
Party Competition in European Election Campaigns in the Context of the Multi-Level Electoral System



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Zusammenfassung

This time is different! Die Europawahl 2024 war eine besondere Wahl, die in vielerlei Hinsicht neue Maßstäbe gesetzt hat. Keine Wahl zuvor verdeutlichte so stark den Wandel in der Wahrnehmung und Bedeutung von Europawahlen und die enge, komplexe Verflechtung zwischen der nationalen und europäischen Ebene.

In Deutschland zeigte sich diese enge Verbindung der beiden Ebenen besonders deutlich in der Wahlkampagne der Regierungspartei SPD. Diese warb auf ihren Plakaten mit dem Slogan „Zusammenhalt. Auf Katarina Barley und den Kanzler kommt es an!“. Die Integration des Bundeskanzlers Olaf Scholz in die Kampagne war eine bewusste Strategie, um die Wähler zu mobilisieren und die Bedeutung der Europawahlen für die nationale Politik zu betonen. Damit unterstrich die Partei die Botschaft, dass es bei den Europawahlen nicht nur um Europa, sondern auch um nationale Themen geht.

Noch deutlicher zeigte sich die Verbindung zwischen nationaler und europäischer Ebene in Frankreich. Insbesondere die rechtspopulistische Partei Rassemblement National (RN) unter Marine Le Pen forcierte die Europawahl zu einem Referendum über die Regierungsarbeit von Emmanuel Macron. Diese Taktik erwies sich als äußerst effektiv, da sie die Europawahl in den Kontext nationaler politischer Debatten und Probleme stellte, wodurch die Wahl weit über europäische Angelegenheiten hinaus an Bedeutung gewann. Mit 31,37% der Stimmen schaffte das RN ein herausragendes Ergebnis und das beste in seiner bisherigen Geschichte. Das Bündnis von Präsident Macron erhielt hingegen nur 14,6% der Stimmen, also weniger als die Hälfte der Stimmen des RN. Dieses europäische Wahlergebnis hatte schnelle und tiefgreifende nationalpolitische Konsequenzen. Es veranlasste Macron noch in der Wahlnacht dazu, nationale Neuwahlen auszurufen. Die Entwicklungen in Frankreich illustrieren eindrucksvoll, wie eng verflochten die politischen Ebenen sind und welche Dynamik sich daraus entwickeln kann.

Ziel dieser Dissertation ist es, die Auswirkungen der zunehmenden Politisierung europäischer Themen auf die Wettbewerbsdynamiken in Europawahlen zu analysieren. Seit den ersten Direktwahlen zum Europäischen Parlament gelten Europawahlen als "second-order elections" (Reif und Schmitt, 1980; 1984) was bedeutet, dass im Vergleich zu nationalen Wahlen weniger auf dem Spiel steht. Gleichwohl Europawahlen weiterhin als Nebenwahlen einzuordnen sind, haben sich im Zeitverlauf insbesondere seit dem Vertrag von Maastricht bedeutende Entwicklungen ergeben, die eine neue Perspektive auf die Wettbewerbsdynamiken erfordern:

1. Erstens zeigt sich eine deutliche Zunahme der Bedeutung des Eurothemas. Vor dem Vertrag von Maastrich spielten europäische Themen sowohl auf nationaler als auch auf europäischer Ebene nur eine sehr vernachlässigbare Rolle. Der Vertrag führte jedoch zu zahlreichen Kontroversen über grundlegende Fragen wie die Erweiterung und zukünftigen Ausrichtung der Europäischen Union und rückte damit europäische Themen

auch in den Fokus politischer und öffentlicher Debatten. Bisherige Forschungsergebnisse zeigen, dass europäische Themen sowohl auf nationaler (Hutter und Grande, 2014) als auch auf europäischer Ebene (Braun et al., 2016; Braun und Grande, 2021; Braun und Schäfer, 2021; Ehin und Talving, 2021) zunehmend an Bedeutung gewinnen.

2. Zweitens ist seit Maastricht ein bemerkenswerter Aufstieg und Erfolg rechtspopulistischer, euroskeptischer Challenger Parteien zu beobachten. Zwischen 2010 und 2018 sind in Europa mehr neue Parteien entstanden als in den 30 Jahren zwischen 1949 und 1979. Challenger Parteien zeichnen sich durch ihre systemkritische Haltung (Jun, 2013) sowie durch extreme Positionen (Adams et al., 2006) aus. Zudem agieren sie als sogenannte „Issue Entrepreneurs“, d.h. sie setzen in ihren Wahlkampagnen auf Themen, die von Mainstream Parteien vernachlässigt werden (Hobolt und De Vries, 2015). Insbesondere das Eurothema, welches von Mainstream-Parteien aus verschiedenen Gründen weitgehend ignoriert wurde, bot Challenger Parteien die Möglichkeit, dieses Thema für sich gewinnbringend zu nutzen. Die wachsende Unzufriedenheit der Wähler mit der europäischen Integration und die zunehmenden Spannungen innerhalb der EU boten diesen Parteien einen Nährboden, um ihre euroskeptischen Positionen zu propagieren und Unterstützung zu mobilisieren. Die spezifischen Bedingungen der Europawahlen begünstigten zudem den Erfolg dieses Parteientypus. Der Aufstieg von Challenger Parteien hat signifikante Auswirkungen auf die Dynamik des politischen Wettbewerbs. Diese Parteien zwingen die etablierten Parteien dazu, ihre Strategien neu zu bewerten und Themen im Wahlkampf anzusprechen, die sie strategisch gemieden haben.
3. Drittens hat die Bedeutung des Multi-level electoral system (MLES) deutlich zugenommen. Politische Parteien agieren nicht nur auf einer einzigen politischen Ebene, sondern innerhalb eines MLES (Deschouwer, 2003; Van der Eijk und Schmitt, 2008; Van Houten, 2009; Golder et al., 2017; Braun et al., 2020; Schäfer et al., 2021). In seiner aktuellen Form bedeutet dies, dass nationale Parteien innerhalb eines nationalen politischen Kontextes um Repräsentation in einer supranationalen Institution konkurrieren, wobei die Wettbewerbsregeln mehr oder weniger von denen nationaler Wahlsysteme abweichen können. Insbesondere in den letzten Jahren wurde die Analyse der Auswirkungen des MLES verstärkt zum Gegenstand einiger Forschungsarbeiten (siehe z.B. Wonka und Rittberger, 2014; Braun und Schmitt, 2018; Braun und Grande, 2021; Gross und Chiru, 2022). Diese Studien zeigen, dass die Europawahlen nicht isoliert betrachtet werden können, sondern in engem Zusammenhang mit nationalen politischen Prozessen stehen und umgekehrt (Schulte-Cloos, 2018; Chan, 2022). Diese Verflechtung hat weitreichende Auswirkungen auf die Art und Weise, wie politische Parteien agieren

und sich positionieren und unterstreicht die Notwendigkeit einer umfassenden Analyse der politischen Dynamiken auf allen Ebenen.

Forschungslücke

Aus diesen Ausführungen ergeben sich drei zentrale Forschungslücken. Die erste Forschungslücke betrifft den Einfluss des MLES auf die Wettbewerbsdynamiken. Obwohl es nicht neu ist, dass Parteien im Kontext des MLES in Europawahlen agieren, gibt es nur begrenzte Forschung über die Auswirkungen des MLES auf das strategische Verhalten von Parteien und die Wettbewerbsdynamik. Ein wichtiger Faktor, dem bisher zu wenig Beachtung geschenkt wurde, ist die Kongruenz bzw. Inkongruenz von Wahlsystemen, d.h. ob auf nationaler und europäischer Ebene das gleiche oder unterschiedliche Wahlrechte gelten. Je nachdem, ob ein Land kongruente oder inkongruente Wahlsysteme hat, kann dies Auswirkungen auf die Wettbewerbsdynamik haben. Zudem ist nicht vollständig klar, welche Auswirkungen das MLES auf das individuelle Verhalten von Parteien hat. Eine Ausnahme bildet die Studie von Braun und Schmitt (2018), die zeigte, dass Parteien ihre Positionen auf verschiedenen Ebenen des MLES konsistent halten, um die Wählerunterstützung zu maximieren. Die Analyse berücksichtigt jedoch nicht spezifische Parteitypen. Eine umfassende Analyse im Kontext des MLES muss jedoch berücksichtigen, dass das MLES für unterschiedliche Parteitypen – je nachdem ob es sich um eine Challenger oder eine Mainstream Partei handelt – unterschiedliche strategische Optionen bietet.

Die zweite Forschungslücke betrifft den Einfluss der Politisierung des Europathemas auf die Wettbewerbsdynamiken. Die Forschungsliteratur zeigt, dass das Europathema ein zentraler Bestandteil der politischen Debatte geworden ist – sowohl auf der Nachfrage- (De Vries, 2007; Hooghe and Marks, 2009; De Vries, 2018; Van Elsas *et al.*, 2019) als auch auf der Angebotsseite des politischen Wettbewerbs. Zudem zeigen insbesondere Kriesi *et al.* (2008, 2012), dass das Europathema neben anderen cleavage issues den politischen Konflikt strukturiert. In einer umfassenden Studie untersuchten zudem Hutter *et al.* (2016) die Politisierung des Europathemas in unterschiedlichen Phasen der Europäischen Integration in mehreren westeuropäischen Ländern. Die Ergebnisse zeigen deutlich, dass das Europathema, insbesondere nach dem Maastricht-Vertrag erheblich an Bedeutung gewonnen hat. Zudem wurde aufgezeigt, dass sowohl Krisen als auch neue rechtspopulistische Parteien Treiber der Politisierung sind. Zusammengefasst wissen wir also, dass das Europathema stark an Bedeutung gewonnen hat und auch den Parteienwettbewerb strukturiert. Was wir jedoch noch nicht ausreichend wissen, ist, welchen Einfluss das Thema auf Parteistrategien sowie die Wettbewerbsdynamiken hat.

Die dritte Forschungslücke umfasst die Wettbewerbsstrategien von Mainstream und Challenger Parteien. Im Hinblick auf Mainstream Parteien liefert die Literatur bereits wichtige Erkenntnisse, insbesondere in Bezug auf das Europathema. Die dominante Strategie dieses Parteitypus besteht darin, das Europathema zu vermeiden (z.B. Green-Pedersen, 2012). Dies ist auf zwei Hauptfaktoren zurückzuführen. Erstens spielt die Einbettung in historisch gewachsene Strukturen

eine bedeutende Rolle (Marks und Wilson, 2000). Mainstream Parteien haben oft tief verwurzelte Positionen und Ideologien, die lange vor der Europäischen Integration entstanden sind. Diese ideologischen Wurzeln erschweren es den Parteien, ihre Haltungen zu bestimmten Themen zu ändern, ohne Gefahr zulaufen Teile ihrer Kernwählerschaft zu verlieren. Zweitens vermeiden Mainstream Parteien das Europathema aufgrund innerparteilicher Konflikte (Van der Eijk und Franklin, 1996). Insbesondere zum Europathema gibt es in Mainstream Parteien unterschiedliche Positionen. Da es jedoch für die Parteien wichtig ist, ein einheitliches Bild an die Wähler zu vermitteln, wird das Thema im Wahlkampf eher gemieden. Im Gegensatz zu Mainstream Parteien ist jedoch das strategische Verhalten von Challenger Parteien weniger gut erforscht. Untersuchungen zeigen, dass Challenger Parteien als Issue Entrepreneurs agieren (Hobolt and De Vries, 2015) und im Vergleich zu Mainstream Parteien deutlich flexibler hinsichtlich ihrer Themenpriorisierung sowie Positionierung sind. Zudem zeigen Studien, dass Europawahlen gerade für Challenger Parteien wichtige Wahlen sind und sie ihre Erfolge von der europäischen auf die nationale Ebene übertragen können (Schulte-Cloos, 2018). Inwieweit ihnen dies jedoch gelingt hängt von verschiedenen Strategieoptionen ab. Erstens, inwieweit sie ihr Themenspektrum erweitern können und zweitens, ob es ihnen gelingt issue linkages, also z.B. das Europathema mit dem Immigrationsthema zu verbinden, zu bilden. Inwieweit Challenger Parteien dies jedoch in Europawahlen tatsächlich machen, ist bisher kaum erforscht.

Sollten Challenger Parteien damit jedoch erfolgreich sein, müssen Mainstream Parteien wiederum darauf reagieren. Die bisherigen Untersuchungen (Meguid, 2005; Meguid, 2008) beziehen sich jedoch meist auf die nationale Ebene. Nur wenige Studien zeigen dies auf Europäischer Ebene (z.B. Adam *et al.*, 2016; Braun and Grande, 2021). Diese Studien bleiben jedoch auf der aggregierten Parteiebene und betrachten nicht das individuelle Verhalten einzelner Parteien.

Theoretischer Rahmen

Die Dissertation liefert einen wichtigen theoretischen Beitrag, indem sie die integrative Sichtweise auf die Wettbewerbsdynamik durch die Zusammenführung verschiedener Forschungsstränge in einem konzeptionellen Rahmen stärkt: (1) Konzepte des Wettbewerbsverhaltens von Parteien, (2) Forschung zur Politisierung des Europathemas und ihrer Integration in das MLES und (3) der Umgang von Mainstream Parteien mit (neuen) euroskeptischen Challenger Parteien.

Der theoretische Rahmen der Dissertation ist in drei Teile gegliedert. Im ersten Teil werden die vorherrschenden Theorien des Parteienwettbewerbs, insbesondere Spatial (Downs, 1957) und Salienz Theorie (Budge and Farlie, 1983b), sowie aus diesen resultierende Erklärungsansätze diskutiert. Dabei wird insbesondere erörtert, wie wichtig die Kombination dieser beiden Ansätze für die Analyse der Dynamiken im Parteienwettbewerb ist. Aufbauend darauf konzentriert sich der zweite Teil auf Europa als institutionellen Kontext. Dies umfasst Ausführungen zum MLES sowie die Bedeutung und den Einfluss des Europathemas. Das Europathema ist besonders

wichtig, da es ein komplexes strategisches Thema ist, das auf verschiedene Weise von Parteien adressiert werden kann. Der Einfluss weiterer Kontextfaktoren, wie beispielsweise des Wahlsystems, wird ebenfalls diskutiert. Im dritten Teil werden schließlich Hypothesen zu den strategischen Optionen der Parteien entwickelt. In diesem Zusammenhang wird zwischen Mainstream und Challenger Parteien unterschieden, wobei gezeigt wird, dass beide Parteitypen über eine komplexe Bandbreite an strategischen Optionen verfügen.

Methoden und Daten

Das gewählte Forschungsdesign ermöglicht den Vergleich von drei Analysedimensionen: (1) ein Vergleich zwischen der europäischen und nationalen Ebene, (2) ein Vergleich zwischen verschiedenen westeuropäischen Ländern und (3), ein Vergleich über Zeit. Es werden die Länder Österreich, Frankreich, Deutschland und Großbritannien untersucht. Insgesamt umfasst die Analyse einen Zeitraum von 1994 bis 2019 und umfasst damit 24 Europawahlkämpfe sowie 29 nationale Wahlen. Die Analyse stützt sich im Wesentlichen auf Mediendaten. Für nationale Wahlen werden die Daten von Kriesi *et al.* (2020), für Europawahlen die Daten von Grande and Braun (2021a) herangezogen. Die Analysen erfolgen zunächst auf der Ebene der Wahlen und anschließend auf der Parteiebene. Da die Analysen signifikante Unterschiede zwischen den Ländern aufzeigen, werden detaillierte länderbezogene Studien durchgeführt.

Zentrale Ergebnisse der empirischen Analyse

Die Dissertation liefert zusammengefasst vier zentrale Erkenntnisse:

(1) Europa ist der treibende Faktor für die Veränderung von Wettbewerbsdynamiken

Die Ergebnisse der empirischen Analyse zeigen, dass Europa ein zentraler Faktor ist, der die Dynamik des Parteienwettbewerbs maßgeblich beeinflusst. Durch die zunehmende Politisierung des Europathemas hat das Thema auch an strategischer Relevanz für Parteien gewonnen. Die Analysen machen deutlich, dass Europa nicht eins von vielen Themen ist, sondern ein zentrales Thema, das die Wettbewerbsdynamiken verändern kann. Entgegen der Erwartungen zeigt sich, dass Parteien sich in nationalen Wahlen und Europawahlen nicht gleich positionieren, sondern es auf den spezifischen institutionellen Kontext ankommt.

Zudem zeigt sich in der differenzierten Betrachtung des Europathemas, dass Parteien sich deutlich mehr auf konstitutive europäische Themen (z.B. weitere Integrationsschritte, Erweiterungsrounden etc.) fokussieren, als auf Policy Themen (z.B. europäische Umweltpolitik). Dies trifft sowohl in nationalen Wahlen als auch Europawahlen zu. Diese Dominanz konstitutiver Themen unterstreicht, dass die Diskussionen um die EU häufig auf deren zukünftige Entwicklung und institutionelle Rahmenbedingungen abzielen, anstatt auf konkrete politische Maßnahmen. Aufbauend auf den Ergebnissen von Braun und Grande (2021) zeigen die Ergebnisse, dass insbesondere Mainstream Parteien bestimmen, welche Rolle das Europathema in der politischen

Debatte spielt. Überraschenderweise zeigt sich, dass innerparteiliche Konflikte keinen signifikanten Einfluss darauf haben, wie Parteien sich zu diesem Thema positionieren.

(2) Die Bedeutung der Strategien von Challenger Parteien

Zweitens hat die Studie gezeigt, wie Challenger-Parteien das von Mainstream Parteien eröffnete Chancenfenster nutzen und welche Strategien sie dabei anwenden. Die Analyse zeigte, dass Challenger Parteien die Strategie des Issue Entrepreneurships (Hobolt and De Vries, 2015) anwenden, sich jedoch auf europäischer und nationaler Ebene auf unterschiedliche Themen fokussieren. Besonders in den länderspezifischen Kapiteln wurde hervorgehoben, dass eine besonders effektive Strategie von Challenger Parteien darin besteht, Themenverknüpfungen (issue linkages) zu bilden. Dabei werden zwei Themen miteinander verknüpft, um einen größeren Vorteil zu erzielen. Insbesondere sind Challenger Parteien dann erfolgreich, wenn sie das Europathema mit dem Migrationsthema verbinden. Die Analyse zeigte zudem, dass diese Themenverknüpfungen nicht statisch sind, sondern sich je nach politischem Kontext weiterentwickeln.

(3) Die erhebliche Variation in den Reaktionen von Mainstream Parteien auf Challenger Parteien

Drittens haben insbesondere die Länderstudien gezeigt, dass die Reaktionen von Mainstream Parteien auf ihre Herausforderer sehr unterschiedlich ausfallen. In allen untersuchten Ländern bestand die vorherrschende Strategie nach dem Auftauchen von Challenger Parteien darin, sie entweder zu ignorieren oder ihre Bedeutung herunterzuspielen. Diese Strategie erwies sich jedoch in keinem Land als erfolgreich. Die theoretische Annahme war, dass Parteien, die der ideologischen Ausrichtung der Challenger Partei nahe stehen, sich ihr eher annähern, während Parteien, die ideologisch weiter entfernt sind, eher auf Distanz gehen. Die Ergebnisse bestätigen diese Annahme teilweise, jedoch nicht über den gesamten Untersuchungszeitraum und auch nicht in allen Ländern.

Beispielsweise waren in Frankreich konservative Parteien lange Zeit Teil des Cordon sanitaire, der jede Form der Zusammenarbeit ausschloss und eine deutliche Distanzierung erkennen ließ. In den späten 2000er Jahren unter Präsident Sarkozy kam es jedoch zu einer Annäherung, die bei den Europawahlen 2019 wieder deutlich abgelehnt wurde. Diese Dynamik zeigt, dass es kein kontinuierliches Muster gibt, sondern dass Annäherung und Distanzierung oft in Wellen auftreten. Im Gegensatz dazu zeigte die Conservative Party im Vereinigten Königreich eine starke Nähe zu den euroskeptischen Herausforderern, während die Labour Party zwischen Annäherung und Distanzierung wechselte.

Insgesamt zeigen diese Fälle, dass Mainstream Parteien auf euroskeptische Challenger Parteien mit unterschiedlichen Strategien reagieren, die von Isolationstaktiken bis hin zu strategischen Allianzen und ideologischen Anpassungen reichen. Diese Vielfalt in den Reaktionen unterstreicht

die Komplexität der Wettbewerbsdynamiken und die Notwendigkeit, kontextspezifische Faktoren zu berücksichtigen.

(4) Die Bedeutung institutioneller Kontextbedingungen

Die Ergebnisse der Dissertation zeigen, dass besonders zwei institutionelle Faktoren die Wettbewerbsdynamiken erheblich beeinflussen: das MLES und die Kongruenz bzw. Inkongruenz der Wahlsysteme.

Erstens eröffnet die Einbettung in das MLES den Parteien neue strategische Optionen, die sie auch aktiv nutzen. Es wird deutlich, dass Parteien flexibel auf unterschiedliche Wahlkontexte reagieren und ihre Strategien entsprechend anpassen.

Zweitens spielt die Kongruenz der Wahlsysteme auf nationaler und europäischer Ebene eine wichtige Rolle. In Ländern mit kongruenten Wahlsystemen verfolgen die Parteien auf beiden Ebenen eine ähnliche Strategie bezüglich ihrer Themenpriorisierung und Positionierung. In diesen Ländern nimmt das Eurothema auf beiden elektoralen Ebenen eine geringere Rolle ein. In Ländern mit inkongruenten Wahlsystemen hingegen setzen die Parteien insbesondere bei Europawahlen stärker auf das Eurothema und nutzen es strategisch.

Insgesamt verdeutlichen die Ergebnisse, dass institutionelle Faktoren einen erheblichen Einfluss auf das strategische Verhalten von Parteien haben.

Forschungsbeitrag und zukünftige Forschung

Die vorliegende Dissertation leistet sowohl in theoretischer als auch in empirischer Hinsicht einen Beitrag zur Erforschung der Wettbewerbsdynamiken in Europawahlen. Theoretisch stärkt sie den integrativen Blick, indem sie verschiedene Forschungsstränge miteinander vereint und so zu einem umfassenderen Verständnis der Dynamiken beiträgt. Empirisch bestätigt die Arbeit bestehende Erkenntnisse und liefert gleichzeitig neue Einsichten. Insbesondere durch die detaillierten Länderstudien wird das individuelle Parteiverhalten analysiert und aufgezeigt, welche Faktoren das strategische Verhalten unterschiedlicher Parteitypen beeinflussen.

Die Dissertation zeigt jedoch auch Potenziale für zukünftige Forschungsvorhaben auf. Weitere Untersuchungen sollten den Fokus von westeuropäischen auf osteuropäische Länder erweitern, da dort andere Ausgangsbedingungen vorherrschen. Zudem wäre es sinnvoll, stärker zu analysieren, wie Challenger Parteien auf Mainstream Parteien reagieren. Bisher liegt der Schwerpunkt überwiegend auf der Reaktion von Mainstream auf Challenger Parteien. Ein genaueres Beobachten dieses Wechselspiels wäre wertvoll. Nicht zuletzt ist es wichtig, die Europawahl 2024 detailliert zu untersuchen. Viele Hinweise deuten darauf hin, dass diese Wahl einen Wendepunkt in den Wettbewerbsdynamiken im Kontext des MLES markiert. Eine vertiefte Analyse könnte weitere wichtige Erkenntnisse liefern.

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1. Introduction

This time is different! The 2024 European Parliament election was an unforgettable event and a landmark in the history of European elections. Unlike any previous election, it underscored that the national and European levels are highly connected. In Germany, the social democratic party (SPD), for instance, advertised with the slogan: "Zusammenhalt. Auf Katarina Barley und den Kanzler kommt es an!" and displayed images of Olaf Scholz alongside their lead candidate, Katarina Barley. By prominently featuring the chancellor in their campaign, the SPD underscored the message that the stakes of the election extended beyond European issues to encompass national politics as well. In doing so, the SPD turned the upcoming European elections into a referendum not only on European matters but also on national government policies, conveying that "everything is at stake." However, considering that governing parties often face backlash in European elections, whether this strategy was effective remains a matter of debate.

The connection between national and European politics becomes even more evident in the case of France. France exemplifies several phenomena simultaneously: the strong interconnection between the national and European election arena, the increasing power of right-wing populist parties, and the mainstream parties' responses to them. The French right-wing populist party, Rassemblement National (RN), led by Marine Le Pen, framed the European election to frame it as a referendum against President Emmanuel Macron and his government under Prime Minister Gabriel Attal. This strategy proved successful, with 52% of French voters indicating that their vote was intended to influence national politics (DFI, 2024). The RN had an outstanding election result, securing 31.37% of the total votes. In the previous European election in 2019, the right-wing party already had a lead over Macron's camp. Still, this time, they significantly expanded their margin, securing nearly twice as many votes as Macron's centrist forces, which only gained 14.6%.

The RN's success in the European elections had a significant and rapid spillover effect on national politics. On election night itself, Macron announced new elections and dissolved the current parliament. In the first round of the new elections, the RN won 29.3% of the votes. Close behind was the left-wing alliance Nouveau Front Populaire. To prevent the RN from achieving an absolute majority, the left-wing alliance and Macron's camp strategically supported the candidate with the best chance of defeating the RN candidate. This resulted in 214 candidates withdrawing from the race. This united republican front, or "cordon sanitaire," had its intended effect. Although the right-wing populists gained ground in the decisive second round compared to the previous parliamentary election, they missed their goal of an absolute majority by a wide margin, finishing in third place. Surprisingly, the left-wing alliance won the elections ahead of President Macron's coalition.

These two examples illustrate that something has changed in European election campaigns. First, they clearly demonstrated the strong interconnection between the national and European level and illustrated the complex dynamics within the multi-level electoral system (MLES). Second, they revealed the continued rise of right-wing populist parties, which have become a significant force in party competition. Third, they highlighted the increasing importance of European elections, which was particularly evident in the election campaigns.

Since the first direct elections to the European Parliament, these elections have been regarded as "second-order elections" (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; 1984), meaning that compared to national elections, less is at stake. While European elections continue to be considered second-order elections and are likely to remain so for a long time, this does not mean they are less important. On the contrary, since the Maastricht Treaty, there have been significant developments that necessitate a new perspective on the competitive dynamics:

- (1) First, the increasing importance of European issues. Before the Maastricht Treaty¹, the Europe issue played a negligible role both at the national and European level. The treaty, signed in 1992, increased public controversies arising from disagreements over fundamental questions about the scope and future course of European integration. This also led to the emergence of new divisions within political elites and between member states. Recent research findings indicate that European issues are becoming increasingly important on the national (Hutter and Grande, 2014) as well as on the European level (Braun *et al.*, 2016; Braun and Grande, 2021; Braun and Schäfer, 2021; Ehin and Talving, 2021). The Europe issue also appears to transform the competitive structures in national election campaigns (Hutter *et al.*, 2016b).
- (2) Second, since Maastricht, there has been a notable rise and success of right-wing populist Eurosceptic challenger parties. While the European party system has for many decades been subject to a "fundamental bias toward stability" (Bartolini and Mair, 1990, p. 68), one phenomenon is becoming increasingly evident: parties outside the mainstream are gaining importance and power. The European party system is now dominated by strong electoral instability (Chiaromonte and Emanuele, 2015; Hernández and Kriesi, 2016), which is evident in the number of new parties and their electoral support. Between 2010 and 2018, more new parties have emerged in Europe than during the 30 years between 1949 and 1979. Most of them are so-called "challengers". Challenger parties are often system-critical (Jun, 2013), occupy extreme positions (Adams *et al.*, 2006), and

¹ The Maastricht Treaty in 1992 enhanced the rights of the European Parliament through the co-decision procedure and made Commission appointments dependent on Parliament's approval. The Treaty of Lisbon established the co-decision procedure as the standard practice, giving the Council and Parliament equal legislative authority. Additionally, the Parliament gained the power to consent to international trade agreements.

frequently act as issue entrepreneurs (e.g. they address issues that mainstream parties often neglect) in their strategic behaviour (Hobolt and De Vries, 2015). In particular, the Europe issue, which mainstream parties have largely ignored for various reasons, provided an opportunity for these challenger parties to capitalise on an issue that had gained importance among the public. This strategic positioning allows challenger parties to differentiate themselves from mainstream competitors and attract voters dissatisfied with the status quo. Due to favourable conditions, such as the electoral system and the second-order nature of European elections, these parties have been particularly successful in these contests. The increasing significance of this party type has also profoundly affected the competitive dynamics within the electoral landscape.

- (3) Third, the importance of the multi-level electoral system (MLES) is increasing. Political parties operate not only at a single political level but within an MLES (Deschouwer, 2003; Van der Eijk and Schmitt, 2008; Van Houten, 2009; Golder *et al.*, 2017; Braun *et al.*, 2020; Schäfer *et al.*, 2021). Multi-level electoral systems are characterised by the interdependence of different elections, where these interconnections also influence the motivations and behaviours of electoral actors at various levels (Van der Eijk and Schmitt, 2008, p. 5). In its current form, the MLES entails that national parties compete for representation in a supranational institution within a national political context, following competition rules that may differ more or less from those of national electoral systems. In the last decade, scholars have become increasingly interested in analysing multi-level party politics between the European and national level and between the European and regional levels (see e.g. Dellmuth and Stoffel, 2012; Gross and Debus, 2018). This leads to the assumption that, at least to some extent, European elections also have consequences at the national level (Schulte-Cloos, 2018; Chan, 2022). Therefore, understanding the behaviour of political parties in a multi-level electoral system is crucial as these parties, in an ideal scenario, establish a vital connection between citizens and the government (Dalton *et al.*, 2011).

Taken together, it is evident that European elections are undergoing substantial changes. The rise of Eurosceptic challenger parties, the newfound importance of European issues, and the complex interplay within the multi-level electoral system all contribute to reshaping competition dynamics. These transformations raise important questions about their implications for European election campaigns. Specifically, how have these dynamics reshaped the landscape of electoral competition, particularly considering the growing salience of European issues?

1.1 Research Gap

As previously discussed, several key developments influence parties' competitive strategies and dynamics in European elections. These include the impact of the Multi-Level Electoral System, the growing significance of European issues, and the strategic behaviour of mainstream and challenger parties. While significant research exists within each of these areas, the effect of these factors on the competitive dynamics in European elections has not been sufficiently examined. This chapter aims to identify and address three specific research gaps in this context:

Research Gap 1: The impact of the MLES on competition dynamics

For the analysis of competition structures, it is essential to consider that party competition takes place within the context of the Multi-Level Electoral System (Deschouwer, 2003; Van der Eijk and Schmitt, 2008; Van Houten, 2009; Golder *et al.*, 2017; Braun *et al.*, 2020). The MLES implies that „different elections are not independent but are related to one another, and, therefore, that such interdependencies also exist concerning the motivations and behaviours of ‘electoral actors’ at different levels” (Van der Eijk and Schmitt, 2008, p. 5).

As elections have historically taken place in closed electoral systems, it is unsurprising that party behaviour has been examined for a long time separately rather than across different levels. However, as political actors do not base their actions solely on the election at hand but are also influenced by the effects of another electoral arena, the outcome differs from what one would expect in a purely isolated election (Golder *et al.*, 2017, p. 3).

The second-order election model is the most common approach to considering European election results in the context of multi-level electoral politics rather than in isolation (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). The model argues that not all elections are equally important for parties and voters but that elections can be classified as first- and second-order. Research based on this model shows in various respects that first-order elections influence second-order elections and vice versa. Regarding the influence of first-order on second-order elections, it is evident that the less time between the elections, the stronger the influence (Weber, 2011). It is also evident that there are spill-over effects from second- to first-order elections. Schulte-Cloos (2018) provides a comprehensive analysis of spillover effects, examining their occurrence in all European Union member states and national elections from 1979 onwards. Additionally, her findings indicate that when national and European elections occur close, the importance of European integration issues increases the electoral prospects of radical right parties at the domestic level.

While it is not a new insight that parties operate in the backdrop of the MLES in European election campaigns, there is limited research on the effect that the MLES has on the strategic behaviour of parties and, ultimately, on competitive dynamics.

First, an important factor that has been overlooked is the variation in electoral systems across different election levels. This is not to be underestimated, as we know that the electoral system significantly influences the strategic behaviour of voters and parties. Golder (2006) demonstrates

that the influence of presidential elections on decreasing legislative fragmentation diminishes as the number of presidential candidates rises. Therefore, it is important to include whether national and European elections involve congruent (i.e., the same) or incongruent (i.e., different) electoral systems. This, in turn, opens up new strategic options for parties. Parties could exploit electoral incongruence by adopting distinct strategies to maximise their electoral gains in each context. Second, there is a lack of explanatory models for the individual electoral behaviour of parties in the MLES. In particular, the SOE Theory is deeply rooted at the aggregate level and is therefore less suited to explaining individual behaviour (Marsh and Mikhaylov, 2010). One exception is the study by Braun and Schmitt (2018). Using manifesto data, they demonstrated that parties strive to maintain consistency in their positions across different levels of the MLES as they seek to maximise voter support. However, the analysis is based on the party-system level and does not consider specific types of parties. The multi-level architecture significantly alters the conditions for parties, especially for challenger parties. Moreover, the multi-level system provides political actors additional strategic options to achieve their goals. The strong connection between the national and European levels creates potential for issue linkages between these levels. Challenger parties, in particular, could benefit from linking multiple issues to create broader appeal and mobilise support. For instance, linking the Europe issue with immigration could be an effective strategy. However, the extent to which this is empirically the case needs to be examined in the present study.

Research Gap 2: The influence of the Europe issue on competition dynamics in European election campaigns

First of all, until the Maastricht treaty in the 1990s, European integration did not play a significant role in party competition research. As Mair (2000) highlighted, Europe had a minimal impact and did neither significantly affect the format nor the mechanism of party systems. In fact, European integration issues were regarded as a "non-issue" for the public (Hooghe and Marks, 2009, p. 6 f.). Also, the first large-scale study on European Parliament elections conducted in 1989 and 1994 revealed that parties did not provide their voters with a distinct and unequivocal choice regarding European issues (van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). Hence, due to its low salience, the European integration issue was long referred to as a "sleeping giant" (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2007), or as Mair stated, "the giant is not only sleeping, but has been deliberately sedated" (Mair, 2007, p. 13). This metaphor suggests a substantial potential for shifts in public attitudes towards European integration, whether in favour or against, that has not yet materialised in a meaningful manner. However, as one of the first researchers, Gabel (2000) examined how the European integration issue impacted party competition. Today, in the research literature, it is widely acknowledged that European integration has become an integral part of the public debate within party politics. On the demand side, it has been shown that European issues are important for voting behaviour (De Vries, 2007; Hooghe and Marks, 2009; De Vries, 2018; Van Elsas *et al.*, 2019). The EU issue

voting literature posits that when EU issues become salient and relevant to voters, they will consider them in their voting decisions (e.g. Carrubba, 2001; Van Spanje and De Vreese, 2011). Research has demonstrated that as the visibility and importance of European issues increase, voters are more likely to base their electoral choices on parties' positions and policies related to the European Union. Especially in European elections, it is evident that European issues play an important role in voters' decisions (Hobolt, 2015).

The increasing importance of the Europe issue is also evident in the supply side. On the one hand, the studies clearly show that in both national and European election campaigns, the salience, i.e. the proportion of importance of an issue compared to all other issues, has increased. For national elections, Senninger and Wagner (2015) show, based on press releases, the growing importance of the Europe issue (see also Guinaudeau and Persico, 2013) For European elections, based on manifestos, the studies by Spoon (2012) and Braun *et al.* (2016) demonstrate that the salience of the Europe issue in European elections is higher than expected. However, there are only a few studies that compare both levels. Case studies for Italy (Kritzinger *et al.*, 2004) and Germany (Brunsbach *et al.*, 2012) indicate that parties emphasise the Europe issue in their election campaigns. Braun and Schmitt (2018) further show that parties tend to allocate less emphasis to EU matters in their national election manifestos compared to their European manifesto. They also showed that positions regarding this issue remained stable over time. However, this analysis was conducted at an aggregate level and did not differentiate between different types of parties, such as mainstream and challenger parties.

Furthermore, it has been shown that the European integration issue is a cleavage issue, and besides the other cleavage issues like immigration, it structures political conflict in a new demarcation-integration conflict line (Kriesi *et al.*, 2008; see also Kriesi 2012b). Undoubtedly, the Europe issue became politicised². In a large study, Hutter *et al.* (2016b) examined the politicisation of the Europe issue in public debates on major integration steps for several Western European countries using media data. The results clearly showed that the issue has become much more important, especially after Maastricht. On the other hand, it was shown that both crises and new radical right-wing parties are drivers of politicisation. Hoeglinger (2016a) comes to similar conclusions, showing that parties close to the TAN pole³, i.e. right-wing populist parties but also conservative mainstream parties, emphasise the Europe issue more strongly in their election campaigns. For European elections, with the exception of Braun and Grande (2021) there is hardly any study that has examined the politicisation of the Europe issue from a comparative perspective. Braun and Grande (2021) show that the Europe issue is also politicised at the European level and, surprisingly, that mainstream parties are responsible for whether the Europe issue gains importance or not. Therefore, the Europe issue has become a matter of “mass politics” (Bartolini,

² Politicisation is defined as “an expansion of the scope of conflict within the political system” (Grande and Hutter, 2016b, p. 7)

³ This refers to the GAL-TAN scale. GAL= Green, Alternative, Libertarian. TAN=Traditional, Authoritarian, Nationalist.

2005; Hutter et al., 2016), with significant levels of politicisation observed in public and parliamentary debates, election campaigns, and national referenda.

In summary, we know that the Europe issue has gained importance over time and that it structures party competition. However, the specific mechanisms through which this issue impacts party strategies, as well as the strategic significance for European party competition dynamics, require further investigation.

Research gap 3: Competition strategies of mainstream and challenger parties in European election campaigns

The third research gap concerns the strategies of mainstream and challenger parties. The existing literature already provides important insights into the behaviour of mainstream parties, especially about the Europe issue. The dominant strategy of mainstream parties is to avoid the Europe issue (e.g. Green-Pedersen, 2012). This avoidance can be attributed to two primary factors. First, the historical heritage of mainstream parties plays a significant role (Marks and Wilson, 2000). Established parties often have deep-rooted positions and ideologies formed long before European integration became a central political issue. These historical legacies can make it challenging for parties to shift their stances or prominently address EU matters without alienating core supporters or conflicting with their traditional platforms. Second, mainstream parties avoid the Europe issue due to intra-party conflicts, i.e. there are different positions on this issue within a party (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). However, it is strategically important for parties to communicate unity to voters. Such internal divisions can weaken the party's unified stance and present an inconsistent message to the electorate. Therefore, to present a united front, mainstream parties may choose to avoid European issues in favour of more consensual and less contentious issues. Recent studies also show that the established parties are strategically avoiding the topic of European integration in the European election campaign (Braun and Grande, 2021).

While the strategic behaviour of mainstream parties in European elections is well-researched, there are still gaps in our understanding of the behaviour of challenger parties. These challenger parties, often unburdened by historical legacies and intra-party conflicts, can adopt more clear-cut and radical positions on European integration, appealing to voters dissatisfied with the status quo. Concerning the behaviour of challenger parties, we know that they challenge mainstream parties by focusing on new issues and adopting distinct and extreme positions (Carmines and Stimson, 1993), which is empirically evident (Hooghe and Marks, 2008; Parsons and Weber, 2011). Against this background, Hobolt and De Vries (2015, p. 3) developed the concept of issue entrepreneurship for national multi-party systems, which refers to “a strategy by which parties mobilise issues that have been largely ignored in party competition and adopt a policy position on the issue that is substantially different from the mainstream status quo“. Challenger parties, in particular, embrace this strategy as they operate more flexibly than mainstream parties. However,

the extent to which challenger parties act as issue entrepreneurs at the European level has not been examined. This would be interesting to explore, as European elections are particularly crucial for challenger parties, as their successes can have spill-over effects to the national level (Schulte-Cloos, 2018). Whether challenger parties can transfer their success from the European to the national arena depends on several factors. One key factor is the range of their issue spectrum. If they focus on multiple issues rather than just one, they are more likely to appeal to a broader electorate. Another important aspect is their ability to form issue linkages, connecting European issues with national concerns in a coherent and compelling narrative. This strategic manoeuvring can significantly enhance their appeal and impact across different electoral contexts. However, the practical application of these strategies remains to be determined.

If challenger parties achieve success, mainstream parties must then make strategic decisions regarding their response to these challengers. At the national level, Meguid (2005, see also Meguid 2008) has pioneered analysing mainstream party reactions to niche parties. In contrast to conventional spatial theories, the analytical framework incorporates salience and issue ownership. Using data from 17 EU countries from 1970 to 2000 Meguid (2005) demonstrated that the behaviour of mainstream parties influences the electoral success of niche party actors.

However, there is still no consensus among scholars regarding the impact of Eurosceptic challenger parties on the political mainstream. On the one hand, research shows that the success of challenger parties leads to a change in party positions within mainstream parties (Meijers, 2017; Filip, 2021). Other studies find little evidence for Eurosceptic challengers influencing mainstream parties, as mainstream parties have no incentive to politicise the Europe issue (Green-Pedersen, 2012; Rooduijn *et al.*, 2012). These studies, however, are limited to the national level. Only a few studies have examined the reaction of mainstream parties to challenger parties. For the 2014 European Parliament election, Adam *et al.* (2016) investigated the strategies of pro-European parties towards Eurosceptic parties. They found that pro-European catch-all parties tended to de-emphasise the Europe issue and adapt their positions. A key contribution is also made by the study of Braun and Grande (2021). Their long-term analysis (1994-2019) demonstrates that the decisions made by mainstream parties can either elevate or diminish the significance of European issues in the electoral arena.

Taken together, although these studies offer valuable insights into the behaviour of both mainstream and challenger parties, there remains a significant gap in our understanding of how these two types of parties interact and the competitive dynamics that emerge from their interplay. Existing research predominantly focuses on the aggregate level, which overlooks the specific decisions and actions of individual parties. This aggregate-level approach fails to capture the nuances and intricacies of party behaviour that influence electoral outcomes. To address this gap, it is crucial to conduct a detailed analysis that considers the strategies and responses of individual

parties. By examining how mainstream and challenger parties influence each other and shape the broader competitive landscape, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of party competition. This approach not only enriches the existing literature but also provides a more nuanced view of the factors driving electoral dynamics in European elections.

1.2 Central Findings and Contribution

This dissertation investigates party competition dynamics in European election campaigns, particularly against the backdrop of the increasing importance of the Europe issue and the integration within the Multi-Level Electoral System (MLES). It contributes both theoretically and empirically to the supply side of party competition and has implications for real-world politics.

Theoretical contribution

The significant challenge in analysing party competition dynamics stems from the complexity of the subject, making it insufficient to rely on a single theoretical approach for explanation. Instead, it is crucial to integrate multiple research strands to achieve a comprehensive understanding. Therefore, the theoretical contribution of this dissertation is to emphasise an integrative perspective. To address this complexity, a theoretical framework is needed that brings together diverse insights from different approaches - from politicisation research, party behaviour studies, particularly concerning the new party type of challenger parties, and European election research.

First, theories of party behaviour are crucial to understanding competition dynamics. In this context, the dissertation highlights that issue emphasis and positioning strategies must be considered together, necessitating integrated concepts like those proposed by Meguid (2005, 2008) and Hobolt and De Vries (2015) to analyse party strategies effectively. It particularly strengthens the focus on the strategic options of challenger parties. Specifically, it examines whether challenger parties form issue linkages, how broadly they position themselves on various issues, and the implications of these strategies.

Second, the politicisation of the Europe issue is integrated. Politicisation research offers valuable insights into how political issues gain prominence and influence public discourse. The European issue's multifaceted nature allows parties to adopt various stances and strategies depending on their political goals and the electoral context. This results in a complex array of strategic options for political parties, a complexity that is further amplified by the MLES.

Third, it is crucial to incorporate findings from European election research. This includes the second-order election theory (Reif and Schmitt, 1980, 1984) as well as research about the implications of the MLES (Golder *et al.*, 2017; Braun *et al.*, 2020). Although the second-order theory was developed to explain voting behaviour, conclusions are also frequently drawn regarding party behaviour. The focus of this dissertation, however, is not to confirm or refuse the

current validity of the SOE theory. Instead, it aims to explore the implications of the second-order character for party competition dynamics. This becomes even more important in the backdrop of the MLES. The dissertation examines how both the SOE-character and the integration into the MLES expand or constrain the strategic options available to different party types. In particular, the institutional context conditions are also addressed. For example, the effects of whether national and European elections in a country are congruent or incongruent electoral systems. By integrating these different theoretical approaches, the dissertation establishes an appropriate framework for analysing party competition dynamics.

Empirical contribution

The empirical contribution of the work is, in particular, that it provides new insights into competition dynamics in European elections. Therefore, a research design is employed that allows for comparing three dimensions of analysis: European vs national, cross-national, and inter-temporal. Four countries (Austria, France, Germany, and the UK) are examined, covering the period from 1994 to 2019, which includes six European elections and up to nine national elections per country. Using media data from the DFG project “European elections and conflict structuring” and data from former projects of politicisation and conflict structuring on the national level⁴, I can show distinct dynamics in the competitive behaviour of different party types⁵.

The empirical analyses confirm the previous research findings but also go one step further and provide new insights. The results clearly show that Europe is a driving force in shaping competitive dynamics. This means that the Europe issue has a prominent position. It becomes clear that it is particularly constitutive issues, i.e. issues such as further integration steps, enlargement rounds, etc., that dominate the debate on Europe.

The detailed country studies, in particular, shift the focus from the overarching aggregate level to the level of individual party behaviour, thereby enhancing our understanding of the strategic behaviour of mainstream and, especially, challenger parties. Building upon the works of Meguid (2005) and Bale et al. (2010), the thesis uncovers the strategic choices made by mainstream parties in response to successful challenger parties. This shows that mainstream parties in different countries react very differently to their challengers. At the same time, the analysis also demonstrates how challenger parties can be successful and under what conditions they use the strategy of issue linkages. By linking the Europe issue with another significant national issue,

⁴ The data are from the project "National Political Change in a Globalizing World" (NPW, 2002-2009), "The Politicization of Europe" (PoLEU, 2009-2013), and "Political Conflict in the Shadow of the Great Recession" (POLCON, 2014-2019), which can be downloaded through the Political Conflict and Democracy (PolDem) platform (<https://poldem.eui.eu/the-observatory/>).

⁵ The European Election Study (EES) has provided valuable insights into the nuanced nature of voting behaviour and its implications for party strategies (e.g. De Vreese and Tobiasen, 2007; Schmitt *et al.*, 2020; Braun and Schäfer, 2021). Research from the Euromanifesto project (Carteny *et al.*, 2023) has shed light on the salience of issues and positions in European elections. However, it is important to acknowledge that different data sources, such as party manifestos, expert surveys, or media data, may yield diverse findings and interpretations.

such as immigration, challenger parties manage to transfer their success from the European to the national level.

The thesis also illustrates how important the institutional context conditions are. This concerns both the embedding in the MLES and, in particular, the electoral systems. It shows that it makes a difference whether the electoral systems are congruent or incongruent. In countries with incongruent electoral systems, the salience of the Europe issue is higher than in countries with congruent electoral systems.

Further contributions

Beyond science, the thesis also makes a real-life contribution as it has implications for political actors and policymakers seeking to comprehend and navigate the European electoral landscape. The results highlight the significance of taking into account the unique electoral context and adapting campaign messaging accordingly. Both mainstream and challenger parties can benefit from this approach. Furthermore, mainstream parties can learn that they are responsible for shaping the discourse on Europe and influencing the nature and extent of discussions about it. Additionally, the thesis offers valuable insights for electoral strategists working with political parties in European election campaigns. Understanding the strategies employed by mainstream and challenger parties can guide electoral strategists in crafting effective campaign strategies that resonate with voters and maximise electoral outcomes.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is structured into five main chapters. Chapter 2 forms the theoretical framework for the dissertation and is divided into three parts. Part one discusses the prevailing theories of party competition, namely issue emphasis and spatial theory and, in particular, how to combine these two approaches to analyse party competition dynamics. Building on this approach, part two focuses on Europe as an institutional context. This includes explanations of the MLES as well as the significance and influence of the Europe issue. The Europe issue is particularly important as it is a compound issue that can be addressed in various ways. The impact of other contextual factors, such as the electoral system, is also discussed. Finally, in the third part, hypotheses are developed about the strategy options of the parties. In this context, a distinction is made between mainstream and challenger parties, revealing that both party types have a complex range of strategic options.

Chapter 3 introduces the research design that compares three analytical dimensions: European vs national, cross-national, and inter-temporal. The study covers a period from 1994 to 2019, encompassing 24 European election campaigns and 29 national elections. Furthermore, the chapter explains the data selection process, which relies on media data as a primary source. For

the present analysis, the media data for national elections from Kriesi *et al.* (2020)⁶ and the European Election Campaign (EEC) for European elections from Grande and Braun (2021a) are combined. Additionally, the chapter operationalises the key variables, such as mainstream vs. euroskeptic challenger parties.

The empirical analysis in Chapter 4 is structured into three sections. The first section examines issue competition in an MLES at the aggregate level. In the second section, the focus shifts to the party level, with a particular emphasis on differentiating between mainstream and challenger parties. The third section contains detailed country studies for the four countries under investigation, which examine the individual party and their dynamics in more detail.

Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the study's main findings and the research contributions. Furthermore, it acknowledges some limitations of the study and provides directions for further research.

⁶ The dataset itself is a combination of the projects "National Political Change in a Globalizing World" (NPW, 2002-2009), "The Politicization of Europe" (PolEU, 2009-2013), and "Political Conflict in the Shadow of the Great Recession" (POLCON, 2014-2019), which can be downloaded through the Political Conflict and Democracy (PolDem) platform (<https://poldem.eui.eu/the-observatory/>).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Parties as Strategic Actors: Understanding Party Competition

“Party competition is an institution in which parties strategically cooperate or contest as political actors to gain political power” (Franzmann, 2011, p. 320). Considering the importance of party competition, it is not surprising that researchers have developed numerous theories to explain and analyse it.

The essential ones are the spatial theory (Downs, 1957; Robertson, 1976; Adams *et al.*, 2005) and the theory of issue emphasis (Budge and Farlie, 1983b; Budge, 2015). Although there are numerous approaches to explaining further aspects of party competition, such as framing (Elias *et al.*, 2015), negative campaigning (Van Heerden and Van der Brug, 2017), populist rhetoric (Bos and Brants, 2014; Kriesi, 2014) or personalisation (Marino *et al.*, 2022), this thesis specifically focuses on spatial theory and issue emphasis. These concepts have been selected as central to the research due to their significance in understanding party competition and their relevance to the specific research question addressed in this study.

The aim of this chapter is to explain and discuss the fundamental concepts of party competition. Therefore, it starts by exploring the different goals of parties in national and European elections. Then, I systematically discuss the two fundamental concepts of party behaviour: positioning and issue emphasis.

2.1.1 The Strategic Goals of Parties

Parties are strategic, utility-maximizing actors pursuing different goals (Strøm and Müller, 1999). „The strategy sets out party objectives, identifies target voters, establishes the battleground issues, and generally lays the framework within which the campaign communications are constructed” (Norris *et al.*, 1999, p. 54). As Strøm and Müller (1999, pp. 5-9) systematically illustrated, parties pursue three goals: vote-seeking, office-seeking, and policy-seeking. However, not every goal is of equal importance to the parties. „Each of these goals dictates certain party behaviours and require trade-offs among the priorities and the resources of parties” (Aldrich, 2018, p. 3). The prioritisation of these goals varies depending on the type of party and the type of election. This includes considerations such as whether it is a mainstream or a challenger party and whether it is a national or European election.

The primary and essential goal for all parties is vote-seeking. Securing votes is crucial for parties as it determines their ability to attain political offices and advance their preferred policy issues. Strom (1990) highlights the significance of vote-seeking, placing it above other party goals. This applies to both mainstream and challenger parties. However, smaller parties, in particular, place

a greater emphasis on votes due to the constant risk of falling below the electoral threshold (Bolleyer, 2007).

Furthermore, parties also have the goal of office-seeking. At the national level, for mainstream parties, the acquisition of a significant number of votes is particularly crucial as it increases their chances of participating in the next government and attaining political offices. This goal influences the strategic party behaviour even more when a party aims to be part of a coalition government. The party must carefully navigate its campaign strategies to avoid alienating potential coalition partners during the election period (Green-Pedersen, 2012). In contrast, for challenger parties, the goal of office-seeking is, at least in the beginning, less relevant than vote- or policy-seeking (Swaan, 1973, p. 166). In fact, their profile often includes refusing government participation to emphasise their anti-establishment character. With government participation, they would also risk losing voters who elect them precisely because of their outsider status (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2007; Van Spanje, 2011). However, it is evident that when presented with the opportunity to participate in government, challenger parties are inclined to seize it. Although there have been a few exceptions, such as the Perussuomalaiset party (Finns Party; PS) in Finland in 2011, most challenger parties are generally willing to assume governance responsibilities, as evidenced by the FPÖ in Austria. Nevertheless, it remains a strategic goal, as Pedersen (1982, p. 8) concludes: „[T]he goal of any minor party is to pass the threshold of relevance, and, to become an influential, at best a ruling party“.

However, European Parliament elections are not linked to the formation of a government or the appointment of other important offices. The introduction of the "Spitzenkandidaten" concept aimed to associate the highest office in the EU, the Commission President, with European Parliament elections. However, analyses of the concept clearly show that this connection failed (e.g. Hobolt, 2014; Schmitt *et al.*, 2015; Gattermann and Marquart, 2020). In the absence of a European government, the election is less characterised by office-seeking ambitions (Spoon and Klüver, 2014, p. 50). Nevertheless, parties use second-order elections as an opportunity and engage in opportunity-seeking (Aldrich 2018: 4). Parties can see these elections as an occasion to pave the way for upcoming talent or long-serving members who have not yet made it to any other national office.

The third goal is policy-seeking. Implementing their agenda is significantly impeded without holding an office (Strom, 1990, p. 567). In European elections, national parties can influence the legislative process due to the co-decision process. The legislation process must undergo the approval of both the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers. The success of a legislature is strongly influenced by the committee chairs and their rapporteurs (Ringe, 2010). These positions often go to long-serving parliament members (e.g. Yoshinaka *et al.*, 2010; Daniel, 2013). As a result, mainstream parties have a significant advantage and often choose to reappoint highly experienced representatives. However, this option for policy-seeking is less realistic for challenger parties. Instead, they tend to adopt a strategy of influencing the policy agenda

indirectly through a strategy of contamination (e.g. Bale, 2003; Norris, 2005; Van Spanje, 2010). This implies that even though challenger parties may lack direct influence on political issues in the legislative process due to their outsider status, their mere presence compels mainstream parties to address their concerns, take a public stance, and even prompt ideologically aligned parties to adopt similar positions.

The explanations provided demonstrate that different goals give rise to distinct behaviours, which vary based on the type of party and the type of election.

2.1.2 Party Positions

First of all, the strategic positioning of political parties within the political landscape is crucial in party competition. According to Schattschneider (1975 [1960]), a modern democracy needs parties with different positions on important issues. The following, therefore, explains when and under what conditions parties change their positions.

The traditional model for explaining and analysing party positions is the spatial model, introduced by Downs (1957). The theory suggests that parties will strategically align their positions with those of their targeted voters. It assumes that voters have a ranked list of issue preferences and that the pursuit of maximising their benefits guides their decision-making. Consequently, voters are more likely to support a party whose ideological stance matches their preferences (Benoit and Laver, 2006, p. 38). This, in turn, leads to the expectation that parties will try to offer policy positions that match a large number of voters (Downs, 1957; Manin *et al.*, 1999; Carrubba, 2001). The spatial theory has received widespread theoretical (e.g. Riker and Ordeshook, 1968; Enelow and Hinich, 1984; Roemer, 2001) and empirical support (e.g. Budge, 1994; Adams *et al.*, 2005; McDonald and Budge, 2005; Schofield and Sened, 2006). However, the spatial theory has several criticisms and challenges in the context of party competition. Indeed, one of the main criticisms of spatial theory is its assumption of a one-dimensional political conflict space, typically represented by the left-right dimension. As proposed by the spatial model, the assumption that voters aim to minimise the gap between their position and the party they vote for is valid only within the oversimplified context of a one-dimensional political space (Achen and Bartels, 2016, pp. 23-27). Consequently, in a multidimensional space, as is also the case in the multi-level system of the European Union, the significance of issue voting is not as pronounced as postulated by the spatial theory.

This raises the question of why and under which conditions parties alter their positions. First of all, changing positions is associated with a high degree of uncertainty for parties (Budge, 1994) and entails substantial risks. For instance, there is the risk of losing more existing voters than gaining new ones or jeopardising future coalition partners. Additionally, there is the risk of appearing implausible or inconsistent to the electorate. Sustaining a coherent and credible image

is paramount for parties to uphold the trust and backing of their electoral constituency. This already indicates that parties may face constraints when attempting to adjust their positions across varying levels of governance, underscoring the complexity of their strategic manoeuvring.

The literature generally assumes that party positions are relatively stable (Marks and Wilson, 2000; Marks *et al.*, 2002; Hooghe and Marks, 2018). From Lipset and Rokkan (1967) to Bartolini (2005), research argues and empirically shows that parties are embedded in fixed ideological structures due to their origin. According to the cleavage theory (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967), European party systems have developed along conflict lines. These conflict lines reflect conflicts of interest or values between different organised social groups, giving rise to the formation of parties. These cleavages are highly stable. For the positioning of parties, this long history leads to stable, relatively unchanging positions, at least in the medium term. Political elites possess coherent ideological maps that enable them to comprehend complex and multifaceted issues, unlike the general public (Druckman, 2001). Thus, established parties face challenges in changing their positions at short notice and reacting flexibly. Marks and Wilson (2000) describe this as “bounded rationality,” which means that parties are not entirely free to decide how to position themselves on a (new) issue.

In addition, parties are constrained by their intra-party conflicts. Intra-party conflict refers to disagreements, tensions, or disputes within a political party among its members or factions. This is particularly evident in the case of cleavage issues, such as the European issue. If this is the case, research shows that parties try to avoid such issues or take a moderate position (Steenbergen and Scott, 2004b; Edwards, 2008; Green-Pedersen, 2012; Spoon, 2012; Hellström and Blomgren, 2016).

In summary, the strategic flexibility of mainstream parties depends on the strength of their reputation on a particular issue, the intensity of internal party conflict, and whether they have a stable base of voters.

Nevertheless, empirical research indicates that parties may alter their positions under specific conditions.

First, party change their positions according to mean voter shifts (Adams *et al.*, 2004; Adams *et al.*, 2006; Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009). Parties can either adapt their position in response to their core voters (Weissberg, 1978; Dalton, 1985; Wessels, 1999) or in response to all possible voters (Downs, 1957; Huber and Powell, 1994; Stimson *et al.*, 1995; Adams *et al.*, 2005)⁷. Which voters a party wants to address depends primarily on the party organisation and the party type (Lehrer, 2012; Schumacher *et al.*, 2013). The results of Ezrow *et al.* (2011, p. 277; see also Schumacher 2013) show that mainstream parties tend to orient themselves on the position of the mean voter while niche (respectively challenger) parties focus on their core supporters. In

⁷ Ezrow *et al.* (2011) refer to this as the "partisan constituency model" and the "general electorate model".

addition, Steenbergen and Scott (2004b) demonstrate that parties emphasise an issue to a greater extent if it aligns with the preferences of the median voter and the median party supporter.

Second, parties show that they change their positions due to negative experiences, such as achieving poor election results (Sommer-Topcu, 2009; Budge *et al.*, 2010). Learning from electoral setbacks and making necessary changes is crucial for parties to remain competitive and relevant in the political landscape.

Third, it strongly depends on the issue at hand. There are issues where parties are more likely to adjust their position than others. As Hooghe and Marks (2018, p. 112) stated, “Political parties can be flexible on particular issues, but efforts to shift position at the level of a conflict dimension are rare”. According to Bartolini (2005, pp. 321-326), four models explain the attitude of national parties towards European Integration. First, the geopolitical model posits that national-specific features or geopolitical interests primarily determine support or opposition to a particular issue. These interests are shaped by entrenched cultural predispositions and should be understood within the specific pattern of state and nation formation. Second, the institutional model explains party positions on European integration based on the party's function, whether it is part of the government or in the opposition. Accordingly, mainstream parties are more inclined to avoid conflicts and take a more pro-European position (Marks *et al.*, 2002; Hooghe and Marks, 2009). Third, the partisan model refers to parties' ideological and programmatic aspects. According to the Europe issue, liberal and Christian democratic parties were considered pro-European, while parties on the right and left fringes were classified as anti-European (Hix and Lord, 1997; Marks *et al.*, 2002). Fourth, the genetic model interprets party positions as being shaped or connected to their original position on national cleavages. Empirical research shows that, concerning the Europe issue, parties are more flexible. Kersch (2018) highlights the significance of distinguishing between constitutive and policy issues in this context. While parties are fixed in their positioning on constitutive issues, e.g. issues which refer to fundamental or foundational matters that shape the identity, principles, and core values of a political party, there is some scope of action on policy issues, e.g. issues which refer to specific topics or areas of concern, like environmental issues.

Fourth, it depends on the structure of party competition. Hooghe and Marks (2018) assume that changes in party positioning and, ultimately, changes in the party system are due to the emergence of new challenger parties. These challenger parties disrupt the political landscape by introducing new ideas, issues, or approaches, thereby prompting established parties to respond in order to remain competitive and relevant.

2.1.3 Issue Emphasis of Parties

One crucial decision parties must make during election campaigns is which issues to emphasise. The issue competition perspective, labelled by Carmines and Stimson (1993), essentially

resembles the theory of Robertson (1976), which assumes that party competition is based on "selective emphasis." Issue competition means that political parties prioritise the issues they seek to dominate during electoral competition. In order to be successful, parties emphasise specific issues while neglecting others (Budge *et al.*, 2001b, p. 81).

This does not mean parties cherry-pick a few issues and completely ignore the rest. Parties aim to gain dominance over certain issues, forcing other parties to engage with those issues, particularly if they are inclined to avoid them (Green-Pedersen, 2007).

Why parties emphasise specific issues is extensively discussed in the literature. However, deciding which issues to emphasise should in no way be underestimated. Depending on which issues parties highlight or downplay strongly determines the political competition in the election campaign (e.g. Green-Pedersen, 2007). The predominant approaches for explaining issue emphasis are salience theory and their resulting concepts and agenda-setting approaches. In the following, I will discuss the most prominent approaches in this field.

Salience theory and issue ownership

First, in its most common form introduced by Budge and Farlie (1983a), salience theory assumes that election campaigns are characterised by parties favouring some issues over others. The core assumption is that parties emphasise issues from which they hope to gain an advantage⁸ (Robertson, 1976; Budge and Farlie, 1983a; Budge *et al.*, 2001a; Budge, 2015). It suggests that parties are more likely to focus on issues deemed important by the public rather than issues that are not considered relevant or urgent. In other words, parties are more likely to emphasise salient issues that capture public attention and generate public concern. According to salience theory, the strategies of parties regarding issue emphasis are not anticipated to be significantly influenced by the actions of their competitors and the issues they highlight.

The concept of issue ownership is also based on these underlying assumptions. Parties are considered issue owners when they are linked to specific issues over a long period (Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik *et al.*, 2003), like green parties with environmental issues (Wagner and Meyer, 2014), social democratic parties with welfare issues (Ross, 2000), or right-wing parties with immigration issues (Smith, 2010). By emphasising their ownership issues, parties and candidates can differentiate from their opponents and position themselves as the most competent and trustworthy actors on those issues. Petrocik (1996, p. 826) points out that "a history of attention, initiative, and innovation toward these problems [...] leads voters to believe that one of the parties (and its candidates) is more sincere and committed to doing something about them". Research shows that voters base their voting decision on whether a party is competent in their preferred

⁸ A good overview of the overall development of salience theory and its connection to content analysis is provided by Budge (2015).

issue or whether that party is generally considered competent (Green and Hobolt, 2008; Walgrave *et al.*, 2012). Empirical analyses reveal that the probability of voting for a party increases when the party is perceived as competent and when one's preferences align with the party's stance (Bélanger and Meguid, 2008; Walgrave *et al.*, 2020).

However, while Klüver and Sagarzazu (2016) could not confirm this in their analysis based on press releases, a substantial body of research provides evidence for the issue ownership hypothesis. Issue ownership effects are found over various issues, electoral and party systems, platforms, and prolonged periods (Budge, 2015; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015; Thesen *et al.*, 2017; Schwarzbözl, 2019; Schwarzbözl *et al.*, 2020). Since issue ownership tends to remain constant over time, the significance that various parties attribute to the issue is also anticipated to exhibit temporal stability (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015). In summary, it can be said that if parties succeed in establishing themselves as issue owners and making these issues visible during the election campaign, it is a successful strategy.

Influencing the party system agenda

Second, and in contrast to salience theory, which assumes that parties consciously choose their issues, the literature on agenda-setting (e.g. Norris *et al.*, 1999; McCombs, 2005; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010; Wagner and Meyer, 2014) assumes that parties try to influence the party system agenda to their advantage. In this sense, issue competition is understood as “party competition on which issues should dominate the party political agenda” (Green-Pedersen, 2007, p. 607). However, parties can not only set their issues but are also forced to react to the issues set by their competitors (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010) or as Eugster *et al.* (2021, p. 7) sum it up: “[E]ven if parties want to engage in a monologue, they will find it difficult to avoid dialogue”. Therefore, parties must tactically manage which issues they discuss in the election campaign, which are forced by the party system agenda, and how they place their preferred issues high on the agenda. If they fail to succeed in the latter, they have to discuss the issues raised by their competitors (Spoon, 2012; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015; Hoeglinger, 2016a; Meyer and Wagner, 2016; Tresch *et al.*, 2018).

The extent to which parties emphasise the same issue is referred to as issue convergence⁹ (Sigelman and Buell Jr, 2004; Steenbergen and Scott, 2004b). Research finds evidence that parties campaign on the same issues - and this is not the exception but rather the rule (Damore, 2004; Sigelman and Buell Jr, 2004; Sides, 2006; Green-Pedersen, 2007). Issue convergence has been observed in various types of elections (Damore, 2004; Sigelman and Buell Jr, 2004; Sides, 2006; Dolezal *et al.*, 2014; Meyer and Wagner, 2016) and different types of platforms (Schwarzbözl *et al.*, 2020). If parties want to be successful, they must also emphasise issues on the public agenda (Kaplan *et al.*, 2006).

⁹ Depending on the author, the term systemic salience is also used.

Research shows that the closer an election is, the less critical issue ownership becomes and the more a party focuses on the issues of other parties (Seeberg, 2020). Additionally, it indicates that issue convergence is more probable when parties' issue positions are closely aligned or belong to the same ideological party bloc (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015).

Furthermore, the literature suggests that party types exhibit varying patterns of reaction. For mainstream parties, it is difficult and strategically problematic to ignore issues pushed by key political competitors, their voters, or the media. Schwarzbözl *et al.* (2020) show that, in particular, large parties emphasise the issues of other parties in the public debate. Mainstream parties must align with the broad system agenda to maintain supremacy (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015). Additionally, due to their massive resources, large parties can mainly address more than one issue (Wagner and Meyer, 2014). Accordingly, they are more inclined to engage in dialogue than those with limited resources (Meyer and Wagner, 2016, p. 559). In addition, opposition parties are also more likely to respond to their challengers than governing parties due to their greater willingness to take risks (Van de Wardt, 2015).

2.1.4 Combined Concepts of Issue Emphasis and Position

What do the discussions on party positioning and issue emphasis reveal? They highlight that positioning and issue emphasis is strategically important for party competition and competition dynamics. Therefore, it is crucial not to consider these two elements of party competition in isolation but to connect and integrate them to analyse party behaviour.

Meguid (2005, 2008) combines the two theoretical approaches to explain mainstream parties' reactions to niche parties' success. She argues that mainstream parties strategically react to niche parties' success by adjusting their positions and issue priorities. For example, mainstream parties might attempt to adopt the positions of niche parties to win back potential voters or limit the success of niche parties.

Another example that combines the salience theory with the spatial theory is the study by Green and Hobolt (2008). Their research examines how party positioning on European integration and immigration affects voter behaviour. They consider both the salient issues for voters and the parties' positioning along these political dimensions. Furthermore, Hobolt and De Vries (2015), use these concepts to explain the strategic success of challenger parties. Challenger parties are successful when they focus on issues mainstream parties neglect and adopt extreme positions. These two elements are combined in the strategy of "issue entrepreneurship".

These examples illustrate how researchers combine salience and spatial theories to understand and explain the behaviour of parties and voters in political systems. Due to the high explanatory power of these theoretical connections, this study will also integrate these theories to analyse competition dynamics in European elections.

Secondly, it is evident that, as Schwarzbözl (2019) highlighted in his dissertation concerning national elections, the political and institutional context in which parties operate significantly influences party competition and competition dynamics. This influence is further amplified against the backdrop of the multi-level election system and the secondary nature of European elections. Therefore, it is crucial to delineate the specific contextual conditions of European elections in the following sections.

2.2 Europe as Institutional Context

So far, I have discussed the various strategic options regarding positioning and issue emphasis. In particular, combining these two strategic options already leads to a complex, competitive dynamic within the political arena. However, this complexity is further compounded when considering different contextual conditions. Specifically, four contextual factors significantly impact competition dynamics in European elections: (1) The type of election. (2) The integration into the Multi-Level Electoral System (MLES). (3) The strategic importance of the European issue. (4) The nature of the electoral systems at different electoral levels.

First, which type of election is crucial, whether first-order or second-order. The distinction between these two types significantly impacts the dynamics of electoral competition due to the varying perceptions and importance that voters and political parties assign to them. The type of election influences the strategic choices of political parties and, consequently, the competitive dynamics within the electoral context.

Second, it is important to consider that European elections take place within the context of the Multi-Level Electoral System (MLES). This complex system, characterised by the intricate interplay between national and supranational levels of governance, introduces many additional factors and considerations that influence the strategies and interactions of political actors.

Third, as the Europe issue becomes increasingly politicised, understanding its implications within the MLES becomes imperative.

Fourth, institutional factors such as the electoral system also influence competitive dynamics. It makes a crucial difference whether a country has congruent electoral systems (i.e., the same system at both national and European levels) or incongruent systems (different systems for national and European elections)

2.2.1 The Nature of European Elections

The first important contextual factor influencing competition dynamics is the nature of an election, i.e., whether it is a first-order or a second-order election. The classification of an election depends on various criteria. Fundamentally, both voters and parties perceive first-order elections as more important. Second-order elections, on the other hand, are considered less significant or

secondary because they do not directly determine the composition of important political offices. While the results of second-order elections have fewer direct effects on national politics and government, they are often regarded as indicators of political sentiment and the performance of established parties.

European elections are, and will likely remain for a long time, second-order elections. One year after the first direct election to the European Parliament, Reif and Schmitt (1980) formulated the second-order theory, which argues that because these elections do not lead to government formation, less is at stake for voters as well as for parties. In contrast, "first-order" elections, such as national legislative or presidential elections, are seen as more essential and significantly impact the composition of government and policy outcomes. They developed an analytical framework for European elections, which consists of four particular points: (1) a lower level of participation, (2) brighter prospects for small and new political parties, (3) a higher percentage of invalidated ballots, and (4) government parties lose (Reif and Schmitt, 1980, p. 7). Accordingly, voters tend to use European Parliament elections as an opportunity to express dissatisfaction with their national government rather than focusing solely on European issues or party preferences. The second-order theory suggests that European Parliament elections serve as a barometer of public opinion towards the national government, providing valuable insights into the political landscape and potentially influencing subsequent national elections.

This SOE model has been extensively tested and confirmed in numerous studies based on aggregated data for all further elections (e.g. Schmitt, 2005; Hix and Marsh, 2007; Schmitt and Toygür, 2016; Ehin and Talving, 2021).

Initially developed to explain the behaviour of voters, the framework is also used to explore party behaviour. Parties are well aware that European elections are less important in voters' perception than national parliamentary elections. As a result, parties also attach less importance to European elections or, as Marsh (1998, p. 607) put it, "parties themselves generally work to make European elections second-order national elections".¹⁰

This is reflected in the assumption that European issues do not matter in European elections. Regarding party competition, parties are assumed to tend to campaign on national rather than European issues (De Vreese, 2009; Petithomme, 2012; Hoeglinger, 2016a). It "predicts that European Parliament elections should not have much to do with 'Europe'" (Hix and Marsh, 2011, p. 5).

It is assumed that parties simply transfer their national strategies to the European level and play the same game as they do at the national level. However, this cannot be interpreted solely as

¹⁰ Compared to national elections, parties spend significantly less money on the European election campaign (Petithomme, 2012).

parties' disinterest but rather as strategic adaptation. Given the parties' strong awareness of European elections' second-order nature, they have adjusted to the subsidiary election character.

2.2.2 From Second-Order to Multi-Level Electoral System

The second contextual factor, the multi-level electoral system, also has implications for competition dynamics. While national and European elections represent distinct electoral arenas, they are inherently intertwined within an MLES framework. This interconnectedness results in a dynamic feedback loop wherein developments at the national level can precipitate changes at the European level and vice versa. In essence, the electoral landscape is characterised by a complex interplay between national and European politics, where shifts in one arena can reverberate across the other, shaping the overall political landscape and electoral outcomes. Understanding and navigating this intricate web of interdependencies is paramount for comprehending the broader dynamics of contemporary electoral politics in Europe. This chapter examines the key features of the MLES, including its institutional arrangements and the role of political parties. Also, it explores the implications of the MLES for the strategic options of different party types and competition dynamics in European elections.

The EU is defined by its multi-level governance structure, which implies the absence of a political centre and hierarchy in the classical sense. Following Hooghe and Marks (2001, pp. 3-4), the structure is characterised by three components: First, decision-making competencies are not only in the hands of the national government but are distributed among several actors at different levels. The influence of supranational institutions such as the European Commission or the European Parliament on the policy-making process takes place independently and not on behalf of the national executive. Second, the common decision-making process with other member states implies a loss of control for national governments. Third, the different political arenas are interconnected. Subnational actors thus act not only on one level but on both the national and the supranational levels. In addition, the EU is characterised by a system of dual representation, which means territorial and political representation.

On the one hand, the representation of the member states in the European Council or the Council of Ministers; on the other hand, the representation of the citizens in the European Parliament. While it is the task of the government to represent the whole state, it is the task of the parties to represent the interests of the citizens in the European Parliament. The European Parliament has significant powers in the EU decision-making process, including the ability to amend and veto legislation. This creates a unique opportunity for parties to influence EU policy but requires them to engage in complex negotiations and alliances with other parties to achieve their goals.

The multi-level governance structure also gives rise to a multi-level election system. In its current form, the MLES results in (a) national parties, (b) competing for representation in a supranational institution, (c) in a transnational political context, (d) according to competition rules that may differ more or less enormously from those of the national electoral law. As the different electoral arenas are not detached from each other but rather interwoven, the MLES forces parties to operate and compete across multiple levels simultaneously (Golder *et al.*, 2017). They act in the regional and sub-national arena (Müller, 2013; Klingelhöfer, 2014) and on the national and European level (Ladrech, 2002; Ladrech, 2010, pp. 128-145).

This results in unique challenges and opportunities for electoral strategies. When choosing their strategy, it is therefore essential for parties to consider the conditions of this particular multi-layered structure of the European Union (Hooghe and Marks, 2001; Bache and Flinders, 2004).

While the nature of European elections has remained constant over time, there has been a significant change regarding the European issue. Examining the Europe issue over time reveals a notable increase in its importance and salience at both the national and European levels. The impact of this shift on party strategies and overall competition dynamics will be further elucidated in the following discussion.

2.2.3 The Growing Importance of European Issues

For a long time, European Integration issues were considered "non-issue" for the public. This was mainly based on three assumptions (Hooghe and Marks, 2009, p. 6 f.): First, public attitudes toward European integration are so superficial that they offer no real incentive for parties to focus on this issue in the election campaign and to take a position. Second, in the eyes of the public, Europe is an issue with low salience and thus does not influence party competition. Third, the Europe issue is seen as *sui generis* and, therefore, evades the traditional structure that organises party competition. This is also because the Europe issue is multidimensional, posing challenges for parties to position.

Until the 1980s, there was hardly any politicisation of the European Integration issue (Schmitter, 2009, p. 211). Nevertheless, the Europe issue has gained increasing significance in both election arenas. Particularly in the post-Maastricht era, the relevance of the Europe issue has increased significantly (e.g. Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; Ray, 2003; Evans and Butt, 2007; Schuck *et al.*, 2011b). With the Maastricht Treaty, the issue „entered the contentious world of party competition, elections and referendums” (Hooghe and Marks, 2009, p. 7).

On the one hand, the EU issue voting literature challenges the assumption that national issues dominate voting behaviour in European elections. The theory suggests that when EU issues become salient and relevant to voters, they can influence voter preferences and shape electoral

outcomes. Some studies have shown that attitudes towards the EU are essential in voting decisions in European elections (Carrubba, 2001; Carrubba and Timpone, 2005; Van Spanje and De Vreese, 2011; Hobolt, 2015; Van Elsas *et al.*, 2019; Braun and Grande, 2021). Particularly for the 2014 European elections, Hobolt (2015) shows that EU attitudes influenced the election of euroskeptic parties caused by the aftermath of the euro crisis. The EU issue voting effect is more significant the more information voters have about the EU (Hobolt and Wittrock, 2011) and the more parties and candidates emphasise this issue in their election campaigns (Ferrara and Weishaupt, 2004; Beach *et al.*, 2018).

On the other hand, based on the post-functionalism theory, the politicisation literature argues that the Europe issue (encompasses discussions on the future direction of the EU) has become a significant political issue that structures party competition and voting behaviour along the new demarcation-integration cleavage (e.g. De Wilde and Zürn, 2012; Statham and Trenz, 2013b; Hutter and Grande, 2014; Grande and Hutter, 2016a; Zeitlin *et al.*, 2019; Braun and Grande, 2021). Generally, politicisation is defined “as an expansion of the scope of conflict within the political system” (Grande and Hutter, 2016b, p. 7).

Expansion rounds and deepening measures have brought about fundamental shifts in the integration process. As European unification progressed, the boundary between national and European politics became increasingly blurred. This intertwining of national and European dynamics reflects a growing interconnectedness between the two spheres. Moreover, this transition has given rise to a new conflict structure. The process of transferring national sovereignty from member states to the supranational level has engendered a notable intensification in conflicts about identity and financial redistribution (Hutter and Grande, 2014, p. 1002). Other researchers like Flora (2000), Bartolini (2005), and Hooghe and Marks (2018) expected a separate “pro” versus “anti-Europe” cleavage.

However, in most West European countries, the political competitive landscape consists of a two-dimensional structure. Parties do not compete solely within a simple left-right dimension but rather along an economic and cultural axis (Hooghe *et al.*, 2004; Kriesi *et al.*, 2008; Hutter *et al.*, 2016b). The economic axis describes the spectrum of more or less state interventions - from strong market liberalisation to a strong welfare state. The cultural axis has undergone significant changes and now ranges from traditional, authoritarian, and nationalist (TAN) values to green, alternative, and libertarian (GAL) values¹¹. Political actors are positioned within this two-dimensional political space based on their stances regarding the issues constituting each of the two dimensions. But how does the increasing Europe issue fit into this two-dimensional competitive space? Hooghe and Marks (2009; see also Hoeglinger 2016: p.26)) argue that Europe is attached to the cultural axis. According to them, Europe has become a contentious issue between GAL

¹¹ These labels are introduced by Hooghe *et al.* (2004). Other authors named it new politics, post-materialist (Inglehart and Flanagan, 1987), or libertarian–authoritarian axis (Kitschelt, 1994).

supporters, meaning left and green parties, and TAN opponents, meaning right and conservative parties. Kriesi *et al.* (2008; see also Kriesi 2012b) go a step further and argue that European integration is part of a general structural conflict between globalisation winners and globalisation losers. However, this conflict is not exclusively culturally conditioned but contains an economic component. They empirically demonstrated that conflicts and denationalisation in West European countries have led to a new cleavage characterised by cultural and territorial nature. This new "demarcation-integration" cleavage primarily consists of two issues. First, immigration and attitudes towards foreigners, and second, European integration. Overall, however, the Europe issue has a structuring effect and has contributed to transforming the cultural conflict line in Western Europe.

Overall, the study by Hutter *et al.* (2016b) indicates that the extent of politicisation did not continuously increase. Instead, the examined countries exhibit sporadic phases of politicisation. The timing and extent of politicisation regarding the Europe issue are mainly driven by some key factors: critical events, actors and party strategy (Grande and Hutter, 2016b, p. 20 f.).

First, critical events are important for the politicisation of the Europe issue. Critical events encompass various integration milestones like treaties, inclusion of new member states and crises. These occurrences force discussions that extend beyond the elite-driven decision-making process in Brussels and resonate with the public. Hutter *et al.* (2016b; see also Hutter and Kriesi 2019) show in a large-scale analysis that politicisation is more a patchwork of different events fostering it rather than a straightforward process.

For a long time, treaties and further integration steps were not discussed in the light of public opinion but by the European political elite. The rejection of the Constitutional Treaty by referendums in the Netherlands and France marked a turning point and triggered a politicisation of the European Integration issue in some countries (Grande and Hutter, 2016a). As a result, the approval of further treaties could no longer be easily expected (Statham and Trenz, 2013a; Statham and Trenz, 2013b). With regard to the accession of further member states, it can be assumed that politicisation will occur in the accession states themselves (Kitschelt, 1997). Moreover, the level of politicisation is likely to be even more pronounced when there are substantial cultural differences between the newly joining member states and the existing member states (Hutter *et al.*, 2016b, p. 21).

Furthermore, despite treaties and further integration steps, crises also drive the politicisation of the Europe issue. Despite crisis-specific and regional variations, the euro crisis in 2010 and the refugee crisis in 2015 led to a stronger politicisation of the Europe issue (Grande and Kriesi, 2015; Statham and Trenz, 2015; Hutter and Kriesi, 2019).

Second, the party's strategic considerations also have an impact on politicisation. Political parties and their strategies can foster the politicisation of the European integration issue (Adam *et al.*, 2016). Hooghe and Marks (2009, pp. 6-9; 18-21) identify various factors that promote

politicisation due to party strategy and those that inhibit it. On the one hand, a conducive factor is a "party's potential electoral popularity" on an issue (Hooghe and Marks, 2009, p. 19). The greater a party's public support, the greater its willingness to politicise an issue. On the other hand, parties have to be aware of their reputation. Parties must also give voters the impression that they are doing what they were elected for. In addition, the party type, i.e., whether a mainstream or a challenger party, plays a decisive role in politicisation.

As the Europe issue appears unfavourable for mainstream parties due to internal conflicts, they tend to depoliticise it. For this purpose, they have a whole repertoire of depoliticisation strategies at their disposal: they „de-emphasized the issue in national elections; [...] sidestepped treaty changes to avoid referendums, delegated authority to so-called „non-majoritarian“ technocratic institutions, opted for Eurocompatible government formation, adopted incomplete contracts, and [...] resorted to integration by regulation“ (Hutter and Kriesi, 2019, p. 1000). Green-Pedersen (2012, p. 123) adds that "a lack of politicisation is due to a lack of coalition and electoral incentives for mainstream parties". As the issue deviates from the traditional left-right dimension that structures party competition in Europe, the impact on possible coalitions when parties politicise the issue is uncertain. In contrast to mainstream parties, radical right and left parties have understood the need to take electoral advantage of a Eurosceptic population by rejecting the integration issue (Hooghe and Marks, 2009, p. 21). Nevertheless, Braun and Grande (2021) have demonstrated that particularly mainstream parties drive the Europe issue forward.

The increasing importance of the Europe issue is visible in both national and European elections (Braun and Schmitt, 2018; Braun and Grande, 2021). Even though European elections are not exclusively about European issues, there is a development toward a stronger mobilisation of the European issue¹². Parties increasingly focus on the Europe issue in their manifestos (Spoon, 2012; Braun *et al.*, 2016), press releases (Maier *et al.*, 2017; Eugster *et al.*, 2021), and various media like TV Spots (Adam and Maier, 2011; e.g. Adam and Maier, 2016a). For example, in the 2014 European election, 35% of press releases from government parties concerned Europe (Eugster *et al.*, 2021, p. 21). Research also shows that conflicts over Europe in European elections revolve more around constitutive than policy issues (Dolezal, 2012).

In addition, as previously highlighted, the Europe issue is distinct from other political issues, characterised by its unique and complex nature. The Europe issue is unique in two ways. First, Europe is a “compound issue” that can be addressed in many ways. Second, the Europe issue is a "moving target" as the subject "Europe", and its significance changed over time.

¹² For the 2009 European election, see Jalali and Silva (2011), Adam and Maier (2016b); for 2014 Adam *et al.* (2016).

(1) *Europe is a compound issue*

Compared to other issues, Europe is a highly complex political issue, characterised by its multifaceted nature. But what exactly is meant by "Europe issue"? Most research literature considers Europe a unitary political issue and differentiates between pro- and anti-European positions (e.g. Steenbergen and Scott, 2004a; De Vries and Van de Wardt, 2011; Spoon, 2012). These studies do not consider the various aspects of the Europe issue; instead, they reduce it to the constitutive dimension of European integration, such as the question of further deepening. Prominent examples are the studies by Kriesi (2007) and Spoon (2012). In his media-based analysis, Kriesi (2007, p. 93) specifically concentrates on the broad category of "European Integration," which encompasses issues related to membership and enlargement. Spoon (2012, p. 565) uses in her analysis, based on Euromanifestos, the EUSUM variable, which „includes items such as favourable mentions of the EC/EU, competences of various European institutions, and mentions of a European way of life”.

However, the Europe issue is complex and multidimensional and “it depends on what issue one is talking about” (Marks, 2004, p. 241). The Europe issue is more than just integration debates or institutions. It is also about policies such as immigration or the environment. This definition problem was discussed thoroughly in the literature (Thomassen and Schmitt, 1997; Hooghe *et al.*, 2002; Koopmans and Statham, 2010).

According to Bartolini (2005, p. 310), the Europe issue can be divided into the categories of “general orientations”, “constitutive issues”, and “isomorphic issues”. General orientations refer to the overall pro or anti, positive or negative stance towards the EU. Constitutive issues include all those dealing with fundamental questions of the European Union, i.e., questions about the enlargement process, the transfer of sovereignty rights, or decision-making processes. In contrast, isomorphic issues tend to concern specific fields of action, such as environmental or economic policies.

A similar definition is also used by Schmitt (2007, p. 13), who distinguishes between "normal issues" and "constitutional issues". Normal issues refer to matters addressed at multiple levels within the MLES. These issues are not inherently specific to the European context. Just the institutions of the EU seek to be involved in the decision-making processes related to these issues. Constitutive issues are inherently related to the European context, although they are not necessarily exclusive (meaning that other political arenas may also address them). Examples of such issues can be found in the major projects pursued by the European Union in recent decades. While constitutive issues are outside the traditional left-right conflict axis, policy issues are embedded in this axis (e.g. Kriesi *et al.*, 2008; Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Statham and Trenz, 2013b).

Also, empirically, more and more studies can be found that examine the Europe issue in their analyses in a differentiated manner (e.g. Helbling *et al.*, 2010; Risse, 2015; Braun *et al.*, 2016; De Wilde *et al.*, 2016; Hoeglinger, 2016b; Hutter *et al.*, 2016a; Kersch, 2018).

One of the first was Pennings (2006) who, in his analysis of the Europeanisation of party manifestos, demonstrated that references to Europe are influenced not only by the process of European integration itself but also by institutional and party strategic factors. Further studies that have differentiated between constitutive and policy issues have already shown that the salience of the Europe issue is higher than previously assumed. The findings of Senninger and Wagner (2015) reveal that Austrian parties addressed European issues in national election campaigns (2008 and 2013) in approximately 9% of their press releases. The two mainstream parties especially achieved high values by focusing on such issues in over 50% of their press releases. Using manifestos, Braun *et al.* (2016) illustrate that the salience of the Europe issue in European elections is significantly higher when policy issues are integrated into the definition. Based on a large-sample study, Hutter *et al.* (2016a) show that constitutive issues trigger the politicisation of Europe.

(2) Europe is a „moving target“

Second, the EU and the Europe issue have changed considerably over time. As European integration is conceived as “an open-ended multi-dimensional process” (Dolezal *et al.*, 2016, p. 34), the EU has undergone fundamental changes over time. The EU has evolved from a primarily economic community to a complex political entity with broad policy-making powers. The EU is, therefore, rightly referred to as a “moving target” (Marks, 2004, p. 23). For a better understanding of the transformation process of the EU, Leuffen *et al.* (2012, p. 1) differentiate between the three dimensions of “the level of centralisation”, “the functional scope”, and “the territorial extension”. One can also refer to vertical and horizontal integration as these dimensions encompass the scope and level of authority on one side and the territorial scope on the other (Dolezal *et al.*, 2016, p. 34). Horizontal integration is characterised by various territorial expansions. In total, the EU has grown from 6 to 27 members through several rounds of enlargement. Additionally, other countries aspire to join, such as Turkey, some Balkan states, and recently, Ukraine. Moreover, the EU has expanded territorially through membership and the integration of non-EU countries like Switzerland through a common market and numerous treaties.

Despite horizontal integration, vertical integration was also indispensable for the European integration process. Economic integration with the completion of the common market in the late 1980s and the introduction of a common currency are equally important to expanding activities into non-economic areas. Notably, with its famous three-pillar structure, the post-Maastricht treaty immensely impacted the integration process. Maastricht not only established new structures but also embodied the idea of a European identity. However, this also increased Euroscepticism, also known as the “post-Maastricht blues” (Eichenberg and Dalton, 2007), which led from a

"permissive consensus" (Lindberg and Scheingold, 1970) to a "constraining dissensus" (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). While economic interests determined the citizens' EU preference until the mid-1990s (Eichenberg and Dalton, 1993; Anderson and Kaltenthaler, 1996), issues on the cultural conflict dimension have moved into focus (Carey, 2002; De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2005). In its beginnings, the European Union had decision-making powers in only a few issues. However, the EU now has decision-making powers in almost all policy areas, from environmental to economic to common foreign policy. The EU "reached a point where it touches upon almost every aspect of public life and includes every European country" (Dinan, 2010, p. 4).

Taken together, what does this mean for the competition dynamics in European elections? The EU-issue voting literature and the literature on politicisation indicate that the Europe issue has become more prominent over time, leading to a complex competition dynamic. This becomes even more challenging when considering the peculiarities and specificities of the Europe issue. Consequently, the question no longer revolves around whether parties emphasise the Europe issue in their election campaigns but rather how and which aspects they highlight.

2.2.4 The Influence of Congruent and Incongruent Electoral Systems

Institutional factors, including the electoral system, party funding regulations, and media coverage, also influence the competition dynamics in European elections. The most influential factor is the election system, which will be explained in detail in the following section.

First of all, there is no electoral threshold in some member states (Jackman and Volpert, 1996). Thus, even parties with very low turnouts can win seats in the parliament. The importance of an electoral threshold should not be underestimated, as demonstrated by the case of Germany. In 2009, six parties successfully secured seats in the European Parliament, whereas in 2014, after the elimination of the 5% threshold, the number increased to 14. The threshold removal also led to a shift in the distribution ratio of mainstream and challenger parties. In 2009, challenger parties could only claim 8% of German parliamentary seats, but this share rose to 22% in 2014 and 25% in 2019 (Bundeswahlleiter, 2021).

Furthermore, there is still no transnational voting right in European elections. Initially, when the European Parliament was established in 1952, its members were appointed by national governments and not elected by the people. Since 1979, European citizens have directly elected their representatives in the European Parliament. Some countries used a first-past-the-post system in the early years, while others used proportional representation. Although the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 stipulated that the election should take place according to a uniform procedure, the states have only been able to agree on the principle of proportional voting in the Amsterdam Treaty. So

far, citizens of the European Union vote for representatives from national party lists. The candidate campaigns at the national level and represents national parties.

However, more crucial is the fact that there is a significant difference in the competitive dynamics depending on whether congruent or incongruent electoral systems are in place for national and European elections in each country. Electoral systems are congruent when national and European elections follow the same principle, such as proportional representation. Incongruence arises when national elections use the majority voting system while European elections employ proportional representation. An example of this is the United Kingdom.

Particularly for smaller parties, the proportional voting system forms the basis for their electoral success in European elections. Smaller parties often struggle to gain representation in national elections where the first-past-the-post system is used. They may not win enough votes in individual districts to secure a seat. The proportional representation system allows smaller parties, including challenger parties, to gain representation in the European Parliament even if they do not have the same popular support as significant mainstream parties. The UK Independence Party (UKIP) example shows this with great clarity. While UKIP has had little success at the national level, the party has consistently performed better in European elections, even becoming the strongest party in the UK with 28% in the 2014 European elections.

This, in turn, has implications for parties' competitive behaviour and competition dynamics. Incongruent electoral systems may necessitate strategic adjustments by political parties to accommodate the varying incentives and conditions in national and European elections.

In countries with a first-past-the-post electoral system, only two major parties usually have realistic chances of entering parliament. In contrast, the proportional representation system in European elections allows smaller parties to gain parliamentary representation. This means the competitive dynamics in national and European elections differ in countries with incongruent electoral systems. In countries with a first-past-the-post system, parties only have to compete with another major party in national elections. As smaller parties have a lower chance of being elected to parliament at the national level, mainstream parties have less incentive to respond to their issues in national elections. However, a different scenario unfolds in European elections. The proportional representation principle allows several parties to enter parliament, increasing the pressure to respond to (new) challengers. This leads to a higher systemic salience, indicating the degree to which parties align with the issue agenda of other parties (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015). In such contexts, incongruent electoral systems could prompt parties to emphasise European issues more strongly to enhance voter mobilisation and their prospects in European elections.

Conversely, in countries with congruent electoral systems, the disparities between national and European elections may be less pronounced, as the incentives for political parties are more similar. In such countries, parties may be less motivated to emphasise European issues, as voter

preferences and the political agenda are more alike in both types of elections. This leads to the following hypotheses.

H1a: Countries with incongruent electoral systems between national and European elections have a significantly different competitive dynamic than countries with congruent electoral systems.

H1b: The Europe issue is significantly more salient in countries with incongruent electoral systems between national and European elections than in countries with congruent electoral systems.

2.3 Competition Dynamics in a Multi-Level Electoral System

The previous discussions have demonstrated that the competition dynamics in multi-level electoral systems are shaped by three key components: First, the second-order nature of European Elections. Second, the integration into a multi-level election system and the increasing politicisation of the Europe issue in election campaigns – both at the national and European level. Third, the influence of the electoral system, e.g. whether it is congruent or incongruent.

Therefore, the next step is to examine the influence of the increasing significance of the Europe issue on the strategy options of parties in an MLES.

To analyse competition dynamics, it is necessary to differentiate between party types. Party types can generally be constructed or mapped based on various aspects or dimensions and aggregated into typologies (e.g. Beyme, 1984; Krouwel, 2006; Lucardie, 2007; Decker, 2011). Common classifications are usually based on party families or government status.

Party families represent similar political values, are characterised by a definable ideological basis, and have a historically grown genetic identity (Mair and Mudde, 1998). The classification into party families is based on the cleavage model of Lipset and Rokkan (1967). Along four primary cleavages¹³, the traditional party families emerged: conservative, socialist, Christian democratic, liberal, and communist party families.

Hence, an additional distinction is made between government and opposition parties. Government parties include those that are part of the national government during the election, while opposition parties are those represented in parliament but not in charge. Research on national elections has demonstrated that the party's status as either a government or opposition party impacts its ability to mobilise the Europe issue (e.g. Sitter, 2001; Netjes and Binnema, 2007; De Vries and Van de Wardt, 2011). At the national level, several studies have examined the influence of government

¹³ Owner versus worker, church versus state, industry versus land, and center versus periphery.

participation on party positions regarding the Europe issue (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2013). However, the categorisation based on party families or government status is not ideal for adequately assessing the competition dynamics, as these categories may not necessarily capture the strategic and tactical differences between parties. The differentiation between "mainstream" and "challenger" parties better captures the dynamics of competition, as they refer to the strategic positions and behaviour of parties within the political system. This distinction has become increasingly significant in the literature, reflecting a deeper understanding of the dynamics within party systems (Meguid, 2005; Hobolt and De Vries, 2015).

Therefore, in this thesis, I differentiate between mainstream and challenger parties. Mainstream and challenger parties differ in their goals, strategies, and resources, which affect their behaviour and the electoral outcome. This differentiation provides a more nuanced understanding of party dynamics in European election campaigns than traditional classifications based solely on party families or government status.

Next, I will explain the strategies of issue competition for both party types, specifically focusing on party issue emphasis and position-taking. Due to the peculiarities of the Europe issue, the parties' articulation of this issue in election campaigns becomes a particular strategic challenge.

2.3.1 Strategy Options of Mainstream Parties

First and foremost, we must define what the term 'mainstream party' means. Mainstream parties generally belong to the political establishment, i.e., they have grown historically, already have government experience in most cases, and hardly ever challenge the existing political system. In particular, they are characterised by their loyalty to the political system (Abedi, 2004), i.e., they are system-friendly, which implies that they represent democratic, pluralistic views and are committed to the general rules of the political system. According to De Vries and Hobolt (2020, p. 20), mainstream parties can be seen as dominant parties, i.e., parties that control political competition. They are often on the centre-left or centre-right of the socioeconomic axis on the political spectrum (e.g. Marks *et al.*, 2002; Meguid, 2005; Adams *et al.*, 2006; Meguid, 2008). Akkerman *et al.* (2016, p. 7) sum it up: "the term 'mainstream' can encompass programmatic and positional centrism, the high salience of socioeconomic issues, and behaviour and stances that show commitment to the principles of liberal democracy and to the formal and informal rules of the political game".

How mainstream parties strategically behave in the MLES heavily depends on the issue type. The scope for action is relatively small for constitutive issues, e.g., issues that were programmatically constitutive for the parties during their founding phase and historical development. For example, Christian democratic parties are strongly connected to the "family" issue (Kersch, 2018, p. 66).

The Europe issue is particularly intriguing. Since Europe is not a constitutive issue for any of the party families that established themselves in Europe during the 20th century, the scope for action is generally much broader in this regard. It can be assumed, especially with the increasing importance of the issue, that the scope for action for mainstream parties has further expanded. As has already been demonstrated at the national level, unlike socio-economic issues, parties tend to position themselves less extreme on Europe (Grande, 2012, p. 294).

Nevertheless, due to the unique characteristics of the Europe issue, mainstream parties face significant strategic challenges. Following Marks and Wilson (2000, p. 435), mainstream parties have their “own “bounded rationality” that shapes how it comes to terms with new challenges and uncertainties”. The extent to which mainstream parties emphasise the Europe issue depends, on the one hand, on the strength of their historical and ideological roots (Marks *et al.*, 2002; Hooghe and Marks, 2018) and, on the other, on the intensity of the intra-party conflict (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996).

Regarding the Europe issue, Marks *et al.* (2002) demonstrated that the ideological background is essential for the parties' positioning on this issue. They find evidence that “party family is a stronger influence than the strategic competition, national location, participation in government, or the position of a party's supporters” (see also Hix and Lord, 1997; Marks *et al.*, 2002, p. 585). Emphasising the Europe issue risks losing generally mobilised voters from the classic right-left dimension (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004). Consequently, mainstream parties are averse to shifts in their position and are not inclined to address new issues.¹⁴

Second, mainstream parties must assess the extent of intra-party conflict concerning the European issue, as this factor significantly influences their scope for action. Europe traditionally generates intra-party conflict within mainstream parties (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; see also Hooghe *et al.*, 2002; Ferrara and Weishaupt, 2004) because the conflicts surrounding Europe do not align with the traditional left-right conflict line (Kriesi *et al.*, 2008; Hutter *et al.*, 2016b).

The intra-party conflict exists between the fundamental demand for more versus less Europe, as well as the substantive confrontation on specific sub-issues. Some members strongly advocate for deeper European integration, while others maintain a more critical stance. For example, the British Labour Party struggled with internal divisions over Brexit, with some members advocating for a second referendum while others supported leaving the EU outright. This conflict led to a loss of voter trust and a drop in the party's popularity. Therefore, presenting a coherent image and

¹⁴ Overall, however, it must be noted that challenger parties are also subject to restrictions in their choice of strategy due to internal factors. One factor is that party leadership and the party base are not always in unison and sometimes pursue different goals. Even if the party leadership believes in acting in the interests of its members and generating votes through strategic initiatives, this does not mean that the party base sees it in the same way. The party elite may encounter considerable resistance from individual wings or members (Harmel and Janda, 1994, p. 261). The internal structure can also be an obstacle. In particular, grassroots-democratically organised and highly institutionalised parties are often subject to a lack of flexibility, which prevents them from making strategic, short-term decisions.

avoiding displaying internal party conflicts in the public sphere is crucial for achieving success in elections.

With the issue's salience, intra-party conflict has also increased. For example, Edwards (2008) expert surveys illustrate a significant rise in intra-party conflict following the Maastricht treaty. However, variations between parties and countries were also evident.

Mainstream parties internally divided on Europe tend to de-emphasise it to avoid losing voter support (Steenbergen and Scott, 2004b; Edwards, 2008; Green-Pedersen, 2012; Spoon, 2012; Hellström and Blomgren, 2016). Therefore, they will not strongly emphasise the Europe issue in national or European elections. Mainstream parties with low intra-party conflict on the Europe issue are more flexible. However, Hellström and Blomgren (2016) demonstrate that not all internally divided parties can avoid the Europe issue. This is illustrated by the British Conservative Party, which has a widely divergent membership and is intensely engaged in public debates around Europe.

With the increasing politicisation of the issue, avoiding it also becomes increasingly difficult. Rather, it compels parties to engage with the issue and reconsider their positions. As Kerscher (2018) has been shown for Christian Democratic parties, these parties tend to adopt more negative positions, which results in greater intra-party dissent. Since internal dissent has increased, partly due to numerous crises, it can be assumed that the parties' positions have also become more negative.

H2: With increasing intra-party dissent, mainstream parties tend to adopt more negative positions towards Europe over time.

However, if mainstream parties still actively avoid the Europe issue, they create an opportunity window for new challenger parties. By exploiting the gap left by mainstream parties, challenger parties can attract disaffected voters who feel unrepresented by the established political order. Thus, mainstream parties' strategic decision to neglect the Europe issue may inadvertently fuel the rise of challenger parties, leading to a more fragmented political landscape.

2.3.2 Strategy Options of Challenger Parties

Challenger parties differentiate themselves through their characteristics compared to mainstream parties and their strategic behaviour in party competition.

While mainstream parties often represent established political ideologies and have a strong presence within the political system, challenger parties typically emerge as alternatives to the status quo. Challenger parties assert that mainstream parties cannot represent the general population's interests and position themselves as authentic representatives of the people. Challenger parties can be found across the entire political spectrum, from radical left to radical

right¹⁵. Furthermore, they are often system-critical and express their stance in protest or emphasise their critical attitude toward the general policy (Jun, 2013, p. 128). As a result, challenger parties tend to position themselves extremely to differentiate themselves to be perceived by potential new voters (Adams *et al.*, 2006). Many of them originated in a movement and are characterised by simple structures.

Unlike mainstream parties, challenger parties do not yet have power (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020, p. 20). Mainstream parties usually have government experience or a good chance of getting into government. In contrast, challenger parties were not yet part of a government or had enough power to dictate policies. Furthermore, challenger parties are initially not interested in participating in government. They don't need to concern themselves with potentially alienating coalition partners in the national electoral arena.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the party type can change over time. Parties previously categorised as challenger parties have transformed into mainstream parties, as exemplified by the case of the Green Party in Germany. While they were formerly referred to as a challenger party until the mid-1990s, they transitioned to a mainstream party in 1998 when they entered government. Further examples are Italy's Lega Nord and Greece's Syriza. This evolution underscores the dynamic nature of party politics and highlights the potential for shifts in party status within the political landscape over time.

Challenger parties exhibit a notably higher degree of flexibility in their strategic behaviour than mainstream parties for different reasons. The risk of alienating voters through specific strategic actions, such as a change in issue emphasis or position, is considerably lower. This is attributable to the fact that addressing the broad electorate is not initially the primary objective of challenger parties; instead, they concentrate on targeting their core voters (Ezrow *et al.*, 2011). In addition, challenger parties are often young parties that have not existed for long. Consequently, their core voter constituencies tend to remain more fluid. Particularly for new parties, the stakes are much lower, and each newly acquired voter represents a significant gain.

Parties' use of this flexibility was particularly evident during the financial crisis. Far-left and far-right parties exhibited significant shifts in their positions, while mainstream parties were more resistant to change. De Sio *et al.* (2016, p. 490) show that the “impact of changes in support for EU integration appears asymmetrical among parties, as anti-EU parties received increased opportunities between 2009 and 2014 regarding public support and internal cohesion while for pro-EU parties, the story was reversed”.

¹⁵ The main difference between right-wing and left-wing system critical parties is what they mean by "the people". Left-wing parties take a class-based approach. Right-wing parties define this on the basis of nationalistic and cultural criteria that strongly exclude minorities. Both – parties on the extreme left and right – form an extreme opposition position to existing parties and promise the people better popular representation (Jun, 2013).

Based on the SOE theory, challenger parties tend to gain from European elections. At the individual level, voters pay attention to national issues and use European elections to express their dissatisfaction with national governments (e.g. Clark and Rohrschneider, 2009; Hobolt and Wittrock, 2011). In addition, voters decide to vote more for small and extreme parties in European elections. This suggests that challenger parties enjoy an edge in European elections over national ones. However, the magnitude of this advantage varies depending on several factors. These factors play a crucial role in determining the effectiveness and adaptability of challenger parties in navigating the complexities of electoral competition.

First is the size of the "window of opportunity" mainstream parties provide. Second, the scope of challenger parties' positioning, i.e., whether they focus on one or multiple political issues. Third, the extent to which challenger parties connect their winning issues with other topics, i.e., creating issue linkages, thereby increasing the likelihood of success in multiple electoral arenas.

First and foremost, it is crucial to consider the size of the "window of opportunity", e.g. the extent to which mainstream parties leave space for challengers to gain political traction and capitalise on voter dissatisfaction. A larger window of opportunity indicates a greater potential for challenger parties to mobilise support and challenge the status quo. Conversely, a narrow window may constrain the ability of challenger parties to effectively win seats in an election.

Mainstream parties often leave a window of opportunity open when they fail to adequately address issues demanded by their electorate. This phenomenon is rooted, as previously discussed, in the historical legacy and intra-party dissent of mainstream parties.

This creates an opportunity for challenger parties to focus on issues that mainstream parties neglect strategically. Particularly advantageous for challenger parties is the ability to mobilise around issues related to the "winners versus losers of globalisation" conflict line (e.g. Kriesi *et al.*, 2008). As mainstream parties are constrained on these issues, challenger parties have a particular incentive to mobilise these issues, i.e. issues not aligned with the dominant left-right dimension such as Europe, immigration, or the environment (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020, p. 120). In the 1990s, research already showed that right-wing parties achieved considerable success with the help of the immigration issue (e.g. Kitschelt, 1997; Mudde, 2007; Zaslove, 2012; Mudde, 2013).

In this way, challenger parties act as issue entrepreneurs (Hobolt and De Vries, 2015, p. 1163). Issue entrepreneurship describes the strategy of „active mobilisation of a previously ignored and not divisive issue by adopting a policy position on that issue substantially different from the status quo position of the mainstream“ (Hobolt and De Vries, 2015, p. 1163). This leads to challenger parties typically occupying more extreme positions. What is particularly innovative about this concept is the integration of two crucial theoretical concepts: salience and spatial theory. The mechanism underlying this strategy follows product establishment in the free market economy. A product can only be successfully established if it is new and innovative (e.g. the first mobile

phone) or dramatically improves an existing product (e.g. the further development of the mobile phone into the iPhone) (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020, p. 114). However, ensuring demand for such a product is essential for the customer. Hence, political competition is nothing other than the interplay of supply and demand based on the basic economic principle. Like consumers, voters appreciate it when issues that are important to them but have been neglected so far are addressed in the election campaign. This means that parties must either offer something new, i.e., new issues, positions, etc. or improve their offerings by putting existing issues more firmly on the agenda or by changing their position (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020, pp. 53-55).

What role does this play in the context of the multi-level electoral system? De Vries and Hobolt (2020) demonstrated that challenger parties take advantage of this opportunity on a national level and benefit from their role as issue entrepreneurs. It can be expected that challenger parties will also act as issue entrepreneurs in European elections.

First, challenger parties have better chances of winning seats in the European Parliament, as Schulte-Cloos (2018) demonstrated. Second, the Europe issue is growing in importance. As the issue gains importance, it presents greater opportunities for new challenger parties to succeed, particularly in European elections. The increasing salience of the Europe issue, especially in European Parliament elections, suggests that challenger parties can leverage the advantage of issue entrepreneurship

H3a: Challenger parties are more likely to engage as issue entrepreneurs in European than national elections.

The second important contextual factor concerns the scope of challenger parties' positioning. This encompasses the strategic decision of whether to concentrate on a single political issue or to adopt a broader political agenda. One strategic option is to emphasise a specific issue extensively and concentrate solely on that particular issue. This describes the strategy of single-issue parties like the British UKIP or the Austrian Liste Martin. Both parties have strongly focused on the European issue. Focusing on a single issue allows for clarity of message and differentiation from mainstream parties. The aim of this strategy is to attract support by presenting themselves as the most dedicated and effective proponents of that particular issue. Nevertheless, this strategy has potential drawbacks. However, it may also limit the party's appeal to a broader electorate. One major challenge is that voters have diverse concerns and interests that extend beyond a single issue. A single-issue party may struggle to attract a broad support base by focusing exclusively on one issue. Additionally, once a single-issue party achieves its policy objective or loses relevance, it may struggle to maintain its appeal and viability in the long term, which was the case of UKIP after the Brexit referendum.

One possible solution to circumvent this problem would be flexibly adjusting issue priorities. For example, if the Europe issue is no longer promising, shifting focus to the immigration issue could be a viable alternative. However, this strategy risks inadvertently creating a window of opportunity for other challenger parties if they fail to maintain ownership of the issue. This is exemplified by the case of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ). Despite its Eurosceptic stance, the FPÖ neglected the European issue, particularly during its time in government, and instead focused on the immigration issue, even in European elections where this issue was not significant. As a result, the Liste Martin emerged, claimed ownership over the Europe issue, and succeeded. By neglecting the Europe issue, the FPÖ missed an opportunity to establish itself as a credible voice on European matters.

Therefore, the third contextual condition is particularly crucial within the context of the multi-level electoral system. A primary challenge, especially for eurosceptic challenger parties, is that the Europe issue may not always be significant at the national level. While the European Union (EU) and its policies may not always be at the forefront of national political debates, disregarding the Europe issue entirely could be detrimental to the strategic interests of challenger parties. However, instead of neglecting the Europe issue, challenger parties would have a significant advantage if they managed to create "European issue linkages." This entails connecting the Europe issue with another important issue, such as immigration. In this specific scenario, parties would attempt to frame the immigration issue to highlight its connection to Europe, for example, by emphasising that EU policies cause immigration. By doing so, challenger parties can effectively broaden the scope of their political agenda and capitalise on the increasing importance of the Europe issue, even in domestic contexts where the Europe issue may not naturally command significant attention.

Furthermore, building European issue linkages allows challenger parties to shape the narrative surrounding of key policy debates and influence public perceptions. By framing immigration as a direct consequence of EU policies, challenger parties can underscore their eurosceptic stance and capitalise on public discontent with perceived shortcomings in EU governance. For national elections, Helbling *et al.* (2010) demonstrate how parties frame the Europe issue differently. They have shown that it strongly depends on their interests at the national level, their general position on the EU, and whether they are established parties or not.

This strategic issue linkage allows challenger parties to align their policy priorities with broader societal concerns while leveraging the Europe issue as a focal point for mobilising support and galvanising their electoral base.

H3c: If eurosceptic challenger parties successfully create "European issue linkages" by connecting the Europe issue with other salient issues, such as immigration, they can broaden their political agenda and increase their electoral appeal.

2.3.3 Mainstream Party Reactions

After examining the issue competition behaviour of mainstream and challenger parties in the MLES separately, it becomes crucial to address the implications of their behaviour. Mainstream parties' avoidance behaviour regarding the Europe issue opens up an opportunity window for new challengers in European elections. Consequently, mainstream parties face the follow-up problem of deciding how to respond to these new challengers, as every new competitor, primarily if it operates within the party's ideological spectrum, means a potential loss of votes and, consequently, a loss of power.

Research shows that mainstream parties react directly to challenger parties with different strategies (e.g. Meguid, 2005; Meguid, 2008; Abou-Chadi, 2016; Meijers, 2017)¹⁶. Taken together, mainstream parties have three main options in their response to challenger parties: disengage, create distance, or converge towards them (Meguid, 2005, p. 349).

Strategy of Disengagement

The first decision parties take regarding challenger parties is whether to engage or disengage (Downs, 2001, p. 26)¹⁷. If parties decide to "disengage", this means ignoring the challenger party and, in fact, a strategy of doing nothing (Downs, 2001, p. 26; Meguid, 2005, p. 349). Mainstream parties neglect challengers as a form of punishment. The aim is to give the impression that these challengers are trivial and unworthy of their attention and to ensure no one is interested in the challenger party, which disappears into insignificance. In short, a party, whoever is not talked about, does not exist.

Mainstream parties hope that if they do not pay attention to the challenger party, the voters will not either. However, this strategy also entails considerable risks. According to Downs (2001, p. 26), mainstream parties "run the risk of having the members of an established party system appear to their constituents, the media, their central party headquarters, and the international community as derelict in their 'democratic duties'". Mainstream parties could be criticised for failing to fulfil their elected responsibilities and being inactive (Van Noije *et al.*, 2008). According to research, catch-all parties primarily employ this strategy when dealing with internal dissent (Adam *et al.*, 2016, p. 270). In the worst case, the strategy could have the opposite effect: Instead of weakening, it could even strengthen the challenger party. The extent to which an emerging challenger party can be ignored depends on two critical factors: The timing and whether mainstream parties within a political system act consistently. First of all, timing is crucial. The strategy of ignorance can only be applied during the establishment phase of the challenger party. Once the challenger party has established itself as a serious political opponent, it is impossible to ignore it. In concrete terms, the strategy can only be adopted when the challenger party's media presence is still low and it is

¹⁶ Even before the rise of right-wing and Eurosceptic parties, numerous researchers showed that the behaviour of mainstream parties influences the success of new parties (Hauss and Rayside, 1978; Kitschelt, 1988; Ignazi, 1992; Müller-Rommel, 1998).

¹⁷ Also referred to in the literature as inclusion and exclusion (Goodwin, 2011, p. 23).

not yet part of parliament. The second condition is that all relevant mainstream parties must choose the strategy of ignorance. If only one mainstream party decides to ignore the other or both decide on an "engage" strategy, the challenger party gains political importance (Meguid, 2005, p. 350). Since both mainstream parties are still political opponents despite their shared antipathy to the challenger party, there is always a risk that one party will deviate from the agreement.

*Strategies of Distance*¹⁸

Rather than completely disregarding the challenger party, mainstream parties could also distance themselves from them. If all mainstream parties agree to distance themselves, they can exclude the challenger party by forming a cordon sanitaire (Downs, 2001, p. 27; Downs, 2002). In this case, mainstream parties refuse to cooperate with challenger parties. In doing so, they effectively communicate to supporters of challenger parties that their vote is wasted (Art, 2007; Goodwin, 2011). The only commonality shared among mainstream parties is their antipathy towards challenger parties. At the same time, they are also fighting over votes, and if one party sees a strategic advantage to deviate, it certainly will do so. This implies that an anti-challenger party block like this can also easily fall apart. In addition, a cordon sanitaire favours minority governments, as is the case in Sweden, which can further weaken the stability of the political system (Downs, 2012, p. 49 f.). How effective such a cordon sanitaire is is controversially discussed. Some studies show an increase in the radicalisation of parties (Downs, 2002; Van Spanje and Van Der Brug, 2007), while others show the opposite (Akkerman and Rooduijn, 2014). In addition, this strong demarcation may lead challenger party supporters to show even greater solidarity with them, and the party may become more radicalised (Van Spanje and Van Der Brug, 2007, p. 1023). In principle, this strategy is only viable as long as it is possible to find other parliamentary majorities. If the challenging party is too large at some point, it can hardly be excluded completely (Schellenberg, 2011, p. 327).

Another distancing strategy is demonisation. Demonisation refers to mainstream parties intentionally placing challenger parties in a morally reprehensible corner (e.g. Mouffe, 2005; Saveljeff, 2011; Schwörer and Fernández-García, 2021). The goal is to deny them their legitimacy. For instance, they link challenger parties with right-wing extremism (Mouffe, 2005), racism, or national socialism (Hellström and Nilsson, 2010; Van Spanje and Azrout, 2019). Parties thus become practically unelectable, or as Van Spanje and Azrout (2019, p. 291) phrase it: 'if a party is labelled "neo-Nazi" or "fascist," its viability as an option in a democracy is clearly in question'. Research shows that vote shares decline for parties associated with these issues, at least temporarily and under certain conditions (Van Heerden and Van der Brug, 2017; Van Spanje and

¹⁸ Mainstream parties can also take legal actions (Downs, 2001, p. 27), like banning the challenger party. However, this is extremely rare in Western Europe (Bale, 2007), requiring several legal hurdles. Another approach would be to raise or establish a threshold. Depending on its level, a threshold can prevent parties from gaining seats in Parliament. This would particularly impact challenger parties and small established parties that may fail to overcome the threshold and, therefore, fail to secure representation in Parliament.

Azrou, 2019). Moreover, demonisation is less common than initially assumed, and centre-left parties are more likely to use this instrument than conservative ones (Schwörer and Fernández-García, 2021).

Strategies of Accommodation

One accommodation strategy option is co-optation (Downs, 2001). Mainstream parties seek to weaken the challenger party by moving closer to its policy position and occupying the issue (Bale, 2003; Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009; Schumacher and van Kersbergen, 2014; Han, 2015). By doing this, they try to prevent the challenger party from building up a monopolistic position and “take the wind out of [their] sails” (Downs, 1957, p. 131). The likelihood of accommodation by the mainstream party is more significant the closer the mainstream and challenger parties are ideologically (Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009; Han, 2015), particularly on cleavage issues like immigration or Europe (e.g. Van Spanje, 2010; Carvalho, 2013; Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020). Several studies show a correlation between the emergence of Eurosceptic challenger parties and mainstream parties' adoption of clearly Eurosceptic positions (Meijers, 2017; Conti, 2018; Williams and Ishiyama, 2018). The aim is to win back voters who voted for the challenger party. Parties have changed their positions in this direction, and their supporters have moved to (Abou-Chadi and Stoetzer, 2020). While this approach may succeed in winning back some initially considered lost voters, it also carries inherent risks. Mainstream parties must carefully navigate a trade-off between moving closer to a particular position without drifting too far towards an extreme pole, which could alienate voters on the other side. It primarily serves to increase an issue's salience and enhance the visibility of challengers. Moreover, this approach may potentially provoke a strong reaction from the challenger party, leading to its radicalisation and positioning itself as the original or authentic alternative (Decker, 2004, p. 268).

Based on the increasing importance of the Europe issue and against the backdrop of the MLES, the question arises of how mainstream parties specifically respond to challenger parties under these conditions. According to the findings of Hutter *et al.* (2016b), challenger parties are not a necessary or sufficient factor for the politicisation of the Europe issue. Furthermore, Braun and Grande (2021) demonstrate that mainstream parties drive the Europe issue forward.

However, challenger parties still play an important role. The way mainstream parties deal with them essentially determines their success or failure (Bale, 2008) and to what extent challenger parties succeed in translating their successes to the national level (Schulte-Cloos, 2018). Whether a successful challenger party exists within the party system has substantial implications for the competition dynamics. First, the presence of a successful challenger party raises the competitive pressure on established mainstream parties. They must make greater efforts to retain their voter base and convince potential voters of the attractiveness of their policies. Second, they influence the political agenda. Challenger parties can change political issues and discussions by introducing

new approaches and ideas. This can lead to established parties being forced to address new or neglected issues. Third, the presence of a challenger party leads to a strategic adjustment by mainstream parties. Faced with the success of a challenger party, mainstream parties may need to adjust their strategies to better compete. This may involve changes in campaign strategy and policy positioning.

This means that merely by the presence of challenger parties, it becomes important for mainstream parties to adapt strategically and decide how to respond to these challengers. As the Europe issue gains significance in both arenas, parties will seek to factor this development into their strategic considerations. The increasing salience of European issues on the national level could lead both mainstream and challenger parties to intensify their efforts in European elections to present themselves as competent and committed actors in European affairs to win the favour of voters. Mainstream parties adjust the salience of the Europe issue in their political campaigns to counter the success of challenger parties. Suppose successful challenger parties emphasise the Europe issue more strongly. In that case, mainstream parties also emphasise this issue to signal to voters that they take concerns and issues related to Europe seriously. This adjustment in salience leads to a convergence of the political agenda between mainstream and challenger parties.

H4a: If a successful challenger party exists within a party system, mainstream parties align their political agenda with that of the challenger party.

How mainstream parties react depends, among other things, on which party family they belong to. Research shows that mainstream parties are more sensitive to changes made by members within the same party family. This means that “left-wing parties are particularly responsive to the policy shifts of other left-wing parties, while right-wing parties respond disproportionately to other right-wing parties” (Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009, p. 828). Therefore, mainstream parties ideologically close to the challenger party are expected to increase the salience of the issue emphasised by the challenger party and simultaneously move closer to their position. These mainstream parties aim to make the challenger party irrelevant and present themselves as a successful alternative. On the other hand, mainstream parties ideologically distant from the challenger party are expected to be more likely to downplay the issue and distance themselves from its position.

H4b: Mainstream parties ideologically close to the challenger party are more likely to emphasise the issue raised by the challenger party and converge in their position.

H4c: Mainstream parties ideologically distant from the challenger party are more likely to downplay the issue raised by the challenger party and take a distant position

The response of mainstream parties can, however, in turn, lead to a reaction from challenger parties. The challenger party responds to the adjustments made by mainstream parties by adapting its strategies accordingly, aiming to differentiate itself from established parties and emphasise its unique positions. This dynamic results in a cycle of strategic adaptation and response between mainstream and challenger parties. The dynamic of strategic adaptation and response between mainstream and challenger parties is an ongoing process based on the interaction between the parties.

H4d: When mainstream parties adjust their strategies in response to the presence of a successful challenger party, the challenger party will also adapt its strategies to maintain its distinctiveness.

3. Data and Methods

3.1 Research Design

To understand the impact of the politicisation of the Europe issue on the competition dynamics in European elections, a multi-level examination is required. The research's challenge, therefore, lies in conducting a comparison across three dimensions. First, a comparison between the national and European level. This allows for examining whether the same mechanisms transfer from the national level to the European level and whether the changes at the national arena also led to changes at the European arena. Second, adopting a cross-national comparative perspective, which involves comparing significant EU member states, is essential. This facilitates the examination of the extent to which individual countries exhibit similarities and differences and the degree to which disparities depend on varying institutional conditions. Third, an inter-temporal comparison. Since European integration is an ongoing process rather than a completed one, it is essential to consider developments over time and assess the similarities between successive European elections to determine whether there are stable patterns. The research design presented below considers all three dimensions.

Period of investigation

The investigation period ranges from 1994 to 2019, encompassing six European elections and up to nine national elections per country due to varying parliamentary terms and snap elections (see Table 1).

Table 1: List of National and European Elections

Country	National elections	N	European election	N
Austria	1994, 1995, 1999, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2013, 2017, 2019	9	1996, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019	6
France	1995, 2002, 2007, 2012, 2017	5	1994, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019	6
Germany	1994, 1998, 2002, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2017	7	1994, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019	6
United Kingdom	1992, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2017, 2019	8	1994, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019	6

Note: In France, the national elections encompass the first round of presidential elections instead of elections to the national parliament.

The analysis starts with the first European election following the Maastricht Treaty, which was of immense significance and marked a major shift in the European integration process. Maastricht is particularly important as it has given the EU a significant transfer of authority and expanded

the scope of rights and activities (Hooghe and Marks, 2009, p. 21; Leuffen *et al.*, 2012, p. 21). This also had an immense impact on public opinion on the European Union, as the public became more euroskeptic (Çiftçi, 2005).

In particular, since it has been shown that the Europe issue did not play a significant role in the elections of 1989 and 1994 (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996), the Maastricht Treaty can be considered an appropriate starting point for systematically analysing the influence of the politicisation of the Europe issue on the dynamics of competition in European election campaigns. Additionally, the long research period allows for examining temporal variations in the analysis of party competition. Moreover, the study period encompasses various enlargement phases, intensification, and crises and can, therefore, be divided into three phases:

- *I Post-Maastricht Phase (1994-2004)*: This phase includes the effects of the founding treaties of the EU and subsequent treaties such as the Treaty of Nice and the Treaty of Amsterdam. It also encompasses the debates surrounding Eastern enlargements. Additionally, the first Eastern enlargement represents the largest expansion of the EU, bringing about significant changes in the shape and significance of the EU. It included the European elections of 1994 and 1999.
- *II European Union's Turbulent Phase (2004-2014)*: This period encompasses significant events such as the failure of the Constitutional Treaty and the Treaty of Lisbon, the effects of the Eastern enlargements, the heightened debate surrounding Turkey's accession, and the occurrence of the Eurozone crisis and the Greek crisis. This phase includes the European elections of 2004 and 2009.
- *III Actual Transformation Phase (2014-2019)*: This phase is characterised by the implementation of the Spitzenkandidaten concept and the European refugee crisis and its consequences, which have led to a significant increase in Euroscepticism. This includes the elections of 2014 and 2019.

Country selection

Four countries—Austria, France, Germany, and the UK—were selected for analysis based on a most-similar-system design. The selection of these countries has been valuable in previous studies (Kriesi *et al.*, 2008; Kriesi *et al.*, 2012b; Hutter *et al.*, 2016b; Braun and Grande, 2021)¹⁹.

The most-similar-system design allows for analysing a limited number of countries with similar conditions. All of the countries under investigation are EU member states and classified as consolidated democracies throughout the entire study period. Central and East European countries that joined the EU in the later enlargement rounds are, therefore, not part of the study. At the same

¹⁹ Although additional countries are included in the individual project datasets, such as the Netherlands at the national level or Sweden in European elections, data for both levels are available only for these four countries.

time, these countries also exhibit differences in the duration of their membership, the degree of integration, the success of challenger parties, and various political and socio-economic contextual factors, such as the national party system (see also Dolezal *et al.*, 2016, p. 37).

First, in terms of the duration of their membership, France and Germany are founding members, while the UK joined in 1973 during the first round of enlargement after two decades of controversy. Britain's accession was contentious not only within its population and the members of the two major parties but also actively opposed by the French for a long time. Austria was already economically integrated into the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) but only became a member of the EU during the third round of enlargement in 1995.

Second, regarding the degree of integration, (Leuffen *et al.*, 2012). Austria, Germany, and France are highly integrated countries, with the latter being often referred to as "motors of integration" (Webber, 1999, p. 3). In contrast, the UK was neither a Eurozone nor a Schengen Area member, making it one of the least integrated member states.

Third, right-wing or Eurosceptic parties have experienced varying success in national and European elections (Kriesi, 2007; Treib, 2014). While the Front Nationale (FN) in France had already succeeded in the early 1990s, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) only began to gain significant success from 2013 onwards. Fourth, the countries differ in terms of their electoral systems. While France and Great Britain are characterised by incongruent electoral systems, meaning different electoral systems in national and European elections, Germany and Austria have congruent electoral systems.

Taken together, the research design for analysing party competition dynamics in European elections considers the unique character of the EU. The study period from 1994 to 2019 covers 24 European election campaigns and 29 national elections.

3.2 Data Sources

When selecting the data source, numerous aspects need to be considered. First, data is required that allows for a comparison between the national and European election arenas. Second, the data should be comparable over an extended period. For research purposes, mass media data is the best fit. In today's "audience democracies" (Manin, 1997), politics occurs, at least most visibly, in the mass media. Particularly before an election, voters take their cue from media information to make their voting decision. Political actors have adapted their strategies to this logic. As a result, parties must get their issues into the media. Numerous studies have shown that media data is an excellent source for investigating the politicisation of an issue (e.g. De Vreese, 2001; Kriesi *et al.*, 2008; Kriesi *et al.*, 2012b; Statham and Trenz, 2013b; Hutter *et al.*, 2016b). It was considered that media data is not a neutral source of information and can play a role in political campaigns. However,

with media data, it is possible to examine the specific issues addressed and the actors' positions on these issues.

An alternative would be Manifesto data from the Comparative Manifesto Project for national elections and the European Election Study (Euromanifestos) for European elections. Although the project includes information on both positive and negative positions, the data can only be used to calculate general positions toward European integration. However, a more detailed categorisation is needed for research purposes, which cannot be achieved through manifesto data. Additionally, manifesto data always have the disadvantage of only showing what parties focused on before an election but not the focus during the election campaign.

Another possible data source is expert surveys, which offer the advantage of differentiating between various aspects of the Europe issue. However, they may not be as suitable for measuring salience and often do not directly address individual elections (Laver and Hunt, 1992; Benoit and Laver, 2006). Elite surveys are also unsuitable since they are only available for a limited number of elections and do not provide distinctions between various aspects of the Europe issue (Wüst *et al.*, 2006).

Media data can be collected from various media sources, including traditional newspapers (Kriesi *et al.*, 2008; Hutter *et al.*, 2016b), TV news (Walter, 2017), and social media platforms (Popa *et al.*, 2020). Each of these data sources has its advantages and disadvantages. TV news often neglects smaller parties, and social media data may not be available for the entire investigation period. Therefore, quality newspaper data is the most suitable for the analysis.

Currently, no dataset includes national and European elections, so a new dataset must be created by combining existing datasets. Combining datasets is a standard method in research on party behaviour. Dolezal (2012) offers preliminary insights by replicating analyses conducted on national election campaigns to those of elections to the European Parliament and focusing on the structure of political conflict in campaign debates. Further examples²⁰ are Spoon and Klüver (2014) and Braun and Schmitt (2018), who combined national and European manifestos.

For the present analysis, the media data for national elections from Kriesi *et al.* (2020)²¹ and the European Election Campaign (EEC) for European elections from Grande and Braun (2021a) are combined. The datasets are excellent for analysing party competition dynamics in the MLES context, as they share the same structure, are available for the whole post-Maastricht period, and include information on the salience of issues and the actors' positions.

²⁰ Meyer *et al.* (2020) merged information from press releases and newspaper articles for Austrian parties and used it for further studies (Haselmayer *et al.*, 2017a; Haselmayer *et al.*, 2017b). Merz (2017) combined manifesto data with campaign debate data to examine party strategies in mediated environments.

²¹ The dataset itself is a combination of the projects "National Political Change in a Globalizing World" (NPW, 2002-2009), "The Politicization of Europe" (PoLEU, 2009-2013), and "Political Conflict in the Shadow of the Great Recession" (POLCON, 2014-2019), which can be downloaded through the Political Conflict and Democracy (PolDem) platform (<https://poldem.eui.eu/the-observatory/>).

The data in both datasets are based on core sentence-based media content analysis of two quality newspapers. At the national level, these newspapers are Die Presse (Austria), Le Monde (France), Süddeutsche Zeitung (Germany), and The Times (UK). For the European level, the newspapers are Die Presse and Der Standard (Austria), Le Figaro and Le Monde (France), Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and Süddeutsche Zeitung (Germany), and The Guardian and The Times (UK)²². Data collection took place on the national level six weeks before the election. In contrast, European elections were conducted four weeks before the election due to the shorter campaign period. The EEC data categorise issues into 11 broad categories: Welfare, Economy, Cultural Liberalism, Europe, Culture, Defence, Immigration, Environment, Security, Infrastructure, and Institutional. The PolDem data is also categorised into similar issue categories. For the analysis, the issue categories in the PolDem dataset are aligned with those in the EEC dataset (see Table 16 Appendix). The combined data set is used to measure the overall party issue emphasis of political parties and the salience of the Europe issue concerning other political issues during the election campaign.

To adequately address the significance of the Europe issue, as explained in detail in the theory chapter, it is insufficient to analyse it only compared to other political issues. Since the Europe issue is crucial for the competition dynamics in European elections, it is necessary to zoom into it to gain a more detailed understanding. Here, it is also essential to combine datasets from the national and European level. The PolDem dataset by Grande *et al.* (2020) will be used for the national level, while for the European level, the EEC_EU dataset by Grande and Braun (2021b) will be utilised. Both datasets include various subtypes of the Europe issue based on Bartolini's distinction between general orientations, constitutive, and policy-related issues (Bartolini, 2005, p. 310; for similar distinction see Schmitt, 2007).

These three categories are further divided into six sub-categories. The first is (1) general orientations. The constitutive issue falls into three categories: (2) economic deepening, (3) non-economic deepening, and (4) widening. Issues in the category of economic deepening are related to the transfer of competencies from the national level to the EU level, primarily focusing on the first pillar of the Maastricht Treaty, like the Single European Act. The category of non-economic deepening encompasses the transfer of competencies related to the second and third pillars of the Maastricht Treaty, as well as more general topics related to competence transfer and decision-making structures. Examples include common foreign and security policy or the Constitutional Treaty. The third category, widening, pertains to the horizontal dimension of integration, which involves the accession of new member states and the associated conditions. Policy issues are divided into (5) intervention in economic and (6) non-economic issues, which relate to whether

²² For European elections, two newspapers are necessary due to the low salience of the Europe issue to gather a sufficient number of core sentences required for the sophisticated data analysis (Grande and Braun, 2017, p. 13).

and how Europe expands its competencies in the economic or non-economic domains (for further description, see Dolezal *et al.*, 2016; Hutter *et al.*, 2016a, p. 140).

3.3 Analytical Methods and Operationalisation

The data provide numerous opportunities for quantitative analysis to examine the dynamics of party competition. In addition to descriptive statistics, regressions will be calculated to better understand the causal relations between competition strategies. These regression analyses will be further explained at the respective points in the empirical analysis where they are applied. The analyses are conducted at the level of elections, countries, and parties. In the following, I explain the operationalisation of the key variables.

Mainstream and challenger parties

The discussion in Chapter 2 underscores the significance of distinguishing between mainstream and challenger parties for analysing party competition in European election campaigns. Mainstream parties are typically associated with the political establishment, having a long-standing history and often previous experience in governance, while rarely challenging the prevailing political system. In contrast, challenger parties, primarily without government experience, are characterised by extreme positions on cleavage issues and critical attitudes toward the system. Therefore, categorising parties into mainstream and challenger for the analysis is mainly based on two criteria: government experience and their position on cleavage issues. Given the study's specific focus on Eurosceptic challenger parties, a further distinction is made between these parties and other types of challenger parties. Mainstream parties are categorised as those with government experience, while parties that have not been part of the government since their establishment are classified as challengers.

To distinguish whether a challenger party is Eurosceptic, each party's position on the European issue in European elections is examined. The position of the actors is calculated using the dataset of Grande and Braun (2021a). The positioning of the actors ranges between -1 and +1, where -1 indicates an anti-attitude to an issue, 0 is an ambivalent attitude, and +1 is a pro-attitude. The average position is calculated for each election year for each relevant party in the party system (see Figure 33-36 in the Appendix). A party is considered relevant when it possesses coalition or blackmail potential (Sartori, 1976, p. 107 f.). Parties with coalition potential are seen as potential partners in forming governing coalitions. In contrast, parties with blackmail potential can exert significant influence even without being part of the government by being strong enough to hold a veto position, thereby influencing the direction of party competition. Table 2 presents the categorisation into different party types.

This classification approach provides a flexible and dynamic conceptualisation of challenger parties. It considers that parties can change over time, meaning that a challenger party can evolve

into a mainstream party. By acknowledging this possibility, the classification framework allows for a nuanced understanding of party dynamics and recognises the fluid nature of party positions and trajectories.

Table 2: Classification of Mainstream and Challenger Parties

		Mainstream party	Euroskeptic challenger party	Other challenger parties
1994	Austria	SPÖ ÖVP LIF	FPÖ Die Grünen	
	France	PS RPF RPR-UDF	FN PRG PCF	
	Germany	SPD CDU CSU FDP		Linke B90/Grüne
	UK	Lab Cons Lib	UKIP	
1999	Austria	SPÖ ÖVP LIF	FPÖ	Die Grünen
	France	PS RPF UMP UDF	FN PRG PCF	LV
	Germany	SPD CDU CSU FDP B90/Grüne		Linke
	UK	Lab Cons Lib	UKIP	
2004	Austria	SPÖ ÖVP LIF	FPÖ Liste Martin	Die Grünen
	France	PS RPF UMP UDF	FN PRG PCF	LV
	Germany	SPD CDU CSU FDP B90/Grüne		Linke
	UK	Lab Cons Lib	UKIP	
2009	Austria	SPÖ ÖVP LIF	FPÖ Liste Martin BZÖ	Die Grünen
	France	PS UMP MoDem	FN	LV
	Germany	SPD CDU CSU FDP B90/Grüne		Linke
	UK	Lab Cons Lib	UKIP BNP	GP

2014	Austria	SPÖ ÖVP NEOS Die Grünen	FPÖ	
	France	PS UMP MoDem	FN	ELLV
	Germany	SPD CDU CSU FDP B90/Grüne	AfD	Linke
	UK	Lab Cons Lib	UKIP BNP	GP
2019	Austria	SPÖ ÖVP NEOS Die Grünen	FPÖ	
	France	PS LR MoDem LREM	FN	ELLV
	Germany	SPD CDU CSU FDP B90/Grüne	AfD	Linke
	UK	Lab Cons Lib	Reform UK	GP

Issue emphasis, position, and intra-party conflict

Given that party competition in European elections is essentially structured by issue emphasis and party positioning, it is crucial to operationalise these key variables. A party's issue emphasis is measured through salience, calculated by the proportion of core sentences related to a specific issue compared to the total number of core sentences during an election campaign (Dolezal *et al.*, 2016; Schwarzbözl *et al.*, 2020).

The positioning ranges from -1 to +1, where -1 indicates an anti-attitude towards an issue, 0 shows an ambivalent attitude, and +1 indicates a pro-attitude (Dolezal *et al.*, 2016).

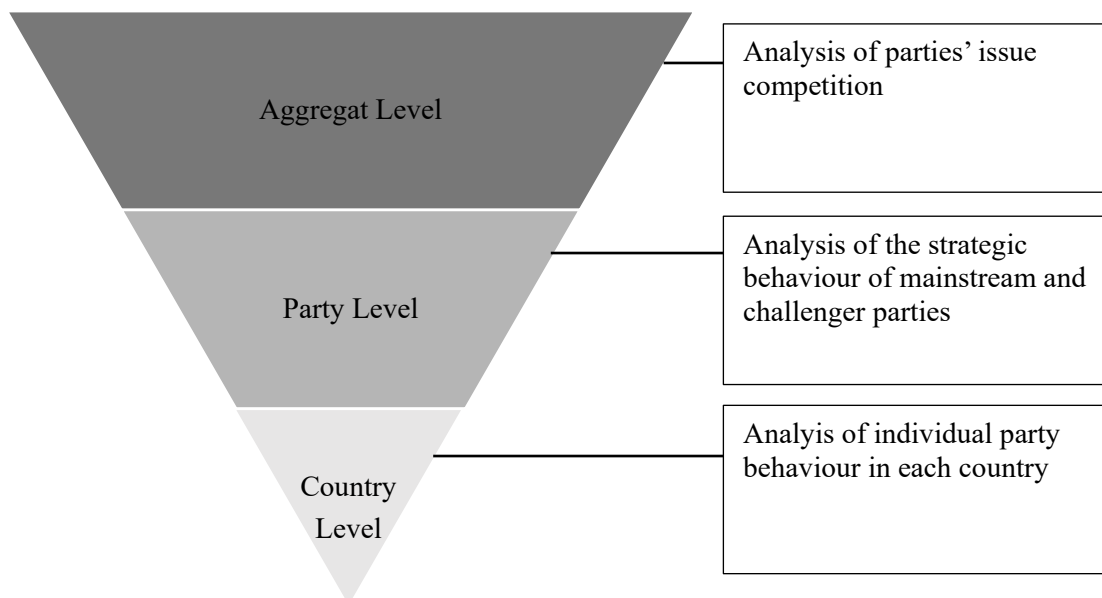
Intra-party conflict is understood as ideological discrepancy within a party. Since elections are an unfavourable time to measure intra-party dissent, as parties strive to present unity externally, the variable for intra-party dissent is derived from the CHES dataset (Jolly *et al.*, 2022). Experts assess intra-party conflict using an eleven-point scale, harmonised with the earlier waves of the Ray dataset (1999). The wave closest in time to the election is considered for each assessment.

4. Empirical Analysis

The theoretical discussions in the preceding chapters have revealed the multifaceted influences shaping competition dynamics in European elections, highlighting their inherent complexity. Institutional conditions such as electoral systems, the integration into the MLES, the significant and evolving importance of the European issue, and the challenge posed by eurosceptic challenger parties impact the dynamics. To fully grasp these dynamics, a nuanced approach is essential. Consequently, the analysis is divided into three levels, each with its specific focus (see Figure 1).

First, this study analyses issue competition on the aggregate level. This integrates the issue emphasis and position of parties, especially on the Europe issue, which will be analysed in detail by differentiating between constitutive and policy issues. Additionally, the study examines the impact of the electoral system.

Figure 1: Approach of the Empirical Analysis



Note: Own illustration

Second, the analysis shifts to the party level, focusing on analysing the behaviour of different party types, specifically mainstream and challenger parties. This entails closely examining how these parties engage with and respond to the prevailing issues in European elections.

Third, the analysis is focused on the individual party behaviour in each country. This entails a detailed examination of each country's specific conditions and dynamics, considering factors such as political culture, historical context, and institutional structures. The aim is to uncover how these country-specific factors shape issue competition and party behaviour in European election campaigns. By conducting country-specific analyses, a nuanced understanding of the complexities and variations present across different national contexts in European elections is sought.

4.1 Issue Competition in a Multi-Level Electoral System

This initial step of the analysis aims to understand the overall picture of competition dynamics and their influences at the aggregate level. I will examine the relevant issues in national and European election campaigns and the parties' positions. Building on this, the focus shifts to the significance of the Europe issue. The analysis will explore its evolution over time and its multifaceted nature. Finally, the impact of the electoral system is considered, specifically whether there is a difference between congruent and incongruent electoral systems.

4.1.1 Issues Emphasis and Positions

The first step of the empirical analysis is to gain an overview of which issues are relevant in the various electoral arenas, how parties position themselves, and analyse how strongly these issues are interconnected. The analysis starts by comparing the parties' issue agendas in national and European election campaigns. An agenda is defined as a "hierarchy of issues", meaning that some issues are prioritised over others. The process of agenda setting can be understood as a competition for the attention of different issues (Dearing and Rogers, 1996, pp. 1-5). The issues on the top of the party's agenda are the issues parties pay the most attention to and those they believe they can gain an advantage from.

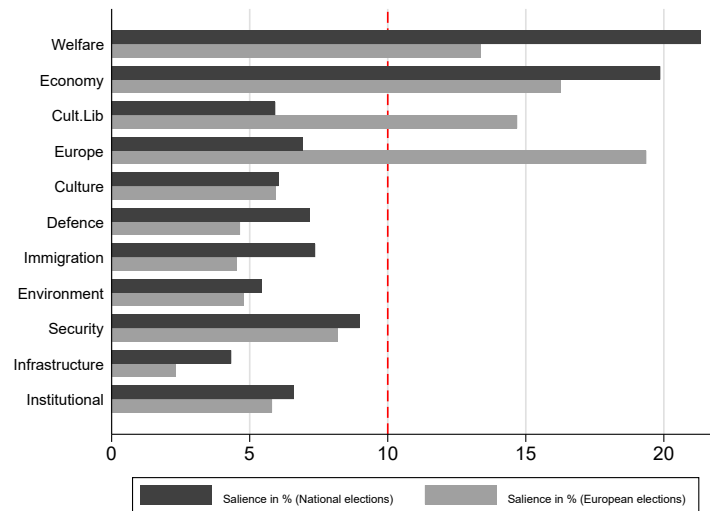
The salience of the 11 issue categories was calculated to determine the agenda. Salience indicates the proportion of a specific issue relative to all issues. This is calculated for national elections using the media data from Kriesi *et al.* (2020) and for European elections from Grande and Braun (2021a).

Overall picture

Figure 2 shows the average salience values of the eleven issue categories from 1994 to 2019 for all countries. The distribution is highly skewed, indicating that parties focus on only a few key issues in their election campaigns. The four issue categories Welfare, Economy, Cultural Liberalism, and Europe are the most salient ones. These issue categories reach salience values above 10%, meaning they are more salient than the overall average (Ø National elections: 9%, Ø European elections: 11%).

Moreover, it becomes evident that parties prioritise different issues in national and European election campaigns. In national elections, welfare and economic issues are dominant, i.e., issues from the traditional socio-economic axis. In European elections, by contrast, issues of the category's cultural liberalism, i.e., support for cultural diversity, gender equality, or international cooperation, and European issues are highly prioritised. The other issue categories have nearly equal levels of salience in national and European election campaigns.

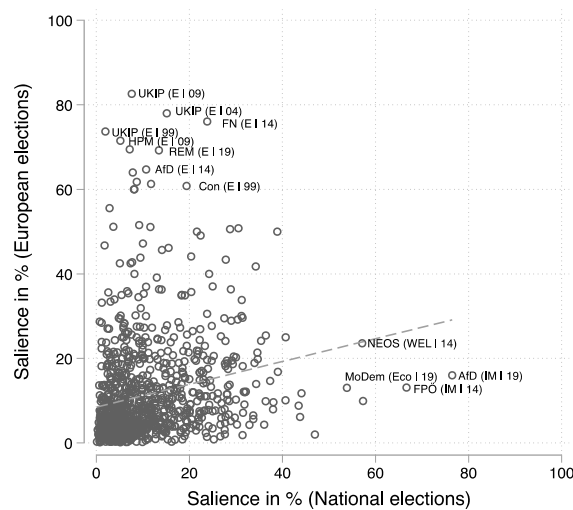
Figure 2: Average Issue Salience in National and European Elections by Issues



Note: The graph shows the average salience of the eleven issue categories in national and European elections for all countries (Austria, France, Germany, UK). The dashed line represents the average salience value. Data Source: Kriesi et al. (2020) and Grande and Braun (2021a).

How closely are the issue competitions of the two levels generally related? To examine this, the correlation of saliences is calculated. The scatterplot in Figure 3 reinforces the findings in more detail. It illustrates to what extent the saliences of individual issues in European elections (y-axis) correspond to those in national election (x-axis) campaigns. A circle represents the issue salience of a party on an issue in a given election, e.g., how strongly the SPD focused on welfare issues in the 2004 European election. The correlation coefficient of $r = 0.33$, $p < 0.01$ indicates a moderate correlation between the variables and a positive connection between the two types of elections.

Figure 3: Issue Salience in National and European Elections



Note: The graph shows a scatterplot of the issue salience of parties in European and national elections. Each circle represents the salience of an issue of a party in European and national elections (N=974). The black line shows the linear fit. Data Source: Kriesi et al. (2020) and Grande and Braun (2021a).

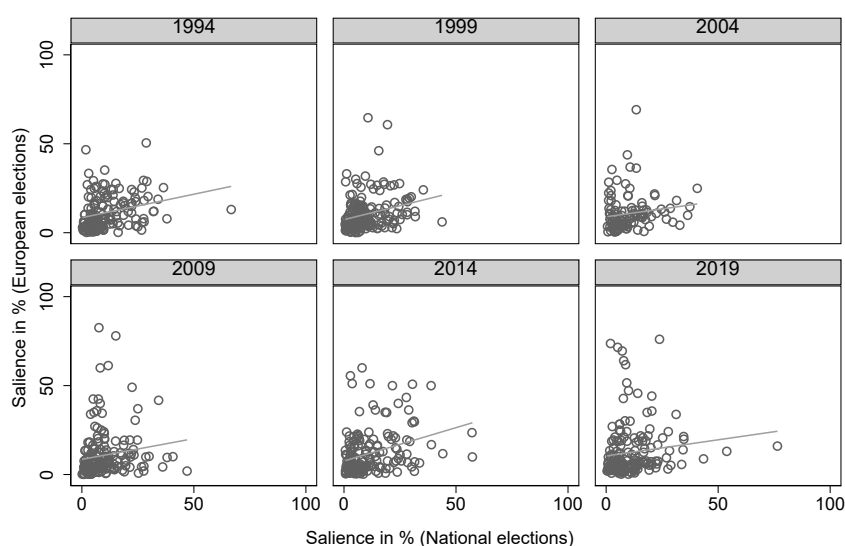
Furthermore, the cloud of dots in the lower left corner signifies that many issues receive little to no attention. Only a few parties allocate more than 35% of their agenda to a specific issue.

The dots outside the cloud and in the upper-left quadrant suggest that it is more common in European than in national election campaigns for parties to emphasise a single issue strongly. Upon analysing the alignment between parties and specific issues, it becomes apparent that Eurosceptic challenger parties, in particular, exhibit a notable emphasis on specific issues during election campaigns. Furthermore, these are issues that possess a high potential for conflict, such as those in Europe or immigration. An example is the Liste Martin, which achieved a salience value of 69% for the Europe issue in the 2009 campaign. In contrast, the same issue received only 5% in the subsequent national election.

Over time

Since the overall picture shows a fundamental connection between the two electoral arenas, it is important to examine how this relationship has developed over time and whether there are differences between individual countries. Figure 4 shows the distribution of issue salience over time from 1994 to 2019. The data reveals a notable trend: the number of issues attaining high salience values has grown. In the 1990s, issues surpassing the 50% salience threshold were relatively limited. However, towards the late 2000s, a substantial increase in such issues became apparent, particularly in European election campaigns. It is also evident that, in many cases, the Europe issue is at the forefront, and eurosceptic challenger parties strongly emphasise it.

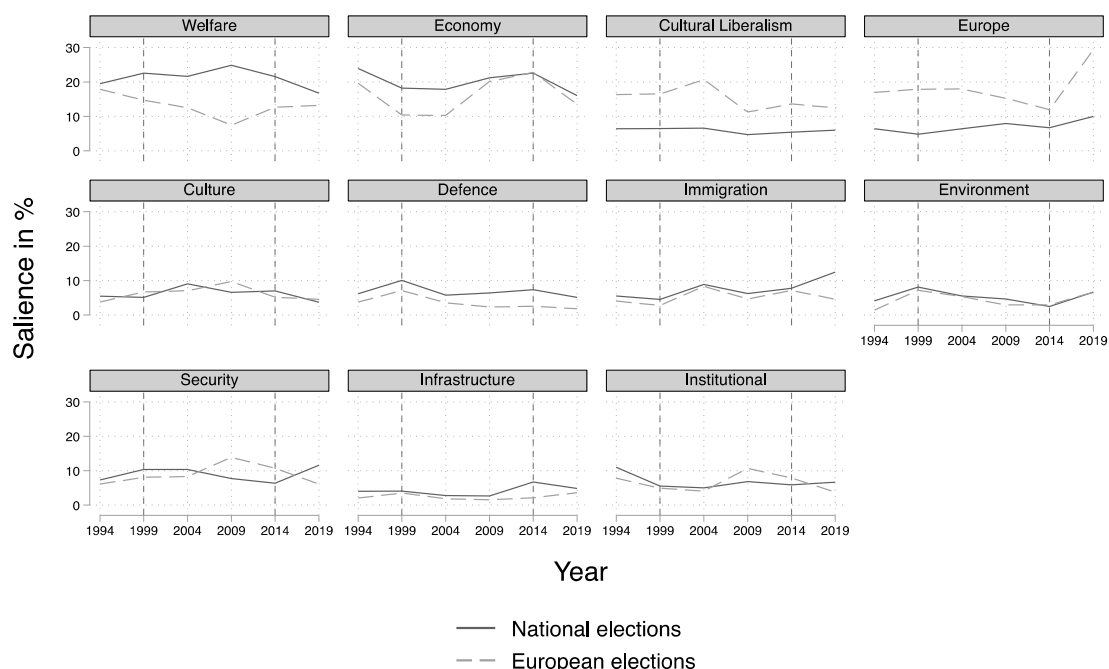
Figure 4: Issue Salience in National and European Elections by Year



Note: The graph shows a scatterplot of the issue salience of parties in European and national elections by year. Each circle represents the salience of an issue of a party in European and national elections (N=974). The black line shows the linear fit. Data source: Kriesi et al. (2020) and Grande and Braun (2021a)

Next, it is important to examine the different issue categories by country. In line with the analysis conducted at the aggregate level, the results regarding the evolution of issue salience over time in national (solid line) and European elections (dashed line) show a consistent pattern (see Figure 5). The issues of welfare, economy, cultural liberalism, and Europe consistently maintain high levels of salience over time. It is also evident over time that the issues of welfare and economy dominate the issue competition at the national level, while the Europe issue takes centre stage in European election campaigns. However, there are also differences in different time phases. In the post-Maastricht phase until the Euro crisis, which marked the turning point, the welfare issue was more prominent in national than European elections. From the 2010s onwards, this trend reversed. The issue gained importance in European elections and decreased in national elections.

Figure 5: Parties Issue Emphasis by Issues over Time



Note: The graph shows the issue saliences for national (solid line) and European elections (dashed line) over time from 1994-2019 (N=136). Data Source: Kriesi et al. (2020) and Grande and Braun (2021a).

Regarding economic issues, the curves hardly differ between the election types. The issue lost importance in both election types, followed by a significant increase in the 2000s and a decrease in the most recent elections. Issues from the cultural liberalism category have been stable, except for an increase in the 2004 European elections. Regarding the Europe issue, we see huge differences over time and between election types. The salience of European issues decreased in European elections during the post-Maastricht phase, reaching its lowest point in the 2014 European election, followed by a significant increase during the 2019 European elections. These findings align with Braun and Grande (2021, p. 8), who similarly observed relatively low levels of politicisation during the 2014 elections, followed by a notable increase in the subsequent

election. This is quite remarkable, as it could have been expected that the increased competencies of the European Parliament would have led to a stronger focus on European issues in European elections. Surprisingly, in the same period, however, the salience of the Europe issue in national elections increased and became a salient issue (see also Hutter and Grande, 2014, p. 1012).

Positions

Having analysed the issue's emphasis on European issues, the question arises regarding the positions. For this purpose, the average position on Europe is calculated for the individual countries. The position can vary between -1, meaning a strongly negative attitude, and +1, i.e. a strongly positive attitude. Figure 6 presents the descriptive results for each country over time.

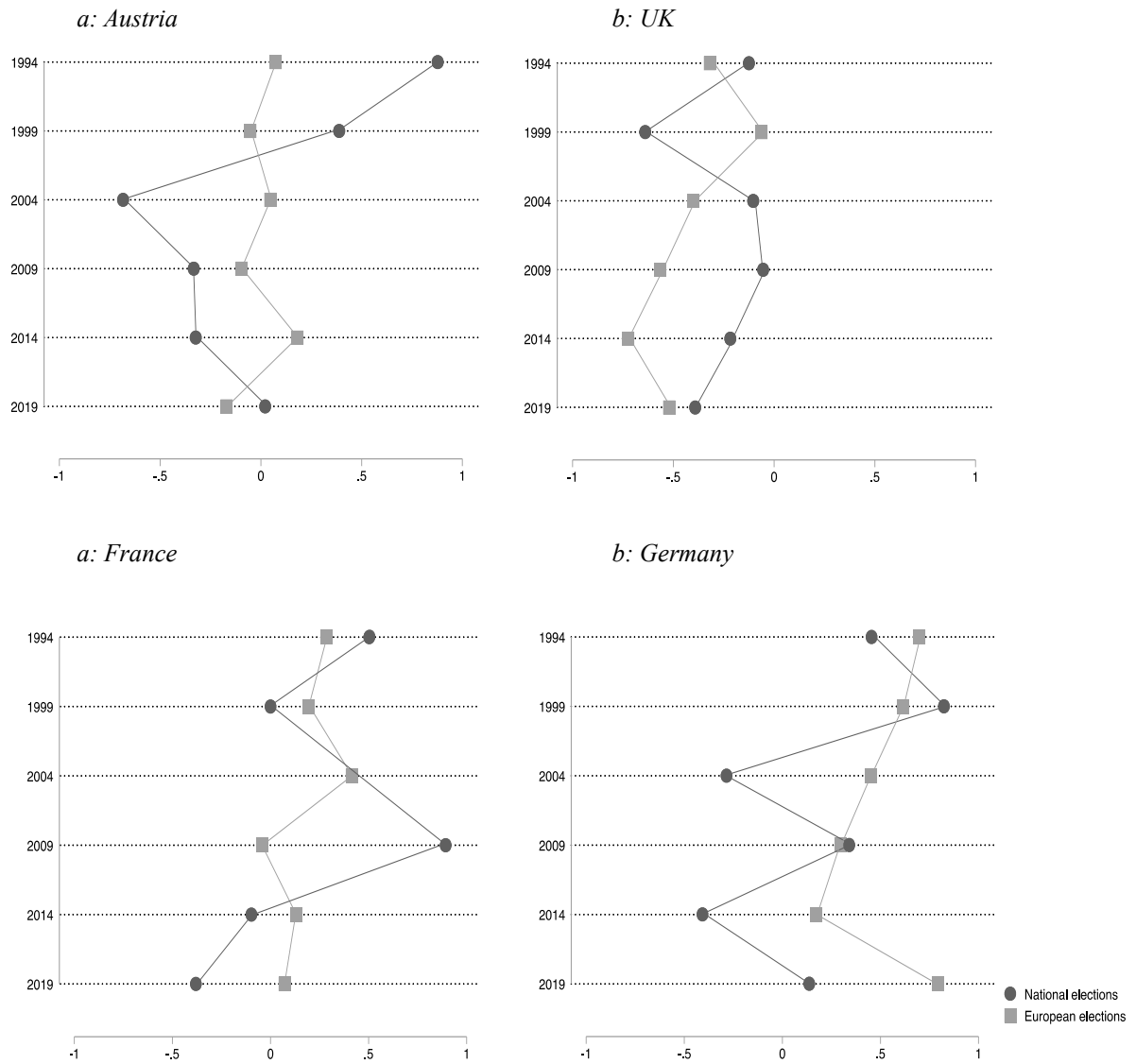
First, it should be noted that some countries show clear differences in their positions in national and European elections. This is surprising in two ways. It can generally be assumed that parties do not change their positions at different levels to convey a consistent and reliable image to their voters. Second, more minor deviations would have been expected due to the close connection of both election levels through the MLES.

In Austria, the position ranges in national election campaigns from pro-European in the post-Maastricht phase to a more Eurosceptic stance in the early 2000s and a return to a neutral position in the subsequent elections.

Major fluctuations in position over time are also visible in Germany and France. Particularly in national elections, it can be seen that the positions have changed considerably in some cases. While France's average position at the end of the 1990s tended to be neutral, a strongly positive stance can be seen in the mid-2000s, with a clear reversal in the following years. The position in European elections, on the other hand, is rather stable. This can also be seen in Germany, which generally has a favourable position on the Europe issue. The 2013 election campaign was characterised by the euro crisis, which had not yet been fully resolved. Questions about the stability of the euro, European financial policy and Germany's role in overcoming the crisis were discussed by the political parties and candidates.

In the UK, a traditionally more Eurosceptic country, it can be seen, in contrast to Austria, that the parties have positioned themselves more positively towards the EU in national elections than in European elections. At the same time, it is clear that the position in European elections has become increasingly negative. One possible explanation is that the two mainstream parties dominate national election campaigns. In European elections, however, where proportional representation applies, smaller Eurosceptic parties such as UKIP also have greater chances and can influence the political debate in a more Eurosceptic direction.

Figure 6: EU Positions by Country



Note: The graph displays the average EU positions for each country for national elections (circles) and European elections (squares). Data Source: Kriesi et al. (2020) and Grande and Braun (2021a).

In summary, the divergent positioning of parties between national and European elections in various countries underscores a notable departure from the expected consistency across electoral levels. This phenomenon, observed in Austria, Germany, France, and the UK, highlights the nuanced dynamics in shaping public perceptions and political discourse surrounding the European Union.

4.1.2 The European Issue in European Election Campaigns

The analyses conducted in the previous chapter have already provided significant insights regarding the Europe issue. In general, the salience of the Europe issue is higher in European than in national elections. It is important to know not only that the salience of the Europe issue has generally increased in the various electoral arenas but also which aspects of the Europe issue are particularly emphasised and whether there are differences between national and European elections.

Based on this, it is essential to delve into the significance of the Europe issue in the next step and examine it in detail. Even though research has increased (e.g. Braun and Grande, 2021), a systematic investigation of the European issue's complexity and comparison of national and European elections are still lacking. The chapter, therefore, explores the role of the European issue for party competition at the election and country level.

Most research studies treat Europe mainly as a single political issue (e.g. Steenbergen and Scott, 2004a; De Vries and Van de Wardt, 2011; Spoon, 2012). However, as explained in detail in the theory chapter, the European issue is multifaceted and complex, requiring differentiation. Based on Bartolini (2005, p. 310), the Europe issue is divided into two subcategories, constitutive and policy issues²³. Constitutive issues deal with membership-related issues, such as the EU's territorial and functional boundaries, EU institutions' competencies, and decision-making rules. Policy issues²⁴, in contrast, correspond to structures similar to national issues, such as environment, welfare, or economy. They are concerned about how European institutions utilise the competencies they have been assigned in their policy-making processes.

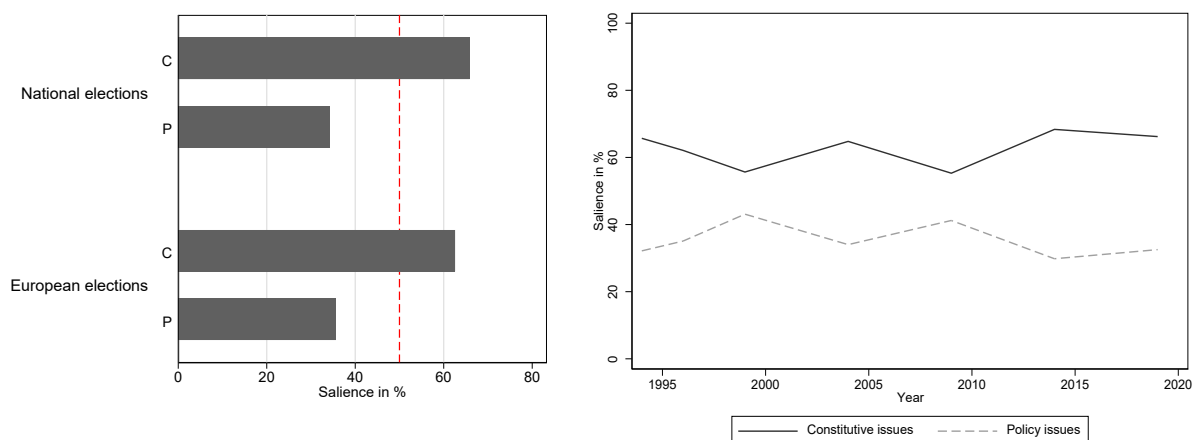
The analysis begins by examining the aggregate level (Figure 7). For this purpose, the salience of constitutive and policy issues is calculated separately for national and European elections. The graph on the left side of Figure 7 illustrates a clear predominance of constitutive issues in both election levels. This suggests that issues related to the fundamental structure and identity of the political system are consistently more prominent in electoral campaigns, irrespective of whether they are held at the national or European level. In particular, regarding European elections, the graph indicates that, on average, 60% of the emphasis on European issues is directed towards constitutive matters. This could be attributed to the overarching significance of issues relating to the European Union's foundational aspects, such as its governance structure, institutional framework, and membership. These fundamental aspects often resonate strongly with voters and are crucial in shaping their perceptions of the European project. As a result, political parties may strategically prioritise these constitutive issues in their election campaigns to appeal to the electorate and convey their vision for the future of the European Union.

²³ The work of Bartolini (2005, p.310) also includes the category of "general orientations." However, due to its inherent vagueness, this category is excluded from the analysis.

²⁴ Bartolini (2005, p. 310) refers to these as isomorphic issues.

This trend is also observed over time, as shown in the graph on the right side. Constitutive issues are important in every election campaign, and their share remains constant.

Figure 7: Constitutive and Policy Issue Salience in National and European Elections



Note: The graph on the left side shows the average salience of constitutive and policy European issues in national (1994-2019) and European elections (1994-2019). The graph on the right side shows the average salience of constitutive and policy European issues in European elections. Data source: Grande et al. (2020) and Grande and Braun (2021b).

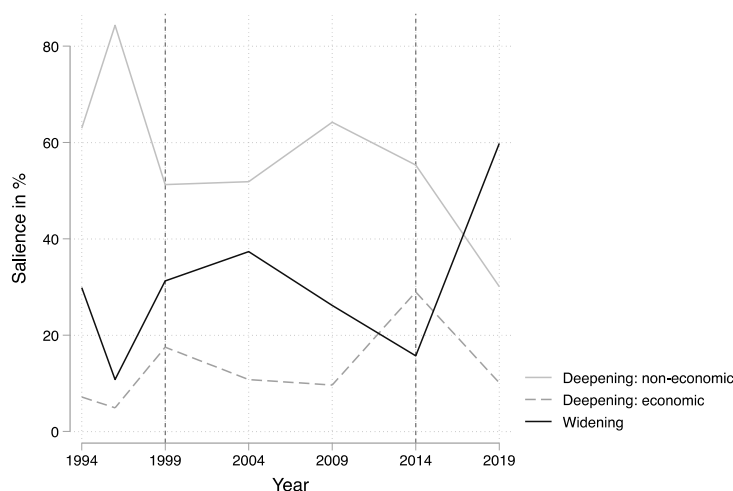
When examining the salience of constitutive and policy issues in European elections, constitutive issues consistently receive more emphasis than policy issues. Interestingly, the curves do not follow a constant upward or downward trajectory for both types of issues but rather exhibit little fluctuation in each election.

Given the complex nature of constitutive issues, which cover various aspects, it's important to explore which specific aspects parties emphasise. Do parties' priorities further cooperation in general, or do they focus more on deepening economic ties, in line with the EU's original purpose? Data allows us to dig deeper into this analysis. Following Dolezal *et al.* (2016, p. 56), the constitutive issue is divided into three sub-issues: non-economic deepening, economic deepening, and widening. Non-economic deepening includes issues related to expanding the EU's reach in areas like security or social policies. Economic deepening involves issues advocating for stronger economic collaboration, such as fiscal policies. Widening primarily concerns territorial expansion, like the integration of new member states.

Figure 8 illustrates the development of the three sub-categories across European elections over time. Most importantly, the findings indicate significant differences over time. In the post-Maastricht phase, there was a clear dominance of non-economic deepening issues, which persisted until the 2014 European election. This primarily revolved around questions of common foreign and security policy, as well as immigration and asylum policy. The category of economic deepening, which mainly pertains to the first pillar of the Maastricht Treaty (e.g., customs union and trade), except for the 2014 election, has the lowest salience. The peak in 2014 can be attributed

to the preceding economic and euro crisis. Particularly, issues concerning the future of the currency union, as well as trade policy, international agreements (e.g., TTIP), and discussions regarding state indebtedness and austerity policies, were subjects of debate during the election campaign.

Figure 8: Specific Kinds of Constitutive Issues in European Elections



Note: The graph on the right side shows the average salience of the different sub-categories of the constitutive issue in European elections. Data source: Grande and Braun (2021b).

The widening category experienced its initial peak during the 2004 election. Particularly during the European Parliament election of 2004, which occurred immediately after the Eastern enlargement, the potential accession of Turkey was heavily debated. The second peak is observed in the European elections of 2019. This peak is attributed to the immediate withdrawal of the UK from the EU. In conclusion, the analysis of Figure 8 underscores the evolving dynamics of European elections, with notable shifts in the prominence of constitutive issues over time. From a predominance of non-economic deepening concerns post-Maastricht to heightened attention to widening matters during key events such as the 2004 Eastern enlargement and the 2019 UK withdrawal, the findings illustrate the multifaceted nature of political discourse on constitutive matters within the EU.

The next step is to examine whether differences exist in the individual countries (Figure 9).

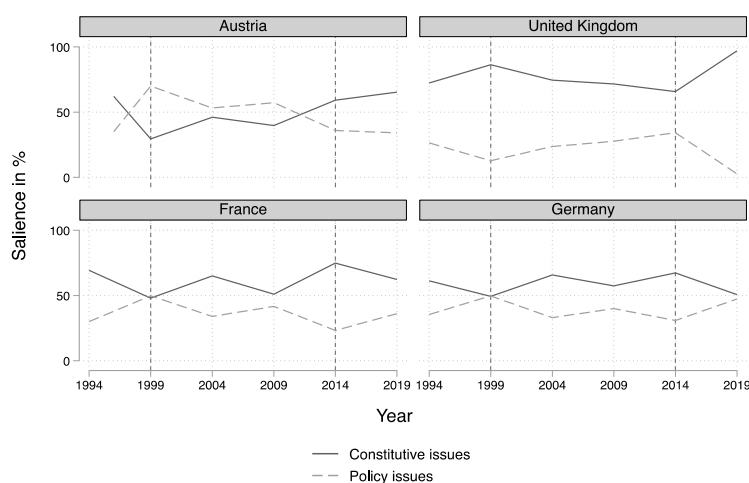
Apart from Austria, constitutive issues dominate in all countries, albeit at different levels. In France and Germany, constitutive issues are dominant, but the gap between constitutive and policy issues is very close. Especially in the European election in 1999, the share of constitutive and policy issues was almost identical in both countries. However, the situation in the UK is distinct, as constitutive issues strongly outweigh policy issues in every European election.

When subdividing constitutive issues again into the three sub-categories of non-economic deepening, economic deepening, and widening, it is noted that there are also differences between

countries (see Figure 37 in the Appendix). In Austria, a strong development of the various sub-categories can be observed. While non-economic issues were particularly prominent after joining the EU in 1996, widening issues were most dominant in the European elections of 2004 and 2009. This is attributable to both the Eastern enlargement and further EU enlargements. The potential accession of countries like Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia, considered candidate countries in 2004 and 2009, was heavily debated in Austria then.

In the UK, widening issues are also of particular importance, especially in the 1999, 2014, and 2019 elections. At the end of the 1990s, the question of EU membership and the role of the UK in the European Union was a central issue in political discussions and debates. The significant increase in the last two elections can be explained by Brexit debates and the withdrawal from the EU.

Figure 9: Salience of Constitutive and Policy Issues by Countries (1994-2019)



Note: The graph shows the salience of constitutive (solid line) and policy issues (dashed line) in European elections by country (N=71). The reference lines indicate the different time phases. Data source: Grande and Braun (2021b).

In contrast, Germany and France strongly dominate non-economic deepening issues. This can be attributed to historical legacy. Particularly in the two founding states, which were already strongly economically connected before Maastricht, the focus is more on deepened cooperation in the areas of security and peace policy.

To summarise, the analysis has shown that the competition on the Europe issue is primarily about constitutive issues, e.g. the fundamental aspects and structures of European integration, such as membership, the distribution of competencies among EU institutions, and decision-making rules. When examining the differentiated aspects of constitutive issues, it becomes apparent that the focus is primarily on non-economic deepening. Furthermore, the analysis of positions has demonstrated variations between national and European elections over time and across countries.

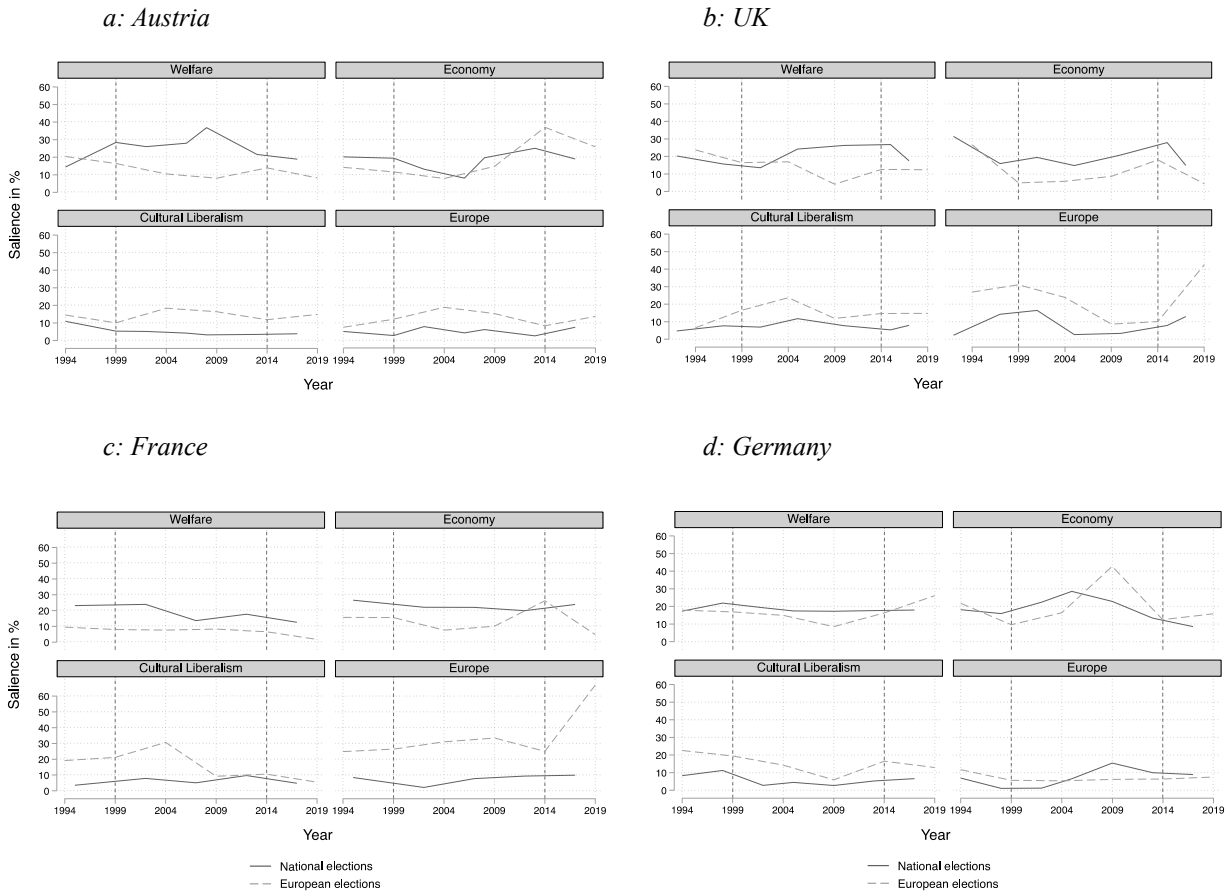
4.1.3 The Influence of Congruent and Incongruent Electoral Systems

The discussion in the theory chapter has shown that it should matter whether countries have congruent electoral systems, i.e., the same electoral system at the national and European levels, or incongruent systems, i.e., different electoral systems at the national and European level. Regarding the Europe issue, it is hypothesised that the salience of this issue is greater in incongruent electoral systems.

To verify this, the salience of the most salient issues, i.e. Welfare, Economy, Cultural Liberalism and Europe are calculated for the individual countries. Regardless of the general trend, significant differences between countries are evident. Figure 10 shows the results for national (solid line) and European elections (dashed line) for each country separately. The overall picture is confirmed for all four countries: Welfare and economic issues dominate in national elections. At the same time, cultural liberalism and Europe dominate the agenda in European election campaigns. However, there are differences between countries regarding both the development over time and the level of salience. Different patterns emerge for countries with congruent electoral systems, i.e. Austria and Germany, and countries with incongruent electoral systems, i.e. France and the UK. For countries with congruent electoral systems, it can be seen that the European issue has a consistently low salience and that the salience fluctuates less over time. The salience of European issues is generally low in Austria in national and European elections. In Germany, it is not a salient issue at any point. Interestingly, it is even observed that the European issue was more important in national elections than in European elections after the Eastern enlargement. The eurozone crisis inevitably brought Europe onto the national political agenda in Germany.

It also shows that economic rather than European issues dominate in these countries. In both countries, the salience of economic issues significantly increases, particularly during the financial and euro crises. This trend is evident not only in national elections but also in European elections. In Austria, particularly in the 2014 European election, the issue is of great importance, with a salience of 37%. This finding is consistent with Kritzinger *et al.* (2014) those who showed that the Austrian parties' election campaigns addressed solutions to overcome the financial and Euro crises. In Germany, the focus on economic issues was strongest in the 2009 European election. However, the picture differs for the two countries with incongruent electoral systems. European issues are salient and strongly dominant in European elections. In France, European issues have traditionally been salient in European elections. Notably, the referenda on the Maastricht Treaty (1992, narrow approval) and the Constitutional Treaty (2005, rejected) illustrate the growing aversion to "more Europe" since the late 1980s (Manigand, 2010, p. 189 f.). This aversion has led parties to emphasise this issue in their election campaigns, especially in European elections. In the 2019 European elections, in particular, the salience of the Europe issue has once again increased significantly. This is primarily attributed to the election campaign by Emmanuel Macron's "*La République En Marche !*", characterised by a clear focus on Europe.

Figure 10: EU Issue Salience by Countries (1994-2019)



Note: The graphs show the issue saliences for national (solid line) and European elections (dashed line) over time and by country. The reference lines indicate the different time phases. Data Source: Kriesi et al. (2020) and Grande and Braun (2021a).

The salience curve of European issues in the UK is particularly interesting as solid ups and downs characterise it. In the post-Maastricht phase, European issues were highly salient in national and European election campaigns. However, a significant decline can be observed in the European elections of 2009 and 2014. One explanation is the expenses scandal in the British House of Commons in May 2009, which affected all three major British parties (Labour, Conservatives, and Liberal Democrats). This scandal led to a strong demand for institutional reforms, which also dominated the campaign for the European election (see Figure 38 Appendix). In the 2014 election, the low salience of the European issue coincided with an increase in the salience of the economic issue. Like France, the most recent European election in the UK also witnessed a significant increase in the salience of the European issue triggered by the impending withdrawal from the EU.

These findings are consistent with previous research (De Vreese, 2003; De Vreese *et al.*, 2007; Schuck *et al.*, 2011a; Boomgarden *et al.*, 2013; Boomgarden and De Vreese, 2016; Braun and Grande, 2021). Overall, the assumption (H1b) that the Europe issue plays a more significant role in incongruent electoral systems can be confirmed.

4.1.4 Conclusion

Based on the comparative analysis, several key insights emerge regarding the dynamics of issue competition across national and European electoral arenas within multi-level electoral systems.

The comparison of issue emphasis in national and European elections has shown that parties prioritise different issues in various electoral arenas. The salience analysis highlights that issues related to Welfare, Economy, Cultural Liberalism, and Europe consistently dominate, albeit to varying extents across different elections. In national elections, issues within the categories of welfare and economy tend to dominate. In contrast, in European elections, issues related to cultural liberalism and Europe are more prevalent in the political discourse. This highlights the nuanced strategic approaches parties adopt depending on the electoral context.

The analysis of the European issue shows that it holds a significant place in party competition, both on national and European level. Except for France, it is also evident that the issue exhibits similar salience curves in national and European elections within individual countries. This underscores that European issues cannot be viewed in isolation but must always be considered within the context of the multi-level electoral system. A particularly new insight in the analysis of the Europe issue is the identified dominance of constitutive over policy issues. This indicates a broader trend where the fundamental aspects of the EU's structure and integration are of greater concern to parties and voters than specific policy debates. This shifts the focus of political competition and necessitates a deeper understanding of the EU's institutional debates within the electoral context.

The impact of congruent versus incongruent electoral systems on issue salience further enriches the analysis. Incongruent systems, where electoral rules differ between national and European elections, tend to amplify the salience of European issues. This finding supports the hypothesis that electoral system incongruence encourages parties to tailor their campaign strategies more distinctly to the respective electoral contexts, thereby influencing issue prioritisation.

In summary, these insights underscore the complex and multi-faceted nature of issue competition within multi-level electoral systems, demonstrating the unique strategic considerations parties must account for in both national and European elections.

4.2 Party Level

In the next step, the focus of the analysis changes from the country to the party level. The discussion in the theory chapter has shown that different types of political parties exhibit distinct competitive behaviour patterns in national elections. Therefore, the analysis distinguishes between mainstream and Euroskeptic challenger parties²⁵. Mainstream parties have government

²⁵ For which party is classified as mainstream and which is a challenger party, see Chapter 3 (Data and Methods).

experience, are part of the political establishment, and hold moderate positions. Challenger parties, on the other hand, have distinct policy positions (especially on cleavage issues like Europe) and an anti-system attitude.

This chapter examines how mainstream and challenger parties behave in European elections, particularly regarding the Europe issue, and aims to understand the impact of this party behaviour on competition dynamics.

Before closely examining the direct behaviour of the two party types, their vote shares and visibility in campaign debates are analysed. Visibility refers to how prominent a party type is in the election debates. Analysing vote shares and visibility before examining the direct behaviour of the two party types is essential because it provides a foundational understanding of their electoral success and presence in the political discourse. Furthermore, it helps gauge the influence and competitiveness of mainstream and challenger parties, setting the stage for a more nuanced exploration of their strategic behaviour and its impact on election dynamics.

Next, the issue emphasis and the positions of mainstream and challenger parties will be examined in detail. The analysis examines changes over time and assesses potential country-specific differences. Still, due to the particular importance of the European issue, it will be examined in more detail by differentiating between constitutive and policy issues. These analyses provide insights into the extent to which mainstream parties leave a window of opportunity for challenger parties in European elections. Following this, an analysis will be conducted to determine to what extent challenger parties act as issue entrepreneurs in European elections.

Last but not least, the analysis examines how challenger parties alter traditional competitive dynamics, particularly regarding the positioning and strategies of established mainstream parties.

4.2.1 Vote Shares and Visibility of Mainstream and Challenger Parties

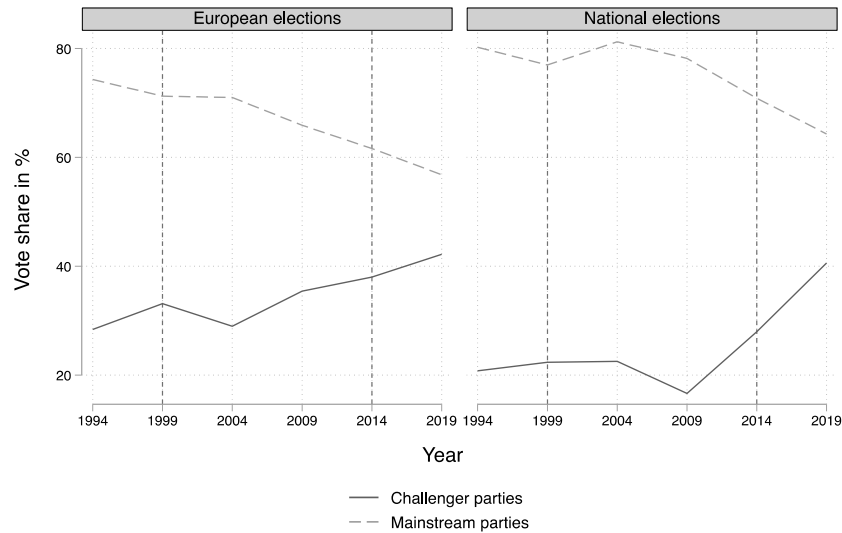
Before delving into a more detailed analysis of parties' issue emphasis or positioning, examining the success of challenger parties and their shares in the debates during election campaigns is worthwhile. By conducting this analysis, the extent of the threat posed to mainstream parties is examined and whether this threat has grown over time.

Vote shares

Figure 11 plots the aggregate vote shares of challenger (solid grey line) and mainstream parties (light grey dashed line) for national and European elections from 1994 to 2019. As might be expected, challenger parties are initially more successful in European elections than in national ones. However, the difference is less significant than one might expect. Moreover, both election types show the same tendency: mainstream parties lose, and challenger parties succeed. In the

post-Maastricht phase, mainstream parties hardly faced challenger parties on average in national elections.

Figure 11: Vote Shares of Challenger and Mainstream Parties by Election Type (1979-2019)



Note: The graph shows the average vote share differentiated for challenger (solid line) and mainstream parties (dashed line) for the four countries. Source: ParlGov (Döring and Manow, 2021).

By the end of the 2000s, challenger parties began to achieve significant success on average. In particular, the financial and euro crisis in 2009 was a game-changer for challenger parties. In both national and European elections, there has been a significant increase in the vote share of challenger parties. This trend is particularly noticeable in recent elections, where the gap between mainstream and challenger parties has narrowed. This is due, in particular, to the rise of right-wing populist parties. For instance, in the 2019 European election, approximately 60% of the vote went to mainstream parties, while challenger parties received 40%. Similarly, at the national level during the same period, mainstream parties accounted for 64% of the vote, while challenger parties obtained 36%.

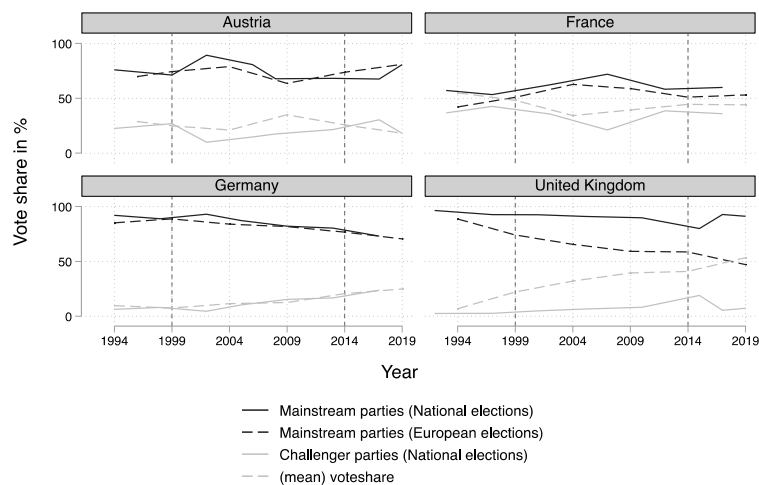
Analysing this in more detail, Figure 12 displays the development of vote shares for individual countries. The dark grey lines illustrate the development of mainstream parties, and the light grey lines for challenger parties. As expected, the findings demonstrate differences between countries and, in some cases, between national and European elections. Even if challenger parties succeed more in European elections, the differences are lower than expected. In both national and European elections, there is an apparent increase in the number of vote shares for challenger parties.

In Austria, we observe that mainstream and challenger parties' vote shares remain relatively stable. In the second phase (2000-2014), challenger parties demonstrated slightly higher levels of success than the national level. Despite the presence of the FPÖ, another eurosceptic challenger

party, the Liste Martin, gained power²⁶. This can be attributed to the FPÖ being part of the national government and their decision to prioritise immigration over the Europe issue. The euro-critical Liste Martin gained considerable success in the European elections in 2004 (13,98 %) and 2009 (17,7 %). In the early 2000s, there was an increase in the vote shares of mainstream parties, followed by a further decline.

Among the analysed countries, France is where the gap between mainstream and challenger parties is the smallest and exhibits the least pronounced changes over time. In France, at least in national elections with a two-round runoff system, there is no general decline tendency for mainstream party vote share. Rather, a wave-like development peaks in the middle of the 2007 elections. In European elections, the vote shares of the two-party types are generally close together. The success of the challenger parties is dominated by the Front National, alongside the Parti radical de gauche (PRG). The FN had its breakthrough in second-order elections at the beginning of the 1980s at the municipal and European levels. Due to a short-term switch to proportional representation in the first round, the party was also able to succeed at the national level, even after a change back to the majoritarian system (Bornschieer, 2008, p. 88).

Figure 12: Vote Shares of Challenger and Mainstream Parties in National and European Elections by Countries (1979-2019)



Note: The graph shows the average vote share differentiated for challenger (grey line) and mainstream parties (black line) for the four countries, as well as for national (solid line) and European elections (dashed line). Source: ParlGov (Döring and Manow, 2021).

By contrast, the picture in Germany is quite different. Germany exhibits the lowest vote share for challenger parties among the analysed countries, and only minimal disparities are observed between national and European elections. Mainstream parties can claim a clear majority of votes in national and European elections. Even though there was an increase from the beginning of the 2000s onwards in the votes of challenger parties in both types of elections, this increase is relatively moderate compared to the other countries. The rise of the AfD in 2013 and its

²⁶ A detailed analysis of this phenomenon will be conducted in the Austria country chapter.

subsequent rapid expansion are the primary factors contributing to the rise in vote shares for challenger parties in Germany.

The most significant differences between the vote shares in national and European elections can be observed in the UK. The case of the UK clearly shows the influence of the electoral system on the success of challenger parties. Due to the majority voting system at the national level, which results in a two-party system, challenger parties are hardly relevant in national elections. The majority voting system was in force at the European level until the 1999 European election. Since then, all European countries have applied the proportional representation system. This change in the voting system paved the way for the success of challenger parties in the UK extremely. From then on, the most significant challenger party, UKIP, improved its results in every European election. In the 2019 European elections, shaped by Brexit and the Brexit party, challenger parties even managed to win the majority of the votes. More importantly, the case of UKIP indicates that challenger parties can transfer their success, at least to some extent, to the national level, which is in line with the findings of Schulte-Cloos (2018). UKIP took its success in the 2014 European elections into the 2015 British General Election, where it quadrupled its 2010 result by 9.6 per cent.

Visibility

In addition to the vote share, the visibility of challenger parties in the party competition is also crucial, i.e., the extent to which they are present in the political debate regardless of the issue. Visibility is measured by the proportion of core sentences of a party type in a country in relation to all core sentences (Table 3).

Table 3: Share of Party Types by Country

	AUT	FRA	UK	GER	Mean
<i>National elections</i>					
Mainstream Parties	68.4	83.7	96.7	95.3	86.0
Challenger Parties	31.6	16.3	3.3	4.7	14.0
<i>European elections</i>					
Mainstream Parties	71.0	80.9	90.0	95.2	84.3
Challenger Parties	29.0	19.1	10.0	4.8	15.7
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
(N) National	(10.752)	(7.006)	(9.180)	(10.076)	(37.014)
(N) European	(7.970)	(6.242)	(6.421)	(8.501)	(29.134)

Note: The table shows the visibility share of the two types of parties in national and European elections. Sampling weight used. Data source: Kriesi et al. (2020); Grande and Braun (2021a).

On average, challenger parties represent 14.0 per cent of the statements made by parties in the public debate during national elections and 15.7 per cent during European elections. This proportion is considered appropriate considering their respective vote shares.

Surprisingly, there are hardly any differences between national and European elections. Due to the more favourable conditions in European Parliament elections, it would have been expected that challenger parties would be more visible. The average shares of challenger parties in national and European elections are approximately the same. In addition, there are essential country-specific differences. In the UK and Germany, challenger parties are hardly visible in the public debate, especially in national elections. This is mainly because challenger parties in these two countries have not been successful at the national level and, thus, have not been able to gain visibility in the debate. It is, therefore, even more surprising that, especially in the case of the UK with UKIP as a very successful challenger party, the visibility in European elections did not significantly increase. The other two countries, Austria and France, both have successful challenger parties at the national level. In Austria, challenger parties achieve the most visibility at both levels. This is due to the FPÖ, which achieved being part of the government in the 2000s. In France, on the other hand, the Front National could only achieve a moderate visibility share despite considerable successes in European elections. Overall, the strength of challenger parties is not reflected in the visibility of the public debate in all countries.

To gain a deeper understanding, the visibility of challenger parties is also examined for each European election (Table 4). Although the visibility of challenger parties remains significantly lower compared to mainstream parties, notable differences emerge between countries and individual elections.

Table 4: Visibility of Party Types by Country and Year

	Austria		France		Germany		UK	
	<i>CP</i>	<i>MP</i>	<i>CP</i>	<i>MP</i>	<i>CP</i>	<i>MP</i>	<i>CP</i>	<i>MP</i>
1994	21.9	78.1	9.2	90.8	4.1	95.9	1	99
1999	25.6	74.4	21.7	78.3	2.6	97.4	9.2	90.8
2004	39.7	60.3	8.2	91.8	0.8	99.2	14.2	85.8
2009	29.8	70.2	11.0	89.0	5.6	94.4	10.4	89.6
2014	16.6	83.4	15.3	84.7	8.3	91.7	20	80
2019	41.4	58.6	24.5	75.5	7.2	92.8	5.7	94.3

Note: The table shows the visibility share of the two types of parties in national and European elections. Sampling weight used. Data source: Kriesi et al. (2020); Grande and Braun (2021a).

For instance, Austria exhibits a highly fluctuating trend, with high values in the European elections of 2004 and 2019. These peaks can likely be attributed to the strength of the FPÖ. In contrast, France saw a significant increase in the visibility of challenger parties in 1999, which

dropped in 2004, followed by a gradual increase up to 2019. In Germany, challenger parties maintained a low visibility throughout the entire period, with minor variations. In the UK, challenger parties had low visibility overall, peaking in 2014, followed by a significant decrease in 2019.

Overall, the visibility of challenger parties varies considerably across countries and over time, with some notable peaks and declines, reflecting the dynamic nature of political competition and the varying contexts of national and European elections.

How can the results be summarised? Generally, it has to be noted that in most countries, mainstream parties can still gather the majority of votes, but challenger parties are increasingly successful. However, countries have apparent differences regarding vote share levels and the development of challenger parties. While some are relatively successful from the outset, others only increase their vote shares over time, and others hardly do. There are countries like the UK where challenger parties barely succeeded at the beginning of the direct elections to the European Parliament and now secure a vote share of around 50%. Then there are countries where the share of challenger and mainstream parties has always been close to each other, as is the case in France. And there are countries where challenger parties have had little or no success. Like in Germany, challenger parties have not increased strongly from the beginning or over time, and mainstream parties' vote shares have remained relatively stable.

Furthermore, it becomes apparent that voting for challenger parties instead of mainstream parties is no longer a unique European election phenomenon. The analysis suggests that successful challengers in European elections can somehow transfer these successes to the national level. This is also consistent with the findings of Franklin (2017), who demonstrated this for the 2014 European and subsequent national elections (see also Schulte-Cloos, 2018).

Surprisingly, however, it is also apparent that the electoral success of challenger parties does not necessarily go hand in hand with increased visibility in political debates. Here, the results clearly show that mainstream parties, in particular, are much more present.

4.2.2 Issue Competition of Mainstream and Challenger Parties

4.2.2.1 Issue Emphasis

The discussions in the theoretical chapter already make strong assumptions about the behaviour of mainstream parties in European elections. First, based on the SOE Theory and its embedding in the MLES, it can be assumed that mainstream parties play the same game at the European level as they do at the national level. In terms of their issue emphasis, this would mean that they emphasise the same issues in European election campaigns as they do in national election campaigns. Second, it is expected that mainstream parties, due to their historical legacy and intra-

party dissent, will be more likely to avoid the Europe issue. Therefore, the chapter examines how the issue emphasis of mainstream parties looks and to what extent it differs from that of challenger parties.

The analysis starts by examining the issue emphasis, differentiated by party types, at the aggregate level (Table 5). For each party type, the salience of each of the 11 issue categories is calculated and distinguished between national and European elections. The results in Table 5 display the salience values for all countries, categorised by party type.

The aggregated data show several key insights. First, mainstream and challenger parties prioritise a different number of issues. This applies to both the national and the European level. It can be seen that mainstream parties have a broader focus than challenger parties. While mainstream parties focus strongly on 2-3 issues in their election campaigns, challenger parties tend to focus only on 1-2 issues.

Table 5: Issue Emphasis of Mainstream and Challenger Parties in National and European Election Campaigns

	Mainstream parties		Challenger parties	
	National	European	National	European
Welfare	23.6	16.3	22.7	14.3
Economy	22.4	23.6	17.7	18.1
Cult. Lib.	7.3	16.6	7.2	21.5
Europe	9.7	24.4	9.1	42.2
Culture	7.9	10.2	11.0	6.0
Defence	9.8	5.8	12.7	9.3
Immigration	9.1	8.7	23.0	22.1
Environment	11.5	9.5	8.1	7.5
Security	11.5	12.8	13.2	14.3
Infrastructure	6.4	3.5	6.0	6.7
Institutional	8.1	12.6	11.7	7.5

Note: The table shows the average issue saliences (rounded to the first decimal place) for all issue categories for challenger and mainstream parties, differentiated by national and European elections for France, Austria, Germany, UK (1994-2019). Data Source: Kriesi et al. (2020) and Grande and Braun (2021a).

Second, however, it is also evident that both mainstream and challenger parties generally focus on different issues in national than European elections. While both types of parties tend to focus on welfare and economic issues in national election campaigns, in European elections, the focus tends to be on issues relating to cultural liberalism and Europe, although to varying degrees.

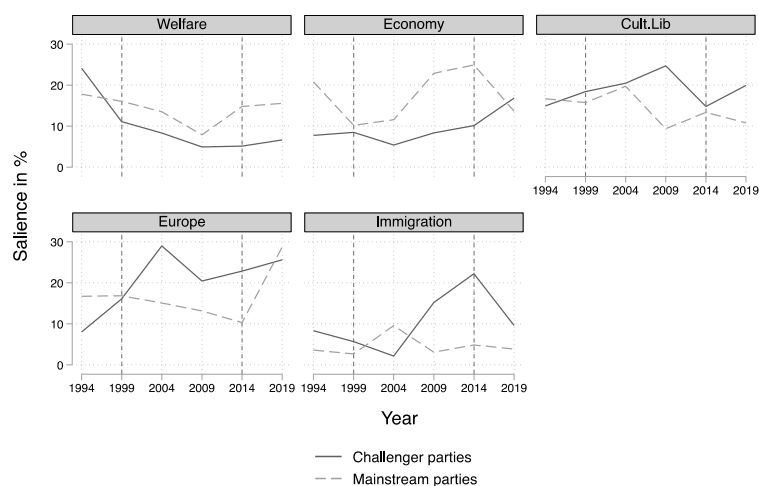
The average salience of the Europe issue in European elections among challenger parties is 42%, whereas only 24% among mainstream parties. Furthermore, challenger parties also heavily

emphasise the issue of immigration, which mainstream parties downplay. This aligns with previous research findings that indicate immigration as a mobilising issue for challenger parties (e.g. Kriesi *et al.*, 2012a; Grande *et al.*, 2019; De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). Thus, the aggregated data indicates that mainstream parties in European elections focus on issues similar to those in national elections. Still, the degree to which they emphasise these issues differs.

As differences between mainstream and challenger parties have become evident, the next step is to analyse the extent to which differences occur over time. In the following, the saliences of the issues with high salience values, i.e., Welfare, Economy, Cultural Liberalism, and Europe, are analysed over time for European election campaigns. Additionally, the immigration issue, which has been identified as significant in party competition for challenger parties, is also included.

Figure 13 shows the issue salience of mainstream and challenger parties in European elections over time. Mainstream parties strongly focus on economic issues in their election campaigns, however, with significant fluctuations. Especially in the first European elections after the Maastricht Treaty and the euro and financial crisis, economic issues had a clear peak. The first peak is due to the effects of the completion of the European Single Market in 1993. The completion of the single market resulted in significant economic integration and the removal of trade barriers within the EU member states. The implementation and effects of these new regulations were still very present and relevant in 1994. This development is also reflected in national elections (see also Appendix Figure 39).

Figure 13: Issue Salience of Mainstream and Challenger Parties in European Election Campaigns over Time (1994-2019)



Note: The graph shows the issue salience of mainstream and challenger parties in European election campaigns over time. Data source: Grande and Braun (2021a).

The emphasis of mainstream parties on the Europe issue is also interesting. After Maastricht, the salience of the European issue declined sharply, with a sudden increase in the 2019 European elections. The sudden rise is due, in particular, to the Brexit. The Brexit process and the associated

discussions and uncertainties have made European integration and the future of the EU a central issue. On the other hand, populist and Eurosceptic parties have gained strong support in the years leading up to the 2019 election and highlighted European issues prominently in their campaigns. This has forced mainstream parties to address these issues to counter the populists' success and win back voters.

While mainstream parties have downplayed the issue, it is evident that challenger parties have used it to their advantage. In contrast to mainstream parties, challenger parties have strongly focused on European issues. The salience of the immigration issue is also noteworthy. In the 2014 European election, challenger parties campaigned strongly on this issue a year before the European refugee crisis. However, the issue held little relevance for mainstream parties at that time. In the subsequent European elections, the immigration issue was insignificant for any party type. While welfare issues were highly important for challenger parties directly after Maastricht, this has declined sharply over time. The high importance of the issue in the early 1990s is due to the significant economic challenges in Europe, including high unemployment rates and economic restructuring in the aftermath of the Cold War. Challenger parties saw an opportunity to capitalise on public dissatisfaction with incumbent governments' economic performance and social policies.

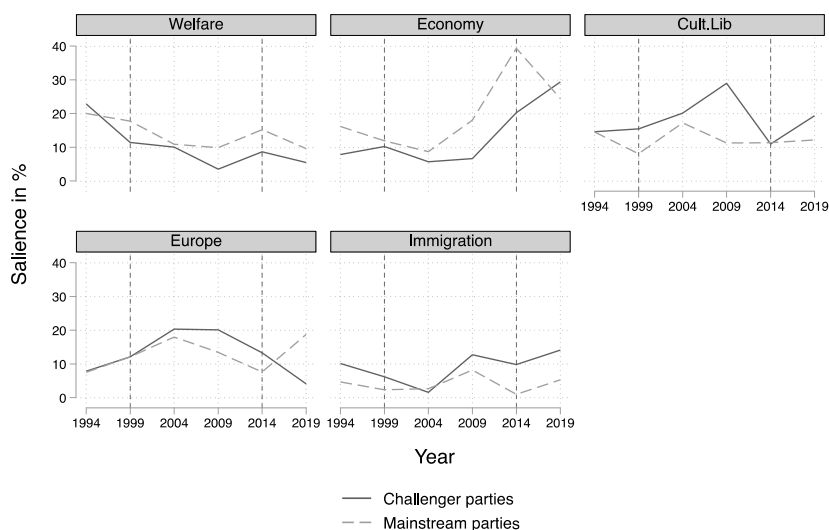
In addition, the salience values for mainstream and challenger parties are calculated for each country separately, using the data provided by Kriesi *et al.* (2020) and Grande and Braun (2021a). The findings offer a remarkable divergence across countries and party types regarding the level and timing of issue emphasis.

The analysis clearly shows two patterns. As before, countries with congruent electoral systems show a similar pattern, and countries with incongruent electoral systems also show a similar pattern.

The first pattern is a *high degree of homogeneity of issues with a low focus on European issues*. This pattern is observable in Austria and Germany (Figure 14 and Figure 15). Only minor differences are visible in these countries regarding the salience curves of the different party types. This means that mainstream and challenger parties sometimes emphasise the same issues but at a different level. If we look at which issues are important, it becomes clear that in both countries, triggered by the financial and euro crises, economic issues are of central importance, even in the years after. However, European issues were less important in both countries.

The salience curves for the Europe issue in Austria provide particularly interesting insights. First, the accession to the European Union in 1995 did not result in high salience values in the first European election. Both major mainstream parties, ÖVP and SPÖ, which strongly advocated accession in their grand coalition (Luther, 2003, p. 1012), downplayed the Europe issue.

Figure 14: Issue Emphasis of Austrian Mainstream and Challenger Parties



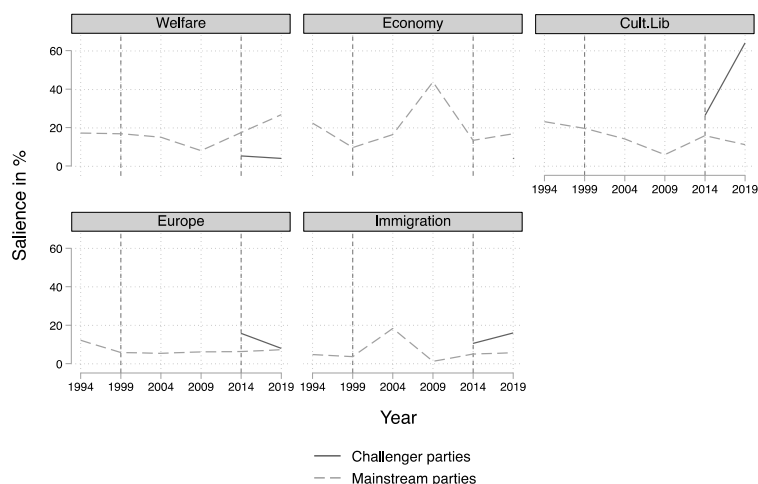
Note: The graph shows the issue salience of Austrian mainstream and challenger parties in European election campaigns over time. Data source: Grande and Braun (2021a).

However, there is a notable increase in salience in the 2004 European election, observed among both mainstream and challenger parties. At that time, the national government was a coalition between ÖVP and the Eurosceptic challenger FPÖ. This controversial coalition led to major protests by the European member states (Falkner, 2001). Furthermore, it was the first election in which the Eurosceptic challenger party, Liste Martin, participated. The subsequent election in 2009 is particularly interesting. While the Europe issue remains highly salient for challenger parties, influenced by the presence of the Liste Martin, mainstream parties attempt to downplay the issue. Even in the face of a challenger party, mainstream parties' dominant strategy has been deemphasising. The salience of the Europe issue declined again after that. Only in the 2019 European election campaign was the issue again strongly emphasised by mainstream parties.

In Germany (Figure 15), in contrast, the Europe issue is de-emphasised by both party types. National issues strongly influence European election campaigns in Germany. Mainstream parties consistently downplay the European issue. Even the rise of the eurosceptic right-wing party AfD in 2013 did not lead to an increased salience of the Europe issue. Interestingly, not even the challenger party seems to emphasise this issue in its campaigns. Instead, they focus on immigration issues and issues categorised under cultural liberalism, which involve different values and moral concepts.

Even in European election campaigns, mainstream parties tend to prioritise economic issues, especially during the financial crisis 2009, when Germany played a significant role. Additionally, the increase in the salience of the immigration issue in the 2004 European election is notable. This can be attributed to the debate surrounding Turkey's potential accession to the European Union and the associated concerns about further immigration, which benefitted the Union parties, CDU and CSU.

Figure 15: Issue Emphasis of German Mainstream and Challenger Parties



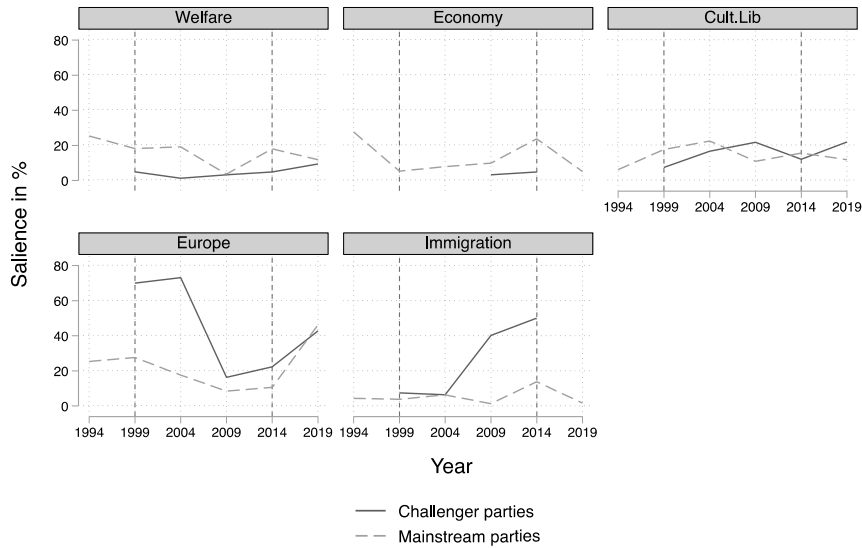
Note: The graph shows the issue salience of German mainstream and challenger parties in European election campaigns over time. Data source: Grande and Braun (2021a).

The second pattern is characterised by a *high salience level and heterogeneity across party types concerning the Europe issue*. We find this pattern in the UK and France (Figure 16 and Figure 17). Both countries are characterised by a high average salience value of the European issue. The average salience value in France is 35%, and in the UK, 24%. By comparison, the value in Austria is 13%, and in Germany only 7%. However, these high average values include significant ups and downs.

In the UK, welfare state issues were important in the post-Maastricht European election (Kriesi and Frey, 2008, p. 183 f.). However, this changed at the end of the 1990s, triggered by the strong programmatic shifts of the two major parties that developed in opposite directions (Evans, 1998). This shift also heightened the focus on the Europe issue, which has traditionally been highly politicised in the UK (Grande and Hutter, 2016c, p. 99). The traditionally pro-European Conservative party developed an increasingly critical attitude toward European integration with the Maastricht treaty. For many Conservatives, Maastricht was, as Margaret Thatcher described it, a "treaty too far." The party was also internally divided on whether the UK should join the eurozone. During the opposition period (1997-2010), anti-European attitudes intensified. This change corresponded with the change in the Labour Party going in the opposite direction. Under the leadership of Tony Blair, the party transformed itself into "New Labour," which essentially means a pragmatic, non-ideological orientation (Kriesi and Frey, 2008, p. 185). In the late 1990s, Europe was a key issue for the British parties at the national level (Grande and Hutter, 2016c, p. 99) and the European level. Significant differences are also evident in terms of the party type. Challenger parties, especially UKIP, emphasised the issue strongly, while mainstream parties only moderately emphasised it. From the mid-2000s, however, the situation changed again. The Europe issue was only one among several. This decline in challenger party attention is due to the rise of the immigration issue, targeting, in particular, the uncontrolled immigration of EU citizens from

Central and Eastern European member states (Treib, 2015, p. 162 f.). It was not until the 2019 European elections, dominated by Brexit and the debate on another exit referendum, that the issue reached the same high levels as in the early 1990s.

Figure 16: Issue Emphasis of British Mainstream and Challenger Parties



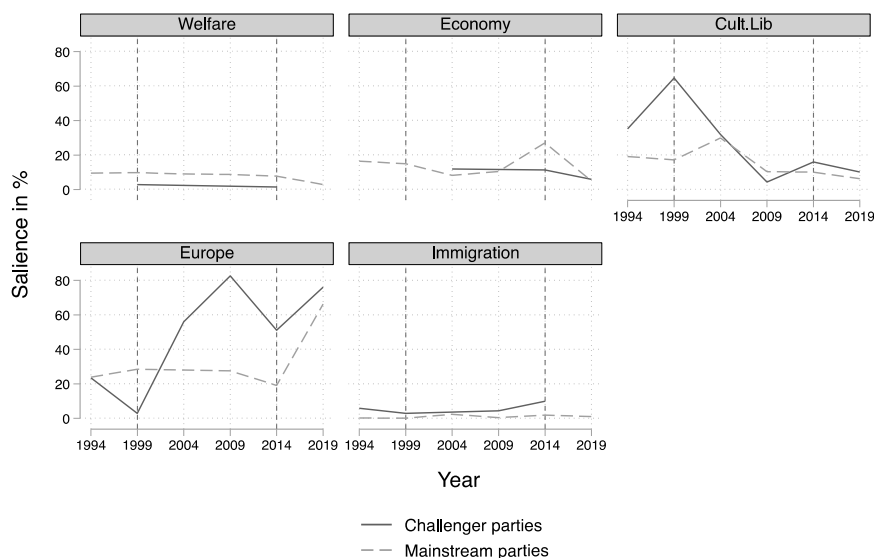
Note: The graph shows the issue salience of British mainstream and challenger parties in European election campaigns over time. Data source: Grande and Braun (2021a).

The French party system underwent transformation processes in the 1990s. This is partly due to the process of European integration. French politics is characterised by ambivalence concerning European integration (Manigand, 2010, p. 177 f.), running through the traditional left and right-wing parties. The left-wing parties in France were split between a eurocritical PCF and a europhile PSF (Bornschieer, 2008, p. 101). The cultural-identitarian and economic aspects of the integration process are part of the national conflict (Bornschieer, 2008, p. 103). The EU serves as a projection screen for fears and hopes. On the one hand, for the unemployed, blue-collar and white-collar workers, i.e., the 'globalisation losers', and their fear of losing national identity and sovereignty rights and jobs.

On the other hand, the well-educated in positions of responsibility - the 'globalisation winners' - as the hope and chance for a strong France in a globalised world (Bélot, 2009, p. 308). This division was particularly evident in the narrow approval of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in 2005.

Like in the UK, the Europe issue is crucial for French parties, independent of the party type, with consistently high salience values that have increased over time. However, the rise of the Front National in the 1980s was not directly linked to an anti-European stance. On the contrary, the "European project" was initially strongly supported. The FN first developed an anti-European stance in its new election program at the beginning of the 1990s and profited enormously from anti-European sentiment (Perrineau, 1997, p. 75).

Figure 17: Issue Emphasis of French Mainstream and Challenger Parties



Note: The graph shows the issue salience of British mainstream and challenger parties in European election campaigns over time. Data source: Grande and Braun (2021a)

In the most recent European election campaigns, it was the issue with the highest salience for all mainstream and challenger parties. In particular, the emergence of Macron's pro-European "La République En Marche!" (REM) and its strong emphasis on the Europe issue contributed to its increased salience.

4.2.2.2 Party Emphasis on European Issues

At the national level, Hobolt and De Vries (2015) have shown that mainstream and challenger parties behave differently, especially regarding the European issue. The previous descriptive analyses in this study have also demonstrated significant differences in how mainstream and challenger parties emphasise the Europe issue in European elections and between countries.

To confirm these findings and examine the extent to which other influences also affect the issue emphasis of mainstream and challenger parties, a linear regression analysis was conducted using parties as the unit of analysis (see Table 6).

The aim is to test the influence of the party type, whether it is a mainstream or a challenger party, on the salience of the European issue. The analysis utilised data from Kriesi *et al.* (2020) for national and Grande and Braun (2021a) for European election campaigns. The dependent variable is the salience of the European issue (for measurement, see Chapter 3). The independent variable is the party type, operationalised as a binary variable: 0 for mainstream parties and 1 for challenger parties. Furthermore, different control variables are included. The first control variable is government status. If a party is part of the government, it is operationalised as 0, and if it is in opposition as 1. The second control variable is the party size, measured as the percentage of votes

gained in the respective election. To prove whether the position on the left-right axis leads to differences, it was integrated into the model as another control variable. The control variables, party size and left-right position, are taken from the Manifesto dataset (Carteny *et al.*, 2023).

Table 6: Mobilisation of European Issues (1994-2019)

	National elections	European elections
Challenger	3.182*** (0.405)	6.082*** (0.849)
Opposition	-0.736*** (0.245)	17.19*** (0.625)
Party size	0.0603*** (0.0117)	-0.0178*** (0.00341)
Ri/Le position	0.0925*** (0.00693)	0.223*** (0.0231)
Constant	9.358*** (0.389)	17.35*** (0.407)
Observations	2,378	3,370
R-squared	0.109	0.262

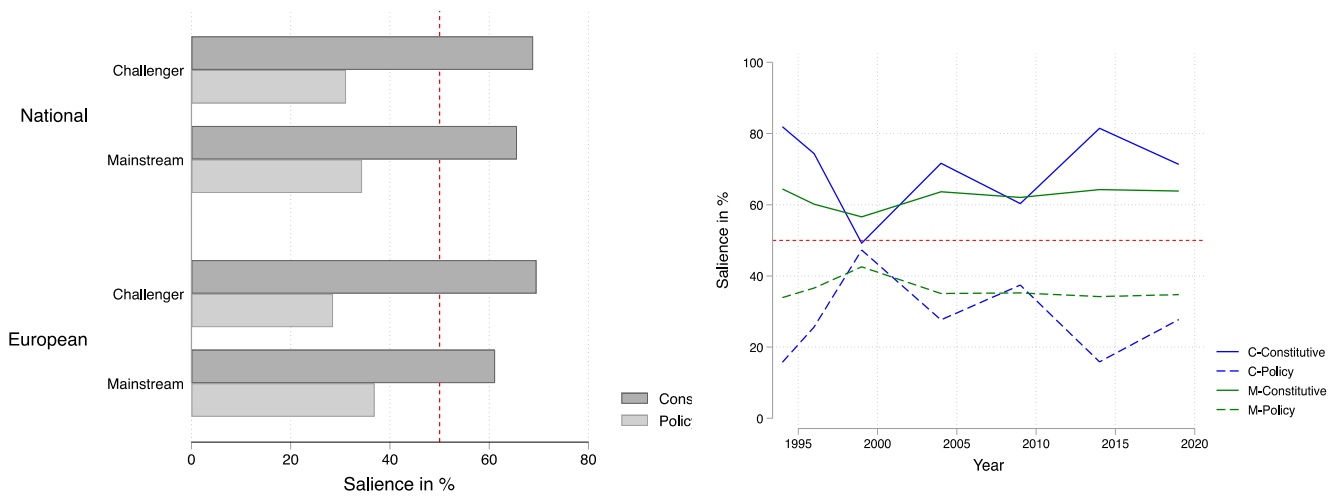
*Note: OLS Regression, unstandardised coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Data source: Kriesi *et al.* (2020); Grande and Braun (2021a).*

The results in Table 6 confirm the previous findings. First, challenger parties emphasise the Europe issue significantly more than mainstream parties. Additionally, the results show that challenger parties emphasise this issue even more during European than in national elections. Furthermore, the results also indicate whether a party is in government makes a difference. Compared to governing parties, opposition parties emphasise the Europe issue less in national elections but much more in European elections. The variables party size and left-right position also show statistically significant effects, although the effects are relatively small. With minor effects, it is evident that larger parties tend to give more emphasis to the Europe issue in national elections but less in European elections, and parties positioned further to the right on the political spectrum tend to emphasise the Europe issue more in both national and European elections. Taken together, the models explain a moderate proportion of the variance in the salience of the Europe issue, with better explanatory power for European elections than national elections.

The next step is to take a more differentiated look at the Europe issue. For this purpose, a distinction is again made between constitutive and policy issues. The media data from Grande *et al.* (2020) and Grande and Braun (2021b) are used for the analysis. Starting again with a broad picture, the left graph of Figure 18 summarises the relative shares of the constitutive and policy shares by mainstream and challenger parties. The results demonstrate two significant findings:

First, for both party types, European constitutive issues are the most important issue type. Mainstream and challenger parties have a constitutive issue share of over 50%.

Figure 18: European Constitutive and Policy Issues by Party



Note: The graph on the left side shows the average salience of constitutive and policy European issues in national (1994-2010) and European elections (1994-2019). The graph on the right side shows the average salience of constitutive and policy European issues in European elections. Data source: Grande et al. (2020) and Grande and Braun (2021b).

When examining the salience of constitutive and policy issues over time, clear differences between the two party types emerge. While the percentage of these issues remains relatively stable for mainstream parties, significant variations are observed among challenger parties in European election campaigns. Challenger parties had an intense focus on constitutive issues, nearly 80%, in both the election following the Maastricht Treaty and the 2014 European election. In contrast, in the 1999 European election, policy and constitutive issues were emphasised equally.

According to Börzel and Risse (2009), mainstream parties should benefit from articulating policy issues, as these are embedded in their preferred conflict dimension. However, the data indicate that mainstream parties focus more on constitutive issues.

To confirm this descriptive analysis, it is necessary to comprehensively analyse mobilisation on constitutive issues in European elections in greater detail. Therefore, a linear regression is run with the salience of constitutive issues as the dependent variable and the party type as the independent variable. Additionally, the control variables, such as government status, party size, and left-right positioning, are again utilised (see explanations in Table 6 for measurement).

The results in Table 7 indicate interesting differences between the different party types and national and European elections. In national elections, challenger parties prioritise European constitutive issues less than mainstream parties. However, in European elections, the scenario is reversed, with challenger parties strongly emphasising constitutive issues. Regarding the control

variables, opposition parties tend to focus more on constitutive issues compared to governing parties, and there's a tendency for parties further to the right to accentuate these issue type more.

Table 7: Mobilisation of Constitutive Issues

	National	European
Challenger	-7.441*** (0.940)	4.858*** (0.503)
Opposition	2.149*** (0.479)	6.849*** (0.362)
Party size	-0.206*** (0.0251)	-0.101*** (0.0124)
Ri/Le position	0.203*** (0.0128)	0.552*** (0.0136)
Constant	76.32*** (0.795)	65.61*** (0.383)
Observations	4,851	9,454
R-squared	0.060	0.195

*Note: OLS Regression, unstandardised coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Data source: Grande et al. (2020) and Grande and Braun (2021b).*

4.2.3 Positions of Mainstream and Challenger Parties

4.2.3.1 The Impact of Intra-Party Dissent on Mainstream Party Positions

How mainstream parties position themselves towards the Europe issue depends, on the one hand, on their ideological background and, on the other hand, on intra-party conflict.

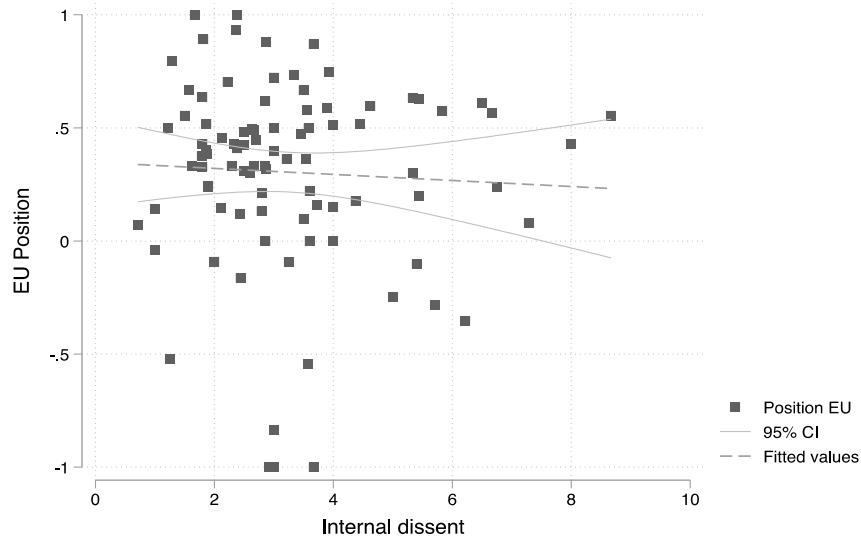
The theory chapter already explained that intra-party dissent influences how mainstream parties behave regarding the Europe issue. The question that arises is to what extent does intra-party dissent influence the positions of mainstream parties? According to the hypothesis, the higher the intra-party dissent, the more negatively mainstream parties position themselves towards the Europe issue.

To test this, the position variable from Grande and Braun (2021b) and the internal dissent variable from the CHES-dataset (Jolly *et al.*, 2022) are used. Figure 19 shows the correlation between the variables. The results show only a slight, non-significant correlation ($r=0.07$).

This implies that it cannot be concluded that mainstream parties position themselves more negatively on Europe when internal dissent is high. Consequently, the parties position themselves neither more positively nor more negatively. There are, therefore, cases in which internal dissent is high, but the party nevertheless positions itself positively. At the same time, there are also cases

in which dissent is low, but the party positions itself negatively. Hypothesis H2 is therefore rejected.

Figure 19: Intra-Party Dissent and EU Positions



Note: The figure shows the relationship between the positions of mainstream parties and intra-party dissent.

4.2.3.2 Party Positions on the Europe Issue

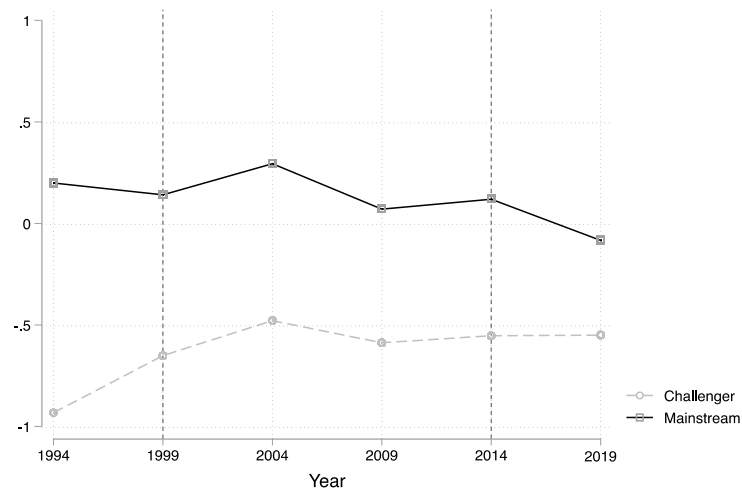
After analysing the European issue salience of different party types, the question about their positioning regarding the Europe issue now arises. In the previous chapter, the positions were already analysed over time and by country. While Austria and France adopt neutral positions, Germany positions itself as Europhile, while the UK takes a eurosceptic stance. In the next step, it is essential to determine whether there are differences in positions between mainstream and challenger parties.

First, some descriptive results will be presented. Figure 20 shows the mean positions of challenger and mainstream parties over time in European election campaigns. The positions were calculated using the EEC data from Grande and Braun (2021a). For this purpose, the average position for each election was calculated according to the party type. The solid line shows the positions of mainstream parties, and the dashed line shows those of challenger parties.

The graph shows that the positions of the two party types have converged over time. While mainstream parties have become more Eurosceptic, challenger parties have adopted significantly more Europhile positions. Immediately after Maastricht, challenger parties took a strongly negative stance. Even if the positions of challenger parties have become more positive, they are still clearly eurosceptic. In contrast, mainstream parties do not take pro-European positions, as might be assumed, but, on average, tend to take a more neutral position on European issues. Over

time, however, it can be observed that challenger and mainstream parties are moving closer together.

Figure 20: Positions by Party Type (1994-2019)



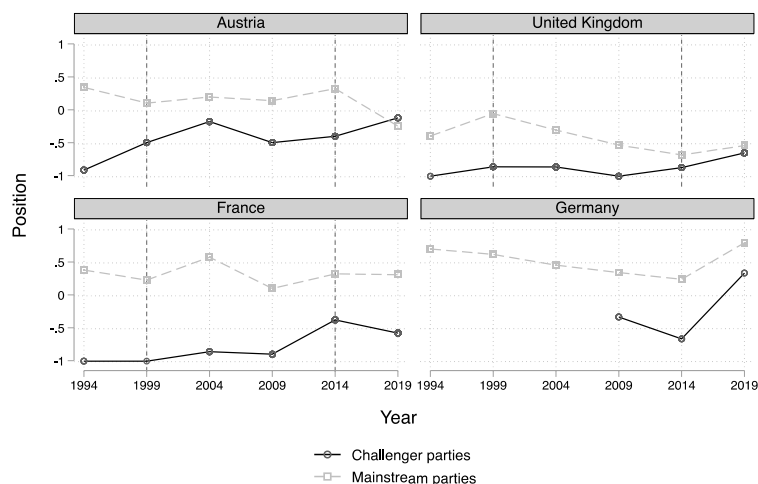
Note: Positions go from -1 to +1, with -1 indicating a strongly Euro-critical stance and +1 a strongly pro-European stance. Data: Grande and Braun (2021a).

Given that previous analyses have also revealed significant country-specific differences, examining the positions of mainstream and challenger parties at the country level in this context is important. The data and methods chapter explains which party in each country is categorised as a mainstream or challenger party.

Figure 21 shows the positioning over time for mainstream parties (dashed line) and challenger parties (solid line) for each country. Overall, it confirms the trend across all countries that while the positions of mainstream parties have remained stable over time, the position of challenger parties on the Europe issue has become significantly more positive. However, differences are observed between countries regarding the degree of this change. For example, in some countries, the shift in challenger party positions is more pronounced, reflecting a stronger movement towards pro-European stances. In other countries, the change is more moderate, indicating a more cautious approach towards Europe.

In *Austria*, it is evident in the post-Maastricht phase that mainstream parties tend to position themselves as pro-European, while challenger parties, like the FPÖ and the Green Party, take a strong eurosceptic stance. While the positions of the Austrian mainstream parties remained stable during the 2000s, there was a noticeable change among challenger parties. The positions of challenger parties have become increasingly more positive, though still eurosceptic. Additionally, the development in the last European election in 2019 is intriguing. Here, it is evident that the Austrian mainstream parties positioned themselves more negatively than the eurosceptic challenger party FPÖ. This could indicate that mainstream parties, in particular, have aligned themselves more closely with eurosceptic positions due to the success of the FPÖ.

Figure 21: EU Positions of Mainstream and Challenger Parties by Country (1994-2019)



Note: Positions go from -1 to +1, with -1 indicating a strongly Euro-critical stance and +1 a strongly pro-European stance. Data: Grande and Braun (2021a).

In *Germany*, which is traditionally strongly pro-European, mainstream parties adopt strongly pro-European positions. However, a decline in the European election in 2014 can be observed. The European election 2019 shows increased pro-European shifts for mainstream and challenger parties (Die Linke and AfD). Interestingly, while the AfD initially positioned itself as euroskeptical during its first European election, the party underwent a significant shift in its position in subsequent elections.

The most considerable difference in positioning between mainstream and challenger parties is observed in *France*. Mainstream parties adopt precise pro-European positions, emphasising the importance of EU integration and cooperation. In contrast, challenger parties, such as the Rassemblement Nationale (former FN) and France Insoumise, strongly advocate euroskeptical positions. These parties often criticise the EU for its perceived lack of democratic accountability, economic policies favouring multinational corporations, and loss of national sovereignty. However, over time, particularly in the 2014 European election, there has been an increase in more pro-European positions among challenger parties in France.

The *United Kingdom* has traditionally been the most euroskeptical country, which is also reflected in the positions of individual parties. Mainstream parties in the UK tend to be more negative than in other countries. As a comparison, British mainstream parties are, on average, more euroskeptical than Austrian challenger parties. Among all the countries in the analysis, British challenger parties, primarily UKIP, hold the most negative position, which is unsurprising considering their role in driving the Brexit process by putting pressure on mainstream parties. This is evident in the positions taken in the two most recent European elections, where there are only marginal differences between challenger and mainstream parties.

Two linear regression models are conducted using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) to validate and assess the extent to which other factors, particularly the size of a party and its left-right positioning, influence the stance of mainstream and challenger parties. These models provide insights into the relationship between party characteristics and attitudes towards European integration. By examining the impact of party size and ideological orientation on the positions adopted by mainstream and challenger parties, we can better understand the dynamics driving their respective stances on European issues. The dependent variable is the position on the European issue, while the independent variable is the party type, coded as 0 for mainstream parties and 1 for challenger parties. Additionally, the analysis controls for party size, measured by vote shares and positioning on the left-right axis²⁷.

The findings presented in Table 8 further confirm the previous analysis. It is evident that challenger parties exhibit a strong negative positioning on the European issue. This tendency is particularly pronounced during European election campaigns compared to national election campaigns. Additionally, it is worth noting that opposition parties also tend to adopt a negative stance, although the statistical significance of these findings is not given. It also shows that the size of the party and its left-right positioning have hardly any influence.

Table 8: EU Issue Positions of Party Types

	National	European
Challenger	-0.229*** (0.0638)	-0.544*** (0.0833)
Opposition	-0.0576 (0.0527)	-0.104 (0.0799)
Party size	-0.00218 (0.00213)	0.000270 (0.000244)
Ri/Le position	0.000146 (0.00131)	-0.00254 (0.00253)
Constant	0.313*** (0.0680)	0.274*** (0.0585)
Observations	99	90
R-squared	0.167	0.434

*Note: OLS, unstandardised coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$; The regression is based on all parties with at least five observations per election for the relevant issue category.*

Additionally, it is worth noting that opposition parties also tend to adopt a negative stance, although the statistical significance of these findings is not given. The study also shows that the party's size and left-right position have hardly any influence.

²⁷ Both variables were extracted from the Manifesto Dataset (Schmitt *et al.*, 2018).

In conclusion, the positions of mainstream and challenger parties regarding European integration vary across different European countries. While mainstream parties tend to adopt pro-European positions, challenger parties often lean towards Euroskepticism, criticising aspects of EU policies and institutions. However, there have been notable shifts over time, with some challenger parties gradually adopting more pro-European positions, particularly in the aftermath of the 2014 European election. However, it is also evident that challenger parties do not constantly switch positions; instead, they tend to align themselves more closely with mainstream parties over time. For party competition, this could indicate that challenger parties strategically attempt to make themselves more electable to a broader population and move away from their niche status.

4.2.4 Issue Entrepreneurship in European Elections

The theory chapter has already explained in detail that the behaviour of mainstream parties strongly influences the success of challenger parties. Depending on their behaviour, they create a window of opportunity that challenger parties can exploit for themselves. More bluntly, mainstream parties are changing the political competition game by strategically emphasising or de-emphasising the Europe issue. The previous analyses in this study have shown that the strategy of mainstream parties (except the last European elections) was to avoid the European issue in European election campaigns. This, in turn, means that the window of opportunity for challenger parties was very large. As explained in the theory chapter, parties are particularly successful when they combine issue emphasis and positioning in their strategy. One promising strategy in this regard is that of issue entrepreneurship.

Parties are considered issue entrepreneurs if they emphasise a previously neglected or even new issue and if their positioning deviates from the mean position of the party system (Hobolt and De Vries, 2015, p. 1161). Issue entrepreneurship can be seen as an innovative strategy. We already know from research that challenger parties are more likely to act as issue entrepreneurs than mainstream parties in national elections in specific issue areas (Hobolt and De Vries, 2015; De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). However, the extent to which this applies in European elections must be examined. The expectation is that due to the favourable conditions for challenger parties, the effect of issue entrepreneurship in European elections is even higher than in national elections.

Issue entrepreneurship can best be examined on cleavage issues beyond the dominant right-left axis (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020, p. 120)²⁸. In the subsequent analysis, Europe and immigration are examined as these issues lie outside the dominant dimension and create internal differences

²⁸ Another issue is the environmental issue. Analyses by De Vries and Hobolt (2020, p. 125) show that challenger parties are also more likely to take up this issue.

among (mainstream) parties. The immigration issue is included in the analysis as previous analyses have shown its significance, particularly at the national level, for challenger parties.

It is first necessary to operationalise the dependent variable. To test who acts as an issue entrepreneur in the different types of elections, two aspects are relevant: the emphasis a party attaches to an issue compared to others and the size of the difference between the challenger party's positioning and the positioning of the other parties. Therefore, the dependent variable "issue entrepreneurship" is calculated according to the concept of Hobolt and De Vries (2015, p. 1169) by multiplying the salience of an issue by the issue distance for each party. Salience is calculated by dividing the sum of all core sentences on an issue by the sum of all core sentences. The issue distance is calculated by subtracting the average position of a party on an issue from the central position of all parties (Hobolt and De Vries, 2015, p. 1169). For the analysis, the datasets of Kriesi *et al.* (2020) (national elections) and (Grande and Braun, 2021a) (European elections) are used, as they contain sufficient information on the salience and the positioning of parties. The independent variable, challenger party, is coded as a dummy variable with a value of 0 indicating a mainstream party and a value of 1 indicating a challenger party. The model includes additional control variables to account for various factors. First, party family affiliation²⁹. This ensures that not just party families at the extreme fringes (where challenger parties are increasingly located) engage in issue entrepreneurship. Second, government experience is integrated. Whether and how long a party was part of the government can influence its issue strategy. Government experience describes the years a party was part of a government. The number can range from 0 to 20. Third, the models are controlled for electoral success. This is important because prior studies show shifts in vote share impact party issue emphasis (Enelow and Hinich, 1984; Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009). In particular, parties that lost in the last election tend to shift the agenda in their favour (Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Hobolt and De Vries, 2015). Electoral success is measured by subtracting the vote share in the previous election from the vote share in the current election. Negative values imply electoral defeat, and positive values electoral success. Fourth, the right-left positioning of parties is included to ensure that they are not simply ideological extremities on the left or right fringe. Vote shares and right-left positions are taken from the MARPOR dataset for national elections (Volkens *et al.*, 2020) and the EUROMANIFESTO dataset for European elections (Schmitt *et al.*, 2018). Due to the data structure in which parties are nested in countries and time, a generalised least squares regression is run. The model is run for each issue for both national and European elections.

The results in Table 9 provide interesting insights into the strategic behaviour of challenger parties. There are differences in issue emphasis across different electoral arenas, suggesting that challenger parties tailor their strategies depending on whether they compete in national or

²⁹ Parties can belong to the following six party families: communists/left socialists, greens, social democrats, liberals, conservative/moderate right, and the radical right.

European elections. Regarding the European issue, challenger parties are more likely to engage as issue entrepreneurs in European elections. In national elections, while challenger parties still act as issue entrepreneurs compared to mainstream parties, they do so to a much lesser extent. Even when all control variables are included, the positive and statistically significant coefficient for challenger parties concerning European issues indicates a clear strategic choice. This suggests that while European issues are important, they are not as dominant in national election campaigns, where domestic issues typically take precedence.

Table 9: Issue Entrepreneurship: Europe and Immigration Issue

	European integration		Immigration	
	National elections	European elections	National elections	European elections
Challenger party	1.713** (0.385)	13.606** (1.031)	3.699** (0.634)	-6.338** (0.966)
Party family	0.973** (0.097)	4.058** (0.240)	2.782** (0.162)	-4.828** (0.219)
Government experience	-0.026 (0.019)	-0.505** (0.053)	-0.269** (0.033)	0.408** (0.048)
Electoral success	-0.055** (0.010)	-0.044** (0.014)	0.273** (0.020)	0.228** (0.031)
Left-Right Position	0.030** (0.006)	-0.049* (0.021)	0.108** (0.011)	0.158** (0.018)
Constant	-3.544** (0.401)	-9.897** (1.048)	-6.938** (0.663)	14.705** (0.910)
<i>Observations</i>	2,484	3,472	2,663	1,203
<i>Log Likelihood</i>	-6845	-13853	-9077	-4047

*Note: Standard errors are in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. Data source: Kriesi et al. (2020) and Grande and Braun (2021a)*

An opposite trend is observed for immigration. Challenger parties leverage this issue primarily in national elections, which resonates more strongly with voters concerned about national sovereignty, border control, and cultural identity. In European elections, challenger parties tend to avoid emphasising immigration. The results reflect complex dynamics where the context of national versus European elections significantly influences how different parties emphasise issues related to European integration and immigration.

4.2.5 Mainstream Party Reaction to Challenger Success

After demonstrating how different party types behave in European election campaigns and showing that challenger parties are increasingly successful, the next step is to investigate how mainstream parties respond to the success of challenger parties. This involves examining whether

and, if so, how they react to this growing challenge. By examining how mainstream parties react to the success of challenger parties, we can gain insights into the evolving dynamics of political competition. This helps in understanding how political strategies shift in response to emerging threats.

First, the reaction of mainstream parties regarding the salience of the Europe issue will be examined. The previous analyses have clearly shown that challenger parties capitalise on the Europe issue. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that mainstream parties adjust their political agendas when a challenger party is part of the party system (H4a). Thus, the analysis starts with the impact on the issue emphasis of mainstream parties regarding the Europe issue. Due to the party year structure, a time series sectional model is run for the Europe issue, including a lagged dependent variable to control for serial correlation. The dependent variable is the salience of the Europe issue by mainstream parties. It is calculated by dividing the proportion of statements made by mainstream parties related to the European issue by the total number of mainstream party sentences. The independent variable is the salience of challenger parties on the European issue. As a party's participation in government can also have an impact (e.g. Mair, 2000), government status acts as a dummy control variable, with 0 if a party is in government and 1 if a party is in opposition. In addition, we know from the literature that parties tend to change their issue emphasis when they have lost an election (e.g. Somer-Topcu, 2009). Therefore, electoral success is also included in the models, measured by subtracting the vote share in the previous election from the current election's vote share.

Table 10: Impact of Challenger Parties on the Issue Emphasis of Mainstream Parties

	European Issue	
	National	European
Lag.d.v.	0.640*** (0.0452)	0.652*** (0.128)
Salience CP	0.403*** (0.0671)	0.103** (0.0455)
In gov./opp.	-0.116 (0.540)	0.339 (0.732)
Electoral gains	0.0761* (0.0404)	0.0678 (0.0857)
Constant	-0.597 (0.505)	2.073** (0.910)
Observations	101	105
R-squared	0.614	0.766

*Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Data source: Kriesi et al. (2020); Grande and Braun (2021a). The models only include elections in which at least one challenger party successfully contested, e.g., Germany in 2017.*

Table 10 shows the results. The coefficients of the lagged dependent variable are high and significant ($p < 0.001$) in both national and European elections. Mainstream parties tend to be stable in their issue emphasis over time. The coefficient for the salience of challenger parties is positive and significant in both electoral arenas, but it is significantly higher in national elections (0.4) than in European elections (0.1). This means that the emphasis challenger parties place on the Europe issue also prompts mainstream parties to give more emphasis to this issue, particularly in national elections. In European elections, the effect is smaller but still significant.

The results clearly demonstrate that mainstream parties adjust their issue emphasis regarding the Europe issue when a challenger party is part of the party competition.

In addition to the issue emphasis of mainstream parties, the next step is to examine to what extent mainstream parties also react in terms of their position towards challenger parties. Therefore, it is examined if mainstream parties change their position if a challenger party threatens them. Table 11 presents the coefficients from a quantitative cross-country analysis examining how the positions of challenger parties influence the positions of mainstream parties on the Europe issue. The analysis is conducted separately for national and European elections, using a time series sectional model with a lagged dependent variable. The dependent variable is the position of mainstream parties on the Europe issue, while the independent variable is the position of challenger parties. The models also include control variables for government status and electoral success.

The results show that mainstream parties respond to challenger parties regarding their positions. The coefficient for the position of challenger parties is 0.26 for national and 0.25 for European elections and is significant ($p < 0.01$). This indicates that mainstream parties adjust their positions on the European issue in response to the positions taken by challenger parties. The effect in European elections is slightly less pronounced compared to national elections.

Specifically, as challenger parties become more Eurosceptic or Europhile, mainstream parties tend to shift their positions in a similar direction, though to a lesser extent. Surprisingly, there are hardly any differences between national and European elections regarding the Europe issue. Government status does not significantly impact their positions, while electoral gains have a minor but significant effect in national elections.

These findings suggest that mainstream parties are responsive to challenger parties' competitive pressures, particularly concerning the Europe issue, and tend to align their positions accordingly while maintaining overall stability over time.

Table 11: Impact of Challenger Parties on the Positions of Mainstream Parties

	European Issue	
	National	European
pos_main_lag	0.538*** (0.0844)	0.747*** (0.0717)
cp	0.266** (0.107)	0.257*** (0.0842)
government	-0.0765 (0.0729)	0.0293 (0.0368)
electoral_gains	0.00947** (0.00460)	-0.00286 (0.00325)
Constant	0.163*** (0.0509)	0.113** (0.0509)
Observations	126	105
R-squared	0.380	0.670

*Note: Standard errors in parentheses *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$; The analysis includes only those elections in which a challenger party was present.*

The results from the two regression analyses provide valuable insights into how mainstream parties adjust their behaviour in response to the presence and strategies of challenger parties, specifically regarding the Europe issue.

In summary, the analyses provide robust evidence that mainstream parties adjust their political agenda if a successful challenger party exists within the party system. Consequently, Hypothesis H4a can be confirmed.

4.2.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis on the party level reveals important insights into the competition dynamics in national and European elections.

Initially, it could be demonstrated that challenger parties are becoming increasingly successful over time, both at the national and European level. However, the difference between national and European elections is much smaller than expected, considering that European elections particularly favour challenger parties. Surprisingly, the findings also reveal that the electoral successes of challenger parties do not correlate with increased visibility in media debates. While

there are slight increases in visibility, these are not proportional to success. However, this could be due to a media bias. Mainstream media outlets may prioritise coverage of mainstream parties over challenger parties, resulting in limited exposure for the latter. Furthermore, challenger parties may face difficulties gaining recognition and legitimacy in the eyes of the media and the public, leading to less coverage and visibility. Nevertheless, this success threatens the electoral and governmental dominance of mainstream parties.

Regarding the issue emphasis of parties, it has been demonstrated that while the issues with high salience values in national and European elections do not differ completely, parties focus differently in the various electoral arenas. While welfare and economic issues exhibit high salience values in national elections, in European elections, issues related to cultural liberalism and Europe are particularly prominent. This holds for both mainstream and challenger parties. However, it was also found that challenger parties, in addition to the European issue, also strongly emphasise the immigration issue, especially in national elections.

Furthermore, variations between countries were observed, highlighting two distinct patterns. (1) A high level of homogeneity in issue emphasis is characterised by a low focus on European issues among mainstream and challenger parties. This pattern is observed in Germany and Austria and suggests a common approach of prioritising domestic concerns over European integration in the electoral discourse. (2) A high salience of European issues accompanied by heterogeneity in other issue domains, as observed in France and the UK. This indicates a more nuanced landscape where parties may adopt varying positions on EU matters while concurrently emphasising different domestic policy agendas. These observations highlight the intricate interplay between national political contexts, party ideologies, and electoral dynamics, underscoring the need for context-specific analyses when examining the behaviour of political actors in European elections. However, these findings also confirm the hypotheses regarding congruent and incongruent electoral systems. First, they indicate that the dynamics differ between congruent and incongruent electoral systems. Second, they also validate that in incongruent electoral systems, the salience of the European issue is significantly higher than in congruent electoral systems.

Due to the high significance of the Europe issue, the behaviour of mainstream and challenger parties was also examined more closely. For both party types, it is evident that constitutive issues are emphasised much more strongly than policy issues. In particular, the analysis reveals that challenger parties, compared to mainstream parties, place even greater emphasis on constitutive issues. While it is not new that challenger parties prioritise European issues more than mainstream parties, it is indeed intriguing that constitutive issues specifically are in focus.

Regarding the EU positions, contrary to expectations, it was found that the intra-party conflict of mainstream parties has no influence on their positioning regarding the Europe issue. Furthermore, regarding the EU positions of mainstream parties, it was also observed that their positions are, on

average, less Europhile than expected. This is particularly attributed to the embedding in the MLES, as mainstream parties thereby signal strong reliability for their voters. There was a clear trend in the positions of challenger parties in all countries. Although challenger parties continue to hold Eurosceptic positions, challenger parties have tended to move closer to the positions of mainstream parties over time. This adjustment could be a strategic decision to appeal to broader voter groups and bolster their credibility as significant political actors.

The analyses also revealed that challenger parties are more likely to act as issue entrepreneurs regarding the EU in European than national election campaigns. Interestingly, they only act as issue entrepreneurs regarding immigration issues at the national level. This indicates that challenger parties strategically select their issue entrepreneurship issues depending on the election in which they can gain the most advantage.

Last but not least, the reaction of mainstream parties to the thread of challenger parties was analysed. The results indicate that mainstream parties react in terms of their issue emphasis and positions when a challenger party becomes part of the competition. Specifically, when a challenger party succeeds in elections and emphasises the European issue, mainstream parties tend to increase their emphasis on European issues. This adjustment reflects an attempt by mainstream parties to address voter concerns and compete effectively with eurosceptic challengers on their chosen battleground. Moreover, the findings indicate that this phenomenon is more pronounced in national elections compared to European elections.

4.3 Individual Country Studies

While the cross-country analyses provide valuable insights into the general dynamics of party competition regarding the Europe issue, it is essential to delve deeper into individual countries for a more nuanced understanding. Examining specific countries allows us to account for unique political contexts, historical legacies, and electoral systems that might influence party behaviour differently. This detailed analysis can uncover country-specific patterns and variations that broader analyses might overlook. Focusing on individual countries, we can also explore mainstream and challenger parties' distinct strategies and adaptations in response to national circumstances, providing a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the competitive dynamics at play. The country chapters are structured as follows: first, a brief explanation of the structure of party competition is provided, including the key political actors. This is followed by analysing how specific mainstream parties have responded to their challengers regarding issue emphasis and position.

4.3.1 Austria

Regarding competition dynamics, Austria is an interesting case for two reasons. First, Austria is the only country among those examined where a challenger party, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), became part of the government. The rise of the FPÖ and its transition from a fringe party to a significant political force has strongly influenced Austria's party system. Secondly, the "Liste Martin" has achieved electoral success alongside the already established Eurosceptic FPÖ³⁰. In addition, new political actors such as the "Team Stronach" and "Das neue Österreich" (NEOS) have emerged in recent years, further diversifying the party system. This increase in new parties has altered the competition dynamics and brought new challenges for established parties.

Structure of Party Competition

Traditionally, the Austrian party system has been dominated by two major parties - the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) and the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP). According to Sartori (1976), the Austrian party system has evolved from a moderate pluralism, characterised by the stable dominance of the SPÖ and ÖVP and a relative ideological proximity, to a polarising pluralism. Austria has experienced several phases where so-called "grand coalitions" between the two dominant parties, SPÖ and ÖVP, were formed. One of the longest and most well-known grand coalitions in Austrian history lasted from 1945 to 1966. Further grand coalitions occurred from 1987 to 2000 and from 2007 to 2017. Consequently, Austria has one of the most enduring grand coalition governments among West European countries. However, it should be noted that the ÖVP and SPÖ were practically forced to form a coalition due to the lack of alternative coalition partners.

The Austrian Green Party was founded in 1986. Over the years, the Greens have steadily increased their political influence, securing seats in both national and regional parliaments. The Austrian Green Party's pro-European stance is a core aspect of their platform. The "Liberales Forum" (LIF), a split from the FPÖ, was founded in the early 1990s. Since 2013, NEOS, the successor party to the LIF, has represented liberal politics in Austria. NEOS has since sought to advocate for progressive policies and reforms, offering an alternative voice to the more established parties in the Austrian political arena. The establishment of these new parties signalled a greater degree of fragmentation for the mainstream parties. However, it is essential to note that these parties did not fundamentally oppose the core principles of the existing political landscape. However, since these parties have not significantly shaped the competitive dynamics, they will not be extensively incorporated into the analysis.

³⁰ There are further challenger parties in Austria. In 2012, Austrian billionaire Frank Stronach founded the conservative and anti-European party Team Stronach (TS). Numerous former FPÖ and BZÖ supporters became members of the new party. Unlike the List HPM, the party has never run in European elections due to internal differences and is therefore not part of the analysis.

What is the stance of the Austrian parties on the Europe issue? The SPÖ is generally considered to be pro-European. During Austria's accession to the European Union in 1995, the SPÖ played a crucial role. It advocated for EU membership, arguing that Austria needed to collaborate more closely with its European neighbours in an increasingly globalised world to ensure economic success and political stability. In the subsequent years, the SPÖ supported the deepening of European integration and the further development of the European Union.

Similarly to the SPÖ, the ÖVP has traditionally adopted a pro-European position and was one of the main advocates for Austria's accession to the EU in 1995. Over time, the ÖVP's stance on the EU has evolved in line with political developments and the concerns of its voters. With the expansion of the EU and the deepening of integration, the ÖVP has continued to support European integration, albeit with a focus on safeguarding national interests and subsidiarity. In recent years, under the leadership of Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, the ÖVP has adopted a more sceptical stance towards further EU integration, particularly regarding issues of sovereignty and migration. The party has sought to maintain a balanced position, emphasising the benefits of EU membership while also insisting that decisions at the European level respect national interests and grant member states greater autonomy in certain policy areas (Mayer, 2018).

NEOS has generally positioned itself as a pro-European party and often emphasises the importance of Austria's active participation in EU decision-making processes and advocates for reforms aimed at strengthening the EU's democratic institutions and enhancing transparency.

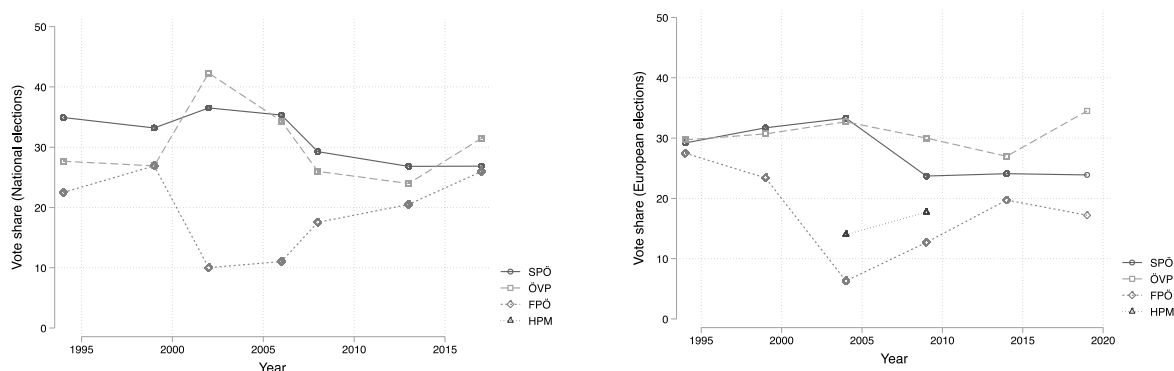
Fluctuating Fortunes: The Rise, Fall, and Resurgence of the FPÖ and the Emergence of a Second Eurosceptic Party

Of immense significance for the competitive dynamics in Austria is particularly the FPÖ. The rise of the FPÖ began in the mid-1980s with the election of Jörg Haider as party leader. At this time, the FPÖ was seen as a successful example of a right-wing populist party (Wodak and Pelinka, 2002). Over time, the party transitioned from a marginal to a significant political force, reshaping the country's political dynamics. Particularly, the Eurosceptic stance of the FPÖ has posed a unique challenge to Austria's traditionally pro-European mainstream parties, to which the dominant mainstream parties reacted differently.

The SPÖ has consistently rejected any form of collaboration with the FPÖ. Conversely, the ÖVP showed a much more open stance regarding cooperation. The 1999 National Council election marked the end of the grand coalition between the SPÖ and the ÖVP. The FPÖ achieved significant electoral success in this election, coming in second place just behind the SPÖ. With the ÖVP trailing in third place, there was an opportunity to form a coalition with the FPÖ to gain control of the government, thus ending the long-standing grand coalition with the SPÖ. The ÖVP's decision to form a coalition with the FPÖ was also a strategic manoeuvre to reshape the political landscape. By aligning with the FPÖ, the ÖVP aimed to counterbalance the influence of the SPÖ

and capitalise on the rising popularity of the FPÖ. The formation of a government between the ÖVP and the FPÖ marked a significant shift in the competitive dynamics in Austria.

Figure 22: Vote Shares of Austrian Parties in National and European Elections



Note: The graph on the right shows the vote shares for European elections, and the graph on the left shows the vote shares for national elections. Source: ParlGov (Döring and Manow, 2021).

The FPÖ's government participation led to a substantial decline for the party in the national elections of 2002 and 2006 (see Figure 22), as well as in the European elections of 2004. This delineation was seen, on the one hand, as a successful strategy of the ÖVP to weaken the challenger party (Luther, 2003) and, on the other, as a failure of the FPÖ to reconcile its populist orientation with the duties of a governing party (Heinisch, 2003). Finally, this led to the split of the FPÖ. A large part of the officeholders founded the new party, Alliance of the Future of Austria (BZÖ), again led by Jörg Haider. The FPÖ thus also lost its status as a governing party. Between 2006 and 2013, the FPÖ and the BZÖ represented two right-wing parties in parliament.

During their time in government, the FPÖ's position on Europe became notably more pro-European (see also Figure 23). Additionally, the party increasingly shifted its focus away from European issues towards immigration issues. Since 2005, the FPÖ has staged itself as a "social home party," but at the same time, it advocates a (neo-)liberal economic policy. Only with the onset of the financial crisis and a rise in unemployment, especially among non-Austrians, did the party manage to use this issue to its advantage and achieve substantial electoral success again. Their election campaigns emphasised national interests and a stop to immigration (Moreau, 2016, p. 120).

However, with this strategic decision, the FPÖ opened a space for another eurosceptic party in the Austrian party system. By failing to establish an issue linkage between immigration and the European issue, the FPÖ paved the way for a new party.

In 2004, the Liste Martin (HPM) was founded. Hans-Peter Martin, a former journalist and independent member of the European Parliament, founded the party in response to his dissatisfaction with the established parties and their handling of EU politics. He aimed to combat corruption and misconduct in the European Parliament and advocated for increased transparency and citizen engagement within the EU.

The Liste Martin successfully positioned itself as a viable choice for individuals sceptical of the European Union who preferred not to vote for right-wing parties such as the FPÖ or BZÖ. By presenting themselves as a moderate Eurosceptic option, they appealed to voters who shared concerns about the European Union but did not align with the more right-wing ideologies of the FPÖ or BZÖ. This positioning allowed them to attract a specific segment of the electorate looking for an alternative EU-sceptical party. In contrast to the FPÖ, the Liste Martin is a single-issue party, meaning the party has explicitly focused almost exclusively on the European issue. After protracted disputes, Hans-Peter Martin, who was still the lead candidate of the social democratic SPÖ in 1999 and represented the party as a member of the European Parliament, ran as his candidate list in the 2004 European elections. The party received 13.98 % of the votes and thus 2 of the 18 Austrian mandates in the European Parliament. Programmatically, the party advocated greater transparency of government action, direct democracy, and opposition to Turkey's accession to the EU. In the subsequent national elections in 2006, the party failed to pass the 4% threshold and failed to enter parliament. In the 2009 European elections, the party again increased its result, achieving 17.9% of the vote and three seats in the European Parliament. The party did not run in the 2014 European elections and has been inactive since then.

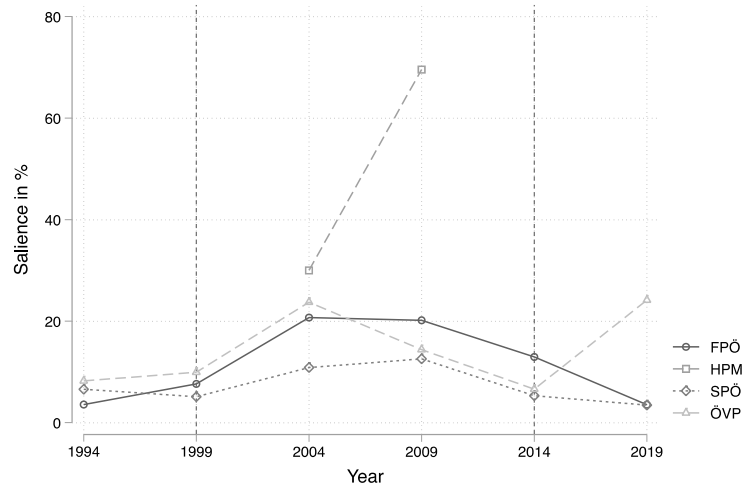
This exit was an opportunity for the FPÖ to capitalise on, and they again gained considerable momentum and increased their voter base in various elections. In the 2017 national elections, the party secured 26% of the vote, becoming the third-largest party in the National Council. Following the 2017 elections, the FPÖ formed a coalition government with the ÖVP, led by Sebastian Kurz. The FPÖ held several key ministerial positions, including the Vice-Chancellorship. This coalition marked a significant point in Austrian politics, as it brought the far-right FPÖ into the mainstream government. At the same time, it can be observed that Europe was not the decisive issue for the FPÖ's success. Looking at the salience curve of the Europe issue (see Figure 23), it is clear that the issue played a minor role in the last two European elections.

Mainstream party reaction

How do Austria's mainstream parties respond to their challengers in European elections regarding salience and position? First, we look at the issue emphasis of the Austrian parties on the European issue. For this purpose, the salience is calculated for the two major mainstream parties and the two challenger parties. Table 3 shows the salience of the European issue for Austrian parties in European election campaigns. In the post-Maastricht phase, the salience of the European issue was relatively moderate among all parties. An apparent increase in salience for all parties can be observed in the 2004 European election. This is largely due to the entry of the Eurosceptic party HPM into the political contest. Both mainstream parties adopt an emphasis strategy in response to the new challenger. However, in the subsequent election, they shift towards a deemphasising approach. Analysing the FPÖ's emphasis on the Europe issue, we observe a pattern resembling an inverted U-curve over time. The party placed the highest emphasis on this issue when another

competing challenger party, the Liste Martin, was in the electoral competition. The issue emphasis of the SPÖ on Europe has also steadily declined since the mid-2000s. The ÖVP, which had strongly deemphasised the issue, placed significant emphasis on it in the 2019 European election. They advocated for a new EU treaty, urging member states to agree on the necessary rules to ensure the European Union's continued success in the 21st century. In national elections, the Europe issue is of minor importance among all parties, except the FPÖ in 2009.

Figure 23: Salience of Austrian Parties on the Europe Issue in European Elections

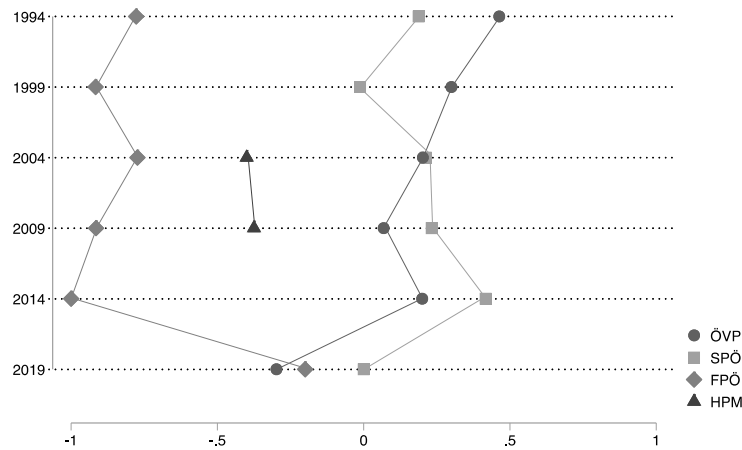


Note: The graph shows the salience of the European issue for the major mainstream parties and challenger parties in Austria. Data Source: Grande and Braun (2021a).

The next step is to examine how the positions of the individual parties have evolved over time. Figure 24 shows the positions of the parties for European elections. Austria has a high potential for Euroscepticism, especially as a small country and a net contributor (Dolezal, 2008a, p. 111). In particular, the sanctions the other 14 member states applied against the ÖVP-FPÖ government at the beginning of the 2000s increased Austrian Euroscepticism (Luif, 2005, p. 877). The challenger party FPÖ has been eurosceptic since Austria's accession. The FPÖ, a vocal opponent of the negotiation process, argued that membership would compromise Austrian sovereignty and independence. Although the party holds the most euro-critical position on average, the trajectory is nonetheless intriguing. During its initial period in government, there was little change in its position. Despite being part of the government, the FPÖ maintained its strongly euro-critical position, which later intensified. More surprising is the significant shift in the 2019 European election, where the FPÖ adopted a much more positive stance towards the EU. At the same time, it is evident that their coalition partner, the ÖVP, which is typically known for being strongly pro-European, moved closer to the FPÖ's stance and took a much more euro-critical position in this election compared to other elections. This also applies to the SPÖ, which otherwise consistently held pro-European positions.

The HPM strategically positioned itself between the highly critical FPÖ and the two more pro-European mainstream parties.

Figure 24: Position of Austrian Parties on the Europe Issue in European Elections



Note: The graph shows the position of the major mainstream parties and challenger parties in Austria for European elections. Data source: Grande and Braun (2021a).

Table 12 summarises the results and shows the strategies of Austrian mainstream parties concerning salience and positioning on the Europe issue. Two crucial findings become visible: Initially, mainstream parties tend to downplay the Europe issue. However, they respond by emphasising when a new eurosceptic challenger becomes part of the competition. This was particularly noticeable in the 2004 European election when the HPM participated for the first time. However, they subsequently reverted to their original strategy of deemphasising the issue. Secondly, both major mainstream parties are pursuing different strategies regarding their positioning. While the ÖVP is moving closer, the SPÖ is rather distancing itself. The 2019 election is particularly surprising. On the one hand, the ÖVP emphasised the Europe issue strongly, while on the other hand, the FPÖ adopted a more pro-European position. In contrast, the ÖVP and SPÖ positioned themselves more negatively.

Table 12: Reaction Pattern of Austrian Mainstream Parties

	<i>Emphasizing</i>	<i>Deemphasizing</i>
<i>Convergence</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ÖVP (04, 19) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ÖVP (94, 99, 14) ▪ SPÖ (99, 19)
<i>Distance</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ SPÖ (04) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ÖVP (14) ▪ SPÖ (94, 09, 14)

Conclusion

What conclusion can be drawn from this? Overall, the analysis of competitive dynamics in Austria over time reveals a remarkable evolution. The fluctuating fortunes of the FPÖ, from its rise to prominence, decline, and subsequent resurgence, have profoundly impacted the competitive dynamics of Austria. On the one hand, when a eurosceptic challenger party is in government, it adapts accordingly, yet this adjustment is not always rewarded by its voter base. Simultaneously, the Austrian case vividly demonstrates that when the eurosceptic challenger party shifts its focus, but the population's interests remain unchanged, space is created for a new challenger party. Furthermore, the FPÖ's case illustrates that linking the Europe issue with the immigration issue is a successful strategy for electoral success in both arenas. However, this issue linkage also makes it more challenging for mainstream parties to marginalise the challenger. Just as the behaviour of challenger parties has evolved over time, a dynamic shift is evident among mainstream parties. Previous trends, such as the tendency of mainstream parties to de-emphasise the salience of the European issue, have been disrupted by the emergence of new eurosceptic challengers. This led mainstream parties to adapt their strategies and emphasise the importance of the Europe issue to counter new challenges. Despite the SPÖ's consistent refusal to cooperate with the FPÖ, it's clear that even they have had to make adjustments.

4.3.2 France

France presents a compelling case in terms of competitive dynamics for several reasons. First, due to its historical context and changes in the party system. France has experienced significant shifts in its party system since World War II, moving from a fragmented multi-party system to a more consolidated structure dominated by a few major parties and then witnessing the emergence of new challengers. The French party system has always been volatile due to numerous new formations, splits, short-lived party alliances, renamings, and dissolutions (Bornschieer and Lachat, 2009). Second, due to its political polarisation and realignment. In recent years, France has seen increasing political polarisation and realignment. The traditional left-right divide has been challenged by new political movements, such as La République En Marche! (LREM) founded by Emmanuel Macron, which has disrupted the traditional party system and introduced new dynamics into the political arena. Third, the EU holds a special significance in France. France is a key member of the European Union, and debates over EU membership, integration, and sovereignty have been central to French politics. The varying positions of French parties on the EU offer insights into how European issues influence national competitive dynamics.

Structure of Party Competition

Based on the categorisation of Sartori (1976), the French party system has shifted from moderate pluralism to a system of polarised pluralism. Until the mid-1980s, the political landscape in

France was characterised by the dominance of two parties on the left and two on the right. The electoral competition was primarily shaped by a left-right dimension, the so-called quadrille bipolaire, with the Parti communiste français (PCF) and Parti Socialiste (PS) on one side and the Union pour la démocratie française (UDF) and the Gaullist Rassemblement pour la République (RPR) on the other. Coalitions were formed only within the two groups, not across them. However, since the end of the 1980s, the constellation within the two groups has changed significantly. The conservative RPR was traditionally more eurosceptic and critical of deeper European integration. The PS held traditionally pro-European positions. However, the national referendum on the Maastricht Treaty led to a split within the PS. A significant part of the party supported the treaty but also saw the need for reforms and social safeguards to mitigate the negative effects of the single market and monetary union. Overall, the Maastricht Treaty can be seen as a turning point in the French party system. The intense debates around the treaty led to numerous new formations and splits, such as the anti-European Mouvement pour la France (MPF), led by the ex-UDF deputy Philippe de Villiers, which split from the Neo-Gaullists, or the Mouvement des citoyens (now known as Mouvement républicain et citoyen), which split from the Parti Socialiste. Thus, a minority national republican and Eurosceptic discourse became entrenched and established institutional expression in these new party formations (Schild, 2008, p. 12).

After two decades characterised by fragmentation tendencies, the 2000s brought a period of reconcentration of the party system within the framework of a bipolar competitive situation with the PS as the dominant force on the left and the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP) on the moderate right. After the RPR merged into the UMP the position of France's conservative parties on Europe gradually shifted. The UMP attempted to adopt a more pro-European stance under the leadership of Nicolas Sarkozy, who served as president from 2007 to 2012. Sarkozy advocated for increased economic cooperation within the EU, supporting initiatives such as the introduction of the Euro and the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty. With the founding of Les Républicains (LR) in 2015, which emerged from a restructuring of the UMP, this pro-European orientation continued, albeit with certain nuances. The LR continued to support closer cooperation within the EU, albeit focusing on reforms and emphasising national sovereignty in certain policy areas.

In addition to these major parties, several smaller parties are part of the French party system. These include the centrist "Mouvement Démocrate" (MoDem) and the "Europe Écologie Les Verts" (ELLV).

The Rise of the Front National and Responses of Mainstream Parties

Particularly after Maastricht, numerous small new (eurosceptic) challenger parties emerged, such as the "Mouvement pour la France" (MPF) or the "Rassemblement pour la France" (RPF) (Reungoat, 2017, p. 20). Nevertheless, the Front National (FN), renamed "Rassemblement National" (RN) in 2018, remains the most significant and successful challenger party.

Founded in 1972 by Jean-Marie Le Pen as a fusion of various national conservative and extreme right-wing party movements, the FN experienced its electoral breakthrough in the 1980s in different second-order elections - much earlier than in other European countries (Bornschieer, 2008, p. 77). Initially, the FN held pro-European positions based on the defence of nationalism at the European level and strong opposition to Soviet communism (Reungoat, 2017, p. 19). Since Maastricht, the party has been highly critical of the European Union (EU), arguing that it is undemocratic, bureaucratic, and undermines national sovereignty. The party has advocated for France to leave the EU and abandon the euro currency, which it sees as harmful to French interests. In the 1984 European Parliament elections, the party won 10.6% of the vote, giving and nine seats in the European Parliament. However, the party's rise was accompanied by controversy and criticism, particularly over its anti-immigrant and antisemitic views. Both the conservative right-wing parties, i.e. UDF and RPR under the leadership of Jacques Chirac and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, and the socialist PS, under President François Mitterrand, regarded the FN as a marginal phenomenon and initially largely ignored it.

Nevertheless, the FN grew in popularity throughout the 1990s and 2000s. The particularly broad and intense debates surrounding the Maastricht Treaty, with a rift between the dominant factions of the "heart and mind Europeans" on the one hand and the national republicans and sovereigntists on the other, led to a surge for the right-wing populists (Goulard, 2002).

In the 1998 regional elections, the FN offered an alliance with the right-wing conservative parties (RPR and UDF), leading to significant tensions within the conservative camp. This offer was formulated by Bruno Gollnisch, a leading FN member, and accepted in several regions. The strategy was supported by Jean-Marie Le Pen, aimed to strengthen the right-wing front and influence regional governments. Jacques Chirac (President of the RPR) and François Léotard (President of the UDF) condemned the collaboration with the FN, resulting in the resignation of several regional top candidates who had entered into an alliance. These events led to considerable internal tensions and splits within the conservative parties and marked a turning point where the conservative parties began to pursue a clearer distinction from the FN. In response to political and societal reactions, the conservative parties, along with the socialist PS, developed a "cordon sanitaire" strategy, meaning they strictly rejected any collaboration with the FN and attempted to politically isolate the party³¹. This strategy aimed to undermine the FN's legitimacy and protect democratic values (Villalba, 1998). However, this was also controversial within the parties. Lionel Jospin (PS), later Prime Minister, for example, distanced himself strongly from this strategy.

In 2002, Jean-Marie Le Pen shocked the political establishment by making it to the second round of the French presidential election. Le Pen's success in the first round, where he garnered nearly 17% of the vote, was unprecedented for a far-right candidate and marked a significant moment in French politics. The PS mobilised support for Jacques Chirac, the candidate of the conservative

³¹ The expression "cordon sanitaire" first appeared in France in a manifesto published in *Le Monde* in 1987, written by Jean-Christophe Cambadélis and signed by 122 leading figures.

party, against Le Pen. Le Pen's advancement to the runoff caused widespread outrage and led to massive protests across France (Henley, 2002). The mainstream parties and civil society rallied against Le Pen in what became known as the "Republican Front" (Front républicain), a broad coalition aimed at preventing the far-right from gaining power. This entailed specific arrangements between the two major parties during runoff elections. Alongside the majority voting system, this resulted in FN candidates rarely having a chance in runoff elections. Consequently, between 2002 and 2012, the FN had no representation in the National Assembly and also rarely secured public offices at the municipal level.

After this election, the FN struggled to maintain its momentum. The 2004 regional elections were disappointing for the FN, marking a decline from their earlier successes. The party faced internal conflicts and challenges in the following years as it sought to expand its appeal beyond its traditional base. The UMP, the successor party to the RPR and UDF, continued in the late 2000s the "cordon sanitaire" strategy and ruled out any cooperation with the FN.

The turning point for the FN came in 2011 when Jean-Marie Le Pen's daughter, Marine Le Pen, took over the party leadership and initiated a process of "de-demonization," seeking to distance the party from its extremist roots. She aimed to broaden the party's appeal beyond its traditional far-right base by focusing on issues like immigration, national sovereignty, and Euroscepticism, while toning down overtly xenophobic rhetoric. Under Marine Le Pen's leadership, the party continued to gain support,

In the 2012 presidential election, she secured nearly 18% of the vote, positioning the FN as a significant force in French politics. The UMP under Sarkozy responded by aligning more closely with similar issues. While Marine Le Pen referred to Islam as "green fascism" and equated Muslim street preachers to the Nazi occupation of France, it was Nicolas Sarkozy who targeted the Muslim population and adopted some of Le Pen's rhetoric (Godin, 2013, p. 59). While the anti-establishment rhetoric was successful in the 2007 election campaign, this strategy proved problematic in 2012. 20% of former Sarkozy voters from 2007 shifted to the Front National camp in 2012, casting their ballots for Marine Le Pen (Fourquet and Philippot, 2011, p. 47).

The next big success for Marine Le Pen came in the municipal elections in March 2014. There, the FN made it to the runoff in 328 municipalities. The FN's successes at the local and national level are primarily due to the fact that the UMP terminated the "Front républicain" that had been in place since 2002 following its defeat in the 2012 presidential elections.

The 2014 European elections marked a breakthrough for the FN. The party won 24.9% of the vote, securing 24 seats in the European Parliament. This was the first time the FN had come first in a nationwide election, signalling its transition from a fringe party to a major political force in France. This development was surprising, as many commentators spoke of the disenchantment and decline of the far-right party after its poor result in the 2007 presidential elections. Seven years later, the FN is part of the French political mainstream (Mayer, 2013, p. 161). In the 2014

European election campaign, the FN campaigned without a specific electoral program. Instead, it adopted the points regarding the EU and globalisation from its national party program and used them as demands for the European election campaign. The FN's campaign focused heavily on Euroscepticism, opposing the European Union's policies and advocating for national sovereignty, resonating with a significant portion of the electorate dissatisfied with the EU's influence over French affairs. Furthermore, the results of the European election highlight the growing divide between the governing elites and the governed on the issue of European integration. While political elites, particularly in the early 1990s, pushed for further European integration and still considered France a key driver of the European Union, in 2014, the French public increasingly rejected this view. They saw the EU as the cause of national problems rather than a potential solution (Grunberg, 2014, p. 79f.).

The major mainstream parties reacted differently to the growing strength of the FN. The PS was struggling with internal conflicts and decreasing voter support. Nevertheless, it tried to counterbalance the FN and position itself as the voice of social justice and progress. The LR (former UMP) tried to counter the loss of votes by taking a tougher line on immigration and security and positioning itself more strongly against populist ideas. At the same time, Emmanuel Macron's 'La République En Marche!' (LREM), a strongly pro-European party was founded³². LREM was founded to transcend traditional left-right. The party quickly gained momentum and resounded victory in the 2017 presidential election. The party achieved 28% of the votes and an absolute majority of mandates in the National Assembly. LREM presents itself as a centrist and pro-European party, advocating for economic reforms, social progress, and a revitalisation of the European Union. This attracted a diverse range of supporters, including both moderate left-wing and right-wing voters disillusioned with the established parties.

However, these strategies were not as effective as hoped. In the 2019 European Parliament election, the Rassemblement National (former FN) achieved significant success. The party won around 23.3% of the votes in France, making it the strongest party in the country. President Emmanuel Macron's party, La République En Marche (LREM), was defeated in the 2019 European Parliament election. It did not achieve the expected results, securing only second place behind the RN. The contrast between pro-Europeans and anti-Europeans constructed by Macron did not resonate with centrist voters to the extent he had hoped. Instead, the populists (as well as the moderate opposition) seized the opportunity to turn the election into a referendum on Macron's

³² Another new party is "France Insoumise" (FI), founded by Jean-Luc Mélenchon and representing a left-wing and anti-establishment movement. The party has called for a "Plan B" for Europe, which would involve renegotiating the EU's treaties and shifting towards more progressive policies. In the 2017 French parliamentary election, the party leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon was the lead candidate and won 17 constituencies (after receiving 11% of the votes in the first round) and was able to form its parliamentary group in the National Assembly. However, in the 2019 European Parliament election, the party achieved a disappointing result with only 6.3% of the votes and six seats in the European Parliament.

policies of the past two years (Galetti and Wissmann, 2019). The centre-right conservative LR only achieved 8.4 per cent, placing fourth - the worst result ever for the Gaullists in an European election.

Mainstream Party Reaction: Issues Emphasis and Position

After this detailed description of the Front National's development and mainstream parties' responses in the different elections, it is important to also examine the extent the major mainstream parties have reacted in terms of issue emphasis and positioning.

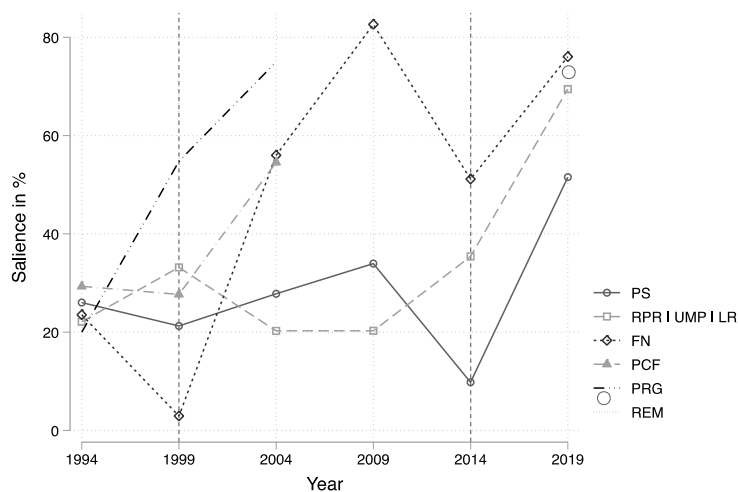
Figure 25 shows the EU issue emphasis of different French Parties in European elections. The issue is generally important in European party competition for all French parties compared to other countries.

Looking at the salience curve of the FN, it becomes clear that the party exhibits strong fluctuations. In the post-Maastricht phase, the FN did not emphasise the issue more than the mainstream parties PS and RPR. Particularly in the 1999 European election, the issue was hardly significant for the FN. This changed dramatically in the following elections when the EU issue showed high salience values. The centre-left PS consistently emphasises the Europe issue, except in the 2014 European election, where the party focused more on social justice and increased regulation of financial markets in response to the global financial crisis.

The salience values for the 2014 and 2019 European elections are particularly interesting. In 2014, as previously mentioned, the FN managed to win the most votes. In this election, the conservative UMP also placed a greater emphasis on the Europe issue compared to previous elections. On the other hand, the more left-wing PS emphasised the issue much less than in the 2009 election.

In the 2019 European election, all parties intensely focused on the EU issue. Not only the FN but also LR, LREM, and now the PS significantly increased their emphasis on the EU issue.

Figure 25: Salience of French Parties on the Europe Issue in European Elections



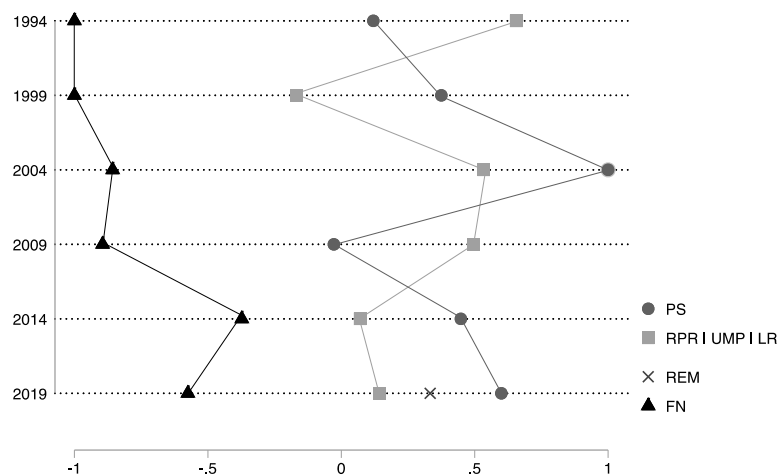
Note: The graph shows the European issue salience of French major mainstream and challenger parties for European elections. The party France Insoumise (FI) did not have enough data points in the analysis and is therefore not included in the figure. Data source: Grande and Braun (2021a).

The next step is to examine party positions, i.e., whether mainstream parties are converging or distancing towards the challenger party. Figure 26 plots the party positions of the most relevant French parties. The FN has the strongest Euroskeptical position, although the party has become more moderate in the last two European elections. This is mainly due to the leadership change under Marine Le Pen and her de-demonization strategy. The left-wing mainstream party PS has traditionally taken a pro-European stance, but its position on the European Union (EU) has evolved and fluctuated significantly since the Maastricht Treaty. In response to the successes of the FN, both post-Maastricht and starting in 2014, the PS has positioned itself pro-European to counterbalance the FN.

The conservative parties have also shown significant fluctuations. While they took pro-European positions in the election following Maastricht, they aligned more closely with the FN in 1999, only to adopt clearly pro-European positions again in subsequent elections. In the elections following the resurgence of the FN, they once again moved closer to the FN.

What does this indicate? It shows that the strategy of the "Cordon Sanitaire" is not consistently reflected in the positions of the major mainstream parties. Although both parties excluded collaboration with the FN, their positions over time do not consistently reject the FN. Instead, both parties have, at times, aligned their positions more closely with the FN.

Figure 26: Position of French Parties on the Europe Issue in European Elections



Note: The graph shows the position of the major mainstream parties and challenger parties in France for European elections. The party France Insoumise (FI) did not have enough data points in the analysis and is therefore not included in the figure. Data source: Grande and Braun (2021a).

The strategic emphasis on the Europe issue and the positioning of French mainstream parties follows a clear pattern, as shown in Table 13. None of the major mainstream parties chooses the combination of moving closer to the position but de-emphasising the issue. In general, the dominant strategy regarding issue emphasis is emphasising. This is particularly evident in the high salience values of the Europe issue compared to other countries, which is especially pushed

by the challenger party FN. However, it is also noticeable that there are temporal differences. Especially in the post-Maastricht phase, the PS has attempted to deemphasise the Europe issue.

Table 13: Reaction Pattern of French Mainstream Parties

	<i>Emphasizing</i>	<i>Deemphasizing</i>
<i>Convergence</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ RPR (99); UMP (14) ▪ PS (09) 	
<i>Distance</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ LR (19) ▪ PS (04, 19) ▪ LREM (19) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ RPR (94); UMP (04, 09) ▪ PS (94, 99, 14)

The strategy of emphasising the issue while distancing themselves in terms of position suggests that parties are trying to differentiate themselves by adopting specific and potentially critical perspectives on the EU, aiming to appeal to voters dissatisfied with the current EU policies. However, when parties choose to downplay the Europe issue and take a distanced position, they are attempting to avoid the issue in the campaign and diminish its significance. However, it is worth noting that right-wing and left-wing mainstream parties exhibit different behaviour in this regard. Right-wing mainstream parties are more inclined to approach the issue, whereas left-wing parties are less likely to do so.

Conclusion

Taken together, changing competitive dynamics can be observed in France. On the one hand, the case shows that, when collaborating, mainstream parties can also decrease the success of challenger parties. Specifically, between 2002 and 2011, mainstream parties succeeded in significantly limiting the influence of the challenger party through the cordon sanitaire.

At the same time, it also shows that when mainstream parties deviate from this strategy, they leave room for challenger parties to re-emerge. It also demonstrates that attempts to win back voters by aligning more closely with challenger parties, as was the case with the UMP, are not necessarily rewarded by voters. The opposite effect was observed: “Sarkozy’s policies have encouraged, rather than responded to, the droitisation of French society” (Godin, 2013, p. 63).

The case of France also illustrates how challenger parties can strategically act and regain strength. While the FN was almost defeated in the mid-2000s, it returned to its former strength and even expanded its successes by changing leadership and adopting a seemingly more moderate course. Additionally, the FN has successfully linked EU scepticism with other politically charged issues, such as immigration, national sovereignty, and security. This issue linkage has enabled the party to appeal to various voter groups concerned about different aspects but united in their opposition to EU integration. The FN has also used issue linkages regarding national identity by connecting it with the economy. By emphasising that the EU and globalisation threaten jobs and the economic

stability of France, the FN was able to attract economically disadvantaged voters and those worried about the loss of national identity. Mainstream parties must recognise this strategy and respond by developing their issue linkages and political messages to adequately address the multifaceted concerns of voters. This underscores the need for mainstream parties to pursue not just short-term victories but also to develop long-term strategies to combat challengers.

4.3.3 United Kingdom

The UK is also a special case regarding competitive dynamics. First, this is due to its historical Euroskepticism. The UK has always been considered an "awkward partner" (George, 1998) since it became part of the European Economic Community (EEC) 1973 under a Conservative government. The UK has a long history of scepticism towards European integration, reflected in various parties. This Euroskepticism is deeply rooted in political culture and influences national and European elections. The British population has always been less EU-friendly than the European average, also reflected in voter turnout. Although low voter turnout is generally a characteristic of European elections, the UK is one level below. In summary, voter turnout in the European Parliament elections in the UK remained consistently low, with a historic low of 24% in 1999 and never exceeding 40% in subsequent years. In every European election, on average, only one-third of eligible British voters ever participated.

Second, due to incongruent election systems, the dynamics at the national and European level are very different. It incentivises parties like UKIP to focus more on European elections, leveraging the proportional representation system to their advantage.

Third, the UK is a prime example of successful single-issue challenger parties that have exploited dissatisfaction with the EU. UKIP's success was built on its singular focus on the issue of the UK's relationship with the EU.

Fourth, the Brexit has fundamentally changed the competitive dynamics of British politics. Brexit has realigned the party landscape, with new conflict lines emerging between pro- and anti-Brexit positions that cross traditional party boundaries.

Structure of party competition

The UK is the European prototype of a majority system and is dominated by two mainstream parties: The Conservatives (Con) and the Labour Party (Lab). According to the electoral system, it is challenging for smaller parties to gain seats in the national parliament. In addition to the two large mainstream parties, there are smaller parties, even though they have only a few seats in parliament. The Liberal Democrats (LD) are the third largest party in the UK and were even part of the government from 2010-2015. The Green Party of England and Wales (GP), founded in 1990, has held a seat in the House of Commons since 2010. In addition to national parties, the UK has regional parties limited to specific regions or autonomous territories. An example is the

Scottish National Party (SNP) in Scotland. The SNP is a political party primarily active in Scotland, advocating for Scottish independence. Its candidates can only be elected by the citizens of Scotland, as they stand in elections for the Scottish Regional Government or the UK parliamentary elections in Scottish constituencies. The analysis focuses on the two major mainstream parties, as historically, they have been the dominant political forces and have exerted significant influence on the country's political landscape and EU policy.

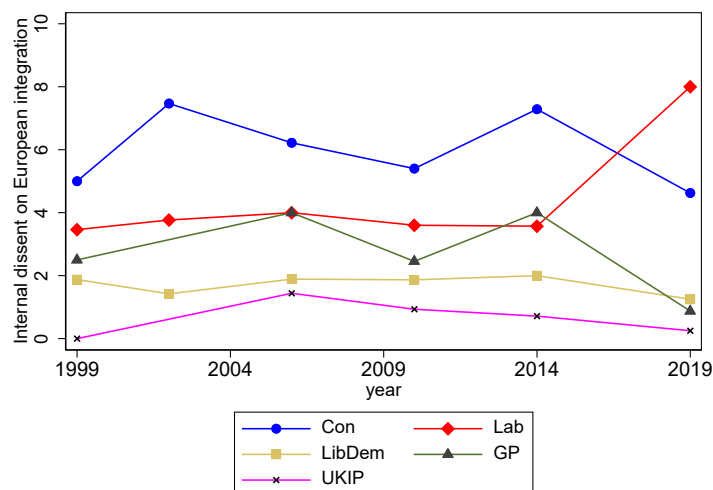
The European positions of the two major mainstream parties of the United Kingdom, the Conservative Party and the Labour Party, have undergone significant changes over time.

At the time of EU accession, the Conservative Party was considered pro-European. However, a divided relationship with the European Union began to emerge under Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990). While the party supported the Single Market, it became increasingly sceptical of deeper European integration. Despite a eurosceptic faction within the party, Prime Minister John Major supported the Maastricht treaty, leading to internal tensions and party divisions. Under David Cameron (party leader from 2005), the party became increasingly eurosceptic.

The Labour Party, on the other hand, was divided over joining the EEC, with a significant faction opposing it. However, in the first referendum in 1975, the party officially supported remaining in the EEC (Saunders, 2016). Although the majority voted to remain in the EEC, this first referendum manifested the divided relationship with the European Union. In the 1980s, under the leadership of Michael Foot, the Labour Party became increasingly Eurosceptic and even advocated for withdrawal from the EEC in their 1983 election manifesto. As long as Labour held a Eurosceptic stance, the potential for Europe to emerge as a divisive issue across party lines remained limited (Evans and Mellon, 2019, p. 78). In the 1990s, under Tony Blair, the party dramatically changed its position and became a staunchly pro-European party. Blair supported EU enlargement and the Euro, although the UK ultimately did not join the currency union. During this period, the traditionally Labour-supporting working class, who were also Eurosceptic, began to shift their loyalty away from the Labour Party (Evans, 1999).

Although Gordon Brown was notably less enthusiastic than Blair, the party remained fundamentally pro-European, albeit focusing more on economic cooperation and EU institution reform. While under leader Ed Miliband, the party maintained its pro-European stance, it displayed a strongly ambivalent attitude under Jeremy Corbyn (2015-2020). These developments reflect internal party dynamics and highlight the huge internal differences within the British mainstream parties. Figure 27 illustrates the level of internal differences between the British parties. The value ranges from 0 to 10, with 0 indicating hardly any internal differences and 10 indicating strong ones. Both major parties, in particular, consistently showed a high degree of dissent on the European integration issue, with the Conservatives being the group that dissented more than the Labour Party.

Figure 27: Internal Party Dissent on European Integration



Note: Source: Chapel Hill Expert Survey – Trend File (Jolly et al., 2022). Variable: EU_dissent (0=party was completely united; 10=party was extremely divided). No values for Greens and UKIP 2002. Value for BREXIT party 2019=2.

In particular, the last European election in 2019 showed a substantial increase for the Labour Party. This is due to the disagreement regarding the upcoming Brexit and whether the party should campaign for a second referendum. UKIP, with a strong anti-European position, and the Liberal Democrats as a pro-European counterpart, are the least internally divided.

UKIP and Mainstream Party Reaction

A first-past-the-post system is a huge hurdle for the rise of challenger parties. However, the Eurosceptic challenger party UKIP achieved success not only at the European but also at the national level. UKIP was founded in 1993 by a group of anti-Maastricht treaty advocates but did not achieve success until the introduction of proportional representation in European elections in 1999. While the party received just 1% of the vote in its first election in 1994 and increased its share to 6.52% in 1999.

The party is characterised by a strong Euroscepticism, whose main goal is to leave the EU from the beginning, and a strong opposition to immigration and its effects on the British economy (Ford and Goodwin, 2014, p. 278). This almost exclusive focus on the demand for an exit resonated with voters as a clear and simple message. The clear focus on a single issue made it easy for voters to understand and support the party. This is particularly significant against the backdrop of the major parties' internal divisions on the Europe issue. In the early years, the Conservatives largely ignored UKIP, considering the party marginal and unimportant. They ridiculed UKIP as a collection of eccentrics and Eurosceptics without real political significance. Similarly, the Labour Party ignored UKIP and focused mainly on engaging with the Conservatives.

In 2004, under the leadership of Nigel Farage, the party achieved its first breakthrough. UKIP won 16% of the votes in the European Parliament election and 12 seats. Particularly in the

following years, the party continued to grow, benefiting from increasing EU scepticism in the British population. An essential factor in its increasing success was the Labour Party's decision in 2004 to open the borders to EU accession countries. This decision led to massive immigration of workers from countries such as Poland, Hungary, and other Eastern European states to the UK³³. UKIP capitalised on this immigration issue, positioning itself as the only party opposing open borders. The party argued that immigration from the EU undermined national sovereignty, depressed wages, and strained public services. Doing so created a perfect issue linkage between the immigration issue and EU scepticism. This anti-immigration agenda of UKIP resonated with a significant number of voters, especially those who felt let down by the established parties, particularly due to the "inability of the government, any government, to respond to rising public concern about immigration" (Evans and Mellon, 2019, p. 77).

Originally, immigration was part of the traditional two-party left-right competition. The Conservative Party took a significantly tougher stance on immigration issues and pledged to limit immigration to tens of thousands. This strategy proved promising for the Conservatives, allowing them to attract some Labour voters (Evans and Chzhen, 2013). Although the strategy helped the Conservatives return to power, they failed to keep their promise, leading to a significant shift in voter support toward UKIP (Evans and Mellon, 2016).

In the 2009 European election, UKIP won 13 seats and became the second-largest party. The Labour Party, in particular, recognised that UKIP threatened them and its voter base. Gordon Brown, the Prime Minister, attempted to address voters' concerns about immigration and EU regulations by emphasising that Labour took these issues seriously and would implement measures to control immigration, as he made clear in his "immigration speech" (Stratton, 2009). Nevertheless, UKIP was extremely successful in the 2014 European election, winning 26.77% of the votes and setting a historic mark. For the first time in UK history, the party with the most votes were neither the Conservative nor the Labour Party. This came as a shock to the major mainstream parties. In particular, the Conservative Party, which had consistently won since 1999, achieved only 23.92 % and was, therefore, just the third-best party. This put pressure on the two mainstream parties domestically. To neutralise the pressure from UKIP and marginalise the party, David Cameron promised to hold a referendum on EU membership if the Conservatives will win the 2015 parliamentary election. The Labour Party initially advocated a pro-European position, supporting Britain's EU membership and later the "Remain" campaign, although there were differing voices within the party. In their 2015 election manifesto, the Labour Party also promised stricter immigration controls and measures to combat wage undercutting caused by cheap labour from the EU. In the 2015 parliamentary election, UKIP received 12.6% of the vote but, due to the first-past-the-post electoral system, only won one seat in the House of Commons. The party

³³ The Labour government's choice to enact immediate open borders with the 10 EU accession states instead of imposing transitional controls on immigration diverged from the approach adopted by most other EU member states, barring Ireland and Sweden. This decision led to a concentration of migrant flows towards Britain, Ireland, and Sweden (Evans and Mellon, 2019, p. 78).

achieved its main goal, the exit from the European Union (Brexit), in 2016. 51.89% voted for “leave” in the referendum on June 23. After the Brexit referendum, which was successful from the party's point of view, UKIP underwent a leadership and programmatic crises. In the 2017 local elections, UKIP lost 145 of 146 seats. The party suffered a major stroke with the formation of the Brexit Party “Reform UK” in January 2019, in which former UKIP leader Nigel Farage took a prominent role after a short time. The party propagated a program virtually identical to UKIP but distanced itself from the latter's alleged right-wing extremist tendencies. Opinion polls before the 2019 European elections already indicated that UKIP was about to crash. UKIP lost all 24 seats and dropped to a 3.2 per cent vote share. In contrast, the rival “Brexit” party won 30.5 per cent of the vote and 29 mandates.

In addition to UKIP, the far-right British National Party (BNP) also exists. Except for winning two seats in the European Parliament in 2009, the party has not been able to achieve any major successes.

Mainstream Party Reaction: Issue emphasis and Position

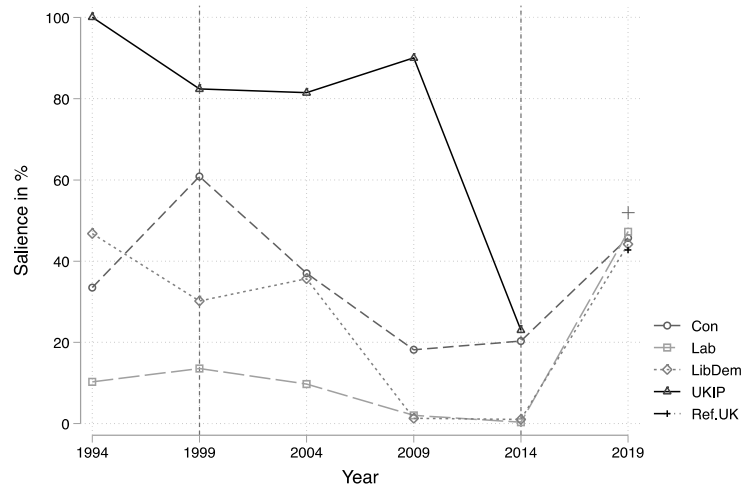
The next step is to examine to what extent the behaviours described above are reflected in terms of issue emphasis and positioning in European elections.

Let's begin with the analysis of the issue emphasis. Figure 28 shows the EU issue emphasis of the British parties over time. The figure illustrates that UKIP is the party that emphasises the Europe issue the most, followed by the Conservatives, albeit at a significant distance. Particularly surprising is the strong decrease in the 2014 election³⁴ for UKIP. A closer look at the election program provides more insights (Treib, 2015, p. 162): UKIP's election campaign focused primarily on the immigration issue and the significant increase in the number of immigrants. The successor party, Reform UK, once again pushed the Europe issue in the 2019 European Parliament election, although still to a lesser extent than earlier values. While the Conservative and Labour party showed nearly identical values in the election following Maastricht, the 1999 election already displayed significant differences. The Conservative Party had a very high salience value of 60%, whereas the Labour Party downplayed the issue. Overall, it is observed that the Conservatives generally paid more attention to the issue than Labour did, although both parties largely neglected the issue between 2004 and 2014. A decisive change occurred in the 2019 European election. In this election, all parties emphasised the issue strongly in their campaigns due to the impending Brexit.

This shift underscores the impact that challenger parties like UKIP can have on shaping the agendas of mainstream parties, particularly when the challengers successfully capitalise on salient voter concerns. Taken together, we observe a clear temporal pattern in terms of mainstream parties' issue emphasis: emphasising, deemphasising, and then emphasising again.

³⁴ To verify to what extent the results are due to the data source, the analysis was repeated with Manifesto data of Schmitt *et al.* (2018). The results are similar.

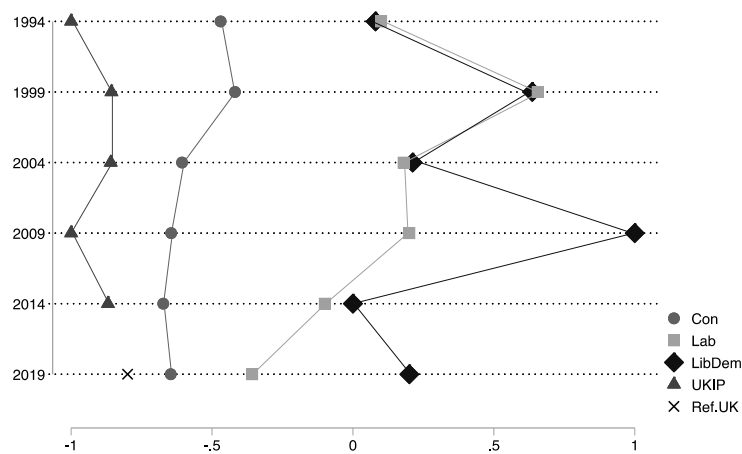
Figure 28: Salience of British Parties on the Europe Issue in European Elections



Note: The graph shows the European issue salience of British major mainstream and challenger parties for European elections. Data source: Grande and Braun (2021a).

Examining the positions, Figure 29 indicates different strategies of the two major mainstream parties towards the challenger. The Conservatives consistently adopt a strong eurosceptic position, indicating a clear convergence strategy. In contrast, the Labour Party initially takes a noticeably pro-European position. The positions observed during the post-Maastricht phase can be attributed to the developments in the late 1980s. After some tough electoral defeats, the Labour Party began to reform itself. With Tony Blair becoming the party leader, the party adopted a non-ideological approach, positioning itself as more pro-economic and pro-European (Kriesi and Frey, 2008, p. 185). This brought "New Labour" a series of electoral successes in the 1997, 2001, and 2005 parliamentary elections.

Figure 29: Position of British Parties on the Europe Issue in European Elections



Note: The graph shows the position of the major mainstream and challenger parties in the UK in European election campaigns. Data source: Grande and Braun (2021a).

The conservative party responded by shifts in the cultural dimension. The party became a national conservative, focusing on Europe and immigration (Kriesi and Frey, 2008, p. 185). The two parties have developed in different directions concerning their position toward the European Union (Evans, 1998). While the Labour Party took a more pro-European position, the Conservative Party became increasingly critical of the EU. However, it can also be observed that the Labour Party has gradually moved closer to the positions of UKIP and the Conservative Party over time. The Liberal Democrats, on the other hand, exhibit significant fluctuations in their positioning but tend to occupy the most pro-European positions.

Table 14 summarises the findings of the British mainstream party reactions. It can be observed that the Conservative Party only utilised the strategy of emphasising the issue more strongly while simultaneously moving closer. This suggests they strongly attempted to win over UKIP voters in these elections by adopting their themes and positions through this dual convergence approach. However, the Conservative Party also demonstrates that between 1999 and 2014, while they moved closer to UKIP in their position, i.e., becoming more Eurosceptic, they simultaneously attempted to downplay the significance of the issue. This can be attributed to the high levels of internal dissent, as already shown in Figure 27. The Conservatives likely aimed to avoid internal party conflicts and public debates over the Europe issue. This approach helped them maintain party unity and focus on other issues.

Table 14: Reaction Pattern of British Mainstream Parties

	<i>Emphasizing</i>	<i>Deemphasizing</i>
<i>Convergence</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Con (94, 19) ▪ Lab (19) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Con (99, 04, 09, 14) ▪ Lab (09, 14)
<i>Distance</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lab (94, 99, 04)

However, the internal shift described earlier is evident for the Labour Party. While the party distanced itself in terms of its position and issue emphasis in the elections between 1994 and 2004, thereafter, it is apparent that although it continued to downplay the issue, it became more Eurosceptic in its position. In the 2019 election, they maintained positional convergence and additionally emphasised the issue. Both major parties predominantly used strategies to manage internal divisions and public sentiment concerning the EU. They tended to converge with broader political sentiment when emphasising the Europe issue and adopted distinct positions when deemphasising it. They attempted to manage their positions and salience of the Europe issue to minimise the electoral threat posed by UKIP. Overall, the success of UKIP has influenced the

positions and strategies of the mainstream parties, leading to shifts and adjustments to the Europe issue.

Conclusion

The analysis of the UK reveals a complex party competition landscape shaped by the dynamics between various parties. The European positions of the major parties have changed significantly over time, with both the Conservative and Labour parties transitioning from pro-European to more Eurosceptic stances. A significant influence on the development of these competitive dynamics was the rise of UKIP as a single-issue challenger party. UKIP's ability to translate anti-EU sentiment into electoral success was remarkable. UKIP adeptly utilised immigration as a central issue, coupling it with EU skepticism, resonating with a considerable number of voters. The party positioned itself as an alternative to established parties, garnering substantial voter support. UKIP's rise exerted pressure on mainstream parties, particularly the Conservative Party, to address issues related to EU membership and immigration more prominently. The responses of mainstream parties to the rise of UKIP varied. The Conservatives sought to neutralise UKIP's pressure by promising a referendum on EU membership, while Labour initially maintained a pro-European stance before adjusting its strategy to address voter concerns about immigration. Overall, the strategies of mainstream parties were not entirely successful. Neither the Conservatives' strong alignment nor Labour's attempts to address immigration concerns yielded significant gains. The success of a single-issue challenger like UKIP forced mainstream parties to reevaluate their positions on EU-related matters and respond to the concerns of Eurosceptic voters. This dynamic influenced political discourse, policy agendas, and electoral strategies across the political spectrum.

4.3.4 Germany

As one of the founding countries, Germany is a key player in the European Union. However, compared to the other countries, Germany has successfully managed to keep a right-wing challenger party out of the national parliament for the longest period of time. For a long time, it seemed that Germany was immune to this phenomenon (Decker, 2008, p. 119). Although Germany underwent similar political transformations as countries like Austria and France (Kriesi *et al.*, 2006), challenger parties from the right could not capitalise on these transformations (Dolezal, 2008b). Since the 1950s, the AfD has been the first right-wing party to successfully become part of the national parliament (Franzmann, 2014, p. 115).

The German Party System and the Structure of Party Competition

Germany has a long tradition of a stable party system of moderate pluralism. Until the 1980s, the votes were concentrated almost entirely on four parties: the Christlich Demokratische Union (CDU) and its sister party Christlich Soziale Union (CSU), the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD), and the Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP).

In 1983, the Die Grünen (renamed into Bündnis90/Die Grünen after reunification) made it with 5,6% into the Bundestag. Over time, the party was able to evolve from a small protest party into one of the most important political forces in the country. Since German reunification, the “Partei des Sozialismus” (PDS) and its successor, “Die Linke”, have been represented in the Bundestag. The party is considered rather eurosceptic in its criticism of the democratic legitimacy of the EU institutions and their neoliberal policies. The party advocates a successful "us against the elites" strategy (Rooduijn *et al.*, 2012). Apart from significant successes in regional and state elections, particularly in East Germany, the party does not pose a major threat to the established parties.

How do the two major mainstream parties position on European policy? Among the political elite, there was a significant agreement to support European integration (Dolezal 2008), which hindered the mainstream right from promoting eurosceptic stances. The CDU and CSU are clearly pro-European. While both parties support steps toward deeper European integration, the CSU has shown more concern about the loss of national sovereignty and has called for more national control over certain policy areas. This was evident, for example, in their reactions to the Eurozone crisis. While under Chancellor Merkel's leadership, the CDU supported bailout packages for Greece and other countries affected by the crisis, emphasising the need for European solidarity and measures to stabilise the Eurozone, such as the European Stability Mechanism, the CSU was significantly more critical. They demanded stricter conditions for financial aid. In particular, party leader Horst Seehofer advocated for more national control and a limitation of Germany's liability during the Eurozone crisis (Paterson, 2011).

The SPD has consistently positioned itself as a pro-European party that supports European integration and views the EU as a central pillar of German foreign and economic policy. It endorsed both the Maastricht Treaty and the creation of a common currency, actively promoting its introduction in 2002 during the Red-Green coalition. Schröder and the SPD played an active role in shaping European economic policy, particularly through the Agenda 2010, which aimed economic reforms and fostering growth and employment in Germany and Europe (Gloser, 2001). Even during the grand coalition under Angela Merkel, the SPD continued to support European integration and advocated for enhanced cooperation within the EU. During the financial and Eurozone crises, the SPD backed bailout packages for affected countries, emphasising the need for solidarity and economic convergence within the EU. In the 2017 federal election campaign, the SPD presented a pro-European platform, advocating for deeper EU integration and

strengthening the social dimension of Europe. They called for measures such as the introduction of Eurobonds and increased cooperation in migration policy (SPD, 2017).

The AfD Phenomenon: Challenges and Responses from Germany's Mainstream Parties

The question arises as to why a right-wing challenger party failed to establish itself on the national level in Germany for such a long time. This is due to several factors. One key factor is undoubtedly the 5% threshold in the national parliament (Bundestag), which makes it particularly challenging for smaller parties to gain seats in parliament. In order to get over this threshold, it realistically requires a list of candidates and an election campaign in each federal state. Often, however, smaller parties are only active in one federal state and do not manage to establish nationwide structures. Second, due to the German history of national socialism, it is difficult for right-wing parties to be successful as they are quickly stigmatised as “Nazis”. At the regional and local levels, a number of right-wing parties achieved electoral success, such as the NPD³⁵ in the 1960s, the REP³⁶ in the 1980s or the "Partei Rechtsstaatliche Offensive"³⁷, more commonly referred to as the "Schill-Partei" in the early 2000s. Unlike in other neighbouring European countries, these extreme parties could not establish themselves in the long term.

Third, the Christian Democrats in Germany managed to absorb certain political conflicts related to conservative issues and function as "functional equivalents" of a challenger party (Kriesi and Frey, 2008, p. 206).

Therefore, the AfD was the first right-wing party to gain seats in the national parliament. What did the AfD do differently? The "Alternative for Germany" party was established in February 2013 and has its roots in the political group "Wahlalternative 2013". Even before its official founding, the AfD built a nationwide structural network with various sub-organizations. By May 2013, they were already represented in all 16 German states (Häusler, 2013, p. 38). The party was formed based on its anti-German euro policy and called for the dissolution of the monetary union. Initially, it did not seek to leave the European Union. In their first election program for the 2013 Bundestag elections, they called for an orderly dissolution of the eurozone and the reintroduction of national currencies, an amendment of the European treaties, a debt cut for over-indebted states, and the return of legislative powers to the federal states (AfD, 2013). From the

³⁵ Only two years after its foundation, the party already had 25,000 members and 23 state parliament mandates (Dudek and Jaschke, 1984, p. 286), followed by further entries into German „Landtage“. The party was defeated in the 1969 federal elections and failed to clear the 5% threshold with 4.3%. After that, it only succeeded in the eastern German states in the early 2000s but never gained more than 1.6% of the vote in federal elections.

³⁶ The Republicans were founded as a split from the Christian Social Union (CSU). The reason was the continued financial support of the GDR by Franz Josef Strauß, who had opposed it in the 1983 Bundestag election campaign. The REP won several seats in Bavarian municipalities and the Baden-Württemberg Landtag in the following years. In the 1989 European elections, they won a seat in parliament with 7% of the vote. Until today they never had a seat in the Bundestag.

³⁷ In the 2001 elections in Hamburg, the party won 19.4 % of the votes. Although its leader Ronald Schill was well known beyond Hamburg, the party failed to enter the German Bundestag a year later, gaining only 0.8% of the vote.

beginning, these attacks against the European Union were linked to criticism of the political elites and parties. They tried to generate voters, who were generally frustrated and disillusioned with the established parties and mainstream politics. They also demanded more democratic rights in the form of direct democracy on the Swiss model and a restriction of the power of political parties (AfD, 2013). This euro-critical stance motivated many voters to vote for the AfD (Reher, 2017, p. 50; see also Schmitt-Beck 2014). Unlike the NPD, it was initially difficult to classify the party as a right-wing populist or even a right-wing extremist party. Studies found that while the party showed connections to the far-right spectrum through its extremely conservative social policies, it lacked the xenophobia or nativism typically associated with right-wing populism (Arzheimer, 2015; Bebnowski, 2015; Lewandowsky *et al.*, 2016).

Despite its strong performance of 4.7% in the national election in 2013, the AfD initially failed to secure seats in the Bundestag as it did not pass the 5% threshold. While the party had a distinct position with its euroskeptic stance, it is evident that the Europe issue does not possess significant mobilisation potential in Germany. Turnbull-Dugarte (2020: 13) shows no increase in Euroskeptic attitudes among AfD voters from the 2013 election to the 2017 election. The two major parties, CDU/CSU and SPD, largely downplayed the AfD's significance. Instead, they focused on maintaining a strong economic record and promoting stability, which resonated with a broad electorate. The party's strategy was to avoid giving the AfD additional publicity or legitimacy by engaging directly with its Eurosceptic and anti-euro rhetoric.

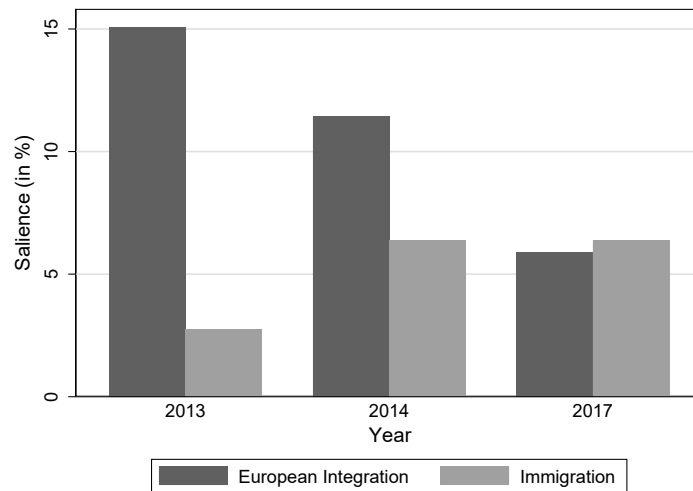
On the other hand, the SPD faced internal challenges and a struggle to present a cohesive alternative to Merkel's government. The SPD did not specifically target the AfD; instead, it focused on traditional social democratic issues such as social justice, fair wages, and opposition to the CDU/CSU's policies. This approach, however, did not effectively counter the AfD's growing appeal to voters disillusioned with the mainstream parties' handling of the eurozone crisis

In the subsequent European elections in 2014, the party shifted its emphasis from European issues to immigration concerns. While maintaining their opposition to a European bank bailout and advocating for stronger nation-states, they also aimed to curb immigration into German social systems. As a result, they advocated for enhanced control of the EU's external borders to prevent uncontrolled immigration into EU countries (AfD, 2014). The change in the issue emphasis turned out to be beneficial to the party's success. The AfD won 7.1% of the votes and was subsequently represented in the European Parliament with 7 of 96 seats. Since the federal constitutional court overturned the 5% hurdle, some small parties became part of the enter the European Parliament. From 2009 to 2014, the number of parties represented in the European Parliament rose from 6 to 14. Apart from the AfD, however, no party won a seat in the subsequent Bundestag elections.

Even in the European elections, the two major parties' approaches to dealing with the AfD already differed. The CDU campaign presented itself as a stable, experienced force capable of handling European issues, emphasizing economic stability and EU integration.

Their strategy also included stressing their achievements and policies, particularly in managing the Eurozone crisis, rather than giving the AfD more visibility by directly confronting them. However, at the same time, the CSU has attempted to approach the AfD, for instance, by warning against social abuse by EU citizens and overregulation by the EU during the election campaign (Spiegel, 2014).

Figure 30: Saliencies of European and Immigration Issues in the AfD's Election Programs



Note: For national elections, the Marpor dataset (Volkens et al., 2021) was used; for European elections, the Euromanifesto dataset (Schmitt et al., 2018) was used.

The SPD, led by Martin Schulz (who was also the President of the European Parliament), chose a more confrontational approach. The SPD actively criticised the AfD's eurosceptic stance and sought to expose the party's lack of experience and concrete solutions for European issues. The SPD highlighted the risks of Euroscepticism and framed the AfD's positions as dangerous for Germany's and Europe's future.

The AfD's trend of focusing more on the immigration issue and less on European issues continued in the following federal election in 2017 (Figure 30). In its "Program for Germany," the party declares itself particularly opposed to mass immigration to Germany, against a culture of multiculturalism, in favour of a German Leitkultur (guiding culture), and in favour of effectively combating foreigner criminality. With 12.6%, they became part of the national parliament. By now, the party is increasingly classified less as eurosceptic and more as a right-wing radical or populist party.

In the 2019 European election campaign, the AfD behaved in a polarising manner, focusing heavily on its anti-European and critical stance towards migration. In doing so, they successfully established an issue linkage with the immigration issue. Despite this, they improved slightly compared to the previous European elections, achieving 11.0% of the vote.

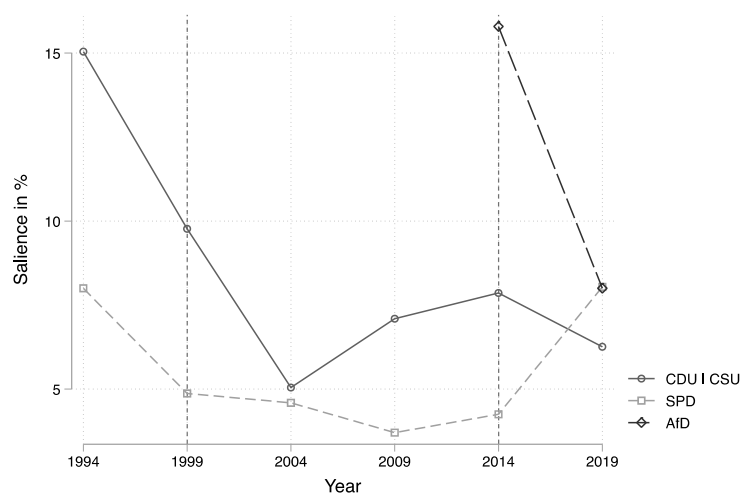
CDU and CSU largely responded by clearly distancing themselves from the AfD. They emphasised the importance of the European Union and warned against the resurgence of nationalistic tendencies that could endanger stability and peace in Europe. At the same time, they emphasised traditional conservative values such as security and economic strength to deter voters from the AfD. The SPD also emphasised a clear distinction from the AfD, particularly regarding social justice and advocating for a strong and united Europe. They sought to highlight the social and economic benefits of EU membership.

To sum up, the AfD was founded in euro-friendly Germany as a euro-critical party that was able to use the euro crisis to its political advantage. Up to now, the AfD is represented in all German state parliaments. It is already dubbed the "East German People's Party" by the media (Wehner, 2021). By strategically shifting its focus from the Europe issue to the immigration issue, it was also able to use the refugee crisis in its favour. This underlines the typical character of challenger parties, which, on the one hand, can use crisis as a window of opportunity and, on the other hand, are flexible in their positions and issues, especially at the beginning.

Mainstream Party Reaction: Issue Emphasis and Position

How do the German mainstream parties respond to the new challenger regarding their issue emphasis and EU position? First, the issue emphasis of the individual parties is examined (Figure 31). When comparing the salience of the Europe issue in Germany with other countries, we see that the average salience in European elections is relatively low, even for the eurosceptic challenger party AfD. For the Union parties and the SPD, the issue played a comparatively significant role in the election after Maastricht, but then there was a noticeable decline.

Figure 31: Salience of German Parties on the Europe Issue in European Elections



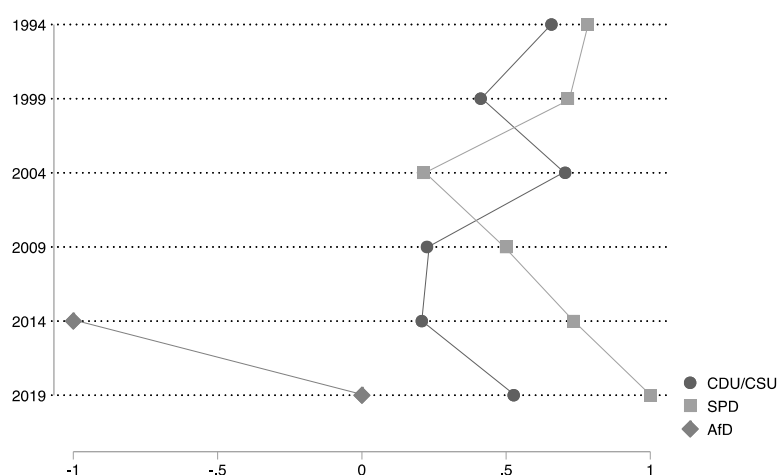
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Note: The graph shows the European issue salience of German major mainstream and challenger parties in European election campaigns. Data source: Grande and Braun (2021a)

While salience among the CDU/CSU parties rose again slightly from the 2004 European election onwards, the issue did not reach 5% among the SPD, including the 2014 European election. In the 2014 European election, where the AfD competed for the first time, both mainstream parties experienced only a slight increase in issue emphasis. At that time, both mainstream parties were part of a coalition government together. Furthermore, it suggests that the parties did not assign greater importance to the issue in response to the Eurosceptic challenger. In the 2019 European election, it is evident that even the AfD no longer strongly emphasised the Europe issue. More strikingly, the issue emphasis on Europe in this election was almost as high as that of the SPD, which, in turn, recorded a significant increase in salience. Conversely, the CDU and CSU de-emphasised the issue. This suggests that mainstream parties prioritise other issues over Europe unless external pressures or strategic advantages necessitate a shift in focus.

The next step is examining party positions on the Europe issue (Figure 32). Both parties have consistently positioned themselves as pro-European over time, although differences between the individual parties are evident. The SPD has positioned itself as even more pro-European, with the exception of the 2004 European election. This exception is attributable to the debate regarding Turkey's accession to the EU. While the SPD fundamentally supported the start of accession negotiations with Turkey, it also recognised the economic concerns associated with it. While the CDU and CSU initially became more sceptical towards the EU from 2004 onwards, the SPD has become progressively more pro-European during this period.

Figure 32: Position of German Parties on the Europe Issue in National Elections



Note: The graph shows the position of the major mainstream and challenger parties in Germany for European election campaigns. Data source: Grande and Braun (2021a).

Throughout the other election campaigns, there was minimal debate or disagreement regarding the European position, as all parties agreed and advocated for a strong pro-European policy. Different behaviours can be observed when considering the parties' positions after the AfD entered the party competition. The CDU and CSU hardly changed their position in the 2014 election, while the SPD positioned itself as more pro-European. Significant changes are evident, particularly in the subsequent 2019 election. Both mainstream parties adopted a more pro-European position. What is particularly interesting is that the AfD has become much more euro-friendly.

In summary, the analysis of issue emphasis and position on the Europe issue reveals distinct strategies employed by the major mainstream parties. Both the Union parties and the SPD initially opted for a strategy of emphasising and distancing, highlighting the importance of the EU while maintaining a clear pro-European position to differentiate themselves from the AfD. This approach aimed to attract voters who value European integration and portray the AfD as an unreliable alternative. However, in the subsequent 2019 European election, the Union parties shifted their strategy by deemphasising the Europe issue while still distancing themselves in their position. This strategic adjustment highlights the dynamic nature of competition dynamics, with mainstream parties flexibly responding to the presence of challenger parties.

Table 15: Reaction Pattern of German Mainstream Parties

	<i>Emphasizing</i>	<i>Deemphasizing</i>
<i>Convergence</i>		
<i>Distance</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ CDU CSU (14) ▪ SPD (14, 19) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ CDU CSU (19)

Conclusion

Initially, Germany had effectively kept eurosceptic challenger parties out of the national parliament for an extended period. However, like other Western European countries, Germany now is confronted with managing such a challenger party. The evolution of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) illustrates several key points: First, during the Euro crisis, the relatively unified approach by the CDU/CSU and the SPD inadvertently created a strategic window of opportunity for a eurosceptic challenger party like the AfD. Both major parties' handling of European integration and economic stabilisation measures left some voters feeling disillusioned or left out, which the AfD capitalised on. Second, while initially focused on Euroscepticism, the AfD strategically shifted its emphasis to immigration issues, aligning them with broader concerns about European integration, albeit less intensely than countries like the UK or France.

Furthermore, the AfD's ideological flexibility and adaptability have made it a complex political entity. Its internal debates and shifts in policy create challenges for both mainstream parties as they navigate how best to respond. This ongoing flux complicates efforts to categorise and predict the AfD's positions, requiring continual reassessment of strategies by CDU/CSU and SPD.

The changing competition dynamics in Germany's political landscape, influenced significantly by the AfD's emergence, underscore the need for adaptive strategies among mainstream parties. They must balance reaffirming their pro-European stances with addressing domestic concerns effectively while countering the appeal of a challenger party that thrives on exploiting perceived gaps in policy and public sentiment.

4.3.5 Conclusion

Despite the aggregate-level insights, it was crucial to delve into individual country chapters to fully understand the nuances and specific dynamics. On the one hand, they have demonstrated how different mainstream parties deal with their challengers in various countries. On the other hand, they have also shown the different strategies used by challenger parties. What insights did the different cases provide?

Austria's experience with the FPÖ illustrates a dynamic evolution in competitive dynamics influenced by eurosceptic challengers. It showed that collaboration with the challenger party could be a promising strategy to mitigate their influence, as evidenced by the success of the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition in the 2000s. This coalition helped integrate the FPÖ into the political mainstream, reducing their appeal as an outsider party and diminishing their anti-establishment rhetoric. By bringing the FPÖ into government, the ÖVP managed to moderate some of their more extreme positions and co-opt their voter base. Additionally, it became clear that when challenger parties deviate from their original successful issue, such as the Europe issue, they may create space for new challenger parties to emerge. For example, if the FPÖ shifted its focus away from Euroscepticism, it allowed room for another party to capitalise on that sentiment. However, the FPÖ's case also demonstrates that a challenger party can regain success even after a period of decline. The FPÖ's strategy of linking the Europe issue with immigration was particularly effective, contributing to their resurgence. This issue linkage strategy allowed the FPÖ to address multiple voter concerns simultaneously, thereby broadening their appeal.

France's case underscores the effectiveness of mainstream parties collaborating to defeat challenger parties, as seen through the *cordon sanitaire*. However, deviations from this strategy allowed the FN to regain strength by linking Euroscepticism with issues like immigration and national identity. This strategic issue linkage broadened the FN's appeal across diverse voter groups. Additionally, the FN's ability to rebrand itself by adopting more moderate rhetoric and policy stances was crucial in its resurgence. By softening its image and focusing on a broader

range of issues beyond Euroscepticism, the FN appealed to voters who might have previously been hesitant to support a party perceived as too radical. This transformation enabled the FN to attract not only voters disillusioned with the EU but also those concerned with broader issues like national sovereignty, economic stability, and cultural identity. This case highlights the fluidity and adaptability of challenger parties in the political landscape.

The case of the UK highlights the significant influence of the electoral systems on changing competition dynamics through a challenger party. While UKIP faced limited success at the national level due to the first-past-the-post electoral system, its achievements in European elections impacted the behaviour of mainstream parties. The rise of UKIP as a single-issue challenger party exerted substantial pressure on both the Conservative and Labour parties. This pressure led to shifts towards more Eurosceptic positions and efforts to address immigration concerns. Moreover, the success of UKIP highlighted the effectiveness of issue linkages. By linking Euroscepticism with immigration issues, UKIP resonated with a broad spectrum of voters discontented with the EU and concerned about immigration policies. Nevertheless, UKIP's single-issue focus also revealed its vulnerability. The party were intricately tied to the Brexit issue, and once the UK voted to leave the EU, UKIP struggled to maintain relevance and support. This illustrates the precarious nature of single-issue parties that risk fading into obscurity once their main issue loses salience or is resolved.

For a long time, Germany effectively kept eurosceptic challengers out of its national parliament. However, the dynamics shifted with the emergence of the AfD. The AfD capitalised on the Euro crisis, where mainstream parties like the CDU/CSU and SPD struggled to present a unified front on European integration and economic stabilisation measures. Both CDU/CSU and SPD positioned themselves against the AfD, aiming to counter its influence and electoral success by distancing themselves ideologically and politically. However, by focusing on opposition rather than addressing underlying voter concerns that fueled support for the AfD, mainstream parties inadvertently allowed the AfD to capitalise on dissatisfaction with mainstream policies and position itself as a viable alternative. This approach also enabled the AfD to strengthen its narrative as a party representing genuine change and addressing neglected issues. Furthermore, the AfD recognised early that linking the EU issue with immigration was promising for electoral success. By intertwining these two issues, the AfD developed a clear and appealing political stance for many voters. This strategy was pivotal for its rise and its ability to remain relevant despite internal ideological debates and strategic adjustments.

Taken together, the cases demonstrate that mainstream parties have reacted differently to the challenge posed by eurosceptic parties in each country. While some pursued a policy of isolation (as seen in France with the *cordon sanitaire*), others sought strategic coalitions or adjusted their political messages to appeal to voters. Regarding challenger parties, the dominant, successful strategy appears to be issue linkage. They effectively connected issues such as EU criticism,

immigration, and national sovereignty to appeal to broad voter groups who felt neglected by established parties. Mainstream parties must recognise this strategy and respond by developing their issue linkages and political messages to adequately address the multifaceted concerns of voters.

5. Conclusion

This dissertation aims to thoroughly understand the competitive dynamics in European election campaigns. Specifically, it examines these dynamics within the unique context of their integration into a Multi-Level Electoral System (MLES) and against the backdrop of the increasing importance of the Europe issue. By exploring how parties navigate this complex electoral framework, the research sheds light on the strategic behaviours and interactions characterising European elections.

The starting point for the investigation was the question: What impact does the politicisation of the Europe issue in national elections have on the competitive dynamics in European elections? By incorporating findings from various research strands—such as the concepts of party competitive behaviour, the politicisation of the Europe issue, and the handling of (new) Eurosceptic challengers—this work offers an integrative view that enhances our understanding of party competition in European elections.

The empirical analysis was conducted across three levels and three dimensions. Firstly, at the aggregate level on a country basis, followed by the party level, differentiated between mainstream and challenger parties, and thirdly, analyses within individual countries, involving intensive analyses of individual party behaviours. At all three levels, the analysis was conducted across three dimensions: (1) between national and European elections, (2) over time and (3) across different party types. The study period spanned 25 years, starting from the European election after Maastricht in 1994 up to the European election in 2019, across four countries. All countries are located in Western Europe and share strong similarities, yet they differ in terms of their duration of EU membership and the degree of their integration.

Overall, it was shown that the increasing salience of the Europe issue at the national level affects party strategies in several ways, impacting both mainstream and challenger parties. Firstly, it influences both strategic issue emphasis and party positioning. Additionally, it impacts the strategies of challenger parties. Eurosceptic challenger parties strategically combine European issues with national issues, such as immigration, to bolster their electoral appeal. This issue linkage allows challenger parties to maintain a coherent and appealing narrative across different electoral contexts. Furthermore, the research highlights that mainstream parties' responses to the rising prominence of Eurosceptic challengers vary significantly. While some mainstream parties adopt a more Europhilic stance to differentiate themselves, others may adopt elements of Euroscepticism to neutralise the challengers' appeal. This dynamic showcases the fluidity and complexity of party competition in the face of Europe issue politicisation. Lastly, the dissertation reveals that competitive dynamics do not remain static. Over the 25-year period, the strategies and interactions between mainstream and challenger parties evolved.

In this concluding discussion, I will first summarise the main findings and critically place them within the context of existing literature. Subsequently I provide some final reflections on the contributions and limitations of this thesis and suggest potential directions for future research.

5.1 Main Results

The primary objective of this dissertation was to analyse the competitive dynamics in European elections and investigate the impact of the politicisation of the Europe issue on these dynamics. In the following, the main findings of this dissertation will be explained³⁸. There are four key insights: (1) Europe is the driving factor for changing competitive dynamics, significantly influencing the strategic behaviour of parties. (2) The strategic options of challenger parties, particularly the importance of forming issue linkages. (3) The considerable variation in mainstream party responses. (4) The significant importance of institutional factors.

Main Finding 1: Europe as a Driving Force in Shaping Competitive Dynamics

Europe has become a pivotal factor influencing the dynamics of electoral competition. The increasing prominence of the Europe issue and its growing strategic importance have profoundly shaped the strategic orientation of political parties. To remain successful, parties must adjust their campaign strategies concerning this issue to address the voters' different priorities in both national and European contexts. This means that Europe is not merely an additional issue but a central element that can transform the entire campaign dynamic. Regarding salience, similar salience curves for the Europe issue are observed across various contexts, except in France. This indicates that Europe is a significant issue and not limited to a specific setting. This finding supports the hypothesis derived from the second-order theory that when parties increase their issue emphasis on Europe in national elections, they also elevate it in European elections. However, the alignment of party positions on European issues between national and European elections does not always follow predictable patterns. Contrary to expectations, parties may adopt varying positions depending on the electoral context, revealing nuanced strategic calculations driven by different voter priorities and electoral incentives.

Furthermore, a nuanced examination of the Europe issue reveals that debates predominantly centre on constitutive matters such as EU structures and integration, overshadowing specific policy debates. This holds for both national and European elections. The debates focus more on the fundamental aspects of the EU rather than individual policies. This dominance of constitutive issues underscores that discussions surrounding the EU often pivot on its future trajectory and institutional framework rather than on discrete policy measures.

³⁸ For an overview of which hypotheses were confirmed and which were rejected, see Appendix.

Furthermore, the study delves into how various parties respond to these dynamics. The influence of the Europe issue hinges initially on the opportunity window created by mainstream parties. As Braun and Grande (2021) have already been demonstrated, the politicisation of the Europe issue in European elections depends on the behaviour of mainstream parties. The size of this window, as elaborated in the theoretical chapter, is shaped by historical legacies and intra-party conflicts. Interestingly, empirical findings indicate that intra-party conflicts do not significantly affect how parties position themselves on the Europe issue.

In conclusion, Europe has become a decisive driver in shaping competitive dynamics.

Main Finding 2: The Significance of Challenger Parties Strategies

Second, the study demonstrated how challenger parties utilise the opportunity window that mainstream parties open for them and the strategies they employ in this process. From existing literature, we know that challenger parties are successful when they position themselves as issue entrepreneurs (Hobolt and De Vries, 2015), highlighting issues that mainstream parties neglect for various reasons. This study showed that challenger parties utilise this strategy during European elections by focusing on European issues, while in national elections, they tend to emphasise immigration issues. Hypothesis H3a is thus confirmed. The study went a step further and, particularly in the country-specific chapters, highlighted that an especially effective strategy for challenger parties is to create issue linkages (H3c). This involves connecting two issues to gain an even greater advantage. For instance, they frame the EU as an elite-driven project that undermines national sovereignty, connecting concerns about EU integration with broader anti-establishment sentiments. This not only helps them appeal to Eurosceptic voters but also taps into a wider disillusionment with the political status quo. Moreover, the study revealed that these issue linkages are not static but evolve depending on the political context. This nuanced understanding of how challenger parties craft their strategies to exploit the weaknesses of mainstream parties and create effective issue linkages provides valuable insights into the dynamics of political competition. It underscores the importance of strategic issue framing and highlights the adaptive nature of challenger parties in their quest for electoral success.

Main Finding 3: Wide Variation in Mainstream Party Responses to Eurosceptic Challengers

Examining mainstream party responses to eurosceptic challengers reveals crucial insights into competitive dynamics across different countries. The country studies, in particular, have shown a wide variance in how mainstream parties respond to their challengers. It is evident that historical legacies, intra-party conflicts, and specific contextual factors heavily influence these responses. These factors determine the extent and manner in which mainstream parties react. It is important to note that the complexity of these reactions also lies in the fact that challenger parties, especially in their early stages, undergo significant transformations. For instance, the example of the AfD illustrates a shift from being Eurosceptic to becoming a right-wing populist party, changing its focus from Europe to immigration.

Across all countries examined, the dominant strategy upon the emergence of challenger parties has been to either ignore them or downplay their significance. This approach reflects mainstream parties' initial reluctance to engage directly with challengers they perceive as fringe or extreme, often hoping to prevent legitimising their platforms or ideas. However, this strategy has not been successful in any country.

The theoretical assumption was that parties closer to the challenger party would tend to approach it, while parties ideologically further apart would tend to distance themselves. The likelihood of parties with ideological proximity approaching the challenger party is evident in the country studies. However, this is not consistent across all countries and throughout the entire study period. For example, in France, conservative parties close to the National Front (FN) were long part of the *cordon sanitaire*, which excluded any form of cooperation and showed clear distancing. The dynamics in France, in particular, show no continuous pattern, with approaches and distancing often occurring in waves. In contrast, in the UK, the Conservative Party showed strong proximity, while the Labour Party alternated between approach and distancing.

These cases demonstrate that mainstream parties adopt diverse strategies in response to eurosceptic challengers, ranging from isolation tactics to strategic alliances and ideological adjustments.

Main Finding 4: Importance of Institutional Context Conditions

This study has highlighted two pivotal factors that significantly influence competitive dynamics in electoral contexts: The integration into the MLES and the electoral systems in place. These factors underscore the intricate interplay between political strategies and institutional contexts, ultimately shaping the intensity, logic, and dynamics of party competition.

First, the study has clearly demonstrated that the operation of parties in an MLES opens up new strategic options. Parties in an MLES deploy nuanced campaign strategies that cater to different electoral contexts. This means they can strategically prioritise issues like welfare and the economy in national elections where these topics resonate more strongly with voters. Simultaneously, in European elections, parties may emphasise cultural liberalism and European integration issues, which are more salient in that electoral context. This flexibility allows parties to appeal to diverse voter preferences across different levels of governance. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, challenger parties have effectively utilised issue linkages to bridge issues between national and European levels. By intertwining the Europe issue, which is crucial at the EU level, with immigration concerns and pivotal at the national level, challenger parties can broaden their appeal and mobilise support across multiple policy domains.

Second, the electoral systems, whether congruent or incongruent across national and European elections, introduce another layer of complexity. Congruent electoral systems, where the voting mechanisms remain consistent across national and European elections, facilitate a more streamlined approach to party strategies and issue emphasis. This consistency allows parties to

maintain cohesive campaign narratives and policy platforms that resonate across national and European levels, leveraging their resources more efficiently to address voter concerns. On the other hand, incongruent electoral systems introduce distinct challenges and opportunities for political parties. These systems, characterised by varying electoral rules between national and European elections, amplify the salience of European issues due to the unique electoral dynamics at play. Incongruent systems encourage parties to strategically emphasise European issues more prominently in European elections while potentially adopting different priorities in national elections. The hypotheses H1a and H1b can therefore be confirmed.

Taken together, the institutional context of electoral systems sets parameters for strategic decisions and issue prioritisation.

5.2 Contribution and Theoretical Implications

The dissertation has contributed to understanding competitive dynamics and party competition in European election campaigns. It demonstrated the necessity of examining competitive dynamics against the backdrop of parties' integration into the MLES. The contribution is evident both theoretically and empirically.

Theoretical contribution

In theoretical terms, this dissertation has made a significant contribution by strengthening the integrative view on competitive dynamics through the unification of different research strands into a cohesive conceptual framework: (1) Concepts of party competitive behaviour, (2) research on the politicisation of the Europe issue and its integration into an MLES, and (3) the handling by mainstream parties of (new) Eurosceptic challengers.

The *first strand* concerns the competitive strategies of parties. The discussions in the theory chapter clarified that both issue emphasis and party positioning are the two central strategic elements of parties, and - this is the crucial point - they should not be considered independently from each other. Rather, the combination of these two elements is essential. Integrating salience and spatial theory, as it was already shown by Meguid (2005) or Hobolt and De Vries (2015), not only enhances the explanatory power of the concept of party strategies but also of the resulting competitive dynamics. Especially in the context of the MLES, it is necessary to understand how the positioning and issue emphasis of parties in different contexts can potentially reinforce or weaken each other. In summary, the combination of issue emphasis and positioning is crucial as it not only explains the strategic orientation of parties but also enhances their adaptability to the specific challenges and opportunities of the MLES.

The *second strand* concerns research on the politicisation of the Europe issue and its integration into the MLES. The dissertation has advanced the understanding of how the Europe issue

influences party strategies and voter behaviour within the MLES context. It has incorporated previous findings on the politicisation of the issue at both the national (Hutter *et al.*, 2016b) and European levels (Braun and Grande, 2021). By examining how the MLES framework creates both opportunities and constraints for party strategies, it developed theoretical assumptions about how parties adapt their issue emphasis and positioning, especially on the Europe issue, in different electoral contexts.

The *third strand* pertains to the competitive dynamics between mainstream and challenger parties. To what extent mainstream parties respond to new (Eurosceptic) challengers has been widely discussed and empirically examined in the literature (e.g. Downs, 2002; Meguid, 2005; Meguid, 2008; Bale *et al.*, 2009). To investigate the dynamics, it is not only essential to examine how mainstream parties react to their challengers but also to broaden the perspective and include the strategic options available to challenger parties.

Theoretically, it has provided a comprehensive framework that accounts for the complexity of competitive dynamics in a multi-level electoral system.

Empirical contribution

The study's approach enriches the understanding of competitive dynamics and offers practical insights for parties navigating the challenges and opportunities within the MLES. The contribution of the empirical research first lies in illustrating the competitive dynamics and their changes over an extended period. It was shown that the dynamics do not always remain consistent; mainstream parties sometimes draw closer to their challengers and then distance themselves again. Additionally, it has contributed to understanding the real complexity of competitive dynamics, including both strategic options and constraints.

Second, the dissertation has advanced the understanding of how the Europe issue influences party strategies in the MLES context. The study by Braun and Grande (2021) demonstrated that mainstream parties are responsible for whether the salience of the Europe issue in a country is high or low. This dissertation expanded this perspective by analysing not only the role of mainstream parties but also by examining how their strategies interact with the emergence and success of Eurosceptic challenger parties across different contexts and electoral levels. Additionally, it has also incorporated the strategies used by challenger parties to be particularly successful with the Europe issue.

Third, detailed country studies also made an important empirical contribution. These studies, considering the individual contextual conditions in each country, demonstrate that competitive dynamics are strongly influenced by specific contextual factors such as historical legacies, intra-party conflicts, and the congruence or incongruence of electoral systems. While previous works have already demonstrated the importance of contextual conditions for party competition (Schwarzbözl, 2019), has deepened this understanding by considering not only the national level but also the European level and the interplay between both levels in the MLES.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

Despite several significant contributions, the dissertation encounters several limitations that must be acknowledged. At the same time, these limitations suggest avenues for future research.

First, the study focuses on a limited sample of four West European countries. Considering the current membership of 27 states, this constitutes a small number that by no means claims representativeness. To obtain a more comprehensive understanding of party competition, it would be crucial to extend the analysis to include a broader range of countries, specifically those from Eastern Europe. In his examination of the second-order model for the 2004 European Parliament election, Schmitt (2005) already concluded that while the model still holds for Western European countries, it does not apply to the newly participating Eastern European countries. By including Eastern European countries in future analyses, it would be possible to compare and assess the extent to which the findings from this study can be generalised across different regions. This would provide a more holistic view of party competition within the European Union and reveal whether the dynamics observed in Western Europe are applicable in Eastern Europe, where political contexts and historical legacies differ significantly.

Second, the study uses the national level as a comparative dimension to highlight the distinct dynamics of party competition in European election campaigns. However, given the multilevel nature of European elections, it must also be assumed that the dynamics in European elections have implications for the national level and vice versa. Schulte-Cloos (2018) has already demonstrated spillover effects from the European level to the national level, particularly regarding the success of challenger parties. Understanding the intricacies of these interactions and their impact on different types of parties is an essential avenue for future research. Moreover, it would be valuable to analyse these interactions across different types of parties, considering the varying strategies and priorities of mainstream parties, challenger parties, and other party types. For example, mainstream parties might adapt their strategies to mitigate the influence of successful challenger parties at the European level, which could reshape their national electoral campaigns. Conversely, the success of challenger parties in national elections could enhance their credibility and resources, influencing their performance and strategies in subsequent European elections. Investigating these bidirectional influences would provide a deeper understanding of the dynamic interplay between different electoral levels and the strategic responses of diverse political actors.

Third, the dissertation focuses on how mainstream parties have responded to challenger parties. However, examining how challenger parties respond to mainstream parties is equally essential. Research has shown that challenger parties often adopt strategies that bring them closer to mainstream parties, a phenomenon commonly referred to as "mainstreaming." This trend can be observed across the political spectrum, both on the right and the left. On the left, for example,

there is evidence of convergence between green parties and mainstream left parties and vice versa (Bomberg, 2002; Müller-Rommel and Poguntke, 2002).

Similarly, on the right, there is a mutual convergence between conservative and right-wing parties (Bale, 2003; Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup, 2008; Bale *et al.*, 2009; Van Spanje, 2010). Exploring the dynamics of challenger parties' responses to mainstream parties is crucial for comprehensively understanding party competition in European elections. By investigating how challenger parties position themselves to mainstream parties, researchers can gain insights into the strategies employed by different party types and the changing dynamics of party competition over time. To further advance this line of research, it would be valuable to analyse the specific mechanisms and drivers contributing to mainstreaming among challenger parties. Understanding the factors leading to a convergence between mainstream and challenger parties can provide valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of party systems and the shifting boundaries between ideological camps.

Fourth, it is essential to compare the findings with the results of the recent European election. The 2024 election had some new developments that warrant closer examination. First, the election highlighted the strong connection between the national and European levels. More importantly, it had direct impacts on the national level. In France, the election results led to the immediate call for new national elections. These spill-over effects should be given more attention. Second, right-wing populist parties, such as the Front National, achieved significant successes, thereby exerting pressure on the national level as well.

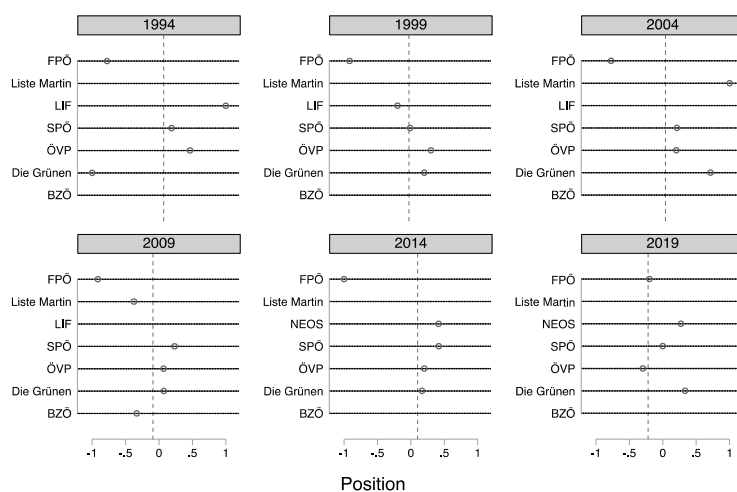
Appendix

Chapter: Data and Methods

Table 16: Categorising PolDem Issue Categories according to EEC Issue Categories

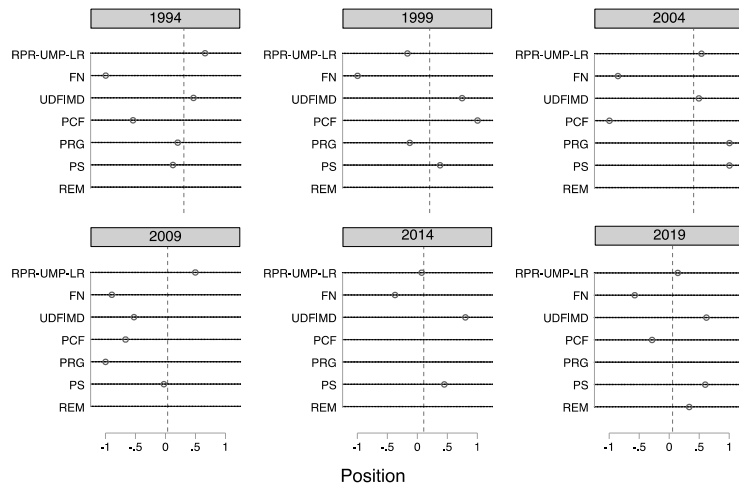
EEC	PolDem
Welfare	Welfare
Economy	Economic liberalism; Economic reform
Cultural Liberalism	Cultural liberalism
Europe	Europe; Euro
Culture	Education
Defence	Defence
Immigration	Nationalism; immigration
Environment	Environment
Security	Anti-Corruption; Security
Infrastructure	Infrastructure
Institutional	Democratic renewal; Democratic reform; regionalism

Figure 33: EU Position Austrian Parties



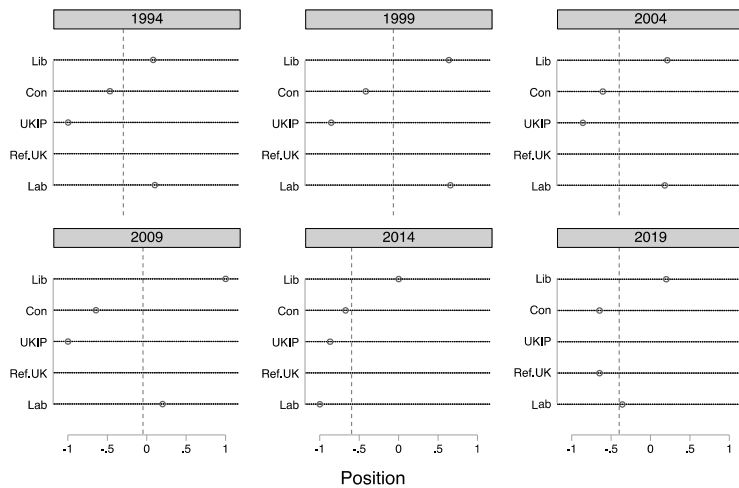
Note: The graph shows the average position of each Austrian party in each European election. Additionally, the vertical reference line (dashed line) represents the average position of all parties. Data source: Grande and Braun (2021a).

Figure 34: EU Position French Parties



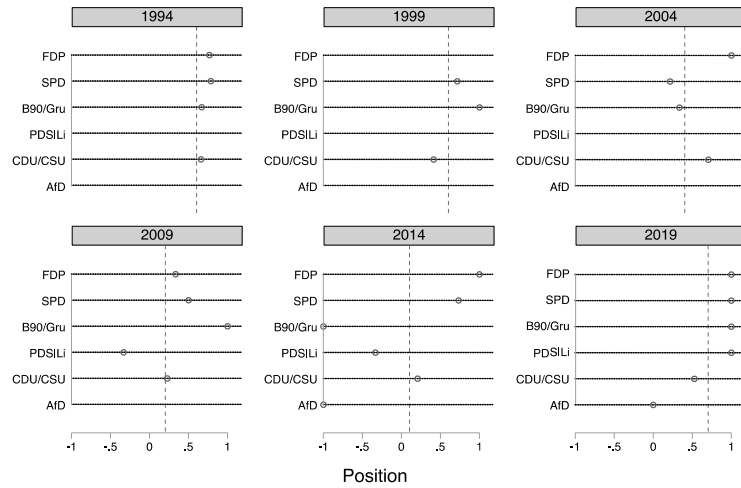
Note: The graph shows the average position of each French party in each European election. Additionally, the vertical reference line (dashed line) represents the average position of all parties in each year. Data source: Grande and Braun (2021a).

Figure 35: EU Position British Parties



Note: The graph shows the average position of each British party in each European election. Additionally, the vertical reference line (dashed line) represents the average position of all parties in each year. Data source: Grande and Braun (2021a).

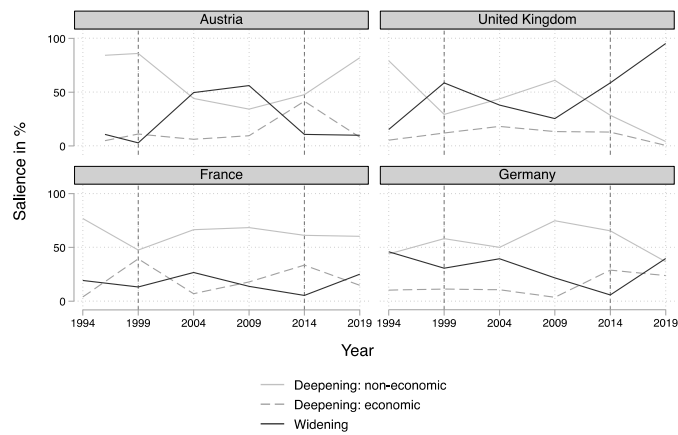
Figure 36: EU Position German Parties



Note: The graph shows the average position of each German party in each European election. Additionally, the vertical reference line (dashed line) represents the average position of all parties in each year. Data source: Grande and Braun (2021a).

Chapter: Empirical Analysis

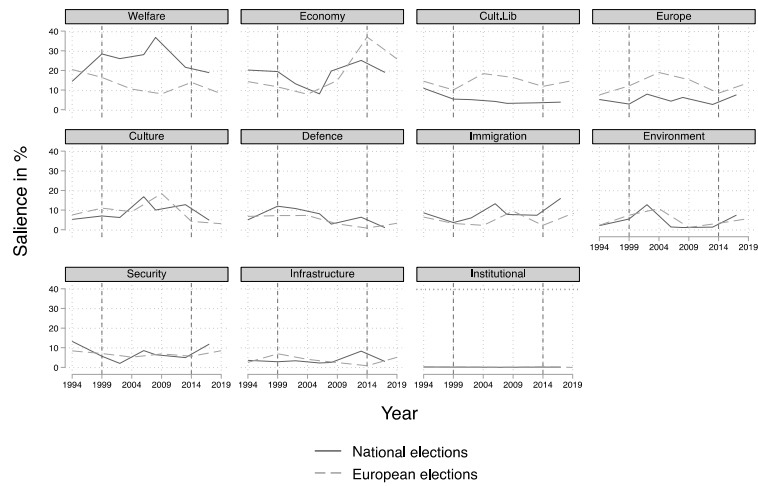
Figure 37: Specific Kinds of Constitutive Issues in European Elections by Countries



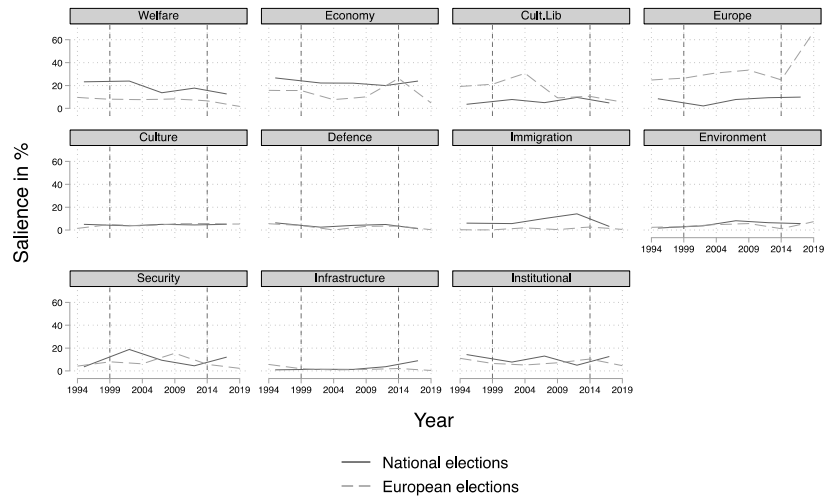
Note: The graph on the right side shows the average salience of the different sub-categories of the constitutive issue in European elections. Data source: Grande and Braun (2021b).

Figure 38: Parties Issue Emphasis over Time by Country

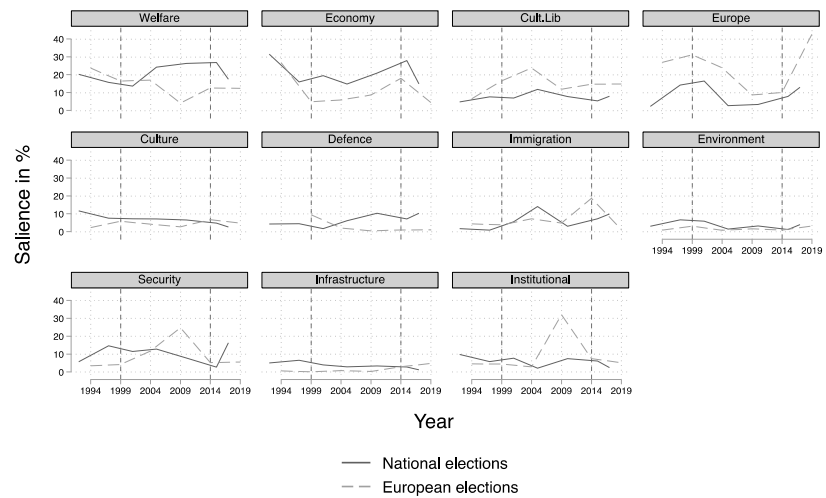
a: Austria



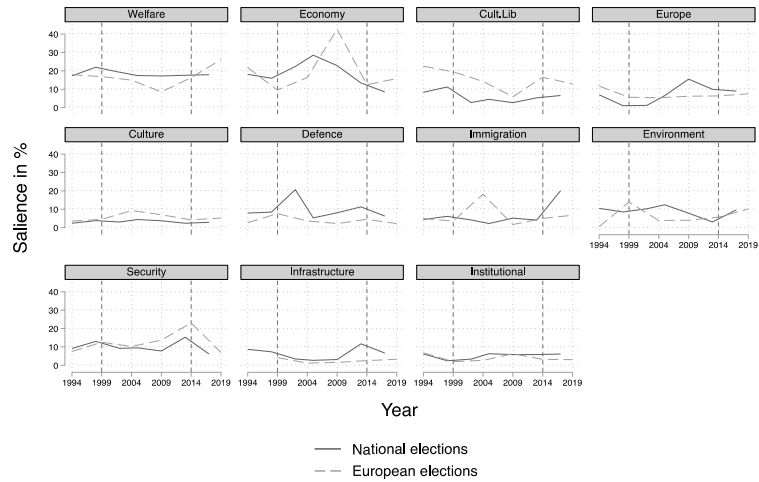
b: France



c: UK

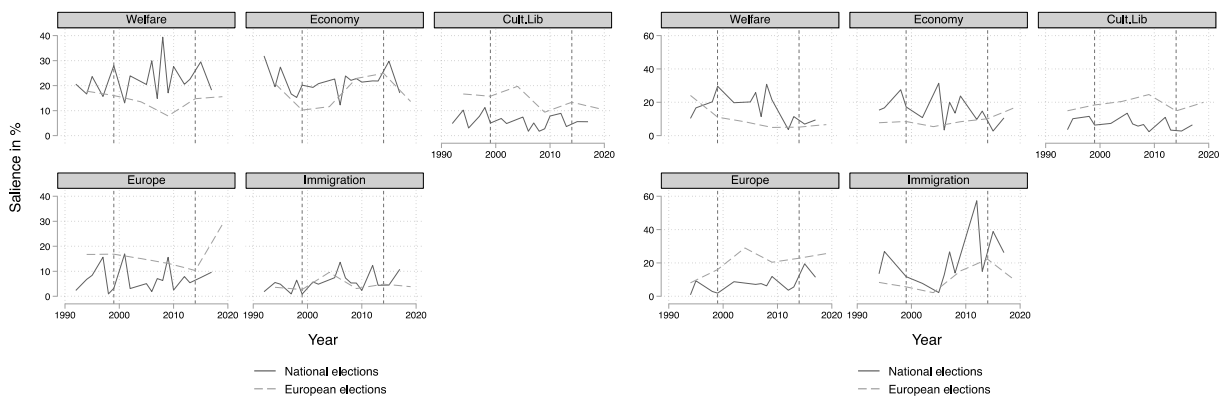


d: Germany



Note: The graphs show the issue saliences for national (solid line) and European elections (dashed line) over time and by country. The reference lines indicate the different time phases. Data Source: Kriesi et al. (2020) and Grande and Braun (2021a).

Figure 39: Issue Emphasis of Mainstream and Challenger Parties in National and European Elections



Note: The graphs show the issue saliences for national (solid line) and European elections (dashed line) over time for mainstream (left side) and challenger parties (right side). The reference lines indicate the different time phases. Data Source: Kriesi et al. (2020) and Grande and Braun (2021a).

Table 17: Hypotheses

Institutional Conditions	<i>H1a: Countries with incongruent electoral systems between national and European elections have a significantly different competitive dynamic than countries with congruent electoral systems</i>	✓
	<i>H1b: In countries with incongruent electoral systems between national and European elections, the Europe issue is significantly more salient than in countries with congruent electoral systems</i>	✓
Intra-Party Dissent	<i>H2: With increasing intra-party dissent, mainstream parties tend to adopt more negative positions towards Europe over time.</i>	x
Challenger Parties	<i>H3a: Challenger parties are more likely to engage as issue entrepreneurs in European than national elections.</i>	✓
	<i>H3b: If challenger parties focus solely on the Europe issue, it will be difficult for them to transfer their success from the European to the national level.</i>	✓
	<i>H3c: If eurosceptic challenger parties successfully create "European issue linkages" by connecting the Europe issue with other salient issues, such as immigration, then they will be able to broaden their political agenda and increase their electoral appeal.</i>	✓
Mainstream Party Reaction	<i>H4a: If a successful challenger party exists within a party system, mainstream parties align their political agenda with that of the challenger party.</i>	~
	<i>H4b: Mainstream parties ideologically close to the challenger party are more likely to emphasise the issue raised by the challenger party and converge in their position.</i>	~
	<i>H4c: Mainstream parties ideologically distant from the challenger party are more likely to downplay the issue raised by the challenger party and take a distant position</i>	✓
	<i>H4d: When mainstream parties adjust their strategies in response to the presence of a successful challenger party, the challenger party will also adapt its strategies to maintain its distinctiveness.</i>	✓

Note: ✓ = confirmed, x = rejected, ~ = partly confirmed

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