SOCIOECONOMIC POLARISATION AND GREEN VOTE: EVIDENCE FROM ESS

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Abstract. This paper analyses the impact of income inequality on European citizens' attitudes towards the green transition, using data from Round 11 (2023) of the European Social Survey (ESS). Although there is extensive literature on the relationship between inequality and populist political attitudes, the same cannot be said when looking at the "green" orientation of the population. In particular, similar to the Kuznets curve, the relationship studied may take a non-linear form: in a non-polarised context, greater inequality should lead to a strengthening of environmentalist attitudes, while in a polarised context the sign of the relationship should be reversed. From a methodological point of view, the Gini index is calculated to measure inequality, while a binary logistic regression model is estimated to understand the probability of voting for green parties, considering not only polarisation but also individual socio-economic control variables. In addition, a Multilevel Linear Probability Model was used, which also allows for the impact of aggregate factors such as gross domestic product, population density and perceptions of environmental quality to be taken into account. The results show that higher levels of inequality are associated with a lower propensity to vote green. The study contributes to the literature by highlighting how socio-economic polarisation can influence environmental attitudes and support for ecological transition in Europe.

1. Introduction

Environmental degradation undoubtedly represents the most pressing challenge of the 21st century, requiring politicians and society to embark on a path of ecological transition. At the European level, the adoption of the Green Deal marks a fundamental shift towards a sustainable development model, while green parties are now an established presence in the political systems of most Western democracies (O'Neill, 2019; Marquardt, 2024). Their growth is fuelled by increased interest and support for environmental issues (Debus and Tosun, 2021). In particular, environmentalist attitudes reflect a personal commitment to preserving the environment, which can be encompassed in the realm of cooperative behaviours benefiting the collective good (Reese, 2016).

However, citizens also increasingly perceive that they are part of a context marked by strong economic and social inequalities (Qadri *et al.,* 2025). This imbalance can generate disillusionment, leading to support for populist parties (Stoetzer *et al.,* 2023),

on the one hand, and coupling with a decline of social capital (Putnam, 2000), i.e. one of the most common proxies of cooperative behaviour. The scientific literature has extensively studied the relationship between economic inequality and political orientations, showing how contexts characterised by strong social polarisation can fuel distrust of institutions (Lipps and Schraff, 2021) and strengthen support for populist parties (Ivanov, 2023). At the same time, little research has been done on the effect of inequality on environmental attitudes, particularly in terms of the propensity to vote green. Studies offer conflicting evidence. Older studies emphasise that wealthier voters are not necessarily more "green", as they may not be willing to pay more for better environmental quality through taxes (McAusland, 2003). On the other hand, Huo *et al.,* (2025), highlight how income inequality can inhibit citizens' environmental attitudes by impeding individuals from identifying with their nation. In the authors' view citizens' discontent about the government's inability to guarantee widespread well-being for citizens can lead to a lack of trust in the effectiveness of green policies and therefore to a deacreased support for green parties. A possible extension comes from the analogy with the Kuznets environmental curve (EKC), which identifies a non-linear relationship between economic development and environmental quality (Dinda, 2004). Applying this logic to green attitudes, it is plausible to assume that their relationship with inequality follows a similar pattern: in less polarised contexts, moderate levels of inequality can stimulate trust in the system and strengthen willingness to support ecological transition; in highly polarised contexts, however, inequality itself generates mistrust and resentment, weakening support for green policies. In light of these considerations, this study aims to contribute to the literature by analysing the role of economic inequality in the green orientations of European citizens. In particular, three research questions are addressed:

1. To what extent does this inequality affect citizens' propensity to support green parties, controlling for various socio-economic variables?
2. Is the relationship between inequality and green voting linear or does it follow a non-linear pattern, similar to an inverted U-curve?

According to the reviewed literature, we expect inequality to negatively affect green parties' preferences (Hypothesis 1), and we hypothesise that this relationship takes the form of an inverted U-curve, likewise the so-called Environmental Kuznets Curve (Hypothesis 2).The article is organised as follows: in Section 2, we present the dataset and descriptive statistics; in Section 3, we present the methodology; in Section 4, we describe the results obtained from the model estimates; finally, in Section 5, we discuss the results and present our conclusions.

2. Data

This study uses data from Round 11 of the European Social Survey (2023) to investigate inequality in income perceptions and green attitudes of European citizens

in the post-pandemic context. The ESS is a cross-national survey promoted to ensure high standards in the production of reliable and comparable data across countries (Pollak and Grand, 2016). Previous studies have highlighted the importance of ESS questionnaires for analysing attitudes related to the environment (Vaznonis *et al.,* 2024). The dataset includes 31,551 respondents from the 18 EU member countries included in the survey, with a higher percentage of Italians (9%), followed by Greeks (8.7%), Germans (7.6%) and Austrians (7.4%). Concerning political affiliation, respondents identified themselves mostly as centre (46%), followed by centre right (16.4%) and centre left (14.8%). High civic participation is indicated by the fact that 74.4% voted in the last elections. In addition, 24.7% state that they feel fairly close to the political party, while a small group 0.7% do not feel represented. The perception of income emerges as a significant variable: most of the respondents (46%) indicate that they live comfortably and only a small percentage state that they face serious economic difficulties (3.7%). More than half of the sample (63.3%) has a permanent contract, compared to 4.4% who have no employment contract. The analysis was further enriched by adding additional variables, such as educational level, age and outlook on the causes of climate change.

A large proportion of respondents have between 9 and 12 years of education (35.1), followed by a significant proportion of those between 13 and 16 years (32.5%) and a segment with more than 17 years of education (20.2%). A small proportion have a very low education (3.2%). The age range of the sample is wide, with the population tending to be older than 65 (27%). Furthermore, in order to capture the structural and socio-economic conditions of the countries, the ESS microdata were supplemented with additional variables, this time of an aggregate nature from Eurostat, all referring to the year 2023 and relating to the countries included in the analysis. In particular, the following were taken into account: GDP per capita, population density and environmental quality.

3. Methodology

In line with the objective of this study, we examine income inequality among the EU countries included in the data sample. Since the 1980s, Isaac (1982) states that "Economists have lamented the lack of a satisfactory theory of income distribution", emphasising the need to measure inequality. The theory of income inequality, in fact, developed as a result of the need to make comparisons between or within individual countries and to fill various gaps in our understanding of income distribution. A fundamental contribution was made by the Italian statistician and polymath Carlo Gini through the development of an index measuring how much income distribution differs from perfect equality (Park and Kim, 2021).

Table 1 - *Survey socio-demographic characteristics (n and %).*

Country	n	%	Gender	n	%
Austria	2354	7,4	Male	14706	46,3
Belgium	1594	5	Female	17077	53,7
Cyprus	685	2,2	**Income**	n	%
Germany	2420	7,6	Living comfortably on present income	10644	33,5
Spain	1844	5,8	Coping on present income	14614	46
Finland	1563	4,9	Difficult on present income	4991	15,7
France	1771	5,6	Very difficult on present income	1181	3,7
Greece	2757	8,7	**Has child**	n	%
Hungary	2118	6,7	Yes	11118	35
Ireland	2017	6,3	No	10518	33,1
Italy	2865	9	**Employment contract**	n	%
Lithuania	1365	4,3	Unlimited	20116	63,3
Netherlands	1695	5,3	Limited	3152	9,9
Poland	1442	4,5	No contract	1385	4,4
Portugal	1373	4,3	**Occupation**	n	%
Sweden	1230	3,9	Managers	97	0,3
Slovenia	1248	3,9	Professionals	2078	6,5
Slovakia	1442	4,5	Technicians and associate professionals	5652	17,8
Political orientation	n	%	Clerical support workers	3933	12,4
Left	1741	5,5	Service and sales workers	2513	7,9
Centre Left	4697	14,8	Skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers	5211	16,4
Centre	14622	46	Craft and related trades workers	875	2,8
Centre Right	5202	16,4	Plant and machine operators and assemblers	3124	9,8
Right	1777	5,6	Elementary occupations	1935	6,1
Party identification	n	%	Armed forces occupations	2678	8,4
Very close	1848	5,8	**Age**	n	%
Quite close	7866	24,7	under 25	2972	9,5
Not close	2275	7,2	25-35	4262	13,3
Not at all close	227	0,7	36-45	4759	14,9
Born	n	%	46-55	5351	16,9
Born in country	28965	91,1	56-65	5736	17,9
Foreign Born	2799	8,8	over 65	8512	27

Table 1(cont.) - *Survey socio-demographic characteristics (n and %).*

EU Remain	n	%	Years of education	n	%
Remain member of the European Union	24842	78,2	0-5	998	3,2
Leave the European Union	3484	11	06-08	2506	7,8
			09-12	11157	35,1
			13-16	10237	32,5
			over 17	6412	20,2

Source: own elaboration.

The Gini index is, therefore, a widely used measure of inequality in economics, and its value ranges from 0 to 1, denoting perfect equality and perfect inequality respectively. Its statistical form is given by the following equation:

$$G = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n} \sum_{j=1}^{n} |x_i - x_j|}{2n^2 \mu}$$

In this survey, the Gini index was not calculated on actual income, but rather on the personal assessment of household income provided by ESS respondents. Specifically, we considered the variable *hincfel* ("Feeling about household's income"), which measures the level of satisfaction or economic hardship perceived by participants. The Gini coefficient obtained reflects the effect of inequality experienced by citizens in each country.

The analysis continues with the estimation of a binary logistic regression model, one of the methods commonly used in various research fields. The application of the model makes it possible to answer the next research question, namely to understand how different socio-economic variables, including the inequality calculated above, may influence citizens' propensity to vote for green parties during the last elections. The dependent variable is dichotomous, i.e. it can take value 0 or 1, depending on whether the condition is met or not. In our case, it takes on value 1 when the respondent states that he or she votes for a green party, and value 0 otherwise. The binary logistic regression model is part of the family of generalised linear models (GLM) (Roni and Djajadikerta, 2021). Its main distinguishing feature is the type of dependent variable, which is categorical and has two modes (Harris, 2021). The statistical form of the model is given by the following equation:

$$P(y) = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-(\beta_0 + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_2 x_2)}}$$

where P(y) represents the probability of belonging to a certain category of the dependent variable, β are the coefficients of the independent variables (or predictors)

and x represents the independent variables. The logistic function ensures that the probability estimate is within the range [0, 1]. According to Aliyu *et al.,* (2021), it is possible to rewrite the model in logit form, as shown in the following equation:

$$Logit(P_i) = \text{Log}\left(\frac{P_i}{1 - P_i}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{1i} + \dots + \beta_k X_{ki}$$

The independent variables include individual factors (gender, age, native/migrant status, contract and sector of employment, years of education, political orientation, party identification and attitude towards the EU) and aggregate factors (Gini index, GDP per capita, population density, environmental quality).

The selection of independent variables takes into account the main demographic, socio-economic and political-value factors that may impact green voting. Native or migrant status allows us to identify potential differences associated with experiences of social integration and perceptions of economic inequality. Employment status, which includes the type of contract and sector of work, is equally relevant as it reflects different degrees of economic stability and material interests that may influence behaviour towards environmental policies. Political position and party affiliation are assessed to consider the importance of ideological preferences and long-term affiliations, which frequently influence electoral decisions. Age structure and educational attainment are also included given the role of these features in shaping political preferences. Attitudes towards the European Union are also considered, as they can be a sign of global openness and trust in supranational institutions, aspects that are usually linked to greater support for environmental policies. Finally, at country level we control for the GDP per capita and the population density.

Reference categories were defined for the dummy variables (female gender, migrants, conservative orientation), while the "occupation" variable was kept unchanged due to its hierarchical nature.

To disentangle the country effect, we then replicate the estimates using a Linear Probability Multilevel Model, which is appropriate for the hierarchical structure of the data, with individuals (level 1) nested within countries (level 2). The associated equation thakes the following form:

$$P_{ic} = \beta_1 X_{ic} + \beta_2 Z_c + \mu_c + \epsilon_{ic}$$

where X_{ic} are the individual-level characteristics Z_c are the country-level features, μ_c is the unobserved country effect and ϵ_{ic} is the error term.

4. Results

Table 2 shows the Gini index, which measures the degree of perceived income inequality in most EU countries. There is some heterogeneity in the results obtained,

but overall it is possible to divide them into three categories according to perceived inequality. Ireland, Belgium and Spain record higher levels of economic inequality, which may indicate economic and social polarisation. In contrast, Finland, Lithuania, Slovakia, Greece, Hungary and Poland show a more equal perception of income. In an intermediate position of inequality are most countries.

Table 2 - *Gini Index.*

Country	Gini Index	Country	Gini Index
Ireland	0.243404	Sweden	0.19937
Belgium	0.241324	Austria	0.1977
Spain	0.233785	Portugal	0.19547
Cyprus	0.228145	Finland	0.18828
Slovenia	0.225852	Lithuania	0.18544
France	0.217502	Slovakia	0.18234
Netherlands	0.210887	Greece	0.16477
Germany	0.210579	Hungary	0.15427
Italy	0.209509	Poland	0.13215

Source: own elaboration.

The estimation of a binary logistic regression model allows us to understand how certain socio-economic factors influence the probability of voting for green parties. The variables were standardised to facilitate comparison of the impact of the different independent variables by placing them on the same scale. Table 3 shows the most relevant results, illustrating only the coefficients of statistically significant variables. The previously calculated Gini index plays a particularly important role, showing an inverse relationship with green voting, suggesting that in contexts characterised by greater inequality, people tend to be less inclined to support green parties (H1 confirmed). Another significant factor is political affiliation: the probability of voting for the Greens is consistent with a progressive orientation, while it is reduced among those who identify with a conservative ideology typical of the right. Education also has a significant influence: as the level of education increases, so does the propensity to vote for green parties. Employment status has a negative and statistically significant effect: individuals employed in less skilled occupations are less likely to vote for green parties. Native-born individuals, on the other hand, show a significantly greater propensity to support green parties than migrants. Finally, a favourable attitude towards remaining in the European Union is positively and significantly associated with voting green, suggesting a consistency between Europeanism and the political agenda of green parties.

Table 3 - *Binary Logistic Regression with Standardized Variables.*

Variable	Estimate	Std. Error	z	p-value	
(Intercept)	-5.33705	0.216595	-24.6406	0.001	***
Left	2.098513	0.163467	12.83756	0.001	***
Centre left	1.891525	0.156274	12.10392	0.001	***
Centre	1.083785	0.155028	6.990894	0.001	***
Centre right	0.351784	0.167161	2.104465	0.04	*
Born in country	0.530083	0.116026	4.568665	0.001	***
Eu remain	1.257257	0.121027	10.38822	0.001	***
Years of education	0.217961	0.02646	8.237419	0.001	***
Occupation_z	-0.18605	0.029167	-6.37899	0.001	***
Party identification	-0.26882	0.024579	-10.9373	0.001	***
Gini_z	-0.35437	0.024412	-14.5159	0.001	***

Source: own elaboration.

Table 4 - *Linear Probability Multilevel Model.*

Variable	Estimate	Std. Error	z	p-value
Left	.2104562	.0136699	15.40	0.000
Centre right	.0442329	.0117396	3.77	0.000
Centre left	.1753973	.0118988	14.74	0.000
Centre	.0804677	.0109856	7.32	0.000
Male	-.001396	.0050371	-0.28	0.782
Age	-.0002511	.0001745	-1.44	0.150
Has child	.0038872	.0064963	0.60	0.550
Eu remain	.0619436	.0077011	8.04	0.000
Years of education	.0046889	.0007518	6.24	0.000
Occupation	-.0063975	.0011788	-5.43	0.000
Employment contract	.0029312	.004786	0.61	0.540
Party identification	-.010095	.0013113	-7.70	0.000
Gdp_pc_2023	.0002558	.000745	0.34	0.731
Pop_density_2023	.0000721	.0001779	0.41	0.685
Env_problems_2023	.0004096	.004869	0.08	0.933
Gini	-1.685.735	.801532	-2.10	0.035
cntrynum: Identity				
var(_cons)	.0055569	.0019428	.0028005	.0110263
var(Residual)	.0758678	.0009652	.0739995	.0777834

Source: own elaboration.

Table 4 presents the results of the multilevel Linear Probability Model (LPM), with a random intercept at country level, which allows the effect of individual characteristics to be isolated from systematic differences between national contexts. The results confirm that a pro-European orientation and a higher level of education are associated with a greater likelihood of voting for green parties.

Conversely, both employment status, with a lower probability of support for the Greens among those in less skilled jobs, and strong identification with traditional parties show a significant negative effect. At the contextual level, the Gini index confirms that in countries with greater economic inequality, support for green parties tends to be lower. Other factors, such as age, gender, presence of children and aggregate variables (pro capita GDP, population density and perception of environmental problems), do not show statistically significant associations. Furthermore, multilevel analysis shows that a significant variation in support for green parties is due to differences between countries. In particular, approximately 7% is attributable to the national context, while the remainder derives from individual differences within states. LR test chibar2(1) =818.26; p<0.001 confirms that the inclusion of the "Countries" level significantly improves the explanatory power of the model, despite individual differences being predominant.

Finally, a new binary logistic regression model was estimated that includes the quadratic term of the Gini index. As shown in Table 5, this estimation affected the configuration and interpretation of the model by altering the results obtained in the previous model. In particular, the addition of Gini² indicates that there is a non-linear connection between the two factors. For low levels of inequality, the support for ecological parties falls, whereas such support rises again above a certain threshold (H2 confirmed).

Table 5 - *Binary Logistic Regression with Standardized Variables and Gini².*

Variable	Estimate	Std Error_	z	p_value
(Intercept)	-4.108	0.231	-17.76	0.000
Left	2.073	0.163	12.7	0.000
Centre left	1.855	0.156	11.9	0.000
Centre	1.05	0.155	6.79	0.000
Centre right	0.324	0.167	1.94	0.052
Born in country	0.546	0.116	4.71	0.000
EU remain	1.261	0.121	10,42	0.000
Years of education_z	0.217	0.026	8.21	0.000
Occupation_z	-0.183	0.029	-6.3	0.000
Party identification z	-0.263	0.025	-10.75	0.000
$Gini^2$	-29.6	2.273	-13.02	0.000

Source: own elaboration.

5. Discussions and conclusion

This study highlights the inverse relationship between perceived income inequality, as measured by the Gini index, and voting for green parties. This suggests that inequality could be a source of discontent that favours populist parties and causes

people to turn away from green parties. However, for a very high level of inequality, this relationship may reverse due to lower voter turnout among low-income citizens, combined with wealthier individuals' greater tolerance of high levels of inequality and their continued participation in elections.

Our results also highlight the influence of other socio-economic factors on the tendency to vote green, which can be understood by analysing the underlying dynamics. The emergence of these new parties is fuelled by a conflict concerning cultural modernisation and globalisation, which reflects the social fractures rooted in today's society, such as those related to economic status or education. Since the 1970s, Kramer (1971) states that economic conditions have always had an impact on the outcome of elections Specifically, in times of economic growth, green parties tend to achieve more favourable results. This can be explained by the fact that sensitivity to environmental issues increases when people are not beset by urgent material needs (Panarello, 2021). Consequently, as income inequality increases, support for green parties decreases: the focus becomes more on redistributive issues and environmental priorities become less important, perceived as the prerogative of cultural and economic elites (Cassin *et al.,* 2021). Green parties thus behave like what in economics is called the "normal good": their support grows in contexts where average wealth is higher, on the other hand environmental protection becomes relevant after basic economic needs have been met (Gourley and Khamis, 2023).

However, among the strongest predictors of the green vote is education. Those with a higher level of education are more likely to translate their environmental concerns into consistent political behaviour, such as voting for parties with environmentalist agendas (Papp, 2022). Education is, often, correlated with a higher level of open-mindedness and provides those cognitive and informational tools to assess the importance of the topic (Bleidorn *et al.,* 2025). Infact, Kosse and Piketty (2021) reveal that educated elites tend to vote for left-wing parties (including the Greens), while economic elites move, in some cases, to the right: a sign of misalignment between cultural and economic capital that fuels the polarisation between cosmopolitanism and populism.

Furthermore, our study highlights that those who vote for green parties are generally more favourable towards European integration. Whitley *et al.,* (2023) emphasise that green voters perceive environmental issues as transnational challenges and, for this reason, believe that their country should remain within the EU and collaborate with supranational institutions capable of coordinating and promoting climate policies.

As in any research, the present study has some limitations. Firstly, it is based on cross-sectional data from 2023, which limits the possibility of the evolution of the phenomenon over time or comparisons between different election cycles. It should also be noted that the Gini index is calculated based on subjective perceptions of

household income rather than objective income data. This can lead to perceptual biases or cultural differences in the assessment of personal economic conditions.

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