



CANADA-EUROPE TRANSATLANTIC DIALOGUE:  
SEEKING TRANSNATIONAL SOLUTIONS TO 21ST CENTURY PROBLEMS

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*April 2013 Policy Brief*

**Parties, Voters and the Environment**

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**Introduction**

One saying captures the essence of the environmental movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s: ‘We are neither Left nor Right, we are out in front.’ Early environmental leaders such as Jonathan Porritt of the British Friends of the Earth and Petra Kelly of the German Green party frequently repeated this slogan. Green activists claimed that the established Left and Right parties were unresponsive to the environmental problems facing advanced industrial democracies, and these new issues transcended traditional Left/Right ideologies.

In the next several decades, environmental concerns forced themselves on to the political agenda of most democracies—stimulated by their advocates and opposed by their critics. Green parties entered the government in several European nations and pursued green policy reforms. Al Gore was a vocal advocate for environmental reform both as Vice President of the United States and after the 2000 Presidential election. In Canada, the Liberal Party’s advocacy of a “Green Shift” in the 2008 federal elections, and the Conservative Party’s and NDP’s opposition, illustrate how division and choice on environmental policy exists in some party systems. In addition, a Canadian Green Party has gained a significant vote share in recent elections, even winning a parliamentary seat in 2011. Yet in other nations, environmental issues still seemingly

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struggle to gain representation in party systems that are defined by their economic or social policies.

How have modern parties in affluent democracies responded to the call for environmental reform, and how is this issue related to the parties' traditional economic identities? Has the hesitancy of the established parties to respond to citizen environmental demands changed with the passage of time? If so, this would mean that environmental issues are systematically being added to the agenda of elections and policy making. In addition, if parties offer contrasting positions on how to address these issues, this would give citizens a meaningful partisan choice on these issues. Partisan choices would mean that citizen preferences can influence their voting choice, providing representation for their views within the governing process.

## **Party Choices**

Each nation has its own unique alignment of parties in each election—but our interest is in the broad pattern of party choice in affluent democracies. We want to compare party choices on traditional socio-economic matters, to their positions on environmental protection. To examine the position of parties toward environmental reform across Western democracies, we turn to a survey of party experts conducted by Benoit and Laver (2006). They surveyed almost 1500 experts in 47 nations in 2002-03, including some new democracies in Eastern Europe. We focus on the Western democracies in their study.

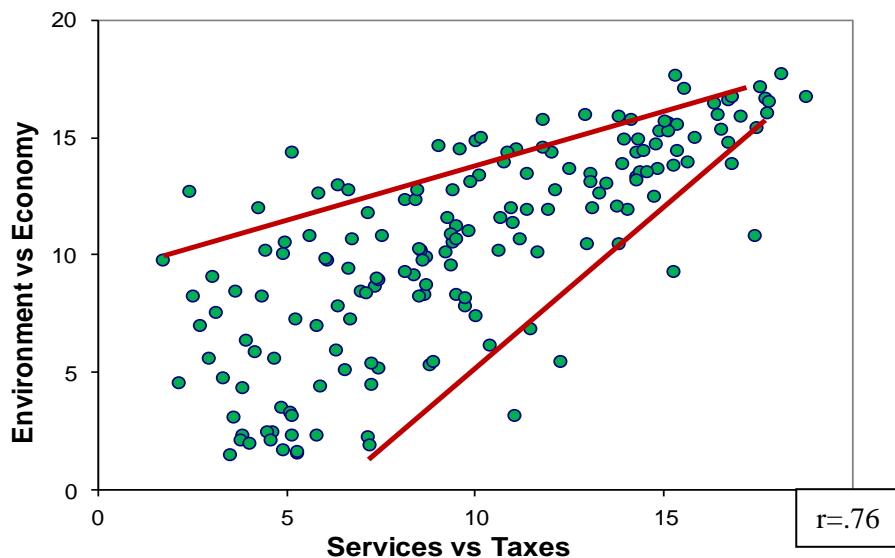
The survey asked the experts to position the parties along two scales. The first was the *environmental policy scale*; its endpoints were: 1) "Support protection of environment, even at the cost of economic growth" at one end of the scale, versus 2) "Support economic growth, even at the cost of damage to the environment" at the other end. Certainly the environmental agenda includes diverse policy goals such as reducing the industrial degradation of the environment, preserving nature, promoting biodiversity, energy policy, and addressing global climate change. Thus, the core of environmentalism is the contrast between the growth and consumerist paradigm of market systems versus the protection of nature and sustainable economic policies. This contrast is the source of conflict between Green parties and established parties of the Left and Right that endorse the present economic paradigm, albeit with different emphases.

Second, we sought to contrast the parties' positions on environmental matters with their positions on the traditional Left/Right socio-economic cleavage: the role of the state in providing social services. Thus, the experts also placed parties on a *taxes versus public services scale*: 1) "Promote raising taxes to increase public services," versus 2) "Promote cutting public services to cut taxes." The economic dimension should reflect the continuing debate about the role of government in the economic domain. This implies Leftist support for an activist government, social welfare programmes, and a concern for the disadvantaged—all issues with a long basis in

the economic programme of Labour and social democratic parties. In contrast, the other pole reflects a conservative orientation to reduce the government's role in society, reduce social programmes and lower tax rates.

By plotting the position of parties on these two scales we can compare how environmental and socio-economic positions vary across parties in Western democracies (Figure 1). Each dot in the figure represents where the experts located one of the 170 parties on the two scales. The strong positive relationship between party positions on both scales is evidence that green issues are being integrated into the traditional socio-economic basis of party competition. Leftist parties have proven more receptive to calls for environmental reform, while conservative parties have been less supportive. These results are similar to Laver's earlier expert study in 1989 (as published in, Laver and Hunt 1992), suggesting that little has changed, and more recent expert surveys of just European party systems (Rohrscheider and Whitefield 2012).

**Figure 1. Party Positions on Policy Choices**



*Source:* Benoit/Laver Party Expert Survey.

However, the figure also highlights the persisting tension between these two issue areas among leftist parties. Economically right parties are generally 'conservative' on the environment dimension, and in another publication I have shown that they have become a bit more conservative since 1989 (Dalton 2009). In contrast, there is a much wider variation among economically Left parties. This is even clearer if one compares ideologically comparable parties

(party families) in Europe and North America. Green parties and social democratic/Labour parties are located at about the same point on the economic dimension, but differ substantially on the environmental dimension. The Social Democratic/Labour parties are generally closer to conservatives and Christian Democrats than to Green parties. Even more clearly, Communists are further to the left on the social service question compared to Social Democratic/Labour parties, but more conservative on the environment. Thus, on the environmental dimension Leftist parties struggle to balance, or choose between, their traditional economic base in the working class, and the pro- environment positions that often appeal to young, middle class voters. The German party system provides a natural example. The Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) tried to build an electoral coalition between these two distinct constituencies, and in successive elections in the 1980s and 1990s its chancellor candidates varied from trying to incorporate potential Green voters to arguing against an environmental agenda. In the end, the party suffered a split with the formation of *Die Linke*.

In summary, if we look beyond the specifics of any one election and the campaign strategies of any particular party, and instead examine the broad experience of Western party systems—contemporary parties are offering a choice on the environmental policy dimension. This choice is more distinct on the right, as conservative parties are gravitating toward a skeptical position on environmental reform and instead prioritizing economic growth. The advocates of environmental reform are typically Leftist parties, but often Green or Left-libertarian parties, with social democratic and post-communist parties holding more ambiguous or wavering positions. But clear choices do exist.

## **Voters and Parties**

If parties offer a choice, will voters respond? One of the enduring criticisms of environmental issues are that they are ‘sunshine issues,’ that is, voters will support them only when economic times are good, and then revert to more basic socio-economic concerns when there are economic doubts. Similarly, the mantra of Clinton’s 1992 election campaign—“It’s the Economy, Stupid” has become a truism among campaign managers and pundits. Both observations lead to doubts about whether environmental attitudes really influence party choice, and whether the environmental attitudes of party voters match their party choice. In short, are voters’ environmental positions finding representation in contemporary party systems?

To address this question for Western democracies, we turned to an additional data source—the 2010 International Social Survey Program (ISSP) study of environmental attitudes. The ISSP is an international partnership of social scientists that coordinate the collection of cross-national data on topics of broad policy concern to societies today. The 2010 ISSP asked a common battery of environmental questions to nationally representative samples of citizens in 39

nations. For the parties in Western democracies, we calculated the position of their voters using a set of questions on the willingness to bear additional costs to protect the environment.<sup>2</sup>

We then compared the position of party voters on environmentalism to the parties' position on environmentalism based on the previous expert survey. We should note that the expert positioning of the parties are from 2002-03 (Benoit and Laver 2006) and the voter statistics are from the 2010 ISSP study.<sup>3</sup> This is a substantial time gap of two or more elections in most nations. In addition, the 2008 Great Recession might have disrupted partisan patterns. So we are looking at the broad constancy of party-voter agreement that endures through these changing conditions and the ebb and flow of electoral politics.

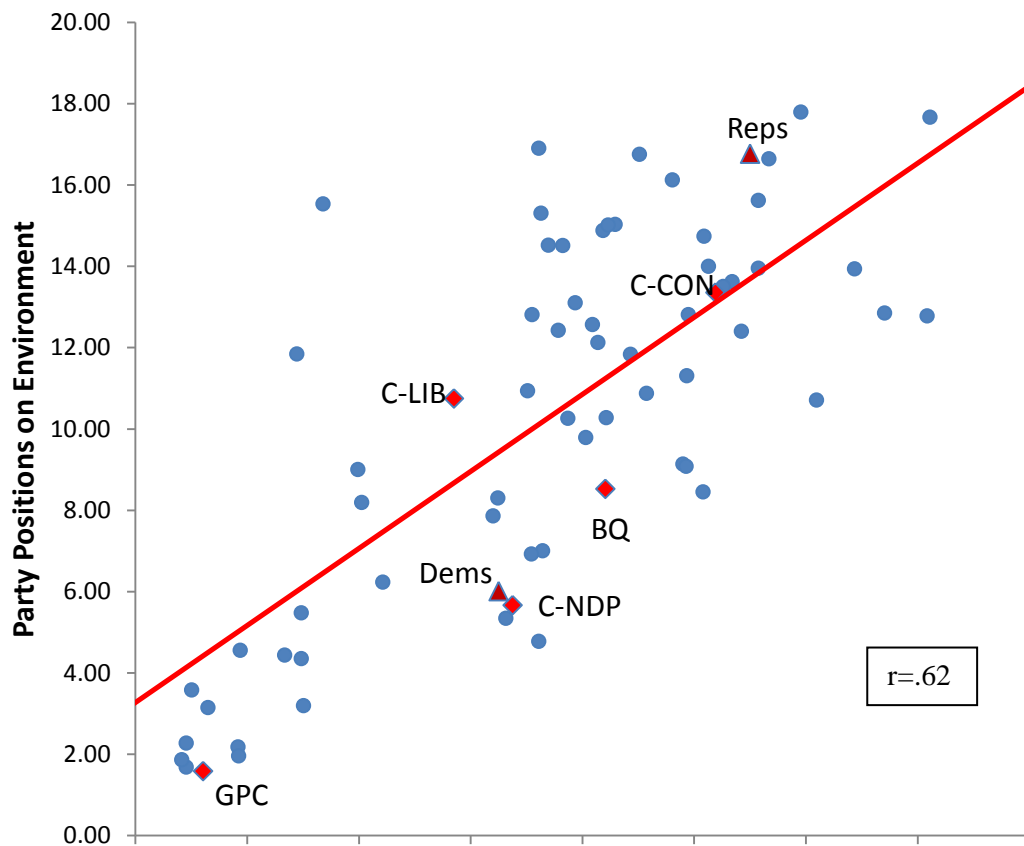
Figure 2 compares the average environmental attitudes of the voters of each party along the horizontal axis, and the experts environmental positioning of the party along the vertical axis. For comparative purposes, the major Canadian and American parties are highlighted in the figure. Despite the caveats of making such comparisons across time, differently worded measures of environmental positions, and different groups (voters and party experts), the agreements between voters and their parties on environmentalism is striking. Voters show a strong tendency to pick parties that match their own environmental positions.

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<sup>2</sup> The three questions asked: "How willing would you be to pay much higher prices in order to protect the environment?"; "How willing would you be to pay much higher taxes in order to protect the environment?"; and, "How willing would you be to accept cuts in your standard of living in order to protect the environment?" We combined the items into a summary scale.

<sup>3</sup> One reason for using the 2002-03 expert study is that it included Canada and the United States, and subsequent expert studies were limited only to European Union member states.

**Figure 2. Voters and Parties on Environmental Policy**



*Source:* The environmental position of partisans is from the 2010 International Social Survey Program environmental module (Q12); party positions from the Benoit/Laver expert study.

The American and Canadian party systems illustrate this general pattern. Supporters of the U.S. Democratic Party are to the left of center on the environmental support scale along the horizontal axis, and Republican partisans are distinctly conservative on this scale. Moreover, in comparison to other parties, the expert data suggest that the Democratic Party is even more liberal on these issues than their supporters (below the regression line) and the Republican Party is similarly more conservative than its supporters. The Canadian party system is even more complex. The party alignment predictably runs from the Green Party of Canada (GPC) to the Conservatives (C-CON). More complicated is the position of the Liberals and New Democratic Party. In 2002-2003 the experts saw the NDP as distinctly more pro-environmental than the Liberals, but one suspects that may have changed somewhat in the interim because of the Liberals' initiatives on environmental reform in 2008, and the criticisms of the NDP in reply. This is an example of the tensions among Leftist parties in addressing the environmental agenda. At the same time, in 2010 the supporters of both of these parties express quite similar views on their willingness to take action to protect the environment.

## **Environmentalism in Contemporary Party Systems**

One of the prime democratic functions of political parties is to articulate and represent the interests existing within a society. The emergence of the environmental movement reflects the new issue concerns of contemporary democracies, and the question is whether these issues can find voice and representation within contemporary party systems.

If we look beyond a specific election in a specific country, we find strong evidence that Western party systems are now offering voters clear choices on the broad dimension of environmental reform (undoubtedly with some variation on more specific green issues). These issues are more easily integrated into the world view of conservative parties, while continuing to divide Leftist parties among themselves. Indeed, the experience of the Canadian parties in recent elections is typical of the general patterns we observe across nations, and thus not an idiosyncrasy of Canadian politics. But clear choices typically exist across parties in most democracies, and are becoming more institutionalized over time.

We have also shown that because of these party choices, citizens are able to find parties that express their environmental views, which maximizes environmentalism as a factor in electoral choice. And it improves the representativeness of the electoral process, as like-minded voters and parties connect together. This may make electoral politics more complex as traditional socio-economic issues vie with green issues and other policy concerns; it affects the strategy of parties and the voting calculus of citizens. It undoubtedly makes governing more complex as well, as specific policy matters have differing relevance to various issue groups. But the benefit of democracy is that it provides a vehicle to resolve these complexities.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

A previous version of this paper was presented at the Canada-Europe Transatlantic Dialogue Policy Workshop, “Public Attitudes and Environmental Policy in Canada and Europe,” held at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, on February 8, 2013. The author would like to thank Carleton Professors Jon Pammett and Joan DeBardeleben, and the other participants at the conference for their comments.

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