

Corrective behavior among *mainstream* parties as a *vote winning* strategic response to *niche* challengers

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Abstract

This paper analyzes how *mainstream parties* respond to their mainstream challengers. We know that *vote seeking* behavior among mainstream parties urge them to bracket the median voter (usually situated around the center of the political spectrum), which has a moderating effect on their electoral rhetoric. However, they shift their position relative to the mood of the electorate by following the direction voters move to so moderation is not the only option. *Niche parties*, on the other hand, are policy seeking. They position themselves away from the center by championing issues outside the mainstream. I argue that niche parties produce a *centrifugal effect* pulling the median voter away from the center. This situation reduces the *utility of moderation* and mainstream parties adopt the rhetoric of their challengers to maintain their appeal. The system as a whole move from *moderate* to *extreme* as parties try to *neutralize* the effect of the *niche alternative*. I use the *Comparative Manifesto Project* data to demonstrate how *niche issues* make it to the manifestos of mainstream parties as an evidence of *corrective behavior*. The issue I am particularly interested in how *radical right rhetoric* makes it way to the manifestos of mainstream parties. My expectation is that *corrective behavior* among the mainstream parties i.e. drift away from the center becomes more likely when niche challenger disrupts the system by kindling issues like immigration systematically ignored by the mainstream.

Introduction

Mainstream parties are losing ground across Europe – and in the rest of the world too. New *niche parties* are now championing issues previously ignored or systemically downplayed by the mainstream parties. Alternative for Deutschland (AfD), for example, made use of the recent migrant crisis and increased its vote share by roughly 8 percent by extensively advocating anti-immigrant agenda, which resulted in 8.6 percent and 5.2 percent loss in the votes of the incumbent coalition of mainstream coalition of CDU and SPD respectively. Similarly, Swedish Democrats (SD) saw steady growth of its vote share since its first time entry in the Swedish parliament in 2010 – 3.7 percent, 7.2 percent, and 4.6 percent in the three consecutive elections while the votes of mainstream parties went on a steady decline. Put bluntly, the voters of the mainstream parties are defecting to new and specialized parties all across Europe. This is particularly alarming as a significant majority of these *niche parties* is radical-right ones. As a consequence, interest in ‘how do the niche parties disrupt the politics as usual’ and ‘how do the mainstream parties respond to this challenge?’ is growing.

Research on the *niche parties* can be traced to the pioneering study of Bonnie Meguid, who suggested that even when niche parties fail to attain any seats, their electoral endeavors influence the fate of the mainstream parties [Meguid2005]. Subsequent studies refined the definition of the niche parties and proposed methods to measure their *niche-ness* [Wagner2012]. Other scholars demonstrated that niche parties are from the mainstream parties in their objectives and tactics [Adams et al.2006] [Ezrow2008]. A few scholars have also paid attention to the strategies of the mainstream parties in dealing with their niche challengers [Bale et al.2010] [Green-Pedersen and Mortensen2015] [Meguid2005]. However, most studies dealing with the mainstream response to the niche parties are either based on case studies or relying on the RILE left-right index of the Manifesto Research on Political Representation (MARPOR) data. This is problematic on many levels: (1) case studies run into external validity issues, (2) the validity of the RILE left-right index

of the CMP/MARPOR data has been challenged [Mölder2016], and (3) the accuracy of manifesto coding has also been challenged [Hansen2008]. The question then is what is the way forward if these studies are deficient? This paper builds on the existing work on niche parties and uses the frequencies of issues pronounced in the party manifestos to explore the mainstream parties' response to their niche challengers.

The objective of this paper is to compare manifestos of the *niche* and the *mainstream* parties to see whether issues advanced by the former make their way into the manifestos of the latter or not. I describe the weight of each category in the manifestos of mainstream parties as *emphasis on salient issues* and cross-check it with the manifestos of the niche parties to find a possible relation. The scope of this study is narrow due to the limited *annotated manifestos* available in the MARPOR database. Nonetheless, the objective is to check the feasibility of an extensive study using this endeavor as a pilot project.

The following sections of this paper are divided into a literature review section defining niche parties and outlining existing on them; a theory section laying out my theory and the expected mechanism linking the responses of the mainstream parties to the niche parties; an operationalization section describing my choice of data and the method I choose to test my expectation; and an analysis section based on the comparison of manifestos of the parties of my interest from Germany, Sweden, and Turkey. This is followed by an overview of the problems I faced and the limitation of my research design as well as the existing data. The last section describes the way forward – lessons learned from this exercise that could shape my future research agenda.

I must acknowledge that the outcome of this exercise is not as interesting as I initially thought (but that could be due to limited ready-to-use data). With a few exceptions, parties seem to maintain their issue positions in their manifestos. The circumstances in which elections take place are probably more salient than the niche parties because they force the mainstream parties to change their position on certain issues. Moreover, manifestos should be treated as the *ought to be agendas* instead of the *real agendas* and combined with the data from party elites' speeches to understand the actual party posi-

tion. I'll show in my short discussion of Turkey that party manifestos do not reflect the complete picture of the reality.

Literature Review

Existing research suggests that niche parties introduce or own previously non-salient issues in the political arena. Bonnie Meguid defines niche parties as parties rejecting traditional class-based politics, introducing novel issues not coinciding with the existing political cleavages, and limiting themselves to special issues [Meguid2005]. This definition is very similar to Cas Mudde's *single-issue parties* definition. He suggests that such parties lack ideological programs and have electorate across the political spectrum. These parties address only one all-encompassing issue based on which they earn votes from a diverse electorate [Mudde1999]. Similarly, Adams et al. describe niche parties based on their extreme or non-centrist ideology [Adams et al.2006]. As a result, the definition remains vague and the term niche has been employed to describe a wide range of parties including environmentalist, anti-immigration, anti-intellectual property, regionalist, ethnic, and radical right parties among others [Wagner2012]. As a matter of fact, niche party concept has been used to different parties running on non-economic, non-centric, extremist, and cross-cutting platforms against the mainstream or catch-all parties.

The answer to how mainstream parties respond to their niche challengers is mostly in the form of case studies with a few exceptions. Bale et al. suggest that existing parties act strategically in the face of a niche challenger. They demonstrate through the case studies of Denmark, The Netherlands, Norway, and Austria that a party's decision to *hold* its position, to *defuse* the niche issue, or to *adopt* the niche agenda is *context* and *time-dependent*. Mainstream parties who realize the challenge early on choose to *defuse* the issues owned by niche parties while late realizers choose to *adopt* the niche agenda. *Holding* position could cost votes as the voters could be more interested in a single issue offered by niche party than the ideological package offered by the mainstream party offers [Bale et al.2010]. Meguid suggests something similar that parties often choose to *dismiss*

the issues championed by the niche party to reduce their *saliency*. They could also choose to take *accommodative* (converge with the niche party) – or *adversarial* (diverge from the niche party) – stance on the issue providing an alternative and more powerful option to the like-minded voters who could then defect from the niche party when they see their preference accommodated by the mainstream. However, divergence strengthens the issue ownership of niche party and primes voters interested in that issue to vote for it (Meguid, 2005). In other words, divergence from the niche issue could be costly for the mainstream party when niche party gains significant attention of the public. Sensing danger of voter defection (and to win new voters) mainstream parties would accommodate the niche issues and move closer to niche party’s agenda. Hence, the most optimum strategy for a mainstream party is to shift its position to accommodate the niche issues its agenda because doing otherwise would result in losing voters to the party that offers them this choice – the niche party. This is the foundational bloc of my theory described in the following section.

On other other hand, Downsian logic suggests that party positions are not static. Parties change their position relentlessly to bracket the median voter. At the same time, the relative position of the parties generally remains unchanged as the crossover of parties – parties rebranding themselves for example from left to right – is a rare occurring. Meyer and Wagner suggest that transition occurs from niche to mainstream as a vote-seeking behavior, but such transition from mainstream to niche is rare [Meyer and Wagner2013]. I found it counter-intuitive because they tactility fix *mainstream* to the *center*. However, *mainstream* could shift with the shift in the *median voter*. If median voter sits close to the niche parties, the mainstream parties would feel compelled to accommodate niche agenda in their politics. Moreover, Adam et al. suggests that center and right parties are more likely than left parties to change their position when faced with a changing public opinion [Adams et al.2006]. In other words, parties are influenced by other parties and shift their positions accordingly [Green-Pedersen and Mortensen2015]. Hence, mainstream parties shifting their position in response to the niche parties is very likely - especially when the

former is a center or right party.

Theory

Parties act strategically and adjust their position when the threat of voter defection is presented by a niche party. I argue that *major* parties should feel more threaten by the entry of a *niche* party compared to any *minor* parties because the former often brackets the median voter with its counterpart from the opposite side of the ideological continuum. Both parties move closer to the center to become catch-all parties. Any parties on extremes have either loyal voters who are not satisfied by the catch-all appeal of the major parties, or their voter size is too small that defection does not alter their odds dramatically. On the other hand, voter defection from the major parties could break their hold on government or opposition benches and could potentially push them several levels down the victory list. As a consequence, these parties would feel a greater threat from the niche parties – especially in proportional representation systems where voter defection could bear greater costs. The major parties would be more likely to adopt or accommodate the issues raised by the niche parties to keep their share of votes and seats as a rational move.¹

I borrow the *hold* and *adopt* strategy typology from Bale et al [Bale et al.2010]. The first strategy of these parties should be the *hold*, which means being unresponsive to the newly emerging niche challenger. We should observe this behavior when the challenger enters the political arena i.e. contests its first election. The existing parties would prefer to hold on to their usual positions due to the uncertainty about the magnitude of defection among their voters. If the niche party fails to poach their voters – or fails to win significant percentage of votes – the major parties would feel no need to alter their policy stance(s) and maintain the hold strategy. However, major parties could consider *adopt* strategy the if the niche party successfully bags a significant percentage of the total votes including the defected votes of the major parties. Adopt should change the party

¹I mean the majority, the second, and the third party when I say ‘major parties’.

position on niche issues bring it closer to niche parties. Voters would then choose the major party because it could potentially form the government and execute their desired policies.² Hence, I assume major parties picking up the niche issue if they lose voters to niche parties.

HI: *Major parties adopt niche issues when niche parties win election.*³

III: *Major parties hold their position on the niche issues when niche parties fail to win elections.*

Operationalization

The thing I am trying to measure is whether niche issues make it to the manifestos of the major parties or not? And if so under what conditions? I initially thought of Chapel Hill Expert Survey data to test my theory, but that data is not fit for the analysis. As we have seen in the class, the variation in the party position on the left-right dimension is so little that robust empirical conclusions cannot be drawn from the CHES. My second go-to option was the Manifesto Research on Political Representation (MARPOR) data. I initially thought of using the RILE variable of this data but it does not fit the purpose for being an additive index of various components. Using this index could be problematic when it comes to niche parties because (1) they are generally single-issue oriented parties, and (2) their agenda is non-ideological – or in other words could not be mapped on the left-right. An alternative method to observe the responses of the mainstream parties to the niche ones is by looking at individual categories in the MARPOR data and identify variation in party positions with regards to specific issues. I call this variation *emphasis on niche issues*.

I used the *annotated text files* from the MARPOR data to collect party positions on various issues. These files record the frequency of each issue/category appearing in the manifesto of a party. However, there are very few cases available because the manifestos

²Voting for niche parties is always risky because one could never be sure of their success.

³Potentially as a result of poaching majority party's votes.

prior to 2006 have not been coded for this purpose.⁴ I calculated the percentage of each category coded in the data to see which issues were emphasized in each manifesto. Very rarely an issue occupies more than 10 percent of the manifesto, so I decided to set 5 percent weight of each manifesto as an indicator for *emphasis*. However, many significant issues received less than 5 percent emphasis, so I decided to set 3 percent as the base. The underlying logic is that an issue occupying more than 3 percent of the manifesto represents the salience of that issue for the party. I consider new emphasis on certain topics related to the niche agenda as well as increased or decreased emphasis from previous as an indicator of mainstream parties' response to their niche challenger. I only consider the most salient or defining issues posited by the niche party in my analysis. If niche party is a radical right party, I pay attention to the issues like National Way of Life: Positive (601) or Traditional Morality: Positive (code 603) that are generally pronounced by such parties to see mainstream's response to them. Similarly, I pay attention to issues like Environmental Protection (code 501) when the niche party is an environmentalist party.

Mere presence of a niche party in the political arena might not be perceived as threat by the major parties. They could employ *hold* or *defuse* strategies to hinder issue from becoming salient or to mitigate the perceived impact of the niche party by creating counter-discourse, respectively. On the other hand, major party would consider adopting niche agenda if the niche party successfully contests the election and wins considerable seats. That's why I use the first successful election of the niche party and the one after to see change in the mainstream party positions. I look at the cases of Turkey, Germany, and Sweden to test my theory.

Results

Figure 1. shows the positions of three mainstream and one niche party on various issues in two consecutive elections in Germany. *Alternative for Deutschland* entered the

⁴Annotated PDFs are available waiting for someone to code them in excel.

German Parliament in 2013 so I take it as the reference year. The most interesting outcome is AfD rebranding itself from an *economically orthodox* (code 414) party and *pro-equality* (code 503) party to an openly *nationalist* (codes 601, 603) and *anti-immigrant* (608.2) party. Even more interesting is the response of Christian Democratic Union whose emphasis on the *national way of life* (code 601.1) and *law and order* (code 605.1) increased significantly compared to zero in previous election. This I suppose is a likely reaction to AfD's anti-immigrant discourse. SPD also responded by dedicating more than 5% of its manifesto to *law and order* (code 605.1) – up from zero in the previous election. They also dropped their stance on *civic mindedness* (code 606), which could be a precarious position when anti-immigration is the hot issue. On the other hand, FDP appeared to ignore the issues raised by AfD and said nothing about the salient issues (code 601, 603, 605, 606).

What could be said about these results? Major German parties seem to exhibit the *adopt* strategy. The data is too limited to draw any robust conclusion, but apparently AfD created momentum in anti-immigration debate and the mainstream parties responded to it. The rightist party's position shift close to that of the niche party was more discernible than other parties. This behavior was expected in the light of previous research [Adams et al.2006]. The left party showed a tacit shift toward the niche agenda by deciding not to pronounce potentially vote defecting stance on multiculturalism. The third party AfD remained indifferent, which is a bit intriguing because it lost 2.3% votes in previous election. I would be interesting to analyze the positions of CDU and SPD in the next election because both parties have lost 8.6% and 5.2% of votes while AfD saw a net increase of 7.9%. I expect CDU and SPD would adjust their position of the salient issues like immigration to lure some of the voters back.

Figure 2. shows the results from two previous elections in Sweden where an anti-immigrant niche party –Sweden Democrats – was successful in poaching votes from the mainstream Social Democratic and Moderate parties. The results from 2018 Elections are out and the Sweden Democrats increased its vote share for the third consecutive time.

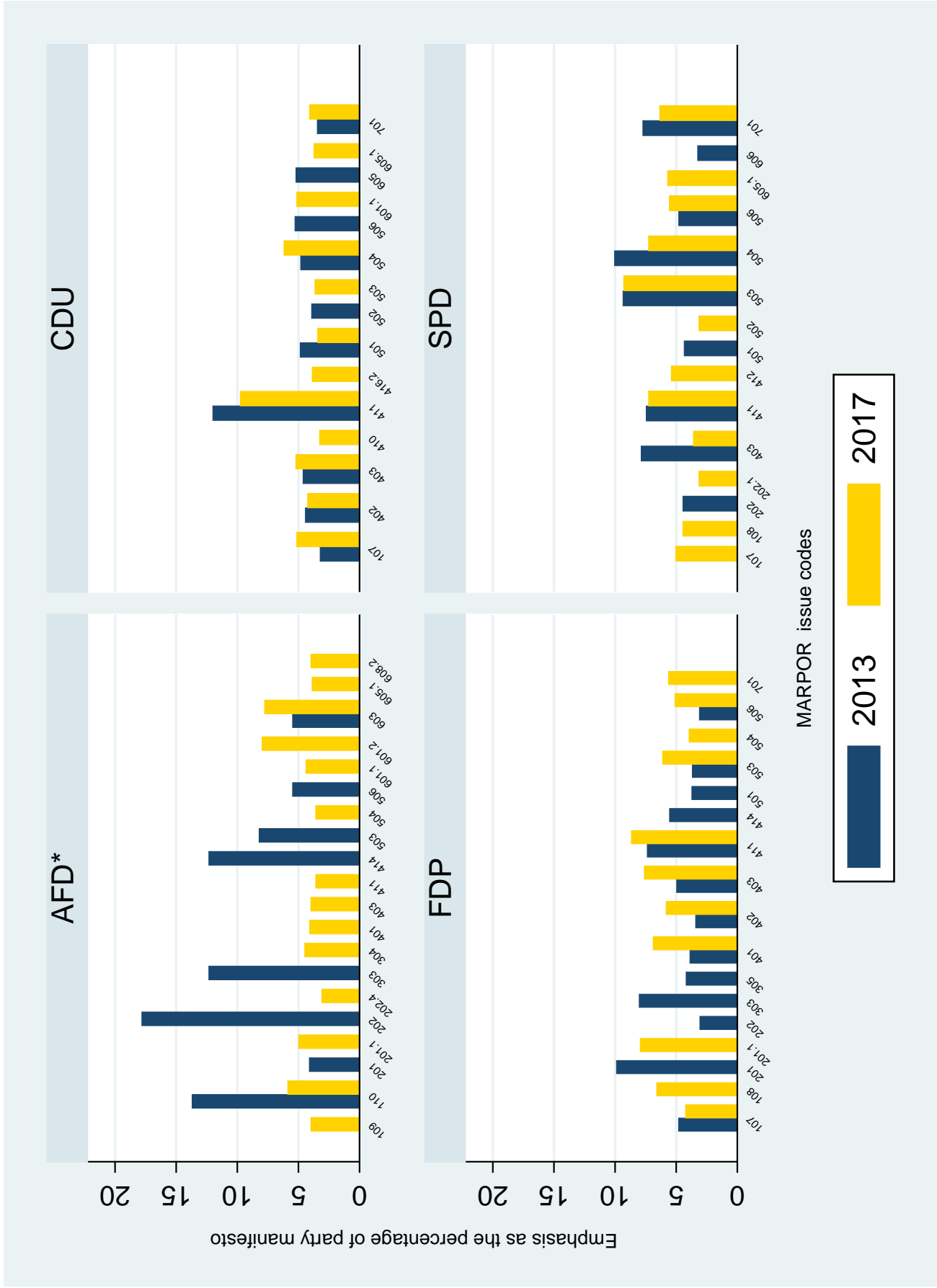


Figure 1: Party positions in 2013 and 2017 Election - Germany.

I expected see greater appeal of the *adopt* strategy among Swedish parties compared to those of Germany. However, the parties seem to *hold* steady on their previous policy position. They did not move in the direction of the niche party. Nonetheless, it would be interesting to see the latest strategies of the mainstream parties, but the data on their 2018 Election manifestos is unavailable for the time being. On other other hand, the Center party is also a niche party also an environmental niche party in Sweden. I wanted to test the response of the mainstream parties to its entry into the parliament but the data on annotated texts do not go as far back to that point in time.

Figure 3. shows the results from two elections taking place months apart in Turkey. I have put this graph not to demonstrate my theory, but to criticize the pitfall of looking only at the manifestos and ignoring the political context in which elections take place. People's Democratic Party (HDP) entered the Turkish Parliament as an ethnic niche party poaching a significant chunk of Kurdish voters of AKP whose vote share declined by 8.96%. However, the manifesto of HDP does not emphasize on Kurdish identity but focuses mainly on freedom, democracy, and rights fro minorities. Justice and Development Party (AKP) decided to go to an early election after failing to reach a coalition formula with other parties and adopted a *hard-line nationalist stance* to lure the nationalist votes. The results from manifesto comparison (Figure 1) show almost no variation in the party positions, but that shift was communicated through the speeches of the party leaders. AKP abandoned the ongoing peace talks and decided to resume a military operation in the Kurdish majority Southeastern Turkey. The nationalist campaign was successful and AK saw a recovery of 8.63 percent while the votes of the nationalist party MHP decreasing by 4.39 percent. Some might argue that AKP rebranded itself from a center to a right party. However, right wing agenda was absent from AKP's manifesto in the November election, but the campaign was teemed with arousing nationalist sentiments. A change in party position happened, which was not pronounced in the manifesto and thus goes undetected in the manifesto studies. This incident puts the validity of manifestos in understanding a party's election strategy or its overall position on salient

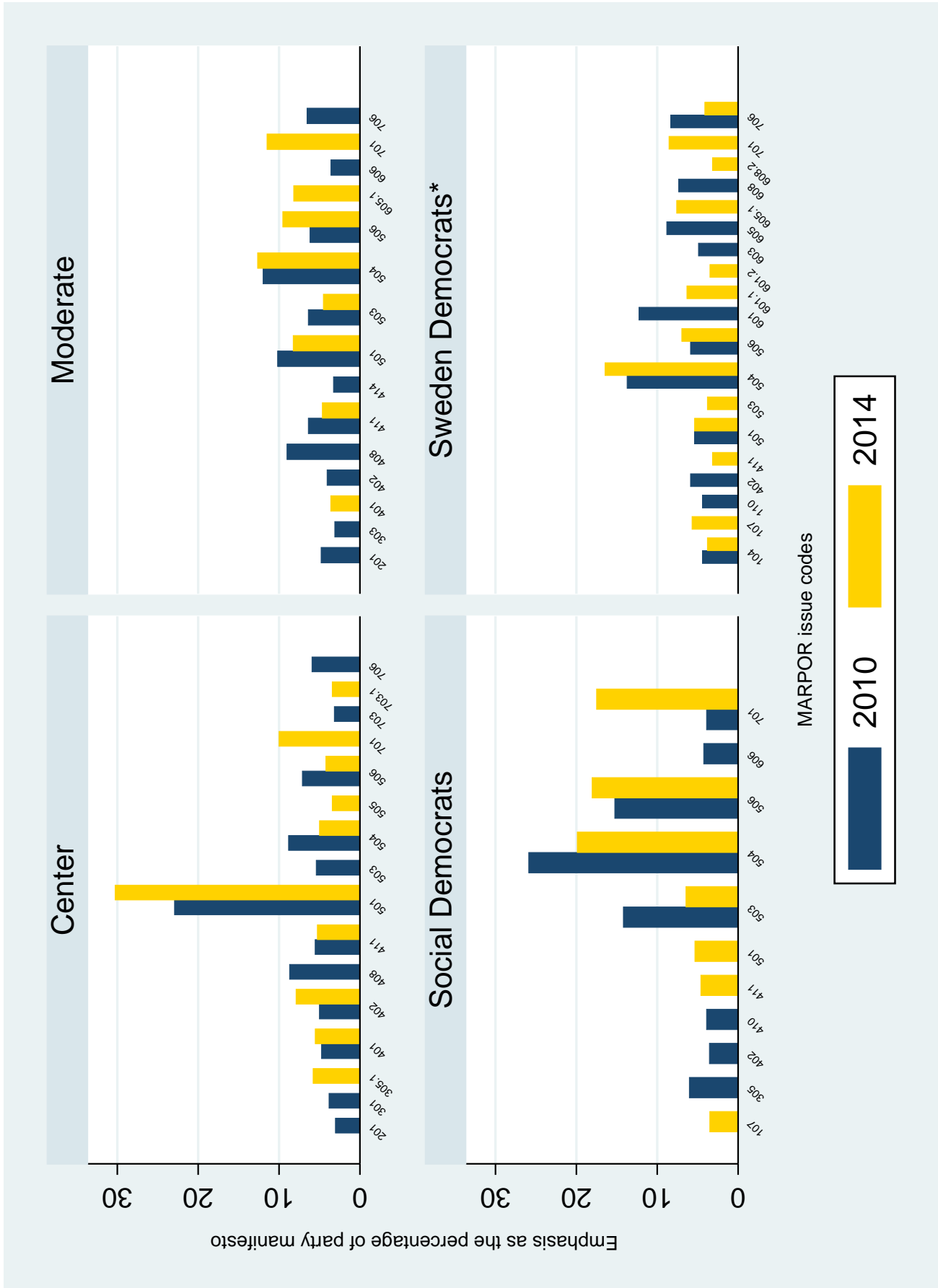


Figure 2: Party positions in 2010 and 2014 Election - Sweden.

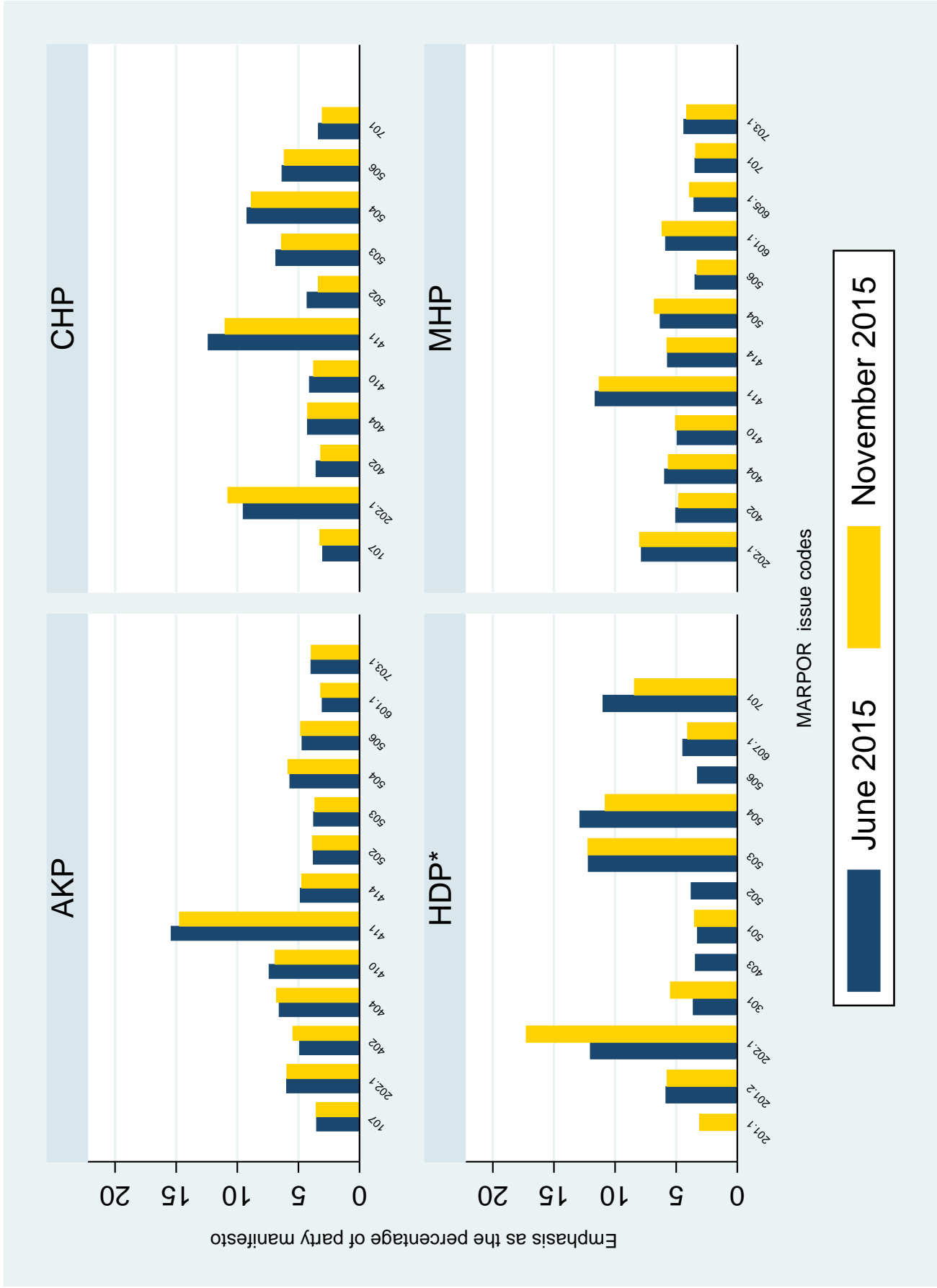


Figure 3: Party positions in June 2015 and November 2015 Election - Turkey.

issues under a question mark – this is an issue I discuss in the following section.

Nonetheless, the pilot study shows that mainstream parties respond to their challenger, but that’s most likely based on the *timing* of emergence and the *context* in which the elections take place. If the niche issue is a salient one – like immigration in Germany – the mainstream party would take a stance closer to that of the niche party on that particular issue under the expectation that *adoption* of niche agenda would dissipate the appeal of niche party and the voters would choose the mainstream alternative – as suggested by Meguid [Meguid2005].

Limitations

Manifestos only represent a partial picture of the reality as many policy issues are communicated through elite discourse. Moreover, there could be systematic constraints on pronouncing certain issues – like Kurdish party in Turkey cannot pronounce its ethnic agenda through its manifestos, but its program is communicated through the speeches of party leaders. Similarly, the anti-immigration parties like Sweden Democrats or Alternative for Deutschland avoid a direct expression of racism in their manifesto due to the historical (Nazi) taboo surrounding such discourse. Their strategy can only be deciphered by reading between lines the speeches of their party leaders. Nonetheless, manifestos are still important. Combining manifesto data with the elite speeches and situating them in the political context could refine our ability to define party positions. This is true both for the mainstream and the niche parties. Furthermore, the rate of position shift is slow and it cannot be captured over a few elections, but the data on annotated texts of manifestos is available only after 2006. On the other hand, most niche parties especially the environmental ones emerged in 1990s. One way to overcome this problem is to code the frequencies of issues using the annotated PDFs. This endeavour would have had taken enough time so I used only the available texts. I’ll probably back-code those PDFs over the winter break.

The way forward

This paper was a useful exercise in understanding the *niche party* concept and familiarize myself with the literature on how mainstream parties respond to their niche challengers. The most important learning outcome is that MARPOR data is useful but not complete. The categories provide useful anchors, but if I am to work on this topic, I should be coding party positions on the niche issues pronounced in elite speeches. Moreover, I am planning to code more data from the PDFs available on MARPOR's website to extend my current operationalization to elections before 2006. I should also be working on refining the *response of mainstream parties* coding. The current scheme assumes that any dramatic shift from existing position or new *emphasis* in the manifesto is linked to pressure created by niche party. Although I only look on the issues owned by the niche party to observe this change, I cannot be sure whether mainstream party's decision to emphasize on those issues was a reaction to the niche party or mere a product of the political circumstances. Nonetheless, the current scheme could be sufficient to conduct a multivariate analysis using *response* dummies if I extend it to years before 2006.

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