



Do parties respond? How electoral context influences party responsiveness



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ABSTRACT

How responsive are political parties to the issue priorities of voters? While there are numerous studies that examine policy position congruence between parties and voters or government responsiveness, we know little about the extent to which parties adjust their policy priorities to the issue concerns of voters. Following saliency and issue ownership theory, we argue that political parties listen to their voters by emphasizing policy issues in their election manifestos that have been prioritized by citizens. However, in line with second-order election theory, we expect that issue responsiveness varies with the electoral context. To test our theoretical expectations, we generated a novel dataset that combines data on issue attention of political parties from the Comparative Manifesto and the Euromanifesto projects with data on policy priorities of voters from the European Election Studies, the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems and various national election studies. We empirically test our theoretical claims based on a comprehensive analysis of 104 parties from 17 countries competing in 84 national and European elections from 1986 to 2011. Our findings have important implications for political representation in Europe.

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1. Introduction

Political parties are important intermediary organizations that link voters with political decision-making (Lawson, 1980; Dalton et al., 2011). As one of their key functions, parties aggregate and articulate voter preferences (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000) and thus provide an important channel through which democratic decision-making is legitimized. It is, however, crucial for political representation that political parties are responsive to voter demands. Huber and Powell (1994) and Powell (2000) have argued that in addition to procedural representation, which is the proportionality of vote and seat share, substantive

representation is equally important in democracies. Substantive representation (Miller and Stokes, 1963) requires that there is congruence between the policy preferences of voters and the policy positions that political parties adopt. Considering the dynamic relationship of parties and voters, Stimson et al. (1995) developed the concept of dynamic representation to describe how a party shifts its policy positions in response to changes in public opinion. Ezrow et al. (2011) have recently tested and confirmed this relationship by analyzing the responsiveness of mainstream parties in Europe. We argue, however, that policy congruence is only one part of the story. In addition, it is also important that political parties listen to their voters with regard to the policy issues they emphasize in democratic societies. We thus argue that political parties respond to the policy priorities of voters, but that party responsiveness varies across electoral contexts. Following second-order election expectations (e.g. Reif and Schmitt, 1980), we

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posit that parties are more responsive to voters in national elections than in elections to the European Parliament.

The research agenda of many political parties' scholars in recent years has been to understand the nature of the relationship between voters and parties with regard to their policy positions. Adams et al. (2004), for example, have found that parties adjust their positions in response to changing public opinion. Looking at the context of the election, Adams et al. (2009) qualify this finding by showing that right-wing parties adjust their policy positions as a response to both changing global economic conditions and shifts in public opinion, whereas left-wing parties are less responsive to both factors. Ezrow and Hellwig (2011), however, show that as parties become further integrated into world markets, they become less responsive to preference shifts of the electorate. While these studies have considerably enhanced our knowledge of party responsiveness to voters, they have exclusively looked at preference congruence while neglecting the responsiveness in terms of issue priorities.

Another line of research focuses on the link between policy priorities of citizens and government policy (e.g. Wlezien, 1995; Stimson et al., 1995; Jones and Baumgartner, 2004; Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2008; Jennings and John, 2009; Chaqués Bonafont and Palau, 2011; Bevan and Jennings, 2014). Two mechanisms have been identified that explain why governments respond to issue priorities of citizens: electoral turnover and anticipatory pressure (Stimson et al., 1995). Government responsiveness through electoral turnover occurs due to the choice of one government over another. If a government fails to enact policies that are supported by the electorate, it may be replaced by a government which is more in line with public preferences. Responsiveness due to anticipatory pressure occurs as governments adjust their policies to public preferences in the light of upcoming elections to maximize their re-election chances. In addition, scholars have shown amongst others that government responsiveness varies with institutional friction (Bevan and Jennings, 2014), with the timing of elections (Chaqués Bonafont and Palau, 2011), and with the levels of political contestation (Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2008).

Both lines of research have made important contributions toward understanding the link between voters and their representatives; there is, however, an important gap in the literature which we address in this article. While party scholars have primarily been concerned with policy position shifts of political parties in response to changes of voter preferences, the second line of research has studied the responsiveness of governments to the policy priorities of citizens rather than looking at the responsiveness of political parties more generally. In this study, we thus extend this previous research by examining whether political parties listen to voters with regard to the attention they pay to different policy issues (see also Wagner and Meyer, 2014). Importantly, this article also builds on current research that focuses on how voters are influenced by the issues that parties emphasize and those in which they are perceived to have competences (e.g. van der Brug, 2004;

Bélanger and Meguid, 2008; Green and Hobolt, 2008; Green and Jennings, 2012; Reher, 2013).

Various scholars have offered insight into what determines the attention that parties pay to political issues. First, parties' policy priorities are based on the issues they own (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996) as well as the issues that other parties own. Recent research has demonstrated that parties cannot only emphasize their own issues, but must also respond to the issues of other parties in the system (see, e.g. Damore, 2004; Holian, 2004; Sigelman and Buell, 2004; Green and Hobolt, 2008; Spoon et al., 2013). Second, parties' priorities are placed on the agenda by issue entrepreneurs or by other parties in the system (e.g. Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010; Hobolt and De Vries, 2011). Third, they are affected by the political and economic context (Duverger, 1959; Inglehart, 1997).

In line with these previous findings, our central argument is that political parties not only respond to shifts in voter preferences, but that they also listen to voters when deciding which policy issues to emphasize in their election manifestos. Hence, we expect that there is a positive relationship between the attention that voters pay to a given policy issue and the attention that parties devote to this issue. However, following the insights of second-order election theory (Reif and Schmitt, 1980), we hypothesize that the issue responsiveness of parties is not constant across all elections, but that it varies with the electoral context. We thus argue that because of the second-order nature of European elections, parties pay less attention to the issue priorities of voters when deciding on which issues to primarily focus.

To understand the relationship between parties and voters and how it differs in first- and second-order elections, we examine parties' responsiveness to voters' issue priorities from 1986 to 2011 in 17 European countries. More specifically, we analyze the responsiveness of 104 parties across 13 issue areas in 79 national and five European elections. We measure party issue attention using data from the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) and the Euromanifestos Project (EMP). Issue priorities of voters are measured using data on the most important issue/problem that is obtained from the European Election Studies, the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, and various national election studies.

2. Party issue responsiveness in elections

In this section, we present our theoretical argument in detail. We begin by outlining our assumptions about party behavior from which we derive the argument that parties are responsive to the issue priorities of voters. Drawing on second-order election theory, we argue that issue responsiveness is not constant across all elections, but that it varies with the electoral context and the timing in the national electoral cycle.

2.1. Issue responsiveness of political parties

Parties are rational, goal-oriented and purposeful collective actors that aim to maximize the achievement of their preferences. Following the party behavior model set out by Riker (1962), we assume that parties are office-seeking actors. Parties seek to win elections for

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