

Words and deeds: electoral success for Greens in the US leads to less environmental sabotage



Does extremism necessarily beget violence? [Benjamin Farrer](#) and [Graig R. Klein](#) compare the electoral success of the US Green Party with rates of environmental sabotage. They found that when Greens won seats at local and state level, sabotage declined. Voters also appeared to punish candidates for violence carried out by environmental campaigners.

Extreme words and extreme deeds might seem to go together in politics. The more drastic a group's rhetoric, the more radical – and perhaps violent – we might expect their tactics to be. So if extremism is on the rise in public discourse, and in electoral politics, then perhaps extreme or violent expressions of politics are on the rise too?

This is an important discussion in many industrialised democracies. There were spikes in hate crimes in the UK after the Brexit referendum and in the US after the election of Donald Trump, and some blamed this on the political rhetoric accompanying those events. Most recently, in the [German federal elections](#), the [Alternative for Germany](#) Party [won seats](#) largely based on anti-migrant and xenophobic rhetoric and policies. This accompanies a rise in [xenophobic violence in Germany](#).

But increased support for an extremist party does not necessarily lead to an upsurge in violence. Rather, the reverse can be true – one can be a [substitute](#) for the other.

The role of elections in environmental sabotage

The Green Party is a minor US political party, but it has run campaigns across a variety of levels ranging from town officials to president, and repeatedly wins seats at state and local levels. While losing national-level campaigns is unlikely to breed frustration because the probability of victory is so small, repeated failure at local and state levels breeds frustration because hopes of winning were realistic.

Our [research](#) shows that this frustration with democracy and voting leads to violence. Environmental sabotage becomes more common when environmentalists cannot influence the political process through electing Green Party candidates. If environmentalists win elections, even for comparatively minor offices, then environmental sabotage becomes less common.

For example, if the Green Party, over the past five years, ran six local and three state campaigns, and won all nine races versus lost all nine races, the predicated number of environmental sabotage incidents increases from 0.06 to 0.21 – a nearly 300% increase. While environmental sabotage is not overly common in the United States, as demonstrated by these predictions, if speculation about a rising wave of Green extremism turns out to be correct, the effect of two-party domination over the Green Party in the voting process is likely to compound the rate of violence.



An activist daubs a slogan with mud at a Wisconsin protest against tar sands exploitation, 2014.
Photo: [Joe Brusky](#) via a CC-BY-NC 2.0 licence

And, in a recently presented project, we show that environmental sabotage decreases Green Party candidates' vote share in the next Congressional election cycle. Voters appear to notice whether activists are carrying out violent attacks, and show their disapproval when Green candidates appear on the ballot.

The Green Party and extremist groups are two distinct branches of environmental politics, which generally disavow each other. Nonetheless, our research shows that they are connected, and the implicit links between the electoral wing and direct action wing create the potential for an escalating cycle of electoral failure and environmental sabotage.

Some argue that this presents a credible threat to national security, and concluded that environmentalism, climate change and the 'Green' movement will define the next wave of extremist violence; others disagree. In the context of this debate, we note that the modus operandi of Green violence avoids direct physical threat to people. In the context of Green politics, at least in the US, violence seems to spring not from the presence of extremist rhetoric, but from a lack of representation in elected offices.

The rhetoric of Brexit, Trump, the Front National and the AfD may lead to more violence. But our paper suggests that the root cause of that violence is the underlying movement. And if the movement had not been able to find a political channel – a referendum, a candidate, or a party – or if that political channel had been repeatedly thwarted by non-democratic methods, then the violence might actually have been worse.

- This article first appeared at the [Democratic Audit UK blog](#).

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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