

Niche parties and party competition

Markus Wagner

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Abstract

Niche parties are commonly defined as parties that emphasise a small range of issues that their competitors largely ignore. Such parties have become increasingly relevant in many party systems over the past decades; common examples are Green, radical-right and Regionalist parties. This chapter begins by discussing the various ways in which niche parties have been defined and measured. It then examines the main strategic aims of niche parties: politicisation and contagion. Mainstream parties react to niche party success in various ways, pursuing accommodative, adversarial and dismissive strategies. Yet, the effectiveness of these strategies remains debated.

Introduction

In many countries, party systems have undergone substantial transformation in recent decades. Contestation based on ‘old’ issues – the economy and the welfare state – has been complemented by debates on ‘new’ issues such as immigration, the environment, devolution or European integration. At the same time, new parties have emerged and grown, focusing on precisely these new topics. Many party systems now have radical-right and Green parties, and some party systems also contain parties that focus on regional power or European integration.

This chapter discusses these parties jointly using the term ‘niche parties’. As we will see, the precise definition of niche parties is not entirely settled, but there is broad consensus on general points. Thus, typical niche parties are Green parties, radical right parties and

regionalist parties; other single-issue parties (Mudde 1999) that focus on issues such as European integration or women's rights may also fit into this category. Traditionally, these parties emphasise one topic more than the rest of the party system, be it the environment, immigration or devolution/independence. These topics also tend to cross-cut existing party system cleavages, which is why these parties present a unique challenge to mainstream party competition (van de Wardt et al. 2014).

In this chapter, I will first describe in more detail how 'niche parties' have been defined. Then, I will consider three questions examined by researchers in recent work: What are the strategies of niche parties? How have mainstream parties responded to the threat posed by niche parties? And when are niche parties electorally successful? In the conclusion, I will reflect on whether the niche party label remains a useful way of grouping parties and suggest avenues for future research.

Definitions and characteristics

The label 'niche parties' was coined to find an encompassing term for non-mainstream parties. Mainstream parties are established within party systems and aim to be as large as possible by appealing to centrist voters. Usually, these parties have some form of governing experience (Hobolt and De Vries 2020), but this is not a necessary characteristic. Typical examples of mainstream parties are Labour and the Conservatives in the UK, the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats in Germany or the Socialist Party and the Popular Party in Spain. More broadly, Social Democratic, Christian Democratic and Conservative parties are generally seen as 'mainstream'.

From the 1980s onwards, party systems were increasingly characterised by competitors that did not fit the mainstream label (Hobolt and De Vries 2020). Green and Radical Right parties started to become consistent competitors in countries such as Austria,

Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and across Nordic countries (Mudde 2014; Spoon et al. 2014; Grant and Tilley 2019). Given this trend, researchers began to study whether these new parties share common strategies and how mainstream parties respond to their emergence; the most influential and path-breaking work is that by Meguid (2005; 2008). The label ‘niche parties’ signals that these parties share enough characteristics that one umbrella term can be used to describe them. However, there is some disagreement as to what these shared characteristics are.

Table 1 Definitions of niche parties and nicheness

Source	Definition	Measurement
Meguid (2005, 2008)	(1) Niche parties reject the class-based orientation of politics. (2) The issues raised by niche parties are novel and do not coincide with existing lines of political division. (3) Niche parties limit their issue appeals.	Party family (Green, radical-right and ethno-regionalist)
Adams et al. (2006)	Extremist or non-centrist niche ideology	Party family (Communist, Green, radical-right)
Wagner (2012)	Niche parties compete primarily on a small number of non-economic issues.	Binary measure based on party manifestos and expert surveys
Meyer/Miller (2015)	Niche parties emphasize policy areas neglected by their competitors	Continuous measure based on party manifestos
Zons (2016)	Niche parties emphasize different issues than their competitors and talk about few issues.	Continuous measures based on party manifestos
Bischof (2017)	Niche parties predominantly compete on niche market segments neglected by their competitors, but do not discuss a broad range of these segments	Continuous measure based on party manifestos

The core meaning of ‘niche’ is that it is of limited appeal: interests and tastes are ‘niche’ if they are of interest to only a small section of the population. While for most people

the product or hobby is too eccentric or otherwise unappealing, some people love it. The equivalent for political parties is a focus on narrow topics that lie outside the core of party competition. This is essentially the approach of Meguid (2005; 2008) who defines niche parties based on three characteristics: they do not focus on traditional topics of party competition, specifically economic debates; they raise topics that do not match established dimensions of party competition; and they pursue a limited range of issue appeals.

Meguid's definition was modified and simplified in later work (Wagner 2012; Meyer and Miller 2015; Zons 2016; Bischof 2017). For instance, Wagner (2012) drops the requirement that the issues niche parties address fail to correlate with established dimensions of party competition as this is difficult to implement empirically, while Meyer and Miller (2015) additionally drop the requirement that niche parties fail to focus on economic topics in order to provide a more general measure of niche parties. Like Wagner (2012), Bischof (2017) argues that niche parties focus on a narrow range of niche market segments, while Zons (2016) focuses on 'programmatically concentration'. Related work by Greene (2016), not directly aimed at studying niche parties, focuses on issue diversity as its key measure. Hence, these later definitions focus in particular on the narrowness of parties' issue appeals, with niche parties essentially defined as emphasising some issues more than competitors. While these later definitions differ in several points, for example in their treatment of economic issues, they all base their definitions around the salience of issue appeals pursued by niche parties rather than on other characteristics such as their issue positions. This later research also tended to move away from using party family membership to decide which parties are niche competitors. Instead, it has classified niche parties based on widely available datasets on party positions and salience (see handbook chapters 38 and 40).

A second approach to understanding niche parties saw the common feature of the new challenger parties as less about the topics they addressed and more about the positions they

took. This second definition, used mainly by Adams et al. (2006), thus sees niche parties as ideologically extreme parties outside of the political mainstream (see also Ezrow 2008; Adams et al. 2012). Adams et al. (2006) apply this definition to Green, Communist and Radical Right parties. What united these parties is therefore their willingness to take positions far from the political centre. Note that the inclusion of Communist parties is the key difference to salience-based definitions of niche parties. As Communist parties emphasize economic topics, almost always a central feature of party competition, this party family is not characterized as niche by Meguid (2005; 2008) and related work.

Use of the second definition has been less widespread, perhaps because the niche-as-extremism definition is less succinct than simply focusing on ideological extremism directly, both theoretically and empirically. Moreover, Green parties are not particularly extreme in most party systems. Finally, researchers may have seen commonalities in terms of issue salience as more characteristic of niche parties than issue positions on a left-right scale. In other words, what unites the newcomers upsetting old patterns of party competition is not that they introduce extreme positions. After all, Communist parties, which took extreme positions on economic issues, had been important competitors in many party systems for several decades. Instead, it is the introduction of new issues that truly captured what was distinctive about this group of parties. In the rest of this paper, the definition based on Meguid will be used as the main definition of niche parties.

Can parties move in and out of being a niche party? In Meguid's and Adams et al.'s (2006) original formulation, niche parties were fixed, at least within the period they studied. However, later work generally allowed for time-specific classification. Most prominently, Meyer and Wagner (2013) show that switching between niche and mainstream profiles is frequent; in their sample, sixty-eight per cent of parties classified as a niche party in one

election switch to a mainstream profile in the subsequent one. As discussed below, the narrowness of a party's issue profile is in part a strategic choice.

Finally, niche parties are related to other party types. Most closely related are single-issue parties (e.g. Mudde 1999), a sub-type of niche parties that focus on one specific topic almost exclusively. Another related type of party is the issue entrepreneur (De Vries and Hobolt 2012; Hobolt and De Vries 2015). These parties actively try to mobilise new issues that were hitherto largely ignored by mainstream party competition or where mainstream parties hitherto took centrist positions. Niche parties frequently act as issue entrepreneurs in party competition, especially in their efforts to push party systems to focus on new issues. Niche parties also share features with challenger parties, which are usually defined as parties that have never been in government (de Vries and Hobolt 2012; Hobolt and De Vries 2020). Both niche and challenger parties are seen as opposing mainstream parties. The difference is that the niche-mainstream distinction is based on programmatic characteristics, while the challenger-mainstream distinction is based on the simple fact of never having governed. At least until recently, many or even most niche parties had never governed and were thus challenger parties. Challenger parties may also be more likely to choose niche strategies (Allen et al. 2017). However, long-standing niche parties have increasingly entered governments directly or tolerated minority governments in many European countries such as Austria, Germany or the Netherlands (Bischof et al. 2019; on the radical right, e.g. De Lange 2012; Twist 2019), so the overlap between the categories is declining.

Niche parties also share other characteristics, but these are not essential to their definition. Niche parties tend on average to have been founded more recently and to be more ideologically extreme than mainstream parties (Wagner 2012). They are also still less likely to be in government or have governed (Bischof et al. 2018). Finally, some niche parties may be more likely to be led by activists rather than a narrower cadre of elite politicians. For

instance, many radical-right parties are often dominated by a small group of leaders. Geert Wilders' party in the Netherlands is an extreme example of this. However, this is not a consistent characteristic of niche parties: the correlation between nicheness and activist influence is positive but very weak (Bischof and Wagner 2020: fn. 49). There is also little evidence that niche parties are particularly policy-seeking rather than office-seeking (Bischof and Wagner 2020: fn. 49). Finally, niche parties in non-European party systems may be different; for instance, in Latin America niche parties often focus on group representation rather than programmatic linkage (Kerneck and Wagner 2019).

Niche party aims and strategies

Niche parties are generally defined by the strong emphasis on their core issues, but they also tend to hold strong policy preferences on these issues. Their ultimate aim is therefore to achieve policy change in the area they focus on. Niche parties may be more single-minded than mainstream parties, which tend to follow a more 'catch-all' strategy, following the preferences of the median voter (Adams et al. 2006; Bischof and Wagner 2020).

There are two ways in which niche parties try to make it more likely that their political goals become reality: politicisation and contagion. Politicisation means that the topic becomes more important across the political system as a whole (Green-Pedersen and Otjes 2019) while also becoming more divisive and polarised (Hutter and Grande 2014). When niche parties manage to turn their main issue into a key debate, polarisation is an inherent consequence as niche parties tend to have distinctive positions on these issues.

Politicisation is useful to niche parties because they may be able to attract more voters if an issue becomes more important. Salience determines the weight of issues in citizens' calculus of voting. Given niche parties' distinctive position and frequent ownership of their issue, increased politicisation of their core topic may promise electoral success. Politicisation

may also be useful if this means that parties that share their policy goals actually address these topics. This will make it more likely that these issues then become part of government policy. In this way, politicisation is a key step that precedes policy change.

Contagion means that other parties take up the niche party's positions (van Spanje 2010). The aim is to make mainstream parties adopt the niche party's views. For example, one of UKIP's aims was to influence the Conservatives' position on the EU. Although UKIP never governed, its electoral success was one factor in leading the Conservatives to conduct a referendum on EU membership (Hobolt 2016). Similarly, one goal of Green and radical right parties is for mainstream parties to shift towards them.

Through politicisation and contagion niche parties can achieve their policy aims, even without governing themselves. This does not mean that niche parties do not seek power, even if some Green parties were initially reluctant to do so. After all, entering government will be the most straightforward way to implement their desired policies.

Beyond their overarching aim to increase issue politicisation, niche parties differ from mainstream parties in the other issue-based strategies they pursue. Niche parties thus tend to pay less attention to broader attitudes in the general public. Specifically, niche parties do not react to aggregate changes in public opinion, or more specifically to movement in the position of the median voter (Adams et al. 2006). More recent work by Bischof and Wagner (2020) confirms this using a direct measure of niche issue emphasis.

However, niche parties are nevertheless strategic actors. For instance, niche parties are more likely to respond to shifts among their own supporters (Ezrow et al. 2011; Ferland 2020; though see Romeijn 2020). Niche parties (specifically Greens) are responsive to their supporters in terms of the emphasis on the environment (Klüver and Spoon 2016). This pattern of response to supporters' preferences may come about because niche parties are more focused on their activists (though see Bischof and Wagner 2020).

There is also evidence that niche parties are responsive to external developments such as electoral prospects and competitors' campaigns. Niche parties moderate their positions in order to guarantee survival in parliament (Pereira 2020, though see Maeda 2016). Niche parties also respond to shifts of proximate parties, especially on their core issues (Tromborg 2015). Meyer and Wagner (2013) find that niche parties' decision to broaden their issue focus, thus becoming a more mainstream competitor, is often due to electoral setbacks. Niche parties are no different from other parties in that vote-seeking incentives can inspire changes in party behaviour (Somer-Topcu 2009). Green parties may reflect the variability in nicheness well, as they have recently broadened their profile to encompass other topics such as immigration or pro-European positions.

Mainstream party responses

So far, we have focused on niche parties and how they behave, but how do mainstream parties react to this electoral threat? In her enormously influential article, Meguid (2005) identified three mainstream party responses: dismissive, accommodative and adversarial strategies. First, dismissive strategies are present when mainstream parties try to ignore the niche party in the hope that it will then weaken on its own. For example, mainstream parties may try to reduce the salience of immigration by not addressing the topic. The aim is to reduce or keep low the importance of the topic among voters, while also signalling that the topic does not merit attention (Meguid 2005).

However, dismissive strategies might be quite difficult to pursue in practice. This may be because of the pressure of real-world events and of media attention, while the party system agenda as a whole also exerts pressure on all parties to address an issue. If mainstream parties do decide to take up the issues that niche parties raise, then they face two choices: they can

either take positions similar to those of the niche party, or they can take opposing stances. These are the accommodative and adversarial strategies.

Mainstream parties pursue accommodative strategies when they take up similar positions as the niche party on their issue: for example, a mainstream party may become critical of immigration in order to respond to the radical right. Van Spanje and de Graaf (2018) term this strategy ‘parroting’. The aim of an accommodative strategy is to weaken the niche party’s ownership of ‘their’ issue and steal their (potential) voters by taking up essentially the same position. Mainstream parties’ reputation for competence may be helpful in this goal (Meguid 2005), as may be niche parties’ low social acceptability (van Spanje and de Graaf 2018). Of course, accommodation in the pursuit of electoral success ironically helps niche parties achieve one of their strategic aims, namely contagion. Accommodation thus means that niche parties have managed to influence mainstream party positions, and in a direction they welcome.

Adversarial strategies denote the opposite response: mainstream parties take up a contrasting stance. For instance, a mainstream party may become more supportive of immigration in response to the radical right. The aim of this strategy is complex, as the mainstream party may in fact want to strengthen the niche party and its issue ownership in order to weaken a common rival (Meguid 2005). For example, a centre-right party could aim to strengthen a Green party to hurt the appeal of the Social Democrats. Hence, adversarial strategies make it more difficult for other mainstream parties to successfully pursue a dismissive strategy. In this way, mainstream parties may see politicisation as an opportunity, albeit risky, to weaken a mainstream rival.

Abou-Chadi (2016) finds that Green party success does not lead to increased mainstream party emphasis on the environment (though see Spoon et al. 2014). Similarly, Carter (2013) shows that there remains a large gap in the programmes of Green and

mainstream parties in terms of their emphasis on the environment. However, mainstream parties respond much more to radical-right parties by emphasising immigration (Abou-Chadi 2016; Wagner and Meyer 2017), to the extent that it may be hard to speak of immigration as a niche issue in today's context. Emphasis contagion also exists for other types of niche parties, for instance those that focus on feminist issues (Cowell-Meyers 2017).

One reason for the difference between mainstream party responses on environment and immigration may lie in the nature of the debate on these issues. The environment has a clear positive issue owner – Green parties – and the topic is largely discussed in so-called valence terms, with all parties largely agreeing on the goal to be achieved (Abou-Chadi 2016). In contrast, immigration lacks a clear issue owner and is characterized by a diversity of party positions. As a result, politicisation of the environment clearly benefits Green parties: if the issues is important to voters, these are likely to turn to the Greens as they 'own' the topic in the minds of many. The dynamic on the issue of immigration are quite different, with politicization less likely to benefit the radical right as parties take diverse positions on the issue and voters disagree on the correct policies to pursue. These patterns could explain why mainstream parties may try to avoid addressing the environment as much as possible, while being quite willing to talk about immigration (Abou-Chadi, 2016).

Accommodation is a frequent way that mainstream parties respond to the niche party challenge. Most research here concerns the radical right, with a key finding being that mainstream parties move to the right on immigration issues in response to the rise of the radical right (e.g. Bale et al. 2010; van Spanje 2010; Han 2015; Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016; Wagner and Meyer 2017; Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020). On the mainstream Left, accommodation is more conditional: they will emulate the radical right more if they suffer electoral setbacks or if voter opinion encourages this (Han 2015). In some countries, accommodation was limited by a more effective cordon sanitaire that prevented

parties from mainstreaming radical-right positions; in other words, political norms ostracizing extreme competitors proved more effective in some countries than in others. For instance, Swedish parties were slow to accommodate the radical-right Sweden Democrats, especially compared to their Nordic neighbours (Heinze 2018). In addition, responses to niche parties are stronger among opposition than among governing parties (van de Wardt 2015). Hence, many mainstream parties tend to pursue an accommodative stance, at least in reaction to radical-right success.

Explaining the electoral success of niche parties

When are niche parties electorally successful? Most centrally, it is essential that the issues these parties address are salient among the public (Lindstam 2019). Green parties benefit during tangible environmental disputes or when many voters have post-materialist values (Grant and Tilley 2019), while the importance of immigration is associated with radical right success (Dennison 2020). In related work, De Vries and Hobolt (2012) focus on issue entrepreneurs and find that this is an electorally successful strategy, at least for the issue of European integration. This applies in particular to challenger parties, which are parties that have never participated in a national government. It is perhaps this challenger status that helps to explain why niche parties also often attract protest voters, i.e. those who care less about the positions of the party they vote for than about punishing mainstream parties (Hong 2015). Further research indicates that niche parties may also benefit from economic crises (Hobolt and Tilley 2016), especially if mainstream parties converge on austerity positions (Hübscher et al. 2019; but see Grittersova et al. 2016).

Once niche parties emerge on the scene, can mainstream parties effectively respond to the niche threat by taking up their positions? Evidence for this is weak at best. Meguid (2005; 2008) found that mainstream party strategies do affect niche party success. Mainstream party

accommodation towards the Greens can be successful under certain conditions (Grant and Tilley 2019). However, more recent cross-national analyses fail to identify electoral benefits of accommodation, particularly as concerns the radical right (Krause et al. 2020). Mainstream party accommodation on immigration and European integration instead appears often to help the radical right (e.g. Meijers and Williams 2020). This may apply in particular to accommodation by the mainstream left (Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2020; Down and Han 2020; but see Spoon and Klüver 2020). However, some research is more positive on the prospects of accommodation to reduce radical-right support (van Spanje and de Graaf 2018; Hjorth and Vinaes Larsen forthcoming), while Pardos-Prado's (2015) careful, complex analysis highlights that the effectiveness of mainstream right strategies may depend on how immigration is integrated into the core dimensions of party competition.

Importantly, the electoral success of niche party strategies as well as mainstream party strategies to contain them may vary over time. Young niche parties may be combated more effectively than more established niche parties. Thus, Hino's (2012) analysis of challenger parties shows that these are more successful when their core topics are disregarded by mainstream parties, especially just after the emergence of these parties. Similarly, Zons (2016) shows that narrow issue profiles are helpful when these parties have recently entered the electoral arena, but the advantages of these narrow profiles erode as these parties age. Finally, mainstream parties can undermine Green parties through accommodative strategies only when these are young (Grant and Tilley 2019). These over-time dynamics may explain why Meguid's (2005; 2008) findings do not hold as strongly anymore.

Niche parties also vary in their strategies, particularly how narrowly they pitch their appeal and how moderately they position themselves. Evidence that these decisions matter is varied. Thus, Bergman and Flatt (2020) show that radical-right parties gain votes by broadening their issue appeal, while Green parties do not. Like Abou-Chadi (2016), these

findings indicate that the dynamics of niche-mainstream competition is not uniform.

Concerning positioning, niche parties do not appear to benefit from moderation, unlike mainstream parties (Adams et al. 2006, Ezrow 2008).

Some work also considers the electoral venues in which niche parties can achieve success most easily. Specifically, contests at the regional level (Farrer 2015) and EU level (Schulte-Cloos 2018) may foster niche party success, allowing them to establish themselves as national competitors.

A distinct question is when niche parties manage to enter government. De Lange (2012) addresses this topic by examining radical-right incorporation in governments. She shows that standard theories of coalition formation can straightforwardly explain why mainstream right parties chose to include radical-right parties in their coalitions. Research on Green parties indicate that they are most likely to enter governments if the mainstream left is the formateur (Dumont and Bäck 2006), though there have also been several examples of Green coalitions with moderate right parties at the regional or national level in Austria, Finland, Germany and Ireland. Some research also studies regionalist parties (e.g. Tronconi 2015). General research on niche party inclusion in government is so far lacking (but see Bischof et al., 2018). We also know little about how government participation affects the issue profile of niche parties (though see Greene 2016).

Conclusions and Avenues for future research

The term ‘niche party’ is relatively recent, but in the fifteen or so years since its invention there has been a broad range of research studying their strategies and electoral success. It is undeniable that niche parties have a wide-ranging influence on party competition and party systems. Since Meguid (2005), a key focus has also been on the systemic effect of niche parties, specifically on how niche parties shape mainstream party programmes and strategies.

The political effect of niche parties thus often goes beyond their vote share or their immediate government participation. The best example of this is the effect of the radical right on mainstream parties on the right and, to a lesser extent, on the left. It is perhaps ironic that there is not much evidence that these mainstream party reactions are at all effective in achieving their goal of reducing the niche party threat.

Research on niche and mainstream parties suffers from three shortcomings that are also potential pathways for future innovation. First, the niche/mainstream distinction is just one way in which parties differ. As discussed above, parties also differ in their ideological positions, their political goals and their internal organisation (see, e.g., Bischof and Wagner 2020). These characteristics also determine party strategies and the reactions of other parties. Future research should do better in examining how being a niche competitor has an impact distinct from being, say, policy-oriented, activist-led and ideologically non-centrist. Bischof and Wagner (2020) made a first attempt, but more needs to be done to isolate the effects of different party characteristics.

Second, the literature on party competition should move towards greater methodological innovation. There are limits to what we can extract from election-level data from European countries and with programmatic data from party manifestos or expert surveys. This is mainly due to the low number of observations this produces, for instance limiting our ability to track over-time changes in rhetoric. On the one hand, we could expand the range of cases we study, so researchers could try harder to examine niche-mainstream competition outside the usual cases, such as in Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America (Kerneck and Wagner 2019) or Asia. In addition, we could expand the range of data we study, for example by examining party press releases (e.g. Klüver and Sagarzazu 2016) and turning towards more fine-grained analyses of how parties engage with each other. We could move towards methods more strongly oriented towards establishing causality, either by using

survey experiments (e.g. Hjorth and Vinaes Larsen forthcoming) or causal inference methods (e.g. Abou-Chadi and Krause 2018).

Finally, it is important to re-evaluate the need and usefulness of the niche-mainstream distinction altogether. Parties once treated as niche are now electorally successful in many European countries, while some of their traditional mainstream parties are in some places close to irrelevance. On the German and French Left, the mainstream Social Democrats can hardly claim to be significantly stronger than the Greens, and such developments are common in many countries. More importantly, the concerns that niche parties address – most prominently immigration and the environment – are by no means ‘niche’ topics in many countries. It would be interesting to know how time-variant measures of nicheness such as Meyer and Miller (2015) characterise party system changes in the last decade. In any case, it is becoming increasingly hard to treat parties focusing on immigration and the environment as somehow removed from ‘normal’ party competition.

Instead of the niche-mainstream competition, we have now moved towards a competitive context where multidimensionality is the norm and large mainstream parties are either in decline or under permanent threat (Hobolt and De Vries 2020). Perhaps a more accurate approach to studying contemporary politics would be to abandon programmatic categories in favour of specific measurement of the salience and position of parties on key dimensions. Instead of niche-mainstream, the key distinction is then which dimension a party prioritises. A rallying cry could then be: The era of niche parties is dead, long live the era of multidimensional party competition.

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