

## Research Note

### On the inverse relationship between votes and proximity for niche parties

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**Abstract.** Do niche parties occupying left-right policy positions that diverge sharply from the centre of the voter distribution gain more popular support than those moderately positioned along the left-right continuum? Cross-sectional analyses, based on observations from twelve Western European countries from 1984–1998, are presented that suggest the answer is ‘yes’. By contrast, these analyses strongly suggest that for mainstream parties, policy radicalism depresses popular support. The implication of these findings is that for niche parties, it is the distinctiveness of their left-right positions that enhances their competitiveness in democratic elections. While this finding runs counter to the intuition of standard spatial theory, it is consistent with recent dynamic accounts of niche party responsiveness to shifts in public opinion and electoral support for niche parties. These findings have implications for party strategies, spatial theories and the understanding of political representation.

## Introduction

Traditional spatial theory predicts that, *ceteris paribus*, candidates and political parties gain electoral benefits when they moderate their policy positions (Downs 1957; Enelow & Hinich 1984). Recent studies, however, suggest that the logic of spatial theory applies differently to different *types* of parties (Adams et al. 2006; Meguid 2005). Specifically, these studies suggest that *niche parties* – namely, parties that occupy the extreme left (Communists), the extreme right (radical nationalist parties) or a distinctly non-centrist niche (the Greens) – do not necessarily enhance their electoral appeal by presenting moderate policy programmes. Here, I extend this line of research by presenting two new insights about the relationship between parties’ policy programmes and their electoral success.

The first contribution is an extension of a central conclusion in a recently published article by Adams and his co-authors (Adams et al. 2006). In their study, they conclude that niche parties are penalised for moderating their

left-right positions because this alienates their ideological clienteles who perceive that these parties are ‘pandering’ or ‘selling out’. While this finding (the *costly policy moderation result*) is an important one, it does not address directly the question of whether niche parties would gain popular support if they *entered* a political system as more moderate in the first place. The cross-sectional empirical results below suggest that even if these ideologically oriented niche parties entered the party system presenting moderate policies, they would do poorly in elections. By contrast, the results suggest that if niche parties entered the system with distinctly non-centrist policy platforms, they would increase their electoral success. In other words, while most parties benefit when they advocate moderate policies (relative to the centre of the voter distribution), the opposite is true of niche parties.

The second contribution of this study relates to an *American Political Science Review* article by Bonnie Meguid (2005), which argues that popular support for Green and radical right parties is largely determined by the actions of mainstream parties in the political system.<sup>1</sup> Meguid concludes that the electoral competitiveness of Green and radical right parties is greatest when two conditions are met: first, that a mainstream party must engage such parties on their primary issue dimension (i.e., immigration policy for radical right parties and the environment for Green parties), thereby enhancing the salience of this dimension; second, that the mainstream party adopts an ‘adversarial’ position along the issue dimension of the niche party. The highly plausible implication of Meguid’s argument is that *issue salience* and *differentiation*, taken together, contribute to the electoral success of niche parties. While Meguid rightly emphasises additional issue dimensions of party competition, the results reported here suggest that her logic of policy differentiation extends to the central axis of party competition, the left-right dimension, across twelve democratic political systems. Specifically, niche parties do better in elections when their left-right positions are perceived as radical rather than centrist.

Cross-sectional analyses of parties’ vote shares in twelve Western European democracies are presented, with two central findings.<sup>2</sup> The first is that parties, in general, gain vote share when they are positioned closer to the centre of public opinion in the political systems under observation. This finding is labeled the ‘General Policy Centrist Result’ and is consistent with previous macro-level empirical research on the effects of left-right policy positioning in multiparty systems (Ezrow 2005). The second and central finding of the study is the ‘Niche Parties Result’. This result states that centrist niche parties receive less popular support than niche parties positioned towards the extremes of the left-right dimension.

In the next section, I explicate the logic that motivates the expectations about the relationship between party policy distance (defined as the party’s

left-right policy distance from the centre of the voter distribution) and vote share. The third section describes the data and constructs the variables that are necessary to test these expectations. The fourth section analyses the results, and the final section concludes this brief note on niche party success (or failure).

### **Hypotheses on mainstream and niche party support**

The first hypothesis posits that political parties are rewarded for presenting policies that are centrist relative to the voter distribution. Though the first expectation is not the central concern of this analysis, it is nevertheless important because it is necessary to first identify the nature of the relationship between party positioning and popular support for all of the parties in a political system (and then to compare this relationship to that for niche parties).<sup>3</sup> Previous macro-level research on the linkages between parties' vote shares in *real world* elections and their proximities to the centre of the policy space in multiparty elections conclude that parties typically gain votes when they are positioned closer to the centre of the voter distribution (Ezrow 2005). This expectation motivates the first hypothesis:

*H1 (The General Policy Centrist Hypothesis):* Parties occupying left-right positions close to the mean voter position receive a higher proportion of the vote in national elections than do parties positioned farther away from the mean voter.

While the general policy centrist hypothesis posits that the traditional spatial model possesses explanatory power for understanding party support across political systems, one might expect the assumptions of the model not to hold for niche parties. In their analyses of the electoral consequences of changes in parties' ideological positions, Adams et al. (2006) conclude that niche parties (defined as Communist, Green and radical right parties) tend to lose vote shares when they moderate their positions. The implications of Meguid's (2005) argument similarly suggest that niche parties are unable to increase their vote shares through unilateral strategic positioning decisions, and, instead, that niche parties' popular support largely depends on the behaviour of the mainstream parties in the system and whether these parties engage niche parties on the additional dimensions they are attempting to introduce to party competition. Meguid adds that it is in cases when mainstream parties take 'adversarial' positions to niche parties on immigration or the environment that the niche parties are expected to have the highest likelihood of electoral

success. Here, Meguid's logic of niche party differentiation is simply transferred to the left-right dimension. Taken together these analyses produce the counterintuitive expectation that, contrary to the General Policy Centrism Hypothesis, niche parties will in fact gain *fewer* votes when they are perceived as 'centrist' in the party system. Thus the work of Adams et al. (2006) and Meguid (2005) motivates the second hypothesis:

*H2 (The Niche Parties Hypothesis):* Niche parties occupying positions close to the mean voter position will receive a lower proportion of the vote in national elections than will niche parties positioned farther away from the mean voter.

## Data and method

To test *H1* and *H2*, it is necessary to develop measures of popular support and party proximity to the mean left-right voter position. Mackie and Rose (1991, 1997) report the absolute percentage of votes for each party in each election.<sup>4</sup> The measure of popular support (vote share) is reconstructed because it is expected that successful parties will receive fewer votes in systems where there are more competitive parties. The normalised measure takes into account the number of competitive parties in the given election. The measure employed is:

$$\text{Normalised vote share (NV)} = V_i * N_j \quad (1)$$

where  $V_i$  equals the absolute share of the vote for party  $i$ , and  $N_j$  is the number of parties in election  $j$  receiving over 5 per cent of the vote.<sup>5</sup>

The measure of party policy distance relies on the Eurobarometer 31A (1989). The survey asks approximately 1,000 respondents in each of the twelve Members of the European Community to place themselves, and each of their significant national parties, on a left-right scale, ranging from 1 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right).<sup>6</sup> These placements are used to compute the mean voter's left-right position in each country, as well as the parties' mean perceived positions in each country's election year from 1984 through 1998.<sup>7</sup> All of the measures of party policy distance presented in these analyses are defined as the difference between the mean citizen left-right self-placement (i.e., the centre of public opinion) and the party placements based on citizen perceptions, as well as placements by a survey of experts (discussed later).<sup>8</sup> The party policy distance measure is based on the squared difference between the party position and the mean citizen placement.<sup>9</sup>

$$\text{Party policy distance} = (A_i - X_i)^2, \quad (2)$$

where  $A_i$  is the position of the mean voter on a left-right continuum and  $X_i$  is the (mean perceived) left-right position of party  $X$ .

I further rely on the surveys of panels of country experts conducted by Huber and Inglehart (1995) that ask experts for their opinions of parties' ideological placements on a left-right continuum.<sup>10</sup> In so doing, it is possible to develop additional measures of party policy distance for the empirical analyses. An interesting byproduct of these analyses is that the substantive conclusions remain robust, regardless of the measure of party policy distance employed.

### Testing *H1* and *H2*

Recall that the general policy centrism hypothesis (*H1*) posits a *negative* relationship between party policy distance and party support – that is that parties' vote shares decrease with the distance between the party's left-right position and the mean voter position. By contrast, the niche parties hypothesis (*H2*) suggests that this expected relationship will be *positive* for niche parties. The most straightforward way to evaluate these hypotheses is to stratify the sample of parties into niche and mainstream (non-niche) groups.<sup>11</sup> For each set of parties, the parameters of an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression model are estimated in order to evaluate these hypotheses. The specification is given below:

$$\text{Normalised vote share} = B_1 + B_2 [\text{Party policy distance}] + e \quad (3)$$

where,

*Party policy distance* = the squared left-right distance between the party's position and the mean voter position.

In order to ensure that the substantive conclusions are not artifacts of the measurement approach for the dependent variable, additional regression models are estimated as checks on robustness. Specifically, the parameters are estimated for an alternative specification for which the dependent variable is the party's *absolute vote share*. For these analyses it is necessary to also control for the number of competitors in the political system, and here I employ the *effective number of elective parties (ENEP)* measure developed by Laakso and Taagepera (1979).<sup>12</sup> The specification is given below:

$$\text{Absolute vote share} = B_1 + B_2 [\text{Party policy distance}] + B_3 [\text{Effective number of elective parties}] + e \quad (4)$$

H1:  $B_2 < 0$ , for mainstream parties

H2:  $B_2 > 0$ , for niche parties

Table 1 reports the parameter estimates for Equations 3 and 4, which estimate popular support for the mainstream parties that are included in the empirical analysis. Each specification was estimated in turn for each of the two measures of proximity – one based on citizen party placements and another based on expert placements reported in the Huber-Inglehart survey.

The parameter estimates in the first table support the general policy centrism hypothesis, and this finding is labeled the ‘general policy centrism result’. The four coefficients that estimate the relationship between *party policy distance* and (normalised and absolute) *vote share* are negative, and each of these coefficients reach statistical significance. The parameter estimates indicate that as party policy distance increases, vote share decreases for the mainstream parties – a finding that is consistent with the standard spatial model. Thus, moderate party positioning and popular support appear to be linked across the multiparty Western European democracies.

The results presented in Table 2, which reports parameter estimates based on the set of niche parties included in the data set, support the niche parties hypothesis, and this finding is labeled the ‘niche parties result’. Each of the parameter estimates for *party policy distance* is positive and reaches statistical significance. These estimates indicate that as niche parties are perceived to be farther away from the centre of the voter distribution, they tend to receive larger vote shares. The central implication of the niche parties result is that it is the ideological distinctiveness along the left-right dimension that contributes to niche party electoral success.

Figures 1a and 1b, as well as 2a and 2b illustrate the central conclusion that niche parties tend to gain fewer votes, and mainstream parties more votes, when they are perceived by their citizens as centrist parties. These figures plot the policy distances of niche parties (Figures 1a and 2a) and mainstream parties (Figures 1b and 2b) along the x axis, and their absolute vote percentages along the y axis – based on each approach for estimating parties’ left-right ideological positions. The slope estimates of the ‘best-fit’ lines for the niche party scattergrams are visibly positive, indicating that niche parties tend to receive greater vote shares as their policy distance (or distinctiveness) from the centre of the voter distribution increases. Alternatively, the negative slope-lines for mainstream (non-niche) parties suggest that the conventional spatial theory generally applies to the rest of the parties included in the analyses.

Table 1. Regression coefficients for party policy distance when estimating vote shares for mainstream parties

	Eurobarometer placements (1984–1994)		Expert placements: Huber-Ingelhart (1988–1998)	
	Normalised vote shares (1)	Absolute vote shares (2)	Normalised vote shares (3)	Absolute vote shares (4)
Party policy distance	-1.93* (1.11)	-0.50* (0.28)	-3.98*** (1.13)	-1.03*** (0.26)
Effective number of elective parties <sup>†</sup>		-2.55*** (0.60)		-3.18*** (0.69)
Constant	75.91*** (5.78)	29.51*** (3.26)	89.50*** (6.30)	35.51*** (3.51)
N	189	189	120	120
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.01	0.08	0.09	0.21

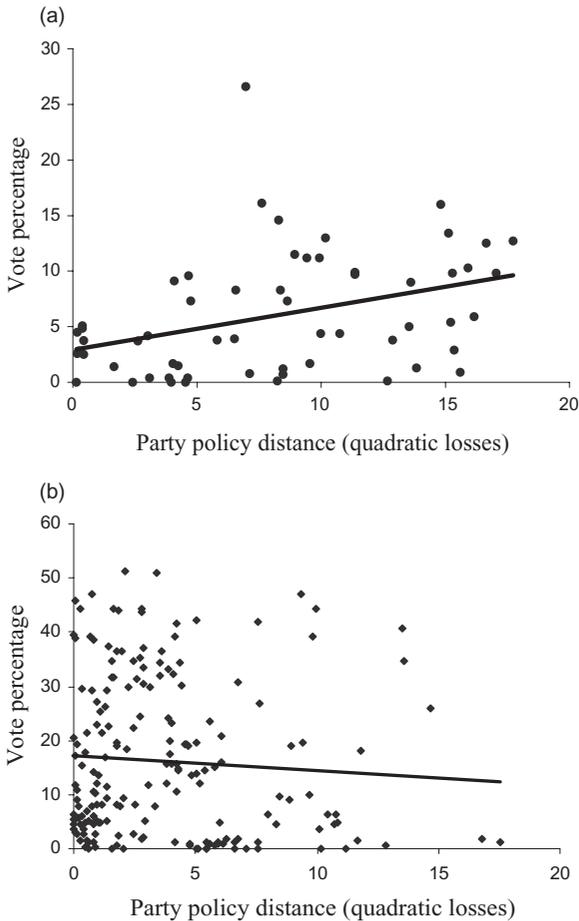
Notes: \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , two-tailed test. <sup>†</sup> Source: Laakso and Taagepera (1979). Estimated standard errors are in parentheses. The dependent variable that is estimated in Columns 1 and 3 is normalised vote share, which is calculated as the party's vote share multiplied by the number of competitive parties in the election (see Equation 1 in the text). The mainstream political parties included in the statistical analyses are those that do not belong to the Green, Communist or Nationalist party families. The Comparative Manifesto Project designates to which 'party family' a party belongs in their published CD-ROM.

Table 2. Regression coefficients for party policy distance when estimating vote shares for niche parties

	Eurobarometer placements (1984–1994)		Expert placements: Huber-Ingelhart (1988–1998)	
	Normalised vote shares (1)	Absolute vote shares (2)	Normalised vote shares (3)	Absolute vote shares (4)
Party policy distance	1.21* (0.62)	0.40*** (0.13)	1.37*** (0.45)	0.21** (0.08)
Effective number of elective parties <sup>†</sup>		0.20 (0.41)		-0.59 (0.35)
Constant	17.76*** (5.97)	1.81 (2.53)	30.49*** (5.29)	9.48 (2.01)
N	59	59	25	25
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.05	0.11	0.25	0.28

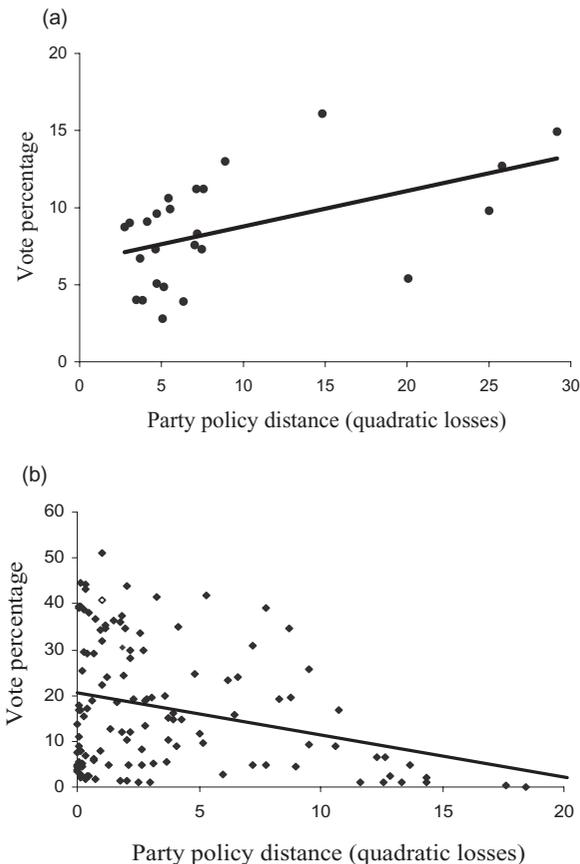
Notes: \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , two-tailed test. <sup>†</sup> Source: Laakso and Taagepera (1979). Estimated standard errors are in parentheses. Niche parties belong to the Green, Communist or Nationalist party families.

While the niche parties result is relevant to the studies by Adams et al. (2006) and Meguid (2005) cited in the introduction, there are several related authors whose empirical results also fit neatly with the central conclusion of this study. Instead of dividing parties into the ‘niche’ and ‘mainstream’ camps, Andrews and Money (2005) separate parties into ‘champions’ and ‘challengers’ – that is, parties that have been a part of a governing coalition at one time and those that have not. The central finding from the Andrews-Money study is that challengers gain votes by adopting a strategy of policy extremism, while champions enhance their electoral support via a strategy of policy moderation. The result also relates to Schofield and Sened’s (2006) book



*Figures 1a and 1b.* Party policy distance and vote percentage for niche parties (Figure 1a) and mainstream parties (Figure 1b) based on respondents’ left-right policy perceptions of parties from the Eurobarometer 31A (1989).

on party competition. One of the authors' central findings relates to parties' valence qualities in elections,<sup>13</sup> specifically that parties possessing low valence scores tend to do better in elections when they differentiate themselves from higher-valence parties. To the extent that niche parties tend to be the 'challengers' or valence-disadvantaged parties, and that mainstream parties are generally the 'champions' or valence-advantaged parties, the niche parties result is consistent with the arguments put forward in the Schofield-Sened and the Andrews-Money studies.<sup>14</sup>



*Figures 2a and 2b.* Party policy distance and vote percentage for niche parties (Figure 2a) and mainstream parties (Figure 2b) based on the estimates of parties' left-right policy positions reported in the Huber-Ingelhart (Huber & Ingelhart 1995) survey of country experts.

## Conclusion

Policy centrism influences mainstream and niche party success in elections though, remarkably, in the opposite direction for each type of party. Policy centrism is generally rewarded with votes in multiparty systems. However, when a line is drawn between niche parties and the rest of the parties in a political system, an interesting relationship emerges: niche parties that present moderate policy positions receive fewer votes than their more radical counterparts. These results are robust across several model specifications, employing numerous measures of the theoretically relevant variables (party policy distance and electoral support). Moreover, these conclusions corroborate and expand upon the contributions of several recent studies (Adams et al. 2006; Meguid 2005). In addition, the cross-sectional feature of the study implies that the *costly policy moderation result*, raised by Adams et al., applies to niche party *entry* into party competition. Based on the findings reported here, budding niche parties would be well-advised to start off by adopting comparatively radical left-right policy positions. Furthermore, the logic of niche party policy differentiation, raised by Bonnie Meguid, appears to hold along the traditional left-right dimension of party competition. Together these studies have introduced significant modifications to the conventional spatial model by considering the *type of party* competing in elections.

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## Notes

1. Unlike Adams et al. (2006), Meguid does not explore directly the electoral fortunes of Communist parties.
2. This study relies on party-level observations from Belgium, Great Britain, France, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, Italy, Portugal, Ireland, Luxembourg, Denmark and Greece.
3. Although the traditional spatial model of two-party electoral competition predicts convergent party behaviour (Downs 1957; Enelow & Hinich 1984), theoretical studies examining multiparty competition have developed alternative predictions about party

positioning. The formal theoretical models that assume deterministic voting predict noncentrist party behaviour (Cox 1990; see also Adams 2001). On the other hand, formal theorists who assume probabilistic voting predict that parties would maximise their vote shares by moderating their ideological policy programmes in multiparty systems (Lin et al. 1999; De Palma et al. 1990). The empirical research has been simulation-based utilising individual-level survey data from real world elections. These authors similarly reach conflicting conclusions on party positioning incentives in multiparty systems. Some studies conclude that centrist positioning would increase popular support for parties contesting multiparty elections (Alvarez, Nagler & Willette 2000; Alvarez, Nagler & Bowler 2000; Schofield et al. 1998a, 1998b), while other simulation studies conclude that parties would maximise votes by presenting distinctly noncentrist positions (Adams & Merrill 1999, 2000).

4. The remaining election returns (through 1998) were gathered using the CD-ROM accompanying Budge et al. (2001).
5. Note that additional statistical analyses are conducted employing as the dependent variable, instead, the parties' absolute vote shares (reported in Tables 1 and 2) and the natural logs of the parties' vote shares, and that these analyses support the substantive conclusions based on normalised vote shares that are reported below.
6. The questions in the 1989 Eurobarometer (31A) are worded: 'In political matters, people talk of "the left" and "the right". How would you place your views on this scale? And, where would you place the political parties (of your country)?'
7. Below alternative sets of analyses are reported that employ country experts' party placements in place of the mean positions ascribed to the parties by the Eurobarometer respondents. Also, note that in addition to the Eurobarometer 31A (1989), Eurobarometers 21 (1984), 23 (1985), 25 (1986), 27 (1987), 29 (1988), 33 (1990), 35 (1991), 37 (1992), 39 (1993), 41 (1994), 43 (1995), 45 (1996), 47 (1997) and 49 (1998) were relied upon to calculate the mean voter's left-right position for each country during its election year.
8. Note that 'party policy distance' and 'party proximity' are, to some extent, interchangeable insofar as each refers to the *ideological distance* between a party and the centre of the voter distribution. The measures are inversely related (i.e., as the policy distance for a party increases, proximity to the mean voter position necessarily decreases – in a one-to-one fashion). In a few instances, I refer to 'proximity' because it is the more familiar of the two terms, and in the rest I refer to 'party policy distance' to improve the substantive interpretation of the results.
9. An alternative set of analyses were performed based on the parties' linear proximities to the mean voter position. These analyses supported substantive conclusions that were identical to the ones reported below, although the statistical fit of these models was not as strong as the fit for squared proximity, suggesting that this latter measure is the appropriate metric for evaluating the electoral effects of party positioning. This empirical finding suggests that the parties' vote shares are *concave* functions of their policy positions – that is, that parties' vote shares drop off slowly at first as they diverge from their vote-maximising positions, but then drop off more rapidly as the parties move further away. Adams and Merrill (2005) present theoretical arguments about why parties' vote shares can be expected to be concave functions of their positions. Interpreted, this means that parties are penalised more for each marginal unit of distance between their left-right position and the mean voter position.

10. Note that all of the party scores have been recalibrated to the traditional Eurobarometer 1–10 scale so that all of the analyses fit the data on public opinion.
11. A list of the niche parties that are included in the study is presented in the Appendix.
12. The Effective Number of Elective Parties (ENEP) is calculated using the following equation developed by Laakso and Taagepera (1979):  $N = 1/\sum v_i^2$ , where  $v_i$  is the proportion of votes of the  $i^{\text{th}}$  party that is represented in parliament. The authors' alternative measure, the Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties (ENPP) is based on seats (i.e.,  $N = 1/\sum s_i^2$ , where  $s_i$  is the proportion of seats of the  $i^{\text{th}}$  party in the legislature). In the following empirical analyses, the results reported are based on votes (ENEP), though analyses have also been conducted using the measure based on seat share weightings (ENPP). In each case, the substantive results remained unchanged.
13. The term 'valence' was introduced in an article by Stokes (1963), where 'valence characteristics' refer to non-policy-related traits of parties that influence election outcomes (e.g., leadership ability, competence, integrity and unity).
14. It is also worth noting that the niche parties result is relevant to the studies on party decision rules (Budge 1994; Laver 2005). The empirical results reported in this section imply that different types of parties may employ different decision rules when they are choosing their policy strategies.

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**Appendix: Niche parties included in the empirical analyses**

Country	Niche party
Belgium	PCB (Communist)
	Ecologie (Green)
	Agalev (Green)
Denmark	Socialistisk Folkeparti (Communist)
France	PCF (Communist)
	FN (Nationalist)
Germany	Grüne (Green)
Greece	KKE (Communist)
Ireland	Workers' Party (Communist)
	Green
Italy	PCI (Communist)
	DP (Communist)
	Verdi (Green)

Notes: The Comparative Manifesto Project designates to which 'party family' a party belongs in their published CD-ROM. Approximately 1,000 respondents per country were asked to place their national political parties, including these niche parties, on a 1–10 Left-Right scale in the Eurobarometer 31A survey (1989).