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Exploiting the Cracks: Wedge Issues in Multiparty Competition¹

Abstract

This study examines the extent to which opposition parties engage in wedge issue competition. The literature on wedge issue competition has exclusively focused on the two-party system in the United States, arguing that wedge issues are the domain of opposition parties. This study argues that within multiparty systems opposition status is a necessary but not sufficient condition for wedge issue competition. Since parties within multiparty systems compete in the wake of past and dawn of future coalition negotiations, parties that are regularly part of a coalition are not likely to exploit wedge issues as it could potentially jeopardize relationships with future coalition partners. Conversely, it is less risky for parties that have never been part of a government coalition to mobilize wedge issues. These theoretical propositions are empirically substantiated by examining the attention given to the European integration issue between 1984-2010 within 14 Western European countries, utilizing pooled time-series regressions.

Keywords: Wedge issues, issue evolution, coalition formation, party competition, European integration.

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The dynamics of issue competition is a key topic for research on party competition (see e.g. Adams 2012; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Steenbergen and Scott 2004). The struggle over attention is crucial for parties' success in elections because the information-processing capacities of voters and the media are limited. While approaches such as the saliency theory by Budge and Farlie (1983) and the issue ownership framework proposed by Petrocik (1996) suggest that the importance parties attach to certain issues is more or less stable, recent studies show that issue attention is a variable rather than a constant in party competition (Damore 2004; Stubager and Slothuus 2012).

What explains these dynamics in issue attention? Although many factors might be considered to be important, such as real-world events (Bernick and Meyers 2012), public opinion (Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008), parties' organizational features (Schumacher, De Vries, and Vis 2013), and competitor behavior (Meguid 2005), this study explores the strategic use of issue attention as a means of driving a wedge into governing party platforms. The literature on issue evolution and issue manipulation suggests that competition between two rivals is characterized by the efforts of the minority party to increase the importance of an issue that is most likely to split the majority coalition in order to sway voters in their favor. As Schattschneider (1960: 69-70) noted over 40 years ago, "the effort in all political struggles is to exploit cracks in [one's] opposition while attempting to consolidate one's own side".

However, most theoretical and empirical work explaining the strategic use of divisive issues, so called 'wedge issues', focuses exclusively on the United States (US) context in which the Democrats and Republicans aim to exploit each other's weak points (see e.g. Hillygus and Shields 2008; Jeong et al. 2011). This study expands our understanding of wedge issue competition by examining more institutionally complex systems that are characterized by coalition governments and multiparty competition. We argue that coalition politics fundamentally alters the nature of wedge issue competition. While wedge issue competition is a tool of the opposition in two-party systems, in multiparty systems only a subset of opposition parties is likely to mobilize divisive issues that could unseat the government. Coalition politics

constrains wedge issue competition for some parts of the opposition as parties always compete in the wake of past and in the shadow of future coalition negotiations. For mainstream opposition parties that routinely alternate between government and opposition, wedge issue competition could risk imperiling relationships with past and prospective coalition partners. In contrast, wedge issue competition involves far less risk for challenger parties which have never participated in government coalitions, and such parties are therefore more likely to mobilize wedge issues compared to their mainstream counterparts in opposition.

These propositions are tested by examining the dynamics of the attention to the European Union (EU) issue. The EU issue constitutes an apposite case to study wedge issue competition comparatively because it exemplifies a wedge issue *par excellence* within Western European party systems. European integration is an issue that is not easily integrated into the dominant dimension of left-right politics, and therefore the process of European integration has provoked deep tensions within major parties on both the left and right (Marks and Wilson 2000). Furthermore, by focusing on the EU issue we can harness cross-temporal and cross-national data from the Chapel Hill Expert Surveys (henceforth CHES) on the degree of importance that parties attach to the EU issue as well as the level of dissent that governing parties experience. Because the CHES contains data for 215 parties in 14 Western European countries for the period between 1984 and 2010 (Bakker et al. 2013), we can examine the dynamics of wedge issue competition for a large number of parties over time. Based on pooled time-series regressions, our empirical results lend credence to the proposition that within multiparty competition only challenger parties with no government experience take advantage of the dissent within government parties. This indicates that coalition politics crucially shapes wedge issue competition in multiparty systems.

This study proceeds as follows. First, we outline our theoretical framework and hypotheses. Next, we discuss the case of the EU as a wedge issue. In a subsequent step, we elaborate on the data and empirical analysis. Fourth, we discuss our results and finally, we conclude by considering the implications for the study of party competition.

Theory and Hypotheses

The strategic mobilization of wedge issues lies at the core of the theories of issue evolution and manipulation developed by Carmines and Stimson (1989) and Riker (1986) in the US context. According to the issue evolution framework, party competition between two rivals is characterized by the efforts of the minority to increase attention on policy issues that destabilize the majority coalition (Carmines and Stimson 1989). In the words of Riker, (1986: ix), the opposition's "fundamental heresthetical device is to divide the majority with some new alternative".

There are two key characteristics of wedge issues. First, it is an issue that cannot easily be subsumed by the dominant dimension of contestation in a party system. Second, a wedge issue has the potential to bring about rifts in party platforms that can destabilize a governing party or a government coalition. In most advanced industrial democracies the left-right dimension constitutes the dominant axis of competition (Pierce 1999). It acts as the focal point for parties and coalition formation and it is an important heuristic for voters and party activists when they decide which party best serves their interests. At its core, the left-right dimension is concerned with conflicting preferences on redistribution and on the role of the state in regulating the economy (e.g. Warwick 2002). The left-right dimension functions as an overarching ideological dimension that encompasses a number of different issues. However, some issues cannot easily be integrated into a left-right system of values. One clear example of this is the European integration issue. This lack of fit has resulted in unusual patterns of party competition in a number of countries, where parties on both the left and right extremes advocate an anti-EU position, while centrist parties are predominantly pro-European (see Marks and Wilson 2000). Another increasingly salient issue that cannot easily be subsumed by the dominant left-right dimension is the immigration issue. Parties on the left are often torn between the preferences of their traditional working class base, which is often weary of immigration, and the better educated middle-class partisans who favor liberal immigration

policies. An example of this can be seen in Danish party competition where the Social Liberals are on the right of the Social Democrats on the left-right dimension, but advocate less restrictive immigration policies (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008). However, in other party systems, this “lack of fit” may be less obvious in party competition since mainstream parties will seek to avoid mobilizing wedge issues that have the potential to drive a wedge between factions in a party or between parties in a coalition.

How can an issue that poorly fits the left-right dimension internally destabilize a government party or coalition? According to Schattschneider (1960: 69-70), a party should be seen as “a coalition of inferior interests held together by a dominant interest”. Established political parties have long-standing links to constituencies and issue agendas that structure the positions that leaders and activists take on given issues. Party positioning on the left-right dimension links parties to voters and unites various factions within the party and guides their responses to new issues (see Pierce 1999; Jeong et al. 2011). Due to these constraints, new issues that enter party competition may jeopardize parties' internal cohesion and carry a degree of risk. A party may become split between those party members agreeing with their party leadership on the new issue and those who do not. The extent of the risk crucially depends on the degree to which new issues fit the left-right dimension. If an issue can be straightforwardly incorporated, there is no reason why its mobilization would present a risk for established parties. A threat arises when preferences are distributed over two, or more, dimensions, as no party position can ever beat all possible alternatives in a two-way vote, and as such, every party platform is vulnerable. This vulnerability stems from the fact that in a two-dimensional space, winning coalitions must consist of voters and politicians who are in conflict on at least one dimension (Jeong et al. 2011). When an issue that is partially or entirely unrelated to the left-right dimension is mobilized, this creates tensions for parties that compete on the left-right dimension (Marks and Wilson 2000). In the US context, consider for example the issue of race in the 1950s and 1960s that divided the governing Democratic Party. As much as President Kennedy tried to downplay the issue, pressure from the civil rights movement eventually led the

Democrats to sponsor the Civil Rights Act. Consequently, not only the votes of many disgruntled southerners were up for grabs, but the issue also caused considerable disagreement within the party (Jeong et al. 2011).

Issues that cannot easily be subsumed in the left-dimension may also foster intra-coalition dissent. Parties tend to form their coalition along the dominant left-right dimension. Hence, it is in the interest of coalition parties to avoid issues that do not align with this dimension (see also Van der Brug and Van Spanje 2009). This explains why for instance the Danish mainstream right refrained from politicizing the immigration issue when governing with the Social Liberals. Even though politicization was electorally tempting, this issue divided the coalition since the Social Liberals and the Social Democrats held different positions on immigration (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008).

The extant literature has focused on two ways in which such wedge issues can be exploited: a voter-centered and a party-centered perspective. The first focuses on the potential for parties to take advantage of the fact that voters are often cross-pressured by narrowly targeting cross-pressured voters on “an issue they care about” while making them “believe that their own party candidate will ignore the policy or move it in the wrong direction if elected” (Hillygus and Shields 2008: 38). The second perspective is party-centered and focuses on potential for internal divisions within parties on an issue where party leaders and activists or different factions of a party may hold different views. According to both of these perspectives, the ultimate goal of the strategic use of wedge issues is partisan realignment, a situation in which voters of the majority coalition change their loyalty on the basis of the issue and defect to the minority party (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Hillygus and Shields 2008; Jeong et al. 2011). In this article, we follow the classic party-centered conceptualization of a wedge issue, not least since the practice of using communication tools to target specific voters to emphasize particular divisive issues is much less widespread outside the US campaign context.

The expectation that parties in opposition are the initiators of wedge issue competition is derived from theoretical approaches specifically applied to the US two-party system. To date,

hardly any scholarly attention has been devoted to the dynamics of wedge issue competition in systems with multiparty competition. This is surprising given the fact that the number of possible wedge issues that parties can exploit is likely far greater in multiparty systems due to the greater dimensional complexity that arises when multiple parties compete for office, policy and votes (Schofield and Sened 2006; Stokes 1963). While our study builds on theoretical work on wedge issues developed in the US context, we extend this literature in two important ways. First, we expand the theoretical framework to a multiparty setting with coalition governments, where we consider not just divisions within parties but also between parties within governing coalitions. Second, by incorporating the logic of coalition formation into our theoretical framework, we arrive at a fundamentally different expectation about when it is advantageous for opposition parties to engage in wedge issue competition.

Two Types of Wedge Issue Competition

Given that coalition governments are the norm in multiparty systems (Hobolt and Karp 2010), opposition parties can mobilize two types of wedge issues: those driving a wedge *between* the different parties in government and those that are divisive *within* a government party. *Intra-coalition wedge issue competition* refers to raising the attention of an issue about which government parties disagree, while *intra-party wedge issue competition* relates to exploiting divisions within government party platforms.

In the coalition bargaining process, parties willing to join a government coalition must always make policy compromises in exchange for office benefits (Laver and Schofield 1998). As a result, the policy positions of the individual parties usually vary around the general position taken by the coalition. By definition, then, there is always some degree of conflict between coalition partners that parties in the opposition could mobilize to destabilize the government coalition by engaging in *intra-coalition wedge issue competition*. However, it might be equally attractive for opposition parties to focus on internal divisions *within* government parties, that is, tensions between party leadership and activists or different factions within a party. Party

activists are likely to care strongly about their party's policies as they commit their time, money, and effort with the aim of voicing a specific ideological view. Compared to party leaders, party activists are less willing to sacrifice the pursuit of policy ideas for the spoils of office given that their participation in the party is primarily based on the party's policy platform or collective identity (Panebianco 1988; Schumacher, De Vries, and Vis 2013). When parties enter coalitions, the internal tensions between party leadership and activists are likely to come to the surface. Given these divisions, parties in opposition may reap electoral benefits by increasing the importance of issues that internally divide government parties—a process that we term *intra-party wedge issue competition*.

While wedge issue competition constitutes an attractive strategy for the opposition to improve its electoral standing, the opposite is true for governing parties. Obviously governing parties have no incentive to mobilize issues that divide their own ranks or the party organizations of coalition partners, as such efforts would undermine their collaboration. It may very well be the case that to some extent, governing parties simply cannot contain the attention given to divisive issues as they can be held accountable due to their position in power (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). Yet, we expect opposition parties to more strongly emphasize wedge issues compared with governing parties themselves, as only the opposition benefits from mobilizing wedge issues. This proposition leads us to formulate the following hypotheses about wedge issue competition in multiparty systems:

Intra-Coalition Wedge Issue Hypothesis (H1): *In comparison to governing parties, parties in opposition are more likely to raise the salience of issues causing divisions between governing parties, all else being equal*

Intra-Party Wedge Issue Hypothesis (H2): *In comparison to governing parties, parties in opposition are more likely to raise the salience of issues causing divisions within governing parties, all else being equal.*

Wedge Issue Competition as Risk or Opportunity

Intra-coalition or intra-party wedge issue competition not only may bring about rewards in the form of electoral gains or government destabilization but also may entail considerable risk for opposition parties. Mobilizing divisive issues could potentially backfire and parties could alienate parts of their own electorate and upset existing linkages with key societal groups. Hence, by highlighting a wedge issue in order to attract disaffected voters from other parties, a party may simultaneously alienate some segments of their core constituents (Jeong et al. 2011; Strøm, Budge, and Laver 1994). Indeed, Carmines and Stimson (1989: 188) argue that the way in which former Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater used race as a wedge issue was a “gamble by a politician who could already anticipate defeat” and “probably did the 1969 Republicans more harm than good”.

We argue that wedge issue competition within multiparty systems entails even greater risk. Here parties are competing with each other in the wake of past coalition agreements and in the dawn of future coalition bargaining, since they generally need to cooperate to secure office and enact policy. As a result, it is important to distinguish between different types of opposition parties in multiparty systems since not all parties in opposition are expected to engage in wedge issue competition to the same degree. Specifically, we differentiate between *mainstream opposition parties* and *challenger parties* (see also De Vries and Hobolt 2012), as they differ in their strategic considerations based on previous coalition experiences and future coalition bargaining expectations. Mainstream opposition parties, who frequently alternate between government and opposition, are likely to be rather cautious when it comes to wedge issue competition. Given that previous research has shown that parties may be punished for their past behavior in coalition negotiations (Tavits 2008), we expect mainstream opposition parties to refrain from both intra-coalition and intra-party wedge issue competition in order to circumvent potential punishment from past or future coalition partners.

Quite the contrary holds true for challenger parties which due to their lack of coalition experience are not constrained by relationships with former coalition partners. What is more, the chances of challengers being part of future governing coalitions are rather slim. Research demonstrates that past governing experience is one of the important determinants of prospective coalition membership as it reduces the uncertainty for potential partners about the way a party will behave once in office. In the words of Warwick (1996: 499), situations of government formation do not “represent a totally new start”, but should be seen as “an iterated game” in which past experience matters. As a result, challenger parties have every reason to exploit the cracks within and between the platforms of government parties, while this may be simply too costly for mainstream opposition parties. This leads us to the formulation of our last hypothesis:

Challenger Party Wedge Issue Hypothesis (H3): *Parties that have never been part of a government coalition are the most likely to exploit the divisions between and within governing parties, all else being equal.*

The EU as a Wedge Issue

Our theoretical framework applies to a broad set of issues that meet our criteria of a ‘wedge issue’, i.e., issues that cannot be easily subsumed in the left-right dimension and that have the potential to split mainstream party platforms. We test our expectations in Western Europe as this allows us to examine wedge issue competition within a set of stable and democratic multiparty systems over three decades. The literature on Western European party competition has identified several issues that constitute wedge issues, such as European integration and immigration (see Green-Pedersen and Krogstun 2008; Kriesi et al. 2006; Marks and Wilson 2000; Meguid 2005; Taggart 1998). Ideally, we would test our hypotheses by looking at more than a single wedge issue. Yet, comparative data on parties’ internal divisions only exist for the EU issue, and as a consequence, we focus our data analysis on this issue.

Focusing on European integration has the advantage that it, according to scholars of party politics, is one of the clearest examples of a wedge issue in contemporary European party systems (Evans 1998; Taggart 1998; Usherwood 2002). It is an issue that cannot easily be subsumed by the dominant left-right dimension of contestation. Instead, parties on the far-left and far-right tend to be most opposed to further integration, resulting in an ‘inverted U-curve’ relationship between party positions on the left-right dimension and their positions on the European integration issue. While other wedge issues may not share the exact same “inverted U-curve” relationship, they share the fundamental characteristic that they cannot easily be incorporated into the dominant left-right dimension and thus threaten to divide parties and coalitions internally.

The EU issue has been described as a major “touchstone of dissent” with a clear potential to divide governing parties and coalitions (see especially Usherwood 2002; Taggart 1998). As the power of the EU’s supranational institutions has increased and the scope of EU jurisdictional authority has widened, European integration has become ever more contested within domestic politics and this has also led to tensions within parties on both the left and the right (De Vries 2007, Hobolt 2009; Marks and Wilson 2000). As an example, Conservative and rightwing Liberal parties, such as the British Conservatives and Dutch *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (VVD), tend to favor market integration in Europe, but oppose the transfer of authority to supranational actors in other policy areas. For the Dutch Liberals these internal divisions prompted Geert Wilders’ successful split from the VVD and the creation of the Eurosceptic *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) (Van der Pas, De Vries, and Van der Brug 2013). The issue of European integration has been equally divisive for parties of the left. For Socialist parties, economic integration in Europe is often seen to jeopardize nation-wide socialist achievements “by intensifying international economic competition and undermining Keynesian responses to it” (Marks and Wilson 2000: 437). At the same time, however, further political integration in

Europe offers an opportunity to regulate labor markets and advance social equality and to introduce what Margaret Thatcher once called “Socialism creeping in through the back door”.²

Hence, while our data analysis below focuses on the European integration issue, our theoretical propositions could be applied to a broader set of issues that meet the criteria of a ‘wedge issue’. The literature on immigration, for instance, lends credence to our main hypotheses concerning the nature of wedge issue competition in multiparty systems. To take the example of the Netherlands, which provides one of the clearest illustrations of party conflict over immigration. Over the last decades Dutch political competition has been transformed by a mobilization of immigration by challenger parties. Dutch mainstream parties have been reluctant to engage in debate on this issue due to internal disagreements on which position to adopt, but from the early 2000s immigration became a very salient component of Dutch party competition mainly due to the campaign skills of the rightwing political entrepreneur Pim Fortuyn (Adams et al. 2012; Pellikaan et al. 2007). Pim Fortuyn and his party skillfully exploited the rifts that the immigration issue had caused within the parties of the political mainstream. Following Pim Fortuyn's death, Geert Wilders and his newly formed PVV continued this anti-immigrant and anti-Islam rhetoric. This example highlights the importance of challenger parties in wedge issue competition. Due to their lack of government experience, these parties can afford to exploit divisions within government parties.

Data, Operationalization and Estimation Technique

To examine which parties mobilize wedge issues, we have compiled a longitudinal and cross-national dataset containing information on the attention given to the European integration issue at the party level as well as the degree of dissent within and between government parties. For the necessary data on political parties, we relied on the several rounds of CHES (Bakker et al. 2013; Hooghe et al. 2010; Ray 1999, Steenbergen and Marks 2007), allowing us to include all

² Party conference speech in Brighton on 14 October 1988, see <http://www.margarethatcher.org/document/107352>.

Western European countries except for Luxembourg that did not feature in the survey. Because we expect perceptions about future coalition bargaining to shape the likelihood of wedge issue mobilization, we also included countries in the sample that have few or no prior experience with government coalition rule.³⁴ The CHES measures expert evaluations of national political parties regarding the importance parties attach to European integration, the degree of internal party dissent on European integration, party positioning on European integration and the left-right dimension, as well as the number of votes that parties received in previous elections. Several studies have compared the CHES expert-based estimates with other data sources such as the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) and voter placements of party positions, and have found that they provide valid and reliable measurements of party characteristics (Marks et al. 2007; Netjes and Binnema 2007; Ray 1999; Steenbergen and Marks 2007).⁵

Wedge issue mobilization is operationalized as the salience that a party publicly assigns to a given wedge issue.⁶ Our dependent variable is therefore measured as the importance that a

³ The post-communist countries were excluded from the sample for reasons of data availability and comparability, see for example Bakke and Sitter (2005) who report highly unstable patterns of party competition in the first decade of democracy in post-communist countries.

⁴ We arrived at the same substantial conclusions, however, when countries were only included after their first experience with a coalition government since WW2 (see online appendix).

⁵ Netjes and Binnema (2007) have cross-validated CHES placements of EU issue salience with estimates from the Comparative Manifesto Project and European Election Studies and have found that a common dimension underlies the three measures. In terms of construct validity, the CHES measures even outperform other measures.

⁶ We conceptualize wedge issue competition in terms of mobilization only and do not include a positional component. While this implies that a party always raises the salience of an issue that is divisive within or between governing parties, it can do so by taking either a pro- or an anti-issue stance. Regarding the specific case of European integration examined in this study, it is fair to say that we find more challenger parties that mobilize an anti-EU stance, such as the UK Independence Party. Yet, some challenger parties in our sample also mobilize a pro-EU stance like the Austrian or Dutch Greens for example. What all these

party attaches to the European integration issue, and it is derived from the CHES question concerning the relative importance of European integration in the party's public stance. Because the number of response categories for this question varied across different rounds of the CHES, all measures were harmonized to a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (European integration is of no importance) to 4 (European integration is of great importance).⁷

Our first key independent variable, dissent between government parties (*intra-coalition dissent*), was constructed by calculating the weighted standard deviation of all the EU positions of the individual government parties (see the supplementary online appendix). Vote shares were used as weights since electorally successful parties have a larger say about the contents of government policy, as reflected for example by their greater likelihood to be 'formateurs' in the formation process (Warwick 1996). Consistently, their deviations from the coalition mean should contribute more to the overall magnitude of inter-party dispersion as these parties are expected to make fewer policy compromises in return for office.⁸

In turn, our second key independent variable, dissent regarding European integration within government parties (*intra-party dissent*)⁹, is based on a CHES item indicating the level of internal conflict between the party leadership and party activists.¹⁰ We computed an aggregated

parties have in common is that they were never part of government coalitions and that they therefore are largely unconstrained in mobilizing wedge issues.

⁷ We collapsed the fourth and fifth categories of the 1984-1999 data together in one category because these categories are equivalent to the maximum score that was used in later rounds.

⁸ Additional analyses based on an unweighted standard deviation produced similar results (see online appendix).

⁹ For every round of CHES the intra-party dissent variable was harmonized to a range from 0, complete unity, to 6, leadership position opposed by the majority of party activists.

¹⁰ Hooghe et al (2010) report satisfactory reliability scores on the intra-party dissent placements for Western Europe. The standard deviation (0.18 in 2002, 0.15 in 2006) of expert placements on dissent mimics those reported for EU positions (0.13 in 2002, 0.14 in 2006). This is quite a remarkable result given that intra-party dissent is a more abstract phenomenon. To be confident that dissent placements do

measure for the whole government coalition by taking the sum of the intra-party dissent scores of the individual government parties weighted again according to their vote shares obtained in the latest national election.¹¹ Weights were normalized so they sum up to 1. The dissent scores of larger parties should have a greater impact on the overall coalition mean as challenger parties could gain more votes by exploiting the internal dissent within parties with larger vote shares. In addition, it may be easier to destabilize a coalition by exploiting wedges within major parties rather than smaller coalition members.¹²

For both measures of dissent it was necessary to establish whether a party was a member of government in a certain year. A party was operationalized as a government party if it governed for more than 6 months in that year, while all the remaining parties were coded as opposition parties.¹³ We differentiate between two types of opposition parties: challenger parties, which had never taken part in a government coalition since 1945 as of the specific year under investigation, and mainstream opposition parties, which had been in government at some point over that same period.¹⁴ For example, the Popular Party in Spain is classified as a challenger from 1984 (the starting point of our analysis) until 1996. In that year (i.e., 1996) it

not partly result from salience placements or vice versa, we also replicated our analyses with lagged values of intra-party (and intra-coalition) dissent and an alternative EU salience measure derived from the CMP for the year after each CHES round was collected. Both analyses lead to the same substantial conclusions (see online appendix).

¹¹ The parties' 1984-2006 vote shares were derived from the CHES, while 2010 vote shares were obtained from the ParlGov database (Döring and Manow 2010).

¹² An additional analysis in which we did not weight the governing parties' intra-party dissent scores produced similar results (see online appendix).

¹³ Government-opposition membership was coded on the basis of the 'ParlGov database' (Döring and Manow 2010).

¹⁴ The online appendix provides an overview of the challenger parties that were included in our dataset and an explanation of how our definition of challenger parties differs from the well-known classification of niche parties (Adams et al. 2006; Meguid 2005).

gained control over the government for the first time. When it returned to opposition in 2004, it was classified as a mainstream opposition party.

We also include several variables tapping into alternative explanations of the importance of the European integration issue for parties. First, it is important to control for a party's own level of dissent on the issue. Previous research has shown that parties lower the importance of the European integration issue if internal conflict exists between the party leadership and activists (Steenbergen and Scott 2004). Moreover, mainstream parties in particular are prone to experience party infighting on the EU issue (Evans 1998; Taggart 1998), and as such, this variable needs to be held constant to ensure that coalition aspirations explain wedge issue mobilization rather than systemic differences between mainstream opposition and challenger parties in internal dissent. Second, political parties may increase the importance of new issue dimensions such as European integration when they are further removed from the mean voter on the left-right dimension. Their disadvantageous position on the dominant dimension of conflict implies a ceiling in terms of votes and a clear incentive to introduce alternative issues that advance their standing within the electorate (see De Vries and Hobolt 2012).¹⁵ Finally, consistent with previous studies, we controlled for the size of the party measured by the percentage of votes it received in the latest national election. Larger parties may have greater organizational capacities to highlight a larger range of policy issues (De Vries and Van de Wardt 2010).¹⁶

We treat the data as pooled time-series data and define political parties as the cross-sectional units that vary over time, in this case, over the various rounds of the CHES. Taking into

¹⁵ The mean voter left-right position was calculated from Eurobarometer data on the self-reported left-right positions of respondents on a discrete 1 (left) to 10 (right) scale. Hence, before generating a measure of Euclidian distance, we first rescaled the parties' left-right positions to a 1-10 scale.

¹⁶ We also included the interaction between internal dissent and party type, the extremity of a party's EU position, and the (effective) number of parties operating in a legislature as controls to our analysis. These analyses (see online appendix) yield essentially the same results.

consideration that political parties are nested within different countries, we added country dummies to the equation to manage the unobserved differences between countries. Following the framework of Plümper and his colleagues (2005), we combined panel corrected standard errors (PCSE) with a Prais-Winsten transformation. This procedure allowed us to address panel heteroskedasticity (i.e., different variances in error terms across parties), contemporaneous correlation (i.e., possible correlation in the error of party i at time t with the error of party j at time t), and serial correlation (i.e., the complications that arise when errors tend to be dependent from one period to the next within parties). Tests indicated that each type of correlation was indeed present in the data.¹⁷ A common alternative for dealing with serial correlation is the inclusion of a lagged dependent variable on the right-hand side of the equation (Beck and Katz 1995). Yet, more recent work recommends the Prais-Winsten solution, which we used to address the panel specific AR(1) error structure, as a lagged dependent variable absorbs a large part of the trend in the dependent variable and likely biases the estimates (Achen 2000; Greene 1990; Plümper, Troeger, and Manow 2005). Finally, by means of tests we ensured that the dependent and independent variables were stationary (Asteriou and Hall 2007).¹⁸

Model Specification

The *Intra-Coalition Wedge Issue* (H1) and *Intra-Party Wedge Issue* (H2) hypotheses posit that opposition parties are more likely than governing parties to raise the importance of the EU issue

¹⁷ We used the Woolridge (1999) test for serial correlation, a modified Wald statistic to detect panel heteroskedasticity (Greene 1990), and the Pesaran (2004) test for contemporaneous correlation.

¹⁸ Because we analyze unbalanced panel data for which conventional unit root tests are unavailable, we regressed each variable on its lagged value and controlled for the unit fixed effects. Using F-tests, we further examined whether we could reject the null hypothesis that the coefficient of the lagged dependent variable was equal or larger than 1 as the latter provides evidence in favor of a non-stationary process (Plümper and Neumayer 2006).

in case of disagreement between or within government parties. To test these propositions, we estimated a multiple regression model containing the following core model specification:

$$(1) \text{ Importance Party } A_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Dissent between GPs}_t) + \beta_2(\text{Dissent within GPs}_t) + \beta_3(\text{CP}_t) + \beta_4(\text{MOP}_t) + \beta_5(\text{CP}_t * \text{Dissent between GPs}_t) + \beta_6(\text{CP}_t * \text{Dissent within GPs}_t) + \beta_7(\text{MOP}_t * \text{Dissent between GPs}_t) + \beta_8(\text{MOP}_t * \text{Dissent within GPs}_t) + \text{controls} + \varepsilon$$

where:

Importance Party A_t = The level of importance party A attaches to the EU issue in the current year.

Dissent between GPs_t = The level of positional disagreement between governing parties on the EU in the current year.

Dissent within GPs_t = The level of intra-party dissent on the EU within governing parties in the current year.

CP_t = 1 if party A is in opposition and has never governed since 1945, 0 if otherwise.

MOP_t = 1 if party A is in opposition and has previously governed since 1945, 0 if otherwise.

The dependent variable denotes the level of importance a party attaches to European integration in a given year. Because of the presence of interaction terms in the equation, β_1 and β_2 capture the effects of dissent between and within governing parties, respectively, on their own emphasis of the issue. The sum of $\beta_1 + \beta_5$ denote the likelihood that challenger parties exploit disagreement between government parties, while the sum of $\beta_2 + \beta_6$ denotes their proclivity for taking advantage of divisions within government parties. By the same logic, the sums of $\beta_1 + \beta_7$ and $\beta_2 + \beta_8$ denote the likelihood that mainstream opposition parties exploit both types of divisions. Consequently, H1 is confirmed in the case of positive significant effects of β_5 and β_7 , as we expect parties in opposition to be more likely than governing parties to raise the

salience of issues dividing a coalition. In turn, positive statistically significant effects of β_6 and β_8 confirm H2. Recall that in accordance with the *Challenger Party Wedge Issue Hypothesis* (H3), we expect challenger parties to be most likely to engage in either intra-coalition or intra-party wedge issue competition. Therefore, we expect β_5 and β_6 to be of a considerably greater magnitude than β_7 and β_8 .

Finally, note that due to list-wise deletion, the model specification described above excludes all single party government cases because divisions between government parties can only be calculated for years in which at least two parties were governing. Since our expectations regarding intra-party wedge issue competition (H2) also apply to single party governments, we carried out an additional analysis (i.e. a model excluding the terms associated with β_1 , β_5 and β_7) to evaluate this hypothesis on the basis of all cases.

Empirical Results

Table 1 displays the results of this study. Model 1 simultaneously explores our three hypotheses, while model 2 presents the results for the *Intra-party wedge issue hypothesis* (H2) on the basis of all cases (including single party governments).

-- Table 1 about here --

The insignificant main effect of intra-coalition dissent in model 1 lends credence to the idea that parties in government are unlikely to focus on issues that cause divisions within their coalition. When we turn to our findings for the *Intra-Coalition Wedge Issue Hypothesis* (H1), model 1 shows that the interactions between the level of intra-coalition dissent on the EU and being a mainstream opposition or challenger party are statistically insignificant. Thus, in contrast to our *Intra-coalition wedge issue hypothesis* (H1), we find that opposition parties are not more likely than governing parties themselves to raise the salience of the EU issue in case of divisions *between* coalition partners.

Turning to the *Intra-party wedge issue hypothesis* (H2), the insignificant main effect of dissent *within* governing parties in both model 1 and 2 provides additional evidence that governing parties are unlikely to call attention to wedge issues. More importantly, however, the statistical significance and positive sign of the interaction effects between the level of dissent within governing parties and being a challenger party or a mainstream opposition party suggests that parties in opposition exploit issues that drive a wedge within government parties. However, the size of the coefficient for challenger parties is more than twice the size of that for mainstream opposition parties, indicating that parties who have never taken part in coalitions are most likely to exploit internal rifts within government parties. Moreover, only the *challenger*dissent* interaction remains statistically significant when single party governments are added to the analysis in model 2. The effect for mainstream opposition parties in model 2 dwindles and becomes insignificant. These results suggest that wedge issue competition is most pronounced among challenger parties who exploit the rifts within rather than between government parties.¹⁹ Overall, the findings provide full support for the *challenger wedge issue hypothesis* (H3), positing that challenger parties are most likely to engage in wedge issue competition, rather than for H2, which states that all opposition parties would do so.

Recall that our hypotheses focus on the differences between parties in terms of their likelihood of engaging in wedge issue competition, implying that simply testing the significance of the interactions suffices to evaluate the hypotheses. Nevertheless the substantive effects are also interesting to explore. To look at the substantive effects, we use the formula proposed by Brambor and his colleagues (2006). Figure 1A shows that mainstream opposition parties increase their attention to the EU issue by .06 ($p < .001$) in response to a one-unit increase in dissent within government parties. In turn, the marginal effect is more than twice as high for challenger parties ($b = .2$, $p < .001$). This again confirms that they are the most likely candidates to

¹⁹ Jackknife analyses (see online appendix) also indicated that the interaction for mainstream opposition parties in model 1 is not robust against the exclusion of individual countries, parties, or elections, whereas the results reported for challenger parties are robust against these tests.

engage in intra-party wedge issue competition. Furthermore, as can also be inferred from the regression model, the confidence bounds of the marginal effects reconfirm that only the coefficient for challenger parties significantly differs from the slope for governing parties.

-- Figure 1 about here --

In turn figure 1B plots the marginal effect of party type on EU issue salience across the range of sample values of dissent within governing parties. Even though our theoretical propositions exclusively concern the manner in which party type moderates the likelihood of engaging in wedge issue competition, we follow Berry and his co-authors (2012) and also show how the effect of Z (party type) varies with X (dissent). Note that positive values on the y-axis denote that mainstream opposition or challenger parties emphasize the EU issue more than governing parties, while negative values indicate the opposite. As such, the lower intercept for challenger parties means that these parties initially attach the lowest degree of importance to the EU issue. This might seem surprising, but it should be stressed that being a challenger, i.e., never having governed, not necessarily implies that a party has an inherent interest in mobilizing the EU issue. The results suggest quite the contrary, namely that the EU is a typical issue for mainstream parties, may they be in government or in opposition. The overlapping confidence bounds show that challenger parties bridge the gap with governing parties when government intra-party dissent is about 2.5 (230 cases), and when dissent is equal to or larger than 3.9 (22 cases) their issue salience becomes even significantly higher. The marginal effects on the basis of model 1, depicted in figure 1C, even provide evidence that the issue salience of challengers is already significantly higher than that of governing parties when dissent is around 2.9 (80 cases). In turn, the fact that the confidence intervals for mainstream opposition parties entrap the zero-line in both figures demonstrates that these parties will never put greater emphasis on the EU issue than governing parties regardless of the level of dissent experienced by the latter. More important than the absolute level of salience at which parties ultimately

arrive, however, is that in line with our theoretical predictions, challenger parties increase the salience of the EU issue when the divisions within governing parties increase, whereas this effect is not robust for mainstream opposition parties. The fact that challengers attach the lowest salience to the EU when there is low dissent within governing parties convincingly shows that, in line with our theory of wedge issue competition, these parties mobilize the issue for strategic reasons and not because of an inherent ideological interest in the EU issue.

In the case of the control variables, we find a negative effect for the distance to the mean voter on the left-right dimension ($b=-.008$) as well as for intra-party dissent ($b=-.091$). The latter finding is consistent with previous studies that have demonstrated that parties experiencing greater levels of dissent put less emphasis on the EU issue (De Vries and Van de Wardt 2010; Netjes and Binnema 2007; Steenbergen and Scott 2004). Finally, the evidence suggests that parties raise the salience of the EU issue in response to increases in party size ($b=.003$) which is also in line with previous work (Netjes and Binnema 2007).

Discussion

All party alignments contain the seeds of their own destruction. The various groups that make up the party may be united on some issues. [...] But lurking just below the surface a myriad of potential issues divides the party. [...] Disequilibrium may only be one issue away.

(Carmines and Stimson 1989: 9)

The above quote captures the idea that the dimensionality of party competition is unlikely to be a stable equilibrium as issues that split existing party alignments virtually always surface. As competition among parties almost inevitably comprises more than one issue, parties currently in the minority have a strategic incentive to highlight issue concerns that divide the party platform of the majority. While existing work on wedge issue mobilization stems nearly exclusively from the US two-party context in which the Democrats and Republicans aim to exploit each other's weak points (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Jeong et al. 2011), this study examines the

mobilization of divisive issues within more institutionally complex systems characterized by more than two parties and coalition governments. We explore if parties in opposition highlight issues that drive a wedge within the platforms of governing parties or between the different parties that make up a government coalition.

Our results yield strong support for the intuition that wedge issue competition focuses on exploiting the cracks *within* the party platforms of governing parties (Jeong et al. 2011). This is in line with the US literature on wedge issue competition thus far. Our theory and findings also go beyond the extant literature, however, as we show that wedge issue mobilization is not a strategy that is used by all opposition parties in multiparty systems; rather, wedge issue mobilisation is primarily used by those who have never been part of government coalitions. These findings suggest that the context in which parties operate should be taken into account in future work on wedge issue competition beyond the two-party context.

Interestingly, we find that these challenger parties only mobilize the divisions within party platforms and not between different coalition partners. How can we explain this finding? First of all, governing parties face a significant trade-off between their own policy preferences and government effectiveness. Since a divided government with an ambiguous EU position runs the risk of isolation and ineffectiveness at the EU level, coalition partners have a strong incentive to voice unitary positions on Europe. This may limit the strategic opportunities for opposition parties to profit from ideological inconsistencies (see also Kriesi 2007; Usherwood 2002). A more general explanation for this finding builds on previous research pointing to the predominance of intra-party politics in understanding the behavior of party leaders governing in a coalition (Laver and Shepsle 1990; Luebbert 1986; Strøm, Budge, and Laver 1994). According to Strøm (1990), party leaders cannot act as ‘unconstrained dictators’ and reap the material benefits of office, while simply ignoring the preferences of their constituents and rank-and-file. Future elections are always on the horizon so leaders are dependent on their activists and extra-parliamentary organizations to provide them with capital and labor. This line of reasoning is consistent with prior studies arguing that party leaders are more likely to side with their

activists than coalition partners when their position weakens due to internal conflicts (Luebbert 1986; Warwick 1996). Hence, a possible explanation for the fact that inter-party wedge issues are not exploited by challengers might be that intra-party wedge issues are a more efficient means to destabilize government coalitions. Due to the dependence of party leaders on their activists, doing so could ultimately also destabilize the government coalition as a whole. Notwithstanding that the above considerations provide a plausible account for our findings, more work, both theoretical and empirical, on the relationship between intra-party and inter-party dissent is needed to provide definitive answers.

This study also contributes to our understanding of the strategic use of issue attention within electoral competition more generally. Previous work suggests that parties emphasize certain issues on which they hold a performance and competence advantage over their competitors, while deemphasizing the preferred issues of their opponents (Budge and Farlie 1983). Stressing the 'ownership' of issues should eventually lead the electorate to associate them with these issues, which is electorally advantageous (Petrocik 1996, Stubager and Slothuus 2012). Since wedge issue competition is largely aimed at internally dividing the parties in government, our findings suggest that certain parties may highlight particular issues regardless of their degree of ownership, but rather due to the fact that this particular issue splits rivals. Playing up the weakness of competitors may constitute as much of a strategic advantage over competitors as highlighting one's own strengths.

The empirical analyses in this article have focused on a classic wedge issue in Western European party competition: the European integration issue. However, the theoretical model of coalition politics and the distinction between challenger, mainstream opposition and government parties should be equally pertinent to understand party competition on other wedge issues such as immigration. Ultimately, the generalizability of the findings is an empirical question and future work should test the theoretical framework on other issues.

In addition, this study also offers an interesting contribution to the literature on coalition formation (cf. Strøm, Budge, and Laver 1994, Tavits 2008; Warwick 1996). Whereas previous work has mainly sought to understand these dynamics by focusing on party size and ideology, less attention has been devoted to the role of a party's past behavior. A recent study by Tavits (2008) suggests that this is important as she demonstrates that parties who defected from a government coalition are likely punished for this behavior in the subsequent coalition negotiations by their former partners. In a similar vein, our findings would lead to the expectation that parties in opposition may aim to avoid punishment from potential coalition partners by refraining from certain strategic tactics available to them such as the exploitation of divisive issues within government parties. As such, the consequences of wedge issues mobilization constitute an important step for further inquiry. Besides the question of whether parties are punished for mobilizing wedge issues, more research is needed on the effectiveness of wedge issue strategies. By distinguishing between intra-party and intra-coalition dissent and showing that opposition parties differ in the extent to which they engage in wedge issue competition, the present study offers an important foundation for future work on the dynamics of wedge issue competition in multiparty systems.

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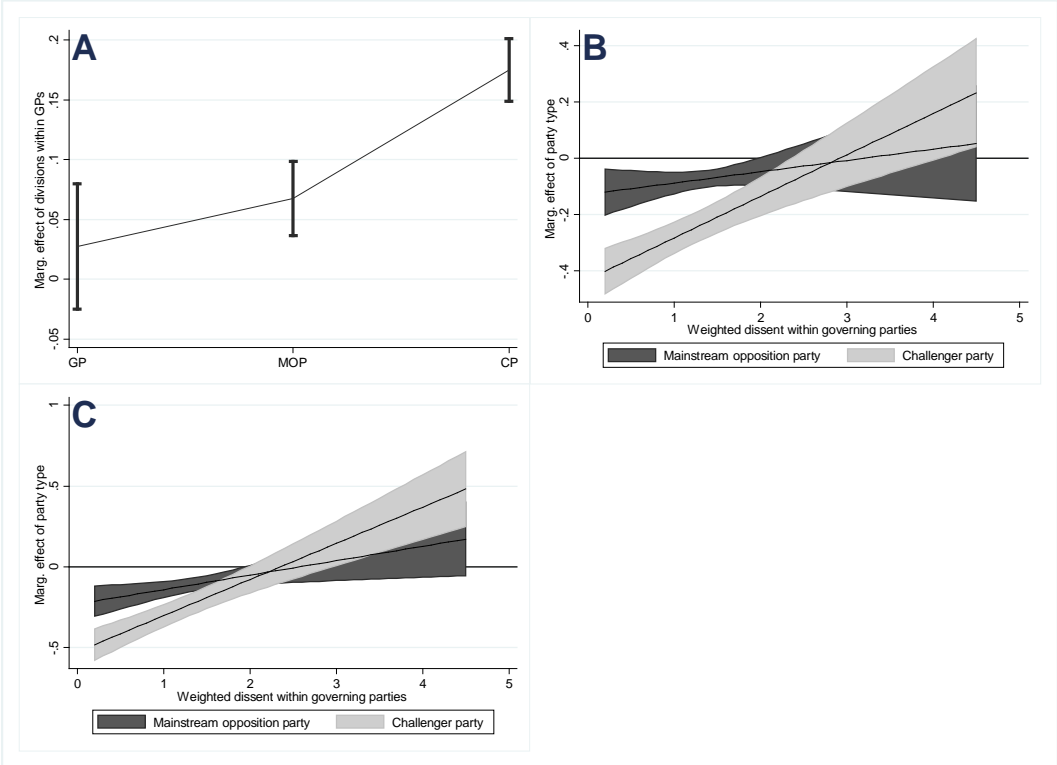
Tables and figures

Table 1. Pooled-time series regressions explaining the salience attached to European integration by parties

	Model 1	Model 2
	b/pcse	b/pcse
Constant	2.829*	2.749*
	(.059)	(.051)
Challenger party (CP)	-.501*	-.432*
	(.057)	(.046)
Mainstream Opposition Party (MOP)	-.258*	-.129*
	(.065)	(.048)
Dissent between GPs	.037	
	(.025)	
CP*dissent between GPs	-.033	
	(.044)	
MOP*dissent between GPs	.038	
	(.04)	
Dissent within GPs	-.026	.027
	(.031)	(.027)
CP*dissent within GPs	.224*	.147*
	(.035)	(.029)
MOP*dissent within GPs	.089*	.04
	(.036)	(.033)
Intra-Party dissent	-.091*	-.109*
	(.014)	(.012)
Distance to mean voter left-right	-.008*	-.008*
	(.002)	(.002)
Party size	.003*	.006*
	(.001)	(.001)
N	538	777

Note: Prais-Winsten regression coefficients with panel corrected standard errors and country dummies (not shown in table). The dependent variable captures the salience of European integration at the party level. * $p < .05$ (two-tailed tests).

Figure 1. Marginal effect plots



Notes: In graph A the y-axis denotes the marginal effect of internal divisions within government parties on the EU issue salience of the different party types (x-axis). In graphs B (based on model 2) and C (based on model 1) the y-axis depicts the marginal effect of party type on EU issue salience for increasing levels of intra party dissent. Negative values on the y-axis imply that the issue salience of challengers or mainstream opposition parties is significantly lower than government parties, while positive values denote the opposite. The level of intra-party dissent observed in the sample ranged between 0.2 and 4.5. In all graphs we report 90% confidence intervals.