

Political parties and climate change policy: why do parties sometimes talk about it, but sometimes keep silent

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Political parties' preferences on climate policy are important for at least two reasons. Firstly, political parties and, in particular, party leaders, are the key actors shaping public policies both at national and international level. Secondly, political parties play an important role in shaping peoples' attitudes by either trying to justify unpopular climate mitigation policies or arguing the opposite. Why political parties tend to compete over some and keep silent on other issues has been addressed by a number of theories. Although they are helpful in explaining parties' policy preferences along the traditional left-right issue axis, they are of lesser use in explaining party competition on the so called new issues such as climate mitigation policy.

The paper aims at studying factors, which shape party electoral issue competition on climate change and environmentalism. The analysis covers the quantitative study on political parties' positions in 22 European countries during electoral campaigns between 1990 and 2016, as well as two case studies: Polish electoral campaign in 2011 and German electoral campaign in 2013.

The key conclusions are as follows. Firstly, political parties tend to talk about environmentalism less when **inequality** increases. It might be either due to other issues becoming more important for voters or due to associated costs of environmental protection and climate change policies, which disproportionately affect the poorest citizens. Interestingly and somewhat unexpectedly, the economic conditions as measured by real GDP per capita do not seem to determine party issue competition on environmentalism.

Secondly, the quantitative study also confirms the association between **public opinion** and party issue competition – more environmentally favourable public opinion is associated with higher party issue salience on environmentalism. Given the strong reverse causality between public opinion and party issue salience, as discussed in the literature, the results of the performed tests are not sufficient to determine the direction of causality. However, the findings of both case studies point towards the direction of public opinion shaping party issue competition. One of the key reasons why political parties did not talk about environmentalism or climate change neither in Poland 2011 nor in Germany 2013 was the relatively low salience of these issues among voters. No key political party tried to highlight climate change or environmentalism as one of the key campaign issues (i.e. increase its salience among voters) despite the fact that, for example, in Poland there was a window of opportunity due to its EU presidency.

Thirdly, while some results of the quantitative study confirm the effect of **party system polarisation** on the salience of climate change, there is no robust evidence for its impact on the salience of environmentalism. Similarly, the selected case studies do not lead to consider that either higher (Poland 2011) or lower (Germany 2013) party system polarisation was an important factor in party issue competition.

Fourthly, although the quantitative study does not show any effect of the **coal industry business groups** on the salience of environmentalism or climate change in party issue competition, the Polish 2011 case study clearly points to the “fuel-dependency narrative”. Voters believe that resigning from coal and introducing alternative sources of energy would create economic downturn and unemployment and, at least partly, such a narrative is sustained by the involved coal industry companies. In Germany, where production of coal is lower, further transition towards clean energy is supported by all political parties and the opposition from coal industry does not seem so strong.

And, finally, in the countries, in which there are stronger **trade unions**, party competition on environmentalism is lower. As already argued in the literature and demonstrated by a few case studies, trade unions seem to be particularly concerned about losing jobs, which may come along with changes of production and consumption and implementation of climate change policies. The Polish 2011 case study confirms this. As already mentioned, transition to carbon-free energy is regarded as threat to the national economy by trade unions.

The full version of the paper:

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