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Electoral competition and the welfare state

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Electoral competition and the welfare state

Over the past decades, the link between voters and parties has become a dominant theme within the studies of advanced welfare states. A number of studies have focused on the realignment of voters, where the traditional links between groups such as the working class and parties have reshuffled (cf. Beramendi et al. 2015; Häusermann 2010; Iversen and Soskice 2015; Manow et al. 2017). This literature represents an ‘electoral turn’ within the study of advanced welfare states. However, focus within these studies has primarily been on the electorate. How party competition over the welfare state has developed over the past decades has received surprisingly little attention. At the same time, party competition in Western Europe has transformed itself with an increased focus on issue competition (Green-Pedersen 2007). Political parties increasingly compete over which issues should receive parties’ scarce attention. The implication of increasing issue competition for the welfare state remains largely unexplored.

In this paper, we therefore wish to investigate how parties compete over the welfare state by emphasising specific welfare state issues such as labour market protection or education. We draw on an existing research traditions on issue competition (Green-Pedersen 2007; Robertson 1976) and combine it with insights from the welfare state literature to develop an analytical framework that allows us to study how the welfare state features in parties’ electoral competition.

The core argument is that two issue-specific factors determine how much parties emphasise individual welfare state issues: the character of policy problems related to the policy issues and the type of social risks involved. With respect to the latter, we emphasise the difference between labour market-related and life cycle-related risks (Jensen 2012). The latter

type of risks are relevant for a much broader part of the population, and this generates a different distribution of risk and different views on the deservingness of the beneficiaries. This leads to a different demand for the benefits related to the lifecycle.

To test the argument, we employ a new large-N dataset with election manifestos from Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The dataset contains information on how much parties have talked about health care, education, and labour market protection in national elections since 1980. With the data at hand, we are able to provide the first systematic investigation of how parties compete for votes over the welfare state. For instance, our approach is able to explain the empirical fact that health care is consistently receiving increased attention everywhere, while particularly labour market protection has witnessed a decline in attention in most locations. This points to a broader shift in welfare state priorities, in which public spending on health care has been constantly increasing, while citizens' labour market-related social rights have been curtailed greatly over the past few decades (Clasen and Clegg 2011; Jensen 2014).

Party competition in the welfare state literature

The 'electoral turn' within the study of advanced welfare states represents a move away from the previously dominant focus on producer groups. The turn has implied a greater attention to the voter-party link, but voters have generally received much more attention than political parties. Beramendi et al. (2015), Häusermann (2010), Iversen and Soskice (2015), and Manow et al. (2017) all provide elaborate examples of the state-of-the-art in the field. Their common starting point is the well-established realignment of voters, where the traditional links between groups such as the working class and parties have reshuffled. Today, newly emerged groups such as

socio-cultural professionals have fostered a two-dimensional political landscape – which, according to these authors, consist of an ‘old’ economic dimension and a ‘new’ socio-cultural dimension – with new linkages between voter groups and parties. Because of this two-dimensional political landscape, policymaking is likely to play out differently today than it has previously. There are now several well-consolidated studies on the new landscape of voters: their socio-economic profile, their policy preferences, and which parties they tend to vote for (e.g., Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Kitschelt and Rehm 2015; Marx 2014). There is also an emerging body of work on policy reforms that assumes that a realignment has occurred (e.g. Häusermann 2010; Iversen and Soskice 2015).

While the perspective has much to say about the electorate and how it is changing, it has paid less attention to parties’ role in this realignment. Further, the understanding of party competition within this approach largely stays with the traditional ‘do politics matter’ approach to the welfare state (see Häuserman et al. 2013). From this perspective, parties represent core constituencies that benefit from the enactment of specific policies. Party competition in this scenario largely boils down to who has the parliamentary majority and, hence, government power.

However, it is difficult to see how voters and parties can realign if parties do not talk about the issues that are supposed to create the realignment. With the exception of a few studies on education (Busemeyer et al. 2013; Jacobi 2011) and inequality (Horn et al. 2017), we have almost no knowledge about what parties actually focus on when they address their would-be voters within the realm of the welfare state. Our ambition is therefore to introduce an analytical framework that allows us to understand what welfare-state issues parties emphasise in their competition over votes. As we argue below, such a framework needs to integrate some of the

lessons learned from the electoral turn perspective and other welfare state scholars on the one hand, with a strand of theory on issue competition mostly not taken into account by welfare state research on the other.

The supply of problems and distribution of social risks

At the most basic level, parties focus on issues they believe will feather their own nest.

Robertson (1976) and Riker et al. (1996) hypothesised this idea of *selective emphasis*, which forms the foundation of the issue competition literature. Further, the notion of issue ownership (cf. Budge 2015; Walgrave et al. 2015) implies that parties selectively focus on the issues they own, that is, the issues on which voters see them as most competent. Yet, parties may not always be able to focus on their own pet issues. Often, there is a considerable overlap between the issues parties talk about, suggesting that they cannot simply cherry pick their favourites (Sigelmann and Buell 2004).

One reason for these overlaps is exogenous events, such as natural disasters, or media reports on underperformance in the public sector that force all parties to focus on similar issues (Baumgartner and Jones 2015; Birkland 1998). A party that ignores a substantial problem is essentially saying that it does not care about solving it. Of course, if a party's voters find an issue unimportant, it may make good sense to ignore it even if other parties engage with the issue, but if a party happens to ignore an issue that is salient to its voters, this can have serious electoral consequences as the voters move to a more attentive alternative. Either way, (lack of) attention given to issues is a powerful way of signalling to voters what the party stands for (Budge and Farlie 1983; Green-Pedersen 2007; Robertson 1976).

If we want to study what specific welfare state issues parties emphasise in the competition for votes, we argue that we need to know both the *supply of problems* and the *distribution of the social risks related to the policy issue*. First, consider the supply of problems. Traditional welfare state approaches implicitly assume that political debates primarily concern general and normally abstract questions about the appropriate level of redistribution or whether to adopt a universal welfare system. Indeed, sometimes they do, but the issue competition approach we propose here underscores that political debates are often about how best to deal with the policy problems that emerge in relation to different policy issues. Taking health care as a case in point, political debates are only to a limited degree concerned with whether a country should adopt a private or a public health care system. This is especially true when dealing with mature welfare states in which fundamental decisions such as private vs. public health care have long since been made and are extremely difficult to reverse (Pierson 1994). Debate therefore concerns how to handle issue-specific problems such as whether doctors should use a new and expensive pill in cancer treatments or how hospitals can reduce waiting times for specific treatments. It is normally these kinds of problems that political parties debate when trying to garner electoral support.

Given that the expected outcomes and production processes are so dissimilar, it is almost trivial to point out that welfare state issues such as health care, education, and labour market protection face a wildly diverse set of problems. The expected outcomes range from ensuring good health and the generation of human capital to providing a livelihood for the jobless, while the production processes range from the running of hospitals and schools to paying out cash benefits. The variety and nature of problems facing politicians across such diverse policy areas

will clearly be heterogeneous. According to the issue competition literature, this entails that the attention parties pay to them will also be heterogeneous.

Turning to the distribution of social risks, we can draw on Jensen's (2012) notion of lifecycle versus labour market risks. Lifecycle risks flow from and threaten individuals' physical integrity at various life stages, that is, birth, childhood, having a family, and ageing. The intention of family services help couples reconcile work and family; education allows children to stay in or move up from the social class of their parents; and health care protects against pain and death. All major parties cater to voters who go through the normal lifecycle and therefore have to provide answers to the problems that the protection against these risks continuously generate.

Notice that the political salience of lifecycle risks are not defined by the fact that lifecycle risks vary across human's lifecycle, which they obviously do, but by the fact that they are a source of risk for everyone.

Labour market risks, particularly unemployment and precarious employment circumstances, stand in stark contrast to this. Outside of periods of massive depression, unemployment rates seldom exceed 10-15 percent of the workforce, and although labour market outsiders are a growing problem, it remains compartmentalised to a much greater degree than lifecycle risks. Moreover, it is never considered part of the normal lifecycle. Rather, it is an anomaly in the life most people foresee for themselves and their families.

Based on this, it is not surprising that studies of deservingness (Jensen and Petersen 2017; van Oorschot 2006) clearly find that recipients of benefits related to lifecycle risks are seen as more deserving than recipients of benefits related to labour market risks. The elderly and the sick are seen as more deserving than the unemployed. Lifecycle risks are seen as risks you cannot do anything about, and therefore, you deserve benefits. Labour market risks are seen as risks that

people to some extent control through their own effort, and therefore, people are less deserving of benefits.

From an issue competition perspective, these differences in both the supply of problems and the social risks involved should matter for party attention. All major parties competing in elections will need to pay attention to life-cycle risks. In terms of labour market risks, this will depend on whether parties want to attract votes from the specific group affected by the relevant risk.

Level of party attention paid to health care, education, and labour market protection

A crucial contention of the issue competition perspective outlined so far is that the level of attention parties give to individual issues in election campaigns will be a function of the issue-specific supply of problems and the distribution of social risk involved. The distinction between lifecycle and labour market issues is a first step towards such a specification, but it remains quite general. To make the framework more tangible, and ultimately empirically testable, we therefore need to select a set of concrete welfare state issues and then develop our argument further from there. To do so, we will return to some of the insights of the electoral turn perspective and other welfare state research. Although none of these deals with party competition directly, they provide several insights into partisan preferences in modern-day democracies, which helps flesh out our framework.

Since we are interested in displaying the analytical fruitfulness of the framework, we want to look at issues that represent that maximum theoretical variation. Health care is probably the most distinct lifecycle issue, although it is closely followed by old age. **The threat of sickness and injury can be considered the major risk against individual's physical integrity, and something**

that everyone must expect to encounter at some point in their life. Although clearly unwelcome, bad health is a risk that is part and parcel of the normal lifecycle. All major parties consequently ought to signal their commitment by paying attention to these issues. Health care is also a clear example of a changing supply of problems over time. Advances in medical research and technology have opened up enormous possibilities in terms of preventing, detecting and treating illness but, at the same time, put the health care system under constant financial stress (Cutler and McCellan 2001). Given the lifecycle character of health care, where large segments of the public expect the government to handle the issue, this development should generally amplify the level of attention parties focus on it. Taken together, this suggests that health care will have witnessed rising bipartisan attention.

Labour market protection is the contrast to health care in terms of being a clearly labour-market related issue rather than a lifecycle issue. As is clear from the preceding discussion, we expect this area to exhibit strong partisan biases in attention, which follows from the skewed supply of problems and demand for solutions that are concentrated among voters of the traditional Left parties (Cusack et al. 2006). It follows from our issue competition perspective that these traditional Left parties should therefore pay particular attention to labour market protection. Apart from partisan differences, attention given to labour market protection should also be a function of problems. These naturally manifest themselves in many forms, but the current employment performance of the economy ought to be of special relevance. Contrary to health care and education, we do not expect labour market protection to gain in attention over time. If anything, in the countries we study, average unemployment rates have improved since the early 1980s, meaning that the overall level of attention may even have dropped.

The third issue we study is education. The issue is a fine example of a lifecycle issue that also has substantial effects on the workforce. A large and growing literature has shown how the educational regime of a country has significant consequences for its capitalist system, levels of economic inequality, and social mobility (Busemeyer 2015; Wren 2013). This means that we might expect greater partisan differences than for health care. Here, we can draw on the insights of the electoral turn perspective, which argues that parties that are comparably left-leaning on the socio-cultural value dimension tend to expand education because it benefits their core constituency, namely socio-cultural professionals (Beramendi et al. 2015). It follows from the issue competition perspective that these parties should therefore talk more about education because this signals their commitment to potential voters. Social Liberal parties such as the D66 in the Netherlands or the Danish Social Liberals are the most obvious examples in this regard. They are often not particularly supportive of classic labour market programmes such as job security and unemployment protection (at least compared to traditional Left parties) but prefer to focus on more future-oriented investment in human capital.

A general thrust of the literature is that education is becoming increasingly important for the operation of modern societies, which is why it has gained prominence in party competition (Beramendi et al. 2015; Iversen and Soskice 2015). As economies deindustrialise, the upgrading of the current and future skills of the workforce becomes increasingly vital, and deindustrialisation has been shown to make countries invest more in education (Jensen 2011). In other words, like health care, partisanship alone is unlikely to drive attention to education. Rather, we suspect that the attention parties give to education will also be a function of a changing socio-economic context brought about by deindustrialisation and associated processes.

Table 1 summarises the expectations for the three issues. We differentiate between expectations that relate to variation between parties (H1-H3) and expectations that relate to variation over time (H4-H6). Critically, our focus on the supply of problems and the type of social risk involved forces us to realise that partisan differences do not characterise all issues. When it comes to health care, we do not expect any partisan differences; only a steady increase over time as medical technology gradually improves and becomes more costly. For the two other issues, our expectations more closely imitate those of the electoral turn perspective. In both instances, the reason is that the parties most likely to emphasise an issue want to woo specific voter groups: The Social Liberal parties want to win the support of socio-cultural professionals, while the traditional Left wants to maximise support from the traditional working class. However, we add a temporal component to these partisan expectations.

[Tables 1 and 2 about here]

Before moving on to test these hypotheses about party attention, it is worth taking an empirical look at public demand for solutions within the three policy issues. If the argumentation behind the hypotheses is correct, we should observe differences in the public demands across the three policy issues along the line suggested in Table 1.

Table 2 summarises public belief in the seven countries we analyse in this paper regarding the government's responsibility to ensure certain desirable outcomes for individual citizens. Several things are worth noting. First, support is lowest on traditional labour market issues. Less than a third of these populations believe it is a government responsibility to ensure jobs for everyone and a decent standard of living for the unemployed. At the other end of the

spectrum, large majorities in all countries agree that it is the government's responsibility to provide a decent standard of living for the elderly and, above all, health care for the sick. In between are areas that are part of the normal lifecycle but integrated into the labour market because they relate to how otherwise healthy individuals should participate in the workforce.

Previous research by Busemeyer et al. (2009) and Jensen and Petersen (2017) has shown that the socio-economic position of individuals matters little for lifecycle issues. By contrast, for labour market issues, traditional socio-economic factors such as income and class position are important, with the greatest support for these programmes coming from poorer voters and those from low-skill and manual occupations. This makes sense because these groups are also highly exposed to the risk of un- and underemployment (Rehm 2016). In the bottom row of Table 1, the different cross-country variations, as measured by the coefficient of variation, are also noteworthy. It shows not only that pro-government attitudes are very pronounced for lifecycle issues but also that they are uniformly so across countries: The cross-country variation is lower for lifecycle issues than for labour market-related issues. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the average coefficient of variation within countries is a very substantial 0.40. That is, the difference between issues within a given country is much greater than the difference between countries on any issue.

How to study levels of attention paid to the welfare state

The few studies of attention to the welfare state so far have relied on the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) dataset (e.g., Jensen and Seeberg 2015). However, the dataset has no dedicated categories for health care or labour market protection (although it does have a dedicated category for education, used by Busemeyer et al. 2013). As an alternative, we draw on a different codings

of party manifestos based on policy agenda (CAP) coding (Baumgartner et al. 2002). For the seven countries for which the data exists, we are able to track attention paid to the welfare state in detail: Denmark (1953-2015), Sweden (1976-2014), the UK (1982-2015), France (1981-2013), Belgium (1981-2007), Germany (1949-2013), and the Netherlands (1978-2012). To establish a comparable period, we study developments from the first election in the 1980s onward.

The coding scheme offers a very detailed coding of policy content, with more than 200 policy categories.¹ These subcategories are organised into broader policy issues such as the economy, transportation, or defence. Subcategories within economy, for instance, include inflation, unemployment, and taxation. Datasets were established independently for each country and then merged together into one dataset. All datasets are hand-coded by trained student coders. The coding units are natural sentences (Denmark and Germany), quasi-sentences (France, Belgium, UK, and Sweden), or paragraphs (the Netherlands). XX (2018) and offers detailed information on coding procedure and so on for each dataset.

¹ The CAP coding scheme was originally developed by Baumgartner and Jones in a US context (see policyagendas.org). Since then, different national versions of the coding scheme have been developed. Additionally, a cross-national cross-walk system has been developed to secure cross-national comparability (Bevan 2019; see also <http://sbevan.com/cap-master-codebook.html>).

Since the coding is at subtopic level, the aggregation of the data is completely flexible. As explained above, we study attention given to labour market protection,² health care,³ and education,⁴ and we construct variables that cover all relevant aspects of these issues.

² This includes most aspects of labour market policy found in the codebook's master version, that is, 500, 502, 503, 505, including general questions about labour market policy, active labour market policy, various benefits for employees, unemployment benefits, early retirement schemes, and programmes to combat youth unemployment. Workers' safety issues (501), seasonal work (529), and labour unions (504) were not included. Some countries have special subtopics for unemployment and similar benefits, such as 507 in Denmark or 509 and 1307 in the Netherlands, which were included.

³ This includes most health care topics found in the master codebook (sub-topics 300-335) as well as questions about medical services, the organisation of the health care system, health care personnel, medical drugs, and prevention. We did not include the subtopics relating specifically to tobacco, drugs, and alcohol (342-343) or questions about health care research (398). France, the Netherlands, and Belgium have a special subtopic for medical-ethical questions (320), which we also did not include.

⁴ The education issue includes the subtopics 600-602 and 604-607 in the master codebook, which cover most aspects of educational policy such as elementary schools, secondary and higher education, and vocational training. Education research (698) and special programmes for socially disadvantaged people were not included. Some countries have a special subcategory (608) for the relationship between public and private schools, which was included.

With a few exceptions, the dataset contains all parties that have won representation in elections.⁵ The parties have been grouped into 10 party families based on their ideological orientation in the period studied.⁶ Based on these ten party families, we constructed four party dummy variables: traditional Left (Socialist and Social Democratic parties), traditional Right (Conservative⁷ and Liberal parties), Social Liberal parties,⁸ and Radical Right parties. Finally, we also have a group of all other party families in the dataset, that is, also those for which we do not test a dummy variable. Including, for instance, the traditional Left dummy only in the analysis then tells us whether traditional Left parties emphasize a given issue more or less than parties from all other party families. These four party family groups together represent the two

⁵ See XX (2018) for a list of parties included. The most important deviation from the inclusion of all parties represented in parliament is that the UK data only includes Labour, Conservatives, and Liberal Democrats. Some parties are also included because they won representation in the last election and were therefore relevant for electoral competition.

⁶ The ten families are: Socialists, Greens, Social Democrats, Social Liberals, Centre, Christian Democrats, Conservatives, Liberals, Radical Right, and special issue.

⁷ Conservative parties include The British Conservatives, the French right-wing parties, the Danish Conservatives, and the Swedish Conservatives. Christian democratic parties such as the German CDU are not included.

⁸ This refers to the Dutch D66, the Liberal Democrats in the UK, FDP in Germany, Social Liberals in Denmark (Radikale Venstre) and the People's Party (Folkepartiet) in Sweden. The group is thus distinct from liberal parties such as VVD in the Netherlands or the Liberals in Denmark (Venstre); see also Kirchner (1988).

main dimensions of contemporary European party systems (Beramendi et al. 2015). The traditional Left and Right constitute the extremes on the old, economic dimension, whereas the Social Liberal and Radical Right parties constitute the extremes on the new, socio-cultural dimension.

We expect that rising social problems will increase the level of attention paid to the three issues. Measuring problem pressure is notoriously difficult, and we cannot hope to capture all problems that arise. Our best hope is to obtain some measure of structural problem pressures, which, all else being equal, is easier to quantify than more short-term events. The most unproblematic structural problem pressure is probably unemployment, which is relatively easy to measure and which is unquestionably a labour market problem.⁹ For health care and education, things are more complex. For the latter, we opt for deindustrialisation as a measure of structural problem pressure. As noted above, the literature highlights the importance of deindustrialisation for the politics of education, and we latch on to this notion here (Jensen 2011; Wren 2013).¹⁰ The best measure of structural problem pressure for health care is the rise in health-related patents (Green-Pedersen and Wilkerson 2006). These patents arguably capture the rise in expensive and sought-after new medical opportunities, which create an often unrelenting demand for better

⁹ Data comes from Armingeon et al. (2018).

¹⁰ We follow Iversen and Cusack (2000) in defining deindustrialisation as the percentage of the working-age population not employed in agriculture or industry. Data comes from (OECD 2017a). The data is only updated until 2013. For latter years, we have extrapolated the values linearly.

health care. We calculate an index of health-related patents using two-year averages to smooth out year-on-year fluctuations.¹¹

[Table 3 about here]

The unit of analysis in our dataset is a given party in a given election year, and we have a total of 455 observations. Table 3 displays a set of summary statistics for all the above-mentioned variables. On average, each of the three issues takes up around five to six percent of the parties' manifestos. To give a sense of the magnitude, this roughly equates to the attention that parties dedicate to the foreign affairs and law and order categories. The statistics on the four party family dummies reveal that a little more than a quarter of all parties in the dataset are categorised as traditional Left, 17 percent as traditional Right, and approximately 10 percent as either Social Liberal or Radical Right.

Moving on, our main analysis consists of a set of regression models, which includes a lagged dependent variable,¹² country-fixed effects, and robust standard errors. Using this setup, it becomes possible to ascertain that country idiosyncrasies, or path-dependence, are not driving

¹¹ The data on health-related patents comes from (OECD 2017b). We combined data on pharmaceuticals and medical technology to form our health-related patent index. The data is only updated until 2013. For latter years, we have linearly extrapolated the values.

¹² A lagged dependent variable is included for theoretical reasons since continuity in issue attention is a standard finding within studies of agenda-setting and issue emphasis (cf. Liu et al. 2011; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2015).

our findings. For each issue, we introduce one covariate at a time – the relevant structural problem pressure measure and the four party family dummies – and end up with a full model with all covariates included simultaneously. We also tried to include all three structural problem pressure measures in all the full models, but this did not change the results. We also tried to include a dummy for government membership, but again, this did not change any of the results (and the government membership dummy was never statistically significant on its own). Overall, we feel confident that the findings reported below are robust.

Findings

We begin by reporting the findings for the labour market protection issue (Table 4). Model 1 displays the result from the first regression, where we only include the unemployment rate together with the lagged dependent variable and country-fixed effects. There is a statistically significant and substantial effect. A one-percent increase in the unemployment rate is associated with a 0.58 percentage point increase in attention, meaning that an increase of one standard deviation is associated with a 2.61 percentage point increase. Given that the mean level of attention is just around six percent, this is clearly a large effect.

[Tables 4, 5, and 6 about here]

Model 2 includes the traditional Left party dummy.¹³ Again, we see a substantial and statistically significant effect. The average traditional Left party spends 2.48 percentage points more of its manifesto on labour market protection than parties **from all other party families**. Model 3 shows that traditional Right parties, in contrast, spend 0.86 percentage points less of their manifestos on the issue, though this effect is statistically insignificant: it is the traditional Left that stands out from the rest by their high focus. This is in line with our expectations, as is the fact that there is no significant effect of the Social Liberal party dummy on Model 4. However, it is surprising that the Radical Right party dummy is negative and statistically significant in Model 5, indicating that this party family is distinguished by its low emphasis on labour market protection. Finally, Model 6 includes all variables together. In this setup, unemployment and the traditional Left party dummy stay positive and statistically significant, and the Radical Right party dummy remains negative and statistically significant.

The next issue we turn to is health care (Table 5), which theoretically constitutes the polar opposite of the labour market protection issue. Model 1 shows how the index on health-related patents correlates with attention. An increase in the index of one standard deviation is associated with a 1.44 percentage point increase in attention given to the health care issue. We also try to include the percentage of elderly, but this variable turns insignificant when included

¹³ As part of a series of robustness tests, we segmented the ‘traditional Left’ into Socialist and Social Democratic parties, respectively. Both subgroups had the same effects as the aggregate variable, indicating that it indeed makes sense to speak of a single-party family called the traditional Left.

together with health patents (in Models 3 and 8). Apart from the effect of the problem pressure as measured by health patents, there is little to report on. None of the party family dummies stands out as associated with more or less attention. This clearly supports the notion that parties do not differentiate themselves much in terms of how much attention they dedicate to this issue.

Last, we turn to education (Table 6). Deindustrialisation, our measure of problem pressure, is associated with more attention in Model 1, as expected. An increase of one standard deviation leads to a 1.29 percentage point increase in attention. Models 2 and 3 show that the traditional Left and Right parties are not associated with higher attention levels, whereas Models 4 and 5 show that Social Liberals and the Radical Right are, with the former paying more and the latter less attention than other parties. In sum, the results of Table 6 provide support to the electoral turn perspective of Beramendi et al. (2015) by highlighting the importance of parties representing the new socio-cultural dimension in politics.¹⁴

Overall, these findings provide considerable support for the issue competition framework of this paper. For one thing, the supply of problems is associated with attention levels for all three issues. Second, there are significant differences in terms of what parties pay most attention to across issues. When it comes to labour market protection, traditional Left parties are the main advocates. In the domain of education, Social Liberal parties take the lead and Radical Right parties the rear. All parties pay equal attention to health care. This essentially means that we are able to confirm H1, H3, and H4 in Table 2.

¹⁴ We have run the regressions using a dummy variable for the Green party family as a substitute for the Social Liberal parties. The Green party dummy was insignificant.

[Table 7 about here]

Tables 4-6 pool all elections from the early 1980s to the late 2000s and early 2010s, but what do the identified effects amount to in terms of overall levels of attention? Table 7 offers a glimpse of the answer. It reports the average level of attention given to the three issues in the 1980s and the 2000s as well as the change from the first to the last period. It reveals a remarkable picture. Attention to labour market protection has either remained stable or has dropped (Belgium and Sweden have admittedly seen increases, but these are statistically insignificant). We can compare this with attention to health care, which has increased substantially in all seven countries, and education, which has remained either stable or increased (with the exception of Belgium). In terms of the expectations formulated in Table 2, this suggests that we can confirm H5 and H7 as well as partially confirm H6.

The decrease of attention to education in Belgium is most likely the result of the 1988 constitutional reform that transferred educational policy to the new regions established in the new federal state. After that, education policy has been clearly separate for each region (de Rynck 2005). It is worth stressing that this drop is in line with our argument. National-level parties should pay attention to issues that can blow up in their own face, meaning that when responsibility is moved away from the national level, attention ought to fall, too. This mechanism also helps understand why countries with a national health system (Denmark, Sweden, and UK) witness a higher average level of attention to health care compared with countries where service provision is in the hands of societal actors, as is typically the case in continental Europe (Böhm et al. 2013).

In summary, health care stands out as the arch-typical lifecycle issue. All parties emphasise health care to an equal extent, and attention has generally been pushed upwards as a response to improving medical opportunities. The issue of labour market protection, on the other hand, has witnessed stable or decreasing salience. Since radical parties in particular – which have entered several party systems during this period – talk little about labour market protection, this depresses the overall attention afforded to this issue. Finally, education takes a middle position. Socio-economic transformations push for more attention on the issue, but the party landscape once again muddles the scene. In countries with strong Social Liberal parties, all else being equal, attention will be high.

Conclusion

The ambition of this paper was to flesh out one crucial element missing from existing welfare state literature: how parties compete for votes. For a literature concerned with the voter-party link, this is a surprising omission. To move the literature forward, we drew on an existing research tradition on issue competition and presented an analytical framework to understand how the welfare state features in party competition. We argued that it is necessary to adopt an issue-specific approach because both the supply of problems and the distribution of social risks – and, hence, the demand for solutions – vary greatly from one issue to the next.

The two-dimensional approach to party politics, which is at the heart of recent welfare state literature (e.g., Beramendi et al. 2015; Häusermann 2010; Iversen and Soskice 2015; Manow et al. 2017), has clear merits. The traditional Left stands out as particularly keen to emphasise labour market protection, while the Social Liberals stand out by their focus on education (and the Radical Right by being disinterested in both issues). Without a two-

dimensional approach, it would not be possible to make sense of these results. However, from this perspective, it is surprising that Green parties do not pay particular attention to education.

Our arguments and empirical findings also point to some sore spots in the existing welfare state literature. It is difficult to see how the literature, as it stands, can explain the shift in overall prioritisation of welfare state issues, with health care receiving more and more attention from parties across the political spectrum. To us, this is no minor problem because the shift in attention is mirrored in a shift in public policy priorities as well. Since 1980, public spending on health care as a percentage of GDP has roughly doubled in the seven countries we study in this paper. For a long time, health economists have known that technological progress largely drives this spending increase (Chernew and Newhouse 2012; Okunade and Murthy 2002), but our account helps specify the political mechanism behind this finding. On uniformly popular areas such as health care, augmenting problem pressures will typically lead to rising costs because all parties wish to signal their sincere commitment. Effectively, this can lead to a downstream crowding out of the less universally popular labour market-related schemes.

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Tables

Table 1. Expectations

	Partisan variation	Temporal variation
Health care	H1: None	H4: Increasing
Education	H2: Social Liberal parties will emphasise most	H5: Increasing
Labour market	H3: Traditional Left parties will emphasise most	H6: Stable

Table 2. Public beliefs about government responsibility

	Job for everyone	Standard of living for the un-employed	Child care services for working parents	Paid leave from work to care for sick family	Standard of living for the old	Health care for the sick	Mean	Coefficient of variation
Belgium	30.9	22.7	48.4	49.9	64.6	69.4	47.7	0.35
Denmark	20.9	33.8	68.8	71.1	73.8	85.4	60.0	0.39
France	34.2	27.7	47.2	49.1	65.1	68.4	48.6	0.30
Germany	37.4	30.7	63.6	51.6	56.3	74.7	52.4	0.28
The Netherlands	15.3	20.7	28.4	34.7	59.1	76.5	21.8	0.56
Sweden	27.1	51.3	64.5	64.4	78.9	81.8	61.3	0.30
United Kingdom	30.2	25.3	42.8	48.0	79.2	84.3	51.6	0.44
Mean	28.0	30.3	52.0	52.7	68.1	77.2	51.4	0.40
Coefficient of variance	0.25	0.31	0.26	0.21	0.13	0.08		

Note: Data comes from the 2008 European Social Survey, Round 4. All variables are constructed with 11-point scales ranging from 'not government's responsibility at all' to 'entirely government's responsibility'. The reported figures are the percentage of all respondents choosing one of the three most pro-government categories. Reported figures are corrected for sample bias with the post-stratification weight.

Table 3. Summary statistics

	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Attention to health care	4.60	3.69	0	24.89
Attention to education	5.78	4.80	0	36.96
Attention to labour market protection	6.07	4.51	0	60.00
Traditional Left	0.28	0.45	0	1
Traditional Right	0.17	0.37	0	1
Social Liberals	0.10	0.30	0	1
Radical Right	0.08	0.27	0	1
Health-related patents	368.47	144.48	100	621
Deindustrialisation	80.17	4.19	68.17	86.93
Unemployment	8.05	3.38	1.70	13.90

Table 4. Attention to labour market protection

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Unemployment	0.58*** (5.66)					0.63*** (6.08)
Traditional Left		2.48*** (4.59)				3.03*** (7.16)
Traditional Right			-0.86 (-1.58)			0.23 (0.47)
Social Liberals				0.76 (0.56)		2.29 (1.77)
Radical Right					-2.54*** (-4.39)	-1.73*** (-3.34)
Lagged DV	0.33*** (6.14)	0.26*** (5.00)	0.34*** (6.49)	0.34*** (6.56)	0.32*** (6.30)	0.20*** (4.63)
Constant	-1.73* (-2.07)	1.87*** (5.08)	2.71*** (6.31)	2.15*** (3.34)	2.49*** (6.32)	-3.40** (-3.10)
Observations	398	398	398	398	398	398
R^2	0.250	0.254	0.212	0.210	0.224	0.326

t statistics in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Country-fixed effects are included, but not reported.

Table 5. Attention to health care

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Health patents	0.01*** (5.29)		0.01*** (3.82)					0.01*** (3.85)
Elderly share		0.52*** (3.94)	0.08 (0.50)					0.07 (0.40)
Traditional Left				-0.06 (-0.16)				0.07 (0.17)
Traditional Right					0.66 (1.25)			0.73 (1.40)
Social Liberals						-0.65 (-1.23)		-0.44 (-0.81)
Radical Right							0.62 (0.78)	0.58 (0.71)
Lagged DV	0.26** (2.83)	0.34*** (3.94)	0.26** (2.83)	0.40*** (4.72)	0.39*** (4.76)	0.39*** (4.68)	0.40*** (4.68)	0.25** (2.78)
Constant	1.88* (2.40)	-3.22 (-1.48)	0.78 (0.32)	4.71*** (6.00)	4.49*** (5.72)	4.93*** (6.24)	4.71*** (6.11)	0.94 (0.37)
Observations	398	398	398	398	398	398	398	398
R^2	0.278	0.236	0.279	0.205	0.209	0.208	0.207	0.286

t statistics in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Country-fixed effects are included, but not reported.

Table 6. Attention to education

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Deindustrialisation	0.31** (2.86)					0.35** (3.25)
Traditional Left		0.25 (0.46)				0.74 (1.39)
Traditional Right			0.18 (0.31)			0.69 (1.19)
Social Liberals				2.36* (2.27)		3.01** (2.99)
Radical Right					-1.96* (-2.35)	-1.76* (-2.03)
Lagged DV	0.34*** (3.99)	0.36*** (3.79)	0.36*** (3.80)	0.33*** (3.58)	0.34*** (3.72)	0.30*** (3.69)
Constant	-19.08* (-2.14)	6.00*** (5.34)	6.04*** (6.05)	5.50*** (5.31)	6.20*** (6.02)	-23.59** (-2.60)
Observations	398	398	398	398	398	398
R^2	0.253	0.224	0.223	0.243	0.232	0.292

t statistics in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Country-fixed effects are included, but not reported.

Table 7. Change in attention from the 1980s to the 2000s

	Labour market			Health care			Education		
	1980s	2000s	Change	1980s	2000s	Change	1980s	2000s	Change
Belgium	5.1	6.2	1.1	2.5	6.3	3.8**	4.1	2.8	-1.4*
Denmark	7.1	4.2	-2.9*	1.9	7.5	5.6**	6.8	9.7	2.9
Germany	5.8	6.1	0.3	2.3	4.1	1.8**	3.5	5.6	2.0*
France	9.5	9.1	-0.4	1.0	3.6	2.5**	3.8	5.7	1.8
The Netherlands	5.0	3.7	-1.3*	3.5	6.2	2.7**	6.3	7.0	0.7
Sweden	4.9	7.2	2.3	3.4	6.7	3.4**	4.8	8.2	3.4**
UK	5.0	2.8	-3.2**	5.6	8.4	2.8**	6.5	9.5	3.0*
Mean	6.1	5.6	-0.5	2.9	6.1	3.2	5.1	6.9	1.8

Note: ** = p-value < 0.01; * = p-value < 0.05.