



It's not easy being green: Why voters punish parties for environmental policies during economic downturns[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship asserts the existence of “luxury goods voting” arguing that voters penalize parties associated with post-material issues or those with long-run payoffs during economic downturns. We test this argument here using data from four election studies in Denmark and Germany that explicitly ask respondents to rate parties on one particular luxury goods issue: protection of the environment. Voters who perceive the economy as weak indeed punish governing parties more severely when they associate them with environmental policies; conversely, a green reputation when the economy is expanding garners left-wing parties higher vote probabilities. Right-wing governing parties fare similarly, benefitting from those who perceive them as green when the economy is hale, albeit only converging to the vote probabilities awarded from voters who see them as less green when the economy sours.

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It's not that easy being green; Having to spend each day the color of the leaves. When I think it could be nicer being red [...], or something much more colorful like that.—Kermit the Frog

1. Introduction

Does the state of the economy influence voters' policy preferences and influence the vote? A recent paper by Kayser and Grafström (2016) asserts a novel empirical regularity: when the economy falters, voters prioritize issues with material and short-run pay-offs such as unemployment benefits and tax relief but reduce their support for issues with long-term and post-material benefits such as medical research or environmental protection. Because this latter category – “luxury goods issues” which grow in support when the economy does well and voters feel they can afford them – is predominantly associated with left parties while material issues are associated with both the left

and right, economic downturns should hurt and upturns benefit left parties.

Using both observational and experimental data, Kayser and Grafström (2016) do much to identify the luxury goods voting mechanism. Nevertheless, several direct implications and open questions remain. In their observational data, Kayser and Grafström (2016) only focus on how the left-right position of ruling parties conditioned the economic vote. They relied on survey experimental data to address the effect of specific luxury goods issues, using three issue examples to explain the policies. We embrace a different research design in this paper to test the external validity of these experimental claims. Instead of a hypothetical recession treatment in a pre-post experimental design, we employ observational data (post-election surveys) and leverage the variation in economic perceptions. Moreover, instead of listing several luxury goods issues, we focus on what may be the single most important luxury goods issue: environmental protection policy.

Using a sample of post-election surveys that explicitly ask respondents to assess the “greenness” of political parties – three from Denmark and one from Germany – we estimate the conditioning effect of perceived greenness on the economic vote. The main center-left governing party receives a markedly lower vote probability when it is rated as very green but only a moderately

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lower vote probability – the classic economic vote – when it is seen as less green. Conversely, the more green the main center-left governing party is perceived to be, the more it benefits from a strong economy.

The main center-right party exhibits a similar pattern when in government with one intriguing exception. As with the main center-left governing party, greater greenness yields greater vote probabilities as the economy is perceived to do better. For respondents with dourer economic perceptions, however, highly green right-governing parties fare no worse than their less green counterparts. This is consistent with the partisan voting findings of Kayser and Grafström (2016) that demonstrate that the main left governing parties are punished more severely than their counterparts on the right in economic downturns. Pro-environmental policy reputation mostly magnifies the effect of the vote on the economy but pro-green incumbent parties on the right are still less associated with green policy than those on the left and are accordingly punished less severely in downturns.

2. Theory and literature

A small literature addresses regularities in the partisan preferences of voters in response to the economy. When the economy sours, left governing parties pay a larger price at the ballot box. Center-right governments replaced those of the center-left disproportionately often in the Great Recession following the Global Financial Crisis of 2008–2010 (LeDuc and Pammett, 2013) as well as in the Great Depression (Lindvall, 2014, 2015) and more broadly in international economic downturns in the thirty years from 1970 onwards (Kayser, 2009).

This regularity is buttressed by findings on the relationship between the economy and systematic shifts in voters' partisan "mood." Soon after empirical measures of policy mood were first constructed (Stimson, 1991), scholars found, first in the US (Durr, 1993) and then cross-nationally (Stevenson, 2001), that the policy mood shifts toward the right in economic downturns. Further findings have shown this pattern in longer periods in the US (DeNeve, 2014) and, conversely, that left parties benefit disproportionately during economic upturns (Markussen, 2008).

Luxury goods voting may partly explain these swings in public opinion as well as in voting. Whereas Inglehart (1971, 1997) demonstrates that parties espousing "post-material" issues only arise over the long-run in countries sufficiently wealthy to have vanquished the most pressing material concerns, Kayser and Grafström (2016) posit an effect on voters' policy preferences in response to short-run changes in the economy. Voters support parties associated with "luxury good" policies – such as environmental protection, funding for the arts and research, and even more abstract issues such as rights for excluded groups and civil protections – more strongly when the economy is strong.¹

These cycles in policy popularity extend to cycles in partisan popularity because many center-left parties are more associated with luxury goods policies than are rival parties. Parties of the center-left certainly do not rush into election campaigns during economic recessions proclaiming their support for a carbon tax or international developmental aid but reputations are sticky and voters only update slowly (Adams et al., 2011). Left parties "own" many luxury goods issues and as the issue ownership literature

suggests, ownership is persistent (Budge and Farlie, 1983). If economic perceptions influence issue salience (Kayser and Grafström, 2016), issue salience conditions how issue ownership affects vote choice (Bélanger and Meguid, 2008), and issue ownership, at least in some cases, provides a better explanation of issue voting in elections than issue-proximity models (Green and Hobolt, 2008), we should expect an issue-centered effect on the vote that varies with states of the economy. Thus, when the economy sours, many voters prefer parties associated with economic growth, job creation or material concerns but most often not parties – mostly on the left – associated with luxury good policies.

Note that this partisan issue-effect, luxury goods voting, is complementary to the incumbent-centered economic vote. Voters punish most incumbents for economic downturns (Duch and Stevenson, 2008; Kayser, 2014). Left parties, at least those associated with luxury goods policies, also lose support when the economy sours. Left incumbents therefore lost most.

3. Data & method

In order to empirically test our expectations on luxury goods voting we analyze data from national election studies in Denmark and Germany.² Surveys following general elections in Denmark in 1998, 2001 and 2011 and Germany in 2013 all included questions asking respondents to assess the greenness of the governing and other political parties.³ Since we need voters' party placements on a greenness scale as well as their evaluation of the state of the economy we make use of election studies in Germany and Denmark as to the best of our knowledge no other election studies exist that include those questions. While this limits our analyses to one center-left and two center-right parties that lead the government, the variation that we are exploiting in order to test our hypotheses is based on voters' perceptions and thus varies on the individual level. The distribution of these perceptions for the mainstream left and mainstream right party (plus the green party in the case of Germany) can be found in Fig. 1.

While for the Danish case the question asks respondents to place the parties on a simple 5-point greenness scale, in the case of Germany, they are asked to assess how they believe each party trades off environmental and economic goals. As we can see, although mainstream left parties are generally perceived as more pro-environment than the mainstream right, there is substantial variation for all mainstream parties.

Our dependent variable is vote choice at the previous parliamentary election. We estimate a conditional logit model for each election study and include at least all parties as choices which were subsequently represented in parliament. An interesting aspect of the Danish context, is that Denmark, unlike many

² The Danish General Election Survey and the German Longitudinal Election Study. Danish respondents were recruited from a random sample of all Danes drawn from the Central Person Registry and interviewed mostly face-to-face with additional online interviews. German respondents were sampled through ADM nets and interviewed face-to-face. East-German respondents are somewhat over represented. The data used are all from the post-election studies.

³ Denmark: "People sometimes speak about a green dimension where some parties are characterized by placing the utmost importance on environmental issues while others think that the importance of environmental issues is exaggerated. One this scale 1 stands for the least green and 5 for the most green policy." Germany: "Some say that the fight against climate change should definitely take precedence, even if it impairs economic growth. Others say that the economic growth should definitely take precedence, even if it impairs the fight against climate change. What do you think is the opinion of the following political parties regarding this issue?"

¹ For environmental issues, Franzen and Meyer (2010) demonstrate that pro-environment attitudes increase in tandem with a nation's wealth as well as individuals' socio-economic status.

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