Conclusion: The rise of (not all) challengers? Similar public opinion, different party strategies[1]

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In this volume we have collected the contributions published on the CISE website (http://cise.luiss.it) belonging to the comparative issue competition project we launched in early 2017, which has covered five major Western European democracies holding their general elections in 2017 – the Netherlands, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Austria.

Building on issue yield theory and its most recent developments (De Sio 2010; De Sio and Weber 2014; De Sio, Franklin and Weber 2016; De Sio, De Angelis and Emanuele 2017), we developed a comparative research design investigating public opinion preferences on positional and valence issues, as well as party opportunity structures on the same issues. This data will constitute the basis for a systematic scientific investigation of party competition patterns in Western Europe (see the Introduction). However, preliminary evidence already provides meaningful insights to the discussion of electoral prospects before the elections, and of electoral outcomes after them.

In short, we collected individual-level data through CAWI surveys in the different aforementioned five countries. Similar questionnaires have been designed in each country to include those issues actually relevant in its electoral campaign. Except for the different issue selection, surveys were absolutely identical. They all asked respondents, along with a classic series of sociodemographic and voting survey questions, to indicate the priority for a list of valence issues, concerning the achievement of shared goals (Stokes 1963); and to specify parties deemed credible to achieve each goal. Furthermore, all surveys

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[1] This text is original for this volume.

included a series of positional issues as well, on which respondents had to state their preferred goal out of two rival ones, and then, just as for valence goals, indicate the goal priority and the parties deemed credible for the selected goal. Although with wording variations, due to the specific national issue framing and content, all surveys included batteries of items investigating the same policy domains, such as the economy, immigration, the EU, the environment, cultural and social issues.

Interestingly, the general public opinion orientations emerging from our analyses appear to be quite similar across the observed countries. First of all, we noticed that valence issues are at the top of the agenda in all national cases. Only seldom we find positional issues being so salient to reach high quarters of issue priority rankings, replacing the least salient valence issues. All of these particularly prominent positional issues were related to immigrants or the EU.

Here comes another interesting piece of evidence shared by the different countries: the general anti-immigrant wind blowing across Europe. Of course, there are national variations in the intensity of this hostility. Nevertheless, in all countries strong majorities of the electorate prefer cultural demarcation goals to those of cultural integration, in the terms developed by Kriesi et al. (2006, 2008). This is true looking at the number of immigrants or refugees who should be allowed to enter; looking to the rules regulating their access and presence; and finally even when looking at issues of cultural assimilation. Voters want less immigrants and that those who do migrate adapt to the national culture. And such preference is frequently quite large: in different countries, between two-thirds and four-fifths of the electorate believe that foreigners should adapt; while roughly three-quarters want more restrictive immigration rules. Furthermore, they also desire a restriction in welfare benefits for immigrants: between 70 and 82% in different countries, with the mere exception of the Dutch case where 'only' 50% supports welfare chauvinism (Emanuele, De Sio and van Ditmars in this volume).

Interestingly, a further common trait across the selected countries is the prevalence, on economic matters, of social-democratic choices. For instance, consistently across all five countries, between 71 and 75% of respondents favoured reducing income differences. A reduction of pension age is desired by two thirds of French and Dutch voters, while in Germany and Austria three quarters of the sample prefer keeping current pension age over its increase. Just to provide an understanding of how deep this leaning towards left-wing economic proposals, we shall mention that two thirds of British voters favour nationalizing the railways (Emanuele in this volume), or that 57% of German voters prefer to spend the budget surplus to increase services rather than cutting taxes (Emanuele and Paparo in this volume).

These are only first empirical elements that deserve further investigation. However, it is hard not to see both orientation as political consequences of

contemporary, large-scale transformation processes which can be seen by citizens as cultural or economic threats. These voter preferences appear to be particularly challenging for mainstream parties, on both the left and the right, which are – perhaps inevitably – mostly supportive of such transformations. It is worth mentioning that our data clearly show what has been (in recent decades, and still is) the strategy pursued by mainstream parties: that of leveraging their superior credibility on valence issues. As mentioned, valence goals are the most salient, and mainstream parties do manage to still be considered the most credible on reaching them. However, this strategy opens up large political spaces for challenger political entrepreneurs exploiting the gaps between voters' preferences and mainstream parties' stances on positional, divisive issues. Looking outside the borders of our investigation, even the whole Trump phenomenon could be seen as a manifestation of this pattern.

In a way, such gaps are already testified by the quantitative evidence emerging from our analyses. Our data clearly show the loss of credibility for social-democratic mainstream parties in achieving classical social-democratic goals on the economy, on which challenger left parties emerged as way more credible. Symmetrically, on the right, mainstream parties have not emerged as the most credible option to achieve demarcation goals, overtaken by radical right-wing alternatives.

For instance, we highlighted, *before* the elections, the particularly problematic prospects for the French Socialist Party (Paparo, De Sio and Michel in this volume), and the Dutch Labour Party (Paparo, De Sio and van Ditmars in this volume), whose poor electoral results became, in perspective, not completely surprising, in light of their low credibility rates on classical left-wing policy goals. However, we were also able to spot exceptions to this general pattern. Particularly in the United Kingdom, where the two mainstream parties appear to have more adequately reacted to the challenges to party system stability, emerging as a consequence of contemporary transformations. Thanks to May's stance on the hard Brexit and Corbyn's platform on the economy, Tories and Labour have defended their credibility from challengers on cultural demarcation and economic redistribution goals respectively, and are today the only mainstream parties perceived as credible not only on shared goals, but also on the positional goals supported by the majority of Britons (Paparo in this volume(a)).

We should also mention the different strategic choices selected by conservative mainstream actors in continental Europe. Mark Rutte in the Netherlands and Sebastian Kurz in Austria have implemented an imitative strategy, incorporating cultural demarcation goals in their electoral platforms, and have been quite successful in containing the feared *exploit* by radical right-wing parties – Geert Wilders and his PVV in the Netherlands, and Heinz-Christian Strache and his FPÖ in Austria. On the contrary, in France

and Germany, François Fillon and Angela Merkel made a different choice. The chancellor maintained a 'Christian' approach to the refugee issue, and immigration more in general. Macron assumed instead a profile much more centred on economic *laissez-faire*, in addition to his support for European integration (De Sio and Paparo in this volume). It is probably not a coincidence, then, that the electoral advances for radical right-wing parties have been more relevant in these two countries.

Of course, these are just some highlights of the vast amount of preliminary empirical results collected in this volume, which includes some more detailed analyses on specific aspects of particular interest, such as the origin of Macron voters' in France (Paparo in this volume(b)) or the details of district-level competition in the UK (Emanuele and Marino in this volume). Here, we have tried to summarize some common indications, which might be useful reference points in approaching future elections in Western Europe, starting with the imminent Italian legislative elections. While the data collected in this project (including the Italian elections) will be fully exploited in a still forthcoming collective contribution, we definitely believe that this volume already contributes to a better understanding of the changing issue competition landscape in Western Europe, as testified by the electoral developments of these five countries in 2017.

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