



The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. Patterns of Issue Competition between Government, Challenger and Mainstream Opposition Parties in Western Europe

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Why did the meltdown of three reactors at Fukushima lead to significant politicisation of the issue of nuclear energy in Germany, but hardly elicit any political attention in France? Why did immigration become one of the most important issues in the Dutch political debate at the beginning of the century, but has European integration only become politicised much more recently? Both examples demonstrate that considerable variation exists in the attention dynamics for issues across countries over time.

This dissertation places itself in the growing body of literature on issue competition. According to this perspective, originally developed against the backdrop of US two-party competition, political parties play the most influential role in determining the relative competition among political issues. Specifically, the current party in government is expected to keep focusing on the issues that brought in into power, while the opposition attempts to mobilise issues that do not reinforce existing patterns of party competition and most likely divide the governing party.

The aim of this dissertation is to test to what extent the issue competition framework stemming from the context of US two-party competition can be extended to more complex multiparty systems. To do so, it begins by identifying four tactics lying at the heart of this

¹ This dissertation is named after Sergio Leone's famous Western movie 'The good, the bad, and the ugly' (United Artists 1966) about the competitive struggle between the bounty hunter 'Blondie' (the good), the Union sergeant 'Angel Eyes' (the bad), and the bandit Tuco (the ugly) to find a fortune of buried Confederate gold. With some imagination, one could say that the strategies of the three gunmen closely match the behavioural differences between government, mainstream opposition, and challenger parties. As will be explained below, government and mainstream opposition parties always take coalition considerations in stride, realising that they must cooperate to gain or to remain in office. The same rationale applies to Blondie and Tuco. Despite having a troubled relationship (e.g., Tuco once directed Blondie on a forced march through the desert during which the latter almost died of dehydration), they realise that they have to cooperate to recover the loot. Tuco knows the name of the cemetery where the gold is buried, while Blondie knows the name of the grave. Alternatively, challenger parties are not constrained by coalition considerations. This closely reflects the behaviour of Angel Eyes, who operates alone and attempts to capture all the gold for himself. It should be stressed, however, that the title is *not* a normative statement of the author to suggest that government parties are good or that challenger parties are bad.

perspective: 1) deemphasising issues over which a party's potential electorate is divided, 2) engaging in dialogue on issues that are/were previously outside the dimensions of party competition, 3) mobilising wedge issues, and 4) emphasising different aspects of issues from competitors. These tactics constitute attractive office-seeking strategies in a two-party system in which vote maximisation suffices to gain office. Yet, most of these tactics conflict with a party's coalition appeal in multiparty systems. As office aspirations are assumed to be dependent on a party's membership in previous governments, the guiding hypothesis is that in multiparty systems, parties' previous membership in government (or lack thereof) crucially determines patterns of issue competition. Therefore, this study employs a behavioural classification distinguishing between *challenger parties*, *mainstream opposition parties* (MOPs), and *government parties*. Challengers are in opposition and have never governed, MOPs are opposition parties that have governed in the past, and government parties are currently in office.

The theoretical expectations set forth in this dissertation are examined by means of quantitative time-series analyses on Western European multiparty systems for the period from 1974 to 2010. It must be noted that countries and timeframes were selected exclusively on the basis of their suitability for testing the hypotheses. Because this dissertation aims to apply the US perspective on issue competition to multiparty systems, I exclusively focused on the consolidated democracies of Western Europe (that are usually governed by coalitions) to ensure comparability. Furthermore, all chapters focus on the issue of European integration, while chapter 3 compares the politicization of the immigration and EU issue. For several reasons the EU issue constitutes an excellent case for testing the strategies connected to the US top-down perspective in a multiparty context.

Importantly, party positioning on the issue of EU integration follows an inverted U curve in the member states. Thus, opposition to EU integration comes from parties from the radical right as well as from the radical left, while parties in the centre support European integration. If such issues become salient, they create a multidimensional party space in which parties become vulnerable because there will always be party members and voters who disagree with their party on this new dimension. Indeed, the issue of EU integration has been a major 'touchstone of dissent', specifically within established parties occupying the centre of Western European party systems. Thus, the issue of EU integration is the most apposite case for examining how parties manage internal conflict (Ch. 2) and which parties mobilise wedge issues that destabilise a governing party or coalition (Ch. 4). Moreover, the issue of EU integration not only poorly fits the left-right dimension but also is multidimensional. Thus, the issue can be disaggregated in different aspects. Importantly, previous research has shown that parties hold strong and divergent preferences as to which aspects of European integration (e.g., economic, cultural, or

social concerns) should be highlighted in the political debate. Therefore, the issue of EU integration is an equally compelling case for studying which parties decide to emphasize similar aspects of an issue (Ch. 5).

In regard to data sources, this dissertation relies on the analysis of secondary data. In two chapters (Ch. 2 and Ch. 4) I use data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (henceforth CHES). The CHES covers expert evaluations of national political parties in a variety of European countries for the period between 1984 and 2010 and includes estimates of the salience that parties attach to European integration, internal party dissent regarding European integration, party positioning on EU integration, party positioning on the left-right dimension, and general party characteristics, such as the party family that parties belong to and the number of votes that parties received in previous elections. In another chapter (Ch. 2) I solely focus on the case of Denmark, which enabled me to use a dataset in which parliamentary questions and declaration of government speeches were classified according to their issue content. This allowed me to study the politicization of the immigration and EU integration issues in Denmark over time. Finally, I relied on a dataset containing a human-coded analysis of election manifestos to find out which aspects of the EU issue parties tend to highlight.

Chapter 2 examines whether parties de-emphasise issues in response to internal divisions among their supporters and whether niche parties (i.e. radical right, radical left and green parties) are more likely to do so than mainstream parties (i.e. Labour, Socialist, Social-Democratic, Liberal, Conservative, and Christian Democratic parties). This is a relevant question since the niche/mainstream dichotomy is well-established in the issue competition literature on multiparty systems. Both concepts have become 'empirical commonalities' explaining the behaviour of a group of parties belonging to particular party families. Therefore, chapter 2 assesses whether the party families under the niche umbrella indeed respond to environmental incentives in a similar fashion. The results demonstrate that all parties except for green parties deemphasise issues dividing their potential electorate. While previous research has claimed that parties under the niche umbrella have horizontal organisational structures, I contend that *differences* in organisational structure account for this finding. Specifically, a horizontal organisation promotes policy maximisation over other goals. Within such parties, the minimisation of divisive issues for electoral purposes conflicts with the pursuit of policy purity. Accordingly, green parties, which usually have horizontal organisational structures, generally fail to contain the salience of internal wedge issues. Yet, further analysis shows that this tendency applies to only green challenger parties (see Appendix A). MOPs and governing parties downplay wedge issues. Their underlying rationale is that internal conflicts are likely to repel potential coalition partners. Overall, chapter 2 suggests that treating niche parties as an empirical commonality may lead to incorrect conclusions (i.e., not all niche parties deemphasise

internal wedge issues) and decreases explanatory power. Being a niche party cannot explain in and of itself why a party fails to downplay divisive issues, but a party's level of internal democracy and subsequent disposition towards policy maximisation can. The remaining chapters continue in this direction and isolate relevant party characteristics, in this case, previous participation in a coalition, to analyse issue competition between parties. The research questions in chapter 2 are examined by means of pooled time-series analysis of 197 parties in 14 Western European countries for the period between 1986 and 2006.

Chapter 3 focuses on issue trespassing by mainstream parties on non-economic issues. Because there are obviously more examples of non-economic issues than the issue of EU integration, this chapter also explores the responses of mainstream parties to challengers mobilising the issue of immigration. This comparison is particularly interesting because the issue of EU integration constitutes a very clear case of an issue that poorly fits the left-right dimension, while the issue of immigration has gradually been aligned according to the left-right dimension. Rather than treating mainstream parties as a homogenous group, this chapter proposes an analytical distinction between MOPs and government parties to understand which mainstream parties will be prepared to take electoral risks. Transferring elements of prospect theory to political science, the chapter argues that MOPs are inclined to issue trespass because they are risk acceptant in order to regain their position in office. Conversely, government parties should be risk averse and are unlikely to engage in dialogue with the parties that originally mobilised both issues. Nonetheless, they are expected to increase attention on immigration and European integration in response to MOPs. This proposed sequence of politicisation is confirmed on both issues. It must be acknowledged, however, that the agenda-setting effect of challengers on MOPs is remarkably smaller on the EU integration issue than on the issue of immigration. This finding suggests that due to their membership in the opposition, MOPs are prepared to take electoral risks by trespassing on issues owned by challengers. Yet, they are somewhat more careful to trespass on an issue that could complicate coalition-formation. These research questions are examined by means of time-series analyses on data for Denmark for the period between 1974 and 2003.

Chapter 4 (co-authored by Catherine de Vries and Sara Hobolt) focuses on the extent to which opposition parties engage in wedge issue mobilisation. To develop a theory of wedge issue competition that is suitable for multiparty competition, we distinguished between intra-coalition and intra-party wedge issues. The first type of wedge issues captured the amount of positional disagreement between government coalition parties, while the second referred to divisions within governing parties, that is, between the party leadership and activists. The results show that only challenger parties, those that have never governed, engage in intra-party wedge issue mobilisation. This finding is explained by the logic that MOPs risk being punished

by the current parties in government in future coalition negotiation rounds, which would jeopardise the attainment of their primary goal: office. Similarly, MOPs refrain from wedge issue competition because they are aware that they may need to cooperate with the parties that are currently governing to fulfil future office aspirations. These constraints do not apply to challenger parties. Because they have never governed, challengers are unlikely to aspire to obtain office, and wedge issue mobilisation thus constitutes an attractive strategy to maximise their votes. Why do challengers only exploit intra-party wedge issues and not positional disagreements between coalition parties? Our explanation holds that party leaders will conform to the unitary position of the coalition as long as their activists do not stir, which neutralises intra-coalition wedge issues. For issues that internally divide a governing party, however, previous research has shown that party leaders side with their activists rather than coalition partners when their position within the party is at stake. Thus, intra-party wedge issue mobilisation is the most effective strategy for opposition parties aiming to destabilise a government coalition. The hypotheses in chapter 4 are examined on the basis of the attention given to the issue of European integration between 1984 and 2010 by 215 parties within 14 Western European countries by using pooled time-series regressions.

	Office participation	Downplaying divisions supporters (Ch. 2)	Issue trespassing (Ch. 3)	Wedge issue mobilization (Ch. 4)	High framing distance (Ch. 5)
Challenger party (CP)	Never	if vote-seeking: yes if policy-seeking: no	-*	Yes	Yes
Mainstream opposition party (MOP)	Not now	Yes	Yes	No	No
Government party (GP)	Now	Yes	No	No	No

Note: *This dissertation does not focus on issue trespassing by challengers. Nonetheless figure 2 in the introductory chapter also hypothesizes when these parties will become inclined to do so.

Chapter 5 explains differences between parties in their degree of frame overlap ('framing distance') with other parties. The results (Chapter 5) show that challengers maintain a significantly larger framing distance than MOPs and governing parties when they faced low levels of support in polls. This finding can be explained by the logic that MOPs and governing parties must cooperate with other parties, either those in opposition or those currently in

government, to regain office or to stay in office. Government parties are forced to address issues arising from European integration in a unified way, and therefore, a low level of frame overlap would limit their coalition appeal. Challenger parties are not constrained by these considerations and have every reason to adopt non-centrist framing positions to maximise policy or vote considerations. Nonetheless, challengers reduce their framing distance in response to a more favourable standing in election polls. This finding suggests that parties adjust their reference point on the basis of not only past performance but also the prospect of future benefits. These theoretical propositions are tested on the basis of the issue of European integration by using pooled time-series regressions on party manifestos issued by 21 parties between 1987 and 2006 in three political systems (Germany, Netherlands, and the UK).

The figure above summarises the findings of this dissertation. In the introductory chapter, I explained why emphasising internal wedge issues, wedge issue competition, and large framing distances have considerable costs for a party's coalition appeal. Based on the argument that a party's primary goal is determined by its past performance, parties that have previously governed, namely, MOPs and government parties, are assumed to be primarily office seeking, while those that have never governed (i.e., challenger parties) focus on policy or votes. To avoid negative consequences in terms of coalition appeal, MOPs and government parties were hypothesised to refrain from the aforementioned tactics. In turn, issue trespassing entails electoral risks rather than potential risks to a party's coalition appeal. Because their current office payoffs are below the reference point (i.e., office), only MOPs were expected to engage in dialogue (i.e., to issue trespass) on non-economic issues that were originally mobilised by challengers. The answers in the different cells of the figure fully conform to these expectations. These findings suggest that a party's previous experience in office and that the current payoffs in the case of issue trespassing are crucial for understanding issue competition dynamics in multiparty systems.

This dissertation contributes to various streams of literature within political science. Only two of these contributions are further discussed here. It has been argued in the literature that niche parties are the multiparty equivalents of the party in opposition in the US two-party system, which is argued to have an ever-present motive to unseat the governing status-quo, while mainstream parties represent the party in government that seeks to maintain the centrality of the current agenda. Therefore, a first contribution of this dissertation is that in addition to theoretical counterarguments against the rather crude distinction between niche and mainstream parties, the different responses of niche parties to internal divisions as well as the differences between mainstream parties with regard to issue trespassing provide empirical evidence that niche and mainstream parties should not be treated as homogenous groups. While this dichotomy has been highly influential in extant research on issue competition in Western

Europe, this study suggests that we gain more explanatory power from focussing on concrete party characteristics, in this case, previous experience in office to understand these patterns of issue competition in multiparty systems.

Second, this dissertation casts new light on the debate about the alleged influence of the parties (e.g., the radical right and left) that own non-economic issues such as immigration and EU integration. Some studies highlight the agency of these parties in the mobilisation of the issues that they own. Yet, others have argued that the incentives of mainstream parties are the exclusive determinant of whether these issues will reach the political agenda. The results of this study call for a more nuanced vision. On the one hand, the sequence of politicisation demonstrates that the issue owners have a considerable impact on the politicisation of their issues in that risk-acceptant MOPs will respond to them. Notwithstanding that risk-averse governing parties tend to ignore issue attention shifts by the issue owner, they will increase their attention when the issues are brought forward by MOPs. Thus, mobilisation by issue owners may also shape the government agenda, albeit indirectly. On the other hand, MOPs are more likely to trespass on immigration, an issue that reinforces existing lines of party competition, demonstrating that also the incentives of mainstream parties are relevant in explaining the extent to which immigration and European integration are politicised. From a societal perspective the findings are relevant since no effect is found for public opinion shifts. This is quite a remarkable result given that immigration and European integration were more salient issues among Danes than among citizens elsewhere, making Denmark a crucial case for observing a bottom-up effect of public opinion. This finding suggests that citizens can only influence the contents of the political agenda indirectly by voting for the parties that mobilise the issues that they find important.