



COMMENTARY

The environment, left-wing political orientation and ecological economics

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Abstract

The objectives of this commentary are twofold. The first is to examine the relationship between a party's position within the left–right political spectrum and its stance on environmental issues, as stated in party manifestos. The second is to examine the relationship between individuals' ideological orientation and pro-environmental beliefs, attitudes and self-reported behavior. Equality, distributional concerns and market skepticism are typically regarded as defining factors of left-wing political orientation. Our results suggest that left-wing parties and individuals are also more pro-environmental than their right-wing counterparts. Ecological economics similarly embraces sustainability, efficient resource allocation and equitable distribution and is skeptical towards the ability of unregulated markets to achieve these objectives. The hypothesis is put forward that ecological economics is more likely to be supported by left-wing parties and individuals.

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1. Introduction

Existing evidence on the link between the position of parties within the political spectrum as well as self-identified ideology of individuals on the one hand and pro-environmental orientation on the other is confined to single country studies (e.g., Dietz et al., 1998; Dunlap et al., 2001) or the study of a very limited number of countries (e.g., Somma

and Tolleson-Rinehart, 1997; Hayes, 2001). This short article demonstrates that political parties on the left of the political spectrum and individuals who identify themselves as left-wing are more likely to embrace pro-environmental positions than their right-wing counterparts. It thus confirms existing studies but provides more comprehensive evidence from a much larger sample of countries. Pro-environmental orientation thus complements distributional concerns and skepticism toward the beneficial effects of unregulated markets, which are traditionally regarded as separating the political left from the political right. This resembles the three

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pillars of ecological economics: sustainability, equity and efficiency (correction of market failures). The hypothesis is put forward that based on this evidence, one can expect that ecological economics is more likely to be supported by left-wing parties and individuals.

2. Party orientation and environmental protection in party manifestos

Do left-wing parties embrace environmental protection more strongly than right-wing parties in their official party statements? One might expect this to be the case given that environmental protection often calls for government intervention, imposes costs on business and given that the poor and the working class are more likely to suffer from pollution than the rich. Left-wing political parties tend to embrace more governmental intervention, are less probusiness and are more concerned about the welfare of the lower social classes than right-wing parties (Dunlap et al., 2001; Neumayer, 2003). In this article, we want to test the hypothesis that left-wing parties are pro-environmental in a large cross-national sample with the help of data derived from party manifestos. Exploring why left-wing parties might differ from right-wing parties would be beyond the scope of this paper.

The Manifesto Research Group (MRG) has counted the sentences of party manifestos for national elections of all significant parties from 25 countries over the period 1945 to 1998 and has grouped them into one of 54 policy categories (Budge et al., 2001). A significant party is defined as one that is either represented in the national assembly or whose existence impacts upon the competition of other parties. The countries, the period of elections, number of elections, number of parties and programs covered are listed in Table 1. The data pass standard temporal stability and intercoder reliability tests. The MRG also offers a number of tests, which support the validity of the data (Budge et al., 2001, ch. 5 and 6).

The percentage of sentences in a manifesto devoted to a particular policy category can be interpreted as an indication of the relative importance a party attaches to this category. For example, the policy category

Table 1

Summary information of Manifestos Research Group data set

Countries	Elections	# Elections	# Parties	# Programs
Australia	1946–1998	22	5	78
Austria	1949–1995	15	5	50
Belgium	1946–1995	17	17	109
Canada	1945–1997	17	6	62
Denmark	1945–1994	21	16	183
Finland	1945–1995	15	13	93
France	1946–1997	14	15	66
Germany	1949–1998	14	15	61
Greece	1974–1996	9	8	33
Iceland	1946–1995	16	10	68
Ireland	1948–1997	16	9	62
Israel	1949–1996	14	40	121
Italy	1946–1996	14	20	106
Japan	1960–1996	13	12	70
Luxembourg	1945–1994	12	8	49
Netherlands	1946–1998	16	10	86
New Zealand	1946–1996	18	5	52
Norway	1945–1993	13	9	85
Portugal	1975–1995	9	14	59
Spain	1977–1993	6	14	45
Sweden	1948–1998	17	8	93
Switzerland	1947–1995	13	9	63
Turkey	1950–1995	12	13	35
United Kingdom	1945–1997	15	5	47
United States	1948–1996	13	2	26

For an additional 189 observations, no programs for elections had been passed. These were estimated as averages from adjacent election programs.

Source: Budge et al. (2001: 97).

most relevant to the analysis here is called ‘Environmental Protection’. The relative importance of this category is measured as the percentage of sentences contained in a manifesto that embraces one of the following as a policy goal of the party: ‘Preservation of countryside, forests, etc.; general preservation of natural resources against selfish interests; proper use of national parks, soil banks, etc.; environmental improvement’ (Budge et al., 2001, p. 226).

There are two ways for measuring the position of a party within the left–right political spectrum. One is to follow a dichotomous classification of parties such as the one in Swank’s (2002) Comparative Parties Data Set. Table 2 presents the list of all parties considered as left-wing by Swank, which is an amended version of Castles and Mair’s (1984) classification and derived from country experts’ placement of parties on the left–right political spectrum. One of the

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