What is Issue Competition?
Conflict, Consensus and Issue Ownership in Party Competition

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What is Issue Competition? Conflict, Consensus and Issue Ownership in Party Competition

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Abstract Empirical assessments of issue competition lack both conceptual precision in the use of the concept of “policy issue”, and sufficient studies integrating both salience and positional perspectives. This article specifies an operational definition of a “policy issue” suited for the analysis of issue competition in the electoral arena and beyond, and proposes a typology of electoral issues that takes into account the two sides of issue competition – the decision to address an issue, and the adoption of a diverging or similar position on it. This typology allows distinguishing proprietal, consensual, blurred and conflictual issues. The framework is illustrated with an analysis of EU-related issues in the electoral manifestos of British, French and German parties. This source did not enable us to identify any blurred issue, but our exploratory study delivers several conclusions regarding the other issue types. Proprietal issues appear to be marginal, indicating that parties tend to devote attention to the same issues and that issue ownership is highly contested. We further observe a primacy of consensus in EU-related discourses, especially among governing parties.

The question whether a given problem poses a position – or valence – issue is a matter to be settled empirically and not on a priori logical grounds. (Stokes, 1963: 373)

The literature on issue competition, concerned with how political parties use policy issues in electoral competition, is well established and has been growing over the last decade. This perspective has had the merit to underline that thematic emphasis is key to understanding the dynamics of party competition. It has also made a crucial contribution to the production of knowledge on electoral campaigns and to the explanation of parties’ electoral fate. More broadly, the concept of “issue” is used in several subfields of political science and opens up perspectives for the joint study

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of parties, policies, the media, public opinion and social movements. Yet, the analysis of issue competition has not realized its full potential. A first problem derives from an impressionistic use of the concept of “issue”. This label tends to cover fluctuating realities, with different degrees of inclusiveness. As argued in more detail below, this imprecision is not only a matter of definitional controversies. It has consequences on the conclusions drawn from the same observations regarding, for instance, issue salience, issue ownership or issue position. This lack of agreement regarding the definition of issues also makes it difficult for party competition experts, who often adopt an inclusive conception of issues – e.g. “immigration” or “the environment” – to engage with scholars from other subfields of political science, such as policy, media or social movement studies, who tend to adopt a narrower conception of issues – e.g. “welfare rights for migrants” or “feed-in tariffs for renewable energies”. Formulating and specifying an operational definition of “policy issue” should contribute to overcoming these problems.

Second, although growing, the literature on issue competition has so far failed to assess the relative weight of conflict versus consensus-oriented strategies in party competition, and hence to sort out its original theoretical debate. Positional theories see issue competition as parties taking distinct positions on a given set of issues, in order to get closer to the positions of a larger number of voters. Following Downs’ spatial model of party competition (1957), they offer a view of party politics that is based on conflicts over policy choices. This view has been challenged by valence and salience theories, which see issue competition not so much as a conflict over policy alternatives, but rather over the issue emphasis of electoral campaigns. In the tradition opened by Stokes’ seminal article (1963), they claim that parties are primarily concerned with catching voters’ attention on issues that are most favourable to them. In this view, issue competition is primarily about controlling the agenda.

The tension between these traditions is very stimulating and may nourish theoretical reflections and empirical research, but, as will be shown below, studies integrating both perspectives into a general model of issue competition remain exceptional. This article departs from the observation that difficulties in articulating both approaches are rooted in diverging a priori conceptions regarding the nature of issues (De Sio, 2010): positional theories conceive issues as essentially conflictual, i.e. subject to a clear disagreement over policy choices, whereas valence and salience theories argue that the decisive political issues are consensual insofar as parties and voters tend to agree over desirable policy goals.

This article seeks to contribute to this debate through the formulation of a precise definition of “policy issues” (section 1) and through the construction of a new typology of issues (section 2) which builds on previous categorizations. Taking together the criteria of conflict versus consensus and of the number of parties addressing the issue, we suggest distinguishing between “proprietal”, “consensual”, “blurred” and “conflictual” issues. We then propose to operationalize this typology of issue competition through a three-step inductive approach, applied to party manifestos (section 3), which enables us to establish on which level of precision a policy issue is defined (scope), its salience to each party and the number of positions
expressed. The final section of the article illustrates the potentialities of this approach, using the example of issue competition over European integration in national electoral contests in France, Germany and the United Kingdom, between 1986 and 2009 (section 4). This exploratory work suggests that, contrary to widespread assumptions (especially regarding issue competition over the European question), propietal issues are both exceptional and ephemeral and that conflict over Europe is the exception rather than the rule: EU-related stances are predominantly consensual, despite the existence of country- and party-specific patterns of issue competition. These findings open up promising research avenues regarding the nature, structure and dynamics of issue competition.

1. What is a Policy Issue?

The issue-competition literature devotes surprisingly little attention to the definition of “policy issues”. There is no agreement regarding their essence, although many authors have tried to characterize policy issues depending on parameters such as their complexity – “hard” and “soft” issues (Carmines & Stimson, 1989) – or the extent to which they are consensual on a spectrum between – “valence” and “positional” issues (Stokes, 1963) – or within parties – “consensual” and “wedge” issues (Hillygus & Shields, 2009). Despite these specifications, policy issues tend to cover very different realities from study to study and, occasionally, even within a single study.

1.1. A Loose Concept

Three major conceptions of “issue” predominate in the issue-competition literature. Issues can be broad (cross-sectorial) themes, such as welfare, prosperity or international relations (e.g. Laver & Benoit, 2006). They can also relate to policy sectors, such as health, transport, education or immigration (e.g. Bale, 2003). They can finally refer to targeted policy problems, such as the invasion of Iraq, the management of railways, nationalization or abortion (e.g. Adams, 1997; Green & Hobolt, 2008). Beyond these divergences in the degree of precision or inclusiveness, “issues” alternatively represent policy objectives – such as less inflation, more income equality, or more security – or policy instruments – monetary policies, change in the penal code, public spending, primary school programs, and so on.

Empirical approaches to issue competition also vary a great deal. Salience theory has motivated the coding of party manifestos on a large scale by the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP). In the coding scheme used, each coding category was conceived as a specific “issue” a priori (e.g. Budge et al., 2001: 76; Klingemann et al., 2006). The same goes for the Comparative Agendas Project, which focuses on attention given to numerous policy topics (Baumgartner et al., 2008). On the other hand, expert surveys, derived from a positional conception of party competition, try to locate parties on very broad “issues”, considered as policy dimensions, such as immigration or European integration (e.g. Bakker et al., forthcoming; Huber & Inglehart,
More qualitative studies may define “issues” in a much narrower sense and tackle the politicization of strictly delimited policy problems (e.g. Adams, 1997 on the case of abortion; Culpepper, 2011 on the case of corporate governance).

The looseness of the concept of “policy issue” has several implications. First, the implicit and a priori decision to define issues more or less broadly, with a focus on instruments or on objectives, hinders scholars from capturing political strategies regarding the construction of public problems. Party officials may strategically decide to specify some policies – e.g. the ones they intend to implement – while not entering into much detail regarding others. This kind of strategic decision cannot be captured if policy issues are delimited a priori.

Second, the definition employed may directly affect the conclusions drawn from the same observations, for instance regarding the question of issue ownership. The idea that some parties “own” some issues, although powerful in explaining votes and electoral performances (Damore, 2004; Kaufmann, 2004; Petrocik, 1996), is contested regarding party behaviour and strategies by scholars mobilizing the concepts of “issue uptake”, “issue convergence”, “issue trespassing” and “issue overlap” in order to emphasize how political opponents often contest issue ownership (e.g. Brouard et al., 2012; Damore, 2004, 2005; Green & Hobolt, 2008; Green-Pedersen, 2010; Green-Pedersen & Krogstrup, 2008; Meguid, 2008; Sides, 2006; Sigelman & Buell, 2004; Sulkin, 2005). However, these studies tend to adopt a broad conception of policy issue as encompassing themes, which makes the identification of issue ownership very unlikely: a party should not abandon a large bundle of issues to a competitor. Instead of remaining silent on others’ policy themes, parties are likely to try to redefine them by politicizing other – more favourable – issues belonging to the same theme, possibly leading to a more specific issue ownership (see Sides, 2006, for evidence). This implies that different conclusions may have been generated when studying narrower issues. The observation of a considerable overlap of issues in the electoral and legislative priorities of left and right parties, based on analyses of the Comparative Agendas Project’s (CAP) data (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Brouard et al., 2012; Persico et al., 2012) could thus be challenged when narrowing down the unit of analysis and comparing the attention to subtopics instead of general topics. Similarly, the characterization of issues as valence or positional may vary depending on the delimitation of “issues”, since parties may agree on an objective, but not on the means to achieve it, or they may agree on some aspects of a policy topic, and not on others.

1.2. Towards an Operational Definition of Policy Issues

Taking the political actors at their word, and studying what they say without preconceptions about the nature and scope of issue(s) implies a more refined approach of the study of issue competition as heresthetics (Riker, 1986). What matters for the study of issue competition is not only the general themes set on the agenda by politicians and their position, but also the issue selected to address these themes. We therefore
suggest an inductive approach to “policy issues”, based on an operational definition that avoids any substantial assumption on the delimitation and specification of issues:

*A policy issue is a question of public policy, as demarcated, defined and specified by political actors, possibly giving rise to one or several positions.*

Even though general problems, such as the desirability of more immigration restrictions or environmental protection, may be called policy issues if political actors frame them in such a general way, we argue against doing so if they are addressed through the lens of a more precise problem. This may justify considering precise issues as part of one or more general policy theme(s), like family policy or environmental protection. Distinguishing between themes and issues seems crucial in order to clarify the debate.

1.3. *The Example of Issue(s) of European Integration*

Our argument can be exemplified by the theme of European integration, which tends to be treated in the literature as a single “issue” over which parties can adopt either pro- or anti-positions.\(^6\) It seems to us that the conflictual character of EU-related pledges cannot be postulated *a priori*. In addition, we have shown elsewhere that Europe is in fact a theme encompassing a wide spectrum of distinct issues: Maastricht Treaty, EU enlargement to Turkey, EU Constitution, single currency, etc. (Guinaudeau & Persico, 2013; see also Veen, 2011).\(^7\) Conceptualizing the European theme as an antagonism between Europhiles and Eurosceptics means ignoring these competing specifications of European politics, with contrasted degrees and targets of contestation/defence of Europe.

Political scientists have a legitimate interest in reducing the number of policy dimensions analysed in order to better capture dynamics and strategies in issue competition (Benoit & Laver, 2012). However, reducing the range of EU-related problems to an antagonism between Europhiles and Eurosceptics seems problematic. This comes down to adopting the dominant specification constructed by mainstream party leaders in order to disqualify any critique of the EU, often branding as “anti-European” any challenger party raising concerns against a given aspect of European integration. A more objective analysis of issue competition over Europe should pay particular attention to the issues emphasized by each party and the relative weight of conflict and consensus in this competition.

2. *An Integrated Framework for Describing and Explaining Issue Competition*

Following Stokes’ advice quoted in the epigraph, we argue that the study of issue competition should integrate the salience and positional approaches, so as to be able to establish the relative weight of conflict and consensus over time.
2.1. Two Faces of Issue Competition

Salience, Ownership and Uptake. Issue competition can be described in terms of salience, i.e. of the attention devoted by a party to an issue, assuming that a minimum level of salience is necessary for an issue to be politicized. As already explained, the determination of the degree of overlap versus distinction of the issues politicized by competing parties appears to be a major challenge for the issue competition literature. The salience of each issue to each party, as well as the number of parties devoting attention to it, thus appear to be crucial parameters of issue competition.

Positions and Issue Conflict. As soon as an issue is salient to more than one party, the second important parameter of issue competition comes into play, that is, the number of positions represented. The abundant literature analysing actors’ policy positions shows the importance of this aspect of party competition, offering stable and insightful conclusions (De Vries & Marks, 2012). Yet, at least since Stokes, we know that not all issues give rise to distinct positions and we cannot exclude a priori that parties don’t share a consensual position on a majority of issues (conflictual issues thus remaining marginal). Describing party competition thus requires a measurement of parties’ positions on each issue in order to determine whether, and under which conditions, policy issues give rise to conflict.

2.2. On the Necessity of Studying Jointly Both Faces of Issue Competition

Most studies focus on only one of the two faces of issue competition – either on emphasis or on conflict. This necessarily leads to a fragmentary knowledge: conflict may not be relevant in the case of non-salient issues; broad similarities between parties’ issue priorities may go along with a differentiation in terms of positions. Notable exceptions are the scholarship by De Vries and Hobolt and a working paper and subsequent article by De Sio and Franklin. The two authors mentioned first, interested in the politicization of the EU, take both salience and position into account. In their convincing longitudinal model, parties that occupy losing positions in the party system are proven more likely to politicize new issues (De Vries & Hobolt, 2010), which appears to be a successful electoral strategy (De Vries & Hobolt, 2012). A further exception is the conceptual effort of De Sio, who offers an intriguing classification of issues based on their level of agreement, which allows the placement of both positional and valence issues on a same continuum, and on their salience, looking at how much specific issues are over- or under-supported within a specific party (De Sio, 2010; see also De Sio & Franklin, 2012). These attempts have opened up promising prospects for a better understanding of issue competition. However, they do not overcome all the problems mentioned above, as they both deal with pre-delimited policy issues and leave unanswered the question of differences in the political agendas across countries – what are the salient issues in each party system and how are they delimited in domestic political discourses?
The concept of “valence issue”, though it had the merit of drawing scholars’ attention to consensual issues, has not led to a comprehensive body of studies of issue competition. A review of the literature inspired by Stokes’ reflection reveals the limitations of the distinction between “positional” and “valence” issues for analysing the two dimensions of salience and conflict. The ambiguity between these dimensions lies in the very definition of “valence issues” as issues, “on which parties or leaders are differentiated not by what they advocate but by the degree to which they are linked in the public’s mind with conditions or goals or symbols on which almost everyone approves or disapproves” (Stokes, 1992: 143).

This definition refers both to the existence of an issue ownership (valence issues are owned by a party and should be salient in the discourse of this party mainly) and to the consensual character of valence issues, suggesting that both characteristics go hand in hand. Yet, this is empirically not necessarily the case (Pardos-Prado, 2012) and there is no reason to postulate a link between ownership and consensus a priori. Several parties may indeed have the same position on the same issue, or a party may be associated with a conflictual issue in the eyes of the voters. Because of this problem, empirical studies of “valence issues” deal with what can be considered as two distinct issue types.

More generally, we still know very little about the relative weight of consensual and positional issues. The rare hypotheses developed so far – e.g. on the growing relevance of valence issues (Green, 2007) – would require empirical confirmation. We thus propose a typology of policy issues that crosses both faces of issue competition. We hope that this will encourage scholars studying issue competition to clearly specify the “policy issues” they study so that empirical work can focus on the share of consensus versus conflict.

### 2.3. A Typology of Policy Issues

We constructed a typology of issues by crossing the two faces of issue competition (Table 1). This classification allows distinguishing issues according to the number of parties making them salient and to the number of positions expressed. Issues that are politicized by one party only lead to the monopoly of this party’s position (following Budge et al., 2001: 153, we then speak of *proprietal* issues).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Salience: number of parties addressing the issue</th>
<th>Conflict: number of positions expressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>More than one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proprietal</strong></td>
<td><strong>Consensual</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Blurred</strong></td>
<td><strong>Conflictual</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. A typology of policy issues
Yet, representatives of a party may take different positions on one issue, resorting to blurring strategies in order to broaden electoral support (Rovny, 2012, 2013): in this case, we speak of blurred issues. Issues addressed by several parties may give rise to one (consensual issues) or several positions (conflictual issues).

If some issues might substantially lend themselves to consensus or conflict, the proprietal, consensual, blurred or conflictual character of an issue is not necessarily linked to intrinsic characteristics. The category within which each issue falls is likely to change along with context and party strategies.

Although simple, it seems to us that this typology offers a clarification when compared to existing classifications. The next section introduces the research design developed in order to operationalize our typology and to assess the relative weight of consensual, proprietal and conflictual issues in electoral discourses over Europe of British, French and German parties, between 1986 and 2009.

3. Measuring Conflict, Consensus and Issue-Ownership in Issue Competition

The primary goal of this article is to explore the usefulness of our typology of issues in order to account for issue competition with respect to issue definition, salience and positions. To our knowledge, no database allows to operationalize this multi-faceted conceptualization. This requires data on the scope of the issues politicized, their salience and their degree of controversy. Available data either makes strong assumptions regarding the scope or the conflictual versus consensual character of policy issues, or focuses on salience or positions exclusively. Given the necessity to collect new data, we had to limit the scope of our study in terms of policy issues, time period and party systems.

3.1. Case Selection

EU-Related Issues as a Subset of Policy Issues. Faced with the necessity of collecting new data, we decided to focus on issues related to the general theme of European integration and EU policies. Previous scholarship has demonstrated that this theme encompasses numerous distinct issues (Guinaudeau & Persico, 2013; see also Höglinger, 2012). What makes the case of European issues interesting is that some of them are in line with the historical cleavages (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967), on which mainstream governing parties acquired their primacy – e.g. the liberalization and privatization of public sectors, the implementation of a redistributive tax policy – while others are linked with “new politics” issues – e.g. EU enlargement, immigration policies or climate change – on which many challenger parties mobilize their voters (Franklin, 1992). This variety makes EU-related issues a challenging subset of policy issues enabling us to explore how our framework can help confirm, challenge or complement the findings of the issue competition literature.

The Period of Study: 1986–2009. Integrating the time dimension represents a major challenge to analyses of issue competition. Some studies differentiate long-term from
short-term issue ownership (for instance, Petrocik, 1996; Walgrave & De Swert, 2007) and suggest that issues can switch from being proprietal to conflictual, blurred or consensual, and vice versa. In order to be able to consider both short-term and long-term dynamics, we study more than two decades covering the years between 1986 and 2009, marked both by an acceleration of European integration (likely making the related issues more salient over time) and by the rise and establishment of challenger parties in many West European party systems (Kriesi et al., 2008).

**Three Party Systems in Comparison.** With regard to the criteria of feasibility, and in order to get an exploratory account of variance in the number of parties and the structure of the party systems, which are classical independent variables explaining parties’ behaviour regarding issues, and the overall salience (or systemic salience) of EU issues, we decided to study domestic party competition among British, French and German parliamentary parties.\(^8\)

France is characterized by a high level of attention to EU issues (Guinaudeau & Persico, 2013). Its multiparty system features three mainstream governing parties – a socialist party (PS), a centre-right party (UDF) and a conservative party (RPR-UMP) – which have shared the post of prime minister since 1958. The Communist Party (PC) has been a governing party, in junior positions within socialist-led coalitions, ever since the legislative elections of 1981. The Green Party (Les Verts) entered Jospin’s cabinet in 1997, thereby changing its status from challenger to governing party. Only one party, the far-right organization (FN), has remained a challenger party over the whole period. EU politics tend to be less debated in the German party system than in France. Besides the two mainstream governing parties, the Social-Democrats (SPD) and the Christian-Democrats (CDU), the Liberals (FDP) have participated in German cabinets since 1949, while the Greens became a governing party when they entered the Schröder government in 1997. The post-communist party (PDS – Die Linke), contrary to its French counterpart, has always remained a challenger party. The French and German cases are compared to the British one, characterized by an intermediary level of salience and a “two-and-a-half” party system dominated by the Conservatives and the Labour Party.\(^9\)

### 3.2. Operationalization

Issues have been identified and classified with respect to the characteristics addressed previously: scope, salience and positions. We decided to use as a source the party manifesto data, which is well suited for a long-term retrospective study. We searched the programmes presented at general elections by all parliamentary parties for EU-related passages, by tracking all sentences featuring the stem “euro” or the acronyms “EU” and “EEC” through a keyword search. This procedure allowed us to gather a corpus covering all substantial propositions regarding EU treaties, institutions and policies, as well as policy claims formulated in a European perspective.

The corpus was qualitatively and inductively analysed. We began by listing all issues that could be distinguished on the basis of the above definition as a “policy
issue” in all manifestos (scope). This identified no fewer than 69 issues, listed in Appendix 1. Each manifesto was subsequently coded according to the presence or absence of each issue (salience), which allowed us identifying proprietal issues, i.e. issues tackled by one party only at a given election. When a party took more than one stance over a given issue and when more than one party emphasised an issue, we analysed the positions expressed for one election by comparing them in substance (positions). Depending on the presence of a single or of several and distinct positions, this allowed us to establish the consensual or conflictual character of each issue. In theory, this step could have allowed to identify blurred issues, if some manifestos had expressed diverging positions over an issue. This was not the case. Party manifestos represent relatively homogenous documents and are probably drafted with a concern for giving a coherent picture of the party’s political project. They may thus not be the best source to detect “blurred issues”, which may be better studied with a focus on the discourses of individual party officials or on the official discourse over the course of a given campaign, using more documents than just the electoral programme.

In order to assess the relative weight of each issue type in the manifestos, the number of words granted to every issue was counted and taken as a proportion of the total number of words of EU-related propositions in each manifesto. For each programme, this provided a measure of the relative salience of all issues addressed and, more importantly for this article, of the relative salience of proprietal, consensual and conflictual issues.

4. How British, French and German Parties Politicize the EU

Figure 1 displays the relative proportion in each manifesto of consensual, proprietal and conflictual issues. The three issue types are present in almost all party manifestos. Contrary to what most of the literature on the EU as an electoral issue suggests, conflict over the EU appears to be limited: the average share of conflictual issues within a manifesto is 33.3%, while consensual EU issues form a majority, with 60.7%. Given the multidimensional nature and the predominantly consensual character of EU-related issues, modelling party competition over Europe in terms of positioning along one or two dimensions of conflict therefore seems problematic. Our exploratory findings are discussed in further detail regarding each issue type in the following subsections.

4.1. An Exceptional and Ephemeral Issue Ownership

Narrowing the definition of policy issues to specified questions of public policy is likely to increase the estimated weight of proprietal issues. Nonetheless, this type of issue represents only a tiny minority of problems addressed by parties (5.9% of manifestos on the average). There are clear inter-country differences regarding this share, since proprietal issues form 11.5% of French parties’ EU-related propositions, while this average percentage is smaller in the UK (7.9%) and even smaller in
Figure 1. Consensual, proprietal and conflictual issues in party manifestos (in %).
Germany (only 1.9%). These results seem to indicate that issue ownership is the exception rather than the rule, and proprietal issues appear to be more marginal (or contested) than suggested by salience theory, most parties contest their opponents’ claim to ownership of any issue by contesting that issue.

We acknowledge that the marginality of proprietal issues might be less pronounced once they are operationalized in a less restrictive manner, by considering proprietal any issue capturing significantly more attention on the part of one party than its competitors. Yet, a closer look at the dynamics of politicization of proprietal issues corroborates the idea of a party system agenda constraining parties’ freedom to emphasize their preferred issues and to ignore their competitors’ issues. First, the share of proprietal issues is declining over time, except in Germany where its share remains at a very modest level. The room left to proprietal issues by German parties does not exceed 5% on average, whereas it reached an average 31.1% in France in 1986, and 16.8% in the UK in 1987. In line with preliminary work testing the “issue-uptake” hypothesis, parties tend to take up their opponents’ issues. Second, analysing parties’ use of proprietal issues over time confirms such dynamics of uptake. We can quote the example of the issue of the European Social Charter, which was only emphasized by the British Conservatives in 1988 and 1993, with strong arguments in favour of opting out, but became conflictual when New Labour began to be in favour of the adoption of this Social Charter. The same goes for European employment policies in Germany, originally “owned” by the SPD but contested by the FDP and CDU from 1998 on. Another example is the common home security policy, politicized only by the RPR until 1997, but strongly opposed by the National Front ever since. Contestation over issue ownership can also turn proprietal issues into consensual ones, as happened with calls for a European Constitution in Germany (originally only defended by the FDP), for Erasmus exchanges and the protection of French cultural identity (“owned” by the RPR in the 1980s) and against market regulations in the UK (first politicized by the Conservatives).

A further striking characteristic of proprietal issues lies in their country-specific character. No party family seems to own an issue across borders and over time: EU support of free enterprise has long been owned by the German Liberals; the reinforcement of citizenship and voting rights for EU citizens has been an attribute of French Greens since 1997; while the FN is the only party addressing the Schengen Agreement and freedom of movement (which it opposes). The Liberal Democrats have been the only British party to politicize the issue of transparency and publicizing of Council meetings, and of defence of civil rights.

This preliminary qualitative analysis indicates that proprietal issues are marginal in the manifestos of all parties. We were surprised not to find any particular importance of proprietal issues in the manifestos of challenger parties, which have been described as more likely candidates for issue entrepreneurship (De Vries & Hobolt, 2012; Müller-Rommel, 1998) or for responding to mainstream parties’ strategies of avoidance (Meguid, 2008). Some policy issues probably lend themselves more than others to being “appropriated” by one party. Further research may clarify whether
our observation that challenger parties do not own more issues than governing parties
is specific to issues of European integration, or valid also for other policy themes and
other party systems.

On the whole, proprietal EU issues are marginal in the programmes of all parties, as
political competitors rapidly take them up. The following analyses are dedicated to
issues politicized by more than one party and to the relative frequency of conflictual
and consensual issues among them.

4.2. Issue Competition Beyond Conflict

Most studies conceive issue competition over European integration as occurring
along an axis opposing Europhiles and Eurosceptics. Decomposing the theme of
European politics into multiple issues and studying their degree of conflict in party
manifestos reveals a different picture, marked by the clear primacy of consensual
issues. This is particularly true in Germany and in the UK, where consensual
issues make up respectively 70.2% and 65.1% of the sections dedicated to Europe
in electoral manifestos. Consensual issues are also predominant in France, with an
average of 47.9%, even though the radically anti-European positions of the FN
render many issues that are consensual among the other parties conflictual on the
whole. This result may seem surprising with respect to well-known public controver-
sies between parties, notably between the more pro-European British Labour and
Liberal Democrats, and their more sceptical Conservative opponents in the 1990s,
or between French mainstream and challenger parties. While acknowledging the
existence of such controversies, we observe that this type of confrontation structures
only a minority of EU-related propositions in parties’ official discourses. Faced with a
highly fragmented opinion and with painful trade-offs between policy-, vote- and
office-related incentives, manifesto writers tend to emphasize facets on which the
vast majority of members and leaders agree.

As for proprietal issues, consensual issues are highly country specific. The only
common consensual issues across countries deal with the reinforcement of the
powers of the European Parliament and of the national scrutiny of EU affairs, both
very stable and popular topics. Beyond these issues, national specificities predomi-
nate. French parties expressing themselves on the following issues all support cultural
diversity and socio-economic interventionism at the European level, including
common employment and industrial policy, harmonization of taxation and joint
research programmes. By contrast, British manifestos push for liberalization,
market deregulation and a reform of the common agricultural policy. They also call for cooperation with NATO and regularly promise not to adopt the euro without a previous referendum. German parties unanimously call for strict environmental standards, a common energy and transport policy, a federal EU respecting subsidiarity and basic rights, a common foreign policy, and the disarmament of Europe. Our observations indicate that consensual issues reflect country specific conceptions of Europe which correspond to the dominant perception of a national interest; a strong social and interventionist Europe in France, a grand market and a European pillar of NATO in the UK, and a federal, pacifist and ecological Europe in Germany.

4.3. Exploring Patterns of Conflict

Only a minority of EU-related issues appears to be debated in a confrontational way. However, we observe considerable variation, notably at the party-system level. The highest average share of conflictual issues is reached in France with 41.4% (a proportion close to the one of consensual issues), while it remains at a low level in Germany and in the UK, with 28.2% and 27.1%, respectively. A qualitative analysis of conflictual issues sheds light on this gap and shows that patterns of opposition tend to reflect pre-existing lines of conflict. The most divisive issues fall into the classical socio-economic left–right opposition regarding the degree of desirable liberalization/deregulation versus social protection which has been present in the UK until 1997, in Germany, and above all in France. Other dimensions differ largely, reflecting country-specific and fluctuating variants of left–right opposition patterns. While the socio-economic divide heavily predominates in France, debates on police cooperation and the European constitution are expressed in the UK and in Germany in the conflict between liberal and conservative parties regarding the balance between state authority and individual liberties. Germany is generally characterized by the weight of “new politics”, in particular by controversies over EU foreign and security policy opposing the anti-militarist Greens and PDS-die Linke to the other parties. Moreover, the CDU rejects the other parties’ position more or less in favour of Turkish membership in the EU.

We also find distinct positions regarding what tends to be seen by scholars as the core of “the” European theme, the desirable level of European integration and the balance between national and supranational competences. British Liberal Democrats advocate for instance the delegation of additional competences to a stronger, federal EU with a strong parliament, a position rejected by the Conservatives. German parties disagree on Germany’s contribution to the EU budget and France is divided between the hard Eurosceptic National Front – rejecting the principle of any increase in EU influence – and other parties. We would like to underline that these general issues regarding the principle of European integration are quantitatively very marginal in the corpus of EU-related manifesto sections. In other words, domestic parties are divided over the desirable degree of European integration but this is not what they usually stress when politicizing Europe.
Finally, we explored potential differences between challenger and governing parties regarding their degree of controversy, assuming that challenger parties would take more conflictual stances than their governing counterparts. Our data confirms that there is such a difference, with challenger parties devoting significantly more attention to conflictual issues (42.9%) than governing parties (30.0%).\textsuperscript{13} Figure 2 also shows that the first, second and third quartiles of the percentage of conflictual issues are higher in challenger parties’ manifestos than in governing parties’ ones. This result is in line with the issue competition literature, which puts that mainstream parties are concerned with limiting conflict.

**Conclusions**

In this article, we argue that empirical assessments of issue competition lack both conceptual precision in the use of the concept of “policy issue” and sufficient studies integrating both salience and positional perspectives. We suggest narrowing the sense of “policy issue” to specified questions of public policy and propose a typology of policy issues, distinguishing proprietal, consensual, blurred and conflictual issues. We hope that this conceptual clarification will stimulate the empirical study of issue competition and that it will serve as an incentive to study jointly both salience and positions – currently one of the most important challenges faced by the issue-competition literature.
Our exploratory analysis of issue competition over EU-related issues by British, French and German parties illustrates how our framework can be operationalized. Our data captures both the salience of each issue in each manifesto and the number of positions defended in each campaign, allowing us to characterize each issue as proprietal, consensual or conflictual. The major downside of this design is that it is relatively time-consuming and data intensive. However, its merit is to capture precisely fluctuations in partisan uses of issues, i.e. in the agenda-setting of new issues, in parties’ specialization in some issues, or in the modalities of contestation of competitors’ issue ownership. If the restrictions linked to the data-collection effort may limit the applicability of our approach to large-N studies, our results suggest that considerable attention is needed when delimitating the issues analysed in studies of issue competition with other methods, such as expert surveys.

Our results show that issue ownership is both exceptional and ephemeral, with a decline in the proportion of proprietal issues over time, which reflects parties’ tendency to dedicate attention to the same issues. Furthermore, regarding EU-related issues, we observe a primacy of consensus, especially amongst governing parties. (Mainstream) politicians seem not to be interested in confrontation over European integration and EU policies. These findings have substantial implications regarding parties’ use of EU-related issues. The predominance of consensual issues calls into question the relevance of the “inverted-U” hypothesis (e.g. Marks & Steenbergen 2004) and the hypothesis of an “absorption” of EU-related issues by traditional cleavages (Harmsen, 2005), which both conceive EU-related discussions as intrinsically conflictual. In line with previous research, we acknowledge that mainstream governing parties have an interest in avoiding conflict over the European theme, especially over the issue of the desirable degree of European integration. However, we contend that, to this end, they do not only adopt a moderate Europhile position, but also emphasize other EU-related issues, which are either consensual, or easier to “domesticate” because they fit better into existing cleavages. By contrast, challenger parties have less interest in mobilizing consensual themes and some of them seek to politicize European integration by adopting more radical positions, both on the principle of European integration and on more concrete, policy-related, issues.

More generally, we hope that our typology will open the way for new developments in the study of issue competition, with a better integration of salience and positions, along with a dynamic perspective. As we were not able to detect any blurred issue on the basis of manifestos, it would be meaningful to use complementary sources, such as partisan discourses covered in the media. When, and by which party, has a given issue been placed on the electoral agenda? Did other parties take up this issue, and with what degree of controversy? Is the primacy of consensus in EU-related discourses specific to these issues, or do discourses over other themes also reflect a tendency towards de-ideologization? Beyond such descriptive accounts of the weight of proprietal, consensual and conflictual issues, there is a need for explanations of the variations identified. This article limited itself to a preliminary exploration of general party and party-system related parameters and more systematic studies are needed. How far are party positions shaped by historical cleavages?
Beyond governmental status, how can we explain the stronger propensity of some parties to politicize conflictual issues? These open questions may stimulate scholars to take advantage of the broad potentialities of a more rigorous study of issue competition.

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Notes

1. As will appear to the reader, our conception of issue competition is broad and is not limited to parties’ strategies regarding issues’ salience, but includes parties’ positions on those issues. In our understanding, issue competition relates to all electoral uses of policy issues by political parties.
2. See in particular the salience (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Budge et al., 1987; Klingemann et al., 1994) and issue-ownership (Green-Pedersen & Blomqvist, 2004; Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik et al., 2003) theories.
3. CMP data do include aspects of positional competition as well, since some coding units refer to a pro or contra position on a given issue (e.g. multiculturalism)
4. Parties have incentives to address issues on which they enjoy issue ownership in the eyes of the electorate (Walgrave et al., 2012), or a greater cohesion compared to other parties, or a position that is closest to the one of the median voter (Budge, 2001; Green-Pedersen, 2007), which may result in some issues being politicized by one party only.
5. The CAP codebook is divided in 250 subtopics grouped in 24 topics.
6. European integration is sometimes also described as a “dimension” (De Vries & Hobolt, 2012; Hix, 1998; Marks & Steenbergen, 2004) or a “cleavage” (Kriesi et al., 2008), which shows its perceived conflictual character.
7. A list of these 69 issues can be found in the Appendix
8. Parliamentary parties are parties that have had access to parliament at least once between 1981 and 2010. This case selection explains why we left some parties out of our selection, such as the extreme-left parties in France (LO, NPA), the extreme right parties in Germany (NDP), or the Greens and UKIP in the UK.
9. By focusing on the period 1986–2009 and on national elections, our study purposely leaves aside two developments in British politics, namely the rise of the United Kingdom Independence Party, which has not yet accessed Westminster yet, and the participation of Liberal Democrats in a Tory-led coalition since May 2010. The Liberal Democratic Party is thus studied here as a challenger party while acknowledging its specificities when compared to the challenger parties in other countries (notably in terms of ancienty and of their position on new politics).
10. This step of the analysis and the list of issues were described and analysed in a previous publication (cf. Guinaudeau & Persico, 2013).
11. We can here draw a link between issue ownership from the voters’ perspective and issue ownership from the parties’ perspective, which appear to be closely connected. Voters are likely to associate a party with an issue if this party was once the only one to emphasize it. The associative issue ownership that exists, in the eye of voters, between Green parties and the environmental issue (Walgrave et al.,...
2009), directly relates to the fact that the Greens used to be the only one to campaign about environmental protection.

12. The median share of proprietal issues is even slightly higher in governing parties’ manifestos.

13. The probability that challenger parties’ average share of conflictual issues is higher than governing parties’ one, tested by a two-sample t-test with unequal variance, is significant at the 0.05 level.

References


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## Appendix 1. List of EU-related issues in British, French and German electoral manifestos (1986–2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Country in the EU</th>
<th>Defence of national interests</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Country’s leadership in the EU</td>
<td>Country’s leadership in the EU</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Creation of a ministry of Europe</td>
<td>Creation of a ministry of Europe</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Internal reforms to adapt to European integration</td>
<td>Internal reforms to adapt to European integration</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>European integration and EU institutions</td>
<td>Principle of (further) European integration</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Federalism vs. intergovernmentalism</td>
<td>Federalism vs. intergovernmentalism</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Transfer of competences and sovereignty</td>
<td>Transfer of competences and sovereignty</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Referendum over EU questions (Euro, Maastricht, ECT)</td>
<td>Referendum over EU questions (Euro, Maastricht, ECT)</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Amsterdam Treaty</td>
<td>Amsterdam Treaty</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Maastricht Treaty</td>
<td>Maastricht Treaty</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>European Constitution</td>
<td>European Constitution</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Subsidiarity</td>
<td>Subsidiarity</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>National/parliamentary scrutiny over EU affairs</td>
<td>National/parliamentary scrutiny over EU affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Majority voting in the Council</td>
<td>Majority voting in the Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>EU budget (amount, country contributions, controls)</td>
<td>EU budget (amount, country contributions, controls)</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>Creation of a mandate of EU President</td>
<td>Creation of a mandate of EU President</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>Transparency and publicity of Council</td>
<td>Transparency and publicity of Council</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>Extension of the powers of the European Parliament</td>
<td>Extension of the powers of the European Parliament</td>
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<td>Representation of Scotland, Wales and Ireland in the European Parliament</td>
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<td>European citizenship</td>
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<td>Voting right for citizens from Member States at municipal and European elections</td>
<td>Voting right for citizens from Member States at municipal and European elections</td>
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<td>Enlargement to Russia, Ukraine, Belarus.</td>
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### Appendix 1. Continued

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