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# Green Parties in National Governments: From Protest to Acquiescence?

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- to hold regular conferences, workshops, seminars and guest lectures on topics related to European political parties;
- to publish a series of parties-related research papers by scholars from Keele and elsewhere;
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## **Abstract\***

The comparative analysis of the record of Green parties in national governments shows that they have had only limited impact on national policy. No doubt, the march through the institutions has changed the marchers more than the institutions. Furthermore, the Green parties are ill placed to wield much blackmailing power in coalition politics. Still, much depends on their skill to exploit a rather limited room for manoeuvre in order to implement reform and attract sufficient electoral support. The record is, however, very mixed. The example of the Finnish Greens shows that Green parties can thrive in government, while the German Greens have suffered badly at the polls.

## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Arguably, the degree of attention Green parties have attracted across publics and the global academic community alike far exceeds their real political impact. About 20 years after the first Green party deputies were elected to national parliaments in Western Europe (Rootes, 1997; Richardson & Rootes, 1995; Müller-Rommel, 1990, Müller-Rommel, 1993), some finally reached the highest echelons of power, that is, national governments. An important reason why it took them much longer than many other new parties (Mair, 2001: 106) may be that many green activists did not really think that national governments were the real loci of power. Governments and parliaments were believed to lack the power to address the most urgent issues relevant for the survival of mankind like pollution, the nuclear arms race, and the expansion of nuclear energy production. Then, why try to get into government? While parliamentary representation would provide a suitable forum for making green ideas and demands known to a wider public, participation in government would at best change very little and, at worst, merely serve to legitimise the continuation of the Old Politics of growth, militarism, exploitation of the Third World and pollution (Doherty & de Geus, 1996; Poguntke, 1993).

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\* chapter draft for: *Green Parties in National Governments*, Special Issue of *Environmental Politics*, ed. by Ferdinand Müller-Rommel and Thomas Poguntke

<sup>1</sup> Obviously, this concluding chapter draws heavily on the evidence provided by the country chapters. This will normally not be annotated.

While it is not the purpose of this concluding chapter to analyse these debates again, it is nevertheless useful to recall their intensity – and some may say far-sightedness – when trying to assess what the Greens have achieved in government. In other words, how much have Greens in government been able to change the course of national politics and how much has governmental incumbency changed the Greens? Conclusive answers are premature, of course, not least since we are dealing with a very recent phenomenon and the Greens may well improve their performance. Or they may come to the conclusion that their more radical supporters were, after all, right and that there is a real difference between being ‘in government’ and being ‘in power’.

Nevertheless, a systematic comparison of the governmental record of Green parties in Belgium, Finland, France, Germany and Italy can provide tentative answers to these questions. An obvious point of departure for our analysis is provided in the comparison of their paths to power, which may have exposed individual Green parties to substantially different institutional pressures to streamline their party structures and moderate ideological appeal. Once in power, the format of national party systems and the type of coalition may account for any substantial variation in their strategy within government and their concomitant policy achievements. Finally, what were the electoral payoffs of joining government? Did Green parties suffer at the polls, and could they maintain their links with the movements?

### **Paths to Power**

Governmental incumbency on a lower level of the political system provides parties with valuable experience for their role in national government. Not all Green parties have been equally well prepared to meet the challenges of national government. Nor have they had equal chances of preparing themselves, because the institutional make-up of individual countries differs substantially. To be sure, all parties have experienced the opportunities and constraints of being in local government to a greater or lesser extent. However, local politics is not politicised to the same extent as regional or national government. Frequently, personal contacts and reputations may be more important than party affiliation or ideology, and the small number of activists in a local party branch may have rendered many formal provisions

of grass roots democracy either superfluous or simply impractical (Poguntke, 1994). Consequently, experience in local executives will normally not make parties fit for national government. The exigencies of regional government, on the contrary, resemble those of national governmental responsibility. We would therefore expect that parties would enter national government well prepared if they previously have held power at this intermediate level.

Yet, experience in regional government did not leave the German and Italian Greens better prepared for taking on the challenges of national government. Arguably, the German Greens should have been most familiar with handling the levers of executive power. After all, German federalism provides a unique opportunity structure for new parties to acquire governmental experience, at the intermediate level of governance provided in a truly federal system. However, the party certainly did not have a smooth start and felt the need to reform its party structures twice (!) shortly after joining federal government in order to create a more efficient leadership structure that would (hopefully) provide the necessary institutional framework for co-ordinating party, parliamentary party and Green members of government (Raschke, 2001: 40-55). Another indication of how unprepared the Greens were upon entering government was the debate as to whether or not Green members of government should be allowed to maintain their parliamentary seats. While combining a cabinet post with a parliamentary mandate would violate the Green principle of separating office and mandate, the debate over this issue reflected a profound misunderstanding about the mechanics of party government in a parliamentary system (Lijphart, 1992; Verney, 1992); revealingly, the example of French semi-presidentialism was frequently used in this debate.

Probably even more telling than the party's inability to enter government with organisational structures suited for governing was the fact that the Green Party's basic programme dated back to 1980. By 1998 it could at best serve as a source of entertaining or sometimes even grotesque quotations from the period when Green programmatic statements usually called for maximal solutions to be achieved over a minimal period of time. The basic programme, to give but one example, still called for the dissolution of NATO and the Warsaw Pact - the latter having been achieved without much contribution by the German Greens, one is tempted to add (Poguntke, 1993). It would be unfair, of course, not to mention that the Greens had modernised their programmes over the years by drafting a series of election manifestos and special programmes. However, the absence of an up-to-date basic programme, whose revision

had been delayed repeatedly in order to maintain the truce between factions, is indicative of the lack of reflection upon the role and function of a party in national government.

Similarly, the Italian Greens seem to have been unable to draw consistent conclusions from their experience in regional government. After all, their participation in national government resembles a roller coaster ride between conflictual and consensual strategies within government, accompanied by similarly sharp turns in their approach to party organisation. This culminated in the 1999 re-launch of the party while it was still in government.

Experience in regional government is, however, but one important factor that may leave parties better prepared for national government. Equally important are parliamentary experience and, above all, parliamentary strength (see introductory chapter). Only parties that have had sizeable parliamentary delegations over a considerable period of time can hope to have acquired sufficient familiarity and expertise with the intricacies of national politics. Size is a particularly relevant variable here as politics is highly specialised and a small number of MPs simply would be overwhelmed by the multitude of tasks concomitant with modern parliamentary politics and the number of policy areas that need to be covered. In opposition, a small party may simply resort to concentrating on its core themes. Once in government, such self-limitation becomes untenable and may produce considerable problems. The uneven record of the Italian Greens appears less surprising from this perspective, while the Belgian, Finnish and German Greens should have entered national government with a sufficient number of politicians familiar with a wide range of policy areas and the nuts and bolts of national politics (at least with regard to parliamentary politics).

### **Organisational Change and Incumbency**

Grass roots democracy has been the hallmark of Green parties ever since they slowly (and sometimes painfully) grew out of the new social movements and established themselves as political parties. It was as much a normative concept aimed at reforming representative democracy as it was intended to be a safeguard against losing touch with the movements and becoming an established party (Frankland & Schoonmaker, 1992; Poguntke, 1989; Poguntke, 1993: 34-41). Moving from protest politics towards government meant that Green parties experienced a gradual shift of the relative importance of different relevant environments

(Panebianco, 1988: 12). While the movements remained important to mobilisation and ideological inspiration, an increasingly electoral (and eventually governmental) orientation meant that other relevant environments had to be given more attention. In other words, Green parties had to adapt to a changing environment (Harmel & Janda, 1982: 11; Katz & Mair, 1992: 9), which was changing not least because they had chosen to play the game of electoral politics.

When analysing organisational change within Green parties on the path to power, two complementary patterns are identifiable. On the one hand, parties decide to adapt their structure to systemic constraints because they anticipate the need for centralisation should they eventually enter national government. On the other, they reform their organisation after joining government because they quickly realise that their 'reaction time' has been drastically reduced and they need more centralised leadership structures.

Anticipatory adaptation was widespread among successful European Green parties. The Italian Greens, for example, abolished collective leadership in 1993, at a time when the entire Italian party system was undergoing a fundamental transformation (Bull & Rhodes, 1997; Newell & Bull, 1997; Morlino, 1998). The Flemish AGALEV strengthened its leadership after the experience of negotiations over entering government in 1991, and even the organisationally conservative German Greens introduced a 'Land council' as their co-ordinating body after their electoral defeat in the Bundestag elections of 1990 when they lost all their West German seats. However, virtually all Green parties experienced a further need to streamline their party structure after they had entered national government. As mentioned already, even parties which have had substantial experience with regional government (like the German and Italian Greens) realised that being in national government is an entirely different ball game. To a greater or lesser extent, all parties share the somewhat sobering experience that whatever was left of grass roots democracy was hard to sustain under the pressures of participation in national government. Probably the most telling example of institutional constraints is that of the Finnish Greens who found it unsustainable not to allow their party chairperson to take up a post in government in a country where these positions are traditionally combined. Yet grass roots democracy was not abandoned totally. ECOLO and the German Greens still maintain collective leadership and, while AGALEV allows ministers to hold party office, this is still very restricted (if highly disputed) in the German Green Party.

Equally significant as these abrupt changes were the gradual processes that resulted from adapting to the new role as a party of government (Harmel & Janda, 1994: 275). Increased media exposure, the frequent need for quick decisions, the constraints of coalition politics and the increased resources that come with holding ministerial posts enhanced the power of party elites (and particularly members of government) at the expense of the rank-and-file. Consistently, linkages between new social movements and Green parties have played a secondary role once the latter were admitted to government. While the Italian Greens actively tried to reconnect with their extra-parliamentary roots towards the end of their term in government, party-movement relationships were not always easy. Military involvement in the Balkans was one of the major bones of contention in Italy and Germany, and the conflict over the transports of nuclear waste in Germany led to a passionate confrontation between a Green Minister for Environment and local protest groups trying to block those transports. At the same time, however, there have been many examples when Green members of government used their connections to the movements as a substitute for their lack of access to expertise and support from within the government apparatus.

### **Power within Government?**

Greens in government means Greens in coalition government. Not only is coalition government the dominant mode of party government in democracies, but Green parties can only expect to play a relatively minor role in coalition government since their growth has had clear limits everywhere. However, as the example of the German FDP illustrates (Poguntke, 1999), small parties may be capable of achieving disproportionate power, depending on the format of the party system and the nature of the coalition.

The power of a party within a coalition largely depends on its capacity to blackmail its coalition partners. First and foremost, this presupposes that the survival of government is at stake should the party decide to leave government. When assessing the governmental power of a party, our first criterion is therefore whether or not it is indispensable for the survival of government. However, while a particular coalition may not survive the exit of a small party like the Greens, the major coalition partner(s) may have attractive alternatives to which they can turn. While the German Greens, for example, were clearly needed for the survival of the first red-green federal government, they were in no position to remove Gerhard Schröder from



the Chancellery. After all, he could have turned to the FDP, or even the Christian Democrats, instead.

Likewise, the credibility of a small party's threat to leave government depends on the range of its own available options. Again, Greens are in a uncomfortable strategic position. In three out of five countries, they are clearly part of the Left, in two cases even locked into an electoral alliance. Whereas coalition formulae follow a less clear-cut left-right logic in Belgium and Finland, they are still highly unlikely to side exclusively with the Right. In other words, Green parties suffer from a strategic disadvantage in that they are not pivotal parties that can turn to either side. On the contrary, they are clearly part of the left camp, maybe even adding to a bipolar pattern of party competition and coalition formation in several European countries (Mair, 2001).

Arguably, the Belgian Greens were in a particularly strong position, because AGALEV was an indispensable coalition partner for the Flemish government and their exit would most likely have removed one of the larger coalition partners from power. Given the unique linkage between regional and federal coalitions, this clearly provided the Greens with a reasonably strong position within government. However the German Greens, frequently dubbed 'the most powerful Green party' in Western Europe, found themselves, as mentioned above, in a less than comfortable position. Modest policy achievements clearly reflect this.

From the perspective of blackmailing power, being a junior partner in an oversized coalition is certainly the least comfortable position to be in (Laver & Schofield, 1990: 85; Sartori, 1976: 122-25). The experience of the Greens in France, Italy, and Finland shows, however, that a purely numerical approach to evaluating the power of coalition partners is myopic. The examples demonstrate that the bargaining position within a coalition is not the sole power resource for a smaller coalition partner. Connecting to new social movements, appealing to public opinion, or simply implementing existing legislation are ways to achieve substantial policy goals in a situation where no credible exit option is available. After all, their position might not have been so much different from that of other green parties in government: given their unambiguous anchorage in the Left, even in a minimum winning coalition, exit could only mean opposition – hardly an attractive option after 20 years on the road to power.

Last but not least an additional complication needs mentioning; the Italian and French Greens came to power as partners in an electoral alliance. Given the uncertain knowledge about the ‘real’ electoral strength of each alliance partner that inevitably accompanies such arrangements, this may actually enhance the bargaining position of a smaller party within an alliance. After all, the larger parties can never be entirely sure whether it had not been the additional momentum that was provided by a small party that eventually tipped the balance in favour of their majority.

Overall, Green parties have been in a relatively unfavourable strategic position when they entered national governments for the first time. With the partial exception of the Flemish AGLEV, they were (numerically) not essential for keeping the other coalition partners in power. Arguably, much depended on how skilfully they exploited the structurally rather limited opportunities government would offer them. Again, the record is a mixed one.

### **Strategies in Government and Policy Impact**

Next to deciding on the governmental programme, choosing portfolios is the most fundamental strategic decision upon entering government - albeit a highly constrained one, because it may involve clashes with coalition partners who claim the same ministry. Controlling the apex of the executive power responsible for a certain policy area gives a party the prerogative of formulating policy initiatives in this field, and it enables it to control and enforce the implementation of existing legislation. From this perspective, choosing the Environment portfolio was an obvious choice for all Green parties although it considerably limited their scope for broadening their appeal beyond environmental issues. To be sure, none of these ministries was restricted to environmental protection in a narrow sense. However, when looking at the policy areas which were covered by Green ministers, it was only the German Greens who managed to obtain a so-called ‘classical’ portfolio, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Yet, another pattern is discernible. Green parties have attempted to expand into policy areas which can be regarded as natural extensions of ecological politics like Health and Agriculture, the latter now fashionably renamed in Italy and Germany as ‘Ministry for Consumer Protection’. All parties attempted to shed their image of being a single-issue party. The Italian Greens made the most decisive attempt when they decided to trade the

Ministry for the Environment for two other ministries (Agriculture, Community Policy) in the short-lived Amato government.

Clearly, selecting portfolios means choosing policy areas which will become (or remain) strongly associated with the Greens in the public mind. Equally important for a party's public image is, however, its general approach towards governing. Within the strategic constraints that have been discussed above, Green parties could still have chosen a conflictual approach that would have conveyed the message that they were, despite being in government, still calling for a more fundamental transformation of politics and policy. Somewhat surprisingly, none of the five Green parties has attempted such a double strategy. By and large, Green parties have been co-operative partners in government. The attempt of the leader of the Italian Greens, Carlo Ripa di Meana, to heighten the public profile of his party by publicly criticising coalition partners was soon met with strong disapproval from his own ranks. Eventually, the conflict led to his own exodus from the Greens and to the election of a party leader who was committed to a co-operative approach.

While the Greens decided to play by the rules and adopt a constructive approach to coalition government, this did not leave them without significant policy impact. It is in keeping with their rather limited blackmail potential that their most noticeable achievements are in policy areas that do not touch upon the core of vested socio-economic interests. All parties have had some success in modernising some of their country's legislation related to a libertarian agenda. More rights for illegal immigrants, an improved legal status for gay and lesbian couples, or a more liberal approach towards asylum seekers are relatively low-cost projects, and it is precisely here where the Greens scored points. The picture is less convincing when it comes to ecological tax reform or the single most important issue for Green parties - nuclear power. While it is hardly an exaggeration to consider the conflict over nuclear power the essential launch pad for most Western European Green parties, their success in this policy area, which touches so much upon their core identity, has been very limited. Unsurprisingly, the French Greens achieved next to nothing in this respect, while their Finnish friends stopped a further expansion of nuclear energy but without a definite change of national policy. The German red-green government agreed on phasing out nuclear energy over two or three decades without providing a definite date as to when the last nuclear power station will have to be shut down. Compared to the original Green slogan of the early 1980s, which called for

an immediate halt to all nuclear power generation in Germany, this is hardly a convincing victory.

Much Green success, however, does not meet the eye immediately. Given the considerable discretionary power of European administrations, much could be achieved by simply enforcing laws that already exist. Italy is a particularly telling example for this strategy which concentrated, often with the active support of experts from the movements, on implementing legislation that is already on the statute book but is not enforced seriously. Likewise, the French Greens could substantially increase the manpower and financial resources of the Ministry for the Environment. The experience of German Greens in Land governments is another case in point. In many policy arenas, federal law takes precedence over Land legislation, but the administration is left to the Länder, where Green ministers of the environment could achieve much without conspicuous victories (Lees, 1999: 179-81). The attempt of Green Land ministers to exploit their administrative discretion to further their causes has at times led to conflicts with the federal minister responsible for the same policy area. Confrontations between Green Land Ministers of the Environment and their Christian Democratic colleagues in Bonn gained much public attention and tended to end with an instruction by the federal minister which forced the reluctant Land minister to carry out federal policies. Obviously, being in federal government has also meant considerably more freedom of manoeuvre for Green Land ministers – an aspect that must not be forgotten when assessing the achievements of Green participation in national government.

### **Voters and Movement Activists: Equally Disappointed?**

Given the lack of conspicuous success, particularly in the core area of nuclear power, a degree of disillusionment among Green voters may have been unavoidable. On the other hand, many studies have shown over the years that Green voters tended to be reformist and appreciative of the inherent limitations of governmental participation – not least because all Greens entered local governments during their years of electoral growth. This would suggest continued voter support for Green parties in government. Such contradictory expectations seem to be matched by inconclusive evidence when looking at how the Greens have fared after entering national governments. However, exactly what evidence is there?

The electoral effects of incumbency are notoriously difficult to disentangle. This is the classic problem of an ‘over-determined outcome’ in that many other independent variables that have no relation to the fact that the party has just joined government may account for a change in a party’s electoral fortune (Müller & Strom, 2000: 27; Rüdig & Franklin, 2000). Our analysis is complicated by the fact that in some cases no national election has been held after the Greens joined government. Hence, there is no reliable standard of comparison. Survey results are equally problematic because they tend to report a ‘mid-term effect’, which means that governing parties usually experience a slump in their poll ratings halfway through their legislative term. Since only the Finnish Greens have entered a second term of office, no meaningful data for comparison exist in the other countries. Local, regional or European elections have been held in all countries after the Greens have joined national governments, and even though there are obvious problems of comparison involved here too, they can be used in an attempt to gauge the electoral effects of incumbency.

Overall, the picture is inconclusive. Those who have maintained that Green parties in national government were bound to lose support because they would inevitably disappoint (or even betray) the hopes and aspirations of their supporters have been proven wrong. The Finnish Greens managed to increase their share of the vote and were returned to government with an additional ministry for the first two years of the new government. The Italian Greens experienced both the worst European election result in their history and good returns in local and regional elections though their ‘true’ electoral strength in the 2001 national elections is hard to determine because of the complications of the electoral systems which forces parties into electoral alliances. The Belgian and French Greens have performed reasonably well at the

polls since they joined government, but the real test will be the next general election. This leaves us with the German Greens, who have suffered dramatic defeats at every single Land election since entering the national coalition with the SPD. To be sure, the extent of their decline in the polls tends to be inflated by the fact that these results are compared to a phase in German electoral politics when the Greens were considered to be something like the leading opposition party while the SPD was in shambles. Nevertheless, even when these distortions are taken into account, there is unambiguous evidence that the Greens have been penalised for entering national government.

Although evidence is still very patchy, the German Greens seem to represent almost a deviant case in that their record is so clearly negative. One possible explanation is that expectations were highest in a situation when a Green party was the sole (albeit not indispensable) coalition partner and when the new government represented – for the first time in the Federal Republic’s history – a complete turnover of government.

It may be for these reasons that the German Greens suffered most from a strategic situation that is the inevitable consequence of joining national government, which (to a greater or lesser extent) has been the same for all parties considered in this volume. Incumbency has put Green parties at loggerheads with their own core constituency. Given the inevitably slow pace of policy change in national politics (frequently involving EU-wide changes), movement activists are bound to be disappointed. By their very nature, those who are active in new social movements tend to be single-issue oriented and call for fast and radical change. This is the very antithesis to national coalition government constrained by European-wide regulations. Ironically, taking over the Ministry of the Environment is probably the most problematic (yet virtually inevitable) choice for a Green party because it involves the largest potential for confrontations with the very core of the Green constituency.

Again, the German example is instructive here. The dilemma of being a party of government was epitomised by the conflict over the transport of nuclear waste that led to a massive mobilisation of protest in Germany. Unenthusiastically committed to a policy of gradually phasing out nuclear energy production, Green politicians found themselves confronted by their formerly most loyal allies, the activists of the anti-nuclear movement, which is the nucleus of the ecology movement and the ‘birthplace’ of the Green party. Another highly conflictual issue for Green parties has been the conflict over the involvement of their

countries in the Kosovo conflict, which touched upon the second element of Green identity, that is, their strong roots in the movement against the deployment of intermediate range nuclear missiles in the early 1980s. Although only parts of these movements were outright pacifist, acceptance of the Kosovo mission nevertheless represented a dramatic departure from previously held Green convictions that the use of military force should not be a means of foreign policy.

Inevitably, government incumbency required acceptance of the constraints of domestic and international policy-making even if this meant alienating a considerable portion of committed movement activists who no longer regarded the Greens as an adequate and trustworthy mouthpiece for their concerns and therefore withdrew their electoral support. One obvious reaction to this strategic dilemma was to broaden their appeal. All Green parties have attempted to free themselves from the image of a single-issue party and to acquire competence in other policy areas, not least by trying to occupy 'promising' portfolios like consumer protection. While this may pay off in the medium or long term, immediate electoral rewards are unlikely, because voters' perceptions of parties change very slowly. The almost universal weakness of parties on the Left when it comes to deciding who is to be trusted in economic policies is a case in point. Furthermore, there is a danger of neglecting Green core competence by trying too hard to become a party concerned with a broader range of themes. After all, the only unmistakably Green issue is the concern with ecological politics, which goes beyond the mere concern with environmental protection now common place in modern democracies. Neglecting to emphasise what is distinct about the Green approach to the environment may lead to the electorally highly damaging feeling among the electorate that the Greens are no longer needed. The alternative option - 'reconnecting' with the movements - has proven hardly more promising. After all, a posture of 'opposition in government' is barely tenable except for parties that hold the balance of power – a favourable but rare strategic position that has so far eluded the Greens everywhere.

In the end, Green party power within national coalition governments (and hence their electoral success) rests primarily on the skilful exploitation of a rather limited room for manoeuvre below the threshold of threatening or even exercising the exit option. Given the format of the respective party systems, normally this could only mean return to opposition on the radical fringes of the party system, including reconnecting with the movements. While this may win back some of the voters lost in the process of moderation, others, who are more

moderately inclined, may defect instead. Obviously, self-limitation to opposition is hardly a viable and promising strategy for the majority of Green party activists. Instead, they may find that their performance in government (and at the polls) can be improved by treading a thin line between loyal co-operation within government and making it clear that Green policy objectives go far beyond the rather limited reforms which are possible under the constraints of coalition government.

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