

How position shifts regarding sociocultural issues may (or may not) hurt political parties

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*Sociocultural issues such as immigration have increased in prominence in recent years in Western Europe, with far-right parties gaining traction in the guise of figures such as Marine Le Pen (and her father Jean Marie before her). Here, **Kyung Joon Han** looks at whether position shifts from these parties hurt them politically, finding that that niche parties that have maintained strong ideologies, put great salience, and competed primarily on a few sociocultural issues, may be well advised to adopt different strategies between values they endorse and those they reject.*



Jean-Marie Le Pen (Credit: Blandine Le Cain, CC BY 2.0)

Sociocultural issues are growing increasingly important in West European politics. The proportion of people in this region stating that the most important problem confronting their country is related to immigration or the natural environment nearly doubled between 1993 and 2016, rising from 9 to 16 percent (Eurobarometer survey).

Political parties have responded to this shift in public opinion by spending more time discussing such sociocultural issues, staking out clear ideological and policy positions on these issues, and incorporating these positions into their electoral campaigns. Many studies have examined how party positions or position shifts on “traditional” socioeconomic issues (e.g., redistributive fiscal policies or government regulation of the economy) affect the vote share of political parties in elections. However, much less research has been done on the electoral effect of party positions or position shifts on “new” sociocultural issues such as immigration and the natural environment.

Recent research suggests that position shifts regarding sociocultural issues have a different electoral effect from those regarding socioeconomic issues. This is due to the different nature of these two broad types of issues. Socioeconomic issues are essentially pragmatic issues. The main purpose of the discussion of these issues is to achieve practical solutions, and voters’ main concern lies with viable policies that will further their economic interests and improve their material well-being. Thus, political parties’ position shifts on these issues are often perceived by

voters as efforts to further such aims in the context of a changing external environment. By contrast, sociocultural issues are considered issues of principle. The main rationale behind the discourse on sociocultural issues is recognizing and expressing a particular identity and ideological commitment as well as specific values. Thus, political parties' position shifts on these issues activate cognitive dissonance among voters, undermine the credibility of political parties, and disturb parties' core supporters who feel a sense of betrayal as a result of these positional shifts.

Despite its contribution to the study of "new politics" issues, this argument neglects the possibility that sociocultural issues have dissimilar consequences for different types of political parties and that the electoral effect of party position shifts on sociocultural issues is likely conditioned by the presence or absence of opinion changes of these parties' core supporters. I consider such matters in an article recently published in *Party Politics*. This article produces three important findings. First, only parties holding extreme ideologies on sociocultural issues lose votes by shifting their positions on such issues, while parties with more moderate ideologies on these issues do not. In practice, this means that ecology parties lose votes by shifting their positions on green and libertarian issues (e.g., those relating to environmental protection, social justice, multiculturalism, and ethnic minorities); and radical right-wing and Christian democratic parties lose votes by shifting their positions on authoritarian and nationalist issues (e.g., those relating to traditionalism and social order).

Second, parties holding extreme ideologies on sociocultural issues are able to avoid this negative electoral effect only when their position shift follows changes in their supporters' opinion. In other words, vote loss caused by a position shift on sociocultural issues is not caused by the position shift itself, but by the incongruity between the position shift and the change in views held by core party supporters.

Finally, although political parties with an extreme ideology on sociocultural issues do not lose votes when they follow supporters' opinion, such conformity leads to vote gain only for radical right-wing parties. Future research is needed to determine under what conditions ecology parties, or niche parties in general, can increase their vote share. Nonetheless, two preliminary conditions can be offered.

First, radical right-wing parties might have been able to gain votes by following supporters' opinion in the period examined in this paper (1990-2008) because of the high salience level of immigration issues in this period (driven by the mass inflow of migrants). If this is indeed the case, then we should observe ecology parties increasingly gaining votes by following supporters' opinion as the salience of issues relating to the natural environment (e.g., climate change) grows.

Second, recent research suggests that both mainstream and niche parties can expand their support by adopting "broad-appeal" strategies and presenting ambiguous positions on some issues. For example, it is suggested that an efficient strategy of radical right-wing parties in multidimensional party competition is to present extreme and clear positions on immigration (to maintain the support of their core voters) and indistinct or even contradictory positions on socioeconomic issues (to attract new voters, regardless of their positions on such issues).

Thus, it may be the case that in the period analysed, radical right-wing parties were better able than Christian democratic or ecology parties to effectively "blur" their positions on socioeconomic issues, and thus also gain support as they shifted their positions on their main (sociocultural) issues. If ecology parties are able to mimic this behaviour, then they too may see their support grow as they follow their core supporters' opinion on issues relating to the natural environment.

These findings suggest that niche parties that have maintained extremist ideologies, put great salience, and competed primarily on a few sociocultural issues, may want to adopt different strategies between values they endorse and those they reject. Niche parties need to take care when they shift their positions on issues and values that they support: they need to make it sure that their position shifts correspond to the changes in views held by their core supporters. However, they can feel freer to shift their positions and change their discourse on issues they disapprove, because such shifts and modifications do not lead to vote loss.

The citation for the full study is: Han, Kyung Joon. "It Hurts When It Really Matters: Electoral Effect of Party Position Shift regarding Sociocultural Issues," Party Politics (forthcoming). The article is [available here](#). This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our comments policy before posting.

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