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Congruence between voters and parties: The role of party-level issue salience

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Abstract. The level of congruence between parties and their voters can vary greatly from one policy issue to another, which raises questions regarding the effectiveness of political representation. We seek to explain variation in party–voter congruence across issues and parties. We focus on the hypotheses that (1) average proximity between the positions of voters and the party they vote for will be highest on the issues that the party emphasises in the election campaign and that (2) this relationship will be stronger for niche parties. We test these hypotheses using data on the policy preferences of voters, party positions, party attention profiles and salience on concrete policy issues in four countries: The Netherlands, Ireland, Germany and Sweden. Overall, we find that voter–party proximity tends to be higher on issues that the party emphasises. As these are the issues where parties typically have the greatest policy impact, this implies that the quality of representation is highest where it matters most. There is some limited evidence that the positive relationship between issue salience and proximity is stronger for niche parties. In sum, the quality of policy representation varies strongly with party-level issue salience and to a lesser extent with the type of political party.

Keywords: congruence; issue salience; political parties; representation; voting-advice-applications

Introduction

Effective policy representation in modern party-centred democracies implies a degree of congruence between the policy positions of parties and the policy preferences of the people who vote for them (APSA 1950; Katz 1997; Powell 2000; Rohrschneider & Whitefield 2012; Thomassen 1994). While previous research shows a high level of congruence between voters and parties in terms of their general ideological orientation, it also finds that parties are often out of step with their own voters on specific policy issues (Dalton 2017; Dolný & Baboš 2015; Miller et al. 1999; Thomassen 2012). This is despite that fact that, as a result of cognitive mobilisation and declining partisanship, citizens in many countries are more capable and willing to vote based on their policy preferences than ever before (Dalton 1984). In the words of one prominent scholar of political representation, ‘low levels of policy congruence in a system with more and more issue voting citizens, not only implies dangers for the individual parties, it also implies dangers for the system as a whole’ (Holmberg 1999).

One explanation for relatively low levels of issue congruence is that in most developed democracies, party and voter preferences are not structured by a single, overarching left-right dimension (e.g., Lesschaeve 2017; Thomassen 2012). Where parties compete on several

*The first two authors contributed equally to the paper; thereafter the ordering is alphabetical.

unrelated issue dimensions, voters may agree with a party on one set of issues while disagreeing with it on others, and it becomes extremely difficult for voters to find a party that represents their views well across the spectrum of policy issues. Yet issue congruence is not uniformly low: there tends to be considerable variation in the level of party–voter congruence across issues and parties. As Jacques Thomassen noted back in 1994, ‘one of the most important challenges ... is to explain why political parties are representative of their voters on some issues, but not on others.’ This article seeks to explain this variation in the proximity of parties to their voters. To do so, we look to parties’ issue emphasis. By emphasising a particular issue, a party seeks to attract voters who care about that issue and agree with its position. It may be the case that, as many have argued, voters are generally ignorant of party policy (e.g., Achen & Bartels 2016). However, to the extent that voters do evaluate party policy positions, this is most likely to be in relation to the issues that the party emphasises in its campaign. We therefore expect that congruence between a party and its voters will be highest on these issues.

We also consider the possibility that the relationship between parties’ issue emphasis and congruence differs between niche and mainstream parties. Niche parties build their reputation and identity only with reference to very few issues of disproportionately high salience to them and to their voters, while mainstream parties are less consistent in their issue emphasis over time (Wagner 2012). We therefore expect a particularly high level of congruence for niche parties on the issues they own.

We argue that understanding how parties’ issue attention profile shapes congruence is important from a normative perspective. We should not treat all issues equally when assessing voter–party congruence. A party is most likely to influence public policy in relation to the issues it prioritises, so congruence is most important in relation to these issues. As previous research shows, there is a strong relationship between the policy priorities of parties in government and the policies those parties emphasised in the previous election campaign (Budge & Hofferbert 1990; Klingemann et al. 1994; see also Bischof 2018). Selective issue emphasis by political parties is particularly important in understanding policy under coalition government, where each member of the coalition tends to have a significant say in shaping policy in the areas it prioritises (and very often also receives the relevant ministerial portfolio) (Bäck et al. 2011; Ecker et al. 2015). In this article, we test whether congruence is indeed higher on these issues, and whether this pattern holds for all parties or just for niche parties.

We test our hypotheses using comparable data from recent elections in Germany, The Netherlands, Sweden and Ireland. As discussed below, these cases are suitable for testing our hypotheses because the chosen elections involved a diverse array of salient issues, including issues not related to the economic left–right dimension; and the elections featured a mix of mainstream parties with broad policy programmes and niche parties with a more restricted policy focus. We find that party–level issue salience has a significant effect on voter–party congruence: the distance between voters and their party tends to be smallest when it comes to the issues that the party emphasises. We find only partial support for our expectation that the relationship is stronger for niche parties than mainstream parties. Below, we develop our theoretical arguments regarding the effects of party issue emphasis and party type on voter–party congruence. We then introduce our data, which includes information on the policy preferences of voters and the policy positions and priorities of parties on a wide range of

issues. The analysis section tests our hypotheses, and the final section concludes by discussing the implications of the findings.

Explaining variation in voter–party proximity across issues

In line with most research on voter–party congruence, our theoretical expectations begin with the assumption that voters consider policy proximity to parties when deciding how to vote (e.g., Giger & Lefkofridi 2014; Thomassen 2012). This is the central premise of the Downsian spatial model, whereby parties compete by adopting positions on issue dimensions, and voters select the party or candidate that is closest to them on the issue or issues that they care most about (Downs 1957). The core components of the model are therefore the salience of the policy issue for the voter, the voter’s position on the issue and the positions of the candidates or parties (Brody & Page 1972: 455). At the individual level, the spatial model predicts a high degree of congruence between voters and parties on the issues that are salient to the voter, and this is supported empirically (Gerber & Green 2000; Giger & Lefkofridi 2014).

However, this does not tell us on which issues we should expect to find high levels of congruence at the aggregate level. Electorates consist of different ‘issue publics’, or groups of voters who focus on distinct sets of issues (Krosnick 1990). The existence of distinct issue publics, with each group voting based on the issues that are salient to them, is often believed to exacerbate the problems of political representation. Not only do parties compete on several unrelated issue dimensions, but voters differ in terms of which issues they base their decision on. An election outcome then communicates ‘a cacophony of desires on the part of many small minorities’, and parties cannot reliably claim to have a clear mandate from their voters on any given issue (Krosnick 1990: 83).

What the traditional spatial model overlooks is that parties differ not only in their policy positions but also in the issues that they choose to emphasise in the election campaign. This is a central assumption of many of the most well-known alternatives to the Downsian spatial model, such as salience theory (Budge & Farlie 1983) and directional theory (Rabinowitz & Macdonald 1989). More recently, theories of party competition and vote choice have integrated aspects of these different approaches. For instance, the ‘issue yield’ model of De Sio and Weber (2014) assumes that parties compete both in terms of position taking and by strategic issue emphasis, and voters’ preferences are shaped by policy proximity. Parties are expected to particularly emphasise what the authors refer to as ‘bridge policies’: that is policies where their position has wide support among the party base and also has support among other voters. By campaigning on these policies, a party can attract new voters without affecting its core support.¹

Incorporating party issue emphasis into a proximity-based model of vote choice has clear implications for voter–party congruence across issues. Policy proximity can only influence voters’ decisions when they know what the party’s position is. Indeed, we know from previous research that higher voter knowledge of party positions on issues leads to greater voter–party issue congruence (Andersen et al. 2005). Voter’s knowledge of party policy on any given issue largely depends on the amount of attention the party devotes to the issue. Election campaigns are particularly important in this respect, as they inform voters of where parties stand on their core issues (Gelman & King 1993). Thus, issue emphasis by

political parties is expected to influence voter knowledge of party policy and vote choice and, ultimately, the level of congruence across issues.

To summarise, we argue that when a party emphasises a particular issue in an election campaign, it is likely to attract voters that agree with the party's position on this issue, and as a result, the average distance between the position of the party and its voters will be relatively small. Such proximity between party and voters is less likely to occur on issues that are not emphasised by the party and are therefore less central to voters' evaluation of the party. Accordingly, our first hypothesis is as follows:

H1: The average distance between the positions of voters and the party they vote for will be smallest on the issues that the party emphasises.

While there is a growing recognition of the need to consider both party policy positions and party issue emphasis when studying party competition and vote choice, the implications of this for voter–party congruence has received very little attention to date. One exception is Valen and Narud (2007), who present evidence from Norway that voter–party congruence is higher on a party's core issues. However, this evidence is based on a handful of issues. One reason for this gap in the literature is that most existing studies have looked at congruence and representation along a general ideological dimension and have not been able to consider variation across issues (Adams et al. 2006; Ezrow et al. 2011; Mattila & Raunio 2006). Below, we test the hypothesis using data on 111 specific policy issues and 34 parties across four countries.²

We also consider the possibility that voters pay more attention to long-term associations that parties have with particular issues than to the issues parties chose to emphasise in a specific election campaign. Of course, long-term issue associations and short-term issue emphasis are likely to overlap considerably (Wagner & Meyer 2014: 1033). We examine the effect of both issue emphasis and issue ownership on congruence.

While we expect the relationship specified in H1 to apply to all parties, there are reasons to believe that it may be stronger for niche parties than for mainstream parties. Niche parties are defined in part by their focus on a restricted set of issues and are clearly associated with the public mind with these issues (Meguid 2005). This issue emphasis tends not to vary significantly over time, which further cements the reputation of these parties in relation to their key issues (Adams et al. 2006). Parties that own a small set of issues offer little information about their stances on all other issues, or indeed deliberately blur their positions (Rovny 2012, 2013). Mainstream parties also prioritise some issues over others, but this focus is less consistent over time compared to niche parties. As Budge (2015) suggests, '[niche party] issue emphases are likely to be even more fixed than those of mainstream programmatic parties'. Klüver and Spoon (2016) show that large parties are more likely to change their issue attention in response to changes in issue salience among the public compared to small parties.³ Due to changing issue emphasis over time, mainstream parties are likely to be less effective at communicating their issue priorities to voters.

Furthermore, mainstream parties are typically office seeking, while niche parties are typically policy seeking (Helboe Pedersen 2012). This suggests that the campaign focus of niche parties will be more heavily focused on policy, while the campaign focus of mainstream

parties will also focus on non-policy factors such as their ability to govern, leadership qualities and past performance. This is supported by evidence that media coverage of mainstream parties is more personalised than that of niche parties (Lengauer & Winder 2013). This is likely to result in differences between niche and mainstream parties in terms of how successfully they communicate their issue priorities.

Following on from these considerations, our second hypothesis as follows:

H2: The relationship between the issue emphasis of parties and the average distance between the positions of the voters and the party they vote for will be stronger for niche parties.

Some previous research has examined how voter–party congruence varies between different types of parties, with mixed results. Romeijn (2018) studies congruence between public opinion and political parties in Germany. He finds mixed evidence about the extent to which congruence varies between niche parties and mainstream parties, but, if anything, niche parties appear more congruent and more responsive to levels of policy support in the general public. Similarly, Van Ditmars and De Lange (2019) find for the case of The Netherlands that ‘mainstream parties do not consistently represent their voters better on specific issues or dimensions than niche parties’. In contrast, Traber et al. (2018) find in a cross-national study that congruence is higher for government and office-seeking opposition parties, while Belchior and Freire (2013) find that congruence is higher for catch-all parties than for ideological parties. These contrasting findings may be due to not taking into account the interaction between issue emphasis and party type, as implied by our second hypothesis.

Research design and data

We test these hypotheses using data on the policy issue positions of voters and parties and the issue emphasis of parties at the 2012 Dutch parliamentary election, the 2016 Irish parliamentary election, the 2013 German federal election and the 2010 Swedish parliamentary election. While our case selection is constrained to a large extent by data availability, these four countries represent a reasonably representative cross section of established Western European multi-party democracies, as they vary on relevant factors such as party system fragmentation, party-centeredness and party attachment. They also feature two necessary conditions for our hypotheses to be testable: variation in the types of active parties and a significant degree of issue-based party competition.

Ireland has one of the lowest levels of party attachment in Western Europe, and Sweden one of the highest (Andeweg & Farrell 2017). While this may affect the overall level of voter–party congruence in these countries, it is not expected to play a conditioning role in relation to our hypotheses. The Netherlands, Germany and Sweden have party-centred electoral systems, whereas Ireland has a candidate-centred electoral system in which candidate attributes play an important role in vote choice (Marsh 2007). This has the effect of reducing the importance of policy-based competition in elections in Ireland relative to the other countries. We might therefore expect to find weaker support for our hypotheses in the Irish case. There are also differences in the party system across the four cases that might affect

the results. The Netherlands has a highly fragmented party system that features a number of what are essentially single-issue parties (such as the Party for the Animals); whereas the party systems in the other countries are somewhat less fragmented.⁴ We therefore anticipate that there will be stronger support for H2 in the case of the Netherlands.

Note however that we do not have strong and specific hypotheses about how the relationships we study should vary across the four countries. We expect our hypotheses to hold in all cases. To the extent that we find that these relationships vary in different contexts, we leave it for future research to formulate and test hypotheses about this variation at the level of the political and party systems. We return to this point in the conclusion.

In terms of our main variables of interest (issue emphasis and party type), there is considerable variation within each country. The party systems in these four countries include a mixture of mainstream parties with broad issue-attention profiles (such as Fine Gael in Ireland and Christian Democratic Appeal in The Netherlands) and niche parties with a narrow issue-attention profile (such as the Freedom Party in The Netherlands and the Anti-Austerity Alliance in Ireland). The parties in these elections campaigned on a diverse set of issues, including immigration, water charges, housing, crime and European integration.

Our data on the issue positions of voters and parties comes from voting advice applications (VAAs): *WhichCandidate* in Ireland, *Kieskompas* in The Netherlands, *Bundeswahlkompas* in Germany and *Valkompas* in Sweden. In all cases, a team of country experts selected a list of issues that were salient for political competition, comprehensive and balanced in terms of scope, and associated with policy differences between the parties (further details can be found in Costello 2017 and Krouwel et al. 2012). In total, 30 issues were included in the Dutch, German and Swedish versions, and 21 issues in the Irish version. Our dataset contains the verified positions of the political parties in each country and the positions of a very large opt-in panel of respondents in each country on the same issues. Descriptive information on our datasets is provided in the Supporting Information, including summaries of the overall level of agreement between voters and parties across issues.

One advantage of using VAA data for the study of voters–party representation is that we can match the positions of voters and parties on the same issues without resorting to scaling and latent dimensions that lack clear substantive interpretation. Another advantage comes from the sheer number of responses that the VAAs have: even after we restrict the sample of responses to those who have completed the policy positions *and* the party preference questions, we are left with more than 43 thousand responses in The Netherlands, 42 thousand in Sweden, 18 thousand in Germany and 21 thousand in Ireland. This means that even for the small parties we have a sufficient number of responses from their supporters, unlike studies that use traditional nationally representative public opinion surveys, which either have to drop small parties or use less than a dozen of respondents to reconstruct the positions of their supporters. As a result, we can estimate reliably the policy preferences of the supporters of small parties as well (see Costello 2017, which shows that the estimates of the preferences of party supporters from VAAs and from modelled responses from large probability-based surveys agree to a very large extent).

Measuring party–voter proximity

The outcome of interest in our study is the distance between the positions of the voters of the party and the position of the party. The distance measure that we use is based on the positions of voters and parties on concrete policy issues, expressed on the same scale. For The Netherlands, Germany and Sweden, the positions on policy issues are measures on a five-point ordinal scale with response categories ‘Strongly agree’, ‘Agree’, ‘Neutral’, ‘Disagree’, and ‘Strongly disagree’, and the party positions are derived from analyses of official documents, newspapers and other sources. For Ireland, the positions are measured on a three-point ordinal scale, and the party positions are based on a survey of political parties. Distance on a policy issue for a party is measured as the average of the absolute distances between the party position and the positions of each of its voters. The distances for the Irish case are rescaled to match the scale used in the other countries (i.e., ranging from a minimum of 0 to a maximum of 4).

We identify the supporters of parties by the declared prospective vote. In Ireland, respondents were asked to indicate who they intend to give their first preference vote to in the upcoming election. In The Netherlands this is captured by a question about which party the respondent is most likely to vote for (only one choice possible). In Germany and Sweden, the prospective vote is captured by a series of questions asking for the probability of the respondent to vote for each of the parties competing at the election on a scale from 1 to 10. We take respondents who picked at least ‘9’ for one party and no more than ‘8’ for any other party. In all cases, questions about vote intention were asked before respondents were provided with information on their policy match with parties.

While there are a number of benefits to using VAA data to study congruence, one potential drawback is the opt-in nature of the voter sample. However, while sample bias may affect the estimates for the level of proximity, our focus is on understanding the factors that drive variation in proximity across issues, which is less likely to be affected by this. We also run additional models (reported in the Supporting Information) where the voter sample is weighted to be representative of the population in terms of age, education, gender, left-right orientation, vote and urban/rural location. The results with these models do not alter the main findings of the analyses presented below.

Measuring issue salience

To measure party-specific issue salience, we rely on three different indicators. The first and main one is based on new coding of the Manifesto Project data (Krause et al. 2018). For each party and each policy issue, we identify relevant statements in the election manifesto of the party that referred specifically to this policy issue (not to the underlying policy or ideological dimension), and we record the number of these statements. We calculate the share of these statements from all statements in the party manifesto using a logarithmic transformation, as recommended by Lowe et al. (2011). We then standardise this number by subtracting the average salience of the issue across all parties. The following formula shows the exact calculation method, where x_{ip} is the number of statements in the manifesto of party p on issue i , x_p is the total number of issue statements in the manifesto of party p and N is the number of parties:

$$S_{ip} = \log \frac{x_{ip} + 1}{x_p} - \frac{1}{N} \times \sum_{p=1}^N \log \frac{x_{ip} + 1}{x_p}$$

The standardisation by the average salience of the issue ensures that we capture differences *across parties* within issues and not *across issues* as such. It is to be expected that an issue such as increasing the pension age will attract more attention from all parties than an issue such as a burka ban, but what is relevant for our theoretical argument is the *relative* party emphasis on each of these issues compared to the emphasis they receive from the other parties (cf. Budge 2015 who argues that ‘it is not the issues most emphasised by parties which distinguish them from other parties but those they uniquely emphasise’). The standardisation by the length of the party manifesto is made to correct for the fact that some parties have much longer manifestos than others, which allows them to have more statements on an issue. Parties receive a limited amount of attention from voters and must choose how to distribute their focus across issues, so it is the amount of attention a party gives to one issue relative to other issues that matters.

For Ireland, we also have a second measure of party issue emphasis, based on a survey of candidates standing in the election. The candidate survey was administered as part of the VAA used in this study. Candidates were asked to list their top three issue priorities (in an open-ended question format). For each of the 21 policy issues included in the Irish case, we counted the number of candidates from each party that listed the issue as a priority, and standardised this in the manner described in the previous paragraph. More details of this measure, along with the results of the analysis using this measure, are given in the Supporting Information.

In the Supporting Information, we also report results for The Netherlands, Germany and Sweden based on an alternative measure of issue salience that tracks the fraction of party supporters that have expressed an opinion on a policy issue question, calculated for each party and issue separately. We consider respondents who have *not* expressed an opinion as those who have answered a policy issue question with ‘Don’t know’ or ‘Neutral’. This is based on the idea that people have more accessible attitudes on issues that are salient to them (Krosnick 1990; Lavine et al. 1996). Our assumption is that party supporters would have been more likely to express an opinion on an issue, if this issue had been emphasised by the party in its communication. Hence, the relative share of voters with an opinion on an issue can proxy the salience that the party puts on the issue. We standardise this measure by the issue-level average across all parties, for the reasons explained above. The results using these alternative measures are substantively the same as the results presented below.

Measuring party niche

Our second hypothesis concerns the distinction between niche and mainstream parties. We employ two alternative measures for this. We construct a continuous measure of party niche in the following way. First, we start with calculating the party’s relative attention to all issues in its manifesto, using the issue categories in the Manifesto Project data. Then, following the approach of Meyer and Miller (2015: 262), we compute the deviation of a party’s issue attention profile from the overall system-level agenda. The values are then standardised by subtracting the average level of deviation of all parties from the particular

issue attention profile score of a party. The following formula shows the precise definition and calculation of the measure (where x_{ip} is the emphasis of party p on issue i and $\bar{X}_{i,-p}$ the average emphasis of all parties other than p on issue i):

$$\sigma_p = \sqrt{\frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^N (x_{ip} - \bar{X}_{i,-p})^2}$$

Our second measure involves classifying parties as either niche or mainstream. A binary classification of ‘niche’ parties can be controversial, but we use this in a very specific sense, namely parties that overwhelmingly focus their attention to a relatively small number of policy issues, relative to the attention paid to these issues by other parties in the political system. Building on the classifications in Budge et al. (2001), Adams et al. (2006), Budge (2015), and the overview in Wagner (2012), we end up categorising the following parties as ‘niche parties’ in the four countries: Anti-Austerity Alliance, Green Party, and Renua in Ireland; GreenLeft, Party for Freedom, the Reformed Party, the Party of the Animals in The Netherlands; the Green Party, The Left, the Pirates, the National Democratic Party (NPD), and Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany; and the Center Party, the Left, the Swedish Democrats and the Green Ecological Party in Sweden.

Additional variables

To explore whether it is issue salience as such that matters for congruence or merely the issue *type*, we use a variable that tracks whether or not the individual issues fit into the socio-economic left-right dimension. Much of the existing literature highlights a general pattern whereby issues associated with the left-right dimension have higher levels of congruence than other issues (Costello et al. 2012; Dalton 2017). The left-right dimension might be expected to be associated with higher levels of voter–party congruence because it serves as a heuristic device to simplify the voting decision (Thomassen 2012). Voters can generally place themselves on the left-right dimension and have a view on where the parties stand in left-right terms (Van Der Brug & Van der Eijk 1999). Issues related to taxes, redistribution, welfare and government intervention in the economy were coded as belonging to this dimension.⁵

Empirical results

We start the presentation of the empirical results by showing three statistical models estimated on the combined data from all four countries. We include country fixed effects in the model specifications to account for differences in the average distance between voters and parties across the four countries. We then present more detailed results from each of the four countries we study, including a party-by-party summary of the relationship between issue emphasis and voter–party distance.

Combined data analysis

Table 1 shows the results of three linear regression models of average distance. Model 1.1 features party-specific issue salience and the continuous measure of party nicheness, as well

Table 1. Multivariate linear regression models of distance between voters and parties, four countries

	Outcome variable		
	Average distance between the policy positions of voters and parties		
	Model 1.1	Model 1.2	Model 1.3
Party issue salience	-0.04* (0.02)	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.04* (0.02)
Nicheness (cont.)	0.01 (0.01)		0.01 (0.01)
Niche party (dummy)		-0.05 (0.04)	
Salience–nicheness Interaction	0.003 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.05)	0.003 (0.01)
Left/right issue			-0.01 (0.04)
Germany	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.05)	-0.04 (0.05)
Sweden	0.15*** (0.04)	0.15*** (0.04)	0.14*** (0.04)
Ireland	-0.11** (0.05)	-0.11** (0.05)	-0.11** (0.05)
Constant	1.18*** (0.03)	1.20*** (0.03)	1.18*** (0.03)
Observations	891	891	891
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,299.94	1,300.13	1,301.88

Note: The Netherlands is the reference category for the country fixed effects, as the country where the effect is closest to the average one in the whole sample. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

as their interaction. Model 1.2 replaces the continuous measure of nicheness with a binary indicator. Model 1.3 adds an indicator for left-right issues.

According to the results reported in the table, issue salience has the expected negative association with the average distance between the policy positions of voters and parties. The coefficient of issue salience is statistically significant at the 0.10 level in two of the three model specifications. The estimated coefficient of 0.04 in models 1 and 3 implies that moving from the minimum to the maximum issue salience observed in the data would decrease the preference distance by 0.26, which is approximately half of one standard deviation in distance (these calculations assume a party with an average nicheness score of zero). A model without the interaction term returns practically the same value and standard error for the coefficient of issue salience – 0.04 and 0.02, respectively – as model 1. Altogether, the results are compatible with Hypothesis 1.

The second hypothesis requires that we examine the interaction between issue salience and nicheness. Nicheness as such is not consistently associated with distance. The interaction

effect is also not consistent across the model specifications: it is negative in one (but not significant) and positive in the other two, so H2 is not supported in the pooled analysis. However, the relatively large standard errors in the models in Table 1 suggest that there is significant heterogeneity in the relationships that is worth exploring further by analysing the data from each country separately. Instead of adding interactions with each country in the models above, which would complicate the presentation of the results, we show scatterplots of the relationships of interest for each party in each country and we report more detailed country-specific statistical models in the Supporting Information.

Country-level analysis

The Netherlands. The fragmented party system in The Netherlands, featuring a large number of parties that differ significantly in their issue-attention profile, with some having a characteristically ‘niche’ profile, should provide a favourable setting for finding support for the theoretical hypotheses.

Figure 1 shows that the effect of issue salience on preference distance is strongly moderated by party type. The linear ordinary least squares (OLS) line through the data points slopes downwards for parties with a high ‘niceness’ score (the parties are ordered according to their niceness), while most of the mainstream parties exhibit either no relationship or a positive one. This suggests that party-specific issue salience decreases the average distance between parties and voters for niche parties, but not for mainstream parties. The Green Left party defies this pattern as it exhibits a positive link, while being classified as a niche party, but the classification can be contested as the party has adopted a rather broad attention profile in the past decade. The People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) exhibits a negative link, while being a mainstream party, but in fact its issue-attention profile is scored as rather narrow, at least according to its election manifesto. These inferences are confirmed by examining the table with regression results from the Dutch data only, which show a significant interaction effect between niceness and salience (see the Supporting Information).

To sum up the Dutch results, we have rather strong evidence that greater issue emphasis by parties is associated with greater voter–party congruence, but only in the case of niche parties. These patterns lend support to Hypothesis 2.

Ireland. While traditionally dominated by the two large centrist parties Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, the Irish party system has become increasingly fragmented in recent years. A number of new parties have emerged, including the Social Democrats, Renua Ireland, and the left-wing grouping of the Anti-Austerity Alliance (later renamed Solidarity) and People Before Profit. Figure 2 plots the relationship between party issue emphasis and voter–party distance for each of the main Irish parties that contested the 2016 election.

The plot in Figure 2 reveals that in Ireland the relationship between party issue salience and distance is similar for niche and mainstream parties: in both cases, distance decreases sharply with salience. The plots show that the negative relationship between salience and distance is found for all parties except Fine Gael, with the slope being the steepest for Sinn Féin and the Anti-Austerity Alliance.⁶ In sum, the Irish case provides strong support for our first hypothesis: that is, the average distance between voters and the party they vote

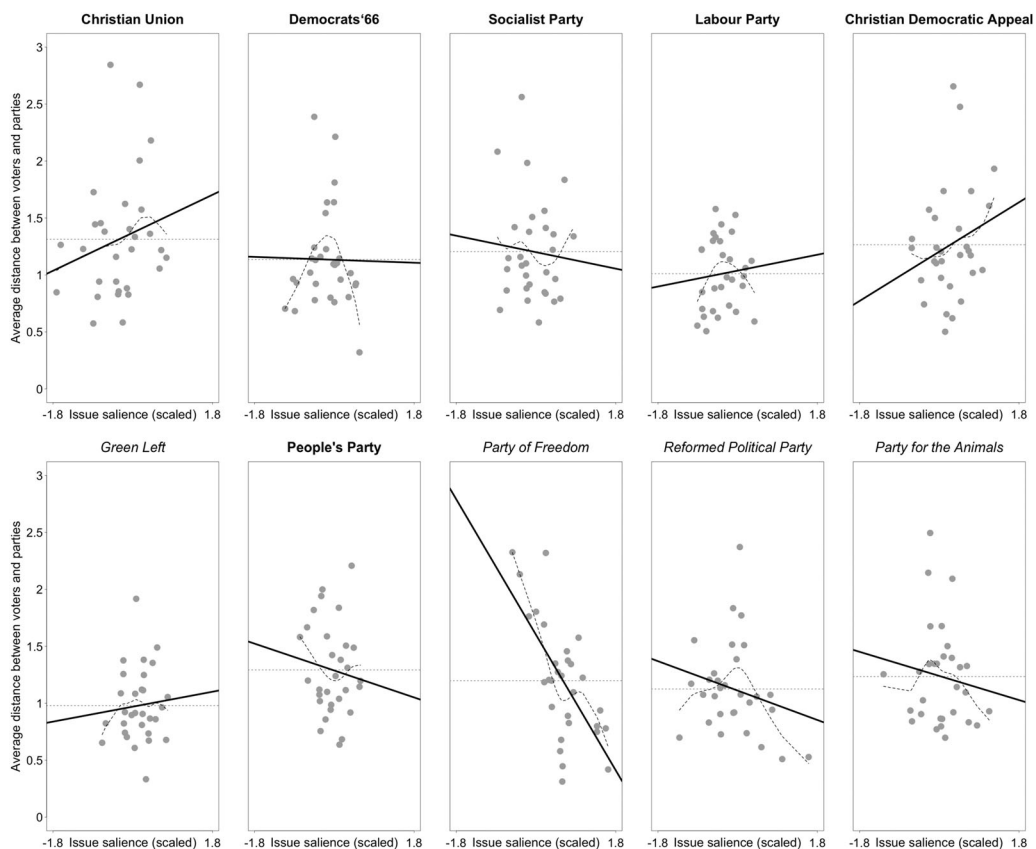


Figure 1. Preference distance and issue salience per party, The Netherlands (2012).

Notes: The panels show the scaled party-level issue salience against preference distance per party. Each dot represents one of 30 policy issues. The solid lines are linear OLS fits, while the dotted lines show cubic smoothing spline fits. The grey horizontal dashed lines show the mean distance for the party across all issues. The panels are ordered on the basis of increasing nicheness of the parties according to the continuous measure described in the text. The party names in the titles of the panels are in bold for mainstream parties and in italic for niche parties according to the binary classification.

Data: Kieskompas and Manifesto Project.

for is smallest when it comes to issues of high salience to the party. In contrast, there is no evidence in support for our second hypothesis. The effect of the interaction between a party's issue attention profile and issue salience is close to zero for all Irish models (reported in the Supporting Information). The findings are the same when the candidate survey-based measure of party issue salience is used instead of the manifesto-based measure.

Germany. Germany features a moderate number of parties with almost all, including the Greens (which has previously been classified as a niche party), adopting a rather broad agenda encompassing a variety of policy issues. This should make it hard to find support for the second hypothesis, as there are no typical niche parties and limited variation in the issue-attention profiles of the parties.

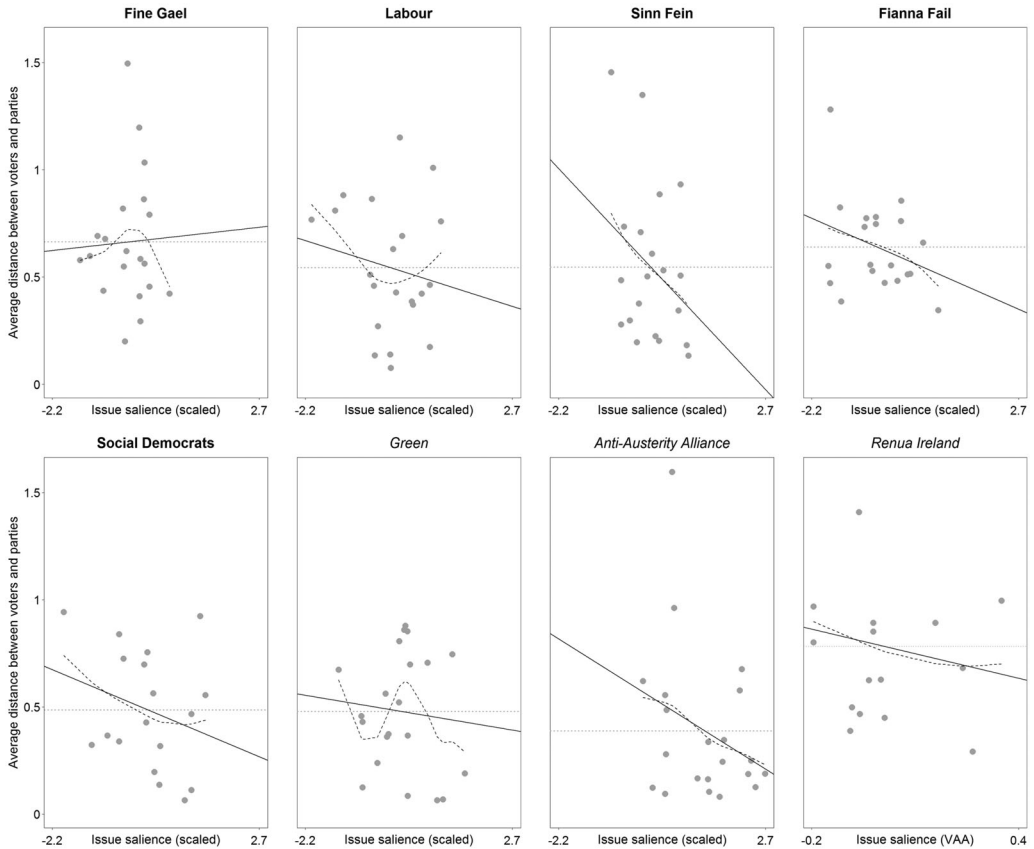


Figure 2. Preference distance and issue salience per party, Ireland (2016).

Notes: See the notes to Figure 1 for an explanation of the figure.

Data: WhichCandidate and Manifesto Project.

Looking at the relationship between issue salience and distance per party (Figure 3) reveals a lot of heterogeneity. For the two parties with the most narrow issue-attention profile, AfD and NDP (for which, however, no exact scores are available from the Manifesto Project data, so the issue salience is based on the VAA-derived measure), there is a rather strong negative relationship between party-specific issue salience and distance. This is also true, to a smaller extent, for the Socialist Party and The Left. Some parties, however – the Greens most notably – exhibit a positive relationship, so that the party is most distant from its voters on some of the issues it has emphasised most in its electoral manifesto (relative to other parties), for example, the liberalisation of soft drugs (marijuana). Yet for other parties, such as the Pirates, there is no relationship between distance and salience at all. The lack of strong relationships in the data for Germany is also confirmed in the statistical models (see Supporting Information), where neither the main variables nor their interaction is significant.

To sum up the results for Germany, we do not find strong support for our hypotheses. There is, however, a lot of heterogeneity between the parties, with some fitting the

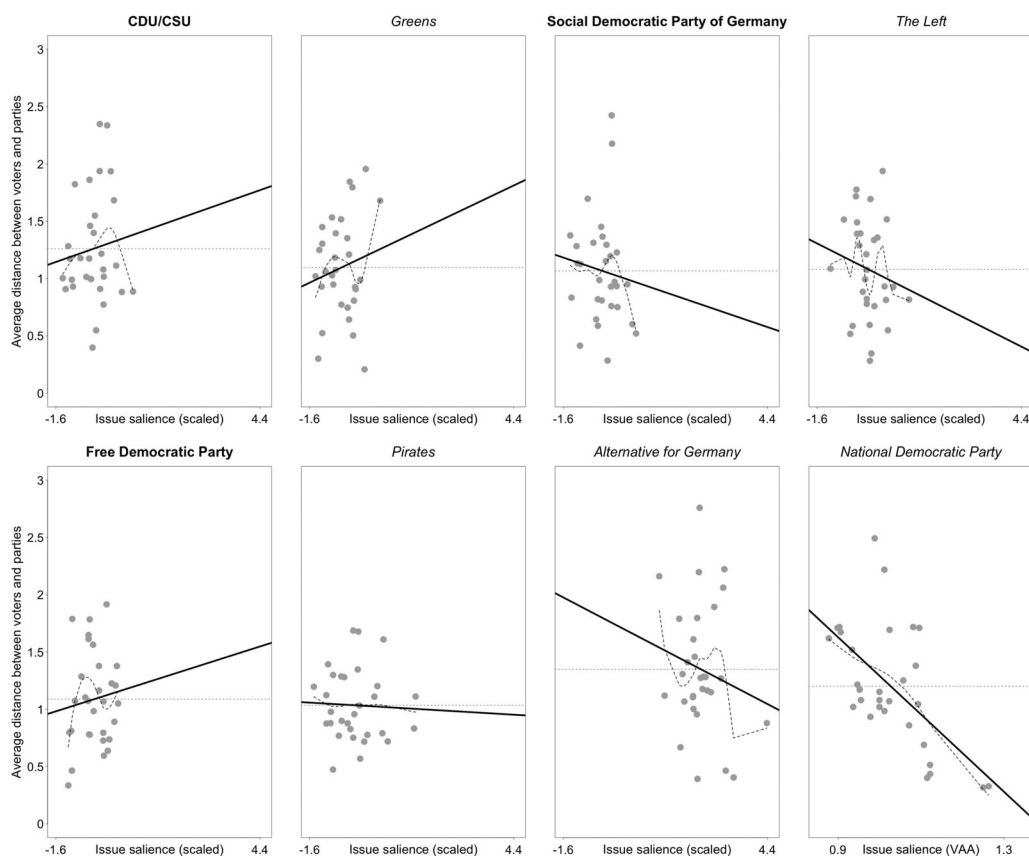


Figure 3. Preference distance and issue salience per party, Germany (2013).

Notes: See the notes to Figure 1 for an explanation of the figure.

Data: Bundeswahlkompass and Manifesto Project.

hypothesised patterns well (AfD, NPD and the Left), while others not (the Greens, CDU/CSU and the Pirates).

Sweden. Finally, we turn to the Swedish case. Sweden features many political parties in a rather fragmented political system, but one with relatively strong left and right blocks. But the country presents a real challenge for classifying parties into mainstream or niche, with many of the parties exhibiting some features of niche parties, such as a strong focus on a select few issues, but at the same time addressing a broad swathe of other policy issues as well (see, e.g., Cowell-Meyers 2017).

In Sweden, as visible in Figure 4, the relationship between issue salience and preference distance is negative for most parties, and the slope is slightly steeper for the ‘niche’ parties. The steepness does not seem to increase *linearly* with the narrowness of the party attention profile, by which the panels of the figure, and respectively the parties, are ordered.

The statistical models confirm this picture⁷. Salience has a negative association with distance across all model specifications, and is significant in two. The effect of nicheness is positive, implying that the distance between voters and their party tends to be larger

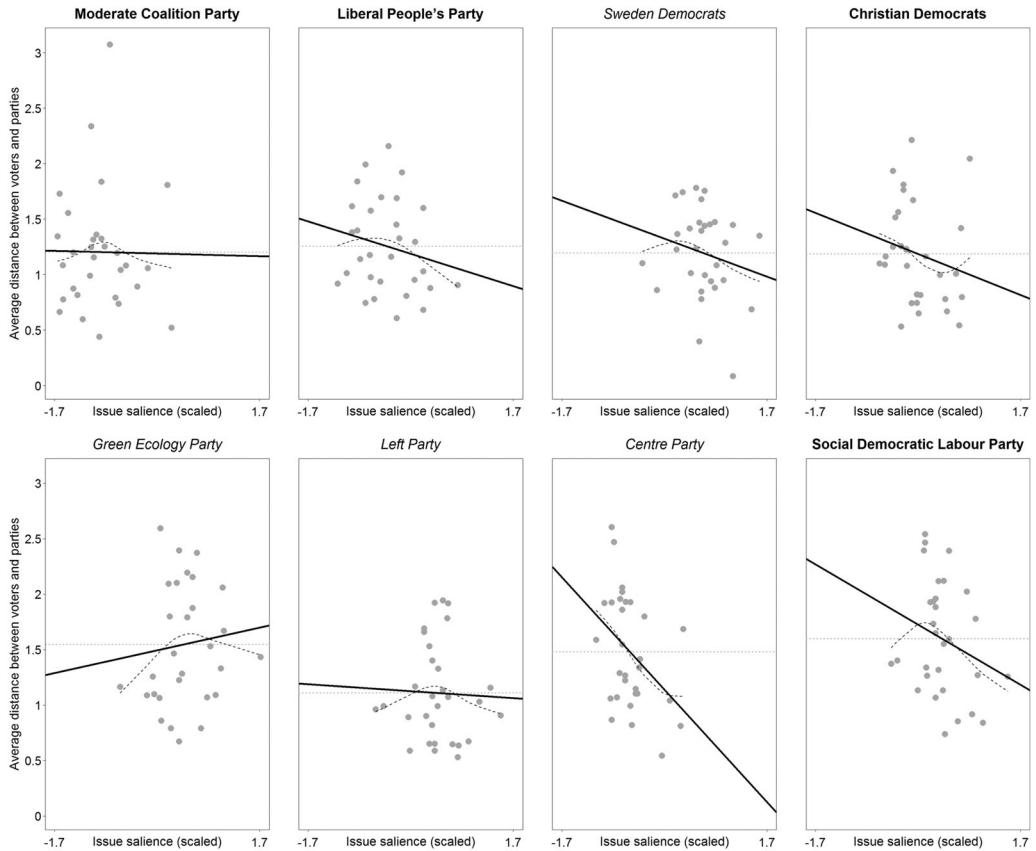


Figure 4. Preference distance and issue salience per party, Sweden (2010).

Notes: See the notes to Figure 1 for an explanation of the figure.

Data: Valkompass and Manifesto Project.

for niche parties. The interaction effect between the binary measure of nicheness and issue salience is negative and significant. The left-right indicator itself has a negative association with distance, meaning that left-right issues tend to be more congruent.

To sum up the Swedish results, issue salience has a negative effect on distance, and there is some evidence for a negative interaction with nicheness, while the latter might have a positive effect on its own.

Issue ownership

As discussed in the theoretical section, the concept of issue salience is related to the concept of issue ownership. In Table 2 we report results of three statistical models following the specifications from Table 1, with the difference being that issue ownership rather than issue salience is the main independent variable. Issue ownership has been assigned on the basis of the party family of the respective party and the nature of the issue, building on the classifications by Budge (2015) and Wagner and Meyer (2014). This is a dichotomous indicator, which identifies whether or not the party in question is associated with the issue.

Table 2. Multivariate linear regression models of distance between voters and parties and issue ownership, four countries

	Outcome variable		
	Average distance between the policy positions of voters and parties		
	Model 2.1	Model 2.2	Model 2.3
Issue ownership (binary)	-0.16*** (0.04)	-0.07 (0.05)	-0.17*** (0.04)
Nicheness (cont.)	0.004 (0.01)		0.003 (0.01)
Niche party (dummy)		0.01 (0.04)	
Issue ownership– nicheness Interaction	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.25*** (0.07)	-0.01 (0.02)
Left/right issue			0.04 (0.04)
Germany	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.05)
Sweden	0.17*** (0.04)	0.18*** (0.04)	0.17*** (0.04)
Ireland	-0.10* (0.05)	-0.05 (0.05)	-0.08 (0.05)
Constant	1.21*** (0.03)	1.20*** (0.04)	1.20*** (0.03)
Observations	891	974	891
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,284.49	1,417.43	1,285.43

Note: The Netherlands is the reference category for the country effects. The Netherlands is the reference category for the country fixed effects, as the country where the effect is closest to the average one in the whole sample. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

While it is not possible with our design to disentangle whether issue salience *or* issue ownership are more relevant for moderating congruence between voters and parties, we can at least see whether the patterns we find using the issue salience data are similar to the ones we can find using issue ownership as a predictor of preference distance. Issue ownership is positively correlated with issue salience in the combined dataset (0.11).

Altogether, issue ownership also exhibits a negative association with distance, and one that is significant in two of the three reported specifications. The effect is comparable in size and consistency to the one of issue salience.⁸ The interaction with nicheness is also negative, and significant in the second model, which uses a dichotomous indicator for niche parties. We therefore observe similar results regardless of whether we measure party salience in terms of the issues emphasised in the election campaign or long-term issue associations. It seems likely that both short- and long-term issue attention matters for congruence. Some of the issues in our data are new issues that arose in the context of the specific election campaign

(e.g., the water charges issue in Ireland), and these show the high levels of congruence for parties that emphasised them (e.g., the AAA in Ireland). We also observe high levels of congruence when it comes to issues that a party is deemed to ‘own’, such as Green parties and environmental issues.

Conclusion

We set out to explain variation in congruence between the policy preferences of voters and political parties across issues. Our focus has been on the theoretical expectations that party issue salience should increase congruence but that the effect will differ for niche and mainstream parties. We find the strongest support for the hypothesis that the distance between the policy positions of voters and parties decreases with party-specific issue salience. There is a significant negative effect of salience on distance in the pooled analysis, and also in the country-level analyses for Ireland and Sweden. Indeed, for most parties in each country, there is a negative relationship between party issue salience and distance. Hence, we consider the data is broadly consistent with our first hypothesis.

The results are more ambiguous when it comes to the interaction between issue salience and issue attention profile. With regard to this hypothesis, the Dutch and Swedish cases stand out with the clearest evidence in favour. The Netherlands and Sweden are more likely cases to observe the hypothesised effect as they feature more parties with some, especially in The Netherlands, having a clear niche profile. Across all four cases, Green parties (which are classified as niche parties) in particular stand out against our hypothesis. Our data shows that Green parties are generally congruent with their voters on environmental issues, but these parties also prioritise other issues that are not related to the environment, and congruence tends to be lower on these. It may be the case that parties who are exclusively associated with one type of issue find it difficult to communicate their policies on other issues that they prioritise, thereby lowering congruence.

Our findings contribute to the literature on representation in a number of ways. Previous research has focused on differences in voter–party congruence for different types of parties (e.g., Dalton 2017), or for different types of issues (e.g., Thomassen 2012). In contrast, our results suggest that congruence depends (in part) on which issues each party emphasises in the election. It is unlikely that these patterns depend on the underlying type of policy issue – whether it maps onto the left-right dimension or not. This variable itself is not consistently associated with the quality of representation across the countries, with a positive association with preference distance in The Netherlands but a negative one in Sweden and none in Ireland and Germany. While previous research has found that congruence is often higher on issues related to the left-right dimension, our findings imply that this is because many parties emphasis on left-right issues. Our results also contribute to the recent debates about the closeness of niche parties to their voters (Giger & Lefkofridi 2014, Dalton 2017, van Ditmars & De Lange 2019). We find that, with the possible exception of Sweden, niche parties are not, on average, more distant from the positions of their voters across all issues than mainstream parties.

To the extent that many extreme and radical right political parties in Europe predominantly focus on a small number of issues – immigration, Islam, European integration – our findings shed light on the relationship between these parties and their voters. Since

these issues are disproportionately salient for these parties and for their voters, we can expect a high level of preference congruence on *these* issues. At the same time, the lower salience of *all other* policy issues for these parties means that they have a much freer hand, unchecked by their voters, on them. Unlike parties with a broader selection of issues to emphasise, radical right parties might be less constrained by popularity concerns when they make decisions on anything other than their ‘core’ issues of concern.

Our results are based on a sample of four countries selected to be broadly representative of the range of party systems in Western Europe, within the constraints of data availability. A limiting factor for the generalisability of our findings beyond the four cases we analyse is the presence of niche parties in the political system at all. But with the rising success of challenger parties across Europe, even in countries which until recently were dominated by a small number of catch-all, mainstream parties organised around a broad ideology (such as Spain), the phenomenon of differential congruence between parties and voters that we find is likely to have general relevance for multi-party parliamentary democracies. Another requirement for generalisation is that political competition revolves around policy issues, and not around personalities or identity-based party loyalties. Again, recent developments indicate that issue voting at the expense of rigid party loyalties is becoming more rather than less relevant.

With regard to the normative implications, it is reassuring that congruence is higher on the issues that the parties emphasise in their campaigns. While in an ideal world congruence would be high on all issues, the multidimensional nature of the issue space makes this very unlikely. Yet it is particularly important that congruence is high when it comes to a party’s core issues. Parties rarely if ever act on all of the policy commitments outlined in their manifesto, particularly in the context of coalition government (Thomson et al. 2017); but they can be expected to act on the issues that they prioritise. This is not to say that low congruence on other issues is unproblematic. The issues a party prioritises are not necessarily the social problems of utmost importance or urgency. Moreover, once they get in power parties need to decide on all kinds of policy issues, including issues that they have not emphasised in their campaigns. Future research should examine whether voter–party congruence for parties that enter government is higher in relation to policy promises that are subsequently acted upon, compared to promises that go unfulfilled.

Finally, it is notable that our empirical results differ substantially across the four elections we study. These different patterns could be due to the characteristics of the specific elections we examine. For instance, it is possible that the effect of party issue emphasis on congruence will be greater in volatile elections, where issue-based voting is widespread, compared to elections that take place during periods of political stability, where more people vote based on habit and party loyalties. Of the four elections examined here, the Irish election was the most volatile (according to the Pedersen index), and in this election we observe the strongest relationship between party issue salience and congruence. It is also possible that the differences we observe reflect more systematic differences in the political and party systems. For instance, the German federal structure might lead parties to communicate their message differently in different regions, reducing the effect of party issue salience on congruence. Future efforts to account for differences across countries and elections would benefit from using a sample of policy issues that is the same across the countries, as different policy issues might be systematically related with different patterns of congruence, but this

implies that some of the policy issues might not be politically salient at all in some of the countries.

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Online Appendix

Additional supporting information may be found in the Online Appendix section at the end of the article.

Table A1a. Descriptive statistics: The Netherlands 2012

Table A1b. Descriptive statistics: Ireland 2016

Table A1c. Descriptive statistics: Germany 2013

Table A1d. Descriptive statistics: Sweden 2010

Table A2a. Regression model results: The Netherlands 2012

Table A2b. Regression model results: Ireland 2016

Table A2c. Regression model results: Germany 2013

Table A2d. Regression model results: Sweden 2010

Table A3a. Regression models results: excluding strong party supporters, Netherlands 2012

Table A3b. Regression models results: excluding strong party supporters, Ireland 2016

Table A4a. Alternative specifications using the data from Ireland

Table A4b. Alternative specifications using the data from The Netherlands

Table A4c. Alternative specifications using the data from Germany

Table A4d. Alternative specifications using the data from Sweden

Table A5. Alternative specifications using weighted data from Ireland

Replication Files

Notes

1. Klüver and Spoon find that parties also respond to changes in voters’ issue priorities, with more responsiveness for large parties and opposition parties (2016) and more responsiveness on more polarised issues (Spoon & Klüver 2015).
2. The causal mechanism behind H1 assumes that voters have exogenous policy preferences, and when deciding how to vote they evaluate each party based on its position on the issues it emphasises. The relationship between issue emphasis and congruence is therefore driven by vote choice. However, an alternative top-down mechanism is also plausible, whereby the policy preferences of partisans are influenced by the policy positions and issue attention of the party they support. We consider this alternative mechanism in the Supporting Information, where we provide evidence that suggests that the top-down mechanism does not drive patterns in voter–party congruence across issues.

3. They also examine niche parties and find that they are less likely than other parties to change their issue priorities in response to public opinion, although this relationship was not statistically significant (p. 644).
4. Ireland has a relatively high score for in terms of the effective number of parties (see Michael Gallagher's election indices, https://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/people/michael_gallagher/ElSystems/Docts/ElectionIndices.pdf), but this is partly driven by the high number of independent candidates.
5. In the Irish case, factor analysis showed that items relating to new taxes introduced during the financial crisis (a water charges and a property tax) formed a separate dimension (see Costello 2017), and so these items are not classified as left-right issues here.
6. The manifesto-based salience measure is not available for Renua Ireland, as the data are not in the Manifesto Project corpus, so the results for this party are based on an analysis that uses the candidate survey-based salience measure. The statistical tables are provided in the Supporting Information.
7. The issue profile (continuous nicheness) measure is not available for Feministiskt initiativ and Pirates (data not in Manifesto Project corpus). So Feministiskt initiativ and Pirates data feature in the models with the nicheness dummy, but not in the models with continuous nicheness. There are missing party positions for the Pirate party.
8. The coefficient for issue ownership in Table 2 is larger than the coefficient for issue salience in Table 1, but the former is a dichotomous variable while the latter is a scale with a range of approximately 4 to 5 points, depending on the country.

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