



## Analysis

# What are political leaders' environmental intentions? The impact of social identification processes and macro-economic conditions

Anna Maria Biscotti<sup>a,\*</sup>, Eugenio D'Amico<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Economics, University of Foggia, Via Caggese 1, 71121 Foggia, Italy

<sup>b</sup> Department of Political Science, University of Roma Tre, Via G. Chiabrera 199, 00145 Rome, Italy



## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 14 December 2015

Received in revised form 15 April 2016

Accepted 2 June 2016

Available online 22 June 2016

## Keywords:

Environment

Political actors

Social identification processes

Macro-economic factors

Financial crisis

## ABSTRACT

Evidence of continued environmental degradation has led to a questioning of the traditional vision of unlimited economic growth in favour of sustainable development. Although several explicit environmental strategies were designed at the supranational level, the pursuit of environmental sustainability remains an aim driven by political concerns at the country level. This study aims to investigate the role of both “internal” (cognitive and motivational factors) and “external” (social forces and macro-economic conditions) contexts in influencing the propensity of political leaders regarding environmental matters. The findings indicate that cognitive and motivational factors tend to shape the environmental intentions of political leaders, whereas the “external” context does not have a significant impact. Our results suggest that the political leaders' propensity for addressing environmental matters is largely affected by the desire of leaders to establish or confirm an individual *status* (through political processes) or to conform to group norms. However, younger political leaders demonstrate a higher environmental propensity than do older leaders.

© 2016 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Attention to environmental matters has increased considerably in the last twenty years, especially in the most industrialized countries. Evidence of continued environmental degradation has led to a questioning of the traditional vision of unlimited economic growth in favour of sustainable development (Shi, 2003, 2004; York et al., 2003; Scrieciu, 2007). However, the European Union (EU), which plays a key role in promoting sustainable development at the member state level (and internationally), has recently noted that “much of our environment is protected by a body of European legislation. But the implementation of these policies remains problematic” (EU, 2014: 4). Therefore, although several explicit environmental strategies were designed at the supranational level, the pursuit of environmental sustainability is still driven by political concerns at the country level (Levine et al., 2015; Bradshaw et al., 2010). Within the international literature that investigates environmental awareness, several empirical studies have focused on the determinants of citizens' environmental attitudes (e.g., Torgler and Garcia-Valinas, 2007; Torgler et al., 2008). However, there is a lack of papers addressing the factors affecting environmental intentions of political leaders, even though they are instrumental players in the promotion or opposition of environmental policies. The purpose of the present study is to fill the gap in the existing literature. As stated by

Levine et al. (2015), human goals and behaviours are affected by the surrounding context, both “internal” (cognitive and motivational factors) and “external” (socio-economic context). The aim of this paper is to investigate, through a quantitative analysis, the role of both “internal” and “external” contexts in influencing the propensity of political leaders for addressing environmental issues.

To measure the level of environmental propensity of political leaders, we conduct a content analysis on the political leaders' narrative discourses addressing environmental topics within political programs<sup>1</sup> for the national elections of 2006, 2008 and 2013. Discourses are important in politics because they reflect the politicians' intentions regarding specific topics (Krippendorff, 1989; Dryzek, 1997; Schmidt, 2008). The analysis is carried out with reference to Italy. Italy is one of the most industrialized countries in the EU, second only to Germany. Unlike Germany, however, Italy has been characterized by greater uncertainty following the global financial crisis. Italy is a suitable setting for our study because it enables us to explore whether and to what extent the factors relating to the surrounding context (both internal and external) tend to influence the environmental intentions of political leaders within an industrialized country and to ascertain the macro-economic effects of a severe economic crisis. In addition, conducting a national study allows the analysis to move from a general perspective of

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [annamaria.biscotti@unifg.it](mailto:annamaria.biscotti@unifg.it) (A.M. Biscotti).

<sup>1</sup> In electoral programs, the main concerns and intentions of political leaders (and their political parties) are formally disclosed with regard to economic, social and environmental matters.

environmental strategies designed at the EU level to a local perspective (Torgler and Garcia-Valinas, 2007), gaining understanding of political propensity for environmental matters (and related potential determinants) at the country level. The analysis begins in 2006, the year when Italian political leaders (and relating coalitions) began to be obliged to register their programs at the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

The results indicate that cognitive and motivational factors (“internal” context) have a strong impact in affecting the political leaders’ propensity for addressing environmental matters, whereas macro-economic conditions and social forces such as community (“external” factors) appear to not influence this propensity significantly. Moreover, younger political leaders (up to 39 years old) seem to be more prone than older leaders to address environmental matters.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides the theoretical framework and the hypotheses development. Section 3 describes the data and research methodology. The results are presented and discussed in Section 4, and the study’s conclusions are presented in Section 5.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses Development

Different from the neoclassical model of *Homo economicus*, where a human actor is assumed to be a mere self-regarding agent who makes isolated decisions independently of the socio-economic context, studies of human cognition and behavioural economics indicate that human attitudes and behaviours are context-sensitive. Individuals’ concerns and goals are shaped by cognitive and motivational factors (internal context), as well as by the social and economic factors (external context) in which the individuals develop and operate (Tajfel, 1981; Buck, 1985; Haidt, 2001, 2006; Eccles and Wigfield, 2002; Venkatachalam, 2008; Manner and Gowdy, 2010; Levine et al., 2015). Within the ecological economics and policy literature, recent studies argue the need for greater environmental concern by political actors for more effective pro-environmental policies (Venkatachalam, 2008; Manner and Gowdy, 2010). The propensity of political leaders toward environmental issues may primarily depend on their social identification. According to the social identity theory (SIT), a social identity is an individual’s knowledge that he belongs to a social category or group (Tajfel, 1974; Hogg and Abrams, 1988). Through a cognitive process of self-categorization, individuals categorize themselves as members of a group that they perceive to have similar beliefs, values, affective reactions, behavioural norms and other properties that are judged as relevant in the self-categorization process (Hogg et al., 1995). This process produces an accentuation of the perceived differences between the self and out-group members, implying an inter-group social comparison. Owing to the social comparison process, an underlying need for positive distinctiveness (motivational factors) leads individuals toward concerns, goals and behaviours that allow them to positively differentiate their own group when compared to other groups (Wilder, 1986; Turner et al., 1987). Within a political landscape, political leaders identify with groups having similar beliefs, values, concerns and behavioural norms. These groups are organized in the form of political parties with political leaders who share an identity with the members of the group they lead. Motivated by a need to enhance the positive distinctiveness of the group they lead (Hogg and Abrams, 1990; Luhtanen and Crocker, 1992; Abrams and Hogg, 1999), political leaders will commit to improving or emphasizing the relevant properties characterizing their own group. According to McCright and Dunlap (2010, 2011), welfare is the relevant quality characterizing the left-wing parties, and environmentalism may be viewed as an additional political instrument to improve the welfare of future generations. On the contrary, right-wing parties are primarily concerned with profit margins and economic growth, and consider environmental issues to be potential costs or constraints that might impair these priorities. Thus, when accentuating the positive properties of their own group, we expect that political leaders of left-wing parties will tend to manifest more propensities for environmental issues as part of a general vision of harmonious development

through the reconciliation of welfare preservation and economic priorities. In order to demonstrate the crucial role of political ideology (belief and values) as the best predictor of politicians’ environmental intentions, several studies argue and show that left-wing politicians express greater attitude toward environmental issues than their counterparts, especially in developed capitalist countries (O’Connor et al., 2002; Neumayer, 2004; Leiserowitz, 2006; Dietz et al., 2007; Dunlap and McCright, 2008; Leiserowitz et al., 2010; McCright and Dunlap, 2011; Nawrotzki, 2012).

Based on the above arguments, we thus test the following hypothesis:

**H<sub>1</sub>.** *Within a developed capitalist country, political leaders of left-wing political parties tend to manifest a greater propensity than their counterparties toward environmental matters.*

As outlined by Brewer (1991), an individual’s social identification process with a group is the result of a compromise between the conflicting needs for the individual’s uniqueness and their assimilation into a social category. To increase the power and notoriety of similar groups over dissimilar groups, this compromise can also be pursued at the intergroup level through the formation of coalitions or alliances between similar groups. In this sense, Brown (2000a, 2000b) – applying the Brewer’s “Optimal Distinctiveness Theory” (1991) to explain the phenomenon of intergroup attitudes and attraction – states that groups seek to establish positive relationships with other groups “to avoid feeling stigmatised, but simultaneously need to retain enough distinctiveness,” thereby favouring the optimal mix of distinctive and common attributes (Brown, 2000a, pp. 758).

According to Brown’s (2000a, 2000b) arguments within a political landscape, the political leader of a party will be motivated to form alliances with relatively similar groups having some distinctive attributes acknowledged by a part of electors to gain more power and notoriety in terms of electoral consensus (motivational factors). Once the alliance is formed, the leader of a coalition will tend to refashion the political identity opportunistically (Taylor, 1994). Within the Italian political context, over the period examined some political leaders formed alliances with the most popular green parties, i.e., the green parties with an electoral consensus in previous political elections. Based on the aforementioned arguments, it is expected that political leaders of these coalitions will tend to manifest greater environmental intentions.

The following hypothesis is thus proposed and tested:

**H<sub>2</sub>.** *Political leaders of coalitions including popular green parties will show a greater propensity to address environmental issues.*

Based on both the social identity theory and the optimal distinctiveness theory used with our first two hypotheses, the following Fig. 1 highlights the assumed inverse relationship between the self-uniqueness of leaders (self-identity) and the consensus opportunity. As the leaders tend to pursue a compromise between their own self-uniqueness and the assimilation in one or more groups, they will achieve a broader consensus by exploiting the positive distinctiveness of the groups.

Although the propensity toward addressing environmental issues is shaped by an individual’s cognitive and motivational factors (internal context), the influence of the external socio-economic context cannot be excluded (Shi, 2004; Esty and Porter, 2005). As stated by Levine et al. “virtually anything a person perceives or experiences at a given time can have an influence on his or her thinking [...] and, ultimately, on his or her choice of action” (Levine et al., 2015, pp. 29). In particular, the external context may act as a constraint or catalyst for human intentions (Matutinović, 2012). In accordance with community psychologists, social forces such as community contribute to shaping an individual’s socio-environmental propensity and behaviour (Sarason, 1974; Bachrach and Zautra, 1985; Chavis and Newbrough, 1986; Perkins and Taylor, 1996; Prezza and Costantini, 1998). Specifically, if an individual has played an active role in a community he will tend to develop greater sensitivity to the pressing matters of the community.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5048999>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5048999>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)