

# Green parties: the rise of a new politics?

## 4



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### Key issues

- ▶ What is the 'new politics'?
- ▶ How can the emergence of green parties be explained?
- ▶ Who are the green voters?
- ▶ Why do people vote green?
- ▶ What factors explain variations in the electoral success of green parties?

Green parties have become a familiar feature of the political landscape, particularly in Europe. The first green parties were formed in Tasmania and New Zealand in 1972, and the Swiss elected the first green to a national assembly in 1979. By the late 1990s, green parties were sufficiently established to have joined national coalition governments in Belgium, Finland, France, Germany and Italy, to have deputies in several other national parliaments, and to be represented in sub-national chambers in many countries. In 2004, thirty-four Green MEPs from eleven countries were elected to the European Parliament. Several individual Green politicians have held high office, notably Joschka Fischer as German Foreign Minister and Michele Schreyer as the first Green European Commissioner between 1999 and 2004. The Greens have clearly arrived, and their message seems to have sufficient coherence and resonance to exert an electoral appeal that transcends national borders. How do we account for the rise of green parties? Do they simply reflect a specific public concern about the state of the environment, or are they part of a general shift towards a postmaterialist ‘new politics’? To whom does the green message appeal? Why have green parties performed better in some countries than in others? Can green parties extend their appeal beyond a handful of rich industrialised nations? What is the impact of government participation on green electoral support? Are green parties here to stay or are they simply a ‘flash party’ that will soon disappear?

The chapter begins with a brief survey of green party electoral performance, identifying those countries where green parties have secured electoral success and those where they have not. The [next section](#) assesses three broad macro-level new politics explanations of green party development:

**Political opportunity structure:** The dimensions of the political environment that either encourage people to use collective action or discourage them from doing so, and which shape the development of movements and parties.

new social movements, new class accounts and postmaterialism. These macro-level theories help explain the rise of green parties, but they cannot account for variations in green party success between countries. In the [next section](#), the ‘**political opportunity structure**’ (POS) framework, which combines these broad structural and

cultural explanations with institutional factors such as the electoral system and party competition in individual countries, is applied to green party performance in Germany, France and the UK. Finally, although the POS framework does provide a more comprehensive and sensitive account, it can be criticised for underestimating the influence of ecological concerns in public support for green parties.

## ► Green party electoral performance: an overview

Green parties have achieved their main electoral successes in Northern and Western Europe (see Table 4.1). In four countries – West Germany, Belgium, Switzerland and Luxembourg – green parties averaged at least 5 per cent of the vote during the 1980s and regularly won seats in national

**Table 4.1 Electoral performance of selected European green parties**

|                          | First Green MP elected | Average % vote national elections |       |           | Number of MPs <sup>a</sup> |
|--------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------|-----------|----------------------------|
|                          |                        | 1980s                             | 1990s | 2000–2006 |                            |
| Austria                  | 1986                   | 4.0                               | 6.0   | 10.3      | 21                         |
| Belgium <sup>b</sup>     | 1981                   | 5.9                               | 10.9  | 5.6       | 4                          |
| Finland                  | 1983                   | 2.8                               | 6.9   | 8.0       | 14                         |
| France                   | 1997                   | 1.1                               | 7.2   | 4.4       | 3                          |
| Germany                  | 1983                   | 5.1 <sup>c</sup>                  | 6.3   | 8.4       | 51                         |
| Ireland                  | 1989                   | 1.0                               | 2.1   | 3.7       | 6                          |
| Italy                    | 1987                   | 2.5                               | 2.7   | 2.1       | 15                         |
| Luxembourg               | 1984                   | 6.8                               | 8.9   | 11.6      | 7                          |
| Netherlands <sup>d</sup> | 1990                   | –                                 | 5.0   | 5.6       | 7                          |
| Spain                    | 2004                   | 0.9                               | *     | *         | 1                          |
| Sweden                   | 1988                   | 2.9                               | 4.3   | 4.9       | 19                         |
| Switzerland              | 1979                   | 7.1                               | 5.5   | 7.4       | 13                         |
| UK                       | –                      | 0.3                               | 0.5   | 0.9       | 0                          |

*Notes:*<sup>a</sup> At most recent election before January 2007.<sup>b</sup> Combined results of Ecolo and Agalev/Groen!.<sup>c</sup> This figure refers to West German elections.<sup>d</sup> The figures refer to the Green Left, not the tiny De Groenen.

\* There are several Spanish Green lists, so it is difficult to estimate their tiny vote.

*Source:* Keesings Archives.

parliaments. The German and Belgian greens have proved most successful. Germany boasts the largest and best-known green party, Die Grünen: it established itself as the third strongest German political party at the 1994 federal election and it joined with the Social Democrats to form a coalition government between 1998 and 2005.<sup>1</sup> The two Belgian green parties, the Flemish-speaking Groen! (formerly called Agalev) and French-speaking Ecolo, mirror the duplication of other Belgian parties on linguistic lines. After entering parliament in 1981 they steadily increased support, gaining a notable success in the 1999 election when a combined vote of 14.3 per cent and 20 MPs propelled them into governing coalitions at federal and sub-national levels. However, after four years in government both parties suffered a resounding defeat at the 2003 election, with Ecolo obtaining just four seats and Groen! failing to win a single seat. The Swiss Green Party is established as the largest alternative party outside the four-party government cartel.

In a second group of countries – Finland, France, Austria and the Netherlands – green parties did not average over 5 per cent of the vote in national

elections until the 1990s. The Finnish Green League was the first green party to join a national government in 1995 and, after strengthening its position, it remained in the rainbow coalition government after the 1999 election. The Green League resigned from the coalition in 2002 after the Finnish parliament supported the government's decision to commission a new nuclear power station, but it achieved its best electoral performance in 2003 winning 8 per cent of the vote and fourteen seats. In France, Les Verts gained its first seven deputies in 1997 and joined the Lionel Jospin socialist-led coalition government, but the defeat of the government in 2002 saw Les Verts slip to three deputies. The Austrian Alternative Grüne Österreich (ALÖ), having absorbed most members of the moderate ecological party Vereinigte Grüne Österreich (VGÖ) in 1986, is now well established, gaining 11.1 per cent and twenty-one MPs in the 2006 election, making it the third largest party. In the Netherlands, a small 'dark' green party, De Groenen, has been completely eclipsed by the merger in 1990 of four small left-of-centre parties – communists, pacifists, radicals and an evangelical party – to form the Green Left. Although slow to take off, in 1998 it gained 7.3 per cent of the vote, slipping slightly by 2006 to 4.6 per cent and seven MPs. In addition to these 'successful' parties, the Swedish Miljöpartiet entered parliament in 1988 and whilst it fell below the 4 per cent threshold in 1991, it has managed to remain just above the threshold since 1994, obtaining 5.2 per cent of the vote and nineteen seats in 2006.

Elsewhere, other European green parties have struggled to secure a firm electoral platform. The Italian Greens have consistently averaged around 2 per cent of the vote, yet they spent five years in the centre-left Olivo government between 1996 and 2001, and, after five years in opposition, they gained 2.1 per cent and fifteen MPs in 2006 as part of the centre-left alliance that formed the Prodi-led coalition government. The Irish Comhaontas Glas has grown steadily stronger, tripling its representation to six MPs in 2002. Green politics in Spain is highly factionalised: a national green party, Los Verdes, was not formed until 1992, although several other green lists are to be found in every national election. In 2004 Los Verdes agreed a coalition list with the Socialists and won its first seat. Another group of countries, including Britain, Norway and Denmark, have yet to elect a Green MP. It is debatable whether the Portuguese Os Verdes, which contests elections in coalition with the Communists, is a genuinely distinct party. Further afield, Greens have been elected to national assemblies in a disparate range of countries including the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Ukraine and Mexico. New Zealand boasts probably the most successful non-European green party, with six MPs elected in 2005. The absence of a single national green party in Australia has hampered progress, although a handful of Greens have been elected to the Senate and to state parliaments, notably in Tasmania. Green parties have had little success in North America, although the veteran consumer campaigner Ralph Nader attracted almost three million votes (2.7 per cent) on a green ticket in the 2000 US presidential election

(see Box 5.5). In April 2006 there were over 232 greens holding minor elected office across twenty-eight American states (Green Party 2006).

This brief overview of green parties raises two main questions. How can the rise of green parties in recent years be explained? Why have they met with such variable electoral success? The following section assesses whether the ‘new politics’ thesis can account for the rise of green parties.

## ► Is there a new politics?

This section analyses the main components of the new politics thesis – the rise of new social movements, the emergence of a new middle class and the flourishing of postmaterial values – before assessing their contribution to the rise of green parties.

### ► *New social movements?*

‘New social movements’ (NSMs), notably the student, peace, anti-nuclear, feminist and environmental movements, were responsible for a major part of the collective social protest that swept Western Europe from the late 1960s. Scott (1990) distinguishes NSMs from old social movements, such as trade unions, according to their location, aims, organisational form and medium of action. First, while trade unions are located within the polity and typically seek to influence social democratic and labour parties, NSMs bypass the state by operating outside the established parties, trying to mobilise civil society rather than win power. Secondly, the aims of trade unions have been political integration, legislative reform and economic rights for workers, whereas NSMs focus on defending civil society against excessive political power (particularly of the state) and seek cultural changes to values and lifestyles. NSMs question the materialist assumptions, such as economic growth, that underpin the ideology of those movements representing capital and labour. Thirdly, trade unions adopt the bureaucratic and hierarchical forms of organisation prevalent in society, while NSMs are usually informal, decentralised and participatory organisations. Finally, trade unions generally work within the existing political institutions, whereas NSMs adopt innovative repertoires of action, including confrontation and direct action, often outside the law (see Box 4.1).

This characterisation of the NSM as participatory, issue-specific and geared to the mobilisation of public opinion, is an ideal type based on the NSM in its most radical and fundamentalist form. One obvious problem, therefore, is that it presents a snapshot of the NSM at one moment – its initial stage – when it ‘has all the optimism of a new movement grounded in recent mobilisation, before the movement must reflect upon how it is to affect the social and political environment’ (Scott 1990: 154). Once established, movements make compromises, usually by gradually adopting conventional organisational structures and strategies.

#### 4.1 New social movements

There are two broad approaches to the study of social movements, commonly termed the European and American approaches (Klandermans and Tarrow 1988).

The *European* approach focuses on the structural transformations underpinning the rise of NSMs, i.e. *why* people take action in this way. Some theorists have made grand claims about their significance, suggesting that NSMs represent a radical new form of class politics (Touraine 1981), or that, in the modern information age, NSMs have a symbolic

resonance reaching far beyond the scale of their activities (Melucci 1989).

The *American* approach, notably Resource Mobilisation Theory, sees politics as the mobilisation of resources. It examines *how* groups pursue goals by focusing on the role of organisation and of political entrepreneurs in turning grievances into political issues.

The *political opportunity structure* framework attempts to integrate these contrasting approaches by combining broad structural and cultural arguments with institutional factors.

These compromises have been so far-reaching that, 'by the end of the eighties, most of the new social movements in Western Europe appeared to be pragmatic reformist movements . . . closely connected to established politics in various dimensions' (Kriesi et al. 1995: xxi). It seemed that some of the more grandiose claims about the radical potential of NSMs (e.g. Touraine 1981; Melucci 1989) were misplaced. Nevertheless, the existence of a dynamic NSM milieu may provide an important *institutional* factor shaping the development of a green party.

#### ► *Environmentalism as middle-class elitism?*

This explanation of the new politics focuses on fundamental changes in the economic and social *structures* of advanced capitalist societies in the post-war era. The contraction of traditional manufacturing industry and the growth of the service sector produced a major shift in occupational structures, with the decline in the traditional blue-collar working class mirrored by an expansion of the white-collar sector. Other factors, including improved material standards of living, the massive expansion of higher education and the information revolution, have also contributed to the blurring of traditional class divisions and loyalties in the 'postindustrial society' (Bell 1973). Some writers claim that a new middle class has emerged: highly educated, filling professional and welfare jobs and economically secure (Gouldner 1979; Kriesi 1993). It is argued that this new class is in some respects more alienated from the political system than the traditional working class and, crucially, more able and willing to criticise the established parties, the bureaucracy and the dominant materialist agenda.

The relevance of the 'new class' thesis to the study of environmental politics lies in the empirical claim that participants in new social movements generally, and environmentalists in particular, are predominantly drawn from the new middle class (Cotgrove 1982; Morrison and Dunlap 1986;

Rootes 1995a). Offe (1985) adds that two other groups are also active in NSMs: first, 'decommodified' groups who are peripheral to the labour market, such as students, housewives, pensioners and the unemployed; second, members of the 'old' middle class who are independent and self-employed, such as farmers, shop-owners and artisans. Significantly, all these groups fall outside the two traditional classes of capital and labour (i.e. the industrial working class).

New class explanations of NSMs assume that, as classes have interests, the domination of environmentalism by the new middle class must represent an attempt to further its own class interests. Indeed, some socialists have sought to dismiss environmentalism as an expression of middle-class elitism (Enzensberger 1974). However, class interest arguments are fraught with problems. In the first place, why should environmentalism serve exclusively middle-class interests? All classes suffer the consequences of pollution; indeed, it is usually the poorest and most disadvantaged groups who suffer the most direct and worst problems of environmental degradation and pollution in the workplace and in inner-city communities (Bullard 2000). Cotgrove (1982) suggests that the location of the new middle class in the non-productive sector marginalises it from the processes of decision-making at the economic and productive core of society. Hence new-middle-class frustration at its own powerlessness is manifested in protest activity and involvement in NSMs. It is not clear, however, why members of the new middle class feel alienated when, by definition, they are usually fully employed in professional and administrative jobs (Eckersley 1989). Alternatively, McAdams (1987) argues that they have an interest in the expansion of government, not least because it provides so many of the professional and welfare jobs they hold. Yet this argument cannot support the view that middle-class involvement in environmentalism is an expression of class interest because green arguments for slower economic growth threaten future expansion of the non-productive service sector, which employs so many of them. Thus, as Martell (1994) observes, new-middle-class concern for the environment may be 'class-based, but does not seem to be class-driven' (p. 130); there may be a disproportionate number of new-middle-class environmentalists, but there is no convincing argument why that concern should be in the material interests of that particular class.

Instead, it may be that the welfare professions encourage 'the development of emancipatory occupational cultures among radicals working in these fields' (Doherty 2002: 61); in other words, the nature of the job – notably its autonomy, its ambiguous role within capitalist society and its essentially political nature – nurtures the kinds of attitudes and values that make the new middle classes receptive to environmentalism. On the other hand, the causal relationship may operate in reverse, so that individuals with predisposed attitudes and values may be drawn to the welfare professions. If so, what is the origin of those attitudes? One possible explanation is provided by the postmaterialist thesis.

### ► *Environmentalism as postmaterialism?*

This explanation for the rise of green parties focuses on changes in the political culture and values of industrialised countries. Inglehart (1977, 1990) is the leading exponent of the postmaterialist thesis. He claims that there has been a ‘silent revolution’ involving ‘the basic value priorities of Western publics . . . shifting from a Materialist emphasis toward a Postmaterialist one – from giving top priority to physical sustenance and safety toward heavier emphasis on belonging, self-expression and the quality of life’ (Inglehart 1990: 66). This argument contains two core components: the scarcity hypothesis and the socialisation hypothesis. The *scarcity* hypothesis, modelled on Maslow’s (1954) psychological theory of human motivation, claims that people place a higher priority on things that are in short supply. Inglehart argues that the post-war era of steady economic growth and unparalleled affluence produced a generation of young people who took their economic well-being for granted. When the lower-order needs of economic and physical security are satisfied, people direct attention to higher-order ‘quality of life’, or postmaterial, needs, such as the environment. According to Inglehart, the ascendancy of postmaterial values does not arise from individuals actually changing their values, but through the *socialisation* of a new generation that lives its formative, pre-adult, years in affluent times. Inglehart initially developed this theory to account for the student unrest that swept across the Western world in the late 1960s. Subsequently, it has been used to explain the dealignment of traditional partisan voting patterns, the involvement of this postmaterial generation in NSMs and the emergence of green parties: ‘The rise of the West German Greens . . . reflects both the emergence of a Postmaterialist constituency whose outlook is not captured by the existing political parties and the emergence of a growing pool of voters who are politicized but do not feel tied to established parties’ (Inglehart 1990: 369).

Although Inglehart’s theory has gained many adherents, it has also been subjected to a barrage of criticisms, particularly aimed at the two hypotheses underpinning the model, and the methodology he devised to measure postmaterialism (see Box 4.2).<sup>2</sup> The scarcity hypothesis assumes that the satisfaction of material needs encourages individuals to shift attention to postmaterial values. Yet the hierarchy of needs adopts a static definition of those material needs – a roof over our heads, food on our plates, money in our pockets, the protection of law and order – when, in the modern consumer society, with greater affluence and an ever increasing range of available goods, our appetite for more and more material goods may be insatiable. Our definition of basic needs is steadily broadening: a washing machine was a luxury item in the 1960s, but many would now consider it a basic item – along with the dishwasher, computer and mobile phone. In short, greater affluence may simply encourage further materialism rather than nurture postmaterial values.

#### 4.2 Measuring postmaterialism

Inglehart's methodology for measuring postmaterialism asks people to select their two most important goals from four options:

1. maintain order in the nation;
2. give people more say in the decisions of government;
3. fight rising prices;
4. protect freedom of speech.

Anyone choosing the second and fourth options is classified as a postmaterialist while someone choosing the first and third options is a materialist. All other combinations are placed in a 'mixed' category. Inglehart (1990) produced extensive comparative research across twenty-four countries to support his claim that Americans and Western Europeans have become substantially more postmaterialist since 1970 and he predicted that this trend will continue. A 1993 European survey found that postmaterialists are still in a minority and, almost everywhere, are outnumbered by materialists.

| % classified as | Germany | Britain | Italy | Spain |
|-----------------|---------|---------|-------|-------|
| Postmaterialist | 23      | 11      | 12    | 12    |
| Mixed           | 56      | 63      | 62    | 57    |
| Materialist     | 21      | 26      | 25    | 31    |

Source: Bryson and Curtice (1998: 130).

##### *Methodological concerns*

1. Is it possible to make confident categorisations of individual value priorities on the basis of such a narrow battery of items?
2. The four-item battery contains no environmental item. Even Inglehart's expanded, but rarely used, twelve-item battery contains just one explicitly environmental item: 'trying to make our cities and countryside more beautiful'. How helpful is such a limited measure in evaluating why people vote green?

Inglehart bases the socialisation hypothesis on the critical pre-adult years, and largely dismisses the impact of any adult economic insecurity on values. His prediction that the proportion of postmaterialists will continue to rise rather downplays the impact of widespread economic insecurity during the 1970s and 1980s on subsequent cohorts. Even putting methodological objections aside and accepting that postmaterialism has increased, can this change be explained by the scarcity and socialisation hypotheses? Rather than NSMs being a product of postmaterialism, value change may actually be rooted in the NSM milieu. Instead of better living standards generating postmaterialism (and this brings us full circle), perhaps the growth of welfare-oriented jobs in education and public health has engendered value change (Martell 1994: 125; Doherty 2002: 61–3). On the specific question of the environment, the key variable linked to increased concern about the environment is experience of higher education, presumably because it helps people to process more information, enhances their job prospects and material security, and encourages a wider critical perspective (Offe 1985; Eckersley 1989; Rootes 1995a). A further problem with the postmaterialist thesis is that 'if environmentalism is simply a question of values, then environmental conflict is a conflict without interests' (Andersen 1990: 104–5). Yet

the opponents of environmentalism are not individuals who simply hold different values, such as a preference for economic growth; rather, they are usually economic actors (employers, farmers, trade unions) who perceive their material interests (profits, livelihoods, jobs) as directly threatened by green measures. Notwithstanding these criticisms, there is sufficient empirical evidence of a spread of postmaterial values at least to treat it seriously as one partial explanation of the emergence of environmentalism.

The [next section](#) assesses how far these three broad ‘new politics’ arguments can account for the rise of green parties.

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### ***Critical question 1***

Is the environment a postmaterial or material issue?

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### ► *Green parties as new politics?*

*New social movement* activity was certainly a catalyst for the development of green parties in some countries. The broad coalition of environmental and leftist groups that formed the anti-nuclear movements of the 1970s and 1980s was particularly conducive to green party formation in Germany, France, Luxembourg and Finland, and in Austria and Sweden green parties emerged from referendum campaigns against nuclear power (Rootes [1995b](#): 237). ‘Eco-pax’ coalitions between the environmental and the peace movements were also important, especially in Germany. The radical principles of NSM activists left a strong imprint on some green parties, notably the German Greens, which informed their reluctance to work with mainstream parties, the preference for participatory, decentralised organisational structures and a willingness to use extra-parliamentary action to achieve their aims. Nevertheless, although undoubtedly influenced by the counter-cultural NSM milieu, green parties cannot be regarded as NSMs. Just by contesting elections and operating within the political system, green parties set themselves clearly apart from the ideal-type NSM. Internal tensions over the extent to which green parties should engage with established political parties and institutions (see [Chapter 5](#)) are essentially about the *degree* of compromise, when the real compromise was the decision to form a party in the first place. Several green parties, notably in the UK, Ireland, Sweden and throughout Eastern Europe, are not rooted in the NSM milieu, which suggests that environmental concern may be qualitatively different from NSM concerns such as gender, race or peace (none of which has, with the odd exception, spawned its own political party).

Most European green parties do attract support overwhelmingly from new-middle-class voters. Academic studies and opinion polls show conclusively that, compared to supporters of other parties, green voters are younger, better educated, less likely to attend church and more likely to hold public sector and/or white-collar jobs (Müller-Rommel [1989](#), [1990](#); Richardson and

Rootes 1995). A detailed picture emerges from Germany which, because of the success of Die Grünen, has been subjected to intensive analysis. Here, until the mid-1990s, the majority of green voters were under thirty-six even though only one-third of the total German electorate was in that age group (Poguntke 1993; Scharf 1994: 79–89; Dalton and Bürklin 1996). Die Grünen has always drawn a disproportionately large share of support, around 50 per cent, from students and white-collar workers; conversely, it attracts relatively few older voters and blue-collar workers (Poguntke 1993; Dalton and Bürklin 1996; Gibowski 1999: 24–5). Greens are well educated: about half of green voters have gained an *Abitur* – which qualifies someone to enter university – compared to a national average of around a quarter (Poguntke 1993). The profiles of green electorates elsewhere, such as Austria (Lauber 2003: 140) and Finland, look remarkably similar. One study found that the Finnish Green League are ‘the female-dominated party of the average to highly educated, and the relatively young, new middle classes’ (Zilliacus 2001: 50).

Green party activists have an even more distinctive socio-economic profile. A 1990 survey of the UK Green Party reported that the typical member ‘is 41 . . . has a university degree in an arts or social science subject (but not engineering, business or law), is an owner-occupier, and works as a “professional” in the public sector, most likely in education’ (Rüdiger et al. 1991: 30), a profile that had changed little by 2002 (Bennie 2004: ch. 8). Similar profiles were found in studies of Dutch (Voerman 1995), Belgian (Kitschelt 1989) and German (ibid.; Poguntke 1993) activists.

Greens, therefore, do seem to be drawn disproportionately from the so-called new middle class but, if Inglehart is right, they should also hold a wide range of postmaterial values. However, whilst levels of postmaterialism are high among party activists – 94 per cent of German Green Party delegates (Poguntke 1993: 93) and 74 per cent of Dutch Green Left delegates (Lucardie et al. 1995: 100) – the relationship is weaker in the wider electorate. German (Poguntke 1993: 58) and Dutch green voters do display a clear postmaterial orientation, but elsewhere green voters hold a broad spread of both material and postmaterial concerns, with the environment as the one theme in common (Jehlicka 1994). Typically, the evidence is suggestive rather than conclusive. In Sweden, for example, green voters are slightly more postmaterialist than those voting for other parties, but the statistical association is no more than ‘modest’ (Bennulf 1995: 135). More broadly, several surveys raise serious doubts about the existence of a direct link between postmaterial values and environmental concern (Nas 1995; Bryson and Curtice 1998).

These findings hint at a deeper problem with postmaterialist accounts of environmental politics: is it accurate to define all ecological hazards as postmaterialist concerns (Nas 1995: 288; Rootes 1997: 320–1)? Many environmental issues – about the safety of nuclear power and GM crops, or the links between air pollution and asthma – could all reasonably be defined as materialist problems because they affect personal security and health. As Beck (1992) has argued, people are increasingly motivated by the growing

perception that we live in a 'risk society'. If so, perhaps the attachment to green politics is partly prompted by old-fashioned materialist values (albeit in a new guise), rather than, as Inglehart claims, the emergence of a new set of value priorities. Not least, this interpretation might explain why many 'materialists' vote for green parties.

On balance, 'new politics' arguments do help explain the rise of green parties; in particular, there is a remarkable cross-national uniformity in the socio-economic profile of green support. However, Inglehart's cultural explanation of green politics as reflecting the emergence of postmaterialist values remains unproven. Indeed, the socio-economic profile of green support suggests possible alternative explanations for the rise of green parties. The large number of greens with higher education lends support to Eckersley's (1989) claim that this variable may be critical. Also, while most greens do have reasonable economic security (or the prospect of future security), they tend to be located on the margins of society. This is not to say, as some have argued (Alber 1989; Bürklin 1987), that greens are profoundly alienated from society, for they clearly are not; teachers and social workers may not always represent the dominant values in society, but neither are they outsiders. However, many greens are shielded from the productive private sector of the economy where growth and its materialist spin-offs are central considerations. Whether this detachment is deliberately chosen by people already concerned by environmental issues, or reflects the experiences of working in specific occupations and sectors of the economy, is difficult to ascertain. However, it bodes well for the future prospects of the greens that they draw heavily for support on sectors of society – higher education, the service sector, health and welfare – that are expanding.

Conversely, there is growing evidence that the green vote in some countries is getting older, or 'greying'. Whereas 70.5 per cent of German Green voters were under thirty-five in 1980, by 1994 it was 51 per cent and in 2005 just 27.5 per cent (Hoffman 1999: 143; Federal Statistical Office 2006). In the 2002 federal election the Greens made most gains in older age groups and drew their biggest ever share of the 45–59 and 65 plus age groups (Saalfeld 2004: 186–7). This trend was repeated in the 2005 election with the share of Green voters in these two groups reaching 27.8 per cent and 16.0 per cent respectively (Federal Statistical Office 2006). Voters seem to have remained loyal to Die Grünen as they have got older, but the party is now less successful at recruiting first-time voters; so the centre of gravity of the party has shifted into the top end of the 35–45 age bracket. The same is true in Finland where the Green League, whilst still the prime representative of new politics, increasingly draws support from older voters, as well as a wider, more 'average', social base (Zilliacus 2001: 40–1). Perhaps there is a cohort of green voters working its way through the system who joined the student protests in the late 1960s and provided the NSM activists during the following two decades? If so, it could be bad for the long-term prospects of green parties. However, as yet there is insufficient evidence to

confirm that greying is a universal trend. Indeed, there are several reasons why green parties might expect to remain popular with young voters. Voting green, particularly where the greens have not yet entered government, still represents a protest vote against the established parties and values, as shown by the success of the Belgian Greens in the 1999 national election and the popularity of Ralph Nader in the 2000 US presidential election. The increasing integration of environmental issues into the public domain, especially through the educational curriculum, should ensure that younger generations have a higher level of knowledge and understanding than older generations. Consequently, one speculative hypothesis is that, while older green supporters may be predominantly postmaterialist in outlook, the new generation of younger voters may be less postmaterialist, but influenced by a specific concern about the environment.

To summarise, new politics arguments identifying structural and cultural trends can provide only broad-brush, macro-level explanations for the rise of green parties. They do not account for differences between countries. This weakness can be illustrated by Inglehart's (1990: 93) own data. He reports that in the mid-1980s the three European countries with the highest proportion of postmaterialists were the Netherlands (25 per cent), West Germany (24 per cent) and Denmark (18 per cent). Yet green party development in these countries contrasts sharply: while Die Grünen has long been the leading light of the green movement, the Dutch Green Left only made a significant electoral breakthrough in the late 1990s while the Danish greens are so weak that they do not even contest national elections. Furthermore, there was an identical number of postmaterialists (15 per cent) in both Belgium and the UK, but while the Belgian green parties have achieved significant electoral successes, the Green Party in Britain has a dismal record in general elections. So, why have green parties developed earlier in some countries than in others, and why is their electoral performance so variable?

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### ***Critical question 2***

Is green politics a middle-class issue?

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## **► The political opportunity structure and green party success**

The political opportunity structure (POS) is a useful framework for analysing green party development because it looks beyond the broad macro variables that underpin the new politics thesis. The POS is concerned with the 'dimensions of the political environment which either encourage or discourage people from using collective action' (Tarrow 1994: 18).<sup>3</sup> Each writer tends to use a different combination of variables. The discussion here employs a model

of the POS based on the work of Kitschelt (1986, 1988, 1990), who has used it to study green parties. His model incorporates the broad structural factors underpinning the new politics thesis, such as the development of modern welfare capitalism and contemporary economic prosperity, but draws particular attention to the institutional and political factors that might determine the openness of a political system to green parties. These include NSM activity, the form of electoral system, the nature of party competition and the existence of precipitating issues, such as the anti-nuclear protests, that may act as a catalyst for the emergence and development of a green party. The following short case studies of green party development in Germany, France and Britain focus on these critical features of the POS that help account for variations in green party performance.

### ► *Germany*<sup>4</sup>

Die Grünen has played a pioneering role in the development of the green movement. After entering parliament in 1983, it rapidly established itself in the German political system. After a blip in the 1990 post-unification election, when no Greens were returned in the former West Germany, the Greens edged past the liberal Free Democrats Party (FDP) to finish third in the 1994, 1998 and 2002 federal elections. Thus since the mid-1990s the party has become a serious political power-broker as a potential coalition partner for one of the two major parties, the Social Democrats (SPD) or the Christian Democrats (CDU). After the 1998 federal election the Greens joined the Social Democrats in a red-green government coalition until its defeat in 2005. Although attracting 8.1 per cent of the list vote in 2005 – only fractionally lower than in 2002 – the Greens slipped to fifth behind the FDP (9.8 per cent) and the new Left Party (8.7 per cent).

Die Grünen was rooted in social movement activity dating from the late 1960s and 1970s. Leading elements included a long-lasting student movement, citizen action groups (protesting about issues such as housing shortages, high rents and pollution), the anti-nuclear-power and women's movements. Many green activists were involved in the large peace movement, which campaigned against the siting of Pershing and Cruise missiles in Europe, and their 'eco-pax' agenda shaped the development of green ideology and practice. The acid rain issue was an important precipitating condition for the general increase in public concern about the environment in the early 1980s.

The electoral rules have generally proved very helpful to the Greens. German electoral law refunds campaign costs to any party gaining more than 0.5 per cent of the votes. Thus, from its early days the party was able to develop a national organisational structure without needing to attract rich sponsors. The additional member electoral system gives representation to every party receiving at least 5 per cent of the votes. This threshold was

sufficiently low to be attainable, yet high enough to act as a force for unity for the disparate collection of green groups that mushroomed throughout West Germany in the late 1970s before forming Die Grünen in 1980. Progress was so rapid that the Greens gained twenty-seven MPs with 5.6 per cent of the vote in the 1983 federal election, matched by similar successes in sub-national government. Subsequently, the party's progress was hampered by internal factionalism but, after the shock of losing all its deputies in the 1990 federal election, the discipline brought by the electoral rules enabled the moderate 'Realist' (see Box 5.2) wing of the party to win control of the party and push through a range of organisational reforms, a more moderate programme and a merger with the East German Bündnis 90. The federal structure of the German political system provided multiple access points for the Greens, enabling it to win seats in the *Länder* (states), which gave the party early publicity and credibility, and later acted as a laboratory for red-green coalitions with the SPD. European parliamentary elections have provided further electoral opportunities, with the Greens usually polling more strongly than in federal elections. The presence of a large and vocal group of Green MEPs in the European Parliament since 1984 gave the party another political platform (Bomberg 1998a).

The actions of the Green Party have also influenced its electoral success, notably its ideological development, internal party struggles and its performance in government. Ironically, for a party that is uneasy with the idea of leadership and suspicious of charismatic personalities, the Greens have produced two of the most popular and well-known German politicians of recent times, Petra Kelly and Joschka Fischer.

The Greens benefited from the political vacuum on the left of the German party system. The SPD – the leading left-wing party – shifted to the centre after a series of electoral defeats in the 1950s. As the dominant party in government between 1969 and 1982 it largely eschewed its socialist roots, to the despair of NSM activists. Consequently, in the absence of a communist party the Greens were able to fill the space to the left of the SPD by offering a new home for a sizeable constituency of disenfranchised leftists. However, since unification, the Greens have struggled in the old East Germany where the PDS (the former Communist Party) staked out the territory to the left of the SPD. Indeed, the Greens remain predominantly *West* German: in 2005 they gained 8.8 per cent there compared to 5.2 per cent in the old East Germany (Pulzer 2006: 569).

Finally, there are also some peculiarly German features to the success of the Greens. Markovits and Gorski (1993) stress the 'Holocaust effect', which covers a number of sensitive issues which have contributed to the significance of student politics and pacifism in post-war Germany. Although this last factor perhaps makes the German Greens untypical of green parties elsewhere, it is clear that institutional and political factors have played a critical role in the electoral performance of the party.

### ► *France*<sup>5</sup>

Although an ecological candidate contested the presidential election as far back as 1974 and Les Verts won eight seats in the 1989 European parliamentary elections, it was not until 1997 that the first Greens were elected to the French national assembly. During the 1970s, especially after the right-wing government launched a huge nuclear power programme in 1974, French environmentalism was dominated by the nuclear issue. When Mitterand, the newly elected Socialist president, broke his promise to place a moratorium on building new nuclear plants in 1981, environmental activists concluded that they needed a unified party to exercise greater influence in French politics. Consequently, Les Verts was formed in 1984 from the amalgamation of a disparate array of environmental and movement groups. After the success of Les Verts in the 1989 European election, a second green party, Génération Ecologie, was formed in 1990 by Brice Lalonde, a former environment minister in the Socialist government. Riding the crest of a green wave, both parties performed well in the 1992 regional elections, getting several hundred councillors elected. Subsequently, they put aside intense ideological and personal differences to form an Entente des Ecologistes to contest the 1993 legislative elections, but they failed to win any seats despite securing a respectable 7.8 per cent share of the vote. The Entente immediately collapsed. Factionalism prompted further fragmentation into a dozen small rival groups by 1995 (Faucher 1998). Yet, from this low point, Les Verts was able to establish itself as the dominant force in French green politics. In the 1997 legislative elections it agreed an electoral pact with Lionel Jospin's Socialists that returned seven Greens as part of a five-party 'plural left' alliance, enabling Les Verts to join the governing coalition with its national speaker, Dominique Voynet, initially holding the environment portfolio. In 2002, the best Green performance in a presidential election saw Noël Mamère attract 5.2 per cent of the vote, but this achievement could not compensate for the defeat of the Jospin 'plural left' government, with Les Verts winning just three seats with 4.4 per cent of the vote.

The political opportunity structure in France has constrained the development of green politics. Although the anti-nuclear movement contributed to the rise of ecological politics in the 1970s, it lost momentum in the 1980s because of conflict within the anti-nuclear movement and the obduracy of the Socialist government on this issue. Subsequently, no big ecological issue has provided a catalyst for the green parties.

France has a distinctive electoral system for legislative and presidential elections, based on two rounds of voting: if no candidate achieves 50 per cent of the vote in the first round, all candidates gaining at least 12.5 per cent can progress to the second round, which is a straight contest for the highest vote. This second-ballot system discriminates against minority parties as it is difficult to reach the 12.5 per cent threshold necessary to stay

in a constituency contest, let alone win a seat. It was only an electoral pact, whereby Socialists and Greens stood down in favour of each other in around a hundred key seats to allow one candidate a clear run, that enabled Les Verts to overcome this obstacle to secure a handful of deputies in 1997 and 2002. Significantly, in European Parliament and regional elections, where proportional representation is used, ecological candidates have achieved more success.

French party politics has been dominated by a left-right cleavage, with a political discourse centred on class politics. For many years a four-party system consisting of two right-wing and two left-wing parties distributed the preferences of the electorate across the political spectrum. It was very difficult for new parties to enter the political arena and, unlike Germany, there was no vacant political space on the left for the greens to colonise. Nevertheless, greater instability characterised the political system during the 1980s: the rise of the far-right National Front suggested growing disillusionment with the established parties, particularly on the right. On the left, the greens benefited from the decline of the Communists and the shift rightwards by the Socialist government, giving them the opportunity to recruit disillusioned left-wing voters.

The electoral prospects of French green politics have been hampered by factionalism. For example, there have always been strong differences of opinion about whether Les Verts should eschew any dealings with other political parties or try building links with the left. These differences have been intensified by fierce personality clashes between leading activists, notably Voynet, Lalonde and Antoine Waechter, a deep green who eventually resigned from the party after it shifted leftwards. It was the ascendancy of Voynet, a keen advocate of closer links with the left, together with the departure of key fundamentalist factions that had strongly opposed them, that eventually led Les Verts to discard its opposition to coalitions. This move coincided with an opening up of the POS when the Jospin-inspired 'plural left' alliance was formed. However, after the defeat of the Jospin government in 2002 Les Verts was again embroiled in a crisis of various forms – organisational, leadership, financial and strategic direction. Thus the party continues to display an electorally damaging penchant for internal squabbling and weak leadership.

The electoral fortunes of Les Verts rest heavily on the continuation of its pact with the Socialists. In the March 2004 regional elections, for example, the unpopularity of the right-wing Raffarin administration produced a landslide for the left, which won twenty-five of twenty-six regional assemblies, with Les Verts doing well in the fifteen regions where it put forward a combined list with the Socialists. This dependency on the Socialists need not be a weakness. The long-term decline of the Communists means that Les Verts has the opportunity to establish itself as the uncontested second party of the left, and therefore vital in securing any future electoral victory

for the centre-left, which would allow it to bargain from a position of some strength with the Socialists – providing it can overcome its self-destructive factionalist tendencies.

### ■ *Britain*<sup>6</sup>

Although Britain boasted the first green party in Europe, the party has struggled to achieve any significant electoral success and performs feebly in national elections. The party, originally called People, was formed in 1973 by a small discussion group to campaign on environmental issues (McCulloch 1992).<sup>7</sup> It did not emerge from a NSM milieu and has remained quite separate from the broader environmental movement, although it has worked closely with the new wave of direct action protesters, such as the anti-roads and anti-GMO movements (see Chapter 6).

Small parties find it difficult to break into the British plurality electoral system in which most individual constituency contests are dominated by the major parties. Electors are unwilling to ‘waste’ their votes on a party with little chance of winning a seat. Only where a party can concentrate its vote geographically, as with the Welsh and Scottish nationalists, is there a chance of gaining representation, but the Greens have been unable to establish any regional base. Small parties are penalised by the need to pay a £500 deposit for each candidate in a parliamentary election, returnable only if they poll at least 5 per cent of the vote, and there is no state funding for political parties. The Green Party was left with a huge bill after the loss of all 253 deposits in the 1992 general election. Subsequently it became more selective about which seats it contested, standing in just 95 seats in 1997, although improvements in party fortunes enabled it to contest 202 (of 646) seats in 2005.

Party competition has left little space for the Greens to occupy. The Conservative and Labour parties have traditionally proved adept at providing a sufficiently broad church to incorporate a wide range of ideological positions. In particular, the relatively inclusive attitude of the Labour Party towards dissident social movements has encouraged leading NSMs, such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, to focus their efforts on persuading the Labour Party to change its policy, rather than by building links with what is widely seen as a narrow, single-issue, green party (Rüdig and Lowe 1986). The Green Party faces tough competition from the centrist Liberal Democrats and the Scottish and Welsh nationalist parties, who have all made some attempt to appeal to the environmentalist vote. The significance of party competition is illustrated by the 1989 European election, when the Greens won a remarkable 15 per cent of the vote (but no MEPs). The POS briefly opened up to allow the Greens to piggy-back on the contemporary growth in public interest in the environment and to benefit from a strong protest vote against the incumbent Conservative government and the weakness of the newly formed Liberal Democrats (Rootes 1995c). Subsequently,

the Liberal Democrats became established and traditional material issues, such as the poll tax and the deepening recession, crowded out the environment, so that this window of opportunity closed again. Generally, however, the closed POS has meant that the focus of environmental politics in the UK has been on the established parties (see Chapter 5) and the large environmental lobby (see Chapter 6), rather than the Green Party. The pressure groups make a virtue of their non-partisan status, believing they will exercise most influence by lobbying politicians from all three major parties. They see little to gain from working with a weak Green Party; indeed, any partisanship might close the doors to government and risk alienating its membership. This vicious circle of exclusion has further weakened the Green Party.

Yet, in recent years, as a result of the Labour government's programme of constitutional reform the political opportunity structure has opened up a little to the advantage of the Green Party. The introduction of proportional representation in second-order elections enabled the Greens to secure election to the European Parliament and the new Scottish Parliament in 1999, and to the new Greater London Assembly in 2000. These successes were repeated during 2003/4, with the notable feat of gaining seven seats in the Scottish Parliament. These achievements seem to have had some positive impact on the party's performance in national elections. In 2005 the Greens won a record 283,486 votes, averaging 3.37 per cent in the seats contested and saving twenty-four deposits (Carter and Rootes 2006: 476), although the election of a Green MP still seems some way off.

### ► *Explaining green electoral performance*

The German, French and British examples illustrate how the institutional and political context influences the openness of a national political opportunity structure to green parties. In this section, drawing on the three case studies and green party experiences elsewhere, the critical institutional and political factors are identified.

The most striking institutional difference between the three countries appears to be the *electoral system*. The German experience suggests that green parties do better in electoral systems based on some form of proportional representation (PR). This hypothesis is supported by the relative success of green parties in Belgium, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland, which all have PR systems, and their failure in the UK and North America, where non-proportional systems are used. The experience of the New Zealand Green Party before and after the introduction of PR illustrates the significance of the electoral system in shaping Green fortunes (see Box 4.3).

Yet in several countries with PR systems, including Norway, Denmark, Spain and Greece, green parties have had little or no success. The weakness of green parties in Southern Europe may reflect lower levels of economic

#### 4.3 New Zealand Greens: proportional representation makes the difference

New Zealand was home to the world's first national green party, the Values Party, which contested the 1972 election. Values fought every seat in 1975, attracting an impressive 5.2 per cent of the national vote – enough to secure parliamentary representation in most countries, but not in New Zealand's plurality electoral system. After slipping to just 2.4 per cent in 1978, the party more or less disappeared from view, fighting a mere handful of seats in each election, until it relaunched as the Green Party in 1989. It gained 6.8 per cent of the vote in 1990, but again no seats, prompting the party to contest elections up to 1996 as part of the left-wing Alliance. Following a 1993 referendum New Zealand adopted a new 'mixed member proportional' system, resulting in the election of two Greens as Alliance MPs in 1996. Subsequently, the Green Party has again contested elections as a separate party. After gaining 5.2 per cent of the vote in 1999 and seven MPs, the Greens were propelled into the position of providing support for the minority Labour Government between 1999 and 2002,

although it was not part of the coalition. The party quickly established itself as a serious political force (Bale 2003). However, it disagreed sharply with Labour over government support for the war in Iraq and its plan to lift the temporary moratorium on the release of genetically modified crops. After a stronger performance in 2002 when nine Green MPs were elected, the party slipped back to 5.3 per cent and six MPs in 2005. Since 2002 the Greens have adopted a halfway position between coalition and outright opposition, by either giving the Labour-led government support or by abstaining on key confidence and budget motions. Thus in 2005 the Greens signed an agreement with Labour giving them rights to consultation, access to ministers and involvement in developing specific policy and budget proposals (Bale and Wilson 2006: 401). It is therefore clear that the introduction of proportional representation has made a critical difference to the electoral performance and political influence of the New Zealand Greens.

development and, consequently, the presence of fewer postmaterialists, but Norway and Denmark are affluent, developed economies with many post-materialists. Moreover, the breakthrough of Les Verts in France shows that a plurality system is not an insuperable barrier, although this success was dependent on a pact with the Socialists. On balance, a facilitative electoral system is probably a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for green party success.

Specific electoral rules may also shape green party development. The 5 per cent threshold in West Germany initially helped a fragmented environmental movement to unite into a single green party and, after the electoral defeat in 1990, contributed to the electorally driven internal transformation of the party. Similarly, after the Swedish Greens slipped below the 4 per cent threshold in 1991 to lose all its MPs, the party took a pragmatic turn, introducing organisational reforms and promoting itself as a conventional party (Bennulf 1995: 117). In Austria, the failure of the two small green parties to reach the 4 per cent threshold in 1983 led to their partial merger in 1986.

**Table 4.2 Green MEPs in the European elections, 2004**

|                                 | MEPs | % vote |
|---------------------------------|------|--------|
| Austria (Die Grünen)            | 2    | 12.9   |
| Belgium (Groen!)                | 1    | 4.9    |
| Belgium (Ecolo)                 | 1    | 3.7    |
| Finland (Vihreä Liitto)         | 1    | 10.4   |
| France (Les Verts)              | 6    | 7.4    |
| Germany (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) | 13   | 11.9   |
| Italy (Federazione dei Verdi)   | 2    | 2.5    |
| Luxembourg (Dei Greng)          | 1    | 15.2   |
| Netherlands (Groen Links)       | 2    | 7.4    |
| Spain (Los Verdes & ICV)        | 2    | *      |
| Sweden (Miljöpartiet de Gröna)  | 1    | 6.0    |
| United Kingdom (Green Party)    | 2    | 6.2    |

*Note:* \*The Spanish Green MEPs were elected from two separate coalition lists: Los Verdes united with the Socialist Party; the ecosocialist Catalanian ICV with the United Left, so it is impossible to isolate the green vote.

*Source:* Carter (2005)

Green parties have performed comparatively well in European Parliament and sub-national elections, where low turnouts and widespread protest voting can often reward smaller parties. The breakthrough election of thirty-one Green MEPs in 1989 was particularly significant, providing a major boost to the green profile across Europe. Their best performance to date was in the 1999 election when thirty-eight Green MEPs were elected, and they joined assorted regionalists to make the Green Group the fourth largest political grouping in the European Parliament (Carter 1999). In the 2004 election, the first following EU enlargement to twenty-five states, the Greens consolidated their position, with the return of thirty-four MEPs (see Table 4.2). The election of the first Spanish MEPs and gains in Germany were counter-balanced by the loss of both Irish members and five other countries returning fewer Green representatives (Carter 2005). The green message may be particularly apposite for elections to a supranational forum because environmental problems are widely regarded as requiring international solutions.

Conversely, sub-national elections, where the green message ‘Think global, act local’ may resonate with voters, have also provided an important base for several green parties. Certainly, in France and Germany, successes at supranational and sub-national levels have given both the party and its leading individuals a higher public profile and the opportunity to demonstrate that the Greens are a credible political force. Even in Britain, where the failure to gain access to Westminster severely limits the impact of the Greens on

the national stage, their profile has been considerably boosted by their successes in the European and Scottish parliaments and the Greater London Authority.

Green parties have benefited from *federal* systems, as in Germany, Switzerland and Belgium, which offer more points of access, and hence more electoral opportunities, for a small party to gain visibility and representation. Yet federalism can be a double-edged sword. In Australia, whilst the Tasmanian Greens have attracted considerable attention, particularly when they held the balance of power after the 1989 state elections and agreed a governing 'Accord' with the Labour Party (Haward and Larmour 1993), the federal system discouraged inter-state co-operation between green parties and impeded the formation of a national Australian green party, thereby hampering electoral progress.

Electoral and institutional systems are relatively fixed institutional features of the POS that have clearly influenced the development of green parties, but they do not explain the lack of success of small green parties in Norway, Denmark or, until recently, the Netherlands. All three countries have structural and institutional conditions that might be expected to have facilitated the development of green parties: a relatively large number of postmaterialists, electoral systems based on PR, an active NSM sector and a high level of environmental consciousness.

*Political competition*, in particular Kitschelt's (1988) concept of the 'left-libertarian' party, may explain this puzzle. Kitschelt identifies a handful of 'left-libertarian' parties in Europe, which accept core elements of the socialist agenda – notably an egalitarian distribution of resources and a mistrust of the market – but, unlike the traditional left, reject authoritarian and bureaucratic statist solutions in favour of libertarian institutions that enhance autonomy and participatory democracy. Kitschelt identifies two groups of left-libertarian parties: first, a small group of left-socialist parties that emerged in the late 1950s/early 1960s in several countries; secondly, the green parties.<sup>8</sup> He argues that the emergence of left-libertarian parties is shaped by political opportunities, specifically the long-term incumbency of social democratic parties in government. When in opposition, social democratic parties appear more radical and offer hope to left-wing supporters, but once in power they shift rightwards, disappointing their radical base. Thus the first group of left-libertarian parties, including the Socialist People's Party in Denmark and in Norway, and the Pacifist Socialists in the Netherlands, flourished where social democratic parties had ruled in the 1950s. Later, when the environmental movement emerged, these existing left-libertarian parties provided a sympathetic platform for green concerns. Consequently, when small green parties appeared, such as De Groenen in the Netherlands, they found themselves crowded out because their 'natural' political space was already occupied and the loyalties of the green electorate committed elsewhere. In Sweden, the communist Left Party (VPK) became increasingly left-libertarian during the 1970s and now competes

strongly with the Greens for the environmental vote. Kitschelt concludes that green parties have been less successful in countries where another left-libertarian party was already firmly established. By contrast, where social democratic parties dominated government throughout the 1970s, as in West Germany, Austria and Belgium, but there was no established left-libertarian party, green parties were able to colonise vacant political territory. The persuasiveness of the left-libertarian thesis is underlined by the keenness of many green parties to stress that they are not simply 'environmental' parties, but are also pledged to a wider left-libertarian political programme. One qualification to Kitschelt's thesis is that left-libertarian parties have generally done less well in countries, such as France, Italy, Greece, Portugal and Spain, where a strong Communist Party provided stiff competition for the left-wing electorate, at least during the 1970s and 1980s (Markovits and Gorski 1993: 17). Nevertheless, Kitschelt's left-libertarian thesis is important for underlining the significance of political competition in green party development.

The POS framework shows how the interplay between structural, institutional and political factors can explain variations in green party performance between countries. Yet the strength of the POS is also its weakness. Although providing a much fuller account of green party development, by throwing everything into the melting pot, the POS can end up looking like a catch-all typology: 'Used to explain so much, it may ultimately explain nothing at all' (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 275). The POS also conflates durable structural features of the political system, notably the electoral system, with contingent features, such as the state of party competition at a particular moment (Rootes 1995b). Whilst electoral systems rarely change (although the introduction of proportional representation in some British elections and the shift towards a plurality system in Italy show that they are not set in stone), the configuration of party competition can alter dramatically, as illustrated by the rightward shift of the German SPD and the thawing of traditional left-right party alignments in France since the 1980s. As long as these limitations are acknowledged, the POS provides a useful framework for testing how different institutional variables have influenced the development of green parties.

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### ***Critical question 3***

What is the principal factor determining the electoral success of green parties?

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## **► Whatever happened to the environment?**

One danger of using broad structural developments or institutional variables to explain the rise of green parties is that the underlying issue – the

objective state of the environment – may be forgotten. Is it simply coincidence that the rise of green parties coincided with growing public knowledge and concern about the state of the environment? Perhaps there is no need for grand ‘new politics’ accounts to explain why people worry about the environment? Admittedly, there is no straightforward relationship between high levels of environmental consciousness and green party success. The environment has consistently ranked high as a salient political issue in Denmark and Norway, but neither has a significant national green party. Conversely, Belgian green parties have been very successful despite confronting the lowest level of environmental consciousness of any EU member state (Eurobarometer 1999). Nevertheless, there is also evidence that green parties have flourished as a direct response to specific environmental concerns. When the Swedish Greens achieved their electoral breakthrough in 1988, they attracted highest support in areas that had been most damaged by fall-out from the Chernobyl nuclear accident (Affigne 1990). The upsurge in green support in the 1989 European Parliament election came on the back of growing concern about environmental issues such as acid rain, climate change and ozone depletion. The success of the Belgian green parties in the 1999 elections was linked to a scandal involving the contamination of the poultry and dairy food chain with highly poisonous dioxins (Hooghe and Rihoux 2000). A strong concern about environmental issues sharply differentiates supporters of the Finnish Green League from supporters of other parties (Zilliacus 2001: 44). Thus in searching for sophisticated political science explanations for the rise of green parties we should not sacrifice the most straightforward interpretation: that in the ‘risk society’ (Beck 1992) support for the greens may be driven by a specific concern about the objective state of the environment, as much as it is a reflection of postmaterial values.

## ■ New challenges

The fortunes of individual green parties may wax and wane, but the overall movement has established a reasonably secure and increasingly important role in several countries. Apart from the long-standing unfulfilled task of matching this achievement in the UK, USA, Australia, Canada and elsewhere, there are two important contemporary challenges facing the green movement.

One challenge in those five countries where green parties have entered government is to retain electoral support when they are no longer a party of protest. Green parties are likely to confront a particular tension: whilst judged by the wider public on their ability to act as responsible members of the government, many Green voters are expressing an anti-establishment protest and may be critical of their party’s involvement in the dirty business of government. It may be impossible to satisfy both constituencies. It is too

early to draw any firm conclusions about the electoral impact of government incumbency. On the one hand, the Finnish Green League slightly improved its electoral performance both in 1999, after four years in the coalition government, and again in 2003, despite (or because of?) having resigned from the coalition in the previous year over its opposition to the government's decision to build a new nuclear power station. The German Greens strengthened their position in 2002, and declined only marginally in 2005. By contrast, having entered government on the basis of a very strong performance in the 1999 election, both the Belgian green parties suffered humiliating electoral defeats four years later. The electoral fortunes of the French and Italian green parties, both of which agreed pre-election pacts with larger centre-left parties, were shaped by the electorate's assessment of the government as a whole at the end of its term in office, as was the return of the Italians to government in 2006 (even though their share of the vote has hardly changed in the last three elections). Perhaps all we can say so far is that entering government is not *necessarily* bad for green parties.

In seeking explanations for the variations in performance, two factors stand out (Rüdig 2006). First, the Greens themselves can make a difference, through the conduct of the party (both its leading politicians and the grassroots membership) and the popularity of Green policy initiatives. For example, government office brings a much higher profile for Green politicians, with both positive and negative results. Whilst the individual popularity of Germans Joschka Fischer and Renate Künast rose significantly after holding ministerial office, public perceptions of the competence of Belgian Green ministers, Martha Aelvoet and Isabelle Durant, plummeted. Secondly, institutional features, notably the links between the Greens and their coalition partners, can have an electoral impact. The German Greens benefited in 2002 especially from tactical voting by many SPD supporters who 'split their ticket' by voting for the Greens with their second 'list' vote, to help them reach the 5 per cent threshold that would ensure their presence in parliament and the continuation of the red-green coalition. However, the Belgian Greens, having resigned from the coalition government just two weeks before the 2003 election, probably lost support as potential voters switched to the Socialists to ensure the survival of the government (Rüdig 2006). Where a pre-election pact occurs it is vital that the Greens continue to perform well in second-order elections, such as the European and regional elections, to demonstrate their continued importance to the major coalition party.

The second challenge is for green parties to extend their electoral appeal beyond the small group of rich industrialised nations where they have achieved successes to date. In particular, a key objective must be to secure a foothold in the transitional states of Central and Eastern Europe, notably the recent EU accession member states. Ecological parties did achieve some short-lived successes in several countries, including Estonia, Lithuania,

Slovenia and Ukraine, as part of anti-Communist alliances in the early 1990s, only for them to disappear as an electoral force when these alliances broke up. In most countries, this brief Green success was a phenomenon peculiar to that particular historical juncture, when many dissidents joined ecological movements simply because they represented one of the few legal political organisations allowed under the former Communist regimes. One exception is Latvia where the green party combined with a farmers party to form the Green/Farmers Union party, gaining electoral success as part of the minority coalition government that came to power in 2004. The Czech Greens won six seats as part of a centre-right alliance in the June 2006 election. Otherwise it is barren ground for the Greens. Those fledgling green parties that do exist in the 'new' Europe badly need the resources, organisational know-how and experience of their counterparts in the 'old' Europe. However, no Green MEPs were elected from the ten accession states in the 2004 European Parliament elections, and the dismal performance of most Green candidates demonstrates the Herculean nature of the task ahead (Carter 2005: 109–10). There is little evidence of any groundswell of environmental concern in the transitional states, where the typical core green constituency – the new-middle-class, postmaterialist voters – remains relatively small. Nor will it be easy for green parties to carve out their own political space in the crowded party systems characteristic of these countries. Consequently, the prognosis for the Greens making a significant electoral breakthrough in the transitional states must be pessimistic.

## ■ Conclusion

No single argument adequately explains the rise of green parties. There is some support for the claim that green parties are an expression of a new politics. Several green parties originally sprang from a vibrant new social movement milieu, with anti-nuclear protest acting as a critical mobilising condition. Green parties do draw support disproportionately from the 'new middle class', but this statistical relationship does not tell us very much, as the majority of this group supports other parties. Although Inglehart's cultural thesis that affluence and early socialisation have produced a population whose values are increasingly postmaterial has important theoretical and methodological weaknesses, there is considerable evidence that green parties do attract a relatively large share of postmaterial supporters. However, educational attainment, particularly possession of a higher degree in an arts or social science subject, may provide the strongest causal link with green support. Suggestions that the green constituency is gradually 'greying' could imply that there is a one-off generational cohort passing through the system, although the evidence is again inconclusive. The political opportunity structure helps to explain variation in green party performance by directing attention to institutional factors, such as the electoral system, and

political competition. But perhaps all of these explanations understate the importance of the real cause of all the fuss: the state of the environment itself.

This discussion of electoral success raises broader questions about how green parties have adapted to the constraints of working within the parliamentary system and government, and how established parties have responded to the green challenge; we turn to these issues in the [next chapter](#).

### ■ Further reading and websites

Doherty (2002) contains several excellent chapters on the development of green parties. Burchell (2002) provides an interesting comparative analysis of green party development and change in four European countries. O'Neill (1997) covers a wide range of countries, but is very dated. Müller-Rommel (1998) is interesting on green party success. The journal *Environmental Politics* contains regular profile articles that update green party electoral performance in individual countries; see its 2002 special issue on green parties in government (also published as Müller-Rommel and Poguntke 2002). Dalton (2006) provides a good empirical survey of new politics issues, and della Porta and Diani (2006) is a general discussion of social movement theories.

The global green parties' page provides links to green parties worldwide (<http://www.greens.org/>) and the website of the European Federation of Green Parties (<http://www.europeangreens.org/>) provides links to most European national parties.

### NOTES

- 1 The party is formally known as Bündnis 90/Die Grünen since merging in 1993 with the East German alliance of greens and civic action groups. The Greens were edged into fifth place by the FDP and the Left Party in the 2005 federal election.
- 2 See Abramson and Inglehart (1995) for a combative rebuttal.
- 3 The concept of the 'political opportunity structure' has been widely used in the social movement literature (Tarrow 1994; Kriesi et al. 1995; McAdam et al. 1996), although Rootes (1998) notes that several writers now prefer to use 'political opportunity' as the use of 'structure' undervalues the importance of 'agency'.
- 4 Detailed accounts of the development of the German Greens include Frankland and Schoonmaker (1992), Poguntke (1993), Markovits and Gorski (1993), Scharf (1994), and Mayer and Ely (1998).
- 5 See Faucher (1998) and Doherty (2002: ch. 4) for a fuller account of the development of the French green movement.
- 6 See McCulloch (1992) and Rootes (1995c) for fuller accounts of the early development of the Green Party.

## PARTIES AND MOVEMENTS

- 7 The party name was changed to the 'Ecology Party' in 1975 and to the 'Green Party' in 1985. There is a separate Scottish Green Party.
- 8 Kitschelt categorises all green parties, apart from the Swiss, as left-libertarian. However, there are several small 'dark green' ecological parties, including the Dutch De Groenen and various French green factions, with a narrow ecological programme rather than a broader left-libertarian programme, which do not fit this label.