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# Who emphasizes and who blurs? Party strategies in multidimensional competition

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## Abstract

Most studies of party competition consider the presentation of ambiguous positions a costly strategy. This literature, however, does not study party strategies in multiple issue dimensions. Yet multidimensionality may play an important role in parties' strategic calculus. Although it may be rational for a party to emphasize a certain issue dimension, it may be equally rational to disguise its stance on other dimensions by blurring its position. This article argues that parties employ strategies of issue emphasis and position blurring in various dimensional contexts. Who emphasizes and who blurs thus depends on the actors' relative stakes in different issue dimensions. The paper makes its case by performing cross-sectional analyses of 132 political parties in 14 West European party systems using Comparative Manifesto Project data, the 2006 Chapel Hill expert survey and the 2009 European Election Study.

## Keywords

ambiguity, dimensionality, obfuscation, party competition, party strategy

## Introduction

The literature on party competition extensively considers how various parties choose their political issues and issue positions, and how adopting ambiguous issue positions is predominantly a costly strategy. However, it rarely studies party strategies in reference to multiple issue dimensions. Yet, multidimensionality likely plays an important role in parties' strategic calculus. Although it may be rational for a party to emphasize a certain issue dimension and unequivocally

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advertise its position on it, it may be equally rational and rewarding to disguise its stance on another dimension by blurring its position. Political strategy thus may not only differ across parties, it may also differ across issue dimensions. Who emphasizes issue positions and who blurs them may thus crucially depend on the dimensional context.

This article contributes to this special issue by addressing the internal logics of party strategies in multiple issue dimensions, following the deductive methodological approach and the strategic theoretical approach to dimensionality (De Vries and Marks, 2012). It argues that party strategies are determined by a party's attachment to political issues, which implies that different political parties have varying interests in issue dimensions. Consequently, parties employ the strategies of *issue emphasis* and *position blurring* in various dimensional contexts.

The study operationalizes dimensional attachment as a function of distance from the centre of a given dimension. Outlying parties are expected to be more invested in the issues they stand out on. Inversely, parties blur issues that are secondary to them, that is, on which they do not hold outlying positions. The article thus explains issue emphasis and position blurring by the relative dimensional positions parties hold. By analysing the logical association between parties' issue positioning, issue salience, and positional ambiguity, this work stands at the theoretical crossroads between spatial theory, issue salience, and the directional theory of voting.

Additionally, this article engages the 'obfuscation' literature, studied mainly in the context of US politics, which argues that ambiguous issue positioning is a costly strategy. The article demonstrates that, in multidimensional competition, position blurring may be beneficial. In doing so, this study complements the ongoing work on niche parties by highlighting that who emphasizes and who blurs does not depend on the party family, but rather on partisan interest in various issue dimensions.

The article makes its case by performing cross-sectional analyses of 132 political parties in 14 West European party systems on three major issue dimensions: economic issues, non-economic or social issues, and the issue of European integration. It utilizes data from the Comparative Manifesto Project, the 2006 Chapel Hill expert survey and the 2009 European Election Study. The findings suggest that political parties that stand further from the centre of a particular dimension tend to emphasize that dimension. Furthermore, parties engage in position blurring on secondary dimensions where they do not hold outlying positions, which allows them to attract broader voter coalitions on these issues.

## **Party strategies in a multidimensional context**

The most broadly analysed party strategy is *position taking*, formalized by spatial theory (Hotelling, 1929; Downs, 1957). Parties respond to voters' preferences and position themselves on continuous issue scales, simplified into issue dimensions. Originally, spatial theory conceptualized party competition along one dimension.

Later models have relaxed the assumption of unidimensionality; their aim, however, was only to test whether and under what conditions equilibrium solutions hold in multiple dimensions (Chappell and Keech, 1986; Enelow and Hinich, 1989; McKelvey, 1976; Schofield, 1993). For spatial theory, the dimensional structure and the salience of the various dimensions are an assumed context within which competition occurs. Consequently, the spatial tradition sees competition as a contest over party positioning with respect to voters, who minimize the aggregate distance between themselves and the party they vote for in an  $n$ -dimensional space.

Some parties, however, may have an advantage or be more competent on some political issues than others, and consequently seek to shift the political focus toward their strengths. Issue ownership theory and salience theory suggest that parties do not merely respond to voter preferences, but that they affect vote choice through their actions in political campaigns (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Budge et al., 1987; Petrocik, 1996). Another party strategy is thus to increase the salience of those political issues on which a party holds an advantageous position, or on which it has better credentials. Inversely, parties ignore or try to mute those issues that do not benefit them.

This is consistent with the spatial theory of voting. By emphasizing one issue over others, political parties increase the dominance of one dimension over others, making the spatial distances on this dimension more important determinants of vote choice.<sup>1</sup> This is very much in line with Riker's *heresthetics* where parties tactically shift dimensional salience to issue scales on which they attract a greater proportion of voters (1986).

The logical corollary to position taking is position avoiding, or *position blurring*. Position blurring is understood here as the deliberate misrepresentation of party positions on the part of party leaders. Rather than taking a clear position on an issue, parties may take vaguely broad positions on this issue, or present a mixture of positions. Position blurring has received considerable attention in the US politics literature under the label of 'obfuscation' or 'ambiguity'.<sup>2</sup> However, this literature studies exclusively unidimensional contexts, common to formal theories simplifying the political world to one theoretical dimension.

In the unidimensional context of US politics, the strategy of position blurring or obfuscation has been seen as disadvantageous to political parties or candidates. The literature generally agrees with Alvarez that 'the more uncertain a voter is about candidate positions, the less likely she is to support the candidate' (1998: 204). Consequently, the winning strategy is to clarify issue positions.

Earlier works conclude similarly on both formal and empirical grounds. Shepsle (1972) demonstrates that ambiguity decreases the appeal of a candidate. An equivocal candidate is disadvantaged, as long as at least a majority of voters is risk averse. Similarly, Enelow and Hinich (1981) develop a formal model showing that voters move away from the position where there is greater positional variance (that is, where there is uncertainty). Bartels (1986) empirically applies the Enelow and Hinich model, illustrating that voter uncertainty is detrimental to candidates and that this effect is comparable to the effect of issue distance between voters and the

candidate. Gill (2005) reports similar findings using a different measure of uncertainty. This suggests that position blurring may deter voters as acutely as does spatial distance.

Moreover, the ‘obfuscation’ literature frequently presents position blurring as primarily a structural factor. Alvarez stresses that uncertainty varies across candidates as a function of incumbency, previous experience, and national prominence, and that uncertainty generally diminishes across the course of campaigns in response to issue and substantive information (1998: 204). This suggests that uncertainty is a candidate characteristic rather than a strategy. It is less a subject of candidate or party agency, but rather an exogenous context that can change only slowly and almost independently from the candidate or the party. An alternate view is that of Franklin (1991), who underlines how political institutions are insufficient tools in providing clear messages to the electorate. He finds that candidates can affect the clarity of their perceived positions through their campaign strategies. Clarity, nonetheless, remains the strategic aim.

In the US context, analysts logically consider candidate rather than party strategies. Theoretically, however, either agent can engage in position blurring. Candidates, as well as parties, may choose to strategically blur their stance on certain issues. Moreover, deliberate position blurring may be even easier for individual candidates than for political parties, since many of the parties have extensive histories and established records – often beyond an individual’s lifetime.

On the other hand, political parties may consist of internal factions that hold somewhat different positions on the same issue. Position blurring, understood here as the deliberate misrepresentation of party positions on some dimensions, is conceptually distinct from intra-party dissent. An ambiguous party position may, however, result from multiple party stances presented by internally divided parties. Unlike position blurring, vagueness caused by intra-party divisions and backbench dissent is clearly costly to political parties (Cox and McCubbins, 2007; Kam, 2009). This article thus concentrates on party leaderships and their strategies over various political issues.

The party strategic literature has underemphasized that political competition is not merely a struggle over where a party stands. Once issue salience is taken into account, political competition becomes a contest over which issues prevail in political discourse and voter decision-making. The works of Schattschneider (1960), Carmines and Stimson (1989), and Stimson (2004) highlight the importance of considering the dimensional structure of political competition when studying party strategies (see also Stimson et al., 2012). The authors demonstrate that the structure of political competition is itself the subject of political strategizing. Parties do not merely respond to voter preference distributions. They shape the importance of these distributions by emphasizing or muting various political topics. They reshape political competition by raising new political issues that do not neatly fold into the standing dimensional structure, thereby creating new dimensions of competition (see also De Vries and Hobolt, 2012, for a similar argumentation). Once party strategies are considered in this dimensional context – in the context of party

competition played out over a number of issue dimensions that may be independent – the strategy of issue emphasis becomes crucial and the strategy of position blurring becomes viable.

## Who emphasizes and who blurs?

The core argument of this study is that, given their histories, constituencies, ideological outlooks, and varying institutional entrenchments, political parties are invested in a limited number of political issues. This ideological investment importantly determines party strategy. On the one hand, parties that hold outlying positions on certain issue dimensions are expected to *emphasize* these issues over others. On the other hand, parties are expected to de-emphasize and strategically *blur* their position on issue dimensions that are somehow detrimental to them, on which they do not take outstanding positions. This section outlines the logic of issue emphasis and position blurring in detail, and generates hypotheses that are tested in the subsequent sections of the article.

Political parties primarily invest in issues that lie at the core of their identity. These issues traditionally define and unite the party's main support base and tend to be the issues on which the party is viewed as competent. Conversely, parties may be uninterested in or disadvantaged on other issue dimensions. This is either because they have poor reputation on these issues; they hold unpopular positions; they are crowded out by other proximate parties on these issues; or their core constituencies are divided over them.

This varied investment in issue dimensions consequently determines party strategies. Political parties seek to shift political competition to their preferred issue dimensions. This is achieved by taking outlying positions on these issues and by *emphasizing* them over others. To attract attention to their preferred issue dimension, parties increase the salience of the relevant issues by presenting them as crucial in their documents, speeches, public meetings, and debates. To further highlight these issues, parties take outlying positions on them. Outlying positions are more distinguishable and capture attention, making the issue more prominent and the party more visible.

In contrast, parties aim to downplay those issue dimensions that are somehow detrimental to them. They first achieve this by de-emphasizing these issues – not mentioning them in party manifestos, policy papers, leaders' speeches, etc. Many issues, however, cannot be simply avoided. The political debate, voter concerns, or media interest may induce a party to engage with a troublesome issue and present some position on it (for additional discussion, see Steenbergen and Scott, 2004). This leads parties to a second positional strategy aiming to mitigate the effects of undesired political issues.

This positional strategy is *position blurring*, which strives to present vaguely broad or multiple party positions on an issue dimension. The goal of the strategy is to misrepresent the distance between the party and its potential voters on the critical dimension. By providing a blurred stance, a party may more easily adjust its

political message to varied audiences or different segments of the electorate. This is particularly crucial when a party's constituencies are connected by their common preferences on one issue dimension but divided over another. In such cases, the party is especially hard pressed to amalgamate the disparate views on the latter dimension, and position blurring provides a useful tool for accomplishing this.

In multidimensional competition it may thus be beneficial for parties to emphasize their positions on their preferred dimensions while blurring their stances on those issue dimensions that do not figure prominently in their ideological profiles. Although a vague or duplicitous position on a dimension is unlikely to attract voters, it allows parties to collect broader voter followings and not deter potential supporters. This is often crucial on secondary issue dimensions where parties face divided constituencies or where they stand to benefit from combining disparate voter support. The following hypothetical example underlines the logic of issue emphasis and position blurring:

Consider a political party that ideologically invests in an outlying position on issue dimension A. Assume further that this party does not invest in dimension B – because either dimension B does not play a role in its ideological profile; it has poor reputation on dimension B; or its constituency is divided over dimension B. The party will logically emphasize issue dimension A. However, on dimension B the party faces a dilemma. If it adopts and communicates a position on this dimension, it risks increasing the salience of issue dimension B, and faces potential defection by those voters who find themselves a long way from the party's position. A rational strategy for this party is thus to compete on issue dimension A with an unambiguous and emphasized position. Simultaneously, it is rational for the party to mute issues connected with dimension B, while blurring its position on them. Consequently, the party will attract voters who are close to its position on dimension A. However, owing to its blurred position on dimension B, the party has a better chance of receiving support from (or not deterring) voters on dimension B. Ultimately the party is supported by voters who are close to its position on dimension A, *regardless of their position on dimension B*.

This is a rather different conclusion from that of the 'obfuscation' literature. Shepsle (1972: 567), searching for the conditions under which position ambiguity is advantageous, finds that deliberate position blurring may be a winning strategy only when the majority of voters are risk-acceptant and possess strong preferences on an issue, thus rendering it 'critical'. My argument, which considers multidimensional competition, is the opposite. The strategy of position blurring is adopted on those dimensions that are less salient to a given party.

This argument is sensitive to varying party behaviour on different political issues. By studying salience and positioning on different issue dimensions, it accommodates the possibility that parties use different competitive logics on different issues. The argument suggests that parties may combine ideological politics on one set of issues with strategic positioning (or rather positional avoidance) on dimensions that are not central to their ideological profile. Consequently, parties may ideologically assume outlying positions on some dimensions, while



simultaneously trying to attract broad electoral support through pragmatic position blurring on dimensions they do not care so much about.<sup>3</sup>

By theorizing a connection between issue positioning and issue salience, my argument presents a middle ground between spatial and directional theory. In their seminal article introducing directional theory, Rabinowitz and Macdonald (1989) stress the idea that political actors emphasize a set of issues by taking 'intense' positions on them:

By taking clear, strong stands, candidates [or parties] can make an issue central to judgments about themselves. At the same time candidates [or parties] who can successfully evade an issue are able to make that issue far less relevant for judgments about themselves. Thus in a multiissue election candidates [or parties] are likely to be intense on issues that benefit them and silent on issues that are potentially damaging. (Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989: 98–9)

This article understands 'intensity' in the sense of both salience and outlying positioning. A 'clear, strong stance' on the part of a political actor is understood to entail a strong emphasis on the issue, together with taking a distinctive position away from the centre of the issue. As suggested by Rabinowitz and Macdonald, the aim of issue 'intensity' is political visibility. Parties that particularly invest in certain issues take outlying positions on these issues relative to other parties and to their own position on other issues. Of course, taking extreme positions entails the potential costs of deterring moderate voters on these issues. In this sense, parties face a trade-off between visibility and acceptability (see Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989: 108). As a result, parties are extreme on only some issues and not on others.

Consequently, parties adopting extreme positions on one dimension are likely to prefer competing on this dimension. Historically or ideologically they have invested in this dimension and thus are likely to emphasize the political issues associated with it. On the other hand, these parties tend to find other dimensions less useful for their competitive aims and are thus prompted to de-emphasize them and blur their position on them. This leads to two hypotheses:

**H1:** Parties that hold extreme views on one dimension are more likely to emphasize their views on that dimension and to de-emphasize their views on other dimensions.

**H2:** Parties that hold extreme views on one dimension are more likely to present a clear position on this dimension and to blur their position on other dimensions.

Put another way, the more extreme a party's placement on a given dimension, the more likely it is to emphasize this dimension, and the less likely it is to blur its position on it. These hypotheses consequently point to a curvilinear relationship between position and issue salience on the one hand, and position blurring on the other.

Historical or ideological investment in different issues, however, is not the only determinant of a party's tactics. Participation in government is an important conditioning factor in party strategy as well. First, parties that have been in government become somewhat constrained in their strategic employment of salience and blurring. While in office, their representatives are likely to take positions on many issues, and these positions are more visible owing to their governmental profile. This establishes a clearer positional reputation of the party, and blurring becomes a futile strategy. The strategy of de-emphasizing and blurring economic issues is likely to be particularly limited by government participation. Economic issues tend to be the dominant concerns of mainstream party competition (see Lipset and Rokkan, 1967), and every government becomes responsible for concrete economic decisions. Second, parties that aspire to join government coalitions are likely to be circumscribed in their capacity to emphasize uncommon – usually non-economic – issues that risk driving a wedge between the coalition partners (see also De Vries and Hobolt, 2012). In short, government participation shifts issue salience toward economic, rather than non-economic, issues:

**H3:** Government participation increases party emphasis on economic issues and decreases party emphasis on non-economic issues.

Finally, voters are likely to be responsive to parties' dimensional strategies. According to the argument presented here, parties take outlying positions and emphasize a given issue dimension in order to induce voters to consider this dimension when voting. Inversely, parties de-emphasize and blur their positions on other dimensions in order to make these dimensions less relevant in voters' electoral calculus, thus inviting broader support on them. Although it is unclear whether voters respond to parties or parties respond to voters, I expect an association between party strategies and voter support:

**H4:** Parties holding outlying positions on a dimension are likely to receive electoral support from voters who consider this dimension (but not other dimensions) in their electoral calculus.

**H5:** Voters supporting parties that blur one dimension significantly more than others have more dispersed positions on the blurred dimension than do voters for parties that do not blur.

Various kinds of parties may employ the strategies of salience and blurring, according to their relative dimensional stakes. This theoretical account does not rely on any party typology. It simply sees party strategies as a function of dimensional investment, where a clear indicator of preferring a dimension is holding an intense, visible position away from the centre. This argument complements the literature on issue entrepreneurship discussed by De Vries and Hobolt (2012). Issue entrepreneurs, who tend to emphasize and take outstanding positions on

the issues they champion, are expected to de-emphasize and blur their positions on mainstream issues.

On the other hand, this argument contrasts with the niche party literature. This literature suggests that electorally small, marginal parties pursue different strategies than do larger mainstream parties by seeking to highlight new or resuscitated political issues (Meguid, 2005, 2008; Rovny and Edwards, 2012). Although this literature provides a theoretical definition of niche parties, it invariably operationalizes them as radical right, green, radical left and, occasionally, ethnic and regional parties (Adams et al., 2006; Ezrow, 2008; Meguid, 2005, 2008; Rovny and Edwards, 2012). This combines parties that are likely to differ significantly in their dimensional outlooks and consequently in their strategies, and simultaneously omits other parties equally likely to attempt to shift political salience to their preferred issue dimensions while blurring their positions on other dimensions. The niche party literature, concentrating on electorally marginal parties, in effect provides an alternative explanation, suggesting that issue salience and position blurring are a function of party size. Party size is thus a relevant control variable in this analysis.

Electoral systems are another important control variable, because their rules aid or hinder minor competitors in gaining representation. Furthermore, Kam (2009), studying Westminster-style democracies, demonstrates that the incentives for back-bench members of parliament to dissent from their party and cater to constituency-specific interests are closely associated with majoritarian electoral systems (Kam, 2009: 22). Controlling for electoral system thus provides a partial and indirect control for intra-party dissent. Finally, I use average issue salience at the country level to control for system-specific characteristics.

## Data and measurement

To test the above hypotheses, I conduct a cross-sectional study of West European party systems in the 2000s. The ideal data set for testing the above theory is the 2006 Chapel Hill expert survey (CHES), which measures party positions on economic issues, on non-economic or social issues, and on European integration (Hooghe et al., 2010). The data set covers 132 political parties in 14 West European countries: Austria, Belgium, Britain, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden. To assess the relationship between party strategies and voter considerations on different issue dimensions, I use the 2009 European Election Study, which provides information on voter preferences on a number of political issues.

I follow the recommendations of Benoit and Laver (2012) by conducting my analyses using three deductively derived issue dimensions. These dimensions are (1) the economic dimension, (2) the non-economic/social dimension,<sup>4</sup> and (3) European integration. As many scholars attest, these dimensions capture core political conflicts in Western Europe (Hooghe et al., 2002; Kitschelt, 1992, 1994, 2004; Kriesi et al., 2008; Laver and Hunt, 1992; Marks et al., 2006; Stoll, 2010).

Although these dimensions do not exhaust the complex concerns faced by advanced industrial societies, they are sufficient to capture the strategic dynamics of issue emphasis and position blurring.

The measure of economic and non-economic issue salience is taken from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) data set, which codes quasi-sentences of party manifestos as belonging to one of 56 issue categories (Budge et al., 2001; Volkens et al., 2011). The salience of an issue dimension is thus measured as the sum of proportions of quasi-sentences pertaining to issues belonging to the given dimension. For details on which issues are considered a part of which dimension, please see Table A5 in web appendix 5. The measure of EU salience is taken from the CHES data set, where it is measured with a direct question on a four-point scale.<sup>5</sup>

The concept which is most difficult to operationalize is position blurring. Lacking a direct measure, I assess this concept using the standard deviation (SD) of expert judgement on party placement. The measure takes advantage of the CHES data set, which provides measures both on expert positioning of political parties on different issues and issue dimensions, and also on expert uncertainty over this positioning in the form of expert standard deviations.

It is important to note that the CHES data explicitly ask about the positioning of *party leadership*. The experts are led to consider the apex of party organization and not the party as a whole. Consequently, the standard deviations of expert placement of parties reflect expert uncertainty over the leadership positions, rather than uncertainty over the positions of the entire party, which may reflect backbench defections. Table A4 in web appendix 5 summarizes party positions and expert standard deviations on their placement on all three dimensions.

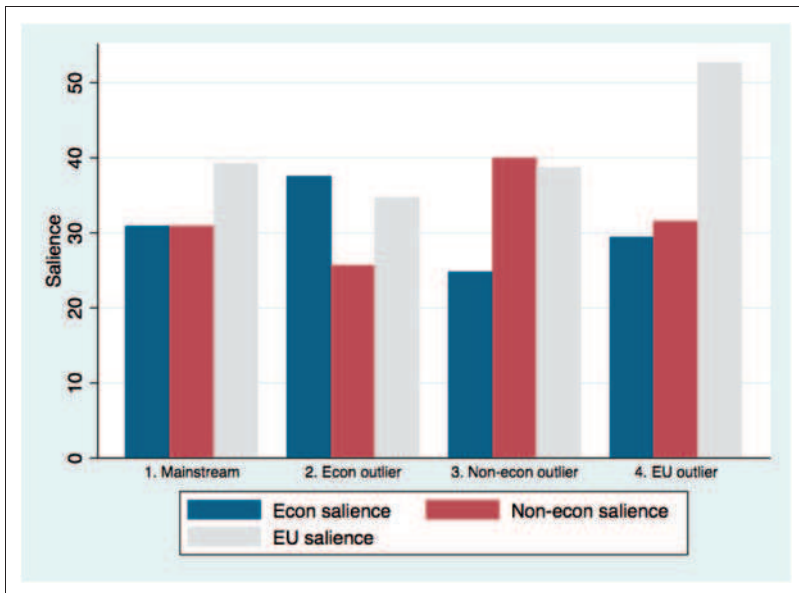
This operationalization is imperfect in that expert standard deviations capture more than position blurring. First, expert standard deviations tap expert (lack of) knowledge of certain parties. This lack of knowledge is likely to be related to party vote share, since experts have better knowledge of the positions of large parties (Marks et al., 2007). If this were the case, small parties should receive uniformly higher scores on blurring. Consequently, the statistical models control for party vote share. Expert lack of knowledge is also likely to be related to the salience of the dimension evaluated, because experts tend to have better knowledge of the positions of parties on highly salient dimensions. To alleviate this concern, the statistical models control for the salience at the party system level of the evaluated issue dimension. Second, expert standard deviations may also capture dissent among party leaders. Where party leadership is divided, a party may project multiple positions and experts may thus disagree on its placement. In order to address this alternative explanation, the statistical models control for internal dissent. Unfortunately, the CHES data set includes a measure on party dissent only for the European integration dimension and not for the other two dimensions. Web appendix 1 addresses the connection between expert standard deviations and dissent in greater detail, presenting analyses highlighting the appropriateness of using expert standard deviations as a measure of position blurring.

## Analysis and results

The theoretical framework stresses that the use of particular strategies depends primarily on party placement. Parties farther from the centre of a dimension tend to emphasize this dimension, while blurring their position on the others.

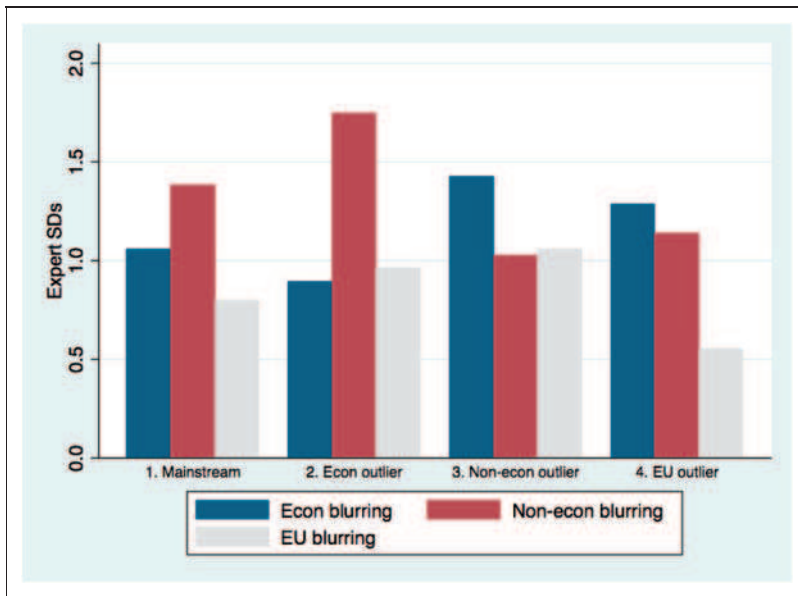
Figures 1 and 2 present descriptive statistics concerning issue emphasis and position blurring depending on the dimensional position of parties.<sup>6</sup> Figure 1 shows the extent to which parties emphasize economic, non-economic, and European issues. As expected, economic outliers concentrate on economic issues, non-economic outliers overemphasize non-economic and EU issues, and EU outliers greatly stress EU issues. Similarly, Figure 2 demonstrates position blurring, supporting my theoretical claims. Economic outliers tend to extensively blur their non-economic positions, and non-economic outliers blur their economic stances. Outliers on EU integration slightly blur the other two dimensions while presenting very clear positions on the EU.

Turning from descriptive to inferential statistical analysis, Table 1 presents six OLS regression models assessing party strategies of issue salience and position



**Figure 1.** Issue salience.

Notes: Outlier parties are the most extremely placed 30 percent of parties on each dimension (15 percent on each end) that simultaneously are not outliers on the other dimensions. Mainstream parties are those that do not stand out on any dimension. Economic and non-economic salience are measured as the proportion of quasi-sentences in party manifestos (CMP data). EU salience is measured by CHES 2006, transformed to range 0 to 100.



**Figure 2.** Position blurring.

Note: Outliers are the most extremely placed 30 percent of parties on each dimension (15 percent on each end) that simultaneously are not outliers on the other dimensions. Mainstream parties are those that do not stand out on any dimension. Source: CHES 2006.

blurring. It uses combined party-level data from the CHES and CMP data sets. The first three models predict position blurring on the three dimensions, measured as standard deviations of expert placements in the CHES data set. The last three models predict the salience of the three issue dimensions. The issue salience of economic and non-economic issues is measured as the proportion of quasi-sentences in party manifestos from the CMP data set, while the issue salience of the EU is measured with a direct question in CHES 2006. All models use robust standard errors clustered by country in order to account for the clustering of parties within national party systems.

The theory suggests that issue salience and position blurring are a curvilinear function of party positioning. Consequently, the key predictors in the models are position and position-squared on each dimension, as measured by CHES 2006. Furthermore, government participation is measured as the number of months a party spent in government since 1990. The rationale behind this measure is to capture not just temporary presence in government in 2006, but rather the party's characteristic of being a major party or a governing coalition partner with the routine aim and expectation of entering government. Vote percentage measures the vote share that each party received in the most recent election prior to 2006. Average electoral district magnitude is an institutional variable capturing the proportionality of the electoral system. The measure is taken from Johnson and

Wallack (2007). Finally, to control for the salience levels of each dimension, average party system salience – measured as the average salience of the given dimension in each party system – is included in the models. In addition, the models predicting EU salience and blurring further control for intra-party dissent on the EU, as measured by a direct question in CHES 2006.

The results presented in Table 1 support my theoretical expectations. To better illustrate the major findings, Figure 3 summarizes some key results graphically. The top three panels of Figure 3 depict the effect of issue positioning on position blurring, while other predictors are held at their means. The first panel demonstrates that economic position blurring is increasingly performed by parties positioned at the extremes of the non-economic dimension, whereas parties at the extremes of the economic dimension present clearer economic positions. The opposite is true for non-economic position blurring. Panel 2 of Figure 3 shows that non-economic position blurring is enacted by parties standing at the extremes of the economic dimension, whereas parties at the extremes of the non-economic dimension present clear positions on it. Finally, as seen in panel 3 of Figure 3, non-economic outliers blur their EU positions, whereas outliers on the EU present clear positions. Given the possible collinearity between the predictors, web appendix 3 presents further statistical tests supporting the discussed relationships.

These results demonstrate that expert confidence about party placement – including the placement of small, fringe parties – differs across dimensions. First, the models control for vote share. Second, experts demonstrate *greater* certainty about the economic positions of economic fringe parties and about the non-economic positions of non-economic fringe parties. Simultaneously, they are significantly *less* certain about the economic positions of the non-economic outliers, as well as about the non-economic positions of economic outliers. This discrepancy cannot be simply attributed to expert lack of knowledge about small or fringe parties (Marks et al., 2007). Similarly, these results remain significant when controlling for mean national economic, non-economic, and EU salience, as well as intra-party dissent on the EU.<sup>7</sup> This suggests that the dependent variables of expert uncertainty do not merely tap expert (lack of) knowledge but also reflect party strategies on different dimensions. Party strategizing – position blurring – is considerably reflected in expert placement standard deviations.

A concern may be that the cohesive placement of extreme parties, and dispersed placement of centrist parties, is a function of the expert survey methodology. Web appendix 2 provides evidence on the effect of the bounded nature of the dimensional scales, indicating that the results are a product of the theory rather than the method.

Another strategy that political parties employ is issue salience. The bottom three panels of Figure 3 illustrate the effects of issue position on issue salience, while other predictors are held at their means. As expected, parties on the fringes of the economic dimension emphasize economic issues, whereas outliers on non-economic issues tend to de-emphasize economic issues (panel 4). In contrast, parties at the extremes of the non-economic dimension tend to emphasize non-economic issues,

**Table 1.** Regression analysis of party strategies

|                                    | (1)                  | (2)                   | (3)                  | (4)                 | (5)                   | (6)                  |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
|                                    | Economic blurring    | Non-economic blurring | EU blurring          | Economic salience   | Non-economic salience | EU salience          |
| Economic position                  | 0.539***<br>(0.101)  | -0.183<br>(0.143)     | 0.052<br>(0.078)     | -5.918**<br>(2.027) | 6.397***<br>(2.116)   | 0.071<br>(0.082)     |
| Economic position <sup>2</sup>     | -0.052***<br>(0.009) | 0.024*<br>(0.012)     | -0.007<br>(0.007)    | 0.537**<br>(0.214)  | -0.628**<br>(0.213)   | -0.003<br>(0.007)    |
| Non-economic position              | -0.184**<br>(0.077)  | 0.508***<br>(0.119)   | -0.157**<br>(0.069)  | 5.919**<br>(2.057)  | -5.345***<br>(1.140)  | -0.151*<br>(0.075)   |
| Non-economic position <sup>2</sup> | 0.019*<br>(0.009)    | -0.052***<br>(0.010)  | 0.014*<br>(0.007)    | -0.562**<br>(0.204) | 0.498***<br>(0.112)   | 0.009<br>(0.007)     |
| EU position                        | -0.124<br>(0.116)    | -0.290<br>(0.201)     | 0.878***<br>(0.066)  | 4.124<br>(2.814)    | -1.874<br>(1.514)     | -0.845***<br>(0.182) |
| EU position <sup>2</sup>           | 0.002<br>(0.016)     | 0.023<br>(0.022)      | -0.112***<br>(0.010) | -0.355<br>(0.332)   | 0.076<br>(0.150)      | 0.097***<br>(0.023)  |
| Vote percentage                    | -0.001               | -0.009                | -0.001               | -0.006              | -0.052                | 0.004                |

(continued)

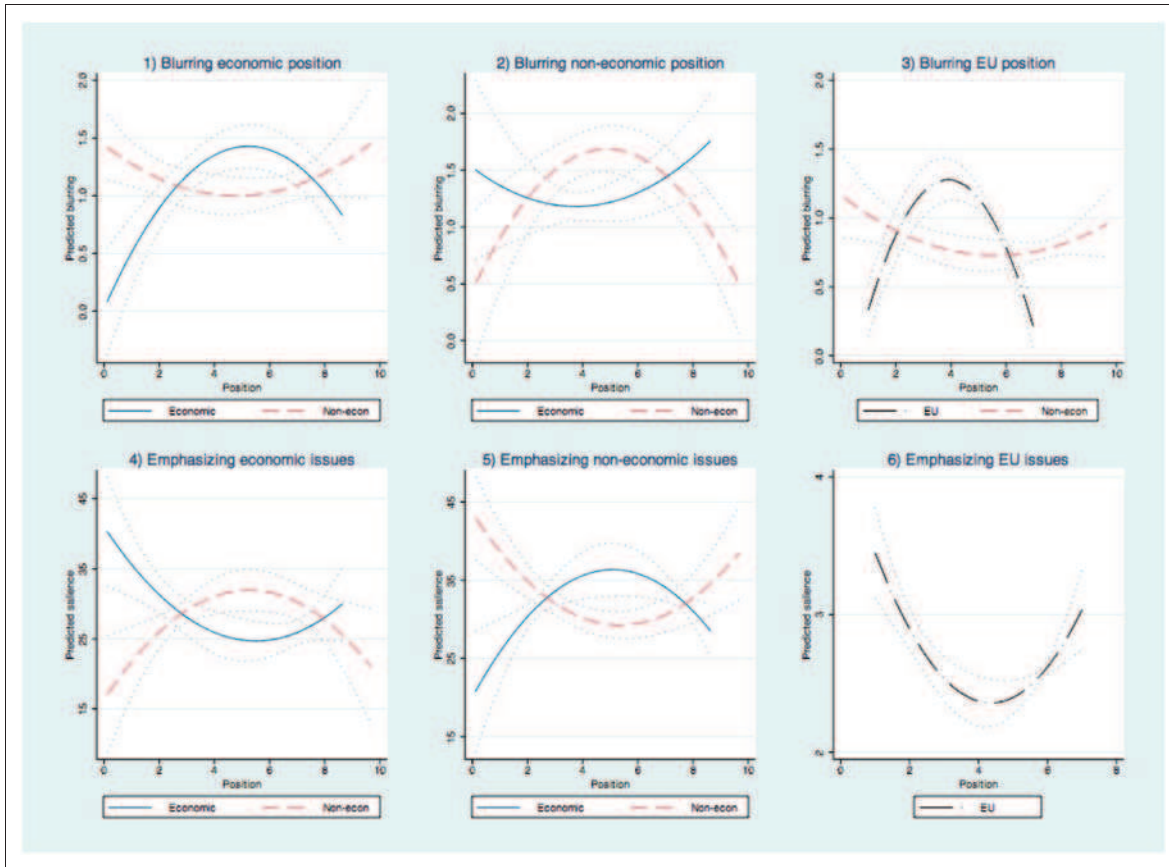


Table I. Continued

|                              | (1)                  | (2)                   | (3)                | (4)                 | (5)                   | (6)                 |
|------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
|                              | Economic blurring    | Non-economic blurring | EU blurring        | Economic salience   | Non-economic salience | EU salience         |
| Government participation     | (0.004)<br>−0.000    | (0.005)<br>0.001      | (0.004)<br>0.001*  | (0.076)<br>0.023    | (0.053)<br>−0.056**   | (0.003)<br>0.000    |
| Electoral district magnitude | (0.001)<br>−0.002*** | (0.001)<br>0.003***   | (0.000)<br>0.000   | (0.013)<br>−0.011   | (0.019)<br>0.009      | (0.001)<br>0.001**  |
| Mean economic salience       | (0.001)<br>−0.003    | (0.001)               | (0.000)            | (0.007)<br>0.956*** | (0.011)               | (0.000)             |
| Mean non-economic salience   |                      | −0.020**<br>(0.009)   |                    |                     | 0.942***<br>(0.138)   |                     |
| Mean EU salience             |                      |                       | −0.209*<br>(0.097) |                     |                       | 0.933***<br>(0.068) |
| EU intra-party dissent       |                      |                       | −0.037*<br>(0.020) |                     |                       | 0.001<br>(0.026)    |
| Constant                     | 1.030***<br>(0.243)  | 2.087***<br>(0.506)   | 0.442<br>(0.382)   | −9.856<br>(7.474)   | 12.241*<br>(6.779)    | 1.785***<br>(0.446) |
| No. of observations          | 96                   | 96                    | 96                 | 83                  | 83                    | 96                  |
| R <sup>2</sup>               | .509                 | .415                  | .670               | .585                | .640                  | .655                |

Note: Robust standard errors clustered by country in parentheses.

\*\*\* $p < .01$ , \*\* $p < .05$ , \* $p < 0.10$ .



**Figure 3.** The effects of position on blurring and salience.

Notes: Based on results in Table 1. All predictors other than position are held at their means. The graphs show predicted values with 95 percent confidence intervals. EU position is a 0–7 scale and EU salience is a 1–4 scale. For tests of statistical significance see web appendix 3.

whereas parties at the extremes of the economic dimension de-emphasize non-economic issues (panel 5). Finally, parties that are at the extremes of the EU dimension emphasize EU issues (panel 6).

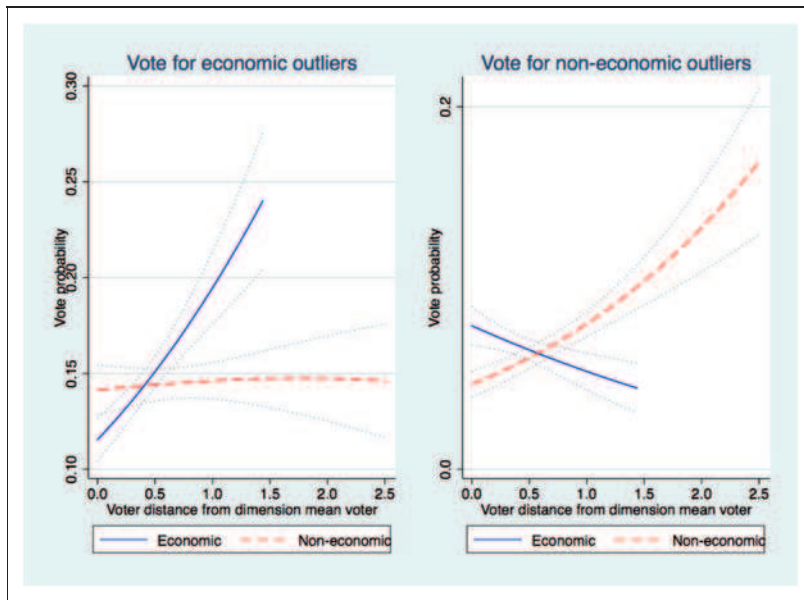
In addition to party strategies, H3 suggests that government participation also affects issue salience. Model 5 in Table 1 indicates that participation in government significantly *decreases* party emphasis on non-economic issues. Although the effect of government participation on economic salience is in the hypothesized direction, it just passes below the acceptable threshold of statistical significance (model 4). As suggested by the theoretical framework, government participation inhibits the politicization of alternative, non-economic issues.

H4 asserts that voters who support parties outlying on one dimension consider primarily this (and not another) dimension when casting their vote. To test this expectation, I perform a multinomial logit analysis of vote choice. It predicts voter support for three groups of parties: economic outliers; non-economic outliers; and mainstream parties. The main predictors in the analysis are voter preferences on economic and non-economic issues,<sup>8</sup> and the model controls for gender, age, education, and wealth. The results of the analysis, supporting H4, are summarized in Figure 4; the details are available in Table A3 in web appendix 4.

Figure 4 shows the probability of voters supporting parties outlying on economic and non-economic issues, given voter distance from the mean on each dimension (while gender, age, education, and income are held at their means). The first panel shows that voters for economically outlying parties consider economic issues when voting, whereas voter preferences over non-economic issues do not significantly determine their choice. This is demonstrated by the steep effect of voter economic positioning, compared with the flat line associated with voters' non-economic positioning. Inversely, the steep curve in the second panel indicates that voters for parties outlying on non-economic issues base their votes on their non-economic preferences and do not consider economic issues.

Finally, H5 expects an association between a party's position blurring and the dispersion of voter preferences. Parties blurring their position significantly more on one dimension over others are expected to attract voters with more dispersed preferences on the blurred dimension than do parties that do not blur. To test this hypothesis, I perform four variance ratio tests of the positions of voters who support different types of party across the economic and the non-economic dimension. The tests use the same operationalization as the analysis of H4 (see endnote 8). All tests consider *party-specific* voter dispersions – measured from the mean voter of each individual party – thus removing the natural differences in party positions. The first two tests compare the dispersion of voters who support parties that blur on either dimension with the dispersion of voters who support parties that do not blur.<sup>9</sup> The last two tests compare the dispersions of voters who support parties that blur either the economic or the non-economic dimension with each other.

Table 2 summarizes the results, which generally support H5. Parties that blur their placement on one issue dimension significantly more than on the other attract voters with greater dispersion on the blurred dimension than do parties that do



**Figure 4.** Vote choice for outlying parties.

*Notes:* Based on multinomial logit analysis detailed in Table A3 in web appendix 4. Shows the probability of voters supporting parties outlying on economic and non-economic issues, based on voter distance from the mean voter on each dimension (measured in standard deviation units), while gender, age, education, and income are held at their means. Includes 95 percent confidence intervals.

not blur. These differences in dispersion are statistically significant in all cases, with the exception of the second test. This test suggests that the difference in dispersion on the non-economic dimension between voters for parties that blur their non-economic placements and voters for parties that do not blur is not significant. This may be caused by the fact that mainstream parties that do not blur tend primarily to attract voters on economic issues. This produces greater dispersions among mainstream party supporters on the non-economic dimension, thus reducing the tested dispersion differences.

The results supporting H4 and H5 demonstrate an association between the dimensional strategies of political parties and voter considerations when casting votes. Voters' electoral calculus is based on the issue dimensions on which parties hold outstanding positions, rather than on other dimensions. Simultaneously, parties that present ambiguous positions on an issue dimension are generally able to attract a broader coalition of voter preferences on this dimension.

### Examples: The Austrian FPÖ and the Greek KKE

To highlight the general argument about the relationship between party placement, issue emphasis, and position blurring, this section briefly considers two specific

**Table 2.** Variance ratio tests of voter placements

|  | N                              | SD    |
|--|--------------------------------|-------|
| <i>Variance ratio test on economic dimension</i>   |                                |       |
| Voters for parties that blur the economic dimension (significantly more than the non-economic dimension) | 129                            | 0.516 |
| Voters for parties that do not blur  | 5679                           | 0.462 |
| Variance ratio test  | F = 0.800 (5678, 128) p = .031 |       |
| <i>Variance ratio test on non-economic dimension</i>   |                                |       |
| Voters for parties that blur the non-economic dimension (significantly more than the economic dimension) | 445                            | 0.687 |
| Voters for parties that do not blur  | 5845                           | 0.709 |
| Variance ratio test  | F = 1.065 (5845, 444) p = .811 |       |
| <i>Variance ratio test on economic dimension</i>   |                                |       |
| Voters for parties that blur the economic dimension (significantly more than the non-economic dimension) | 129                            | 0.516 |
| Voters for parties that blur the non-economic dimension (significantly more than the economic dimension) | 437                            | 0.455 |
| Variance ratio test  | F = 1.305 (128, 436) p = .034  |       |
| <i>Variance ratio test on non-economic dimension</i>   |                                |       |
| Voters for parties that blur the non-economic dimension (significantly more than the economic dimension) | 445                            | 0.687 |
| Voters for parties that blur the economic dimension (significantly more than the non-economic dimension) | 134                            | 0.571 |
| Variance ratio test  | F = 0.654 (133, 444) p = .006  |       |

Notes: Parties that blur their position on one of these dimensions over the other are defined as those with a difference in expert SD across the two dimensions greater than 1.5. Parties that do not blur are defined as those with expert SD on both dimensions smaller than 1.5. Alternative specifications produce substantively comparable results.

Source: European Election Study 2009.

political parties, the Austrian FPÖ and the Greek KKE. These parties are the most extreme outliers on the non-economic and economic dimensions respectively, and are consequently expected to blur their positioning on the other dimension.

The Austrian FPÖ is an extreme outlier on the non-economic liberal–authoritarian dimension, where experts place it at 9.67 on the 0–10 scale (with a standard deviation of 0.52). Simultaneously, the experts disagree on the party's economic placement, where its standard deviation is 2.99. This uncertainty is indeed reflected in the party's ideological profile. Since Jörg Haider assumed leadership of the FPÖ in the late 1980s, the party's primary agenda turned towards the non-economic dimension, stressing tough law and order measures, anti-immigrant views, and, later, anti-Islamic views. The party has presented consistent and extreme positions

on this dimension. On economic issues, however, the FPÖ struggled to integrate liberal and nativist outlooks (Mudde, 2007: 123). Since the departure of Haider in 2005, the party has further abandoned its originally liberal economic profile (Meret, 2010: 191). What characterizes the party's economic views is – in Mudde's words – their 'purely instrumental nature' (2007: 134). The FPÖ combines economic liberalism – with calls for low taxes and privatization – with support for the Austrian welfare state (Meret, 2010: 192). This amounts to blurred economic positioning, which Mudde refers to as a 'schizophrenic socio-economic agenda' (2007: 135).

The Greek KKE provides a similar example, only with a different dimensional strategy. Given its Marxist-Leninist origins, it is not surprising that the KKE is an extreme economic outlier. The experts place it at 0.11 on the 0–10 economic left–right scale (with a standard deviation of 0.33), whereas its non-economic placement is highly ambiguous, with a standard deviation of 2.41. The KKE has ideologically invested in economic issues where it remains on the left fringe, retaining its communist rhetoric. On non-economic issues, however, Kalyvas and Marantzidis (2002) suggest that the party on the one hand promotes nationalism – which finds resonance with its older, less educated electorate – while simultaneously sponsoring social protest aimed at younger, more educated groups. This blurred marriage of social conservatism and liberalism is veiled by a label of anti-capitalism and anti-globalization (Kalyvas and Marantzidis, 2002: 679–80, 682).

## Conclusion

This article argues that the choice of party strategy is determined by varying party involvement in political issue dimensions. The well-studied fact that political parties are endowed with varying core constituencies, ideological heritages, and organizational structures has an important implication. Given these characteristics, specific parties are invested in different issue dimensions. Some parties are better placed to compete primarily over economic issues, some over non-economic issues, others over EU issues, or a combination of the three. These relative stakes in different issue dimensions determine a party's choice of strategies.

Consequently, parties employ the strategies of issue emphasis and position blurring in various dimensional contexts. The primary indicator of issue emphasis and position blurring is the intensity with which parties contest a given dimension. Political parties that stand further from the centre of a particular dimension tend to emphasize that dimension. It is, after all, a dimension on which they hold an outstanding position. In contrast, on the dimensions where parties do not take eccentric positions they tend to de-emphasize the issues and blur their stances. This dynamic holds across multiple party families, including those not considered to be marginal niche parties.

Most importantly, by studying party strategies across multiple dimensions, this study theorizes the conditions under which political parties blur or 'obfuscate' their ideological positions. The analyses demonstrate that political parties engage in

position blurring, and that they do so in accordance with the theoretical predictions. Position blurring is carried out on secondary issue dimensions on which parties do not hold outlying positions. Furthermore, there is an association between parties' position blurring and voter support. Projecting ambiguous positions can be advantageous because it tends to attract voters with more disparate stances, creating broader political coalitions. Position blurring thus may be a beneficial strategy, *if applied on the appropriate issue dimension*.

This finding is consistent with the spatial paradigm. It highlights the utility of mapping positions of political actors in an  $n$ -dimensional space. It is, however, inconsistent with spatial theory, which suggests that political actors compete through *position taking*. On the contrary, this article theorizes and demonstrates the logic of political competition through position non-taking, or *position blurring*.

Finally, this article outlines how strategic political actions are directed at the reframing of political competition. To be sure, party leaders are concerned with concrete political issues. In the aggregate, however, their actions lead to systemic change. Emphasizing particular policy issues aims at increasing these issues' prominence in political competition, whereas the blurring of positions on specific issues seeks to disguise their relevance in political decision-making. Because party strategies follow different stakes in different issue dimensions, it is the structure of political competition that is the central subject of political contest.

## Notes

1. I am grateful to George Rabinowitz for this insight. Formally, this amounts to multiplying the scales with different weight coefficients.
2. I use the terms *blurring*, *obfuscation*, and *ambiguity* of positioning interchangeably.
3. On the idea of strategy-splitting by dimension, see Kedar (2005).
4. The non-economic/social dimension is described by Kitschelt (1994: 9/12) as a communitarian dimension of politics, contrasting self-organized community values with paternalism. Marks et al. (2006) call this dimension 'gal/tan', juxtaposing 'green, alternative, libertarian' values with 'traditionalist, authoritarian, and nationalist' outlooks.
5. It should be stressed that, although experts are asked to place parties on 11-point, 7-point, or 4-point scales, expert judgements are aggregated to form the actual placement, dispersion, and salience variables. Consequently, the values of the resulting variables (some of which are used as dependent variables in the analysis) are real (rather than whole) numbers, reasonably continuous, and normally distributed.
6. For demonstrative purposes, these figures define parties as outliers when they belong to the most extremely placed 30 percent of parties (15 percent on each end) on each dimension, while simultaneously not being outliers on other dimensions. Mainstream parties are those that do not stand out on any dimension.
7. It should be noted that the model predicting position blurring on European integration – which explicitly controls for intra-party dissent – returns significant results in favour of the theory. This result should lend further credibility to the operationalization of position blurring.



8. The analysis uses the 2009 European Election Study, available at: <http://www.piredeu.eu/public/EES2009.asp>. Economic voter placement is measured as a principal factor based on four issue components: q57 'Private enterprise is the best way to solve [country's] economic problems'; q59 'Major public services and industries ought to be in state ownership'; q61 'Politics should abstain from intervening in the economy'; q63 'Income and wealth should be redistributed towards ordinary people'. Non-economic voter placement is measured as a principal factor based on seven issue components: q56 'Immigrants should be required to adapt to the customs of [country]'; q58 'Same-sex marriages should be prohibited by law'; q60 'Women should be free to decide on matters of abortion'; q62 'People who break the law should be given much harsher sentences'; q64 'Schools must teach children to obey authority'; q66 'A woman should be prepared to cut down on her paid work for the sake of her family'; q67 'Immigration to [country] should be decreased significantly'.
9. This analysis considers only the economic and the non-economic dimensions. Parties that blur their position on one of these dimensions over the other are defined as those with a difference in expert SD across the two dimensions greater than 1.5. Parties that do not blur are defined as those with expert SD on both dimensions smaller than 1.5. Alternative specifications produce substantively comparable results.

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