

# Dimensional issue competition on migration: a comparative analysis of public debates in Western Europe

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**Abstract** Considering the case of migration, the paper develops a dimensional framework for the analysis of the politicization of complex issues in public debates. It argues that since cross-sectoral issues are multidimensional in nature, public debates about them are best understood in terms of selective emphasis over their constitutive dimensions. Theoretically, the paper combines structural and strategic approaches to explain selective emphasis in public debates on migration. Empirically, it examines seven West European countries from 1995 to 2009 based on claims-making data collected by the Support and Opposition to Migration project team. Focusing on both actor-level and political opportunity determinants of the salience of issue dimensions, the analysis examines the varying importance attributed to four constitutive dimensions of the immigration issue, corresponding to socio-economic, cultural and religious, security and civic aspects. The findings confirm that the composition of public debates on complex issues is not restricted to one single understanding, but changes depending on the actors involved in the debate and on contextual circumstances defining their involvement. As such, this research has profound implications for the scholarly understanding of issue competition and agenda-setting processes.

**Keywords** Issue competition · Agenda setting · Migration · Public debates · Political parties

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## Introduction

Extant issue competition literature defines political issues in at least three different ways (Guinaudeau and Persico 2014, p. 314): as cross-sectoral themes (e.g., welfare, international relations), as policy sectors (e.g., health, education), and as targeted policy problems (e.g., bank regulations, abortion). On the one hand, there seems to be persistent disagreement on the ‘inclusiveness’ of issues, especially when these are cross-cutting and multi-sectoral in nature, such as immigration, European integration, or the environment (Carter et al. 2017). On the other hand, most scholarship seems to disregard issue dimensionality, and that “every public policy of substance is inherently multidimensional, but official consideration (and public understanding) of the issue at any given time typically is only partial” (Baumgartner and Jones 2002, p. 47). This lack of conceptual precision prevents issue competition scholarship from engaging with other areas of the social sciences such as political communication or social movement studies, which are often concerned with related processes, but tend to use much narrower conceptions of policy problems.

Adopting an inclusive definition of policy issues, most studies on party competition claim that parties can either follow a strategy of issue “avoidance”, thus ignoring the issues emphasized by their opponents to focus only on their preferred ones, or a strategy of issue “engagement”, responding instead to the attention their competitors pay to issues (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). Developed to study how parties cope with ‘new’ issues like immigration and the environment, issue competition approaches assume that actors could deliberately opt to dismiss issues on which they are less credible (or at a disadvantage), thereby signalling their lack of importance (Meguid 2005). Yet, this strategy seems less and less viable as formerly new issues are now fully incorporated into agendas at the party system level. Since it is increasingly hard to simply ignore these issues, political actors might be forced to opt for a more nuanced strategy in which apparent issue convergence hides selective dimensional emphasis. Put differently, actors would no longer compete over entire issues, but over their different underlying dimensions and the importance attributed to them.

Building upon these insights, the paper suggests considering the multiple dimensions that constitute complex public issues. To understand issue competition, it is argued, one has to consider not only the broad themes placed on the agenda by competing actors (issues), but also the specific aspects of the problem selected in addressing these (issue dimensions). For instance, actors may compete not only on the attention devoted to the environment (issue), but also on each of its underlying dimensions, e.g., sustainable development, waste control, ecosystem preservation, climate change, etc. (Zimmer et al. 1994). Issue dimensions might thus pave the way to a variety of selective politicization strategies addressing a limited, partial, and often incomplete subset of dimensions of a problem (Baumgartner et al. 2008; Benoit and Laver 2012). This approach allows investigating to what extent political actors compete by strategically shifting attention from one aspect of an issue to another, thus analysing what determines the predominance of some aspects of a problem over others.



The paper offers a theoretical as well as empirical contribution to agenda-setting research. First, it presents a dimensional model of issue competition, where opposing actors compete to impose their preferred topics and messages in public debates (e.g., Budge and Farlie 1983; Kriesi et al. 2009; Tan and Weaver 2007). In this framework, actors who can no longer choose to simply dismiss an issue considered disadvantageous, engage with it by focusing on alternative dimensions within the issue (Ghanem 1997; McCombs and Ghanem 2001). This implies that each dimension of a complex issue offers alternative opportunities for competition: actors try to gain over their opponents by de-emphasizing certain dimensions of conflict in favour of more advantageous ones (Castelli Gattinara 2016; Odmalm and Super 2014).

This model is then tested empirically on the case of migration debates. Current scholarship recognizes that the immigration issue cuts across the traditional divide between economic and cultural issues (Alonso and Fonseca 2012; Helbling 2014; van der Brug et al. 2015). Yet most studies still tend to adopt a highly inclusive definition of the issue, as their primary goal is to explain how it emerged in national public agendas, rather than to understand what happened once it had stabilized in public debates (Meguid 2005; Odmalm 2014). Instead, this study looks at seven West European countries over 15 years, and presents an explorative investigation of the factors influencing the salience of each dimension of the migration issue. In so doing, it offers initial insight on the strategic, as well as context-level, determinants of competition over issue dimensions in public debates.

## Issues, competition and dimensions

A crucial contribution to the study of how issues are politicized came from the scholarship on agenda setting and issue competition. Highlighting how the attention accorded to specific issues leads to increased public concern with those (e.g., Tan and Weaver 2007), and stressing the importance of thematic emphasis in electoral campaigning, this research crucially explains how issue saliency shapes public opinion, media coverage, and policy-making (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik et al. 2003). Notably this approach has been applied to the study of issues related to ‘new politics’—EU enlargement, immigration, climate change—and the emergence of a new socio-cultural dimension of party competition, at the expense of topics traditionally defining left–right divides (Kitschelt and McGann 1997; Kriesi 2008). However, the concept of ‘issue’ has often been used without specifying an operational definition, so that it may apply to very inclusive conceptions of a policy sector, but also to the narrower notion of a specific policy problem (Guinaudeau and Persico 2014).

Furthermore, this approach has mainly been used to study the way in which parties try to introduce new issues to manipulate the terms of a debate, whereas little is yet known about what happens once these issues stabilize in a system (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Van der Brug and Van Spanje 2009). Once formerly ‘new’ issues are integrated in the party system agendas, it becomes increasingly difficult for actors to simply dismiss them from public debates. Focusing on either issue avoidance or issue engagement on single one-dimensional issues, current



approaches fall short in explaining party behaviour once certain issues can no longer be ignored.

This paper suggests that, under these circumstances, apparent issue convergence might hide selective competition over different issue dimensions. When forced to focus on the same issue as their competitors, actors can still strategically select which aspects they want to highlight and which others they prefer to downplay (De Sio 2010). Put differently, they can choose whether to take up the same issue dimension as their competitors or rather shift the debate towards an alternative one, based on strategic calculations. It follows that, to fully understand how complex policy problems are politicized, one must take into consideration the dimensionality of political issues.

There are at least three rationales, derived from existing research, which support this dimensional approach. First, issue dimensions depend on the fact that certain policy problems are inherently complex and, therefore, have multi-faceted implications cutting across several substantial policy sectors (Baumgartner and Jones 2002). Second, issue dimensionality stems from cognitive factors. Policy problems might in fact be composed of distinct dimensions to facilitate information processing, since people focus selectively on the aspects most relevant to them (Iyengar 1994; Sniderman and Theriault 2004). Finally, strategic factors also corroborate the idea of issue dimensionality. Since political actors have neither the resources nor the incentives to address political problems in all their complexity, they generally promote only the aspects on which they expect to enjoy an advantage over their competitors (Kriesi et al. 2009).

In terms of issue competition, a dimensional understanding means that public agendas would depend not only on the strategies defining which issues deserve attention, but also on competition over which dimensions of these issues are most relevant (López-Escobar et al. 1998, p. 337). If complex issues are not to be understood as a unique entity, then their politicization would mainly depend on the relative salience attributed to each of its constitutive dimensions. To further clarify the mechanisms of dimensional attention, we focus on the case of a complex issue that received much attention in public debates over the last decades: migration.

### **The dimensionality of the migration issue**

For a long time the issue of migration and the integration of migrants remained at the margins of party competition in most countries in Western Europe (Meguid 2005). It began to acquire greater importance only in the late 1970s, rapidly becoming one of the key issues of contestation in European politics (Odmalm and Bale 2014).

While most research adopts an inclusive understanding of migration as a policy issue, some studies have recognized that immigration can be addressed through either an economic or a cultural logic, as it relates to politics in multiple ways, including the economy, security, and identity (Höglinger et al. 2012; Lahav 2004; Roggeband and Vliegenthart 2007). Building on this research, and looking at the policy areas that are potentially affected by migration and integration, I extend this



**Table 1** Categorization of immigration dimensions

Dimension	Example of arguments
Socioeconomic	Economic growth/decay International competition Welfare state Unemployment rates Unfair competition
Cultural and religious	Tolerance Cultural diversity Failure of multiculturalism National identity Loss of tradition
Law and order	Illegal migration/amnesties Crime and illegal migration Anti-social behaviour Terrorism and political violence
Civic	Acquisition of citizenship Refugee status Civic integration Political participation/voting rights

classification to four main dimensions: *socioeconomic*, *cultural and religious*, *law and order* (security) and *civic* (Table 1).

The first two build on previous studies proposing a twofold distinction between the economic and cultural dimensions of migration debates (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007; Kriesi 2012). Economic challenges resulting from globalization would interact with increasing cultural diversity and activate mechanisms of cultural competition, as ethnic minorities come to symbolize a threat to collective identities and standards of living (Kriesi 2012). In addition, security arguments are increasingly crucial in driving migration debates, particularly in terms of the illegal entry of migrants and the challenges of migration to international security. Migrants are portrayed as sources of criminality and even terrorism, and ethnic stereotyping substantiates the nexus between immigration, minority communities and threats to the physical well-being of host populations (e.g., Caviedes 2015). I therefore consider security as a third category referring to law and order narratives around migration. Finally, the civic dimension refers to the civil and political rights that may or may not be granted to migrants in receiving countries, and to the relationship between citizenship and migration. On the one hand, this relates to problems at the core of political conflict in Europe, such as public debates on the regulation of residence and voting rights to be granted to migrants. On the other, the civic dimension articulates political actors' alternative visions of a country's institutional framework of citizenship, including the procedures regulating the acquisition of refugee status and nationality.

While immigration is conceived here as an ideal-typical example of a cross-cutting and multi-sectoral issue, to varying degrees it shares a number of characteristics



with other issues such as social exclusion, European integration, and climate policy (Carter et al. 2017; Guinaudeau and Persico 2014; Kriesi 2008). It follows that party preferences on these issues can either be measured in terms of an inclusive conception—e.g., ‘immigration’, ‘the environment’, ‘Europe’—or using a more narrow definition—e.g., respectively ‘voting rights for migrants’, ‘regulations on waste management’, or ‘EU enlargement’. The approach developed here can thus be extended to other policy areas and may be particularly beneficial for highly complex issues displaying multiple dimensions of conflict.

### **Competition on the migration issue: a dimensional framework**

The model suggests that each dimension of a complex policy issue provides distinct opportunities for politicization. Strategic actors expecting an advantage from a certain issue dimension have incentives to emphasize that aspect to shift the terms of debate to their own advantage. This resonates with the logics of ‘second-level’ agenda setting, or competition over alternative interpretations of the same policy issue (Esser and Matthes 2013; Kioussis et al. 2006; Tan and Weaver 2007). By arguing that politicization stems from the selective emphasis of issue dimensions, I focus on competitive strategies within multidimensional issues, rather than competition over alternative issues.

I examine this process within an actor-centred political model, in which all actors engage in a contest for the control and interpretation of the public agenda (Wolfsfeld 2011). Specifically, I examine three key aspects of issue politicization: (i) how intense the public debate on each dimension of immigration is; (ii) how alternative dimensions of migration are addressed by competing actors; and (iii) what factors are responsible for the predominance of specific dimensions in migration debates.

Literature on the politicization of migration suggests that political responses to immigration are driven by contextual conditions as well as intraparty constraints and strategies, which define the dynamics of party competition (Morales et al. 2015; Odmalm and Bale 2014). I thus distinguish between context-level and actor-level determinants of attention for issue dimensions.

At the context-level, I anticipate that pre-existing opportunity structures trigger the resonance of specific issue dimensions in public debates. Thus, means that political actors take into account—when formulating their strategies of competition—the type of claims that are most likely to be considered reasonable, realistic and legitimate in the context and at the time in which competition takes place (Koopmans et al. 2005). At the actor-level, I focus on the strategies by which actors try to shift the point of reference of public debates, since they are likely to emphasize the dimensions on which they expect to enjoy a strategic advantage while ignoring or playing down all others.

Opportunity structures depend on social and political factors, such as the national characteristics of migration and the institutional and party systems. In addition, discursive constraints determine which type of argument is most likely to resonate and achieve legitimacy in the public sphere (Koopmans and Statham 1999). Political opportunities are thus defined by national statistics on



immigration, which may explain cross-national variation in the way in which migration is debated. If the total annual inflow of migrants is likely to increase the salience of the immigration issue as a whole, the inflow of specific categories of migrants (e.g., economic, or humanitarian migrants) might trigger attention to specific issue dimensions (e.g., the socioeconomic dimension, law and order) (hypothesis H1). Furthermore, the relative importance of different issue dimensions may change depending on the composition of the party system, as defined by three factors: the strength of anti-immigrant parties in the system; the left–right orientation of parties represented in parliament; and the extent to which they support, or oppose, immigration (H2).

Discursive opportunities relate to dominant understandings of migration in the public sphere. On one hand, the attention attributed to each issue dimension depends on whether debates dwell with immigration or integration (H3). For instance, security aspects might resonate more with debates on the admission of new migrants, whilst the cultural dimension is generally more relevant for debates on the integration of migrants. On the other hand, attention to specific dimensions of immigration (e.g., its socioeconomic implications; law and order) might stem from related public opinion concerns (e.g., a country's economic performance; criminality; terrorism) (H4).

Actor-level determinants encompass the logics of political parties, which result from an actor's expected ideological stance on immigration, and the role it plays in a given campaign or debate. If it can be expected that dimensional preferences are coherent with a party's worldview and ideology, politicization choices are, in fact, also influenced by the constraints these actors are subject to. In this respect, the focus is on each actor's role in a campaign (whether they are in office or in opposition), and in the political system (whether they are civil society or state actors).

In terms of party logics, it may be expected that issue dimension preferences vary along the left–right spectrum (H5). Being more attentive to cosmopolitan values and social security, the political left is likely to adopt liberal views seeking to improve the social conditions and cultural rights of migrants (Andall 2007; Lahav 2004). Even though existing evidence suggests that the response of left-wing parties to migration has been far from uniform (Bale et al. 2010, p. 423), a 'principled' strategy would entail openly making the case for multiculturalism, by means of cultural and economic arguments (Helbling 2014). While not unfamiliar to cultural issues, the political right has instead often favoured a law and order agenda, mobilizing on perceived insecurity and against crime (Bale 2003; Mudde 2013).

In addition, previous research suggests that the composition of public agendas is subject to different types of influences depending on the activities of parties in opposition and in office, because challengers are freer to focus on their preferred issues than incumbents (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008) (H6). Furthermore, I expect that issue dimensions provide distinct opportunities to civil society actors compared to state ones (H7), since selective dimensional attention represents a way to put pressure on political opponents by introducing new elements in public debates.



## Data and methods

The study focuses on seven West European countries over 15 years (1995–2009): Austria, Belgium, Ireland, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The case studies were selected to obtain cross-national variation in migration figures and history: if Belgium, the Netherlands and United Kingdom have experienced mass migration since the late 1960s, and Austria and Switzerland were early migration countries using ‘guest workers’ programmes, Ireland and Spain only began to attract large numbers of migrants from the 1990s (Berkhout et al. 2015, pp. 19–20).<sup>1</sup>

Data on public debates come from the Support and Opposition to Migration project’s extensive analysis of claims-making in the media (Berkhout and Sudulich 2011).<sup>2</sup> Political Claims Analysis (PCA) builds on protest event analysis, but extends it to include speech acts and political decisions: these instances of claims-making are units of strategic action consisting of the public articulation of political demands which affect the interests or integrity of the claimants or of other collective actors (Koopmans and Statham 1999). Claims were extracted from a sample of articles related to immigration and integration published in one broadsheet and one tabloid newspaper per country.<sup>3</sup> The identity of the claimants<sup>4</sup> was coded, differentiating in terms of left–right alignment, distinguishing government from opposition and state from civil society actors.<sup>5</sup>

The salience of each issue dimension is measured as the attention attributed to each aspect of immigration by all actors in the system, aggregated by year.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the data allows the ‘position’ taken by claimants on each of the coded topics to be measured, thus enabling analysis of the extent to which a claim articulates support (+1) or opposition (–1) to immigration, as well as intermediate or neutral

<sup>1</sup> Limitations on the availability of data made it impossible to include other countries with large anti-immigration parties or that received many immigrants. However, their inclusion would not greatly modify the variables of interest.

<sup>2</sup> The SOM project has received funding from the European Commission’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007–2013) under Grant Agreement No. 225522.

<sup>3</sup> Newspaper selection accounted for the characteristics of the media systems and for ideological biases (Berkhout et al. 2015). Tabloids and the quality press are similar in the relative importance of each immigration dimension. Yet, tabloids focus even more than the quality press on security, whereas the latter are relatively more attentive to the civic and socioeconomic dimensions. A detailed discussion of newspaper and article selection can be found in Berkhout and Sudulich (2011), and van der Brug et al. (2015).

<sup>4</sup> The original categories included: government; legislatives and political parties; judiciary; police and security actors; state executive agencies; religious organizations; media and journalists; civil society organizations and social movements; minority and racial groups organizations.

<sup>5</sup> State actors include government members and officials, the judiciary, police and security services, and state executive agencies. Civil society actors include religious organizations, civil society organizations, minority organizations and the mass media.

<sup>6</sup> The differentiation of the SOM project distinguished between immigration and civic integration, and across four policy fields: security and crime; economy and the welfare state; politics and institutions; society and culture (Berkhout and Sudulich 2011). Issue dimension salience is measured in absolute terms (real number of claims per year), and in relative terms (share of attention to one issue dimension, relative to all others).



positions. The categorization of claims is then based on a typology of issue dimensions that allows for the systematic comparison of issue and issue dimension salience across actors and countries.

While acknowledging that no perfect way of regrouping issue dimensions exists since new features of an issue may emerge in the political agenda at any time, the working assumption in this paper is that these are nonetheless restricted to a limited set of possible dimensions of conflict. In line with research applying a similar approach (Helbling et al. 2010), this classification is grounded on general theoretical assumptions about the content of claims-making on migration and integration, which reduces the risk of overlooking aspects that were not expected a priori (Berkhout et al. 2015). The SOM codebook reports information on the specific topic of each claim, differentiating first between migration and integration, and then in terms of potentially affected policy fields. The four issue dimensions correspond to the second distinction: the security dimension (crime, illegal migration, anti-social behaviour, neighbourhood policies); socioeconomic dimension (economy and welfare state, labour market integration, guest workers, 'economic' migration); cultural dimension (links with countries of origin, racism and social cohesion, identity issues); and civic dimension (acquisition of refugee status, citizenship, voting rights, participation).

Since the available data does not allow the use of time series statistics (Morales et al. 2015), I opt for a graphic display of trends for the above-mentioned indicators, and  $\chi^2$  and Cramer's V tests for relationships between variables. Logistic regressions are used to predict the conditions for dimensional attention, using characteristics of claimants and context-level variables as key predictors. The dependent variable is coded 1 if the claim focuses on the specific issue dimension and 0 otherwise. A positive sign of beta-coefficients indicates positive association with making a claim on the related immigration dimension, over the observed time period and across the seven countries.

At the actor-level, the models include variables addressing the characteristics of claimants (left–right alignment) and their position in public debates (government and opposition actors; state and civil society actors), in line with the expectations of this study. At context-level, they include indicators capturing political and discursive opportunity structures. Political opportunities are measured with data that capture the annual inflow of different types of migrants, i.e., the total annual inflow, the inflow of asylum seekers, and the inflow of economic migrants.<sup>7</sup> In addition, I also account for the share of votes obtained by anti-immigration parties in a legislature<sup>8</sup>; the average position on immigration by all parties in parliament during a legislature; and the average left–right positioning of parties represented in parliament.<sup>9</sup> Public opinion is measured by the proportions of respondents citing immigration, crime,

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<sup>7</sup> Measured as the total annual inflow of migrants, economic migrants, and asylum seekers, in hundreds of thousands of individuals. Source: OECD Statistics: <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=MIG> (accessed on 10/05/2017).

<sup>8</sup> Proportion of votes subsequent to an election year (Source: Ruedin et al. 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Based on a 7-year moving average of combined expert data (Source: Ruedin et al. 2012).



terrorism and the socioeconomic outlook of the country as one of the three most important problems in the country.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the models control for time and country settings, as well as for whether the claim focused primarily on immigration or on the integration of foreign residents.

## Empirical analysis

The empirical analysis is organized as follows. First, to shed light on the process by which the dominant discourse on migration progressively integrates previously non-salient issue dimensions, I offer some descriptive correlation results, and look at the change in the composition of public debates over time and cross-nationally. Second, I explore to what extent this change can be attributed to the preferences of the actors involved in the debate, taking into account their partisanship, role in government, and in the political system. Finally, to ascertain the linkage between dimensional emphasis and meso- and macro-level factors, I introduce the logistic models addressing the determinants of claim-making on each dimension of the immigration issue.

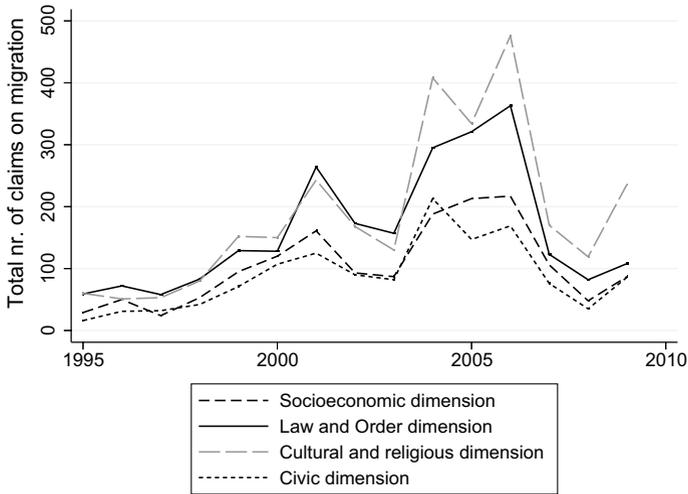
### Over time and cross-national trends: descriptive results

The correlation scores for issue dimension salience and average positions offer some first descriptive insights on the appropriateness of examining issue dimensions. The average correlation score for issue dimension salience was 0.45; police were the highest scoring actors (0.87) and civil society the lowest (0.02). Positions on dimensions also display varying correlation scores, with an average of 0.54, but a maximum of 0.89 for religious groups and a minimum of 0.05 for state executive agencies. Correlations between issue dimensions are moderate too (0.64), but vary among actors: strong associations between the salience of each issue dimension are confirmed for the *Schweizerische Volkspartei* (SVP) in Switzerland (0.91), and (negatively) for *Izquierda Unida* in Spain ( $-1.00$ ), whereas other parties display very weak associations (e.g., the *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie/VVD* in the Netherlands). The same applies to correlations between actors' attention to, and positions on, each dimension, which do not appear to be strongly correlated. This offers some initial leverage, albeit only illustrative, to the idea that the importance attributed to each immigration dimension, and the positions that parties take on them, are not strongly associated.<sup>11</sup>

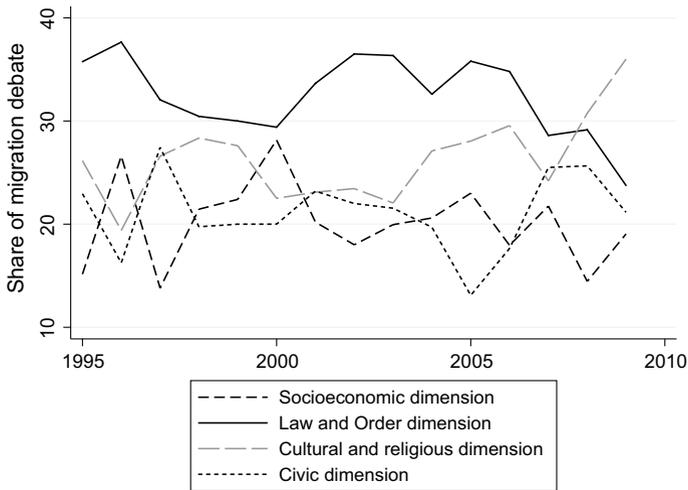
<sup>10</sup> European Commission Eurobarometer surveys (retrieved from the GESIS data archive): 57.2(2002); 59.1(2003); 61(2004); 63.4(2005); 65.2(2006); 67.2(2007); 69.2(2008); 71.1(2009). Data was not available for Switzerland.

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, principal component analysis indicates that the four issue dimension variables do not load on a single factor, whereas the scale reliability coefficient does not reach the minimum threshold of reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.15$ ).





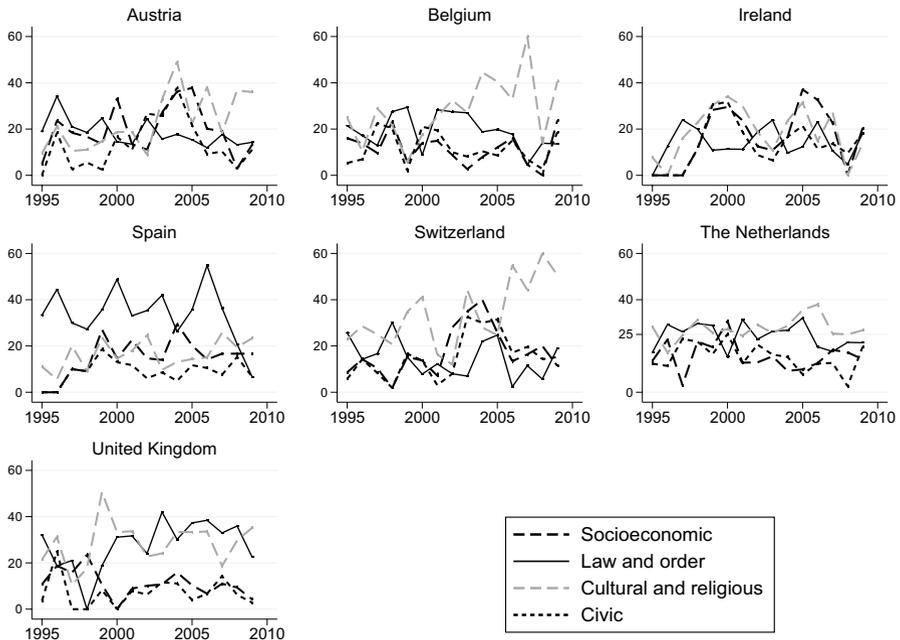
**Fig. 1** Salience of migration issue dimensions over time (number of claims)



**Fig. 2** Salience of migration issue dimensions over time (%)

This is further confirmed by the descriptive analysis of the evolution of migration debates. Figure 1 shows the absolute number of claims reported in the media about each immigration dimension; Fig. 2 displays the share of attention to each issue dimension over time; and Fig. 3 presents the same data disaggregated by the seven countries observed. The data in Fig. 1 indicates that there is an upward trend in the overall salience of the issue. Yet attention to migration is punctuated by years of high (2001, 2006), and much lower attention (2003, 2007). Furthermore, while the yearly salience of the different dimensions evolves in parallel over time, security,





**Fig. 3** Salience of migration issue dimensions across countries (%)

and even more so cultural and religious aspects, have greatly accentuated peak years. Put differently, when immigration is highly salient, these two dimensions dominate public agendas even more.

Figure 2 shows that the security dimension dominates public debates for most of the observed period, but after 2007 it is replaced by the cultural dimension. While the relative importance of security tends to decline after 1995, the cultural and religious dimension grows in importance from the mid-2000s onwards. Civic aspects and the socioeconomic dimension are relatively more marginal throughout the whole period, and their relative importance appears to be intertwined, in that when the salience of one grows, that of the other declines.

Figure 3 shows that the distribution of attention among issue dimensions varies considerably across countries, offering further evidence that dimensional emphasis is crucial to understand cross-national variation in how migration and integration are politicized. Looking at country profiles, the cultural and security dimensions stand out as the main component of public debates in Belgium, the Netherlands and United Kingdom. In Austria and Ireland, the most salient dimension is cultural, although the socioeconomic aspect is also of importance, at least in earlier years. Immigration debates in Spain, instead, are overwhelmingly dominated by security, with a peak at the time of the 2005 terrorist attacks in Madrid.

The descriptive analysis outlined so far provides some first exploratory insights on attention to issue dimensions. National figures stand out as punctuated, indicating that the relative attention devoted to each migration dimension in the public



sphere can rapidly change. Over time, there is evidence of a progressive decline in the importance of socioeconomic affairs, although the great recession seems to have triggered new discussions on the relationship between migration, labour market regulations and welfare state sustainability. At the same time, since the early 2000s cultural and religious issues, and to a lesser extent security, appear to have effectively come to dominate debates on migration across Europe.

### **Actor choices: migration issue dimensions and politicization**

I now look at the choices of politicization of migration deployed by the different actors, comparing attention to, and average positions on, each immigration dimension. As noted above, regarding political actors, the expectation is that government and state are subject to different types of constraints compared to opposition and civil society, resulting in a diverging pattern of dimensional preferences (H6; H7). Furthermore, dimensional attention is expected to vary along the left–right spectrum (H5).

Table 2 below confirms that civil society and state actors differ in their allocation of attention across issue dimensions: state actors focus considerably more on security, whereas civil society organizations privilege the cultural and religious dimension. Furthermore, civil society actors display much more favourable positions on migration than state ones, especially on law and order, which stands out as the most divisive dimension.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the table shows that preferences for specific dimensions of migration vary depending on whether a party is in government or in opposition. Government parties are more inclined to focus on the law and order dimension, whereas the opposition will focus considerably more on the civic and cultural aspects. Specifically, government actors devote on average 37% of their attention to security, over 10 points more than opposition parties, accounting for most of the specific debate on law and order.<sup>13</sup> On average, government parties also display the most anti-immigration stance on the law and order dimension. On average, government parties also display most anti-immigration stances on the law and order dimension, compared to all other issue aspects. The cultural dimension, instead, polarizes the positions of opposition and government parties, as the former tend to address this aspect of migration mainly in negative terms, whereas the latter address it overwhelmingly positively. While only illustrative, the results so far tend to confirm the hypotheses of the present study and the expected mechanisms of competition across issue dimensions.

The lower part of Table 2 looks at variation along the left–right spectrum, showing that party positions on immigration do not vary across different issue dimensions. Centre-left parties, and even more so radical left ones, tend to express more favourable positions than centre-right and radical right ones on all dimensions.

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<sup>12</sup> The  $\chi^2$  test of ‘goodness of fit’ indicates that the association is significant but weak: Pearson  $\chi^2(3)=256.81$ ,  $Pr=0.000$ ; Cramér’s  $V=0.21$ .

<sup>13</sup> Again, Pearson’s  $\chi^2$  test for independence indicates that the association is significant—Pearson  $\chi^2(3)=92.06$ ,  $Pr=0.000$ , but weak: Cramér’s  $V=0.16$ .



**Table 2** Type of actors and immigration issue dimensions

Type of actor	Socioeconomic		Cultural and religious		Law and order		Civic		Total	
	%	A.P	%	A.P	%	A.P	%	A.P	%	A.P
Civil society actors	22.4	0.49	37.2	0.49	23.6	0.24	16.7	0.58	100	0.45
State actors	20.0	0.19	22.3	0.22	40.1	-0.17	17.6	0.11	100	0.05
<i>N.</i>	1334		1843		2047		1087		6311	
Government parties	20.7	0.15	22.7	0.25	36.9	0.06	19.7	0.08	100	0.04
Opposition parties	16.5	0.06	28.4	-0.07	25.6	0.13	29.5	0.08	100	0.04
<i>N.</i>	732		948		1250		891		3821	
Radical left	17.1	0.70	19.4	0.61	27.8	0.73	35.7	0.72	100	0.71
Centre-left	21.4	0.32	23.2	0.46	31.9	0.00	23.5	0.39	100	0.23
Centre-right	14.2	0.03	26.2	0.02	34.7	-0.27	24.9	0.08	100	-0.11
Radical right	17.5	-0.61	34.8	-0.64	20.9	-0.65	26.8	-0.71	100	-0.68
<i>N.</i>	419		616		753		615		2403	

However, the security dimension stands out as centrist parties display considerably more negative positions on law and order than on any other aspect of migration. As regards the salience of issue dimensions, the profiles of centre-left and centre-right parties are strikingly similar. As expected, the left tends to focus somewhat more on socioeconomic aspects, whereas the right is more attentive to culture and security.<sup>14</sup> If radical parties seem to address immigration ideologically, by concentrating on their preferred issue dimensions and assuming a predictable position, centrist parties seem instead to be influenced by other types of constraints, especially in the case of the law and order dimension.

### Determinants of attention: logistic models of migration issue dimensions

The third part of the empirical analysis addresses more precisely the determinants of selective emphasis for the four dimensions of the migration issue. Table 3 presents the results of four logistic regressions with yearly claim-making on each issue dimension as dependent variable. The model includes fixed effects corresponding to the main expectations of this study at the actor-level, indicators of context-level determinants related to political and discursive opportunity structures, and control variables accounting for time and individual country variation.

At the actor-level, none of the indicators for left–right orientation reaches statistical significance, which confirms that the ideological predispositions of parties do not explain the dominance of specific dimensions of the immigration issue. The same applies to the distinction between state and civic society actor, for which there is no evidence of a systematic difference in terms of dimensional preferences. On the other hand, I found evidence that government actors are significantly more likely

<sup>14</sup>  $\chi^2(9) = 54.7494$ ,  $Pr = 0.000$ ; Cramèr's  $V = 0.09$ .



**Table 3** Multivariate logistic models of the salience of migration issue dimensions

Independent variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	DV: socio-econ. dim.		DV: cultural dim.		DV: law and order dim.		DV: civic dim.	
	<i>B</i>	(s.e.)	<i>B</i>	(s.e.)	<i>B</i>	(s.e.)	<i>B</i>	(s.e.)
Actor-level								
Radical right (ref)								
Centre-right	-0.66	1.10	-0.41	0.86	-0.90	0.86	-0.97	0.96
Centre left	-1.51	1.42	-1.02	1.01	-0.37	0.97	-1.08	1.43
Radical left	-2.90	1.77	-1.27	1.21	0.53	1.13	-1.29	1.16
State actors (ref: civil society actors)	-0.40	1.23	-1.16	1.22	-0.81	1.31	-0.38	1.25
Government parties (ref: opposition)	0.10	0.19	0.06	0.15	0.29**	0.14	-0.15	0.17
Political opportunity structures								
Total annual inflow of migrants <sup>a</sup>	0.41	0.66	-1.16	1.04	1.06	0.86	2.34***	0.75
Annual inflow of humanitarian migrants <sup>a</sup>	-1.57	1.86	2.46	2.06	2.59*	1.27	-5.85***	1.83
Annual inflow of economic migrants <sup>a</sup>	-1.98	2.83	9.37**	3.31	-2.76	3.29	-7.76**	3.22
% votes for anti-immigrant parties	-0.34	3.66	6.16**	3.01	-17.01*	9.2	-11.3	10.0
Parliament average left-right position	-0.27**	0.01	0.08	0.09	-0.03	0.08	-0.11	0.02
Parliament average position on migration	0.18*	0.08	-0.03	0.08	0.29	0.15	0.06	0.09
Discursive opportunity structures								
Focus on immigration (ref: integration)	0.12	0.16	-1.82***	0.16	1.71***	0.15	-0.25	0.17
Most important problem (% crime)	0.02	0.02	0.00	0.01	0.05***	0.01	-0.02	0.01
Most important problem (% immigration)	-0.04	0.03	-0.05	0.03	0.07**	0.03	-0.12***	0.03
Most important problem (% economy)	-0.02	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.04**	0.01	-0.06***	0.01
Most important problem (% terrorism)	-0.01	0.02	0.08***	0.01	0.01	0.01	-0.09***	0.02
Control variables								
Year	-0.16	0.10	-0.08	0.09	-0.12	0.09	-0.22*	0.10



Table 3 (continued)

Independent variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	DV: socio-econ. dim.		DV: cultural dim.		DV: law and order dim.		DV: civic dim.	
	<i>B</i>	(s.e.)	<i>B</i>	(s.e.)	<i>B</i>	(s.e.)	<i>B</i>	(s.e.)
Switzerland (ref)								
United Kingdom	0.42	2.04	-4.77***	1.46	1.37	1.45	2.51	1.81
The Netherlands	-1.07*	0.58	-1.15**	0.47	0.95*	0.54	0.17	0.56
Austria	0.27	0.56	-0.25	0.45	-0.46	0.52	0.11	0.52
Spain	0.64	2.49	-5.53**	1.84	1.11	1.70	2.13	2.17
Belgium	-1.08	0.65	-0.59	0.51	0.76	0.61	-0.24	0.61
Ireland	0.45	0.64	-0.89	0.56	-0.43	0.67	0.54	0.59
Constant	-2.82		3.17		-6.37		-0.81	
<i>N</i>	1144		1144		1144		1144	
-2 Log likelihood	-551.01		-677.88		-588.25		-485.29	
Pseudo <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.13		0.19		0.16		0.07	
$\chi^2$ (d.f.)	116.10 (20)***		90.20 (20)***		280.77 (20)***		70.95 (20)***	

\*\*\**P* < 0.001; \*\**P* < 0.05; \**P* < 0.1<sup>a</sup> In hundreds of thousands

to make claims about law and order issues than opposition parties, which suggests that the dimensional preferences of competing actors might be more closely connected with factors pertaining to party competition than with actors' ideological predispositions.

As regards political opportunity structures, the model shows that the total inflow of migrants increases the probability that claims are made on the civic dimension. In line with the expectations, the inflow of humanitarian migrants is significant and positively associated with increasing debates on law and order, whereas it reduces the likelihood that debates focus on the civic dimension. Contrarily, the annual inflow of economic migrants is not associated with attention to the socioeconomic dimension of migration, but it significantly increases the salience of the cultural and religious dimension. Instead, the likelihood that migration is approached in terms of its socioeconomic dimension increases significantly when the average positions of parties in parliament are more pro-migration, and more left-wing. In this respect, the findings offer further insights suggesting that the immigration issue crucially contributes to restructuring political conflict, most notably concerning cultural issues (Kriesi 2012).

In terms of discursive opportunities, the results show that the law and order dimension is more likely to be mentioned when debates focus on the inflow of migrants, whereas the cultural and religious dimension is preponderant when debates focus on their integration. Furthermore, the results for public opinion trends are largely in line with the expectations. When immigration stands out as a major problem in opinion surveys, the security dimension tends to be discussed most frequently, and the civic dimension least of all. Similarly, the higher the public perception that crime and the economy are a major problem in the country, the higher the likelihood that migration debates focus on law and order. In this respect, while different types of public concerns increase the likelihood that debates on migration will concentrate on security aspects, concerns about terrorism increase the probability that they will address cultural and religious aspects.

Overall, the findings outlined in this section corroborate the overarching expectations on the role of issue dimensions and selective emphasis in party competition. However, they also suggest that, at least in terms of the importance attributed to issue dimensions, the composition of public debates depends more on structural constraints and on the dynamics of interparty competition, than on the ideological preferences of the competing actors.

## Conclusion

This article engaged with the literature on agenda setting, and set out to investigate competition over issue dimensions of complex policy problems. It suggested that multi-sectoral issues that have been progressively integrated in party system agendas, such as immigration, are approached dimensionally by strategic political actors. The underlying argument is that complex issues are not restricted to one single meaning, but comprise multiple dimensions, whose importance varies depending on the strategies of the actors involved in the debate and on



macro-level circumstances defining their involvement. To understand politicization as strategic competition over issue dimensions, it examined how competing actors try to de-emphasize certain conflict dimensions of the migration issue in favour of other ones.

The paper thus presented an explorative framework to analyse the determinants of selective attention to issue dimensions, focusing on socioeconomic, security, cultural, and civic aspects of migration. At a descriptive level, the evolution of public debates over time illustrated that changes in how migration is discussed depend on its constitutive dimensions. While cultural and security elements explain the increased salience of migration over the last decade, distinct aspects of an issue gain (or lose) importance abruptly from year to year. This suggests that the politicization of migration is strongly sensitive to temporary junctures, next to macro-structural developments. In this respect, future research might look further at peaks and troughs in public debates, and assess whether critical events may change the public understanding of policy issues by redistributing symbolic resources among competing actors in a debate.

The empirical analysis also illustrated the relevance of strategic as well as political opportunity explanations of selective issue attention. The actor-centred analysis suggested that issue dimensionality is intertwined with the ideological orientations of different political actors, but even more so with the role that they play in a given debate. The composition of public discussions thus appears to be crucially linked to dynamics of party competition, especially in terms of government-opposition interaction. Furthermore, political and discursive opportunities may increase the resonance of certain issue dimensions over others in public debates, which confirm that politicization strategies are linked to migration-specific factors at the context-level. This calls for further research on the interactive dynamic by which political actors respond to changing perceptions of political problems and priorities among the public.

While the available data allows verification of several arguments over time and across countries, the limited number of observed cases, and the paucity of data suggests caution in drawing broad generalizations. In this regards, future research could apply the explorative framework developed in this study beyond the case of migration, on issues pertaining to climate policy and the EU. Additionally, researchers may want to test this framework on multiple issues, accounting for selective attention between and within issues within a single model. Research is in fact still needed concerning the reciprocal strategies deployed by competing actors across multiple issue areas. Future studies might, therefore, develop interactive models allowing assessment of how the arguments advanced by competing actors actually respond to the politicizing behaviour of their adversaries.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the dimensional mechanism outlined in this paper offers suggestive insights on party competition over issue dimensions which have important implications for the study of agenda setting and politicization. The coexistence of distinct dimensions within single policy issues, the strategies of competition by rival actors in the system, and their conditional relationship with macro-level factors and opportunities, are in fact likely to apply beyond the specific case of migration politics.



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