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# Behavioral determinants of proclaimed support for environment protection policies

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## ABSTRACT

Using a representative survey of German university students, we confirm that proclaimed support for environment protection policies depends on socio-cultural factors and political ideology. Unlike most related studies for other countries, we find that the environmental policy stance of German partisans does not follow the left-right cleavage. Only about 25% of the social-democratic partisans wholeheartedly support environment protection policies, whereas 50% of the green partisans, who, in Germany, also belong to the political left, do so; and when controlling for socio-cultural influences, social-democratic partisans become undistinguishable from Christian-conservative and market-oriented partisans. Focusing on behavioral influences, we find that some of the respondents' psychological traits are not filtered through their political ideology but directly influence their proclaimed attitudes towards environment protection policies. We identify as important behavioral determinants the locus of control and psychological traits that capture the respondents' susceptibility to making use of expressive rhetoric.

## 1. Introduction

The economic literature on environmental policy attitudes has traditionally focused on aggregate socio-economic determinants. In this study we shift the perspective from the aggregate to the individual level and, even more, to the mindset of the individual. We are in particular interested in whether attitudes towards environmental protection policies depend mainly on ideas, as famously claimed by Keynes,<sup>1</sup> or rather on economic interest and social imprinting, as maintained by traditional political economists and political sociologists.

To investigate the determinants of expressed political support for environment protection policies, we use a comprehensive survey of German students and explore in a first step how the students' environmental attitudes depend on their political ideology. Since political ideologies, apart from consisting of rather specific predefined bundles of abstract ideas, also reflect economic interests and social background, the traditional approach of regressing specific policy attitudes on an individual's political ideology and his or her socio-economic characteristics is a rather weak strategy for identifying the influence of "ideas and identity".

In an attempt to make some progress in identifying deep-set behavioral influences on political rhetoric, we supplement the set of ideology variables by including psychological traits as determinants of individual support for environmental protection policies. The

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<sup>1</sup> J. M. Keynes, *The general theory of employment, interest and money* (1936), chapter 24, part V: "The power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas."

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rationale for this identification strategy is that psychological traits strongly affect a person's identity and ideas but capture characteristics that are more persistent, more deeply rooted, and more versatile in describing a person's mindset than his or her attachment to some political ideology or party.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, we find that psychological traits contribute to explaining the respondents' proclaimed environmental attitudes even when controlling for the respondents' political ideologies and socio-economic characteristics. This result is perfectly in line with Aaron Wildavsky's (1987) claim that mass political opinions derive from cultural predispositions that encompass a much wider range of worldviews than abstract political ideologies. Recent empirical evidence indeed strongly supports the insights provided by cultural cognition theory<sup>3</sup>: cultural alignment influences individuals' attitudes towards various policy issues much more strongly than their alliance with political parties or ideologies.<sup>4</sup>

Our finding thus lends support to the hypothesis that the voters' identities and ideas are an independent determinant of their proclaimed support for specific political issues. Inasmuch as proclaimed voter support has political consequences, the voters' world of ideas therefore contributes to the shaping of actual policies.<sup>5</sup>

### 1.1. The traditional social science literature

Economic, demographic, and, of late, also political factors are the main macro determinants that economists have used to explain cross-country differences in environmental degradation and in the stringency of environmental protection measures (Gassebner et al., 2011). Arguably, the most prominent economic factors relate to industrial structure, economic development, and openness. Declining industrial employment translates, for example, into lower pollution levels and stricter environmental standards. The possibly non-linear effect of income on pollution and the effect of global economic integration have remained more ambiguous.<sup>6</sup> The demographic factors that have been shown to be related to the degradation of the environment include population size, urbanization, and age distribution (Jiang and Hardee, 2011).

Politics influences the environment, first, via the political regime and, second, via the political process. Countries with autocratic regimes have been shown to suffer more from pollution than countries with democratic governments (Li and Reuveny, 2006), and parliamentary democracies more than presidential democracies (Bernauer and Koubi, 2009). Barrett and Graddy (2000) find some evidence that political and civil liberties have a positive influence on environmental quality. The prevailing political culture also plays a role. Systemic corruption has a negative effect on the stringency of environmental regulation and so does political instability, at least for low levels of corruption (Fredriksson and Svensson, 2003).

When considering the democratic political process, political parties and interest groups come to the fore. Political parties clearly take different environmental policy stances, which, in some cases, even diverge over extended periods (Shipan and Lowry, 2001; McCright and Dunlap, 2011). Various studies find green and left party power in parliament or government to be associated with lower pollution levels or a larger number of enacted environmental regulations (Neumayer, 2003; Bernauer and Koubi, 2009; Knill et al., 2010; Garmann, 2014; Wen et al., 2016). Gassebner et al. (2011) arrive, however, at the conclusion that among the variables capturing political influences, only the political regime robustly affects the environment.

The political economy approach (Buchanan and Tullock, 1975) stimulated models portraying the influence of environmental interest groups (Hillman and Ursprung, 1992, 1994; Aidt, 1998; Polk and Schmutzler, 2005; Fredriksson et al., 2005). The early empirical literature investigated the influence of environmental lobbying on individual pieces of legislation. Studies of the second generation extend the analysis to actual environmental quality (Binder and Neumayer, 2005; Fredriksson et al., 2005; Bernauer et al., 2013). The general finding is that environmental lobby groups tend to have a positive effect on environmental quality, the stringency of environmental regulation, and on the ratification of international environmental agreements. Bernauer and Koubi (2009), finally, find that labor union strength contributes to lower environmental quality.

This traditional macro view represents the backdrop of our study that follows a strand of literature that explores the policy attitudes of survey respondents. The economic literature on individual attitudes towards international trade and immigration policies (O'Rourke and Sinnott, 2006) is already quite sizable. As compared to this literature, mainly political scientists and sociologists pioneered the research on individual environmental concerns and attitudes towards environment protection policies.

The early survey-based sociological literature as summarized by van Liere and Dunlap (1980) emerged in the wake of the environmental movement in the 1970s. This early literature has already identified and scrutinized most factors that standard theories offer to explain *public concern* with environmental problems. The analyzed factors include gender, age, education, exposure to pollution, urban residence, class, religious beliefs, and, notably, political ideology and attachment to political parties. The subsequent literature has resumed this research agenda but profited from an increased interest by political scientists and economists, larger data sets, and better statistical methods (Kellstedt et al., 2008; Vera-Toscano et al., 2008; Kvaløy et al., 2012; Jorgenson and Givens, 2014; Ziegler, 2015). Using similar factors, Konisky et al. (2008) find that environmental *concerns* translate into environmental policy *attitudes*.

An alternative way of identifying the determinants of *individual* support for environmental protection policies is to use voting results

<sup>2</sup> The literature that explores how personality traits influence political attitudes and ideologies is well developed. Gerber et al. (2010) show, for example, that the Big Five personality traits affect ideology as well as economic and social policy attitudes (see also Gerber et al., 2011). Galais and Blais (2016) explicitly address the causality issue and find that a sense of duty has a significant causal effect on voter turnout.

<sup>3</sup> Wildavsky's work greatly influenced what is today known as cultural cognition theory. For an overview of cultural cognition theory, see Kahan and Braman (2006) and Kahan et al. (2011).

<sup>4</sup> For the relative contribution of cultural indicators and political orientation to the formation of specific policy attitudes, see Gastil et al. (2011).

<sup>5</sup> For surveys on how government ideology influences policies, see Potrafke (2017, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> For a survey of the early literature on International Environmental Economics, see Schulze and Ursprung (2001).

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