

ON THE STRUCTURING OF PARTY COMPETITION: THE IMPACT OF MAVERICK ISSUES

Moshe Maor¹ and Gordon Smith²

The shaping and re-shaping of a party system is immediately determined by how the constituent parties act and react in competition with one another, how they deal with new issues that are thrust on to the political agenda, and how they continue to handle those that occupy a permanent place. The following discussion seeks to provide a new context for examining the structuring of party competition by introducing the concept of the 'maverick' issue, the conditions in which it will arise, and how it may affect the prevailing pattern of competition. Some authors tend to emphasize the attitudinal or ideological content of issues that are involved and are less concerned with their relation to social groups (Sjöblom, 1968:169). In this discussion we have preferred to use the term 'issue dimension', and shift the focus of interest away from the substantive or implied content of issues by looking at the effects they may have on party competition.

The argument to be advanced is that, to the extent that party system change depends on the effects of new issues being put on to the public agenda, such a change is most likely to occur when three necessary conditions are met. First, the nature of the issue should be a non-conforming one, that is, an issue which is highly resistant to unilateral ordering. We refer here particularly to value-related issues which point to matters of belief that are absorbed through a person's socialisation as a whole and that lead to a coherent orientation towards a range of specific issues. Second, the issue should evolve in a 'bottom-up' way, that is, emanating from a geographically or socially-defined group. Third, at the level of the party system, the issue should be derived from an unrepresented dimension of party competition.

The analysis suggests that a value-related issue which evolves in a 'bottom-up' way, and in a context of a party system which cannot 'squeeze' it into one of the existing dimensions of party competition, is likely to have a disruptive impact on the existing structure of party competition.

¹ Tel Aviv University.

² London School of Economics and Political Science.

FROM CLEAVAGES TO ISSUE DIMENSIONS

Any treatment of party competition must necessarily be concerned with the issues that are involved, but a specific 'issue' can be viewed from different perspectives. At one extreme, the focus may be placed on the substantive content of the matter in question; at another, it will be related to the underlying social situation, that is, typically by reference to the social and political cleavages that generate the issue.

The primary structuring of European party competition rested on the pre-existing cleavages in European society. As these cleavages have gradually become attenuated, an increasing emphasis on the substantive content of particular issues has become apparent as the trend towards issue-voting has increased. Lijphart's account of 'the issue dimensions of partisan conflict' (Lijphart, 1984:127-49) links those that may be termed the 'historical' social cleavages to the contemporary emphasis on value orientations. Thus, Lijphart lists seven dimensions, four in the first category (socio-economic, religious, cultural-ethnic, urban-rural) and three in the second (regime support, foreign policy and post-materialism).

This categorisation by way of 'issue dimensions' shows the continuing concern with the substantive content of issues as the basis for the study of party competition and thus also of party system change. The purpose of the present discussion is, however, to shift the focus of interest away from the substantive or implied content of issues by looking, in addition, at the effects they may have on party competition. However these effects may be judged, they nevertheless have first to be considered in relation to the existing basis of party competition.

THE DURABILITY OF THE LEFT-RIGHT AXIS

The competitive framework for European party systems is determined principally by the predominance of the Left-Right (socio-economic) dimension in European politics. A number of reasons can be advanced for its predominance. Foremost must be the continuing salience of socio-economic issues for the electorate at large, that is, the substantive content of all those questions that relate to socio-economic differences in society. Yet, in addition, individual parties, especially long-established ones, rely on their traditional appeals, and their permanent symbolic identification with the left or the right

has proved to be an important factor ensuring the survival of parties as cohesive organisations (Smith 1989a; 1990). The connotations of left and right are remarkably flexible: they change from one age to another and from one country to another, parties have been able to interpret and reinterpret their positions without losing coherence or credibility (Bartolini and Mair 1990). Voters perceive political competition according to the distribution of the parties on the left-right axis, the electorate is faced with alternatives as they are shaped by the political parties, and the parties themselves are drawn into the pattern of left-right competition (Smith 1989b). As Dalton, Flanagan and Beck (1984:37) have put it:

The Left-Right dimension, as a political concept, is a higher-level abstraction used to summarise one's stand on important issues of the day. It serves the function of organising and simplifying a complex political reality, providing an overall orientation toward a potentially limitless number of issues, political parties and social groups.

In sum, it could be argued that new issues as they arise can usually be accommodated within the existing pattern of party competition, and that this pattern is normally restricted to the single left-right dimension. In fact, Sartori appears only to allow for multi-dimensional party competition in systems, 'in which another "unsqueezable" dimension calls for two parties (at least) to compete among themselves in such a way as to operate a distinct subsystem' (Sartori, 1976:342). A case in point would be the competition for the same electorate between, say, two national minority parties, which is carried on without reference to the left-right competition of the major system.

CONFORMING AND NON-CONFORMING ISSUES

Yet it is clear that, despite all the formidable qualities of the left-right dimension, not all issues lend themselves readily to this unidimensional 'squeezing' process. We should make an initial distinction between two types of issue. On the one side, there are those issues that can be counted either as already belonging to the discourse of 'left' and 'right', or else can without too much difficulty be absorbed into it. These can be called 're-inforcing' and 'conforming' issues respectively. On the other side, there are those issues that - with the party competition itself restricted to a single dimension - show themselves highly resistant to a unilateral ordering. These issues are 'non-conforming' and in their effects

on party competition may even prove to be maverick ones on account of their disruptive, sometimes fundamental impact.

The category of non-conforming issues is broad, and we should make a further distinction between two kinds. First, there are those that, although apparently new, none the less directly reflect or reinforce existing societal cleavages. The second kind has none of these connections. For example, taking the first case, in a country that has historical experience of strong religious cleavages in addition to socio-economic ones, parties originally representing those cleavages could still survive, and even if they have been brought on to the left-right axis by the exigencies of party competition, they will still be able to take up issues that in other circumstances would be non-conforming, and not readily absorbed into the structure of left-right competition. In contrast, for other party systems - those without such a pre-existing religious cleavage - similar issues would resist being squeezed into the left-right pattern, since the 'vehicle' of a suitable party would not be available. Thus, more generally, whether an issue is judged conforming or non-conforming is likely to be determined by reference to the characteristics of the party system in question and not just by the nature of the issue itself.

THE MAVERICK ELEMENT

It with this second kind of non-conforming issue that we are chiefly concerned, those that are not easily related to the established lines of party competition. They have a 'maverick' potential since the parties are neither able to deal adequately with the issues themselves nor yet successfully exclude them from the public agenda.

One possible development is the formation of a new party and, if it succeeds in crossing the threshold of representation, its maverick qualities work directly on the structure of party competition. Thus, in the first instance it will have taken support from an established party (or parties), and this impact in turn has two distinct effects. One is to force an affected party to make a response to the issue raised, the other is to force the new party into the major axis of party competition. Assuming that this major axis is the left-right one, then if both kinds of effect are strong, the outcome would be twofold: a change in the content of left-right discourse coupled with the new party having to take its place somewhere within the left-right ordering. Once this restructuring in both respects has been completed, then the maverick potential of the new party will have been exhausted.

Yet it is clear that there are other issues which can neither be absorbed directly into structure of left-right party competition, nor lend themselves to the formation of a new party which will itself alter that structure. This 'exclusion' does not imply that they therefore have little political significance; on the contrary, such maverick issues still have the potential to affect the course of inter-party competition. At this point, we should examine the nature of issues in relation to their value-oriented and resource-related character, and then trace the ways in which they evolve.

THE NATURE OF ISSUES

Having laid out the context within which we operate, let us outline the first factor under which we should, or should not, expect an issue to be 'squeezeable'. Within each of the issue- dimensions, for instance those listed by Lijphart (1984), there are two sub-dimensions, namely, resource- and value-related ones, which cut across each of the substantial dimensions. *Resources* point to matters of allocation, distribution and redistribution, whereas *Values* refer to matters of belief absorbed through a person's socialization as a whole that should lead to a coherent orientation toward a range of specific issues (i.e. they may motivate the adoption of an ideology). Values, and therefore value-related issues, may be less cognitive than ideology, yet more effective as they tend to be relatively enduring (Inglehart, 1990).

There are numerous value-related issues that are accommodated within the socio-economic left-right dimension; civil-rights, privacy, civil liberties, safety, homelessness etc. These issues may be transformed into resource-related issues when they are treated by political parties in 'allocation of resources' terms. Instead of focusing on the merits of law and order, attention may be directed to its cost in terms of the resources allocated to the police force or the judicial system. Once transformed, these issues readily become subsumed by the left-right dimension.

In the New-Politics versus Old-Politics dimension, there are also numerous value-related issues, such as, the 'right to enjoy a healthy environment', women's rights, peace, etc. These issues may be transformed to resource-related ones (that is, squeezeable) when they are treated by political parties in 'allocation of resources' terms (for instance, the share of environment policy in the total government expenditure). In relation to EC-related issues, hosts of value-related issues include 'loss of sovereignty', the democratic deficit,

EC Bill of Rights and so on. These issues may be equally transformed into resources related matters once emphasis is re-directed, for example, to the financial benefits accruing to a Member State as a result of EC membership.

The above distinction between resource- and value-related issues suggests that the secret of the success of the major west European parties may reside in their ability to sustain a two-stage process: (i) transferring value-related issues into resources related ones; and (ii) subsuming these issues within the most accommodating dimension, i.e. the left-right. In modern politics, the combination of this two-stage process represents an almost unbeatable combination.

THE EVOLUTION OF ISSUES

The second factor determining whether we should, or should not, expect an issue to be 'squeezeable' is the way it has evolved. If an issue - whether resource- or value-related - evolves at the national level, it may be quickly subsumed by the dominant dimension of party competition. A substantial reason for this absorption lies in the control of major parties over the political agenda as well as over the 'rules of the game' which structure their competition (Dunleavy, 1991; Taagepera and Shugart, 1989; Maor, 1988). Traditions of bi-partisanship or consultation with all major parties about electoral arrangements allow their leaders to discriminate against certain issues. In a broader way, both governmental and opposition parties may avoid raising on the public agenda issues which threaten their electoral, intra-party and institutional environment (Maor and Smith, 1993).

The interesting case occurs, however, when an issue evolves in a 'bottom-up' way, that is, when it emerges from a geographically or socially-defined group, and this also has potential to affect one or even all of the established parties. We refer here to the sub-national level, i.e. the local and regional tiers, as well as to class or caste. In such cases, the agenda of the geographically or socially-defined population is more likely to be dominated by new geographically or socially-based groups, that is, promotional interest groups. As these promotional groups become active participants within the geographically- or socially-defined population, it may be increasingly difficult to distinguish them from political parties. Since the concerns represented by these groups link their members with the values of those belonging to the geographical or socially-defined population, the

promotional groups are likely to reflect more accurately and realistically than do political parties the concerns of the population within which they operate. These groups are therefore compelled to sift claims and establish preferences - a function which has been so far has largely been controlled by the political parties.

The emergence of these promotional groups, representing concerns which are not likely to likely to be raised on the national public agenda by the existing political parties, can undermine the control of the party elites over the agenda. Groups' policy positions might not just be adopted to present support-maximising case to their members, but also be used as weapons to blunt party elites' preference-shaping strategies. By vigorously contesting party elites' attempts to subsume an issue, a viable promotional group may significantly change how the 'concern' of the geographically- or socially-defined population is perceived by citizens and voters. In a broader way, such interest groups may influence the distribution of voters' preferences by bidding up voters' expectations about what is feasible and/or desirable.

In the nexus between economic, social and political powers, these groups may translate economic power (i. e. concentrated in the geographical areas within which they operate), or social power (i. e. concentrated in the societal section within which they operate) into political power, and share, if not compete with the party elites, the function of transforming social power into political decisions at the national level. As an outlet of anti-establishment energies derived from an outdated public agenda, promotional groups could become agents of innovation, by mobilising such attitudes into political decisions. This may occur against a status quo which is achieved by agenda setting carried out by party elites. Geographically or socially-defined groups could therefore destroy a 'set' consensus over a maverick issue as well as prepare for a new one.

A TYPOLOGY OF ISSUES

It is helpful at this point to recapitulate the terms of the original argument. Essentially it is that the issue basis of party system change depends on an analysis of three necessary conditions. First, the judgement of issues as conforming (that is, those that can be counted either as already belonging to the discourse of 'left' and 'right', or else can without too much difficulty be absorbed into it) or non-conforming. Second, the judgement of issues as emerging by a 'top-bottom, or a 'bottom-up' way. The former

evaluation - although a sub-systemic feature - is determined by reference to the characteristics of the party system in question and not by the nature of the issue itself. Thus, issues which evolve in a 'bottom-up' way and are highly resistant to a unilateral ordering may prove to be maverick ones on account of their disruptive impact on the structure of party competition.

What results is a typology of issues - presented below - which positions maverick issues in the context of other politicised societal problems. It indicates that a given issue may be considered differently, depending on its nature and the way it has evolved.

A Typology of Issues

		The type of issue	
The way an issue has evolved	top-bottom	value-related	resource-related
		'peace/war'	'distribution of income'
	bottom-up	MAVERICK ISSUES: 'corruption'	'regional disparities'
		'local disaster'	

This formulation points to four types of issue, with the maverick element being the one which has the most fundamental impact on the structuring of party competition. The basis of this category is the resistance of value-related issues which have emerged in a bottom-up way to a unilateral ordering, resulting in a disruptive impact on the structure of party competition. The basis of all other categories is the stable character of social cleavages, hence the durability of the dominant dimension (that is, the most adjustable dimension of party competition). A classic example is the evolution of the issue of 'corruption' at the national or sub-national levels. At the former level, it can be immediately subsumed by the left-right dimension. At the latter level, where this issue is a target for a geographically- or socially-defined public opinion, it may resist a unilateral ordering and become a maverick issue with a disruptive and fundamental impact on the structure of party competition.

Put differently, resource-related issues are likely to be subsumed by the left-right dimension. Once such issues evolve at the national level, the ability of established parties to control the public agenda means that these issues may become a target, if at all, of parliamentary competition rather than an electoral one. Such issues may be also diffused by diverting attention to other matters, competing over aspects of the issues or transferring these issues to popular decision, i.e. referenda. Note that if the existing party system can take account of these issues within its pre-existing dimensions, there is little chance that they will have an impact on the structure of party competition. Thus, resource-related demands - regardless of how they emerge - can be satisfied within the framework of the political institutions; therefore the system should be retained intact.

CONCLUSION

The parties of Western Europe have shown a strong capacity for survival, and the left-right axis has been equally effective in structuring party competition. For any one country, the rise of a significant new party based on an issue dimension already taken into account by the established parties is a comparatively rare occurrence. Nevertheless, changes do take place and this discussion has suggested that the course of political competition in any West European country can be plotted in relation to the impact of maverick issues. In summary form, the party system of a country provides a guide to the way in which past conforming issues have been subsumed by the left-right dimension. It also provides a guide to the way maverick issues have affected the direction and content of party competition. A leading example - and probably destined to become a classic one - is the corruption issue in Italian politics during the early 1990s.

In the Italian case, the established political parties were able, over a period of several decades, to maintain a close hold on their electoral clientele. That assured connection was effectively broken under the pressure of the maverick issue together with demands for fundamental reform of the Italian polity. A powerful momentum was generated, based precisely on the two critical elements: values that could not be properly handled on the left-right axis and the evolution of the issue in a bottom-up way. The political consequences were first made evident at the local level and were followed by the formation of specifically regional parties which in their turn threatened to bring about a fundamental restructuring of the national party system.

Two problems, related to the impact of maverick issues on the structure of party competition, naturally arise. First, it is difficult to indicate just how the party system may be restructured. Even though the left-right dimension appears initially incapable of meeting the new challenge, the parties in this dimension may be differentially affected (with, say, parties of the left better able to make a response than those of the right). As a result, there would only be a partial restructuring of the party system. There is a further problem to be considered in the juxtaposition of maverick issues with the prevailing left-right basis of party competition, and that concerns the extent of polarisation maintained by the constituent parties. If, as one might argue, contemporary trends indicate a weakening of left-right polarity, what are the implications for the impact of maverick issues? One conclusion could be that - with the declining differentiation of established parties - collectively they will be less able to deal with potentially maverick issues. If this line of argument is correct, then the so-called 'anti-party' sentiments now apparent in Western Europe are likely to have increasingly disruptive effects.

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