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The good, the bad, and the ugly: Patterns of issue competition between government, challenger and mainstream opposition parties in Western Europe

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Why did the meltdown of three reactors at Fukushima lead to significant politicisation of the issue of nuclear energy in Germany, but not in France? What explains why immigration became one of the most important issues in the Dutch political debate at the start of the century, while European integration became politicised much more recently? Both examples illustrate the considerable variation that exists in attention dynamics for issues across countries through time.

This dissertation can be placed in the growing literature on issue competition. According to this perspective, originally developed against the backdrop of US two-party competition, utility maximising politicians play the most influential role in determining the relative competition among political issues. Specifically, the governing party is expected to keep focusing on the issues that brought it into power, while the opposition attempts to mobilise issues that do not reinforce existing patterns of party competition and most likely divide the governing party.

To what extent can these insights be applied to more complex Western European multiparty systems? This study focuses on four strategies that capture the essence of issue competition, namely whether parties will: emphasise issues over which their potential electorate is divided, engage in dialogue on issues threatening existing patterns of party competition, mobilise wedge issues dividing (a coalition of) governing parties, and emphasise different aspects of issues than competitors. By employing a behavioural classification distinguishing between *challenger parties*, *mainstream opposition parties*, and *government parties*, this study demonstrates that previous experience in office forms a crucial factor in explaining whether parties will engage in the strategies at hand.

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