

# **Going Green: Explaining Issue Competition on the Environment**

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## **Abstract**

In this study, we address the dynamics of the issue space in multiparty systems by examining to what extent, and under what conditions, parties respond to the issue ownership of other parties on the green issue. To understand why some issues become a part of the political agenda in multiparty systems, it is crucial not only to examine the strategies of issue entrepreneurs, but also the responses of other parties. We argue that extent to which other parties respond, rather than ignore, the issue mobilization of green parties depends on two factors: first, how much of an electoral threat the green party poses to a specific party and second, the extent to which the political and economic context makes the green issue a potential vote winner. To analyze the evolution of green salience, we conduct a time series cross-section analysis using data from the Comparative Manifestos Project for 19 West European countries from 1980-2010. Our findings have important implications for understanding issue evolution in multiparty systems and how and why the dynamics of party competition on the green issue vary across time and space.

*Keywords:* Green issue, issue ownership, issue competition, party competition

## Introduction

The study of issue competition – i.e. the struggle over which policy issues top the political agenda – has traditionally focused on how parties compete by selectively emphasizing their own issues to gain electoral advantage (see Robertson 1976; Budge and Farlie 1983; Carmines 1991; Petrocik 1996). In a two-party context, the party that is in the minority – and thus occupies a disadvantageous position within the system – has an incentive to introduce a new policy issue that “upset[s] the dominant party alignment” (Riker 1982; Carmines and Stimson 1993). Theories of issue ownership and issue saliency have even posited that parties only emphasize issues that they “own”, i.e. where they have a reputational advantage, while they ignore issues of their opponents (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). This suggests that issue competition is characterized by avoidance rather than engagement. However, more recent work on issue competition has highlighted the importance of studying the interaction between parties. Recent studies have argued that parties cannot exclusively emphasize their own party issues, but are forced to respond to other parties in the system (see, for example, Vliegenthart, Walgraave and Meppelink 2011). Similarly, studies focusing on differences between niche and mainstream parties have shown that mainstream parties in particular go beyond a narrow issue appeal and are responsive to shifts in the political agenda and the electoral threat of niche parties (Meguid 2005, 2008; Adams et al. 2006; Ezrow 2007). However, the question remains of under what conditions mainstream parties choose to mobilize (rather than simply ignore) an issue normally ‘owned’ by niche parties.

The focus of this study is not the electoral success of niche parties or issue owners, but rather the responses of non-issue owning parties when new issues arise on the political agenda. We argue that there are two sets of factors that determine the response of parties to the emergence of a political issue outside the dominant dimension of contestation. First, there is the *electoral threat* posed by the issue owner. We contend that other parties’ responses will depend on the nature of electoral threat posed by the niche party, or issue owner. Second, we also argue that new issues present an *electoral opportunity* to non-issue owning parties. We posit that the vote-maximizing opportunity is greatest for smaller parties with an ideology broadly aligned

with the new issue. The political and economic context also plays an important role: when the economic conditions are good, there are greater opportunities for non-economic issues to attract attention among voters, as when the issue is salient with the public.<sup>1</sup>

Our model of party responses in multiparty systems is general in nature and thus can be applied to the exploration of the dynamics of issue evolution on a large range of issues. In this study, we test the theoretical conjectures derived from the model by examining the dynamics of issue competition on green issues in Western Europe. The green issue provides an excellent testing ground, because the policy specific challenges (climate change, pollution etc.) are shared across Europe, yet we find significant variation in how salient the issue is on the political agenda. We can also identify clear “issue owners”, namely green parties, and this allows us to assess the nature of green issue mobilization by parties that are not issue owners. Using data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP), we analyze Western European parties’ emphasis on the green issue across from 1980-2010. We employ time-series cross-section analysis to test our theoretical propositions and the findings confirm that parties are more likely to emphasize the green issue when there is a credible threat from a green party issue owner, but especially so when the green issue also presents itself as a vote-maximizing opportunity to non-issue owning parties. By addressing the question of when and why parties respond to issue owners by increasing the salience of a specific issue, we contribute to the understanding of party competition and issue evolution in multiparty systems.

The study proceeds as follows. The first section briefly reviews the literature on issue competition and introduces our model and hypotheses of party responses. Next, we elaborate on the data and methods and present evidence that green parties are indeed traditional “issue owners” of the green issue. Thereafter, we present the results of the empirical analyses. Finally, the study concludes by highlighting the implications of the findings.

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<sup>1</sup> Electoral threat and opportunity can also be conceptualized as ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors, respectively. Rüdiger (1990) and Hug (2001) utilize the idea of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ in discussing new party formation. Changes in voters’ values supplied the push and favorable electoral rules provided the opportunity pull to create new parties. Moreover, Kitschelt (1988, 209) argued that the unresponsiveness by existing parties (push) and favorable political institutions (pull) led to the formation of left-libertarian parties.

### **Issue Competition: Why do Parties Respond?**

Democracies produce a multitude of diverse conflicts over public policy. As Schattschneider famously noted: “the game of politics depends on which of these conflicts gains the dominant position: The process in which one or several of these issue conflicts gain political dominance involves a mobilization of bias” (Schattschneider 1960:62). Parties play a pivotal role in this “mobilization of bias”. Studying the dynamics of issue competition within Western Europe is important as party competition is increasingly structured by a diversity of policy issues rather than long-established societal cleavages (Franklin, Mackie and Valen 1992; Mair 1997; Dalton 1996; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Green-Pedersen 2007). This raises the question of why parties choose to emphasize certain issues and ignore others.

The literature on issue competition has focused on the how parties emphasize certain issues to gain an electoral advantage. A prevailing argument is that parties campaign on issues that might benefit them while ignoring issues of other parties. According to Riker (1982, 1996), for example, the purpose of campaign messages is not to engage the opposition in debate or dialogue but to increase the salience of issues over which the party is perceived to be credible. Similarly Budge and Farlie (1983), in their saliency theory, and Petrocik (1996) in his theory of issue ownership, all posit that most political parties engage in selective emphasis of issues on which they have a competence and avoid issue where they have no such advantage.

However, recent empirical studies of election campaigns have found considerable degree of “issue overlap” in the sense that parties engage in discussions about similar issues including issues they would rather ignore from a simple party issue ownership perspective (Damore 2004; Sigelman and Buell 2004; Kaplan et al. 2006; Sides 2006; Green-Pedersen 2007; Green and Hobolt 2008; Vliegenthart, Walgraave and Meppelink 2011). These findings have led scholars to focus more on the interaction between the issue strategies of parties. Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010), for example, have proposed a “model of issue competition” focusing on the interaction between government and opposition parties. According to this model, parties cannot merely emphasize owned issues but also need to respond to issues on the so called “party system agenda”. The authors thus acknowledge that parties are not simply free to pursue their owned issues, but their model still begs the question of how issues become part of

the party system agenda in the first place. This and other studies have also focused on why some parties are more responsive to the issue agendas of other parties. Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010) posit that opposition parties are less responsive because they are able to focus more on “owned” issues that are beneficial to themselves, whereas government parties more often are forced to respond to issues raised by the party-system agenda.

Another distinction is that between mainstream and niche parties. In her seminal work on niche parties, Meguid defines niche parties as parties that “reject the traditional class-based orientation of politics” and raise new issues that “are not only novel, but they often do not coincide with existing lines of political division” and that “differentiate themselves by limiting their issue appeals” (2005: 347-348).<sup>2</sup> Hence, niche parties are quintessential “issue owners” that promote a single issue or narrow range of issues and are largely unresponsive to the issue agendas of other parties (Meguid 2005, 2008; Adams et al. 2006; Ezrow 2007). Meguid (2005, 2008) has shown that the responses by mainstream parties to the issue ownership strategies of niche parties have important implications for their electoral success. She argues that mainstream parties are more likely to respond, i.e. engage with the owned issue, when niche parties are perceived to be an electoral threat. Meguid’s theory of party competition yields important insights into the strategies available to mainstream parties when responding to niche parties. She argues that they can either be *dismissive*, thereby reducing the issue salience of the owned issue, *accommodative*, increasing the salience by adopting a similar position to that of the mainstream party, or *adversarial*, increasing the issue saliency by adopting a different position. According to Meguid, the specific response depends on whether the niche party is a threat to just one mainstream party (an accommodative strategy will be adopted by that party) or to the opponent mainstream party (an adversarial strategy is adopted) or to all mainstream parties (a joint accommodative strategy is adopted). This theory thus conceives mainstream party

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that there are other definitions of niche parties in the literature. Adams et al. (2006, 513) classify niche parties as “members of the Communist, Green, and extreme nationalist party families” in their study of how niche parties respond to public opinion. Wagner (2011) has proposed that niche parties are best defined as parties that compete primarily on a small number of non-economic issues.

responses primarily in terms of how they seek to reduce the electoral threat posed by niche parties, and less in terms of the electoral opportunity also presented by a new issue.

Our model of issue competition builds on these existing studies of the interaction between parties in issue competition, but explains responses of non-issue owning parties both in terms of reducing the *electoral threat* posed by the issue owner and seizing a potential *electoral opportunity* to maximize vote share. Given the issue-specific emphasis of this study, we focus our expectations more narrowly on responses to issue owners of a specific issue, namely green parties ('owning' the green issue), rather than all niche parties. Starting with the threat component, we argue - in line with Meguid - that the greater the electoral threat of the issue owner, the more likely other parties are to increase the issue saliency of that issue. Electoral threat is a function of the electoral strength of the issue owner and the spatial location of the votes it captures. An issue owner is a greater threat to another party if it attracts a significant share of votes. The threat also varies across parties, since issue owners are often not equally likely to attract voters across all other parties. To the extent that the issue owning party also competes on the dominant dimension of contestation, we expect that it is more likely to attract voters from other parties closer to it on that dimension, and therefore pose a greater threat to parties one on side of the left-right ideological spectrum (Kitschelt 1994, 1995; Carter 2005; Meguid 2008). This leads to the following hypotheses:

*H1a: The greater the vote share of the issue owner, the more likely other parties are to increase the salience of that issue.*

*H1b: The closer the ideological location of the issue owner to another party, the greater the incentive for that party to increase the salience of the issue.*

Next, we turn to the question of potential *electoral opportunity*. Political parties are vote-seeking, and they are more likely to respond to an issue when it offers them an opportunity to attract new voters. One aspect of a vote-maximizing strategy is tied to the electoral threat of not losing voters to the issue owner, as discussed above. But the electoral benefits (or risks) associated with mobilizing a new issue is not solely tied to the issue owner. For example, the recent decision by the British Conservative party under David Cameron to "go green" may

have been partly driven by a desire to “ward off the new competitor” (Meguid 2008:141), the Green Party, as Meguid argues. However, given the first-past-the-post system and the relative insignificance of the Green Party in the British electoral landscape, it seems unlikely that such an emphasis was purely based on fear of vote loss to the Green Party. Rather, the British Conservatives are likely to have seen the green issue as an opportunity to win votes, not only from the Green Party, but also from other mainstream parties.

What determines the relative attractiveness of a new issue? We distinguish between party-level factors and system-level factors. At the party-level, we expect that “political losers” are more likely to emphasize a new issue. In line with the theories of issue evolution (Carmines and Stimson, 1986, 1989, 1993) and issue manipulation (Riker, 1982, 1986, 1996), we argue that those parties that occupy losing positions in the party system are more likely to benefit from the emergence of a new issue, and increase its saliency. There are several ways in which “political losers” can be identified in multi-party systems: office holding position, office holding experience, vote loss and seat share. In this study, we focus on the latter notion of party losers, namely party size, since it can be seen as a proxy for how successfully parties compete on the dominant dimension of contestation. Large parties that have successfully gained a leading position in the system by competing on the dominant conflict dimensions are more likely to ‘stay put’ in order to circumvent possible negative side-effects of advocating a new issue dimension. These parties “attempt to maintain their power by being associated with winning issues” (Carmines and Stimson 1993, 154). In contrast, smaller parties are less successful competing on this dimension and thus have greater strategic incentives to respond to the emergence of a new issue. Consequently, our expectation is that larger parties perceive new issues as less of an electoral opportunity than smaller parties.

But, size is not the only party-level factor that determines the nature of the response. The electoral opportunity for small parties by responding to a new issue is greater if the issue is broadly aligned with their position on the dominant conflict dimension. The expectation is that there is greater potential to attract new voters by emphasizing a new issue when voters can relate the new policy issue to a party’s existing ideology on the main dimension of conflict. In Europe, the dominant dimension of political conflict is the left/right dimension, which bundles

a large array of specific policy issues (Pierce 1999; Gabel and Huber 2000; McDonald and Budge 2005). Extensive scholarship suggests that broad-based ideological profiles of parties indeed help reduce complexity in the minds of voters and structure their opinions about specific policy issues (Feldman and Conover 1983; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Popkin 1991; Hinich and Munger 1993; Van der Eijk, Binder and Schmitt 2005; Pardos-Prado 2011). Voters rely on these ideological labels to make sense of the political world around them. Political ideologies make the preferences and actions of political parties understandable and predictable for voters. For example, small right-wing parties should thus be more likely to see the emergence of the immigration issue as an electoral opportunity, while small left-wing parties should be more likely to mobilize the green issue to attract more voters (see also Pardos-Prado 2011). This leads to the following hypotheses:

*H2a: Smaller parties are more likely to increase the salience of a new issue.*

*H2b: Smaller parties with left-right positions broadly aligned with the new issues are more likely to increase the salience of that issue.*

The degree to which the mobilization of a new issue may attract new voters is not only determined by party characteristics, but also by the broader context in which parties compete. Parties argue are most likely to respond when exogenous economic and political factors make the issue a likely vote-winner (see Duverger 1959; Riker 1982, Kitschelt 1994; for example, or more recently Ezrow 2007; Adams et al 2009). We would expect that parties are more likely to emphasize the green issue when it is salient among voters, since higher salience issues are more likely to affect vote choice. This, of course, raises the question of causal direction, since voters are also expected to respond to the issue emphasis of parties (Bélanger and Meguid 2008). In line with the literature, we expect the relationship to be reciprocal, that is that parties are not only influencing voters' perceptions of issue saliency, but also responding to it (Adams et al 2004; Steenbergen et al. 2007; Adams et al 2009). Economic conditions are also likely to play a role in voters' receptiveness to new issues. During times of economic hardship, economic issues are likely to dominate the political debate, whereas during more prosperous times, voters might

be more receptive to think about non-economic (or post-material) issues (Inglehart, 1997). Finally, political institutions are likely to influence the vote-maximizing potential of responding to new issues. Plurality systems provide disincentives for voters to vote on the basis of marginal issues or for smaller parties, whereas highly proportional systems makes it more attractive to vote for parties with a narrower appeal (Duverger 1959; Riker 1982). As such, these less permissive electoral rules not only reduce the threat of the issue owner to other parties, they also minimize the vote-winning potential for other parties emphasizing a new issue. Our final three hypotheses are thus the following:

*H3a: The more salient an issue is among voters, the more likely parties are to emphasize that issue.*

*H3b: The better the economic conditions, the more likely parties are to emphasize non-economic issues.*

*H3c: The more proportional the electoral system, the more likely parties are to emphasize new issues.*

## **Data and Methods**

To test our model of how electoral threat and opportunity affects the issue strategies of non-issue owning parties, we use data from the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP). The CMP codes the quasi-sentences of election manifestos and groups them into a set of policy categories to determine how important an issue is for a party. For some issues, there are both negative and positive categories, such as multi-culturalism, while for others, there is only a positive (or negative) category, such as environmental protection (positive). Higher scores mean an issue dimension is more salient to a party; lower scores indicate less salient issues. An overall left-right position is calculated for each party based on these quasi-sentences. The hypothetical minimum and maximum left-right (or RILE) scores, are -100 (farthest left) and 100 (farthest right), respectively. For the measure of environmental or green issues, we combine two CMP dimensions—*per 416*, which focuses on support for an anti-growth economy, and *per 501*, which represents overall positive support for environmental protection and preservation. Importantly,

these two dimensions are also directional—they measure both salience of environmental issues and support for environmental protection.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1 shows the variation in the salience of the green issue across party families in three different periods—1980-89, 1990-99, and 2000-10. In examining this figure, two patterns are readily apparent. First, green parties are clearly the owners of the green issue in Western Europe. Across the entire time period, the green issue represents an average of 22 percent of green party manifestos. This is nearly twice the salience of the next closest party family, the agrarians, which has a mean salience of nearly 11 percent. For the remaining party groups, the average salience on the green issue during the entire period is 5.6 percent and there is very little difference across the ideological spectrum. Second, whereas almost all party families have increased the salience of the green issue in their manifestos over time, the green parties have decreased the salience of the issue—from 24.9 percent in the earliest period to just over 18 percent in the most recent decade. These data thus show that while the greens remain the clear owners of the green issue, their ownership of the issue has decreased over time as other parties have responded to their mobilization of the issue.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

As we are interested in the how non-issue owners respond to the emergence of a new political issue, namely the green issue, and thus examine the salience of green issues for all non-green parties in 19 West European countries from 1980-2010. Our unit of analysis is the individual party. Importantly, we omit green parties from the analysis as we are not interested in when and why the green issue owners mobilize the issue, but rather how other parties

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<sup>3</sup> The exact wording of these two dimensions is the following. Per 416 —“Favorable mentions of anti-growth politics. Rejection of the idea that all growth is good growth. Opposition to growth that causes environmental or societal harm. Call for sustainable economic development.” Per 501 —“General policies in favour of protecting the environment, fighting climate change, and other “green” policies...May include a great variance of policies that have the unified goal of environmental protection (Klingemann et al 2006). Although there are additional CMP issue dimensions that capture other core aspects of the green parties’ agenda, such as decentralization and a favorable position on European integration (Bomberg 1998; Bomberg and Carter 2006), we chose to focus on the above two dimensions as they explicitly characterize the environmental issue about which we are interested in this analysis.

respond to the issue owner. The total number of party-year observations in our analysis is thus 961.

In our analysis, we first examine how the *electoral threat* to a party influences whether it increases the salience of the green issue. To do this, we include two variables. First, we have a variable that measures the green party's vote share in the previous election. The average vote share is 2.3 percent, with a maximum of 11.6 percent (Luxembourg Green Party in 2009). We expect parties to be more likely to respond to the green issue owner the larger the green party.<sup>4</sup> Second, we include a dichotomous variable for left-wing parties as green parties pose a greater electoral threat to these parties (Kitschelt 1994, 1995; Carter 2005; Meguid 2008). Left-wing parties are those which have a negative score on the CMP left-right measure. Not including green parties, 59.2 percent (509) of the parties included in our dataset are coded as left-wing.<sup>5</sup>

Next, we test how *electoral opportunity* influences the salience of the green issue for parties. We first include a variable for the party's size based on its vote share in the previous election. With a desire to increase their vote share, we expect smaller parties to be more likely to increase their salience on green issues. We also incorporate an interaction term to evaluate whether ideological alignment moderates the effect of party size on issue emphasis. To do this, we include an interaction term that combines the dichotomous variable for left-wing parties discussed above with the party's vote share in the previous election. We expect small left-wing parties to be more likely to increase their green issue focus, as they have greater incentives to attract new voters and have an ideological platform more aligned with a green issue emphasis. Lastly, we control for government participation by including a dichotomous variable for whether a party was in government using Döring and Manow's (2011) data. According Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010), opposition parties are less responsive to new issues as they are freer to focus continually on "owned" issues that are advantageous to themselves, whereas

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<sup>4</sup> One could argue that green party electoral threat would be greater for those parties that have been in government. To test this proposition, we also ran our models with a dichotomous variable for those green parties that participated in government. The variable was not significant in any of our models.

<sup>5</sup> As a robustness check, we ran our models classifying the main competitors of green parties on the basis of positioning on the libertarian-authoritarian rather than the left-right dimension utilizing a scale developed by Bakker and Hobolt (2013) which uses the CMP data. The analysis yields identical results.

government parties more often are forced to respond to issues brought up on the party-system agenda.

Electoral opportunities are also determined by the context and we incorporate several *context-specific* variables into our analysis. First, we include a variable for voter concern for the environment. To measure this, we use an open-ended question from various Eurobarometer surveys from 1973-2010 which asks voters what the most important issue facing their country is. We created a variable that represents the percentage of all voters who gave the response that an environmental issue is the most important or second most important issue facing their country. Responses coded as the 'environment' included the following: environment, climate change, pollution, global warming, greenhouse effect, waste, agriculture, and nuclear energy. We used multiple imputation to fill in the missing values as this question was not asked yearly (King et al 2001).<sup>6</sup> We expect that parties will respond to an electorate that is concerned with the environment by increasing the salience of the green issue. Second, to test the influence of the economy on parties' emphasis of non-economic issues, we utilize a control variable for economic growth.<sup>7</sup> We use OECD data for this variable, which measure the year-to-year GDP growth rate based on the four quarter average before the elections. We expect there to be a positive relationship between growth and green issue salience. Finally, we include average district magnitude as a measure of the permissiveness of the electoral system. We posit that the more proportional the electoral system, the more likely it is that parties choose to focus on issues that may only appeal to a small cohort of the electorate. These data are drawn from Golder (2006). See the Appendix for the descriptive statistics for all of the variables included in our analysis.

To model whether and under what conditions parties respond to the issue ownership of other parties, we use a Prais-Winsten transformation technique for OLS with robust standard

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<sup>6</sup> The most 'important problem question' was included in the Eurobarometer for the following years: 1979, 1989, 1994, and twice per year between 2002 and 2010. In order to obtain an annual measure, we used linear interpolation within each country. We also ran our models without the Voter Green Issue Salience variable, which resulted in near identical results for the other variables in our models.

<sup>7</sup> We also ran our models with unemployment as a proxy for economic conditions. As expected, this has a negative and significant effect on green issue salience.

errors, which corrects for autocorrelation problems in panel data (Plümper et. al 2005). We chose this method over a time series cross-sectional analyses with a lagged dependent variable (green issues at time  $t-1$ ) and panel corrected standard errors (Beck and Katz 1995, 1996) because the lagged dependent variable typically absorbs much of the explanatory power of the independent variables.<sup>8</sup> We cluster the standard errors by country as observations in a given country may not be independent. As we consider Belgium's two regions of Flanders and Wallonia to have two separate party systems, we have 20 country contexts.

## Results

To test our theoretical propositions, we estimate three models which we present in Table 1. First, the *threat model* tests hypotheses H1b and H1b by estimating the effect of the electoral threat posed by the green party in terms of electoral size and ideological distance on the degree of salience non-green parties attach to green issues. Second, the *opportunity model* examines hypotheses H2a through H3c concerning the degree to which green issue salience may pose an electoral opportunity. We expect smaller parties, and especially smaller left-wing parties that are ideologically close to green parties to be more likely to increase the salience of green issues especially when the green issue has high public salience, economic conditions are favorable and the electoral system is proportional. Finally, we estimate a combined model that includes all of the variables.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The results presented in the second column of Table 1 corroborate our electoral threat hypotheses and provide support for the idea that the electoral threat posed by an issue owner forces non-issue owners to react to the dynamics in the party system agenda by attaching more

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<sup>8</sup> In addition, Beck and Katz (2011) argue that Prais-Winsten and lagged dependent variable models are based on different assumptions about the structure of the changes to be modelled. They ask if these are a temporary shift away from equilibrium or long-lasting changes with a possible decay over time. As our theory does not necessarily assume long-lasting shifts in green issue salience, but rather contemporaneous responses, a Prais-Winsten model is the most appropriate.

salience to, in this case, green issues (see also Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). In keeping with the work of Meguid (2005, 2008), our findings show that parties are significantly more likely to raise the stakes of the green issue within their electoral manifestos when the green party was electorally successful in the previous election (H1a).<sup>9</sup> Specifically, when the vote share of the green issue owner increases with one percentage point in the previous election, all other non-green parties respond by heightening their attention to green issues by a factor of 23.74. Since the green issue salience for non-green parties varies between 0.71 and 53.49, this amounts to a roughly 45 percentage point increase, which is a very sizable effect. The results also demonstrate that the ideological closeness of the green issue owner increases the salience of green issues for other parties (H1b). We find that left-wing parties are 3.67 percentage points (a 1.94 point increase on a scale ranging between 0.71 and 53.49) more likely to raise the importance of green issues compared to right-wing parties, which is in line with the arguments advanced by Kitschelt (1994, 1995) and Meguid (2008) that green parties pose a greater electoral threat to parties on the same side of the ideological spectrum. Left-wing parties that are at least partially competing for the same voters as green parties cannot afford to lose touch with left-wing voters due to the issues raised by the greens. Consequently, left-wing parties on average are much more likely compared to right-wing parties to highlight green issues. Both the findings for the electoral success of, and the ideological proximity to, green parties are robust when we include the opportunity and context factors to the model, see the last column of Table 1, and suggest that non-green parties are more likely to respond by raising the issue salience of green issues when the green issue owner poses a larger electoral threat.

We also find some support for the electoral opportunity model. Party size, based on vote share in the previous election does not have a significant effect on green party emphasis, as hypothesized in H2a. However, when we estimate the conditional effect of party size and left-wing parties by modelling the interaction (H2b), the coefficient of the interaction is in the expected direction, indicating that small parties are only more likely to emphasize the green

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<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that ‘success’ is not necessarily the same for all parties. While success for a large, mainstream party may be government inclusion, success for a smaller, niche party may simply be improving its vote share from the previous election or winning 2 percent of the vote. For a further discussion of definitions of success, see Spoon (2011).

issue when they are left-wing, whereas large left-wing parties are no more likely than their right-wing rivals to emphasize the green issue. Hence, the electoral opportunity of picking up the green issue is dependent not just on ideological position, but also on size. The interaction between party size and a left-wing ideological stance suggests that this is indeed the case, however, it only statistically significant at the  $p=.085$  level.

To interpret how party size conditions the effect of ideological proximity to a green party on green issue salience, it is not sufficient to simply look at significance of the interaction term as there is no way of knowing what the impact of the condition is when its value is greater than zero (see Brambor, Clark and Golder 2006). Instead, we graphically illustrate how the marginal effect of being a left-wing party on the salience of green issues changes across varying degrees of party size in Figure 2. The decreasing slope demonstrates that the effect of ideological proximity to a green party on the salience of green issues decreases with party size. The relationship between ideological closeness to a green party and party size is only statistically significant for parties that won less than 6 percentage points of the vote in the previous election. For larger parties, being on the left of the ideological spectrum seems to have virtually no distinguishable effect on the salience they attach to green issues, as Figure 2 also illustrates. This supports the intuition that although smaller parties that hold more marginal positions on the dominant dimension of political competition may seize the opportunity to highlight new issues like the environment in order to advance their electoral position, smaller parties on the left may gain much more traction by doing so as green issues largely coincide with their existing issue agenda.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

In our electoral opportunity model, we also control for government status. The coefficient is positive, suggesting in line with Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010) that governing parties are more responsive to the party system agenda, but it fails to reach statistical significance.

Our results also demonstrate that the context in which parties operate influence the electoral opportunities of highlighting new political issues. Following our hypotheses, we find that when green issues are more salient among the public, and thus makes vote gains due to green issue mobilization more likely, non-green parties will highlight green issues to a larger extent. That said, the overall size of this effect is rather small, namely 0.15 percentage points (a 0.08 point increase on a scale ranging between 0.71 and 53.49) for a one unit increase in the importance the public attaches to green issues. The coefficient for economic growth is positive as expected, but does not reach statistical significance. However, when we exclude the measure of public issue salience from the model, the growth coefficient becomes highly significant, thus suggesting that economic growth may be one of the factors that make green issues more salient to the public. This is in line with post-materialist explanations of green issue salience (Inglehart 1997). We also find support for hypothesis 3c, that the permissiveness of the electoral system does make green issue mobilization more likely. The effect of average district magnitude is positive and statistically significant and robust against model specifications, but with a 0.06 percentage point increase, rather small in size.

Overall, our empirical results suggest that green issue mobilization by non-issue owners increases when the green party poses a credible threat to the electoral base of rival small parties, when green issues constitute more of a vote winner, and when the electoral context is favorable. To illustrate these findings concerning threat and opportunity even further, we can examine the salience of green issues for two small left parties—the Dutch *Socialistische Partij* (Socialist Party) and the Swedish *Vänsterpartiet* (Left Party)—and two large socialist parties—the Spanish *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, PSOE) and the British *Labour Party*. In the 1994 parliamentary elections, the Dutch *GroenLinks* won 3.5 percent of the vote. Seizing the opportunity to improve its electoral fortunes in the next election, the small Socialist Party dedicated 10 percent of its 1998 manifesto to green issues. This decision was also likely influenced by a favorable political and economic climate—high district magnitude (150) and economic growth (4.4 percent). Similarly, the Swedish Green Party won 5 percent of the vote in the 1994 election. The Left Party, which received just over 6 percent in this election, also hoping to increase its vote potential, devoted nearly 16 percent of its subsequent manifesto to green

issues. As in the Netherlands, the context was favorable: over 10 percent of the electorate felt that the environment was the most or second most important issue and economic growth was also 4.4 percent. Conversely, with no green party threat in Spain, the salience of environmental issues in the Spanish Socialist Party's 2000 manifesto was just under 4 percent. The context was also not favorable: low public concern for the environment and a fairly low average district magnitude (6.73). Similarly, in the UK, the Green Party's share of the national vote has been consistently under 1 percent, thus presenting very minimal, if any, threat to the Labour Party. In its 2001 manifesto, only 3.6 percent of the Labour Party's manifesto focused on green issues. The plurality electoral system also contributed to an adversarial context for a large party to focus on issues that have a narrower appeal.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

In this study, we have examined the dynamics of issue competition in multiparty systems – i.e. the struggle over which policy issues top the political agenda. Whereas much recent scholarly attention has been devoted to studying the electoral success of niche parties, issue entrepreneurs or issue owners (see for example Meguid 2005, 2008; De Vries and Hobolt 2012), here we take a slightly different perspective and study the responses of non-issue owning parties when an issue owner puts an issue on the political agenda (see also Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). Specifically, we ask to what extent and under which conditions do parties respond to the issue ownership of other parties? By exploring the degree to which non-green parties highlight green issues within their electoral manifestos in 19 West European countries between 1980 and 2010, we suggest that the answer is two-fold: parties respond when they perceive the mobilization of green issues as a potential *electoral threat*, but also when it offers them a potential *electoral opportunity* in a favorable political and economic environment. In terms of electoral threat, the electoral success of a green party is especially crucial for understanding the extent to which other parties respond, rather than ignore, the issue mobilization of green parties. When it comes to the green issue constituting an electoral opportunity for non-green parties, three findings stand out: Smaller parties on the left and

parties operating in systems where the public salience for green issues is high or where the electoral system is permissive are more likely to raise the salience of the green issue in order to reap potential electoral benefits.

These results inform our understanding of the way parties compete over the environment, but also have wider implications for our comprehension of the nature of issue competition within multiparty systems. Whereas in the traditional view, issue competition was largely viewed as a process in which parties selectively emphasize their own issues and avoid those of competitors (see Robertson 1976; Budge and Farlie 1983; Carmines 1991; Petrocik 1996), our findings suggest that parties are to a considerable degree constrained by the activities of competitors when choosing which issues to put forward within an election campaign. In line with the work by Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010), we show that parties cannot exclusively emphasize their “own” issues, but are forced to react to the changes in the “party system agenda”. This is especially the case when issue owners are electorally successful and ideologically close. However, parties are not merely victims of the challenges posed by issue owners; they can also actively shape their electoral fate by engaging with them. We argue and empirically substantiate that this is especially true for smaller parties in the system that have some ideological affinity with the issues put forward by issue owners. We show that by highlighting the green issue, smaller left-wing parties are also inclined to mobilize green issues to reap potential electoral benefits. Finally, the context in which issue competition takes place provides powerful incentives for non-issue owners to engage in issues owned by other parties. The salience of green issues among parties increases when the public salience of the green issue is high and when the electoral system is more open to smaller parties.

For green parties, these findings highlight the ever-present question of what determines success. If success for green parties is policy-oriented, then our results illustrate the circumstances under which the green issue becomes more salient in the party system as a whole. If the parties that put this issue on their agenda gain not only seats in parliament, but subsequently join the government, and implement policies from their manifestos, then this means raising awareness for green issues. However, if the green parties’ goal is vote- and seat-maximization, then this co-optation (Meguid 2005, 2008) of their issues may not necessarily be

seen as success by party activists, members, and leaders. As the ostensible green issue owner, they have lost the ownership of their issue and the ability to win votes based on this. In sum, our results emphasize this continued tension within green parties.

These results also provide avenues for future research. First, we develop a theoretical framework that can account for the interaction between issue owners and non-issue owners in their struggle over which issues top the political agenda. Although mobilization on the basis of green issues is an excellent test case as it allows us to take a longitudinal perspective and clearly define the issue owners, parties highlight a variety of policy concerns within an electoral campaign. Consequently, future work should also examine the potential trade-off between different issues. Second, we demonstrate that the context in which parties operate, and especially the degree to which the green issue is salient among the public, matters for the degree to which non-green parties highlight environmental concerns. As we noted earlier, the relationship between the salience of an issue among parties and the public is likely reciprocal in nature (Adams et al 2004; Steenbergen et al. 2007; Adams et al 2009). Exploring the conditions under which this relationship is more bottom-up, i.e. when voters influence parties, or more top-down, i.e. the reverse, may prove a very promising line of further research. One could imagine that events like the recent Fukushima meltdown could force parties to put green issues high on the political agenda, at least for a while. Indeed, the German Christian Democratic Chancellor, Angela Merkel, announced a commitment to phasing out nuclear energy by 2022 and replacing it with renewable energy sources just days after the accident. Related to this, it may be a worthwhile avenue for future research to examine how media attention to green issues affects the activities of parties. Although our measure of public salience on green issues at least partially taps into media activity, journalists constitute important gate-keepers of the political debate and can therefore constrain parties in their attempts to increase the salience of specific issues (see Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006, for example). Notwithstanding the significance of these topics for further research, this study has provided important insights into our understanding of the dynamics of issue competition within multiparty systems.

## Appendix

*Table 1. Descriptive Statistics*

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>St Dev.</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>
Green Issue Saliency, <i>t</i>	961	5.63	5.02	0	74.67
Green Party Size, <i>t-1</i>	961	0.02	0.03	0	0.12
Left-wing Party	860	0.59	0.49	0	1
Party Size, <i>t-1</i>	889	0.16	0.14	0	0.54
Left-wing*Party Size, <i>t-1</i>	852	0.10	0.14	0	0.54
Government Party	961	0.34	0.47	0	1
Voter Green Issue Saliency	961	12.01	8.16	0.04	58.4
Economic Growth	961	2.40	2.16	-3.58	9.99
Average District Magnitude	961	16.92	34.12	1	150

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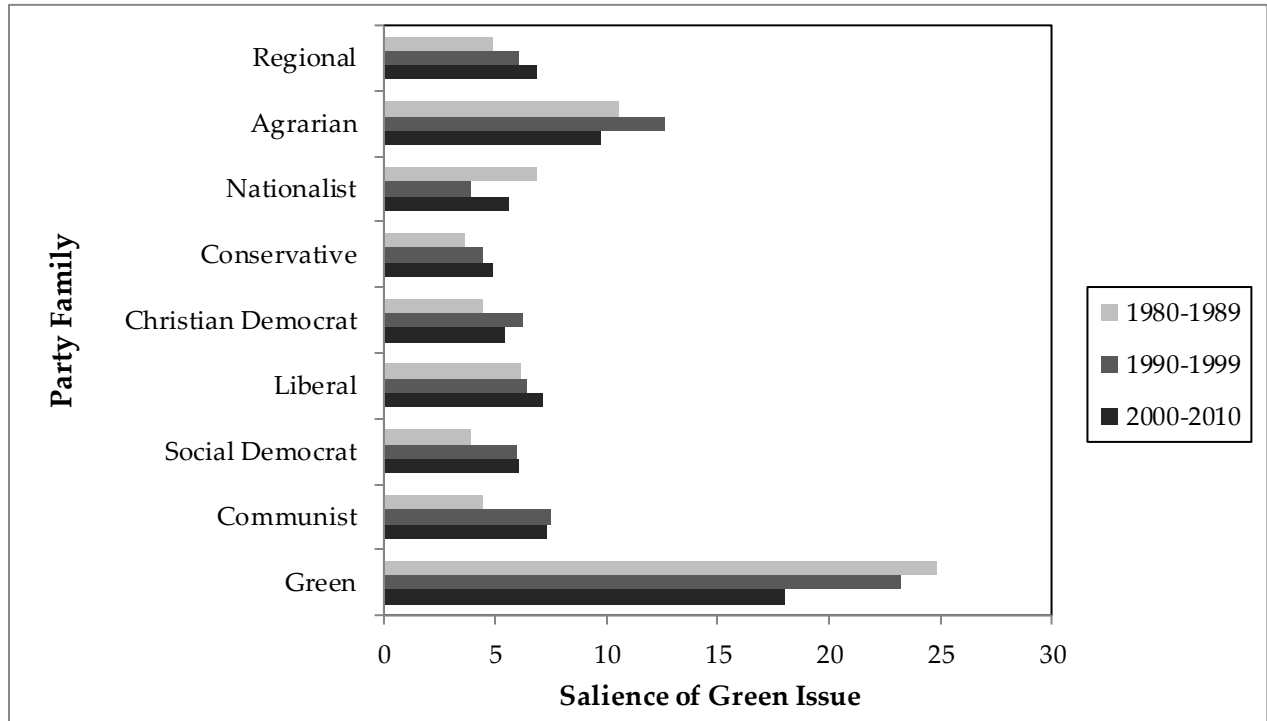
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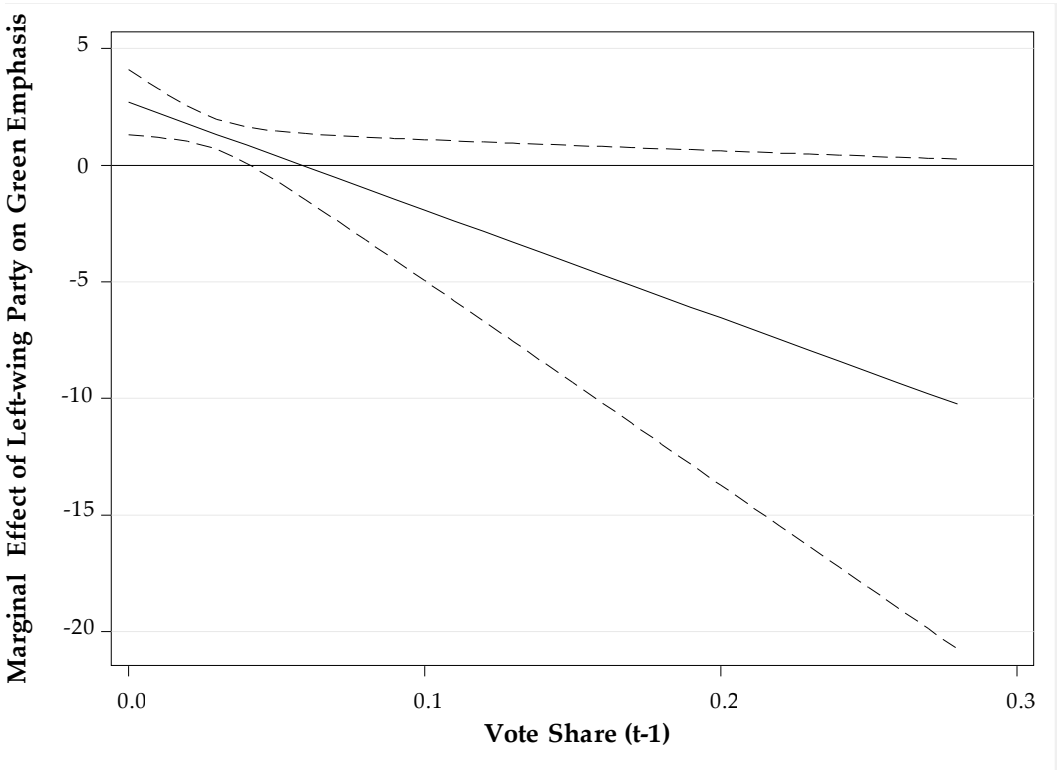
## Tables and Figures

*Figure 1. Green Issue by Party Family, 1980-2010*



Source: Klingemann, et al (2006)

Figure 2. Marginal Effect of Ideology on Green Emphasis by Party Size



Note. The figure is estimated on the basis of the combined model and shows the marginal effect of left-wing party on the salience of the green issue across different values of party size, based on vote share in the previous election. The upper and lower lines are the 90 percent confidence intervals.

**Table 1: Explaining Green Issue Salience of Non-Green Parties, 1980-2010**

	Threat Model		Opportunity Model		Combined Model	
	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE
Green Party Size, <i>t-1</i>	23.74*	10.94			31.30**	10.31
Left-wing Party	1.94**	0.53	2.62**	0.82	2.71**	0.85
Party Size, <i>t-1</i>			-0.01	2.48	0.01	2.24
Left-wing*Party Size, <i>t-1</i>			-4.24	2.57	-4.62°	2.54
Government Party			0.44	0.40	0.27	0.40
Voter Green Issue Salience			0.09**	0.03	0.12**	0.03
Economic Growth			0.13	0.08	0.12	0.09
Avg. District Magnitude			0.01**	0.00	0.01**	0.00
Constant	3.98**	0.48	2.73**	0.79	1.87**	0.78
<i>Obs.</i>	860		852		852	
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.07		0.11		0.14	

*Notes:* Table entries are Prais-Winsten regression coefficients correcting for panel-specific autocorrelation in error terms over one period (AR1) with panel corrected standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable in the analysis is the salience of green issues for all non-green parties in the 19 Western European countries under investigation between 1980 and 2010. \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ ; \* $p \leq 0.05$ , °  $p \leq 0.10$  (two-tailed).