

## Book Reviews

Party Politics  
2024, Vol. 30(1) 200–206  
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Han Kyung Joon, *Rationality of Irrationality: Political Determinants and Effects of Party Position Blurring*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022; \$ 80.00 (hbk); \$ 39.95 (pbk), ix + 229 pp. ISBN 9780472075539; 9780472055531.

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DOI: 10.1177/13540688231211245

Parties are key actors in representative democracies. They link the interests of citizens with the institutions of the respective political system, so that representatives of the parties are voted into executive offices and try their best to implement the policy positions that they presented to the voters during the election campaign. The more of their policy pledges are fulfilled, the higher should - when taking theories of retrospective voting into account - be the chances that the parties maximise their vote share in an upcoming election. Moreover, the more parties are able to implement their policy goals which were communicated clearly to the citizens before an election, the more citizens should be satisfied with democratic political institutions.

One key assumption here is that parties indeed come up with clear positions on key policy issues. Several theoretical models and empirical applications assume that the policy position of a party can be reduced to one single point on one or more policy dimensions. The seminal model by Anthony Downs (1957) uses this assumption and evaluates the incentives for parties to change their policy positions in accordance with the preferences of the electorate. A huge number of studies in analytical political science build on the Downsian model and study, for instance, the impact of the policy distance between voters and parties (and their candidates) and analyze to what degree the (individually perceived) policy distance matters for voting behaviour (e.g., Adams et al. 2005) or if parties adjust their policy positions in accordance with changes in the ideological profile of the electorate or of other parties (e.g., Laver 2005).

A more recent, and very promising, research avenue in the analysis of party policy profiles focusses on the blurring of the policy positions parties come up with when competing for support in elections. That is, parties present - intentionally or not - unclear, vague or inconsistent policy positions to the voters (e.g. Somer-Topcu 2015). This study

by Kyung Joon Han makes an important contribution to this field in both a theoretical and empirical way. Han argues convincingly in his very well written and clearly structured study that blurring is a wide-ranging behaviour of parties that makes their policy position ambiguous and is a deliberate and strategic choice that parties make. Han combines the literature on the political sophistication of voters and their cognitive behaviour with the wide array of studies that analyse issue competition and the strategic position-taking of parties. In so doing, Han develops an innovative theoretical argument that allows us to derive expectations under which conditions political parties will adopt blurring when presenting their policy proposals to the electorate.

Blurring is, according to Han, a tactic of issue competition because parties try to manipulate which issues dominate the political agenda. If, for instance, environmental issues are at the top of the political agenda - as is the case currently in many modern democracies, because of discussions about climate change - then green parties which 'own' the issue of environmental protection are likely to have an electoral advantage. In such a situation, parties which are less associated with environmental policy have an interest to downplay the issue and to - if possible - 'remove' it from the political agenda.

If the issue is so salient among the public that it seems impossible to avoid taking a position on it, then parties should, according to Han's study, present an ambiguous policy position on it to voters if they cannot win an advantage. This should prevent voters from considering the issue when casting their ballot, because they should focus more on the distance towards the competing parties when they regard the respective issue seriously. If the latter would be the case, voters can expect a clear change in the status quo in the respective issue domain if these parties win control over the government. Han further argues that voters should be less certain and less accurate in their perceptions of parties the more ambiguous parties are when presenting their policy goals, so that policy distances are more complicated for voters to estimate. This should result in a smaller influence of proximity voting over issues where parties blurred their positions.

Han is doing an excellent job in introducing his theoretical arguments by means of examples from issue competition in the USA and in Western Europe. To measure the

degree of blurring, Han makes use of the Chapel Hill expert survey data (Jolly et al. 2022) and refers to the standard deviation of experts' party position estimations as an indicator of the parties' position blurring. In addition, he refers to the data of the manifesto project MARPOR (<https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/>) and, on that basis, measures the inconsistency of an issue within a party platform. All this is done in a very convincing way, as is the empirical evaluation of his theoretical argument in chapters 5, 6 and 7 of his book. While in chapter 5 Han focuses on the question of what causes the position blurring of parties, his analyses in chapters 6 and 7 concentrate on two sub-groups of political parties: radical right-wing and social democratic parties. His finding that more ambiguous positions of social democratic parties on immigration result in a decreasing impact of the policy distance on this issue between manual workers and parties speaks in favour of his theory. Moreover, it provides a possible solution for social democratic parties in Europe as how they could integrate voters from a social group which previously strongly supported social democratic and moderate socialist parties.

To summarize, the study by Kyung Joon Han is an excellent piece that provides a clear and innovative theoretical argument on why, and under which conditions, parties should blur their policy positions. The empirical tests of the model are sound and speak in favour of the theory. While the focus on expert surveys and party manifestos is reasonable, future studies could dig deeper into the process by which parties decide when to adopt a blurred policy position. Because more and more voters decide late in the pre-election period which party they will choose, parties might have an incentive to actively blur their position late in

the campaign period. Statements by party representatives in the media, or on widely used social media channels, could be useful sources for a more fine-grained measurement of parties' position blurring, which could provide further insights into the process of policy position-taking of parties for which the study by Han has made an important contribution.

### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DE 1667/4-3).

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Vineeta Yadav, *Religious Parties and the Politics of Civil Liberties*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. ISBN: 978-0-197-54536-2

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DOI: 10.1177/13540688231187969

Some books, as they are published, raise the bar for a whole field of study. This is the case of *Religious Parties and the Politics of Civil Liberties* for research on the role of religion in political parties. In particular, its wide comparative approach based on a robust mix of quantitative and qualitative analytical tools has been sorely needed in a field dominated for a long time mostly by narrow geographical approaches based mainly on historical and qualitative perspectives. Although the book is focused only on Muslim majority countries, and mainly engages with the literature related to these, its significance surely extends far beyond the Middle Eastern region.

The main aim of the book is to understand the impact of religious parties on citizens' civil liberties. To do so, the author puts the role of religious parties in relation to a wide array of variables, to find that their presence in a government is not a sufficient condition to engender a process of restriction of liberties in a country. This happens if both a severe inflationary crisis is underway and religious organisations aiming at curbing civil liberties have become sufficiently institutionalised in a number of fields, from welfare provision to business and the media.

These conclusions are the result of a wide Large-n empirical analysis carried out in chapters 4 and 5, which considers all 49 Muslim majority countries in the world. These results are then further tested through qualitative in-depth analysis of two case studies, Turkey and Pakistan, carried out in chapters 6–9. According to the author, the history of both countries supports her thesis, bearing in mind that the presence of religious parties has become a negative factor for civil liberties only in phases marked by both a high