Parties and Niche Issues

How do parties change their positions in order to secure certain goals (i.e. votes, high-office or legislation on preferred policy)? This is the question that underlies the papers of both Pardos-Prado (2015) as well as Hobolt and De Vries (2015). Hobolt and De Vries investigate the topic of "issue entrepreneurs" i.e. the mobilization of previously ignored issues by a party and the likelihood of a party to become an issue entrepreneur. They find that the choice of issue is dependent upon the internal cohesion of a party and the proximity of that party to the mean voter furthermore the likelihood of being an issue entrepreneur is greater when the party is a loser.

Pardos-Pado (2015) examines whether center-right parties are capable of halting the rise of radical right parties. He posits that if the policy space is primarily one-dimensional, centered around economic left-right positions, then center-right parties can more effectively prevent the success of radical right parties. The author investigates how mainstream center-right parties, as issue entrepreneurs, can prevent the rise of radical right parties on the topic of immigration, particularly when the correlation between immigration positions and economic policy positions is high.

Hobolt and De Vries

While the US context regarding party competition has been studied excessively e.g. Carmines and Stimson (1986, 1989), Hobolt and De Vries specifically examine the more complex multi-party system and aim to explain issue evolution in the context of European integration. They specifically focus on this topic as opposed to immigration due to data constraints, but highlight that both issues are contested areas of discussion in a European context that isn't delineated by the left-right divide.

Hobolt and De Vries focus on the dynamics of issue competition by examining which parties are the agents in the politicization of issues. They define issue entrepreneurship as "a strategy by which parties mobilize issues that have been largely ignored in party competition and adopt a policy position on the issue that is substantially different from the mainstream status quo" (Hobolt & De Vries, 2015: 1161).

The authors explain that as parties act strategically, they want to associate themselves with a winning issue. So, if a party receives a series of losses, then they will aim to redirect the competition between

parties, which is why they would then aim to introduce a different issue to destabilize the system and reposition itself to gain votes electorally. This strategy of introducing a new issue may have advantages for a party, such as the potential for success, but comes with the risk of destabilizing parties internally, putting off certain voters and jeopardizing future coalition negotiations.

As the system works for the winner of the electoral system, electoral victors have no incentive to promote previously ignored issues, or issues with the potential to destabilize the political equilibrium.

In a two-party system, a winner and a loser are more clear cut, whereas in multi-party systems this may be more complicated due to the maximization of vote-potential by a smaller party not necessarily leading to a position in office. Hobolt and De Vries therefore conceptualize "political loss" as being based on political parties' office-, vote- and policy-seeking objectives.

Research Design. The measure of political loss, according to the authors, consists of an inexperience in government, electoral defeat and positions on the main dimension of party competition that are far from the mean voter. Winners on the other hand are parties that alternate between government and opposition and occupy winning and majoritarian positions within the system.

Issue entrepreneurship is a risky strategy, Hobolt and De Vries hypothesize that it is therefore only parties which have little to lose in terms of building potential coalitions that would employ such a strategy. Consequently, as the reputation of a party to be collaborative in government is an indicator of being a good coalition partner, inexperience in government is considered unfavourable.

The most direct indicator of political loss is through elections. Hobolt and de Vries hypothesize therefore that parties that have had electoral defeat are (all else being equal) more likely to adopt issue entrepreneurship as they are eager to change their strategy with the intention to introduce an issue that will influence the political discourse and potentially win in the next election. Particularly in a multi-party system, even the parties not in government are still able to influence policy. Hobolt and De Vries hypothesize that this is particularly the case if the party position is closer to the median party in parliament.

Regarding the selection of the issue a party targets, Hobolt and De Vries argue that this is dependent upon the degree of internal division within the party on the issue and the distance to the mean voter on the issue. The authors argue that if a party is internally divided, they will emit conflicting signals to the voters which will make voters unsure as to which party is closest to their own position on an issue and therefore the selection of a subject that is contested within the party is riskier than an issue upon on which the party unanimously agrees upon. The party will therefore not risk its already marginal position by selecting an issue the party itself cannot wholly agree on.

The distance between a party and the mean voter on an issue is also hypothesized to affect the extent to which the group employs an issue entrepreneurial strategy due to their vote maximizing objectives. Hobolt and De Vries expect parties to be issue entrepreneurs if the distance between the partys' positions and the mean voter positions on the issue are small.

Empirical Findings. Hobolt and De Vries employ two data sources on party and voter attitudes towards European integration, namely the Chapel Hill Expert Surveys (CHES) on party positioning regarding European integration and the Eurobarometer Surveys (EB) on public opinion. The specific interest centres on the extent of EU issue entrepreneurship in 14 West European countries between 1984 and 2006.

The authors' measure of EU issue entrepreneurship within parties combines issue salience as well as position; both of which are taken from the CHES. They measure yearly EU issue entrepreneurship through calculating the difference between the party placements and averaging out these changes for the years in between the two data-points.

As controls they include country dummies and party family dummies (but not on an individual party level as they expect the heterogeneity to be mainly at a country level). Due to the combination of several panels, the authors also include panel-correlated standard errors to minimize the effect of serial correlation, they also control for within panel correlation by using the Prais-Winsten transformation with a panel specific AR(1) error structure.

The main finding is, that parties with no coalition experience are significantly more likely to become issue entrepreneurs.

Downs vs. Hobolt and De Vries. Downs' (1957) spatial model on how parties compete, taking inspiration from economic models of competition and exemplified by ice cream vendors on a beach. The vendors are selling the same product at the same price, where should they position themselves on the beach to maximize the amount of customers buying their ice cream. The optimal strategy would be to position themselves in the middle of the beach, there being a majority of passing trade. Downs (1957) hypothesized that party competition would work along the same lines. Instead of a beach the parties operate on a spectrum of dimensional politics (e.g. left-right) and instead of ice cream vendors there are two political parties with the question being, how to get the most voters to buy their product (i.e. their policy) and vote for them. What they then do is to position themselves as close to the median voter in the centre of this left-right dimension, this being where the most receptive voters will be found. The assumption relies on voters observing the ideological positions of parties and then choosing to vote for the party that is in closest proximity to their ideology.

There are several assumptions underlying this model, the first being that there is only one dimension e.g. left-right that people care about. Hobolt and de Vries move away from this assumption by saying that what parties do is to introduce a new dimension through an issue.

The other assumption Hobolt and de Vries move away from is that it is as easy to set up a new ice cream store (i.e. party) for some as it is for other actors, as there are particular hurdles that other newcomers need to overcome. Hobolt and de Vries (2015) in fact argue that established parties are able to influence the rules and regulations of the framework making it harder for new parties to enter into the competition.

These barriers might be institutional such as the framework of the electoral system (e.g. a two party system vs a multi-party system) or they might be informal rules expressed through for instance loyalty, as voters might prefer to vote for and trust already established parties.

Critique of Hobolt and De Vries. Hobolt and de Vries begin their assumptions on the basis of the Downsian model. They argue that the Downsian model assumes perfect competition where: there is no first-mover advantage, there are no transaction costs and, as such, the model is limited in its applicability. They overcome this limitation by adopting the ideas of industrial organisation, therefore assuming oligopolies and imperfect competition. They assume that established parties (who might have been innovators in the past) get challenged by new parties who, in an effort to win votes and office, become issue entrepreneurs, aiming to innovate. This development is akin to the development of social democratic parties that evolved out of a critique of liberal and conservative parties in the early 19th century, as they entered government taking up new issues such as immigration or the environment.

I argue that this development does not explain the current development, where parties are fragmenting more and the established players are in decline (e.g. the social democratic party as demonstrated by Benedetto et al. (2020) and the centre-right (Gidron & Ziblatt, 2019).

What happens when there are so many challenger parties aiming to enter the status quo that the status quo is fragmentation? We have already seen this in past analysis on the fall of social democratic parties. At what point can it be said that the dominant parties are no longer dominant, even though they possess a long legacy of more than a hundred years and are established in the sense that they have spent a sizeable amount of time in government?

Perhaps a better explanation would be not an oligopoly but an oligopsony where the number of voters i.e., buyers, is small and the number of parties i.e., sellers is very large. On the one hand parties are fragmenting more and mainstream parties are in decline, but on the other hand, as demonstrated in Figure 1, the number of voters abstaining is rather large and still growing. Additionally, as parties become more polarized, the number of voters who potentially would vote for certain parties is reduced as the parties are ideologically too far away from the voters' ideology, thus there is the possibility of increased apathy e.g. (Caulcutt, 2022).
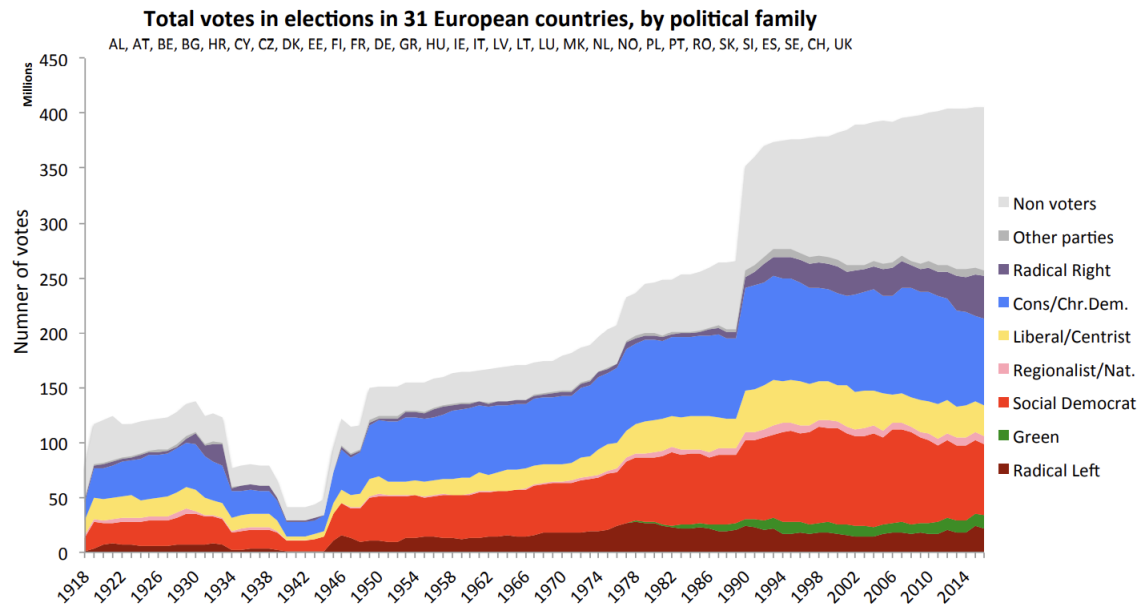
Total votes in elections in 31 European countries, by political family
AL, AT, BE, BG, HR, CY, CZ, DK, EE, FI, FR, DE, GR, HU, IE, IT, LV, LT, LU, MK, NL, NO, PL, PT, RO, SK, SI, ES, SE, CH, UK

Figure 1: Voting according to political family (source Hix, 2022)

Pardos-Prado (2015)

Pardos-Prado (2015) just like Downs (1957) assumes a one-dimensional space, namely the economic left-right dimension. He investigates the limiting of success of radical right groups from the point of view of the political space. The author aims to analyse the underlying conditions under which centre parties are able to limit the success of radical actors from a spatial perspective.

Pardos-Prado in particular concentrates on the introduction of the issue of immigration by political actors and begins by providing a literature review of the determinants of radical right success, recounting how immigration is one of the major issues these parties use to mobilise voters. He explains that a significant amount of the electorate has attributes that match those of radical right voters. Radical right parties have come to light in certain countries and not others, leading scholars to investigate systemic factors that could have led to these parties to arise in some countries and not others. The usual hypothesized factors are the growth of unemployment, economic crises, influx of immigrants, ideological confluence of mainstream parties, the liberality of the welfare state and the proportional representativeness of the electoral system. Pardos-Prado (2015) argues, however, that these factors are not always consistent across different countries and time and are reliant on complex interactions. According to the author, past researchers have assumed that cultural and economic

dimensions contributing to the success of the radical right are independent of each other. Pardos-Prado, rather than assuming an unrelated nature of ideological dimensions, analyzes cross-national variations of radical right parties.

Research Design. Pardos-Prado employs the principles of issue constraint and issue evolution in creating his model. Issue constraint hypothesizes that the stronger the ideological constraint of an issue, the more likely the issue is to have an electoral impact. This is due on the one hand to the pressure the party system is put under and on the other, the necessity to fit the specific issue within the general ideological positioning of the party.

The second theory underlying Pardos-Prado's model is one of issue evolution. The assumption being, that if a political issue is associated with the main ideological conflicts determining party competition, mainstream parties will be better equipped to attract voters that agree with them on that issue. On the other hand, if the specific issue does not line-up with the more general ideological divides, then it is likely that a new actor emerges employing this specific issue to their advantage. The already established mainstream parties then have a vested interest in limiting the issue of party competition to just one issue: limiting internal conflicts in parties.

On the issue of immigration Pardos-Prado concludes that if the ideological space is constricted, then centre-right parties are in a better position to absorb voters and attract an anti-immigration electorate. He therefore has three hypotheses which he posits. The first is the unidimensionality hypothesis, which proposes the overlap of the economic and cultural dimensions. He hypothesizes that when there is a greater overlap the issue of immigration is more strongly associated with the vote for center-right parties and conversely with weaker votes for radical rights. The second hypothesis focusses on the economic constraints of a country and pertains to the the correlation between immigration and state versus market divisions, from which it follows that: "The immigration issue will have a stronger association with the vote for center-right parties". The opposite, that is a weaker association with immigration is true for the vote for radical right parties. The final, third hypothesis concerns immigration from the point of view of culture: "The immigration issue will have a stronger association with the vote for center-right parties (H3a) and a weaker association with the vote for

radical right parties (H3b) when the correlation between cultural and immigration positions in a country is higher". Overall, for all three hypotheses stronger associations between a) immigration and culture, b) immigration and economic aspects of state and market division and c) coinciding dimensions of economics and cultural dimensions can all lead to more votes for the centre-right parties.

Methodological Analysis. Pardos-Prado (2015) analyses both systemic and individual determinants of radical right voting. He therefore employs the European Social Survey (2002–2009) and Benoit and Laver's (2006) expert survey of party positions, in which data is included from 18 countries and for over 40 elections.

The main independent variable is the proximity term of the immigration issue, while he assesses two binary dependent variables, having voted for a centre-right party (or not) and having voted for a radical right party (or not). Pardos-Prado controls for employment status, income, social class, satisfaction with the economy, political interest, satisfaction with the government, gender, age and level of income.

Pardos-Prado's results indicate that closeness between the voters and the parties' positions regarding immigration increases the likelihood of voting for a centre-right party. This effect is stronger in countries where the economic and the cultural chasms overlap, in which unidimensionality prevails. Conversely, when the dimensions are unrelated, then the influence of immigration on centre-right voting is insignificant.

The relationship between immigration and voting for radical right parties is decreasing the greater the overlap between immigration and economic positions is.

Overall Pardos-Prado's statistical results indicate that the effect of the immigration issue can strongly affect the success of center-right parties. This holds true particularly when the economic and cultural aspects coincide and when the issue of immigration is integrated into the economic and cultural axes. Regarding the votes for radical right parties, the effect of immigration is much lower than was hypothesized by the author, particularly regarding high levels of unidimensionality and constraint on

economic issues. On the other hand, the effect of immigration increases at greater levels of cultural constraint though with a smaller intensity than for centre-right parties.

Critique of Pardos-Prado. The framework on which Pardos-Prado builds through the theories of issue constraint and issue evolution is only able to explain variation in the strength of association between issue attitudes and voter behaviour but not in the specific positions adopted by voters or parties.

Pardos-Prado primarily assumes a single dimension i.e. the economic left-right rather than multiple which suffers from the general one-dimensional hypothesis Downs (1957) assumes. That holds if there is only one dimension then converging on the median voter regarding this dimension which is not a stable equilibrium. The endogenous single (Left-Right) economic dimension has no fixed substantive policy meaning and is therefore greatly dependent on time and geographic context. Additionally, this dimension also depends on the choice of the party leaders and policy positions, regarding where on the spectrum the party positions itself.

The measuring of the left-right dimension is also highly dependent on the method employed. There are three main ways that party positions are coded: through the coding of party manifestos, through expert surveys or by the analysis of parliamentary votes. Prados-Prado employs expert surveys and surveys of the electorate. Expert surveys are conducted by asking political scientists to evaluate party positions at one point in time. The people responding to surveys – though researchers aim for as wide a range as possible within the electorate – tend to be biased towards a certain group of people and, for example, more sceptical people who do not trust science or the government as much, would not fill out this type of survey.

Proposed Analysis

Both Hobolt and e Vries as well as Pardos-Prado (2015) begin their assumption by having parties pick issues or blocking other parties from employing them for their own electoral benefit. While this is a reasonable assumption to make, I hypothesize that the decision on which issues get chosen is determined even earlier. Agenda setting theory in this regard is able to provide helpful insight in how

issues come to the attention of parties from which they are then able to chose which ones would be of benefit to them. McCombs and Shaw explain that the media is one of the primary drivers in presenting issues that affect the public's mind. In order for parties to decide to pick issues, I hypothesize that they first much cross a critical threshold of salience.

The starting point of agenda setting is that political attention is scarce and consequential. Green-Pedersen & Walgrave write of a mismatch between "endless" amounts of problems and issues on the one hand and a limited political system in which prioritization must occur on the other. The authors present a dyad between political actors either fighting for what they term "issue intrusion" or against issue intrusion. This is the same dynamic displayed between Hobolt and De Vries and Pardos-Prado. Hobold and De Vries write of issue entrepreneurs where actors aim to introduce new issues i.e. issue intrusion. Pardos-Prado on the others hand discusses the prevention of the issue of immigration by centre-right parties i.e. preventing issue intrusion. Pedersen and Walgrave explain that the selection process is on the one hand unconscious but on the other is deliberate through the active selection of issues due to the preferences of actors. But actors do interact with other actors and may also consume the constant influx of new information. The third factor Pedersen and Walgrave describe is that of institutions which are also determined by the political system the institutions find themselves in. Institutions may place constraints in the form of rules and collaboration, thus limiting the amount of attention an actor is able to give to a given issue.

In a UK context, John, Bevan and Jennings employ the UK Speech from the Throne as customary at the start of the parliamentary session and in which the legislative program the government is aiming to achieve is publicised, providing a platform to shape national agenda. This approach is taken as inspiration.

It is proposed that in a comparative analysis, agenda-defining openings of speeches for different countries should be studied for the issues they contain, which then can be tracked over time in a longitudinal analysis, whereby special attention should be paid to the evolution of issues and which actors aim to further issues, not forgetting to determine which ones aim to fight against this perceived "issue intrusion".

The speeches should be coded by at least two coders into quasi-sentences demarcated by policy ideas or statement as well as punctuation. The quasi-sentences should then be assigned a major topic as well as a sub-topic code. To estimate the effect of party control of government on the content of these policy agendas, a time-series regression for each of the topics over the years should be made with speeches or laws as the dependent variable (DV). In the autoregressive distributed lag (ADL) model the lagged value of the DV controls for the autoregressive nature of the agenda over time. Controls should also be applied for the part in power as well as for potentially short sessions of governments. Additionally, the effect of time to capture long-run changes (i.e. trends) in attention to large issues in the dataset should also be controlled for.

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NOTES ON DE VRIES PODCAST
Electoral fate and disruptive power of challenger parties

What makes a challenger party a challenger party, those that are not in government they are not in control of delivering the product to voters. Parties compete for different policy proposals but they can only implement those policy proposals when they are in government.

Share of how much you have been in government

You can only deliver on the policy proposals you outline when you are in government. Voters are not just voting for policy proposals but want to actually have them be implemented.

In most European parties there are government coalitions, thus the parties change which means that one has to deal with other parties which means that you trade-off with other parties. The parties are thus managing and exectuting and this execution changes the way parties can credibly mobilize on a policy record and it changes the way parties interact with voters in an election time as they also do not want to backtrack on what they have promised voters.

Downsian approach but politics can be a market where parties are the producers and voters are the consumers which are buying the product i.e. the policy proposals but where Hobolt and De Vries differ from the Downsian model is that Downs assumption relies on a free market which does not impose barriers on this market. In politics there are crucial barriers to entry one being the electoral system for example in the British and the US two-party dominant system it is difficult to introduced a new party as the first past the post system where the majority wins favours a two party system of existing parties. In a proportional representation system it is easier to introduce a new party as percentage of votes a party gets almost directly translates to the number of seats a party gets in government. Hobolt and De Vrieses approach thus assumes an oligopoly where several players are dominant but where entrepreneurs entering the market propose a "better" product.

Industrial organisation. How innovation or lack of innovation happens on a market that is not free for all thus there are a couple of players on the market that can protect their dominance and it is more difficult for entrepreneurs to break through.

How well one can manage to deliver the product i.e. competence

Main advantages the main players have is that dominant parties try to block new parties from gaining access to the market thereby blocking the access for new players.