Towards a renewal of the niche party concept: Parties, market shares and condensed offers

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Abstract
Scholars' attention to the concept of niche parties has greatly increased. While researchers agree that niche parties matter in a variety of ways, the definitions and measurements of such parties are manifold and an accordance remains yet to be found. I argue the given conceptualizations of niche parties (a) suffer from gaps between their measurements and theoretical concepts or (b) conceptual clarity. The theoretical concept I propose understands niche parties as (a) predominantly competing on niche market segments neglected by their competitors and (b) not discussing a broad range of these segments. By measuring exactly these two components in an additive index drawn from the MARPOR data, the validation shows that parties emphasizing niche segments differentiate themselves from their competitors also by using a condensed message on these segments. In particular, this component of party competition, the specialization of party offers, has not been studied in the literature on niche parties and should receive more attention.

"*A niche is a hollow place in a wall, often made to hold a statue.*"[1]

1 Introduction

Niche parties have recently found large appeal in political scientists' attention. As several studies showed, niche parties appear to be different from their mainstream sisters in a variety of ways: they are said to differ in their progra- matic offer (Wagner, 2012b), their behavior in parliaments (Jensen and Spoon, 2010), the voters they respond to (Ezrow, 2010) and they appear to play a larger role for party competition than previously suggested (Meguid, 2005). However, until now the conceptualization of niche parties lacks a common conceptual background: scholars differ in (a) their definitions and (b) their measurements. While the debate on the impact of niche parties' behavior is underway, researchers are still searching for concepts to clarify the defining criteria of niche parties, which results in different parties being perceived as niche parties. This makes compar- ison of the results between studies difficult, if not infeasible.

Lately studies have brought some clarity into the debate and attempted to provide a minimal definition of niche par- ties (Meyer and Miller, 2013; Wagner, 2012a). While both studies convince in terms of their unambiguousness and validation of their measures, they imply contestable assumptions from a theoretical perspective as will be shown in the next section. They also neglect an important component of the niche party concept: namely the narrow- ness of niche parties' issue offers. While niche parties have been theoretically understood as limiting their issue appeals, existing measurements of niche parties have not empirically measured this component of the niche party concept. Furthermore, both measurements empirically rely on dimensions of party competition which have not been designed to measure niche parties. The concept outlined in this article attempts to address these shortcomings. After a critical discussion of the *status quo* of the current debate on niche parties, I will present a different theoretical per- spective on niche parties drawn from marketing theories. Niche parties will be understood as parties holding a market

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Table 1. Concepts of niche parties in comparison.

	Study			
	Meguid (2005)	Adams et al. (2006)	Wagner (2012a)	Meyer & Miller (2013)
Concept	(1) Reject traditional orientation of politics (2) Present novel issues (3) Limit of issue appeals	Non-centrist or extreme Ideology	(1) Do not emphasize economic issues (2) Emphasize a narrow range of non-economic issues	Emphasize policy areas neglected by their competitors
Method	Party family (VonBeyme, 1984) Spatial theory (Downs, 1957)	Party family (VonBeyme, 1984) Spatial theory (Downs, 1957)	Distance to mean issue salience on 9 issue dimensions	Nicheness quality of all parties
Outcome	Green Radical Right	Green Radical Right Communist	Dichotomous measurement	Continuous Measurement

Source: Author's own.

share advantage within a narrow range of niche market segments. These are here defined and measured by niche party families' original issue appeals. Section 4 contains the methodological deductions from my theoretical arguments and presents an additive index measuring parties' offer of niche segment and the narrowness of their offer based on the comparative manifesto (MARPOR) data. Section 5 shows the results and validates some assumptions of my theoretical argument. Moreover, it underpins that some party families might have indeed been identified as niche parties in previous research because of their focus on a small amount of issues and not because these families predominantly compete on niche segments. Thus, using both dimensions in applied research will enhance the conclusions we can draw from our models: researchers can now not only gain more fine-grained information on degrees of "nicheness" of parties, but also dismantle the consequences of both niche strategies. The strategy to compete on issues neglected by competitors might have different implications for parties than the strategy to limit a party's issue appeals. The last section concludes and proposes some avenues for further research.

2 Agreement on disagreement: The state of the niche party concept

Recent studies on political parties differentiate these ever more often into mainstream and niche parties (Adams et al., 2006; Ezrow, 2010; Meguid, 2007; Meyer and Miller, 2013; Wagner, 2012a). In her seminal work Meguid (2005, 2007) reasoned about the electoral success of niche parties and stressed mainstream parties' strategies as the main factor

for niche parties' success: mainstream parties deliberately alter issue salience and ownership of niche parties' issues in order to enhance their own electoral fortunes (Meguid, 2005: 357). Consequently, niche parties have a crucial influence on the issue agendas of party systems, which is disproportionately larger than their actual size measured in votes suggests. Other studies show that niche parties are less responsive to shifts in public opinion than their mainstream competitors (Adams et al., 2006: 519, 523). Rather, they are substantially punished by voters for moderating their party programs. Finally, mainstream parties orientate themselves to the median voter position as a proxy to optimize their vote shares, while niche parties use the median voter *within* their own electoral constituency as a yardstick for their positional shifts (Ezrow et al., 2010: 283–285). Scholars also found evidence that niche parties act differently than their mainstream sisters in the European Parliament (Jensen and Spoon, 2010) and therefore might behave differently in any legislative chamber (Vilegenthart et al., 2011).

Hence, while scholars seem to agree on niche parties' importance and partly share the same opinion on the degree they matter for party competition, the defining features of niche parties are highly debated throughout the literature. As shown in Table 1 there are at least four different definitions, measurements and therefrom resulting samples defined in the literature as niche parties.

As a result, scholars do not speak about the same subset of parties when they refer to niche parties, even though some attempts exist to clarify the conceptualization of the latter (Meyer and Miller, 2013; Wagner, 2012a). How do these studies differ in their concepts? And what are the implications of these disagreements?

2.1 Theoretical chasms

First, scholars use different definitions for niche parties based on different theoretical notions of party competition (see Table 1, first row). Meguid (2005) defined niche parties in three steps: (a) they reject the traditional class-based orientation of politics; (b) they raise novel issues, which often do not coincide with existing lines of political division; (c) they differentiate themselves by limiting their issue appeals (Meguid, 2005: 347–348; Meguid, 2007: 3–6).[2] While several studies conclude that green and radical right parties fulfill these criteria (Meguid, 2005, 2007; Vligenthart et al., 2011), others also include regionalist and anti-EU parties into the niche category (Jensen and Spoon, 2010: 3–4; Lynch and Whitaker, 2013).

Subsequent publications were indisputably influenced by Meguid's work, but changed the definition of niche parties to a party group which either does not compete for the center in a Downsian spatial model or holds an ''extreme'' position (Adams et al., 2006: 513; Adams et al., 2012: 1273; Ezrow, 2010: 11–13). This ''Downsian'' definition found large appeal amongst scholars, but also raises theoretical doubts. Keeping in mind that niche parties have been understood to differentiate themselves from their competitors by a deviant issue offer, which not conterminously results in an extreme position. Thus, while a different offer might result in more extreme positions, it does not do so by necessity. It is important to annotate that using extreme positions to define niche parties stems from a different theoretical assumption: while Meguid's work relates to issue ownership theories (Petrocik, 1996), Adams et al.'s (2006) niche party definition is mainly based on spatial theories (Downs, 1957). As such parties on the extremes of a left–right scale might be accurately defined as extreme parties, but not necessarily as niche parties.

Wagner (2012a: 846) finds the concepts to define and measure niche parties in existing studies ''relatively basic'' as they are established on party families, time-blind and structured around the idea that parties of a particular party family present coherent offers to voters. In contrast, he thinks of niche parties as (a) emphasizing non-economic issues and (b) being concerned with only a narrow range of non-economic issues (Wagner, 2012a: 847). They might sometimes represent positions which are new to party competition. Mainstream parties do the exact opposite: they (a) emphasize economic issues and (b) include a broad range of issues. This results in a time-variant and ''party family blind'' approach. As such, Wagner's work not only disagrees with the assumption that certain party families *always* constitute niche parties, but also has opened up a discussion on how scholars should actually measure niche parties, prior to drawing inferences about their behavior. Although, Wagner measures whether parties emphasize economic issues or de-emphasize them, his measure does not take the narrowness of niche parties' electoral platforms

into account. Thus, there appears to be a gap between his theoretical argument and his suggested measurement. However, Wagner (2012a: 850) correctly annotates that being a niche party is ''more than a binary category: it is also a matter of degrees''. Yet, his measurement does not factor in the degrees of ''nicheness'', but uses a binary variable to distinguish niche and mainstream parties.

The most recent concept of niche parties addresses exactly this shortcoming of the existing literature (Meyer and Miller, 2013). Niche parties are defined as ''emphasizing policy areas neglected by [their] competitors'' (Meyer and Miller, 2013: 3) based on a theoretical concept strongly related to salience theories (Budge and Farlie, 1983). The definition follows the idea to taper the concept of niche parties and come up with a minimal definition. Following this minimal definition, Meyer and Miller present a continuous measurement of parties' nicheness. This means they do not *strictly* differentiate between two types of parties, but rather between degrees of nicheness. A continuous measurement is interesting in itself because it bypasses the issue of setting a cutoff point between niche and mainstream parties: whether or not a party is niche is purely a function of the data itself. Furthermore, cutoff points are not only difficult to justify, but often remain rather arbitrary. Yet, defining niche parties purely along the line of backing on issues with less competition appears to be too minimalistic inasmuch as it involves the danger to also interpret parties as niche parties which emphasize traditional issues of party competition, such as welfare state or tax policies. This shortcoming is portrayed by the fact that members of the conservative party family are on average almost indistinguishable from nationalist parties in their ''nicheness'' in Meyer and Miller's measurement (Meyer and Miller, 2013:7).

2.2 Differing classifications

Second, different definitions end up in different parties being categorized as niche (Table 1, third row). Meguid (2005, 2007) and Adams et al. (2006) mainly differ from each other by the inclusion of communist parties as niche parties or their exclusion, respectively. However, the inclusion of communist parties is problematic. While it is true that communist parties are usually found on the extreme left on a spatial model, it remains unclear whether such a conceptualization of niche parties is conclusive. By resorting to the idea that niche parties should differ in their issue offer, it is questionable that communist parties discuss *other issues* than for instance conservative or Christian democratic parties. In fact, communist parties rather present a *different perspective* on traditional issues: they tend to emphasize economic issues, but from a Marxist perspective. As such communist parties might have a radically different perspective on a high salient issue of politics, but still compete mainly by emphasizing economic dimensions.

The assumption that parties of the same ideological family emphasize comparable issues might empirically be less problematic than it appears on first sight (Wagner, 2012a: 855–859), but needs to be rejected from a theoretical point of view. As already pointed out, defining niche parties along the lines of party families results in a time-invariant measurement of niche parties: a green party will always remain a niche party, a social democratic party will always remain a mainstream party. This means that even if parties significantly change their offer, parties will always stay a niche party or mainstream party, respectively, unless parties switch from one party family to another. Yet, parties alter their profile across time and might switch from niche to mainstream or *vice versa* (Meyer and Wagner, 2013). Parties can be expected to emphasize different issues at different points in time to meet external demands in order to achieve their goals (Harmel and Janda, 1994). As a result, relying on a party family concept exclusively based on parties' origins might not be flexible enough to detect niche parties.

To address these issues, recent studies used the MARPOR data to derive time-varying niche measurements (Meyer and Miller, 2013; Wagner, 2012a). These studies are comparable in their efforts to aggregate the issue codes included in the MARPOR data into broader issue dimensions. Yet, in both cases the used issue dimensions do not reflect on issues of niche parties, but were established to measure the de-alignment thesis (Stoll, 2010; Wagner, 2012a) and ministerial portfolio allocations (Bäck et al., 2011; Meyer and Miller, 2013). However, some niche parties mainly debate issues which are split across ministerial portfolios. Moreover, niche parties have been thought of as presenting offers "cross-cutting" existing alignments of party competition (Meguid, 2005: 347). Therefore, using dimensions measuring exactly these alignments does not seem suitable to measure niche parties. This then results in especially extreme right parties showing a comparable low nicheness score (Meyer and Miller, 2013: 7), since their potentially "owned" issues are divided across several dimensions. Furthermore, both studies rely on vote shares introduced as weights into their measurements (Meyer and Miller, 2013: 4; Wagner, 2012a: 853), which appears to be endogenous once scholars are interested in explaining niche parties' electoral successes and failures with these measures. Finally, while Wagner (2012a: 847) rightly reflects in his theoretical definition of niche parties on the range of issues debated within manifestos, Meyer and Miller's (2013) definition appears to be missing this important second dimension of niche parties. On top of that, both measures do not quantify the narrowness of niche parties' policy offers.

I conclude that the main problem of the outlined measurements is their underestimation of country differences and the overestimation of similarities across countries and especially time (Adams et al., 2006; Meguid, 2005). The underlying supposition of the described concepts is bound to the idea that certain party families are composed of niche parties in every party system across all points in time (Adams et al., 2006; Meguid, 2005, 2007).[3] In particular this assumption remains questionable, once the theoretical assumptions which are linked to the party family concept are borne in mind (Mair and Mudde, 1998). Finally, the niche party concept has so far not been bound to a single theoretical concept, but has been subject to a mix of Downsian, issue ownership (Petrocik, 1996) and issue salience (Budge and Farlie, 1983) approaches. While recent studies have brought some clarity into the theoretical qualification and empirical quantification of niche parties (Meyer and Miller, 2013; Wagner, 2012a), the dimensions used to measure niche parties are subject to some concern. Both measurements also do not consider the narrowness of parties' issue offer as an important quality of niche parties. Therefore, the question arises whether there is a possibility to provide theoretical clarification to derive a suitable empirical tool to measure niche parties.

3 Starting from scratch: Parties, products and market segments

A re-conceptualization of niche parties is needed in order to combine the arguments outlined in the last section and address existing critique without missing relevant components of the niche party concept. Thus, instead of claiming what the existing concept "really" means (Adcock and Collier, 2001: 532), the following section outlines a somewhat different approach to niche parties. I advocate the search for a minimal definition which at the same time does not miss necessary definitional criteria for the niche concept. Consequently, I define nicheness as a strategy which results in parties:

(a) predominantly competing on niche market segments neglected by their competitors;
(b) not discussing a broad range of these segments.

Partly built on ideas of marketing theory (Butler and Collins, 1996; Portner, 2004), party systems are regarded as markets, incorporating various segments. These segments can be defined by numerous issues. The space in which parties compete is a market in which several products are offered. For example, one segment can be illustrated by the beverage market: there is one "original" ice tea done by Nestea, there might be an attempt by Volvic to compete on the ice tea segment by presenting a sugar-free ice tea and there are several minor ice tea producers.[4] The last ones might anticipate the competition on the ice tea segment as too challenging. A newcomer on the beverage market therefore perceives the ice tea segment as highly competitive and anticipates a low income from this segment. Such producers will focus on less competitive market segments or take chances by even introducing a new

beverage. By doing so the latter obtain a first mover advantage on the market making it difficult for competitors to incorporate this niche segment. Niche marketers also have scarce resources and need to focus these on a small set of market segments in order to assure their initial survival.

Transferred to party systems traditional segments of party competition exist within each system. Segments dominated by mainstream parties are composed of highly competitive issues. These traditional segments are not associatively owned by a single party (Walgrave et al., 2012). Instead some parties might be perceived more competent than others on one of these segments at certain points in time, but never as being the only horse in the race. Competition on traditional segments is characterized by offer differentiation: parties compete by giving different answers to the same questions. One party favors to extend welfare state expenses, another one advocates welfare state retrenchment in order to fight economic stagnation.

In contrast, niche segments are largely associated with certain party families and therefore often ignored by others. For instance, in a survey in Belgium 87 % of the Flemish respondents spontaneously linked green parties to environmental issues, while only 45 % linked Liberals to taxes (Walgrave et al., 2012: 774–779). Parties sharing comparable original motivations and originating from the same ideological ideas of a certain cleavage in different countries, e.g. working class movement, the ecological movement, are identified as belonging to the same party family (Rokkan, 1970; von Beyme, 1984) and capturing comparable market segments across countries in their infancies. Drawing on these thoughts the blueprints of certain party families are perceived as niche parties, because these parties share comparable niche issue appeals within families across countries (Meguid, 2005, 2007). Finally, in order to assure their market advantages these parties need to focus their issue appeals on a narrow range of segments.

However, parties are not immune to change. Concepts relying only on parties' origins do not reach far enough (Mair and Mudde, 1998: 214–223). The German Green party might be less interested in environmental issues today than the green party in Canada or the German Greens in 1983, or *vice versa*. As such, the salience of market segments should vary across *time* and *countries* and also within party families. It still seems to be a fair conclusion that a green party which remains "true" to its party family's original issue appeals, is a niche party in a given party system, but only if other parties did not incorporate their original issue appeals and the party had not significantly distanced itself from its roots by starting to debate other segments. Such parties can then be understood as niche parties or being more "niche-ish".

Yet, empirical examples for parties distancing themselves from their roots are numerous. Green parties in Western Europe attempted to broaden their issue appeals beyond environmental questions to related topics such as health, agriculture and inequality (Poguntke, 2002: 139). Also green parties in Germany and Italy effectively dropped their ideology of pacifism by going to war in former Serbia in 1998/99. The Austrian Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) and the Swiss Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP) have both radicalized their programs and are nowadays perceived as radial right populist parties by some scholars (Mudde, 2014: 219). Finally, Scandinavian agrarian parties successfully distanced themselves from their origins in order to assure electoral survival (Arter, 2012, 2013; Christensen, 1997).

To take account of parties' deracination, market segments should be thought of as reflecting party families original issue appeals. Niche parties can then be conceptualized as emphasizing these market segments with less competitors and only a limited number of these segments (Butler and Collins, 1996: 32). By doing so niche parties hold a first mover advantage: once they successfully compete on a niche segment, the only options left for competitors is to either follow suit or ignore them. Yet, if mainstream parties are competing on a niche segment before the median voter perceives this segment as important and lasting,[5] the mainstream party might be punished in upcoming elections (Ezrow, 2010).

In summary, the theoretical conceptualization proposed above bridges the gap between previous conceptualizations and aims to conjoin relevant arguments put forward elsewhere with the important criterion that a "nicher" focuses scarce resources on a narrow range of issues. While this criterion has been explicitly discussed in previous theoretical arguments about niche parties (Meguid, 2005: 348; Wagner, 2012a: 847), it has not been empirically implemented in any of the previous measures of niche parties. Yet, in particular, the strategy to limit ones issue appeals is an exclusive decision of a party's own strategy. In contrast, whether or not a party competes on segments neglected by its competitors is by definition depending on the strategies of its competitors.

3.1 What is a niche segment?

In order to account for these theoretical thoughts five dimensions were established reflecting on niche party families original issue appeals: ecological, agrarian, regional, extreme right and eurosceptic segments. These five dimensions have in common that they were either located at the periphery of party competition (regional, agrarian) or had not been recognized prior to their introduction to party systems by new, emergent party families (ecology, extreme right, euroscepticism). Thus, they all present attempts to construct novel conflict lines from the periphery of party systems on issues with less competition. In sum, the dimensions reflect non-economic issues. They can attract voters of most competitors in all party systems and might attempt to introduce a new product into the market (Meguid, 2007). Thereby, the agrarian and regional dimensions are

Table 2. Niche segments and their defining criteria.

Party family	Defining criteria	MARPOR codes	Literature background
Ecology	- main focus on environmentalism	Per501(Environmental Protection)	(Müller-Rommel, 1985)
	- sustainability as a generalizable aim	Per416(Anti-Growth Economy: Positive)+ Per410(Productivity: Positive)	(Lowe et al., 2011: 139)
	- pacifism	Per106(Peace: Positive)	
Agrarian	- agriculture	Per703(Farmers)	(Christensen, 1997: 393);
	- urban versus rural		(Batory and Sitter, 2004: 524)
Regional	- regionalism, autonomism or separatism of region of origin	Per301(Decentralization)+ Per302(Centralization)	(Müller-Rommel, 1998: 19)
	- focused on issues affecting the region of origin	Per706(Non-economic Demographic Groups)	(Brancati, 2007: 138)
Extreme Right	- nationalism: congruence between state and nation	Per601(National Way of Life: Positive)+ Per602(National Way of Life: Negative)	(Mudde, 1999: 187-190)
	-"mono-culturalism": homogenization of nation and xenophobia	Per607(Multiculturalism: Positive)+ Per608(Multiculturalism: Negative)	
	- belief in law and order	Per605(Law and Order)	
Eurosceptic	- opposition to EU	Per406(Protectionism: Positive)+ Per407(Protectionism: Negative)	(Taggart, 1998: 368)
	- protectionism of own market	Per108(European Community/Union: Positive)+ Per110(European Community/Union: Negative)	

Source: Author's own.

theoretically derived from arguments put forward by the cleavage theory, namely the conflict between center versus periphery and urban versus rural areas (Rokkan, 1970). In contrast, the segments of ecology and extreme right both are well known to have disrupted traditional cleavage lines, starting in the 1980s and establishing a novel line of conflict between materialist and post-materialist values (Inglehart, 1984).

Euroscepticism can be understood as one of the latest attempts by parties located at the periphery to penetrate into party systems and legislatures across Europe (Taggart, 1998).[6] Thus, the niche segments introduced here are: (a) segments which were at some point located at the periphery of party systems, (b) attempting to destabilize entrenched party voter alignments and (c) a set of non-economic segments. In contrast other party families original issue appeals, be they liberal, conservative, social democratic, Christian democratic or communist parties, tie on traditional party-voter alignments (e.g. state versus church) and emphasize economic issues in various aspects (e.g. Marxist theories, neoliberalism).

In contrast to previous research on niche parties, parties are then not only allocated into the niche category due to their origins as in the case of conceptualizations based on party families (Adams et al., 2006; Meguid, 2005). Rather, all parties receive a nicheness score irrespective of their origins, but the measurement takes their history and how they (de-)emphasize the five niche segments into account. These five dimensions reflect exclusively on issues associated with the original blueprints of the offers of niche party families.[7] As such, the dimensions presented here are deduced from the theoretical section of the paper and arguments put forward elsewhere (Meguid, 2005). Finally, they attempt to allocate which segments researchers (Jensen and Spoon, 2010; Meguid, 2005; Taggart, 1998) and the public (Walgrave et al., 2012) associate with being niche, instead of relying on dimensions established for different research purposes (Meyer and Miller, 2013; Wagner, 2012a).[8]

I collapsed directional issues into single issue dimensions, since this study is not interested in directionality, but segment emphasis. As has been discussed before, the communist party family is not understood as competing on niche segments, but rather as a group of extreme left parties presenting divergent answers to issues belonging to traditional market segments of party competition.[9] Therefore, the five niche dimensions do not contain a communist segment, as this segment would be defined by economic issues for the most part (e.g. Marxist analysis, nationalization of industry, controlled economy, economic planning).

Table 2 describes the five niche segments, their definitional criteria, the MARPOR codes used to measure these dimensions and the relevant literature which these dimensions are based upon.

The ecological dimension reflects on environmental protection, sustainable development and peace as a general goal. At their origins green parties hold strong relations to pacifist and environmental movements. Instead of focusing on economic goals and achievements, green parties called for sustainable economic development not harming the environment and thus cross-cut existing party lines (Müller-Rommel,

1993: 17–18).[10] The extreme right market segment calls for nationalism, "mono-culturalism" and law and order (Mudde, 1999: 187–190; Mudde, 2000: 169–176). One dimension has been created which reflects on anti-EU parties, such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP) or the Alternative für Deutschland (AFD) in Germany. Eurosceptic parties largely lack success in elections for national parliaments as of today, but their *raison d'etre* of an anti-European standpoint has been described as "at the periphery of party systems" (Taggart, 1998: 363) and should therefore be understood as a strategy of a niche party. Another party family which has been absent for the most part on the debate about niche parties is the agrarian party family. Originating from the idea to represent farmers' interests (Christensen, 1997: 391), they also competed by emphasizing a niche segment up until the 1970s. In fact, agrarian parties present the first niche party group aiming to change traditional party competition by focusing on the divide between urban and rural interests (Rokkan, 1970). Finally, one dimension reflects on the regional party family. The regional party family outlines a borderline case, since many issues regionalist parties emphasize are well categorized into traditional market segments. Yet, I agree with the existing literature that the family's strong claim for autonomy for the regions it acts in justifies an inclusion into the niche segments (Jensen and Spoon, 2010: 176–177).

4 Data and measurements

The 2013 MARPOR data was used to guarantee a time varying and consistent measurement of parties' nicheness (Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006; Volkens et al., 2012).[11] The MARPOR data is based on a content analysis coding of "quasi-sentences" within party manifestos into 56 broader issue categories (Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006). It aims to measure the salience of different issues across parties, countries and time. It is the most proficient data source containing longitudinal and cross-national data of party manifestos: the data can be used to analyze party positions across time and nations starting from 1943 until 2013.[12] As Laver (2001: 66–75) has shown, using the MARPOR to derive policy positions of parties may result in flawed estimates. However, in contrast to spatial modeling of party positions, the presented concept of niche parties is build on the ideas of marketing theories and relates to issue salience arguments (Budge and Farlie, 1983). While other issues still linger with the MARPOR data, such as that "on average, nearly 30 % of the content of manifestos in Denmark are deemed impossible to be coded" (Hansen, 2008: 201), using MARPOR in line with their original intents seems clearly less problematic than deriving ideological left–right placements of parties from the data. Furthermore, until today the MARPOR data remain the most inclusive and broad dataset to be used to estimate which issues political parties emphasize in their manifestos. MARPOR data has also been criticized for providing an accuracy of issue emphasis which is too optimistic and as such the data can significantly change from one election year to another. In order to control for this noise in the data, but also for the theoretical reason that parties are to a large extend path-dependent and cannot completely change their issue appeals from one election to another, I calculate the average issue emphasis using the election at t and the previous election $t-1$.[13] After this, I estimated the log of all party segments, following the suggestions by Lowe et al. (2011) in order to take into account how voters psychologically perceive party change across time. Finally, parties had to achieve *five seats in their parliament* or *at least 5 % of the popular vote share* to be included into the analysis to assure comparability to previous studies (Meyer and Miller, 2013; Wagner, 2012a). Included are only countries understood as belonging to advanced Western Democracies to guarantee a comparable meaning of party families across countries.[14] However, there are no statistical reasons to limit the following measurement only to the country selection used here.

In order to understand who holds an advantage on certain market segments I propose to generate an *additive nicheness index* containing two components.[15] The first component measures how much parties differ in their issue emphasis on niche segments to their competitors. The second one calculates how narrow their offer on these segments is.

First, I calculated a sort of standard deviation of parties' niche segment appeals (market share score), on first sight similar to the measurement suggested by Meyer and Miller (2013):

$$m_p = \sqrt{\frac{1}{5}\sum_{i=1}^{5}(x_{ip} - \bar{x}_{i,-p})^2} \qquad (1)$$

with x_{ip} being *party_i*'s emphasis on one of the five issue dimensions; $\bar{x}_{i,-p}$ being the mean party system emphasis on one of the five dimensions excluding *party_i*. The result m_p outlines the score of the squared distance of a party from its competitors, standardized across the five market segments as outlined previously. Thus, m_p is a relative measurement comparing a party's niche segment profile with all its competitors. Results of equation (1) can be read as follows: if all parties in a given party system discuss the same market segment, this results in a low nicheness score for all parties in that party system. In contrast, the more a party differs from its competitors the higher is its market share score. As such the higher a party's m_p score, the more shares of the five market segments are only debated by *party_i*.

In contrast to Meyer and Miller (2013), $\bar{x}_{i,-p}$ in equation (1) is not weighted by parties' vote shares. Previous measurements included weights by parties' popular vote gains

(Meyer and Miller, 2013; Wagner, 2012a). The assumption standing behind such vote weighted measurements is that bigger parties have higher agenda setting capabilities. Yet, this seems troublesome especially because niche parties are understood to have a higher agenda setting capability on the issues they are associated with. Thus, voters perceive them as issue owners of their segments, even though these parties are small in size. Furthermore, including vote shares to stretch the distance between smaller and bigger parties maps a conceptual distance between theoretical arguments, driven by issue salience theories, and measurements which then reflect on parties' vote gains. In particular, since the literature frequently explicitly excludes the necessity of niche parties to be small in the sense of vote shares (Ezrow, 2010: 11–13; Wagner, 2012a: 8514–852). Finally, including vote-shares into a niche measurement can result in endogeneity, once scholars are interested analyzing niche parties' electoral success. Thus, I decided to not use any weight in equation (1).

Since parties' emphasis should differ across countries, in a two party system the m_p score should be comparably low for all parties; while in systems with more than four parties the m_p score should be comparably higher for all parties, it is more interesting to measure the market shares controlled by one party compared with the share of the remaining parties of a party system:

$$\bar{m}_p = m_p - \mu_{-p} \tag{2}$$

In this equation μ_{-p} is the mean of all parties standard deviation scores in a country excluding again the *party$_i$* of interest. Equation (2) delivers a market share score of a given *party$_i$* picturing the market share compared to all other parties' market shares within a party system.

Second, I calculated parties' specialization on the five segments to measure the range of segments debated by parties. A specialization index was created based on Shannon's entropy (Colwell and Futuyma, 1971; King and Wand, 2006; Shannon, 1949):[16]

$$s_p = ln\left(\frac{1}{\prod\limits_{i=1}^{5} x_{ip}^{x_{ip}}}\right) \tag{3}$$

with higher values representing parties with more divergent platforms. For an explanation of s_p let us consider two parties as pictured in Table 3.

Party 1 spread its offer equally across all five segments and thus receives the highest value for s_p with 1.609. Party 2, instead, focuses its resources on the ecology dimension *only* and thus scores low with a s_p of zero. Therefore, Shannon entropy measures how *diverse* party offers are. Since I am interested in how *specialized* party offers are, I inverted the scale to assure that the highest value pictures the party

Table 3. Shannon entropy example.

Segment	Segment share party 1	Segment share party 2
Ecology	0.2	1.0
Agrarian	0.2	0
Regional	0.2	0
Extreme right	0.2	0
Eurosceptic	0.2	0
Shannon entropy	1.609	0

Source: Author's own.

with the most specialized offer and zero the one with most diverse offer.[17]

Finally, I added both components up to receive a continuous measure of parties' nicheness.[18] To summarize, the measurement equally reflects on parties' market dominance within their party systems on niche segments ($\bar{m}_p$) and the broadness of their electoral platforms on these segments (s_p): the higher a party's nicheness score the more market share advantages it holds in comparison to its competitors and the narrower its segment offer. If a party tends to discuss several market segments and presents a diverse offer, its nicheness score is lower.

5 Parties in niche markets: A validation

What are the classifications resulting from this measurement? Since previous research structured their niche party concept around the idea of party families, I here present the nicheness scores split by party families.[19] Figure 2 presents the nicheness measurement, the specialization (s_p) and market share ($\bar{m}_p$) measure grouped by party families. In all cases means, lower and upper percentiles are plotted.[20]

Looking first into the market share parties hold (lower left quadrant of Figure 2), we see a clear cut divide in the means between ethnic-regional, agrarian, nationalist, green and special-issue parties on the one hand and the remaining five party families on the other hand. Clearly, the former ones are the parties associated with being a niche party. Thus, as outlined in the theoretical section communist parties are not niche in their offer, but once we take a look into parties' specialization scores (lower right quadrant of Figure 2) communist parties score comparably high in the narrowness of their platforms. Interestingly they often either focus on the ecological or the regional segments (underprivileged groups) while neglecting the remaining niche segments. In summary, thus, communist parties score comparably low in terms of nicheness and could be rather understood as leaning towards the remaining mainstream party families or at best as an in-between case.

The highest nicheness scores are associated with special-issue and nationalist parties. Thus, both party groups preliminary compete on niche segments with few competitors and strive to have a condensed platform. This result again underpins that scholars have not paid enough
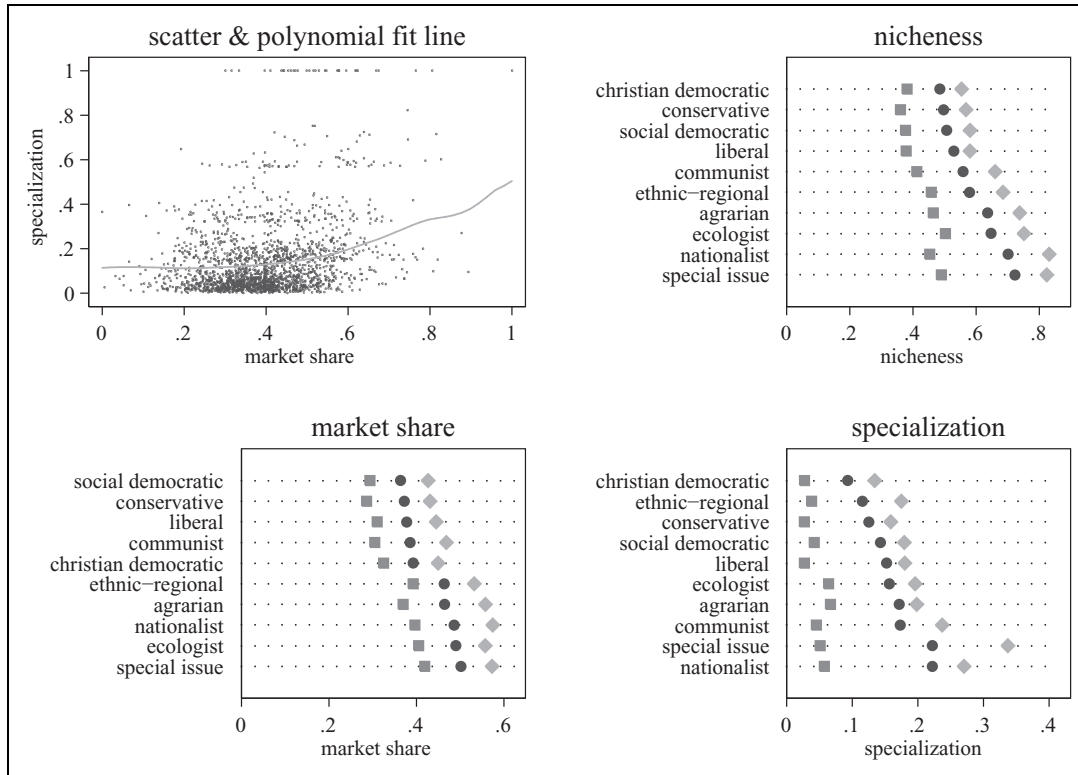
Figure 1. Nicheness & specialization across party families, 1944–2013.
Source: Author's own.
Note: The scatterplot in the upper left quadrant includes a local polynomial smoothed fitted line. The remaining plots picture means (dot), first (square) and third quartiles (diamond).

attention to special-issue parties (Meyer and Miller, 2013: 6). It also shows that the five segments chosen here to measure nicheness do not tautologically reflect the issues of the five party families they are named after, but apparently capture the nicheness of a rather unspecified subgroup of special-issue parties as well. Furthermore, the chosen segments appear to reflect nationalist parties' offer fairly well in comparison to previous measurements. This fact is a major improvement compared to earlier measurements of niche parties. Also agrarian parties hold high nicheness scores comparable to green parties, which share the highest nicheness scores with the special-issue and nationalist parties.

In general, the results underpin my prior outlined theoretical assumptions. As in previous studies the traditional party families, conservatives, Christian democrats, liberal and social democratic parties, are the most "mainstream-ish" parties. However, as the scatterplot in the upper left quadrant in Figure 2 shows, the second component of my nicheness measurement is only weakly correlated with parties market share scores. Most parties have low specialization scores while holding mediocre market share advantages.

Figure 3 compares my suggested measurement (nicheness) with the four aforementioned measurements proposed by other scholars. Even though my measurement is correlated with existing measurements as the density plots and scatter

plot in Figure 3 reveal, the reasons why we perceive these parties as niche remains camouflaged in those measurements.

While measures purely based on party families, such as Meguid and Adams et al., neglect differences across time and parties, Wagner's concept ignores the narrowness of parties' policy offers. In all three cases there is considerable overlap between niche and mainstream parties' nicheness scores. Furthermore, while the nicheness measure suggested here appears to be correlated with Meyer and Miller's measure, the difference between the measures increases with growing nicheness scores. Thus, measuring and including specialization in a measure of niche parties adds information to the measurement of niche parties which has only played a minor role in all previously proposed niche concepts. However, it is especially this defining criterion which is solely controlled by a party itself and not by its competitors.

As outlined in the theoretical argument nicheness should not only vary across parties and party families but also change across time. Figure 4 gives an insight into how party families changed their nicheness during the last 70 years: party families have been sorted according to the highest average nicheness today in descending order. Since MARPOR data has been blamed for being untrustworthy especially for the period before 1970 (Hansen, 2008; Pennings, 2006), results prior to 1970 have to be read with caution.
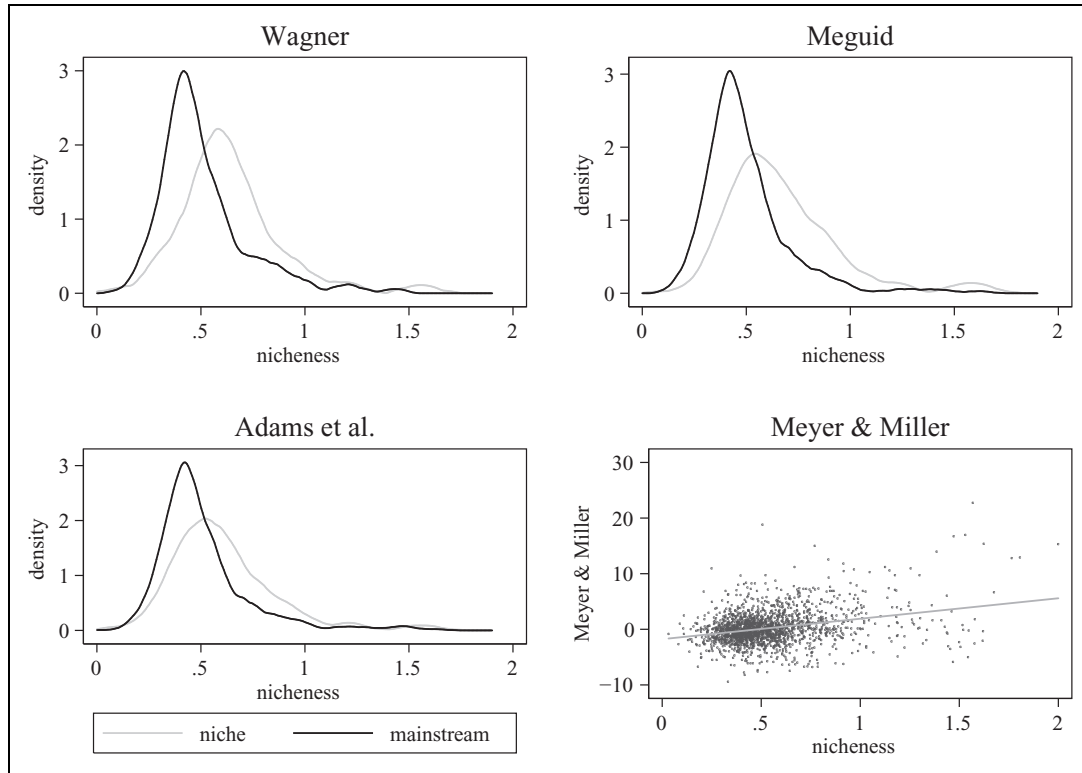
Figure 2. Niche party concepts in comparison.
Source: Author's own.
Note: Two-sample *t*-tests are significant for the first three (Meguid, Adams et al., Wagner) concepts (for all three comparisons $p = 0.000$). A regression with Meyer & Miller's concept as a dependent variable and the measurement suggested here as an independent variable reveals a positive and significant coefficient: $\hat{y} = 1.78 + 3.68(nicheness)$.
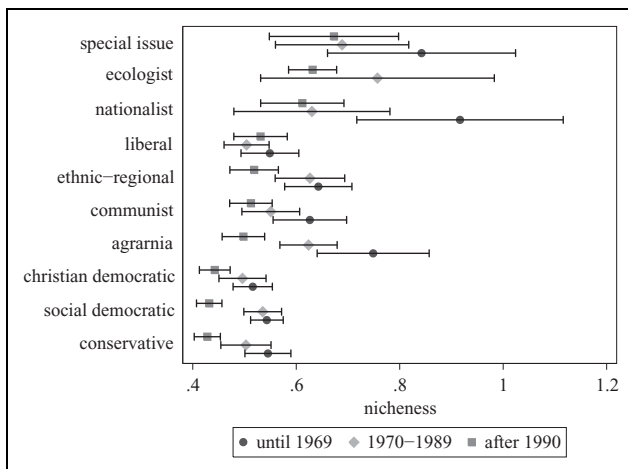
**Figure 3.** Nicheness across time periods.
Source: Author's own.
Note: Markers are the mean values and caps show the 90% confidence intervals.

First, it becomes visible that all party families have lowered their nicheness score across time, only liberal parties appear to have become more "niche" in the last decades. The case of agrarian parties is particularly striking and reinforces arguments of existing studies on their development (Arter, 1999; Christensen, 1997). While agrarian parties were comparably active on niche segments such as the nationalist and special-issue parties until the 1970s, they then remarkably changed their emphasis and their competitors might have adapted to some of their issue appeals. Nowadays they appear to be very close to parties traditionally perceived as mainstream, such as the conservatives, the social and the Christian democrats today. Thus, agrarian parties represent a case in point for a time-varying niche party measurement. It might be particularly interesting to investigate their changes across time to understand when and why parties rely upon a niche strategy.

Second, party families which are largely regarded as niche appear to be more heterogeneous in their nicheness across time and countries than current studies admit, while their mainstream competitors are fairly homogenous groups. This once more pertains also to communist parties. Like ethnic-regional parties they have always been somewhat locked up between their mainstream and niche competitors. In summary, there are three clusters of parties: the traditional mainstreamers (conservative, Christian and social democrats), the niche tenderers (special-issue,
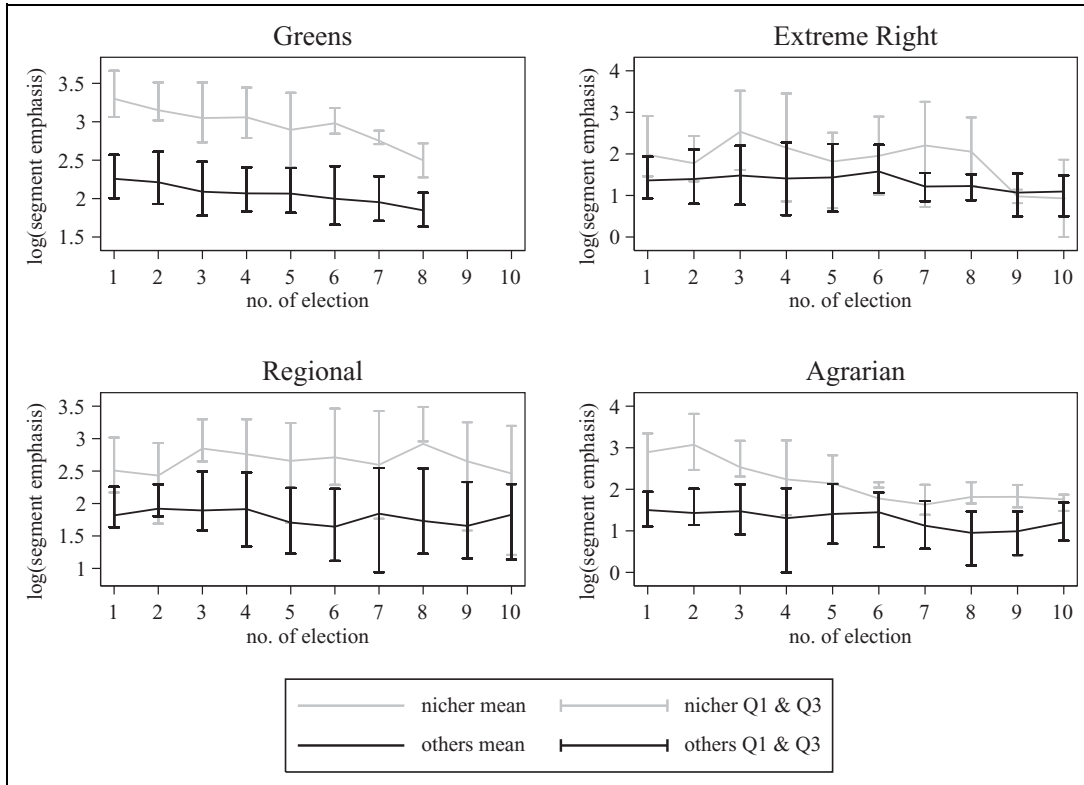
Figure 4. The first mover advantage.
Source: Author's own.
Note: First ten elections included. Markers are the mean values and caps show the first and third quartile.

ecologist and nationalist) and the undecided ones (liberal, ethnic-regional, communist and agrarians).

5.1 The first mover advantage

As the last section showed parties considerably change their nicheness across time and some parties might have forfeit their nicheness advantage by unexpected competitors on their segment. Figure 5 displays the mean of each segment split by the relevant niche party and its competitors across the number of elections the relevant niche party family was competing in.

Thus, a "1" on the x-axis indicates that the respective niche party family participated in an election for the first time across all countries. Interestingly for all four segments niche parties' competitors remained fairly constant in their emphasis on niche segments. Only in the case of the regional segment they increased the salience of the segment across time.

As the upper left graph in Figure 5 shows green parties enjoyed the luxury to be able to lower their emphasis on their ecological segment through time while being able to keep an advantage on their segment. Thus, it seems that the entry barrier for the ecological segment is particularly high,

since on average all competitors lower the emphasis on the ecological segment as time passes. This again underpins results of existing research showing that green parties are largely regarded as issue owners of the environment. Hence, mainstream parties are likely trying to de-emphasizes environmental issues in order to not enhance green parties' electoral fortunes (Abou-Chadi, 2014).

On the other hand, ever since their infancies extreme right parties have been facing strong competition on their segment. In several instances their competitors emphasize the nationalist segment almost as much as the nationalists do. This appears partly to be the case due to the nationalist segment never being absent from their competitors' agendas. Nationalist parties already faced considerable competition on their segment, while green parties used especially the "open" issue of nuclear energy to demarcate themselves from their competitors.

Again the agrarian parties appear to be a case in point. For the first three elections there seems to be a strong entry barrier for their rivals. However, this barrier then continuously shrinks until it completely disappears. Over time agrarian parties lower their issue emphasis on their segment, while aiming to compete on other segments (Arter, 1999). For example, the "True Finns" are nowadays mainly competing

on the nationalist segment (Arter, 2013). Most agrarian parties lost some of their rural voters and thus were forced to change their issue emphasis in order to not end-up being voterless and meaningless (Christensen, 1997).

In summary, it becomes visible that there is a sort of first mover advantage for party families associated with being niche on niche segments. However, this advantage might shrink or even disappear through time. More research is necessary to understand the reasons standing behind this mechanism. As the case of the agrarian parties shows one simple reason might be the diminishment of constituencies. Yet, it might also be that parties' office-seeking incentives, e.g. the green party in Germany, results in them lowering their nicheness appeals in order to attract a wider part of the electorate. Clearly the mechanisms of issue entry barriers and market advantages has so far been understudied in relation to niche parties. The literature mostly disregards niche parties' policy-, office- or vote-seeking goals and instead focusses on mainstream parties' reactions to the potential threat niche issues impose (Abou-Chadi, 2014; Meguid, 2005, 2007; Spoon et al., 2014; van de Wardt, 2014). The proposed nicheness measurement, thus, embodies the potential to step beyond such one-sided understanding of party competition on niche segments by measuring parties' nicheness by not only the issues they compete on but also how condensed their policy messages are.

6 Conclusion

The debate on the impact of niche parties' behavior is underway (Adams et al., 2006; Ezrow, 2010; Jensen and Spoon, 2010; Meguid, 2005, 2007), while researchers are still searching for concepts to clarify the defining criteria of these (Meyer and Miller, 2013; Wagner, 2012a). This paper aimed to contribute to the debate how to define and measure niche parties. In drawing on marketing literature (Butler and Collins, 1996; Porter, 2004), I defined nicheness as a strategy which results in parties: (a) predominantly competing on niche market segments neglected by their competitors and (b) not discussing a broad range of these segments.

I proposed to combine the arguments put forward by Meguid (2005, 2007), Wagner (2012a) and Meyer and Miller (2013) in constructing market segment dimensions which reflect on the original issue appeals scholars allocate to niche party families, I calculated a two-dimensional nicheness measure capturing (a) how much parties compete on niche segments and (b) how narrow their offer on these segments is. The validation section revealed that parties do not only distinguish themselves from each other by the issues they offer, but also by the narrowness of their offer. Thus, in earlier studies some party families might have been associated with being a niche party because of their specialization on niche segments and not because of the issues they offer in their manifestos. Furthermore, it

appears that some party families have felt stronger incentives to diverge from their roots (agrarian and ethnic-regional parties), while others have stayed true to their original niche issue appeals (nationalist, green and special-issue parties).

In particular the second component of niche parties' strategies, namely to present a narrow offer, has been understudied by previous research on niche parties. Yet, the last section revealed that it might especially be the strategy of specialization which secures the electoral survival of niche parties by granting them a first mover advantage in their infancies. Thus, more research should be undertaken to understand when parties narrow their electoral offer on niche segments and why they do so. The two dimensions of my proposed measurement appear to be well suited to be up to this task. Applied research could first question when parties rely on an overall nicheness strategy and in a second step disentangle which consequences both dimensions have for the electoral survival and behavior of parties.

Appendix: Shannon's entropy

$$SEs = -\sum_{i=1}^{5} x_{ip} ln(x_{ip}) = -\sum_{i=1}^{5} ln(x_{ip}^{x_{ip}}) = -ln \prod_{i=1}^{5} (x_{ip}^{x_{ip}})$$

$$= (-1)ln \prod_{i=1}^{5} (x_{ip}^{x_{ip}}) = ln \left(\prod_{i=1}^{5} (x_{ip}^{x_{ip}}) \right)^{-1} = ln \left(\frac{1}{\prod_{i=1}^{5} x_{ip}^{x_{ip}}} \right)$$
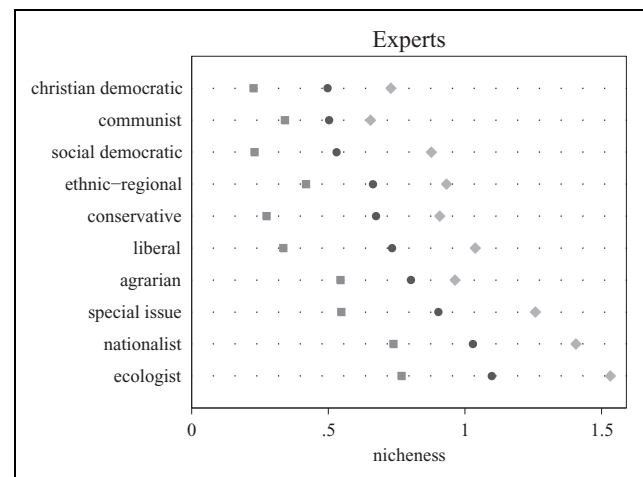

Figure 5. Niche party concepts drawn from experts surveys (Benoit and Laver, 2006).
Source: Author's own.
Note: Plotted are the means (dot), the first (square) and third quartiles (diamond).

Table 4. Nicheness, min max mean.

parfam	N	mean	sd	min	Max
Ecologist	76	0.65	0.21	0.29	1.21
Communist	199	0.56	0.23	0.08	1.55
Social democratic	510	0.51	0.22	0.11	1.58
Liberal	303	0.53	0.26	0.03	1.54
Christian democratic	255	0.49	0.18	0.18	1.62
Conservative	332	0.50	0.23	0.11	1.67
Nationalist	67	0.70	0.32	0.15	1.67
Agrarian	112	0.64	0.26	0.18	1.62
Ethnic-regional	75	0.58	0.15	0.33	0.97
Special-issue	72	0.72	0.34	0.29	2.00
Total	2001	0.54	0.24	0.03	2.00

Source: Author's own.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Source: *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English.*
2. Note that Meguid (2005: 352) selected mainstream parties according to their left–right position: "Mainstream parties from the 17 countries were initially chosen according to their position on the Left–Right axis. Drawing on the party classification structure proposed by Castles and Mair (1984: 83), mainstream parties of the center-left, or 'Moderate Left,' were defined as those parties with scores of 1.25 to 3.75 on a scale of 0 to 10. Mainstream parties of the center-right, Castles and Mair's 'Moderate Right' parties, were those parties with positions of 6.25 to 8.75."
3. While Meyer and Miller (2013) do not share this assumption, a party can be a niche an all of their 11 dimensions, they still rely on the 11 dimensions defined by Bäck et al. (2011).
4. I owe the ice-tea example to Professor Katz. It is truly more suitable than my initial Pepsi/Coca-Cola idea.
5. Lasting in the sense that a topic is constantly debated issue and not just a short-term change of issue appeals.
6. Other issues might fulfill these criteria also in the future, e.g. issues regarding the internet and copyrights in the case of pirate parties. However, as the MARPOR data stands, current codes do not cover pirate parties' original issue appeals.
7. In previous versions of the paper exhaustive party family segments had been created, reflecting on all party families issue appeals. Yet, they came with the flaw that several issues needed to be allocated to certain party families rather *ad hoc* than theory driven, especially economic issues. Furthermore, I agree with previous research that niche parties should be thought of as not preliminary competing on economic issues, but a set of non-economic issues (Wagner, 2012a: 847–848). Furthermore, the results of this exhaustive approach were in general comparable to the results presented in the analysis section in this paper. Yet, with nationalist parties scoring slightly lower in their nicheness than in the results presented here. Since MARPOR codes are outlining percentage points of all sentences used in a manifesto, the other dimensions are still present as the remaining percentage points not considered in my measurement. For example, a green party focusing 25 % of its manifesto on the ecological dimension, necessarily uses the remaining 75 % on non-niche issues in case the other four niche issues are not present in its manifesto.
8. To measure niche parties it is important to understand the competitive advantages parties try to achieve on issue dimensions relevant for parties belonging to families associated with the niche party category. Issues at the core of party competition, such as any economic issue, welfare policy, freedom and democracy, might be more or less debated in manifestos and parties might be perceived as being competent on some of these issues, but these issues are not understood as being of prime importance to measure niche parties here.
9. Effectively most of the communist platforms coded within the MAROR project underpin this argument. They have a rather economically driven platform (mean emphasis 20 %) comparable with social democratic platforms.
10. Per410 is included based on arguments put forward by Lowe et al. (2011) stating that Per410 should be interpreted as the potential reaction of mainstream parties to green parties' environmental emphasis.
11. The measurement has also been reproduced with experts surveys and reveals comparable results as Figure 1 shows (syntax and results are available upon request). However, the expert surveys do not contain a dimension for the agrarian segment in all countries. Furthermore, they are limited in scope and time and thus manifesto data appears to be more suitable for the purpose here.
12. The timeframe depends on countries and election years.

13. Since such a lag method always results in the loss of the very first data point, the entry election year of every party has been used for the first election year and not an average across two points in time.

14. Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom and the United States.

15. Other scholars might be more restrictive in their design and use a multiplicative index, which results in a party receiving zero nicheness in case one of the two dimensions is zero.

16. To be precise, since the classical Shannon entropy is undefined for any zero value, a transposition of the Shannon entropy is used. The mathematics behind the transposition can be found in the appendix. With this transformation I assure that only platforms which do not talk about any of the five niche segments are missing values. This is only the case in six instances out of 2002.

17. There are only six party–year combinations included in the data which do not emphasize any of the five segments.

18. For this purpose both measurements, $\bar{m}_p$ and s_p, have been standardized to run from 0 to 1 in order to assure that both components receive the same weight in the final measurement. Scholars might reject this equality of the two components. However, for the purposes of this paper it seems appropriate to not complicated things even more. Furthermore, the two dimensions can be easily assigned weights in line with potential theoretical arguments about why which component should count more than the other.

19. The data analysis relies upon the "parfam" variable coming with the MARPOR data. Yet, the MARPOR codebook defines families as "tentative grouping[s] of political parties and alliances". Thus, several parties are coded as belonging to "special interest" category, while other researchers would place these parties into different party families, mostly into the radical right/nationalist category. The following parties have been reassigned by the author, based on arguments put forward by previous research on these parties: Vlaams Bloc in Belgium is now "nationalist"; The Animal Party in Netherlands is now "special interest"; Schweizer Volkspartei in Switzerland is now "nationalist"; FPÖ in Austria is now "nationalist"; List Di Pietro in Italy is now "special interest"; Lega Nord in Italy is now "regional"; Liberal Party in Canada and Switzerland is now "liberal".

20. A detailed table of the distributions can also be found in Table 4.

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