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Between institutional political and policy agenda: An analysis of issue congruence in the 2004–2008 election cycle in Slovenia



Samo Kropivnik*, Simona Kustec Lipicer

Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

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ABSTRACT

This article draws on the assumption that certain congruence between the parties' electoral platforms and of the succeeding government's performance shall exist in democratic systems and shall, as such, be considered as an important research topic for the researchers of democratic policy-making processes and political systems in general. In the article, we analyse whether the contents of parties' electoral programmes and the contents of key post-electoral governmental policy documents – that is, the coalition agreement, the government sessions' agenda and governmental weekly press releases – correspond to each other. Slovenia, as one of the younger EU democracies, is used as a case study to test the application of the stated. Original Manifesto Research on Political Representation (MARPOR) methodology for quantifying documents' content is applied and analysis primarily focuses on governmental period of the first right-centred government from 2004 to 2008. The conclusions confirm the existence of issue congruence in the period of the analysed electoral cycle, and at the same time reveal substantial specifics between the hierarchy of political to policy issue orientations of the government and its constitutive political parties. Consequently, an initiative for constructing a tentative theory of political documents is put forward on the basis of inductive research conclusions.

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1. Contextualisation of issue congruence

The concept of issue congruence refers to the comprehensive information about how, why and to what extent governmental policy packages flow from electoral results into post-electoral policy agendas, and as such represents one of the virtues of democracy and accountability (Klingemann et al., 1994; Laver, 2000). On the one hand, facing and measuring governmental actions according to the promises that the political parties (as the members of the government) gave before the elections can be a challenge in itself. On the other hand, it can also help to understand which issue preferences are selected and put on the agenda by political parties¹ and later government as the driving forces of democratic systems after the elections.

As stated by Sabatier (in Klingemann et al., 1994: xx), for democratic regimes two aspects are critical if we want to assess the pre- and post-electoral issue flow: 1) more or less coherent packages that are offered to the voters by the competing

* Corresponding author.

¹ For the list of political parties and their acronyms see "Appendix" at the end of the paper.

political parties in the frameworks of the so-called electoral manifestos/platforms; 2) the conversion of the given pre-electoral promises in the future policy-making processes of the winning, that is, governmental, parties. Or in other words, once in government, election promises play an important role; they bind parties to their policies (Rose, 1984; Budge and Hofferbert, 1990; King et al., 1993; Klingemann et al., 1994; Budge et al., 2001; McDonald and Budge, 2005; Laver, 1998). Hence, the analysis of the flows between pre- and post-electoral issues is thought to represent one of the very important research subjects for any political scientist of democracies. These linkages are important not only for understanding the electoral, but also the post-electoral governmental political and policy-making processes (Lasswell, 1951; Stokes, 1963; Klingemann et al., 1994; Laver, 2000).

Therefore, in the text below we firstly briefly summarise anterior research of issue congruence (Chapter 2) with emphasis on methodological challenges (Chapter 3). Secondly we specify our research topic and framework (Chapter 4) as well as extensively define the data and develop an improved approach to analysis (Chapter 5). Then we present analysis of similarities and differences in issue structure among pre- and post-electoral documents (Chapters 6.1.–6.5.) and summarise them (Chapter 6.6.). Finally, we look beyond the selected electoral cycle (Chapter 7) and draw conclusions regarding the theory of political documents and their congruence, as well as our approach to analysis (Chapter 8).

2. Anterior research

Many attempts have so far been made to find the answers to the above stated challenges, frequently are also named party issue retrospectiveness, responsiveness and issue congruence (Fiorina, 1981; Eulau, 1987; Binzer Hobolt and Klemmesen, 2008). The existing analytical approaches can be classified into three main groups according to their prevailing research emphases: 1) institutional, 2) contextual, and 3) mixed. Speaking about institutional approaches the question of how, why and to what extent the pre-electoral agendas are transformed into the post-electoral ones is related to the different system of institutional characteristics, especially the type of executive, electoral and party systems (Binzer Hobolt and Klemmesen, 2008; Soroka and Wlezién, 2010).

From the contextual perspectives, two prevailing approaches for analysing the potential correspondence between pre- and post-electoral contents of the programmes of competing political parties and later government are being explored – either the issues are framed by their ideological stance (Downs, 1957; Robertson, 1976; Budge and McDonald, 2007) or they are based on an individual issue's emphasis and problem recognition saliency (Klingemann et al., 1994). The so-called mixed approach represents the sum of the first two approaches. The closest to this mixed approach is the classic idea of retrospective voting (Fiorina, 1981), according to which the extent of party pre- and post-electoral issues' congruence, together with the general economic situation, party leadership and party image, represent the constitutive factors of the potential voting retrospectively of a party. Similarly, later on, Wessels and Schmitt (2006) describe the concept of 'meaningfulness of the choices.' According to them, the contents of electoral programmes, party and electoral systems, and the system of government are all supposed to matter in one way or the other for evaluation of the influence of the candidates' issue on the future, post-electoral governmental agenda.

Furthermore, when speaking about the pre- and post-electoral phenomena in general, we need to be aware that usually two dominant sets of factors can be exposed (Budge et al., 2009): 1) the impact of partisanship, such as, the enduring pre-dispositions to vote for a party (for example, ideology or founded cleavage) and/or 2) the impact of the wider pre-electoral 'offers' made to voters and to the society in general; for example, broader features of the election campaign (the events, issues and candidates) that are supposed to first have a decisive influence on the nature of the elections and later to serve as a commitment to the candidates' post-electoral performance. If the first scenario relies mainly on the concept of mutual trust and unconditional support between voters and candidates, the second scenario can be much more 'evidence-based', founded on expectations that parties would pursue and fulfil their pre-election commitments afterwards.

In this article, the second scenario approach will be predominantly taken. With the aim of assessing how and to what extent pre- and post-electoral issues in parties' documents are relevant within one democratic election cycle, we consider the following 'mixed' type of independent determinants as relevant for understanding the logic of the election cycle: a) general level of democracy of the political system; b) general electoral and party (image and leadership) characteristics; c) assessment of general economic situation.

3. Methodological challenges of issue congruence's analysis

Apart from theoretical conceptualisations, methodological challenges of analysing issue congruence are also important. Most studies use different types of data and resources for the analysis of issue contents in both pre- and post-electoral periods. As pointed out by Powell (2009), the conducted approaches to analysis of pre- and post-electoral congruence have consequently and quite rapidly led to criticism. Summing up Pétry and Collette (2009) extensive review of 18 journal articles and book chapters, reporting the extent to which election promises have been fulfilled in North America and Europe and published in English and French over the past 40 years: they have either conceptual weaknesses (like the lack of explicit definitions of terms or of units of analysis), or major methodological weaknesses (like lack of operational definitions or documentation and imperfect research design). Nevertheless, as reported by these authors (*ibid.*), despite the employment of different approaches, with an unequal balance of strengths and weaknesses, between at least 45% and maximum 85% rate of fulfilment of political pre-electoral preferences in post-electoral governmental performance can be identified with the

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