



Who cares about the environment? An empirical analysis of the evolution of political parties' environmental concern in European countries (1970–2008)



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ABSTRACT

Why do parties offer environmental policies in their political programs? While a number of papers examine the determinants of citizens' pro-environmental behaviour, we know little about the extent to which political parties adjust their platform towards environmentalism. We investigate this process through data provided by the Manifesto Project Dataset (CMP) for 20 European countries over the period 1970–2008. Following the literature on public concern towards environment, we examine economic, environmental and political determinants. Our findings provide evidence that political parties' environmental concern is strongly correlated with their political ideology and with country-level economic conditions.

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1. Introduction

Initially introduced to Europe by the former green parties at the turn of the 1970s, environmental issues are currently widespread among the programmes of political parties. Nevertheless, although a large body of literature exists on the individual determinants of citizen pro-environmental behaviour (Torgler and Garcías-Valiñas 2007; Franzen and Meyer, 2010; Aklin et al., 2013; Ercolano et al., 2014) and green voting (Schumacher, 2014), the reasons that explain political party attitudes towards environmental protection remain mostly uninvestigated. Selected contributions in the literature suggest that environmental concern is linked to political ideology and political competition (Fredriksson et al., 2005; Glaeser, 2014; Garmann, 2014), but to the best of our knowledge, this topic is still missing an in-depth investigation of the importance of environmentalism determinants in party platforms and the simultaneous consideration of politically related (supply-side) determinants and demand-side determinants, such as contextual

elements that potentially trigger citizen concern for the environment.

Taking inspiration from the political science and political economy literature, this paper aims to fill the identified gap and identify the correlates of party concern for the environment, which is a crucial step in studying environmental policy outcomes.

The purpose of this paper is achieved via an empirical analysis that relies on data drawn from different sources. Political party environmentalism is measured using data extracted from the Comparative Manifesto Database (CMD), which is a comprehensive cross-national dataset that investigates the content of party electoral manifestos in a wide set of countries and over time and that offers an explicit measure of the saliency of environment-related topics in these documents (Tavits, 2007; Pickering and Rockey, 2011; Zulianello, 2014). Focus on political party electoral programmes is particularly appropriate because parties are crucial elements in the function of democratic systems. Indeed, although legislators might have incentives to shirk once in office, they cannot easily ignore their electoral promises (Laver and Garry, 2000) because electoral programmes represent benchmarks that citizens bear in mind when assessing the commitment of politicians throughout their terms (Klingemann et al., 1994).

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The CMD and other internationally well-known data sources were used to measure the potential supply-side and demand-side determinants of party concerns for the environment. According to hints offered by the existing literature, political variables such as party ideological orientations and electoral competition are considered among the determinants together with country-level variables that describe national economic conditions, environmental degradation and features of the population.

Our results suggest that political party reliance on environmental issues to win votes is primarily driven by political and economic variables. In particular, right-wing ideology, high political competition and weak national economic conditions crowd out environment-related topics from parties' electoral manifestos.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section two illustrates previous contributions that offer useful insights into the determinants of environmental concern in political parties. Section three presents data used in the empirical analysis, and the methodology is illustrated in section four. Section five displays and discusses the results, and robustness checks are reported in section six. Finally, section seven concludes the paper.

2. Explaining political party concern for the environment: evidence from the literature

Although no specific literature exists that is devoted to a comprehensive analysis of the drivers of saliency of environmental concerns in political party manifestos, hints can be found in existing contributions in the political economy and political science literature.

First, there are reasons to believe that political party environmental concern is linked to political factors. Moving beyond the traditional median voter assumption, which states that all parties have an incentive to converge to the median political platform (Downs, 1957), a set of major contributions to the literature suggests that political platforms significantly differ along the ideological spectrum (Hibbs, 1977; Mueller, 2003) because candidates have strong incentives to promote policies that favour their electoral bases (Alesina, 1988). Although green activists have claimed that the left/right divide does not reflect concerns for environmental issues (Dalton, 2009), recent literature suggests that environmentalism actually varies among parties according to their ideological positions. Dunlap (1975) suggested that pro-environment reforms require increasing government intervention and costly innovative action and therefore are strongly favoured by the left-wing electoral base and conversely are firmly opposed by business and industry. Rohrschneider and Miles (2015) found that in Western Europe, pro-environmental attitudes are correlated with support for leftist parties. In line with this perspective, Garmann (2014) stated that left-wing parties are traditionally more pro-environment than right-wing parties because promotion of environmental quality and prevention of environmental degradation implies government intervention that potentially constrains business activities. Neumayer (2003) finds that the strength of left-wing parties in the legislature is positively correlated with openness towards environmental demands and better pollution control. Neumayer (2004) specifically argued "left-wing political orientation goes hand in hand with the greater willingness of parties to embrace pro-environmental issues in election manifestos and more pro-environmental beliefs" (2004, p.174).

Together with the ideological features of political parties, competition in the political arena might also play a role in explaining the importance of environmentalism in party manifestos. According to Rovny (2012), "in multidimensional competition it may be beneficial for parties to emphasize their positions on their preferred dimensions while blurring their stances on those issue dimensions

that do not figure prominently in their ideological profiles" (p. 274). In other words, in competing for voters, the parties stress those issues that they own (Geys, 2012) and that they prefer to see dominate the electoral competition (Green-Pedersen, 2007). In sum, "selective emphasis' instead of 'direct confrontation', is seen as the most common and the most promising party strategy in electoral competition" (Dolezal et al., 2014; p.59). If one hypothesizes that this strategy is exacerbated when the level of electoral competition is higher, then political competition should be negatively correlated with the saliency of environmentalism in party manifestos. Indeed, although mainstream parties have observed a remarkable growth in the non-ideological preferences of their constituencies (Carter, 2013), environmental concern reveals a significant link with left-wing ideology, as we previously reported, and environmentalism cannot be considered as prominent in their ideological profiles.

Because the content of political party electoral platforms is presumed to be strongly driven by citizen demand, the contextual features that stimulate citizen concern for the environment are also potential drivers of the importance that environment-related issues have in party manifestos. From this perspective, a number of contributions that study the determinants of citizen attitudes towards the environment offer interesting considerations (Torgler and Garcías-Valiñas, 2007; Aklín et al., 2013; Ercolano et al., 2014).

A section of the literature presents evidence that attitudes towards the environment are linked to economic development. This literature is inspired by the Environmental Kuznets Curve (EKC), which suggests an inverted-U-shaped relationship between economic growth and environmental quality deterioration (Grossman and Krueger, 1991; Han and Chatterjee, 1997). Although a number of contributions have empirically challenged the EKC hypothesis (Grimes and Roberts, 1997; Jobert et al., 2011; Jobert and Karanfil, 2012; Harbaugh et al., 2002), it is commonly assumed that once a certain standard of living is reached, citizens focus additional attention on environmental protection (Arrow et al., 1995). In line with this perspective, Franzen (2003), together with Franzen and Meyer (2010), reported empirical evidence that the populations in richer countries are more sensitive to environmental quality, and Inglehart (1990, 1997) finds empirical evidence that people in developed countries are more sensitive to non-materialist values. This observation is consistent with the earlier contribution by Baumol and Oates (1979), claiming that the environment is a "luxury good". According to these contributions, we can expect that the greater the country-level economic wealth, the higher the saliency of environment-related issues in the party electoral manifestos is presumed to be.

Together with economic wealth, macroeconomic conditions are also presumed to play a role in driving citizen concern for the environment. Conroy and Emerson (2014) argue that environment is a "pro-cyclical" good because a low growth rate, sustained inflation and high unemployment reduce population support for government spending on environmental-related policies. This observation reflects the idea that ecological objectives usually compete with the pure economic objectives of voters (Kirchgässner and Schneider, 2003).

Boyce (1994) extends this idea by arguing that greater equality in income distribution reduces social conflict and might favour environmental quality improvements. Magnani (2000) specifically assumes that "a reduction of pollution emissions in high income countries is more likely to be observed if economic growth accompanies improvement in other social indicators, particularly income inequality" (2000, p.442). From this perspective, one might assume that inequality affects the importance that parties attribute to environment-related issues in their political platforms.

Trade openness is another specific feature of national economies that might be important in explaining political party emphasis on environment-related issues in their electoral manifestos. Indeed,

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