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# **Issue Evolution and Partisan Polarization in a European Multiparty System: Elite and Mass Repositioning in Denmark 1968-2011**

## **Introduction**

Scholars of electoral behavior have engaged in intensive debates in recent decades on whether and how Western (European) party systems have undergone a transformation from being structured by class and/or religious cleavages to being characterized by conflicts about globalization, immigration, law-and-order, morality or European integration (e.g., Knutsen, 1995; Kriesi et al., 2006, 2008; Enyedi and Deegan-Krause, 2010; Hobolt and de Vries, 2015). Especially Kriesi and colleagues stimulated a debate on whether the transformation of Western European politics can be best explained by using a top-down or bottom-up perspective. The former suggests an elite-driven change of the political agenda and the issues on which political actors compete. Here, the mass public responds after the parties have sent clear cues about their positions to the public and their constituencies. In contrast, a bottom-up perspective implies that the polarization on new issues among the mass public eventually leads political elites to adapt their positions in accordance with public opinion and electoral potentials (Kriesi et al., 2008: 8–9; 14; see Evans and De Graaf, 2013 for a summary of the discussion).

To resolve such controversies about whether party system transformation is elite-driven or mass-driven, scholars of American politics have applied the issue evolution perspective (e.g., Carmines and Stimson, 1986, 1989; Carmines, 1991; Adams, 1997; Layman, 2001; Lindaman and Haidar-Markel, 2002; also Carmines and Wagner, 2006 for a review). According to this perspective, partisan polarization and long-term realignments within the electorate are elite-driven and conditioned by the emergence of new issues cutting across existing alignments (Carmines and Stimson, 1989: 159–161).

However, the application of the issue evolution perspective has thus far almost exclusively been limited to the two-party U.S. system. Few recent analyses have applied the issue evolution toolkit to political behavior outside of the U.S. (de Vries and Hobolt, 2012, Stimson et al., 2012; Stevens, 2013; Raymond and Feltch, 2014; Hobolt and de Vries, 2015). These analyses were nevertheless either focused on single-issue evolution around the EU (de Vries and Hobolt, 2012; Hobolt and de Vries, 2015) or multiparty systems where competition centers primarily around two parties as in the UK (Stevens, 2013) or two coalitions/blocs in Chile and France (Stimson, et al., 2012; Raymond and Feltch, 2014). This study is the first to apply the issue evolution framework to a multidimensional multiparty system. Applying issue evolution to multiparty systems with more

than one dimension and beyond a single issue is crucial since several studies have shown that many European countries have witnessed realignments and the emergence of a second dimension of conflict around cultural issues (e.g., Knutsen, 1995; Kriesi et al., 2006, 2008; Enyedi and Deegan-Krause, 2010). Nevertheless, we still lack evidence as to whether these realignment processes reflect an issue evolution or reflect bottom-up processes and who are the driving actors behind these changes. Existing work on an issue evolution around EU issues provides valuable groundwork here, where niche parties acted as issue entrepreneurs and gained votes at European Parliament Elections by competing on the hitherto neglected EU issue respectively Euroskepticism (De Vries and Hobolt, 2012; Hobolt and de Vries, 2015).

However, using the EU alone has also its limits because this issue can be regarded as most likely case where issue entrepreneurs compete on an issue that poorly fits the traditional left-right dimension at second order elections (see van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004). Moreover, the EU issue alone has not produced fundamental and lasting realignments at national elections in EU member states except for the UK (van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004: 48; see Stevens, 2013 on the UK), while cultural issues have. One reason is that mainstream parties lack the incentive to compete on the EU before national elections which means that the EU is mostly salient at European Parliament elections (Green-Pedersen, 2012). To substantiate the claim that issue evolution can be applied to multidimensional multi-party competition at the national level, I therefore go beyond the EU issue and apply the issue evolution toolkit in Denmark, where a cultural dimension has gradually replaced the socio-economic dimension (Stubager, 2010), and where a realignment bereaved the previously dominant social democrats the function as natural party of government.

This study begins with developing theoretical propositions on issue evolution in a multiparty system and applies them to an in-depth case study of elite-level polarization and its consequences for mass attitudes in Denmark (1968–2011). I combine data from the Danish Policy Agenda Project (Green-Pedersen, 2007, 2011) with data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (Volkens et al., 2013) and pooled data from Danish opinion polls and election surveys from the period 1968–2011. The following analysis shows that the emergence of a cultural dimension follows an issue evolution process which is foremost driven by niche parties followed by mainstream party adaption to the new issue dimension. The final section discusses the findings.

### **Issue Evolution and the long-term transformation of party systems and partisan alignments**

The issue evolution perspective centers around the role of political elites in the transformation of party systems and partisan alignments (Carmines and Stimson, 1986, 1989; Adams, 1997; Lindaman and Haider-Markel, 2002; Carmines and Wagner, 2006). In a nutshell, vote- and office-seeking elites try to change the long-term political agenda by emphasizing issues that are able to break up existing alignments and which produce realignments to their own advantage. Carmines and Stimson's (1986, 1989) theoretical groundwork explained these issue-based realignments in two steps. Assuming that cross-cutting issues do not automatically alter existing partisan alignments, the issue must receive considerable attention at the party elite-level and parties must polarize on the issue(s). This means that a party must send clear cues to the electorate by communicating its issue position and marking the distance to its opponent(s) (Carmines and Stimson, 1989: 161; Layman, 2001: 292).

Second, the electorate must respond to the issue cues, be aware of the elite partisan positioning ('clarity'), and change attitudes and voting behavior in accordance with the party positions on the issues of conflict ('affect'). The issue must be salient among the electorate for a longer time and the electorate must have developed strong feelings about the issues reflecting the polarization at the party level to fulfill the conditions for an issue-based realignment (Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Carmines, 1991; Lindaman and Haider-Markel, 2002; Carmines and Wagner, 2006). The polarization among the electorate can occur through various different ways, which are by no means mutually exclusive: generational replacement and social change, adaption of issue positions according to party identification, or party switching in response to party repositioning (Adams, 1997; Layman and Carsey, 2002; Lindaman and Haider-Markel, 2002).

This perspective had been used extensively in examining the changing nature of U.S. politics in the last five decades. Various contributions have applied and refined the issue evolution perspective to long-term electoral behavior in the U.S. Issues such as race, abortion, religion and minority rights have fundamentally redefined partisanship and reshaped the American political landscape (Carmines, 1991; Adams, 1997; Layman, 2001; Lindaman and Haider-Markel, 2002). Lindaman and Haider-Markel (2002) have further demonstrated situations in which elite-level polarization failed to provoke an issue evolution. Outside the U.S., however, the issue evolution perspective has only recently applied despite the claims that it is applicable to different countries and party systems (Carmines and Stimson, 1986: 915).

Stevens (2013) demonstrated how the conflict about European integration in the UK follows an issue evolution logic, since elite-level (re-)positioning around the EU is antecedent to polarization and partisan sorting among the British mass public. Given Stevens' focus on Labour and the Conservatives, the study reveals the idiosyncrasies of issue evolution in Britain with the changing stances of the two parties and their supporters. Given the exclusion of the Liberal Democrats and other third parties, the study is nonetheless restricted to another two-party system in which the mainstream oppositional party (Labour in early 1970s and 1980s and Tories since 1997) tried mobilizing on another issue dimension by taking a Euroskeptical position.

Other studies applied Euroskepticism as a case for issue evolution in multiparty systems (de Vries and Hobolt, 2012; Hobolt and de Vries, 2015). De Vries and Hobolt (2012) and Hobolt and de Vries (2015) demonstrated how parties that have lost elections on the traditional dimension of party competition are more likely to become issue entrepreneurs, which holds even more for niche parties without government experience. Moreover, de Vries and Hobolt (2012) used individual data to show how Euroskeptical voters supported non-mainstream parties in the 2004 European Parliament elections, while aggregated longitudinal analyses of national elections (1984–2006) revealed that parties taking more Euroskeptical positions were electorally rewarded over time.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these advancements, we still lack an application of the issue evolution perspective in a multidimensional multiparty system setting that studies elite-level and mass-level dynamics over time. Hence, the next section discusses the applicability of the perspective outside the U.S. and how to integrate elite-level polarization and mass response in relation to a multiparty system.

### **Issue evolution in a multiparty system: Theoretical implications**

Applying the issue evolution perspective to European multiparty systems is of particular theoretical and empirical relevance. Most, if not all, Western European countries saw the emergence of new issues such as nuclear power, the environment, or immigration that diverged from the traditional class or religious cleavages that had previously structured electoral behavior (Kriesi et al., 2006, 2008; Enyedi and Deegan-Krause, 2010). In their seminal work, Kriesi et al. (2008) conceptualized these transformations as the emergence of a conflict about globalization which reduces the salience of the economic dimension and replaces existing religious/cultural dimensions of conflict within

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<sup>1</sup> A further study by Ward et al. (2015) shows that economic and European integration affect the content of party manifestos as parties converge on socio-economic issues and diverge on non-economic issues with increasing integration. They however do not inspect the sequence of (de-)polarization or the role of niche parties in the process. In this respect, my paper goes one step further and examines the polarization sequence in a highly globalized economy.

Western European party systems. Their analytical framework largely suggests a bottom-up approach explaining the transformation of party systems as they formulate an adaption hypothesis: 'The mainstream parties take up the new preferences, identities, values and interests, and interpret and articulate them in their own specific ways' (Kriesi et al., 2008: 14). This is different than how theories of issue evolution would conceptualize the transformation of Western European politics.

In this respect, van der Eijk and Franklin (2004) characterized the EU issue as 'sleeping giant' where niche parties have an interest to politicize this hitherto neglected issue (see also Meguid, 2005). This argument was further developed into competition between mainstream government, mainstream opposition, and niche party challengers (De Vries and Hobolt, 2012; Hobolt and De Vries, 2015; van de Wardt, 2015).<sup>2</sup> Niche party challengers without government experience are usually regarded as the driving force behind new issues, which distinguishes issue-driven changes in multiparty competition from two-party competition, where the mainstream opposition party starts competing on a new issue dimension to regain office.

Consequently, the incentives for political elites to mobilize on a new issue dimension differ in multiparty systems. In a U.S.-style two-party system, a mainstream party has an incentive to mobilize a new dimension if this would split the other party's supporter base and if it has lost constantly on the existing line of conflict (Carmines and Stimson 1989: 6-7). These conditions differ in multiparty systems where the existent mainstream parties that usually compete for office risk to jeopardize their coalition potential and bargaining power if they move from a mainstream position on the existing issue dimension to a radical position on a new one. Moreover, mainstream parties opening a new dimension of competition in multiparty systems also risk losing voters by opening niches for new competitors. Here previous studies have argued that mainstream parties can choose to adopt the new niche competitor's issue agenda, to reinforce the new competitor's issue ownership, or can try to ignore the issue to avoid the new issue breaking up electoral alignments and/or established patterns of coalition formation (Meguid, 2005; Green-Pedersen, 2011). Accordingly, and assuming that mainstream party elites are risk averse (see van de Wardt, 2015), I argue that mainstream party elites first try to win office and votes on the old dimension in the first rounds of competition and then gradually adapt after a niche competitor has become successful on the new dimension and office-seeking on old dimension failed several times. This might imply that voters have gone anyway and office-seeking works better on the new dimension if this splits the

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<sup>2</sup> Mainstream parties are those parties that regularly compete for office (e.g., social democrats, liberals, conservatives or Christian democrats) while niche parties or challenger parties are parties that do not compete for office on a regular basis, but try to bring new issues forward (e.g., greens, new right or nationalist parties).

supporter base of the main mainstream competitor or reduces its coalition potential. These problems do not appear in winner-takes-it-all systems and imply a different sequence of issue evolution in multiparty competition

This brings us to the incentives for niche party elites whose first goals are establishment and vote-seeking, and not office-seeking. Since multiparty competition implies that the positions on the existent dimension are already covered by existing parties, and thus space is crowded, a new competitor has stronger incentives to compete on and polarize a new dimension than to compete on the existing competition. Polarization on a new dimension is thus more promising for niche parties for their establishment compared to mainstream parties who might lose office- and vote-seeking potential as argued above. Accordingly, niche party elites have stronger incentives to engage in issue polarization in the early phase compared to mainstream parties who stick to mobilizing on the existent dimension even if they are in opposition.

Empirical studies of issue evolution of the EU issue have shown that challenger parties acted as issue entrepreneurs under multiparty competition and that especially parties who have faced election losses are willing to introduce a new dimension of issue competition; that is competing with a Euroskeptic program (De Vries & Hobolt, 2012; Hobolt & De Vries, 2015). This was supported by Van de Wardt's (2015) model and study of agenda-setting in the Danish multiparty system, which showed how niche parties are the catalysts for putting new issues such as immigration on the political elite's agenda. After new issues were brought forward by an issue entrepreneur – that is a niche party competitor – mainstream opposition parties first responded to the new issue followed by the governing mainstream parties. Furthermore, mainstream parties face stronger external and internal constraints in quickly adapting their positions to the new (emerging) issue dimension (Kriesi et al., 2008: 14–18).

If these arguments are true, we can deduce the following steps of issue evolution in multiparty systems:

Step (1): Issue evolution in multiparty competition is induced by an earlier polarization of the new issue dimension through niche parties rather than mainstream parties.

Step (2): The increasing elite salience of the new dimension is driven by niche party polarization.

Since these arguments do not incorporate the dynamics on the mass-level and an issue evolution sequence requires mass politics to respond to elite-level repositioning, we must combine



these insights with the respective arguments from Carmines and Stimson on mass polarization. Mass polarization on a new dimension first takes place after parties have sent clear cues by marking the distance to their opponent(s) on the new dimension (Carmines and Stimson, 1989: 161). Moreover, new issues must be salient for a longer period after elite-polarization to produce mass polarization (Carmines and Stimson, 1989: 13, 161). In this respect, niche party supporters should move earlier since niche parties acted as first movers on the new issue dimension, while mainstream party supporters react with a time lag as their parties keep competing on the existing dimension. This is crucial and is related to Carmines and Stimson's argument that visible elite polarization over time induces partisans to follow their parties on the new dimension, but also to the arguments that mainstream parties adapt only if they cannot "close" the new dimension (Meguid 2005). In sum, we can deduce the propositions below on issue evolution in a multiparty system on the mass-level:

Step (3): Niche party supporters adapt their positions earlier and polarize more strongly on the new dimension than mainstream partisans.

Step (4): The polarization of mainstream parties and their supporters around the new issue dimension is expected to lag behind the polarization of niche parties and their partisans and also be of a more moderate nature.

### **Case Selection**

The case for applying the issue evolution to a multiparty system is Denmark. Denmark represents a broader set of cases of Western European democracies with multiparty systems where a realignment around cultural issues took place (Kriesi et al., 2008; Stubager, 2010), where the originally strong class voting has disappeared with the Alford index having turned negative, and where the balance of power has shifted since 1973 (see the online appendix for details). Between 1953 and 1973, 90 per cent of all Danish governments were formed by the Social Democrats, while after 1973 50 per cent were formed by the center-right. Denmark was a highly globalized economy already by 1973 which means that this condition identified by Ward et al (2015) was always present. This makes Denmark an ideal test case to apply the issue evolution framework in a multiparty system over time also because Denmark is one of the few countries with a multiparty system where data exists for both the long-term issue agenda and for elite and mass-level polarization over a longer period of time (Green-Pedersen, 2007, 2011; Det Danske Valgprojekt, 2015).

To limit the empirical analysis to theoretically important parties and substantial developments,<sup>3</sup> I focus on the two historically strongest parties, the Social Democrats and the center-right Liberal Party (Venstre) as representatives of mainstream parties, and three parties (party families) that are theoretically relevant niche parties: the Social Liberals, the Socialist People's Party (SF, hereafter) and the New Right (Progress Party and later Danish People's Party). The Social Liberals (Radikale Venstre) had historically been an agrarian party (together with its 'mother party' Venstre) and was despite its small size always represented in the Danish parliament since 1906. Since the 1980s, the Social Liberals have taken a different route than the Liberals, the latter adopting a liberal-conservative profile, including more conservative/restrictive views on law-and-order or immigration (Mortensen, 2008).

The second niche party of relevance is the Socialist People's Party (SF). The Socialist People's Party first contested elections in 1960 as an old-school workerist party, but increasingly espoused a green/left-libertarian platform around anti-nuclear and environmental issues, pacifism, feminism, and minority rights since the 1970s (Mortensen, 2011). Finally, the New Right emerged in the early 1970s as a right-wing libertarian protest party with an anti-statist, anti-tax platform. The New Right increasingly adopted conservative views on law-and-order, immigration and various new issues and moderated their market-liberal profile during the 1980s and 1990s. Neither SF nor the New Right had joined governments until 2011. Theoretically, the New Right resembles the antipode to the Social Liberals and SF, and we should expect a sorting procedure among its electorate in line with rise of cultural issues. Hence, SF, the Social Liberals and the New Right should according to steps (1) and (2) be the first movers on the new dimension, and their partisans should polarize more strongly and earlier than do the partisans of the mainstream Liberals and Social Democrats according to steps (3) and (4).

## **Data and Methods**

The data on elite-level issue evolution stems from two sources. First, to measure elite-level issue salience, I used the data on the Danish parliamentary agenda for the legislative periods from 1968 to 2007 from the 'Danish Policy Agenda Project' compiled by Green-Pedersen and colleagues (2007,

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<sup>3</sup> Denmark has had parliaments with up to eleven parties, many of those as ephemeral phenomena, which would make the analysis unnecessarily complicated. The same argument goes for the exclusion of the Conservative Party, which adopted various profiles during the period under review while it only formed governments together with the Liberals in the period studied (except for the liberal minority government after the 1973 election). Its inclusion would thus provide limited added value.

2011).<sup>4</sup> Applying data on the parliamentary agenda is similar to the procedure in various US-based studies that use roll call data from Congress to assess the salience and polarization of issues in the legislative and thus among party elites (e.g., Carmines and Stimson, 1989: 169ff; Lindaman and Haider-Markel, 2002).

The Danish Policy Agenda Project coded all parliamentary activities into different issue categories. I first recoded the original 236 sub-issues into seven broader categories: ‘Economics’, ‘Immigration and Refugees’, ‘Health’, ‘Environment’, ‘Labor Market and Social Policy’, ‘Other New Politics’ (mainly law-and-order, legal affairs and minority rights) and all other issues. To ease graphical presentation, I merged the cultural issues ‘Immigration and Refugees’, ‘Environment’, and ‘Other New Politics’ into one category for the new cultural dimension while keeping the larger category ‘Economics’, as a category unto itself (see Green-Pedersen, 2011, for a similar coding). This resembles the distinction between an economic and a cultural dimension in Kriesi et al. (2008) as well as studies of issue evolution (Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Stimson et al., 2012).

To measure elite-level polarization, I used the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) (Volkens et al., 2013) and calculated the distances and – thus the polarization – on economic and cultural issues for four selected party dyads.<sup>5</sup> I followed Bakker and Hobolt’s (2013) coding of party positions in a two-dimensional space. The first dimension reflects the parties’ positions on the traditional economic left-right dimension. It contains ‘free enterprise’, ‘economic incentives’, ‘anti-protectionism’, ‘social services limitation’, ‘education limitation’, ‘productivity: positive’, ‘economic orthodoxy: positive’, and ‘labour groups: negative’ as pro-market emphases in the election manifestos. Regarding pro-state emphases, the CMP contains ‘regulate capitalism’, ‘economic planning’, ‘pro-protectionism’, ‘social services expansion’, ‘education expansion’, ‘nationalization’, ‘controlled economy’, ‘labour groups: positive’, ‘corporatism: positive’, ‘Keynesian demand management: positive’, ‘Marxist analysis: positive’, and ‘social justice’. I subtracted the sum of pro-state emphases from the sum of pro-market emphases for each party to capture its position on economic left-right issues. I then calculated the differences for the five parties under review by subtracting the economic left-right position of party A (e.g. the Social Democrats) from the economic left-right position of party B (e.g. the Liberals) for each election year.

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<sup>4</sup> The data, codebooks, and further supplementing information are available at [agendasetting.dk](http://agendasetting.dk). The code for the calculation of the elite-level issue agenda as well as all other materials necessary for replication will be made available on European Union Politics’ homepage.

<sup>5</sup> Further dyads appear in the online appendix.

A similar procedure was used for the second dimension which reflects the parties' positions on the cultural dimension and thus the new dimension of conflict. Here, I added the conservative emphases on the cultural issues 'political authority', 'national way of life: positive', 'traditional morality: positive', 'law-and-order', 'multiculturalism: negative', and 'social harmony' and subtracted the sum of the liberal emphases 'environmental protection', 'national way of life: negative', 'traditional morality: negative', 'culture', 'multiculturalism: positive', 'anti-growth', 'underprivileged minority groups', 'non-economic demographic groups: positive', 'freedom-human rights', and 'democracy'. I again captured the position of every party first and then calculated the differences for the five parties under review by subtracting the conservative-liberal position of party A (e.g. the Social Democrats) from the economic conservative-liberal position of party B (e.g. the Liberals) for each election year. This procedure was validated by Bakker and Hobolt (2013: 41-45) and provides an advantage over other measures of party polarization that only use a simple left-right distinction.

If the argument about issue evolution in Denmark is true, we should observe decreasing distances between the major parties on the economic dimension, while the distances on the cultural dimension should increase. This descriptive part of the analysis reveals the contrasts Liberals-Social Democrats, Liberals-SF, New Right-SF, and New Right-Social Liberals on both dimensions for the period 1968-2011. If steps (1) and (2) concerning issue evolution in multiparty systems hold true, then the contrasts between the New Right and the Social Liberals and SF should be the strongest and the contrast between the Liberals and the Social Democrats the weakest.

To accumulate data on mass-level polarization, I use data from the Danish Election Studies from 1971 to 2011 ([www.valgprojektet.dk](http://www.valgprojektet.dk)). For the elections after 1981, the Danish Election Studies consist of several consistent items on attitudes towards social security, inequality, free enterprise, immigration, and law-and-order. To obtain data for earlier election terms, I supplemented the Election Study Data with Danish Eurobarometer surveys (1973 and 1981), Gallup surveys from 1970 and 1983 as well as the Political Participation Study 1979 as the data sources had not always identical, but comparable items on the respective issue categories. All the items used in the supplementary opinion studies clearly distinguish between pro-market and pro-state attitudes towards economic issues and conservative and liberal attitudes towards cultural issues such as immigration/immigrants (see online appendix for wording and original coding). For instance, the 1983 Gallup survey introduced the item on whether immigration is perceived as a threat to Danish

national culture that was later included in every Danish election study. Following the procedure in previous studies (Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Lindaman and Haider-Markel, 2002; Stevens, 2013), I dichotomized the attitudes on social security, inequality, free enterprise, immigration, and law-and-order and calculated the differences for the same four partisan contrasts as on the elite level described above. These partisan contrasts will be visualized for the period 1968-2011 in a similar fashion as Carmines and Stimson's (1989) and Lindaman and Haider-Markel's (2002) studies of issue evolution dynamics over time.

To substantiate the findings from the descriptive analysis, I finally run Granger and ARIMA causality tests to assess whether elite-level polarization is antecedent to mass-level polarization and to further inspect whether elite-level polarization of niche parties is the driving force for elite salience and mass polarization in a multiparty context. One should keep in mind that these tests are based on the 10-14 election periods with available data for all necessary measures. Granger tests inspect whether the level of Y can be causally related to the level of X at a previous time or whether X can instead be related to the level of Y at a previous time (Granger, 1969). In this respect, the Granger tests first test whether elite polarization antecedes mass polarization. Afterwards, I use a multivariate ARIMA model to inspect whether niche or mainstream party polarization made cultural issues salient in Danish politics. If my arguments about the sequence of issue evolution hold true, the coefficients for the niche party contrasts should be significant, but not the ones for mainstream parties. The analysis below shows ARIMA tests with elite level salience of cultural issues as dependent variable. (Further tests for economic issues at the elite level and issue salience among voters appear in the online appendix). Accordingly, I refine the design applied by Carmines and Stimson (1989) and Lindaman and Haider-Markel (2002) for a multiparty setup with a limited number of election periods with mass-level data.

## Findings

### *Elite-level polarization*

First, I present descriptive results of the political agenda and polarization at the elite-level. Figure 1 shows the elite salience of economic and cultural issues in the left-hand panel and elite polarization around economic issues measured as CMP distances of the four party dyads in the middle and right-hand panel in the period 1968–2011. The left panel in Figure 1 reveals, first, that the elite-level agenda has changed substantially since the 1968–71 term. Having clearly dominated the 1970s with 20 percent of all activities devoted to economics, economic issues started losing salience at the elite-level by 1981 (also compared to issues such as health and labor market, not shown). In contrast, cultural issues roughly doubled their importance for policy-makers in Denmark over time and exceeded the salience of economic issues in the mid-1980s, and then becoming the most important issue category.

Turning to elite distances on economics (middle panel), we can observe a depolarization between the mainstream Liberals and Social Democrats in the period 1968–2011. The pattern of partisan polarization is curvilinear, but with a general trend towards depolarization after the late 1980s.

[Figure 1 about here]

The polarization between the Liberals and SF is still stronger, but declined since the late 1970s. The distance between the mainstream Liberals and Social Democrats on economics first fell in the early 1970s, before again increasing again to distances of 40 and more before again beginning to fall in the 1990s. The middle panel of Figure 1 thus yields an overall depolarization around economic issues when contrasting the mainstream Liberals with the Social Democrats and the SF. The depolarization accompanied the falling salience of economic issues since the early 1980s.

The panel on the right side of Figure 1 demonstrates an even stronger curvilinear pattern for niche parties since the New Right (Progress Party in this case) was first strongly distancing itself from the two other niche parties (SF and Social Liberals), and polarization around economics was strongest in the 1980s. In this respect, the polarization between the Progress Party and SF grew fierce by the early 1980s, but was also the first to decline in line with the declining salience of economic issues.

With some delay, depolarization also occurs between the New Right and Social Liberals. Their programmatic distances on the economy reached their maximum in the mid 1980s, but later converged. In sum, Figure 1 demonstrates a changing issue agenda after 1968, where cultural issues have increased in importance and replaced the economy as the most salient issue dimension in Danish politics in the 1980s. This was associated with a general depolarization of the five parties on the economic dimension with niche parties as earlier and more consequent movers. This is some first evidence that niche parties act as catalysts of issue evolution in multiparty systems (Steps 1 and 2).

The next question is whether depolarization on the economic dimension is reflected by polarization on the cultural dimension. This would indicate an elite-level agenda transformation and, thus, issue evolution in Denmark. Figure 2 plots the programmatic distances on cultural issues for the same four party dyads against the salience of the two dimensions over time.

[Figure 2 about here]

Starting with the patterns in the middle panel in Figure 2, we can observe that the increasing salience of cultural issues is reflected and partly anteceded by a polarization between the Liberals and the SF, but not so much between the two mainstream parties (Liberals and Social Democrats). Until the late 1970s, the Liberals were the more liberal contender on cultural issues such as immigration, while the SF took more restrictive positions. In the late 1970s, these three parties switched positions on cultural issues. They first converged and then polarized around cultural issues by the 1980s. The Liberals took now more conservative stances on cultural matters compared to SF.<sup>6</sup> This is in line with the concept of issue evolution, whereby parties adapt their stance to exploit electoral potential on salient issues (Carmines and Stimson, 1989). Furthermore, polarization and position switching on cultural issues is stronger between the Liberals and SF, but weaker for the two mainstream parties Liberals and Social Democrats. This provides additional evidence for step (1) that niche parties play a decisive role in issue evolution in a multiparty context.

This is further supported in the right panel of Figure 2 that visualizes the polarization around cultural issues for the three niche parties (New Right, SF, and Social Liberals). Polarization on cultural issues was virtually absent with the New Right's emergence in 1973. However, the New Right increasingly distanced itself from SF and the Social Liberals associated with the increasing

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<sup>6</sup> See online appendix Figure A6 for the similar contrast Liberals-Social Liberals.

salience of cultural issues (left panel of Figure 2). Notably, the polarization between the New Right, SF and Social Liberals started in the late 1970s, and then sharply increased as cultural issues trumped economic ones in elite-level salience in 1984 after the Progress Party focused on immigration as one main issue to halt its electoral decline. This pattern is much clearer than the pattern for mainstream party polarization in the middle panel. Consequently, comparing the absolute distances of the parties' positions in Figure 2 yields a maximum polarization of around 20 for the contrasts between mainstream Liberals and Social Democrats, whereas the maximum distances reach 50 and more for the contrasts New Right-SF, respectively New Right-Social Liberals. The distance between the New Right and the Social Democrats on cultural issues started to increase somewhat later in the 1990s and remains less pronounced (see online appendix, Figure A6). This further supports step (1) that issue evolution in multiparty systems is driven by niche parties with the mainstream parties making more moderate adaptations on that dimension.

In sum, the descriptive results provide considerable visual evidence for an issue evolution of cultural issues driven by niche parties. We saw increasing salience of and polarization around a new issue dimension for the five parties under review, which was particularly induced by the three niche parties. To see whether the changing issue agenda on the elite-level is reflected among the mass public, I calculated the partisan differences in attitudes towards social security and immigration for the same five parties and party dyads.

#### *Mass-level opinion and polarization*

Figure 3 displays the differences in partisan attitudes towards social security for the same four party dyads. The bars yield the percentage difference in supporting the statement that 'social reforms in this country have gone too far and that people should become more independent of social security' for partisans of the first mentioned party minus partisans of the second mentioned. The light grey bars reveals the differences between supporters of the mainstream Liberals and Social Democrats, while the black and dark grey bars show the contrasts of the niche parties (New Right, SF and Social Liberals). A medium grey bar shows the comparison of Liberal and SF-supporters.

[Figure 3 about here]



Despite some fluctuations, the partisan differences around social security generally declined from 1977 to 2011, as reflected in how the height of all bars in Figure 3 fell over time.<sup>7</sup> The partisans obviously reacted to the cues from the party elites who attributed less importance to the economy and engaged in depolarization. However, mass-level convergence was more pronounced among niche party partisans (black and dark grey bars in Figure 3). During the time period under review, the strong polarization on economic issues between the New Right and SF/Social Liberal partisans has roughly halved, and New Right voters have moderated their opposition towards social security. For instance, the attitudinal differences between SF supporters and the Progress Party was more than 50 percentage points in the mid 1970s, while the respective difference between SF and Danish People's Party was less than 25 percentage points at the turn of the millennium. This fits to the declining ideological distance between these parties shown in Figure 1.

The convergence between Liberal supporters and Social Democratic/SF supporters on social security is less pronounced and also starts later as only the elections since the turn of the millennium show clear convergence between supporters of these three parties. This fits to the patterns found in Figure 1 where convergence on the economy between the two mainstream parties occurred later than convergence between the niche parties. Overall, this provides first evidence for steps (3) and (4) since partisans of niche parties depolarized more strongly and systematically after their parties converged on the elite-level compared to mainstream parties.

To inspect whether the sorting procedure among niche party supporters was also stronger on the cultural dimension, Figure 4 presents the attitudinal differences for immigration for the same four party dyads.

[Figure 4 about here]

The bars indicate the percentage differences for having a skeptical view on immigration among supporters of the first minus supporters of the second mentioned party in line with the procedure used for Figure 3 above. The general pattern in Figure 4 is that of increasing polarization over time, and this is stronger among niche party supporters as the black and dark grey bars for

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<sup>7</sup> Calculating partisan differences for items on attitudes towards free enterprise, regulation of private investments and inequality yields similar patterns and are available on request.

New Right-SF and New Right-Social Liberals yield much stronger percentage differences in the attitudes towards immigration since 1971.<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly, partisans of the New Right, SF, and Social Liberals demonstrate a stronger and escalating polarization on immigration over time than the partisans of the two mainstream parties (Liberals and Social Democrats). Particularly, SF partisans were the first to distinguish themselves from New Right supporters and these attitudinal differences increased strongly after the early 1980s. This is followed by a similar distinction between Social Liberal and New Right partisans since 1981. Accordingly, SF and Social Liberal supporters followed their parties' repositioning after the 1970s and particularly after the 1983 immigration law and adapted more liberal attitudes to immigration. This fits with the patterns found in Figure 2 which revealed niche parties as first movers in position-switching and polarization on cultural issues at the elite-level.

In contrast, a stronger and consistent polarization of the mainstream party supporters (Social Democrats and Liberals) took only place since the mid1990s, when Social Democrat supporters became less skeptical towards immigration than Liberal supporters. Consequently, mass-level polarization followed the increasing salience and polarization around cultural issues at the elite since the late 1970s, as illustrated in Figure 2. Moreover, this sequence provides strong visual support for steps (3) and (4) since the earlier and stronger polarization of niche parties on the new dimension (here immigration) is much more systematically echoed among niche party partisans and their attitudes and to a weaker extent between partisans of the mainstream parties.

### *The Sequence of Issue Evolution*

Having shown that party competition in Denmark had been increasingly about cultural rather than economic issues since 1968 and that partisans of niche parties polarized more strongly on the cultural dimension than those of mainstream parties, the final goal is to underpin the descriptive evidence found in Figures 1–4 with Granger causality and ARIMA tests of the sequence of issue evolution (Granger, 1969). I first apply two sorts of Granger causality tests where I (1) examine the relationship between elite and mass polarization and (2) between elite salience and mass polarization. For an issue evolution, we need to substantiate that elite polarization and elite salience is antecedent to mass polarization. A final analysis using ARIMA models tests whether the increasing salience of cultural issues was driven by niche party polarization but not mainstream

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<sup>8</sup> A similar pattern of polarization occurs when attitudes towards punishment and crime are used instead (available on request).

party polarization in the first place. Here, I first run models with mainstream and niche party contrasts as independent variables and elite salience of culture as dependent variable, and include salience of the economy and a further niche party contrast as further controls. Specifications with one and two lags are shown.

Beginning with the Granger tests, I follow the procedure from above and present the tests for the same four party contrasts and the attitudes on social security and immigration and provide additional tests for inequality, free enterprise and law-and-order. The tests show whether the elite-level party contrasts Granger caused the contrasts among the partisans of the same two parties or vice versa. To indicate whether the relationships follow a top-down or bottom-up logic, I further count the number of significant Chi-square tests (at  $p < .05$ ) for the relationships shown (the Chi-square and p-values appear in the online appendix). If my arguments about issue evolution in multiparty systems driven by niche parties holds true, there should – despite the rather limited number of election studies – be more significant 'elite causes mass' coefficients than 'mass causes elite' coefficients, and the respective tests should be especially significant for the niche party contrasts.

The pattern in Table 1 suggests an issue evolution sequence rather than a bottom-up polarization or a reciprocal relationship between elite and mass polarization since 15 of the possible 20 elite-driven relationships provide significant Chi-square tests, and only two provide evidence of a mass-driven polarization. With the exception of free enterprise, the patterns are clear and indicate that the polarization of elites in Denmark Granger caused mass polarization and not vice versa. Moreover, a robustness check using the parties' position on immigration from the CMP data and not the position on the cultural dimension indicates a stronger role of niche parties since there is neither a significant top-down nor bottom-up Granger relationship between the two mainstream parties and only the relationships involving niche parties are significant (bottom of table). This shows that the mass polarization in Denmark around cultural issues as well as depolarization on economic ones since 1968 was mainly an elite-driven process with a stronger role of niche parties in line with steps (3) and (4).

[Table 1 about here]

A second set of Granger tests is provided in Table 2. The Granger tests suggest that especially mass polarization on cultural issues follows an issue evolution sequence since elite salience on immigration and crime Granger causes mass attitudes in all eight contrasts and there are few reciprocal effects. While elite salience always Granger causes mass polarization (all 20 Chi-square tests are significant), we find more reciprocal relationships for the traditional economic dimension since economic issues also gain salience after mass polarization on social security and free enterprise. Nevertheless, taken together, the Granger tests in Tables 1–2 support the descriptive results found for steps (2), (3) and (4) since niche party polarization drives the salience of the new dimension and makes niche partisans adapt their positions on the new dimension earlier than mainstream partisans. That is, we have systematic patterns for top-down processes caused by niche party polarization, but no systematic proof for bottom-up processes or mainstream parties as drivers of issue evolution.

[Table 2 about here]

Finally, ARIMA tests in Table 3 inspect the drivers behind the salience of culture at the elite level. I first ran models with the polarization Venstre-Social Democrats and New Right-SF as explanatory variables (M1 and M2). The choice of these party contrasts follows the patterns found in Figures 1-4 to compare one mainstream party contrast with the most important niche party contrast (here New Right–SF). These models imply that, besides autoregressive effects, we only have positive and significant effects of niche party polarization on elite level salience of culture, but not mainstream party effects.

[Table 3 about here]

The results are virtually similar at one and two lags for the autoregressive and moving average terms. Adding another niche party contrast (New Right and Social Liberals) and elite salience of economy as further controls in Models M3-M5 does not change this picture. It is niche party polarization which constantly has significant positive effects (either New Right and SF or New Right and Social Liberals or both), while the mainstream party polarization coefficient is only significant in Model 7, which further contains both niche party contrasts and the control for economy at two lags. Keeping in mind the limited data base, this model thus shows the sequence at

the elite level, namely that niche party polarization is the main driver of elite awareness on cultural issues, and that mainstream parties lag behind the niche competitors in the issue evolution process.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper applied the issue evolution perspective to a European multiparty system. One aim was to develop some testable propositions for issue evolution under multiparty competition and the role of niche parties. Applying issue evolution to the Danish case in the period 1968-2011, I argued and found that issues evolution under multiparty competition occurs as consequence of niche party polarization which introduces the new dimension of conflict. I first showed an evolution of cultural issues such as immigration or crime at the elite-level. After niche parties introduced this new dimension of conflict by polarization on these issues, parliamentary activities increasingly became centered around cultural politics substituting the economic dimension of party competition. Second, I found that this elite-level polarization was eventually absorbed by Danish voters. Issues such as immigration or crime crosscut the traditional class-based alignments and led to polarization of Danish voters around cultural issues. This polarization was more systematic and stronger among supporters of niche parties than mainstream parties.

The findings therefore have some implications for understanding the transformation of Western European party systems. First, the emergence of cleavages such as immigration or globalization (and related divisions, e.g., values, education cleavages, European integration) have likely been more elite-level driven than Kriesi and colleagues (2008) have assumed. My findings based on a single case study over time shows that the role of niche parties as drivers of issue evolution in multiparty systems is not limited to the electoral effects of Euroskepticism as previous studies have shown (de Vries and Hobolt, 2012; Hobolt and de Vries, 2015), but does travel to the more fundamental transformation of Western European party systems and the emergence of a cultural dimension in many European countries.

Since this paper was limited to the evolution of a new issue dimension in 16 Danish elections using aggregated data, a natural next step is to investigate the link between the ‘clarity and affect’ part of Carmines and Stimson’s framework and the final outcome of issue evolution: the restructuring of the electoral landscape through partisan realignment (‘affect’). Here, an analysis of the changed perceptions of mainstream and niche parties on the new dimension of conflict

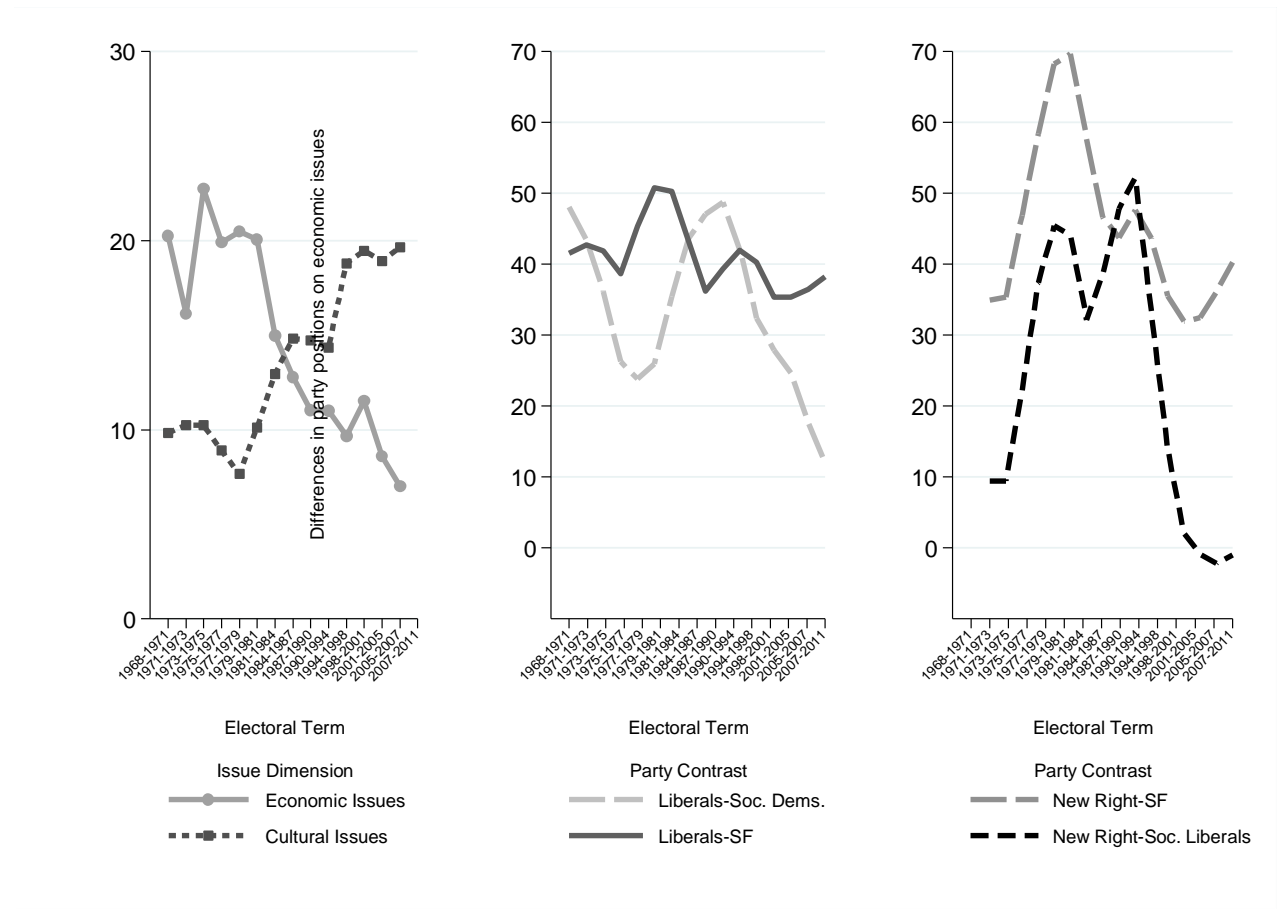
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<sup>9</sup> This finding is virtually similar when using individual level salience for the partisans of the five parties based on the most important issue question instead of the elite level salience (see online appendix Tables A6a-A6e). These tests further show that elite salience antecede mass-level salience.

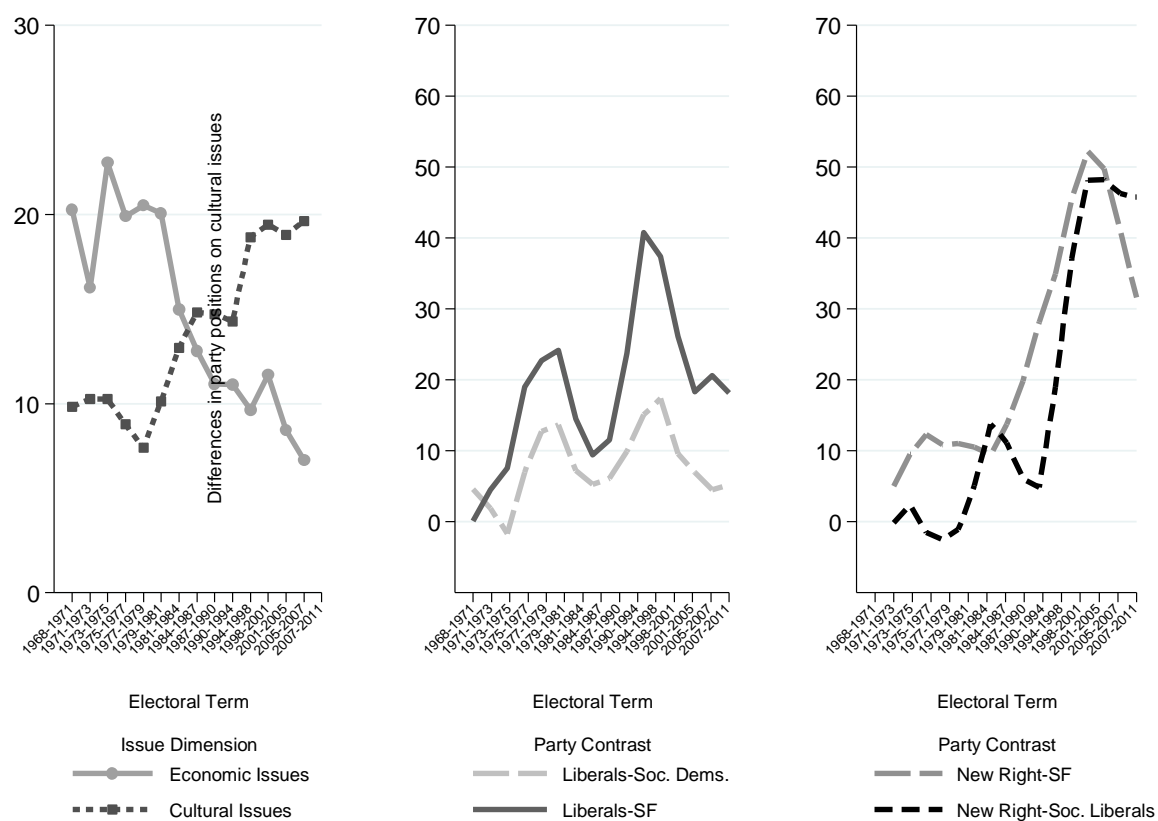
(‘clarity’) with micro-level data would be a good point of departure to underpin the results of this study and overcome some of the problems with the limited data base on the macro level.

These analyses can then be linked to the work of Evans and Tilley (2012a, b) and Stevens (2013) on the role of British political elites in the reshaping of electoral coalitions, who provide a good starting point for empirical analysis in this respect. Moreover, applying the issue evolution framework to multiparty systems should enhance our knowledge about which political actors (mainstream versus non-mainstream) are the driving forces behind polarization and the transformation of partisan alignments in Western European politics (Meguid, 2005; De Vries and Hobolt, 2012). Doing so would yield a more nuanced picture in the discussion on how and whether parties adapt to the changing social structure in an age of globalization or whether political elites act more as agents of change as was the case in the U.S.

# Figures and Tables



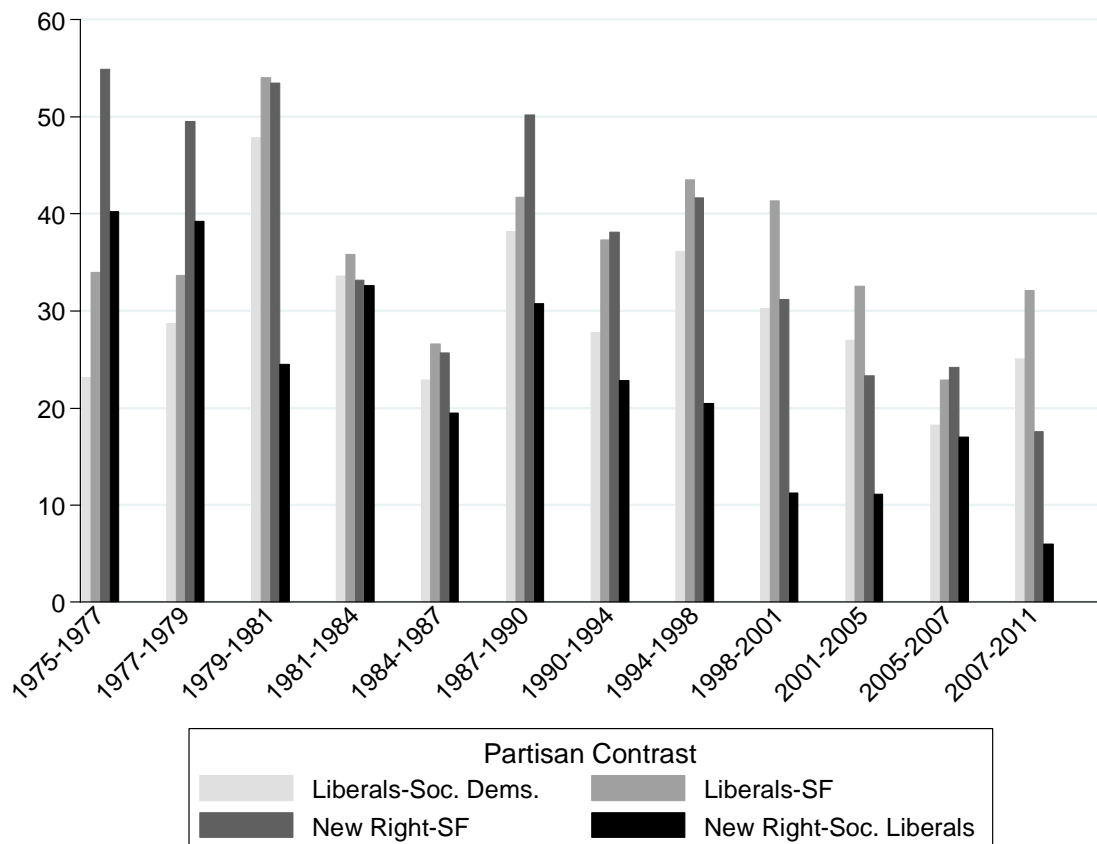
**Figure 1.** Issue salience and elite polarization around economic issues for four party contrasts, Denmark 1968–2011. *Source:* Own calculations based on data on parliamentary activities from Danish Policy Agenda Project ([www.agendasetting.dk](http://www.agendasetting.dk)) and CMP data. Lines are smoothed.



**Figure 2.** Issue salience and elite polarization around cultural issues for four party contrasts, Denmark 1968–2011.

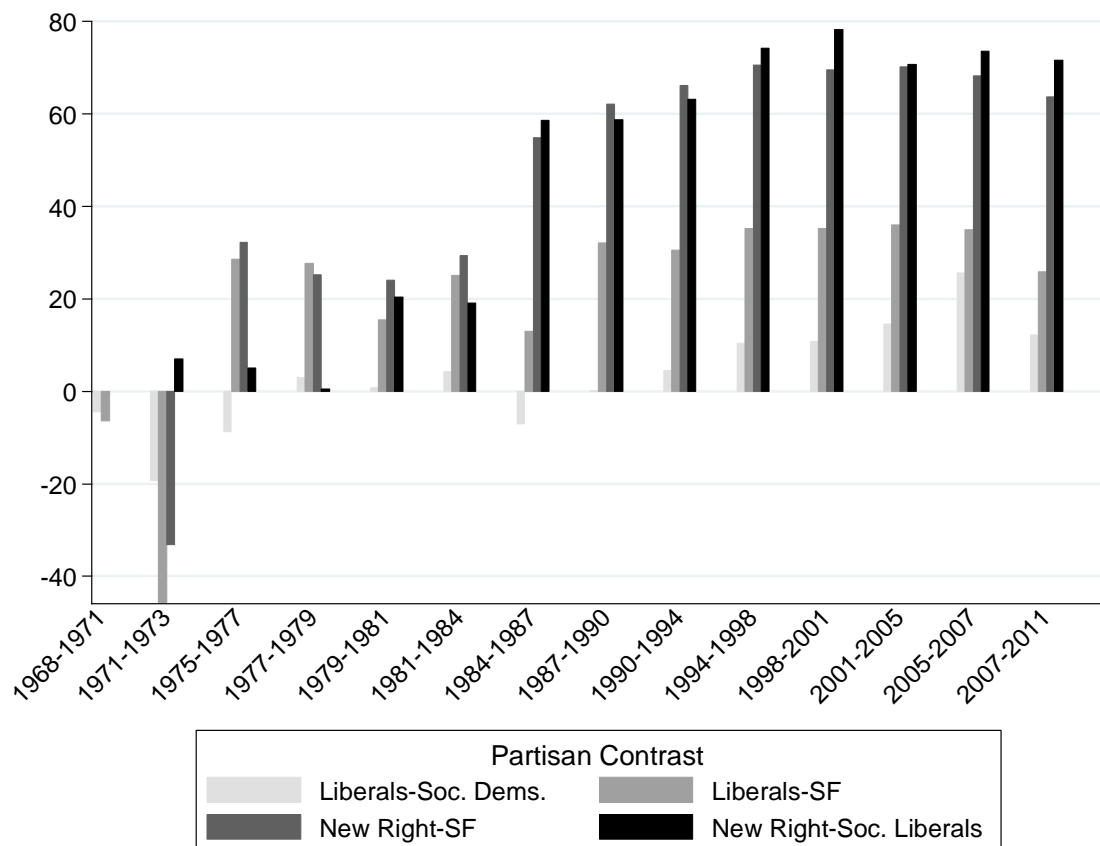
*Source:* Own calculations based on data on parliamentary activities from Danish Policy Agenda Project ([www.agendasetting.dk](http://www.agendasetting.dk)) and CMP data. Lines are smoothed.





**Figure 3.** Differences in partisan attitudes towards social security, 1975–2011.

*Source:* Own calculations based on data from Danish Election Studies and Political Participation Study 1979, N=13,877 (see description in text and online appendix). *Note:* The figures indicate the percentage differences between partisans of the first and second party mentioned. Positive values indicate less support for social security among partisans of the first-mentioned party.



**Figure 4.** Partisan differences in attitudes towards immigration, 1968–2011.

*Source:* Own calculations based on data from Danish Election Studies, Eurobarometer and Gallup surveys, N=14,460 (see description in text and online appendix). *Note:* The figures indicate the percentage differences between partisans of the first and second party mentioned. Positive values indicate more restrictive views on immigration among partisans of the first-mentioned party.

**Table 1.** Bivariate Granger causality between elite and mass polarization for economic and cultural issues.

Issue	Party Contrast	Liberals vs. Soc.Dems.	Liberals vs. SF	New Right vs. SF	New Right vs. Social Liberals
<i>Social security</i>	Elite polarization causes	*	*	*	*
	mass polarization				
	Mass polarization causes	-	-	-	-
	elite polarization				
<i>Inequality</i>	Elite polarization causes	*	*	*	*
	mass polarization				
	Mass polarization causes	-	-	-	-
	elite polarization				
<i>Free enterprise</i>	Elite polarization causes	*	*	-	-
	mass polarization				
	Mass polarization causes	*	-	-	*
	elite polarization				
<i>Immigration</i>	Elite polarization causes	-	-	- (#)	*
	mass polarization				
	Mass polarization causes	-	-	-	-
	elite polarization				
<i>Punishment of violent felony</i>	Elite polarization causes	*	*	*	*
	mass polarization				
	Mass polarization causes	-	-	-	-
	elite polarization				
Number of significant tests for issue		4/1	4/0	3/0	4/1
evolution process/bottom-up process, Total					
15/2					
<i>Immigration (CMP Codes on immigration) as robustness check</i>	Elite polarization causes	-	*	*	*
	mass polarization				
	Mass polarization causes	-	-	-	-
	elite polarization				

*Note:* \* means Chi-square test of Granger causality test significant at 5-%. The lag is one election term. (#) test is significant at two lags. The tests are based on the CMP distances for the five parties and the survey data described in the main text. Number of election terms 10–14.

**Table 2.** Bivariate Granger causality between elite salience and mass polarization for economic and cultural issues.

	Party Contrast	Liberals vs. Soc.Dems.	Liberals vs. SF	New Right vs. SF	New Right vs. Social Liberals
Issue					
<i>Social security</i>	Elite salience causes mass polarization	*	*	*	*
	Mass polarization causes elite salience	*	-	-	*
<i>Inequality</i>	Elite salience causes mass polarization	*	*	*	*
	Mass polarization causes elite salience	-	-	-	-
<i>Free enterprise</i>	Elite salience causes mass polarization	*	*	*	*
	Mass polarization causes elite salience	*	-	-	-
<i>Immigration</i>	Elite salience causes mass polarization	*	*	*	*
	Mass polarization causes elite salience	*	-	-	-
<i>Punishment of violent felony</i>	Elite salience causes mass polarization	*	*	*	*
	Mass polarization causes elite salience	-	*	*	-
Number of significant tests for issue		5/3	5/1	5/1	5/1
evolution process/bottom-up process, Total					
20/6					

*Note:* \* means Chi-square test of Granger causality test significant at 5-%. The lag is one election term. The tests are based on Danish Policy Agenda Project data for elite salience and the survey data described in the main text. Number of election terms 10–14.

**Table 3.** ARIMA models of salience of cultural issues at elite level

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7
<i>Distance Venstre-Social Democrats on cultural issues</i>	0.047 (0.083)	0.056 (0.181)	0.011 (0.029)	0.106 (0.085)	-0.008 (0.033)	0.018 (0.049)	0.073*** (0.007)
<i>Distance New Right-SF on cultural issues</i>	0.185** (0.060)	0.174* (0.071)	0.045! (0.027)	0.124* (0.051)	0.085*** (0.014)	0.037! (0.020)!	0.054*** (0.007)
<i>Distance New Right-Social Liberals on cultural issues</i>	-	-	0.005 (0.007)	0.079* (0.040)	-	0.050** (0.017)	0.027*** (0.004)
<i>Salience economic issues at elite level</i>	-	-	-	-	-0.578*** (0.048)	-0.561*** (0.037)	-0.576*** (0.023)
Constant	9.222*** (1.530)	9.464** (2.896)	13.573*** (2.501)	8.983*** (1.359)	20.261*** (1.041)	20.173*** (0.878)	19.789*** (0.511)
AR(1)	0.802! (0.443)	-	0.767*** (0.192)	-	-0.037 (0.233)	-0.105 (0.402)	-
MA(1)	-1.000*** (0.000)		1.000*** (0.000)	-	-1.000*** (0.000)	-1.000*** (0.000)	-
AR(2)	-	0.639 (1.962)	-	0.336 (0.607)	-	-	-0.801*** (0.187)
MA(2)	-	-0.907 (1.709)	-	-1.000*** (0.000)	-	-	-1.000*** (0.000)
Election Periods	13	13	13	13	13	13	13

Note: !p<.10, \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*<0.001. AR: Autoregressive term, MA: Moving-average term, values in parentheses indicate lags.

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