Abstract

While extensive research has focused on positional competition between parties in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), few studies have investigated issue salience, despite its significant implications for voting behavior and policy outcomes. This thesis contributes to the literature on postcommunist politics through a comparative study of the salience of cultural issues, a theoretically crucial area of contemporary politics. The exploratory study relies on Manifesto Project (MARPOR) data from eleven CEE countries in the period from 1990 to 2020, complemented by a case study of Czech parliamentary debates. It examines 1) how the overall salience of cultural issues varies over time and across countries, 2) whether and to what extent parties' ideological backgrounds and specific electoral dynamics structure their salience strategies, and 3) to what extent so-called new cultural issues, such as immigration or LGBTQ rights, have become more salient over time. The results show that parties consistently emphasize economic issues more than cultural issues in their manifestos, suggesting that the oft-observed shift in the content of party politics from redistributive questions to cultural issues should not be overstated. The thesis also demonstrates that long-term country characteristics, such as ethnic structure or communist legacies, are only weakly associated with the salience of cultural issues, which suggests that more proximate factors, such as public opinion, may better explain the variation. At the party level, the radical right systematically emphasizes the issue area of nationalism, multiculturalism, and minorities more than other party families. However, contrary to findings from Western Europe, the results do not indicate that the electoral success of radical-right parties leads other parties to adjust their emphasis on cultural issues. The Czech case study further finds that the issues of immigration, LGBTQ, and gender rights are becoming more salient over time, demonstrating that parties' issue strategies in the parliamentary arena differ compared to manifestos. The thesis thus advances the literature on postcommunist politics by bringing a series of novel empirical findings about parties' salience strategies. In doing so, it shifts the focus to this relatively neglected aspect of CEE party competition, highlighting several avenues for further inquiry.