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When dimensions collide: The electoral success of issue entrepreneurs

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Abstract

Theories of issue evolution and issue manipulation suggest that ‘political losers’ in the party system can advance their position by introducing a new issue dimension. According to these theories, a strategy of issue entrepreneurship, that is the attempt to restructure political competition by mobilizing a previously non-salient issue dimension, allows political losers to attract new voters and reap electoral gains. In this study, we examine the extent to which these expectations hold by exploring issue entrepreneurial strategies of political parties when applied to the issue of European integration. Using multi-level modelling to analyse European Election Study data, we first show that voters are more likely to cast their ballot for parties that are losers on the extant dimension based on concerns related to European integration. Secondly, a time-series cross-sectional analysis demonstrates that parties that employ an issue entrepreneurial strategy are more successful electorally. Put differently, voters are responsive to the issue entrepreneurial strategies of parties. These findings have important implications for our understanding of party competition and electoral behaviour in multi-party systems.

Keywords

European integration, issue entrepreneurship, issue evolution, issue voting, party competition

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This is the art of politics: to find some alternative that beats the current winner.
(Riker, 1982: 209)

Over the years much attention has been devoted to how many dimensions best describe party competition and voting behaviour: a single dimension relating to left/right ideology or multiple dimensions that capture socioeconomic and socio-cultural issues (see, for example, Downs, 1957; Inglehart, 1977; Kriesi et al., 2006, 2008; also Bakker et al., 2012; Benoit and Laver, 2012; De Vries and Marks, 2012). Notwithstanding the importance of conceptualizing and measuring issue dimensionality, we have a limited understanding of how new issues become salient and how changes within the dimensional structure of party and electoral competition occur, especially in multi-party systems. This study is devoted to researching the mechanisms underlying something that E. E. Schattschneider (1960) eloquently coined as the ‘conflict over conflicts’. Schattschneider argues that politics is essentially about which political conflicts come to dominate the political agenda. Complex societies produce a multitude of diverse conflicts over public policy; ‘the game of politics depends on which of these conflicts gains the dominant position: The process in which one or several of these issue conflicts gain political dominance involves a mobilization of bias’ (Schattschneider, 1960: 62). Political parties play a pivotal role in this mobilization of bias. When parties are losers on the dominant conflict dimension, they have a powerful incentive to promote new issues to improve their electoral standing. As Riker noted in the opening quotation, parties have an interest in finding an issue that ‘beats the current winner’. That is, they are motivated to engage in a strategy of *issue entrepreneurship* by mobilizing conflict on a new issue dimension to change the basis on which voters make political choices and thereby potentially improving their electoral fortunes. This study examines who initiates the mobilization of new conflicts and to what extent these issue entrepreneurs succeed in their strategy.

To address this issue, we build on Carmines and Stimson’s (1986, 1989) seminal theory of ‘issue evolution’. According to this theory, issues evolve when parties that are losers in the current political game seek to promote conflict on a new issue dimension. This strategy of issue entrepreneurship is successful only to the extent that voters are aware of differences in position on the new issue and change their behaviour on the basis of the polarization of issue attitudes. Although the model of issue evolution has been applied to explain the emergence of issues such as slavery (Riker, 1982), racial segregation (Carmines and Stimson, 1986), abortion (Adams, 1997), and ‘culture wars issues’ (Lindaman and Haider-Markel, 2002) in the US context, the question remains of whether this model can be applied to explain issue evolution in multi-party systems.

The aim of this study is to explore the effect of issue entrepreneurship strategies in European multi-party systems. Specifically we ask: who are the initiators of issue evolution in multi-party systems, and how do we conceptualize and measure the

success of such strategies of issue entrepreneurship? In line with the theories of issue evolution (Carmines and Stimson, 1986, 1989, 1993) and issue manipulation (Riker, 1982, 1986, 1996), we argue that those parties that occupy losing positions in the party system are more likely to benefit from the emergence of a new issue. In a two-party system, losers can be easily classified as parties in opposition, but this distinction between political winners and losers is less clear-cut within the context of a multi-party system. This study therefore adapts the issue evolution model to distinguish between three types of parties: *mainstream government parties*, *mainstream opposition parties*, and *challenger parties*. This three-fold distinction is important in the multi-party system context because mainstream opposition parties are reluctant to act as issue entrepreneurs owing to strategic considerations about potential future governing coalitions. In previous work, we have demonstrated that challenger parties are the most likely issue entrepreneurs in multi-party competition and thus to play a key role in the politicization of new issues (Hobolt and De Vries, 2010). Here, we go one step further to examine whether the issue entrepreneurial strategy of challenger parties is successful in terms of generating the desired reactions from voters. Two expectations can be derived from our model of issue entrepreneurship: first, that challenger parties generate a response by voters on a new issue dimension, that is voters are more likely to vote on the basis of preferences on the new dimension when choosing between a challenger and a non-challenger party; second, that parties engaging in an issue entrepreneurial strategy attract new voters in elections.

These theoretical propositions are tested by examining the effects of mobilizing issue competition regarding the European Union (EU). The EU issue provides an excellent testing ground because every EU member state is confronted with issues arising from European integration. Consequently, we can test the issue entrepreneurship model in a wide variety of political contexts. Moreover, we can utilize three rich data sources on party and voter attitudes towards European integration, namely the Chapel Hill expert surveys (CHES), the Eurobarometer (EB) surveys and the European Election Studies (EES). These data sources allow us to examine both individual-level responses to party strategies and over-time changes in the electoral fortunes of issue entrepreneurs. Our empirical strategy is thus two-fold. First, we estimate a multi-level model of electoral behaviour, using EES 2004, to test the proposition that citizens choosing challenger parties in national elections rely on concerns related to the EU issue dimension. Second, we estimate a time-series cross-sectional model to test whether an issue entrepreneurial strategy yields electoral benefits. The results support our expectation that new issue concerns matter more to voters of challenger parties and that issue entrepreneurial strategies enhance the electoral fortunes of parties.

Conflict of conflicts: How issues evolve

The study examines which parties employ issue entrepreneurial strategies – that is, introduce new issue dimensions – in multi-party systems and to what extent these

strategies are successful. In order to understand the success of issue entrepreneurs, we build on the seminal work on issue evolution from the US context (Carmines and Stimson, 1986, 1989, 1993). In the words of Carmines and Stimson (1989: 11), issue evolution can be defined as ‘issues capable of altering the political environment within which they originated and evolved. These issues have a long life cycle . . . The crucial importance of this issue type stems from the fact that its members can lead to fundamental and permanent change in the party system.’ Figure 1 outlines the sequence and structure of the issue evolution process.

In Figure 1, elite polarization on an issue is followed by a delayed, inertial reaction by the mass electorate. According to this understanding, an issue becomes increasingly salient and, consequently, so divisive that this issue alters the link between voters and parties and produces long-term changes in party identification and coalitions (Carmines and Stimson, 1986, 1989). Two critical steps are necessary to link the elite policy position to mass issue realignment. First, the mass public takes cues from the elite partisan actors and alters its perception of the parties with respect to the new issue dimension. Importantly, voters must be aware of the differences in the position of the parties on the new issue (clarity). Second, the new issue must evoke an emotional response among citizens. Public awareness of a new issue dimension is not sufficient; voters must also care about this issue and the differences in party positions (affect). If these conditions are met, they may lead to changes in mass identification on the basis of the polarization of issue attitudes (alignment).

The impetus behind this issue evolution is first and foremost the strategic behaviour by partisan elites (Carmines and Stimson, 1986: 902; see also Rovny, 2012). In this model, parties that are losers on the dominant dimensions of competition have the most powerful incentive to promote a new issue. A parallel can be found in Riker’s theory of issue manipulation (1982: chs 8–9), which posits that parties that are losers in the political game have an incentive to manipulate the agenda by introducing new issues, because this can create disequilibrium in the political

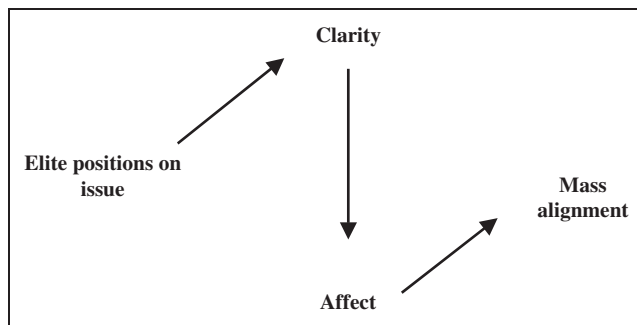


Figure 1. Carmines and Stimson’s model of partisan issue evolution.

Source: Carmines and Stimson (1986, 1989).

system that can unseat the governing status quo. Hence, strategic political actors will pick issues where there is potential for clear partisan polarization (that is, clarity) and public attention and response (that is, affect), since this in turn could lead to changes in mass identification and thus changes in power structures.

These theories of strategic issue manipulation assume a simple two-party model, but in the next sections we extend the model to take into account the more complex dynamics of party competition in multi-party systems. First, we ask: who are the initiators of issue evolution (that is, the issue entrepreneurs) in multi-party systems? Thereafter, we consider how to conceptualize 'success' in a multi-party context.

Issue entrepreneurship: Initiators of change

As in the classic models of issue evolution and issue manipulation, we expect political losers to seek to promote a new issue to attract new voters. One way in which a party can increase the salience of an issue is to adopt a polarizing position on that issue. When parties are in perfect agreement on an issue, it is less likely to become salient in the political debate (Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989). We coin the term 'issue entrepreneurship' to denote the party strategy of active mobilization of new policy issues that have been largely ignored by the political mainstream or the mobilization of a policy position on an issue that is substantially different from the current position of the mainstream.

To establish which parties are likely issue entrepreneurs, we must first address the question of which parties can be classified as political losers in a multi-party system. The work of Carmines and Stimson as well as of Riker was developed in a two-party system and suggests that political losers are those parties that currently do not occupy political office. This distinction is less clear-cut in multi-party systems, which are mostly governed by a coalition of parties and where some parties routinely alternate between government and opposition whereas others may never enter government coalitions (Hobolt and Karp, 2010). We therefore distinguish between three types of political party: challenger parties, mainstream opposition parties, and mainstream government parties. Mainstream parties regularly alternate between government and opposition, occupying winning positions within the system. Mainstream government parties are the clearest example of what it means to be a political winner as they occupy political office and are likely to be close to both the mean party and mean voter position on the main dimension of political competition. Mainstream opposition parties resemble their government counterparts because they too occupy mainstream positions on the dominant dimension of political conflict, but they currently do not inhabit political office.¹ Owing to their overall advantageous position in the system, mainstream parties have an incentive to reinforce existing patterns of political competition and the policy issues underlying them. As a result, they are not likely issue entrepreneurs. Challenger parties, on the other

hand, have less to lose from engaging in issue entrepreneurship. We define challenger parties as parties that have not previously held political office.² Parties thus cease to be classified as challenger parties if they enter government. The category of challenger party comprises a wide range of parties, including far right and far left parties and religious, regionalist, and green parties. To provide a sense of the parties we classify as challengers, we have compiled a list of challenger parties included in our analysis in Table 1 of the web appendix.

The distinction between mainstream and challenger parties relates to recent work on party competition in multi-party systems that also distinguishes between mainstream and so-called 'niche parties' (see Adams et al., 2006; Meguid, 2005, 2008). In Meguid's (2005, 2008) important work on the electoral success of niche parties, she defines them as those parties that 'reject the traditional class-based orientation of politics' and raise new issues that 'are not only novel, but they often do not coincide with existing lines of political division' and that 'differentiate themselves by limiting their issue appeals' (2005: 347–8). In their study of how niche parties respond to public opinion, Adams et al. (2006: 513) classify niche parties as 'members of the Communist, Green, and extreme nationalist party families'. Unlike these studies, the objective of our theoretical model is to predict the impact of party type on the likelihood of mobilizing a new political issue and the effect of this strategy, and hence it would be potentially tautologous to define party types on the basis of their issue-politics. So, although there may be an overlap between our category of challengers and 'niche parties', it is important to note the conceptual distinction, since we define challenger parties on the basis of their office-holding experience rather than in terms of whether they belong to a certain party family or differentiate themselves in terms of single-issue appeals.

Given the losing position they hold within the political system, we expect challengers to be more likely than mainstream parties to be issue entrepreneurs. This expectation deviates from the two-party logic of the classic issue evolution models of Carmines and Stimson, as well as Riker, according to which mainstream opposition parties would also be expected to have incentives to promote new issues. The key difference in a multi-party context is that coalition governments create differential strategic incentives for parties. In multi-party systems, mainstream opposition parties are currently in opposition but tend routinely to alternate between opposition and government and often find themselves in coalitions with other parties. Introducing a new policy issue may thus be risky for mainstream opposition parties because they do not want to remove themselves too much from competitors within the mainstream as this may jeopardize their coalition potential. Consequently, our expectations for mainstream government and mainstream opposition parties are very similar: we do not expect mainstream government parties to act as issue entrepreneurs because they already occupy political office, and mainstream opposition parties may also refrain from an issue entrepreneurial strategy because the potential electoral gains cannot be guaranteed to outweigh the possible costs associated with the loss of future coalition partners. Instead, 'issue adaptation' may be beneficial to parties when, as Riker has pointed out, 'neither side has an advantage on an issue' (1996: 105). In contrast,

challengers – that is, new parties and those that have never been in government – have not built a reputation for being good coalition partners. Owing to uncertainty about their behaviour, engaging in coalition agreements with challenger parties is a potentially risky strategy and the potential costs of forming a coalition with these parties are comparatively high (see Bartolini, 1998; Sartori, 2005; Laver and Schofield, 1998; Warwick, 1996). Unlike mainstream parties, challengers thus have every reason to act as issue entrepreneurs because they have very little to lose in terms of future coalition potential. In previous work, we have shown that, when it comes to the issue of European integration, challenger parties are more likely issue entrepreneurs than mainstream parties (Hobolt and De Vries, 2010). That is, challengers are more likely than mainstream parties to seek to mobilize the European issue and take a different position. Since European integration was conceived as a top-down project based on a broad elite consensus, the ‘mainstream’ position among European political parties has been broadly pro-integrationist (for example, De Vries and Edwards, 2009; Hobolt et al., 2009; Hooghe et al., 2002).³ Adopting a polarizing position is one way for parties to strategically manipulate the salience of an issue. In the next section, we discuss when strategies of issue entrepreneurship can be considered a success.

Mobilization of bias: Changing the game

The strategy of issue entrepreneurship is only the first stage in the model of issue evolution proposed by Carmines and Stimson. As outlined in Figure 1, the next important step is that voters become aware of the different positions on the new issue and respond to it, ultimately leading to a change in voting behaviour and in the electoral fortunes of parties. According to Carmines and Stimson, the outcome of the issue evolution process is a ‘critical moment’ of ‘a mass polarization along the new line of issue cleavage large enough to be noticeable’ (1989: 160). Although such critical moments in the model of issue evolution are less dramatic than a wholesale ‘realignment’, they still involve a substantial redefinition of the issue bases of political competition and a radical change in the party system.

But what counts as successful issue entrepreneurship in a system with multiple parties, where office-seeking is not necessarily the only, or even the primary, goal for many issue entrepreneurs? To adapt our model of issue entrepreneurship to the context of multi-party systems, we adopt a more modest approach to what might account for successful issue entrepreneurship. We argue that to understand changes in party competition in multi-party systems it is important to extend the model to include issue entrepreneurial strategies that do not necessarily lead to a fundamental shift in the nature of party competition – in the way that, for example, the issue of race transformed American politics – but nevertheless alter the basis of voting behaviour for a group of voters and the electoral fortunes of some parties. Literature on party competition in parliamentary democracies has recognized that party objectives combine a mixture of vote-, office-, and policy-seeking aims

(Strøm, 1990). Owing to the fragmented nature of party competition in these systems, some parties have incentives to mobilize new issues, even if they do not appeal to a majority of voters, because vote-seeking and even office-seeking strategies do not necessarily entail winning a plurality of votes. Given the marginalized position of challenger parties in the political system, office-seeking is often not their primary goal. Instead they may be satisfied to mobilize new issue demands among a smaller cohort of voters (Hug, 2001; Kitschelt, 1988).

Hence, we need to develop criteria for a successful issue entrepreneurship strategy that does not necessarily involve a radical mass realignment and the defeat of the party in office. We argue that whether the mobilization of a new issue has succeeded is essentially that '[t]he public must not only perceive a difference in party issue stands, but it must also care about this difference' (Carmines and Stimson, 1989: 161). To the extent that the people care about a political issue, this should become incorporated in the considerations that are relevant to vote choices and ultimately affect the electoral choices that people make. From the perspective of spatial voting theory, we would expect voters to be more likely to vote for a party that is closer on that dimension, all other things being equal. This should benefit parties that adopt positions closer to the median voter on the new issue dimension (see Enelow and Hinich, 1984). Our criteria for a successful issue entrepreneurship strategy are thus two-fold: first, voters' attitudes towards the new issue dimension must influence their vote choices; second, parties that engage in an issue entrepreneurial strategy must benefit electorally from this strategy. Because we expect challengers to be the most likely issue entrepreneurs, we hypothesize that voters choosing to vote for a challenger party are more likely to vote on the basis of concerns related to the new issue dimension. Moreover, we expect that, over time, parties engaging in an issue entrepreneurial strategy will experience an increase in their electoral fortunes as voters are attracted by their stance on the new issue dimension. This leads to the following testable hypotheses about the extent of successful issue entrepreneurship:

H1: Voters choosing to vote for a challenger party are more likely to base their vote choice on preferences related to the new issue dimension, all other things being equal.

H2: Parties engaging in an issue entrepreneurial strategy are more likely to increase their vote share, all other things being equal.

Data and methods

In order to test our expectations about the electoral success of issue entrepreneurs, we employ a dual empirical strategy. First, we estimate a model of vote choice for the three different party types we distinguished: mainstream government, mainstream opposition, and challenger parties. We examine whether vote choice for

challengers compared with vote choice for mainstream parties is more affected by attitudes towards a new issue – European integration. Second, we explore whether challengers indeed benefit electorally from their issue entrepreneurial strategy by exploring whether or not issue entrepreneurship increases parties' vote shares. Let us first elaborate the data, operationalization, and methods used in more detail.

Analysis 1: Effect of the new issue dimension on vote choice across party types

To test whether voting for a challenger party is more strongly affected by voters' attitudes on the new issue dimension compared with mainstream parties we use the EES 2004. Our decision to rely on the EES instead of national election surveys stems from the breadth (cross-nationally) of the EES and the nature of the questions included. Unlike many national election surveys, the EES contains questions probing voters' evaluations of the EU.⁴ This information is paramount, because it allows us to determine the extent to which voters' preferences regarding the EU affect vote choices for the three party types differently. Moreover, since the EES administers comparable surveys in member states across the EU, we are able to analyse the electoral consequences of issue entrepreneurship across a diverse set of institutional and political contexts, namely 21 West and East European countries.⁵

Our dependent variable is whether a voter voted for a mainstream government, mainstream opposition or challenger party in their latest national election. It is constructed using the following EES question: 'Which party did you vote for during the last general election of [year]?' Based on respondents' party vote choice, we created a trichotomous variable, with 1 denoting a vote for a mainstream party in government, 2 a vote for a mainstream party in opposition, and 3 a vote for a challenger party. As discussed above, we define challengers as those parties that have not participated in a governing coalition in the post-war period, which we determine on the basis of the 2006 CHES (see also Hobolt and De Vries, 2010). A list of challenger parties included in the analysis can be found in the web appendix. In our data set, 1185 respondents voted for challengers, 3737 voted for mainstream opposition parties, and 4705 for mainstream government parties.

In our analysis, we aim to determine whether vote choice for challengers is affected by voters' attitudes towards the EU more than vote choice for mainstream opposition and mainstream government parties. We capture this differential impact by including a measure of voters' attitudes towards the membership of their country in the EU in our model of vote choice. The EES 2004 includes a question asking voters if they feel that their country's EU membership is '(1) a good thing, (2) a bad thing, or (3) neither good nor bad'. We recoded this variable into a categorical variable where the value of 1 reflects Eurosceptic attitudes (that is, 'a bad thing') and 0 indicates positive or neutral attitudes (that is, 'a good thing' or 'neither good nor bad'). We expect challenger parties engaging in an issue entrepreneurship strategy to vocally mobilize a Eurosceptic stance because, as discussed above, the

mainstream party position on the issue is broadly pro-integrationist (De Vries and Edwards, 2009; Hooghe et al., 2002).

To determine whether this effect of Euroscepticism on vote choice occurs independently of other sources of voting behaviour, we control for non-EU-related policy and performance factors as well as for the socioeconomic characteristics of respondents. The policy and performance variables include voters' left/right ideological position, government approval and prospective and retrospective national economic evaluations. The socioeconomic controls include education, religiosity, and income. These latter variables are incorporated to control for dominant models explaining vote choice, such as economic and cleavage-based voting. In addition, the inclusion of these controls ensures that a respondent's attitude towards Europe is not merely a proxy for other factors. Finally, we include a dummy variable indicating whether a country has a post-communist legacy.

To test the effect of voters' EU preferences on their ballot choices for challenger, mainstream opposition and mainstream government parties, we employ a multinomial logistic (MNL) regression model. A MNL model allows us to deal with the trichotomous nature of our dependent variable. We also make use of multi-level analysis because neglecting the hierarchical structure of the EES 2004 data in which voters are nested in 21 country contexts could lead to an underestimation of standard errors and spurious inferences (Snijders and Bosker, 1999; Steenbergen and Jones, 2002). A multi-level approach corrects for the dependence of observations within contexts – that is, intra-class correlations – and adjusts for the clustered nature of the data in both the within and between parameter estimates. We estimate our multi-level MNL model with second-order penalized quasi-likelihood (PQL) approximation using MLwiN 2.12.⁶

Analysis 2: Effect of issue entrepreneurship on changes in vote share

In a second step, we explore whether these challengers indeed benefit electorally from their issue entrepreneurial strategy. Introducing new policy issues in the political arena constitutes a risky strategy because the new issue may not catch on with voters or, even worse, may backfire, be electorally costly and alienate potential coalition partners. Consequently, parties will become issue entrepreneurs only when they have reason to believe that they can benefit electorally (see Hobolt and De Vries, 2010). The second stage of our analysis explores whether issue entrepreneurship in fact increases parties' vote shares. In order to do this we employ a longitudinal perspective, bringing together data on the electoral gains and losses of parties from 14 European countries between 1984 and 2006. Unfortunately, the data necessary to tap into parties' issue entrepreneurial strategies are available over time only for West European countries, therefore East European countries were excluded in the second stage of our analysis.⁷

The dependent variable here is the change in the vote share of a party between consecutive national elections. The main independent variable is the degree to

which a party acts like an issue entrepreneur on the new policy issue of European integration. As highlighted earlier, we define issue entrepreneurship as a strategy by which parties actively promote a new issue and adopt a position that is different from the mean position within the party system. Note that this definition combines salience with position-taking (see also Hobolt and De Vries, 2010). For both measures of salience and parties' position towards European integration we rely on the CHES data (Hooghe et al., 2010; Ray, 1999; Steenbergen and Marks, 2007). The CHES data are particularly well suited for our purposes because the data set includes data on party positions and the salience of European integration and a variety of other issues across time and space. Several studies have cross-validated the party position and salience measures based on CHES data and found that expert data often outperform other data sources such as the Comparative Manifesto Project (Marks et al., 2007; Netjes and Binnema, 2007).

To capture issue entrepreneurship, we simply multiply each party's EU salience score by the distance of this same party's EU position from the mean party position in the system on the same policy issue: $(MP_i - P_i) * SP_i$. So, for each party P we multiply its salience score on the new policy issue i by $(MP_i - P_i)$, where MP_i stands for the mean party position on i , P_i stands for the individual party's position on i , SP_i stands for the importance that party P attaches to the new policy issue i , and i stands for the issue of European integration. A party's position on European integration is measured by using the question asking experts to classify the 'overall orientation of the party leadership towards European integration' on a seven-point scale, where 1 signifies strong opposition and 7 strong support. We operationalize $(MP_i - P_i)$ by subtracting an individual party's position on the EU, that is P_i , from the mean EU position of all parties in the system (that is MP_i). This distance measure is constructed in such a way that positive values characterize those parties that are more pro-EU than the average party in the system, whereas negative values indicate those parties that are more sceptical. By multiplying this distance measure by the EU salience measure, EU issue entrepreneurship captures the extent to which a party adopts a position away from the political mainstream (that is, is more Eurosceptic) and attaches importance to this position.⁸

Our main objective is to examine the effect of issue entrepreneurship on changes in parties' vote shares. In order to fully specify a model of changes in vote share and to minimize omitted variable bias, we include several controls. First, we include the government status of a party. Studies from the US context, especially from congressional election research, often demonstrate that incumbents hold an advantage when up for re-election (see, for example, Alford and Hibbing, 1981; Payne, 1980). Incumbents can promote themselves, their work, and their accomplishments as a part of their official position and duties. In addition, incumbents are likely to be more visible in the media and therefore benefit from name recognition and established reputations (Kaid and Holtz-Bacha, 2006). From this perspective, we would expect government status to be positively correlated with changes in vote shares, but we also know that voters are likely to punish governments for poor performance (Key, 1966). Indeed, a vast literature has shown that

voters tend to punish governments when economic conditions are poor (see, for example, Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000; Duch and Stevenson, 2008). Either way, controlling for incumbency status is important. This variable is operationalized as a dummy variable indicating whether a party was part of the government coalition within the legislative period under investigation.

Second, we add two variables tapping into parties' positions on the dominant dimension of political competition: a party's left/right position and parties' left/right positions squared. Our starting point is that issue entrepreneurship, that is, mobilizing and introducing conflict on a new issue dimension, may bring about electoral gains for parties that have losing positions on the dominant dimension of political competition. In order to test whether an effect of issue entrepreneurship is not merely a proxy for parties' extremity on the dominant dimension of political competition, we include both a party's left/right position as well as its squared term. A party's left/right position is measured using CHES responses to the question regarding parties' left/right position on economic issues in a given year, where 0 stands for extreme left and 10 for extreme right.

Third, our model includes a variable tapping into the distance between a party's left/right position and the mean voter left/right position. Parties are expected to lose votes when they move away from the mean voter on the dominant dimension of political competition (Enelow and Hinich, 1984). Consequently, distance is included in our model as an important control variable. In order to capture the distance between a party's left/right position and the mean voter position on this same dimension we calculated $|MV_i - P_i|$ which stands for the absolute distance between the mean voter position on the left/right dimension (that is, MV_i) and a party's left/right position, P_i . Parties' left/right positions were derived from the respective CHES data sets and mean voter positions were obtained by calculating the mean of the left/right self-placements for a given country in a given year using Eurobarometer (EB) surveys. Specifically, the EB surveys ask respondents: 'In political matters, people talk of "the left" and "the right". How would you place your views on this scale?' Finally, our model also controls for party size, which is measured by the percentage of votes obtained in the latest parliamentary elections. Party size is included because it may be argued that larger parties are less likely to be issue entrepreneurs. In addition, changes in vote shares may simply be larger in magnitude for larger parties.

Our data set in the second stage of the analysis includes 178 parties nested in years, that is, a period from 1984 to 2006, and 14 countries, namely all West European EU member states, except Luxembourg. In order to explain change in parties' vote shares, we are dealing with differences between parties, across countries, and over time. We have to estimate a model that deals with the cross-sectional structure, that is, the panel differences based on countries and parties. In order to deal with party and year effects, we use a simple party-year panel set-up and add country dummies to deal with the existence of possible unobserved differences between countries. But this model set-up alone does not allow us to confront all possible problems that may arise using a

panel data estimation strategy. We have to deal with the issue of heteroscedastic error terms because it is very likely that the error terms have different variances between panels and are also correlated across different panels. We estimate panel-corrected standard errors (PCSEs) to address these issues (Beck and Katz, 1995, 1996).⁹

Empirical analysis

In the theoretical section we argued that the success of issue entrepreneurs in multi-party systems can be evaluated using two criteria. First, voters' attitudes towards the new issue dimension must influence their vote choices and, because we expect challengers to be the likely issue entrepreneurs, ballot choices for challenger parties should be more strongly affected by voters' concerns on the new issue dimension. Secondly, we expect that, over time, parties engaging in an issue entrepreneurial strategy will experience an increase in their electoral fortunes, as voters choose on the basis of the new issue dimension. In order to test these hypotheses, we present two sets of empirical results, which we discuss in turn.

Empirical results 1: Effect of the new issue dimension on vote choice across party types

To explore whether vote choice for challengers is driven to a larger extent by voters' attitudes regarding European integration (see hypothesis H1) compared with vote choice for mainstream government and mainstream opposition parties, we estimate two sets of multi-level multinomial logit models using data from EES 2004 for 21 West and East European countries. Our first model includes only the effect of voters' EU attitudes on voting for a challenger party versus a mainstream government party or for a mainstream opposition party versus a mainstream government party. The second model, the full model, also includes control variables.¹⁰

Table 1 shows the results from both models. We find strong support for our main expectation: a voter's choice of challengers versus mainstream government party is indeed strongly and significantly affected by her attitudes towards European integration. When a voter is more Eurosceptic, the odds of voting for a challenger versus a mainstream government party increase, but this is not the case for choosing a mainstream opposition party versus a mainstream government party. In the latter case, Euroscepticism has almost no effect on vote choice. These results indicate that voters' EU attitudes contribute significantly to vote choice for challengers and more so than is the case for mainstream parties. This finding is consistent with our conjectures and robust when we control for other factors influencing vote choice, such as left/right ideology, evaluations of the government or the economy and socioeconomic factors.

The results presented in Table 1 are log odds and therefore substantively not very interesting. Given that we are interested not only in statistical significance but

Table 1. Effects of Euroscepticism on vote choice for party types

Party type	Model 1		Model 2	
	MOP	CP	MOP	CP
<i>Individual-level predictors</i>				
Intercept	-.223** (.0429)	-1.545** (.047)	-.439** (.143)	-.031 (.057)
Euroscepticism	.044 (.075)	.548** (.104)	-.105 (.076)	.444** (.102)
Left/right ideology	—	—	.025 (.010)	-.074** (.016)
Retrospective economic evaluations	—	—	-.061** (.028)	-.025 (.043)
Prospective economic evaluations	—	—	-.068** (.029)	-.100** (.044)
Government approval	—	—	-.676** (.051)	-.863** (.082)
Education	—	—	-.006 (.004)	.007 (.007)
Income	—	—	.019 (.017)	-.038* (.026)
Religiosity	—	—	-.005 (.021)	.044 (.032)
<i>System-level predictors</i>				
Communist legacy	—	—	-.531** (.215)	.048 (.088)
<i>Model summary</i>				
Variance component	3.702**		2.827**	
N (system, individual)	(21, 19,254)		(21, 19,254)	

Notes: The table entries are log odds with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is multinomial in nature (Mainstream Government Party, MGP; Mainstream Opposition Party, MOP; Challenger Party, CP) and Mainstream Government Party is the reference category. The models have been estimated using second-order penalized quasi-likelihood (Browne, 2003). Employing a Bayesian Markov Chain Monte Carlo method yields almost identical results.

**significant at the $p \leq .01$ level; *significant at the $p \leq .05$ level (two-tailed).

also in the relative magnitude of the variables included, we compute discrete changes in the predicted probabilities of choosing one of the other alternatives over a mainstream government party. In order to do so, we change the value of one predictor from 1 standard deviation below the mean to 1 standard deviation above the mean, while holding all other predictors at their respective mean or mode

Table 2. Discrete changes in choice probabilities (percent)

	Δ P(MOP) 1 SD below – 1 SD above	Δ P(CP) 1 SD below – 1 SD above
Euroskepticism (0–1) [<i>min–max change</i>]	–2.54	10.60**
Left/right ideology (1–10)	2.95	–8.09**
Retrospective economic evaluations (1–5)	–3.08**	–1.17
Prospective economic evaluations (1–5)	–3.32**	–4.52**
Government approval (0–1) [<i>min–max change</i>]	–15.16**	–16.35**
Education (0–72)	1.59	–1.72
Income (1–5)	1.29	–2.40*
Religiosity (1–5)	–0.28	2.25
Post-communist legacy (0–1) [<i>min–max change</i>]	–12.19**	1.10

Notes: Table entries are changes (in percent) in probabilities of voting for a mainstream opposition party or challenger party versus a mainstream government party when the value of a respective predictor moves from 1 standard deviation (SD) below to 1 SD above the mean while keeping all other variables at their mean value and dummy variables at their mode. Note that in the case of dummy variables (i.e. Euroscepticism, government approval, and post-communist legacy) minimum to maximum changes are reported. The minimum and maximum values of the different variables are given in the first column in parentheses.

**significant at the $p \leq .01$ level; *significant at the $p \leq .05$ level (two-tailed).

in the case of dummy variables. To compare the size of the marginal effects, we include the discrete changes not only for changes in Euroscepticism but also for all other predictors. Table 2 shows the discrete changes. Please note that, whereas most changes in Table 2 reflect moderate changes in predicted probabilities (that is, changes in 1 standard deviation below to 1 standard deviation above the mean), Euroscepticism and government approval are dichotomous variables, and so Table 2 reports minimum–maximum change in predicted probability for these variables. Thus, strictly speaking, we can truly compare only the magnitude of Euroscepticism with the effect of government approval.

As we saw earlier, the effect of Euroscepticism on casting a ballot for a challenger compared with a mainstream government party is statistically significant. Moreover, the discrete changes reported in Table 2 show that the effect of Euroscepticism is substantial. This being said, however, its effect is smaller than the discrete changes we observe for government approval. The probability of voting for a challenger party versus a mainstream government party increases by almost 11 percent when a voter moves from a pro-EU to a sceptical stance on EU membership. This effect is larger than a moderate change in retrospective and prospective economic evaluations and of similar size to a moderate change in left/right ideology. The predictor with the largest effect on vote choice for a challenger party versus a mainstream government party is government approval. These results are in line with the extant literature on voting behaviour, which has shown

the prominence of performance and economic evaluations on vote choice. On the whole, we see a very similar pattern in size for the factors influencing vote choice for a mainstream opposition party versus a mainstream government party and a challenger versus a mainstream government party. This being said, Table 2 does clearly show that the effect of voters' attitudes on the new issue dimension, that is, European integration, on vote choice for challengers is four times larger than the effect for mainstream opposition parties. This finding is in line with our first hypothesis (H1) stating that we expect challenger parties to benefit more strongly from higher levels of Euroscepticism compared with mainstream parties because these parties are demonstrated to act as issue entrepreneurs when it comes to the European issue by mobilizing a Eurosceptic stance. The findings presented in Tables 1 and 2 are clear testimony to the importance of issue entrepreneurship in explaining differences in vote choice between mainstream government, mainstream opposition and challenger parties.

Empirical results 2: Effects of issue entrepreneurship on changes in vote share

Let us now turn to the second part of exploring the electoral success of issue entrepreneurs: do parties engaging in an issue entrepreneurial strategy attract new voters in elections? To test this proposition, we estimated a model explaining

Table 3. Effects of issue entrepreneurship on changes in vote share

Predictors (min, max)	Coefficient	PCSE
Issue entrepreneurship (-16-16)	.014*	.005
Government party (0-1)	.201**	.086
Left/right ideology (0-10)	-.179**	.082
Left/right ideology squared (0-100)	.014**	.003
Distance from mean voter left/right (0-5)	.087	.086
Party size (0-51)	.001	.005
<i>N</i>	2484	
Groups	178	

Notes: Table entries are Prais-Winsten regression coefficients correcting for panel-level heteroscedasticity with country dummies (not shown in table) and standard errors. The minimum and maximum values of the different variables are given in the first column in parentheses.

**significant at the $p \leq .01$ level and *significant at the $p \leq .05$ level (two-tailed).

changes in vote shares across time (1984–2006) and space (14 West European countries). The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3.

The results displayed in Table 3 show that parties that actively mobilize their Eurosceptic stance indeed reap electoral benefits in elections within the 22-year time-frame under investigation. This is even the case when we control for other important alternative explanations of changes in vote share such as government status or parties' left/right ideological position. As expected, government parties do better in elections, but we find no significant effect of proximity to the mean voter on the left/right dimension or party size. These results lend credence to the proposition that parties engaging in an issue entrepreneurial strategy benefit electorally.

When we compare the magnitude of the different factors influencing parties' vote shares by computing discrete changes, in this case the change in vote shares when we move the value of an independent variable from 1 standard deviation above to 1 standard deviation below the mean *ceteris paribus*, we find that the effect for issue entrepreneurship is fairly modest. Whereas a 1 standard deviation change for left/right ideology for example corresponds to about 11 percentage points shift in vote shares, the same change in issue entrepreneurship increases a party's vote share by about 5 percentage points. The results are in line with our theoretical expectation that parties engaging in an issue entrepreneurial strategy will increase their votes share, although the effects are relatively small.

On the whole, these results support our second hypothesis (H2) stating that parties engaging in an issue entrepreneurial strategy attract more voters than parties that are not engaging in such a strategy, all other things being equal. In addition, the findings corroborate existing work on the role of European integration on vote choice in national elections that demonstrates that EU attitudes affect voters' ballot box decisions only when the European issue produces a salient conflict among parties (see De Vries, 2007).

Conclusion

Questions pertaining to the multidimensional nature of political competition have been high on the agenda of students of party and electoral competition for decades, especially among scholars studying multi-party systems. This being said, we currently have a limited understanding of how changes within the dimensional structure of party and electoral competition occur, especially within multi-party competition. This study is devoted to researching these mechanisms. Building on the issue evolution model by Carmines and Stimson, we explore which parties can reap electoral benefits by introducing a new issue dimension. We devote our attention to the parties attempting to restructure political competition by mobilizing a previously non-salient issue dimension and by taking a stance that diverges from the political mainstream, that is, issue entrepreneurship. Specifically, we explore whether these issue entrepreneurs are electorally successful. For the purpose of understanding dimensional change in multi-party systems, we amend the model of issue evolution for a two-party system in two distinct ways. First, we introduce a

typology of political losers within multi-party competition that distinguishes between three types of party: mainstream government, mainstream opposition and challenger parties. This three-fold distinction is important in multi-party systems because mainstream parties are reluctant to act as issue entrepreneurs owing to strategic considerations about potential future governing coalitions. Challengers are then the parties that engage mostly in issue entrepreneurship. Second, we develop different criteria to determine the success of an issue entrepreneurial strategy. Carmines and Stimson define success by a substantial redefinition of the issue bases of political competition and a realignment of mass identification, but this definition is too restrictive in multi-party systems. Owing to the fragmented nature of party competition in these systems, some parties have incentives to mobilize new issues, even if they do not appeal to a majority of voters. Challenger parties may be satisfied to mobilize new issue demands among a smaller cohort of voters. Hence, we argue first that, in order for challenger parties to engage in successful entrepreneurship, first they have to generate a response by voters on a new issue dimension that is, voters are more likely to vote on the basis of preferences on the new dimension when making a choice between a challenger and a non-challenger party; second, that parties engaging in an issue entrepreneurial strategy should attract new voters.

By examining the party mobilization of the issue of European integration and the respective voter responses, our empirical results support the idea that an issue entrepreneurship strategy allows political losers on the dominant dimension to attract new voters and reap electoral gains. We show that voters are more likely to vote for parties that are losers on the extant dimension based on their EU attitudes, and that parties that employ an issue entrepreneurial strategy can increase their overall vote share. These findings suggest that voters are indeed receptive to the issue entrepreneurial strategies of challenger parties. What is more, they have important implications for our understanding of party and electoral competition within multi-party systems because they outline the differential electoral effects of issue mobilization between mainstream and challenger parties. Our amended issue evolution model provides clear expectations about which parties have an incentive to introduce dimensional conflict and to aim to change the nature of the structure of the party system in order to reap electoral gains. These are parties that hold losing positions on the dominant dimension of political competition. Consequently, the nature of party competition within multi-party systems is largely an interplay between mainstream parties attempting to retain the current dimensional competition while challenger parties will aim at redirecting political competition. Even though these issue entrepreneurial strategies may not necessarily bring about large-scale realignments within the system, they may have important electoral consequences by changing voter alignments and thus affecting election outcomes.

The results presented here also give rise to important avenues of future research. We demonstrate that the dimensional basis of party and electoral competition is never a stable equilibrium but is always under pressure from the actions and

initiatives of challengers, and this raises further questions about the nature of competition between mainstream and challenger parties. How do mainstream parties respond to the strategies of challengers? When do 'challenger issues' become 'mainstream issues'? Related to this, it may be a worthwhile avenue for future research to examine whether media attention to mainstream and challenger parties and the issues they mobilize differs. Because an issue entrepreneurial strategy involves the mobilization of a previously non-salient issue, media attention seems of crucial importance for success. Notwithstanding the importance of these topics for future research, this study has provided key new insights into our understanding of the causes and consequences of changes in the dimensional structure of party and electoral competition within multi-party systems. We theorize and empirically substantiate that parties in losing positions on the dominant dimension of political competition play a crucial role in instigating dimensional change and benefit electorally from this strategy.

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Notes

1. Because the responsibilities of regional governments differ substantially throughout Europe, our conceptualization of holding office refers to national government participation only and does not include regional government representation. This allows us to ensure functional equivalence across the different country contexts under investigation.
2. We operationalize this as parties that have not held cabinet posts in the post-war period.
3. It is important to note that there may be some specificities regarding the EU issue that may explain why challenger parties are likely issue entrepreneurs because anti-EU parties are simply not viable government parties. Although this reasoning is not necessarily in conflict with our theoretical framework, it does raise questions about the direction of causality. In order to address this issue, we would need to test our expectations about the issue entrepreneurship of challengers in other policy areas.
4. Some readers may question whether our results hold given that the focus and timing of the EES surveys may lead to overstated EU effects. Thus far, a number of previous studies using national election study data have provided evidence of EU effects on national vote choice, so we would contend that this basic finding is not in doubt (see De Vries, 2007, for example). Moreover, our focus is on differences in the strength of EU attitudes on vote choice for challenger, mainstream opposition and mainstream government parties across different member states. Since any presumed priming effect in the

- EES surveys should be constant across national contexts, this should not threaten inference in our study.
5. The following countries are included in the analysis: Austria, Belgium, Britain, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain.
 6. We use second-order penalized quasi-likelihood rather than the standard estimation procedure using first-order marginal quasi-likelihood because the latter has proven to produce severely biased estimates in a MNL set-up (Browne, 2003). Also, owing to the fact that our sample includes only 21 second-level units, the maximum likelihood estimation used in Table 1 may not perform optimally (see Gellman and Hill, 2007). Consequently, we also conducted an analysis using a Bayesian Markov Chain Monte Carlo method (see Gellman and Hill, 2007; Jackman, 2000) to inspect the robustness of our findings. The results of this robustness check show that the Bayesian set-up yields substantially similar results to those reported in Table 1. These results are available upon request from the authors.
 7. We include all West European member states of the EU except for Luxembourg. Unfortunately, Luxembourg is not included in the Chapel Hill expert survey that is used to operationalize the different party characteristics in our model and therefore could not be included in the analysis.
 8. Note that we use a more Eurosceptic position to capture those parties taking a 'new' position on European integration. We do so because an extensive literature has demonstrated that the consensus position on European integration in West European party systems is a pro-European position (see, for example, De Vries and Edwards, 2009; Hobolt et al., 2009; Hooghe et al., 2002). This finding is again confirmed by the data employed here.
 9. Because there seems to be some disagreement in the literature about how to deal with heteroscedastic error terms and potential causal heterogeneity, we estimated model specifications of our time-series cross-section analysis including and excluding country fixed effects. These analyses yield almost identical results and are available upon request from the authors.
 10. Note that we also specified the same models including abstention as a choice category in order to deal with the independence of irrelevant alternatives assumption underlying a MNL model. The substantive findings presented here do not change when including abstention in the model (these results are available upon request from the authors). Since we have no particular expectations regarding abstention, we present the results for the models including vote choices, excluding abstention.

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