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Transformations of television systems: Implications for media content, political parties and political attitudes

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Chapter 4

Political Competition in a Fragmented Media Environment:

The immigration issue

Abstract[23]

Using the immigration issue as a case study, this chapter investigates the effects of two television system characteristics on political competition: (1) the dependence of television systems on advertising revenues and (2) the fragmentation of audiences. Comparing political issues with each other, the analysis shows that audience fragmentation is positively related with the relative salience of the immigration issue. Large parties tend to pay more attention to the immigration issue in fragmented television systems, compared to small parties. The chapter also reveals that political parties in more fragmented television systems tend to separate themselves from the radical-right 'owner' of the immigration issue in their positioning and the amount of attention they pay to the issue. The analysis therefore shows that the common 'imitation hypothesis' of the radical right is not stimulated by audience fragmentation. Advertising dependency generally yields the same direction of effects as audience fragmentation, but this relationship is not statistically significant.

Key Words*:* Party competition, media systems, audience fragmentation, cross-national comparative study, immigration issue.

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[23] This chapter is a revision of a paper by the author of this thesis.

4.1. Introduction

The role of media systems is an often neglected factor in explaining competitive strategies of political parties. Although this role is acknowledged in the literature, there is limited empirical knowledge of the factors explaining cross-national differences in parties' political agendas and, particularly, how these are affected by the nature of media systems. Media systems vary substantially across countries but it has remained largely unknown how these systems affect the relationship between mass media and macro-level politics (Green-Pedersen & Krogstrup, 2008, p. 610; Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010, p. 677).

Few, if any, studies have empirically investigated how media systems characteristics affect political party competition. This paper aims to fill part of this gap by investigating how television system characteristics affect the agenda of political parties and their competitive strategies. This is done through a cross-sectional comparative study of 16 political systems using the issue of immigration as a case study to understand to what extent variations in television systems can explain differences in political competition across countries[24].

In Western Europe, commercialisation is a concept that is often used to indicate the transformations that have taken place in television systems since the onset of the liberalisation process in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the literature there seems to be a consensus that commercialisation implies that "economic criteria have become more important for decision in the media than journalistic ideals" (Holtz-Bacha, 2007, p. 64). Commercialisation has gone hand in hand with a process of differentiation of media markets and television markets in particular. The number of television channels has increased massively and continues to do so. These developments are likely to have consequences for political parties. Like media products, political parties have to compete in order to get public

[24] Although Belgium has two separate media systems, Belgium is considered here as one political system.

attention, while success is measured by audience shares (Holtz-Bacha, 2007). Since the start of the liberalisation process in the 1980s, the dual process of audience fragmentation and the increasing dominance of market logic in the media have posed a fundamental challenge to political parties.

Despite the higher availability of media, media attention remains *structurally* limited. Media attention is nowadays almost the only doorway to the public sphere (Koopmans, 2004), and political parties therefore compete to gain access. Criteria of newsworthiness and the potential to attract audiences determine who and what receives media attention. Media coverage might favour particular issues and particular politicians if these issues have a higher potential to attract audiences. This is more likely to be the case when competition for audiences and revenues between media is high.

This chapter investigates how competition intensity between television channels as measured by audience fragmentation as well as dependency on advertising is related to dynamics of political competition. This chapter tests two hypotheses about the relationship between the new television environment and party competition. The first is the *imitation hypothesis*, which emphasises the role of the media in leading political communication, and which predicts that in highly competitive and advertising-dependent television systems political parties will imitate the radical right because in such systems the radical right receives extensive media attention. The second is the *distinction hypothesis*, which predicts that political parties will distinguish themselves more from the radical right's political stances in more competitive media environments. They are expected to do so, because in this way they are more likely to receive attention from different

segments of audiences in highly fragmented television systems. The following sections will further outline the conceptual framework and hypotheses.

4.2. A changed media environment

Over the past two decades, West-European television markets have transformed from supply markets that were largely dominated by public television to demand markets characterised by increasing competition for audiences between commercial and public broadcasting stations. European television systems have become increasingly dependent on commercial revenues while the monopoly of public television disappeared to make place for a more competitive broadcasting system. Due to increased technological possibilities, media companies have increasingly used multi-channelling to reach and gain more audiences. As a consequence, audiences have become more and more fragmented.

This study focuses on two dimensions of television systems that characterise the new media environment: (1) the dependency on commercial revenues and (2) the intensity of competition as reflected in the audience fragmentation across television channels. Chapter 2 showed that these two variables are largely independent from each other.

Changes of media systems along these two main dimensions are a useful way of assessing the degree to which media systems are dominated by the economic logic. As the dependency on advertising revenues grows and the audience shares per channel decrease, the media may be pushed to adopt economic criteria as the most important guideline for assessing newsworthiness, and, hence, news selection. Audience fragmentation can also be seen as an indication of heterogeneous audiences and the increasing difficulties the media but also political

parties have in reaching large publics. This could imply that in such fragmented media environments selecting news that target specific audiences could become an important criterion in the process of selecting news. In this context, news selection would be guided by two mechanisms: (1) targeting large groups when possible, which implies focusing on popular themes, alongside (2) separate targeting of specific groups. Television channels and programmes might employ these two mechanisms at the same time or separately.

4.3. Party responses and the issue of immigration

The 'production bias' stems from the need to manufacture news that is able to attract and retain mass audiences. In order to produce appealing news, the media employ three production biases: simplification, personalisation, and symbolisation (Entman, 1989, p. 49). This would lead to a bias towards dramatic and sensational issues, which could also push political parties to perceive these issues as important to the public. Political actors therefore see a need to engage with these issues. Whether the issue is important for the public is less relevant as long as politicians perceive this to be the case (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). If this assumption holds, media competition for audiences would affect political parties directly, irrespective of public opinion. Because of the assumed preference for simple, straightforward stories, competitive media environments may also be characterised by a preference to report about extreme rather than on more nuanced policy positions. Centrist policy positions require more time to explain, while radical positions are more clear-cut and fit more easily in short sound bites.

This production bias is thus more likely to exist in more competitive media systems because of the higher pressure to attract audiences through focusing on

sensational issues. The production bias does not only pertain to the substance of news but also to the way it is reported, coinciding with a tendency to report in a dramatic and negative way, emphasising the urgency of the situation and the need for immediate political action. Tendencies to negativism in the media are often seen as an "inevitable consequence of increased media competition and the commercialization of broadcasting." (Schulz et al., 2005, p. 75). Because sensational issues are often issues associated to dramatic events these are the issues where media effects are most likely to occur.

The immigration issue is one of the political issues on which the media is likely to report using sensational language and images (e.g., massive arrival of boat migrants, associations with crime and terrorism, migrants' flows and migrants' floods, migrant invasion of 'biblical proportions'...). Especially after 9/11, the immigration issue gained more attention in the media and has become increasingly associated to terrorism and crime. This makes immigration suitable for the purpose of this analysis.[25] This paper investigates how political parties react to such competitive media environments with regard to the immigration issue.

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[25] Media system effects are probably not only conditional on the sort of issue but also on its 'novelty' cycle. Both the nature and the novelty of an issue determines it newsworthiness and, hence, its media relevance. There is some evidence that the lack of novelty is one aspect that causes topics to decay in media coverage (Wu & Huberman, 2007).

4.4. The party system level: The relative saliency of the immigration issue in comparison with other issues

It is a common assumption that commercialisation of media has contributed to the rise of populism over the past decades. As Mazzoleni argues:

> "The distinctive nature of the modern commercial media and their enormous capacity to affect the opinions and attitudes of mass audiences are key factors in the political arena and their contribution to the rise of populist groups in several national instances is a field that warrants investigation . . . It is a truism that the media simply cannot ignore what is newsworthy, and clearly newsworthy are the politicians defying the existing order, their abrasive language, their public protests, and the emotive issues brandished by charismatic leaders." (Mazzoleni, 2004, p. 3).

Mazzoleni argues that the increasing dominance of the economic logic in media has pushed media to give access, visibility and legitimacy to populist and extreme right-wing parties. In this perspective, the influence of the media is mainly exerted through influencing public opinion. The effects of the media may however go beyond public opinion by directly affecting political competition between parties, by giving more media attention to some political parties, leaders, and issues than to others.

According to several scholars, the attention given to the immigration issue and radical right leaders by the media has been one of the reasons behind the success of radical right wing parties (Mazzoleni, 2008; Mazzoleni, Sterwart, & Horsfield, 2003; Mudde, 2004; Vliegenthart & Boomgaarden, 2007; Walgrave & De

Swert, 2004). Because of the economic logic within media, news that attracts a large audience is seen as the most newsworthy. Hence, the radical right and their issues receive more attention from media in more competitive and commercially oriented media systems (Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003). This suggests that when competitive and commercial pressures on the media are high, that is, when advertising dependency and audience fragmentation are high, the immigration issue is likely to have more saliency. This leads to the following hypotheses:

- **H1a**: *The relative importance of the immigration issue in comparison to other issues on the macro-political agenda is higher in television system where advertising dependency is high.*

- **H1b**: *The relative importance of the immigration issue in comparison to other issues on the macro-political agenda is higher in television system where audience fragmentation is high.*

4.5. Party level

4.5.1. Imitation as a competition strategy

I expect other parties to change their strategies when they notice the media paying extensive attention to the radical right and its issues such as immigration. Prior work argues that the effects of media on political parties' agendas depend on choices by political parties to react (engaging) or not (avoiding) to media attention. Parties have been shown to react to media attention only when the issue fits with their own agenda, and to avoid or ignore it when it does not. This shows that, instead of only passively reacting to media attention, parties also try to actively draw media attention to preferable issues (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010, p. 667). This concept of 'selective emphasis' puts the media in a passive position, and

ignores the structural limits of media attention that constrain the relative priority issues can get in media coverage.

While politicians may try hard to use a strategy of selective emphasis, as professionals, journalists and media companies have their own agendas and strategies of 'newsworthy' issue coverage. If the media are the leading actor in the construction of news, it is unrealistic to assume that journalists will be passively guided by politicians or that they cover politicians' priority issues that do not fit within their own audience-seeking motives. If a party 'owning' an 'attractive' issue succeeds in drawing media attention, the media tend to put pressure on other parties to take a stand on the same issue. The media have an interest in pursuing issues that fit their economic logic of drawing large audiences. Therefore, politicians often find themselves in a situation where they are compelled to engage instead of avoid. In addition, extensive media attention for particular issues may compel other parties to perceive the 'owning' party as an electoral threat. This may put pressure on other political parties to give strategic attention to this issue even if they do not find it important to close the gap between them and the radical right. This leads to the following hypotheses:

- *H2a: The gap between the radical right and other political parties in the level of salience given to immigration becomes smaller as advertising dependency in the television systems increases.*

- *H2b: The gap between the radical right and other political parties in the level of salience given to immigration becomes smaller as audience fragmentation increases.*

Parties' positions on issues are not only influenced by their own ideological position but also by media system characteristics, which are the focus of this study.[26] Because of the extensive media attention for immigration, we can expect parties to be tempted to pay more attention to this issue. In addition, because of the extensive media coverage of the radical right, parties might perceive the radical right as an electoral threat. The radical right might have gained public support and its views might have gained legitimacy because of the extensive media coverage (Mazzoleni et al., 2003). Parties would therefore be tempted to imitate the restrictive position of the radical right in order to gain public support. Political parties will react to the attention given to the issue owner (radical right parties) by adjusting their default position (prescribed by their ideological orientation) in order to be closer to the issue owner. This leads to the following two hypotheses:

- **H2c**: *In television systems where advertising dependency is high, political parties will position themselves closer to the radical right position.*

- **H2d**: *In television systems where audience fragmentation is high, political parties will position themselves closer to the radical right position.*

The imitation hypotheses predict a positive cross-level interaction between party type and television system characteristics.

Hypotheses H2c and H2d predict strong diffusion of restrictive immigration positioning across the political system in highly fragmented and advertising-dependent media systems. This might be seen as a 'contagion effect' from the anti-immigration party, with the whole political spectrum shifting to more restrictive positions, as observed and explained by Van Spanje (2010) and Davis (2012). The success of the anti-immigration party is not a necessary condition to find such

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[26] We assume that party competition takes place along one dimension that is largely contained by a general left-right ideological orientation.

media effects. The media may be driven to report on immigration because it is a sensational issue that attracts high audience shares. It can therefore rather be the *perceived* success of such parties created by extensive media attention that explains such contagion, and such media attention can therefore independently contribute to the success of the radical right. While Davis (2012) and Van Spanje (2010) attribute the shifting of political parties towards more restrictive immigration positions to the presence and success of a radical right party, they neglect the independent influence that media (system) factors may have. Although this study is cross-sectional and I cannot make firm assertions on causal effects, this study investigates whether media system characteristics fuel or rather discourage the imitation of the radical right by other political parties.

4.5.2. Differentiation and distinction as a competition strategy

The previous paragraph hypothesised that political parties try to imitate the position of the radical right parties because they have gained visibility, popularity and perhaps legitimacy in the media and are therefore perceived as an electoral threat. The previous section has paid attention to the role of the media as leading actors in the process. However, depending on the media environment, politicians may make specific choices that do not necessarily follow mainstream media attention. This section explains how the characteristics of the media environment may directly affect the choices of political parties to imitate or distance themselves from the issue owner.

Research on political campaigns partly attribute changes in campaign styles to media system changes, including commercialisation (Negrine, Holtz-Bacha, Mancini, & Papathanassopoulos, 2007). With the professionalisation of

campaigning, political communication has become a strategically planned affair in which parties use communication specialists to reach audiences that are no longer bound to parties by traditional ties. At the macro-level, the more fragmented audiences are, the more difficult the task of politicians to manipulate multiple news services to their advantage, and the lower the likelihood they will reach large audiences (Swanson & Mancini, 1996, p. 266). Nowadays, party campaigns use marketing strategies, increasingly relying on a *scientific* understanding of electorates to target specific categories of voters. Parties adapt their strategies to media requirements. Political figures increasingly appear on television channels and programmes that target specific audiences that are not commonly known to be very interested in politics, such as the youth. This may indicate that the marketing of political parties follows the segmentation of audience lines followed by media.

In addition, partisan audiences are likely to select news featuring the political figures and parties they prefer and reflecting their political predispositions (Klapper, 1960). In high-choice media environments the opportunity and tendency to select media that tend to reflect people's own values and beliefs is generally greater. Such a media environment gives more room to political parties to target audiences that are most likely to be receptive to their own points of view. From this perspective, it can be argued that the new television environment stimulates political parties to differentiate themselves from each other more than in the old television environment, which was more focused on mass audiences. Evidence of a relationship between the audience fragmentation of television news and political preferences has been found in the US context (Chalif, 2011). In the European context, a study by van Kempen (2007) has shown that the television news party parallelism was present. Although it was relatively low in comparison with press party parallelism its aggregate effect on voter turnout was important (Van Kempen,

2007, p. 313).[27] Audience fragmentation in the European context might be related to party preferences. This suggests that when audiences are fragmented each party is stimulated to target its own support base rather than imitating another party.

Moreover, a frequently used programming formula in competitive television environments is the 'oppositional' format of representation, in which politicians are 'asked' by the journalist to explain to the audience the differences in their positions. This formula stimulates the exposure of differences in points of views because imitation will be interpreted in favour of the opponent. Following this line of argumentation, we expect that parties will take more distance from the radical right among highly fragmented audiences. This leads to the following hypothesis:

- **H3***: As audiences become more fragmented, political parties take more distance from the radical right in:* **(a)** *their positioning and in* **(b)** *the saliency given to immigration.*

Hypotheses H3 (a/b) indicate a negative cross-level interaction between audience fragmentation and party type.

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[27] van Kempen (2007) measured television party parallelism by investigating the correlations between news programmes watched and party preference, using 1999 data on nearly the same sample of countries as this study.

4.5.3. Party size and the choice of imitation or distinction

In the political game, party size matters in how parties react to each other and to media system characteristics. Large parties tend to be 'catch-all' parties targeting the median voter. Large parties are also more likely to lose votes to new parties because they attract voters that are not part of the ideological grassroots of the party. If large parties focus their strategies on the margins instead of their core constituencies they would be tempted to imitate the successful formula of the radical right. Small parties are often niche parties and do not risk amending their agenda to compete with other parties. After all, their competitive advantage lies in their niche targeting. Particularly in a context where the radical right has an advantage in the media (which I expect in television systems with a high audience fragmentation and a high dependency on advertising revenues), imitation dynamics seem to be more applicable to large parties than smaller parties. In other words, larger parties will be more likely to imitate than to distinguish themselves from the radical right. This leads to the following hypotheses:

> ***H4a***: *In advertising-dependent television systems, large parties are more inclined than smaller parties to integrate the immigration issue in their agenda and shift their position closer to the issue owner (i.e., radical right parties).*

> ***H4b***: *In television systems where audiences are fragmented, large parties are more inclined than smaller parties to integrate the immigration issue in their agenda and shift their position closer to the issue owner (i.e., radical right parties).*

4.6. Control variables: Political and societal characteristics

In the interaction between media and political parties, characteristics of political systems may play an important role, and any analysis of media effects should control for them. Majoritarian and proportional systems differ in the number of parties and in the ideological position of political parties. In proportional systems, the number of parties tends to be larger and parties occupy a broader range of the ideological spectrum than in majoritarian systems (Cox, 1997). I control for the majoritarian versus proportional systems as it might affect political competition strategy.

In order to control for differences in political system characteristics, I use an updated index of Lijphart's executive-parties dimension (Lijphart, 1999), developed by Vatter (2009). Vatter's measure covers the period 1997-2006 and includes five variables: (1) the effective number of legislative parties; (2) the electoral disproportionality; (3) the executive-legislative relationship; (4) interest group corporatism; and (5) central bank independence. I label this variable consensualism[28]. I also control for the share of non-EU migrants in the country as a percentage of the total population, because societies with higher levels of non-EU immigration may have a higher inclination to see immigration as a problem.[29] In addition, I control for the size of the anti-immigration party.

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[28] Higher scores on this index indicate more consensus-oriented democracies (Vatter 2009: 153).
[29] Data are drawn from the World Bank Global Migrant Origin database.

4.7. Data and operationalisation

The data on the dependent variables as well as other party characteristics are drawn from the data set of Benoit and Laver (2007). In the 2002-2004 period,[30] Benoit and Laver conducted expert surveys of party positions on various policy dimensions –including immigration – in 47 different countries, including West- and East-European countries, Russia, North America, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Iceland, and Israel. This chapter focuses on the following 16 West-European political systems for which data on media systems have been gathered by Author: Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, UK, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, and Sweden.

Experts were presented with one policy dimension at a time, and asked to indicate where each party was located on a 20-point scale. In addition to the party's policy position, respondents were also asked to assess the importance of that policy dimension to each party, also on a 20-point scale. The position of parties with regard to immigration was measured on a 20-point scale, where lower scores stood for favouring policies designed to help asylum seekers and immigrants to integrate into society; and higher score stood for favouring policies designed to encourage asylum seekers and immigrants to return to their country of origin (Benoit and Laver 2007: 229). The importance score ranged from 0 to 20 with higher scores indicating that more importance is given to the immigration issue. The average score given by experts is used in the analysis.

In the same survey, experts were also asked to rank parties on their general left-right position using a 20-point scale. Following Sani and Sartori (1983) and Hazan (1995), this information was used to classify parties in 5 categories: the radical left (score 0-3.99), moderate left parties (4-7.99), centre parties (8-12),

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[30] Most of their data are from 2003.

moderate right parties (12.01-16), and radical right parties (16.01-20)[31]. The dimension used to assess political competition is the left-right continuum. Party positioning on immigration in the political space partially depends on their general political ideology. Although there is a debate on multi-dimensionality of parties' positions, most studies suggest that the multidimensionality of political issues at the party level can be reduced to the general left-right dimension, except for positions regarding European unification (Van der Brug & Van Spanje, 2009).

The data on media systems were gathered by using the yearbooks of the European Audiovisual observatory (EAO, 2004)[32]. Those countries are selected because they shared similar traditions of public broadcasting and they all experienced a liberalisation process of their television systems. As Benoit and Laver gathered most of their data between 2002-2004, this chapter uses media system data from 2002.

4.8. Results

4.8.1. The party system level: The relative importance of the immigration issues on the macro-level political agenda

Hypotheses *H1a and H1b* predicted that in television systems where audience fragmentation and advertising dependency are high, the immigration issue would be relatively more salient on the political agenda. Table 4.1 shows the average scores of political parties in terms of saliency and position on the immigration issue. The data show that the immigration issue is important for all political party types,

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[31] Data on French political parties' ideological orientation were missing from the original data set (Benoit and Laver, 2007). We used information from the Chapel Hill Survey 2002 (Hooghe et al., 2010).
[32] See the appendix for examples illustrating how we calculated the scores on the television system variables.

although it is least important for centre parties. The centre and left parties tend to favour policies that favour migrants' integration while right-wing political parties support policies favouring the return of immigrants.

Table 4.1. Mean scores of parties on saliency and position on the immigration issue

	Radical left	Moderate left	Centre parties	Moderate right	Radical right
Saliency of the immigration issue (SD)	14.78 (2.03)	13.32 (2.51)	12.39 (1.57)	13.26 (2.59)	16.18 (3.20)
Party position on the immigration issue (SD)	3.73 (1.87)	6.13 (3.23)	7.94 (1.77)	12.61 (3.51)	16.66 (2.97)
N	*16*	*27*	*23*	*33*	*26*

The relevant question now is whether and to what extent the saliency or importance of this issue is related to media system characteristics. This section investigates this question at the party system level by comparing political issues to each other. The next section compares political parties to each other in their positioning and saliency given to the immigration issue.

The relative importance of the immigration issue in comparison with other issues at the country level is assessed in three steps. First, the mean of the importance score given by each party to each issue is weighted by their vote share in the preceding election. Weighting is necessary in order to avoid skewing the results at the country level by extreme score of very small parties. Subsequently, the overall mean of these weighted mean scores across all issues is calculated. Finally the relative importance of the immigration issue is calculated by taking the weighted mean score of this issue as a proportion of this overall mean (see table

A.4.1. in appendix C). A score higher than 1.0 implies that the issue was scored as more important than the mean score for all issues in the country; a score of less than 1.0 implies the issue to be less important (Benoit and Laver, 2007, p. 157-58).

Table 4.2. Correlation between television system characteristics and the relative importance of the immigration issue in 16 countries[33]

	Advertising dependency	Audience fragmentation	Relative importance of the immigration issue
Advertising dependency	1	0.28	0.24
Audience fragmentation		1	0.53*
Relative importance of the immigration issue			1

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed). **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

Table 4.2 shows the correlation between the relative importance of the immigration issue and our two television system variables. The two media system characteristics correlate positively with the relative saliency of the immigration issue. However, only audience fragmentation variable has a significant positive correlation with the saliency of the immigration issue.[34] This suggests that the fragmentation of audiences may be more relevant than the relative dependency on commercial revenues in affecting the relative saliency of the immigration issues.

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[33] We study Belgium as one political system although Wallonia and Flanders have separate media systems. We took the average of the scores of Flanders and Wallonia on both indicators of the media system to calculate the indicators for Belgium as a whole. The scores of television system variables, consensualism and the salience level of the immigration issue in comparison with other issues are shown in table (A.4.1.) in appendix C.

[34] This correlation does not change even when controlling for the vote of anti-immigration parties (i.e. parties with scores higher than 18 on the importance on immigration).

This supports hypothesis *H1b* and the idea that, in more fragmented media systems, media give relatively more attention to the immigration issue in comparison with other issues.

4.8.2. The party level: Position and saliency

The effect of advertising dependency and audience fragmentation on the positioning of political parties on immigration and on the saliency given by a political party to this issue is analysed through a random intercept multilevel analysis, in which parties are nested in media systems (see for instance: Steenbergen & Jones, 2002, where parties are nested in political systems). In our case, the use of multilevel analysis is not merely statistical in order to control for the dependence of observation at the party system level, but is also at the heart of our theoretical model. After all, our analysis is crucially interested in the cross-level interactions between media system variables and party characteristics.

Saliency

Table 4.3 presents the results of three multilevel regression models where parties are nested in media and political systems. The first model is our reference model in which the effect of the control variables is tested.[35] The effect of party ideology on the saliency of the immigration issue is significant for all parties except the radical left parties (radical right parties are used as the reference category). The radical left parties do not significantly differ from the radical right parties in the saliency given to the immigration issue, even though their position is obviously quite different.

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[35] For all analyses reported in the chapter, we also controlled for the success (vote share in the last election) of the anti-immigration party (defined as a party with a score of 18 or higher on immigration position), but this did neither yielded significant effects nor did we find any significant cross-level interaction with this variable. We report the analyses without this variable because by taking it out we retain more degrees of freedom to test our cross-level interactions.

The issue is least salient for the centre parties. The relative population share of non-European migrants and being a consensus democracy or not does not significantly affect the saliency of this issue for the radical right.

In the other models, we assess the effect of the television system variables separately since we are not able to test all cross-level interactions simultaneously. As advertising dependency and audience fragmentation are only weakly correlated and we do not expect the effects of one to offset the effect of the other, this strategy is unlikely to bias the results. Generally, advertising dependency and audience fragmentation have the same positive direction in their effects but only fragmentation yields a significant effect. Here again, as with relative saliency of the immigration issue, the nature of funding of the television system seems less important than the distribution of audiences across channels. Therefore, the following discussion focuses on fragmentation.

Within the context of fragmented media systems, the results support the distinction hypothesis rather than the imitation hypothesis. In fragmented television systems we see a polarisation around this issue: it becomes more salient for the radical right and comparatively less salient for the moderate right, centre parties, and the radical left. The moderate left is not significantly affected by audience fragmentation. This leads us to reject *H2b* which predicted imitation in more fragmented media systems and to partly accept hypothesis *H3b* which predicts stronger differentiation in more fragmented media systems. However, this does not apply to moderate left parties who opt for differentiation from the radical right but do not significantly do that more when audience fragmentation is high.

Table 4.3. Media system variables and saliency of the immigration issue at party level[36]

	Model with control variables	Model with Advertising dependency	Model with fragmentation
Intercept	16.11***	16.01***	15.77***
	(0.49)	(0.49)	(0.49)
Radical left party	-1.42	-1.53*	-1.18
	(0.74)	(0.73)	(0.68)
Moderate left	-2.58***	-2.39***	-2.07***
	(0.65)	(0.64)	(0.60)
Centre party	-3.92***	-3.82***	-3.68***
	(0.70)	(0.68)	(0.64)
Moderate right	-2.89***	-2.93***	-2.85***
	(0.64)	(0.63)	(0.59)
Non-European migrants	9.94	14.87	14.48
	(9.71)	(9.91)	(11.50)
Consensus	0.54	0.72	0.64
	(0.34)	(0.37)	(0.35)
Party size	0.008	0.003	0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Television system characteristic (TSC)[37]	-	8.93	22.28**
		(7.1)	(9.81)
Party size*TSC	-	0.26	0.82**
		(0.20)	(0.34)
Radical left * TSC	-	3.10	-41.98***
		(9.76)	(12.75)
Moderate left * TSC	-	-6.05	-17.24
		(8.43)	(11.23)
Centre party * TSC	-	-5.74	-27.02*
		(8.91)	(12.30)
Moderate right * TSC	-	-14.11	-43.77***
		(7.93)	(11.05)
Residual variance	*5.33*	*5.01*	*4.21*
	(0.72)	*(0.67)*	*(0.57)*
Country level variance	*0.54*	*0.54*	*0.78*
	(0.45)	*(0.42)*	*(0.47)*
Variance explained in comparison with the control model		*5.40%*	14.85%
Deviance[38]	*568.54*	*561.41*	*544.37****

*Table entries are ML estimates. Standard errors in brackets (the mixed procedure SPSS 19.0). * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.
Dependent variable is saliency score on immigration issue at the party level (0 is low saliency and 20 is the highest importance score).
N (media systems) =16 and N (parties) =125

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[36] Macro-level variables are centred around the mean and party size is centred around the grand mean (mean=12.45; sd =12.59). The radical right is the reference category.
[37] TSC (television system characteristic) indicates advertising dependency in the first model and audience fragmentation in the second model.
[38] The model fit is tested in comparison with the control model.

With respect to party size, the results show that in more fragmented television systems, the immigration issue is particularly salient for larger parties. Thus *H4b* is supported with regard to the importance of the immigration issue.

Party Positions

The results with regard to party positions on the migration issue are presented in table 4.4 and mirror the general outcomes for the saliency given by political parties to this issue. Again the two media system variables show similarities in the direction of the effect but only the audience fragmentation variable yields significant effects. And again, a generally bipolar picture emerges: In more fragmented media systems the radical right tends to take a more radically restrictive position and other parties take a less restrictive position than they would have done on the basis of their ideological orientation only. Thus, *H2c* and *H2d* are both rejected.

Table 4.4.Television system variables and party position on immigration issue[39]

	Model with control variables	Model with advertising dependency	Model with fragmentation
Intercept	16.83***	16.80***	16.36***
	(0.51)	(0.51)	(0.51)
Radical left party	-12.88***	-12.83***	-12.33***
	(0.81)	(0.82)	(0.79)
Moderate left	-11.23***	-11.22***	-10.87***
	(0.71)	(0.72)	(0.69)
Centre party	-9.00***	-8.95***	-8.54***
	(0.77)	(0.76)	(0.74)
Moderate right	-4.42***	-4.35***	-3.96***
	(0.71)	(0.72)	(0.70)
Non-European migrants	0.44	2.03	-3.00
	(8.50)	(8.86)	(9.05)
Consensus	-0.36	-0.38	-0.62*
	(0.21)	(0.34)	(0.30)
Party size	0.02	0.02	0.02
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)
Television system Characteristic (TSC)[40]	-	7.35	27.55**
		(7.52)	(10.34)
Party size* TSC	-	-0.09	-0.14
		(0.22)	(0.39)
Radical left * TSC	-	-8.75(	-9.19
		10.98)	(14.90)
Moderate left * TSC	-	-10.10	-38.78**
		(9.26)	(12.99)
Centre party * TSC	-	-9.06	-27.00
		(9.96)	(14.23)
Moderate right * TSC	-	-8.02	-37.07**
		(8.88)	(12.71)
Residual variance	6.58	*6.50*	*5.96*
	(0.89)	*(0.88)*	*(0.80)*
Country level variance	*0.10*	*0.09*	*0.03*
	(0.36)	*(0.38)*	*(0.32)*
Variance explained in comparison with the control model		*1.34%*	10.25%
Deviance[41]	*587.45*	*585.78*	*574.12**

*Table entries are ML estimates. Standard errors in brackets (the mixed procedure SPSS 19.0). * p <0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001. Dependent variable is position on immigration issue at the party level (0 is in favour of integration policies and 20 in favour of restrictive immigration). N (media systems) =16 and N (parties) =125

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[39] Macro-level variables are centred around the mean and party size is centred around the grand mean (mean=12.45; sd =12.59).
[40] TSC (television system characteristic) indicates advertising dependency in the first model and audience fragmentation in the second model.
[41] The model fit is tested in comparison with the control model.

The results of the cross-level two-way interactions between fragmentation and party type partly support the hypothesis that in fragmented media systems parties take distance from the radical right position. In more fragmented systems, parties take more, instead of less, distance from the position of the radical right. Yet the cross-level interactions are only significant for the moderate left and the moderate right (*H3a* is partly supported). Centrist as well as the radical left parties seem to also take more distance from the radical right as audiences become more fragmented, but this interaction is not statistically significant. Party size does not have any significant effect on party positioning. *H4* should therefore be rejected with regard to party position.

4.9. Conclusion

To my knowledge, this is the first time the effects of media system characteristics on political party competition are studied. Using the immigration issue as a case study and comparing 16 West-European political and media systems, this chapter has shown that media system characteristics matter for the competitive strategies of political parties. Political competition between political parties is not a 'closed' game between political parties determined by the *internal dynamics* of party competition only. The structural media characteristics are a crucial third factor to be taken into account.

The study made a distinction between two aspects of television systems: the dependency on commercial revenues (advertising dependency) and the fragmentation of audiences across television channels. Although the two variables generally yield similar effects, only the effects of audience fragmentation were statistically significant.

The study investigated two competing hypotheses concerning the behaviour of political parties in a media environment with a high audience fragmentation and high advertising dependency. It investigated whether the two television system characteristics stimulated the often-assumed imitation of the radical right, or instead stimulates other parties to differentiate from the radical right. Generally the results support the differentiation hypothesis, which defies the dominant imitation hypothesis.

If the competitive and commercial pressures encourage media to pay more attention to the radical right and their favourite issues, this does not automatically push all political parties to imitate the radical right. If there is a contagion effect from the radical right that affects the whole system, audience fragmentation and advertising dependency of television systems do not stimulate but rather offset this process. However, the results also show that in more fragmented media systems, larger parties tend to attach more importance to the immigration issue. In television systems with a fragmented audience, the immigration issue is more important in comparison to other political issues. This implies that media system characteristics affect the *relative* saliency of this political issue and that large parties pay more attention to the immigration issue when audience fragmentation across channels increases.

Although the immigration issue is more salient to large parties in more fragmented media systems, the results show that fragmentation does not lead these parties to imitate the substantive *position* of the radical right. This implies that larger parties enter into competition with the radical right by offering *other* solutions than the radical right. Although in fragmented media systems the radical right may be more successful in influencing the problem definition, fragmentation does not make large parties adopt far-right policy positions on the immigration issue.

In other words, as far as contagion from the radical right has happened, this is not a result of competitive and commercial pressures of media systems. Drawing on marketing terminology, we could conclude that, although larger parties focus on the same issue as the successful radical right, the style and packaging of the immigration issue used by political parties is still highly divergent from the radical right.

This chapter exemplifies that audience fragmentation in media landscapes is a variable that should be taken into account in studying political party competition. It also suggests that audience fragmentation is relevant in two ways. First, audience fragmentation affects the likelihood that media focus on sensational issues, which in turn affects the issue agenda of political parties. Second, in fragmented media environments political parties have various channels/programmes to make connections with various groups of audiences without being obliged to address the median voter. Such a media environment is likely to stimulate differentiation among parties and make them stress their differences rather than make them imitate each other.

Whether political parties will seek distinction by stressing their ideological orientation or stressing other non-ideological differences is an interesting question. From the results presented, it is not clear whether audience fragmentation stimulates the relevance of party ideology in defining party positioning and the saliency given to political issues. Some studies suggest that in high-choice media environments with high audience fragmentation, political polarisation may increase among voters (see: Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011, for a review). It is however not clear which parties take advantage or stimulate this polarisation. Putting audience fragmentation at centre stage as a key variable therefore seems a promising avenue of future research to investigate the polarising potential of high

choice media environments. This can both be done using a bottom-up perspective of individual voters' behaviour or using a top-down perspective by focusing on the behaviour of political parties.