



Can (Inter-party) Politics “Disappear”?¹

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ABSTRACT Based on observational as well as experimental accounts, this meta-analytical article deals with the structure of opportunities and limitations that is encountered in party competition by political actors (especially parties, but, in more personalized contexts, also candidates) when they try to decide whether to prioritize between strategies based on the differentiation of positions on political issues and strategies based on factors that are not directly related to competing on issues. Further, the article outlines the mechanisms that serve to interconnect these two strategies and thus lead to a full-fledged political competition with sufficiently developed positional differentiation. In contrast, emphasizing the disappearance of “the politics of goals” in favour of “the politics of outcomes” is not, according to the current state of knowledge in the field, a rewarding strategy of political competition among parties.

KEYWORDS Politics, political parties, party competition, political space, position, valence, issue ownership

The politics of goals and the politics of outcomes: position, valence, and issue ownership

In current European political thought, discussions on “the disappearance of politics” have been fairly animated. *Politiek van goede bedoelingen* [The Politics of Good Intentions] (1999; Czech translation 2001) by the Dutch philosopher Hans Achterhuis can be regarded as one of the manifestations of this stream of thought. Achterhuis’s work sharply criticizes the ways in which individual European countries and their respective ideologies approached the Kosovo issue, an issue of high saliency at the time Achterhuis was writing this book. In relation to the framing of the Kosovo operation as humanitarian, Achterhuis asks if this

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marks the end of the era when the core of politics was competition among differing interests, in favour of the politics of “moral decisions” within which the role of politicians is to solely talk about the means of implementing these decisions – but the goals are generally shared. According to Achterhuis, this change in emphasis is based on a seriously misguided presupposition that social outcomes can be “implemented” and that they depend, more or less, on an efficient technique of implementation, rather than on any external factors. Achterhuis considers this emphasis on the means of implementation to be the biggest risk in current political development.

This article examines the incentives for the disappearance of politics that can be situated more in the domestic political sphere, particularly in its inter-party competition. It devotes attention to the way in which political parties handle political issues. More than anything, the article is a kind of a meta-analytical study that tries to capture the paradigmatic shift which has taken place in this area in the last several years. For those who prefer the politics of goals to the politics of means and outcomes, the article brings good news. This is because empirical studies have shown that even though the structure of opportunities that encourage parties to turn towards the politics of outcomes or at least to turn away from the politics of goals is quite broad and varied, the competition amongst political parties is governed by rules which themselves contain incentives that draw it back towards a competition about goals. At the same time, it has become clear that the relationship between the politics of goals and the politics of means and outcomes is further complicated by the fact that it is not a zero-sum game – a gain for one side does not automatically mean a corresponding loss for the other side.

I view “the disappearance of inter-party politics” more or less non-normatively, as a deviation from the usual, “normal” competition amongst political parties on issues, a competition that I define in accordance with Sartori (2005: 331) and de Vries (2010) on the basis of the categories of visibility and controversy. I presuppose that a necessary condition for the politicization of issues is that parties define their position on them, and that they do so by explicitly articulating what the issues are as well as by specifying in what ways their own position differs from the positions taken by their competitors, and in this way, a competition is created amongst the various parties. This makes it easier for voters to choose amongst the parties as it makes it easier to find a connection between their own position and that of the particular political party.

Let the opening premise of the discussion that follows be that everyone that works with political issues (whether a political party or a candidate) has several options as to how to strategically approach them. The first option is based on taking particular political *positions*, and it is connected to the parties’ efforts to get closer to the views of the voters while at the same time drawing nearer, or sometimes further away, from the positions of other parties. The second option, which in this article is called *valence*, has at its core an emphasis on the competence of the party (either in relation to a specific issue or in general). It targets voters’ confidence that this party does not just offer good solutions, but that it is capable, often in contrast to the competing parties, of actually achieving these solutions. Finally, the third option, here called *issue-ownership*, centres on making the issues that the party has traditionally been highly rated on by the voters appear more salient while de-emphasizing issues on which it has been rated otherwise. Even from this brief description it can be seen that, in terms of the

intensity of engaging in the conflict amongst various political goals, these three strategies are not of equal strength. While taking different positions on individual issues encourages political conflict, emphasizing the character of those responsible for political measures or highlighting the consistency between who they are and what they want links political conflict to the question of implementation. Stressing only certain issues and at the same time ignoring others leads to the rather paradoxical situation in which the political discourse contains issues that are sufficiently salient but not sufficiently contentious – and this again dangerously distances political competition from the politics of goals. This raises the question: Where in political competition can be found the mechanisms that correct its course and lead it back towards positional rivalry, from “non-competition” towards competition?

Political competition and “non-competition”: Downs, Stokes, Riker and “the rewarding tactics”

The first to systematically develop the idea of political “non-competition” was Anthony Downs, in the 1950s. Downs was more of a public choice economist than a political scientist. He summarized his thoughts in his deductively constructed dissertation, titled *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, which he wrote in 1957. After its publication in 1965 (Downs 1965), it became and continues to be one of the most widely cited works of political science. In it, Downs devoted considerable energy to drawing extensive parallels between market competition and the political competition amongst parties. He based his work on concepts such as profit maximization, spatial location in the (political) market, voter rationality, and the accessibility of political information. He drew on the work of economists Harold Hotelling (1929) and Arthur Smithies (1941) that focused on locating companies in the most competitive spatial location possible.

In Downs’s world, which this American political scientist himself, on several occasions, describes as ideal and hypothetical, there are two basic types of actors in politics. One type is represented by political parties or candidates, whose goal is to maximize the number of votes they get in elections. The other type consists of voters, who aim to maximize the personal benefit they can get from their choice. What makes finding common ground between parties and voters easier are political issues. Downs assumes that, on the one hand, every voter hopes to gain something from the executors of political authority, and that some of these hopes are stronger than others. On the other hand, parties take positions on issues, and in this way hope to gain the votes of the electorate, or at least as much of it as possible. Thus, both types of actors are “maximizers” in that they behave so as to gain as much profit from the election as they can (cf. Chytilek 2014: 23–24).

In every spatial dimension, which constitutes an analytical substitution of one political issue, voters as well as parties can be represented by their ideal point – the most widely preferred political solution or policy result. The simplest analytical example is just one dimension of politics, in which the voters’ preference is tightly connected to the spatial proximity of the voter and the candidate, and the voter simply chooses the candidate whose position is closest to his or her own. However, politics is fundamentally multidimensional, and so voters have to view the benefit from their preference as the total of the vector distances between

their personal ideal point and the ideal points of each party on each topic. Voters consider each party in this way, and then create a party differential amongst them – the difference of the benefits from their preferences. If this differential crosses a certain limit, which is individually based, the voter decides to vote, and if this limit is not crossed, the voter remains indifferent, saves the costs, and does not vote. It is this effort to save the costs of the voters as well as their own that leads parties to present their policies through their “ideologies” as well. These ideologies do not represent a set of specific political measures but rather offer a normative view of the world, “how it should be”, which is often quite vague and can be interpreted in many different ways. Ideologies form one of the spatial dimensions, and if they are to fulfil the role of a cognitive shortcut for the voters, their content has to correlate sufficiently with the specific political measures of the respective parties (Downs 1965: 102–103).

Downs’s ideas about how political competition amongst parties develops are discussed in the eighth chapter of his book. Downs’s preliminary assumption is that in bipartisan systems with a unimodal distribution of voters, parties have strong incentives to take positions close to the median voter (“in the middle” of the electorate) because this strategy brings them the most votes. Nevertheless, he immediately weakens this argument, which would otherwise logically lead to an overlap in the positions of political parties and therefore to “non-competition”, by asserting that this rule does not have to apply absolutely – the middle strategy increases the risk that voters from the edges of the distribution spectrum will not cast their votes. Rather, they will choose to abstain or not take part in the election at all (this expresses the idea of elastic demand proposed by Arthur Smithies). At first sight, this voter strategy seems irrational since, after all, spatial logic presupposes that voters should always vote for the party spatially closer to them. However, in democracies, elections are repeated acts. Therefore, voters who support a more extreme position on a particular issue expect the party to “learn its lesson”, and then in the next election, rather than again taking a middle-position, to promote a more extreme position closer to the voters standing on the extreme.

This is also why Downs repeatedly emphasizes in his work that it is precisely the distribution of voter preferences that is the key variable in the shape of political life because it influences the strategies of the political parties and, in general, their spatial competition. For instance, if the distribution of the voters has two peaks and the peaks are at a great distance from each other, it leads to an instability in the political system – the political party that has won tries to please the voters whose votes ensured its power to govern, and it implements policies that bring only marginal benefits to the voters who did not vote for it, due to the large spatial distance between them and the party. In an extreme case, this situation causes a collapse of the regime and a revolution (Downs 1965: 120). When voters are distributed more or less evenly along the entire political spectrum (poly-modal distribution), bipartism becomes difficult or even impossible, and multipartism is the natural mode of the competition amongst political parties, if the electoral system does not block it with an institutional obstacle (cf. Chytilík 2014: 25–27). However, for the purposes of this article it is important to take into consideration that, regardless of voter distribution or institutional factors such as the features of the electoral system, competition in the political space always offers parties some incentives to differentiate themselves in connection to political issues. For Downs and

his followers (e.g. Robertson 1976), the question is only the range of the differentiation and the flexibility this range exhibits over time.

A fundamental critique of Downs’s model was published in the prestigious journal *American Political Science Review*, in an article by Donald Stokes (1963). In relation to competition and “non-competition”, Stokes makes two important arguments that are relevant for the discussion here. The first one concerns the fact that Downs’s model is too static in terms of the structure of the political issues. Stokes criticizes this model for not taking into account the presupposition that the dimensions of the political conflict amongst parties may develop (some may open, others may close), and so may their saliency as perceived by the voters. According to Stokes, Downs’s theory lacks an explicit integration of the presupposition that in political competition, different issues are represented to a different degree at different times. He sees the dichotomous character of the category of the present in Downs’s thinking as a cardinal misunderstanding of the character of political competition and as a simplification that completely devalues the explanatory capacity of Downs’s model. As he comments:

Political fortunes are made and lost according to the ability of party leaders to sense what dimensions will be salient to the public as it appraises the candidates and party records [...] But the skills of political leaders who must maneuver for public support in a democracy consist partly in knowing what issue dimensions are salient to the electorate or can be made salient by suitable propaganda. (Stokes 1963: 372)

Stokes connects this objection with another criticism, asserting that it is imprecise to assume, as Downs does, that in each dimension there exist many positions which make sense in respect to trying to gain more votes. According to Stokes, the dimensions of political conflict do not allow many such positions – in fact, the opposite is true. Usually, they allow only very few, and quite often, a reasonable voting position is represented by only *one* alternative: “The empirical point that needs to be made is that many of the issues that agitate our politics do not involve even a shriveled set of two alternatives of government action” (Stokes 1963: 372). Based on this, Stokes distinguishes between *positional issues* that allow spatial differentiation and *valence issues* that, in contrast, are characterized by offering one, by far the most advantageous, position that is held by almost all the voters as well as by almost all the parties or candidates.

When valence positions are presented in the past or present tense, they are linked with the purpose of someone gaining some political points through them or someone being blamed for something. When they are presented in the future tense, they hold political promises, and they contain the expectation that voters will evaluate which party is capable (“more competent”) to make these promises a reality. Empirically, Stokes finds a strong presence of valence issues in American presidential campaigns, issues that are connected to corruption, coping with economic crises, and with economic or post-war re-building. However, Stokes’s approach goes much deeper in this respect – it also includes the idea that the relationship between valence and positional issues is much closer than it might seem: “It is of course true that position-issues lurk behind many valence-issues” (Stokes 1963: 373). As Stokes sees it, the assessment of whether a certain issue is a valence or a positional issue should not be made a priori, but should be made in connection to analysis of how the issue is discussed in the political competition. Stokes also suggests strategies that are used to make

a positional issue out of a valence issue – if some fairly general political concept (for example, the fight against communism) is conceptualized at a secondary level so that it would allow a discussion about the best ways to solve it. Then positional differentiation is not only possible, but also likely. On the other hand, there are also strategies that are used to bring positional issues closer to valence issues. According to Stokes, this is done through hard-to-question social goals such “total prosperity” (cf. Chytilek 2014: 32–35). Therefore, much more than Downs, Stokes connects party politics with “non-competition” in which there is not enough conflict and in which the structure of issues with only one acceptable solution turns politics away from issues and towards who is more competent to solve them.

This disagreement between Downs and Stokes was later evaluated, with the perspective afforded by a decade, by the Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori. Sartori’s argument can be regarded as a sober defence of Downs’s original model. On the one hand, Sartori agrees with Stokes that the economic basis of Downs’s model is shaky and the question whether voters are really such strict maximizers of benefit as Downs asserts resists operationalization as well as the measurement that should follow it. On the other hand, Sartori also recognizes Downs’s undeniable contribution, in that his model opens the key question of the influence of the parties’ location in relation to one another (that is, the intensity of political competition) on their success. To put this even more clearly, Downs raises the question of what the “rewarding tactics of inter-party competition” is. In response to this question, Sartori says (and extensively explains in his model of polarized pluralism) that while Downs at first obviously emphasizes the centripetal character of party interactions and considers the centrifugal character to be only consequently enforced by circumstances, his own conception indicates that both the centrifugal and centripetal strategies are completely valid options in a party’s efforts to maximize the number of votes; that is, they both are “rewarding tactics” in elections. Therefore, the layout of the political space in which parties operate as well as the matter of the “rewarding tactics” of inter-party interactions are both foregrounded.

The theoretical conceptualization of the third category – issue ownership – is somewhat more recent. Just as Anthony Downs’s work was seminal in the area of political space theory, the main inspirational figure among issue-ownership theorists is another important American political scientist, a member of the Rochester School, William Riker. Riker was the first theorist to deal with the question of what rhetorical strategies are chosen by political actors in campaigning. As early as 1983, he came up with the terms “heresthetics” and “agenda control”. The purpose of heresthetics is to structure the political situation so that the user of heresthetics will win, “no matter if he persuades his opponents or not” (Riker 1983: 60). As far as the content of political campaigns is concerned, Riker (1993: 112) believed that the basic strategy should be to introduce and emphasize the issues on which a particular party feels itself to be strong and credible, rather than the issues that the party wants to use in discussion to confront the opposition. Riker has termed this the dominance principle. However, parties do not have an incentive to highlight the issues on which no one can gain a clear advantage, and therefore, such issues are usually not even present in campaigns. Riker has called this the dispersion principle. Thus the main goal of election campaigns (cf. Hammonds and Humes 1993: 142) is not to take specific political positions, but to decide which issues will bring the candidates the best strategic advantage by simply being made salient.

Therefore, the rewarding tactics of party competition is completely separated from spatial theories, when the concept is used in the classical sense, by its emphasis on issues on which the party considers itself to be strong and by its simultaneous effort to keep in the background the issues on which the party’s competitors feel strong. The fact that the key characteristic is the effort to gain dominance through manipulating the saliency of issues distinguishes issue-ownership theories from valence theories. In valence theories, parties compete on issues where there is one – by far the most strongly preferred – position, and the competition amongst parties is a competition for voters’ confidence that the party’s announced position is held credibly. However, the competition continues “within the issues”, – not “about the issues”, and neither is it then followed by a competition “through the issues”, which would be a key presupposition in theories of issue ownership. In regards to its relationship to competition and its intensity, issue ownership – which emphasizes saliency as a central characteristic in dealing with issues – is a more flexible concept than spatial competition (which supports it) or valence (which reduces it). Nevertheless, Riker’s stricter approach, in which parties only manage the saliency of the issues but conflict is avoided (the dispersion principle), brings the handling of issues closer to “non-competition”. Therefore, two out of the three strategies create incentives for “non-competition” and the disappearance of inter-party politics. Why does “non-competition” not take over in the end? The answer lies in the interconnectedness of the theories mentioned – especially the latest observational and experimental studies that show that the way in which these theories are used resembles the rock-paper-scissors game, in which one strategy has the potential to beat or at least neutralize the other.

Position, valence, and issue ownership as interconnected strategies of political competition amongst parties

The vitality of the politics of difference in spatial competition

Downs’s model was further elaborated in a whole range of studies that tried to add more variables, usually with the justification that the additions would bring the model closer to describing how competition amongst parties works in the real world² (cf. Chytilék 2014: 44–50). The first major elaboration was suggested by the American political scientist Bernard Grofman (1985). According to Grofman, the ways voters make decisions are complicated by the fact that they take into consideration as one of their reference points the status quo of parties’ positions on the issue at the moment, and they regard the position that each candidate has taken with a varying degree of reservation, called *discounting*. For instance, when a candidate

² In this context, it is necessary to also add that these modifications do not contradict the spirit of the model and that Downs had anticipated them. For instance, he says (Downs 1965: 39) that voters understand that the parties will not succeed in achieving everything and therefore, thinking about the party differential does not involve simply assessing election programmes, it is more about which of the points on the programme of the particular party can be realistically achieved. Downs also points out that voters put different degrees of emphasis on different issues, an assertion which was later incorporated into directional models.

brings up a position that differs widely from the status quo, the voter's line of thinking is that, if elected, most likely this candidate will not be able to change the status quo as much, and so the candidate's politics will end up somewhere in between his or her initial ideal point and the status quo. That voters usually underestimate the degree of change that is possible tends to lead the candidates to position themselves "further away" from a political issue (that is, to suggest political measures that will transform it more significantly). This can be seen as additional incentives for stronger positional differentiation, for the broadening of what is "imaginable" within the given political issue, and as a factor that works against the disappearance of inter-party politics.

Another way of looking at how parties locate themselves is offered by so-called *directional models*. In these models, important variables include not only the positions of voters and candidates, but also the status quo in the given political arena, often called the referential or neutral point. The key variable for assessing the benefit of the choice is not the absolute proximity and distance between the candidate's and the voter's positions, but their direction – that is, whether both the candidate's and the voter's ideal points are positioned in the same direction from the neutral point. Thus, in these models, "positions" do not refer so much to the absolute distance of the position from the neutral point, but more to the direction of the distance and also to the intensity with which the candidate represents the given direction. The position of the individual is therefore dichotomous (it is either for or against) and emotionally influenced, in that different individuals are interested in different issues to a different degree (cf. Classen 2007). The first of these models (Matthews 1979) is significant especially for its presupposition that it is not realistic to expect the voter to think about the candidates in terms of absolute distances, as is required within the framework of Downs's model. The costs of accessing this information are burdensome for the voter. The candidates can realistically hope to communicate to the voters only the direction in which they want to change the status quo. Voters then deduce their total benefit from the candidates based on how often the direction of the change corresponds (or does not correspond) with what they themselves want and on the relative intensity with which the voters as well as the candidates support the change in this or that direction (for more detailed information, see Merrill and Grofman 1999: 25–29; Eibl 2011: 69–72).

An alternative directional model, which has quickly become mainstream in regards to directional thinking, is offered by Stuart McDonald and George Rabinowitz (1989). As a key criterion, they add intensity into the model. When the voter as well as the candidate is on the same side from the neutral point, the voter's benefit from the candidate in this spatial dimension is always positive, and in the opposite case, it is always negative. The exact amount of the benefit then depends on the intensity of the voter's and the candidate's relationship to the neutral point. The further away the voter and the candidate are in the same direction from the neutral point, the bigger the voter's benefit from this choice. In contrast, with issues on which the candidate and the voter are close to the neutral point, the benefit is limited and small, and so these issues are not as important for the voter's decision-making. From amongst the candidates from whom the voter is equidistant according to basic spatial model, the voter always chooses the candidate who is further away from the neutral point and thus supports change with more intensity, in cases where it can be expected that the candidate will achieve this change, and the voter's benefit from this choice will therefore be more significant.

From the point of view of the problem under examination here, directional models pose an interesting question: in competition over issues, does it make any sense at all to locate oneself in a moderate position in relation to the current situation? If a voter who is slightly left of centre has to choose between a candidate who is positioned slightly to the right of centre (and of the voter) and a candidate who is on the extreme left, which one will the voter choose? While according to Downs’s model, the voter will choose the moderate candidate, directional models predict that the voter will choose the extreme candidate. Each model thus gives parties very different incentives as to how to locate themselves, and each implies a different range of competition amongst candidates. This conflict was tackled experimentally with a substantial delay.

Classen (2007) experiments with situations in which, when the choice is between two candidates, the spatial proximity model and the directional model each predicts a different choice to be made by the voter. He observes that when the choice is made in an environment of one-dimensional simplification (as in the American context, which is based on the liberalism – conservatism axis) and/or in the case of fairly expert or pragmatic issues, voters tended to follow the logic of the spatial proximity model. However, on the value-oriented issue of abortion, more voters made their choice in accordance with the directional model. But this was strongly so only amongst the participants against abortion. This phenomenon, which had been described earlier (Adams et al. 2004), is called *balancing*, and it pertains to conditions in which an individual purposefully chooses to support a much more radical position than the one where he or she stands. Voters do so because they dislike the status quo, and believe that the result of strengthening proponents of a spatially more extreme position forces a more radical change than they themselves would normally support. This, they believe, will result in a compromise between the radicals and the status quo, which will end up very close to these voters’ own position. It is important to point out here that Adams’s argument is permeated with the logic of spatial proximity models (for instance, it considers the candidates’ locations as well as the voters’ thinking about them to be positions which correspond to some content in the real world), and Classen uses this argument to question the suggestion that voters were influenced purely by directional logic on the issue of abortion.

The experiment conducted by Lacy and Paolino (2010), which randomly exposed subjects to experimental conditions in which there was one extreme candidate and one moderate candidate in an environment of multidimensional issue competition, provided quite strong evidence for the assertion that the spatial proximity model can serve as an adequate interpretive framework for voters’ decision-making, while the subjects’ behaviour did not demonstrate any evidence of the assumptions of the directional model. In contrast, a recent study (Kropko 2012) of the data from the American presidential election supported the assumption that both the voters who tend to follow directional logic and the voters who strictly follow spatial logic participate in the same election. Another interesting conclusion of this study was the failure to confirm the poorly tested presuppositions of McDonald et al. (1995) that spatial choice is used by less sophisticated voters and directional logic is used by more sophisticated voters. In terms of whether people vote spatially or directionally, the level of the voters’ sophistication did not play a role. The latest study devoted to this same problem in the European context (Fazekas and Méder 2013), in accordance with several earlier studies

(Lachat 2008; Pardos-Prado and Dinas 2012), concluded that in regards to the ratio of voting based on spatial proximity and on directional choice, an important aspect is the level of polarization (the magnitude of the ideological differences amongst the parties on the right-left axis). In countries with the highest level of polarization, both the basic types of spatial choice were represented with about the same frequency, while in little polarized political communities, the choice based on spatial proximity was a significantly more frequent expression of spatial choice than the directional option (cf. Chytilék 2014: 49–50).

Thus the rewarding tactics of political parties must take into consideration that in the electorate, there are voters who think strictly within the categories of proximity and distance, but there are also those for whom the crucial aspect is the direction of the proposed change. How do parties respond to this fact? Amongst empirical studies devoted to the spatial location of parties in multiparty environments, probably the most significant contributions to date are two studies published in 2014 and conducted by the same co-authors (Ezrow, Tavits and Homola 2014a, 2014b). They pose the question: under what conditions should parties locate themselves at more extreme positions from the median voter and under what conditions should they converge closer to it? As they see it, in order to assess which strategy is more advantageous, it is important to take into account that voters bear costs related to gaining information about different parties. Following in the footsteps of earlier studies (Alvarez 1999; Koch 2003), they present voters as individuals reluctant to take risks – the more uncertain they are about a party's programme, the less inclined they are to vote for it since, if things do not turn out well, it could lead to a result very different from their preferred choice. At the same time, from the point of view of clarity and a chance at an unbiased perception, more extreme positions are more advantageous than those in the middle, which hinder voters from easily formulating expectations as to how the party might behave if it comes to power and begins to govern.

The advantage of extreme parties is usually the clarity and consistency of their programmes, which is something that middle-position parties can provide only rarely. Middle-position parties also cannot match the level of the urgency of the issues promoted by extreme parties (cf. Hinich and Munger 1994, 1997; Kitschelt 2000). Similar arguments have been proposed by supporters of directional logic who contrast the “clear and strong positions” of non-centrist parties with the “ambivalent and lukewarm preferences” of parties positioned in the middle. Not only are centrist positions less clear, but, what is even more important, that is how they *appear to be*. Therefore, voters' costs related to gaining information about these parties increase, which in turn decreases the parties' attraction. According to Ezrow et al., this effect of “the curse of the middle” should be especially strongly demonstrated in countries where the party spectrum is not very stable and where voters have not had sufficient opportunity to develop long-term party affiliation. As Ezrow shows, typical examples of this are post-Communist countries with fluid party systems (Birch 2003; Tavits 2005), a low level of political partisanship, and weak institutionalization of political parties (van Biezen 2003; Tavits 2013), which causes very weak links between parties and society (the voters). The parties' instability also makes it harder to establish generally accepted categories of “the right” and “the left” (Tavits and Letki 2009), giving the parties incentives to behave inconsistently in relation to their programmes if they are elected (Druckman and Roberts 2007). Therefore,

such parties do not have long-term histories which allow voters to use information shortcuts in their cases, forcing the parties to use other ways of satisfying their voters with enough information. From this point of view, taking centrist positions is not advantageous.

Based on these kinds of ideas, Ezrow et al. have formulated different presuppositions for post-Communist countries and west European democracies – while in post-Communist countries support for a party, *ceteris paribus*, increases along with its distance from the median voter, in west European countries this effect is brought about by the party’s closeness to the median. Further, Ezrow et al. postulate that parties which are hard for voters to clearly identify ideologically will generally gain less support than parties that are easily identifiable (regardless of the given region). Finally, Ezrow et al. assert that voters in post-Communist countries feel surer about the positions of non-centrist than centrist parties. They tested these hypotheses on the data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). Both of the basic hypotheses were confirmed, as well as the two secondary ones that make up the suggested causal mechanism (the easier identifiability of the positions of extreme parties as opposed to centrist ones, and the weak election performance of hard-to-identify parties). These effects can be detected only in the data from post-Communist countries. In contrast, in developed democracies the relationships amongst these variables are changeable and uncertain. Ezrow et al. conclude by saying that their findings may have a broader significance as they indicate that in systems undergoing a transition, taking more extreme positions should be the dominant strategy, since centrist positions better representing the median voter do not pay off. Ezrow et al. present a similarly formulated argument in another article dealing with the influence of political partisanship and party identification on the taking of extreme positions. While in countries with a low level of partisanship and party identification it is advantageous to use the strategy suggested in their previous study and take extreme positions, in countries with a strong party tradition it is not necessary to so overtly provide cognitive shortcuts though party programmes, and parties therefore tend to take more moderate positions – and they do so even in places where the voters are polarized.

The hybrid character of valence competition

Nevertheless, positional location is just one strategy available to actors in political competition amongst parties. The other strategy is emphasizing the valence character of politics. Stokes (1992: 144) defines valence as a dimension of politics “on which parties or leaders are differentiated not by what they advocate but by the degree to which they are linked in the public’s mind with conditions or goals or symbols of which almost everyone approves or disapproves”. According to this definition, valence issues include not only political measures that a large majority of voters see as beneficial and desirable, and would like to be carried out as effectively as possible (such as promoting economic growth, suppressing criminality, and so on). Simultaneously, as Michael Clark (2009) points out, the concept of valence also includes more general characteristics of parties or candidates that are related to “nonpolicy related aspects, namely parties’ images with respect to competence, integrity, and unity”. Certainly, there can be other constitutive sources of valence as well. For instance, Lilleker (2014: 106–107) adds the party’s or the candidate’s chances of winning the election and the

enthusiasm generated by their main message. Therefore, according to the classical definition of this category of inter-party competition, voters evaluate political actors based not on their positions in a given dimension (such as crime or corruption) but based on the voters' *perception of the degree to which the political parties themselves* are near to or far from the ideal situation in the dimensions (such as crime or corruption). Thus, it is not sufficient to only hold an appropriate position on the issue. At the same time, the perceived trademark of the candidate or the party needs to be in line with this position. This factor has been aptly expressed by Giovanni Sartori (2005: 334), whose definition highlights the following characteristics of a valence issue: it is non-partisan, it is not the subject of any disagreement, but it does serve as a tool for parties to criticize one another for not acting in accordance with the positions they verbally claim to support.

Political science has been rather at a loss as to how to tackle valence *issue* competition, and various disagreements about what a valence issue is (allowing only one politically feasible solution) and what it is not make it almost impossible to operationalize valence in this way. The situation is somewhat easier in regards to the non-issue components of valence, that is, components that are not linked with concrete political issues but are nevertheless used in political competition because they give some actors an advantage over others. Primarily, this concerns the "incumbency advantage" (Fiorina 1981; Enelow and Hinich 1982; Austen-Smith 1987) and the state of the economy (Lewis-Beck 1988; Anderson 2000; Alvarez and Nagler 1998). However, to better understand the valence choice phenomenon, it is necessary to operationalize factors such as political scandals, party disunity, and the assessment of a party's overall competence (Clark 2008).

It is precisely these factors, tightly connected with the politics of outcomes and "non-competition," which can generate incentives for actors lagging in these areas towards a wider *spatial* differentiation. While this in no way diminishes the influence of valence factors in political competition, it does again increase the significance of spatial factors. This premise is formulated in the frequently cited work of McDonald and Rabinowitz (1998) in which they ask why in two-party systems convergence towards the median voter does not usually take place. In McDonald and Rabinowitz's opinion, it is due to valence politics and issues such as the state of the economy, which they nevertheless connect mainly with the performance of the government and the governing party. In the case of the government's weak performance and, simultaneously, very similar positions of parties on issues, support for the governing party would completely collapse. Therefore, political actors choose a location further away from their political competitors so that even in the case of unsuccessful government, there would be voters to whom they are spatially closer and for whom their spatial proximity or distance serves as a basis for their choice in elections. Thus, as McDonald and Rabinowitz see it, the fact that there exist valence issues which turn political competition towards the non-issue valence of parties necessarily encourages spatial differentiation amongst parties. This then leads to equilibrium in political competition, in which there is always the valence dimension connected to a retrospective assessment of the government, as well as positional issues on which there is sufficient spatial differentiation amongst parties.

Here it is interesting to note that a similar argument had been brought up by Downs, too. Downs analyzes a hypothetical situation in which the platform positions of the government

completely overlap with those of the opposition, a scenario in which it is then the voters’ assessment of the competence of the government and the opposition that resolves the situation. According to Downs, this is the reason why the opposition, which in contrast to the government can choose the distance of its position from that of its competitor, rarely takes the same position as the government; without access to the state budget and the power of government, the opposition has less of a chance to demonstrate its competence. It is of course possible that the reputation of the government and its governance is very bad, and then the voters’ assessment of who is more competent will turn out more favourably for the opposition. However, as Downs argues, even this is not a good reason for the opposition to take the same position as the government and thereby in effect identify itself with government policies. Even in this situation, positional differentiation is a surer way to win the election.

The premises regarding this type of relationship between valence and positional preference were not confirmed until relatively recently (Clark and Leiter 2014), in a study that examines the influence of valence on voter choice in conjunction with the degree of the ideological dispersion of political systems. Conventional wisdom would suggest that in systems with little ideological polarization, character valence plays an important role in explaining voters’ preferences, probably more important than in ideologically fragmented political communities in which the party remains distant from a segment of the voters in the political space even in the case of a loss or gain in valence, and so it should be harder for the party to obtain their votes. However, the conclusion of Clark and Leiter’s study is counterintuitive, as the relationship they found is exactly opposite – the influence of the character valence of the party on election results increases with an increasing degree of polarization. The authors explain this finding by suggesting that an increased degree of polarization increases voters’ interest in politics and their cognitive needs are higher, and that is why they pay more attention to valence. Given the fact that Clark and Leiter used aggregated data in their research, their proposed explanation can be regarded as only an untested presupposition. Nevertheless, it brings a new insight into the relationship between valence and spatial competition, which can be seen as two categories that sometimes complement each other and sometimes even support each other.

In other words, for a party which regards itself as having very good chances in “the politics of outcomes”, it is not advantageous to diminish the politics of goals and political conflict because this strategy does not increase the benefits that can be obtained from a strong position in the area of valence – in contrast, it decreases them. Clark and Leiter assert nothing less than that a rewarding strategy for parties with high valence is to simultaneously encourage a positional issue conflict because it is this conflict that brings foregrounds their valence advantage, more so than in the case of competition without positional polarization. This conclusion has been confirmed by another study (Pardos-Prado 2012), which found that in reality valence choice offers a stronger explanation in party systems as well as electorates that are more polarized than in those that are more consensual. In respect to issues such as immigration and the environment, an increasing degree of polarization activates voters’ preferences more intensely based on both spatial and valence criteria. For the Spanish political scientist, this was evidence that both strategies support each other by generally drawing voters’ attention to political topics.

Issue ownership as an ideal type

The conceptualization the working of ideal competition based on the mechanism of issue ownership has been developed by Dolezal et al. (2014). The central characteristic should be issue differentiation which is expressed in each party preferring to “talk” about issues that are different from those of other parties. Another premise is that even though parties differ in the amount of attention they pay to individual issues, they do not significantly differ in the positions they take on any given issue. Therefore, from these two assumptions it is possible to deduce that parties differ more in the emphasis they place on issues than in the positions they take on them. The fourth premise is that parties focus especially on the issues they “own”. Thus, according to the definition used here, this type of competition is more a “non-competition”. That is why it is fitting to examine 1) whether it is realistic for this kind of competition to even take place, and 2) whether in any country, if there exists a significant imbalance in how parties are associated with political issues or they are granted different levels of competence on them, some competition does take place.

Issue ownership is a fairly stable variable. The relationship between competition for the ownership of a certain issue and a party’s position on this issue is even closer than the relationship between a party’s position and its valence. As has been shown for instance by the American political scientist Bonnie Meguid (2005, 2008) and the Austrian political scientist Markus Wagner (2012), new issues – or issues that were being purposefully overlooked by mainstream actors – are most often introduced into political discourse by new, initially small parties that take an extreme position (that is, a position that is very far from other political actors), and only later does the saliency of these issues sometimes increase for other actors as well. This observation has even been linked with the formulation of the concept of the *niche party*, that is, a subject that enters into the party system thanks to its focus on just the issues that are not dominant or not even addressed at all within the political system. A niche party takes a clearly identifiable position far from the other parties, and that at the same time promotes the valence of these issues. This line of argumentation has been further developed (Tavits and Letki 2014) to include the strategies of mainstream parties that for some reason are not satisfied with the current dimensional structure of political issues, and so try to change the structure or at least attempt to modify the valence of particular issues. This elaboration is significant in that it does not link the potential risks for the politics of goals only with niche parties, but shows that, occasionally, parties of various origins have incentives to exit this type of inter-party competition.

Narud and Valen (2001) point out the effect of the link between issue ownership and a party’s extreme position. They notice that in Norway, some issues have two owners. In these cases, the owners are regularly located on opposite sides of the political spectrum within which they take extreme positions. This is caused by the effect that has been documented in Lanz (2014), that is, that voters may be willing to award the highest competence on a certain issue even to a party with which they do not identify. Therefore, the ability of a party to gain issue ownership is not adversely affected by a significant difference in the spatial location of the party and the voter. It is more important that the position of the party can be clearly distinguished from that of other parties. Another study (Lachat 2014) attempted to further specify this assumption. Based on data from the 2011 Swiss elections, it demonstrated

that, from the view of election decision-making at the individual level, competence issue ownership is a variable that moderates the effect of spatial distances. Put in another way, in reference to spatial models, granting competence issue ownership to a party means that the voters behaved in the election “as if they were closer to it” than they in fact were. Thus for a party, the cost it pays for broader spatial differentiation and location in space that is not “inhabited” by many voters is well compensated for by the ownership of an issue that moderates spatial distances and so causes the party to be elected even by voters who are spatially closer to a different party (to which they grant lower competence).

The individual strategies of voters/parties in an environment in which someone owns political issues have been analyzed in a number of studies. Traditional research on issue ownership tends to presuppose that parties try to build and maintain their reputation on the issues that they own and at the same time they consciously somewhat suppress other issues. However, this presupposition has been questioned by several studies, especially from the American and British contexts (Damore 2004, 2005; Sides 2006, 2007). These studies indicate a growing effort on the part of candidates to communicate in their campaigns about issues that have been traditionally perceived as owned by their competitors. A whole range of reasons have been offered to explain this – primarily, it is because of the external pressures which sometimes simply make it impossible to avoid certain issues. Nevertheless, in some cases it may be due to upward-turning factors and efforts to represent a position on the given issues that would resonate with the voters’ views. Moreover, Coffey (2014) even directly states that in US elections, the amount of space that parties devote to individual issues in their platforms does not correlate negatively (as theories of issue ownership would suggest), but positively. This empirical argument corresponds with the theoretical assumption of Bonnie Meguid who, already in 2005, considered the strategies mainstream parties should choose in response to the aggressive attempts of niche parties to gain ownership of certain issues. Meguid thought that the rewarding strategies of mainstream parties would in this case be either to show a complete disinterest in the issue and try to totally ignore it or to swiftly adopt the issue as one of their own, *including the position* held by the niche party. Nevertheless, according to this American political scientist, it is necessary for *all* the parties in the party system to do so as part of a coordinated effort, not only the immediate competitors of the niche party who are closest to it spatially. This condition is much easier to postulate theoretically than to achieve practically. Especially in multi-party systems with more (four, five) parties, it is actually likely that one of the parties will begin to differentiate its position from that of the niche party and will try to compete with it. This then leads not only to increasing the significance of the particular issue, but also of the importance of both (all) of the parties competing on it, making it easier for niche parties to become established in the party system, and encouraging the other parties to differentiate their position on the issue in question.

Dolezal et al. (2014) examined in the Austrian example how this competition unfolds in a country in which parties have long-term claims on certain issues. The Austrian political system, with many established parties (such as FPÖ, BZÖ and the Greens), offers a particularly suitable test case. In spite of this, the average overlap in the platform issues of pairs of parties was around 75 %. It was also very interesting to test another premise of the theories of issue ownership, according to which party positions should not significantly differ on individual

issues. The election competition worked in this way in relation to about half the issues, some of which (for instance economic incentives and the environment) could be called valence issues here, but others (such as subsidies for urban vs. rural communities, investing in labour vs. investing in capital, or constitutional development) were clearly positional issues and should have encouraged issue polarization. Dolezal et al. linked this with the long-established historical agreement in Austrian consensual democracy about which political goals are to be preferred. However, they observed a full-fledged political conflict over not only characteristically polarizing issues such as multiculturalism and the relationship with the EU, but also on more valence issues such as domestic security. The positional differentiation was larger on issues that Kreisi et al. (2006) and Kreisi (2008) have called “the new socio-cultural issues” than on issues related to the economy. However, on the whole, the second premise has been refuted.

It is apparent that only on a single issue, the environment, did the parties differ much more strongly in the saliency they granted this issue than in the positions they held on it. In relation to many other, mainly socio-cultural issues, the pattern was exactly the opposite: the parties differed more in their respective positions than in the saliency the issues had for them. With respect to economic issues, the differences in the degree of saliency and the positions were about the same, but slightly bigger in the position dimension. The data revealed a fairly surprising pattern – as for the issues on which a party’s position strongly differed from the position of other parties, apart from some exceptional cases, the party usually did not devote any more attention to this issue than its competitors. It is possible that in relation to specifically these issues, the positional differentiation of a particular party offers incentives to the other parties to prevent this differentiated party from gaining not just ownership of the issue, but also potentially a position with which voters will gradually come to identify after granting ownership of the issue to the only party talking about it. This demonstrates the complicated relationship between issue ownership, “competing through issues”, and the positional decisions of the various actors.

Therefore, in the context of the examination of “non-competition” in this text, let us suggest the following causal mechanism: when trying to gain issue ownership (the strongest possible association with and/or granted competence on a certain issue), the rewarding tactic for political parties is significant positional differentiation on this issue (taking a different spatial position) in respect to other parties. However, after a party has claimed ownership of some issue, this differentiation contributes to suppressing the activation of the principles of dominance because at least some of the other parties continue to discuss the issue, and so a competition in which the main mechanism would be issue ownership in its pure form does not take place. Instead, the resulting competition takes the form of differences in the degree to which parties assign significantly lower saliency to individual issues are, and at the same time, there is a much stronger positional differentiation than the theory of issue ownership assumes. This theory can thus be regarded as more than just an ideal type that suggests a possible tendency of party competition, but a tendency against which there exist, in the mechanism of competition, certain counter forces that lead the struggle back to a mode that remains a full-fledged “competition”.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to provide at least a brief overview of the structure of opportunities and limitations related to the potential transition from competition strategies characterized by party conflict on political issues to other strategies. It has shown that, in the case of valence, it is the nature of the strategies themselves to offer actors (regardless of whether the valence is high or low) strong incentives to simultaneously take advantage of positional conflict. In the case of issue ownership, positional differentiation is a factor that contributes to parties’ efforts to create an imbalance in how they are associated with particular issues and in their ability to gain ownership of these issues. However, when this imbalance is actually achieved, it becomes a factor that prevents the parties that do not own the given issue from completely dropping out of the competition and the conflict connected to it.

Table 1: The main types of issue competition

Issue competition type	Rewarding tactics	Intervenes	Outcome
Spatial competition	Spatial placement with regard to the median voter and/or the party’s own electorate (depending on	Differences in party valence (character, issue)	Spatial competition moderated by valence considerations
Valence competition	Emphasis on the valence issues with high valence for the party	Character valence, incentives for positional differentiation	Spatial competition moderated by valence considerations
Competition “through issues” (issue ownership)	Emphasis on the saliency of the issues owned by the party	Resistance of other parties, issue agenda setting partly controlled by the media, the dominance principle not activated	Spatial competition moderated by valence considerations

Source: Chytlek (2014: 174)

Table 1 summarizes the conclusion of the preceding discussion. It shows that depending on which strategy parties or candidates initially prefer in issue competition, the other strategies also gradually come into play. The result of their interplay is most often a competition between political parties in which the factors related to the parties’ conflicts caused by differing political positions as well as the factors related to non-issue aspects interact with “the character of the parties and/or candidates”. However, it is important to note that in any of these interactions incentives are not strong enough for the complete dominance of the politics of outcomes and thus of “non-competition”.

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