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Everything and nothing is sustainable:
a thematic analysis of sustainability in Norwegian party platforms

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Foreword

Somehow, sustainability has become something that everyone agrees with, but no one can explain. We talk about sustainable economies, sustainable skin care and sustainable oceans, but the frequent use and nearly buzzword status of the word can also render the concept meaningless to many. This thesis came into existence out of a personal curiosity about the ambiguous yet all-encompassing use of sustainability, allowing for a deeper exploration into how the political parties negotiate this complex concept.

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Summary

Sustainability is a prominent topic in politics globally, and the most recent Norwegian political party platforms published shortly before the 2021 elections were no exception from this trend. The concept of sustainability, though infrequently defined, is used all throughout the political platforms, and this thesis questions how and in what ways the concept is shaping Norwegian politics on a discourse level. Through a thematic analysis, five themes are identified and analysed to form a discussion of how sustainability as a concept is understood and used by the political parties, and the implications of this usage for politics and for the party/voter relationship.

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1. Introduction

In the political platforms for the 2021 parliamentary elections in Norway, the parties profess that they are working for sustainable oceans, sustainable food, sustainable consumer habits, a sustainable economy, a sustainable fish population and a sustainable welfare state. There are few pages that do not include the concept of sustainability, however, a clear definition of how the parties understand the concept is harder to find. Even though the concept is actively used, there also seems to be a trend of researchers and common people getting tired of the persistency in the use of the concept, and express that the concept feels worn out, or even misused at times (Samuelsen, 2020). This tension between the persistence of the concept in the political party platforms and the general uneasy feeling of the concept as overworked and overused is the central conflict addressed in this thesis.

This master's thesis will concern itself with the Norwegian national agenda, and how sustainability is presented, interpreted and negotiated by the political parties. The concept has become a part of the political agenda and can be found in political programs, in media, and used by the general population. Due, in part, to the rise of the United Nations' 2030 Sustainability Agenda with its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the use of the word sustainability has increased nationally in Norway and the definition itself has also expanded and morphed. A buzzword such as sustainability is a part of a language of development, that creates a model of reality; unavoidable, unquestioned, purposefully expansive and vague (Cornwall, 2007, p. 471). With this expansion of meaning and increased emphasis on the concept of sustainability, it is crucial to question in what ways the political parties are understanding and using the concept.

This master's thesis will follow the principles of a thematic analysis, that looks carefully and closely at the ways in which the concept of sustainability is used in the current political party programs (for the 2021-2025 term). The thematic analysis will allow for an exploration of the prevalent national sustainability discourse through a constructive deconstruction of the word in question (Cornwall, 2007, p. 481). This thesis is thus not a discourse analysis, but studies the discourse used by the political parties through a thematic analysis. This method will be outlined closer in part 3.

1.1. Rationale

There are many reasons for pursuing the topic covered in this master's thesis. The first aspect of which has to do with timing. This thesis is written directly following the parliamentary elections in Norway in 2021. The party platforms analyzed within this thesis will shape the political direction of Norwegian parliamentary decisions until the year 2025. Understanding how the political parties use and conceptualize sustainability across the political spectrum is therefore a good indicator of can be expected from the parliament as a whole in the coming years (Fleig & Tosun, 2017, p. 434). It is therefore important to critically analyze and discuss the platforms as they will have a great deal of influence on the country's direction for the next parliamentary term.

With regards to why the coming years are particularly important, at the time of writing, Norway has less than 10 years to meet the goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Norway, alongside most countries in the world, has adopted the 2030 Agenda which aims to push in the direction of sustainable development by 2030 (Rogers, 2007, p. 16). In the agendas own words: "We commit to pursuing policy coherence and an enabling environment for sustainable development at all levels and by all actors, and to reinvigorating the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development" (United Nations, 2015, p. 30). One important concept to extract from this quote is *policy coherence* which refers to commonalities in goals and missions across policy fields (May et al., 2006, p. 382). In this case, the commonality referred to is a suggest shared vision of sustainable development. However, as May et al. states in their discussion of this topic: "Greater coherence does not necessarily imply better policy" (2006, p. 400). The fact that so many countries and policies are following the principles of sustainability and making decisions in the name of sustainable development, validates the need careful examination of the underlying assumptions of the concepts. If the guiding principles of national policy is sustainability, how the political parties use this concept becomes a matter of great importance.

Taking the timing of this thesis out of the equation, this research is also important with regards to its general political implications. From Easton's understanding of the political system, discourse is a part of the intra-societal environment that shapes the input side of

politics (Easton, 1965, p. 30). It is this input side of the political system that will be considered in this thesis, as the discourse input can have big implications for how the politics is perceived. Fleig and Tosun state that "the assumption underlying the use of election manifestos is that parties do not use words randomly but intend to send 'ideological signals' to their electorate" (2017, p. 434). Political institutions and parties are a part of shaping individual behavior and interests through discourse creation and maintenance (Christensen et al., 2020, pp. 68-69). How a concept is used by political parties can be based on facts, but there is also space for political interpretation, normativity and ideological influence and input (Vabo et al., 2020, p. 165). The political parties can be understood as representations and carriers of the discourse of sustainability. It is therefore important to critically analyze this buzzword, as it seems to hold a lot of normative value in political platforms and have the potential to hold a great power of influence. In this way, the thesis is not concerned with the outputs that happen as a consequence of the use of the concept, but rather how the rhetoric in the political party platforms is shaped by the discourse.

1.2. Research questions

In order to get a deeper understanding of how the political parties engage with the concept of sustainability this thesis aims to take a very direct approach, asking: *How do the political parties understand and use the concept of sustainability, and what are the implications of this usage for politics as a whole and for the relationship between political parties and the voters?* This main research question implies that the political parties have distinctive relationship with sustainability, and that they use the concept in their political platforms. The question also implies that there are implications for this usage on the way politics is generally produced on the rhetorical level, as well as implications for the way that the voter interacts with the parties and their platforms.

Furthermore, three secondary research questions are also identified to further engage with different aspects of sustainability in the party platforms. The three secondary research questions are the following:
- How do the parties relate to the Sustainable Development Goals?
- What do the political parties see as their role/responsibility in achieving sustainability?
- What is currently not sustainable according to the political parties?

1.3. Structure of thesis

The master's thesis is made up of ten sections. This first section, the introductory section includes a general introduction to the theme of thesis, as well as rationale for the research and the identification of research questions. The second section covers the literature and theory relevant for the research. This includes a brief introduction to the history of the use of the sustainability concept, an overview of the different ways sustainability has been and can be defined, and a review of the necessary theoretical building blocks for the construction of the argument in the thesis. The third section of the thesis is the methods section, which includes a justification for the qualitative research method used which is a thematic analysis, and the primary research materials used. The fourth section includes a brief presentation of the results of the Thematic Analysis; including the thematic map. Next comes the analysis, which is made up by sections five through nine. Each of the five sections analyses a theme identified in the thematic map; section five analyses the theme 'future', then section six addresses 'unsustainability', section seven 'normative orientation', section eight 'language of progress' and the last analysis section, which is section nine, is concerned with SDGs and the theme 'responsibility for SDGs'. Finally, in the tenth and final section, the concluding remarks, a final answer will be given to both primary and secondary research questions as a way to round off the analysis and ultimately conclude the thesis.

2. Literature and theory

Before the commencement of the theory section, it is important to acknowledge how literature was integrated into the research at different stages of the research and analysis. What is presented in the literature section is not the preliminary research done at the beginning of the research process, rather, it is all the theory deemed necessary for the discussion of the research, which was theory accumulated mostly at the very end of the research process.

The research follows the general methodological structure of a thematic analysis. In this framework, there is no specific rules for how to relate with literature. Rather, it is up to each individual researcher to make the choice about how they will integrate research and reflect on what impact the choices they make will have on the research itself.

In the case of this thesis, research played an important part in the preliminary stages as well as during the development of the analysis and discussion. The research started with the topic of sustainability in the political party platforms written for the 2021 parliamentary elections in Norway. After the identification of the topic, a simple search for 'sustainability; definition' was made in google scholar, and a quick scan of the first 50 articles was done, finding commonly cited articles on the topic and generating some general understanding of what sustainability *is*. Then, realizing that the topic of how sustainability is understood and practiced was still a much debated and relevant topic of academic interest, the decision was made to stop researching the topic any further at that point. This decision was made based on two realizations; first, that since the concept of sustainability itself and how different actors interact with the concept appeared to still be a heavily discussed topic, the main research question that would be interesting to ask is how the political parties understand and use the concept of sustainability in the platforms and the consequences of this understanding and use. Secondly, after finding this guiding research question, doing more research would skew the thematic analysis, so by stopping the research process for the time being the thematic analysis would be more objective. Therefore, during the first three or so phases of the thematic analysis no more research was done, but the coding units were rather expected to speak for themselves.

In the latter phases of the analysis, once the themes had been generally established, was when the main part of the research was conducted. Going back to the long list of frequently cited authors on the topic of the 'construction of a concept of sustainability,' a thorough review of the academic literature began. Then, after the preliminary research, new keywords were added to *Google Scholar* searches to represent the themes and sub-themes that were identified in the thematic analysis. The additional keywords added to 'sustainability; definition' were; future, normative, positive, progress, growth, development and innovation and political party. Again, a preliminary scan of articles that appeared to be relevant (based on the abstract of the papers) was completed, and again a list of frequently cited and discussed authors were made. These articles were then read and reviewed and formed the foundation for the literature review and analysis of the themes and sub-themes during the analysis.

The following literature and theory section will therefore include research mostly conducted at the latter analytical stages of the thematic analysis. This is done to create a logical narrative progression for the reader and set up a fruitful, literarily grounded and rich discussion. Part 2.1. of this section will detail the history of the concept of sustainability, then part 2.2. will outline different literary definitions of sustainability and attempts of conceptualizations of sustainability. Part 2.3. will present the theoretical building blocks and scholarly influences that are central to the analysis sections of the thesis, which includes a discussion of discourse, the concept of the empty signifier and neoliberalism. Finally, part 2.4. will consist of a short wrap up of the theory section detailing how the theory is used in the rest of the thesis.

2.1. History of sustainability

In the past decades, the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals have taken the world by storm, creating a global discourse of sustainability that permeates both economic, social and environmental spheres. The goals, adopted in 2015, were a part of the ambitious 2030 agenda aiming to push and transform the world into a more resilient and equal state of being (Monkelbaan, 2019, p. 4). The Sustainable Development Goals have since been adopted by the Norwegian government and have become a prominent topic on the national political agenda. But the term itself has a much longer history that is important to acknowledge.

The roots of sustainability go deep, and conversations about sustainable resource management can be traced far back in human history (Waas et al., 2011, p. 1639). As long as humans have been manipulating resources such as forests and animal populations, the question of sustainability has been present. As Waas points out: "Ancient Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek and Roman civilizations faced anthropogenic environmental problems, such as deforestation, accretion, salinization, and loss of soil fertility" - and conversations about these issues were frequent (2018, p. 46). However, the modern history of sustainability begins in the late 19th century. The late 19th century marked the rise of a wide array of research addressing environmental concerns of overpopulation and so-called unsustainable human actions. An example of such a publication is George Perkins Marsh's *The Earth as Modified by Human Activity* published in 1874 (Rogers, 2007, p. 15). Moving into the 20th century, these environmental concerns were set on pause during the world wars but saw a revival shortly after (Steffen et al., 2011, p. 844). As quickly as 1948, Fairfield Osborn's *Our Plundered Planet* was published, discussing the potential effects of advancements in agriculture (Rogers, 2007). The interest increased by the 60s with popular publications like *Silent Spring* and *Population Bomb*, and the 60s also marked the start of a sharp increase in environmental concern and mobilization of an environmental movement (Rome, 2003, p. 527). These publications and larger conversations about environmental issues gave way to modern conversations of human impact and what we now understand as environmental sustainability (Rogers, 2007, p. 15).

To understand how sustainability is used today, it is essential to look back at the formation of the concept of *sustainable development*, which researcher agree originated with the United Nations' report by the Brundland Commision called *Our Common Future* (Redclift, 2005). This report was the source of the famous definition of sustainable development commonly used today, that sustainable development is development that: "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own" (WCED, 1987, p. 24). The creation of a concept of sustainable development cannot be seen out of context, but must be understood as a part of a larger culmination of language of development within the United Nations. Trantas explains that: "Given the heavy legacy of the industrial revolution and the overwhelming hegemony of the growth paradigm at the second half of 20th century, we should not underestimate the emergence of "human development" and, in parallel, "sustainable development" discourses, both to a large extent within the United Nations framework" (Trantas, 2021, p. 227). The concept appeared at a time characterized by heavy

economic growth, innovation and optimistic belief in progress and a potential increase in individual quality of life (Waas et al., 2011, p. 1640). In fact, the report specifically states that: "What is needed now is a new era of economic growth - growth that is forceful and at the same time socially and environmentally sustainable" (WCED, 1987, p. 14).

Thus, the concept of sustainable development morphed from the original definition of sustainability that existed in a purely environmental sphere into a wider socio-economic context of growth and development (Brown, 2016, p. 122). This way, sustainability seemed to be a term designed to reconcile the differences between the environmentalists and the 'developers' (Dixon & Fallon, 1989, p. 73-74).The anthropocentric shift in the understanding of sustainability formed the foundation of the inseparability and perceived interconnectivity of social, economic and environmental sustainability issues as we understand them today" (Alaimo, 2012, p. 562).

2.2. Sustainability – searching for a definition

Pinning down the definition of sustainability has been a much-debated topic among researchers the past few decades. Holden states that "it is rare indeed in these times to hear anyone speak overtly against sustainability. At the same time, the relationship between sustainability and social change remains ambiguous, unexamined by theorists and unarticulated by practitioners" (Holden, 2010, p. 647). Even though this statement is over a decade old, articles written in the past few years share a similar sentiment: "The ambiguity and lack of clarity about the concept of sustainability is a recurring obstacle to sustainability research" (Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muñoz, 2019, p. 1). This lexical confusion has not stopped researchers from trying to study the concept. The following section will present some of the definitions and the nuances that should be considered in the definition of the concept. This section will not aim to define sustainability, nor sustainable development, just simply act as a springboard for a more nuanced understanding of the complex nature of the concept.

Sustainability vs. sustainable development

So far in this text, sustainability and sustainable development have been used to reference the same phenomena. It is important to start the discussion of the definition of the terms by

clearing up how these terms are different from each other, and to what extent they share meaning. As it was mentioned in the section of the history of the concept, sustainable development was a term coined in 1987 by the Brundtland commission (Waas et al., 2011, p. 187). Before that time, sustainability was an independent term, mostly associated with environmental concerns of for instance the long-term health or carrying capacity of fish populations despite fishing activity, or forest-regrowth in forestry areas (T. Brown, 2016). In its simplest form, sustainability is the "ability to 'sustain', or maintain something indefinitely at a steady rate" (Torkington et al., 2020, p .6). However, with the Brundtland report and the creation of the concept sustainable development, the term sustainability suddenly expanded in meaning. Sustainable development was defined as a global economic, ecological and social strategy to achieve sustainability. Thus, sustainability, a term that previously only existed in an environmental sphere, was now suddenly found in discussions about social issues, inequality and the economy (Renn et al., 2009, p. 292). The concepts became so interlinked in the public conscious that sustainability at times became synonymous with sustainable development (Torkington et al., 2020, p. 6). In fact, in a study by Salas-Zapata et al. mapping the trends in sustainability research, they found that even 59.9% of research articles did not distinguish between sustainability and sustainable development (Salas-Zapata et al., 2017, p. 1135). Evidently, sustainability has become a sort of catch all term, often mimicking the definition of sustainable development. But coming back to the simple definitions, sustainability can be seen as the ideal state we are aiming for, and sustainable development is the method by which we will get there.

This discussion also gets more complex when we then factor in the translational aspect of sustainability and sustainable development. As this research considers Norwegian primary source materials, it is important to acknowledge that this thesis is operating with two languages that are not interchangeable in meaning. At a first glance it may be easy to argue that the understanding of sustainability [bærekraft] and sustainable development [bærekraftig utvkling] is the same across the two languages as the individual components of 'sustainability' and 'development' have the same lexical meaning and are influenced by the same Brundtland definition of sustainable development. This is all true, and at a fundamental level the translation is seamless. However, there is one notable difference, which is the Sustainable Development Goals. In Norwegian, the Sustainable Development Goals [bærekraftsmål] from the UN 2030 Agenda have omitted the 'development' part of the name of the goals, they are simply *sustainability goals.* Initially, this may not seem significant,

however, it is important to at least consider that this may further aid in blurring the line between sustainable development and sustainability. In the political party platforms, the parties claim to be working on the sustainability goals, which is different than saying that they are working on Sustainable Development Goals.

From this discussion it is clear that the lines between sustainability and sustainable development are blurred, both with regards to policies and research on the terms. As this thesis concerns itself with the Norwegian political parties' use of sustainability, this also means that the research must address how the parties themselves understand the concepts. Instead of analyzing either sustainability or sustainable development, the research must therefore see both as interconnected and purposefully engage with the complexity of their relationship to each other.

The Brundtland definition

As the Brundtland report introduced the term sustainable development, it is also essential to take a closer look at the nuances of the definition. Sustainable development, according to the Brundtland commission, is development that: "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own" (WCED, 1987, p. 24). This definition has become one of the most popular ways to define sustainable development. There are several aspects of the definition, such as the seemingly anthropocentric perspective, the lack of mention of the natural environment and what they actually mean by development, that has piqued the interest of researchers. But the definition is vague, and thus it may be helpful to look closer at another section of the same paragraph: "The concept of sustainable development does imply limits - not absolute limits but limitations imposed by the present state of technology and social organization on environmental resources and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities. But technology and social organization can be both managed and improved to make way for a new era of economic growth." (WCED, 1987, p. 24). In this 27th paragraph, the Brundtland commission's definition of sustainable development becomes more clear. When asking what development they are talking about, the short answer is economic growth, as economic growth is seen as their solution to social, technological and later issues of poverty reduction, which they state are the factors that currently impose limits on the environment. Waas et al. discusses this particular part of the definition and states that: "Unlike often thought by environmentalists,

environmental protection is not the primary objective of sustainable development, but a precondition to achieve it" (2011, p. 1648). This means that the commission suggests that poverty reduction, social organization and technological advancements will all be solved through economic growth, which then will result in a sustainable environment. When looking closer at the definition, both the needs referred to in the definition as well as the future generations mostly assumed to be human needs and human generations (Alaimo, 2012, p. 562). This anthropocentric framing of sustainable development is often criticized.

There are also a few other aspects of the definition that may be worth pointing out, firstly there is the relational connections made in the definition. For the Brundtland commission "the term sustainability refers to an integrative view of three fundamental relationships of the human being: its relation to other contemporaries, other generations, and nature" (Stumpf et al., 2015, p. 7444). The Brundtland commission's definition of sustainable development also did something new in the political field. It was a term that integrated economic, social and environmental problems into the same narrative (Torgerson, 1995, p. 10). The new concept joined the forces of political oppositions, and found common ground, a form of catch-all policy coherence that could unite and form alliances (Livesey, 2002, p. 316).

Buzzwords

With the global coming of age of the term sustainable development in the end of the 1980s, the word sustainability suddenly got a lot of added attention and became a sort of buzzword still going strong today (Dixon & Fallon, 1989, p. 83). Scoones starts his article on sustainability stating that the word "must be one of the most widely used buzzwords of the past two decades" (2007, p. 589). But what does it mean that a word is a buzzword? In fact, a lot of theories around sustainability are grounded in this idea of sustainability as a buzzword. Buzzwords are words that have become very popular, they are used frequently and have therefore almost inevitably experienced a change or expansion in meaning as the popularity increases (Waas et al., 2011, p. 1638). With the Brundtland commission introducing sustainable development as a concept, and sustainable development being connected to social, economic and environmental issues, this also permitted sustainability to widen its conceptual meaning. Linked to this expansion, one the big pitfalls of buzzwords can be how the rapid expansion and wide use of a term can dilute the meaning, lead to misuses of the term, and thus potentially lessening its efficacy in the long run (Waas et al., 2011, p. 1638). One can

ask, if sustainability can be used to mean everything, does it really mean anything at all? This sense of the intellectual emptiness associated with sustainability and sustainable development is expressed by many authors, that the term has become so flexible and all-encompassing that it has lost all meaning (Kambites, 2014, p. 337). Some also claim that the intellectual emptiness was there from the very introduction of sustainable development by the Brundtland commission, as their definition allowed for the formless concept to be introduced in the first place (Luke, 2005, p. 228).

Another issue with buzzwords is that they often gain a lot of traction in policy and government quickly, but as some or many of the changes made in the name of sustainability or sustainable development do not work out, the steam is lost followed shortly by the loss of motivation and belief in the buzzword (Scoones, 2007, pp. 592-593). The outcomes of the policies implemented on behalf of a buzzword may cause a buzzword to either thrive and stand strong or fizzle out and be replaced by a new word (Cornwall, 2007, p. 472).

Lastly, buzzwords are also effective in altering perceptions. One part of a buzzword that is particularly strong is the normative value. As a buzzword is used frequently, a positively-loaded buzzword will therefore have a very strong positive charge (Torkington et al., 2020, p. 16). If the entire world is aiming for sustainability and have agreed to using sustainable development as a tool to get to that point, it becomes very difficult to have negative associations or opinions about the concepts. This normative weight of buzzwords also makes it easier to form political alliances around the buzzword, which we see in the efficacy of the mobilization around the Sustainable Development Goals (Torkington et al., 2020, p. 16).

Universal characteristics of sustainability

Although the general consensus may be that sustainability may be ill-fitted for a straightforward definition, there is also a strong agreeance that leaving sustainability conceptually unexamined is a worse faith as the concept has great damaging potential (Waas et al., 2011). Researchers have therefore picked apart aspects of sustainability and presented their own ideal typical presentations or lists of characteristics for how sustainability may be understood. The following will be a small sample of the most relevant of these academic endeavors.

The first aspect of sustainability that should be mentioned here is a widely accepted theory, namely the theory of the three dimensions or three pillars of sustainability. This idea of the three pillars of sustainability suggests that there are three interconnected elements of sustainability; the social, the economic and the environmental, and that these elements are actively working together as a larger unit toward sustainability (Weisser, 2017). This metaphorical image of pillars is significant, as no pillar can stand alone, but is rather one of many elements that must carry a similar weight each (for a visual representation see Figure 1a). This metaphor is widely used in international policies, government and party politics, even the oil company shell adopted this three-part pillar metaphor in their company documents (Livesey, 2002). Researchers looking at the three dimensions of sustainability have often looked at how the relationship of the dimensions come to play through the common visual representations of the three pillars (Barton & Gutiérrez-Antinopai, 2020; Moir & Carter, 2012). Figure 1 shows three of the common representations of the three pillars of sustainability.

Figure 1

Representations of sustainability. 1a) three pillars of sustainability, 1b) sustainability Venn diagram, 1c) geometric representation of sustainability objectives

1a   1b   1c
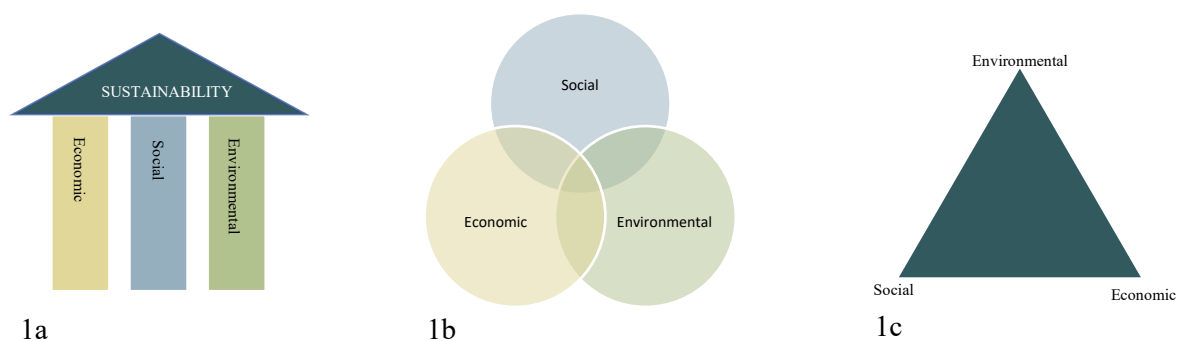
When analyzing the common representations of sustainability, there are many issues that come up. The problems shared between the three pillars model and the Venn diagram model (1a and 1b respectively) are the assumed equal weights of each of the three dimensions, as

well as the assumed independence of each, not recognizing the potential for interconnectivity and interdependence which is a reductionist interpretation of the complexities of reality (Moir & Carter, 2012, p. 1480-1481). Similarly, in the geometric representation of the social, environmental and economic objectives of sustainability (Figure 1c), the figure becomes "conditioned by the preconceptions of the Tangible forms that are selected" (Barton & Gutiérrez-Antinopai, 2020). All the three models in Figure 1 represent only three of the most basic representations of sustainability. After a wide study of different model representations of sustainability, Barton and Gutiérrez-Antinopai concluded that among the commonalities found in the representations they could identify a mission to reveal complexity, non-linearity, and the communication of interrelation information about a triad group of elements (2020).

A quartet of functions

In their exploration of the ways in which sustainability is used, Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muños developed of what they state are the four functions of sustainability (2019). The first function is "sustainability as a set of guiding criteria" like for instance as a set of requirements for an economy to be considered sustainable, or the criteria a resource-extraction firm need to meet to be considered environmentally sustainable (Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muñoz, 2019, p. 3). The second function is "sustainability as a goal of humankind", which means that sustainability can be understood as that which humanity should be striving for (Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muñoz, 2019, p. 3). The third way of viewing sustainability in this framework is "as an object", examples here are objects like a sustainable farm, a sustainable ocean or a sustainable diet (Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muñoz, 2019, p. 5). With this way of looking at sustainability comes all the assumptions of what a sustainable version of the *object* (like a farm or an ocean) would be. The last way of looking at sustainability, according to Salas-Zapata & Oritz-Muñoz, is "as an approach of study", which means the use of sustainability as a way to structure research (2019). A study looking at the economic, social and environmental facets of a problem would be an example of such a study.

What makes this approach different to that of the others in this category is that it considers not what it believes are integral components to sustainability, but rather how it is practically and linguistically used in research and elsewhere. This research is therefore important to consider for this thesis as it opens up an important perspective into the practical use of sustainability,

which can relate to how the political parties use the concept and what the consequences of such a use is.

An octet of characteristics

Many scholars have attempted to come up with universal characteristics of sustainability. Among these, one notable contribution is that of Stumpf et al. that in their search for a justice dimension of sustainability also made a list of eight universal traits that they claim sustainability to have. The following is a brief summary of the characteristics they present in their article. *Continuance* is in reference to something sustainable as something that has a continued presence (Stumpf et al., 2015, p. 7443). *Normative orientation* refers to the widely accepted positive orientation of sustainability (Stumpf et al., 2015, p. 7443). *Encompassing scope*, is the characteristic geographical (local, national, global) and time scope associated with sustainability (Stumpf et al., 2015, p. 7444). *Threefold relationality* refers to how the concept connects a human being to its "contemporary humans, future humans, and non-human nature" (Stumpf et al., 2015, p. 7444). *Relational asymmetry,* Stumpf et al. explains, is the uneven power distribution between these three relations, where some of the three actors hold more power and agency than others (2015, p. 7445). *Systemic mediation*, that most issues of sustainability are acted upon and dealt with through institutions or other systemic bodies (Stumpf et al., 2015, p. 7445). *Limits* is the idea that sustainability deals with the issue of limits (such as environmental limits, or economic limits) that must be overcome or avoided (Stumpf et al., 2015, p. 7446). Finally, the last characteristic Stump et al. identifies is *uncertainty*, as issues of sustainability, and especially how to overcome these issues, are complex problems resting on a great deal of uncertainty (Stumpf et al., 2015, p. 7446).

2.3. Theoretical building blocks and scholarly influences

There are a few important theoretical building blocks and scholarly influences that must be presented before the analysis and discussion. Previous research on sustainability in political party platforms have taken a more quantitative approach of documenting the rise of the use and significance of the concept in political platforms over time, as well as a focus on which political fields the concept was associated with (Fleig & Tosun, 2017). However, as the presence of the concept in the party platforms is well-documented, and there seems to be few

fields of politics not touched by the concept, the focus is rather directed more specifically to the discourse of sustainability in itself as this is still a much-desired research endeavor.

Sustainability is not a straight-forward concept, in fact: "The lack of clarity about the concept of sustainability entails certain problems for researchers since it can hinder the operationalization of the concept, generate contradictory discourses on the matter, and may affect the validity of the studies." (Salas- Zapata p. 1) Thus, instead of formulating a completely new definition and understanding of sustainability, this research aligns itself with Brown's argument that sustainability can be understood as an empty signifier, and uses this perspective as the starting point for the specific analysis of sustainability discourse in Norwegian political party platforms. For this analysis to make sense to the reader the following three sections presenting discourse, empty signifiers and neoliberalism will help to situate the thesis in the theoretical foundations that make up the base of the analysis.

Discourse

The first important step in identifying the theoretical foundation for the thesis is situating this the work within the ontological framework that it operates in. This thesis uses the technique of discourse analysis as it is an approach that looks at discourse to determine how reality is constructed, and how meaning (such as our understanding of a concept like sustainability) is created (Bratberg, 2021, pp. 32-33). This analytical approach is helpful, as it draws attention to how our collective experiences and understandings of the world are created, produced and maintained by reading between the lines of text (Bratberg, 2021, p. 41). Through a discourse lens, it is possible to analyse how the language we use about sustainability shapes the reality of the concept (Bratberg, 2021, p. 44). Discourse analysis also allows for a discussion of relations of power, how the hegemonic pressures on a concept like sustainability affects the concept, creating a discourse that is "internalised in power" (Fairclough, 2010, p. 6). Hegemony, in this context, can be referred to pressures with the ability to change and expand discourse "into a dominant horizon of social orientation and action" (Torfing, 1999, p. 101). As the concept of sustainability is embedded in a rich contextual history and constantly negotiated by structures of power, this approach is appropriate for the research. It allows for an understanding of how we construct and maintain the concept of sustainability, how this construction may be challenged, and how the power relations and institutional structures that surround the concept may be affecting this discourse (Bratberg, 2021, pp. 61, 69).

Empty signifiers

One central part of the theoretical foundation for the arguments in this thesis rests on Ernesto Laclau's theory of the empty signifier. This thesis will argue that sustainability can be understood as an empty signifier, which is a theory first suggested by Brown (2016). The thesis will use this understanding of sustainability as an empty signifier to discuss the concept in the context of the Norwegian political party programs. A more detailed explanation of the empty signifier will appear in the analysis, but a short definition will follow next.

The theory of the empty signifier is founded in the linguistic theoretic tradition, in the theory of the signifiers and the signified (Weisser, 2017). The signifier is frequently the name of something, like a house. And the signified will be that which the name refers to, which is a dwelling that humans live in. For the signifier to have meaning there must therefore exist a social structure that the signified can exist in. An empty signifier, then, in the simplest terms, is a signifier without a signified (Davidson, 2010, p. 394). MacKillop explains that: "These are signifiers which are 'tendentially' emptied of meaning, representing/signifying an impossible fullness" (2018, p. 190), or a utopian ideal such as sustainability. In short, they are terms that are emptied of meaning until they become the meaning of everything. It will be argued in the discussion, that sustainability is one such signifier.

Neoliberalism

Another central concept in the analysis will be neoliberalism. There is little to no contestation that sustainability came into its own at the same time and has been significantly influenced by neoliberalism from the 1980s when the Brundtland commission coined 'sustainable development' (Barton & Gutiérrez-Antinopai, 2020, p. 2). Whether or not one believes that neoliberalism is still affecting how sustainability is perceived at present time (which this thesis will argue that it does), the ideology is still an important part of the historic roots and foundations for sustainability. In his debate on discourse, Torfing suggests that "neo-liberalism can be seen as a hegemonic discourse to the extent that it has managed to redefine the terms of the political debate and set a new agenda" (Torfing, 1999, p. 102). It is a hegemonic ideology with the power to alter discourse or expand discourse in new directions.

But what then, does neoliberalism actually entail? Wendy Brown argues that neoliberalism is both a "mode of reason" that produces subjects, a way of conduct and "a scheme of valuation" (2015, p. 21). In this way of reasoning, the market forces become the principles upon which all institutions and governments operate (Brown, 2019, p. 19). What the market deems as a valuable objective is what society as a whole will deem as valuable. One property of neoliberalism is its ability to economize every aspect of society, from social dimensions to environmental issues, and arguably sustainability. The ideology strives for a triple economization of the government, which includes that the government rules by economic principles, "the the economy becomes the primary object of state concern and policy" and the economization of previously non-economic objectives and targets such as social and environmental objectives (Brown, 2015, p. 62). Neoliberalism holds the hegemonic power to engulf and redirect a wide variety of discourse and reframe into to a market centered discourse (Brown, 2015, p. 21). And finally, due this flexible and easily moldable framework, Brown argues that: "It is globally ubiquitous, yet disunified and nonidentical with itself in space and over time" (2015, p. 21). From this understanding of neoliberalism, sustainability then, must be analyzed in light of neoliberalism, as neoliberalism holds a great amount of influence as well as shapeshifting ability that can easily go unnoticed.

2.4. Theoretical wrap up

The theory chosen for this section were collected both at the beginning and end stages of the thematic analysis and represent only a selection of the theory that will be used in the analysis sections of the thesis. This is in line with the thematic analysis method which will be outlined in the following section, where most of the theory is collected and introduced in the later stages of the analysis. For the ease of the reader, the theory introduced here represents the fundamentals necessary for understanding the analysis. The history of sustainability is crucial for the contextual understanding of sustainability. Then, the various definitions of sustainability presented in 2.2. gave an overview of some of the nuances of how sustainability may be defined that were most consequential in the interpretation of sustainability in this thesis. In the section on the universal characteristics of sustainability, the understanding of sustainability as consisting of three dimensions, or as being linguistically malleable enough to have different functions, or as a concept that has many potential characteristics were all conceptual understandings of sustainability central to the formation of the arguments in the

thesis. Finally, the discussion of discourse, empty signifiers and neoliberalism forms the analytical lens and angle utilized in the analyses. All the scholars explored in this theory section are representative of different aspects of the sustainability discourse debate and will be revisited in the analytical sections of the thesis. In line with the thematic analysis, there will also be other influential scholars appearing in the analysis to support and supplement the discussion.

3. Choice of sources and thematic analysis method

3.1. Qualitative method

The choice of the type of method used in the master's thesis is based on the nature of sustainability as a research topic. Sustainability, which is an ambiguous and often unclear concept, is entangled in a complex web of meaning that cannot be easily quantitatively measured (Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muñoz, 2019, p. 1). The method by which the concept, and its association with the political parties of Norway, should be analysed, should therefore reflect a research method that allows for such a complexity in meaning. Thus, the qualitative analysis is appropriate as it "is generally employed to support a researcher in generating a deep and nuanced understanding of a given phenomenon" (Lester et al., 2020, p. 95). Through qualitative research, a researcher is able to identify how society is constructed through interaction action and production of meaning and discourse (Tjora, 2020, p. 28).

The choice of qualitive method is important, and the methodological choices made by a researcher will inevitable influence how the researcher interacts and ultimately concludes their research (Nilssen, 2014, p. 29). Qualitative research is not a singular formalized methodology, and the degree to which the formulation of a clear methodology should be constructed is also heavily contested (Flick, 2014, p. 12). The following sections will account for the methodological choices that were made in the production of this thesis.

3.2. Document analysis

Analysing documents is seen as a mostly unobtrusive research method as the researcher can study the data without directly interacting with the subjects who produced the text (Tjora, 2020, p. 24). Documents can include anything from casual personal email records to official governmental reports (Flick, 2014, p. 367). Document studies are unique opportunities to analyze text its contextual setting, such as the time and space it was produced, as well as through knowledge of the intended reader and the purpose of the production of the text (Tjora, 2020, p. 25). In the SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis state that documents can be pictured as "the 'physical traces' of social settings; as data or evidence of the ways in which individuals, groups, social settings, institutions and organizations represent and account

for themselves" (Flick, 2014, p. 367). Thus, documents represent a textual slice in time and space with vast potential for analytical complexity.

3.3. Political party platforms

Party programs as a source

In the lead up to the quadrennial parliamentary elections in Norway, the political parties produce and publish their political platforms in document form. This is the most important textual product produced by the parties and reflects the parties' general viewpoint (Valen & Narud, 2007, p. 127). The party platforms serve both an internal function as a way of reworking the central politics of a party, and an external function as a promise to the voters about what the party intends on doing if they are elected (Valen & Narud, 2007, p. 137). Because the platform is so good at capturing the different parties' collective ideology, the platforms are a popular primary resource in research (Valen & Narud, 2007, p. 127).

Generally speaking, research on political parties are often concerned with issue ownership, which is the discussion of which parties are considered to have more proficient knowledge of specific political fields like education or environmental policy (Bay et al., 2007, p. 19). One could argue that the issue ownership perspective should be included in the discussion of sustainability, as it would appear logical that parties with issue ownership in environmental politics (like the Green Party in Norway) would be more proficient in the language of sustainability. However, this lens is not relevant in the context of this thesis, as this considers sustainability as a concept that has seeped into all the corners of politics and should not be seen as associated exclusively with one or a few political fields. This argument is further justified by the word sustainability appearing all throughout the party programs in most sections.

Similarly, the research on political party platforms frequently consist of comparative analyses of the political parties to see where the political parties stand on certain issues, or for instance to form a theory of the left-to-right orientation of an issue. This thesis will not offer a comparative analysis between the political parties, rather, the thesis concerns itself how the discourse of sustainability operates within the political parties as a whole. Instead of seeing

the political parties as separate competing entities, the political parties are here seen as collective agents of discourse and the thesis thus aims to uncover this discourse.

This master's thesis will specifically look at the party platforms made by the nine parliamentary parties for the 2021-2025 election term. This means that the platforms must specifically be analysed in the contextual setting of the 2021 elections. The party platforms were extracted from the parties' websites and ranged from 82 to 152 pages in length. In these platforms, the word *sustainability* was found with an even spread across most sections of the platforms a total of 327 times across the nine party platforms (excluding instances of sustainability used in titles and sub-titles for sections). When looking at the research, however, it must be mentioned that there is a big variety in how many times sustainability is mentioned by the different parties with a spread from 12 times to 60 times. The exact number of mentions will be detailed shortly. This discrepancy in the number of mentions of sustainability by the different political parties cannot be reduced to a simple issue of left-right orientation as the horizontal belonging to the party does not naturally map on to the number of times sustainability is mentioned. Rather, sustainability must be addressed as a cross-party phenomenon. It is also important to state at the very end of this paragraph that the numbers of mentions and differences between the parties are not necessarily what is important, as the thesis is rather concerned with *how* the concept is used, the contents of the use, not how many times it is used.

Limitations

As any primary source, it is important to consider the limitations of the source to be able to justify using the textual primary source as the foundation for the research. For the party platforms one can question whether the platforms are accurate representations of what politics the party *will* end up carrying out. This concern is based on the idea that the party platforms represent a skewed version of their politics, modified to appeal to voters and win the election (Vabo et al., 2020, p. 98). What is stated in the political party platforms may not necessarily represent the output of the politics, especially as the elected parties in Norway mostly have to form a coalition government due to the multiple-party system. However, in the context of this thesis, this limitation is void, as what is considered is the input, not the output of the process. The party platforms are arguably very good representations of the system inputs such as discourse as they are the only collectively produced and agreed upon texts that the parties

make and are therefore a much more objective and realistic portrayal of the collective will and goals of the party. Additionally, as the research concerns itself with how parties understand and use a current buzzword, a platform partially made with the intention of gaining voters would be a valuable document to analyze as one can expect the buzzword to be used with care and attention (Fleig & Tosun, 2017, p. 434). The political system inputs, such as the discourse input should be visible as it forms the foundation of what is expressed in the platforms.

List of political parties

The following is a list of the political party platforms that will be analyzed, together with the number of mentions of sustainability in their platform and the official Norwegian name of the party in parenthesis. The list is in order of most to least mentions of sustainability:
The Labor Party 60 (Arbeiderpartiet), the Green Party 60 (Miljøpartiet de Grønne), the Christian Democratic Party 52 (Kristelig Folkeparti), the Conservative Party 48 (Høyre), the Center Party 34 (Senterpartiet), the Socialist Left Party 30 (Sosialistisk Venstreparti), the Liberal Party 18 (Venstre), the Progress Party 13 (Fremskrittspartiet) and the Red Party 12 (Rødt).

3.4. Thematic analysis

In qualitative research there are few specific methodological recipes to follow, which frequently forces researcher to find their own methodology that is systematic and creative enough to produce quality results (Nilssen, 2014, p. 29). One of the big concerns in qualitative analysis is the irreproducibility and methodological inconsistencies that question the credibility of research done in a qualitative fashion (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3352). However, one analytical approach that has received a lot of positive feedback for its easy-to-follow foundational structure and theoretical flexibility is the 'thematic analysis' (Lester et al., 2020, pp. 97-98). A thematic analysis is based on a structure of six general research phases, that do not have to be completed in a strictly linear manner, but allows for methodological transparency while still having the freedom to approach the research using a wide variety of analytical tools and theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). The transparency in approach here is not only valuable for the researcher, but also for academic peers who are evaluating the work (Lester et al., 2020, p. 98). This thesis will follow the general structure of

a thematic analysis, and as a part of the process the following text will outline the six phases as they apply to the research. These six phases, although outlined as a step by step process, do not follow as linear of a structure in the actual research process. In reality, the analysis process required a lot of jumping back and forth between the phases throughout, but still represents the general structure of the process.

Phase 1 - Getting started

As a part of the first phase of the thematic analysis the party platforms were collected, and all the programs were read and reread. The reading in this part of the process was *active* in the sense that it was idea-generating, and thoughts and themes were noted down (Braun & Clarke, 2006), p. 87.

Phase 2 – Codes

The next phase of the thematic analysis was structuring the corpuses and generating initial codes. To get to this point several decisions had to be made. Firstly, a conclusion was made that the research would use combined theoretical approach as the literature would be used strategically in both the beginning and final stages of the research process (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3355).

The literature was first used to generate a research question, then put aside for the process of the thematic analysis, before extensive research was conducted in order to finalize and base the discussion of the finalized themes in existing theory. Next, to further reduce the scope of the coding, the decision was made to condense the corpus to smaller coding units. These units consisted of every occurrence of the word sustainable (and all linguistic variations in Norwegian [bærekraft, bærekraftig, bærekraftsmål]) with a sentence on either side of the word for context. Another important consideration at this point was what type of analysis would be appropriate for this research, the decision fell on a discourse analysis approach, which will be elaborated on after the discussion of the phases. As a part of the rereading and restructuring process, the coding units were also reorganized from the order they appeared into groupings based on what Sustainable Development Goal, targets and subject matters they were closely related to. This restructuring of the data material, although time consuming, meant that there

were two completely differently organized data sets that allowed for two physically different viewpoints to look at the data (Nilssen, 2014, p. 103). At the end of this phase some codes were produced, the first of which included sustainability as associated with growth and with development.

Phase 3 – Themes

Once codes had been found, the next phase of the coding included the reworking of codes to find common threads and eventually themes (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3356). During this part of the research, the work included reorganizing codes in a spreadsheet and moving the codes around to find common themes. This was a back-and-forth process where themes would become sub-themes and vice versa until the themes and sub-themes solidified. As a last part of this phase, a mind map with three unpolished themes were created; normative orientation, time scope and language of growth and improvement.

Phase 4 – Reviewing themes

The fourth phase included the reviewing of the themes. This both includes reviewing the coded units within each proposed theme or sub-theme and consider the value of the theme as a whole (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). For this thesis, this step included reading and moving around the coding units for each proposed theme and sub-theme, listing out the main characteristics of each theme/sub-theme and merging or splitting the themes as necessary. Finally, a thematic map was created in this phase including all the new configurations of themes and sub-themes.

Phase 5 – Finalizing themes

The penultimate phase of the thematic analysis included a final review of each of the themes. Here, special attention was payed to the names of the themes and sub-themes. Several names were changed to better represent the content of each theme and sub-theme. An example of this in this thesis was that the preliminary theme 'SDGs' was changed to 'responsibility for SDGs'. Even though the theme was made up of all statements that included mentions of the SDGs, in the end, the theme actually discussed the ways in which the political parties

assigned responsibility for the SDGs to different actors. With the completed thematic map in terms of names and defining features of themes and sub-themes, the last part of this phase included the creation of relational indications in the thematic map to show how the different themes and sub-themes interact.

Phase 6 – The write up

The final stage of the thematic analysis is the write up of the report. In the case of this thesis, as it is a master's thesis in the social sciences, there are certain elements in the write up that are expected; such as a literature review, a method's section, a rationale etc. A lot of this phase of the thematic analysis did therefore include following a certain prescribed formula, and writing, rewriting, getting feedback on and reviewing the written text several times before submitting the thesis.

For the write up, several choices also had to be made regarding the use of the coded units. First, all but one theme had several sub-themes. Each sub-theme again included several coding units (which were text excerpts from the different political party platforms). In the write up of the sub-themes, as all the coding units could not be presented, a sample of a few coding units had to be chosen for each section of the write up. A few considerations were made in this process. As the research was not intended as a comparison between the political parties, it was important to try to include a variety of parties' statements whenever possible. Secondly, the examples chosen were the ones that were most representative of the data units as a whole in that particular sub-theme. Then, the data units were translated to English, or the information was paraphrased and added to the discussion. The choice was made not to include references for each individual quote and paraphrase in the discussion, as the significance is not which party made the statement or where the party made the statement, the significance is rather in the statement itself as a representation of sustainability discourse in a political party platform.

4. Preliminary results

In this section the thematic map produced in the thematic analysis will be presented. There will also be a short description of the connection between the thematic map and the research questions, as well as an outline of how the following analyses sections are organized.

Figure 2 show the thematic map of the concept of sustainability as understood by the parliamentary political parties of Norway, based on the party programs for the 2021-2025 parliamentary term. Central in the thematic map is sustainability as that is the topic of investigation. The yellow and blue circles represent the themes identified in the analysis; 'normative orientation', 'future', 'responsibility for the SDGs', 'unsustainability' and 'language of progress'. Two separate colors were purposefully chosen for the themes, where the yellow themes represent aspects of sustainability, and the blue is the directly antagonistic theme of 'unsustainability'. The green circles are the sub-themes connected to their associated theme by dark blue relational lines. The grey dashed relational lines represent cross-thematic relations, whether it is a connection between two sub-themes from different themes, or a relation between a theme and sub-theme that belongs to a different theme. Finally, the bi-directional red arrows going from sustainability to the yellow themes represents that the bi-directional influence of sustainability on the themes and vice versa. This signifies how the concept of sustainability is socially constructed and maintained through a process of signification that goes in both direction from and to the themes that make up the concept. Notice that the antagonistic theme, 'unsustainability' has a dark blue relational line with the symbol for inequation, suggesting that there is a direct relational line between 'sustainability' and 'unsustainability' and that this relational line is based directly on one being what the other is not.

In summation, there were five themes identified in the thematic analysis, with a total of 22 sub-themes, as seen in Figure 2. The themes and sub-themes will be explored further in the analysis chapters.

Figure 2

Thematic map of 'sustainability' based on the political party platforms for the 2021-2025 parliamentary terms in Norway.
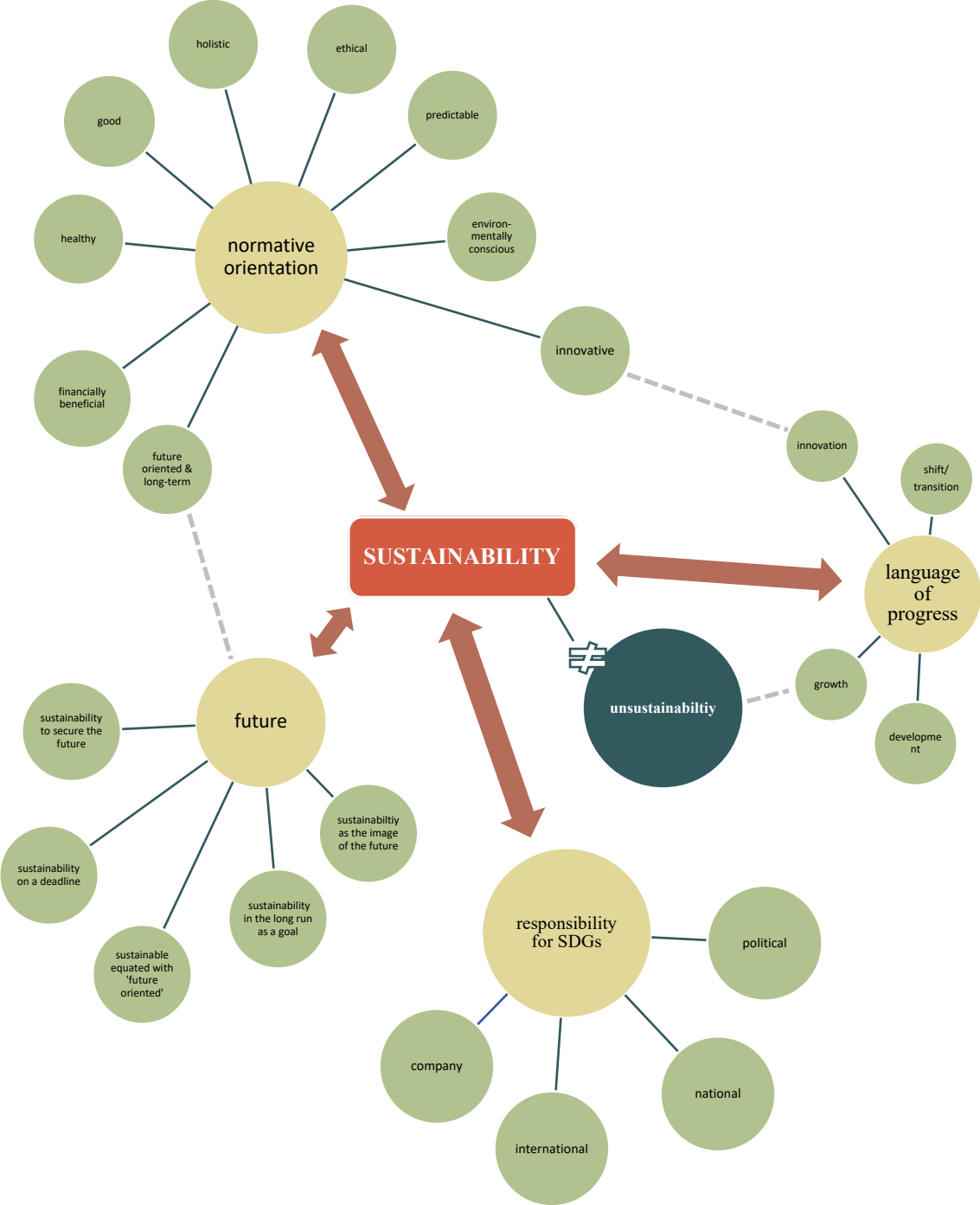
Next there is a need for a clarification for the structure of the analysis. In short, each of the identified themes in the thematic map will make up their own analysis section, which means that there will be 5 analytical sections. The sections will all also aim to address different aspects of the primary research question and relevant secondary research questions. We must therefore look back at the primary research question and the three secondary research questions to see how they relate to the thematic map.

The primary research question will be the guiding question for the analysis of all of the themes: *How do the political parties understand and use the concept of sustainability, and what are the implications of this usage for politics as a whole, and for the relationship between political parties and the voters?* Each theme will consist of a deep dive into how the theme represents some aspect of sustainability, and what the implications of this are on politics as a whole and for the relationship between the parties and the voter.

The theme 'unsustainability' will also address one of the three secondary research questions, namely: *What is currently not sustainable according to the political parties?*

Then, the other secondary research questions will be addressed by the theme 'responsibility for SDGs': *How do the parties relate to the Sustainable Development Goals? What do the political parties see as their role/responsibility in achieving sustainability?* This fifth theme exploring the SDGs in the political platforms and the sense of responsibility reads a bit different than the other themes. Where the other four themes represents different aspects or dimensions of sustainability, this theme is rather discussing how the SDGs are represented in the platforms, and the how this representation often comes with a sense of responsibility.

The following five sections, section five to nine, will make up the main analysis of the thesis. This is the order of the analysis by section:
- Analysis I: The sustainable future
- Analysis II: The unsustainable
- Analysis III: The normative orientation of sustainability
- Analysis IV: Sustainability as the language of progress
- Analysis V: Responsibility for the Sustainable Development Goals

5. Analysis I - The sustainable future

The first analysis section will concern itself with the idea of the sustainable future and the 'future' theme in the thematic map from Figure 2. The section is divided into five parts. Part 5.1. outlines how the 'future' becomes a condition for sustainability as an empty signifier. Part 5.2. explores the theme 'future' from the thematic analysis, including an analysis of each of the five sub-themes identified in the theme. Part 5.3. is a discussion of the impact of specific deadlines, particularly the 2030 deadline for the SDGs, on how politics is conducted in a 4-year parliamentary term cycle. Next, part 5.4. talks about the implications of the collective aim for the 'sustainable future' for national politics. Lastly, part 5.5. consist of a discussion of the implications of the collective political goal of the 'sustainable future' on the voters, and the relationship between the parties and the voters.

5.1. Empty signifier – empty sustainable future

In all versions of the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development the one aspect of the definition that does not change is the presence of a time dimension. Sustainability, from a biological perspective has to do with the future continuation of a species. For loggers or mine workers sustainability means the continued availability of raw-materials and biological matter. There is a sense that what is happening in the present time has an impact on a future dimension, the concept therefore operates on two spheres of existence, the present and the future. This two-planed existence of the concept creates a tension between the *now* and the future as what we choose to do, or not to do, will make a difference in what the future looks like. The future is thus not a static goal but riddled with uncertainty. Waas states that: "Uncertainty is a key feature of sustainability, which is by definition a future-oriented concept" (Waas, 2018, p. 19). Uncertainty and the hope of a "sustainable future" goes hand in hand. What does this sustainable future look like? How will we get there? And what future are we talking about?

In the Brundtland definition of sustainable development this tension between the now and the future is also very much present. Meeting "the needs of the present with without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own" (WCED, 1987, p. 24), speaks to a present generation that has the ability to impact to what extent future generations

are able to get what they need to exist and thrive. Again, this two-planed definition puts the pressure on the humans living today (if seen from an anthropological perspective), to decide what this future will look like and even which "needs" this generation of humans want to prioritize for the future generations.

As the idea of the future is so present in the conceptualization of sustainability in the political party platforms, it is important to consider what the effect this conception of a "sustainable future" has on the political understanding of sustainability – here using the lens of the empty signifier. The question therefore becomes if sustainability, as an empty signifier, relies on the future dimension that is so present in the popular definitions of the term? Put differently, is the notion of the future integral to the mechanisms of sustainability as an empty signifier for the political parties?

To get to the root of this question it is prudent to go back to the foundation of the theory of the empty signifier, to *Emancipation(s)* by Ernesto Laclau. The next part of the text will include excerpts from the detailed account of the nature of the empty signifier.

Laclau suggests that empty signifiers represent "the precise theoretical possibility of something which points, from within the process of signification, to the discursive presence of its own limits" (1996, p. 36). In terms of sustainability then, the term has a self-referential feature, that refers not to itself, but to the limits of sustainability, which is that which is not sustainable. Laclau later states that "the very possibility of the signification is the system, and the very possibility of the system is the possibilities of its limits" (Laclau, 1996, p. 37). Through a linguistic lens here, Laclau is expressing that for sustainability to have meaning, it must exist in a signifying system. A signifying system are made up of a collection of signs that interconnect and form a social-linguistic reality. The author states that for a signifying system to exist it must have limits. If one, for instance, has a signifying system for all the words that are associated with the concept of a family, for this family signifying system to exist one must also be able to define what the limits of the system are, like how a *mother* should be included in the system, but a *boat* should not. Sustainability thus, is not signified by what it is, but by the very borders that make up the signification system, so the limits of what sustainability is not. How does one then identify the limits to sustainability? Laclau suggests that "it is clear that those limits cannot be themselves signified, but have to show themselves as the interruption or breakdown of the process of signification" 1996, p. 37). Thus these

limits of sustainability, that which is not sustainable, cannot be signified directly, as they are contingent on the very structure of sustainability in the first place. As an example, if one considers unsustainable agricultural practices as something that is a limit to sustainability, something that is not sustainable, the very conditions that this limit is measured up against is sustainability itself. It is this issue that Laclau calls a "paradoxical situation" that causes "blockage of the continuous expansion of the process of signification" (1996, p. 37). Signification is no longer necessary, as the empty signifier exists in a self-referential space.

It is here, in the limits of sustainability existing in the impossibility of sustainability, that we again turn to the question of the future. How is the future an element in the signification process of sustainability? To answer this question, I build upon the work of the scholar Brown, who created a frequently cited account of the arguments for why and how sustainability can be understood as an empty signifier. Brown confirms that his main theory is that "the conditions for sustainability as an empty signifier are to be found in multiple experiences of our individual and collective futures being threatened and denied" (2016, p. 123). There are two important parts to this quote, the first being that the *future* is a condition for sustainability, thus sustainability must from this perspective be understood as the locus for the potentiality of sustainability. The second part has to do with the fact that this potential future is at risk.

Continuing on with this narrative, and thinking back to the "chain of equivalence" created when sustainability expanded in meaning from its ecological beginnings to its wide all-encompassing buzzword status it has today – why is the condition of the future at potential risk important? According to Brown, if the only condition to sustainability is that what you wish to include within the signifier is *something* with the possibility of self-destruction in an unspecified future, then there is almost nothing that could not be considered within the structure of sustainability. "Discourses that are able to recognise their own destructive effects and incorporate an adaptive locus of change cease to be antagonistic" (Brown, 2016, p. 124). By antagonistic Brown is here referring to something existing outside the limits of the signifier. Take for that the Norwegian political parties' are working towards a sustainable economy. Even though an economy was not considered as a part of the sustainability framework until the late 20th century with appearance of the Brundland report and the concept of sustainable development – because the economy has the potential to be self-destructive and it exists in the world in a non-fixed state, the political parties can consider it within the

framework of sustainability. It is now possible to see why we have the emergence of everything from a sustainable economy, to sustainable trucking, a sustainable society and sustainable aquaculture has emerged in the party platforms. With the simple conditions of non-fixed state of being and potential for destruction, there are few things that cannot carry a sustainability label.

5.2. The 'future' theme

One of the themes identified in the thematic analysis was the theme of the 'future' as a collocate with sustainability. Through the data analysis it became clear that the future made a common appearance throughout the coding units, and thus had to be a part of the final thematic maps.

The following figure, Figure 3, shows a section of the thematic map from the data set, including the theme *future*, which represents the various ways in which the idea of a future has been related to or connected with the concept of sustainability in the political party programs made for the 2021 election in Norway. The theme consists of five subthemes, which will be explored more in detail in the following paragraphs. The subthemes are placed in no particular order.

Figure 3

A thematic map featuring the theme "future".
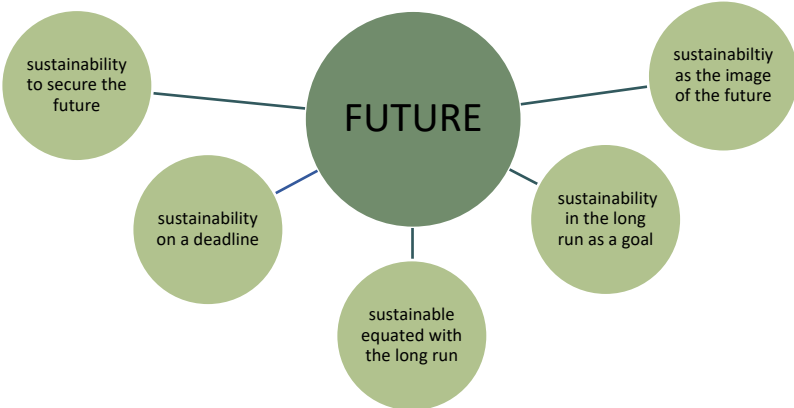
Sustainability to secure the future

This sub-theme represents the perception of sustainability as a necessary means to achieve a desired future. Sustainability is here a means to an end, and even though the end is always somewhere in the future, this desired future can take many shapes. One example here is the Liberal Party stating that: "To safeguard nature and outdoor recreation in the future the municipalities must have the competency and the resources to take a larger responsibility for sustainable development and environmentally-friendly land management". To achieve the desired goal for the future, here ensuring the integrity of nature and outdoor recreation, a municipality that takes responsibility for sustainable development is needed. Another example in this subtheme is the Green Party claiming the goal of maintaining the size and the welfare contributions of the Government Pension Fund of Norway in the future, the most important way to achieve this goal is making sure that investments follow the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals. Both of these examples show sustainability as a means to an end that is a desired future, which can mean different things for different parties.

Sustainability on a deadline

This subtheme explores the different specific dates set for achieving sustainability goals or implementing sustainability measures. This sub-theme is important as sustainability has the ability to exist as a concept referring to many different time horizons (Stumpf et al., 2015, p. 7444). In the coding units, there were four different time units identified. The first, and most frequently mentioned was 2030. This has to do with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. A majority of the mentions of the year 2030 specifically mention the agenda or the Sustainable Development Goals. This comes in the form of statements that define the SDGs. Some of these explanatory sentences are followed up by a statement about the need to take the 2030 agenda seriously, or that the political sphere must come together if the goals are to be met. There are also three examples of mentions of specific goals set out by the governmental 2030 agenda, the Christian Democratic Party mentions working towards the goal of marine protection by 2030, the Green Party states that they want to work towards a higher degree of national self-sufficiency in terms of food production, and the Labor Party wants to work towards the goal of sustainable feed in the aquaculture industry by 2030.

The Green Party and the Center Party also mention goals within the 2021-2025 election term. The Green Party states that they want to: "Reduce the ecological footprint of Norway to a sustainable and socially just level by 2040 and set binding sub-goals that ensure development in the 2021-2025 parliamentary term". Similarly, the Center Party states that: "The fulfillment of the Sustainable Development Goals must be a main objective in the 2021-2025 parliamentary term". What both these accounts have in common is that they express a need for the *beginning* of a prioritization for accomplishing the SDGs within the political sphere. The goals are not specifically targeting something concrete, a policy goal for instance, to be achieved within the parliamentary term, but rather a change in priority.

As seen in the example above from the Green Party, this party has also set themselves a goal of reducing the national ecological footprint of Norway by the year 2040. This goal is not shared by the other political parties in the programs, but the Green Party uses the deadline to prompt for a change in the political prioritization of sustainable development in the 2021-2025 parliamentary term.

The last specific year mentioned in the parties in relation to sustainability is the Conservative party stating that: "The fisheries and aquaculture industries have a potential for further sustainable growth, and the Conservative Party's ambition is to lay the foundation for thousands of jobs by 2050". The future discussed here, the year 2050, is a year where the end goal of an increase in jobs, has been achieved through sustainable growth.

Sustainability equated with the long run

The sub-theme of *sustainability equated the long run* includes a collection of statements where political parties have equated the quality of being sustainable with the quality of something that existing in the long term. Take this example of a statement from the Christian Democratic Party: "Ensure a long-term and sustainable management of our natural resources". Similarly, the Labor Party states that they aim to: "Lead a predictable and responsible tax policy that increases employment (…) and ensures a better long-term sustainability for the welfare state". This example shows how sustainability and the long-run/long-term go hand in hand.

Sustainability in the long run as a goal

Related to the previous sub-theme, a slightly different narrative is also put forth by parties, where sustainability in the long run becomes a goal in and of itself. This sub-theme includes statements such as this one from the Conservative Party: "In the long run we must secure the sustainability of the welfare state". The Christian Democratic party also states that a functioning economy is key is to "ensure the sustainability of the welfare society in the long run". Both of these examples show how the parties believe that goal itself *is* long term sustainability of the welfare state or the welfare society. Sustainability is here thus a given goal in the long term.

Sustainability as the image of the future

The last sub-theme is *sustainability as the image of the future*. This sub-theme consists of depictions of sustainability *as* the future. For instance, the Labor Party states that: "In the future the safest jobs are the ones that are sustainable," which suggests that sustainability, in fact, *is* the future. There is a sense of sustainability as a nonnegotiable path to the future. Similarly, the Socialist Left Party suggests that equipping the Government Pension Fund of Norway for the future, means making investments that follow the guidelines of the Sustainable Development Goals. These accounts imply a sort of inevitability in political direction when it comes to sustainability, that sustainability is the only way forward because it *is* the future.

Closing questions

Rounding off the discussion of the 'future theme', the thematic map of political parties' understanding of the 'future' in relation to sustainability, and the presentation of the five subthemes within the theme leaves a lot of questions. As Brown states; "sustainability derives its meaning entirely through the construction of potential futures in the present, along with the affective consequences of these constructions" (2016, p. 124). What then, are the consequences of the construction of these sustainable futures that the political parties are operating with? Sustainability, in some parts of the party platforms is represented *as* the future, but also seen as a means to an end, a goal in the long run, and the very definition of

something that will be long lasting. This brings back the theory of the four functions of sustainability as a set of criteria, a vision or a goal, an object or an approach, which are represent the function sustainability has to resolve a problem or point to a future dimension (Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muñoz, 2019, p. 3). What does it mean that the construction of sustainability appears so scattered in the party platforms? And finally, what does it do to the construction of sustainability in a political sphere to have fixed deadlines such as the 2030 agenda? These questions all relate back to the main research question of how the political parties in this case understand and use the future dimension of sustainability, and what implications this creation of a sustainable future has for politics as a whole, or for the relationship between the political parties and the voter. The following discussion parts will bring back the theoretical perspectives necessary to offer some insights into the above questions. In part 5.3., *Save the date*, a discussion will follow on the impact of the timeframes set for sustainability deadlines. Part 5.4., *The only future*, will analyze the impact of the singular future-vision constructed by sustainability. Then, part 5.5., *The future of the voter*, will discuss the implications of the future construction of sustainability on the party/voter relationship.

5.3. Save the date

Going back to the sub-theme of the future as represented through a specific deadline, how do these deadlines impact the political objectives of sustainability and the movement towards the sustainability goals? In relation to the research question; do the deadlines set for achieving a sustainable future have implications for the way political parties' approach sustainable politics?

At the year of writing, 2021, the 2030 Agenda, which was established in 2015, has existed for over a third of its supposed timeline of action. The agenda has set goals to be achieved by 2030, which means that countries accepted to actively work towards those goals in order to achieve them by the allotted 15 years. During these years, there will likely be three full parliamentary terms in Norway; 2017-2021, 2021-2025 and 2025-2029. If there are only three full terms, why then are there parties still expressing at the start of the second term a need for the prioritization of the achievements of the Sustainable Development Goals? Going back to the political cycle and agenda setting, the question then becomes, if the deadline of specific

sustainability goals does not fall on the following parliamentary term, will the targets still appear on the agenda? If the political parties are still calling for politics to start to consider working heavily for the SDGs, this indicates that the during first full parliamentary term (approximately a third of the allotted time for achieving the SDGs) there was not a big enough focus on the SDGs to actually make a political difference. What can we then consider the implications of a more long-term deadline for sustainability to be for the political agenda? The 15-year time span of the 2030 Agenda may work effectively to shift governmental aims and focus, but to see effective results on the political level, there may be a need for more concrete goals for each parliamentary term within the timeframe of the larger governmental agenda. Political parties and politicians are central forces in what gets considered for the political agenda (Stigen et al., 2018, p. 61). However, if the big global goals and agendas operate on entirely different time-scales for implementation than the political cycle with parliamentary terms, achieving said agenda may be put on the backburner for a parliamentary term or two until the deadline lines up with the current parliamentary term.

5.4. The *only* future

Sustainability is inarguably on the agenda, and the many mentions of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, and parties' intention on following through with the goals, means that the current political agenda can be stated to have been at least somewhat shaped by the 2030 Agenda. As we have learned from the discussion of sustainability as an empty signifier, the limited conditions for signification of something as belonging within the system of sustainability means that something done in the name of sustainability does not necessarily mean that it falls under the Sustainable Development Goals. The SDGs, thus, should not be seen as a representation of a system of sustainability, but as an artificial selection of *sustainability goals*. Thus, a party has the possibility of talking about aiming for sustainability goals without actually working on the SDGs, which further complicates the dilemma. Sustainable Development Goals and specific deadlines for achieving sustainability objectives aside, there is still a sense of sustainability as the *only* desirable future in a more unspecified time frame in the party platforms. Looking at how this singular future narrative is constructed is important to the argument, as it is important to question that which goes unquestioned. Why does it appear that the political party programs agree on a sustainable future as the only desirable future? And related to the central research question of the thesis: What implications

does the singular cross-party objective of a sustainable future have on national politics as a whole?

This brings us back to the definition of the empty signifier, and the relationship between sustainability and the future condition upon which it rests. If the unsustainable is defined in terms of its possibility to break down the sustainable, then the future becomes the impossible sphere of existence of the signifier. It is important to understand the sustainable future as an impossibility, as the very existence of that reality would mean the break-down of the limits of its own signification. A sustainable future can therefore only exist in reality if none of the limits to signification are a possibility. That is to say, sustainability would only exist if we arrive at a future where there is no possibility that the economy, the society, the environment or any other potential limit to sustainability have the potential to become unsustainable. This is an impossible condition, so the idea of the sustainable future must be understood as an impossible utopia. It also becomes the only future worth striving for, as the alternative to a sustainable future is an unsustainable future – which is the antagonistic future of destruction.

So, what does it mean that the political parties are all aiming for this singular future? What is being addressed is policy coherence, the common goal that all the parties are aiming for across political fields and parties. Consider the quote: "If politics and policy are fundamentally concerned with 'the future shaping of collective life' then when sustainability discourse is mobilized, this may suppress, rather than encourage, deliberation" (Ainsworth, 2020, p. 2). What Ainsworth questions here, is sustainability's impact on one of the fundamentals of political theory. Political parties, and political theory, aims to shape the future, and especially in a multi-party system like Norway where there are several parties with different ideologies and standpoints – what effect does sustainability have? If everyone is striving for sustainability, does that mean that all the political parties agree? No, but Ainsworth suggests that it may act to tune down deliberation and discussion and cause a suppression of political thought and other conceptualizations of the future. As we go into ten more years of working towards the Sustainable Development Goals, and new international conferences on climate change, could the existing sustainability discourse hinder new perspectives and discussions of potential solution to global issues? Are we nationally, and internationally, stuck in a framework of sustainability discourse that works against accomplishing the very goals of sustainability? Or does the sustainability framework allow for new thinking, dialogue and discussion?

We can look at the general introduction of 'green politics' into the Norwegian political realm as a comparison. Ryssevik argues that the introduction of 'green politics' has done very little, if nothing, to change the foundational structure (left-right orientation) of national politics in Norway (Ryssevik, 2000, p. 79). The argument made is that the pressure to transition to 'green politics' has been an even pressure on the political parties, which means that there is very little change made to how the politics is structured as a whole. Similarly, if all the political parties are striving for a 'sustainable future', but this future can include almost anything the party wants to include, there are no changes to the actual politics or structure of the politics, just to how the political objectives are rhetorically presented. From this perspective one can therefore imagine that there are no real implications of the 'sustainable future' being used as the direct aim for political parties, as the aim has multidirectional potential.

5.5. The future of the voter

What are the implications of the future condition of sustainability and of sustainability as an empty signifier on the relationship between the political parties and the voters? Sustainability discourse does not just include policy and political actors, it is also a discourse that includes other societal actors – such as the voter demographic. As established in the introductory sections of this thesis, political platforms are on one level a promise made by political parties on what decisions and priorities they will make if they are elected. As political parties are making decisions in the name of sustainability, it is therefore also important to consider how this may have implications for the voter.

To a voter immersed in sustainability discourse to varying degrees, the promise of sustainability by a political party can have a large effect. In their analysis of the increased use of sustainability discourse by political parties in Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Ireland and the UK from around 1980 to 2011 - in addition to their statistical contribution to scholarship, the authors also weigh in on the potential implications of this spread of sustainability to the voter: "adopting some rhetoric on sustainable development comes at a comparatively low cost for political parties, as voters cannot easily judge whether government has really delivered the policies proposed during election campaigns. The direct observation of policy delivery is

hampered by the characteristics of the sustainability concept, which include process orientation, simultaneity in goal attainment, and a long-time horizon" (Fleig & Tosun, 2017, pp. 435-436, 440). What is being expressed here is that sustainability has the potential of going unchecked and unexamined by voters as it operates on different time-scales and inter-policy dimensions that differ from how political platforms generally operate. Thus, this rhetoric can interfere in the voter's process of choosing what party to vote for. As discussed in the previous section, all the political parties appear to be working towards a sustainable future, but this does not mean that the parties are necessarily working for the same policies. This is of course a beneficial position to be in for the political parties. The stakes are low for advertising for politics that aim for a sustainable future, which is also what the voters are looking for. However, for the voter it is difficult to check up on how well the parties meet their sustainability targets as true sustainability is unachievable, and almost anything can be twisted into politics for sustainability.

Secondly, the voters are, similarly to the political parties, caught up in the idea of the sustainable future as a desirable objective. A discussion of the normative dimension of sustainability will follow more specifically later in the discussion. As Alaimo suggests, sustainability is a "plastic but potent" signifier (2012, p. 559), and can therefore incorporate a lot of different political ideologies, while still retaining a generally positive value and fit in the structure of the signifier. What we have here, is a voter believing in the good of sustainability as a concept but may not agree with all policies enacted in the name of sustainability. This is a dangerous position as voters do not necessarily read into what the sustainability objective the political party is suggesting but can risk accepting the premise of a political action just based on the superficial notion that sustainability is good. This part of the discussion will continue in the normative orientation section of the analysis.

6: Analysis II - The unsustainable

One of the research questions leading the way for the thematic analysis was the question of what the political parties would call out as unsustainable and what the implications are of a political party stating that something does not fit within the concept of sustainability. When collecting and extracting the coding units for analysis, there were some surprising initial observations on the topic of unsustainability. There were very few instances of the term unsustainability in use, out of the around 300 coding units, less than 10 mentioned unsustainability (or other linguistic forms of not sustainable). In the larger thematic map, the theme of unsustainability has no sub-themes, but is represented as a theme with one central message.

In this section of the analysis, part 6.1. will include a discussion of the theme 'unsustainability'. Following this, in part 6.2. answers the question of how the rhetoric of the unsustainability may be used as a political tool. The last part, part 6.3., will discuss how this political tool may have an impact on the voter.

6.1. The 'unsustainability' theme

The thematic map of the political party platforms for the 2021-2025 parliamentary elections showed a small theme without sub-themes named *unsustainability*. What is included in this theme are all the instances of unsustainability being used to describe a current situation or a current trend, followed by a recommendation for how to counteract this unsustainable situation or trend. There are three slightly different variations to this general rhetorical argument, but they all rest on similar principles of reasoning.

In the first variation of unsustainability, the Labor party states that: "Today's level of conflict with regards to the management of predatory animals is a hinder to a good and sustainable predatory politics and must be reduced". Here, a current situation is being identified as an obstacle to sustainability, and this is used as a justification for a reduction in 'the level of conflict'.

The first variation can be exemplified by the Progress Party's statement that: "The immigration tempo is not sustainable for our welfare model and the Norwegian society". This statement is then followed up shortly with strategies for how to reduce this tempo. Similarly, the Christian Democratic Party states that: "Today we consume much more than what is sustainable for the Earth," this statement continues with the party proposing that "a green shift must include a dematerialization and more sustainable consumption and production". The two examples show how unsustainability in these instances signify a fault with the current way of doing something, and the parties then propose how they will turn the unsustainability around – in a sustainable direction.

The last nuance of this theme uses the observation of a trend that can risk developing into a possible unsustainable future, and therefore the new policy or direction from the party must be implemented to avoid such a development. An example here is the Progress Party stating that: "Even though the state has big values, we have to avoid a situation where high state expenditures over time make for an unsustainable national economy".

What is currently not sustainable according to the political parties? This is how the secondary research question about unsustainability reads. But what becomes obvious through the theme is that 'what' is considered unsustainable, is not as interesting as 'how' do the parties use unsustainability. Whether it is claiming that something that is happening today is an obstacle to sustainability and must be changed, is currently unsustainable and must be changed, or is trending in an unsustainable direction and must be changed, the common usage of unsustainability functions as a way to justify a turn in direction. This will be discussed further below.

6.2. Taking the unsustainable in a new sustainable direction

The commonalities of these nuances lay in their promise of fixing what is assumed to be broken. If sustainability is seen as the undisputable desirable future, calling something out as unsustainable is a big threat. Brown discusses how: "The discourses and practices that are critiqued as "unsustainable" have a common feature. All have been interrupted by claims that their long-term (and in some cases, medium- and short-term) effects make them, in some sense, unjustifiable" (Brown, 2016, p. 123). Calling out something as unjust, thus creates a

space for changing priorities, a new direction, and a sense of urgency in fixing what is standing in the way of the future that we all agree we desire.

Based on this brief discussion, the thesis argues, that calling out something as unsustainable in a political party platform must be seen as a potentially potent rhetorical device that can be used to strategically direct blame and further ones' own political interest. Stating that something is unsustainable, has the potential to become unsustainability, or stands in the way of reaching sustainability is a way of justifying the switch to a new political direction.

The same can be said for the term sustainability as a whole, but the big difference in calling something out as unsustainable as opposed to stating what the sustainable direction should be, is the creation of a space that allows for a change in narrative. For instance, by stating that today's levels of consumption are unsustainable, the Christian Democratic Party opens up a space of conflict between sustainability and consumption. The party can then fill the conflict space with their proposed solutions. In this way it is possible to introduce a whole new concern into the discourse, or even shift the narrative of which political actions and ideologies are sustainable and which are not. Stating that something is unsustainable can therefore be an effective rhetorical tool for political parties to justify a change in narrative or political direction.

6.3. The voter's fear of the unsustainable

With regards to the party/voter relationship, unsustainability can work as an effective tool to directly sway the voter to agree with a specific opinion. The fear of unsustainability runs deep and can "evoke anxiety" that overrides a person's ability to rationally debate what is presented to them (Ainsworth, 2020, p. 11). This simple fear of a collapsing future, which is what unsustainability is presented to be, can therefore act as a scaring tactic on the voters, especially in political topics that are already controversial. Take the example of the statement from the Progress Party's that: "The immigration tempo is not sustainable for our welfare model and the Norwegian society". By stating that the rate of immigration is not sustainable, or unsustainable, this statement can act to heighten anxiety about immigration. In the statement the Progress Party claims that the rate of immigration is not sustainable for the welfare model and the Norwegian society. There is no mention of what aspects of the welfare model or the Norwegian society are affected in an unsustainable way by the rate of

immigration. Still, the statement holds a lot of value. This is exactly because of the fear of unsustainability, the fear of the destruction of the sustainable future, holds a lot of weight. From the political parties' perspectives, then, claiming that something is unsustainable and opening up space for a new political direction can also work to sway voters to agree with your politics.

7. Analysis III - Normative orientation of sustainability

From the examples given in the earlier sections of the analysis, it appears as if there is a general consensus about sustainability as a worthy political goal. Taking a closer look at the seemingly unanimous positive attitude towards sustainability is not novel in research. In 2007, in analysing sustainability as a buzzword, Scoones expresses that: "it is the more over-arching, symbolic role – of aspiration, vision, and normative commitment – that remains so politically potent" (Scoones, 2007). Here, Scoones explains how the power of sustainability lays in its ability to mobilize people and politics in a shared vision. This again connects back to the idea of policy coherence, that the normative orientation of sustainability allows for a political unity, and the joined political movement for sustainability across political parties and even globally across nations.

What is it about sustainability that makes it carry such positive connotations? Is sustainability in itself a positive term? If we look back at the original definitions of sustainability, in the biological terms, sustainability can be understood as: "the ability of the whole or parts of a biotic community to extend its form into the future" (Ariansen, 1999, p. 84). The idea of something continuing its own existence into the future is not necessarily a normatively laden statement. Continuance is not normative in and of itself, there must therefore be a socially constructed attachment of normative value to the concept that makes it have the normative orientation we see today (Stumpf et al., 2015, p. 7443). If the normative orientation of sustainability is socially constructed and maintained in a social system of discourse, looking more closely at what these positive normative valuations are and how they operate in the political sphere is important.

This section of the discussion, therefore, questions what the normative values put on sustainability in the party platforms for the 2021-2025 election term are. Additionally, how does this normative orientation shape the discourse of sustainability as presented by the political parties, and what consequences may this have for the national political agenda and the relationship between the voters and the parties? These questions fall under the main research question of how the parties understand sustainability (in this case the normative aspects of sustainability) and the implications and consequences of this normative orientation on politics as a whole and on the relationship between the parties and the voter.

The flowing discussion of the normative orientation of sustainability is divided into four parts. Part 7.1. discusses the results from the theme 'normative orientation'. Part 7.2. questions whether or not there are limits to what positive attributes can be associated with sustainability. Part 7.3. analyzes how the normative orientation of sustainability impacts the production of politics as a whole, and part 7.4. takes on the party/voter relationship and questions what consequences the normative orientation of sustainability may have on the voter.

7.1. The 'normative orientation' theme

During the process of the thematic analysis of the political party platforms, one of the pronounced trends of the coding units was the presence of positive adjectives collocated with sustainability. A political aim would for instance be expressed as a *good* and sustainable, *profitable* and sustainable or *long-lasting* and sustainable. The list of adjectives associated with sustainability in the party platforms got distinctly long, and the theme 'normative orientation' was formed. From this theme the different adjectives were grouped into nine sub-themes which are illustrated in the selection of the thematic map in Figure 4. Each of the sub-themes will be outlined in the following text section, in no particular order.

Figure 4

The theme 'normative orientation'.
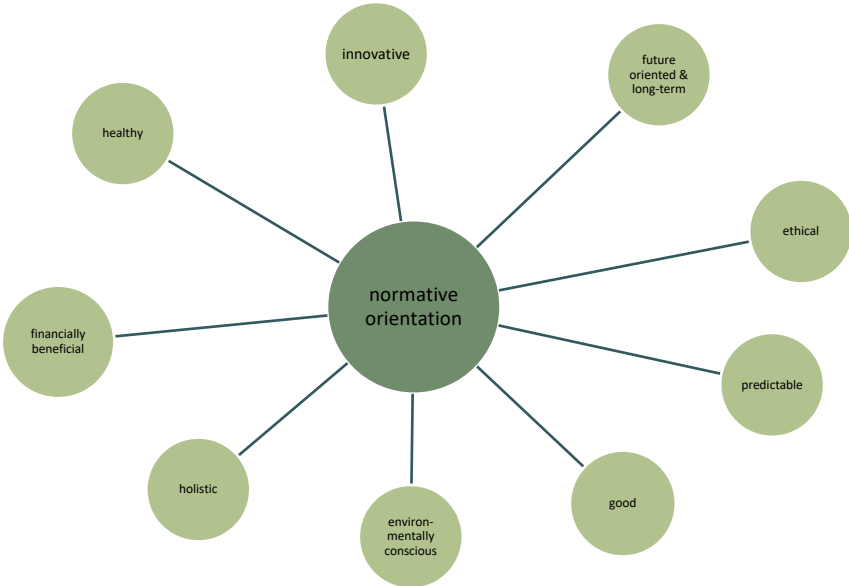
Healthy

The first sub-theme is the theme 'healthy'. This is one of the smallest sub-themes as it pertains to a very specific topic of conversation in the political platforms. Both the Labor Party and the Green Party state that there is a need for sustainable and healthy food. For the Labor party this is mention in connection with the need for a more national production of food, whereas the Green Party expresses a need for the healthy and sustainable food in schools and in other public institutions like hospitals and elderly care facilities. Sustainable food here, is considered as coexisting with food that is healthy.

Holistic

The other smaller sub-theme is the 'holistic' theme, which also includes the idea of balance. One of the statements in this sub-theme include the Progress Party expressing that the party "sees the importance of the marine mammals in the ocean ecosystem, but like other resources, these populations must be managed in a holistic and sustainable way". The Christian Democratic Party also states the need for a holistic and sustainable system for freight transportation and distribution of goods, and the conservative party sees the need for a holistic and sustainable development of the Norwegian aviation industry. Sustainability, in this sub-theme, is seen as political actions or goals that are also able to handle multifaceted problems such as the many functions of a fish population or the large system of freight transport.

Environmentally conscious

The sub-theme 'environmentally conscious' is constituted of three different qualities, renewable, energy efficient and environmentally friendly. For the two first qualities, the Socialist Left Party state talks about using "renewable sustainable fuel" in construction sites, and the Conservative Party wants to "build more energy-efficient and sustainable buildings". In these two examples, the goal of renewable fuel and energy-efficiency are paralleled with the goal of sustainability. As for the examples of the environmentally friendly quality, the Red Party, for instance, states that they are aiming to "run environmentally friendly and sustainable forestry practices". Another example here is the Socialist Left Party states that

they are working for a "sustainable and environmentally friendly food production". All the examples of this sub-theme can be seen under the umbrella of environmentally conscious. They illustrate how the parties couple actions and goals that are environmentally conscious with the idea of sustainability.

Good

The 'good' sub-theme was originally combined in a joint sub-theme with 'predictable', but as it became increasingly clear that the two had to be separated as the qualities they were portraying were more different than expected. This sub-theme gets to the core of the normative orientation of sustainability, as the sub-theme represents statements that directly correlate sustainability with that which is *good.* The Labor Party mentions a "good and sustainable predator politics," the Progress Party wants to ensure "good and sustainable welfare systems" and the Conservative Party claims that it is necessary to manage renewable energy sources in a good and sustainable way. The word good, in these examples, has no function in the statement other than stating that what they are proposing is normatively correct. And by proposing this normative value to their statement, they are also placing a normative value on the 'sustainable way' they are intending to approach the issue at hand.

Predictable

This next sub-theme, 'predictable', is a sub-theme consisting of several features that suggest a form of control and expectedness that the parties claim exist simultaneously with a sustainable political action and goal. The Labor Party states that they "want to ensure a predictable, controlled and sustainable growth in the aquaculture industry". In their political platform, the Conservative Party states that they want to develop a "strict, predictable and sustainable immigration politics" as well as continuing their development of a "sustainable and predictable pension system". All three of these examples suggest that sustainable policies and political actions can exist in forms that limits future uncertainty. Uncertainty would come with policies that are unsustainable. In this same sub-theme, the Labor Party suggests that "the world needs more healthy, safe, and sustainable food". The idea of sustainable as associated with safe also falls under the category of predictable as something that is unsafe would be something that is hard to predict. The last element in this is expressed through the

Christian Democratic Party stating that they want to "ensure the continued right to a sustainable and traditional harvesting from nature". Traditional is added to this category of predictable as it represents what is already known, a method that comes with certainty. As a whole, this sub-theme explores the ways in which sustainable policies and goals proposed by the political parties across the political spectrum can in some cases coexist with values of predictability.

Ethical

The next sub-theme consists of a lot of statements where sustainable policies and goals are held up against a social-ethical dimension. The sub-theme is called 'ethical' but questions everything from justice to humanness and peacefulness. Some examples in this sub-theme include: The Green Party wanting to "Reduce Norway's ecological footprint to a sustainable and socially just level", the Center Party wanting to "ensure a defensible and sustainable management of the resources and the environment", the Christian Democratic Party working "to secure a peaceful and sustainable management of the Arctic" and the Labor Party desiring immigration "politics that are more just, humane and sustainable for the Norwegian society". The ethical dimension in these statements suggest that on some levelsustainable policies are aligned with an ethical value.

Future oriented & long-term

One of the overlaps in the thematic mapping of sustainability as understood by the political parties, was the theme 'future' with the sub-theme 'future oriented'. The theme and sub-theme overlap in some ways but are also a bit different. The 'future' theme looks at all the ways the coding units interact with any aspects of the *future*, whereas the sub-theme 'future oriented' codes for the normative instances where something that has the quality of lasting for a long time, or where being future oriented is paired with an action or goal of sustainability. The normative aspect of the statement is one of the key differences between the theme and sub-theme. For instance, the Labor party states that they want to create tax policies that yield "better long-term sustainability for the welfare state". Notice that if sustainability is defined as something that continues to exist in the future, then the phrase 'long-term sustainability' can be described as better long-term continued existence into the future – something that seems a

bit superfluous. In any case, examples in this sub-theme includes the Labor Party aiming for "better long-term sustainability for the welfare state" and the Christian Democratic Party stating that they are focusing on an "active, sustainable and future oriented agriculture industry". Even though the very definition of sustainability surrounds the idea of a continued existence into an unspecified future, this sub-theme also shows that the political parties still feel the need to specifically express that many of their future oriented or long-term oriented goals and objectives are also, in fact, sustainable. The fact that there is such a need to clarify the future-oriented nature of a sustainable initiative also does say something about the ambiguity around sustainability as a concept. If the concept was more evident, these sub-themes would cease to exist.

Innovative

The penultimate sub-theme is 'inventive', which is a sub-theme made up of statements about sustainable objectives or actions that are also new, active and creative. It surrounds the idea that sustainable actions can be creative and original in nature and allow for new impulses and perspectives. The Labor Party states that "new, sustainable businesses and jobs must be created", the Conservative Party aims to make the Northern-Norway "one of the most innovative and sustainable regions in Europe". Sustainability is here aligned with ideas of innovation and creativity, about bringing in new ideas and perspectives and making room for growth.

Financially beneficial

Finally, the last sub-theme is *financially beneficial'*. This is a small sub-theme, and even though economic incentives and sustainability goes hand in hand, which will be discussed in closer detail in the next part of the discussion, this is still a fairly small sub-theme. The two concrete examples in this sub-theme is the Center Party "supporting research into effective and sustainable mining practices" and the Green Party wanting to protect the countryside through the creation of "profitable and sustainable industry". The examples do demonstrate that at least some of the parties suggest there are financial benefits to be had in aiming for sustainable goals in some instances.

7.2. Anything goes, as long as it is positive

After looking at all the different positive attributes aligned with sustainable goals and objectives in the political party programs, the first pondering that that came to mind while processing the thematic map was that it appears that *any* attribute or quality can be mapped onto sustainability, so long as it is positive. Renn et al. suggests that the concept has "led to confusion and irritation among researchers, practitioners and the general public as almost anything that can be linked to positive developments was framed as "sustainable"" (2009, p. 292). Similarly, Weisser remarks that sustainability "offers an inclusive positivity that can be applied to diverse circumstances, goals, and desires" (2017). If something that is good, inventive, healthy or effective is also sustainable, where are the limits to the positive attributes that can be associated with sustainability? Is there a positive quality that actually can be excluded from the sustainability framework? And what impact does this potentially limitless positivity around sustainability have on in politics and on the communication between the parties and the voter?

The first step in this discussion is therefore unpacking the seemingly limitless positivity that the parties align with sustainability. A part of the answer may again be at least partially explained by the theory of the empty signifier. As discussed previously, in short terms, sustainability as an empty signifier is made up of a system that signifies all that which has the potential for destruction in an unspecified future. In his theory, Laclau states that if the limits to an empty signifier is seen as 'pure negativity' (like environmental destruction and economic destruction, also known as unsustainability), then the empty signifier itself can be an entirely positive being (1996, pp. 38-39). Brown sums up this point rather eloquently: "It is only through reference to this generalised "threat", external to the signifying system, that it is possible for the system itself to be coherently represented as a positive order of Being" (2016, p. 118-119). From this perspective, then, sustainability actually becomes the very being of positivity, as what is on the limits or excluded from sustainability is pure negativity. In this framework, the answer to whether any positive attribute can be related to sustainability, the answer is seemingly yes. In theory, the empty signifier reasoning is the simple answer to why no one can seem to speak overtly negatively about or against sustainability as a concept. But what, then, do we do with a concept that is the embodiment of positivity, when it is put in a political framework?

7.3. Positive sustainable policy

From the thematic mapping it is possible to see that the political parties are aligning sustainability with a variety of different positive attributes, but if everything about sustainability is positive, or if it is, in fact, the embodiment of positivity, then what purpose does this positive linking actually serve? According to Holden, the positivity and unity embodied by sustainability can make it so that "local concerns and oppositions can be trumped by strategic national interests, and particular interests by particular citizens for particular places are lost in the overall quest for a mythical global sustainable future" (2010, p. 650). In other words, because of the strength of sustainability as a global discourse, and because of the utopic nature of the concept, it can act to *override* local interests or particular interest groups. It is hard to argue against policies that were globally generated by the United Nations. It is also hard to argue against policies implemented in the name of sustainability, which is the untouchable embodiment of positivity.

Another function of the normative orientation of sustainability is that the fear of the negative consequences of unsustainability "evokes anxiety that current systems may not continue, even when used in its positive forms, inhibiting capacity to think about the future, deterring the generation and discussion of alternatives" (Ainsworth, 2020, p. 11). What Ainsworth is getting at here is that inherent to the positivity of sustainability lays the anxiety about the potentially devastating effects of unsustainability. This anxiety can, according to the author cause discussions about alternative solutions to cease and disable engagement. Sustainability, used in party platforms, can in this way also work to *disengage* critical discussion and the generation of new ideas.

It is also possible to see the positivity associated with sustainability in a more optimistic light. Weisser states that: "The broad-based positivity of the term is an important aspect of its promise as a policy and planning framework, since it provides a blank canvas for implementing change" (2017). It is difficult to refute the mobilizing effect sustainability has had, from Brundtland's introduction to sustainable development in the late 80s to the global commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals. All over the world, sustainability has become a part of the national political agendas, forcing political parties to engage with sustainability as a concept. The widespread policy coherence built into the SDGs,

and the positivity of sustainability has showed how the concept has a great power to *mobilize* across nations.

Now, looking back to the thematic map, during the processing of the codes, one aspect of the 'normative orientation' theme that appeared odd was the seemingly contradictory positive sub-themes of 'innovative' and 'predictable'. Whereas the 'innovative' sub-theme consisted of that which was new, active and creative, the 'predictable' sub-theme was comprised of that which was traditional, predictable, safe and controlled. This shows the great range of positive values associated with sustainability, which can work to further *muddle* the clarity of the concept.

Another complication found within the coding units was how two different sustainability objectives could work side by side or even against each other. Take the example of predator politics, and the statements made by the Liberal Party and the Labor Party. The Liberal Party states that: "We must have a balanced predator management, which includes a sustainable predator population". Here, the party preaches balance and a sustainable population of predators. The Labor Party states that: "The level of conflict associated with predator management today is a hinder to a good and sustainable predator politics". In this statement the party is expressing that good and sustainable politics would include a reduction of instances of conflict with predators. These two examples are both normative statements about what sustainable predator politics looks like. One concerns itself with sustainability of the population itself, and the other with sustainability in terms of the amount of conflict the population causes to external populations like livestock. These statements both argue for sustainability but are pulling in two different directions. Even though they may not be completely antagonistic, they still illustrate how sustainability has the ability to *mold* to fit any side of an argument.

If sustainability holds the power to mobilize political coherence, while also overriding and even disengaging discussion, muddling its own conceptual clarity through use and mold to fit any side of an argument, it cannot simply be rejected as a meaningless concept. It is a concept that holds a great deal of power to influence politics. As Holden articulates "it is rare indeed in these times to hear anyone speak overtly against sustainability" (2010, p. 647). And the fact that it is rarely questioned or negatively debated should therefore also be a bit of a cause of alarm. Political parties are using a concept that is inherently seen in a positive light, but also

hold the ability to mold this concept into whatever fits their political agenda. What then, is the purpose of sustainability if it can take nearly any shape the user desires? Going back to the research question one can first determine that sustainability is understood and used by the political parties as a normative concept that holds normative value. The consequences on politics as a whole on this normative usage and understanding of sustainability is then how the concept can serve to disengage critical reflection around political topics, it can also act to mobilize, to override interests, to muddle political clarity and mold arguments.

7.4. A positive promise to voters

It is also important to ask how the positive framing of sustainability may affect the voting population, as they are some of the intended audience for the party platforms. Let us here consider the same ideas, that the normative orientation of sustainability gives it mobilizing, disengaging, muddling and molding abilities.

One of the main functions of a party platform is to arguably to attract voters, and convince them to vote for your party. In their study of the rise of sustainability discourse in political parties in five European countries (Norway not included) from the 80s to around 2011, Fleig & Tosun found that over the years the political parties started converging on their statements about sustainable development, making it hard for the voters to distinguish between them on this particular topic (2017, p. 440). Additionally, the study concludes that by 2011 "sustainable development does not represent a dimension on which parties compete against each other by using different rhetoric signaling strategies" (Fleig & Tosun, 2017, p. 440). Now, it is possible and important to argue that the political parties in Norway use sustainability and sustainable development nearly interchangeably, and that Fleig and Tosun's study has relevancy also for this thesis. Although a decade later, one would assume that the policy coherence would not be any less with the added pressures of the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda. For a voter, then, if there are only minor differences between how the sustainability is used between the parties, and all the parties are claiming to be striving for the concept – it is then first of all very easy to accept sustainability as a desirable goal for the voter. The positive connotations with sustainability alone makes it easy to *mobilize* around the concept as a voter, and one could say that from a party competition standpoint it would also be the wisest decision to include sustainability as the

mobilization effect is so strong and the word is as relevant as it is today. Here it is important to bring in the idea of the 'cost of participation' in politics, which is the idea that engaging in politics can be understood as an active choice to endure the costs (time, effort etc.) of participation (Mjeldheim et al., 1989, p. 57). Here, the mobilizing effect of sustainability may act as a motivator that lowers the cost of participation in politics, as voters that feel motivated have a greater reason to participate.

However, as the political parties use the same sustainability rhetoric and align them with myriad positive adjectives, discerning empty rhetoric from actual policy suggestions may be difficult for an average voter. One can say that the normative sustainability rhetoric can appear to *muddle* both the understanding of what sustainability is for the voter, but also what the parties are actually trying to say. This may, then, become a barrier to participation for a voter.

On a similar note, it is important to acknowledge that political parties do aim to influence voters, and if sustainability is as pliable as it appears in this research, it can also be used to purposefully *mold* the political material to catch a wider net of voters or to reframe an previously unpopular opinion. This can therefore be used strategically by a political party to purposefully gain more voters.

Then there is the claim that sustainability may act to *disengage* voters. This can work on several levels. As sustainability is a large and vague concept with a decidedly positive tone, a voter can simply choose to disengage with the actual policy after hearing that the policy aims to be sustainable, as sustainability supposedly is what we collectively desire. If sustainability is seen as something positive, a voter may reason that any proposed objective made in the name of sustainability must be a positive one as well. Even though it is easy to think of a voter in terms of a rational being, research suggests that this idea of a voter's perfect rationality is not is not realistic (Ryssevik, 2000, p. 92). Rather, the voter often takes rational shortcuts and do not always engage fully or critically with the political material created for them. The positive connotations with sustainability, then, can easily cause a disengagement with the political material, and potentially lead to voters supporting parties they do not actually agree with if voters blindly follow any policy in the name of sustainability due to its normative orientation.

The second part of how voters may disengage from the political platforms at the mention of sustainability may be found in the term 'eco-anxiety'. As previously discussed, Ainsworth explains how one may disengage with sustainability issues as anxiety about the consequences of unsustainability may force a person to disconnect (Ainsworth, 2020, p. 11). Eco-anxiety, loosely defined as "difficult feelings because of the ecological crisis," is still a very much debated state of being, but has been a state of being affecting many especially young people today (Panu, 2020, p. 14). Even if it is placed in positive terms, the thought of the potentially looming unsustainable future may be enough to make voters disengage with the political material or fail to vote at all.

For the research question, one can therefore conclude that the normative orientation of sustainability does have a consequence for the party/voter relationship. Political parties have the ability to use the normative orientation of sustainability to mobilize voters and create positively perceived political goals and objectives. These objectives may even go unquestioned by the voters.

8. Analysis IV - Sustainability as the language of progress

After finding the last theme 'language of progress' it was hard not to see the connections between the sub-theme topics like growth, development and innovation and the *Our Common Future* report by the Brundtland Commission. Before going into the details of each of these sub-themes, it might therefore be necessary to look a bit closer at why the empty signifier may appear to be so closely connected to Brundtland's definition of sustainable development and the ideology found in the Brundtland report - the language of the Brundtland report has been identified as steeped in neoliberalist ideology, and it is therefore also important that the theories around neoliberalism forms the foundation of this theme. As Trantas expresses: "neoliberalism is so deeply embedded in institutions, ideologies and practices, that a substantive change of this hegemonic paradigm is not easy to foresee" (Trantas, 2021, p. 230). What is being explored here is that the institutions that exist today are so far entangled in neoliberalist ideologies that this paradigm is unescapable. Wendy Brown, a prominent political science professor, states that at least in the case of the United States, but also a general trend in the Western world; "the state's table of purposes and priorities has become indistinguishable from that of modern firms, especially as the latter increasingly adopts concerns with justice and sustainability" (2015, p. 27) From this statement it becomes clear that as the government is so far steeped in neoliberalist ideology and structure, no discussion of sustainability discourse on a political level would be complete without a consideration of the neoliberal influence on that discourse.

To understand this connection, we turn again to the empty signifier and the connection between empty signifiers and hegemony. When it comes to empty signifiers it is first of all important to acknowledge that the signifiers the terms can never achieve "absolute fixity" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 112). The empty signifier, as it exists in a social structure of meaning, can never have a fully static meaning. Similarly, it can also not achieve absolute non-fixity. This does not, however, mean that there cannot be some amount of fixity of an empty signifier, and often the fixity comes from hegemonic pressures. Torfing describes hegemony as "the expansion of a discourse, or a set of discourses, into a dominant horizon of social orientation and action by means of articulating unfixed elements into particularly fixed moments in a context crisscrossed by antagonistic forces" (Torfing, 1999, p. 101). Let us work through this definition in the case of the influence of hegemony on the empty signifier

sustainability. Through hegemony, there was an expansion of the meaning of sustainability, which favored the dominant ideology at the time. Sustainability was popularized through the Brundtland report in 1987, which was, arguably, a report written from a neoliberal perspective. It is from there easy to argue that this was a 'dominant horizon of social orientation' as a report produced by the United Nations generally holds a great deal of weight globally. The last bit of the definition: "articulating unfixed elements into particularly fixed moments in a context crisscrossed by antagonistic forces" is very interesting in the context of sustainability (Torfing, 1999, p. 101). The first part of that section is the articulation, the creation of "nodal points" of meaning, which in this case is the way the Brundtland report constructed their definition of sustainability (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 113). Some of these nodal points may be argued to include the three dimensions of sustainability; the economic, environmental and social, or linking sustainability to development. The 'antagonistic forces' intersecting with this new fixity can in this case be understood as the previously antagonistic ideology of the environmental movement. And that through the articulation of discourse the hegemonic forces were able to fuse the antagonistic discourses of the environmental movement into their own hegemonic paradigm. Thus, sustainable development came to exist, and this new hegemonic fixity of meaning, caused sustainability to become an empty signifier, and overwrite the preceding meaning of the term.

This exploration of the hegemonic forces that shaped sustainability opens up a lot of questions about if, and if so how, these hegemonic forces are currently shaping Norwegian political parties' understanding of sustainability. Do we see the theoretical fixity to the neoliberal ideals expressed by the Brundtland Commission now, over 30 years after *Our Common Future* was published? What aspects of this fixity may still be present, and what implications does this have for Norwegian politics? The aspect of the research question that is being addressed in this section is therefore how the perceived language of progress and neoliberalism found in the sustainability discourse may have implications for politics as a whole and the voter.

The rest of this analysis section is divided into three parts. Part 8.1. is concerned with the 'language of progress' theme identified in the thematic analysis. Following the discussion of the theme, Part 8.2. will analyze an excerpt from the party platform of the Red Party on the topic of capitalism and growth. Finally, Part 8.3. considers the implications of the language of

progress and neoliberal influence that comes with sustainability on the political sphere as a whole and on the party/voter relationship.

8.1. The 'language of progress' theme

To address in what ways the political party platforms may be influenced by the hegemonic fixity of sustainability as linked to the Brundtland Commission's construction of sustainable development, let us first consider the selection of the thematic map that explores the theme of 'language of progress' in Figure 5, with the four-sub themes that make up the theme.

Figure 5

The theme 'language of progress'.
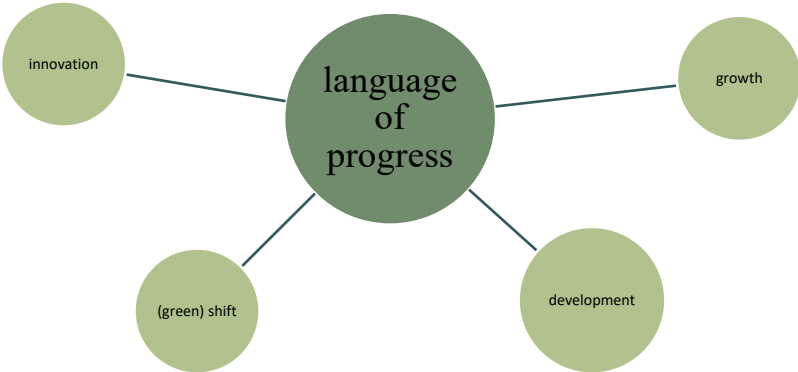
Innovation

The sub-theme entitled 'innovation' includes the coding units that uses language of innovation and of renewal in association with the use of the concept of sustainability. Examples include the Labor Party expressing the need for "new, sustainable industry and jobs" and the Green Party aiming to "make the economy more effective and sustainable through reduced consumption, rapid technological advances and innovation". The Christian Democratic party also claims that: "We must be smarter, greener and more innovative to create sustainable growth and safe jobs". Before going into a discussion of the potential neoliberal understanding of this sub-theme, it is worth pointing out that a political party aiming for something that is new or innovative is not inherently tied to neoliberalism, as

political parties have always and will always suggest new political direction. However, going back to the point that government today is steeped in neoliberal ideology, it is important to at least consider the ways in which these new and innovative solutions by the parties may reflect neoliberalist thinking. To see this in perspective Brown states that: "Enthusiasm for the market is typically animated by its promise of innovation, freedom, novelty, and wealth," and this belief in the market is also integral to the neoliberal agenda (2019, pp. 89-90). From this example, it is interesting to look a little closer at the two latter examples from this sub-theme.

Let us first consider the Green Party's statement that they want to "make the economy more effective and sustainable through reduced consumption, rapid technological advances and innovation". From Browns perspective, this statement can illustrate how the Green Party has a strong belief in the market when it comes to arriving at a 'sustainable economy.' This reflection is based on the statement insinuating that a sustainable and effective economy will be achieved through innovation and technological advances. Similarly, the Christian Democratic Party's statement that "We must be smarter, greener and more innovative to create sustainable growth and safe jobs" also has a faith in the market when it comes to 'sustainable growth and safe jobs'. There is an inherent belief in the statement in a market, that through innovation, can be sustainable. Now consider these examples alongside this statement from the Brundtland Commission: "The combination of advanced technology, stronger national economies, and a developed institutional infrastructure give resilience and the potential for continuing recovery to cities in the industrial world" (1987, p. 197). The statement indicates a comparable trust in a market which together with advancements in technology will secure a sustainable future. It is the idea of the market as the foundation upon which security and sustainability is built that is being expressed, and that innovation and technological advancements are integral to succeed in this mission.

The (green) shift

The next sub-theme considers the topic of a political shift or transition. In this sub-theme the 'shift' is referred to by many names: green shift, sustainable shift, economic shift, an environmentally friendly shift, and simply a 'shift' with no more specificity. Arguably, all these different 'shifts' are talking about the same conceptual idea of a transition from a non-sustainable economy to a sustainable economy. It is worth noting here, that the important part of that definition is that *what* is changing is the state of the economy.

Let us look at a few examples from the political party platforms where the parties mention the shift in relation to sustainability. An important example to consider from this sub-theme is the following statement from the Labor Party:

> "The green shift is changing the conditions for all Norwegian industry. We are already seeing that the international markets we deliver to are requesting products and services with zero emissions or low emissions. This creates a lot of opportunities for increased export for Norway in areas like energy, minerals, food, battery technology, transport and a green and blue economy. The Labor Party wants to focus on a more environmentally friendly and sustainable industry and reduce the climate risk for the Norwegian economy. A fast and successful transition to sustainable industry will secure jobs and demand that unions and industry develop an even stronger collaboration"

First of all, in this example, the green shift is equated with a 'sustainable transition' in terms of industry. This is important to note as the idea of a 'green economy' is not necessarily connected with sustainability. Wanner suggests that "discourse of green economy/growth is a step further than the discourse of sustainable development which was based", but as green growth has sprung out of the idea of sustainable development the two are often interlinked and even used interchangeably (2015, p. 27). This interchangeability can, for instance, be seen in this statement from the Liberal Party: "Research and higher education are crucial in solving the climate crisis, taking care of nature and in contributing to the sustainable shift". Going back to the statement from the Labor Party, the statement also illustrates how the green shift to a green economy can be viewed as a neoliberal construction. The statement mentions the future potential of growth in export as a result of increasing demand for 'green products and services', which plays into the "commodification, marketisation and privatisation of 'nature'" (Wanner, 2015, p. 23). Even though a rising demand for low and zero emissions goods and services is at the surface level a sustainability objective, there is still a market-based framework of understanding operating as the foundation for the objective. The goal here, is not to produce in a sustainable way, but to capitalize on the growing demand for sustainable products. It is environmentalism, when convenient for the economy.

The sub-theme '(green) shift' shows several examples of how sustainability discourse and the discourse of a transition to a greener economy are interlinked in the political party platforms. The parties claim that a green shift will lead to new jobs, they make statements about what industries should be included in this new green economy (such as nuclear power and the redistribution of funding from the private to the public sector), and all seem to be in agreeance that the green shift is the only way forward.

Development

The sub-theme 'development' is the most unified of the sub-themes. It concerns itself with the political parties expressing goals and objectives relating to what they call sustainable development. Now, there are a total of 21 specific mentions of sustainable development, the mentions come from all parties except the Red Party. In the introductory chapters it was also briefly explained that the Sustainable Development Goals are called the *sustainable goals* in Norwegian, dropping the word development from the name of the goals. This is important to note here as all mentions of the SDGs specifically are not included in this sub-theme. It also means that due to this linguistic difference, there is a big likelihood that 'sustainability' may have been used synonymously with 'sustainable development' in other instances of the political text. If we were to have taken all mentions of the SDGs as a mention of sustainable development, this would put the total mentions of sustainable development to 57 (with 36 of which being mentions of the SDGs) and then the list would also include the Red Party. Nevertheless, this sub-theme concerns itself with the specific mentions of sustainable development, which is limited to 21 instances of the use of the term.

In this sub-theme, the parties express that they want to towards sustainable development in a range of political fields such as tourism, the mineral industry, fishery and aquaculture industry and arctic politics. Out of all the sub-themes, this is arguably the one that overlaps most with the values and ideals of the Brundtland Commission as the definition of sustainable development introduced by the commission is still considered a central defining core for the concept in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals and then also, by extension, the core of how the political parties understand the term today. In *Our Common Future*, the report states that "sustainable development is not a fixed state of harmony, but rather a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are made consistent with

future as well as present needs" (WCED, 1987, p. 25). This definition speaks to the central core of sustainable development, which is the belief that there exists a directional evolution, a sense of progress that can be followed to achieve sustainability. Sustainable development, then, becomes that directional process. It is also important to acknowledge the multiplicity of concurrent paths that the Brundtland Commission explores to achieve this sustainability, it is not just a singular path, but must include a collaboration of resource management, technology, investments and institutions. Such a multiplicity of concurrent paths is acknowledged by the political platforms through the vast variety of policy suggestions and objectives associated with sustainable development. There are also several statements that engage with the complexity of actors and intersecting paths. An example of this is the Socialist Left Party stating that, with regards to the Northern Arctic areas: "International collaboration about sustainable development, resource use, indigenous right and trade is in Norway's interest". This acknowledgement of the web of processes, resource use, the economics and the social/ethical indigenous dimension are all a part of the same conversation, even though they represent very different paths.

Growth

The last sub-theme is called 'growth' and surrounds the language of sustainability and growth. This includes all instances of sustainability paired with a form of expansion or growth, whether that is economic growth, or an increase in industry, green growth or an increase in jobs. Examples include the Conservative party wanting to encourage politics in the fishery and aquaculture industry that "creates jobs and sustainable growth" and the Labor Party wanting to: "Stimulate for an increased production of Norwegian produced sustainable feed" for the aquaculture industry. The commonalities with all the coding units in this sub-theme is that they all express that an increase of something (growth, production etc.) is necessary for sustainability, or is a part of a sustainable process.

One common critique of sustainable development in the early days of the term's existence was that it was operating as an oxymoron (Redclift, 2005, p. 213). If one looks at sustainability as the ability to maintain a certain level of resources, and that these resources are finite. And then look at development as synonymous with 'growth,' then the term is oxymoronic, as nothing can continue to grow and expand indefinitely in a finite system. But as Daly points out in his critique, published only three years after the Brundtland report,

growth and development are vastly different, where growth assumes a purely quantitative increase, development is the increase in qualitative potential which is the 'type of progress' we should be striving for (1990, p. 402). This gets to the bottom of his critique, which is that at the time of writing in 1990, what the Brundtland commission has called for is in fact a huge increase in throughput growth, not development which is what they appear to be claiming, which Daly claims could have ecologically disastrous outcomes in the future (p. 404). He concludes his critique stating that if sustainable development is to succeed "we must first take the conceptual and political step of abandoning the self-contradictory and thought-stopping slogan of "sustainable growth" (Daly, 1990, p. 406). Now, more than 30 years after this critique was written, the phrase 'sustainable growth' appeared nine times in the 2021 party platforms from a total of four different parties.

Sustainable growth, growth as a part of the sustainable process, or growth as a means to a sustainable end are prominent political ideas in the political party program for the 2021-2025 election terms in Norway. But how can this inconsistency between sustainability and growth have existed for such a long time? Again, the answer may be found, at least partially by the theory of the empty signifier. The empty signifier has the ability to target that which frightens us (unsustainability, ecological destruction etc.) and can then turn this fear around in a way that masks and ultimately eliminates through generalizations the "specificity in complaints or illogical gaps in ideas" like how sustainability and growth are incompatible (Brown, 2016, p. 124). Illogical arguments and structures fall to the sideline when the feeling of potential doom is present. What becomes clear then, is that many sustainable development objectives and goals are only considered if there are economic incentives to do so without changing the neoliberal ideological framework (Davidson, 2010, p. 391). Thus, the neoliberal economic machine can follow the market forces, and if those forces pull in sustainable directions then that is of course where the economy will follow.

8.2. A red reflection

There was only one political party that was not represented in the entirety of the 'language of progress' theme. It was the Red Party, which is a small party that received a total of eight parliamentary seats after the 2021 election. It is important to acknowledge that the absence of a representation of the Red Party in this sub-theme is partially due to the method used for

coding, as only text appearing in context with the word sustainability was considered. This, of course, means that ideas analyzed such as growth and development are limited to growth and development in context with sustainability, all other discussions of the topics are not included. This was a purposeful choice, but also led to the exclusion of a very relevant text excerpt about the language of progress and growth by the Red Party. This text, though not a part of the original coding units, will be included here:

> "Capitalism cannot work without continuous growth, but continuous growth is impossible in a world where the access to energy and other resources are limited. If we want the ability to make sure that the world is a livable place for future generations, we have to replace capitalism with an economic system that can work without economic growth, a socialist and democratic economy that ensures that the necessary reduction in consumption and emission happens in a just way".

What is explored in this statement by the Red Party is a very similar sentiment to that of Daly in his critique of 'sustainable growth'. It is a critique of the oxymoron that is capitalistic growth paired with a finite resource system. The statement calls for a removal of the capitalist economic system in favor of social-democratic economic system. What is worth bringing to light in this part of the discussion as well is that the Red Party has the least mentions of sustainability overall in their party platform, with a total of 12 mentions. If anything, it is an interesting parallel, that the party that is publicly opposing capitalism is also the party with the least mentions of sustainability. This is of course just an observation, but still an important one. Since it appears from the rest of the analysis in this section that there is a strong presence of neoliberal and market-oriented thinking associated with sustainability, it does make sense that a political party that opposes capitalism also would find itself aligning less with certain aspects of sustainability.

8.3. Market-oriented politics

Going back to the research question we can see that one part of how political parties understand and use sustainability is through a market-oriented lens. The question then becomes what the implications are of this market-orientation on politics as a whole and on the political party/voter relationship. First, let us start with the implications on politics. The

boundaries between the market and the state is not a new topic, but can rather be considered one of the fundamental debates in politics (Ryssevik, 2000, p. 17). Norway has arguably also followed the common trend of a gradual political shift towards a more competitive and economic/liberal form of democracy (Allern, 2010, p. 157). Even though a multiple-party system like Norway on the surface appears to have a democratic structure, this democratic structure may in fact be hiding an underlying oligarchic structure, where all the parties are guided by similar pressures and trends (Allern et al., 2019, p. 44). What we can see then, is that if sustainability is frequently associated with a neoliberal agenda, and if the sustainability objective is an objective that all the parties subscribe to, the parties are also then giving into neoliberal pressures. What effect, then, does this have on democracy? This question gets at another fundamental debate in politics, the tension between the power of the elite vs. the power of the people (Lesjø & Rønning, 2015, p. 90). We can ask, how much power do we want hegemonic discourse to have over political parties and their agendas? When the Norwegian state commits to the Sustainable Development Goals they are also committing to the ideological pressures that come with those goals. If one sees democracy in terms of political parties' right to opinions and the independent formation of ideology and construction of meaning (Ryssevik, 2000, p. 33), then agendas like the SDGs can to some extent be understood as a threat to political democracy. The ideological pressures and hegemonic discourse that comes with the SDGs can take precedence over a party's own ideological roots and lead to a reduction in the overall diversity and divergence of the political sphere nationally.

The narrowing of the national ideological political field can be seen in both a positive and negative light. From a positive perspective, when faced with overwhelmingly large global issues such as climate change or poverty, political divergence can halter progress. Big global goals, objectives, deadlines and policy coherence are specifically designed to align potentially conflicting interests through common goals to deal with shared issues. By aligning political ideology across the political spectrum collaboration becomes easier and may yield more effective results. However, the narrowing of the ideological political sphere through hegemonic discourse and pressures can also be seen in a negative light. It can be seen as a threat to democracy as the political parties are not acting independently, but rather are forced to align with certain ideologies such as the neoliberal ideologies associated with the SDGs. Diverging political ideologies are also drivers for discussion and innovation as it is easier to leave goals unquestioned and fail to properly scrutinize political goals if everyone agrees. In

the case of the SDGs, because it is a globally agreed upon agenda, the ideological elements that form the foundation of the goals may go unquestioned. One can say that there is a general agreeance on the aim of sustainability, and most of the political parties may be tackling the goal of sustainability through a neoliberal approach as that is the way the SDGs were originally formulated, but are the parties following this ideology purposefully or inadvertently? The better question is whether the neoliberal approach actually is the most effective way to approach a sustainable future? From the critique from the Red Party, as well as the scholarly debate on the oxymoron of growth paired with sustainability, there are certainly antagonistic forces at play between neoliberalist thinking around progress and expansion and sustainability. In this way, the hegemonic pressures towards neoliberal thinking may be acting to shut down the discussion of other potentially more effective methods and ideological approaches for achieving sustainability. The discourse can be perceived as being somewhat fixed in place to the Brundtland definition of sustainable development from the 80s, thus not allowing for new ideological inputs or alternative perspectives and approaches.

Going over to the implications for the political party/voter relationship, it again becomes an issue of democratic process. Democracy is generally identified as consisting of free and open election systems (Allern, 2010). The free and open part suggests that the voters are free to align themselves with the political parties that best represent their own political ideology and interests. But if the hegemonic pressures have the ability to inadvertently shift political party ideology and approach, and if these shifts in ideology or these pressures are not visible or communicated to the voters the democratic process can also become compromised. If a party, for instance, claims to follow a social-democratic ideology and approach to sustainability, but follow through with a neoliberal ideology and approach to sustainability there is a disconnect between what is promised and what is actually done. An argument against this perspective is that even if it is not explicitly stated outright, whatever the hegemonic pressures are they will be visible through the discourse and the explicitness should therefore not matter to a rational and attentive voter. The issue is therefore complex, but the bottom line is that hegemonic ideological pressures may vary in visibility and explicitness and can therefore work to muddle the line between where the voter believes the party stands as opposed to where they actually stand.

9: Analysis V – Responsibility for the Sustainable Development Goals

After the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals there has been a frequent mention of the goals in the party platforms. In total, the SDGs are mentioned 36 times in the political party platforms for the 2021-2025 parliamentary term, by all parties except the Progress Party. Norway committed itself to working on the SDGs from 2015-2030, but what do the political parties have to say about this? Who do the political parties believe should take responsibility for following-through on the SDGs, and what does this follow-through look like?

For this part of the analysis there are two secondary research questions that will be explored in addition to the main research question. The first secondary research question is: *How do the parties relate to the Sustainable Development Goals?* The second secondary research question for this section is: *What do the political parties see as their role/responsibility in achieving sustainability?* In addition to this, the primary research question in relation to the specific theme of 'responsibility for the SDGs' will be; how do the political parties understand who is responsible for following through with the SDGs, and what are the implications of this understanding of the responsibility for the SDGs for politics as a whole.

This section of the analysis is divided into two parts. Part 9.1. is details the theme 'responsibility for the SDGs'. The second part, Part 9.2. then considers the two secondary research questions that relate to the topic of responsibility and SDGs.

9.1. The 'responsibility for SDGs' theme

The theme 'responsibility for SDGs' is one of the themes identified in the thematic analysis of sustainability in the political party platforms. The theme consists of four sub-themes which will be detailed next.

Figure 6

The theme 'responsibility for SDGs'.
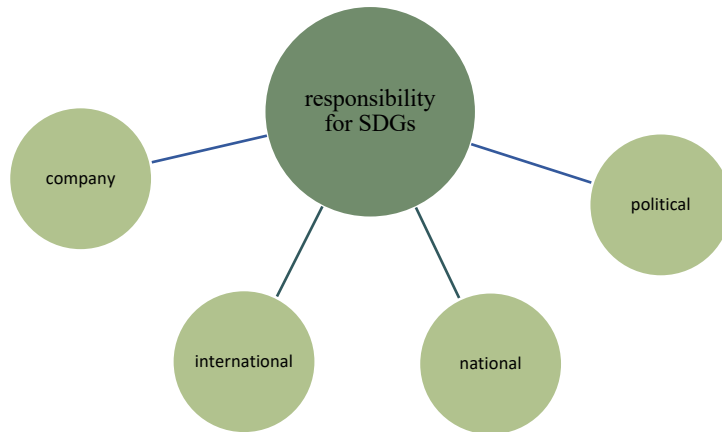
Company responsibility

In the sub-theme 'company' the political parties are expressing concerns for how both public and private companies should, or can, interact with the SDGs. There is a big difference here in the public and the private companies. For public companies, the Labor Party and the Conservative Party both have statements that suggests that public companies *must* follow or attempt to follow the SDG. The only party that mentions the SDGs in relationship with private companies is the Conservative Party. In the two statements the party makes they suggest a sustainability label for companies that commit to reporting on the SDGs and making it easy for companies to report on the SDGs if they wish to. There is thus a bit of a different level of commitment asked for by public companies as supposed to private companies.

International responsibility

The next sub-theme is 'international', which is a sub-theme that includes statements referring to the SDGs as global goals or talking about international collaboration in relation to the SDGs. In this sub-theme there are quite a few general statements about the SDGs such as the Christian Democratic party stating that: "The UN's Sustainable Development Goals is the

common plan for sustainable development from 2015 to 2030 for nation-states". These statements share the idea that the SDGs are a shared global political agenda, thus situating Norwegian politics as only one of many contributing forces to the achievement of the SDGs.

The other part of this sub-theme concerns itself with international collaboration in relation to the SDGs. The statements in this part of the sub-theme have a few varying ideas including; seeing the SDGs as an example of international collaboration, stating that Norway must be 'the voice of the SDGs in international contact' or that international collaboration within the framework of the SDGs are necessary for the maintenance of peace. All the statements understand international collaboration as interconnected with the SDGs, and they must co-occur.

There is a clear understanding of an international responsibility connected with the SDGs, it is not a set of goals that any nation can achieve on their own, but must be a part of a larger international collaboration to accomplish.

National responsibility

The sub-theme 'national' concerns itself with the statements that indicate an anticipation of a national commitment to the SDGs. This is the largest sub-theme and includes some tertiary themes; general national commitment, setting the national course, national investments and international aid. The first tertiary theme is general national commitment, which consists of a singular statement where the Center Party states that 'Norway has committed itself to the Sustainable Development Goals' and goes on to detail goal three of the SDGs.

The next tertiary theme is 'setting the national course'. The statements in this category talk about the need for an improvement in the reporting on the SDGs and the creation of a new national action plans on based on the SDGs. Included in this category is the following statement from the Socialist Left Party: "We need to set a course that secures our livelihood from catastrophic climate change and loss of nature, and we need a course that takes the Sustainable Development Goals seriously". The 'we' in the context of this example can be assumed to be the national we.

Next is the tertiary theme 'national investments' which are all statements about how the Government Pension Fund of Norway should be investing in line with the SDGs. For instance, the Green Party states that: "The funds in the Government Pension Fund of Norway must be invested in line with the Sustainable Development Goals and international environmental and climate agreements that Norway has committed itself to". This example illustrates the claim that the Government Pension Fund of Norway must commit to taking some responsibility for reaching the SDGs, as they are an extension of the state, through their investments.

The last tertiary theme here is international aid, similarly to the previous theme, this one is also concerned with investments, but here in the form of aid. A part of the SDGs is to redistribute wealth from developed countries to developing countries, and the statements are therefore statements that call for action on the national commitment to the SDGs, particularly as a financial contribution to developing nations. The Center Party, for instance, suggests that "Norway should contribute at least 1% of GDP to development aid" and continues to state that SDGs should be central targets for the upcoming parliamentary term.

Political responsibility

The last sub-theme in this theme is 'political,' which includes all statements about the political commitment and responsibility associated with the SDGs. It is not necessarily the case that all the political parties define their role in achieving the SDGs directly. By how frequently the parties state that they are working towards sustainability, or sustainable development, it is clear that the parties align themselves and their politics with the aims of the SDGs, but this sub-theme concerns itself with the direct mention of the political party role in achieving the SDGs. Only three parties directly state that they, as a party, are working directly with the accomplishment of the SDGs in their political party platforms; the Labor Party, the Christian Democratic Party and the Conservative Party. The Labor Party has two separate statements about their level of commitment to the SDGs, they state that they "want to build on the UN Sustainable Development Goals and consider social, economic, geographical and environmental sustainability in all their decisions", they also state that their developmental politics follows the SDGs. The Conservative Party states that they want to "follow up on the UN Sustainable Development Goals and develop a national action plan with national indicators for targets". The Christian Democratic Party has a long list of statements about

their commitment to the SDGs expressing that they "want to develop politics that aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goals" and they want their developmental policies and marine policies to align with the goals.

The one statement that is important to look more closely at, however, has a more general message from the Christian Democratic Party:

> "The UN Sustainable Development Goals is the world's shared plan to eradicate poverty, fight differences and stop climate change by 2030. All Norwegian politics must have a unified voice so that measures taken in different political fields all pull in the same direction, and support the fight against poverty, social development and sustainability as well as the Sustainable Development Goals' ambition of "leaving no one behind".

This passionate statement pushes responsibility for the achievement of the SDGs in the hands of the political parties. In the statement, the party claims that a cross-party political coalition of all the parties is necessary for the politics as a whole to "pull in the same direction" and in order to achieve the SDGs.

9.2. Whose job is it anyway?

From the theme 'responsibility for the SDGs' what is very clear is that the global, national and local geographical division of responsibility is strong in the political parties. Stumpf et al. states that: "The global scale is probably a common feature of all sustainability conceptions" (2015, p. 7444). This core characteristics of sustainability, the geographic span of the concept, is also found in the national SDG plan, and is clearly a very established conceptual framework in the discourse.

From the 'commitment to the SDGs' theme it is also possible to conclude that there is no easy answer to whose job it is to ensure the achievement of the SDGs. However, what is made abundantly clear in the theme, is that all the actors do believe that it is important to ask who and in what ways the international community, the nation, political actors and even companies can and should be held accountable for their piece of the puzzle. Thus, to answer the question of how the political parties relate to the SDGs; Firstly, one party (the Progress

Party) does not mention it. The other parties collectively believe that the state at least has some form of responsibility whether internationally or nationally to follow the SDGs and the parties also express a political alignment with the goals. Then there are a few parties that specifically acknowledge that the political parties themselves also have some responsibility in following through with the SDGs. From the political parties' statements there is no question as to whether or not the SDGs should be followed, in fact, it goes without saying that the SDGs *must* be followed according to the party statements. The question of accountability and responsibility, however, is more up for debate. Waas et al. states that "global responsibility refers to the need for cooperation worldwide and from the local level to the global level in a spirit of "shared but differentiated responsibility" in tackling sustainability issues" (2011, 1646). This statement illustrates the sentiment shared by the political parties, that sustainability is a shared mission, and that even though there is a sense of responsibility for everyone, for political parties, governments and even companies, there are certain actors that appear to hold a greater level of responsibility.

Then we go over to the question of what the political parties see as their role and responsibility in achieving sustainability. This question does not only apply to the SDGs, but in this part of the discussion let us consider the case of the SDGs specifically. From the statements in the theme, some parties do believe that it is their responsibility to fully align their individual party politics with the SDGs. In fact, as much as one third of the parties express such a statement. Now, what is common for all the eight parties that mention the SDGs, they all use their political platform to suggest what Norway as a state must do to follow the SDGs, whether this is what the state should invest in, or how the state should act either nationally or internationally. What this suggests, is that the parties collectively believe that Norway should and must follow the guidelines of the SDGs. Additionally, the parties position themselves as a monitoring mechanism whose purpose it is to make sure that the state is performing in line with the SDGs. The consequence on politics as a whole then is that the presence of SDGs or other long-term targets set by the state is in this case that the political parties appear to expend resources on keeping the government to hit the targets that are set. Since political parties in large parts set the political agenda, for a government to keep up with international agreements and future targets the political sphere must also then act as a monitoring mechanism to check up on progress and developments to meet these targets.

10. Concluding remarks

The concluding remarks for the thesis will not just follow a traditional conclusion, but rather draw together the five sections of analysis into a coherent analysis and answer of research questions before the conclusions are drawn.

The section will be structured around the research questions, starting with an answer to each of the three secondary research questions followed by the first part of the primary research question concerned with how the political parties understand and use sustainability. After this, the second part of the primary research question will be addressed as a three-part discussion before the final part of the section, the conclusion.

How do the parties relate to the Sustainable Development Goals?

To start the conclusionary section of the thesis, the first secondary research question to be addressed is concerned with how the political parties of Norway relate to the SDGs. The SDGs are the globally agreed upon framework for policy at local, national and international levels (Haustein & Tomalin, 2021, p. 296). The Norwegian government, along with most global nations has committed to the SDGs and with it, the 2030 Agenda. From the thesis it is clear that there is a general alignment with the SDGs by the political parties. Some parties, more specifically one third of the Norwegian parties, also express in their party platforms that they believe it is their duty as a political party with agenda setting power to do politics that fully align with the SDGs. There is one collective sentiment, however, among the political parties, that the political parties play a part in monitoring the state's mission to reach their 2030 targets. Statements from the party platforms suggest that the parties position themselves as a monitoring mechanism that controls that the state is working towards their objectives, whether this is with regards to the state's investments or how the state acts nationally and internationally. These global target date of 2030 exists outside of the current 4-year political cycle, lessening the urgency for action by the parties specifically in this particular election term, but making statements of what the state should be striving for in the unspecified future or to accomplish their 2030 deadline a popular approach.

It is also important to restate that there does not appear to be a strict difference between when the parties use the words sustainability, sustainable development and "sustainable goals"

(SDGs), these terms are rather often used interchangeably. How the political parties relate to the SDGs can therefore not be directly separated from how the parties relate to the concept of sustainability as a whole, as they also make no difference to separate the meaning in the platforms. The political parties align themselves with the values of the SDGs, but what they outwardly express to be aligning with is goals that work for sustainability, not necessarily the SDG framework. The parties do collectively make

What do the political parties see as their role/responsibility in achieving sustainability?

There is a general consensus among the political parties of sustainability as a desirable objective. The parties are quick to propose strategies and political objectives that will lead to a sustainable future, and sustainability is associated with a strong normative value frequently paired with adjectives such as good, ethical and environmentally conscious. In terms of what the parties role or responsibility in achieving sustainability, it does not appear that the parties collectively express that sustainability necessarily is a target that they take responsibility for reaching, as much as it seems as if it is a mandatory and inevitable objective for all the parties to aim for. Only one third of the parties state a specific personal party responsibility for striving for the SDGs, but this is only a part of sustainability as a whole. Still, all the parties make statements that indicate that sustainability is the ultimate objective. From the theory of the empty signifier, the thesis argues that the conceptual understanding of the sustainable future renders it the *sole* desirable objective for the political parties. The sustainability discourse, then, is inescapable for the parties. This leaves the answer to the secondary question that the parties may not see sustainability as an objective that they have a role or responsibility in reaching, but rather as an inevitable and ultimate political objective, an inescapable utopian future-vision that all the parties are collectively striving for.

What is currently not sustainable according to the political parties?

The political parties in Norway do not use the term unsustainable or not-sustainable frequently in their political platforms. But what is not sustainable can be defined as what is antagonistic to what sustainability is. In understanding sustainability as an empty signifier, Brown states that "the conditions for sustainability as empty signifier are to be found in multiple experiences of our individual and collective futures being threatened and denied" (2016, p. 123). From this statement, the conditions of sustainability is that is destructive to

sustainability, so that which threatens the existence of the future. In this way, then, the condition of sustainability is anything that is not sustainable, so unsustainability is directly linked to the threat of a sustainable future. In this way, what the political parties understand as unsustainable is no longer an important question in this context, because just like sustainability there are infinite potential answers. The more important question is how unsustainability is used by the parties, which will be addressed next.

How do the parties understand and use sustainability?

Answering the question of how the political parties in Norway understand and use sustainability in their political platforms is a natural continuation of the previous parts of this section. Sustainability can be understood as an empty signifier, and the discourse created by the empty signifier is one in which the political parties perceive of the sustainable future as the only future-vision. Antagonistically, unsustainability is expressed as that which stands in the way of this sustainable future. The two concepts are defined in terms of each other and are therefore necessarily linked. In the platforms, sustainability is also always understood as normatively positive, and associated with a wide range of other positive attributes like policies that are sustainable but also ethical, new-thinking and future-oriented. The concept is understood as connected with the future, in some cases with the deadline for the 2030 agenda, but mostly with an unspecified future dimension. All but one of the political parties also use the concept of sustainability in association with neoliberal or market-oriented language of growth and progress. This language of progress comes out of the hegemonic fixity of sustainability to the ideological foundation of the Brundtland definition of sustainable development. The remnants of the neoliberal ideology of the 80s is still going strong, and the concept of sustainability as understood and used by the Norwegian political parties cannot be completely separated from this ideology, especially as the 2030 Agenda presupposes an alignment with the Brundtland report.

The concept of sustainability is used evenly throughout the political party platforms by the parties and cannot be limited to a specific set of political issues or political fields. When it comes to how the political parties use the concept, the answer is no less complicated. In the political party platforms, sustainability is expressed as a goal and objective, as a quality that comes with a goal or objective, as a means to an end or as a representation of what the future inevitably will be or should be. The concept, therefore, is flexible and can serve different

syntactical functions when used. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the use of sustainability is always positive, and therefore acts as a self-justifying concept. This means that if sustainability is exclusively something positive, and is both syntactically and semantically flexible, it can be sprinkled on top of a party platform to add positive weight and create a sense of justification for political actions without necessarily making significant changes to the political message. An opposite use is found for unsustainability, where by calling out a current political direction or political structure as unsustainable, the fear of the unsustainable future acts to subvert competing party's politics by negatively weighing down what the actor is calling out as unsustainable. Because of the power of sustainability and the fear of the unsustainable, calling something out as unsustainable without any other justification will in many cases be enough to create fear due to the weight of the concept. The implications of this effect will be discussed further in the next parts of the conclusion.

Implications of the understanding and use of sustainability

The second part of the primary research question concerns itself with what the implications are for how the political parties use and understand sustainability on national politics as a whole and on the party/voter relationship. This part of the question can be answered from many angles, but in this conclusionary section of the thesis, it will be approached as a three-part discussion.

Not just a buzzword

From the previous paragraph on how sustainability holds a blind positive weight that can be placed on political initiatives without much further justification, it is important to question the implications of this weight on politics. Is sustainability merely just a buzzword, a trending word that can be sprinkled haphazardly on top of a political platform to add positive flavoring to an otherwise unchanged political message? It is frequently expressed in literature that over time the concept of sustainability has been watered down, and in using the concept parties are "window dressing unsustainable "business as usual" activities" (Waas et al., 2011, p. 1638). The implication here is that the concept of sustainability in politics is losing meaning over time, and that in use the concept simply acts as a positive filter to make a political party's politics appear to fit into the globally agreed upon framework of progress and development. However, this thesis argues that this viewpoint trivializes the complexity and dismisses the

political power that sustainability holds as a concept. The concept of sustainability is constructed in such a way that it is almost impossible to argue against, which is precisely why it is easy to dismiss its influencing power and turn a blind eye to the consequences of its use. Dismissing sustainability due to its frequent and scattered use and not critically reflecting on its complicated role in political discourse construction and maintenance means blindly following and not questioning the hegemonic forces that are shaping the global method by which we approach the biggest challenges on this planet. It is therefore not enough to say that sustainability has become so frequently used that it has lost its meaning, but rather we must ask what it means that sustainability still appears to encompass everything in politics.

An airtight political strategy

What are the implications of the understanding and use of sustainability by the political parties for the development of their politics and for the party/voter relationship? Let us first here consider why the political parties are using the concept. From the discussion of how sustainability is used and understood, it is clear that sustainability is an easy concept to use as it carries positive meaning and can be used in a wide variety of ways to add value to the political statements. Already from this description it is possible to see that it would be foolish of a party not to use this concept in their politics. If by simply using the word sustainability whenever possible means adding positive value to the platform, then this is sound logic for why the parties do good in using the concept when relevant.

But adding positive value is not the only way sustainability may serve a political party in their platforms. As seen in the analysis of how the normative orientation of sustainability may have implications for politics as a whole, the sustainability narrative can act to override non-hegemonic ideologies and narratives that do not specifically promise sustainability. Sustainability can aid in mobilizing across political parties and political fields, setting differences aside with the promise of collaboration and policy coherence. In this way, the concept can also work to disengage discussion and critical thinking as sustainability is generally seen as a common goal, if something is done in the name of sustainability it must also therefore by extension serve this shared vision. Because of the flexible and expansive meaning of sustainability political parties can easily mold it to fit into their political framework. In frequent use the concept also helps to muddle the politics, serving as an additional layer of meaning on top of the politics that makes it harder to critique and question.

Sustainability here becomes a political tool that builds up a party's political platform, making it more trustworthy, harder to critique and more diffuse. Unsustainability is similarly a tool, but as unsustainability acts on the fear of the potential destruction of the sustainable future it serves a slightly different function. Instead of building up politics, by calling something out as unsustainable, a party is effectively justifying a change in political direction or political narrative based solely on the basis that something currently is or has the potential to become unsustainable. It can be a tool to undermine political opponents, to open up a new political narrative on an issue in your party's favor or shift a conversation in your desired direction. Seen from this perspective, one implication of the understanding and use of sustainability in politics is that is can act as a powerful political tool to change and steer the political narrative, and that the way the concept is constructed means that political parties not only can use this tool, but must use this tool in current politics to be competitive. Using sustainability discourse is not an optional tool for the political parties, the usage is rather predetermined through how sustainability as an empty signifier functions, where the sustainable future has become the *only* perceivable future.

Sustainability and unsustainability as a political tool does not only have implications for how politics are conducted, but also on the relationship between the political parties and the voter. The promises made by the political parties in political platforms and the upholding of these promises are an integral part of the democratic process. The multi-party political system of Norway is built on the promise of political parties acting independently from one another, and communicating clear intentions to the voters about the political ideology of each party so that the voter stands free to exercise their democratic right to align with whatever party fits them best. How does sustainability fit into this framework of the democratic process? Sustainability has the ability to muddle political messages, creating a diffuse layer of meaning that lessens the clarity of the message. In itself, this can increase the cost of participation by the voter, as the political message is obscured by vague wording and can cause a misinterpretation by the voters. One can also picture the muddling effect to be purposefully used by political parties to hide unpopular opinions and perspectives behind a sustainability lens to catch a wider net of voters. As sustainability also has a mobilizing effect, this can cause voters to blindly agree and misalign with parties that do not necessarily represent their own political ideology. Sustainability can also act to disengage voters in critical reflection and discussion about the proposed policies, either because of a blind faith in sustainability, or as a result of an anxious logical shut down in the fear of what a potentially unsustainable future may look like. In

summary, the way sustainability is understood and used by political parties may in fact hinder a clear democratic process as it muddles political intentions, can cause a disengagement with the political messages that are being expressed and potentially misalign voters to a point where they vote for parties that do not represent them.

Sustainability must then be understood as a potentially potent tool that has the capability of interfering with both the production of politics and the democratic process by way of the party/voter relationship. All the political parties use sustainability discourse in their political platforms for the 2021-2025 parliamentary term and align themselves at least partially with the concept of sustainability. An exact definition of sustainability from the perspective of the parties is not in sight, but the parties still appear to be striving for the very same perception of the *sustainable future.* If the end goal is perceptively identical for the different political parties, do the parties differ in their perception of the method by which they intend to approach these goals? The next part of the discussion will address the answer this question by detailing the ideological foundations for the sustainability concept.

The ideological framework of sustainability

As a final part of the analysis in the thesis, we again look to the Brundtland report and the original construction of sustainable development. Previous research argues that sustainable development was created as a way to engulf politically antagonistic environmental pressures by restructuring sustainability into an empty signifier, expanding the discourse of sustainability to include the newly constructed sustainable development (Haustein & Tomalin, 2021, p. 300). The hegemonic pressures that were threatened by the environmentalists consisted of the global institutions believing in economic growth and development as the most promising solution to the social and economic problems facing the human population. Through establishing sustainability as an empty signifier and incorporating the environmental issues argued by environmentalists, the conflicts between issues such as continuous growth and limited resources were resolved as the neoliberal ideology seeped into the discourse. Following the neoliberal ideology, the simple answer to conflicts of growth and resources were found in the promise and belief "in technological innovation, market instruments and managerial perfection" as the resolve to all problems, including the problem of finite resources (Blühdorn & Welsh, 2007, p. 186). It is frequently argued that little improvement has actually come out of this ideological framework, the progress and market-based solutions

to the global issues that have been the dominant since the 80s (Kambites, 2014, p. 336). The neoliberal foundation of sustainability discourse can be argued to have narrowed the conversation of how the sustainable future may be achieved into a singular ideological framework that promotes continuous economic growth and development as the only solution to all global issues. All but one of the political party platforms for the 2021-2025 parliamentary term in Norway uses language frequently associated with neoliberalist thinking concurrent with the word sustainability, but is this singular track towards sustainability going to be effective enough? Will the neoliberal ideology that most of the political parties in Norway at least partially align with actually lead to enough collective mobilization and advancements in the path to sustainability? Or does this ideology actually prevent us from seeing other potential paths to a sustainable end, or to see a reimagination of what that sustainable future looks like? Does the Red Party have a point in stating, like many researchers also have stated before, that to solve the problems of the world we must first overthrow the economic system that forms the foundation of the problems we are seeing today?

Conclusion

Understanding sustainability as an empty signifier in relation to how the concept is used in the political sphere in Norway is a fruitful lens that allows for a deep dive into the sustainability discourse used by the political parties. The concept, which is found all throughout the 2021-2025 party platforms unites the political parties in a shared mission of reaching the utopian *sustainable future*. The parties find themselves aligned with the national goal of meeting the 2030 Agenda targets, but sustainability is not limited to these global deadlines. In the platforms, sustainability acts as a potent political tool for garnering voters - and the mastering of the discourse of sustainability can yield a great political advantage in overriding and molding political narratives. In the 2021-2025 political party platforms, all the parties use sustainability discourse, and all but one also show traces of hegemonic fixity in their interpretation of sustainability with the neoliberalist ideology that laid the foundation for the Brundtland definition of sustainable development. The traces of the neoliberal discourse in the sustainability discourse a good three decades after the Brundtland report suggests that the concept has a strong hegemonic fixity still persistent in politics today. Three decades of political sustainability steering the global discussion in a neoliberal direction. For the political parties in Norway, the sustainable future has become a near synonym with the *only desirable*

future, it is a singular future-vision shaped and limited through a neoliberal framework. Seeing that the political parties in Norway are using the neoliberal and hegemonic discourse of sustainability, the thesis concludes by asking whether we, as nation, but also globally, are following the best framework for solving global issues? Is the current construction of the sustainable future preventing us from seeing a better alternative collective approach to global issues, and thus, must the empty signifier of sustainability with the hegemonic fixity that comes with it be deconstructed in order for us to collectively find solutions to the global issues we are faced with?

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