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The Green wave

Why Green parties' support is surging across many countries – and what this has to do with right-wing populists

Read this interview in German.

In a recent study, you took a detailed look at the current electoral success of Green partie in 32 countries. Is the "green wave" that we see in some European countries a global phenomenon?

Several advanced democracies are currently undergoing a real "Green surge". Green parties are currently polling at an unprecedented 15-20 per cent in Germany and the Netherlands. Voter surveys ahead of upcoming general elections in Canada, Australia, Finland, Switzerland and Belgium also make for heady reading and suggest that support is either equal to or above record levels.

Taking a wider look, the Global Greens confederation of environmental parties currently boasts of parliamentary representation for members in over 25 countries worldwide. Most recently, in the Dutch provincial elections, the GroenLinks were the big winners, doubling their seat share and becoming the largest party in major urban centres such as Amsterdam and Utrecht. As a collective, the Green party family has come a long way since the birth of the humble New Zealand Values Party at the University of Wellington in 1972.

Are there any exceptions?

The increasing political prominence of the Greens is not distributed equally. While these parties have gradually expanded out from their western-central European heartlands, in some countries – for example, Norway, Spain, and Poland – they remain fundamentally obscure and inconsequential electoral players. The weakness of these parties in eastern Europe is also notable and a major reason why they aren't expected to increase their seat share in the upcoming European Parliament elections.

In this respect, rather ironically, the Greens may be lagging behind the populist right, whose bridge-building attempts at "international nationalism" have been widely commented upon. They may be about to reap results in May due to the strength of "populists" and "nationalists" on both sides of the former Iron Curtain.

What does the picture look like outside of advanced western democracies?

Though it fell outside the remit of our study, one has to acknowledge the reality that Green parties tend to be extremely weak outside of "advanced western democracies". Despite a rich history of third-world grassroots environmentalism such as the anti-logging Chipko movement in India or Kenya's Green Belt movement, Green parties are mainly absent from electoral contests in Africa and Asia. They even lack parliamentary representation in wealthy, post-Fukushima Japan.

An exception to the "no economic development = no major green party" rule of thumb is contemporary Latin America. The Green Party of Mexico has enjoyed parliamentary representation since the late-1990s (though the party is much more conservative than its European counterparts), and a Green candidate gained almost 20 per cent of the vote in Brazil's 2010 presidential election.

Another Green party sits in the legislature in Colombia, and a further one recently won over 100,000 votes in Bolivia. This region's Green parties haven't been studied enough. But I believe that in certain developing economies, environmental devastation in the form of deforestation and water shortages may actually be a real material threat to people's livelihoods. By and large though, Green parties are only really "surging" in the most economically developed democracies of Europe and the Anglosphere.

How do you explain the large variation in Green parties' electoral success? Why do they succeed in places such as Germany and less so in places such as Spain or Norway? What kind of "fertile soil" do Green parties need to flourish?

This puzzle is part of what inspired our recent article in which Professor James Tilley and I undertook a quantitative analysis of over 340 general election results in 32 countries across Europe, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia over the course of 45 years. Our findings highlight a variety of institutional, socioeconomic, and political factors that are systematically associated with higher or lower vote shares for Green parties.

Non-proportional electoral systems are often blamed for the woes of

minor parties in countries. Overall, however, our study found decentralisation – federal institutions, devolution etc. – to be a better predictor of Green party strength than the electoral system. Minor parties find it easier to win seats at the subnational level, possibly due to the smaller size of the electorate and the relative lack of resources committed to these secondary elections by major national parties. These are typically second-order elections which are perceived as less important by voters, and therefore allow for greater chances of minor party success. Consequently, parties like the Greens can build reputations as credible legislators which aids future national election campaigns.

What about socio-economic factors?

In terms of socioeconomic factors, we found that Green parties perform better in countries with high levels of GDP per capita and lower rates of unemployment. We attribute this to the fact that when economic conditions are dire, the salience of the environment and other "green" issues is inevitably reduced. Political attention turns to resolving a country's economic problems. This usually involves discussions about competence and economic management, which established parties with longer histories in government are better placed to benefit from than the Greens, who haven't had government responsibility in many countries.

We also find that Green parties are more likely to be successful in countries highly dependent on nuclear power. Abolishing this type of energy resource has been a near universal cause célèbre for Green parties, and actually existing power plants can serve as a convenient rallying point for Green campaigning. In a way, nuclear power is what higher rates of immigration might be for radical right parties in terms of catalysing support.

What about the political party system? How does political competition influence the success of Green parties?

Green parties do better in countries which lack substantial support for "radical left" parties such as Syriza and Podemos. I would argue that, in general, there's a degree of functional equivalency between certain Green parties and the radical left. Both, after all, are concerned about the excesses of capitalist modes of production. Historically, both have also had something of an anti-establishment appeal.

Furthermore, these parties also tend to appeal to the same sort of people: the young, the urban, the secular, and the highly educated. Therefore, we expect there to be some level of competition between the two. More importantly, however, we find that the positions of

mainstream parties can be very influential.

How so?

Following an earlier paper, we used data from party manifestos to determine how often a country's largest centre-left and centre-right parties mentioned certain 'green issues', and what position they took accordingly. We found that actually Green parties tended to perform better when major parties took an "accommodative", pro-Green stance. Mainstream parties *can* undermine Green parties when they're still young by taking an "accommodative" position on their issues. But once the Green party has survived a few electoral contests, the public become more and more aware and further mentioning of environmental issues reinforces their importance. This benefits the Greens, as they are by then seen as "owners" of environmental issues.

This way, major parties can help the Greens as it gives environmental policy more headlines and credibility when, say, Angela Merkel or Justin Trudeau bring it up, than when Annalena Baerbock or Elizabeth May do the same thing for the hundredth time. Therefore, we would expect Green parties in Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden to actively benefit from major parties talking a lot about the importance of the environment. Fledgling Green parties in Poland or Spain should be a lot more vulnerable to a major party "stealing" the issue for themselves.

Isn't Green parties' success also a consequence of post-materialistic values dominant in certain demographic groups?

Ronald Inglehart's theory of post-materialism is widely-cited in discussions of Green parties' electoral performance. To simplify somewhat, the idea is that voters are concerned first and foremost with material sustenance and physical security. The increasing affluence and existential security of post-war western societies, however, has liberated new generations of voters from the traditional priorities of economic growth and redistribution. As demand for the goals of the "old left" falters, voters begin to look for new outlets to express "higher" goals – some might say "luxury" concerns – such as environmentalism, pacifism, feminism, and other ideals associated with the "new left". Once a group of voters can take the victories of previous generations on basic living standards for granted, their minds focus on new "quality-of-life" and "self-expression"-based agendas.

Can you give some examples?

Firstly, the countries where the Greens made their initial breakthrough were almost all highly economically developed societies

with relatively strong welfare states: Germany, Austria, Belgium, Switzerland. Poorer countries, and those with less robust social safety nets, tended not to have major Green parties until much later – if at all. In our article, we show that GDP per capita and lower unemployment levels are associated with higher rates of Green party voting. This is probably one reason why Green parties are much weaker in southern and eastern Europe.

Secondly, survey data analysis in many different countries consistently paints a similar picture with regard to who are the "core" Green voters: young, university-educated people working in "sociocultural" areas (healthcare, social services, the arts etc.) that hold liberal social values. Those who we might refer to as the "new middle class" or those with the mindset and level of existential security that allows them to devote attention to long-term causes and concerns like environmentalism.

This is a very different electorate to that of the old left, which was typically characterised by less-well educated industrial workers and the unemployed. Indeed, this is the group that is most under-represented amongst Green voters today, and is instead far more likely to be mobilised by right-wing populists. There are other factors but, in general, post-materialism remains a useful theory to explain why we see strong Green parties in Belgium, but not in Bulgaria.

Is the perception of man-made drastic climate change a factor in the Green surge?

As climate change will become more visible in Europe in the coming decades and the number of forest fires etc are already increasing, environmentalism could well become a defiantly "materialist" concern. For now though, much of Europe has been shielded from the very real everyday problems of climate change facing citizens of, say, Bangladesh and the Maldives; hence why I believe post-materialism is a helpful theory at understanding present day Green voting.

What does this mean for political competitors? How can they stay silent on climate change when we witness climate change everywhere we look?

To some extent, major parties are somewhat trapped. In light of recent dire warnings about the state of the climate – the 2018 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change argued that we have just 12 years to limit temperature increases below 1.5°C – I am sceptical as to whether major parties will be able to just brush the issue under the rug, so to speak. A "conspiracy of silence" by major parties may not be achievable in 2019, which is why, in my own opinion, we

should continue to expect to see good performances by Green parties in future elections.

Recent events in the United Kingdom show the damage to a Green party when major parties do ignore their issues. The Green Party of England and Wales has definitely fallen back since 2015. On the one hand, this has to do with the revitalisation – and move to the left – of the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn. But it's also about Brexit taking up all the space on the political agenda. YouGov polls of voters' "3 most important issues" generally reveal that the top concerns are Brexit (circa 65 per cent), healthcare (circa 33 per cent), and the economy (circa 30 per cent). The environment is usually only 5th or 6th. In such a climate, the Greens are really struggling for recognition among the electorate.

What does this mean for established parties on the left of the political spectrum?

The rise of Green parties and the rise of green issues could be a big problem for the established left. Social democratic parties are caught between a declining but substantial white working-class and a new coalition of socially liberal professionals and minorities. Populist right-wing parties threaten to take the former; Greens and New Left parties the latter. This uneasy coalition means that social democrats make unsatisfactory compromises on issues of immigration and multiculturalism which end up not pleasing anyone.

In contrast, the Greens like the populist right have a clear message in most countries. They are pro-international cooperation or pro-multiculturalism, which resonates with a significant segment of the electorate. Their clear position on these "value" questions is one of the reasons that they are increasingly displacing the social democrats as the major party in big cities with diverse populations and lots of young service workers and students like Amsterdam, Frankfurt or Brussels.

Which role do potential coalitions between green and centre-right parties play?

Many Green parties are increasingly willing to enter coalitions with centre-right parties, which makes life even harder for social democrats. For a long-time, though Green parties often positioned themselves as "neither right not left", they were definitely seen as on the left. Some, such as the UK Greens, have stuck to left-wing principles, but others have definitely moderated. The Irish and Finnish Greens have coalesced with the right and a coalition remains an option in Germany.

In a proportional representation system, strong Green support need not be an existential threat to the social democrats, as long as the Greens are a dependable coalition partner. If it turns out that Green parties are far more pragmatic about who they will work with, this is a strong threat to left-wing cabinet formation, particularly in light of the simultaneous rise of the populist right.

So both Greens and the radical right benefit from polarisation?

They benefit from polarisation on *their* issues as opposed to classic "old politics" concerns about economic redistribution. I think it's helpful to think of Green parties as mobilising on a similar cluster of issues than right-wing populists do, albeit at the other end of the spectrum. They are largely pro-European Union – with a few exceptions –, pro-refugee, pro-foreign aid, pro-gay marriage, and pro-environmental protection. It's becoming increasingly clear that, while many in Europe oppose these positions, others are prepared to move to Green parties to see these stances defended more vigorously.

In a time of profound societal changes such as de-industrialisation, the expansion of higher education and immigration, the dominant axis of competition is slowly shifting from battles of economic redistribution – the worker vs capital cleavage – to one surrounding values, identity, and international integration.

The new politics would appear to be represented best by the ideals of the Greens, on the one hand, and the populist right, on the other. The post-2015 gains of the populist radical right and the Greens do suggest that this is the way the political fault lines of Europe could be shifting. As a general rule: the more voters are focusing on and polarising around questions of identity, integration, and the environment, the better this is for the Greens and the populist right – and the worse it is for the established parties.



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