the ineffectiveness of policies (Coan, Boussalis, Cook, & Nanko, 2021; Painter et al., 2023). The need to prioritize China's emissions to tackle climate change was voiced by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison and shown on TV channels in August 2021, as Painter and colleagues (2023) analyzed. They observed similar claims aired on television in the United Kingdom and dubbed this strategy to refocus on other countries "whataboutism." The tweet (4) follows the same logic and articulates Australian losses ("[w]aste of billions of dollars") and Chinese or Indian gains leading to "absolutely nothing." Climate action advocates are conceived as incapable of understanding the futility of their project, missing the larger perspective. In this articulation, their initiatives merely play into the hands of other countries and jeopardize the Australian economy through unwise spending. However, climate action proponents do not mean to do harm; it is their inherent quality of incapability to understand something so straightforward, which calls for a helpless "why."

### ***Affective Opponents' Identities in Climate Action Discourses***

Typical for these groups were expressions portraying climate contrarians as doing injustice to children and farmers, holding Australia back, and harming the planet. These meanings produced in the affective discourses were intertwined with blame, condemnation, and high concern:

(5) "To a mother, her children's future is always more important than money. Australians die of heat strokes each year already, and climate change will make it a lot worse. You can't bring back the dead with money."

In this tweet (5), good parenthood related to climate change is articulated through care of their health ("Australians die of heat strokes each year already"), which cannot be more important than "children's future" for a mother. The user reacts to a reply to her earlier tweet in a thread demanding the shutdown of coal exports. The reply articulated job and money losses, as well as the futility of climate projects because of "China emissions." As a response, the interlocutor is presented as not understanding good parenthood. By implication, a good parent would mean someone who desires the utmost climate action, while those not wanting it are portrayed as indifferent and harmful to their children's future. This also puts parents in a position of authority to speak about climate change by virtue of parenting obligations (see Kverndokk, 2020). Here, the positioning reverses, and now, climate action proponents have the "understanding" that their discursive competitors lack to be "authorized" to speak about climate.

Harming a group or society as a whole is a typical feature of climate action opponents in representations by their discursive competitors. They are described in criminal terms in discourses of condemnation and blame. Furthermore, climate change affective discourses are characterized by invoking a sense of abandonment and betrayal in farmers, distancing them from the National Party, which traditionally positions itself as a party representing rural areas. This is illustrated by the tweets of a climate activist who posted a thread of tweets with videos. In one of the tweets, the author reports on a walk with one of The Green's candidates where they were:

(6) ". . . talking about the fact that the Nationals always put the coal and gas industry and the big business over Australian farmers' interests."

In this excerpt (6), the National Party is presented as siding with the "coal and gas industry and the big business" and as being at a distance from farmers. The farmers' interests are put behind those of the fossil fuel industries. The tweet creates a clear configuration of the positions of different groups where the National Party is close to the big coal and gas business, and they together pose a danger to farmers. Farmers here are of lesser power, a betrayed group that can rightfully hold a grudge. The distinction between affected farmers and influential big businesses and politicians is presented as a fact to discuss, a matter of concern, positioning the author and interlocutor as advocates for the marginalized group in this situation.

The multitude of affects intertwined with the positioning of opponents as harmful include intense blame and resentment:

(7) "The Liberal Party climate destroyers and deniers wasted 6 years and held Australia back: They blocked investment in renewables. They worsened climate impacts. This mob is a climate disaster, and we can't afford another day of their acts."

In the tweet (7), the Liberal Party is portrayed as "climate destroyers and deniers" and a criminal "mob" who "held Australia back" at a cost to the nation in terms of time ("wasted 6 years") and

environmental damage ("climate disaster"). The tweet is a direct reply to the LNP candidate's post criticizing a lack of calculation for the competing Labor Party's climate action plan. The tweet presents climate action blockers as a threat or the cause of Australia's problems and places them outside the Australian community. It produces righteous anger or moral outrage, constructing "we" as feeling exhausted with climate contrarians so that "we can't afford another day of their acts." Climate action discourses present the perceived opponents as harming and threatening various groups—children, farmers, and Australia. The table below summarizes the discursive subject positioning and intertwined affective patterns of relating thereto, as identified in the studied Twitter discussions. They are typically conflated in climate change discourses and lack an either/or quality, but are dissected here for analytical purposes.

**Table 1. Discursive-Affective Constructions of Opponents' Identities.**

Subject positioning of opponents	Affective patterns
<b>Climate contrarian discourses</b>	
Lacking rational understanding of the climate issues or mis-prioritizing them or/and miscalculating the consequences of their project.	Disregard and disdain from the position of cognitive superiority in calculating consequences;  Indulgent mockery;  Frustration, irritation, and helplessness from the position of cognitive superiority.
Hypocrites who merely pay lip service to climate concern.	Despisement, contempt of a person who curtailed the deception.
Selfish and motivated by economic interests, harmful to Australia's national wealth and international standing.	Indignation, resentment from a standpoint of epistemic superiority and care for the motherland.
<b>Climate action discourses</b>	
Harmful for various groups and the whole Australia	A sense of worry and concern;  Blame and condemnation;  Righteous anger;  Speaker's position is often one of caring and better knowing how to care for others.

### ***Workings of Meaning and Affect in Climate Change Discourses on Twitter***

Our focus on the discursive-affective construction of opponents' identities in climate change discourses sheds light on the affective patterns associated with different subject positions and their relations in the articulated structures under different truth claims. It examines the interconnection between affect and meaning, revealing the open-ended quality of affect in discourses. Articulations of subject positions can invoke

different relations and affects, including a perceived malice of opponents (Wetherell et al., 2015) through the constructions of their subject positions as harming agents. The affective-discursive patterns reveal not only the interlocutor's relation to the articulated subject positions but also involve relations to and among others. Here, demarcations of social groups are drawn in affective discursive moments. The affective articulations "align individual and group subjects with and against each other" (Kenway & Fahey, 2011, p. 189). The construction of identities in the studied affective discursive struggles on climate action articulates and demarcates who should be "cared about," who is threatened, and who needs to be saved from those who brought the groups into needy situations. In these discourses, those holding opposing views are not just considered incorrect, but they are approached with an array of negative affects, giving merit to their exclusion by virtue of unjustly harming others or putting their own interests ahead of the wider community. When shared—as is afforded by Twitter—these condemnations cause moral outrage (Konishi, Oe, Shimizu, Tanaka, & Ohtsubo, 2017). This way, in the power struggles, a competing discourse is delegitimized, and its identity is posed as a menace. The affects intertwined with the identity constructions seem to be linked to the power given to the menacing opponents relative to the speaker's position: the less powerful opponents are dismissed or mocked, and the more powerful opponents are resented or blamed. The competing identities are articulated as affecting the others in a way that identifies them as threats, while those threatened are put in a position of powerlessness. The harming agents and their projects need to be eliminated to save those under threat. The opponents are not seen as legitimate, reflecting how untamed antagonism operates (Mouffe, 1993).

The moral claims in discourses are what Phelan (2022) calls "sedimented antagonisms," which indicate the absence of real political contestations and are also visible in predictable narratives. The claims by climate contrarians in our data are identical to those documented in other studies on social media platforms, blogs, and mainstream media (Coan et al., 2021; Falkenberg et al., 2022; Painter et al., 2023). The use of constructs like children and the future are also not novel (Jones, Davison, & Lucas, 2023; Kverndokk, 2020). However, we have shown how the same identities can be intertwined with different affective patterns with different social implications. Some of the discussed articulations bring interests and policy consequences with regard to the fossil fuel industry and farmers, climate, and the Australian economy into the debate—a sign of politicization in the Mouffean sense (Maesele & Raeijmaekers, 2020). However, as opponents holding "wrong" truth claims are presented as damaging and thus illegitimate alternatives, they are eradicated from the power struggle.

In the climate change discussion, both discursive groups relied on a shared Australian identity to portray their opponents as a danger to the nation and exclude them from the collective identity. Portraying others as not being part of "us" is a common strategy in truth construction in affective discourses (Wetherell et al., 2015). Of interest here is that the climate change discursive struggles engage the wider Australian insecurity of the country's international standing (Kenway & Fahey, 2011). The competing subject positions on climate change revive anxieties about how Australia is seen internationally, including the apprehension of losing economically to its Asian-Pacific neighbors or failing to protect its natural richness.

There are a couple of takeaways from our study. The first concerns our approach to studying affective polarization. Instead of measuring feelings in a survey or computationally assessing Twitter interactions' sentiments, we offered a case for studying affective polarization qualitatively. We looked for affective-discursive patterns in discursive struggles and used extant literature coupled with discursive



approaches. We believe this approach could complement the computational analysis of interactions, since it can reveal what is not shown when interactions are absent, but negative affects toward the imagined opponents persist in discourses. The two retweet-based groups spoke predominantly among themselves, but in the talks, affective constructions of opposing subjects took place. Second, employing the affective-discursive practice approach (Wetherell, 2013; Wetherell et al., 2015, 2018) both confirmed and enriched existing accounts of discursive identity constructions in literature by highlighting the role of contingent affective patterning, its social consequences, and its link to power relations. As shown, the construction of opposing subject positions as irrational, ignorant, or harmful agents interlaced with varying affects. Climate change communication scholarship could further benefit from building knowledge of the open-ended ways of relating to the discursive positions and demarcating the social space with specific placement of the social actors therein as seen by discourse participants themselves.

### Conclusion

The article investigated climate change discussions involving political candidates on Twitter during the electoral campaigns in 2019 and 2022 in Australia, aiming to see how dislike toward the differently minded becomes discursively manifest. The Twitter data was computationally and manually analyzed with the lens of Laclau and Mouffe's (1985/2001) discourse theory and affective discourse approach by Margaret Wetherell (2013; Wetherell et al., 2015, 2018).

The retweet networks indicated interactional polarization between a core—proponents of climate action—and a periphery—climate change contrarians. The distanced groups had limited engagements with the rest of the users. The retweet network relationships had an accidental and temporal, rather than strategic, character and hinged on the attractiveness of the discursive positions articulated by different actors at a certain moment.

The power struggles included the affective construction of opponents' identities in undesirable ways. Affective polarization, or negative feelings toward others, transpired in the affective-discursive construction of opposing subject positions as (1) lacking rational understanding of the climate issues or mis-prioritizing them or/and miscalculating consequences of their project, (2) hypocrites who merely pay lip service to climate concern, (3) selfish and motivated by economic interests endangering Australia's national wealth and international standing, and (4) harmful for various groups and the whole Australia. These subject positionings are intertwined with different affects. Constructing holders of opposing views as irrational, ignorant, and lacking understanding was coupled with varying affects, including disdain, indulgent laughter, frustration, and helplessness. Constructing competing subject positions as harmful agents twined with concern, resentment, indignation, blame, and anger. Discourses of hypocrisy were associated with loathing and hostility.

When understood as discursively constructed relations between different identifications, negative affects and affective polarization can be interrogated in depth to uncover different placements of various individuals and social groups in discursive spaces. As a result, discursive-affective patterns reveal alignments and exclusions and other ways to relate to the social actors that imply different consequences. In the competing affective discourses of climate change, a web of relations emerged. Identifications such as children, families, workers, farmers, and Australia were frequently invoked in opposition to discursive competitors, who were

often framed as threats. The affective patterns of relating to these perceived threats varied—from dismissal and mockery to blame and righteous anger—revealing alternating power plays in the discourses.

### Limitations and Outlook

Our conclusions have expected limitations. Some of them stem from the chosen theoretical approach. First, our study focuses on dislike toward differently minded in contestations, omitting favoritism of in-groups that is a part of affective polarization. However, the interrogation of opponents' identities in discourses gives an idea about different patterns of dislike toward out-groups. Studying a phenomenon that is typically measured quantitatively via automated text analyses, surveys, and experiments (although not methodologically ideal) through a mixed-methods approach—contextual grounding, basic network analysis, discursive-affective analysis—was a risky undertaking from the start. Our results are not to diagnose affective polarization but to bring attention to the place that cultivation of negative affect may take in power struggles. They do not indicate the scope of the issue or fully grasp how it is experienced by participants of the discussions, since we studied the artifacts of those experiences without observing them as they unfolded. The latter could be an interesting avenue for future qualitative studies on online discussions, including qualitative interviews with participants.

Additionally, the scope of this study did not allow for a detailed unraveling of the discourses of different groups. While there was consistency in the discursive construction of opponents' identities, neither the opponents nor the proponents of climate action must be seen as homogenous groups with identical, conflict-free truth claims.

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## Appendix A

### List A. Terms Used to Filter Tweets

climate  
coal  
fossil  
warming  
net-zero  
cop2  
emission  
co2  
renewable  
solar  
carbon  
ipcc [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change]  
emit  
cefc [Clean Energy Finance Corporation]  
cprs [Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme]  
greenhouse  
ets  
adani [name of the large industrial group that planned the biggest coal mine project in Queensland; also a colloquial name of the project]  
stopadani  
gautam\_adani [name of the founder of the Adani Group, see p. 19]  
reef  
gbr  
geoengineering  
weather modification  
chemtrail