

The Growing Importance of Issue Competition: The Changing Nature of Party Competition in Western Europe

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Changes in Western European political parties in general have attracted considerable scholarly interest, whereas changes in party competition have been almost overlooked in an otherwise extensive literature. Using the party manifesto data set, this article documents that party competition in Western Europe is increasingly characterised by issue competition, i.e. competition for the content of the party political agenda. What should be the most salient issues for voters: unemployment, the environment, refugees and immigrants, law and order, the welfare state or foreign policy? This change is crucial because it raises a question about the factors determining the outcome of issue competition. Is it the structure of party competition itself or more unpredictable factors, such as media attention, focusing events or skilful political communication? The two answers to this question have very different implications for the understanding of the role of political parties in today's Western European democracies.

Recent years have seen the emergence of an extensive literature on how political parties in Western Europe are responding to changes in society, not least changes in the electorate.¹ This literature carefully analyses changes such as the decline in party membership and the professionalisation of the staff of political parties in Western Europe. However, it pays surprisingly little attention to how societal changes have affected the way political parties compete with each other for electoral support. This article argues that party competition in Western European countries increasingly focuses on what Edward Carmines and James Stimson (1993) describe as 'issue competition', i.e. party competition on which issues should dominate the party political agenda. Thus where party competition used to be almost entirely about positional competition in relation to mainly socio-economic issues, it is today characterised by a combination of positional and issue competition. This increased importance of issue competition is sometimes briefly discussed in the literature (e.g. Mair *et al.*, 2004, pp. 6–7) but has not received enough attention, either theoretically or empirically.

Therefore, the main aim of this article is to show that party competition in Western Europe has, in fact, been increasingly characterised by issue competition. Further, the article will discuss the challenges raised by this development to scholarship on political parties in Western Europe and thus to the understanding of political parties in modern democracies. Due to its limited attention to changes in party competition, the existing literature only partially covers such questions.

Most importantly, the existing literature has little to say about the central question emerging from the growing importance of issue competition: what determines which issues actually come to dominate the party political agenda? Is this the result of factors outside the political system, such as mass media attention, or the result of factors inside the political system, for instance the structure of party competition?

The empirical demonstration of the growing importance of issue competition is conducted by analysing the party manifesto data set (Budge *et al.*, 2001) in a different way from how this data set is typically analysed. The analysis shows that, as a consequence of increasing issue competition, the party political agenda is characterised by greater capacity and complexity, i.e. it potentially involves a greater number of political issues with a more equal distribution of political attention. It also shows that even though they emphasise different political issues, issue competition means that political parties are forced to pay attention to issues that have come on to the party political agenda.

Before the empirical analysis, two introductory steps are necessary. First is a very brief review of the extensive literature on changes in the Western European electorate, which points to the need for what this article does, namely analysis of the electoral issues put before the electorate by the political parties. Second is a theoretical discussion of what issue competition implies and how it can be studied. This discussion also involves showing how issue competition both differs from but is also related to positional party competition. To date, the latter perspective – implying that parties compete by taking different positions on a pre-given policy dimension resulting in a party political agenda fixed on a few connected issues – has been a fairly accurate description of party competition in Western Europe. It has been dominated by positional competition on mainly economic left–right issues.² The increasing importance of issue competition thus implies less dominance, but certainly not the disappearance, of positional competition.

The Changing Western European Electorate

The clearest finding on the Western European electorate in the literature is the decline of social-structural voting, especially class voting (Dalton, 2002; Knutsen, 2004; Thomassen, 2005). In countries like Denmark and Norway, class voting has declined dramatically to the point of almost disappearing (Aardal, 2003; Andersen and Borre, 2003). In other countries, e.g. the Netherlands, where social-structural voting has also been religiously based, it has declined significantly as well (compare Oskarson, 2005). Another clear finding is of an increase in electoral volatility. Voters are thus increasingly inclined to change their vote (Mair, 2002).

The literature offers less clear-cut conclusions in terms of what has replaced social-structural voting. Analyses of recent elections in Western European countries (Aardal, 2003; Andersen and Borre, 2003; van Holsteyn *et al.*, 2003) point to

the increased importance of issue voting, whereas the recent major volume edited by Jacques Thomassen (2005) points less to the growing importance of issue voting as such, but instead focuses on the political institutional context of electoral choice, not least the importance of the partisan choices offered to the electorate. A good example is Bernt Aardal and Pieter van Wijnen's analysis (2005), which shows the importance of issue voting when combined with an understanding of which political parties 'own' salient issues. However, as argued above, the recent literature on changes in Western European political parties only pays limited attention to changes in party competition and thus the party choices available to the electorate. As Robert Rohrschneider (2002) has argued, the existing literature on political parties has little to offer in terms of understanding how parties compete for votes today in connection with, for instance, electoral campaigns.

Issue Competition vs. Positional Competition

If electoral behaviour is changing in the direction of increased importance of issue voting or voting based on issue ownership, it poses a question of what type of party competition matches this type of electoral behaviour. Here the answer is fairly straightforward, namely issue competition: what should be the most salient issues – unemployment, the environment, refugees and immigrants, or foreign policy? As Aardal and van Wijnen (2005) showed, answers to exactly these types of question are crucial to the understanding of electoral behaviour.

The issue competition perspective, as labelled by Carmines and Stimson (1993), is very similar to David Robertson's (1976) theory of party competition based on 'selective emphasis', and Ian Budge and Dennis Farlie (1983) demonstrated the importance of this perspective decades ago. Thus, the aim of the following analysis is not to argue that issue competition has never existed before, but rather to show empirically that it has become more important in Western Europe.

Issue competition means that political parties will emphasise issues which they would like to see dominate electoral competition. Some parties will, for instance, focus on economic issues, other parties will focus on the environment, whereas yet others will focus on law and order or refugees and immigrants. However, issue competition does not imply that political parties will each select and emphasise one or a few issues and then just ignore all other issues. The central aim of a political party in issue competition is to get other parties to pay attention to the issues that it would like to see dominate electoral competition. It is about forcing political opponents to pay attention to issues they would rather see disappear, which also means that it is about being forced to pay attention to issues that are not necessarily attractive in electoral terms.

Issue competition, in other words, is about getting the issues that a party prefers to dominate the party political agenda. A party political agenda emerges as the

sum of all issues to which political parties pay attention. Each party can influence the agenda, but is also constrained by it as a party is forced to pay attention to issues attended to by other parties and cannot focus on an issue ignored by all other parties. Consequently, the party political agenda is both shaped by and shapes the issues emphasis of political parties.

Before I proceed to the empirical analysis, it is worth discussing how issue competition relates to positional competition. This latter form of competition implies that parties compete by taking different positions on a pre-given policy dimension and was originally developed by Anthony Downs (1957). Historically, positional competition has typically implied competition along a left–right scale dominated by economic issues.

Even though issue competition and positional competition are different forms of competition, they do not exclude each other. Issue competition may easily involve positional competition as well. This is evident from William Riker's (1996) two principles of issue competition, the dominance and dispersion principles. Drawing attention to an issue where all parties agree is not attractive even though voters might find it important and parties will move attention away from such issues: the dispersion principle. To a political party, it is much more advantageous to draw attention to an issue where there is a conflict with other parties and where it has the electorate on its side: the dominance principle according to Riker. In other words, issue competition may presuppose positional competition in the sense that different party positions are necessary for partisan interest in focusing attention on an issue. At the same time, a change in positional competition in the direction of similar party positions is a possible strategy to try to remove an issue from the party political agenda.

Issue and positional competition may thus be closely connected. However, it is not necessarily so. Wouter van der Brug (2001) shows how left–right positions in Germany and the Netherlands remained stable concurrently with a significant change in the agenda of electoral campaigns. Therefore, it is important that the two types of competition, despite their possible connections, are not conflated either analytically or empirically (see also Meguid, 2005).

How Can (Growing) Issue Competition be Studied?

To show the growing importance of issue competition, we need data on party behaviour in Western Europe back to the Second World War. Therefore, the following analysis draws on the 'party manifesto data set', which contains codings of the content of party manifestos back to the first election after the Second World War for most countries.³ The data set is unique because of its coverage both in time and in terms of countries. What the data set actually measures is a debated issue (Laver, 2001, see also below). For the purpose of this article, however, it is important to notice that the data set aims at measuring the saliency of different

issues for different political parties – their issue emphasis.⁴ It was actually developed with Robertson's theory in mind and is thus based on a saliency perspective on party competition, which makes it very suitable for the purpose of this article.⁵

The data allow us to evaluate the argument about the rise in issue competition in three related ways. The first two ways involve looking at the development of the party political agenda emerging out of party competition as laid out above. Maxwell McCombs and Jonathan Zhu (1995) have studied the long-term development of the public agenda in the US, using the concepts of capacity and complexity.⁶ The two concepts involve an absolute and a relative agenda perspective. Capacity is an absolute perspective and refers to the size of an agenda which is not fixed despite limits to expansion. McCombs and Zhu (1995) thus discuss how the public agenda may have expanded in the US if people find a larger number of issues politically important. Complexity is a relative agenda perspective and refers to how attention is distributed across issues: is attention focused on one or a few issues, or is it spread over a number of issues?

From an absolute agenda perspective, the implication of growing issue competition is an increase in size of the party political agenda, i.e. growing capacity, as political parties pay attention to the issues they prefer as well as to other issues on the party political agenda. From a relative agenda perspective, the implication of increased issue competition is growing complexity. Parties will still focus on left–right issues as they have historically done, but also on other issues, resulting in a decline of the relative dominance of mainly economic left–right issues.

The third way of evaluating the argument about increased issue competition involves looking at changes in the issue profiles of different party families. Increased issue competition implies that, looking at specific issues, one should expect to find specific types of party with an increasing emphasis on these issues. However, following the argument above, one cannot expect parties to focus solely on the issues they would like to see dominate the party political agenda. They are also forced to pay attention to issues that other parties have placed on the party political agenda. Therefore, increased issues competition implies that attention to other issues than mainly economic left–right issues increases throughout the party system, as well as implying variation in party issue emphasis.

Following the discussion above about the relationship between positional and issue competition, it is also worth discussing how the approach to the study of issue competition laid out above differs from the analysis of changes in party competition typically conducted from a positional competition perspective, often using the party manifesto data set. Analysing changes in party competition from a positional perspective has thus led to questions such as whether party positions are still unidimensional (Cole, 2005) or whether party polarisation has increased (Klingemann, 2005).

These are obviously relevant questions but are different from that of increased issue competition. Especially, it is worth stressing that the question of dimension-

ality in party positions is different from the ones posed above (van der Brug, 1999). The dimensionality perspective focuses on whether party *positions* on different issues are related and thus belong to the same dimension(s). The questions of capacity and complexity refer to the number of issues involved in party competition. The importance of this difference can further be shown by recognising that even if other issues than left–right issues, such as the environment and refugees and immigrants, come to constitute a new ‘post-materialist dimension’, it still matters considerably to, for example, social democratic parties which of the two issues attracts political attention. The reason is that the electorate tends to hold different views of which political parties are most capable of handling these issues, i.e. there are considerable differences in issue ownership (Petrocik, 1996). In short, one should distinguish between the question of the content of the agenda of party competition and party positions on the issues on the agenda, the latter being the core of what the dimensionality debate is about. However, as argued above, this does not mean that the two types of competition are necessarily unrelated and growing issue competition does not necessarily mean less positional competition, but rather that party competition becomes considerably more complex.

Issues in Western European Party Competition

This difference between, on the one hand, analysing the party political agenda from an issue competition perspective and, on the other, analysing dimensionality in positions from a positional perspective also matters for how the party manifesto data set is approached. The question of using the party manifesto data set to study dimensionality or constructing a left–right scale has thus been the object of considerable scholarly debate.⁷ However, the questions following from an issue competition perspective are different and can be approached by looking at the number of issues potentially involved in party competition and the amount of attention the parties pay to them in party competition.⁸

Empirically, focus is on the Western European countries omitting Luxembourg and Iceland due to size as well as Spain, Portugal and Greece because of late democratisation. The analysis thus covers Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Italy, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the UK and Ireland.⁹ This broad selection of countries points to the generality of the change in party competition and demonstrates a non-relation to country-specific factors such as specific elections, political leaders or parties.

Capacity

As stated above, capacity simply refers to the size or extent of an agenda. A simple measure is to look at the length of the party manifestos, which is reported in the party manifesto data set. More precisely, the data set, with the exception of the

Table 1: Average Number of Quasi-Sentences Found in Each Party Manifesto

	<i>Sweden</i>	<i>Norway</i>	<i>Denmark</i>	<i>Finland</i>	<i>Belgium</i>	<i>Netherlands</i>	<i>France</i>
1950s	166	298	77	108	296	181	187
1960s	281	508	95	104	318	237	122
1970s	158	838	84	85	449	602	163
1980s	159	1,269*	170	144	830	1,386	140
1990s	212	2,089	175	150	1,180	1,454	160

	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Austria</i>	<i>Switzerland</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>Ireland</i>	<i>All parties</i>
1950s	151	62	122	144	274	60	155
1960s	304	165	167	168	407	229	225
1970s	323	166	266	385	479	222	302
1980s	353	296	344	408	905	352	504
1990s	473	492	637	296	834	855	642

Source: Updated version of Budge et al. (2001), CD-ROM; see also Note 7.

*There is no data for the 1989 election in Norway.

1989 election in Norway, provides information on the number of quasi-sentences – the coding unit of the party manifesto data set – found in each party manifesto.

Table 1 shows the average number of quasi-sentences found in each party manifesto in the countries included for each decade.¹⁰ The overall trend is a growth in length of party manifestos. From the 1950s to the 1990s, the average manifesto increased more than four times. The general increase in length is found in all countries except France, but with varying degrees: in Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Italy, UK and Ireland the increase was considerable, whereas it was more moderate in Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Switzerland. Still, the general trend is clear: the capacity of the political agenda as measured through the number of quasi-sentences found in the party manifestos has grown considerably in Western Europe.

It is of course clear that looking at the length of manifestos does not necessarily tell us much about their content. It simply tells us that parties may potentially be able to cover more issues without neglecting others. They have the capacity to do so. How this capacity is actually used is analysed from the complexity perspective.¹¹

Complexity

Complexity refers to how attention is spread across the issues on the agenda. Is it concentrated on a few issues or spread out more evenly on several issues? The

coding scheme of the party manifesto data set has 56 items, dominated by mainly economic left–right issues rooted in the conflict between capitalism and socialism. The dominance of these items in the coding scheme has consequences for the analytical strategy. Normally, complexity is measured through entropy scores such as the *H*-statistic developed by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver (1949), which measures the equality of the distribution of attention across the categories involved. However, given the many items reflecting the capitalism/socialism conflict, this would measure distribution across left–right issues more than it would measure the distribution between these issues and other issues. Therefore, the analysis is less sophisticated in the sense that we look at the development in the share of the manifestos taken up by left–right issues and the share taken up by a few other issues. Still, this is substantially similar to what an entropy score does. The latter simply provides a single measure, which is necessary to look at, for instance, the distribution across a larger number of categories.

The first step in the analysis is to look at the percentage of quasi-sentences relating to left–right issues. Naturally, the question is what left–right issues are or what items from the party manifesto data set should be included in the analysis. This question is closely linked to the different perspectives on party competition. From a spatial or positional perspective, this question relates to the issue of combining items in such a way as to produce the optimum scale for determining party positions. This is done through theoretical considerations checked empirically by factor analysis (Dush and Strøm, 2004; Laver and Budge, 1992). A left–right scale is thus constructed by selecting items that from a theoretical perspective are considered to be typical for the left and right, respectively. Factor analysis is then used to analyse whether parties in fact take similar positions on the items. An example of such an approach is the left–right scale developed by Michael Laver and Ian Budge (1992) based on the party manifesto data set and included in the CD-ROM version (Budge *et al.*, 2001). Economic items dominate this scale, but non-economic issues are included as well when they can clearly be related to either the left or right, for example law and order, which can be seen as a ‘right’ issue.

This approach is of course perfectly valid given the theoretical aim of such an analysis. However, if one focuses on competition between different issues, one should keep different issues such as the economy and law and order apart, even though controlling inflation and focusing on law and order can both be considered views of the right.

For the question of increasing issue complexity, this raises the question of what constitutes an ‘issue’. The only way to approach this question is through substantial arguments as to what items in the coding scheme reflect the same issues. Further, this implies that what is seen as left–right issues are issues that can be argued to be substantially related to the conflict between capitalism and socialism. Economic and distributional issues are definitely left–right issues. As argued above, the party manifesto data set has a large number of such items, e.g. items

referring to the management of the economy, nationalisation, social justice, expansion of the welfare state and classes in society. All such items are included.¹² Furthermore, most of the items found in the party manifesto data set relating to external relations are included.¹³ Issues relating to external relations and foreign policy are not necessarily substantial left–right issues, but the items in the party manifesto data set, such as military spending or imperialism, are ‘Cold War’ issues. They reflect that foreign relations issues used to be another aspect of the capitalism/socialism conflict with, for instance, right-wing parties in Western Europe seeing high military expenditure as necessary to keep communism at bay. The exceptions are the two items relating to the EU, which are not included. Conflicts around the EU are not reflections of the capitalism vs. socialism conflict even though the left and right might have different positions with regard to the EU (compare Marks and Wilson, 2000). The EU is a substantial issue on its own as is the environment, law and order, etc.

Table 2 shows the party average percentage of the total number of quasi-sentences devoted to items reflecting left–right issues as defined above for each country in each decade. It shows a declining importance of left–right issues. In all countries political parties devoted less attention to left–right issues in the 1990s than in the 1950s. Further, when comparing the 1960s with the 1990s, the declining trend is found in all countries with the exception of Belgium and Finland. In other words, despite cross-national variation, the manifesto data support a picture of declining

Table 2: Party Average Percentage of Quasi-Sentences Referring to the Left–Right Issues for Each Country in Each Decade

	<i>Sweden</i>	<i>Norway</i>	<i>Denmark</i>	<i>Finland</i>	<i>Belgium</i>	<i>Netherlands</i>	<i>France</i>
1950s	70	67	44	62	51	57	56
1960s	60	68	53	55	38	60	61
1970s	55	60	40	58	40	56	59
1980s	53	58	48	47	44	52	58
1990s	50	56	43	55	41	43	48

	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Austria</i>	<i>Switzerland</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>Ireland</i>	<i>All parties</i>
1950s	43	61	57	64	57	65	57
1960s	41	69	60	61	52	60	56
1970s	38	58	61	49	51	55	49
1980s	39	56	48	44	52	64	51
1990s	40	50	45	45	46	56	46

Source: Updated version of Budge et al. (2001), CD-ROM; see also Note 7.

dominance of the left–right issue in Western Europe. The average across all parties shows a decline from 57 per cent being devoted to left–right issues in the 1950s, to 46 per cent in the 1990s.

Going back to the question of which items to include, it is worth noticing that the same general tendency appears if only the items related to economic and distributional issues are included and thus the items related to external relations omitted.¹⁴ The average across all parties declined from 47 per cent in the 1950s to 40 per cent in the 1990s.

The other side of the decline of left–right issues is the rise of other issues. As argued above, the weakness of the party manifesto coding scheme is the limited number of items to choose from in dealing with other and partly new issues, such as the environment, refugees and immigrants and law and order. However, for three issues, namely the environment, the EU and law and order, the data set provides suitable items. Categories 416 and 501 deal with the environment, 605 deals with law and order and 108 and 110 with the EU (compare Budge *et al.*, 2001). The following three tables show the attention paid to each issue in each country over the past decades.

Tables 3–5 show that the other side of the decreasing importance of left–right issues is the growing importance of other and partly new issues, most clearly the environment, which has gained more attention in all countries. Likewise, the EU issue has seen an increase in importance in most of the countries, when we look

Table 3: Party Average Percentage of Quasi-Sentences Referring to the Environment for Each Country in Each Decade

	<i>Sweden</i>	<i>Norway</i>	<i>Denmark</i>	<i>Finland</i>	<i>Belgium</i>	<i>Netherlands</i>	<i>France</i>
1950s	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1960s	1	2	0	0	1	1	0
1970s	9	7	1	3	4	7	2
1980s	13	8	4	12	5	8	2
1990s	12	10	6	11	6	8	7

	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Austria</i>	<i>Switzerland</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>Ireland</i>	<i>All parties</i>
1950s	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
1960s	0	2	0	2	1	1	1
1970s	1	3	3	12	3	2	4
1980s	5	9	10	15	3	4	7
1990s	6	10	9	8	5	9	8

Source: Updated version of Budge *et al.* (2001), CD-ROM; see also Note 7.

Table 4: Party Average Percentage of Quasi-Sentences Referring to the EU for Each Country in Each Decade

	<i>Sweden</i>	<i>Norway</i>	<i>Denmark</i>	<i>Finland</i>	<i>Belgium</i>	<i>Netherlands</i>	<i>France</i>
1950s	0	0	0	0	3	2	2
1960s	0	1	2	0	3	2	3
1970s	0	1	2	0	3	1	3
1980s	1	1	2	0	2	2	2
1990s	5	2	4	2	4	3	4

	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Austria</i>	<i>Switzerland</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>Ireland</i>	<i>All parties</i>
1950s	2	3	1	0	1	0	1
1960s	2	4	2	2	2	1	2
1970s	2	5	1	1	3	0	2
1980s	2	4	1	1	2	1	2
1990s	3	5	3	2	6	3	3

Source: Updated version of Budge et al. (2001), CD-ROM; see also Note 7.

Table 5: Party Average Percentage of Quasi-Sentences Referring to Law and Order for Each Country in Each Decade

	<i>Sweden</i>	<i>Norway</i>	<i>Denmark</i>	<i>Finland</i>	<i>Belgium</i>	<i>Netherlands</i>	<i>France</i>
1950s	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
1960s	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
1970s	2	1	1	0	0	1	1
1980s	2	2	1	0	2	3	2
1990s	3	2	5	2	6	7	5

	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Austria</i>	<i>Switzerland</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>Ireland</i>	<i>All parties</i>
1950s	0	0	1	1	0	1	0
1960s	0	1	1	0	1	0	0
1970s	1	4	2	2	3	1	1
1980s	2	1	2	2	4	3	2
1990s	4	3	3	3	7	4	4

Source: Updated version of Budge et al. (2001), CD-ROM; see also Note 7.

at the average party, although on a smaller scale in the founding countries: Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and France, as well as in comparison with the environment issue. With regard to law and order, there is also a general increasing trend at the level of the average party, but cross-national variation also occurs since the issue has moved further up the agendas in Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, France and the UK than in the remaining countries considered.

Refugees and immigrants is an issue where growing attention is anticipated. However, the coding scheme spread out attention to this issue over a number of items. There are two items covering positive and negative mention of multiculturalism (607 and 608) as well as one relating to the mention of underprivileged minority groups such as refugees, handicapped and disabled (705). Item 705 is difficult to use as an indicator of the attention paid solely to the refugees and immigrants issue due to its inclusion of several incomparable groups. Likewise, the multiculturalism items cover, for instance, the pillarisation of Dutch and Belgian societies, i.e. the division between several Christian groups internally or into secular groups, a structure which is clearly related to socio-structural voting as noted above. Thus, the items of the coding scheme do not allow for a general analysis of a possibly growing attention to refugees and immigrants across Western Europe.

Changing Issue Profiles of Party Families

A third way of evaluating the argument about growing issue competition is to look at issue attention across party families. As discussed above, parties can be expected to focus on different issues while at the same time be forced to pay attention to issues already on the party political agenda.

Table 6 shows the party average percentage of quasi-sentences relating to left-right issues for the different party families in the party manifesto data set, starting with the 1950s.¹⁵ In all the traditional party families attention to left-right issues has declined, most strongly among social democratic, Christian democratic and agrarian parties, and less strongly among (former) communist, liberal and conservative parties. Left-right issues still remain central to West European party competition but have declined relative to other issues, and the extent to which party families have given up left-right issues varies.

If we turn to the environment, Table 7 shows the expected pattern that some parties, especially ecology parties and agrarian parties (mainly centre parties in Scandinavia except Denmark) have paid significantly more attention to the environment than other parties, but all parties have been forced to pay increasing attention to the issue. Table 8, which shows attention to law and order over decades for party families, reveals a similar picture, namely a general rise in attention to law and order though more pronounced for centre-right parties, i.e. Christian democratic, liberal and conservative parties. Finally, Table 9 looks at

Table 6: Party Average Percentage of Quasi-Sentences Referring to Left-Right Issues for Different Party Families in Each Decade

	Ecology parties*	(Former) communist parties	Social democratic parties	Agrarian parties	Christian democratic/religious parties	Liberal parties	Conservative parties
1950s		60	62	73	57	53	57
1960s		57	59	65	57	56	54
1970s		49	53	57	45	47	55
1980s	35	56	52	56	49	50	58
1990s	39	54	48	51	45	45	52

Source: Updated version of Budge et al. (2001), CD-RDM; see also Note 7.

* Only one ecology party participated in an election in the 1970s, namely the Swiss Green party.

Table 7: Party Average Percentage of Quasi-Sentences Referring to the Environment for Different Party Families in Each Decade

	Ecology parties*	(Former) communist parties	Social democratic parties	Agrarian parties	Christian democratic/religious parties	Liberal parties	Conservative parties
1950s		0	0	0	0	0	0
1960s		1	1	2	1	1	1
1970s		3	4	6	5	4	2
1980s	22	5	6	12	7	6	4
1990s	22	8	7	11	6	5	4

Source: Updated version of Budge et al. (2001), CD-ROM; see also Note 7.

*Only one ecology party participated in an election in the 1970s, namely the Swiss Green party.

Table 8: Party Average Percentage of Quasi-Sentences Referring to Law and Order for Different Party Families in Each Decade

	Ecology parties*	(Former) communist parties	Social democratic parties	Agrarian parties	Christian democratic/religious parties	Liberal parties	Conservative parties
1950s		0	0	1	1	1	0
1960s		0	0	1	0	0	1
1970s		0	1	1	2	1	3
1980s	2	1	2	1	2	2	3
1990s	1	2	3	3	5	5	7

Source: Updated version of Budge et al. (2001), CD-RDM; see also Note 7.

* Only one ecology party participated in an election in the 1970s, namely the Swiss Green party.

Table 9: Party Average Percentage of Quasi-Sentences Referring to EU for Different Party Families in Each Decade

	Ecology parties*	(Former) communist parties	Social democratic parties	Agrarian parties	Christian democratic/religious parties	Liberal parties	Conservative parties
1950s		0	1	0	2	2	1
1960s		2	2	0	3	2	1
1970s		2	1	0	2	2	1
1980s	1	1	2	0	3	2	2
1990s	3	3	3	2	3	4	4

Source: Updated version of Budge et al. (2001), CD-ROM; see also Note 7.

*Only one ecology party participated in an election in the 1970s, namely the Swiss Green party.

attention to the EU across party families over decades. Here, the picture of some parties driving the rise in attention is less clear, though there seems to be a stronger focus from conservative parties in the 1990s.

In sum, the three related ways of evaluating the argument about growing issue competition all support the argument. The party political agenda in Western Europe has grown as well as having become more complex. The picture across party families is one of different party families focusing on different issues while at the same time being forced to pay attention to a wider variety of issues, both traditional left–right issues and other partly new issues such as the environment, law and order and the EU.

It is important not to interpret this as an argument that other issues besides left–right issues did not play a role in the early decades covered above. Issues such as the political system, morality and nationalism had a fixed position on the agenda of party competition in most countries (compare Budge, 1993). Moreover, it should not be seen as an argument that left–right issues have disappeared from the agenda of party competition in Western Europe. The data show a decline, but certainly not a disappearance, of left–right issues. In particular, the welfare state and welfare state reforms are central political issues in many countries. This article merely argues that the agenda of party competition has become more complex in the sense that left–right issues are less dominant.

Altogether, the three types of analysis developed above all point in the direction of the growing importance of issue competition in Western Europe. Thus, controlling the agenda of party competition has become a more important part of this competition, but, as argued above, this does not make positional competition or the study of it less relevant.

Conclusions

The discussion above of the changing nature of Western European party competition is a description of a changing process of party competition in the direction of competition over agenda control: on what issues should political parties compete for votes? One may thus speak of the growing importance of what Elmer E. Schattschneider (1960) labelled the ‘conflict of conflicts’, i.e. conflict over which issues should receive political attention. The otherwise extensive literature¹⁶ on how political parties have responded to changes in society has generally not paid much attention to changes in party competition and is therefore not in a strong position to respond to the questions raised by this development.

The most important question for further research is how to explain the outcome. This question can be posed in a number of different ways: one way is to look at comparative differences in the content of the agenda of party competition. Why has refugees and immigrants, for instance, emerged as a central element in Danish

party competition, but not in Swedish party competition (Rydgren, 2002)? Or why has law and order attracted increased attention in some countries, but not in others, as indicated by Table 5? The question can also be asked from a temporal perspective. Why do some issues come to dominate party competition in a particular country at a particular time, for instance in connection with an election? The literature on political parties and party competition pays surprisingly limited attention to these issues (compare Rohrschneider, 2002). What does exist is literature focusing on particular issues and party types such as green parties (Mair, 2001; O'Neill, 1997; Talshir, 2002) or radical right-wing parties (Betz, 1994; Hainsworth, 2000; Kitschelt, 1995). However, such a single-party focus risks losing the general perspective. The rise of a specific issue and the entrance of 'issue parties' are part of a larger process, the outcomes of which need to be understood.

There are basically two theoretical approaches to explaining the outcome of issue competition from a general perspective. One approach is to focus on societal factors such as public opinion or mass media coverage. Cross-national differences in issue salience with the electorate are an obvious explanation for cross-national differences in the agenda of party competition. Growing salience with the electorate is also a possible explanation for growing party attention to an issue over time. Furthermore, the medialisation of politics, i.e. that political communication largely takes place through the mass media, is a well-established fact (Cook, 1998; Newton, 2006), and media attention may be what drives attention from political parties. In this context it is also relevant to highlight the role of focusing events such as the Dutroux case in Belgium or 9/11, the specific personalities of politicians like Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands or Jörg Haider in Austria, and the increased role of spin doctors and the communication efforts of political parties. From this perspective, the theoretical tools for understanding the outcome of party competition over agenda control should largely be found within media research and political communication. Such a perspective implies a strong element of unpredictability in the content of agendas of party competition. Focusing events or party leaders like Pim Fortuyn are hard to predict or even include in variable-oriented explanations.

Another approach would be to focus on how the existing structure of party competition determines whether and how new issues become part of party competition. Here the work of Carmines and Stimson (1986; 1993; see also Carmines, 1991) stands out as the only theoretical attempt to understand issue evolution. The theoretical model is developed through the study of American politics, and its applicability to Western European party systems remains, for the most part, untested. However, a study by Tim Bale (2003) shows how the rise of radical right-wing parties and their issues, especially immigration, is dependent on whether centre-right parties take up the issues to strengthen the right-wing bloc. A study of the politicisation of euthanasia (Green-Pedersen, 2007) also shows the importance of the religious vs. secular party conflict for whether euthanasia

becomes a party political issue. This implies a much more predictable view on the outcome of issue competition than the societal approach identified above with its focus on, for instance, focusing events.

It goes without saying that the two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. Even if the existing structure of conflict between the parties is important for the outcome of issue competition, focusing events or charismatic political leaders may play a role. However, the relative importance of the two different types of factors is a crucial issue for political science to study. It implies two very different views of modern politics in terms of predictability and two very different assessments of the role and importance of political parties in modern politics, the core issue of the literature on changing political parties referred to above. If the outcome of issue competition is determined by the internal structure of the competition between political parties, it places political parties as much more central actors in modern politics than if the outcome of issue competition is determined by outside forces such as media attention or focusing events.

Finally, the interplay between issue and positional competition deserves further scholarly attention. A starting point for such attention could be to focus on the circumstances under which a party political agenda is frozen around a few issues, and when it is open and fluctuating. The former situation implies the dominance of positional competition in relation to the issues on the 'frozen' agenda, whereas the latter implies a central role for issue competition.

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Notes

- 1 E.g. Dalton and Wattenberg (2000); Mair *et al.* (2004); Karvonen and Kuhnle (2001); Cain *et al.* (2003); Gunther *et al.* (2002); Lawson and Poguntke (2005); Luther and Müller-Rommel (2002); Webb *et al.* (2002).
- 2 As will be further discussed below, left–right issues in this article refer to mainly economic issues related to the capitalism vs. socialism conflict. This usage differs for instance from the idea of a left–right scale or left–right dimension, which points to issues that separate the left from the right. There is an obvious overlap between the two usages, but a left–right scale such as, for instance, the one reported in the party manifesto data set (compare Budge *et al.*, 2001) may also contain questions such as law and order that are not related to the capitalism vs. socialism conflict but still distinguish the left and right.
- 3 For an introduction to the data and the coding, see Budge *et al.* (2001); Völkens (2001).
- 4 For a somewhat similar use of the data set see Janda *et al.* (1995); Saglie (1998).
- 5 It is worth stressing that the party manifesto data are used as an indicator of the party political agenda. The aim is not to make an argument about the role and importance of party manifestos in electoral campaigns or politics more generally.
- 6 McCombs and Zhu also look at a third aspect, namely volatility. The confines of this article do not leave space to address this aspect.
- 7 Compare Budge *et al.* (2001); Franzmann and Kaiser (2006); Gabel and Huber (2000); Laver (2001); Laver and Garry (2000); Pelizzo (2003); Pennings and Keman (2002).

- 8 Note also that construction of positional scales such as the Laver and Budge scale found in the party manifesto data set is based on subtracting, for instance, rightist items from the leftist items, not by adding them up as is done in this analysis; see Laver and Budge (1992).
- 9 The party manifesto data set is publicly available on CD-ROM through Budge *et al.* (2001). This CD-ROM version covers elections until the mid-1990s. Andrea Volkens has kindly provided me with an updated version of the data set, which covers all elections in the 1990s and, for all countries, the first election after the millennium. For the Netherlands, both the 2002 and 2003 elections are included.
- 10 The analysis starts with the 1950s due to the special character of many of the first post-Second World War elections. The 1990s also include the election in the early 2000s reported in the party manifesto data.
- 11 A way to 'bridge' the analysis of capacity and complexity would be to count the number of issues receiving attention at all in the manifestos. Such counting of issues has been done by Green-Pedersen (2006) in a similar analysis of Danish politics based on different data. However, as is discussed below, the dominance of economic items in the coding system of the party manifesto data set makes such a counting exercise of limited value as there are quite a few other issues that can be counted.
- 12 More precisely the following items: 401–15, 503–7 and 701–4; see Budge *et al.* (2001).
- 13 Items 101–7 and 109, see Budge *et al.* (2001).
- 14 Items 101–7 and 109.
- 15 In this part of the analysis we have left the following party families out: national parties, special interest/issue parties, ethnic and regional parties, either because N is very small or because these parties have not generally entered parliaments before the 1970s and 1980s, which makes a longitudinal perspective impossible; see Budge *et al.* (2001).
- 16 Compare Note 1.

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