Original Paper

Consensus or Conflict?

Niche Party Behaviors and Their Electoral Success

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Abstract

Niche parties are now a common feature in most countries with multi-party systems. Thus far, however, the literature only provides scattered evidence and unsatisfying theoretical explanations of the mechanisms behind niche parties' electoral outcomes. In this paper, we propose a mechanism potentially explaining the variation in niche parties' electoral outcomes: niche party issue distinctiveness. Distinguishing themselves from their political competition, niche parties demonstrate their raison d'être to voters by prioritizing their respective niche issues. In this paper, the functioning of this mechanism is further theorized by showing how various party behaviors – consensus-seeking or conflict-mobilizing – affect the niche party electorate's perception of the utility of the niche party vote for achieving their preferred policy. This mechanism is tested empirically by a randomized survey vignette experiment, conducted on two different cases of typical niche parties: pro-environment parties and anti-immigration parties. Our experiment indicates that niche party electorates tend to rewards niche parties pursuing a conflict-mobilizing party behavior while rather punishing niche parties pursuing a consensus-seeking party behavior. This research nuances the work done so far on niche parties by placing voting behavior and voter psychology in the center of both our theoretical reasoning and empirical testing.

Keywords: Party politics, niche parties, elections, polarization, voting behavior.

1. Introduction

In parallel to the Swedish Green Party barely making the parliamentary threshold of four percent in the two most recent general elections, green parties in Germany, Finland, and Austria, among others, have advanced their positions. While the Swedish right-wing nationalist party, the Sweden Democrats, in the recent 2022 election became the second largest party in Sweden, their Danish counterpart, the Danish People's Party, has simultaneously completely imploded. This myriad of different trajectories - under what seems to be rather comparable circumstances - presents the scholarly community with something of a puzzle: What factors determine whether or not a niche party will gain voters as the salience of the niche issue(s) increases?

In previous research, the success of Western European niche parties has been attributed to, e.g., favorable institutional settings and high issue salience. Over the last few years, however, Western European politics have provided contradicting evidence regarding these links, suggesting that there might be a need to re-think the functioning of these supposed causal relationships.

In line with this, we propose a mechanism potentially explaining the variation in niche parties' electoral outcomes: niche parties' degree of issue distinctiveness. Distinguishing themselves from their political competition in regard to their niche issues, niche parties demonstrate their raison d'être to voters inclined to prioritize these issues. In this paper, the functioning of this mechanism is further theorized by showing how various party behaviors – consensus-seeking and conflict-mobilizing – affect the niche

party electorate's perception of the utility of the niche party for achieving their preferred policy. We also test this mechanism empirically by conducting a survey vignette experiment.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we give a brief depiction of the previous literature relevant for this article, and second, we outline in detail the theoretical framework mentioned above. Third, we explain the research design of the experiment, and fourth, we present the results from the experiment. Finally, we return to our theoretical framework as well as the main results from the experiment and discuss our findings against the backdrop of the overarching question asked in this paper: What is the secret behind certain niche parties' electoral success?

2. Previous Literature

Niche parties are typically defined by their prioritization of non-class-based issues, the inadequacy of a left-right dimension to categorize them politically, and their specialization in a restricted set of issues (Meguid, 2005). The level of programmatic concentration, corresponding to what Meguid calls specialization, varies between different niche parties. Therefore, some have envisioned *nicheness* as a continuous concept, rather than a binary one (e.g. Meyer & Miller, 2015). Following this definition, some niche parties are more "*niche*" than others, in the same way that certains, arguably, are less (or more) *niche* now, than they have used to be. For example, the programmatic focus of the German green party for the election in 2021 was less concentrated on issues relating to the environment, than it was in the 1980's. Therefore, some may argue that the current German green pary in fact no longer really is a niche parrty. Within the framework of this paper, however, we apply a rather generous definition of the niche party concept. As the theoretical framework of this paper primarily focus on the behavior of voters – and more specifically: those inclined to prioritize a small set of political issues – rather than that of parties, so does our niche party definition. Thus, within the paper, all parties that are clearly associated with one (or a few) non-class-based issue(s), and who's voters primarily vote for them because of this or theese issue(s), are considered niche parties. From this follows that we, for example, also after the general election in 2021 still consider the German green party to be a niche party – albeit less so than they were some 30 years ago.

Most research on niche parties concerns either green or right-wing nationalist parties in Western Europe. Thus far, research provides a scattered image of what leads niche parties to succeed electorally. For example, studies have shown that green parties do not profit from seeking ownership of a broader range of issues, while right-wing nationalist parties have been found to advance their positions with such an electoral strategy (Bergman & Flatt, 2020). However, other studies have shown that niche parties foremost profit electorally from a high degree of programmatic concentration, i.e., a high degree of nicheness, in the beginning of their lifecycle. The older the niche party, the greater the yield from seeking ownership of other issues than its niche issue(s) (Zons, 2016). More generally, studies have shown that green parties thrive in contexts of high economic growth and low unemployment (Grant & Tilley, 2019; Meguid, 2008; Müller-Rommel, 1996; Taggart, 1996), while issues relating to immigration and multiculturalism become more salient under conditions of economic insecurity (Jackman & Volpert, 1996; Lubbers et al., 2002; Swank & Betz, 2003; Meguid, 2008). It is by now well established that niche parties can be affected by mainstream parties' attempts to alter the salience and ownership of the niche party's issue (Meguid, 2005, 2008). However, studies of primarily green parties have shown that the power of mainstream parties in this respect tends to fade after a certain number of elections (Grant & Tilley, 2019). Mainstream parties tend to emphasize anti-immigrant positions in response to success of radical right-wing parties, whereas green party success often leads to mainstream parties de-emphasizing the environment (Abou-Chadi, 2016). Other studies have shown that the rise of right-wing parties in Western Europe has contributed to center-right (Meijers & Williams, 2019) and center-left parties (Han, 2015) taking a harder stance on multiculturalism. The electoral success of green parties has been shown to be conditioned by the presence of a left-wing party in parliament (Grant & Tilley, 2019). Niche party voters also protest more than mainstream party voters does when they perceive to be deprived of representation when entering as the junior partner of a governing coalition (Nonnemacher, 2022).

Considering their narrow programmatic focus, niche parties often claim ownership of a restricted set of issues. Moreover, studies show that issue ownership of so-called cultural issues – so far almost always

located at the core of niche parties' policy profile – tends to be more stable than traditional left-right issues (Christensen et al., 2015; Walgrave et al., 2012; Aslanidis, 2016). Furthermore, ownership in terms of issue competence, i.e., whenever a political party is perceived to be the best to handle a specific issue and implement the best policies, is more easily acquired than associative ownership, i.e., a spontaneous association between an issue and a political party (Martinsson, 2007; Petrocik, 1996; Walgrave et al, 2015; Neundorf & Adams, 2016). Moreover, it has been found that there is a connection between issue salience and niche party voting (Lindstam, 2019; Grant & Tilley, 2019; Neundorf & Adams, 2016), as well as between issue ownership and niche party voting – the latter, of course, being conditioned by the salience of the issue (Neundorf & Adams, 2016). Up until recently, there have been few motives for doubting these results. Yet, over the last few years, certain events in Western European politics suggest there might be reasons to re-think the functioning of this relationship.

New parties often surge in response to "electoral market failures" (Lago & Martinez, 2010) and attract voters by offering a policy profile that is distinct from those of existing parties (Zons, 2016). In order to differentiate themselves from their political competition, parties can communicate extreme issue positions (Wagner, 2012) and adjust their programmatic profile (Zons, 2015). Generally, party polarization clarifies the choices presented to voters (Lupu, 2013) and what values are at stake (Petersen et al., 2010; Lachat, 2008) – something that is considered desirable for parties in general (Spoon, 2009) but smaller parties in particular (Wagner, 2012). Interestingly, niche parties have been shown to more often turn to populist communication than mainstream parties does (Järviniemi, 2022). Within the framework of issue yield theory, such a conflict-mobilizing approach is thought to be favorable for parties associated with one of two rivalling positions of a so-called positional issue, where the electoral preferences are distributed across multiple issue positions. Conversely, parties that are associated with so-called valence issues, where the electorate essentially stands behind one and the same issue position, should be favored by politics being framed as a technical procedure requiring a problem-solving approach (De Sio et al., 2020). The distinction between valence and positional issues is an empirical question (Stokes, 1963; D'Alimonte et al., 2020). Thus, issues are rarely intrinsically valence, but they become increasingly positional as they are framed in less generic terms, whereby the focus of the debate shifts from goals to means (van der Brug, 2017).

Even though some has opened up for a discussion on the malleability of issue valence (e.g. Franzmann et al., 2020), the literature has had difficulties conceptualizing this dimension as being the result of differing party behaviors. Moreover, even though there are clearly a vast number of ontological differences distinguishing niche and mainstream parties (Adams et al., 2006), the literature has not systematically theorized the strategic maneuver space taking these differences into account. Theories conceptualizing the dynamics of the electoral yield of parties are often more adequate for mainstream parties. For example, as put forth by proponents of issue yield theory, it makes sense that mainstream parties should always strive to increase the level of electoral support for the issue positions they are associated with. Similarly, it makes sense that mainstream parties associated with issues that are currently more valence than positional should more or less automatically profit electorally from favoring a problem-solving approach, and vice versa (de Sio et al., 2020). However, as will be further detailed in the upcoming section, we argue that niche parties can in fact be electorally disfavored by an increase in the level of electoral support for their issue position(s). Whenever this leads to mainstream parties applying what Méguid calls an accommodative strategy, producing an increase in party political competition around the niche party's issue position, it becomes harder for the latter to provide a distinct policy profile. Considering the electoral value of distinguishing itself from its political competitors, we suggest that niche parties are almost always favored by their issues becoming more positional and should therefore benefit electorally from pursuing strategies that result in a more polarized political landscape.

Following this line of reasoning, the aim of the study is to investigate what factors determine whether a niche party will gain or lose voters by an increase in salience of the niche issue(s). For this purpose, we propose a new theoretical model where the mechanism of central importance is the ability of niche parties to demonstrate the distinctiveness of their issue position relative to that of their political competitors. In the upcoming section, this mechanism, as well as how it can be utilized by niche parties, is further elaborated. Thereafter, the suggested mechanism is tested empirically through a vignette

survey experiment.

3. Theory and Hypotheses

The process leading upp to a voter choosing one party over another is, of course, complex and involves several components, such as political ideology, retrospective accountability, economic development and popularity of party leaders and candidates (see, e.g., Arzheimer et al., 2017 for a good recent overview). In this article, however, we focus on how the usefulness for the voter – or percieved individual utility (Note 1) – of voting for a niche party is both affected by how important the issue is to the voter and by the voter's perception of how important - or instrumental - the niche party is for achieving their preferred policy outcome.

It is essential to the concept of niche parties that these parties are perceived to prioritize a small set of political issues, often at the expense of a perceived commitment to other issues. This prioritization is almost always shared by their electorate. For example, green party voters tend to rank issues related to the environment as their most important issues. These issues also are, by far, the most common reason to vote, as well as considering to vote, for green parties. The same holds true for far-right parties, but then primarily in regard to issues related to migration. Considering that niche parties, with some exceptions, struggle to gain issue ownership over other issues, the niche party's electoral support usually is contingent on voters prioritizing this specific small set of issues, rather than a broader range of issues – more likely to be associated with other parties.

Moreover, in order for voters inclined to prioritize the niche party's issues (hereinafter: the niche party electorate) to actually vote for the niche party, the niche party must be perceived as more important than their mainstream competitors for achieving the voters' preferred policy outcome. Logically, if the niche party electorate were to perceive that a mainstream party is equally instrumental for their preferred policy outcome as the niche party, the utility of voting for the niche party, in comparison to the mainstream party, decreases. Considering that mainstream parties are likely to own policies on other issues as well, potentially also of importance for those considering voting for the niche party, the utility of the mainstream party vote then would surpass that of the niche party vote. This leaves a very weak incentive, even for those prioritizing the niche party's main issues, to actually vote for the niche party.

Following the niche party voting rationale presented above, the probability of the niche party electorate to actually voting for the niche party should increase as the perceived utility of the niche party for reaching a specific policy outcome (hereinafter: perceived policy utility), in comparison to that of its mainstream political competitors, increases (Note 2). This constitutes the basis for the notion of niche party distinctiveness, which is the central mechanism in the theoretical framework.

The niche party distinctiveness is defined according to the difference in perceived policy utility between the niche party and its mainstream political competition. As the gap between the niche party and the mainstream parties grows in regard to their perceived policy utility, the niche party's degree of distinctiveness increases. The bigger the difference in perceived policy utility, the bigger the niche party's distinctiveness.

Thus, the degree to which niche parties are distinct is largely dependent on the perceived policy utility of other political parties. For example, considering that niche parties usually are created in response to electoral market failures – where no parties advocate a certain set of policies, that have become important to (some part of) the electorate – they almost certainly, at some point, advocate a unique set of policies, automatically leading to them being perceived as the most important parties for the implementation of these policies. Considering that no parties, in fact, support the policy in question, the niche parties' distinctiveness is obvious and should, *ceteris paribus*, lead to the niche party electorate voting for them.

Mainstream parties usually position themselves in accordance with the issue position of the median voter (Ferland, 2020; Costello et al., 2021). If the salience of the niche party's issue increases, mainstream parties typically applies accomodative strategies, hoping to gain the support of the niche party electorate by moving closer to the niche party's issue position or redirecting its programmatic focus. This decreases the niche party's issue distinctivenss and should, all things being equal, reduce

the probability of the niche party electorate actually voting for the niche party.

However, niche parties can, also themselves, affect the degree to which they are perceived as distinct in relation to their mainstream party political competition. We assert that that there are mainly two party behaviors that affect the distinctiveness of the niche parties: *consensus-seeking party behavior*, reducing the niche party's distinctiveness, and *conflict-mobilizing party behavior*, increasing its distinctiveness.

In multiparty systems, parties are rarely in a position to legislate without cooperating with other parties. Therefore, they often have to find agreements with other parties around a smallest common denominator. In other words, seeking *consensus* around a compromised version of its policies is commonly the only way for niche parties, or smaller parties in general, to de facto influence the state of affairs. This approach does not, however, lead to an increase in the perceived distinctiveness of the niche party. Instead, it leads to a decrease in the distinctiveness of the niche party, reducing the perceived policy utility of voting for them. Thus, from a vote-seeking perspective, this behavior is sub-optimal.

Conversely, niche parties adopting a *conflict-mobilizing* behavior, defined by its accentuation of the difference between the niche party and their political competitors, increase their own issue distinctiveness. The accentuation of these differences should be valuable to niche parties. Niche parties invest the lion share of their political capital and resources into their main issues. Moreover, niche parties usually enjoy a higher degree of credibility and issue ownership over their issues than other parties. Niche parties should, therefore, have an advantage over their political competitors when it comes to manifesting their policy utility in regard to these issues. By mobilizing coflicts to the party-political landscape, thereby increasing party political polarization, the distinctiveness of their issue position should become visible to their potential voters making the niche party vote more attractive to the niche party electorate. However, by doing so, they probably decrease their chances of harnessing the support needed to realize their policy.

In Figures 1 and 2, we have tried to illustrate the essential difference between a *consensus-seeking* and *conflict-mobilizing* party behavior, in regard to its effect on the niche party's degree of issue distinctiveness. Here, we display the development of the perceived policy utility for two competing policies (Policy A and B) for three political parties over the course of three elections. As is indicated by the labels, the parties are positioned on the axis between Policy A and B, based on their perceived utility for achieving the policy in question. The scale ranges from 0 to 5, where 0 implies that the party is not perceived to have a position on the issue, and 5 that the party is perceived to be absolutely necessary in order for the policy in question to materialize. It is important to note that, in this illustration, Policy A and B are mutually exclusive. The figures, therefore, only illustrates a situation where there is a trade-off between two policies in regard to the same issue, making it impossible for a political party to pursue Policy A and B at the same time. Policy A could, for example, be a set of restrictive migration policies, aiming to reduce the amount of migrants arriving to any given country, whereas Policy B, then, would be a more generous migration policy.

Figures 1 and 2 show the same scenario for the first two elections. For the first election, the niche party is the only party advocating Policy A – automatically leading to the niche party being perceived by the voters as the most important party for its realization. For the second election, the two mainstream parties starts pursuing an accomodative strategy. Here, the two mainstream parties starts advocating for Policy A instead of Policy B, investing both time and resources trying to demonstrate its importance for its realization. Voters might still consider the niche party as the most important party for realizing Policy A, but as the perceived policy utility of the two mainstream parties increases, the niche party's issue distinctiveness decreases. Again, the bigger the difference in perceived policy utility, the bigger the niche party's distinctiveness. Here, niche party electorate's perceived utility of voting for the niche party, in comparison to voting for one of the mainstream parties, decreases. The niche party electorate should therefore, all else being equal, be more prone to mainstream party voting in Election 2, compared to what they were in Election 1.

For the third election, however, Figures 1 and 2 display two very different scenarios. In Figure 1, the niche party pursues a concensus-seeking approach. Here, the perceived policy utility of the niche party

is reduced, potentially as a result of it changing its position in regard to Policy A, in order to favour a compromise. Nor does the niche party mobilize any conflicts in regard to Policy A, that would display the differences in regard to the perceived policy utility between the niche party and its mainstream political competition. Indeed, as a result of this compromise, all parties are now supporting Policy A, favouring the prospects of actually realizing some version of it. However, the perceived distinctiveness of the niche party clearly decreased over the course of these three elections, drastically reducing the estimated utility of the niche party vote.
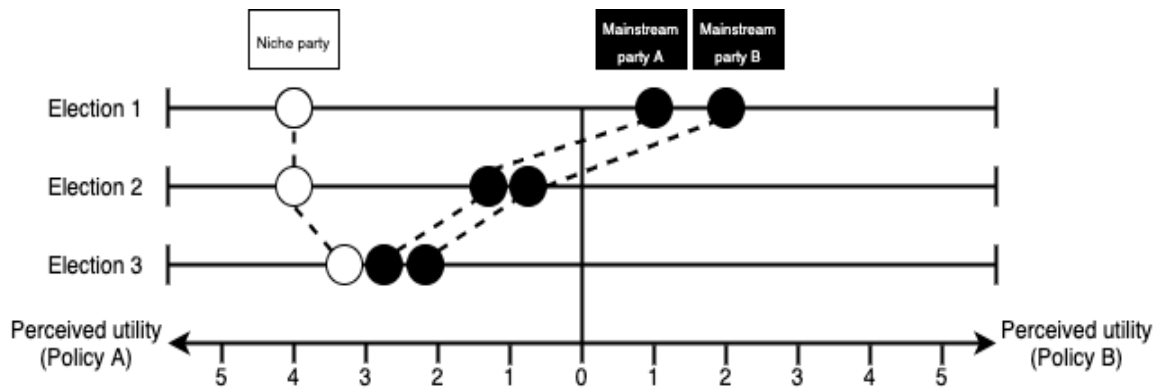

Figure 1. Illustration of a Consensus-seeking Party Behavior

Figure 2 shows the niche party pursuing a conflict-mobilizing approach. Here, the niche party maximizes its niche issue distinctiveness by adopting a conflict-mobilizing party behavior. Between the second and third election, the niche party manages to successfully mobilize a conflict, leading to the voters' perception of the importance of the two mainstream parties for realizing Policy A to decrease, and this at the same time as the perceived policy utility of the niche party increase. Thus, the niche party has increased the distinctiveness of its issue position.
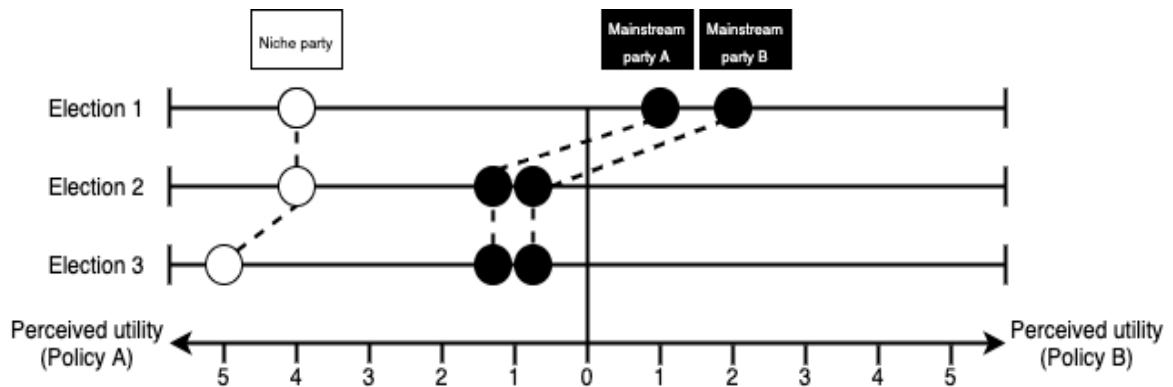

Figure 2. Illustration of a Conflict-mobilizing Party Behaviors

Based on this theoretical reasoning, we formulate the following two hypotheses:

H1 - *Voters susceptible to niche party voting perceive the relative policy utility of a niche party as smaller whenever niche parties adopt a consensus-seeking behavior (thereby reducing the perceived issue distinctiveness of the niche party and ultimately the probability of niche party voting).*

H2 - *Voters susceptible to niche party voting perceive the relative policy utility of a niche party as larger whenever niche parties adopt a conflict-mobilizing behavior (thereby increasing the perceived issue distinctiveness of the niche party and ultimately the probability of niche party voting).*

4. Survey Design and Data

In order to test our two hypotheses, we conducted a randomized vignette survey experiment. The design was basically a two-group between-subjects design. However, the experiment was conducted on two different cases of typical niche parties: pro-environment parties and anti-immigration parties. The survey was administered to respondents in the Swedish Citizen Panel at the University of Gothenburg, which is an online panel managed by the SOM Institute, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

The experiment was performed in two survey waves. The purpose of the first survey wave in December 2020 was to identify what we label the niche party electorate, defined as voters inclined to prioritize a niche party's main issue(s) and thereby constituting potential niche party voters. This was done by identifying which political proposals are most important to them.

In this first survey wave (Appendix 1), respondents were asked to choose one of nine political proposals that they considered to be the most important. Thereafter, they were asked to pick two additional political proposals that they also considered important. Lastly, the respondents were asked to specify how important each issue they selected was to them on a scale from 1 to 7. Using the results from this survey, respondents who named either a progressive climate change mitigation policy or a restrictive immigration policy as their most important policy while also saying that two other policies are important to them to some degree, were then chosen for inclusion in the second survey wave of the experiment.

Those who selected mitigation of climate change as their most important issue were judged to constitute potential green party voters, and those who selected decreasing immigration as most important were identified as potential anti-immigration party voters. The information concerning their second and third most important issues was collected in order to design the experiment so that the mainstream parties also advocated issues that were relevant to the voters, but that did not qualify as their most important issue.

In the second survey wave (see full survey in Appendix 2), conducted in January 2021, each respondent was presented with a scenario consisting of a series of events facing three fictitious political parties: Party A, B, and C. The respondents were told that Party A is known for its work with the political issue identified as most important by the respondent in the first survey, Party B for its work with their second and third most important political proposal, and Party C for its work with one of the issues that the respondent did not consider important (randomly chosen) (Note 3).

The first event illustrated a situation leading to an increase in salience of the respondent's most important issue, relating to either progressive climate change mitigation policies or restrictive immigration policies depending on what policy each respondent had pointed out as the most important one in the first survey. The second event presented one of two different niche party behaviors – consensus-seeking or conflict-mobilizing – in relation to a negotiation taking place between Parties A, B, and C, as a response to the increase in salience following the first event. More specifically, in the event where Party A follows a consensus-seeking behavior, it manages to find an agreement together with Parties B and C, even though this means giving up some of its policy proposals. Conversely, in the event where Party A adopts a conflict-mobilizing behavior, the negotiation falls apart. Here, Party A can pursue its initial preferred policies without having to compromise with Parties B and C. The depicted fictitious behavior of Party A in response to the event leading to the increased saliency of the issue constitutes the treatment in our experimental study. Thus, we have designed the two experiments based on two different cases of typical niche parties: one concerning green parties and one concerning anti-immigration parties to be as similar as possible while still taking the realism of the scenarios into account.

The series of events in the scenario presented in the survey were followed by the measurement of two different dependent variables. First, the respondents were asked to state to what extent they sympathized with each fictitious party on a scale from 1 to 7. Second, they were asked which of the

three fictitious parties they would vote for in a hypothetical election corresponding to a national parliamentary election. A set of basic control variables are also available, either measured at the end of the same survey or already available in the Swedish Citizen Panel. The control variables available in the dataset include gender, education level, age, political interest, political trust, and left-right ideological self-placement.

For the first survey wave, where the main purpose was to screen for potential niche party voters, 25,565 panel members were invited, resulting in 16,734 complete responses with a response rate of 65 percent (AAPOR RR6). Based on these 16,734 responses, potential niche party voters according to our criteria stated above were identified. Next, a random sub-sample consisting of 2,800 panel members fulfilling the criteria of potential progressive climate change niche party voters were invited to the second survey wave containing the actual vignette experiment. Similarly, 2,800 respondents who met the criteria for potential restrictive immigration policy niche party voters were also invited. Thus, a total of 5,600 panel members were selected for inclusion in the experiments. In the second survey wave, the invited respondents were randomly assigned to receive either a scenario where the niche party displays consensus-seeking behavior or a scenario where it instead acts according to a conflict-mobilizing logic. The second survey wave received 5,030 responses, yielding a response rate of 86 percent among those invited (AAPOR RR6).

5. Results

In this section, the results from the two different niche party cases, our two experiments, are analyzed and our hypotheses tested. Both cases had a similar design, where respondents first read a text presenting a hypothetical external event increasing the salience of their most important issue. Next, they read another text presenting information on how the three main political parties reacted to this event, where half the respondents received a scenario where the niche party acts consensus seeking and strikes a compromise with the two other main parties, and the other half received a scenario where the niche party instead acts in a conflict-mobilizing manner, refusing to make a deal and instead leaving the negotiations and pushing its own more radical policy.

After reading this information, the respondents were asked to rate their sympathy for the three main hypothetical parties from 1 (very little sympathy) to 7 (very much sympathy) as well as which of the parties they would vote for in a hypothetical parliamentary election, based on the information in the vignettes. Thus, we have two different outcomes to study: general party sympathy and party voting. First, we examine the results from the green niche party in the climate change scenario.

Case 1: Climate change

We start with how voters evaluate the political parties in terms of their general party sympathy during our two experimental conditions: consensus-seeking and conflict-mobilizing behavior. In Table 1, we examine the results for the case of climate change. We see that the niche parties receive a slightly higher degree of sympathy when they act in a conflict-mobilizing way and insist on their own more far-reaching policies rather than being part of a parliamentary compromise with the two mainstream parties in our scenario. This difference seems quite small though, only 0.2 units on a scale from 1 to 7. All differences between the two experimental conditions in Table 1 are, however, statistically significant at the 99 percent confidence level.

Table 1. Effects of Party Strategy on Party Sympathy. The Case of Climate Change (Mean Party Sympathy, 1–7)

	Consensus-seeking party behavior	Conflict-mobilizing party behavior	Difference
Party A (niche party)	5.6	5.8	+0.2
Party B (mainstream party	5.3	4.8	-0.5

promoting other salient issues)			
Party C (mainstream party promoting non-salient issues)	3.3	2.9	-0.4

Table 2 instead shows the effects on stated voting intention in the hypothetical parliamentary election. Here we see that the seemingly minor effect on the sympathy for the niche party (Party A) actually translates into a fairly large difference in voting intention. The share intending to vote for Party A increases by 10 percentage points when it exhibits the conflict-mobilizing strategy instead of the consensus-seeking strategy. This difference, too, is statistically significant at the 99 percent confidence level.

Table 2. Effects of Party Strategy on Party Choice. The Case of Climate Change (Percent Voting for the Parties)

	Consensus-seeking party behavior	Conflict-mobilizing party behavior	Difference
Party A (niche party)	54.6	64.6	+10.0
Party B (mainstream party promoting other salient issues)	43.0	33.9	-9.1
Party C (mainstream party promoting non-salient issues)	2.5	1.5	-1

Case 2: Immigration

Next, we examine the results for the second case, with an anti-immigration niche party. The effects of party strategies on general sympathy and on voting choice are shown in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Effects of Party Strategy on Party Sympathy. The Case of Restrictive Immigration Policies (Mean Party Sympathy, 1–7)

	Consensus-seeking party behavior	Conflict-mobilizing party behavior	Difference
Party A (niche party)	5.4	6.1	+0.7
Party B (mainstream party promoting other salient issues)	4.7	4.2	-0.5
Party C (mainstream party promoting non-salient issues)	3.0	2.6	-0.4

We note a clear positive effect on sympathy for the niche party when it pursues a conflict-mobilizing strategy. In this case the difference is bigger, +0.7 units on a 1–7 scale. All differences in Table 3 are statistically significant at the 99 percent confidence level.

Concerning voting choice (see Table 4), we find a positive effect of approximately 10 percentage points when the niche party pursues a conflict-mobilizing strategy rather than a consensus-seeking strategy aimed at making a wide parliamentary deal with the mainstream parties. The difference in vote share between the two experimental conditions for Party A and B in Table 4 is statistically significant at the 99 percent confidence level.

Table 4. Effects of Party Strategy on Party Choice. The Case of Restrictive Immigration Policies (Percent Voting for the Parties)

	Consensus-seeking party behavior	Conflict-mobilizing party behavior	Difference
Party A (niche party)	67.5	78.4	+10.9
Party B (mainstream party promoting other salient issues)	30.1	19.2	-10.9
Party C (mainstream party promoting non-salient issues)	2.4	2.4	0

Thus, we have two parallel experiments concerning two different political issues and two different types of niche parties with very similar results. For niche parties, conflict-mobilizing party behavior seems to yield more sympathy and more votes than consensus-seeking strategies (Note 4).

However, when considering the size of these effects, it is important to remember that they are not effect sizes that could directly translate into votes in a general election. The study is deliberately conducted on the relevant sub-population of voters, i.e., those who are potential niche party voters due to having the niche party's issue at the top of their own political agenda. Thus, in itself, the effect in the sample being studied is both fairly large and clearly significant. However, the substantial impact that this can be expected to have on the electorate in its entirety is thus a different story.

According to the annual cross-sectional surveys from the SOM Institute, a well-known Swedish academic survey institute at the University of Gothenburg, the share of the electorate considering immigration/integration one of the most important political issues in recent years has been approximately 38 percent, while the corresponding number for the environment and climate change has been approximately 18 percent (Andersson & Martinsson, 2021, p. 40). However, unlike climate change, immigration is a positional issue with some people favoring restrictive immigration policies and some favoring generous immigration policies. According to the same survey, the share currently in favor of restrictive immigration policies in Sweden is about 59 percent, while the share favoring generous policies is circa 19 percent and 22 percent have opinions in between. This is sufficient to arrive at a very rough estimate of the magnitude of the potential niche party electorates for green and anti-immigration parties, respectively. We estimate that each of those niche electorates make up approximately one fifth of the total electorate. However, since the SOM surveys allow people to mention up to three important issues rather than only their single most important issue, we assume that somewhere in the 15–20 percent range is a fairer estimate. Thus, in the current political context, we are not discussing some minor niche electorates; rather, both issues now tap into a group of currently quite salient issues and challenges for contemporary societies.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

In this article, we aim at disclosing "the secret" behind the electoral success of niche parties. To do so, we suggest a theoretical framework where the *distinctiveness* of niche parties, in regard to their perceived utility for achieving policies preferred by voters that are inclined to prioritize issues owned by niche parties (here referred to as *the niche party electorate*), is crucial for understanding if niche parties will, in fact, gain voters as the salience of "their" issues increases. More specifically, the notion of distinctiveness is defined by the difference in the perceived utility of the niche party and its political competitors. Thus, as the difference in the perceived policy utility between the niche party and its political competitors increases, so does the distinctiveness of the niche party – as well as the probability of the niche party electorate actually voting for them. Similarly, as this difference decreases, so does the distinctiveness of, as well as the probability of the niche party electorate voting for, the niche party.

From this follows that if voters perceive that a mainstream party is equally committed to pursuing the same policies as the niche party, the utility of voting for the latter decreases. Considering that mainstream parties are likely to own policies on other issues – potentially also of importance for the niche party electorate – the utility of the mainstream party vote then ends up surpassing that of the niche party vote. Thus, the perceived utility of the niche party, when it comes to actually achieving this specific policy, determines whether or not the niche party electorate will, in fact, vote for the niche party. Based on this line of reasoning, we derived two hypotheses both of which concern the probability that potential niche party voters (who believe the niche party's focus issue is of highest importance) sympathize with and ultimately vote for the niche party. The idea behind the hypotheses is that the probability of this happening increases when niche parties pursue conflict-mobilizing rather than consensus-seeking party behaviors.

In order to test our hypotheses empirically, we conducted a randomized vignette survey experiment. The experiment showed that conflict-mobilizing party behavior has a statistically significant positive effect on niche party sympathy for both types of niche parties. The experiment also shows that niche parties' conflict-mobilizing behavior decreases the sympathy toward Parties B and C. This effect is bigger for the fictious anti-immigration party than for the fictious green party. Moreover, the second operationalization of our dependent variable (fictious voting intention) shows the same tendency: Niche parties' conflict-mobilizing behavior increases the chances of the niche party electorate voting for them. Thus, we cannot dismiss either of our hypotheses. Our experiments indicate that the niche party electorate rewards niche parties pursuing a conflict-mobilizing party behavior and punishes niche parties pursuing a consensus-seeking party behavior.

For the research on niche parties, these results have several implications. For example, they provide a very useful nuance to some of the reasoning put forward within the framework of issue yield theory, where a common claim is that a conflict-mobilizing approach is favorable for parties associated with one of two rivalling positions of a so-called positional issue, whereas a problem-solving approach is favorable for parties associated with so-called valence issues, where the electorate essentially stands behind one and the same issue position. We argue that this goes against the most intuitive interpretation of the results from our experiment, namely that the niche party electorate consistently rewards a conflict-mobilizing party behavior. Thus, considering that niche parties depend on the distinctiveness of their niche issue position, we argue, niche parties are almost always favored electorally by a conflict-mobilizing party behavior.

Moreover, this research also nuances the work done so far on niche parties by placing voting behavior and voter psychology in the center of both our theoretical reasoning and empirical testing. Of course, considering this is the first of its kind, it is impossible to say based on this experiment alone, what drives the niche party electorate to actually vote for a niche party. It does, however, constitute a first step to better understand the niche party electorate, which is obviously crucial for unveiling the secret behind the electoral success of niche parties.

Also, this research helps understanding the potential electoral consequences of real world political events, naturally affecting the distinctiveness of niche parties, such as niche parties entering into government or engaging in various forms of cross party political collaborations. But also, how such events might affect different multi-party systems differently, considering that distinctiveness of any

given niche party also is affected by the party political landscape as a whole.

For example, the notion of distinctiveness could be useful in explaining why the German Greens are doing substantially better than their Swedish counterpart. Namely, there are three factors contributing to the German Greens being more distinct than the Swedish Green Party in regard to their niche party issues. First, at the time of writing, the German Greens have not been in government for over a decade, whereas the Swedish Greens have been in government together with the Social Democrats for nearly eight years. Second, it has been easier for the German Greens, as part of the opposition, to criticize the German climate policy framework put forward by the CDU/CSU-SPD coalition, deemed insufficient by the environmental movement. Conversely, the Swedish Greens were the initiators of the Swedish climate policy framework and are therefore naturally held accountable for the outcome. Third, compared with Sweden, the German party-political landscape contains fewer parties accommodating the German Green's policy positions on matters relating to the environment.

It is also interesting to note that our empirical results suggest that the conflict-mobilizing behavior seem to decrease the general sympathy for the mainstream parties (Table 1). One interpretation of this result is that the refusal to compromise and continued insistence on the niche parties' own more radical policies emphasizes the inadequacy of the mainstream parties' policies in the area of climate change mitigation or immigration. However, understanding how niche parties' conflict-mobilizing party behavior affect the niche party electorate's view on mainstream parties and their policies demands more specific studies and experiments. In this paper, such conclusions remain very tentative and can merely remain a speculation.

As we see it, based on our theoretical assumptions and the results from our experiment, there are several avenues for future research worthy of scholarly attention. First, future research should look deeper into what factors, besides the policy positions and programmatic concentration of parties, influence niche party voters' perception of how important niche parties are for achieving their policy agendas, here referred to as perceived "policy utility". Second, future research should go beyond the experimental approach, looking to real-world examples of different party behaviors and how they affect the distinctiveness of niche parties' in regard to their main issues. For example, future research could investigate how niche parties' distinctiveness is affected by niche parties entering into government and engaging in various forms of cross-party political collaborations. Third, future research should investigate whether there are any systemic differences between different types of niche parties. For example, it would be worthwhile investigating how the fluidity of voters interacts with the line of reasoning developed in our theoretical framework. Intuitively, voters with a lower threshold for changing party should probably become more prone to mainstream party voting as the niche party's distinctiveness decreases. Then, if there are any systemic differences in voter fluidity between, for example, voters prioritizing pro-environmental and anti-immigration policies, demonstrating niche issue distinctiveness is, perhaps, not equally important for all niche parties.

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Appendix 1: First survey (Note 5)

Q1: Many different policy proposals are being discussed in the public debate. Some you may want to see implemented, and some you may not want to see implemented. Please read the list of proposals below and then choose the one that you think is **the most important to** implement.

o Increase efforts to combat climate change and significantly reduce CO2 emissions (1)

o Accept fewer refugees into the country (2)

o Remove the possibility for businesses to generate profits in the welfare sector (3)

o Substantially increase the public resources allocated to health care (4)

o Reduce taxes (5)

o Promote a society with greater equality between women and men (6)

o Increase the budget for national defense (7)

o Reduce income inequality in society (8)

o *I do not want any of the above proposals to be implemented* (9)

o *Don't know / unsure* (10)

Q2: If you could choose **two additional proposals** that you also think are important to implement, which ones would you choose?

☐   Increase efforts to combat climate change and significantly reduce CO2 emissions (1)

☐   Accept fewer refugees into the country (2)

☐   Remove the possibility for businesses to generate profits in the welfare sector (3)

☐   Substantially increase the public resources allocated to health care (4)

☐   Reduce taxes (5)

☐   Promote a society with greater equality between women and men (6)

☐   Increase the budget for national defense (7)

☐   Reduce income inequality in society (8)

☐   *I do not want any of the proposals to be implemented* (9)

☐   *Don't know/unsure* (10)

Q3: Thinking again about the different policy proposals you would like to see implemented, how important is it to you that each proposal be implemented?

	1 Not at all important (1)	2 (2)	3(3)	4(4)	5(5)	6 (6)	7 Very important (7)
Increase efforts to combat climate change and significantly reduce CO2 emissions (1)	O	O	O	O	O	O	O

Accept fewer refugees into the country (2)	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Remove the possibility for businesses to generate profits in the welfare sector (3)	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Substantially increase the public resources allocated to health care (4)	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Reduce taxes (5)	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Promote a society with greater equality between women and men (6)	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Increase the budget for national defense (7)	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Reducing income inequality in society (8)	O	O	O	O	O	O	O

Appendix 2: Second survey

q5 You have previously responded to a Citizens' Panel survey on which policy proposals you think are most important. Here is a follow-up survey on what policy issues political parties prioritize and what you think about it. The study is carried out in cooperation with researchers at the Department of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg. If you have any questions about the study, please contact lead researcher Sverker Jagers, Professor of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg (sverker.jagers@pol.gu.se).

q7 On the next few pages, you will learn about the political priorities of three fictional political parties. You will also learn about a fictional development in the country. We want you to read the pages carefully and then share what you think about the parties based solely on the information you have received. Imagine a country where there are three political parties: Parties A, B, and C.

Party A is particularly known for pursuing the issue of XYZ (Note 6). Party B for pursuing issues related to XYZ (Note 7) and XYZ (Note 8). Party C to pursue the issue of XYZ (Note 9).

q9 Then imagine that during the hottest summer on record, large forest fires begin to spread across Europe and Sweden. Scientists agree: climate change is to blame for the big fires. The issue is now being widely discussed in the media. Your friends, acquaintances, and colleagues are starting to talk more and more about the issue. Even Parties B and C are starting to talk more than in the past about the importance of combating climate change.

q11 Then imagine that about 15 million people are forced to flee after a war between two countries in the Middle East. Sweden becomes the final destination for many of them, with around 40,000 people expected to arrive each month. The issue is now being widely discussed in the media. Your friends, acquaintances, and colleagues are starting to talk more and more about the issue. Even Parties B and C

are starting to talk more than in the past about the importance of reducing the number of refugees coming to Sweden.

q13 One evening, about a month later, you are watching the news. In a clip from a press conference, Parties A, B, and C jointly announce that they have reached a cross-party agreement. Despite major differences between the parties, they have now jointly agreed on the importance of reducing emissions in order to combat climate change. Party B (known for pursuing issues related to XYZ (Note 10) and XYZ (Note 11)) and Party C (known for pushing the issue of XYZ (Note 12)) are now pushing a joint proposal with Party A. In order to reach an agreement, Party A has had to compromise. Several of the policy proposals that Party A has previously advocated to reduce emissions and combat climate change are therefore not represented in the agreement.

q14 One evening, about a month later, you watch the news. In a clip from a press conference, Party A tells you that they have been trying to negotiate a cross-party agreement with Party B and Party C. Parties B and C, who are typically known for pushing other policy proposals, have agreed to raise their ambitions to fight the climate crisis. However, Party A believes that the climate crisis requires greater emission reductions than those that Party B and Party C were willing to agree to. As a result, Party A has now left the negotiations.

Party A is now pushing its own proposal to drastically reduce emissions. At the same time, Party B (known for pursuing issues related to XYZ (Note 13) and XYZ (Note 14)) and Party C (known for pursuing the issue of XYZ (Note 15)) are pushing a less ambitious proposal.

q15 One evening, about a month later, you watch the news. In a clip from a press conference, Parties A, B, and C jointly announce that they have reached a cross-party agreement. Despite major differences between the parties, they have now jointly agreed on the importance of limiting the number of refugees coming to Sweden.

Party B (known for pursuing issues related to XYZ (Note 16) and XYZ (Note 17)) and Party C (known for pushing the issue of XYZ (Note 18)) are now pushing a joint proposal with Party A. In order to reach an agreement, Party A has had to compromise. Several of the policy proposals that Party A has previously promoted in order to reduce the number of refugees coming to Sweden are thus not represented in the agreement.

q16 One evening, about a month later, you watch the news. In a clip from a press conference, Party A tells you that they have been trying to negotiate a cross-party agreement with Party B and Party C. Parties B and C, who are typically known for pushing other political proposals, have agreed to limit the number of refugees coming to Sweden. However, Party A believes that the refugee crisis requires greater measures than those that Party B and Party C were willing to agree to. As a result, Party A has now left the negotiations. Party A is now pushing its own proposal to drastically reduce the number of refugees coming to Sweden. At the same time, Party B (known for pursuing issues related to XYZ (Note 19) and XYZ (Note 20)) and Party C (known for pushing the issue of XYZ (Note 21)) are promoting a less ambitious proposal.

q18 Based on the information you just read, to what extent do you sympathize with the following parties?

	1 Very little sympathy for the party (1)	2 (2)	3(3)	4(4)	5(5)	6 (6)	7 Sympathize very much with the party (7)
Part A (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Part B (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Part C (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

q20 Imagine that you were to vote in an election equivalent to a parliamentary election where you could choose between Party A, B, and C. Based on the information you have just read, which party would you vote for?

    ○ Part A (1)

    ○ Part B (2)

    ○ Part C (3)

q22 Can you tell us a bit more about how you reasoned when you decided to vote for XYZ (Note 22)?

_____

_____

_____

_____

q24 In general, how much confidence do you have in Swedish authorities?

    ○ Very high confidence (1)

    ○ Fairly high confidence (2)

    ○ Fairly low confidence (3)

    ○ Very little confidence (4)

q26 In general, how much confidence do you have in the Swedish news media?

    ○ Very high confidence (1)

    ○ Fairly high confidence (2)

    ○ Fairly low confidence (3)

    ○ Very little confidence (4)

Notes

Note 1. By using the term *utility* in order to explain voting behavior, we do indeed position ourselves to some extent within a loose rational choice framework for explaining voting behavior. However, this positioning should not be exagerated: Our point of departure is simply that voters are (at least) partly influenced by rational considerations concerning the issues and societal problems they want politicians to address. This does not imply that we believe that voters are exclusively or primarily rational and consciously calculating the expected utility of different political parties. For a previous usage of the term *utility*, or more specifically, *electoral utilities*, in modeling voter choice, see van der Eijk et al. (2006).

Note 2. Many different elements, of course, shape the voter's perception of the utility of voting for a specific party. The notion of perceived policy utility would, therefore, be worthy of further scholarly investigation. For the purpose of the survey experiment conducted in this paper, this concept is operationalized as only being a question of policy position and programmatic concentration. Of course, other aspects also affect the perceived policy utility, such as the competence and likeability of party representatives.

Note 3. We acknowledge that this corresponds to a somewhat simplified version of the definitions of niche and mainstream parties broadly used in the literature. As previously stated, however, the general association of parties to certain issues is central to our definition of niche parties. Therefore, we argue that the operationalization of the party categories used above is justified – albeit probably being far

from perfect.

Note 4. We also investigated whether the size of the effect of the treatment (conflict-mobilizing party behavior) is conditional upon how much more important the niche issue is to the voters compared with other issues. For example, if the three most important issues are of roughly equal importance, the consensus-seeking approach might be relatively speaking more appealing. Since it is not evident precisely how the relative importance should be measured, we created three different operationalizations of the saliency of the first issue relative to that of the second and third issues. However, in all three versions of the operationalization of the relative importance of the niche issue, the differences in effect sizes are small and do not exhibit any meaningful pattern. Our tentative conclusion is therefore that the size of the effect of party behavior is not conditional on how much more important than other issues the most important issue is to the voter.

Note 5. In order to improve the readability of the survey, we have excluded certain elements of code used in Qualtrics. Some elements of the surveys was individualized based on previous answers by the respondent. Here, we have inserted the letter XYZ together with a footnote explaining what each respondent saw in this specific place.

Note 6. The respondent was shown the issue that they ranked as their most important issue in the first survey (either mitigation of climate change or decreasing immigration).

Note 7. The respondent was shown one of the two issues that they also ranked as important issues to them (albeit not the most important) in the first survey wave.

Note 8. The respondent was shown the other of the two issues that they also ranked as important issues to them (albeit not the most important one) in the first survey wave.

Note 9. The respondent was shown on of the issues that they did not rank as important. This was randomized.

Note 10. The respondent was shown one of the two issues that they also ranked as important issues to them (albeit not the most important) in the first survey wave.

Note 11. The respondent was shown the other of the two issues that they also ranked as important issues to them (albeit not the most important one) in the first survey wave.

Note 12. The respondent was shown one of the issues that they did not rank as important. This was randomized.

Note 13. The respondent was shown one of the two issues that they also ranked as important issues to them (albeit not the most important) in the first survey wave.

Note 14. The respondent was shown the other of the two issues that they also ranked as important issues to them (albeit not the most important one) in the first survey wave.

Note 15. The respondent was shown one of the issues that they did not rank as important. This was randomized.

Note 16. The respondent was shown one of the two issues that they also ranked as important issues to them (albeit not the most important) in the first survey wave.

Note 17. The respondent was shown the other of the two issues that they also ranked as important issues to them (albeit not the most important one) in the first survey wave.

Note 18. The respondent was shown one of the issues that they did not rank as important. This was randomized.

Note 19. The respondent was shown one of the two issues that they also ranked as important issues to them (albeit not the most important) in the first survey wave.

Note 20. The respondent was shown the other of the two issues that they also ranked as important issues to them (albeit not the most important one) in the first survey wave.

Note 21. The respondent was shown one of the issues that they did not rank as important. This was

randomized.

Note 22. The respondent was shown the party (Party A, B or C) that they would vote for in the hypothetical election described in the question before (q20).