

Bridging Spatial and Saliency Theory: Party Size and Issue Selection in Campaigns

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Abstract

I propose a unified explanation for parties' joint policy and emphasis decisions which bridges saliency theory and spatial analyses of party campaigns. Party platforms are anchored by the policy preferences of activists, core supporters and target voters, leading parties to disproportionately emphasize issues where their policies are popular with all key constituencies. However, which voters a party targets relates to its historical electoral performance ('party size'). Traditionally successful ('major') parties emphasize issues where the policies preferred by activists and core supporters are generally popular, but smaller ('minor') parties emphasize issues where their preferred policies may be unpopular but are distinctive. Using recent European data and various empirical strategies, I show that this account has significant explanatory power beyond existing party typologies and theories of issue selection.

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In the 2010 general election, the British Liberal Democratic party achieved its highest ever vote share. Curiously, in the preceding campaign, the party devoted considerable time to some of its less popular policies—such as amnesty for illegal immigrants or opposition to nuclear power—instead of spending that same time on its more popular and more moderate economic policies, such as its proposal to raise the income tax threshold, or to reduce the fiscal deficit, but gradually. This is evident from the parties’ social media campaigns in 2010. Compared to the Labour and Conservative parties, the Liberal Democrats referenced policies on taxation and public services considerably less often in tweets from their official Twitter account, and referenced policies on the environment considerably more often.”¹ Might emphasizing its more extreme and less popular policies have been a vote-winning strategy for a party like the Liberal Democrats – and if so, why?

Drawing on both saliency theory and spatial analyses of party competition, I propose a unified theory of parties’ joint policy and emphasis decisions which can explain patterns like the above. Following Wagner (2012), I distinguish between the policy *position* adopted by a party on an issue and how much it *emphasizes* the issue in its campaigns: position and emphasis are distinct but complementary aspects of a party’s electoral strategy. As previously argued by a large literature (Aldrich 1983; Miller and Schofield 2003; Bawn et al. 2012), I observe that party platforms are frequently anchored by the policy preferences of activists and core supporters, leading political parties to adopt some policies which may be unpopular with their target voters. However, if parties are able to increase the electoral importance of certain issues by emphasizing them, they can limit any negative electoral fallout from such decisions by disproportionately emphasizing the issues where the policies preferred by their activists and core supporters are also popular with target voters.

Crucially, in a departure from previous work on party strategy, I argue that which voters a party targets not only depends on characteristics like its nicheness (Meguid 2005), governing experience (van de Wardt, Vries and Hobolt 2014) or party organization (Schumacher, de Vries and Vis 2013), but also past electoral performance. In particu-

¹Whereas Labour and the Conservatives referenced policies on taxation and public services in about 20% of tweets from their official accounts, the Liberal Democrats did so in 10.8% of official tweets. Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats devoted five times as many tweets as the Conservatives to its policies on the environment, and ten times as many as Labour — while also putting the environment on the cover of their election manifesto and emphasizing ‘green’ proposals in each policy area (author’s calculations, based on analysis of all tweets posted by @LibDems, @Conservatives and @UKLabour between 6 April and 6 May 2010). However, a majority of British respondents have consistently supported including nuclear power in the UK’s energy mix. For instance, in June 2010, 64% of respondents supported some reliance on nuclear power to satisfy Britain’s energy needs (Corner et al. 2011).

lar, I suggest that historically successful parties—‘major parties’—will tend to target the median voter, but parties that have often struggled to secure a parliamentary foothold—‘minor parties’—will instead pursue voters with atypical policy preferences. That minor parties, even ostensibly ‘centrist’ ones, may actually benefit by emphasizing their more distinctive positions is consistent with the experience of the Liberal Democrats – a canonical example of such a party.²

Analyzing cross-sectional party-issue level data on the issue emphases of 178 parties in 27 Eastern and Western European countries, I present evidence consistent with this account. In particular, I show that, throughout Europe, both major and minor parties adopt more extreme policies when their core supporters are more extreme on an issue. However, whereas major parties de-emphasize their more extreme issue positions, minor parties typically emphasize these positions. Perhaps surprisingly, even minor parties that are often considered ‘centrist’ typically emphasize their more extreme issue positions.³

These differences between major and minor parties appear to be induced by differences in these parties’ past electoral performance, rather than simply because major and minor parties are different in other fundamental respects. I suggest that it may be electorally optimal for major and minor parties to behave in this way if major parties are preferred to minor parties by voters when all else is equal. I also discuss a range of alternative explanations for these patterns, and find all wanting. For instance, although a party’s issue emphases may influence its vote share, I show that this cannot by itself account for the observed differences between major and minor party emphasis strategy: these differences are well predicted by parties’ electoral performance in 1995, and also if we instrument for each party’s current major or minor party status using its seat share in 1995, but not predicted by parties’ current electoral performance. Further, while major and minor parties may systematically differ on a range of criteria, I also show that the observed difference between major and minor party strategy cannot be accounted for by

²British psephologists have previously suggested that emphasizing ‘radical’ rather than ‘centrist’ policies might be a vote-winning strategy for the Liberal Democrats (Russell and Fieldhouse 2005; Cutts and Russell 2015). Yet, the Liberal Democratic party has consistently been perceived as centrist by researchers and the British electorate (Adams and Merrill 2006; Nagel and Wlezien 2010). The party has never obtained more than 10% of seats in parliament.

³Examples of minor parties with centrist economic platforms which disproportionately emphasize their more extreme non-economic issue positions include the Christian Democrats in Finland, the Green and Farmers’ Union in Latvia, Order and Justice in Lithuania, and Potami in Greece. All of these parties were, on average, located between 4 and 6 on the left-right economic scale in the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey. Several minor liberal or Christian democratic parties, like the Free Democratic Party in Germany, the Liberal Alliance in Denmark, the Swedish Centre Party or the Swedish Christian Democrats, do disproportionately emphasize their economic platforms – but the policies they advocate on economic issues were, in fact, considered extreme by experts.

any differences in prior governing experience, party organization, party nicheness or left-right ideology. Finally, I argue that these differences cannot merely be accounted for by activists selecting into certain parties based on the issues they emphasize. Cumulatively, the analyses suggest that whether a party is major or minor has a distinct and substantial effect on its electoral strategy.

1 Related Literature

This paper bridges several distinct but overlapping literatures. Most importantly, in building a theory linking a party's choice of which issues to emphasize in campaigns to its preferred policies on those issues, I draw on both saliency theory and spatial analyses of party behavior. Saliency theory has long argued that parties will emphasize issues on which they are favored by voters so as to increase the electoral importance of those issues (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996; Dolezal et al. 2014), whereas spatial analysis has frequently been used to study the origins and effects of parties' positional choices (Adams, Merrill III and Grofman 2005; Adams 2012). By combining elements from both literatures, I am able to explain why some parties may adopt favorable issue positions and others unfavorable ones, and moreover, why parties with unfavorable issue positions may choose to de-emphasize those issues rather than adopt positions that are more favorable instead. To date, most work on party strategy has not focused on these questions, instead taking the issues that are favorable for a party as given.⁴

That said, this paper relates closely to, and builds on, the few studies that also investigate the relationship between party position-taking and emphasis strategy – notably, Wagner (2012) and de Sio and Weber (2014). For instance, Wagner (2012) also suggests that smaller parties will emphasize their more extreme, or distinctive, policies due to the electoral benefits of policy differentiation – whereas larger parties might de-emphasize their more extreme issue positions. I replicate these findings, but clarify that a party's historical electoral performance—and not just its recent vote share—influences its emphasis strategy, and also show that the effect of party size is distinct from that of its nicheness.⁵ Meanwhile, de Sio and Weber (2014) argue that the issue positions associ-

⁴The tendency of a party to be systematically favored by voters on a certain issue has often been termed 'issue ownership' (Dahlberg and Martinsson 2015). While some recent studies have explored how and why a party's ownership of an issue may evolve over time, they have not studied the relationship between a party's issue reputation and preferred policies.

⁵Wagner (2012) notes the considerable overlap between party size and niche party type, but seems to suggest that niche parties are a subset of small parties, rather than considering nicheness and size to be orthogonal characteristics of a party (p. 70–71).

ated with a party are those favored by its core voters, and that parties will emphasize ‘bridge policies’ – issue positions which are popular with the party’s existing voters. This resembles the strategy I suggest should be favored by major parties. However, I show that a different emphasis strategy may be optimal for minor parties, and also discuss the additional constraints that activist and core supporter preferences imply for parties.

A second contribution of this paper is to the literature on party types. I determine that a party’s major or minor status has a separate but complementary effect on its strategy that goes above and beyond the effect of other party characteristics identified in the literature. These include whether a party is niche or mainstream (Meguid 2005), whether a party is a challenger or mainstream (Hobolt and de Vries 2012), whether a party is activist-dominated or leader-dominated (Schumacher and Giger 2017), and whether a party is office-seeking or policy-seeking (Schumacher et al. 2015). For instance, the distinction I draw between major and minor parties may resemble that often drawn between mainstream and niche parties, but I show that while niche parties—however measured—are more often ‘minor’, they can be ‘major’, and mainstream parties are about equally likely to be major or minor. Similarly, while minor parties are more likely to be challenger parties than major parties, are slightly more dominated by activists and tend to have lower levels of office-seeking ambition, I show that the distinction in behavior between major and minor parties that I identify survives even after controlling for these factors, as measured by these authors.⁶

A third contribution of this paper is to the literature on parties’ electoral incentives for differentiation. I propose that minor parties face stronger incentives to differentiate themselves from their competitors than do major parties, and they do so by emphasizing their more distinctive issue positions. This departs from earlier studies of electoral differentiation that do not consider how these incentives may vary by party type (Cox 1990; Kitschelt 1994). That said, this argument resembles that of (Schofield 2004), who uses a spatial model to argue that high valence parties have a greater incentive to locate near the median voter than low valence parties. This echoes the argument I develop in Section 2, where I posit that historically successful parties may be more attractive to the median voter than historically smaller parties when all else is equal, imbuing major parties with a non-policy advantage among voters. However, whereas Schofield focuses on explaining party position-taking, I adapt this reasoning to understand party emphasis strategies instead. The difference in behavior between major and minor parties that

⁶This also suggests that major parties are not necessarily catch-all parties (Katz and Mair 1996), as I find a difference in major and minor party emphasis strategy even after controlling for organizational structure and levels of office-seeking aspiration.

I identify also reinforces the conclusions of earlier studies arguing that smaller parties face stronger electoral incentives to adopt distinctive policy positions (Abou-Chadi and Orłowski 2016; Spoon 2009).

Finally, this paper complements other work on the origins of parties' issue reputations (Walgrave, Lefevere and Nuytemans 2009; Dahlberg and Martinsson 2015), as well as on the determinants of parties' emphasis strategies on positional issues (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; van de Wardt 2014; van de Wardt, Vries and Hobolt 2014). These studies identify several other factors which are important for parties' issue emphasis decisions, such as division among a party's supporters on the issue, governing experience, and the issues emphasized by other parties in the same country or party family. I control for these additional factors in my analyses, and continue to find that a party's major or minor party status influences its emphasis decisions on positional issues.

2 Theory

I distinguish between the position a party chooses on an issue dimension (its policies on the issue in its platform) and its emphasis on the issue dimension in public statements (how much the party talks about the issue). This differs from work equating positional extremism on an issue with emphasis, clarity or 'intensity' on the issue.⁷ Accepting this distinction allows for the possibility that parties may emphasize an extreme position, or a centrist position. Likewise, parties may de-emphasize extreme *or* centrist positions. For simplicity, I assume that parties take a position on every issue dimension in a multidimensional Downsian policy space – even if they place no emphasis on this position.⁸ Throughout, I focus on the vote-maximizing incentives faced by both major and minor parties, arguing that such incentives lead different parties to behave differently.⁹

I develop a theory where the preferences of a party's activists and core supporters influence the policies adopted by a party and, thereby, the issues it emphasizes in public. The theoretical argument rests on five claims. In this section, I discuss the claims and suggest reasons why we might expect each claim to hold. Building on these claims,

⁷This equivalence is implicit in directional theory (Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989), and also apparent in more recent work relating to parties' salience strategies (Rovny 2012).

⁸From a voter's perspective, a party that takes no position on an issue is observationally equivalent to a party that places no emphasis on the issue.

⁹This is not to say that all such parties are vote-seeking; in any context where parties' legislative influence is increasing in vote share, all else equal, even office-seeking or policy-seeking party elites will presumably want to maximize votes in the short run – either to retain office or to obtain greater policy influence.

I propose a number of testable hypotheses. In Section 4, I argue that these testable hypotheses are supported in recent European data.

Claim 1: *Party platforms are anchored by the preferences of their activists and core supporters.*

The channels through which activists may constrain party policy are straightforward if activists play a key role in internal decision-making: the party leadership is more reliant on activist support for its survival, and may need activist approval when devising policy. More generally, party elites must take note of the opinions of “policy-demanding groups” (Bawn et al. 2012), including activists and core supporters, since they rely on their financial and logistical support in campaigns, and this support may be conditional on policy payoffs.¹⁰ This is plausible even in an era of increasing electoral volatility and declining party membership (Mair, Müller and Plasser 2004), as canvassing by activists remains an important means by which parties persuade and mobilize likely voters.¹¹ Meanwhile, core supporters—as distinct from a party’s core *voters*—provide parties with a reservoir of volunteer campaign workers (Scarrow 2015), and may persuade their friends and family to support a particular party. As such—and consistent with a large literature (Aldrich 1983; Miller and Schofield 2003; Bawn et al. 2012)—we may expect that, when choosing policies, parties will endeavor to locate close to their activists and core supporters, leading all parties to take non-centrist positions on some issues.

From Claim 1, the following testable hypothesis follows straightforwardly.

H1: *Parties adopt positions closer to the median voter on issues where the preferences of their activists and core supporters are more similar to those of the median voter.*

The second theoretical claim concerns party issue emphases.

Claim 2: *Parties tend to disproportionately emphasize the issues where their policies are more popular with their target voters.*

This claim is based on the premise that a party will be more able to win over its target voters if the election is fought on issues where these target voters prefer the party’s policies

¹⁰Here, ‘activists’ refer to a party’s rank-and-file members and campaign workers, while core supporters are those “strong party identifiers who are deeply engaged in the political process” (Egan 2013, 126). Implicitly, I assume that activists are normally also core supporters, but core supporters are not necessarily activists.

¹¹Numerous recent studies have found local campaigning by activist to have positive electoral payoffs in diverse contexts (Johnston and Pattie 2006; Karp and Banducci 2007; Pons 2018). The payoff from local canvassing may even have increased over time, as undecided voters have increased in number and as innovations in campaign technology have allowed parties to target marginal constituencies more effectively (Fisher, Cutts and Fieldhouse 2011).

to the policies of its opponents. Then, the party may wish to particularly emphasize such issues in order to increase their importance to voters. Such a strategy for a party is consistent with previous research on ‘heresthetics’ and saliency theory, which has argued that political parties are able to influence voters’ issue priorities by selectively emphasizing certain issues, and that parties disproportionately emphasize electorally favorable issues in order to increase their salience (Riker 1996; Wagner and Meyer 2014).

Claim 3: *Historically electorally successful parties face strategic incentives to target the median voter.*

This claim builds on fairly standard Downsian reasoning. If there are more moderate than extreme voters on each issue¹², a party can reasonably expect to do best electorally if able to appeal to voters near the median. Then, a party will have a strategic incentive to target such voters if it believes it can win them over. The parties with the most realistic hope of appealing to voters near the median will often be parties that have achieved substantial seat shares in recent elections. I term these ‘major parties’. If major parties can realistically expect to obtain the support of the median voter but historically smaller parties—‘minor parties’—usually cannot, then only major parties will consistently have a strategic incentive to target the median voter.

In combination, Claims 1–3 suggest the following testable hypothesis:

H2: *Major parties emphasize the issues on which the position of the party, and the preferences of activists and core supporters, are closer to the median voter.*

The reasoning behind **H2** is as follows. If the strategic incentives described in Claim 3 are sufficiently powerful, major parties will tend to target the median voter. Based on Claim 1, if major party platforms are anchored by the preferences of activists and core supporters, major parties will typically only adopt policies like those preferred by the median voter on issues where their activists and core supporters are also closer to the median voter. If voters care about ideological proximity to some degree, then a major party’s policies are likely to be more popular with the median voter on issues where its activists and core supporters are closer to the median voter. Then, based on Claim 2, major parties can be expected to emphasize such issues in order to increase their electoral salience, in which case **H2** follows. Emphasizing these issues helps the major party to appeal to the mass of voters near the median. Although, in principle, a major party could

¹²This will be true so long as voter preferences are approximately single peaked and symmetric on each issue. Empirically, I find that these hold for voter preferences on most issues. Kernel density plots of average European voter preferences on each issue are given in Appendix B.1.

be more popular with such voters if it were to take a moderate position on all issues, in practice this is not possible if the party is anchored to particular policies by activists and core supporters (Claim 1).

The next claim asserts that minor parties do not have the same strategic incentives as major parties.

Claim 4: *Minor parties do not usually face strong strategic incentives to target the median voter.*

While major parties can often realistically expect to secure a high vote share, and therefore seat share, by appealing to voters near the median, minor parties usually cannot expect to achieve this in the short term. As such, targeting the median voter may be a sensible strategy for major parties but not a viable strategy for minor parties.

One reason that major parties may be advantaged over minor parties, and so have more success with the median voter, is that a party's historical electoral performance may shape voters' expectations regarding the party's *likely* vote share in future. This may lead some voters to vote tactically for major parties. In particular, as the single largest party in a parliamentary system is likely to either form a single-party government or to be the formateur in a multi-party government—with possible disproportionate cabinet and policy clout (Ansolabehere et al. 2005)—voters may try to coordinate on the parties likely to obtain a plurality of seats. In most cases, these are likely to be major parties, as voters use a party's past electoral performance as a heuristic for its future viability (Blais, Erisen and Rheault 2014). Provided voters are concerned to influence the choice of executive, this provides an incentive for strategic voting for major parties. This is true not only at the district level under majoritarian electoral systems—as voters abandon locally noncompetitive candidates—but also at the national level under both majoritarian systems and proportional representation.¹³ As such, studies considering both majoritarian and proportional electoral systems have found that smaller parties frequently lose votes to large parties due to strategic voting (Abramson et al. 2010).

Then, it may be very difficult for minor parties to draw support from voters near the median if major parties are also targeting these voters. If a minor party tries to pursue the same voters as a major party—by taking similar positions to the major party or by emphasizing similar issues—then tactical considerations may lead such voters to

¹³In some cases, tactical considerations may still entail a vote for a minor party over a major party – for instance, as “threshold insurance” (Gschwend 2007), or due to a desire for “policy balancing” (Kedar 2005). However, it seems probable that, in most scenarios, tactical considerations like the above will favor major parties over minor parties.

choose the major party over the minor party. Moreover, there are other reasons voters may turn to the major party rather than the minor party in such a scenario.¹⁴ For instance, the major party may have more activists and media exposure than the minor party, allowing it to run a more visible campaign and to establish greater name brand recognition. Major parties may also benefit from more widespread pre-existing partisan allegiances, and voters may value the major party's greater legislative experience.

Thus, it may not be viable for a minor party to target the median voter. The next claim proposes that minor parties will instead target voters whose policy preferences are poorly represented by other parties.¹⁵

Claim 5: *Minor parties face strategic incentives to target voters who are ideologically distant from the positions taken by other parties.*

If minor parties cannot expect to successfully appeal to many voters also being targeted by major parties, then they are more likely to target voters unhappy with the policies being advocated by other parties in the same system, including major ones. Minor parties usually begin each election campaign at a significant disadvantage relative to major parties also in the race. Therefore, they may secure more votes by targeting voters who feel their preferences on issues salient to them are not well represented by other parties—including by the major parties—than by targeting the median voter. These may be voters like those who chose to support the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in Britain over the Conservatives in 2015 or 2017, believing that no other party was sufficiently Euroskeptic – or supporters of the Pirate Party in Germany, who do not feel their views on civil liberties are being adequately represented by any of the other parties in the system. Voters like these may be less easily swayed by tactical or other reasons to support major parties, and so are more likely to be attracted to minor parties.

If a minor party aims to attract voters who are ideologically distant from other parties, then it will find it easiest to do so by espousing policies that are distinct from other parties on one or more issues. Then, in many cases, the policies of a minor party that are most likely to be electorally valuable will be the policies it espouses that are most distinct from those espoused by other parties. Based on Claim 1 above, these are also likely to be the issues where the minor party's activists and core supporters hold views that are most distinct from those supporting other parties. Based on Claim 2, it follows that minor

¹⁴I posit that many, but not necessarily most, voters would choose the major party over the minor party in this scenario. There are many reasons why some voters might still prefer the minor party, such as local considerations, or the minor party's ownership of an issue.

¹⁵One important case where a minor party may want to target the median voter is if all major parties hold very extreme positions on some issue. This is discussed after **H3b** below.

parties should be expected to emphasize the issues where their policies are most distinct from other parties, in order to increase the salience of these issues. This line of reasoning suggests the following testable hypothesis:

H3a: *Minor parties emphasize the issues on which the position of the party, and the preferences of its activists and core supporters, are most distinct from those of other parties in the same system.*

So long as there are no issues where all major parties adopt very extreme policies, the issues where a minor party's policies are most distinctive will necessarily be those where its policies, and activist and core supporter preferences, are most extreme, since its centrist policies are not very distinctive. This in turn suggests another testable hypothesis:

H3b: *Minor parties emphasize the issues on which the position of the party, and the preferences of activists and core supporters, are further from the median voter.*

When all major parties hold very extreme positions on an issue, **H3b** may not hold, since a minor party's most distinctive position may then be a centrist one. Nevertheless, I conjecture that **H3a** will still hold under these circumstances. The example of the British Liberal Democrats discussed in the introduction illustrates the implications of **H3b**. The party increased its vote share in the 2010 election while emphasizing non-centrist positions on asylum and immigration and the environment rather than its more centrist economic positions. Similarly, the radical right parties of Europe have won the support of sections of the electorate while emphasizing their relatively extreme positions on immigration. While these parties have increasingly adopted relatively moderate economic platforms (for instance, of a 'welfare chauvinist' hue), they nevertheless continue to emphasize their positions on immigration considerably more than their economic policies,¹⁶ appealing to voters' national identities rather than their economic interests (Kriesi et al. 2006).

Major and minor parties may differ in a number of ways that are important for their political behavior. For instance, major parties might be more leader-dominated than minor parties (Schumacher, de Vries and Vis 2013); they may differ in whether they have governing experience (Hobolt and de Vries 2012), in their office-seeking ambitions (Schumacher et al. 2015), or in whether they are mainstream or niche (Meguid 2008). Nevertheless, Claims 3 and 4 propose that differences in strategy between major and minor parties partly reflect different strategic incentives faced by these parties as a consequence of their past electoral performance. Then it follows that major and minor parties can be expected to behave differently in part because of their past electoral performance rather

¹⁶I find this to be true of all radical right parties in the CHES dataset I analyse in Section 4.

than simply due to other differences that may exist between these parties. Moreover, it follows that major and minor party *status* is not simply a consequence of the emphasis strategies that different parties adopt, but itself determines parties' strategic incentives and therefore their emphasis strategies.¹⁷ This implies a further testable hypothesis:

H4: *Differences in issue emphases between major and minor parties cannot be entirely attributed to other long-standing differences between these parties, such as organization, government experience or nicheness.*

In Section 4, I show that hypotheses **H1-H3b** are consistent with recent patterns of party issue emphasis in Europe. In Section 4.2, I present a range of analyses providing suggestive evidence in favor of **H4**. A full empirical evaluation of **H4** is left to future work. In sum, the evidence provided for **H1-H4** is suggestive that the underlying theoretical Claims 1–5 characterize the incentives facing political parties in Europe in recent times, and their resulting behavior, to some degree.

3 Data Description

To evaluate the extent of empirical support for hypotheses **H1-H4**, I estimate the effect of variation in the extremism of a party's core supporters on its positional extremism and emphasis decisions across various issues. I combine data from the 2014 European Election Study (EES) and the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) to construct a country-party-issue level measure of core supporter extremism, parties' positional extremism and issue emphasis for eight issues. I include all available issues: state intervention in the economy, redistribution, taxes vs. public spending, same-sex marriage, civil liberties, restrictions on immigration, EU integration and environmental protection. For each issue, respondents were either asked to place themselves (in the EES) or the party (in the CHES) on an eleven-point scale.¹⁸ In the CHES, experts were also asked to identify and rank the three most important issues for each party.

¹⁷Implicit in this analysis is the possibility that major and minor parties might change which voters they target in response to changes in their electoral performance. For instance, we would expect that when a formerly major party loses enough support to become a minor party, its emphasis strategy (and target voters) will evolve accordingly. In analyses discussed in Appendix E.8, I show that a party's emphasis strategy depends on its average electoral performance over approximately the previous fourteen years, but not its electoral performance prior to that time.

¹⁸The feasibility of this exercise clarifies the positional character of all eight issues. The exact wording of questions posed is given in Appendix B, alongside more discussion of why CHES and EES are preferred to other sources.

In a few analyses, the main outcome variable is a party's positional extremism on an issue. I measure this by the difference between a party's position on an issue (according to the CHES) and that of the average voter in its country (according to the EES).^{19,20} In the majority of analyses, the main outcome variable is party emphasis on an issue in a given country. Absent a continuous measure of issue emphasis, I construct an ordinal measure using data from the CHES, which takes values between 0 and 3.²¹ For instance, if experts, on average, considered an issue to be the most important issue for a party, the issue is scored 3; the second most important issue for a party is scored 2, and so on and so forth. In a few instances, two or more issues were, on average, ranked as being similarly important to a party. In these cases, all issues were awarded the same score.²²

In all analyses, the key independent variable is either the issue extremism or the ideological distinctiveness of a party's core supporters. For each country-issue, I measure the extremism of a party's core supporters by the absolute difference between the average self-placement of core party supporters and the mean voter on that issue, as recorded in the EES. I measure the distinctiveness of parties' core supporters on each issue by the absolute difference between the average self-placement of core party supporters and those of all other parties in the same country. The EES does not include questions on political behavior aside from voting; consequently, I cannot use party membership or campaign activity to identify party activists. Thus, I only evaluate the theory with respect to the implications of core supporter preferences for party strategy. As discussed in Section 2, like party activists, core supporters are valuable to parties not only for their votes, but also for their support during campaigns. However, insofar as the views of core supporters are an accurate proxy for activists' views, this approach also is informative about the

¹⁹This is certainly an imperfect measure, as we are forcing measures of policy preferences from different surveys onto the same scale. However, this is preferred to a measure locating the average voter at 5 on each issue and measuring party extremism relative to this point, as, first, this may equate the preferences of the average voter with the status quo, and second, the EES reveals that average voter placement in a country frequently deviates from 5, e.g. on immigration.

²⁰We may be concerned that expert assessments of parties' issue emphases and issue position are highly correlated if experts are more likely to assume a party is emphasizing an issue if the policies it advocates are particularly extreme. However, these variables are virtually uncorrelated, with a Pearson's correlation coefficient of 0.04.

²¹As a robustness check, I replicate the main analyses using data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP), reported in Appendix E.1, and obtain substantively and statistically similar results. Although the CMP enables a direct measure of party emphasis, it does not contain information for as many minor parties as the CHES, and does not yet include the relevant elections for many countries now included in the analysis. Thus, I measure party emphasis using data from CHES for the main analyses.

²²We might also interpret this variable as measuring how electorally valuable an issue is for a party. However, my analyses would still suggest that major parties benefit electorally by emphasizing issues on which they are relatively moderate, whereas minor parties benefit by emphasizing their more distinctive issue positions.

constraints activists impose on parties.

As described in Section 2, a party’s core supporters are those “strong party identifiers who are deeply engaged in the political process” (Egan 2013, 126). Thus, two types of respondents are considered ‘core supporters’ of a party: (i) strong or weak partisans with high political interest, and (ii) strong partisans with moderate political interest.²³ Although imperfect, this is the best cross-national measure of core supporter preferences available. By this approach, 6.8% of EES respondents are classified as core supporters of a party, with an average of 27.8 core supporters for each major party and 7.9 core supporters for each minor party. However, my results are robust to eliminating parties with fewer than 15 core supporters from the sample, or to using any of the following approaches to identify core supporters: (i) strong partisans with at least moderate political interest, (ii) all partisans with at least moderate political interest, (iii) all strong partisans and (iv) all partisans (see Appendix E.6).

Finally, across specifications, I control for other factors that may be important for party emphasis strategies. Country-issue fixed effects allow that country, issue, or country-issue specific factors may influence party emphasis decisions – for instance, voter polarization (Spoon and Klüver 2015), party system size (Wagner 2012), party system ‘crowdedness’ (Kitschelt 1994) or the prior salience of an issue (Spoon and Klüver 2014; Meyer and Wagner 2015). Country-issue fixed effects are also essential to correctly identify the relationships implied by the theory, as I elaborate in Appendix C. Next, I include separate issue-specific intercepts for major and minor parties to account for differences in the issues favored by each type of party – as, for instance, major parties are more likely to emphasize economic issues than minor parties. Further, I control for division among core supporters on an issue (Rovny 2012, 2013)—measured by the standard deviation of the average self-placement of a party’s core supporters on each issue—as well as whether a party has previously held office (Hobolt and de Vries 2012) and the mean emphasis placed on each issue by a party’s coalition partners, if any²⁴ (Sagarzazu and Klüver 2017).

3.1 Types of Parties

Per the discussion in Section 2, we want to empirically distinguish between major and minor parties. As whether a party is ‘major’ or ‘minor’ is argued to be a function of

²³Specifically, respondents who were either ‘very’ interested in politics, and ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ close to a party, or ‘somewhat’ interested in politics but ‘very’ close to a party, were considered core supporters of that party.

²⁴Only coalition partners as of 1 Jan 2014 (if a party is in government), or any pre-electoral coalition partners in the most recent election preceding this date, are considered (details in Appendix B.2).

recent electoral performance, I identify major parties on the basis of their average seat share in national legislative elections between 2000 and 2014. For two reasons, I rely on seat share rather than vote share to measure parties’ past electoral performance. First, seat share allows us to identify the relative importance of different parties within the same pre-electoral coalition, when the vote shares of individual parties cannot be calculated. Second, when the two deviate, a party’s seat share is more indicative of its legislative clout.²⁵ In the main specification, parties are classed as ‘major’ if they received at least 13% of seats in the national legislature, on average, between 2000 and 2014.²⁶ By the baseline measure, the median and modal number of major parties in a country is two, and the maximum number of major parties in a country is four. By comparison, the number of minor parties in a country exhibits considerably greater variance, ranging between one and eight, with a median and mode of five.

Applying these criteria, I obtain a core sample of 177 parties from 27 Eastern and Western European countries, of which 61 are major parties, and 116 are minor parties. In the main specification, I treat Belgium as two separate countries—Flanders and Wallonia—each with a distinct party system. This is because, with Flemish and Franco-phone parties only contesting the same seats in the Brussels Capital region, and otherwise contesting seats in Flanders and Wallonia respectively, each party’s national performance underestimates its true electoral strength in seats it does contest.²⁷

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Main Results

Table 1 presents some initial support for **H1–H3b**. Models 1 and 2 report results from OLS regressions with country-issue fixed effects, regressing parties’ positional extremism

²⁵The two are especially likely to deviate in less proportional systems, such as in the United Kingdom. However, in the countries considered, parties’ historical vote share and seat share are highly correlated ($\rho = 0.95$), and my results are substantively and statistically identical when parties are classified as major or minor using historical vote share instead.

²⁶In Section 4, I demonstrate robustness to the choice of seat share threshold. In Appendix E.7, I show that the statistical model best explains parties’ emphasis strategies when the time frame used to calculate historical electoral performance is 2000–2014 and the average seat share threshold is 13%. Including years before 2000, using a shorter time frame, or a different seat share threshold instead reduces model fit. Data on historical electoral performance was compiled using the Comparative Political Data Set, the Parliaments and Governments database (Parlgov) and the Parties and Elections in Europe website maintained by Wolfram Nordsieck.

²⁷I treat the Brussels-Capital region as part of Wallonia as Francophone parties are overwhelmingly dominant in this officially bilingual region. My results are robust to treating Belgium as a single country.

Table 1: Positional Extremism and Party Emphasis Strategy

	Dependent Variable:			
	Positional Extremism		Issue Emphasis	
Supporter Extremism	0.098*	0.352***		
	(0.046)	(0.083)		
Supporter Extremism \times Major	0.082	0.022		
	(0.103)	(0.121)		
Positional Extremism			0.111	0.204**
			(0.062)	(0.071)
Positional Extremism \times Major			-0.306**	-0.392***
			(0.097)	(0.101)
Supporter Disagreement		0.176*		-0.286***
		(0.074)		(0.083)
Prior Office Experience		-0.496***		0.114
		(0.138)		(0.207)
Mean Coalition Partner Emphasis		-0.142		0.100
		(0.087)		(0.091)
#Party-Issue Observations	1,298	1,154	1,415	1,154
R ²	0.247	0.319		
Adjusted R ²	0.096	0.158		
Log Likelihood			-1,851.537	-1,480.597

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Note: Models 1 and 2 present OLS estimates from a linear fixed effects model, and Models 3 and 4 BUC estimates from a fixed effects ordered logit model of party issue emphases. All models include issue-specific intercepts for major and minor parties and country-issue fixed effects. Standard errors are robust and clustered by country-issue.

Table 2: Emphasis Strategy for Major and Minor Parties

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Supporter Extremism	0.209*** (0.055)	0.346*** (0.099)		
Supporter Extremism \times Major	-0.328** (0.115)	-0.607*** (0.155)		
Supporter Distinctiveness			0.200** (0.065)	0.272*** (0.081)
Supporter Distinctiveness \times Major			-0.354*** (0.099)	-0.436*** (0.105)
Supporter Disagreement		-0.195** (0.075)		-0.228** (0.077)
Prior Office Experience		0.158 (0.204)		0.154 (0.196)
Mean Coalition Partner Emphasis		0.075 (0.085)		0.087 (0.084)
Observations	1,298	1,154	1,298	1,154
Log Likelihood	-1,687.195	-1,477.450	-1,686.272	-1,478.329

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Note: Cell entries report BUC estimates from a fixed effects ordered logit model of party issue emphases. All models include issue-specific intercepts for major and minor parties and country-issue fixed effects. Standard errors are robust and clustered by country-issue.

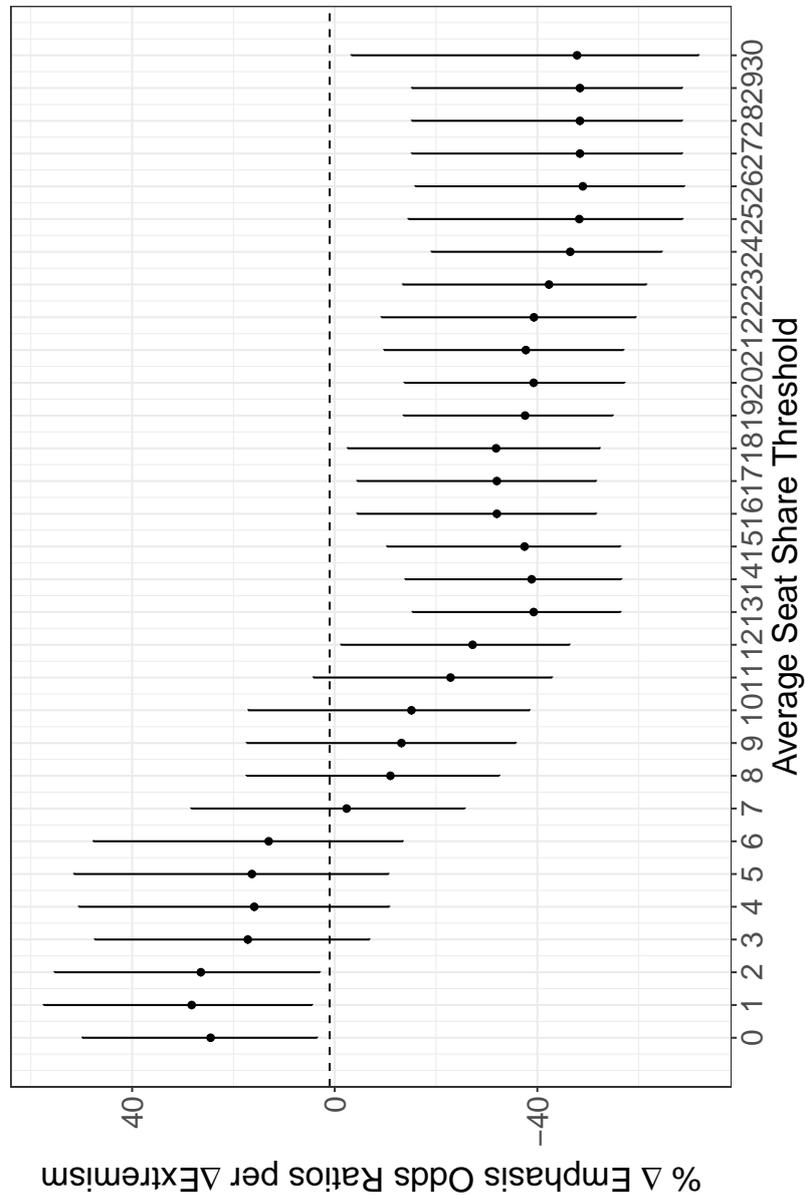
on the extremism of their core supporters with and without additional controls. The positive and statistically significant coefficient on supporter extremism in both models, in conjunction with an insignificant coefficient on the interaction term between major party status and supporter extremism, is consistent with **H1** – suggesting that major and minor parties respond similarly to supporter extremism when choosing policies. Next, Models 3 and 4 regress party issue emphases on their positional extremism. Now, the positive and statistically significant coefficient on positional extremism in Model 4 suggests that minor parties emphasize their more extreme issue positions (**H3b**). However, for major parties, positional extremism decreases party emphasis on the issue, since the combined effect on party emphasis implied by the constituent and interaction term is negative and statistically significant (**H2**). In these analyses—and in all analyses where issue emphasis, an ordinal variable, is the dependent variable—I estimate an ordinal logit model – using the BUC fixed effects ordered logit estimator proposed by Baetschmann, Staub and Winkelmann (2015) in order to allow for country-issue fixed effects.²⁸

As stated in **H1**–**H3b**, we would expect an analogous relationship between the positional extremism, or positional distinctiveness, of parties’ core supporters and the issue emphasis strategies of major and minor parties. Table 2 reports results consistent with these expectations. Models 1 and 2 regress party issue emphases on core supporter extremism. Model 1 presents the baseline specification, with no controls except country-issue fixed effects and issue-specific intercepts for major and minor parties. Model 2 adds controls for disagreement among supporters on an issue, parties’ prior office experience and mean emphasis by coalition partners. In both specifications, the magnitude and statistical significance of the coefficients indicate that an increase in supporter extremism on an issue is associated with a substantial increase in minor party emphasis on that issue, but a *decrease* in major party emphasis on the issue. As discussed in Section 2, in the unlikely event that *all* major parties advocate very extreme policies on an issue, a minor party may prefer to emphasize an issue where their relatively moderate position is distinctive (**H3a**). To account for this possibility, Models 3 and 4 replicate Models 1 and 2 while substituting the policy distinctiveness of a party’s core supporters as the main independent variable. The results are also robust to this alternative specification.

The decision to classify a party as major based on a 13% average seat share thresh-

²⁸Appendix C provides more detail on the BUC estimator and empirical specification. While a variety of approaches have been suggested for estimating an ordered logit model with fixed effects; in their survey of available estimators, Riedl and Geishecker (2014) show that the BUC estimator consistently delivers the most efficient, consistent and least biased parameter estimates. Nevertheless, in Appendix E, I demonstrate robustness to using an unconditional fixed effects ordered logit estimator or a linear fixed effects estimator.

Figure 1: Effect of Supporter Extremism on Issue Emphasis by Seat Share Threshold



Note: This figure plots exponentiated BUC coefficient estimates for fixed effects ordered logit model of party issue emphases, while varying the average seat share threshold for a party to be included in the sample. All models include country-issue fixed effects and control for parties' prior office experience, supporter disagreement and mean coalition partner emphasis on each issue. Exponentiated 95% confidence intervals are reported, based on standard errors clustered by country-issue.

old may appear arbitrary. Figure 1 shows the robustness of estimates to varying this threshold. For very low thresholds, there is a positive and statistically significant relationship between supporter extremism and emphasis, but for high thresholds, the sign reverses. The sign reversal appears to occur for a threshold close to 12%. In fact, the point estimates in Figure 1 suggest a function that looks almost discontinuous at a 12% seat threshold, supporting the view that emphasis strategy is qualitatively different for major and minor parties. This is confirmed by a comparison of the in-sample fit of the regression analyses reported in Table 2 with statistical models using a continuous measure of historical electoral performance instead (results reported in Appendix E.2).

4.2 Alternative Explanations

It is probable that parties that emphasize their more moderate positions are more likely to become major, and parties that emphasize their more extreme positions are more likely to remain minor. However, in additional analyses presented in Appendix D, I show that *even if this is the case*, this cannot credibly account for my findings. Rather, it is more plausible that major parties prefer to emphasize their more moderate positions, and minor parties typically emphasize their more extreme positions.

These additional analyses demonstrate the following. First, I show that the difference between major and minor parties we observe is better predicted by their historical electoral performance than their more recent electoral performance. Next, I show that the observed difference in emphasis strategy between major and minor parties survives if we, first, use party seat share from 1995 as a proxy, and second, as an instrument, for parties' current electoral performance. Together, these analyses strongly counter the suggestion that party emphasis strategies are primarily driving their electoral performance, rather than the other way around.

The only remaining possibility is that there exists some other extremely persistent factor that is highly correlated with whether a party is major or minor, or which determines a party's historical electoral performance and also its current emphasis strategy. The analyses reported in Table 3 suggest that none of the following long-standing party characteristics can fulfill this role: (1) a party's left-right ideology²⁹, (2) party family³⁰, (3) whether a party is mainstream or niche³¹ (Meguid 2005), (4) whether a party has

²⁹Measures of each party's overall left-right placement are taken from the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey.

³⁰Party family designations are taken from the Comparative Manifesto Project.

³¹For this analysis, I classify all parties considered by either Meguid (2005) or Adams et al. (2006) as 'mainstream' to be such, and all others as 'niche' – leading me to classify only socialist, social democratic,

Table 3: Alternative Explanations for Major vs. Minor Party Emphasis Strategy

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Supporter Extremism	0.344*** (0.098)	0.379*** (0.091)	0.223* (0.108)	0.308 (0.260)	0.393** (0.123)	0.464* (0.204)
Supporter Extremism × Major	-0.299* (0.146)	-0.359* (0.163)		-1.063*** (0.263)	-0.498** (0.166)	-0.976** (0.353)
Mean Party Family Emphasis		1.644*** (0.124)				
Supporter Extremism × Major Mainstream			-0.522*** (0.157)			
Supporter Extremism × Minor Niche			0.203 (0.153)			
Supporter Extremism × Major Niche			0.280 (0.663)			
Supporter Extremism × Leadership Domination Index				0.578 (0.483)		
Supporter Extremism × Prior Office Experience					-0.224 (0.177)	
Supporter Extremism × Proportion of Years in Office						0.278 (0.535)
Supporter Disagreement	-0.127 (0.079)	-0.148* (0.074)	-0.162* (0.077)	-0.005 (0.128)	-0.206** (0.075)	-0.128 (0.166)
Prior Office Experience	0.439* (0.186)	0.194 (0.197)	0.062 (0.198)	0.562* (0.228)		0.421 (0.262)
Mean Coalition Partner Emphasis	0.095 (0.088)	-0.053 (0.075)	-0.004 (0.078)	0.062 (0.087)	0.044 (0.080)	0.039 (0.091)
Observations	1,154	1,154	1,154	615	1,154	615
Log Likelihood	-1,326.411	-1,271.749	-1,406.627	-783.804	-1,448.461	-809.004

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Note: Cell entries report BUC estimates from a fixed effects ordered logit model of party issue emphases. All models include country-issue fixed effects, and all except Model 3 include issue-specific intercepts for major and minor parties. Model 3 includes issue-specific intercepts for major mainstream, major niche, minor mainstream and minor niche parties, while Models 4, 5 and 6 also allow for leadership domination, prior office experience and a party's governing history, respectively, to have an issue-specific influence on party emphasis. Standard errors are robust and clustered by country-issue.

held ministerial office in the post-war period (or its challenger party status) (Hobolt and de Vries 2012), (5) whether a party is leadership or activist-dominated³² (Schumacher, de Vries and Vis 2013), and (6) how frequently a party has been in office since its foundation (a measure of the party’s latent office aspirations) (Schumacher et al. 2015).³³ This provides suggestive evidence in favor of **H4**. That even leadership-dominated or office-seeking minor parties may prefer to emphasize issues where their preferred policies are relatively extreme need not be surprising, as this strategy may be more likely to win the party votes than emphasizing an issue where the minor party’s position is more moderate but less distinctive.

Finally, the selection of core supporters into parties cannot plausibly explain the observed difference between major and minor parties. One would have to argue that, not only do activists and core supporters select into parties based on the policies they advocate, but that they do so differently depending on the size of the party. This argument requires that, for major parties, those individuals with more extreme preferences on an issue are more likely to support a major party that emphasizes the issue *less*, but for minor parties, those individuals with more extreme preferences on an issue prefer to support a minor party that emphasizes the issue *more*.

5 Conclusion

How do parties remain popular while advocating unpopular policies? And why advocate unpopular policies at all? This paper argues that party platforms are anchored by the preferences of the activists and core supporters. To limit any negative electoral fallout from adopting unpopular policies, parties turn to “salience strategies”: disproportionately emphasizing the issues they would prefer voters to prioritize. However, I suggest that whether this nudges a party towards emphasizing its more centrist *or* its more extreme issue positions depends on its electoral performance in recent decades. In particular, I conjecture that traditionally successful parties—major parties—do best by emphasizing the issues where their preferred policies are relatively moderate, whereas traditionally smaller parties benefit from emphasizing their relatively distinctive, and po-

liberal, conservative, agrarian and Christian democratic parties as mainstream, and all others as niche.

³²Information on the extent to which the leadership dominates a party’s formal structure is taken from the Integrated Party Organization Dataset (Schumacher and Giger 2017). As this data is only available for a subset of the countries included in my sample, the number of observations in this analyses shrinks considerably.

³³For a deeper motivation of these analyses, discussion of measurement and additional robustness checks, see Appendix D.

tentially extreme, issue positions. Consistent with this theory, I find a clear difference in the emphasis strategies of major and minor parties in my analyses. Throughout, major parties de-emphasize issues on which their core supporters are relatively extreme, whereas minor parties emphasize issues on which their core supporters are relatively extreme or distinctive. In this respect, a party's historical electoral performance emerges as more important than other long-standing characteristics, such as prior office experience, party organization or whether a party is mainstream or niche.

This paper is deliberately ambitious in trying to develop a joint theory of party position-taking and emphasis decisions that can account for key patterns in party behavior. Inevitably, such an endeavor entails substantial generalization and requires making many assumptions that may be contested. A definitive empirical verification of all aspects of this theory is well beyond the scope of this study. As such, I focus on only evaluating the empirical support for the four hypotheses that I set out in Section 2, relating the preferences of a party's activists and its historical electoral performance to its preferred emphasis strategy. Nevertheless, I suggest that the empirical support that I uncover for all four hypotheses suggest that the underlying theoretical claims are, at least, worth taking seriously. Further empirical investigation and evaluation of this theory is left to future work.

By focusing on the relationship between party position-taking and emphasis strategy, this paper clarifies some of the potentially sinister consequences of salience endogeneity for parties' responsiveness to voters' policy preferences. In particular, the evidence here suggests that major parties may be able to take quite non-centrist positions on some issues, while de-emphasizing these issues so as to reduce their electoral salience. Consequently, governments may be able to make some policy decisions that are disliked by most voters, while facing little scrutiny. Activists and core party supporters, who may be unrepresentative of the population at large, may in turn exert a considerable influence on policy outcomes.

This opens the door to many other avenues for future research. While I rely solely on cross-sectional data, a time-series analysis would allow us to analyze the effects of changing activist and supporter composition on party emphasis strategies. Further, this line of reasoning raises the possibility that minor parties may move to emphasizing their less distinctive issue positions if their electoral performance improves with time. Conversely, previously major parties might move to emphasizing their more extreme issue positions if their electoral position decays to the point that they cease to be major. Future work could evaluate the evidence for these processes.

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