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# IPSOS VIEWS

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## Who Owns the Environment?

The state of Green party politics around the world

By Mitra Thompson





Throw a dart at a map of the world and, odds are, it will land on a country where public trust in the political establishment is significantly low – if not at an all-time low. In 2018, just one in five people (21%) globally thought it would be best to stick with political parties and leaders who have been in power before – dropping to just 15% in France and Italy.<sup>1</sup>

More often than not, climate change is impacting national policy in unpredictable ways. Just by looking at the *gilets jaunes* movement in France, sparked by the announcement of a highly unpopular fuel-tax increase, we can see how these two phenomena intersect.

Mainstream consensus on the real threat of climate change has raised the question of how to slow or contain its long-term effects. In recent years, the policy changes needed to meet these planet-sized goals have focused increasingly on introducing tariffs on carbon emissions as a disincentive to their use. When taxes on fuel and carbon come into play, ordinary citizens are often unprepared and unwilling to accept the additional cost burden. And any resentment towards existing political power structures risks becoming amplified as a result.

**Could this be fertile ground for a new era of Green politics? Research from Ipsos shows that the answer to this question depends heavily on where you look...**



## Europe

### UNITED KINGDOM

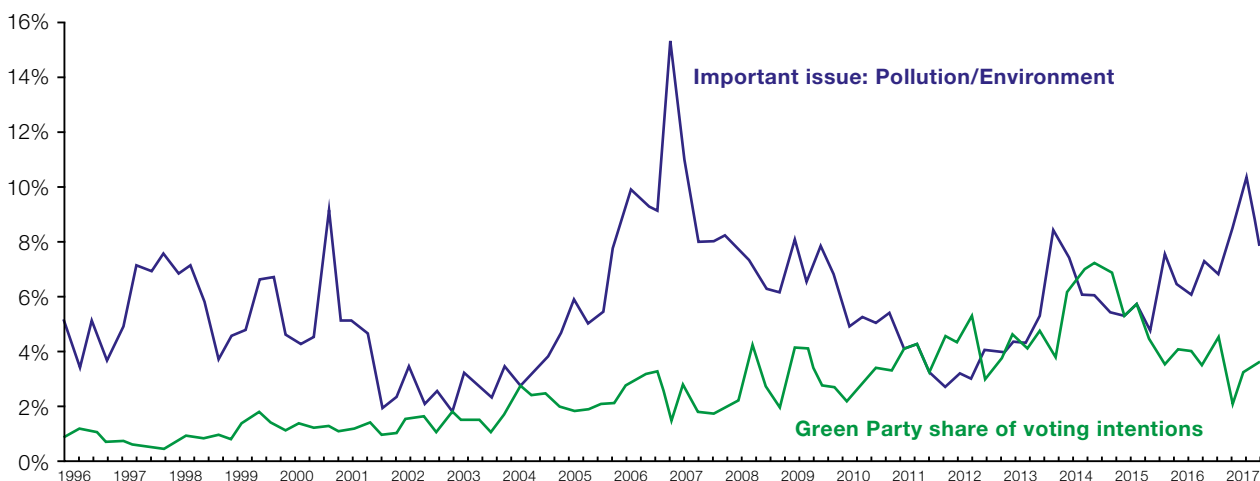


The perception of pollution and the environment as important issues facing the United Kingdom has fluctuated over the past thirty years. After peaking in 1989 (with an all-time high of 35% in July of that year), the perceived importance of environmental issues never quite regained its former strength. The most recent peak in perceived importance was 15.5% in 2007. Since late 2012, the environment has been considered an issue of

national importance by an increasing number of Britons, though still fewer than was the case thirty years ago. However, as shown in the chart below, this has not been reflected in voter intent for the Green Party. Indeed, there is no statistically significant relationship between perceived importance of environmental issues and the strength of voter intent for the Greens.

The Green Party in the United Kingdom has never been able to secure more than 3.8% of the vote at general elections, and it typically garners significantly less than that. As is the case in Canada, however, British Greens often fare better at other political levels. For example, London Assembly elections in the past two decades have seen the Greens consistently capture around 10% of the vote, while at the European Parliament level the Green vote stood at 7.9% in 2014 and 8.6% in 2010 (with an all-time high of 14.9% in 1989).

What do you see as the most/other important issues facing Britain today?  
How would you vote if there were a general election tomorrow?



Base: c. 3,000 GB adults aged 18+ each quarter

Ipsos MORI Political Monitor and Issues Index 1996 - 2017

### SWEDEN

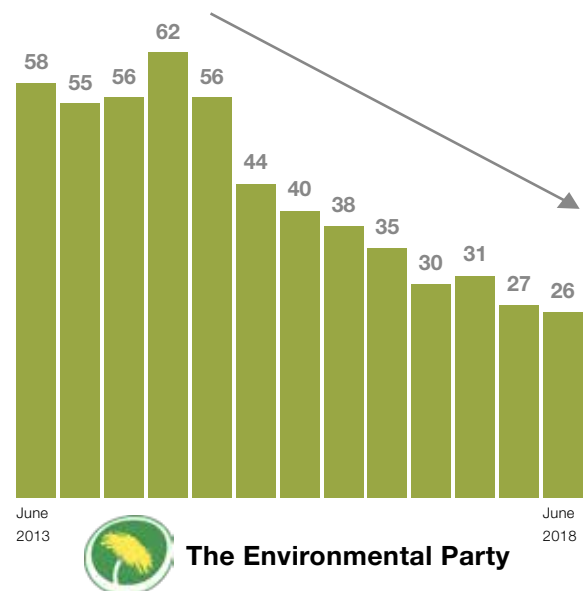
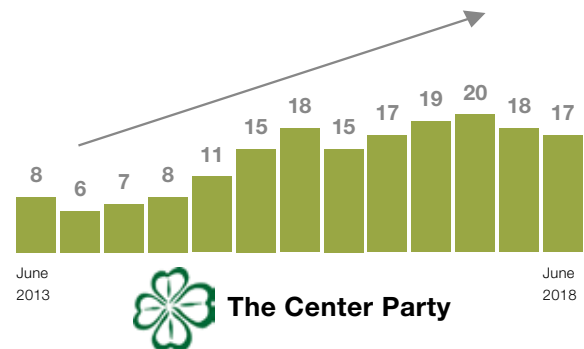


In Sweden, the Greens are represented by the Miljöpartiet (Environmental Party). Ipsos tracking shows that over the past five years, the Environmental Party has consistently been considered to have the best policy on the environment and climate issues of all political parties in Sweden, by an overwhelming margin.

But there is a recent downwards trend. Despite concern about climate change being 10 points higher in late 2018 than in 2011, research from Ipsos in Sweden has found that the Swedes increasingly view the Centre Party's policy on green issues as the best, while fewer feel the same about the Environmental Party. The chart on the right shows that while the Environmental Party still has the edge in terms of policy perceptions, in 2018 it is just 9 points ahead of the Centre Party in terms of green policy leadership. In 2013, there was a 50-point gap between the two.

Greater awareness of environmental issues has not helped the Environmental Party at the ballot box: they received 4.4% of votes at the most recent general election in September 2018, down from

6.9% in the previous election in 2014. This was part of an overall downturn in votes for the ruling coalition government, of which the Environmental Party has been a member for the past four years. On the other hand, the Centre Party's vote share grew slightly, from 6.1% in 2014 to 8.6% in September 2018.



## SWITZERLAND



Switzerland is unique for having not one, but two Green parties, with the centrist Green Liberal Party having split from the more left-wing Greens in 2007. Interestingly, the schism does not appear to have taken away from the Greens' vote share, which has held steady in the region of 7% to just under 10% for the past three federal elections, while the Green Liberal Party has grown its share of the popular vote to about 5%.

voting for the party “one day” – was third strongest overall, behind Emmanuel Macron’s En Marche! and François Fillon’s Republicans, but well ahead of the Front National or the Socialists.

In some parts of Europe, public concern about environmental issues is noticeably lower, and in these countries the Greens have an even more diminished presence in the political arena. The environmental banner tends to be taken up by the dominant centre-left party or coalition. For example, in Spain, the Unidos Podemos coalition is most strongly associated with policies to address climate change.

## FRANCE



Green party politics in France have evolved one step further, following the 2010 merger of Les Verts (the Greens) with the new Europe Écologie (Europe Ecology) to form Europe Écologie Les Verts (EELV). Ipsos research conducted in the run-up to the 2017 French general election found that future voting intent for EELV – expressed as the probability of

## ITALY



In Italy the Federazione dei Verdi (Federation of the Greens) often join left-leaning coalitions within Italy’s parliamentary system. They lean heavily to the left and have never reached more than 2.8% of the overall national vote (3.8% for their Lista Verde predecessors in 1989).

Meanwhile, the Five Star Movement (M5s) – part of Italy’s ruling coalition government since June 2018 – also claims a certain amount of pro-green politics, with four of its five “stars” standing for Green issues such as access

to public water, sustainable transport, sustainable development, and environmentalism, despite its more right-wing stance on issues like immigration. Yet the electoral success of M5s cannot be described as part of a “green wave”, but rather as the result of the anti-establishment sentiment it promotes.

But for all its claims of standing for green causes, M5s spent comparatively far less time speaking about the environment and climate than it did about immigration during the 2018 election campaign.

Green conservatism is a political phenomenon that exists in many countries including Italy, though mainly through much smaller parties that combine liberal economics with support for policies that aim to restrict environmental damage. Some, particularly in the United States, have expressed concern about detrimental environmental effects due to national overpopulation.

### GERMANY



Germany has the strongest precedent for seeing the Greens in power. The German Grüne are firmly a party of the centre-left, giving it a broader appeal

than some green parties in other countries. They have served in governing coalitions twice between 1998 and 2005. Since then, in the CDU/CSU coalition era, the Greens’ impact has primarily been at the local level, mirroring a tendency seen in the United Kingdom and Canada.

The environmental impact of industrial developments in Germany has boosted the Greens’ profile. German cities are beginning to implement diesel driving bans, and following the Volkswagen emissions scandal, the German automotive industry is under immense pressure to find alternatives to combustion engines.

Elsewhere, plans by mining company RWE to clear the Hambach Forest caused a major political stir over the summer, providing visibility to the Greens just prior to state-level elections.

Yet, while much has been written about the success of the Greens in Germany, in actual electoral terms this may be overstated. Despite increasing public worry over climate change revealed by Ipsos polling since early 2017, the Greens were only able to grow their overall vote share by 0.5% (to 8.9%) at the September 2017 general election.

However, both parties of the ruling Grand Coalition (the CDU/CSU and the SPD) suffered losses in 2017. Germans are growing tired of the Grand Coalition and see it as a political establishment resistant to change. Some traditional SPD voters may have opted for the Greens in 2017 as a progressive alternative, and may do so again the next time around.

## North America

### CANADA



In Canada, the number of people who see climate change as a worrying issue for the country rose sharply in the spring of 2017; a time when many global leaders were urging US President Donald Trump not to withdraw from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Worry about climate change has hovered steadily at around the 20% mark ever since. Yet voter intent toward the Green Party of Canada (GPC) has not followed suit. For most of 2017, Ipsos polling shows that voter intent toward the GPC stayed constant at about 4%, peaking at 7% in December of that year for a single month before returning to 4% by October 2018.

Three quarters (75%) of Canadians agree that Canada needs to do more than it is currently doing to address climate change, and that Canada has an obligation to lead on climate change globally. <sup>2</sup>

The Canadian Green Party has never been able to achieve national party status in the House of Commons. Their leader, Elizabeth May, has been elected in the last couple of elections but has not been able to get any other Green members elected.

This is because the territory the Greens would like to take up on environmental issues is occupied by the two other progressive parties, the Liberals (led by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau), and the left-leaning New Democratic Party. Both the Liberals and NDP have made the environment a high priority in their election platforms, effectively squeezing out the Greens.



**We tend to think of a vote for the Greens as a vote for the environment, but we can see from the data that there are many shades of green.**

### UNITED STATES



The picture is similar in the United States. Concern about climate change has been growing slowly and steadily over the past decade, but is still dwarfed by worries over issues like health care, immigration and crime.<sup>3</sup>

Americans who are the ideological brethren of Green Party-leaning Europeans make up a core segment of the Democratic Party's base. The "Green New Deal" currently championed by Democratic Representative-elect Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is a perfect example of how the dominant centre-left

party can make issues like fighting climate change and creating green jobs their own, leaving the Greens twisting in the wind. It's a situation that looks set to intensify as the more progressive wing of the Democratic Party led by Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders continues to find its voice.

Another reason why greater awareness of green issues has not driven a rise in the green vote is the US's famously bipartisan political arena. When the Greens recorded their strongest-ever election-night performance in 2000 garnering 2.7% of the popular vote the leader Ralph Nader was widely blamed for costing Al Gore the presidency. The bipartisan split has only intensified since, and by the time of the 2016 election, Green Party leader Jill Stein received a mere 1.1% of the popular vote – just one third of Libertarian Party candidate Gary Johnson's 3.3%.



## What Does “Green” Really Mean?

Voting green to express discontent with parties in power, as seen in the German example, raises the broader question of what “Green” actually means. We tend to think of a vote for the Greens as a vote for the environment, but in fact when we look at the data, there are many shades of green. Sometimes it is merely a protest vote, sometimes it is a vote that is not driven by environmental priorities at all, and sometimes it is a vote by default.



**A Green vote is not entirely an anti-incumbent vote as those who wish to punish the ruling government tend to vote strategically for a more viable party**

If the dynamic of green politics as traditionally understood doesn't fit the rising environmental awareness seen in countries across Europe and North America, it could be because “Green” means many different things and because Green parties do not, as we have seen, have a monopoly on environmental issues.

### **A vote against politics as usual**

In Canada, a vote for the greens is often a true environmentalist vote. Ipsos research reveals that more than half (57%) of those who voted Green in the 2011 federal election did so because of the party's stance on the issues – more so than for voters of any other party.

It also tends to be a protest vote. The survey shows that self-reported green voters in Canada tend to be more likely to dislike the other parties, so use their vote to express this aversion. However, a Green vote is not entirely an anti-incumbent vote as those who wish to punish the ruling government tend to vote strategically for a more viable party. Green party voters are therefore a subgroup of people who are disengaged with politics or the current political system, but still turn up to vote rather than staying home or spoiling their ballots. It follows that green votes also tend to be last-minute votes. In the past two federal elections, Canadians who voted green are the most likely to have made their choice within the final week of the campaign.

Prior to the collapse of the green vote in the United Kingdom's 2017 general election from 3.8% to 1.6% - likely due in part to Labour moving further to the left, thereby reducing the perceived need for the Greens as a leftist alternative – the Green Party was still being described in 2015 as “a party of choice for those on the left wing who are disenchanted by traditional politics and rally around a commitment to diversity, minority rights and an actively positive outlook towards immigration.”<sup>4</sup>

## An elite vote

One explanation for why the green vote share is often so small is that the average green voter tends to be far from average. In France, the UK and Germany, Green party supporters tend to be younger, more affluent, better educated, and working in more specialized professional roles. UK green voters are more likely than supporters of any other party to have a university degree, while in Germany, Green party supporters have monthly income levels among the highest in the country.

In Italy, green voters tend to be more prevalent in urban centres than rural areas. Issues such as pollution and protecting green spaces take on more importance among urban voters in Italy compared to the rural electorate: Ipsos research from November 2018 finds that one in four residents (26%) of Italian cities with populations of 100,000 or more are worried about environmental issues in their local area, compared to just 10% of those in more thinly populated rural areas. When it comes to concern about environmental

issues for Italy as a whole, levels of worry are much lower, but stronger in large urban centres (7%) than in rural areas (3%).

## A vote for the Left

The French see the Green Party (EELV) as distinctly left wing. Nearly four in ten (38%) position it as a 2 or a 3 on a scale of 0-10, with 0 being the most to the left and 10 the most to the right – on par with 37% for the Parti Socialiste.<sup>5</sup>

This perception is borne out among those who say they feel closest to the EELV (or feel less distant from it than other parties). Six in ten of those who position themselves on the political left (self-rated as a 0-4 out of 10) and over 50% of centrists (4-6) feel closest to the Greens, compared to just 10% of those on the right (6-10).

In Britain, Labour's move to the left under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn may have contributed in part to the sudden downturn in Green votes in 2017. Prior to this, Green Party leadership was making a concerted effort to cement the party's position on the left wing of the political spectrum. In 2014, national media reported that “the party has increasingly sought to capitalise on the disaffection of many on the left”.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, the 2015 British Election Study shows that during the 2015 general election campaign (prior to Corbyn's Labour leadership), Labour and Green supporters were near-identical in terms of where they positioned themselves on the left-right political spectrum, with both parties' supporters clustering around a self-rating of 2 or 3.

However, Dennison, the author of the study, makes the case that Green Party supporters in the UK have a significantly different outlook than Labour voters on a specific subset of policies, with views described as “New Left” as opposed to Labour’s traditional left. These include being more inclined than Labour supporters to think environmental protection should be prioritized over economic growth, less inclined to feel schools should teach children to obey authority, and (in 2015), less inclined to think Britain should leave the EU.<sup>7</sup>



**Green political leaders face very real challenges from more established centre-left parties that can and do co-opt green issues into their policies**

## **A vote for the environment and beyond**

The top issues among Green party voters are evolving. Far from being limited to the environment, green supporters often have similar issues of concern to those of supporters of other parties – like jobs and healthcare. Ipsos findings from Canada and shows that while the environment was green supporters’ second most important issue in the May 2011 general election and their top issue at the next one in 2015, by September 2018, climate change had dropped to fourth place, behind healthcare, the economy and immigration.

Likewise, when voters in Britain were asked in 2015 to identify the single most important issue facing the country, green voters cited the National Health Service (NHS), the economy, inequality, and the environment, in that order. Several of these issues were of great importance to the electorate at large, whose top four included the economy, immigration, the NHS, and public services.

In sum, a green vote is often, but not always, a vote for the environment. This puts the Greens in a vulnerable spot: when things are going well, voters may be more inclined to cast their ballot in favour of the Greens as the party that most closely fits with their personal environmental values. However, in times of strife, be it economic, political or otherwise, there is little to stop those sympathetic to the Greens from voting strategically for a larger party that also promises to tackle the issues of the day in a way that voters find appropriate.



## Conclusion

Green political leaders have a unique window to seize upon disillusionment within the electorate and develop as a stronger progressive voice, yet they also face very real challenges from more established centre-left parties that can and do co-opt green issues into their policies. Whether this results in effective environmental policy is far from a given, however, and discontent with the slow pace of change could still fuel growth in green party voting.

The fact remains, however, that the Greens have lost their monopoly on climate change and the environment as a voting issue, and their recent disappointing ballot-box results across a number of countries are evidence of this. Greens are thus faced with a major strategic

choice: remain a single-issue party, potentially at the expense of not addressing voter concerns, or adopt a more mainstream approach, and become a stronger political contender.

A final challenge is that voter intent towards smaller parties with less political representation does not always translate into actual votes; as we see in Canada, support for the Greens tends to be overstated in the run-up to general elections. Ipsos polling has found that the Greens in Canada deliver about half the vote that their polling numbers suggest they will on election day. Somewhere between their home and the ballot box, many potential green voters are still second-guessing their choice.



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