Challenging Europe: How AntiEU Parties Use Opposition to Environmental Protection as a Way to Confront with the EU

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Abstract: *As part of its commitment to enhancing overall well-being, the European Union (EU) has pursued ambitious goals regarding the protection of the environment and a more resource-efficient economy. In this context, the EU has implemented policies and rules in various areas, such as waste management, climate, nature and biodiversity, and air quality, among others. The EU's ambitious goal of achieving climate neutrality by 2050 and its requirement for countries to develop strategies to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions have likely impacted citizens' perceptions of European policies and forced political actors to advocate for environmental protection even when they may prefer to pursue economic growth-oriented policies. Given the EU's strong commitment to environmental protection, Eurocritical parties have been using this EU strategy to advance their own climate and environmental agendas as a means of challenging the EU and gaining support from those who are negatively affected by or opposed to the changes implemented to achieve the European Green Deal (EGD).*

Given that the extent to which political parties employ this strategy in European-level elections has not been fully investigated, and considering the significance of this phenomenon in the context of the upcoming European elections scheduled for next June, this paper explores the extent to which challenger political parties have identified a new approach to confronting the mainstream positions of the EU by adopting anti-environment stances. We investigate this phenomenon in the context of the 2009, 2014 and 2019 European Parliament (EP) Elections by examining the prominence given to environmental issues in party manifestos and the pro- or anti-environmental protection positions articulated in their European electoral programs. Our findings indicate that challenger parties, namely those with more Eurosceptic tendencies, are also more likely to express anti-environmental positions in their European manifestos. In contrast, parties with more Europhile leanings either omit environmental issues from their manifestos or even appear to adopt a more environmentally friendly stance, despite potentially

holding different positions in their national manifestos. This suggests that environmental issues have emerged as a relevant factor in electoral competition, strategically employed by political parties in their campaigns, and emphasized differently depending on the potential electoral gains in multi-level settings. This research offers a novel perspective on the role of environment in political competition and contributes to understanding how parties can challenge the EU's environmental agenda in their quest to confront the EU.

1 Introduction

In the complex landscape of European multi-level governance, electoral dynamics vary significantly across different tiers of government, compelling political parties to adopt nuanced strategies tailored to the distinct contexts of subnational, national, and European elections.

The EU, having grown in influence, now holds greater importance in the lives of European citizens not only because national and subnational legislation of EU members must align to the European legislation, also because the EU has come into ruling on issues that transcend borders and, especially after Covid-19, has contributed to advance in the process of political integration (Tesche, 2022). Nevertheless, EP Elections have been and predictably will continue to be seen as second-order national elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980) because citizens perceive there is not much at stake. This implies that parties seeking to mobilize and attract voters in European elections will underscore supra-national issues in order to shift to domestic concerns. Many times, voters, confronted with the difficulties of assessing parties' performances and competences in the complex multi-level institutional settings, would just take their cues from the national level to make their choices at inferior and superior layers (Reif and Schmitt, 1980).

Citizens are better at understanding national politics than the distant and complex EU polity in which their elected representatives are then grouped in transnational party families with diverse interests. Nevertheless, as the EU is becoming more pivotal in citizens' lives, there seems to be a more fluid "issue contamination" between the different electoral arenas what according to some authors implies that national elections might be becoming more Europeanized (Jurado and Navarrete, 2021; Pannico and Costa Lobo, 2023). Consequently, the "second-orderness" of European elections would be a matter of degree that varies between elections, time, place and individuals (Cabeza, 2018). This

impacts also on parties' electoral strategies, because the more prominent the EU and the more citizens aware of the impact of the policies decided in Brussels, the more incentives parties have to address EU issues to attract voters. This dynamic is comparable to that leading some regionalist parties to steadily focus on environmental and climate policy to challenge the central authority of the state in subnational elections (Conversi and Friis Hau, 2021; Enguer and Navarrete, 2023). This is driven by the growing significance of environmental issues in the political agenda at the subnational level, as evidenced by the particularly proactive role that regional parliaments have been adopting regarding it (Galarraga, Gonzalez-Eguino and Markandya, 2011; Jordaan *et al.*, 2019).

This research explores the role of environmentalism in political competition at the EU level, demonstrating how Eurocritical parties have found the environment to be a key issue in challenging the EU.

2 The EU and the environment

Recent studies have shown an increase of prominence of transnational issues among the main topics in the 2019 European Elections and point to the mobilizing effect of these topics that transcend national politics as one of the reasons behind the unexpectedly high turnout (Braun and Schäfer, 2022). In their analysis of the 2019 EP Elections, Daniela Braun and Constantin Schäfer (2022) found that citizens who attributed greater importance to climate change and environment were significantly more likely to participate in the European elections. In their opinion, this mobilizing effect of green issues would suggest there is a sense of political urgency to take care of climate change, as well as a sign of how the "green wave" became more salient during the campaign to the EP Elections. The relevance of green politics also in European Elections would be the result of the increased concern about the environment but also to new dynamics in electoral competition as green parties become more important in their national arenas. Green issues perceived as a potential electoral threat for some parties or as a potential electoral opportunity (Spoon, Hobolt and De Vries, 2014) are becoming more salient in the public debate and, consequently, parties that have traditionally avoided addressing green issues find incentives to take positions in order to attract voters in pursuit of representation.

More specifically, the environmental and climate policy was initially perceived as "a mere side-product of economic integration" (Biedenkopf and Delreux, 2023, p.418). However, with the increasingly noticeable effects of global warming, European environmental and climate regulations have evolved into a more intricate and ambitious framework. Thus, while the 1990s are generally regarded as a period of limited progress in EU climate policy and governance,

particularly marked by the blockade by member states against a carbon/ energy tax proposed by the European Commission (EC), the 2000s witnessed a progressive politicization of the issue, exemplified by the implementation and later revision of the Emissions Trading System (ETS), a key policy measure creating a European carbon market for GHG emission allowances (Dupont *et al.*, 2024). Despite a slight halt in this trend experienced in the context of crisis and austerity that characterized the first half of the 2010s, the same logic previously described was able to be resumed and intensified from the second half of the decade, especially materializing in the adoption of the EGD by the EC in 2019 (Gravey and Moore, 2018). By generally targeting climate neutrality in all member states by 2050, this standard adheres to a progression of policies and legal frameworks whose gradual adoption over the last decades has consolidated them as a source of pride for the EU.

In such a context in which environmentalism is becoming more intertwined with EU identity, it is important to analyse how parties have adjusted their electoral strategies at the EU-level. Euro-critical parties have traditionally focused on constitutive issues to confront with the EU (Braun, Hutter and Kerscher, 2016), this is, they emphasize their criticism toward the EU polity over other more policy-related issues. Nevertheless, as the EU regulatory framework includes more policy areas, it is reasonable to expect that those parties who have outstand for their confrontational position against the EU polity have increasingly more incentives to also discuss policy-related issues, especially those more salient in domestic politics. In this regard, we understand that environmental politics play an important role in the strategy of parties contesting European integration and they will downplay or emphasize their stances on the environment depending on the electoral arena in which they are competing and the domestic concerns of their likely voters.

3 The relevance of party manifestos

In their manifestos, parties express their issue priorities and set their positions on the political topics and conflicts that are more important for them. This implies that they, sometimes, give more or less prominence to some topics depending on what is more convenient for their electoral strategy. For this reason, we consider that what parties write in their manifestos is representative not only of the policies they want to implement, but also of the topics parties consider could be used to mobilize and attract voters. Similarly, we expect that this strategy of highlighting some issues or topics in their manifestos as part of their electoral campaign implies that absences are also equally telling. Parties can decide to skip topics that can be too controversial, divisive or simply that could distract attention from their main issue of political competition. This does

not imply that parties have no stances on a certain topic, it could also mean that they selected to not equally emphasize all of their policy positions as a way to help voters to have clearer choices or to be able to choose among the party menu based on the topics that are more relevant for them. Then, parties tend to put more emphasis on the issues they "own" while de-emphasize those in which they show a position that can be disadvantageous during the campaign (Dolezal *et al.*, 2014).

Scholars have paid attention to how parties strategically reflect their policy stances and issue attention in their manifestos (see Braun 2023). Party manifestos can be considered as a central source of information on what a party stands for, but it has a clear disadvantage though: its asynchrony with the electoral campaign. As some scholars have pointed out, issue competition is a bottom-up process in which political actors respond to citizens' policy concerns (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010; Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016; Baumann, Debus and Gross, 2021). Nevertheless, electoral manifestos are published weeks or months before the election. Thus, these texts serve to set the main goals for the upcoming term but parties are confronted with the challenge of being tied by their programmatic goals as expressed in their manifestos and foreseeing the issues and conflicts that might be relevant during the eventual electoral campaign. This implies that, in their manifestos, parties try to set the topics in which they hold positions that are less likely to force them to get into contradiction during the campaign and, at the same time, are important enough to attract voters.

Based on the role of manifestos as one of their tools for electoral strategy, we theorised that the growing regulatory framework that comes from the EU in relation to the environment will move Eurocritical parties to use the environment to confront with the EU and that this can be observed in their manifestos.

4 The relationship between attitudes towards EU integration and positions on the environment in Euromanifestos

Our analysis explores the relationship between environmentalism and stances on the EU based on what parties expressed in their Euromanifestos (Carteny *et al.*, 2023) and, therefore, we correlate and calculate linear associations between parties' scores on the pro-anti EU dimension as well as the share of positive quasi-sentences over the share of negative sentences about the environment at the EU level (see Methodological Appendix). The obtained results are depicted in Figure 1 and support our theoretical expectation because they

reveal a noteworthy correlation between a more negative view of the EU and more negative mentions of the environment.

Figure 1. Parties' Positions on Environmental Protection at the EU Level by Position on European Integration.
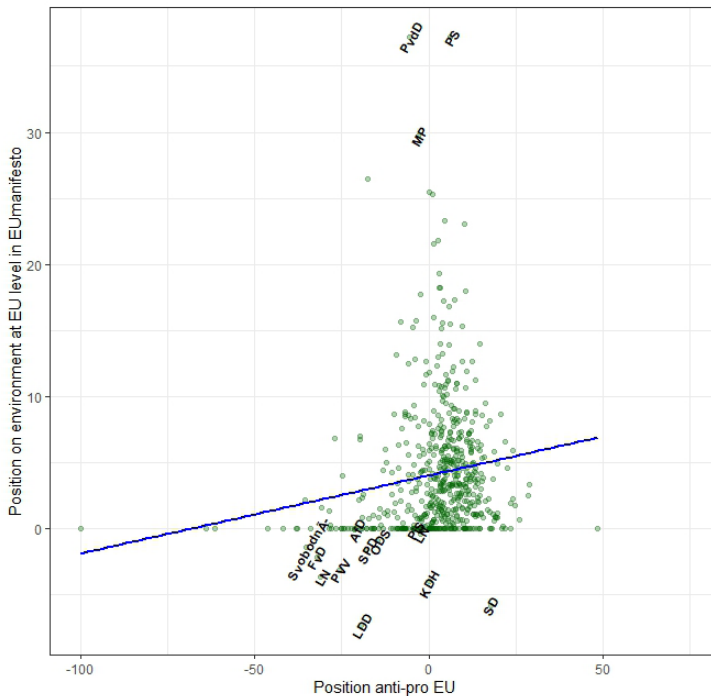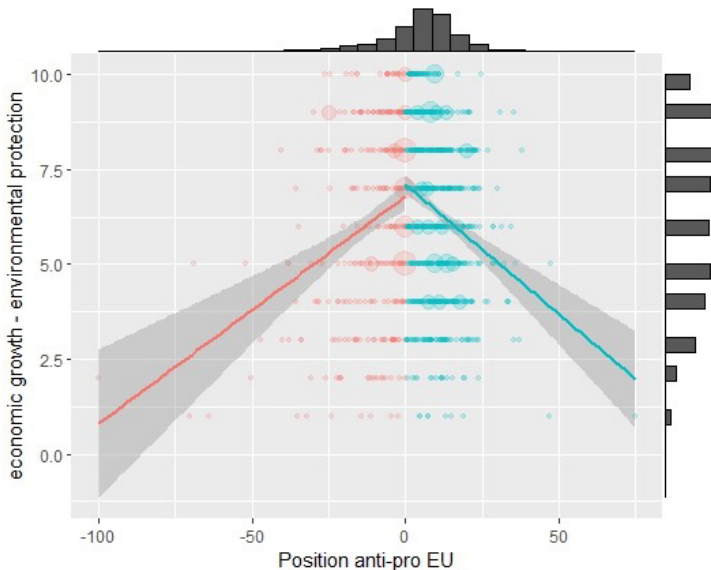

Note: Linear regression line in blue. This figure was elaborated by the authors using secondary data available in Euromanifesto Study (years 2009, 2014 and 2019).

As shown, parties exhibiting a greater proportion of negative mentions in relation to the environment have also a more negative view of EU integration. This is relevant because the number of parties that present a more positive view of EU integration in their Euromanifesto is more than double the number of parties that show a more critical view of EU integration, but to this smaller group belong all the parties with a negative discourse about the environment at the EU level. The sole exception is the Social Democrats in Ireland who talk more negatively about the environment at the EU level in their Euromanifesto while being a more pro-EU integration party. Conversely, among the more pro-environment Euromanifestos we find the soft-Eurosceptic Party for the Animals from the Netherlands (*PvdD*) and the Swedish Greens (*Miljöpartiet de Gröna*). The latter is a party that during years actively opposed EU membership (Burchell 1997) and even demanded a new referendum on this matter, an idea

that was only abandoned in 2008 (Jozwiak 2008). These parties, however, have soften their opposition towards EU integration as the EU was increasing its regulation on environmental issues to the point that in 2019 the Swedish Greens were no longer among the group of the Eurocritical parties based on their Euromanifesto.

The fact that parties opposing the EU or simply Eurocritical emphasize in their manifestos their positions towards protection of the environment suggests that this issue has become a new dimension of political competition that is used to confront with the EU because it has gone too far in the environmental regulation or because it is not sufficiently ambitious (which will be the case for the *PvdV* and the *Miljöpartiet* before 2019). Parties critical of the EU will be more likely to incorporate mentions criticising environmental protection in their manifestos as a way to challenge the EU in a policy domain that is becoming one of its hallmarks. This is even more evident when comparing with the positions on environmental protection at the country level as shown in their Euromanifesto (see Figure A.1. in the Appendix). In contrast to what happens when referring to the EU level where the positive trend between environmentalism and pro-EU integration stances is clear, there is no correlation at all between stances on the environment at the national level as referred in their Euromanifesto and support for the EU.

Figure 2. Parties' positions on economic growth versus environmental protection by position on European integration

Note: Regression discontinuity design. 95% confidence intervals. This figure was elaborated by the authors using secondary data available in Euromanifesto Study (years 2009, 2014 and 2019).

Finally, we explore whether this relationship holds when analysing political stances from a more qualitative perspective. Thus, we use the Euromanifesto Project's coders' assessments to determine whether the parties defend economic growth over environmental protection and test whether these stances are associated with positions on EU integration (see Figure 2). While we could not identify a clear trend, using a regression discontinuity design we found that for Eurocritical parties, the more radical they are against the EU, the more they support economic growth over environmental protection. However, and to our surprise, from these qualitative assessments, it is revealed that Europhile parties also exhibit a significant inclination toward prioritizing economic growth over environmental concerns.

Given that in the analysis of the quasi-sentences of the Euromanifesto, parties supporting the EU were less negative on the issue of environmental protection, we can deduce that they are less likely to campaign on the environment at the EU level because it could be understood as a way to challenge the EU mainstream position. Thus, they are more willing to avoid controversial stances about the environment in their manifesto for the European Elections. Conversely, those more Eurocritical are willing to explicitly use the environment in their Euromanifestos as a way to confront the EU by holding a clearer negative position on this issue in their electoral programs for the EP Elections.

5 Conclusions

The EU's environmental goals do not only shape policies but have also become a focal point for political manoeuvring. Using data from parties' Euromanifestos on the 2009, 2014, and 2019 EP Elections, this study unveils a pattern where Eurosceptic parties are more likely to adopt anti-environmental positions in their manifestos as a way to challenge and confront with the EU. On the other hand, Europhile parties either downplay environmental issues or even embrace a more environmentally friendly stance. This approach highlights the complexity of the interplay between environmental concerns and political strategies, showcasing how parties strategically emphasize or de-emphasize environmental agendas based on their perceived electoral gains. As Eurocritical parties strive to challenge the EU, they employ the environment as a strategic instrument for both opposing the union and forging alliances. This research provides a new outlook on the complex interplay between environmental priorities and party competition within the EU.

In our perspective, the debate on environmental protection and climate policy will become even more relevant at the European-level electoral competition. This is primarily because the discourse on the EU polity is losing strength in

favour of issues related to policies, and those parties that have traditionally opposed the EU are compelled to take positions on matters such as environmental protection, which have become integral to European identity.

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Methodological Appendix

To study the extent to which Euro-critical parties make their stances on the environment more or less prominent in their political campaign to the European Elections, we use the data from the *Euromanifesto Study* (Carteny et al. 2023). This dataset contains information about the percentage of quasi-sentences coded in different categories that integrate the different party programs to the European Elections (Euromanifestos). Each Euromanifesto is unitized and every quasi-sentence is classified in one of nine domains and its subcategories following a coding scheme similar to the one of the *Comparative Manifestos Project*. The unitization of the texts is described in Carteny et al. (2023). For the

elections of 2009, 2014 and 2019 the Euromanifestos dataset includes also information about the percentage of quasi-sentences referred to "Environmental protection" and distinguishes between positive (for) and negative (against) mentions of environmental protection at the national, European and undefined levels. In order to obtain positional measures from the share of quasi-sentences, we deduct the share of negative quasi-sentences referring to "Environmental protection" at the EU level (*per_v2_501b*) from the share of positive mentions of the same domain at the same level (*per_v2_501a*). Thus, positive (negative) values indicate that the Euromanifesto contains more (less) quasi-sentences that present the environmental protection at the EU level in a positive than in a negative way. While this is not clearly a positional score – i.e. it does not explicitly says where the party stands regarding environmental policies -, it provides valuable information about the extent to which parties talk about it in their Euromanifestos, suggesting there are incentives to take stances on this policy dimension.

We follow a two-fold strategy and include another dependent variable which is parties' positions on the continuum from environmental protection versus economic growth. The original variable "environ" runs from (1) Environmental protection to (10) Economic growth but we reverted the scale so higher number would indicate a more pro-environment position. This variable is rather qualitative as it is the result of Euromanifestos' coders' assessment.

Our main independent variable is parties' anti-pro EU positions which is measured as the sum of pro-EU integration codes minus the sum of integration-sceptic codes (*pro_anti_EU* variable in the Euromanifestos dataset. See Carteny et al. 2023). This way, negative scores are associated with parties holding Euro-critical stances in their Euromanifesto against positive scores that identify parties in favour of more EU integration.

Figure A.1. Parties' positions on environmental protection at the national level by position on European integration.
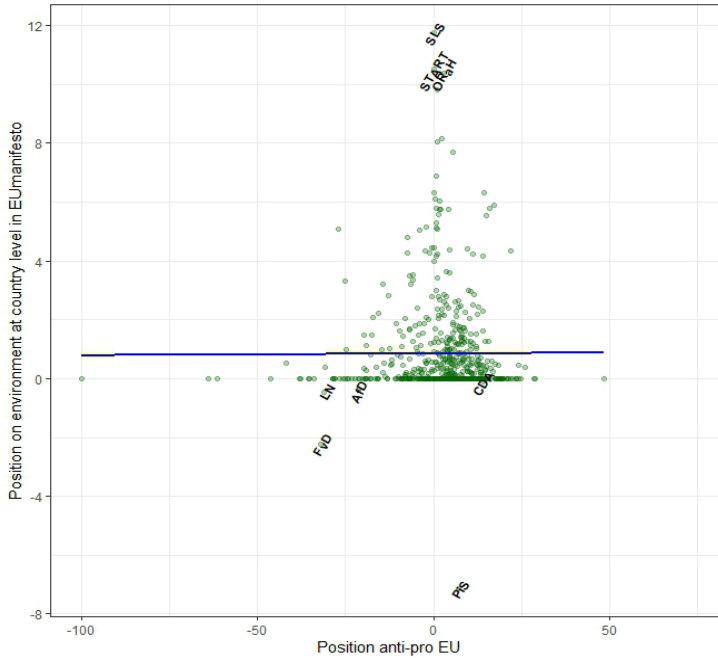
Note: Linear regression line in blue. This figure was elaborated by the authors using secondary data available in Euromanifesto Study (years 2009, 2014 and 2019)

Data Sources

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Notes

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