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978-0-521-88765-6 - Party Competition between Unequals: Strategies and Electoral Fortunes in Western Europe

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Excerpt

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I

The Niche Party Phenomenon

Running under the slogan “defend the French,” a new political party known as the Front National (FN) first fielded candidates in the 1973 French national legislative elections.¹ Over the next three decades, the FN, fearful of the contamination and erosion of the French national identity, advocated a ban on further immigration and called for the (forced) repatriation of immigrants and the restoration of traditional French family values. Initially, the FN’s promotion of this new set of issues was met with little electoral enthusiasm; in its first decade of existence, the party received less than 1 percent of the national vote per legislative election. Its charismatic leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, also fared poorly, capturing a mere 0.7 percent in the 1974 presidential election.

Although political observers and scholars at the time discounted the prospects of this minor party – especially in an electoral environment thought to disadvantage nonmainstream parties – the FN emerged as one of the strongest radical right parties in Western Europe by 2000.² Even though large-scale immigration to France had been banned officially since 1974 and the percentage of foreign citizens had been stabilizing and even falling, the anti-immigrant FN won an average of more than 9 percent of the vote across national legislative elections in the 1980s and 1990s and ended the millennium with a peak vote of 14.9 percent in 1997. Once on the margins of the French political scene, the Front National would surpass the Communist Party to become the number three party in France.

Just as the French radical right party was flourishing under inauspicious institutional and sociological conditions, other parties were struggling under supposedly propitious ones. The Swedish Ecology Party (Miljöpartiet) first contested national elections in 1981, calling for the elimination of Sweden’s nuclear power plants and the reduction of environmental pollution.³ Despite the fact that

¹ Front National, *Défendre les Français*, 1973, cited in Mayer and Sineau 2002: 71.

² As will be discussed later in this chapter, France’s restrictive two-ballot plurality electoral system is thought to discourage voting for smaller parties.

³ In 1985, the party would rename itself Miljöpartiet de Gröna.

Sweden had electoral and socio-economic conditions thought to benefit small parties, and environmental parties in particular, the Ecology Party captured a mere 1.7 percent of the vote in that first election.⁴ Its vote share would increase to 5.5 percent in 1988, but this lifetime peak vote was hardly consistent with the strong environmental priorities of the Swedish electorate. In a poll taken in 1988, “53% of respondents believed that a sound environmental policy was more important than whether one or [an]other of the main party groups achieved power.”⁵ The Ecology Party, however, would never gain the support of half of the electorate; indeed, it would not surpass the 5 percent mark in any of the next three elections. Contrary to scholarly expectations, permissive institutional and socio-economic environments matched with strong Swedish environmentalist demands failed to produce a strong green party.

Across Western European political landscapes over the past thirty years, stories of new party successes and failures abound. Green parties have succeeded electorally in Belgium but failed in Italy. Radical right parties have done well in Denmark but struggled in Sweden. Ethnoterritorial parties have captured significant percentages of the vote in Flanders and Scotland but fared less well in Brittany and Ticino. And these disparities are not limited to cross-country cases, as the strength of the German Greens and the weakness of their radical right compatriots, the Republikaner and Deutsche Volksunion (DVU), illustrate. Why have some parties flourished while others have floundered? In other words, what determines variation in the electoral success of niche (green, radical right, and ethnoterritorial) parties?

These questions have typically been answered with institutional and sociological explanations. Scholars have looked to a country’s electoral rules and state structure or its levels of postmaterialism, unemployment, and immigrants to account for party success and failure. Yet, although popular, these explanations are insufficient. Static institutions cannot account for variation in a party’s support over time. And, as suggested by the “surprising” but not unusual cases of the French FN’s success and the electoral stagnation of the Swedish Miljöpartiet, neither institutional nor sociological conditions are determinative of new parties’ vote share.

By emphasizing the context in which party competition takes place, the existing literature has curiously downplayed the behavior of the competitors. This book brings parties back into the analysis of party success. It demonstrates the critical role that the most powerful set of party actors – mainstream parties of the center-left and center-right – plays in shaping the competitiveness of new political dimensions and the electoral fortunes of the niche parties competing on them. Recognizing that mainstream parties have access to a greater range of strategies

⁴ Sweden’s Sainte-Laguë electoral system is considered favorable to minor parties. Moreover, Sweden had low levels of unemployment and high rates of postmaterialism, factors that sociological theories posit encourage green party support.

⁵ Poll conducted by Research Group for Social and Informational Studies, cited in O’Neill 1997: 397.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88765-6 - Party Competition between Unequals: Strategies and Electoral Fortunes in Western Europe

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Niche Party Phenomenon*

3

than previously outlined by the strategic literature, I explain how and why niche parties became (or were made into) electoral superstars under often inhospitable institutional and sociological circumstances and minor electoral figures under supposedly favorable ones. In doing so, this book not only sheds light on the nature of competition between these fundamentally different and unequal sets of parties, but its comparative analysis of mainstream party strategies and niche party fortunes also provides insights into the character of competition between mainstream political equals, the survival of mainstream party actors, and the longevity of the party system.

THE NICHE PARTY PHENOMENON

Since 1960, countries from Western Europe and North America to Australasia and Latin America have experienced an explosion in the number of new parties. In Western Europe alone, that number has exceeded 250. This rapid multiplication of the number of political options exacerbated an already tumultuous political environment; in many of these countries, class cleavages were weakening (Franklin et al. 1992; Inglehart 1997; Särlvik and Crewe 1983), and voter loyalty was declining (Dalton 2000). Traditional bases of party support were called into question, and voter volatility was on the rise.⁶ The flood of new parties thus further increased the competitiveness of these unstable political arenas.⁷ In some countries, these new parties even caused a sea change in the identity of the governments and the nature of the political systems.

Along with exacerbating these system-level changes, what is remarkable about this wave of new parties is the presence of a set of political actors quite unlike those seen before. Although many of the new political organizations are variants of the existing socialist, liberal, and conservative parties, the new group of parties includes green, radical right, and ethnoterritorial parties. While these actors, which I call *niche parties*, have typically been studied individually in the literature, they share three characteristics that differentiate them from both their fellow neophytes and mainstream parties.

First, niche parties reject the traditional class-based orientation of politics. Instead of prioritizing economic demands, these parties politicize sets of issues that were previously outside the dimensions of party competition. Ethnoterritorial parties, for example, entered political arenas in the 1960s and 1970s to promote regional and ethnic identities over class ones. Green parties followed on their heels in the 1970s, echoing their calls for locally oriented action but

⁶ As recorded by Anderson (1998: 579), Bartolini and Mair (1990: Appendix), Pedersen (1979: 202), and others, voter volatility rates across Western Europe increased between the 1960s and the mid-1990s. These increases in the net electoral shifts between political parties were accompanied by, and often thought to be a result of, a decline in voter partisanship and a weakening of social cleavages.

⁷ Not only did the new parties increase the number of political options available to the voters, but in many countries, they also attracted significant voter support. This is one reason for the increase in the effective number of parties seen in all advanced industrial democracies, except the Netherlands, since World War II (Dalton et al. 2000: 43).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

placing the emphasis on the underdiscussed issues of environmental protection, nuclear disarmament, and the elimination of nuclear power. The most recent wave of new political actors, the parties of the radical right, prioritizes (patriarchal) family values and the protection of a nationally oriented, immigrant-free way of life. Despite differences in the substance of their demands, these parties similarly challenge the economic content of the political debate.

Second, the issues raised by the niche parties are not only novel, but they also often do not coincide with the existing, “left-right” lines of political division. Niche parties appeal to groups of voters that may crosscut – and undermine – traditional patterns of partisan alignment.⁸ And with the class-based political cleavages already beginning to weaken by the period of niche party emergence, the niche parties’ issue appeals resulted in the creation of new types of political coalition. Where niche parties compete, cases of voter defection between “unlikely” party pairs have occurred. The defection of former British Conservative voters to the Green Party in 1989 and former French Communist Party voters to the radical right Front National in 1986 are typical examples.

Third, niche parties further differentiate themselves by limiting their issue appeals. They eschew the comprehensive policy platforms common to their mainstream party peers, instead adopting positions on and prioritizing only a restricted set of issues. Even as the number of issues covered in their manifestos has increased over the parties’ lifetimes, they have still been perceived largely as single-issue parties by the voters and other parties. While this image is a simplification of reality, research has shown – and the case studies in this book will reveal – that each of these parties is best known for one issue (Lubbers et al. 2002: 350),⁹ and that those voting for niche parties share few policy preferences besides those on the niche party’s single issue (Ivarsflaten 2005).¹⁰ Unable to benefit from pre-existing partisan allegiances or the broad allure of comprehensive ideological positions, niche parties rely heavily on the salience and attractiveness of their one policy stance for voter support.

The countries and political systems of Western Europe have been most profoundly affected by this phenomenon. Over the past forty years, approximately 110 niche parties have contested national elections in eighteen countries in Western Europe.¹¹ This group has included women’s, peace, environmental, ethnoterritorial, and radical right parties, with the last three being the most common types. As shown in Table 1.1, no country has been spared from the niche party

⁸ Even though the introduction of a new issue axis does not necessarily result in the reorganization of party competition around that dimension, the electoral participation of the niche parties did lead to an increase in public awareness of, and eventually electoral support for, their issues.

⁹ This point is highlighted by Lubbers et al. (2002: 350) in their analysis of radical right parties: “If there is one issue with which the extreme right wing has made itself heard, it has been a restrictive position towards immigration.”

¹⁰ Not all scholars of new parties share this perspective, as evidenced by Mudde (1999) and Kitschelt (1994, 1995).

¹¹ These countries are Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Niche Party Phenomenon*

5

TABLE I.1. *Niche Parties in Western European Countries, 1960–2000*

Country	Number of Niche Parties	Number with Peak National Vote Greater than 5 Percent	Number with Seat in National Legislature
Austria	4	2	2
Belgium	12	6	8
Denmark	5	1	3
Finland	4	2	3
France	6	1	2
Germany	7	1	1
Greece	6	0	3
Iceland	3	2	3
Ireland	1	0	1
Italy	20	3	10
Luxembourg	5	2	3
Netherlands	4	1	3
Norway	3	1	2
Portugal	2	0	1
Spain	14	1	13
Sweden	2	2	2
Switzerland	8	2	8
United Kingdom ^a	6	0	2

^a The information on U.K. niche parties in this table, as in the rest of the book, does not include Northern Ireland.

Sources: Binghamton Election Results Archive; Mackie and Rose (1991, 1997); Mair (1999).

phenomenon. The number of parties competing in national-level elections has varied, however, from a single example in Ireland to twenty in Italy (Mackie and Rose 1991, 1997).¹² Given that some parties participate only in local and municipal elections, the actual number of niche parties to form is probably much higher. Niche party electoral success has also varied, with 24 percent achieving a peak national vote of over 5 percent and 63 percent holding a seat in a national legislature. This electoral success is not concentrated in a few countries; fourteen countries have had at least one niche party surpass the 5 percent threshold, and all eighteen have had at least one niche party officeholder.¹³

The influence of niche parties is not limited to vote and seat percentages. These parties have shaped the nature of governments and the electoral fortunes of other parties. Almost 12 percent of niche parties have participated in coalition governments, and the participation of over half of those parties was pivotal to the formation of majority governments (Woldendorp, Keman, and Budge 1998). Even in those cases where niche parties have not gained many or any seats, their electoral strength has influenced the vote level of others. The role of the

¹² These numbers are based on those parties reported in a country's official election statistics.

¹³ The four countries lacking a niche party with a peak national vote greater than 5 percent are Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and the United Kingdom.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

French FN in the legislative victory of the Socialist Party (and the defeat of the Gaullists) in 1997 is just one of many similar examples. Less dramatic but more pervasive, the niche parties' introduction of new issues has changed the content of the political debate and altered the careers of mainstream parties. For instance, the environment and immigration have become standard campaign topics in most Western European countries, topics that the mainstream parties continue to address even in cases where the niche parties that introduced them have disappeared.

STANDARD RESPONSES TO VARIATION IN NEW PARTY ELECTORAL SUCCESS AND THEIR LIMITATIONS

Variation in niche party electoral and legislative strength across Western Europe presents us with a puzzle. Why have some niche parties gained more electoral support than others? Moreover, what determines the timing of the peaks and troughs in the electoral trajectories of these noneconomic, single-issue parties? Although there is no scholarship on the electoral success and failure of niche parties as a *category* of party actors per se, a significant literature has developed to account for the electoral fortunes of parties in general and specific types of niche party (e.g., green, radical right, or ethnoterritorial) in particular. This work focuses on two sets of factors: institutional and sociological conditions.

Institutional Approaches

Based on their role in shaping the political and electoral environment in which a party competes, institutions have earned a prominent place in theories of party systems and individual party success. They provide incentives – opportunities and costs – that are thought to influence voter and elite behavior and, consequently, party support. Proponents of this approach have concentrated mainly on the effect of electoral rules and, to a lesser extent, state structure and governmental type.

Consistent with the work of Duverger (1954), Lijphart (1994), Ordeshook and Shvetsova (1994), and Cox (1997), scholars of green and radical right parties have posited a connection between electoral systems and party success. Applying the logic of Duverger's Law and Hypothesis for party systems to the fortunes of individual parties, Müller-Rommel (1989), Jackman and Volpert (1996), and Golder (2003b) argue that the number of votes received by single-issue parties is positively related to the permissiveness of the electoral rules.¹⁴ Plurality electoral rules reduce the likelihood of third parties obtaining office, thus providing disincentives for voters to support, and elites to serve as candidates for, those minor parties. Proportional representation (PR) rules, conversely, increase the

¹⁴ Duverger's Law states, "The simple-majority, single-ballot [i.e., simple plurality rule] system favors the two party system" (Duverger 1954: 217). His more tentative Hypothesis reads as follows: "the simple-majority system with second ballot and proportional representation favor multipartism" (*Ibid.*, 239).

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Bonnie M. Meguid

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Niche Party Phenomenon*

7

likelihood of minor party seat attainment and, thus, provide incentives for sincere minor party voting. Consequently, green and radical right parties are expected to receive lower vote shares in systems with low district magnitudes and high electoral thresholds and, conversely, higher vote shares in systems with high district magnitudes and low electoral thresholds.¹⁵

An oft-overlooked exception to Duverger's Law has led to different expectations about the relationship between electoral rules and ethnoterritorial party support. Rae (1971: 95) notes that a two-party system should not emerge "where strong local minorities exist."¹⁶ Sartori (1986: 59) further explains this anomaly:

Conversely, a two-party format is *impossible* – under whatever electoral system – if racial, linguistic, ideologically alienated, single-issue, or otherwise incoercible minorities (which cannot be represented by two major mass parties) are concentrated in above-plurality proportions in particular constituencies or geographic pockets. If so, the effect of a plurality system will only be reductive vis-à-vis the third parties which do not represent incoercible minorities.

Thus, while most parties are expected to prosper only under permissive electoral systems, this correction suggests that those single-issue parties representing regionally concentrated groups are likely to flourish under more restrictive plurality rules. De Winter (1998: 219) consequently hypothesizes that ethnoterritorial parties gain greater shares of the vote under plurality than PR systems.

Although it is less common, institutional accounts have also considered other system features, such as state structure (unitary vs. federal states) and governmental type (presidentialism vs. parliamentarism), in their explanations of new party fortunes. Harmel and Robertson (1985) and Willey (1998: 93) argue that federal systems are more conducive to minor party success than unitary ones. Their logic is as follows: under federal systems – where governmental power is shared between multiple levels (i.e., local, regional, and national) – there are more elected offices and consequently more opportunities for minor parties to obtain office. The multiplication of representative offices also increases the familiarity of those elected parties with governance, thereby increasing the quality of their candidates. Furthermore, it allows new competitors, such as niche parties, to build up their bases of electoral support and, with that support, their credibility before tackling a national-level seat (Willey 1998: 57). In unitary states, on the other hand, party competition is restricted to the national-level arena, where minor parties do not necessarily have the reputation and degree of grassroots support needed to succeed.

Approaching this question from the study of party system formation, Chhibber and Kollman (2004) similarly expect a positive relationship between federalism and party support, but for different reasons and only for regionally oriented parties. They argue that where political and fiscal authority rests with subnational

¹⁵ In contrast to the others, Müller-Rommel (1989) more closely follows Duverger's original dichotomization of electoral systems and focuses on the broad distinction between plurality and PR systems.

¹⁶ A similar argument is made in Riker (1982b: 760).

governments, as is the case in a decentralizing or federal system, there are fewer incentives for parties to coordinate or aggregate across districts and regions to win national office.¹⁷ The result is the emergence of regional party systems and stronger regional parties than in unitary states.¹⁸

These positive predictions are challenged by scholars of ethnoterritorial parties. According to Levi and Hechter (1985), ethnoterritorial parties, like all niche parties, can benefit from the increased political opportunities and patronage available in a federal or highly decentralized system. They note, however, that because decentralization is a policy goal of ethnoterritorial party actors, the implementation of federalism should appease ethnoterritorial party voters, leading them to abandon the niche party. Jolly (2006) likewise believes in the appeasement effect of decentralization on ethnoterritorial parties, but he argues that a curvilinear relationship exists. Voter mobilization and support for regionalist parties will be lowest, he posits, at middling levels of decentralization, where demands for some regional autonomy have effectively been met. A lack of decentralization and extensive decentralization both will spur voter support for ethnoterritorial parties.

The case for the influence of governmental type on party success is the least well developed or examined in the new party literature. However, the basic argument evident in Shugart and Carey (1992), Lijphart (1994), and Cox (1997) and applied specifically to the question of new party vote in Willey (1998: 58, 94) is that presidentialism depresses support for minor parties in legislative elections because voters do not want to support a candidate whose party is perceived to have no reasonable chance of winning the presidency. This suggests that niche party vote should be higher in parliamentary systems where (1) there are no winner-take-all executive elections and (2) the frequency of coalitions increases the likelihood of niche party politicians' being in government.

Inconsistent Findings. The literature on green, radical right, and, to a lesser extent, ethnoterritorial parties has explored (some of) these general relationships, with conflicting conclusions. In analyses of radical right party vote in Western Europe, Jackman and Volpert (1996), Golder (2003a, 2003b), and Swank and Betz (2003) find that party vote is significantly and positively correlated with the permissiveness of the electoral rules.¹⁹ Similar patterns in the success of green parties come out of the more descriptive work by Müller-Rommel (1989) and

¹⁷ Unlike most institutional accounts, Chhibber and Kollman (2004) argue that the actual implementation of an institutional change is not necessary for its effects to be felt; a credible commitment by a government to adopt federalism or to decentralize is all that is necessary for a regional party's vote to increase.

¹⁸ Their prediction applies to all regionalist parties, including but not limited to ethnoterritorial parties. Regional versions of green or radical right parties in decentralizing or federal systems should also be included in this group of parties.

¹⁹ These three studies employ different measures of electoral systems in their statistical analyses. Golder (2003a) argues, however, that Jackman and Volpert (1996) would find little evidence that lower electoral thresholds are positively related to the electoral success of radical right parties if they took conditional standard errors into account.

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Bonnie M. Meguid

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Niche Party Phenomenon*

9

Taggart (1996). Regarding ethnoterritorial parties, case study analyses by De Winter (1998: 219) find the reverse relationship; as predicted by Rae's correction to Duverger's Law, regionalist actors perform better under plurality than PR rules.

Yet, the existence of causal relationships between institutions and party vote share are challenged by others. Carter's (2005) examination of radical right party support in Western Europe finds little support for these claims; she concludes that neither the effective electoral threshold nor the disproportionality index of an electoral system has any significant effect on the support of these parties. Swank and Betz arrive at similar conclusions in their 1995 and 1996 studies of radical right party support when they test the effect of electoral thresholds and an ordinal measure of proportionality on the vote share of radical right parties. Kitschelt (1989: 25) downplays the centrality of electoral institutions to the success of left-libertarian parties (including green parties):

The correlation between voting systems and left-libertarian parties is not very neat, since at least five countries with proportional representation do not have significant left-libertarian parties . . . although plurality rules do create an impediment to left-libertarian parties, this factor should not be overemphasized.

The limited statistical examination of ethnoterritorial party vote (see Pereira, Villodres, and Nieto 2003) also offers little support for the consistent and determinative role of electoral institutions.²⁰

The few analyses that explore the relationship between vote and state structure also provide mixed support for the institutionalist claims.²¹ Whereas Jolly (2006) discovers a nonlinear relationship between decentralization and ethnoterritorial party vote, Chhibber and Kollman (2004) find support for a somewhat contradictory claim that regional parties in Canada, Britain (including the Scottish National Party [SNP] in Scotland), India, and the United States receive more support in times of decentralization – both periods of middling and full-fledged federalism – than in times of centralization. Harmel and Robertson (1985) conclude that federalism plays no appreciable role in explaining new party success in general in Western Europe, Canada, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia. And Willey's (1998) analysis of new party cases in Western Europe reveals that federalism, contrary to expectation, actually *decreases* new party support.²² To my knowledge, no study examines the effect of government type on green, radical right, or ethnoterritorial party vote share in Western Europe.

Accompanying the empirical ambiguities evident in these analyses are the theoretical limitations of institutional approaches for explaining niche party fortunes.

²⁰ The negative relationship between proportional systems and ethnoterritorial party vote that Pereira, Villodres, and Nieto (2003) find in bivariate analysis disappears when they examine specific aspects of these electoral systems in multivariate analysis.

²¹ Being a theoretical piece, the Levi and Hechter (1985) chapter does not test this hypothesis.

²² Unlike the other scholars, Willey (1998) measures new party support as seat percentage in the national legislature. This discrepancy must be taken into consideration when weighing his unexpected findings.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

As some of the empirical analyses demonstrate, differences in electoral rules and possibly in the degree of state centralization may help to explain the poor performance of a green, radical right, or ethnoterritorial party in one country and the strong performance of its counterpart in another. However, these institutions are unable to account for two key dimensions of the niche party story: variation in electoral success across a party's lifetime and variation in the electoral success across parties in one country. As largely static factors, these institutions cannot explain why, for example, voter support for the Swedish green party changed over time, or why support for the radical right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) was higher than for its green party compatriots.

There are, of course, exceptions to the fixed nature of institutions; electoral rules or state structure do change – or rather, are changed. In France, the two-ballot plurality system was replaced by PR for the 1986 legislative elections, an institutional change that played a role in the sharp increase in the radical right Front National's vote in that election. Yet, while the changeability of these factors may overcome the aforementioned shortcoming in some cases, this mutability serves to highlight another limitation of the institutional approach. Namely, institutions are not as exogenous to electoral competition as generally portrayed by this literature (e.g., Chhibber and Kollman 2004; Cox 1997; Lijphart 1994; Samuels 2002).²³ Rather, they are chosen by parties and governments over other options for specific purposes. They are neither neutral nor independent of the process.²⁴ As this book argues, institutions are part of a party's strategic repertoire. To the extent that institutions alter or are designed to alter niche party support, they cannot be separated from strategic theories of party fortune.

Sociological Approaches

Whereas institutional arguments view party support as a function of the independent structure of the electoral and political system, a second set of theories, which I term *sociological theories*, locate the determinants of party success in the salience of the party's issue(s). This approach has been widely used in the research on green, radical right, and ethnoterritorial parties, often in conjunction with institutional factors. According to these theories, the vote share received by a green, radical right, or ethnoterritorial party depends on the resonance of its issue position with a particular electorate, where voter receptivity is a direct product of the objective cultural and socio-economic conditions of a society and its population.

²³ Although there is a recent literature exploring why electoral institutions are adopted (e.g., Andrews and Jackman 2005; Benoit 2004; Boix 1998), its insights about institutional endogeneity have not yet been incorporated into the work on new party fortunes. Earlier work by Levi and Hechter (1985) on the emergence and success of ethnoterritorial parties did consider how the state (and its government) could use decentralization schemes to alter the electoral support of these regionalist niche parties. Some of their insights on the use of institutions as policy appeasement strategies inform the model of competition between unequals discussed in this book.

²⁴ I borrow this language of institutional nonneutrality from Huber (1996: 1).