

# Electoral mobilisation in turbulent times

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## Abstract

This symposium examines how European parties mobilize electorally in an era of recurrent crises and rapid political transformation. Building on the updated PolDem dataset, which tracks media coverage of national election campaigns across fifteen European countries from 1972 to 2023, the symposium investigates how issue salience, party positioning, and voter behaviour interact under turbulent conditions. The introduction situates the contributions around three core themes: (1) measuring and comparing party communication across media and manifestos; (2) mapping cross-national and longitudinal variation in political conflict lines; and (3) identifying the drivers of politicization across economic, cultural, and political dimensions. Together, the articles offer an integrated, content-based perspective on campaign dynamics that links short-term issue emphasis to long-term party-system structuration. The collection advances our understanding of how crises reshape electoral competition and democratic representation in Europe.

## Keywords

electoral mobilisation, party competition, campaign effects

## Introduction

The symposium endeavours to illuminate a key dimension of contemporary politics: partisan mobilization during electoral campaigns. Recognizing the imperative to comprehend the evolution of party politics and voter behaviour within an epoch marked by multifaceted crises and rapid transformations, this symposium aspires to deliver an exhaustive analysis of the longitudinal changes in European party-system salience and positions of issues throughout the past two decades and successive crises. It also explores the intricate relationship between electoral campaigns and voter choice in the European context.

Extant literature reveals a dearth of convergence in the methodologies and research findings pertaining to the influence of media and campaigns on vote choice in Europe (e.g. [Boomgaarden and Schmitt-Beck, 2016](#); [Finkel and Schrott, 1995](#); [Gelman and King, 1993](#); [Hillygus and Shields, 2008](#); [Kalla and Broockman, 2018](#); [Kinder, 2003](#)). Taking these observations as its starting point, the symposium engages with several crucial research questions that illuminate the dynamics of electoral mobilisation and

party competition in contemporary Europe. First, how have party positions and issue salience evolved in European elections over the past two decades, particularly in response to successive crises? Second, what is the impact of different information sources, e.g. mass media campaign coverage versus party manifestos, on how we measure party strategies? Third, how do issue-specific campaigns affect vote intentions and electoral results? Fourth, what are the regional variations in political conflicts across Northwestern, Southern, and Central Eastern Europe, and how do these reflect different historical legacies and contemporary challenges? Fifth, how have recent crises, such as the euro crisis, refugee crisis, COVID-19 pandemic, and the War in Ukraine, reshaped party competition and voter behaviour? And finally, how do parties adapt their strategies to navigate

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an increasingly complex and fragmented media landscape while addressing emerging voter concerns? By addressing these questions, the symposium aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the changing nature of electoral politics in Europe and its implications for democratic representation.

Central to this endeavour is the utilization of the updated PolDem dataset of electoral campaigns, which captures media coverage of national election campaigns across 15 European countries. This dataset offers a longitudinal view of issue-specific campaigns from 1972 to 2023 (Hutter and Kriesi, 2019; Kriesi et al., 2008, 2012). Unlike other datasets, such as the Comparative Manifesto Data or Chapel Hill expert data, the PolDem dataset focuses on real-time campaign content and its representation in the public sphere. This approach provides a more accurate snapshot of the campaign environment and the political conflicts that unfold within it.

In the current introduction, we discuss the individual contributions based on three themes. These are: 1. The measurement and comparison of party communication during election campaign, 2. The cross-national and over time variation in conflict lines across European regions, and 3. The driving forces of the politicization of economic, cultural and political issues. We illustrate the use of the PolDem dataset by providing, a first, aggregate overview that highlights variation across regions and parties. We recognise that the succession of crises, ranging from the euro crisis, the so-called refugee crisis, COVID-19 pandemic and the most recent war in Ukraine. We argue that these events have reconfigured the substance of political conflict in Europe, rendering it essential to investigate how these developments have impinged upon party politics. Our main innovation lies in taking a content-based perspective of political campaigns. Content-based perspectives have been comparatively under-examined, especially in terms of their relevance for electoral choices. By concentrating on this dimension, the symposium probes the multifaceted factors that engender parties' campaign strategies and messaging, as well as their bearing on voters' predilections and decision-making processes. In addition, extant literature has not adequately explored the manner in which parties' issue emphasis or issue positioning impacts citizens' voting choices. The symposium endeavours to redress this deficit by scrutinizing the role of issue-specific campaign content in moulding voter behaviour.

Our main empirical contribution is introducing the updated PolDem dataset. The dataset includes the media coverage of national election campaigns in seven North-western (AU, CH, DE, FR, GB, IE, NL), four Southern (GR, IT, SP, PT), and four Eastern European (HU, LV, PL, RO) countries in selected cases between 1972 and 2022. Following a relational perspective, the unit of observations is individual core sentences that capture the position of political parties vis-à-vis a great variety of issues. This allows

us to study the dynamic issue- and party-specific mobilization and systemic relations between different political forces.

This updated dataset diverges from antecedent resources such as the Comparative Manifesto Data or Chapel Hill expert data. In contrast to these other resources, the PolDem dataset focuses more on capturing the relative salience and positioning of parties and issues as they unfold in an actual electoral campaign and as they appear in the public sphere. Rather than measure abstract positions on issues that might never be mentioned or influence an election, the PolDem dataset provides a more accurate snapshot of the campaign and the political conflict that took place throughout it. Hence, it allows reconstructing both the short-term content of election campaigns and the long-term trend in party supply. By contemplating the ramifications of short-term context factors, including the agenda-setting strategies of other parties, public debate dynamics, and unforeseen events, the updated dataset will proffer a more intricate understanding of the nexus between campaign content and voter choice. In our view, the data represents a key resource for future research on party competition and voting behaviour.

By utilising this rich dataset, we aim to bridge existing gaps in the literature on campaign effects and voter behaviour in Europe. The insights derived from the PolDem dataset will illuminate the determinants of campaign effectiveness, the role of parties' electioneering strategies, and the impact of issue emphasis and positioning on voter choices. This analysis is particularly relevant in the context of the successive crises that have shaped European politics, offering deep understanding of how parties navigate turbulent times.

## Public debates in mass media and party manifestos

Understanding party positions and issue salience in public debates is crucial for comprehending the dynamics of electoral mobilization. Public debates serve as a critical arena where political parties communicate their stances on various issues, engage with opponents, and attempt to sway voters. The media, acting as an intermediary between parties and the electorate, plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and voter behaviour. In modern democracies, the media landscape has expanded to include both traditional forms (such as newspapers and television) and new media (such as social media platforms). Each medium has distinct characteristics and reaches different segments of the population, making it essential to study how parties navigate these platforms to maximize their electoral impact. By examining public debates, we can gain insights into the strategies parties use to highlight certain issues, frame their messages, and react to their opponents' positions.

The media serves as a battlefield for political parties, where they vie for attention and influence. Mass media provides a rich source of information about party positions and issue emphasis during election campaigns. The salience of issues in public debates can significantly influence electoral outcomes. Issues that dominate media coverage often become central to the election agenda, shaping voter priorities and party strategies. The ability of a party to effectively elevate the salience of its key issues in the media can be a critical factor in its electoral success. Existing research emphasizes the importance of issue salience in electoral campaigns (Helbling and Tresch, 2011; Hopmann et al., 2012). Parties that successfully align their key issues with those highlighted in media coverage are more likely to influence voter perceptions and gain electoral advantage. This alignment requires a deep understanding of media dynamics and the ability to respond quickly to changing media narratives.

The PolDem dataset, which captures media coverage of election campaigns across 15 European countries, offers a comprehensive view of how parties are portrayed in the media and how they interact with each other in public debates. Public debates in the media are characterized by their dynamic nature, with parties needing to respond quickly to emerging issues and the actions of their competitors. This contrasts with the more controlled and static nature of party manifestos, which are often crafted with great care and reflect the internal deliberations of party elites. The media's role as an agenda-setter means that parties must continuously adapt their strategies to stay relevant and maintain their visibility. The media's ability to set the agenda and influence the salience of issues is a well-documented phenomenon in political science. Agenda-setting theory (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) suggests that the media does not tell people what to think, but it does tell them what to think about. This concept is particularly relevant in the context of electoral campaigns, where the issues that receive the most media coverage often become the most salient in the minds of voters. Moreover, the concept of framing further elucidates how the media shapes public perception by highlighting certain aspects of an issue while downplaying others (Chong and Druckman, 2007; Entman, 1993). Through selective emphasis and repetition, the media can influence how audiences interpret political events and issues, which in turn affects their voting behaviour. This framing effect is particularly potent during election campaigns, where the stakes are high and media coverage is intense.

Party manifestos are key documents that outline the official positions and policy proposals of political parties. They are intended to present a coherent and comprehensive vision of what the party stands for and plans to achieve if elected. However, the representation of these positions in the media can differ significantly from the manifestos

themselves. Gessler and Hutter (2026) compare mass-media-based measures of party positions with those derived from manifestos. Their analysis reveals high convergence in party positions across most issue areas, except on "political" issues such as democracy and corruption, but significant divergence in issue emphasis. This divergence is most pronounced for smaller parties and niche issues, which are often underrepresented in media coverage compared to their prominence in party manifestos. Their findings underscore the importance of considering both manifestos and media coverage to obtain a comprehensive understanding of party competition and electoral behaviour. The high convergence in party positions across different datasets suggests a consistency in the core values and policies of parties, while the divergence in issue emphasis highlights the media's role in shaping public debates, underscoring the importance of using mass-media data to capture real-time electoral competition while validating their complementarity with manifesto data.

While this symposium focuses on parties' communication in mass media and their comparison with manifestos, the ongoing digitalization of campaigns represents a frontier for future research, as social-media platforms increasingly complement mass-media campaigning and introduce new dynamics of engagement and polarization.

## Conflict lines in Europe

One of the main applications of the PolDem dataset has previously been to map the main lines of conflict in the electoral arena over time in Northwestern European countries. This regional account has recently been extended to cover Southern, Central and Eastern European countries. These studies re-visit the classical framework of cleavage politics and rely on the media coverage of electoral competition to document the rise of a new cultural cleavage.

According to the central thesis of this research agenda, globalisation results in a new cleavage by distinguishing relative winners and losers, mainly on occupational (Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015) and educational basis (Hooghe et al., 2025). This results in a new 'transnational' (Hooghe and Marks, 2018) or demarcation-integration divide (Kriesi et al., 2008). The cleavage is mobilised by a coalition of various actors, including political parties, social movements, and civil society associations (Kriesi et al., 2012). We call the emerging divide the cultural dimension.

More specifically, the cultural dimension is most strongly mobilised by two cleavage-coalitions. New left parties, especially the Greens, represent the interventionist-cosmopolitan coalition most clearly. Still, the Social Democrats and the Communist/Left Socialists have also taken up the demands of this coalition. In contrast, the neoliberal/nationalist coalition is mainly represented by radical or extreme right parties, alongside with some

Christian-democratic and liberal parties that have also taken up demands associated with this coalition. According to the results of existing studies, the cultural dimension co-exists with an economic dimension. The economic dimension mainly distinguishes traditionally left (social democratic) and right (Christian-democratic) parties.

The original formulation of this theory referred to the development of Northwestern European party systems. In a study on the economic and political consequences of the 2008 Great Recession and successive Eurozone crisis, [Hutter and Kriesi \(2019\)](#) expand this framework to include Ireland, four countries from Southern, and four countries from Central and Eastern Europe. According to the results of their analysis, the combination of economic and political crises has facilitated the emergence of the second dimension, cultural conflicts. Beyond this general trend, they document significant cross-regional variation. In contrast to Northwestern Europe, in Southern and Central and Eastern Europe, political issues related to the functioning of the institutional system, checks and balances, corruption, and bureaucratic efficiency are highly salient. In Southern Europe, political issues form part and parcel of an emerging divide between old and new politics ([Hutter et al., 2018](#)) that differentiates the post-crisis movement parties from established formations ([Della Porta et al., 2017](#)). In Central and Eastern Europe, party positions on political issues are not well-structured and result from strategic positioning. The main parties flip their position on salient political divides depending on their government-opposition status (e.g., [Borbáth, 2019](#)).

We build on these previous results with the updated core sentence dataset (for technical details and the categorization of issues, see Gessler & Hutter in this symposium). We move beyond the effect of the crisis and collect the data over a much longer time frame (1972–2023) to examine structural changes in party competition. As a first step, we take up the regional distinction and present the evolution over time of economic (welfare, economic liberalism, eurozone, economic reform, education, infrastructure); cultural (cultural liberalism, environment, Europe, immigration, Covid-19, defence, security, regionalism, nationalism); and political (corruption, and democracy) issues. We follow [Hutter and Kriesi \(2019\)](#) and group Ireland together with the initially analysed six Northwestern European countries (Austria, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom); we group Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain as Southern Europe; and Hungary, Latvia, Poland, and Romania as Central and Eastern Europe. We distinguish between salience – the share of issues in a campaign – and politicisation – salience multiplied by polarisation. We focus on both, as next to salience, politicisation informs the analysis about the capacity of various issues for structuring party competition ([Hutter and Kriesi, 2019](#)). [Figure 1](#) presents trend lines smoothed over

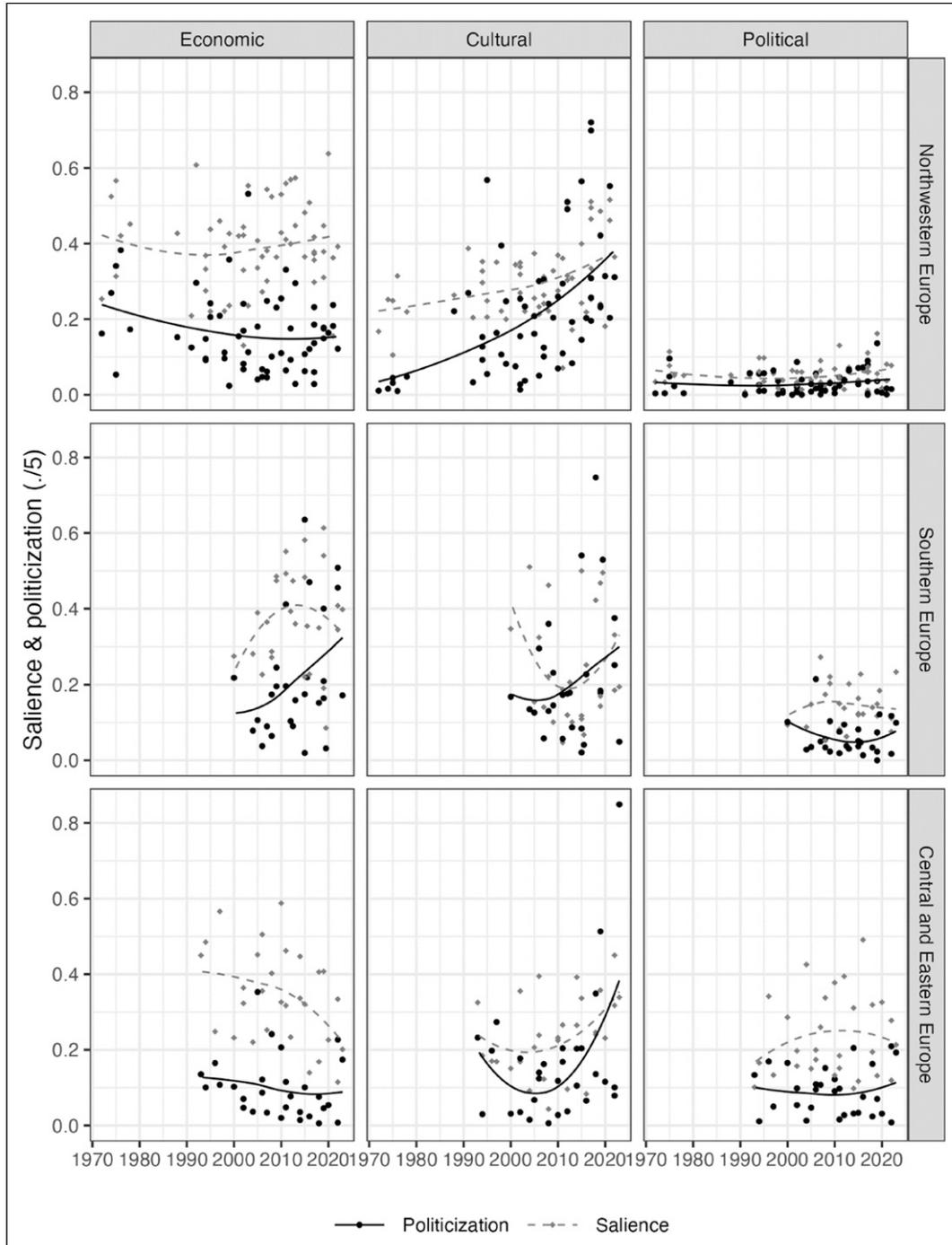
country-election-specific means of issue salience and politicisation.

The figure qualifies the results presented by [Hutter and Kriesi \(2019\)](#). Regarding Northwestern Europe, we find the well-documented pattern of the co-existence of an economic and a cultural dimension, with very little salience/politicisation of political conflicts. Cultural issues have been incrementally rising in terms of both salience and politicisation. While economic conflicts are less politicised over time, their relative salience stays stable, with almost 50% of the campaign devoted to these issues. Therefore, our results suggest the continuing importance of the economic and cultural dimensions in structuring politics in Northwestern Europe, not the replacement of economic with cultural conflicts.

In Southern Europe, we document the steep rise in the politicisation of economic and cultural conflicts, as they become more polarized. In contrast, political issues have remained relatively weakly politicised, and their relative importance in the years of the financial crisis remained short-lived. Regarding issue salience, we document a curvilinear dynamic, with a steep increase in the salience of economic issues, peaking in around 2011 and their relative decline afterwards. The salience of cultural conflicts follows the exact opposite pattern. Cultural conflicts have become less important during the years of the economic crisis, but their salience has been rising ever since. After 2020, around one-third of the campaigns in Southern Europe have been devoted to cultural conflicts. Despite the curvilinear dynamic of salience, their level of politicization rises incrementally, as party positions become more structured, and the two kinds of conflicts become more polarizing.

In some way, the Central and Eastern Europe issue landscape is the most balanced, with all three types of conflict almost equally present in electoral campaigns. Economic issues become less salience over time, as they are incrementally crowded out, primarily by cultural, and then by political conflicts. Like in Northwestern, and in Southern Europe, in Central and Eastern Europe cultural conflicts linearly increase in their level of politicization. Unlike in the other two regions, political issues are highly salient in Central and Eastern Europe. However, political conflicts revolve around valence issues (e.g., corruption and democracy), and therefore, they are not as polarising and remain less politicised than, for instance, cultural conflicts.

These results suggest that the general pattern of rising cultural conflicts travels well to the Southern and Central and Eastern European regions. However, one crucial differentiation, hidden by the broad issue categories, refers to the nature of economic, cultural and political conflicts. In the composition of these aggregate dimensions, national- and regional specificities and historical legacies likely play an essential role. Our data allows us to de-compose the broad categories into smaller issue conflicts that are present

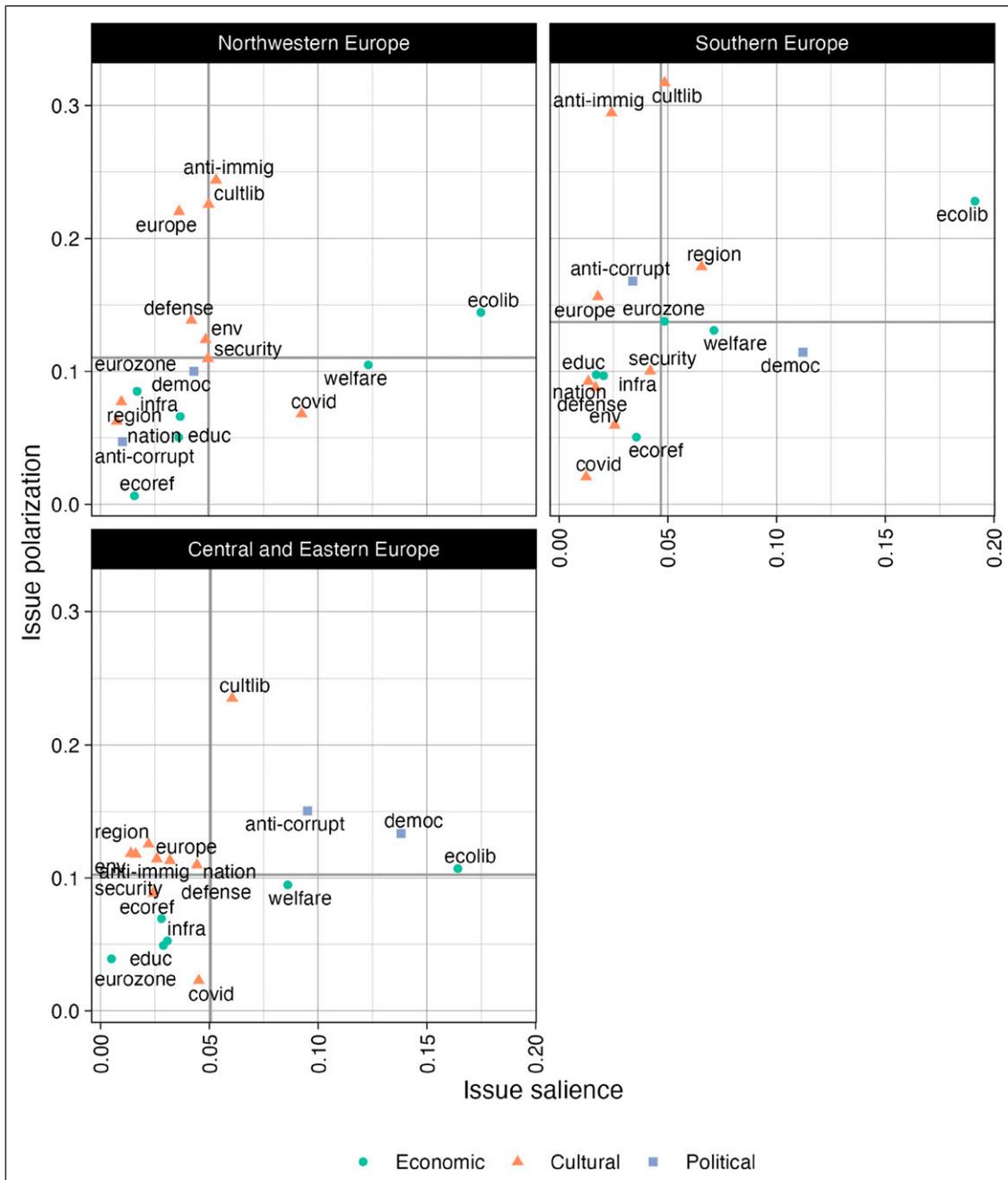


**Figure 1.** Salience and politicisation of economic, cultural, and political conflicts over time across Europe.  
 Note. The figure presents salience and politicisation, smoothed over country-election means of issue-specific averages. Salience and politicisation are shown on the same vertical axis to facilitate their relative comparison, but politicisation values need to be divided by 5 to get an accurate estimate. The outlier value of cultural politicization of  $0.86 \times 5$  in 2023 in Central and Eastern Europe and  $1.14 \times 5$  in 2019 in Southern Europe are not shown on the figure.

in almost all campaigns. Figure 2 presents the salience and polarisation by issue categories in the three regions to examine this variation. The values are averaged over issue- and election-specific means. The reference lines show the region's average issue salience and polarisation level. Issues

that are highly salient and polarised, located in the upper right corner, are the most politicised.

Figure 2 shows that the list of the most politicised economic, cultural, and political conflicts is relatively different across the three regions. Regarding economic



**Figure 2.** Salience and polarisation by economic, cultural, and political issues in Northwestern, Southern, Central and Eastern Europe. *Note.* The figure shows the salience and polarisation of issue categories, averaged over country-election-specific values. The reference lines represent the average level of salience and polarisation in the respective region. Issues that are highly salient and polarising (in the upper right corner) are the most politicised.

conflicts in all three regions, economic liberalism and to a lower extent, welfare are among the most salient and polarising issues. In Southern Europe, the list is complemented by eurozone-related economic conflicts that are both salient and polarising. There is a similar level of homogeneity in political issues. Anti-corruption and democracy are highly salient and polarising in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe, albeit with

some differences. In Southern Europe, anti-corruption is not as salient, and democracy is not quite as polarising as these issues have become in Central and Eastern Europe.

We observe the most significant cross-regional heterogeneity in the composition of cultural conflicts. In line with earlier results, in Northwestern Europe, cultural conflicts are primarily about cultural liberalism and the two new issues of

immigration and European integration (Kriesi et al., 2008, 2012). In Southern Europe, anti-immigration is not as salient, and Europe is not as polarising as in Northwestern Europe. In Central and Eastern Europe, neither anti-immigration nor Europe is among the most salient or polarising conflicts. Therefore, in both the Southern and Central and Eastern European regions, the main cultural conflict is about cultural liberalism. Cultural liberalism is, in turn, complemented by two region-specific sub-issues that appear among the most salient and polarising cultural conflicts: regionalism (Southern Europe) and nationalism (Central and Eastern Europe). In the case of regionalism, one might debate the classification of this issue as cultural. Still, since it often challenges the boundaries of the political community (e.g., in Catalonia) and has been identified as one of the main non-economic cleavages by the foundational literature (Lipset and Rokkan, 1966), here we include it among second-dimension conflicts.

Two papers in the symposium develop these arguments in-depth. First, Hutter and Kriesi (2026) examine the role of recent crises (the Great Recession, the Eurozone crisis, the ‘Refugee’ crisis, the Brexit crisis, and the COVID-19 crisis) in shaping the long-term transformation of electoral competition in Northwestern European countries. The analysis focuses on the six original Northwestern European countries: Austria, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. They demonstrate that most crises reinforced rather than replaced the politicisation of existing divides. The cultural (integration–demarcation) dimension has become more salient, producing a multi-polar configuration, with a programmatically unified left (composed of the Greens and Social Democrats) opposing populist radical right parties, while centre left and centre right continuing to oppose each other on the economic dimension.

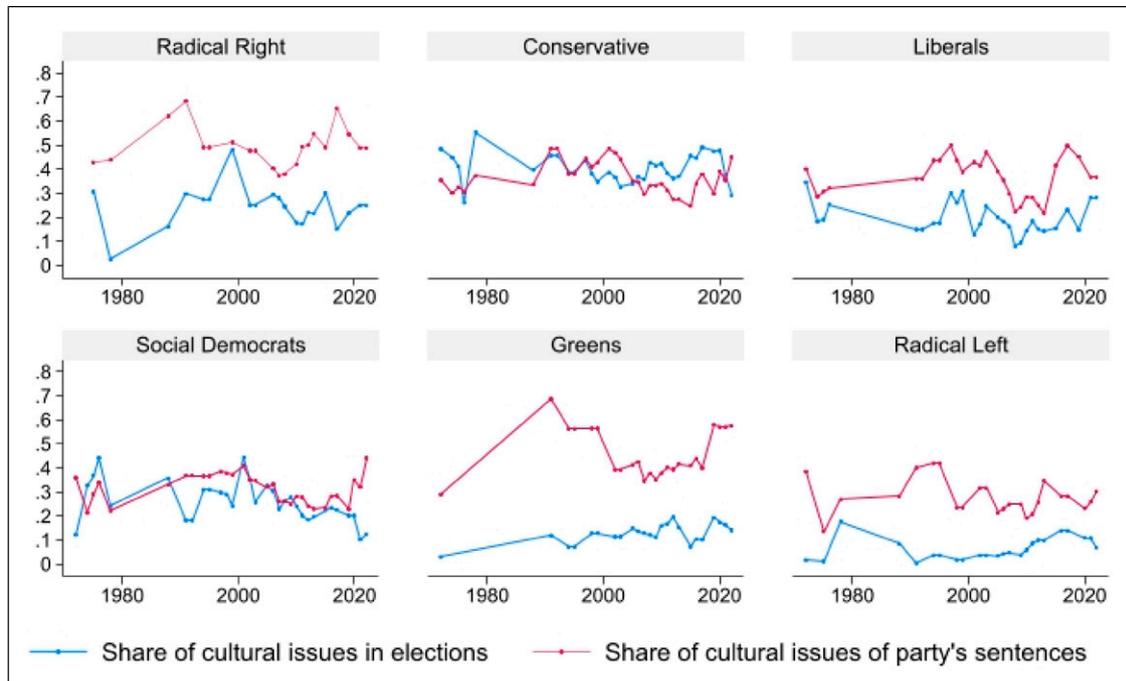
Borbáth (2026) examines cleavages in Central and Eastern Europe. Re-visiting the literature on electoral (in-)stability, he focuses on the role of programmatic differentiation amidst the emerging stability in the Hungarian, Latvian, Polish, and Romanian party systems. He combines the party system analysis of programmatic linkages, issue salience and politicisation with party-level analysis of issue salience and entrepreneurship. The results demonstrate that programmatic position-taking distinguishes the appeal of mainstream and emerging new parties in the Central and Eastern European region. We see that these systems exhibit substantial and relatively stable programmatic structuration. Cultural conflicts have become more important, especially under democratic backsliding, while new parties expand the issue agenda by politicising previously under-represented conflicts. “Political issues” such as democracy and corruption remain highly salient valence topics, but they are less polarized than cultural or economic ones. The findings underscore the continued relevance of cleavage theory for understanding party competition in post-communist Europe.

## Drivers of political conflict change, party-family strategy and votes

To provide an overview of party strategies at an aggregate European level, we alternatively work with party families and parties, depending on the level of abstraction. There are seven party families in our data, comprising the mainstream Conservatives and Social-Democrats, their radical peers in the radical right and left respectively and the Green and Liberal party families positioned more towards the centre. Additionally, due to the importance of Fidesz and PiS in Eastern Europe, we have chosen to create a separate category for those two parties, as they straddle the space between conservatism and the radical right, without definitely belonging to either group. This section is a sample of the possibilities of exploring party-strategy in our dataset, exploring the drivers of major issue-space changes.

We have recorded a heterogenous mix of issues dominating countries in the North-West, South and Central-East Europe. Starting with North-Western Europe, we saw, in line with the hypothesis of scholars for these countries (Kitschelt and McGann, 1997; Kriesi et al., 2012) that cultural issues have become more prevalent over the long term, at the expense of economic ones. Furthermore, cultural issues typically are more polarizing than economic ones, as seen in Figure 2, an effect compounded by the occurrence of the refugee crisis circa 2015–2016. To identify the drivers of this long-term transformation and the effect of the refugee crisis, we have to track the parties that prioritize this cultural dimension. We measure this in two ways: first, by the distribution of the issue-specific coverage over the party families, i.e., by how much of the coverage of an issue is captured by any party-family. Second, we also show the number of sentences each party-family spends talking about cultural issues as a share of its total sentences. The outcome for party-families in North-Western Europe on cultural issues over time is shown in Figure 3 below, including a figure showing the party’s positions on those issues and the voters’ perception of immigration as one of the most important problems in their country.<sup>1</sup>

In line with the theory about the “cultural” transformation of North-Western Europe’s political systems (Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Hutter and Kriesi, 2019; Inglehart, 1990), the parties spending most of their time addressing cultural issues are the ones belonging to the radical right and green families. Their share of the overall cultural issue domain is more subdued, but this is because the larger parties, especially the Conservatives, appear much more frequently in the written press, our main source. This is the reason behind the discrepancy between the red and blue lines, as the parties which spend a disproportionately high amount of their time talking about cultural issues are more frequently situated in the fringes of the electoral system. Nevertheless, it is logical to assume that



**Figure 3.** The drivers of cultural issues in North-Western Europe.

their constant emphasis on cultural issues and their ascending electoral trajectories combine to put pressure on other parties to, at least, engage with them, hence rendering this dimension of political conflict more salient in North-Western Europe.

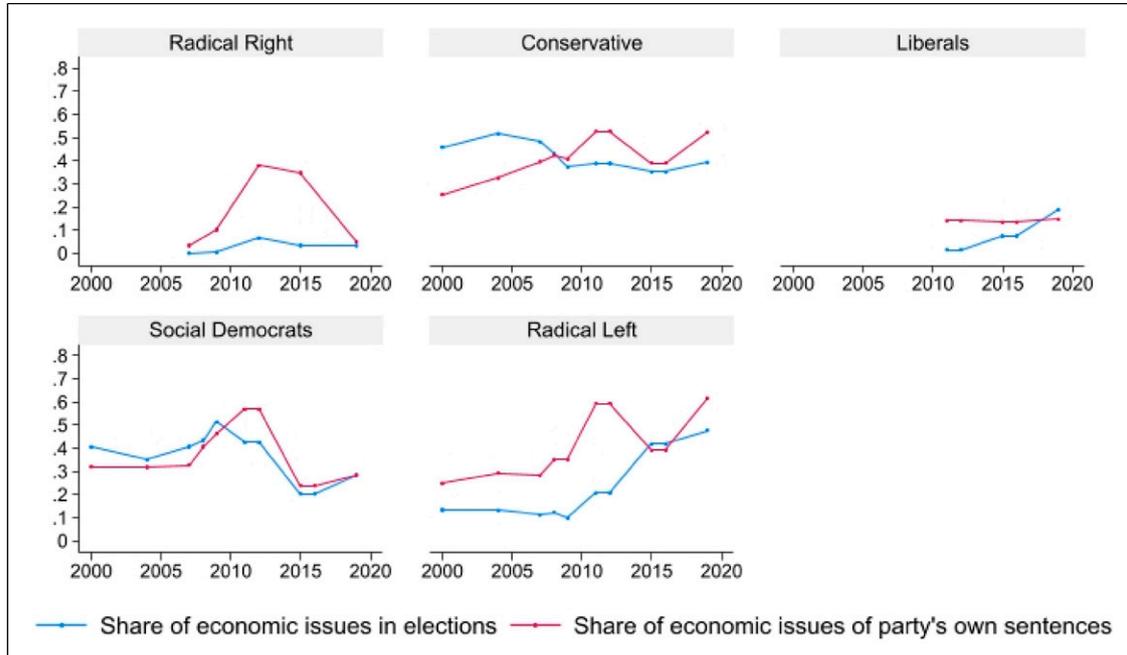
Another phenomenon we can explore with our data is how an economic crisis reshapes political conflict. We have already seen in [Figure 2](#) how the salience of economic issues resembles an inverse u-shape in Southern Europe, peaking at the height of the Eurozone crisis, circa 2010–2015, when Southern Europe was facing intense pressure to adopt austerity from bond markets and its EU peers ([Hernández and Kriesi, 2016](#); [Hutter et al., 2018](#)). Reproducing [Figure 3](#), but with economic issues instead of cultural ones, we can clearly see the drivers for this development in [Figure 4](#) below, focusing on Spain and Greece, which were the two Southern European countries where unemployment climbed the most.

For all party-families there is a sustained rise in the share of economic issues between 2008 and 2015, when the financial and Eurozone crises respectively commenced. However, the renewed focus on the economy in this case did not only prompt the mainstream parties to compete harder in this domain, but also initiated their displacement from the spotlight. Whereas the socialist/social-democratic parties of Spain and Greece held the lion's share of economic-related sentences up to the crisis, maintaining on average more than forty percent of all such sentences in most elections up to 2011, in the elections after that they would see that share

curtailed to somewhat less than thirty percent at best, matching their declining electoral fortunes. Meanwhile, the radical left challengers that sought to displace them managed to increase their share, especially during the peak years of the Eurozone crisis, circa 2010–2015. PoIDem data hence allows us to reconstruct the way challengers from the left during the Eurozone crisis became more prominent, how they displaced the centre-left parties in this region but also the rising salience of economic issues during those years in general, helping us understand the major changes that occurred during this crisis in terms of electoral supply.

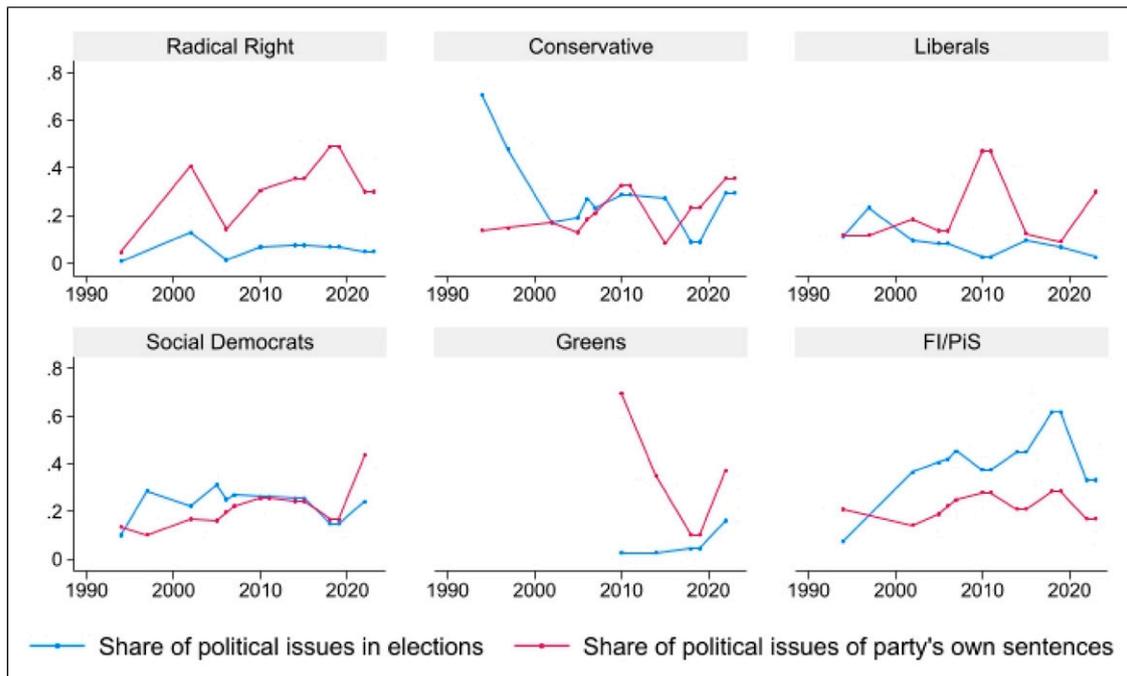
Finally, we proceed to look at political issues in a subset of our Central-Eastern European dataset, focusing on Hungary and Poland where the rule of law crisis has taken effect most forcefully in recent years and concerns about the quality of democracy, corruption and populism have increased. In [Figure 5](#), we see the evolution of the same measures for political issues in Hungary and Poland combined, excluding the radical left since it is poorly represented in the region and our dataset.

Our first observation is a rather surprising one. Whereas most scholars and analysts emphasize that the rule of law and associated decline of democracy is an issue most often wielded against PiS and Fidesz, in our data those two parties are the ones where most of political issue salience originates from. To understand this, we need to take two facts under consideration. First, the media takeover of Fidesz in Hungary especially, and secondarily of PiS while it ruled Poland, induced a lopsided press coverage of those two



**Figure 4.** The drivers of economic issues in Spain and Greece.

Note. There are almost no radical right parties in SE before 2005 and few Green/liberal parties recorded overall, hence the missing data in our graph, as in many elections those party families were absent.



**Figure 5.** The drivers of political issues in Poland and Hungary.

parties. To provide an example, in 2018, 55% of the Hungarian sentences in the entire election have Fidesz as the subject, while the remaining 45% covers all the rest of the parties. Hence, we see in Figure 5 that while most of the PiS

and Fidesz sentences are *not* about political issues, they still occupy around fifty percent of the entire discourse on the issue. Second, PiS and Fidesz do not necessarily place most of their emphasis on the rule of law, but also talk incessantly

about the alleged corruption of their opponents and the potential of electoral fraud against them, particularly PiS.

However, we should also note that the opposition's effort to highlight the issues surrounding the rule of law, democratic decline and corruption of PiS/Fidesz has significantly picked up pace and became more salient in the public sphere only in the most recent elections. PO for example in Poland raised the share of political-themed sentences in its discourse in 2023 by ten percentage points compared to 2019, as did the liberal Momentum Mozgalom party in Hungary. The same uptick at the end of this period can be witnessed for the liberal, conservative, green and social democratic families, which have begun in earnest to prioritize the issue of political malfeasance in the most recent elections, whereas they mostly tried to compete on the economic/cultural dimension before. As such, despite the rule of law crisis being emphasized in European media for over a decade now, the data reveals that there is some gap between the perception of the issue abroad and domestically, partially due to the media bias in those countries but also due to opposition parties choosing to campaign on other issues during electoral campaigns in the 2010's.

Overall, we have provided a sample of the breadth and detail of our database, showcasing how it can be used to create very broad descriptive overviews of longitudinal trends in terms of party salience, coverage, emphasis and positioning and how it can be potentially used in conjunction with demand-side data. Within the symposium, we go further in this direction in two papers.

Michel (2026) zooms in at the French campaign of 2022 and looks at how the unfolding Ukraine crisis presented a unique context within which party strategies of response to an exogenous event can be studied. Using PolDem data and EnEF survey data, the paper shows that candidates initially engaged with the Ukraine crisis but quickly shifted back to domestic economic concerns, and that mainstream candidates aligned their emphasis more closely with voter issue salience. Notably, Marine Le Pen behaved like a mainstream candidate, prioritising economic issues over owned themes such as immigration by prioritising purchasing power over foreign policy. Overall, the results show that the exogenous shock did not redefine electoral competition during the campaign, illustrating how crises may temporarily disrupt but rarely redefine established lines of competition.

At the aggregate level, Kriesi, Wang and Altiparmakis (2026) examine the issue of the effect of campaign strategies on electoral outcomes. Using 214 parties across 110 elections in 15 countries (1988–2023), the paper asks whether issue-specific campaign strategies, i.e. salience, position, and extremity/moderation, move votes, and how parties choose those strategies. Overall campaign effects are limited, but heterogeneous by party family. The radical right gains the most: it benefits when it emphasises cultural issues

in the short term, and when it adopts clear-cut, even extreme, rightward positions on economic issues in both the long and short term. Among mainstream parties, liberals profit from distinct (and even extreme) pro-market economic positions, and conservatives tend to benefit from a long-term emphasis on economic issues. Greens gain from a long-term cultural emphasis and distinct left-leaning cultural positions, with some payoff even for extreme cultural positions. Social democrats see short-term gains when they move left on economic issues. Across the board there is no general payoff to moderation. The results find no centre-right accommodation of the radical right on the cultural dimension; instead, left families respond adversarially, the radical right radicalises as it succeeds, and Greens tone down. These patterns confirm that parties' strategies are structured by ideology and mainstream versus challenger status, and that campaign agency exists but is tightly bounded by context.

## Conclusion

This symposium has explored the multifaceted dynamics of electoral mobilization and party competition in Europe, focusing on the impact of issue salience and party positioning in public debates during electoral campaigns. The contributions have provided valuable insights into the ways parties adapt their strategies to changing political landscapes and crises, clarify what we can and cannot expect from campaign content in shaping outcomes. Overall, the cross national evidence points to bounded campaign effects—with the most consistent electoral payoffs observed for the radical right—alongside durable structuring forces related to the cultural divide and region specific legacies.

The PolDem dataset, specifically, has traced the impact of multiple crises, such as the euro crisis, refugee crisis, climate crisis, and COVID-19 pandemic, to reveal how these crises have redefined political competition, with parties recalibrating their issue salience and positioning to address emerging issues and voter concerns, and exploit the emergence of new gaps in electoral demand. In parallel, the comparison between PolDem and the Manifesto Project clarifies that positions largely converge across sources, while salience diverges in systematic and theoretically meaningful ways. Furthermore, the research also emphasizes the reverse causal direction, by highlighting the importance of issue salience in influencing voter behaviour, demonstrating that parties' ability to align their campaign messages with the most salient issues in public debates can significantly impact their electoral success. Finally, regional variations in political conflicts are also analysed, showing distinct patterns in Northwestern and Central and Eastern Europe, thereby underscoring the potential divergence across European regions.

The flexibility of the PolDem dataset also allows for its application across various research agendas, providing opportunities to explore new dimensions of party competition and electoral behaviour. Future research could delve deeper into the regional specificities and historical legacies that shape political conflicts, examining how different cultural, economic, and political contexts influence party strategies and voter responses. Additionally, one could apply it to the study of the politicization of new and emerging issues, such as climate change, as well as on exploring trends such as party radicalization, the re-structuring of political competition around cultural issues and the potential creation of a common European issue-space. At the same time, the digital transformation of political communication represents another next step for research on party competition. While the symposium focuses on mass media campaign content (and its comparison to manifestos), a fuller integration with social media data remains a promising avenue. By addressing these and other research questions, scholars can build on the findings presented in this symposium to enhance our understanding of the effects of electoral mobilization, the dividing lines of political conflict and their evolution. This ongoing research will contribute to a more comprehensive view of the factors that shape political behaviour and democratic governance in Europe and beyond.

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### Note

1. To be precise, the blue line denotes the number of party  $j$  sentences on an issue category  $i$  for a given election divided by the total sentences on the issue, i.e.,  $Coverage = \sum_{i,j} s / \sum_i s$ , while the red line is the party emphasis on an issue, measured as the sum of party  $j$  sentences on an issue category  $i$  for a given

election divided by the total number of party  $j$ 's sentences for that election, i.e.,  $Empasis = \sum_{i,j} s / \sum_j s$ .

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