

## **Defining and measuring niche parties**

Markus Wagner, Department of Methods in the Social Sciences, University of Vienna

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### **Abstract**

Various scholars have recently argued that niche parties are to be distinguished from mainstream parties, in particular because the two party types differ in their programmes, behaviour and strategies. However, there has so far been no attempt to provide a concise, measureable definition of the niche party concept. This paper argues that niche parties are best defined as parties that compete primarily on a small number of non-economic issues. The occurrence of niche parties is then operationalized and measured using issue salience information provided by expert surveys and manifesto data. After comparing the findings to existing definitions, the main characteristics of the niche parties identified are examined in a final step.

### **Key words**

Issue salience; mainstream parties; niche parties; party ideology

## **Introduction**

Recently, a number of scholars have suggested that niche parties are different from their mainstream competitors (Adams et al., 2006; Ezrow, 2008, 2010; Jensen and Spoon, 2010; Meguid, 2005, 2008). Niche parties, it is argued, not only diverge programmatically from the mainstream, they also differ from other parties in their electoral strategies, their roles in political institutions and the way they are evaluated by voters. However, given this attention paid to this type of party, there is little agreement on how to define niche parties and how to measure their existence.

Two definitions of the niche party have been offered by scholars so far. The first, by Adams et al. (2006), is simple: they argue that niche parties are characterised by their ‘non-centrist’ or extreme ideologies. In contrast, Meguid’s (2005; 2008) more complex definition states that niche parties differ from mainstream parties and other new parties in three ways. First, the issues they raise fall outside the traditional class cleavage. Second, niche parties confine themselves to a very limited set of issues, to the extent that some can be seen as single-issue parties (Mudde, 1999). Finally, the issues addressed by them cross-cut existing cleavage lines and partisan alignments.

In addition to a lack of definitional clarity, a second shortcoming of current niche party research is the approach to operationalizing and measuring the phenomenon. So far, measurements of niche party status have been relatively basic. All existing work (Adams et al., 2006; Ezrow, 2008, 2010; Jensen and Spoon, 2010; Meguid, 2005, 2008) bases its measurement on party family membership. This means that niche party status is implicitly seen as a fixed and purely binary characteristic. Moreover, such an approach ignores the actual programmatic offer presented by parties, as membership of a certain party family defines a party as ‘niche’ no matter what the party’s actual ideological programme is.

Given these differences and insufficiencies, this paper aims to provide a theoretically grounded approach to defining and measuring the niche party phenomenon. Simplifying the

definition proposed by Meguid (2005; 2008), I suggest that niche parties are best defined as parties that de-emphasise economic concerns and stress a small range of non-economic issues. The paper then operationalizes this definition and measures the occurrence of niche parties using expert surveys and party manifestos. The niche parties thus identified are compared to existing measurement approaches. Finally, the main characteristics of niche parties are described and the validity of the approach assessed.

### **Why distinguish niche and mainstream parties?**

Before moving on to the definition of niche parties, it is worth stating clearly what the purpose of distinguishing niche from mainstream parties is, that is, what we stand to gain both empirically and theoretically from formulating and using this concept. First, it may describe an empirical reality. The term ‘niche parties’ has so far been used as an umbrella term to refer to a diverse set of parties such as Greens, ethnic regionalists and the radical right. If parties as superficially disparate as these can be usefully gathered using a single concept and thus differentiated from ‘mainstream’ competitors, then this serves to highlight empirical commonalities that might not be visible superficially. Specifically, niche parties have so far been seen as sharing a similar programmatic offer, be it distinctively non-centrist (Adams et al. 2006; Ezrow 2010) or cross-cutting and non-economic (Meguid 2005, 2008). If the simple yet theory-based dichotomy between mainstream and niche parties captures an important difference between types of party ideologies, then our understanding of party programmes is significantly furthered.

Yet, to be truly useful the dichotomy needs to go beyond descriptive purposes. There are several ways in which the mainstream-niche distinction could be important for the analysis of political parties; specifically, niche status can help explain a party’s behaviour and its place in party competition and the party system. First, niche parties may behave differently

than their mainstream competitors. For example, Adams et al. (2006) argue that niche parties do not respond to shifts in public opinion, unlike their mainstream competitors. In their analysis of the European Parliament, Jensen and Spoon (2010) show that niche parties behave differently than mainstream parties in the legislative arena as well. Moving beyond existing studies, it may be possible to link niche and mainstream party types to policy, office and vote orientations (Strom, 1990). Second, the place of niche parties in the party system and in party competition may also differ from that of mainstream parties. Existing studies show that niche parties are not electorally rewarded for centrist policy shifts, again in contrast to mainstream parties (Adams et al., 2006; Ezrow, 2008). Meguid (2005; 2008) argues that the party strategies of mainstream and niche parties need to be distinguished and their interaction understood in order to be able to explain niche party success. Niche parties may also play a different role than mainstream parties in coalition formation. For example, niche parties might be relatively attractive coalition partners as only its specific policy interests need to be addressed, allowing policy on other issues to be decided by the other coalition partners independently. A mainstream party with preferences on a whole range of issues may be harder to integrate into a coalition.

In sum, there is already strong evidence that the niche-mainstream distinction serves important descriptive and theoretical purposes and can add to our understanding of party strategies and competition. As a result, it is important to increase the clarity of the concept and make it measurable (Adcock and Collier 2001).

### **Defining niche parties**

Niche parties are best defined as *parties that compete primarily on a small number of non-economic issues*. This means that niche parties (a) do not emphasise economic issues and (b) emphasise a narrow range of non-economic issues. This definition is an important

simplification of that proposed by Meguid (2005) and is illustrated in Figure 1, where the x-axis represents the salience of economic issues and the y-axis the salience of a non-economic issue. The identity of this non-economic issue can vary by party, but examples could be immigration, the environment, European integration or social liberalism. Under the proposed definition, niche parties take up the area of low economic and high non-economic salience, with mainstream parties located outside of those boundaries. It is worth emphasising that a party has to fulfil criteria (a) *and* (b) in order to be seen as a niche party. Parties that emphasise non-economic and economic topics simultaneously are thus not included. For example, a classically liberal party (such as the German FDP) that stresses economic reform but has also had a strong emphasis on its social progressiveness would not be classed as a niche party under this definition.

Figure 1 about here

### *Improvements on existing definitions*

This proposed definition improves on existing definitions in three ways: it is based solely on parties' ideological programme; it treats niche parties as a fluid, continuous characteristic; and it lends itself to empirical measurement.

First, I define niche parties solely based on their programmatic offer, or what can be called the 'supply side' of electoral politics (Kriesi et al., 2008; Mudde, 1999). In other words, niche parties are characterised by what they offer to the voting public instead of by the ideological preferences and sociological characteristics of their supporters. For example, for an ethnic-regionalist party to qualify as a niche party, it would need to have an ideological focus on decentralization and devolution while showing relative disregard for purely economic matters.<sup>1</sup> It would not be enough for a party to qualify as niche just because its

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<sup>1</sup> It is of course not always easy to separate economic and non-economic elements of a party's ideological programme. Thus, an ethnic-regionalist party can justify its stance on devolution with reference to the economy.

support is concentrated among an ethnic or regional sub-group. Similarly, what would make a Green party a niche competitor is not the fact that its supporters share a strong concern for environmental protection but rather that its programme concentrates on that topic. An ideology-based definition is preferable because it centres on the programmatic offer made to voters, so the commonalities that are identified between parties are less superficial than, say, age or size. A supply-side definition also complements existing policy-based models of voting, party competition and coalition formation.

While this focus on the supply side of electoral politics is common to all current approaches to defining niche parties, this is rarely made explicit. Moreover, the actual operationalization of the definition by both Meguid (2005, 2008) and Adams et al. (2006) is in fact somewhat divorced from the ideological offer made by parties. Instead, these approaches use party family membership as a way to measure niche parties, giving the impression that some families are intrinsically niche competitors, no matter what their current ideological profile. Interestingly, Adams et al. and Meguid both argue that Green and extreme-right parties are niche parties and only differ in the inclusion of regionalist parties (Meguid, 2005; Meguid, 2008) and Communist parties (Adams et al., 2006; Ezrow, 2010).

Moreover, while this is not explicitly part of her definition, Meguid argues that niche parties are always *new* parties as they upset the existing party system. Indeed, for Meguid niche parties are fundamentally a synonym for ‘New Politics’ parties, and the term is also used in this way by Jensen and Spoon (2010). Yet according to Meguid niche parties form a subset of new parties: she distinguishes niche parties from other ‘neophytes’. (In contrast, Adams et al. (2006) do not see age as a distinguishing factor: in their analysis they include Communist parties, often some of the oldest parties in each country.) It is better not to define

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A Green party’s environmental views and an extreme-right party’s views on immigration are also sometimes coloured by economic concerns. Yet, it should still be possible to discern the primary focus of a party’s programme, and ultimately the separation of economic and non-economic programmatic elements is primarily an empirical rather than a theoretical challenge.

niche parties by their age. Though they operate within a programmatic gap left open by their competitors, there is no need for this gap to be new. We can thus conceive of an established party changing its platform and becoming a niche player within the party system. Moreover, three of the four cleavages (urban-rural, Church-State and centre-periphery) identified originally by Lipset and Rokkan (1969) are at least partly non-economic, so niche parties arguably have a long history in European party systems. Given the rise of 'New Politics' parties it is of course probable that niche parties will be younger than their mainstream competitors. However, there is no reason why older parties that either take on or always had a niche programmatic profile should be excluded from the niche party type.

Second, the definition treats niche party status as a fluid, continuous rather than a fixed, binary characteristic. Existing definitions treat membership of the niche party type as a fixed or stable property of a party, so niche parties are seen as so fundamentally different that they can never join the ranks of the mainstream. Yet, a party can also change from niche to mainstream and vice versa.

This change can be initiated by the party itself if it alters its programmatic offer (Elias, 2009). For example, a mainstream-to-niche change occurred in Austria in the 1980s, when the Freedom Party changed from a relatively centrist, liberal party to an extreme-right (and arguably niche) competitor. In contrast, Green parties can become a mainstream party by including more economic policies in their programme and lessening their focus on environmental protection. A possible example is the German Green Party, which has broadened its programmatic offer significantly since it was founded in the 1980s. Indeed, the niche-to-mainstream change, when initiated by the party itself, may often be a consequence of government participation, which will encourage and/or force parties to take a stance and be associated with a wider range of issues, including those related to economic matters.

The shift from niche to mainstream parties can also occur without any ideological change on the part of the niche party. If mainstream competitors decide to increase their focus

on a niche topic, parties may lose their niche party status without altering their own programme at all. The latter will then no longer stand out in the party system for the emphasis on an otherwise under-addressed policy area. If, say, environmental policy were to become an important concern for many parties, then a Green party would no longer be a niche competitor as its topic would have become mainstream. In Meguid's (2005, 2008) terms, a niche party will become mainstream if the existing mainstream parties use 'accommodative' or 'adversarial' strategies, thus increasing the overall salience of the niche parties' main political issue.

Third, being a niche party is therefore more than a binary category: it is also as a matter of degrees. Both niche and mainstream parties will differ in the extent to which they fulfil criteria (a) and (b). For example, some niche parties may completely disregard economic topics while others may devote some effort to addressing these issues. Being a niche party does not preclude it altogether from competing on economic matters, and such parties may follow quite specific strategies even on the dimension they tend to de-emphasise. While it is nevertheless worthwhile to classify parties overall into two groups, niche and mainstream, it is worth keeping in mind that some parties will fulfil the definitional criteria more than others.

Fourth, the definition uses an understanding of the party ideological space that is simpler than that of Meguid (2005, 2008). Her approach, while based on a theoretical understanding of the niche party concept, is relatively complex and difficult to implement. In particular, Meguid (2005: 348) argues that the issues addressed by niche parties cross-cut existing partisan alignments. She illustrates this part of her definition by referring to voter defection to parties that were thought to be ideologically distant: she cites the example of previous French Communist voters switching allegiance to the Front National in 1986. However, in many accounts new political issues do not cross-cut existing cleavages, at least not neatly (McDonald and Budge, 2005). For example, Kitschelt (1994; 1995) argues that the new libertarian-authoritarian dimension is not orthogonal but rather oblique to the traditional

economic dimension: thus, in his account Green parties propose left-wing and extreme-right parties liberal economic policies. In general, issue dimensions tend to be highly correlated rather than independent, and it is rare that parties will stand at a clear cross-cutting position to the rest of the party system (McDonald and Budge, 2005). Given the significant theoretical controversies and measurement difficulties surrounding this aspect of the concept, it is better to drop it for the sake of parsimony and ease of measurement (Gerring, 1999; Adcock and Collier, 2001).

While providing an important simplification, the proposed definition does not go as far as Adams et al. (2006) and Ezrow (2010), who define niche parties as characterised by their overall left-right non-centrism. Under their definition, a niche party might compete strongly and exclusively on economic matters and still be a niche party; an example would be an old-fashioned Communist party. However, such a party is, programmatically speaking, simply a more radical version of existing mainstream parties and should best be called an 'extreme' or 'non-centrist' rather than a 'niche' competitor. The theoretical added value of the 'niche' term lies precisely in such parties' focus on issues away from the mainstream dimension of party competition, and certain behavioural regularities may spring from this programmatic make-up. This added value would be lost if 'niche' were merely a synonym for 'extreme'.

Like Meguid (2005, 2008), I argue that the main dimension of political contestation remains the economy. Thus, the 'niches' referred to are in fact non-economic issues. The niche party concept could arguably be rendered even more general if it referred to a 'main dimension' of political contestation instead of to economic ideology. The assumption in the proposed definition is that economic matters generally have primacy over other concerns, yet this need not be the case: party systems in some countries are defined more strongly by, for example, ethnic divisions. However, in most countries economic matters remain the primary focus of political debate and party ideologies. The overriding importance of economic issues is underlined by the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) data: there are only two elections

in the countries analysed in this paper, Greece in 1997 and Japan in 1996, where non-economic concerns are the top issue area. Moreover, despite the present focus on the economic dimension, the concept can easily be adapted to countries where the long-standing main dimension was not (or no longer) based on economic ideology. For the purposes of studying OECD and EU democracies, however, it makes sense to retain the economic dimension as primary, a role it has held consistently over the past decades (Lipset and Rokkan, 1969; Iversen, 2006).

### *Differences to small, single-issue and New Politics parties*

So far, I have shown that the proposed definition is based on a strong theoretical understanding of party ideologies and improves upon existing definitions. Importantly, the niche party type is an approach to classification that improves upon existing attempts to classify parties that are similar to the niche party approach – for example, single-issue parties, small parties and New Politics parties.

Some authors have suggested that *small* parties are fundamentally different from their larger competitors (e.g. Müller-Rommel and Pridham, 1991). The term ‘niche’ might be in fact taken to imply that these parties are small. However, both Meguid (2005: 347) and Adams et al. (2006) stress that size (i.e., vote share) is not a defining characteristic of this party type. While there is likely to be a clear correlation between size and niche party status due to the fact that these parties compete in areas removed from the mainstream, this is by no means a necessary attribute of niche parties. There is no reason why the distinct ideological offer – be it noncentrist or noneconomic – should mean a party cannot be successful in an election; it is possible to think of several examples where parties best classified as ‘niche’ have scored considerable successes, e.g. the National Front in the 2002 French elections, UKIP in the 2004 European elections, or Geert Wilders’ PVV in the 2010 Dutch elections. Moreover, setting apart niche from mainstream parties has an inherently stronger theoretical

foundation than distinguishing small and large parties: the former approach is based on the ideological offer of the parties in question instead of their simple electoral success.

Similarly, *single-issue* parties are also seen as distinct from other parties. According to Mudde (1999: 184), single-issue parties have four characteristics: their electorate has ‘no particular social structure’; they are ‘supported primarily on the basis of a single issue’; they ‘do not present an ideological programme’; and they ‘address only one “all-encompassing” issue’. Mudde’s definition of the single-issue party is thus similar to Meguid’s description of niche parties. Yet he finds that extreme right parties, a main focus of Meguid’s (2005; 2008) and Adams et al.’s (2006) analysis, do not generally fit his definition of the single-issue party. Indeed, single-issue parties are best seen as a sub-set of niche parties: they are an extreme form of the niche party as they address exclusively one non-economic topic. The niche party concept therefore encompasses single-issue parties and is preferable due to its stronger theoretical foundation.

*New Politics* parties are also sometimes identified as an important sub-group among political parties. These are parties that grew out of the rise of postmaterialist and postmodern New Politics issues such as the environment, civil rights, immigration and security (Dalton, 2009; Flanagan, 1987; Inglehart, 1997; Kitschelt, 1994). Examples of such parties are, of course, Green parties and new radical right parties. Niche parties are sometimes treated almost as a synonym for such parties (e.g. Meguid, 2005, 2008; Jensen and Spoon, 2010). However, using the term ‘niche’ has a couple of advantages. First, it divorces the party type from the specific issues in question. A niche party can focus on any non-economic issue, not just one that is part of New Politics concerns; examples of such issues may be regional decentralization, Christian values or European integration. Second, the niche party concept is not linked to a particular historical period. Instead, it builds on a theoretical conception of the political space and identifies this sub-group based on that conception. It is therefore a concept that can travel both backwards and forwards in time.

## Measuring niche parties

In the following, the definition presented above will be operationalised using two data sources, expert surveys and party manifestos. Concerning the expert surveys, the data released by Laver and Hunt (1992) and Benoit and Laver (2006) are used. The surveys were carried out in 1989 and 2002-2003, respectively. Experts were asked for the ‘relative importance’ of several policy areas for each party on a scale ranging from 1 to 20. I use information for 186 parties in 25 political systems from the Benoit and Laver dataset and for 151 parties from 21 countries from the Laver and Hunt dataset.<sup>2</sup>

The CMP has coded party manifestos by assigning each ‘quasi-sentence’ to one of 56 categories. (For more on the CMP data, see Budge et al. (2001) and Klingemann et al (2007).) Instead of using the 56 raw categories, I aggregate these into ten distinct issue areas in a similar way to Stoll (2010); see the appendix for more details. One of these ten categories captures all economic references, with the nine other topics containing information on non-economic matters.

Given the relatively contested nature of the CMP data (Benoit et al., 2009; Mikhaylov et al., 2008), some further comments are in order. First, using CMP data to measure salience is likely to be relatively reliable as this is the way the coding scheme was designed. Second, it has been noted that there is a lot of ‘noise’ in the CMP data: parties move a lot more than is often considered plausible (McDonald and Mendes, 2001). To attenuate this random fluctuation, the average of two manifestos is taken for measurement, from the programme for the election at  $t$  and the programme for the election at  $t-1$ . This is justifiable as a party’s programme will always be a combination of past and current strategies, with voter perceptions

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<sup>2</sup> The political systems in two datasets are: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Britain, Canada, Cyprus (Benoit and Laver only), Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Northern Ireland (B&L only), Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland (B&L only) and Turkey (B&L only).

slow to change and characterised by discounting (Grofman, 1985; Ordeshook, 1976). Finally, it has been argued that the older CMP data is particularly unreliable (Hansen, 2008; Pennings, 2006). I therefore exclude manifestos from before 1970 from the analysis; this is also the date at which Meguid begins her analysis. In total, manifestos from 241 parties in 22 countries are included.<sup>3</sup>

### *Measurement approach*

I propose that niche party status can be operationalized as follows (Table 1). First, it is assessed whether parties de-emphasise economic issues. This is measured by comparing the party's salience score on the most important economic question in the survey with the mean weighted salience of all other parties in the party system.<sup>4</sup> In the expert surveys, the mean salience was weighted by the percentage of votes won in election preceding the survey; in the manifesto data, it was weighted by the percentage of votes won in the election for which the manifesto was written.

Criterion (a) is that a party exhibits low emphasis on economic matters. A suitable cut-off point is one weighted standard deviation below the weighted mean on economic issues. The standard deviation indicates what the 'normal' variation in salience is in each country and for each issue, so lying below this cut-off indicates an unusually low emphasis. It is useful to use a standard deviation measure as this allows for country- and issue-specific variation in the spread of salience levels. Here, the standard deviation is weighted by party vote share in order to give more weight to larger parties within a party system. A cut-off of one weighted standard deviation is of course not set in stone, but it serves as a useful and clear line that can be used to divide unusually high from relatively normal levels of emphasis. This cut-off is the

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<sup>3</sup> The 22 countries are: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Britain, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

<sup>4</sup> In the Laver and Hunt survey, the two economic questions are on taxes versus public spending and on public ownership; in the Benoit and Laver survey, the three questions are on taxes versus public spending, deregulation and privatisation. The issue with the greater mean weighted salience is chosen for each country.

equivalent of the vertical dotted line in Figure 1, which represents the division between relatively low and ‘normal’ levels of salience on economic matters.

Table 1 about here

Second, I assess the extent to which a party fulfils criterion (b), high emphasis on non-economic matters, the equivalent of the horizontal dotted line in Figure 1. The weighted mean salience of each other issue is calculated for each party, again excluding the importance of that issue to the party itself. To be classed as a niche party, an issue needs to be emphasised at more than one weighted standard deviation above the weighted mean salience on that issue for all other parties. This captures whether a party emphasises a specific issue more than its competitors.

In addition, this emphasis also needs to be high within the party system in general. For the expert surveys, this was implemented by adding a second cut-off: the issue needs to be emphasised at one weighted standard deviation above the weighted mean salience of *all* issues.<sup>5</sup> These two conditions for criterion (b) mean that only parties that both emphasise an issue a large amount compared to other parties *and* compared to the extent issues are generally emphasised are coded as niche-type parties in the expert surveys.

This second condition was implemented differently in the manifesto data. There, it would be possible for a party to emphasise a topic in just four percent of its manifesto and still be counted as a ‘niche party’ on that issue if the other parties barely mention that issue. For that reason, a minimum coverage of ten percent of the manifesto was added as a cut-off point for each issue. A cut-off of ten percent is relatively arbitrary and perhaps a rather low number. The total number of niche parties found is therefore larger than if a stricter cut-off were chosen.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> To calculate overall salience and its standard deviation, only issues generally salient within each country are included. This is measured by excluding those issues where the mean salience for all parties is below the cut-off of one weighted standard deviation below the weighted overall salience.

<sup>6</sup> No special cut-off restricting the number of issues was implemented: no parties in the expert surveys and very few parties in the manifesto data meet conditions (a) and (b) and emphasise more than three topics.

It is worth noting briefly that the measurement approach above indicates that it is not possible to summarize ‘niceness’ as a single combined value. As niceness requires both low economic and high non-economic issue emphasis, it is necessary to consider separately the extent to which a party meets both criteria.

Figure 2 presents the overall distribution of niche and mainstream parties in the three data sources. The large ‘N’ indicates niche, the small dots mainstream parties; the axes are the difference between party and weighted mean salience for economic matters (x-axis) and for the party’s most salient non-economic issue (y-axis). Figure 2 therefore presents the empirical implementation of Figure 1’s schematic illustration.

Figure 2 about here

This paper is accompanied by a website [*link to be inserted here*] that presents a dataset that contains the binary niche party coding along with other main variables as well as list of all the niche parties identified for each expert survey in 1989 and 2002-2003 and of all manifesto-based niche parties since 1970, together with the years of their niche party status.

### *Comparison with existing measures*

The parties coded as niche competitors according to the proposed approach naturally differ from the niche parties identified in the work of Meguid (2005, 2008) and Adams et al. (2006). Here, I will present these differences (and similarities) in more detail. First, Table 2 compares the niche parties listed by Meguid (2008) with those identified in the expert surveys. This comparison is appropriate as Meguid (2008) uses expert surveys as a guide to determining niche party membership. There is clearly overlap between the two approaches, with Green and ethnic-regionalist parties frequently identified as niche in both sources. It is also worth noting that the Laver and Hunt survey did not include immigration or nationalism as an issue, perhaps explaining why the overlap for radical right parties is stronger between Meguid and the Benoit and Laver measurement. However, there are several parties identified as niche by

Meguid that do not have such a profile according to experts (e.g. Green parties in Luxembourg and the Netherlands; ethnic-regionalist parties in Spain and Belgium; and radical right parties in Denmark, Italy, Norway and Portugal). Moreover, the survey-based coding includes parties outside the three party families used by Meguid. For example, Agrarian parties from Finland, Norway and Sweden are each included in one of the two expert survey measures, as are the small Christian and Christian Democratic parties in Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden; these Christian parties are very different from catch-all Christian Democratic parties such as the CDU in Germany or the CDA in the Netherlands.

In sum, the listing highlights that restricting the party families that can be niche parties leads to the exclusion of some such competitors, at least as identified by using expert assessments. Conversely, not all members of the Green, ethnic-regionalist and radical-right families are clearly identified as niche parties using those assessments.

Table 2 about here

Given the previous focus on party families in determining niche party membership, it is worth providing a general overview of the party families to which the niche parties identified in the Benoit and Laver expert survey and the manifesto data belong (Table 3). As could be expected, Green, ethno-regionalist and extreme-right parties are more likely to be identified as niche parties. In the Benoit and Laver expert survey, Green parties (9 out of 18) are particularly likely to be counted as niche parties; this is also true, if to a lesser degree, of ethnic-regionalist (4 of 7) and nationalist (3 of 10) parties.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in the manifesto data, 38 or 54% of Green party manifestos have niche characteristics, as do 20 or 51% of Nationalist manifestos and 31 or 35% of Ethnic-Regionalist manifestos. Again, a party family that contains relatively many niche parties are the Christian Democrats (5 of 11 such parties in the expert surveys and 23% of the Christian Democratic manifestos). It is worth noting that Communist parties are under-represented among the niche parties identified; this is

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<sup>7</sup> Information on party family membership from the CMP (Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2007).

particularly clear in the expert surveys, but also applies to the manifesto data. This provides a first indication that general left-right extremism, the understanding of ‘niche’ used by Adams et al. (2006), is not associated with niche party membership as defined here.

Table 3 about here

### *Niche party characteristics*

In this final section, I briefly describe the main characteristics of the niche parties identified in terms of their age, size, party system and policy positions. The first three characteristics can be seen as an assessment of the construct validity of the measure, that is, the extent to which the measure shows the expected relationships with other variables as based on established theories or observations.<sup>8</sup> Based on our knowledge of the make-up and development of party systems, we should expect niche parties to be younger and smaller than their mainstream competitors (Meguid, 2005; 2008), and to be more present in larger party systems, where there is space for narrowly-focused competitors (Ezrow, 2010).

Niche parties are indeed younger than mainstream parties (Table 6).<sup>9</sup> To be precise, niche parties are on average about 10 years younger than mainstream parties. In the Benoit and Laver expert survey, the mean party founding year is 1963 for mainstream parties and 1974 for niche parties.<sup>10</sup> A similar difference in age is also found in the manifesto data: The mean party age for mainstream parties is 1959; it is 1969 for niche parties.<sup>11</sup>

Table 4 about here

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<sup>8</sup> I also examined the convergent validity of the measurement, that is, the extent that alternative indicators of the same concept identify the same case (Adcock and Collier 2001), by comparing the lists produced by the expert surveys with the list from the manifesto data. Overall, there is large overlap between the two data sources, with for example almost all survey-based niche parties classed as such using manifestos. More information available from the author upon request.

<sup>9</sup> Party age information from Day (2002).

<sup>10</sup> The minimum year of foundation is 1945; older parties were thus coded as being founded in 1945. Only countries continuously democratic since 1945 are included in the calculation of mean party age.

<sup>11</sup> Only manifestos after 1990 included in this comparison.

Niche parties are also smaller than mainstream parties in terms of vote share. In the Benoit and Laver expert survey, the mean vote share is 15.3 per cent for mainstream parties and just 4.7 per cent for niche parties. In the manifesto data, mainstream parties receive an average of 15 per cent of the vote, compared to 5.8 per cent for niche parties.

Niche parties are also unsurprisingly more likely to be found in larger party systems.<sup>12</sup> In the Benoit and Laver expert survey, the effective number of electoral parties is 3.7 for countries with no niche parties; 4 for countries with one or two and 6.3 for countries with three niche parties. The effective number of electoral parties shows similar trends for the manifesto data: it is 4.2 and 4.6 for countries with no and one niche party, respectively; it then increases to about 5 for countries with two or more niche parties.

Finally, the definition and measurement approach has centred on the salience of issues, yet party positions are of course at least as important to party competition. Moreover, left-right extremism is used as a definitional approach by Adams et al. (2006). I therefore calculated the mean absolute distance of mainstream and niche parties from the ideological midpoint on the left-right dimension. For the manifesto data, the log-scale left-right position is used, as recommended by Lowe et al. (forthcoming). For both data sources, it is clear that there are no great ideological differences between niche and mainstream parties: niche parties are slightly less centrist than their mainstream opponents, though this difference is small in magnitude and statistically significant (at a .05 level) only for the CMP data (Table 5).<sup>13</sup> While niche parties have programmes that are very distinct from their competitors in terms of their issue focus, they are not much less centrist when we take the overall left-right dimension as a guide. This gives further strength to the argument that the theoretical assumptions

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<sup>12</sup> Data from Gallagher and Mitchell (2004) and Michael Gallagher's webpage, [http://www.tcd.ie/Political\\_Science/staff/michael\\_gallagher/EISystems/index.php](http://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/staff/michael_gallagher/EISystems/index.php).

<sup>13</sup> The midpoints used are 10.5 for the expert survey and 0 for logged left-right CMP scale. Results for the CMP data do not differ if the CMP's own left-right measure ('rile') or country-specific left-right averages over time are used.

underlying the approach to understanding and defining niche parties used by Adams et al. (2010) is difficult to combine with that of Meguid (2005, 2008) and that presented here.

Table 5 about here

Yet, despite their overall relative centrism, niche parties tend to be far more extreme than mainstream parties on the issues that they focus on; this is also shown in Table 5, where mean policy extremism is shown for four frequent niche-party issues.<sup>14</sup> The ‘niche party’ column here presents the mean extremism for those niche parties that have immigration, the environment, social liberalism and decentralization respectively as their strongest niche issue. These are compared to parties for which these issues are not the top niche issue. As is very clear, niche parties are very extreme on the issue they concentrate on. For example, the mean extremism for immigration-niche parties is 8.5, compared to just 3.96 for all other parties; the maximum score would be 9.5, so this is a very large number. The standard deviation for the niche parties is also always low. Niche parties may not be extreme on the left-right dimension, but they are nevertheless characterised by notable extremism on the issue that they care about most.

## **Conclusion**

The term ‘niche party’ has gained significant currency recently, yet deficiencies have remained in the definitions and measurement of this empirical phenomenon. In response to this current weakness of the debate, this paper has sought to provide a firmer theoretical and methodological foundation to the concept of niche parties. Building on Meguid (2005; 2008), these can be defined as parties that compete primarily on a small number of non-economic issues, a definition that has the virtues of parsimony and measurability. Moreover, it allows

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<sup>14</sup> I do not calculate these measures for the CMP dataset due to the difficulty of measuring party policy positions on single issues using this data.

parties to vary in niche party status over time and to be classified independently of party family.

This definition was implemented using data from expert surveys and party manifestos, the two most frequently used sources of summary information on party programmes and ideologies. As measured through the proposed approach, niche parties are a common party type, occurring at one point in nearly all countries examined. Moreover, niche parties are newer and smaller, if not much more extreme, than their mainstream competitors. It is therefore appropriate to speak of a 'niche party phenomenon' (Meguid, 2008).

Niche parties are thus an empirical reality: there is an identifiable group of (newer and smaller) parties that differ programmatically from their mainstream competitors. Yet, this concept is important beyond this empirical pattern, as the strategies and systemic role of niche parties may differ from those of mainstream parties. These differences between mainstream and niche parties deserve further attention. Finally, the definitional and measurement approach in this paper has itself thrown up further questions. For example, there are parties that move in and out of niche party status, a possibility that previous approaches have disregarded. Why do some mainstream parties become niche parties and vice versa? Future research should examine the strategic reasons behind these ideological shifts.

**Table 1 Niche party measurement in expert surveys and manifesto data**

**Criterion (a):** low emphasis on economic matters

Measurement:

Party-issue salience *minus* mean weighted issue salience

Niche status cut-off:

Mean weighted issue salience *minus* one weighted standard deviation

**Criterion (b):** high emphasis on small range of non-economic issues

Measurement:

Party-issue salience *minus* mean weighted issue salience

Niche party cut-off:

Mean weighted issue salience *plus* one weighted standard deviation

**Additional expert survey measure for criterion (b):** high emphasis relative to general issue emphasis

Measurement:

Party-issue salience *minus* mean weighted salience across all issues

Niche party cut-off:

Mean weighted salience across all issues *plus* one weighted standard deviation

**Additional manifesto data measure for criterion (b):** high emphasis within manifesto

Measurement:

Overall percentage of quasi-sentences devoted to issue

Cut-off:

A minimum of 10% of the manifesto quasi-sentences required

**Table 2 Comparison between Meguid and direct expert survey coding**

Country	Political party	Party family	Meguid	Laver and Hunt	Benoit and Laver
<b>Austria</b>	Die Grüne Alternative	G	X	X	X
	FPÖ	RR	X		
<b>Belgium</b>	Ecolo	G	X	X	
	Agalev/Groen	G	X	X	
	Vlaams Blok	RR	X	X	X
	Front National	RR	X	NA	X
	Volkunie	E-R	X		NA
	Front Democratique des Francophones	E-R	X		(MR)
<b>Britain</b>	Scottish National Party	E-R	X	X	X
	Plaid Cymru	E-R	X	X	X
<b>Denmark</b>	De Gronne	G	X	X	(Enhedslisten)
	Fremskridtpartiet	RR	X		
	Left Socialists	Com		X	(Enhedslisten)
	Christian People's Party	ChD			X
<b>Finland</b>	Vihreä Liitto	G	X	X	X
	Christian League	ChD		X	X
	Centre Party	A		X	
<b>France</b>	Les Verts	G	X	X	
	Front National	RR	X		X
<b>Germany</b>	Die Grünen	G	X	X	X
	Die Republikaner	RR	X	NA	X
	Deutsche Volkunion	RR	X	NA	X
<b>Greece</b>	Pasok	SD		X	
	Synaspismos	Com		(KKE)	X
<b>Ireland</b>	Green Party	G	X	NA	X
	Sinn Fein	Nat			X
<b>Italy</b>	Liste Verdi/FdV	G	X	X	X
	Movimento Sociale Italiano/Alleanza Nazionale	RR	X		
<b>Luxembourg</b>	Di Greng Alternative	G	X		
<b>Netherlands</b>	Groen Links	G	X	NA	
	Reformed Political Union (GPV)	ChD		X	NA
	Reformed Political Federation (RPF)	ChD		X	NA
	Political Reformed Party (SGP)	ChD		X	X
	Democrats '66	L			X
<b>Norway</b>	Fremskirtspartiet	RR	X		
	Christian People's Party	ChD		X	X
	Centre Party	A		X	
	Venstre	L			X
<b>Portugal</b>	Os Verdes/PEV	G	X	X	
	Partido da Democracia Crista	RR	X		NA
<b>Spain</b>	Herri Batasuna	E-R	X	X	NA
	Partido Nacionalista Vasco	E-R	X	X	X
	Convergencia i Unio	E-R	X		
<b>Sweden</b>	Miljöpartiet de Gröna	G	X	X	X
	Christian Democratic Union	ChD		X	
	Centre Party	A			X
<b>Switzerland</b>	Grüne Partei der Schweiz (Parti ecologiste suisse)	G	X	NA	X
	Nationale Aktion (Action nationale)/	RR	X	NA	X
	Schweizerische Demokraten				

Note: G=Green, Com=Communist, SD=Social Democratic, ChD=Christian Democratic, L=Liberal, A=Agrarian, Nat=Nationalist, E-R=Ethnic-Regionalist, RR=Radical Right; changed party names or mergers indicated in parentheses; NA = party not included.

**Table 3 Niche party membership of party families**

	<b>Benoit and Laver</b>		
	<b>Mainstream</b>	<b>Niche</b>	<b>Total</b>
Green	9	9	18
Communist	17	1	18
Social Democratic	27	0	27
Liberal	20	2	22
Christian Democratic	11	5	16
Conservative	19	1	20
Nationalist	7	3	10
Agrarian	7	2	9
Ethnic-regionalist	3	4	7
Special issue	1	1	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>149</b>

	<b>CMP</b>		
	<b>Mainstream</b>	<b>Niche</b>	<b>Total</b>
Green	32	38	70
%	45.7	54.3	
Communist	136	25	161
%	84.5	15.5	
Social Democratic	250	30	280
%	89.3	10.7	
Liberal	133	20	153
%	86.9	13.1	
Christian Democrats	119	35	154
%	77.3	22.7	
Conservative	136	6	142
%	95.8	4.2	
Nationalist	19	20	39
%	48.7	51.3	
Agrarian	53	8	61
%	86.9	13.1	
Ethnic-regionalist	57	31	88
%	64.8	35.2	
Special Issue	43	4	47
%	91.5	8.5	
<b>Total</b>	<b>978</b>	<b>217</b>	<b>1195</b>
%	81.8	18.2	

**Table 4 Niche party characteristics (1): age, size, party system size**

	<b>Party age</b>					
	<b>Benoit and Laver</b>			<b>CMP</b>		
	Mean	Median	n	Mean	Median	n
Mainstream parties	1963	1947	102	1959	1945	306
Niche parties	1974	1981	28	1969	1975	77

	<b>Vote share</b>					
	<b>Benoit and Laver</b>			<b>CMP</b>		
	Mean	Median	n	Mean	Median	n
Mainstream parties	15.28	10.35	144	15.00	10.44	978
Niche parties	4.71	2.3	41	5.78	4.01	217

	<b>Party system size</b>					
	<b>Benoit and Laver</b>			<b>CMP</b>		
		ENEP	n		ENEP	n
Mainstream parties only		3.73	4		4.22	42
One niche party		3.97	6		4.60	70
Two niche parties		4.03	6		5.10	29
Three or more niche parties		6.35	6		5.00	26

**Table 5 Niche party characteristics (2): policy extremism**

	<b>Benoit and Laver</b>	
	<b>Mainstream parties</b>	<b>Niche parties</b>
<i>Left-right</i>		
mean distance (s.d)	4.32 (2.33)	4.61 (2.59)
n	143	39
<i>Immigration</i>		
mean distance (s.d)	3.99 (2.40)	8.52 (0.85)
n	175	11
<i>Environment</i>		
mean distance (s.d)	3.39 (2.23)	7.96 (0.95)
n	176	10
<i>Social liberalism</i>		
mean distance (s.d)	4.56 (2.39)	7.73 (0.96)
n	168	10
<i>Decentralization</i>		
mean distance (s.d)	2.63 (1.81)	7.05 (0.93)
n	181	5
	<b>CMP</b>	
	<b>Mainstream parties</b>	<b>Niche parties</b>
<i>Left-right (logged)</i>		
mean distance (s.d)	0.90 (0.77)	1.03 (0.72)
n	987	180

**Note:** mean distance refers to the mean distance from the midpoint, i.e. 10.5 on the 1-20 scale, for the Benoit and Laver data; for the CMP data, mean distance refers to 0 on the logged left-right scale; standard deviations in parentheses.

Figure 1 Schematic representation of niche and mainstream parties

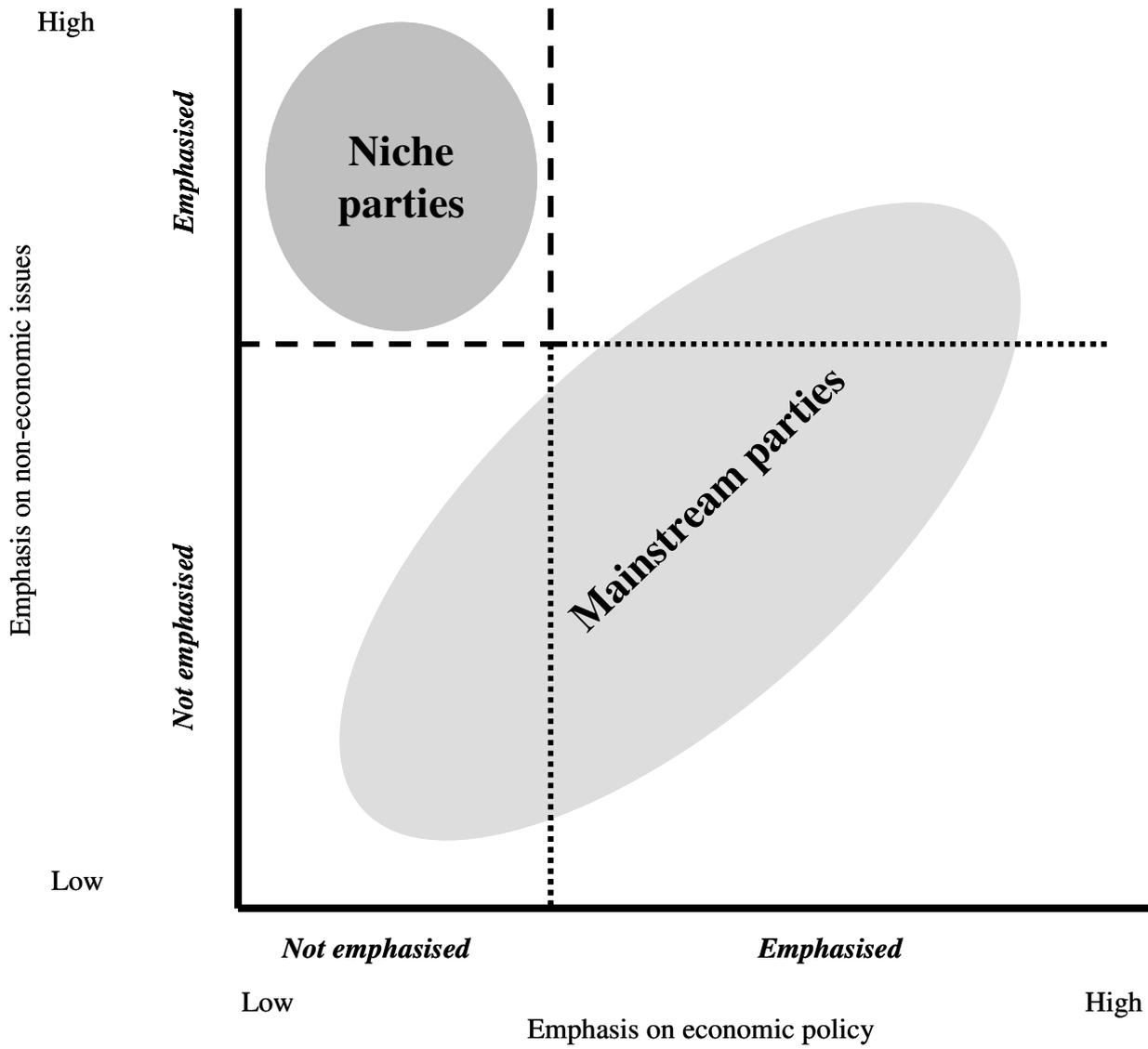
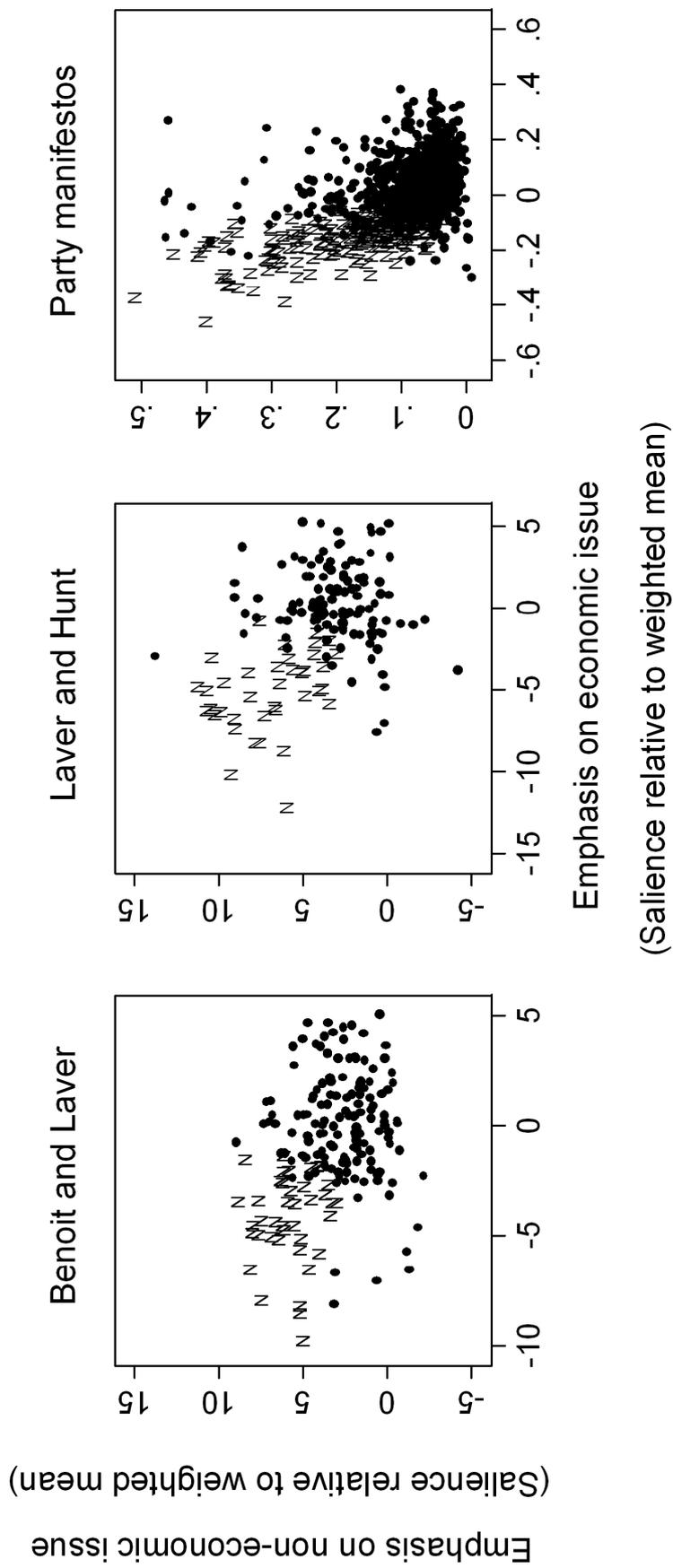


Figure 2 Niche parties according to expert surveys and party manifestos



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**Appendix:** The assignment of CMP issues into aggregate issue areas

**Economy:** 401 (Free Enterprise: Positive), 402 (Incentives: Positive), 403 (Market Regulation: Positive), 404 (Economic Planning: Positive) 405 (Corporatism), 406 (Protectionism: Positive), 407 (Protectionism: Negative), 408 (Economic Goals), 409 (Keynesian Demand Management: Positive), 410 (Productivity), 411 (Technology and Infrastructure), 412 (Controlled Economy: Positive), 413 (Nationalisation: Positive), 415 (Marxist Analysis: Positive), 503 (Social Justice: Positive), 504 (Welfare State Expansion: Positive), 505 (Welfare State Limitation), 701 (Labour Groups: Positive), 702 (Labour Groups: Negative), 703 (Middle Class and Professional Groups)

**Foreign policy:** 101 (Foreign Special Relationship: Positive), 102 (Foreign Special Relationship: Negative), 103 (Anti-Imperialism: Positive), 104 (Military: Positive), 105 (Military: Negative), 106 (Peace: Positive), 107 (Internationalism: Positive), 109 (Internationalism: Negative)

**Liberal-authoritarianism:** 305 (Political Authority: Positive), 603 (Traditional Morality: Positive), 604 (Traditional Morality: Negative), 605 (Law and Order: Positive)

**Democracy:** 201 (Freedom and Human Rights: Positive), 202 (Democracy: Positive), 203 (Constitutionalism: Positive), 204 (Constitutionalism: Negative)

**Urban-rural:** 703 (Farmers: Positive)

**Cultural-ethnic relations:** 601 (National Way of Life: Positive), 602 (National Way of Life: Negative), 607 (Multiculturalism: Positive), 608 (Multiculturalism: Negative), 705 (Underprivileged Minorities: Positive), 706 (Non-economic Demographic Groups: Positive)

**Education:** 506 (Education Expansion: Positive), 507 (Education Expansion: Negative)

**Environmental protection:** 416 (Anti-Growth Economy: Positive), 501 (Environmental Protection: Positive)

**European integration:** 108 (European Integration: Positive), 110 (European Integration: Negative)

**Decentralisation:** 301 (Decentralisation: Positive), 302 (Centralisation: Positive)