

Research Statement

Bonnie M. Meguid

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My research is motivated by an interest in comparative political institutions and political behavior in advanced industrial democracies, with a focus on Western Europe. The central themes uniting my work include party strategy and the implications of party competition for voter behavior, the endogeneity of political institutions, and the ramifications of institutional reform for parties and voters. My work challenges long-held assumptions and key findings in the theoretical and empirical literatures on political parties, voters and institutions, and it calls attention to new or previously overlooked sets of actors and variables. Through this research, I provide answers to important and formerly unsolved empirical puzzles and open up new avenues for research.

In my work, I generate parsimonious and generalizable theory and combine it with the analysis of substantive cases. My research methods are likewise multiple: I rely upon statistical as well as case study analyses to illuminate real-world puzzles and test my theories. My analyses draw upon extensive field research that I have conducted in Western Europe. These experiences have yielded previously unavailable qualitative information from interviews and newly released archival documents, and they have enabled me to construct original databases on party competition, electoral rules and multilevel election outcomes.

My work has already contributed to the literature on party and voter behavior and Western European politics, and my goal is to continue to generate research that draws upon and advances the theoretical and empirical study of comparative political institutions and political behavior.

My research has four main components: (1) party competition; (2) voting behavior; (3) the origins of political institutions; and (4) the consequences of institutional reform. I discuss each of these projects in detail below, with the full set of research summarized on pages 8 and 9.

Party Competition

Why do some parties flourish while others flounder? This question motivates my research on party competition. In particular, I am intrigued by what determines the electoral fortunes of niche parties. This is the term I coined for the set of single-issue parties that have emerged since the 1960s in advanced industrial democracies, promoting previously overlooked, non-economic, cross-cutting issues, such as the environment, immigration and regional autonomy. In providing answers to these questions about niche party success, my work also answers larger questions about the nature of party competition and the fortunes of mainstream parties.

In “Competition Between Unequals: The Role of Mainstream Party Strategy in Niche Party Success” (*APSR*, 2005), I examine how mainstream parties shape the electoral success of niche parties and, as a result, their own electoral fortunes. The literature on new party success has been dominated by institutional and sociological explanations. With a few exceptions, the role of

party strategy has been ignored. In this article, I bring parties back into the theory of party success. I propose a theory of party competition that moves beyond the basic tenets of the standard spatial model of party behavior. In addition to altering their policy position, I argue, parties can also manipulate the electoral support of themselves and others by shifting – reinforcing or undermining – the salience and ownership of new issues for political competition. Where niche parties introduce new issue dimensions to the once “fixed” policy space, mainstream parties are faced with three strategic options: dismissive, accommodative or adversarial tactics.

The implications of this reconceptualization of party strategies are significant. Contrary to the prevailing wisdom in the theoretical and empirical literature on parties, niche party vote can be influenced by both proximal and non-proximal mainstream parties. Thus, not only can mainstream parties undermine niche parties threatening their vote, but established parties can also boost the electoral support of new parties that threaten the vote of their mainstream party opponents. For mainstream parties, therefore, niche parties are either targets or weapons used to hurt other parties. As this suggests, a niche party’s fortune depends upon the behavior of multiple established parties across the political spectrum. However, timing is also crucial. This article argues that an established party’s ability to undermine a niche party challenger ultimately rests on the implementation of strategic responses prior to the reputational entrenchment of the niche party as the only credible issue promoter. Mainstream party hesitation means niche party success.

To evaluate the competing theories of party fortunes, this article examines the electoral trajectories of 30 green and radical right parties across 17 Western European countries from 1970 to 1998 using my original dataset of party interaction. The cross-sectional time series analyses confirm that the strategic behavior of mainstream parties better accounts for variation in the support of niche parties than the dominant institutional and sociological explanations. Moreover, calling into question the explanatory power of the standard spatial model, the results demonstrate the importance of strategies by both proximal and ideologically distant established parties for shaping niche party performance. The article is based on my dissertation, which won the Samuel Beer Prize for the Best Dissertation on British Politics, awarded by the British Politics Group. The article has helped spark a subfield of research on niche parties by other scholars. It is routinely assigned in graduate and undergraduate courses on political parties, comparative politics and Western Europe.

Party Competition between Unequals: Strategies and Electoral Fortunes in Western Europe (Cambridge University Press, 2008) builds on this initial research into party competition. In seeking a broader and deeper understanding of niche party and mainstream party fortunes, this book explores the *how* as well as the *why* of mainstream party strategies towards ethnoterritorial, green and radical right parties. I more fully develop my Position, Salience and Ownership (PSO) Theory of party interaction. I also discuss how, in addition to programmatic strategies, parties trying to affect niche parties have access to innovative organizational tactics, such as co-opting a niche party’s leader, and institutional tactics, including adopting more permissive electoral rules or banning a specific niche party.

Beyond exploring the effect of strategies, the book also focuses on understanding the motivations and capabilities of political parties to adopt and implement these strategies. I recognize that mainstream parties view niche parties as means to boost their electoral strength relative to that of their mainstream party opponents. Based on this insight, I develop a theory of mainstream party strategic choice that turns on the relative threat posed by a niche party to one mainstream party over another. This theory allows us to understand how a radical right party drawing 3% of a party's vote can be more threatening to the mainstream party's electoral strength – and, therefore, merit a more active response – than one taking 6%. In addition, I argue, mainstream party leaders do not choose strategies in a vacuum; using a game theoretic logic, I examine how the choice of a particular strategy is constrained by both the tactical maneuvering of other parties in the system and a party's own capacity to overcome internal division and decision-making impasses.

To evaluate the theories of party interaction and strategic choice, this book draws on a range of original quantitative and qualitative data on competition between mainstream parties and niche parties in Western Europe over a thirty-year period. I present statistical analyses of strategic effects based on my newly expanded database; I have now incorporated tactics towards ethnoterritorial parties into the data, and thus the database covers strategies by 35 established parties in 17 countries towards 55 green, radical right and ethnoterritorial parties. As such, my book offers an important advantage over most of the work on new parties, which examines either one country or one type of new party.

I supplement this statistical analysis with in-depth case studies of the motivations and choices of mainstream party behavior and their effects on niche parties in Great Britain and France. These chapters draw on qualitative and quantitative data derived from interviews, archival documents and survey data that I gathered through extensive field research (1998-1999 and shorter trips in 2001, 2003, and 2004). In one chapter, I explore how British mainstream parties of the left and the right competed with each other to steal ownership of the environmental issue away from the Green Party, leading to the niche party's electoral decline. In the next chapter, I seek to explain the phenomenal success of the anti-immigrant French Front National despite the co-optative efforts of its political neighbor, the RPR. Consistent with my theory, I find that the key to FN fortune lies in the pro-immigrant adversarial behavior of the distant Socialist Party in combination with the hesitation of the RPR. A chapter on the ethnoterritorial Scottish National Party highlights how a mainstream party's internal factionalism can undermine the effectiveness of its salience- and ownership-altering accommodative strategies. The combination of a divided Labour's weak accommodative tactics and the stronger vote-boosting efforts by the Conservatives led to the entrenchment of the SNP's reputation as the owner of the devolution issue position and to the niche party's electoral resilience. The final empirical chapter provides a comparison of these case studies to mainstream party interaction with other niche parties in France and Great Britain and demonstrates the generalizability of the theories to cases of party competition between unequals in the United States and Australia. The combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses in the book allows me to derive generalizable conclusions about the effects of strategies on a variety of niche parties while also explaining *why* mainstream parties adopted particular tactics. The book therefore brings together two complementary approaches that are typically employed separately in the parties literature.

The book provides insights that span multiple literatures. Within the comparative literature, it casts a new strategic light on why some parties – both new and mainstream – succeed and others fail. It solves longstanding puzzles about how parties do well despite hostile institutional and socioeconomic climates and even neighboring parties trying to steal their issue positions. And these lessons extend beyond Western Europe to party competition in other advanced industrial democracies, such as the US, Canada, Japan and Australia. Within the theoretical literature on parties, my work challenges the sufficiency of proximity models of voting and party behavior and opens up a new avenue of inquiry into the role of issue salience and ownership in party competition and voter behavior. It provides new perspectives on competition between unequal opponents. At the same time, the book highlights the centrality of niche parties for understanding (and modeling) mainstream party competition, the development of the political issue space and party system stability.

The book was awarded the 2009 William H. Riker prize, for the best book in the past three years on political economy, by the Political Economy section of the APSA. It also received the 2009 Best Book award, by the European Politics and Society section of the APSA.

Voting Behavior

A set of projects on voting behavior grew out of my interest in the strategic behavior of political parties. If parties employ issue salience- and issue ownership-altering tactics, as my research on party competition has found, voters should behave in ways that run counter to the expectations of the dominant proximity-based theories of issue voting. In “Issue Salience, Issue Ownership, and Issue-based Vote Choice” (*Electoral Studies*, 2008), co-authored with Éric Bélanger of McGill University, we propose and test a salience- and ownership-based theory of issue voting. Drawing upon individual-level survey data from the 1997 and 2000 Canadian Election Studies, we find evidence that a party’s issue reputation, or ownership, influences an individual’s voting behavior. A voter is generally more likely to support a political party if that party is perceived to be the most competent party on a given issue. But the micro-level relationship between issue competence and party choice is not as simple as is commonly articulated and tested by the existing issue ownership voting literature. Rather, our analysis demonstrates that the influence of issue ownership on vote choice is conditional upon the perceived salience of the issue. Consistent with our theory, issue ownership affects the voting decisions of only those individuals who think that the issue is salient. Our article is one of only a few to test the voting dimension of the ownership theory at the individual level, and our finding about the importance of issue salience in issue-based voting decisions provides a critical advancement over past voter theories of issue reputation in the comparative and American subfields.

I am currently working with Éric Bélanger on a second paper to test our conditional hypotheses in a different political setting: the United States. The US has been the focus of much of the established literature on the role of issue salience and ownership in voting behavior. However, despite the abundance of American survey data, no survey has posed the questions needed to test our conditional propositions. Based on my proposal, Harris Interactive has agreed to include our salience and ownership questions in its pre- and post-election surveys for the November 2008 elections. After the elections, we will use these data to explore the conditionality of issue

ownership on issue salience in the US and to see if our findings from Canada hold, as we would expect, in a traditional two-party system where issue ownership is stronger and less fluid.

The Origins of Political Institutions

My third broad area of research explores the role of strategy in the formation of institutions. In political science, much is known about the effects of institutions, but, until very recently, little attention has been paid to their origins. My work is part of an emerging body of research on the motivations and decisions behind the adoption of these so-called exogenous structures. My research demonstrates the link between institutional reform and party strategy and thus shows how institutions are endogenous to party competition. I am writing a series of journal articles, which, in the case of the work on the origins of decentralization, may eventually become a book project.

Decentralization

My first paper on this project, “Institutional Change as Strategy: The Role of Decentralization in Party Competition” (under review), examines the causes of political decentralization. Over the past forty years, waves of political decentralization have swept across countries in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Europe. With maximization of power assumed to be a central goal of political actors, it may seem paradoxical that governments would choose to give away some of their powers to subnational authorities. This paper resolves this paradox with a novel explanation for decentralization: I show that decentralization is a means to bolster a governing party’s *national-level* power. It is an institutional form of policy appeasement used to co-opt pro-decentralization regionalist party voters in national elections. By conceiving of decentralization in this manner, we can understand why parties propose devolution reforms that sabotage their control of the newly created subnational bodies. I test my appeasement theory by employing a comparative case study design whereby I examine intranational variation in the degree and timing of decentralizing reforms in the regions of Great Britain. My analyses confirm that the decision to decentralize turns on the degree of regionalist threat in national elections and the strategizing mainstream party’s willingness and capability to prioritize national-level over subnational power.

In future papers, I plan to extend the examination of my appeasement theory to other countries, using cross-national time-series analyses. The first paper will focus on Western Europe and will draw on elections data from the Multilevel Elections Database that I have been constructing over the past two years with grant support from the Program in Empirical Policy Research and the Lanni Program at the University of Rochester. The database, which is near completion, is unique in providing multilevel – specifically, national, subnational, local and supranational level – election results for Western European countries from 1970 to 2008. Among other things, these data will allow me to test the effects of regionally based electoral threats (in national and in subnational elections) on mainstream party decisions to decentralize in a given region.

While the impetus for decentralization in Great Britain and other Western European countries is a threatening ethnoterritorial party (or parties), the demand for greater regionalism can come from a variety of political groups, ranging from states’ rights parties to parties representing

regionally concentrated economic interests. In a second paper in the planning stages, I will explore the generalizability of my strategic account of decentralization to developing and developed democracies around the globe. This paper will combine large-N statistical analyses with case studies.

Compulsory Voting

A second set of papers on the origins of institutions (co-authored with Gretchen Helmke) examines the adoption of compulsory voting laws. As with the topic of decentralization, many scholars have explored the effects of these laws. We are the first to rigorously investigate why some governing parties require their electorates to turn out to vote. In a paper entitled “Endogenous Institutions: The Origins of Compulsory Voting Laws” (under review), we posit that strategic considerations shape the decision to adopt such a law. Compulsory voting laws, we argue, are an inexpensive means for governing parties to overcome their mobilizational weakness to turn out their voters. Parties are likely to adopt such laws when they are faced with an organizationally stronger competitor that is gaining electoral support. Historically, this means that parties of the Right were likely to adopt compulsory voting in response to a growing Leftist threat. Qualitative accounts of democracies that have adopted compulsory voting since 1862 are supportive of this logic. To perform more systematic statistical tests of our hypotheses, we have constructed a cross-national dataset on voting laws and election results. It includes data on cases and non-cases of compulsory voting adoption drawn from all developing and developed democracies from a 140-year time period. Statistical analyses of this data in combination with historical analyses of out-of-sample CV cases confirm our strategic explanation of compulsory voting implementation, showing that political parties faced with an electoral threat use CV as an antidote to their organizational weakness.

While our first paper on compulsory voting explores its adoption as part of an electoral strategy in democracies, we are beginning to work on a second paper to examine the rationale behind its adoption in non-democratic countries. Of the 34 countries that implemented such laws between 1862 and 1998, 14 were autocracies. We posit that governments in non-democracies embrace compulsory voting as insurance against loss of power should a regime change occur; given that the act of voting reinforces people’s political identity and partisanship, even in a single-party system, mandatory voting laws may reduce the size of the uncommitted electorate available to alternative political forces. We will test this theory using information on non-democracies from the dataset on voting laws and election results that we have already assembled (see above). This paper will contribute to the growing scholarship on electoral authoritarianism and shed light on the role of strategy under dictatorship.

The Consequences of Institutional Reform

My interest in the origins of institutions has led to my exploration of the effects of these institutional reforms on voters and parties. Despite the focus of comparative and even American politics scholars on the effects of institutions on a range of phenomena, there is a curious lacuna in our knowledge about the impact of decentralization on voter engagement and the performance of parties – those that adopted the reforms as well as general supporters and opponents of the

institutions. To help answer these questions, I draw upon the Multilevel Elections Database I am constructing. The resulting papers will fill the gap in our understanding, contributing to the developing literatures on decentralization and multilevel governance and to the cross-subfield research on voter turnout and party performance.

“Bringing Government Back to the People? The Impact of Political Decentralization on Voter Engagement in Western Europe” (under review) expands upon existing research on voter engagement by considering the effects of a new institution – decentralization – on voter attitudes and behavior. In contrast to politicians’ campaign promises and, more importantly, hypotheses based on the voter engagement literature, my analyses show that decentralization has not led to pronounced aggregate-level changes in voter efficacy, interest in politics or participation in elections. Further examination, however, reveals the limitations of conclusions based solely on aggregate-level results. Rather than finding this institutional reform to be unimportant, my research shows that decentralization differentially affects members of the electorate. Consistent with my theory that the winners of decentralization are more likely to react to these reforms than the losers, analysis of pre- and post-decentralization survey data from Scotland reveals that partisans of the pro-decentralization Scottish National Party, unlike their mainstream counterparts, experience increased engagement levels. Beyond shedding light on the specific effects of decentralization, this paper reminds us that the impact of institutions is not necessarily uniform; their influence on voter attitudes and behavior may be mediated by the individual-level characteristics of those voters.

“Institutional Change and Ethnoterritorial Party Representation at the European Level,” (under review) focuses on the effect of decentralization on voter behavior in supranational elections. Over the past thirty years, Western European countries have faced both pressures to decentralize and, conversely, pressures to transfer competencies to the supranational level of the EU. Despite the joint occurrence of these processes, the existing literature has typically explored only their separate effects. This paper begins to fill this lacuna by examining the effect of decentralization on the European electoral fortunes of some of decentralization’s most prominent supporters, ethnoterritorial parties. Consistent with the claim that ethnoterritorial parties in decentralized regions still see the European Union as a useful arena for expressing enhanced regionalist identities and pursuing additional political and financial legitimacy, cross-sectional time-series analyses reveal that decentralization increases the vote shares of ethnoterritorial parties. Thus, counter to the fears that increasing the number of levels of government will create competing centers of power and serve to demobilize voters, these results suggest that – for at least some parties – these political environments prove complementary. This paper is part of an edited volume to come out of the “Conflicting Identities and Nationalisms within the New Europe” conference held in the fall of 2008 and organized by Anthony Messina and Andrew Gould of the University of Notre Dame.

A third paper in this project explores the effects of decentralization on the likelihood and configuration of split-ticket voting. I have shown elsewhere that decentralization reforms are a strategy designed to secure national-level mainstream party support and that they are expected to result in mainstream party vote loss (and ethnoterritorial party vote gain) in subnational elections. In “Multilevel Elections and Vote Choice: The Impact of Decentralization,” I examine the extent to which these parties’ expectations are met: do mainstream parties gain support in

national-level elections and lose it to ethnoterritorial parties at the subnational level? And are these vote patterns being driven by vertical split-ticket voting, whereby the same voters are awarding their support to different parties in national and subnational elections? This paper will examine party fortunes and voter behavior at multiple levels of elections across decentralized advanced industrial democracies, using data I have assembled in my Multilevel Elections Database. It will expand the comparative literature by examining the prevalence of split-ticket voting in a new institutional setting and by offering a theory of not only the conditions under which votes are split – the focus of much of the existing comparative literature – but also the type of party preferred at each level of office.

List of Publications, Papers under Review and Future Projects

Books

Party Competition between Unequals: Strategies and Electoral Fortunes in Western Europe (2008) Cambridge University Press (Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics series).

Journal Articles and Articles Under Review

“Issue Salience, Issue Ownership and Issue-based Vote Choice” (2008) (co-authored with Éric Bélanger) *Electoral Studies* 27(3): 477-91.

“Competition between Unequals: The Role of Mainstream Party Strategies in Niche Party Success” (2005) *American Political Science Review* 99(3): 347-59.

“Institutional Change as Strategy: The Role of Decentralization in Party Competition” (2009, manuscript under review).

“Endogenous Institutions: The Origins of Compulsory Voting Laws” (co-authored with Gretchen Helmke) (2008, manuscript under review).

“Bringing Government Back to the People? The Impact of Political Decentralization on Voter Engagement in Western Europe” (2009, manuscript under review).

“Institutional Change and Regionalist Representation at the European Level,” chapter for an edited volume, eds. Anthony Messina and Andrew Gould (2009, manuscript under review)

Work in Progress and Future Projects

“The Conditional Nature of Issue Ownership in American Voting Decisions” (with Éric Bélanger).

“Decentralization: An Institutional Strategy of Appeasement across Western Europe.”

“The Origins of Political Decentralization.”

“Compulsory Voting and the Strategies of Dictators” (with Gretchen Helmke).

“Multilevel Elections and Vote Choice: The Impact of Decentralization.”