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# Party Competition

POLITICAL PARTIES AND POLITICAL BEHAVIOR



# Agenda

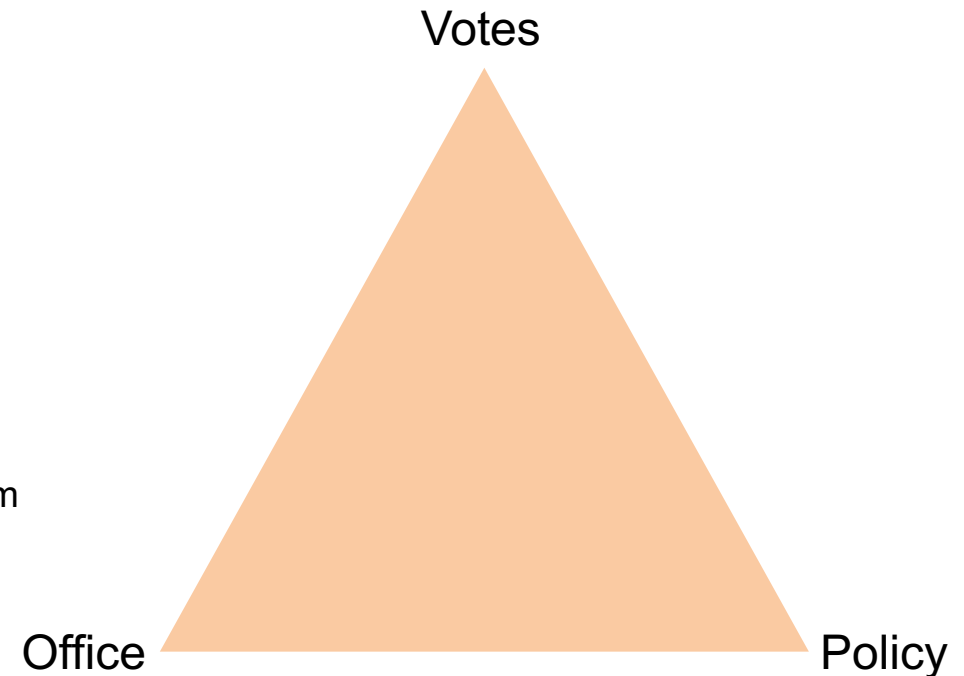
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- Previous lectures: voters and political behavior, upcoming lectures: parties and governments
- Party goals
- How parties compete
  - Positional competition
  - Issue competition
- Niche parties
- Changes in party competition

# Party goals

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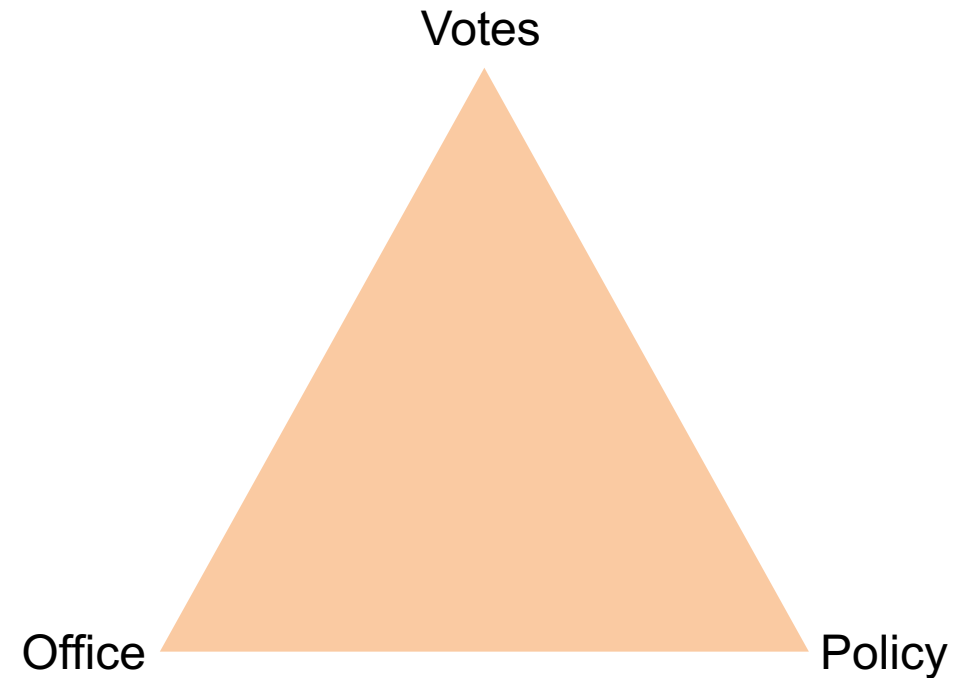
- What do parties want to achieve? (Strøm 1990)
- Office
  - Govern and get the benefits associated with governing
  - Maximize formal power and control ministries
  - Motivated by a desire for prestige, power, income
- Policy
  - Change society in their preferred direction
  - Maximize influence on public policy, implement party's platform
- Votes
  - Votes can be traded for office and policy



# Party goals

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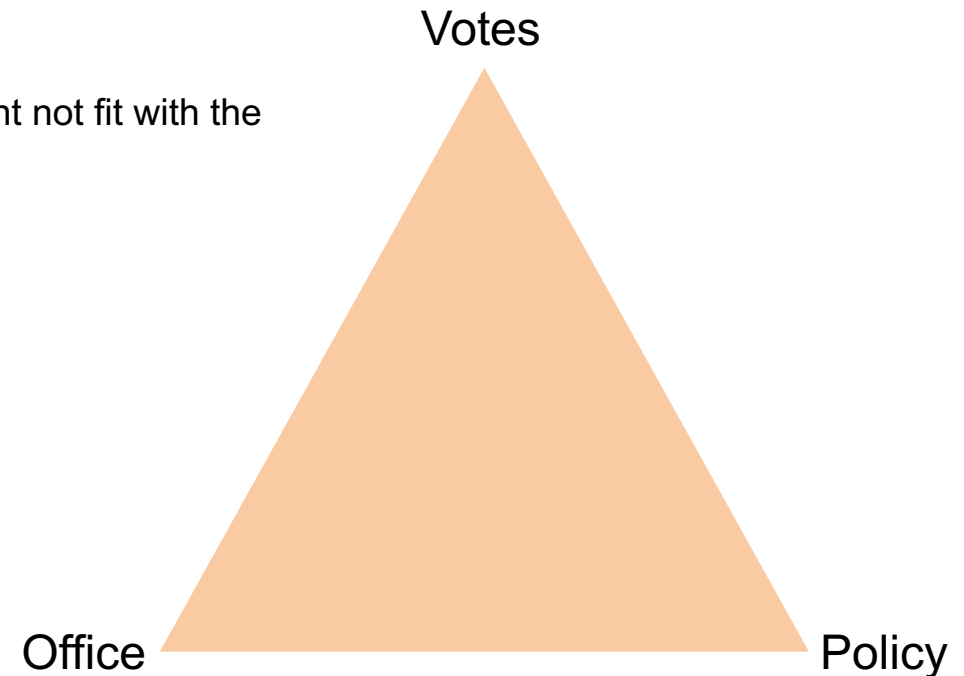
- Potential trade-offs between the three goals
- Policy-office
  - Might have to compromise to enter a coalition government
  - Might be more influential by supporting government



# Party goals

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- Potential trade-offs between the three goals
- Policy-votes
  - Certain policy positions might get a party more votes, but might not fit with the party's ideas of what society should look like
- Office-votes
  - Might lose votes after holding office



# Party competition

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- When a party tries to reach its goals, it faces competition from other parties
- What do parties do to reach their goals vis-a-vis other parties?
- Two main strategies
  - Positional competition
  - Issue competition

# Positional competition

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- Laver (1997) chapter 6
- Positional competition concerns the positions parties take on ideological dimension(s) to maximize their vote share
  - E.g. left-right, GAL-TAN
- Where do the parties end up in relation to each other on these dimensions?

# Positional competition: median voter theorem

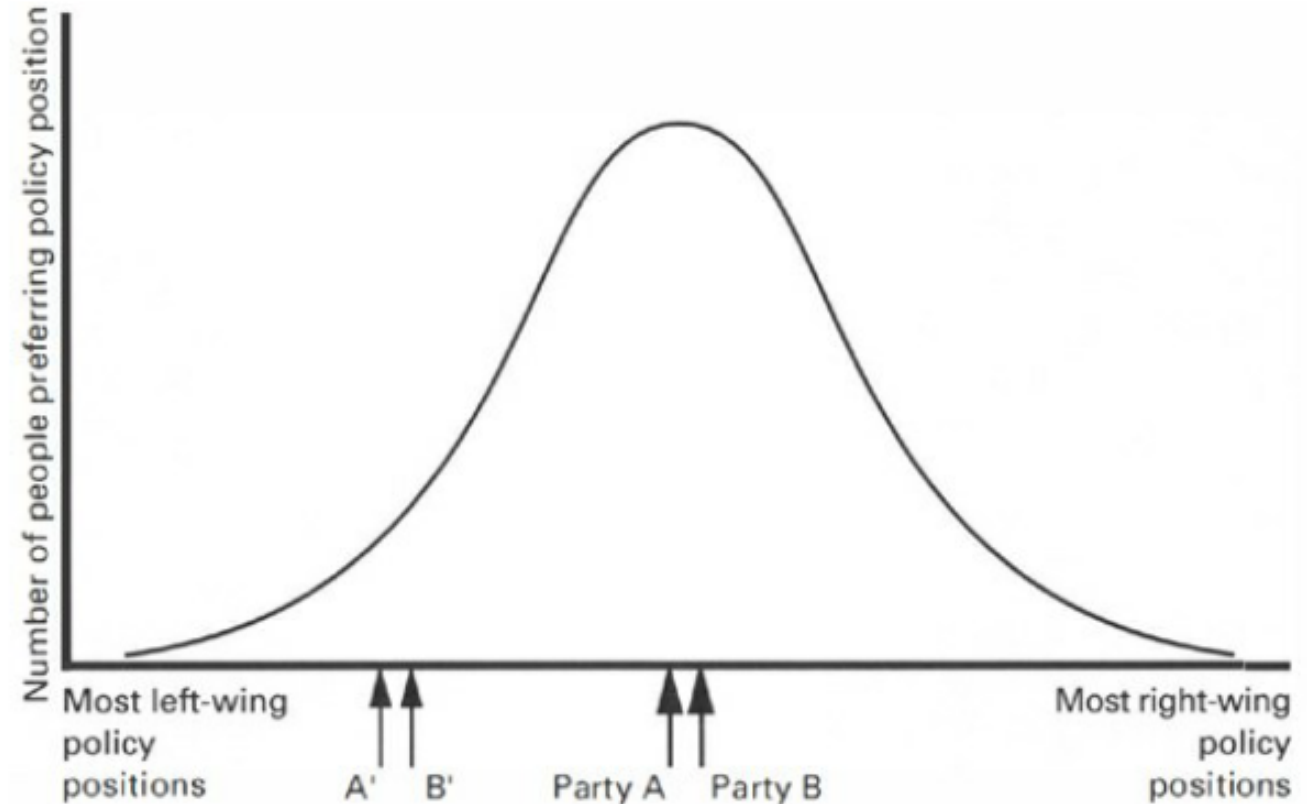
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- Simplest illustration of positional competition: two parties that compete on single dimension (e.g. left-right)
- The parties are free to take any policy position they want
- Voters' preferences can also be structured along the dimension and they support the party that is closest to their preferences (proximity voting)
- Outcome: converge on the preferences of the median voter (median voter theorem)
  - Both parties will be located close to the preferences of the median voter
  - Only outcome where both parties maximize their vote shares and where neither party can improve their position



# Positional competition: median voter theorem

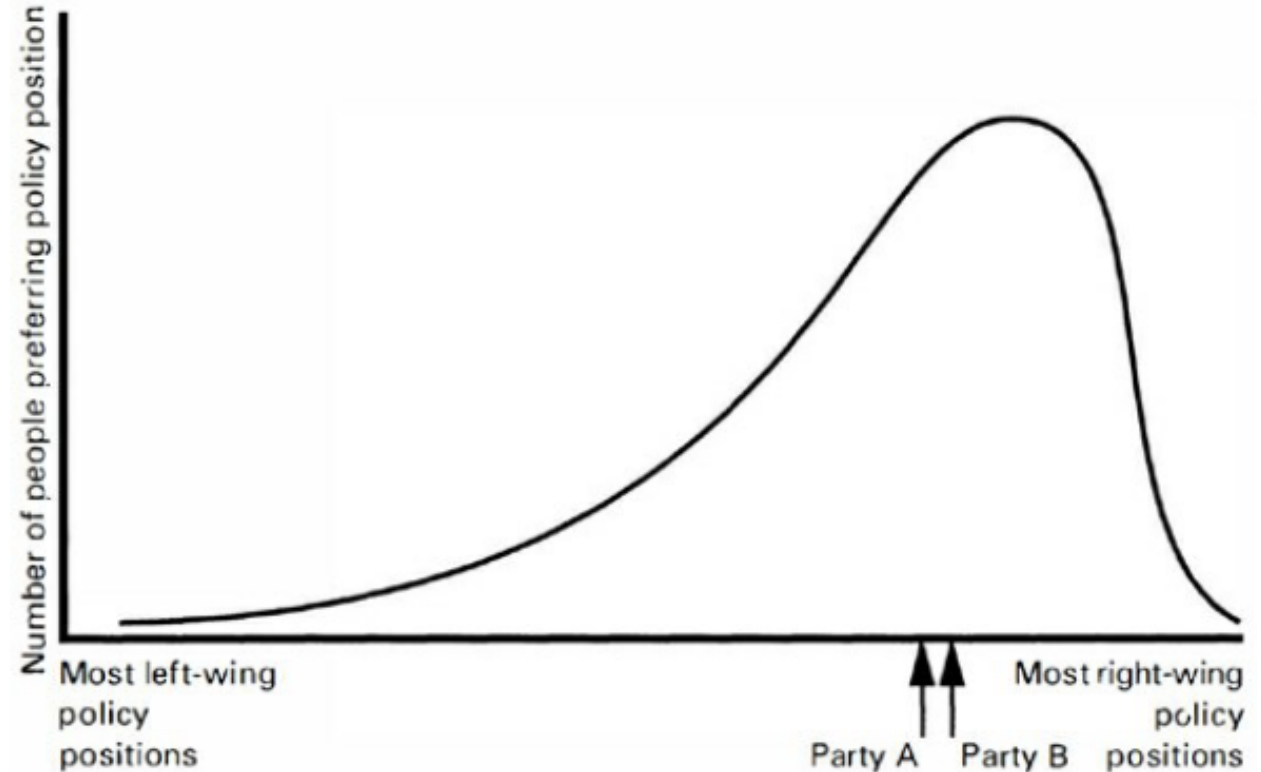
- Example: distribution of preferences is normal, median voter is located at the center
- Party A and B will converge at this centrist position
  - All the voters to the left of party A will vote for party A
  - All the voters to the right of party B will vote for party B
- If party A moves further to the left, they lose the voters that are now closer to party B



Laver (1997)

# Positional competition: median voter theorem

- The median voter theorem also holds if the distribution of voter preferences is not concentrated in the center
- Where the median voter is located depends on the distribution of voter preferences
- Example: distribution of preferences is skewed to the right, and the median voter is found closer to the right end of the left-right dimension
- The two parties will converge on median position



Laver (1997)

# Positional competition: median voter theorem

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- Based on the median voter theorem, in a two-party system, the parties would be expected to converge on the position of the median voter.
- What might lead parties in a two-party system to *not* converge on the position of the median voter?

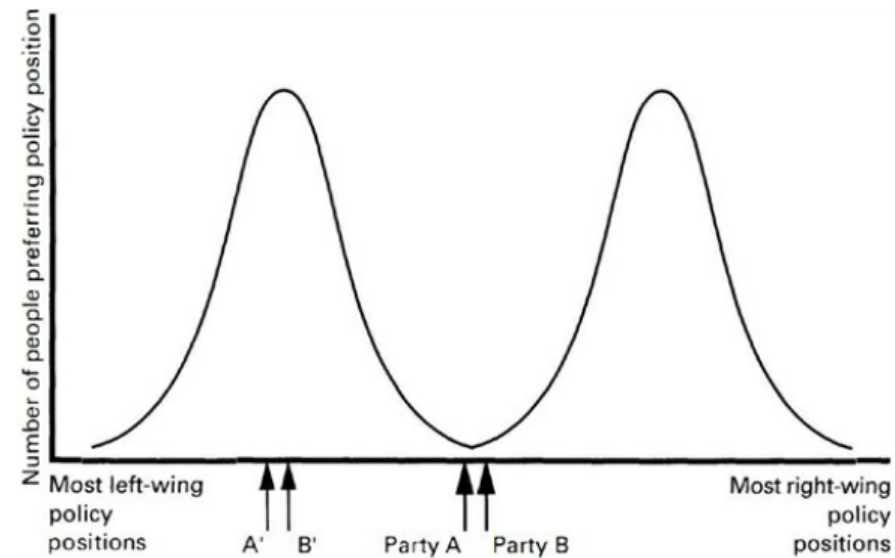
# Positional competition: median voter theorem

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- One model assumption is that the parties do not face any constraints when they decide on their positions
  - They are free to take any position they would like
  - Parties usually face constraints when they decide on a position
- Reputation constraint
  - If a party's position moves around based on chasing the median voter, they might come across as less trustworthy
    - » Politicians can shirk once elected (do something other than promised)
  - Lose votes?
- Resource constraint
  - Parties need resources to promote their policy platforms
  - The preferences of party activists and party donors might differ from the median voter's
  - Party might be compelled to give concessions to these actors to ensure that they want to work for/donate to the party

# Positional competition: median voter theorem

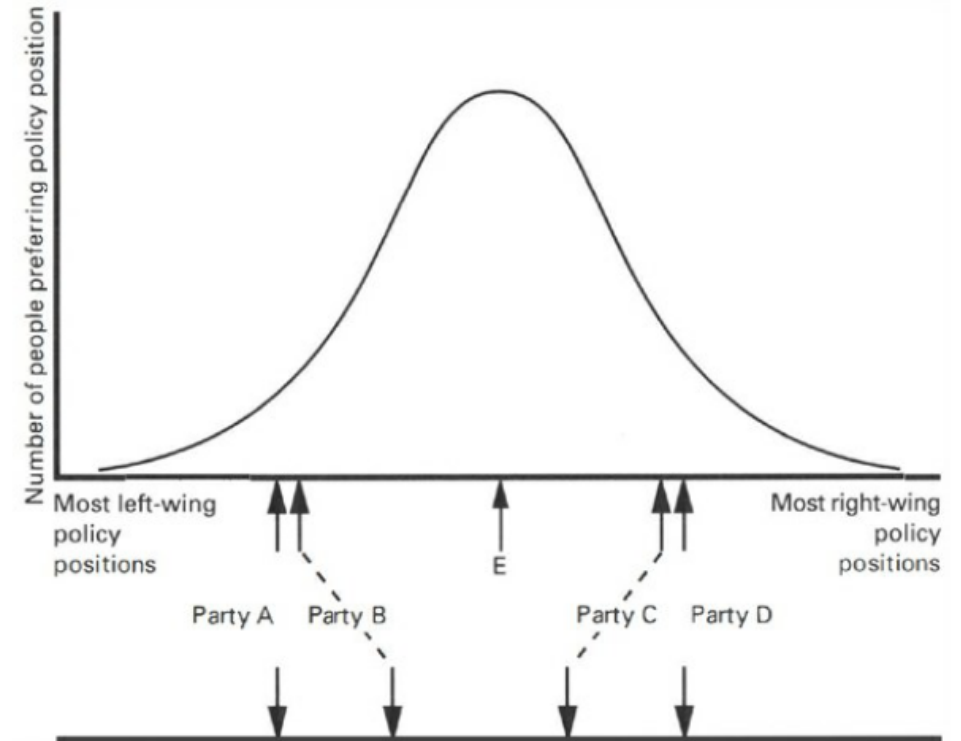
- Model also assumes that people turn out to vote
- Example: distribution of voters' preferences have two peaks and few voters are actually located where the median voter is
- People who are located far away from the parties' positions might choose not to vote at all
- Potential incentive to not converge on median voter: mobilizing non-voters



Laver (1997)

# Positional competition: more than two parties

- More than two parties: less likely that a single party will get a majority of votes and govern on its own
  - Coalition governments
- Desire to enter office: do not want to be positioned too far away from your potential coalition partners
  - Keep distance but not to the extent that no one wants to govern with you
- Parties might do better electorally if they *do not* converge on the median voter's position and keep their distance from each other
  - Risk of losing more votes to other parties than you gain
  - Threat that new parties can emerge

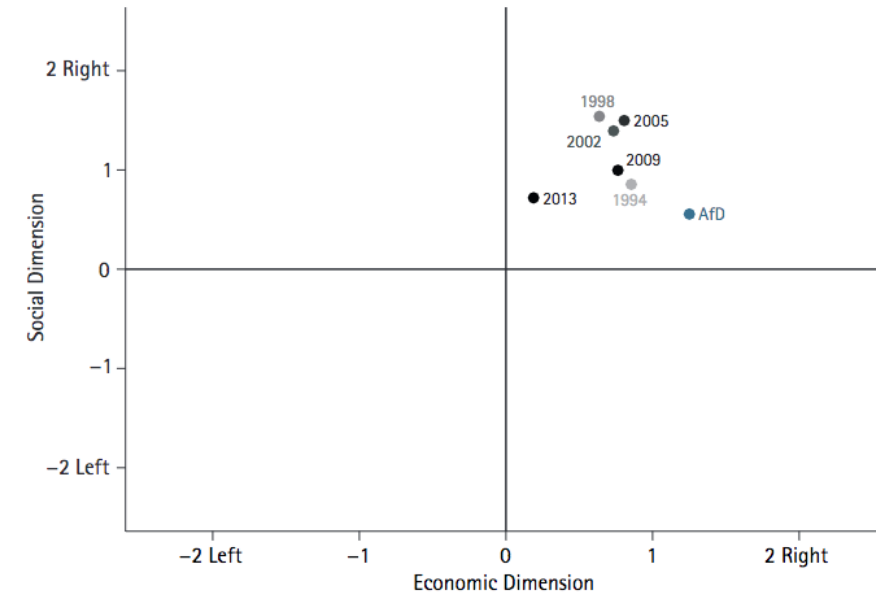


Laver (1997)

# Positional competition: more than two parties

- Policy vacuum part of explanation for the rise of the Alternative for Germany (AfD)?

Figure 3 Comparing the two-dimensional position of the CDU/CSU 1994–2013 to the AfD in 2013



Dataset: Comparative Manifesto Project

Source: Reinl, Ann-Kathrin, Tassilo Heinrich. 2018. "The Christian Democratic and the Christian Social Union Party and Voter Shifts during the Chancellorship of Angela Merkel." *Informationsdienst Soziale Indikatoren*, 60: 6-13.

# Positional competition: adjustments in response to other parties' policy shifts

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- Adams and Somer-Topcu (2009) examine empirically whether parties adjust their policy positions in response to other parties' policy shifts
  - Does a given party consider where other parties are located?
    - » Central idea in spatial models (positional competition)
- Find that parties adjust their positions in response to the policy shifts of other parties
  - Tendency that parties in the current election shift their policies in the same direction that the other parties had shifted at the previous election
  - Parties are especially responsive to policy shifts by parties with a similar ideology (e.g. Conservative parties respond to the shifts of Christian Democratic parties)



# Issue competition

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- Positional competition: parties take positions vis-a-vis each other on the ideological dimension(s) that make up the policy space in their country
  - Want to take a position that maximize their electoral support vis-a-vis what the other parties do
- Issue competition: parties try to get 'their' issues to dominate the party political agenda (what parties pay attention to)
  - Compete by drawing attention to issues they find advantageous to themselves
  - Strategy: find some core issues that are salient to some voters *and* where the party has issue ownership or unique position, and try to make these issues the main issues on the party political agenda
  - Win votes by having the issues you 'own' dominate the agenda
    - » Want voters to remember and consider your issues when they vote
- Not mutually exclusive: issue competition and positional competition can coexist

# Issue competition

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- Two principles of issue competition (Riker 1996)
- Dispersion principle
  - Do not draw attention to issues where all the parties agree
  - Your position does not distinguish you from the other parties and you will not be able to gain anything electorally by drawing attention to such issues
- Dominance principle
  - Draw attention to issues where there is conflict with the other parties and where your party has the upper hand
    - » Where your party has voters on its side and where you can expect to gain electorally
  - Want other parties to pay attention to these issues, 'force' them to pay attention to issues they do not want to be salient
    - » Through debates in parliament, the media, etc.
- Want your preferred issues to dominate the party political agenda so voters will notice these issues and vote for the party
  - Compete about what the most salient issues should be

# Niche parties

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- Niche party: focus on new, non-economic issues, (perceived to be) single-issue parties (Meguid 2005)
  - Most common niche parties in WE: green parties and radical right parties
- Can think of the strategies of niche parties in terms of positional competition and issue competition
- Positional competition: to succeed, fill gap in ideological space where no other party is placed and that voters care about
  - Compete on GAL-TAN issues: environment, immigration
- Issue competition: to succeed, draw attention to issues where your party has the upper hand
  - Radical right parties: increase the salience of the immigration issue, green parties: environmental issues
    - » 'Own' these issues and have unique position vis-a-vis other parties

# Niche parties

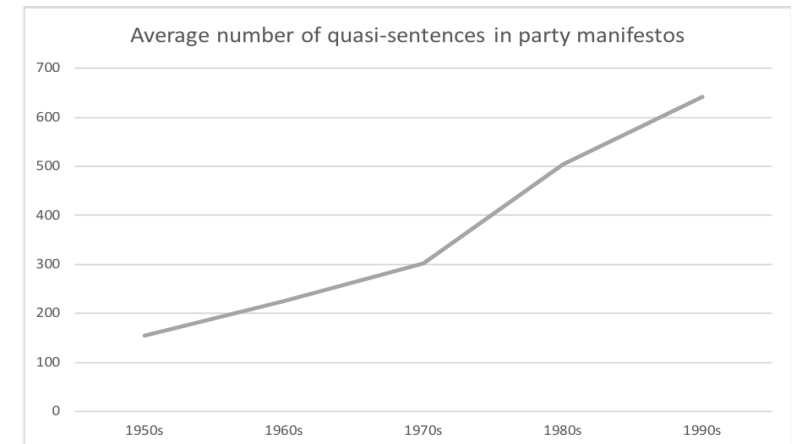
- The strategies of mainstream parties can affect niche parties' vote shares (Meguid 2005)
- Dismissive
  - When mainstream parties dismiss/ignore the issue a niche party focuses on, the niche party is expected to lose votes
- Accommodative (convergence)
  - When mainstream parties take a similar position on the issue as the niche party (e.g., anti-immigration), the niche party is expected to lose votes
- Adversarial (divergence)
  - When mainstream parties take the 'opposite' position on the issue as the niche party (e.g., pro-immigration), the niche party is expected to gain votes

TABLE 1. Predicted Effects of Mainstream Party Strategies (in Isolation)				
Strategies	Mechanism			Niche Party Electoral Support
	Issue Salience	Issue Position	Issue Ownership	
Dismissive (DI)	Decreases	No movement	No effect	Decreases
Accommodative (AC)	Increases	Converges	Transfers to mainstream party	Decreases
Adversarial (AD)	Increases	Diverges	Reinforces niche party's ownership	Increases

Meguid (2005)

# Changes in party competition

- Party programs have a broader scope and are more complex than they have been traditionally in WE (Green-Pedersen 2007)
- Scope
  - The length of party manifestos has increased: parties write about more issues
- Complexity
  - Party competition has become more complex in the sense that parties no longer mostly just pay attention to economic (left-right) issues
    - » Dominance of left-right issues has declined
  - New issues have emerged (e.g. environment)
- Party families focus on different issues but are also 'forced' to pay attention to a wide variety of issues
  - Find that e.g. green parties pay more attention to the environment than other parties but all parties pay attention to the issue
- Party competition today as a mix of positional and issue competition



Based on Green-Pedersen (2007)



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