Introduction: Mapping public opinion on issues in elections across Europe in 2017[1]

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In the seven months going from mid-March to mid-October 2017, five major Western European democracies voted for their general elections. Chronologically, we had the Dutch legislative election in late March, the French presidential election between April and May, and the UK snap election immediately afterwards. Finally, after the summer, we had legislative elections in Germany (late September) and Austria (mid-October). This represented an exceptionally interesting opportunity to study the evolution of public opinion and party systems in the particularly turbulent environment we are currently facing (Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2018).

Indeed, party systems in established democracies are increasingly challenged. In the 1990s and 2000s the most common pattern was the prevalence of a two-bloc (or two-party) competition by mainstream parties having relatively similar, moderate policies, and adopting general valence appeals addressed towards the whole electorate. Conversely, in recent years we have experienced an unprecedented emergence of successful challenger parties (and leaders), with examples both on the right (Donald Trump, the UKIP, the Front National – to mention the most successful) and on the left (such as Bernie Sanders, SYRIZA, Podemos, and Jeremy Corbyn). Such new, challenger parties and leaders share instead a conflictual emphasis on a relatively small set of controversial policy issues that have proved electorally successful.

The emergence of such new developments in party competition has presented a challenge, not only to pundits, but even to scientific theories of party competition. We argue that existing theoretical frameworks have not been entirely successful in describing and explaining the competitive dynamics of

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[1] This text is original for this volume.

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recent years. We believe, then, that there is a compelling need for analysis driven by a fresh theoretical perspective, general enough to travel across different contexts, and supported by empirical evidence that is systematically and rigorously collected.

Building on these considerations and on the recent development of issue yield theory (De Sio 2010; De Sio and Weber 2014, De Sio, Franklin and Weber 2016), at CISE we decided to launch a comparative research aimed at collecting comparable cross-national data on issue competition, with innovative measurement approaches. We have collected individual-level data through CAWI surveys in the aforementioned five countries (with the involvement of scholars from each country) in view of the respective general election. Similar questionnaires have been designed in the five countries to include those issues actually relevant in the electoral campaign of each specific country. Except for the different issue selection, questionnaires were absolutely identical. They all asked respondents, along with a classic series of sociodemographic and voting survey items, specific issue-related items: respondents' positions on divisive policy issues, followed by respondent-reported priority and goal credibility of different parties on both shared, valence goals (Stokes 1963) and on those divisive goals selected by each respondent on positional issues (with issues covering several policy domains).

This survey design has allowed us to develop specific cross-nationally comparable and replicable indicators for the level of priority and popularity of the different policy goals, the level of credibility of different parties for achieving such policy goals, and finally, by relying on issue yield theory, for the specific *issue yield* configurations (i.e. the assessment of electoral risks and opportunities associated with each issue) for each party.

Such data was collected with the aim of providing the basis for a comparative analysis of issue competition in Western Europe directed to a scientific audience; such effort, which is now involving the CISE plus five additional country teams, will lead to separate scientific contribution (namely, a special issue of an international scientific journal, planned for early 2019). In this volume, we collect and discuss first empirical results from the project: in particular, the book collects all the research notes published on the CISE website (http://cise.luiss.it) at campaign time. Such notes were based on preliminary evidence from the above described dataset, and aimed at providing an external outreach for the project, directed to a non-scientific audience.

Contributions in this volume, organized by country, are both pre-electoral and post-electoral. In particular, before the elections we look at the state of public opinion in terms of issue priorities and preferences, highlighting the issues at the top of the various national agendas, and also the overall preferences of different national electorates on rival policy goals. Furthermore, we discuss the opportunity structures facing different parties in various coun-

tries, by interacting party credibility with opinion preference data. Post-electoral contributions present and discuss electoral results, by also analysing the issue compatibility among electorates of potential post-electoral governmental partners.

The general *Zeitgest* emerging from our analyses appears to be quite similar among the observed countries. In general, voters appear to be favourable to cultural demarcation and to economic protection. With different emphasis and extent, this pattern is clearly visible in all the selected countries (which, by the way, show pretty different economic performance). What is then interesting to investigate is how different parties have reacted to this similar opinion setting; something we investigated with respect to a simple distinction between *conflict mobilization* and *problem solving* strategies, emerging from the reliance on positional vs. valence issues (De Sio and Paparo in this volume). Both on the left and the right, traditional mainstream parties appear quite strong on valence issues. However, quite often they are not anymore the most credible option to achieve specific policy goals. In particular, left parties appear losing their role on classic left-wing welfare and redistributive goals, while right-wing parties face the strong competition of radical right-wing parties on cultural demarcation goals (Kriesi et al. 2006, 2008). This appears true in all countries of our study, but not in the United Kingdom, where on the contrary, traditional mainstream parties appear to have more adequately coped with the challenges of the current turbulent political environment; being able to maintain (or re-conquer) their role as credible parties for achieving not only shared valence goals, but also divisive policy choices (Paparo in this volume(a)).

The volume is structured as follows. There are five separate chapters, one per each of the five countries included in this research project, ordered on a chronological basis. National chapters are structured in a similar fashion. We first have one or more contributions presenting the most significant findings of the pre-electoral surveys in terms of opinion preferences and party opportunities. Then, chapters are concluded by a post-electoral contribution, which reports electoral results, interprets them also in the light of issue data, and discusses (in terms of their party constituency) the issue compatibility of potential governmental coalitions. The various chapters also include in-depth analyses on specific relevant topics, such as district-level competition in the United Kingdom (Emanuele and Marino in this volume), crucial to understand possible parliamentary outcomes; or electoral shifts in France (Paparo in this volume(b)) to understand where Macron's and new Le Pen's votes come from. Conclusions follow.

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