The Critical Role of Non-Proximal Parties in Electoral Competition: Evidence from France

Bonnie M. Meguid

Dept. of Political Science
University of Rochester
Rochester, New York 14627
Bonnie.meguid@rochester.edu

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Abstract:

A spatial approach has long dominated theories of party behavior and political competition. However, recent findings on the importance of issue salience and ownership for a party’s electoral success introduce the possibility of non-positional conceptions of party strategy. Based on this observation, I construct a modified spatial theory of party interaction in which parties manipulate electoral support by shifting the salience and ownership of new issues for political competition. Consequently, competition is no longer restricted to ideologically-proximal parties; non-proximal parties play a critical role in determining the electoral fortunes of other actors. An examination of party competition in France and its effect on the electoral trajectory of the Front National confirms these claims. The phenomenal success of the French radical right party is a result, not of the weak accommodative tactics of the proximal RPR, but rather of the timely adversarial strategies of the distant PS.
Over the last fifty years, a spatial logic has come to dominate theories of party interaction. Based on the assumption that voters accord their support to the closest candidate, political parties are thought to compete by changing their policy positions. Yet recent work on the importance of issue salience and ownership for a party’s electoral support introduces the possibility of non-positional conceptions of party strategy (Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989; Budge, Robertson and Hearl, 1987; Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). In this paper, I challenge the standard spatial approach to party interaction by developing and testing a theory of party competition based on this expanded conception of party strategies. I argue that by manipulating the importance of issue dimensions or altering the perceived ownership of issue positions, parties can affect the competitiveness of challengers across the political spectrum. Political actors can undermine parties threatening their vote or boost the electoral support of those parties who threaten the vote of their opponents. Competition is, thus, no longer restricted to ideologically-proximal parties; non-proximal parties play a critical role in determining the electoral fortunes of other actors.

This paper begins with a review of the standard spatial model of party competition and the presentation of my modified spatial approach. Special attention is paid to the implications of these theories for competition between mainstream parties and new, single-issue parties. In the second part of the paper, I test the claims of these theories by examining strategic party interaction in France and the resulting impact on the electoral support of the French Front National. The paper concludes with a discussion of the larger implications of my findings for the study of party politics.
Understanding Party Interaction: The Spatial Model and Its Challengers

Interest in the behavior of political actors has long stood at the center of political science research. Scholars have investigated the range of tools available to parties, the conditions under which they are employed, and their effect on the strategizing party and competing political actors (e.g., Downs, 1957, Enelow and Hinich, 1984; Shepsle, 1990; Kitschelt, 1994, 1995). Party behavior has also been examined in relation to the formation and longevity of governments (e.g., Laver and Schofield, 1998; Laver and Shepsle, 1996), the decentralization of states (O’Neill, 1999; Garman et al, 2001; Meguid, 2001), the efficiency and direction of policy-making (Boix, 1998) and the stability of regimes (Valenzuela, 1978; Mainwaring and Scully, 1995; Kreuzer, 2001). Parties are ubiquitous to theories of political phenomena.

Despite the wide variety of research questions asked and methodologies applied, most scholars have adopted a spatial approach to party behavior. Made famous by Downs (1957), this set of theories holds as its central tenet the assumption that voters are rational and cast their ballots for the party with policy stances most similar to their own. In response, parties will choose policy positions which minimize the distance between themselves and the voters.\(^1\) Party competition therefore becomes defined as a series of programmatic moves by competing parties in a given policy space.

In this framework, parties are faced with two possible strategies: movement towards (policy convergence) or movement away from (policy divergence) a specific competitor. Considered the primary tool in party interaction, policy convergence, or what I call an accommodative strategy, is typically employed by parties hoping to draw voters away from a

\(^1\) The extent to which parties relocate to maximize their votes depends on whether they are vote-seeking or office-seeking. Policy-seeking parties are typically excluded from spatial models because they view policy positions as goals in and of themselves rather than as a means of obtaining office. Consequently, policy-seeking goals constrains the degree of movement available to parties.
threatening competitor. At its extreme, such behavior can result in the oblitera
tion of the challenging party.\textsuperscript{2} By increasing the policy distance between parties, on the other hand, policy
divergence, or what I term an adversarial strategy, encourages voter flight to the competing
party. While such a strategy is thought to be rarely used under conditions of unimodal, normally
distributed voters,\textsuperscript{3} policy divergence, like policy convergence, serves to alter the attractiveness
of the strategizing party relative to neighboring political actors.

This programmatic conception of party behavior has become the dominant lens through
which to understand political competition. However, it is not exhaustive. Recent studies have
demonstrated that political actors can change their competitiveness by manipulating the salience
of the political dimensions (Budge, Robertson and Hearl, 1987; Rabinowitz and Macdonald,
1989). Given that voters discount the attractiveness of parties on irrelevant policy dimensions,
“(p)arties compete by accentuating issues on which they have an undoubted advantage, rather
than by putting forward contrasting policies on the same issues” (Budge, Robertson and Hearl,
1987: 39). While spatial theorists have conceded that the policy space may consist of unequally-
weighted issue dimensions (Enelow and Hinich, 1984), the findings of Budge et al. and others
directly challenge the spatial assumption that the relative salience of the issues remains fixed
throughout the course of party interaction. This suggests that, instead of being limited to
programmatic movement in a pre-established policy space, competing parties can shape the
perceived importance of issues in the political arena. Strategies therefore have a salience
dimension.

The dominance of the programmatic conception of party tactics is further challenged by
research on the role of issue ownership in voter decision-making. A relatively under-theorized

\textsuperscript{2} To quote Downs (1957: 118), when faced with a threatening party challenger, “Party B must adopt some of Party
C’s policies, thus…taking the wind out of Party C’s sails. This will cause Party C to collapse.”

\textsuperscript{3} This strategy is useful in political systems encouraging and rewarding policy distance.
phenomenon, issue ownership, or issue credibility has been ignored by spatial theories of voting and party competition which claim that voter decisions depend only on ideological proximity. However, in a situation where voters face equally-distant parties, it is not necessarily reasonable to believe the spatial claim that voters are actually indifferent between their political options. Indeed, common sense tells us that voter decisions are rarely dictated by the flip of a coin. Rather, as studies have shown, voter behavior is influenced by a party’s issue ownership; voters accord their support to the most credible proponent of an issue (Trilling, 1976; Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996).4

Recognition of the importance of a party’s ideological reputation introduces the possibility of an additional facet of party strategy and political competition. While initial research on issue ownership assumed the long term stability of this characteristic (Budge and Farlie, 1983), more recent observations confirm that policy reputations are not static (King, 1998: 185-7; Sanders, 1999; Bélanger, 2003). Moreover, there is reason to believe that issue ownership is subject to manipulation. Through campaign efforts, parties have been shown to reinforce or undermine linkages between political actors – themselves and others – and specific issue dimensions (Budge, Robertson and Hearl, 1987; Meguid, forthcoming). Strategies, therefore, are also instruments of ownership manipulation.

Thus, in contrast to the claims of spatial theories, this paper argues that party behavior is not limited to policy movement in a fixed policy space. Rather, parties compete by altering policy positions and the salience and ownership of the involved issue dimensions. Consequently, parties have access to a much larger and more effective toolkit than previously thought. In the next section, I spell out the implications of this new conception of strategies for a

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4 In highly aligned political environment, partisan identification is another factor which influences voters’ behavior. However, in the current dealigned political climates of most advanced industrial democracies, the force of this factor is significantly reduced. See, for example, Särlvik and Crewe, 1983 and Dalton, 2000.
model of party interaction. As the discussion reveals, not only does recognition of the salience and ownership-altering properties of strategies fundamentally expand the form and the utility of tactics available to parties, but it also changes the nature and objectives of party competition; the traditional rules of party engagement postulated by spatial theorists no longer apply.

The Positional, Salience and Ownership Theory

An Expanded Toolkit    In moving from a definition of strategies as purely positional tools to one with positional, salience and ownership dimensions, the range and effectiveness of party tactics increases. While spatial theories emphasize party movement on a given issue dimension, this new model suggests strategic behavior starts one step earlier. Parties must actively decide whether or not to recognize and respond to the policy issue at hand. In other words, contrary to the assumptions of spatial models, party placement on a specific issue dimension is not a given. Parties finding an issue unimportant or too difficult to address can choose to ignore it; this previously-unrecognized (non)action is called a dismissive strategy. Conversely, parties can choose to validate an issue by adopting a position on it. Depending on the direction of the party’s stance, this response is one of the already familiar accommodative (convergence) and adversarial (divergence) strategies.

As this suggests, a party’s decision to either react or not react affects the salience of the relevant issue dimension. A dismissive tactic, defined as the absence of any position on an issue, reduces the perceived importance of the issue. By ignoring an issue, a party signals to voters that the issue lacks merit. The party does not validate its inclusion within the political debate and urges voters to similarly dismiss it as irrelevant. This strategy can be effectively employed

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5 While researchers often look for significance in the content of an actor’s response, this suggests that critical information can be gleaned from the absence of any statement.
against a competitor located anywhere on the political spectrum.\(^6\) If the voters perceive this message to be sincere,\(^7\) then the strategy will be correlated with the electoral decline of the issue-promoting party. On the other hand, parties can heighten the salience of the issue by actively engaging with it. By adopting a position on the issue dimension, a party acknowledges that the issue in question merits a place in the political debate. As such, the tactic increases the salience of the issue, bolstering the legitimacy of the issue, and presumably that of the issue’s political proponent, in the political and electoral arenas.

While both accommodative and adversarial strategies serve to increase the salience of a policy dimension, their rationale for calling attention to the issue differs. As emphasized in spatial models, an accommodative tactic is adopted to reduce the loss of voters to a political competitor. By advocating an issue position similar to that of the challenger, the strategizing party aims to recover defected votes. In accommodation, therefore, the party publicizes the issue in order to reap the electoral benefits.

However, the party has more than just luck on its side in effecting a transfer of “indifferent” spatial voters from its competitor to itself. Recall that party strategies contain an issue ownership dimension. By advocating a policy stance similar to that of an opponent, the strategizing party is challenging the exclusivity of its opponent’s policy stance. Indeed, the accommodative party is trying to signal to the electorate that it is the rightful owner of the particular ideological position. If credible, i.e. not inconsistent with the party’s other policy stances, accommodation can lead to the transfer of issue ownership – and issue voters – to the strategizing party.

\(^6\) While validation of the dominant – often Left-Right - political dimension is typically a forgone conclusion, parties can effectively refuse to take a stand on a less central, newly-emerging issue. This tactic is therefore commonly used in response to single-issue parties, like peace parties, women’s parties and regionalist parties. Meguid, 2005.

\(^7\) This requirement of strategic credibility is not unique to dismissive strategies; it determines the effectiveness of all types of party tactic.
The effectiveness of this issue ownership-altering tactic is particularly strong when competition occurs between established mainstream parties and new, single-issue parties. In this interaction between political unequals, the accommodating mainstream party is aided in this process by its greater legislative experience and governmental effectiveness. In addition, mainstream parties generally have more access to the voters than the single-issue parties, allowing them to publicize their issue positions and establish name-brand recognition. Given these advantages, the established party “copy” will be perceived as more attractive than the new party “original.”

While the salience and ownership dimensions further strengthen the already powerful tool of policy convergence, they empower the otherwise ignored spatial strategy of policy divergence. As discussed earlier, when a party presents a different policy position to that of a political competitor, it calls attention to that challenger and its issue dimension. However, while personal electoral gain is the motivation for the accommodating party, the primary goal of the adversarial party is not necessarily to increase its own vote share. Adversarial behavior publicizes the policy disagreement, emphasizing the range of policy options available to voters. More importantly, by allowing the strategizing party to define its issue position in juxtaposition to that of the political competitor, the adversarial tactic reinforces the issue ownership of the opponent. This salience-heightening tool reinforces the link in the public’s mind between the issue and the challenger as its credible and primary proponent. In contrast to accommodative

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8 That exposure occurs through the media and the mainstream party’s activists. The latter are typically more numerous and better integrated into society than those of the single-issue party.

9 The effectiveness of this issue-ownership altering strategy is even greater in restrictive electoral systems (e.g. under plurality rules) where the “wasted vote” fear is stronger.

10 While not the primary goal, one of the adversarial mainstream party’s objectives may be to consolidate its own support by attracting voters who are opposed to the target party’s issue position. This is, in fact, the only predicted effect of policy divergence according to the standard spatial model. That model states that such movement should not affect on the electoral strength of a non-proximal party. Any evidence that adversarial strategies do bolster the vote of the non-proximal party will therefore confirm the primacy of my modified spatial theory of party interaction.
strategies which seek to transfer issue ownership to the strategizing party, adversarial tactics, thus, try to strengthen the competitor’s already existing issue ownership. Parties which engage in adversarial strategies are, therefore, encouraging the other party’s electoral prospects.

The predicted effects of this expanded set of party strategies on issue salience, ownership and party programmatic position are summarized in Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Salience of the Opponent’s Issue</th>
<th>Issue Position Relative to the Opponent</th>
<th>Issue Ownership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dismissive (DI)</td>
<td>Decreases</td>
<td>No Movement</td>
<td>No Effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodative (AC)</td>
<td>Increases</td>
<td>Converges</td>
<td>Transfers to Strategizing Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adversarial (AD)</td>
<td>Increases</td>
<td>Diverges</td>
<td>Reinforces Opponent’s Ownership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The Critical Role of Non-Proximal Parties**

As the above discussion has revealed, the expanded conception of strategies has altered the range and effectiveness of political tactics. However, the implications of this revision extend far beyond the size of the political party’s toolkit. Indeed, they call into question the very rules of party interaction propounded by spatial models. Recall that in the positional conception of strategies championed by spatial theories, parties can only affect the electoral support of neighboring parties; in a uni-dimensional space, for example, this means that movement by a center-left party away from a center-right party cannot impact the electoral support of a right flank party. However, if instead strategies can also alter issue salience and ownership, then parties can target opponents *anywhere* in the political arena. Ideological proximity is no longer a requirement.

To illuminate this point, let us consider the effects and utility of the adversarial strategy. Given that political opponents are generally viewed as threats, it might seem counterintuitive to
suggest, as I did in the previous section, that a party would seek to heighten the political visibility and electoral strength of a competitor. Indeed, in a two party system where politics is a zero-sum game, it is unlikely to see adversarial tactics employed. However, where competition occurs between three or more players, such a vote-boosting strategy might be employed against a non-proximal competitor on the opposite flank of the political spectrum. While spatial theorists would argue that this strategy is unnecessary, costly and, ultimately, ineffective,¹¹ the salience and ownership-altering dimensions of these adversarial tactics allow strategizing parties who are not directly threatened by a party to use it as a weapon against other party opponents. Indeed, this is the political embodiment of the adage, “the enemy of my enemy is my friend;” the strategizing party helps the targeted party – the enemy of my enemy in this case – gain votes from the third party. Thus, in this novel form of party behavior, the targeted party becomes the pawn in a larger political competition; it is the weapon used by the strategizing party against its own, more threatening competitors.

By highlighting the non-traditional use of policy divergence, this example clearly demonstrates that party competition is not restricted to interaction between ideological neighbors. In this case and others, non-proximal parties have the ability and motivation to alter the electoral fortunes of their political friends and enemies. Failure to consider the effects of their behavior on party competitors will lead to faulty predictions about the outcome of party interaction. Consequently, spatial models of party competition which restrict analysis to proximal parties must be traded for a model in which party success turns on the interaction of strategies by proximal and distant parties.

¹¹ Note that under the tenets of spatial theory, policy convergence and divergence only reduce or increase the electoral support of the most proximal party. They have no impact on the electoral strength of parties on the other side of their spatial neighbors.
Table 2 spells out the predictions of my modified spatial Position, Salience and Ownership (PSO) theory of party competition for party success. In contrast to traditional spatial models, the electoral fortune of the target party is shaped by the issue salience, ownership and positional effects of multiple parties’ strategies; the outcomes recorded in each cell are the product of the effects of each individual strategy from Table 1. For ease of presentation, I assume that there are only three parties in the political system and, thus, I model the impact of two parties’ strategies on the electoral strength of a third.12

Table 2: Predicted Effects of Party Strategic Combinations on a Target Party’s Electoral Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARTY ONE</th>
<th>PARTY TWO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dismissive (DI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dismissive (DI)</td>
<td>Target Vote Loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodative (AC)</td>
<td>Target Vote Loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adversarial (AD)</td>
<td>Target Vote Gain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The reconceptualization of party strategies has a profound impact on the expected outcomes of party competition. As demonstrated in Table 2, parties have multiple means of undermining and bolstering the electoral support of a competitor. Instead of being limited to

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12 However, this restriction does not represent an integral limitation of the model; the strategies of more than two parties can be included.
accommodative (AC) strategies as suggested by spatial theories, mainstream parties can also lower the third party’s vote by employing simple, salience-reducing dismissive (DI) tactics.\textsuperscript{13}

The predictions in Table 2 also highlight that fact that the electoral fortune of the target party is shaped by the behavior of both mainstream parties. Indeed, in contrast to the claims of traditional spatial models, the proximal party’s behavior alone is rarely determinative of third party support. Distant parties can use strategies to thwart the strategic efforts of their mainstream competitor. For example, a party’s adversarial (AD) strategy will undermine the proximal party’s ability to reduce vote loss by dismissive (DI) or accommodative (AC) means. In the case of a DIAD combination, the salience, ownership and positional effects of the active adversarial strategy will overpower the simple salience-reducing impact of the dismissive strategy. To the dismay of the threatened proximal party, then, the result will be a more popular third party with a strengthened issue ownership.

The outcome of the ACAD strategy is less straightforward. While one party’s adversarial behavior prevents its mainstream opponent from easily coopting the third party’s issue ownership and issue voters, its ability to bolster the third party’s vote depends on the relative intensity of the two strategies. In this situation best described as a battle of opposing forces, the strategizing party employing the greatest number of tactics consistently for the longest period of time will prevail.\textsuperscript{14} If the accommodative strategy is more intense than the adversarial one, the target party will lose its issue reputation and issue-based voters to the accommodating party. On the other hand, if the adversarial tactic is stronger and more consistently employed, then the issue ownership of the target party will be strengthened and its electoral support will increase.

\textsuperscript{13} While the effect may be the same, it is important to remember that the strategic mechanisms are different.\textsuperscript{14} Strategic intensity is a function of the prioritization, frequency and duration of party tactics. This can be measured by the number of speeches, official statements and percentage of party manifestos devoted to the issue consistently over the longest period of time.
Testing the Model: An Analysis of Party Competition in France

According to the PSO theory of party competition, therefore, party interaction involves more actors with a wider range of tools than proposed by traditional spatial theories. While the claims of this new approach are consistent with recent studies on issue salience and ownership (Budge, Robertson and Hearl, 1987; Petrocik, 1996; Bélanger, 2003), to what extent do they capture the actual motivations and behavior of political parties? Moreover, does this new model more accurately account for the electoral trajectories of party competitors than other strategic explanations?

To test the merits of these competing strategic theories, it is necessary to examine party interaction in an environment in which voter behavior, and thus party strength, is a function of party behavior. For either strategic theory to have much explanatory power, voting decisions cannot be merely unconscious and automatic reflections of deep partisan identification; voters must react to the tactics of political actors. Similarly, party success should not simply reflect the exogenously determined institutional and sociological characteristics of the society. Political forces need to have a role.

Based on these criteria, this paper turns its attention to party competition in France and its impact on the electoral support of the Front National. The country has a multiparty system in which low levels of partisan identification encourage voters to respond to the tactical decisions of political actors.15 Voter decisions, and thus party support, are likely a function of party behavior. Existing research on the electoral trajectory of the Front National has reinforced this claim by demonstrating the limitations of non-strategic, structural models of the radical right.

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15 In 1993, only 39% of French survey respondents reported feeling close to a particular party. Dalton, 2000: 25.
party’s support (Meguid, 2005). Indeed, the Front National has achieved phenomenal electoral success despite inhospitable institutional and sociological conditions.

Given the promise that strategic explanations hold for the French case, how do we describe the nature of party competition in France? What challenge did the emergence of the Front National pose for the mainstream parties, and how did the established parties react? Finally, what were the effects of those strategies on the electoral trajectory of the radical right party?

**Mainstream Party Strategic Response to the Front National**  

In the late 1970s and early 1980s when the Front National emerged onto the French legislative and presidential electoral scenes, the French political system was defined by relative stability. The government and presidency were largely dominated by two parties, the Socialists (PS) and the Gaullists (RPR). These two parties of the center-left and center-right captured, on average, over 50% of the vote in legislative elections and served as the senior coalition partners in every French government since 1960 (Meguid, 2008). While these parties were not without challengers, they were able to easily overcome competitors on the economically-defined Left-Right dimension.

However, by the middle of the 1980s, the relative hegemony of the two mainstream parties was threatened by the new radical right rival. In the 1986 legislative elections, the Front National captured 9.9% of the vote and won 34 seats. As shown in Chart 1, over the next three elections, the party’s electoral support continued to rise, netting it an average of over 12% of the
vote. In only 20 years, the xenophobic single-issue party had climbed from a position on the sidelines of the French electoral scene to become the third party in France.\textsuperscript{16}

[Chart 1 about here]

The electoral success of the radical right party engendered different responses from the two mainstream parties. While the anti-immigrant message of the Front National had cross-party appeal, with 70\% of all respondents to a 1981 poll opposed to the further arrival of immigrants to France, the RPR was the hardest hit party (SOFRES, 1981). In the 1984 European Parliamentary election, RPR voters made up 25\% of the new party’s electorate (SOFRES, 1988: 139). Even though some voters did return to the mainstream center-right party at the next electoral opportunity, a plurality of the 2.8 million FN voters in the 1986 legislative election were former Gaullists (Platone, 1994: 64). In light of this continued electoral threat, the RPR eventually adopted an accommodative strategy.

Initially delayed by internal party disagreement over how to respond to the xenophobic competitor, the RPR, as of 1986, launched a campaign to convince voters of its ardent anti-immigration position. RPR-run governments introduced and passed bills restricting the rights of immigrants (Pasqua Law of 1986, Debré Law of 1996) and halting further immigration to the country (Pasqua Law of 1993). In the 1980s and early and late 1990s, electoral pacts were concluded between RPR and FN candidates in regional and local elections; similar agreements were considered for the national parliamentary elections.\textsuperscript{17} And, RPR politicians even adopted

\textsuperscript{16} In the 1997 legislative elections, the Front National came in third place behind the Socialists and the RPR. The radical right party surpassed the traditional third place parties – the UDF and the Communists. http://www.parties-and-elections.de/france.html
the xenophobic rhetoric of their FN colleagues. If the electorate was not impressed by the Gaullist party’s legislative and electoral attempts to coopt the FN’s issue position, then perhaps it would have been convinced by the colorful promise of RPR officials to “deport illegal immigrants in train-loads.”

The Socialists responded to the Front National with an even stronger adversarial strategy. While the PS was not immune to the electoral threat of the radical right party, losing votes from some of its traditional working class constituents, the party chose to emphasize its opposition to the anti-immigration policy position and its radical right party proponent. In a campaign which started in 1984, the Socialist governments relaxed harsh anti-immigrant laws – many of which were put in place by RPR governments – and reinforced their commitment to the integration of immigrants into the French community. As part of this same initiative, the PS created a new cabinet position and a bipartisan council concerned with the integration of immigrants into French society. Coupled with these positive measures, the PS launched a continuous and unrelentless attack against the xenophobic demands of the FN and demonized the party and its leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen. Every inappropriate and offensive statement made by the radical right party was highlighted by Socialist parliamentarians. The PS even used its electoral campaign literature, documents typically filled with vague positive statements, as an opportunity

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19 In the 1984 European Parliamentary election, 11% of FN voters were former supporters of the Left or Greens (SOFRES, 1988). In addition to stealing established PS voters, the radical right party also drew support from the potential Socialist electorate. Throughout the 1990s, as reported by Perrineau (cited in Hainsworth, 2000: 21-2), the Front National seized first time voters who, apart from their support of the rising party’s anti-immigration position, would have allied themselves with the policy positions of the Left. This phenomenon of “gaucho-lepénisme” highlights the fact that the Socialists’ adversarial strategy was not a cost-free means to consolidate PS support. Rather, the strategy was a conscious attempt to indirectly bolster their relative electoral position by encouraging RPR voters to support the FN.
to explicitly name and rebuke the FN for being “racist and hateful” and for “using immigrants as scapegoats.”

The Socialist strategy did not end with these intense, but standard, tactics. Indeed, in a move which revealed the PS’s real intentions to bolster the FN’s support, it adopted an unusual institutional form of the adversarial strategy. In 1985, the Socialist government changed the electoral rules from a restrictive two-ballot plurality system to a permissive system of proportional representation. The reform, it was argued, would lessen the PS’s seat loss in the 1986 elections while improving the FN’s chances for representation. With the “wasted vote” logic eliminated, the PS hoped that the radical right party would gain votes and seats at the expense of its mainstream opponent, the RPR (Faux et al., 1994). Statements from both Socialist supporters (e.g., Mitterrand and Bérégovoy) and opponents (e.g., Rocard) of this institutional reform attest to its strategic, explicitly pro-FN nature. The Socialists were using the FN as a weapon to hurt the RPR, thereby improving their own relative electoral strength and their chances of controlling the government.

The Effect of Strategic Interaction

What is the expected effect of these accommodative and adversarial strategies on the electoral support of the Front National? According to the standard spatial model, only the behavior of the proximal mainstream party – the RPR – can

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21 This pointed language was used by François Mitterrand in his 1988 presidential campaign document, “Une Lettre à Tous les Français.” (Mitterrand, 1988)
22 PR rules were in effect for the 1986 legislative election. The RPR government restored the restrictive, two-ballot plurality rules for the 1988 legislative election.
23 As explained by Tiersky (1994: 135-7), “In 1984-85, looking at a probable Socialist defeat in the 1986 parliamentary elections, Mitterrand’s consideration of changing the electoral law had much to do with the newly important National Front. To keep majority voting would minimize the FN’s National Assembly presence, whereas a change to proportional representation would maximize it…Proportional representation maximized the National Front’s electorate and victories. Why? Because PR meant that National Front votes would be ‘useful,’ would not be wasted as in a majority system where the FN would lose almost everywhere because it had no allies with whom to seek majorities…Mitterrand hoped that the PR law, by maximizing the National Front’s success, would split the right-wing vote enough to prevent an RPR-UDF victory.”
24 See Meguid, 2008 for additional evidence.
affect the strength of the party on the right flank. Therefore, if we consider only the RPR’s strategy of accommodation, or policy convergence, we expect the popularity of the radical right party to fall. The model’s prediction does not change even if we note the RPR’s hesitation in first responding to the FN. In both cases, an accommodative strategy should lead voters who previously supported the Front National to (eventually) cast their ballots for the RPR.

A different story is told when we examine the predictions of the modified spatial model of party interaction. According to the PSO theory, the strategies of both the proximal and distant mainstream parties influence the electoral strength of the radical right actor. Therefore, it is important to know that the Socialists were engaging in an adversarial approach – a strategy which began before and was maintained throughout the RPR’s implementation of accommodative tactics. Thus, before 1986, a dismissive-adversarial set of strategies was in effect. Based on Table 2, this combination is expected to result in the strengthening of the target party; the Front National should gain votes, specifically at the expense of the RPR.

After 1986, when the RPR actively pursued an accommodative strategy, the net effect of the two strategies on the radical right party depended on their relative intensity. Analysis of the mainstream parties’ strategies reveals that the Socialists prioritized and publicized their stance on immigration more than their Gaullist counterparts.25 In addition, as discussed previously, the PS pursued a multiprong strategy which allowed them to “attack” their target with both institutional and positional tactics. This evidence suggests that the adversarial strategy was more intense than the accommodative one. Consequently, we expect the electoral strength of the Front National to increase through 1997.

25 As one example, François Mitterrand’s 1988 presidential campaign literature devoted a third more space to the issues of immigration and citizenship than that of RPR candidate, Jacques Chirac. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the Socialists took the unusual step of clearly identifying and slandering their political opponents – the Front National – in their campaign documents. Mitterrand, 1988; Chirac, 1988.
A glance back at Chart 1 reveals an electoral trajectory consistent with the predictions of the PSO theory. Between the legislative elections of 1981 and 1986, the Front National gained 9.7 percentage points. And as predicted, the majority of the new radical right voters defected from the French mainstream right.\textsuperscript{26} Front National gains at the expense of the RPR had also taken place during the earlier 1984 European Parliamentary elections. While not a national election and therefore not directly comparable, the 1984 supranational election provides a further example of the increasing power of the radical right party at the hands of Socialists.

In contrast to the claims of the standard spatial model, the electoral strength of the Front National did not fall after the implementation of the RPR’s accommodative strategy in 1986. Rather, the radical right party continued to gain support over the course of the next three elections. A closer look at the individual behavior of voters confirms the predictions of my modified spatial model: more RPR voters were defecting to the FN than FN voters returning to the RPR. For example, in the first round of the 1988 Presidential elections, 17\% of RPR partisans voted for the FN candidate, Le Pen, whereas a negligible number of FN partisans voted for the RPR candidate, Jacques Chirac.\textsuperscript{27} The situation was repeated in the 1988 and 1993 legislative elections when a greater number of RPR partisans defected to the radical right party than FN partisans returned to the RPR.\textsuperscript{28} A comparison of the defection of Le Pen and Chirac 1995 presidential election voters to the RPR and FN, respectively, in the 1997 legislative

\textsuperscript{26} 20\% of the FN’s vote in the 1986 legislative elections came from RPR or UDF partisans. SOFRES, 1988: 139.  
\textsuperscript{27} Own calculations from Pierce, 1995. Given that only a very small percentage of voters self-identified as FN partisans in 1988, a better measure of voter flow is to examine those voters who supported the FN in 1986. Of those voters, only 4\% cast their ballots for the RPR candidate in the first round of the 1988 Presidential elections. Conversely, almost 16\% of 1986 RPR voters supported Le Pen in the 1988 Presidential elections. Own calculations from CEVIPOF et al., 1988.  
\textsuperscript{28} In 1993, 13\% of FN voters were RPR partisans as opposed to only 2\% of RPR voters who self-identified with the Front National. When recalculated as a percentage of RPR partisans, this voter defection translates into a loss of 5.4\% of RPR partisans to the Front National and a loss of 8\% of FN partisans to the RPR or UDF. However, due to the smaller size of the FN electorate, the RPR experienced a net loss of voters to the radical right party. Own calculations, CEVIPOF et al., 1997
elections shows a similar trend; only 2.8% of those who voted for Le Pen in the 1995 presidential election switched to the RPR in 1997 as opposed to just under 6% of the larger group of 1995 Chirac voters casting their ballots for FN candidates in the 1997 elections.\textsuperscript{29} Thus, despite its accommodative tactics, the RPR was not gaining significant numbers of former radical right party voters; it was not even stopping the flow of its own voters to the new party.

Given these election results, the PSO theory appears as the better overall predictor of the shape and timing of the Front National’s electoral trajectory. Consideration of merely the strategies of the proximal party leads to incorrect predictions about the electoral withering of the radical right party. Only when the adversarial tactics of the ideologically-distant Socialists are included in the analysis do we account for the phenomenal, early and lasting success of the Front National.

**Testing the Mechanism: Shifts in Issue Salience and Ownership**

If this paper has shown a strong similarity between the FN’s electoral trajectory and the modified spatial PSO theory’s expectations, has it also demonstrated that the motivations and mechanism behind the theory’s new conception of strategies were at work? In other words, did the strategies produce the expected results because they altered the salience and ownership of the radical right party’s issue dimension? Indeed, it is the answers to these questions which reveal the explanatory power of the PSO theory.

According to my modified spatial model of party competition, the strategic combinations pursued by the two mainstream parties from 1981 until 1997 should have boosted the perceived salience of the Front National’s issue of immigration. Between 1981 and 1986, the RPR was passively trying to play down an issue on which its party could find little agreement.

\textsuperscript{29} Own calculations, CEVIPOF et al., 2001.
Unfortunately for the Gaullists, their Socialist counterparts were, during this time, initiating a pro-immigration campaign, an active tactic which should effectively undermine the impact of the more passive, dismissive one. The resulting rise in issue salience should have continued during the period of accommodative-adversarial strategies, when both parties were trying to encourage the electorate to vote on the basis of the immigration issue.

French survey data presented in Chart 2 confirm these predictions. While only 6% of survey respondents noted the importance of the immigration issue in 1984, the number jumped to 17% by 1986.30 At that time, immigration even surpassed the issues of social equality and the economy to be ranked the third most important issue in their voting decision. In the following years, the salience of the topic continued to rise. In 1988, 22% of respondents to a CSA poll deemed the issue critical to their vote.31 By 1993, that percentage was up to 36.9%; according to the study by Chrique, immigration was considered the top social issue facing France. In addition, when all economic, social and political issues were considered, immigration ranked second after the perennial favorite of unemployment!32 In a 1995 poll, the most recent survey in our period of analysis to pose such a question, 45.8% of respondents chose immigration as a critical issue influencing their vote. As predicted, the salience of the radical right’s issue was high and not diminishing.

[Chart 2 about here]

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32 In this survey, unlike the others, an explicit connection was not made between issue importance and vote choice. The questionnaires were administered, however, near the 1993 legislative elections, and thus the respondents’ answers can reasonably be interpreted to reflect the importance of the immigration issue for that election. Calculations from Chrique, 1997.
What impact did the mainstream parties’ strategies have on the perceived ownership of the immigration issue? According to the PSO theory, the tactics pursued from 1984 until 1997 should have reinforced the Front National’s ownership of the issue, and its anti-immigration perspective. The PS’s adversarial strategy emphasized to the electorate that the Front National was its polar opposite on the dimension of immigration. This tactic, therefore, served to strengthen the connection made between that issue position and the radical right party. The failure of the RPR to actively respond to the new party and its issue until 1986 left the Socialists’ claim unchallenged. When the accommodative-adversarial combination was later employed, the expected impact of the strategies on FN issue ownership turned on the relative intensity of the constituent tactics. Between 1986 and 1997, the stronger and more coherent adversarial behavior of the PS further reinforced the ownership claims of the FN.

The lack of survey questions on issue ownership hinders the conclusive testing of this dimension of my PSO theory. However, it is possible to get some sense of the perceived credibility of the various parties on the immigration issue by examining the available survey data. In 1988, over 80% of respondents to the French Presidential Election Study considered the Front National to have a strong anti-immigration stance. A mere 7% of respondents claimed that the RPR, the main challenger to the FN’s issue ownership, had the same reputation. It is interesting to note that this perception of a weakly anti-immigration stance by the RPR was recorded even after the Party had enacted one of its toughest bills restricting entry into France and limiting immigrant rights! Moreover, while less than 6% of respondents could not identify the issue stance of the FN, nearly 17% of those surveyed were unclear about the RPR’s position

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33 The PS, on the other hand, was recognized by the vast majority of those surveyed as the proponent of a less restrictive policy towards immigration, an issue position reflective of its adversarial stance. Pierce, 1995.

34 As would be expected, the variance around the mean survey response for the RPR was much larger than that of the FN. This indicates that there was less of a consensus about the RPR’s position than the FN’s.
on immigration. Clearly, the radical right party was seen as the strongest and most obvious advocate of the anti-immigration position – two indicators of issue ownership.

This perception of the credible owner of the anti-immigration issue would continue into the 1990s. According to the 1995 Presidential Election Study, Le Pen, the leader of the Front National, still stood out as the “best presidential candidate on immigration.” 39% of those respondents with an opinion chose the leader of the Front National as the owner of the issue. 35 Moreover, a breakdown of perceived issue ownership by the 1993 legislative vote of those surveyed reveals that a plurality of RPR voters, not to mention almost all FN voters, agreed that Le Pen was the most credible (anti)immigration candidate.

Analysis of the available survey data largely confirms the expectations of my modified spatial model of party competition. As predicted, the timing of the implementation of the mainstream parties’ strategies corresponds with shifts in the salience and ownership of the Front National’s immigration issue; in other words, the mechanism behind the expanded conception of strategies seems to be at work. In turn, a glance back at Chart 1 reveals that the timing and direction of these changes match the shifts in the electoral support of the radical right party. Aware of the net effects of the PS and RPR strategies on the salience and ownership of immigration, voters in favor of immigration restrictions cast their ballots for the more credible issue proponent, the Front National. And as confirmed by survey data, the RPR continued to lose such voters to the Front National. Theories, like the standard spatial model, which ignore the salience and ownership-altering effects of party strategies and the critical role of non-proximal parties, fail to account for the observed voter defection and the spectacular electoral success of the French Front National.

35 And this was not an ambiguous response; the number of “don’t know” or “none of the above” answers was lower for this issue than for most. Calculations from Lewis-Beck et al., 1995.
A Spatially-based Alternative Explanation

While this paper has argued that the observed success of the radical right party can be attributed to a modified spatial model of party competition, it is plausible that this result may have arisen from other explanations consistent with the standard spatial model. In the next section, I examine the most credible alternative explanation, namely that the inability of the RPR’s accommodative strategy to suppress the FN’s vote was a result of the Gaullists’ internal party division, rather than the presence of an adversarial PS strategy.

The internal party disunity faced by the RPR during the 1980s and 1990s is well documented (Schain, 1994; Gaspard, 1995; Blatt, 1996). The emergence of the Front National onto the national electoral scene sparked a rift within the RPR between those leaders who were willing to use any accommodative tactics to coopt the anti-immigration issue and its voters, and those elite who feared that accommodation would cause them to be linked to the xenophobia and Poujadist past of the Front National. These latter proponents of a dismissive strategy dominated party policy during the early 1980s.36 By 1986, the tide had turned, and the supporters of a more aggressive accommodative strategy reigned. However, even the embrace of active cooptative tactics did not fully quell the internal divisions. Interparty quarrels over the extremity of the RPR’s actions continued throughout the 1990s. As late as 1998, the RPR was split over the decision by some members to form alliances with FN candidates in the regional-level elections.

While this internal party disagreement has not been advanced as a cause of the electoral success of the Front National by other scholars, this argument appears plausible. In any model of

36 Representative of this view is the following 1984 statement by RPR General Secretary Bernard Pons: “The only ‘Le Pen phenomenon’ is to discover that it is a phenomenon. Rather it is a constant of the French political life…(I)t is not the time to dramatize; that would be a political mistake.” Pons interviewed in “‘La bande des 4’ juge Le Pen,” *Le Point*, 13 Feb 1984.
party competition, the effectiveness of party strategies depends upon their credibility. If the RPR’s accommodative efforts were not perceived to be credible by the electorate, then anti-immigration voters would not be expected to return to or cast their ballots for the RPR. In this situation, the Front National’s electoral support should continue to rise. Voters only should return to the RPR once its internal party divisions are erased and the party pursues a unified accommodative strategy.

There is support for the claim that the French public was aware of the internal party divisions plaguing the RPR. Analysis of data from the 1988 French Presidential Election Study suggests that the respondents did not have a precise idea about where the RPR stood on the issue of immigration. Indeed, the variance around the mean survey response was larger for the Gaullist Party than for any other political party, except the Communists. If, in fact, the RPR was seen as having an ambiguous position, it would be reasonable for issue voters to withhold their support. Perhaps, therefore, voters continued to cast ballots for the Front National because they were unsure of the RPR’s anti-immigration stance.

However, closer examination of the survey data discounts the force of this finding and the plausibility of the alternative explanation. While there was a wide distribution of perceived RPR policy positions on the immigration issue across the group of survey respondents, individual RPR partisans saw the RPR’s stance as approximating their own personal policy position; 47% of all RPR partisans believed the Party to be sharing their policy preference, and an additional 34% perceived the Party position to be within one unit of theirs. Thus, a shift to individual-level analysis reveals that the Gaullist Party was not seen as holding an ambiguous

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37 Own calculations from Pierce, 1995.
38 The survey asked respondents to locate the immigration policy preferences of themselves and the French parties on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 represents agreement with the statement “immigrants should return to their country of origin” and 7, agreement with the statement “immigrants living in France should be integrated into French society.” Pierce, 1995.
policy position by its voters. Rather, each partisan had his or her own conception of party policy, a perspective that corresponded with his or her own viewpoint.

Given the perceived ideological affinity between the RPR and its partisans, the standard spatial model cannot account for the fact that many of these RPR affiliates chose to cast their ballots for the candidate of the single-issue radical right party. Indeed, for the overwhelming majority of this potential FN electorate, the RPR was their closest political option. And yet, survey data from the 1988 Presidential Election reveals that those voters who shared immigration policy positions with the Gaullist Party made up 28% of the Front National’s electorate in that election. These voting decisions were not being determined by spatial proximity. Some other factor was at play.

Evidence from other elections suggests that this factor was issue ownership. According to the 1995 Presidential Election Study, 83% of former RPR voters who supported Le Pen in the first round of the elections named the FN leader as the most credible proponent of the immigration issue. In contrast, only 32% of those RPR voters who remained loyal to their Party leaders (Chirac or Balladur) named Le Pen as the issue owner. Moreover, former RPR voters who thought that Le Pen was the most credible immigration candidate were more likely to defect and vote for the FN leader in 1995 than to vote for Chirac. Those Gaullist voters who deemed Chirac to be the issue owner were less likely to defect. The electoral behavior of former FN voters similarly depended upon their views of the rightful owner of the immigration issue; those few 1993 FN voters who voted for the RPR in 1995 were more likely to consider Chirac

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39 In other words, according to each voter, the RPR was located within one unit of his or her own issue position. Own calculations from Pierce, 1995.
40 Own calculations from Pierce, 1995.
41 Former RPR voters consist of those who voted RPR in the first round of the 1993 legislative elections. The percentages are very similar if one compares issue ownership as perceived by RPR partisans instead: of the RPR partisans who supported Le Pen, 81% named Le Pen as the issue owner as opposed to 12% who named Chirac. On the contrary, 48% of RPR partisans who voted for Chirac in 1995 identified him as issue owner and 29% identified Le Pen as the most credible on the immigration issue. Own calculations from Lewis-Beck et al., 1996.
the issue owner than their radical right partisan counterparts who continued to support Le Pen. Voting decisions were turning on issue reputations more than programmatic positions.

In sum, the disunity of the RPR’s stance on immigration cannot account for the non-proximal voting of RPR partisans and the resulting electoral success of the Front National. Rather, this examination of the alternative explanation suggests that other, non-positional dimensions of voter and party behavior are critical to understanding the fortunes of target parties – a story consistent with the predictions of the PSO theory of party competition.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to revise the standard conception of party strategy and party competition in light of recent findings about the importance of issue salience and issue ownership for party electoral success (Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989; Budge, Robertson and Hearl, 1987; Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). In contrast to the claims of the dominant spatial model, I argue that political party strategies are not limited to programmatic movement in existing policy space. Rather, parties can also alter the competitiveness of the electoral arena by manipulating the salience and ownership of those issue dimensions.

The implications of this claim are twofold. First, parties have access to a larger and more effective toolkit; dismissive and adversarial tactics join a strengthened accommodative tactic. Second, political competition is no longer restricted to interaction between ideological neighbors; parties can alter the electoral strength of actors located anywhere in the political arena. Consequently, the electoral trajectories of political parties are shaped by the behavior of multiple actors. Models which ignore the strategies of non-proximal parties risk overpredicting the failure of target parties.
An analysis of party competition in France confirms the expectations of the modified spatial PSO theory. The phenomenal electoral success of the Front National can be attributed not to the behavior of the neighboring Gaullists, but rather to the timely adversarial strategy of the non-proximal Socialists. As survey evidence reveals, the PS was able to undermine the accommodative tactics of the RPR by reinforcing the issue ownership of the radical right party. Thus, in a move unexpected by standard spatial models, the Socialists boosted the electoral strength of the “enemy of their enemy” to hurt their mainstream party opponent, the RPR. The electoral success of the Front National was the result.

This last point reveals that the PSO theory has a utility that extends beyond accounting for the electoral trajectory of a target party. Indeed, it also provides insights into the long-term survival of the strategizing – typically mainstream – parties. Adversarial strategies, for example, turn the target party into a weapon against another party opponent. At its extreme, this strategy could result in the elimination of that party opponent and its replacement with the target party; in other words, an adversarial tactic could end in party system realignment. With consequences for both the number of parties and the issues dominating political debate and competition, mainstream party tactics are not just means to counteract a set of often, single-issue political actors; these everyday strategies have effectively become tools in the much larger political processes of party system stability and change.
Appendix:

Chart 1:

Electoral Support of the French Front National

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Vote Percentage in National Legislative Elections</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart 2:

Salience of the Immigration Issue in France

Sources: Schain 1994; Perrineau 1996; Chrique 1997; Lewis-Beck et al. 1996.
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