Strategic incentives, issue proximity and party support in Europe

by

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West European Politics 01/2012; 35(6-6):1363 - 1385

*Mark Franklin is grateful for the support of the College of Arts and Social Sciences, Australian National University, which provided him with ideal working conditions during September 2011.

ABSTRACT

The *Issue Yield* model [De Sio 2010] predicts that parties will choose specific issues to emphasize, based on the joint assessment of electoral *risks* (how divisive is an issue within the party support base) and electoral *opportunities* (how widely supported is the same issue outside the party). According to this model, issues with high *yield* are those that combine a high affinity with the existing party base, together with a high potential to reach new voters. In previous work, the model showed a remarkable ability to explain aggregate issue importance as reported by party supporters [De Sio 2010], as well as issue emphasis in party manifestos (De Sio and Weber 2011). This paper tests the implications at the individual level by comparing a conventional model where issue salience is determined from manifesto data with a revised model where issue salience is determined by issue yield. The empirical findings show that issue yield is a more effective criterion than manifesto emphasis for identifying the issues most closely associated with party support in the minds of voters.

Any assessment of the extent to which parties represent those who vote for them requires us to discover on what grounds people support the parties that they vote for. If those grounds do not include (directly or indirectly) a choice based on a preference for policies that parties promise to try and implement, then representation in policy terms is not taking place.

Determining whether policy representation takes place requires us to know which are the issues that parties promise to try and implement; but determining which issues these are is difficult. We might look at party manifestos, at media reports of stump speeches, at reports of positions taken in debate and at policies enacted when the parties concerned have the power to enact their policies, but still we would miss things. In this paper we examine the potential of starting from something we definitely can measure – the benefit to parties of stressing certain issues – and present evidence suggesting that parties do indeed stress, by some means or other, the issues from which they stand to benefit the most.

Determining which issues these are is complicated by the fact that there is disagreement in the literature over whether parties campaign on (and people choose between them on) the basis of position or valence. Position issues are those upon which parties (and voters) take positions that are for or against (some proposition), more or less (regulation), higher or lower (government expenditure, redistribution, etc.). Valence issues are those upon which most people are agreed (peace, security, economic growth) but, regarding which, different parties may be better or less well-positioned to credibly undertake to bring about the commonly desired objective. Certain parties may be so advantaged in these terms regarding certain issues that they could be said to "own" those issues.

In previous work (De Sio 2010; De Sio and Weber 2011), one of the present authors has argued that many issues can be seen as combining valence and position aspects because even a

position issue can approximate the character of a valence issue if the proportion of those supporting the issue is overwhelmingly large, so that it becomes something very close to a commonly desired objective. Moreover, the quasi-valence character of such issues can provide different opportunities to different parties. Certain issues can be safely exploited by some parties (whose supporters are largely in agreement about the issue) but not by others (whose supporters are more evenly split). In that work it was argued that parties take advantage of this variability between issues in order to focus on issues that promise them a high "issue yield" – little chance of costing them the support of those who already vote for them together with a high potential to reach (and perhaps convert) other voters.

Findings demonstrate that the issue yield approach performs well in explaining aggregate issue importance as reported by party supporters (De Sio 2010), as well as issue emphasis in party manifestos (De Sio and Weber 2011). This paper addresses the implications of the model for individual level voting behaviour. Our argument is that, if the configuration of strategic incentives encapsulated in the Issue Yield Model does indeed influence party strategies, this will show up in the behaviour of voters - the final objective of party strategizing – in terms of stronger support for parties that are close to them on issues that promise those parties high yield. We are agnostic as to the exact mechanism by which voters become aware of the strategic importance of certain issues for certain parties. It might be that that parties focus in their campaigning on issues that promise high yield and voters respond to these campaign activities. Alternatively, parties may simply enjoy a long-standing reputation for their concern with these issues. Other mechanisms could be envisaged, but it is not our purpose to spell these out. We merely focus on establishing that voters behave as though some such mechanism exists.

In the pages that follow we will first summarize the Issue Yield Model and describe our

strategy for determining whether this model better explains party support than other approaches do. We then move on to introduce the data we employ and to describe the analysis we undertake in order to conduct our test. After reporting our findings the paper concludes.

The Issue Yield model

At the very core of democratic representation is the fact that political debate during election campaigns is structured around a multiplicity of issues. Most such issues can be hypothesized to jointly contribute to the construction (or reactivation) of party preference – and ultimately to the determination of party choice, as election day approaches.

The literature has already confronted various problems connected to this multiplicity of issues. The dynamics of issue emergence have been framed in terms of their lifecycle and *evolution* (Carmines and Stimson 1986, 1989; 1993); attention has been drawn to the *priming* effects that allow issues that are salient in a specific campaign to play a special role in subsequent vote choice (Iyengar and Kinder 1987); finally, what is probably the most developed framework for the analysis of voting behavior and party competition, Downsian theory, has been extended in order to accommodate the presence of multiple issue-bases of party competition.[1]

Attention has also been drawn – although without the development of a systematic

[1] Albeit with mixed results, given that the cornerstone of Downsian theory is precisely that only the synthetizing of political conflict into a *single* dimension (Downs 1957; Black 1958) can avoid the inherent disequilibria and decision cycles produced by issue multidimensionality (Arrow 1951; Riker 1982). As a result, most of the literature has concentrated on determining the conditions upon which the *median voter theorem* can be extended to multiple dimensions – conditions that are in general very restrictive (Davis and Hinich 1966; Plott 1967; McKelvey 1986; Ansolabehere and Snyder 2000).

framework – to the analysis of the risks and opportunities that different issues present to political parties. In this regard, pioneering work by William Riker (1982, 1986, 1996) developed the concept of *herestetics*: the idea that a core resource in political competition is, rather than a change in position on the main dimension of conflict, the *selection of a favorable dimension of conflict*. In Riker's words, "For a person who expects to lose on some decision, the fundamental heresthetical device is to divide the majority with a new alternative, one the person prefers to the alternative previously expected to win" (1986: 1). The Issue Yield model builds on this idea to develop a systematic framework for comparative analysis by focusing on the systematic analysis of the electoral risks and opportunities that each issue presents to each party.

Underlying the Issue Yield model lies a generalized view of political issues that subsumes in a single concept two categories of issues that are usually seen as qualitatively distinct: traditional Downsian *positional* issues on the one hand, and *valence issues* on the other hand. While the former are characterized by the presence of a distribution of preferences over different policy alternatives (in other words, by the presence of *disagreement* about policy goals), the latter lack a distribution of preferences: they are characterized by complete agreement over particular objectives (usually in domains such as economic prosperity, national security, etc.). With valence issues, voters will evaluate different parties not on their proposed policy, but on the *credibility* they can claim for achieving what is perceived by everyone as a *common goal* (Stokes 1963, 1992).

A heresthetical unification of these two apparently incompatible issue types can be developed on the basis of a suggestion made by Stokes himself: "the question whether a given problem poses a position- or valence-issue is a matter to be settled *empirically* and not on *a priori* logical grounds" (1963, 373). In other words, *any* issue can be a valence issue, provided

that there is a very large degree of agreement among citizens over a policy goal to pursue. A simple operationalization of Stokes' suggestion can be achieved – using survey data – by measuring the percentage of respondents that lie on the "agree" side of response items dedicated to specific policy issues. Comparative empirical analyses among the 27 EU member countries show that Stokes' suggestion is empirically confirmed: issues that are very controversial in some countries show a very high level of agreement in others, giving them a character very close to that of valence issues. As an example, a statement such as "Income and wealth should be redistributed towards ordinary people" has 75% support in France and Italy, 92% in Slovenia, but only 49% in Denmark, where it is a clearly divisive issue (De Sio 2010; De Sio and Weber 2011). This leads to the conclusion that, when adopting an indicator such as the *overall level of support* for one side of a policy issue, positional and valence issues can be considered as lying in different positions on the same continuum, with ideal type valence issues displaying close to 100% agreement and 0% disagreement (or the opposite), and ideal type position issues displaying close to 50% agreement and 50% disagreement[2].

But the most useful application of this idea is to highlight the presence of an intermediate category of issues for which support lies in between these two extremes (for simplicity, those that register support from about 75% and up). Though still positional,[3] such issues share some properties with valence issues: the policy at hand becomes something close to a *shared* goal (if

[2] This example should clarify the decoupling between the *potential* for a trade-off and the *empirical presence* of a difference of opinion regarding policy alternatives. Even in a country where 100% of voters agreed on income redistribution, a potential trade-off would still exist on the issue: but, so long as the trade-off does not show up in public discourse, we would expect competition to take place on that issue in *valence* rather than in *positional* terms.

[3] The 25% disagreeing on the policy confirms the presence of a proper distribution of preferences.

not by 100% of voters, then at least by a vast majority). For such issues we expect some of the dynamics of valence competition to come into play: parties will not necessarily take opposed views on such issues. Some may rather try to claim more credibility in being able to achieve the (almost) commonly desired outcome. Differences between parties in this regard are indeed quite likely. Since part of the electorate still disagrees on the policy concerned, the likelihood is that the distribution of preferences will be different for different parties. For some parties, all (or almost all) supporters will agree on the policy; for others, supporters might be more evenly split. This has clear implications in terms of party strategy. Parties for which the issue is internally divisive will hardly be able to claim credibility on the issue in valence terms; as a result, they will likely refrain from emphasizing the issue in a campaign. By contrast, parties whose supporters agree on the policy will be better positioned to safely campaign on the issue without the risk of losing existing support. For such parties the issue will clearly represent an attractive opportunity, given that it is supported by many who are not current adherents to that party: as such, it will represent a "bridge" issue (De Sio and Weber 2011), allowing the parties to reach new supporters beyond their core support base.[4]

The Issue Yield model builds on these insights[5] to develop specific indicators for the configuration of risks and opportunities that each issue offers to each party. It does so based on two

[4] We do not suppose that party leaders necessarily spend their time poring over polling figures trying to determine the issues on which their supporters are agreed. Politicians have other ways of gauging public opinion. Astute party leaders presumably have well-honed abilities to evaluate the potential of certain issues without necessarily requiring survey data. It is we who need survey data to understand the strategies that they eventually adopt.

[5] These insights are not entirely new, as they are present – though part of a slightly different theoretical framework – in both the *saliency theory* (Budge and Farlie 1983) and the *issue ownership* (Petrocik 1996) approaches.

core indicators: the *overall level of support* that characterizes each issue,[6] and the level of *differential support* (over- or under-) for the issue among adherents to a party.[7] These two core indicators can be combined into a party- and issue- specific index of *issue yield*, L, that expresses the combination of risks and opportunities that each issue presents to each party.[8] L can have a maximum value of 1 when all supporters of a party also support the issue. In this case the issue will provide only opportunities for the party, with no risks of losing existing supporters. A value of 0 will instead correspond to a situation where the issue is supported by the same proportion of respondents as of party adherents (though obviously not the same ones): in this case it provides no opportunity for attracting additional support; and stressing it will likely cost as many existing party adherents as it stands to gain new supporters. Negative values correspond to issues for which support in the electorate as a whole is even *lower* than the level of support enjoyed by the party. Here, a stress on the issue will likely cost more party adherents than it will gain new ones.[9]

Empirical tests employing cross-national datasets show that issue yield is able to account in a general model for a large part of cross-country variation. Moreover, the nonlinear combination of risk and opportunity indicators that makes up the issue yield index performs

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[6] Defined as the share of respondents lying on the "agree" side of the corresponding response item.

[7] Compared to the default expectation that agreement and disagreement within each party is the same as in the whole electorate.

[8] If we define p as the share of respondents that support a party, i as the share of respondents that support an issue, and f as the share of respondents that jointly support both, the formula for issue yield is $L = \frac{p(p-i)}{f + p(p-(1+i))}$ (see De Sio 2010; De Sio and Weber 2011).

[9] Of course, it might be possible to *convert* opponents of the issue, both within and beyond a party, but this will produce a different proportion of supporters within and beyond the party and give rise to a different value of L.

significantly better than the indicators alone, providing empirical support for the theoretical hypothesis incorporated in the issue yield formula. These findings tell us that, in substantive terms, the Issue Yield model effectively captures an important part of the mechanisms that drive issue salience. Parties give a stronger emphasis in their manifestos to issues with a higher yield; and voters for such parties perceive those issues as more salient than others.

What is now of interest is to determine whether issue yield can explain the grounds on which voters choose specific parties.

We do not, however, expect yield-weighted issues to play an equal role for all parties. Past research (De Sio and Weber 2011) has shown that small parties are more greatly influenced by issue yield when deciding which issues to stress, and it would thus make sense for voters to respond more strongly to differences in issue yield when the party they are evaluating is a small one. Again the exact mechanism involved is not central; but we speculate that large parties generally benefit from widespread familiarity with the their policies. Because of this familiarity, stress on specific issues in a particular manifesto (or campaign) will be less central to winning support. So large parties have less to lose from a poor choice of issues to stress and less to gain from a good choice. Small parties, by contrast, will have issue positions that are almost inevitably less widely known. At the same time, support for such parties almost by definition is based on fewer issues. So it matters more to small parties that they make good choices over what issues to stress. They have both more to gain and more to lose from this choice than large parties do.

Issue yield and individual voting behavior

If parties are seen by voters to stand for issues that promise those parties high yield, this should be evident in voters' behaviour. At the margin, voters whose primary concerns are with issues

that distinguish a particular party should be drawn more to that party than to parties that are seen to stand for other issues. Indeed, although not our purpose in this paper, such a focus on individual behaviour might even permit scholars to distinguish between issues stressed in party manifestos and issues stressed in campaigns, a point of contention for those who criticize the use of party manifesto data as a means of determining the issues that parties campaign on (for example, Ray 1999; Benoit, Laver and Mikhaylov 2009). In this way we take a step forward from previous tests involving party manifesto data. In that research (De Sio and Weber 2011) it was found that parties do stress in their manifestos issues that promise high yield. Here we are concerned with whether voters also take account of issue yield in their party evaluations. Our expectations can be summarized into one main research hypothesis:

> *H: In assessing the importance that different issues have in driving support towards specific parties, predictions based on the Issue Yield model should outperform those based on party manifesto emphasis and both of these should outperform a model in which all issues have equal emphasis.*

This hypothesis is consistent with the expectation that only some of the issues stressed in a party manifesto are the focus of party campaign activities, since manifestos evidently serve additional purposes than simply attracting voters at election time. But it also expresses the expectation that considerations leading voters to assign different weights to issues are not completely idiosyncratic, but can be at least partially deduced from the general theoretical framework of issue yield. In other words, we expect the issue yield model to provide theoretical leverage in predicting which issues drive which voters towards which parties, and a test that pits the stress given to issues in party manifestos against the stress that would be given to issues with high yield should discover voters being attracted to parties on the basis of issues with high yield

even more than on the basis of issues stressed in those parties' manifestos (which we already know reflect issue yield to some extent).

Finally, when considering the implications of the issue yield model for voting behaviour, we need to mention its relationship with existing rival spatial models of voting. Here, the important distinction is between *proximity* and *directional* theories, whose rivalry is prominent in the literature. We are fully agnostic regarding this debate, in that the issue yield model is positioned one step back in the causal chain. We expect issue yield to influence *which parties* stress *which issues*, and then – as a consequence – which issues will play a stronger role in driving voters towards specific parties. But our hypothesis will only concern the *relative weight* of different issues, not the specific dynamics (based on proximity or direction) that would best describe the relationship between party position, voter position and party support. It is true that the test we apply in assessing the weight of different issues could come out differently if we chose one or the other spatial model; but – as we explain in the next section – we will employ what is effectively a "lowest common denominator" between the two theories, not requiring us to bind our empirical findings to the choice of a specific spatial theory.

Research strategy

Being focused on the interaction between party strategy and voting behavior, our research question inevitably calls for a composite dataset, comprising at least three distinct pieces of information. The first is a snapshot of issue support and party-issue alignments as shown in voters' attitudes: this first element is what is needed to build issue yield information, thus synthesizing the risks and opportunities that issues present to parties; it typically requires voter-level survey data. A second piece of information relates to parties, in terms of both the party

positions on the various issues (in order to compute party-voter proximity as a predictor of party preference) and the emphasis given in the party manifesto to each specific issue. Such information is typically acquired through manifesto data or expert surveys. Finally, these two elements can be used as predictors of the weights that voters implicitly employ in building party preferences: information about these latter (in terms of party support) must also be collected from voter-level survey data.

Our research design inevitably calls for the analysis of the largest possible number of parties, for at least two reasons. The first is, understandably, to increase the number of party*issue relationships that are the main object of interest; the second – not less important – is that the very general and abstract nature of issue yield calls for an empirical test of maximum generality, involving many different party systems, in order to demonstrate that the issue yield mechanism is able to travel across different contexts. Finally, we would ideally like to compare multiple elections under "controlled conditions" to the largest extent possible, in trying to minimize the impact of contingent national factors.

For these reasons, we employ data from two of the comparative datasets collected by the PIREDEU study (http://www.piredeu.eu) of the 2009 European Parliament (EP) elections. EP elections may not appear the most appropriate context in which to study the dynamics of party competition in national party systems; however, EP elections are organized on a strictly national basis, and are contested by national parties. This presents a combination of country differences and cross-country context uniformity that can be seen as providing appropriate laboratory-like "windows" into national political processes (see, for example,Van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; van der Brug et al. 2008). Moreover, the PIREDEU project includes information about both voters and party manifestos, and its voter component (van Egmond et al. 2010) is a represent-

tative mass survey consisting of 27 virtually identical national samples, allowing for excellent comparability of issues across countries.[10] The same applies to the party manifesto component of the study (Schmitt 2010), although the differences between the issue response items included in the voter study and the issue areas included in the manifesto study has required a "conceptual matching" stage, whose choices are presented in Table A1 in an Appendix to this paper.[11]

Using this dataset, we chose to operationalize our research question in terms of rival models of party support, employing as dependent variable a measure of Propensity-to-Vote (PTV). Following a proved measurement and analysis strategy (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; van der Eijk and van der Brug 2007) respondents are asked to report separately for each party the likelihood that they will ever vote for that party. The dataset is then reshaped into a "stacked" format, by converting the PTVs reported for each party by each respondent into different values of the same "generic" PTV variable for duplicate observations of the same respondent across different parties. This reshaping changes the unit of analysis in each country from the number of individual respondents (N) to N*P respondent-parties (van der Eijk et al. 2006). Of course, for

[10] The main quantities for computing issue yield indicators (party support, issue support, joint party-issue support) were derived from vote intention in national elections ("And if there was a general election tomorrow, which party would you vote for?") and from standard, five-point Likert response scales (strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree) on 12 issues presented in Table A1 in this paper's Appendix. These latter scales were dichotomized to calculate the measure of issue yield. Neutral values were coded .5, resulting in a conservative estimate of bridge issues because (dis)agreement is shrunk toward the midpoint.

[11] The possibility for parties to exploit either the positive or the negative side of an issue has been taken into account in the analysis by separately computing issue yield for each side of each issue, then assuming that each party would exploit the side with the higher yield.

the analysis to produce meaningful results, predictors need to be tailored to the respondent-party unit of analysis.[12] In this study, our main focus is on the key issue-based predictor at the respondent-party level: the affinity between the respondent and the party on each of the issues included in the analysis.[13] This affinity was computed in three different versions, aiming at expressing the rival models whose comparison is at the core of our research hypothesis.[14]

The first version of the respondent-party issue affinity measure involves comparisons between individual issue positions and party positions as revealed in party manifestos. The position of the party on the issue is determined on a three-point scale,[15] based on the relative occurrence (and prevalence) of negative and positive mentions of the terms pertaining to the issue in the party manifesto.[16] Secondly, the position of the voter on the issue is determined on the same three-point scale, based on her response to a five-point survey item.[17] A party-

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[12] Otherwise, all predictors (being respondent-level) would have the same value across all the within-respondent observations: thus PTV differences across party-level observations for the same respondent could not be explained.

[13] Control variables were included at the party-respondent level based on sociodemographics at the respondent level, and on respondents' party evaluations (which party did they feel closest to and which party did they think would perform best in terms of the most important problem facing their country). The specific procedure for doing so is based on multivariate regressions (run separately for each party) of a party's PTV on the specific predictors: predicted values (y-hats) are then centered on their means and saved as scores for use in the later analysis as party-respondent-specific predictors [van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; van der Eijk e al, 2006].

[14] A fourth version was computed as a robustness check (see below, footnote 32), but its detailed results are not reported.

[15] With scores -1, 0, +1 corresponding to disagreement, neutral position, agreement.

[16] In case of lack of any mention, the "neutral" code is assigned.

[17] Simplifying the five-point- into a three-point scale is needed to render the voter and party scales comparable.

respondent affinity score is then computed by multiplying the two scores together, leading to an overall affinity score of +1 when the party and the respondent lie on the same side, -1 when they lie on opposite sides, and 0 when either or both are neutral.[18] This measure assumes that all issues have the same degree of salience across voters and parties.

The second version additionally takes account of party manifesto emphasis, and is computed by taking the "raw" affinity score calculated as described above and weighting it by the emphasis devoted to the issue in the party-specific manifesto:[19] it expresses a *manifesto emphasis model*, where respondents that report a high propensity to vote for a party are expected to do so because they have a high affinity with the party on issues that receive most emphasis by the party in its manifesto.

The third version is also a weighted score, but this one is instead constructed by computing each affinity score based on the *issue yield* of the issue for the party,[20] and then weighting it by the issue yield[21] so that issues whose affinity produces a higher propensity to vote for a party are those that have a higher yield for the party, regardless of the emphasis they received in the manifesto. Finally, because the three measures have different maxima and

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[18] We also give a score of 0 when both are neutral, thus expressing the fact that this is a weaker form of agreement than when both are on the same side.

[19] Actually, the difference between the emphases given to the two sides of the issue. For comparison, a model is provided in which issues are not weighted by manifesto emphasis.

[20] Analogously to the manifesto emphasis score, this is based on the difference between issue yields for the positive or negative side of the issue.

[21] Actually, as in the manifesto version, by the difference in yield between the positive and negative side of the issue.

minima, all were converted to standard scores prior to analysis.

As should be clear from the operationalization outlined above, the basic procedure for deriving the affinity measures (prior to weighting) essentially acts as a lowest common denominator between the proximity and directional approach to the relationship between voter and party positions. From a proximity point of view, the computed affinities are clearly equivalent to a party-voter proximity, albeit measured on an oversimplified three-point scale; from a directional point of view, the same affinities are equivalent to interactions between party and voter positions, when both are measured against a neutral position. In this regard, we then deem this operationalization appropriate for expressing our agnostic views concerning the proximity-directional alternative (cf. Pardos and Dinas 2010 for corroborative reasoning).

Given the construction of each of these sets of predictors, our research strategy becomes straightforward. We estimated rival three-level random-intercept[22] models of propensity-to-vote for different parties (with PTV responses given by each respondent as the units of analysis). Our expectation is that, with a set of controls common to all models, yield-weighted issue affinities should predict PTVs more accurately than manifesto-emphasis-weighted affinities and both should perform better than the baseline unweighted affinities.

Findings

We proceeded to model estimation by including in all models a base set of control variables

[22] With responses nested within respondents who are nested within countries. Random intercepts are specified at the country and respondent level. Since the model contains no party-level variables, we do not specify a party level in this model (see Table 2 for models that include a party level).

consisting of socio-demographics,[23] political awareness,[24] partisanship (whether a party was one that a respondent felt close to), and general competence.[25] Each of these groups of variables is represented by a single measure (dummy variable or y-hat).[26] The results of the estimation are presented in Table 1, which includes b coefficients (with standard errors), as well as goodness-of-fit statistics. The table reports coefficients for the sociodemographics (y-hats), political awareness (y-hats) and other control variables first, followed by coefficients for issue affinities.

Interpretation of affinity measures requires an understanding of the stacked nature of the data and the yhat generation procedure. In a stacked dataset the dependent variable is not any longer the propensity to vote a particular party, but rather the propensity to vote for a party *in general*; and affinity measures are similarly divorced from reference to specific parties. For y-hats in particular, the b coefficient for a specific predictor (e.g. political awareness) does not express the effect of any particular indicator of political awareness, but rather the importance of

[23] Education, union membership, marital status, employment status, social class (worker), family income, religion, and religiosity (church attendance).

[24] Political interest and campaign interest.

[25] Whether a party was considered best able to deal with the most important problem facing the country (the identity of the problem is not specified here).

[26] Though one benefit of a stacked dataset is that it can include party-specific variables, we include no such variables in this model. We do have an expectation, detailed earlier, that party size and its interactions with yield-weighted issues will play a role in explaining party support. Specifically we expect support for small parties to be affected more strongly than support for large parties. However, in this initial test we have twelve measures of issue yield, and interactions between each of these and party size would produce more variables at the party level than we can handle in a multi-level model. Once we have established the ubiquity of the relationship we theorize, we can simplify the model so as to be able to include party size.

political awareness in general (in this, y-hats are rather like factor scores, but tuned to provide

Table 1 Estimated effects of rival three-level, random intercept models of PTVs, based on different versions of party-respondent issue affinities

	Model A Unweighted	Model B Salience-weighted	Model C Yield-weighted
	b s.e.	b s.e.	b s.e.
Control variables:			
Demographics (y-hats)	0.696 (0.008)***	0.704 (0.008)***	0.695 (0.009)***
Political awareness (y-hats)	0.528 (0.022)***	0.525 (0.025)***	0.515 (0.026)***
This is party R feels close to (Dummy)	2.738 (0.059)***	2.754 (0.063)***	2.701 (0.065)***
This is party best for MIP (Dummy)	4.347 (0.029)***	4.366 (0.031)***	4.271 (0.033)***
Party-respondent issue affinities:			
Q56. Immigrants should adapt	0.027 (0.009)**	0.131 (0.009)***	-0.001 (0.012)
Q57. Private enterprise best solution	0.124 (0.008)***	0.147 (0.009)***	0.211 (0.011)***
Q58. Prohibit gay marriages	0.145 (0.009)***	0.084 (0.009)***	0.208 (0.012)***
Q59. State should own public services	0.099 (0.008)***	0.062 (0.009)***	0.163 (0.012)***
Q60. Women should decide on abortion	0.153 (0.009)***	0.016 (0.010)	0.152 (0.011)***
Q61. Economy should be free of politics	0.095 (0.009)***	0.096 (0.010)***	0.058 (0.011)***
Q62. Harsher prison sentences	0.127 (0.010)***	0.099 (0.011)***	0.024 (0.013)
Q63. Redistribute income	0.095 (0.009)***	0.221 (0.010)***	0.199 (0.012)***
Q64. Schools should teach authority	0.060 (0.010)***	0.023 (0.011)*	0.124 (0.013)***
Q65. EU treaties require referendum	-0.041 (0.009)***	-0.060 (0.010)***	0.053 (0.012)***
Q66. Women should cut work for family	0.026 (0.008)**	0.018 (0.009)	0.070 (0.012)***
Q67. Immigration should be reduced	0.093 (0.008)***	0.106 (0.009)***	0.173 (0.013)***
Constant	3.028 (0.140)***	3.034 (0.140)***	3.037 (0.142)***
Random effects:			
Standard deviation of respondent intercepts	0.722	0.841	0.917
Standard deviation of country intercepts	0.601	0.737	0.735
Observations: Level 1 (response)	150,482	150,482	150,482
Level 2 (individual)	27,069	27,069	27,069
Level 3 (country)	27	27	27
R^2	0.354	0.361	0.378
AIC	703535	630357	566348
BIC	703742	630552	566435

Note: Significant at *0.05, **0.01, ***001 levels.

the best available linear prediction of the dependent variable). So b coefficients for y-hat measures are always positive (in the absence of collinearity with other predictors they would all equal 1.0), and (in regard to multicollinearity) behave rather like beta coefficients (effects of

standardized variables). But, in Table 1, y-hat affinities are used only for control variables, in contrast to the party-respondent issue affinities already described, whose values are the theoretically called-for product of respondent and party scores. Finally, information about goodness-of-fit is reported, by means of AIC and BIC coefficients, as well as of R-squared values.[27]

Model A is provided as a baseline, showing to what extent specific issue affinities predict party support. Model B tunes these affinities in terms of manifesto emphasis. It tries to eliminate correspondences that play no role in party preference formation by focusing on issues that the parties themselves focus on. Finally, model C tunes the affinities in terms of issue yield. As such, the three models provide alternative interpretations of the manner in which issues impact the preference-formation process.[28]

We derive a substantive interpretation of the empirical results by comparing the b coefficients for unweighted issues and issues weighted by manifesto salience (Models A and B) with b coefficients for the same issues weighted by issue yield (Model C). What these comparisons tell us is that effects of yield-weighted issues are generally stronger than effects of unweighted or salience-weighted issues – so much so as to be generally greater by more than the 95% confidence interval of the yield-weighted coefficients (see Figure 1).[29] While four yield-weighted

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[27] Obtained by squaring the correlation between observed values and values predicted by the model.

[28] In this table we control for "Party best for most important problem", which arguably already incorporates some effects of issue yield. We do this to provide the most conservative available test of those effects. Table A2 in the Appendix shows Models B and C without the Most Important Problem variable. Those models explain considerably less variance but show even greater gains for the issue yield model in comparison with a model employing salience-weighted affinities.

[29] In Figure 1 we compare models B and C because this is the more critical comparison: models B and C have fewer

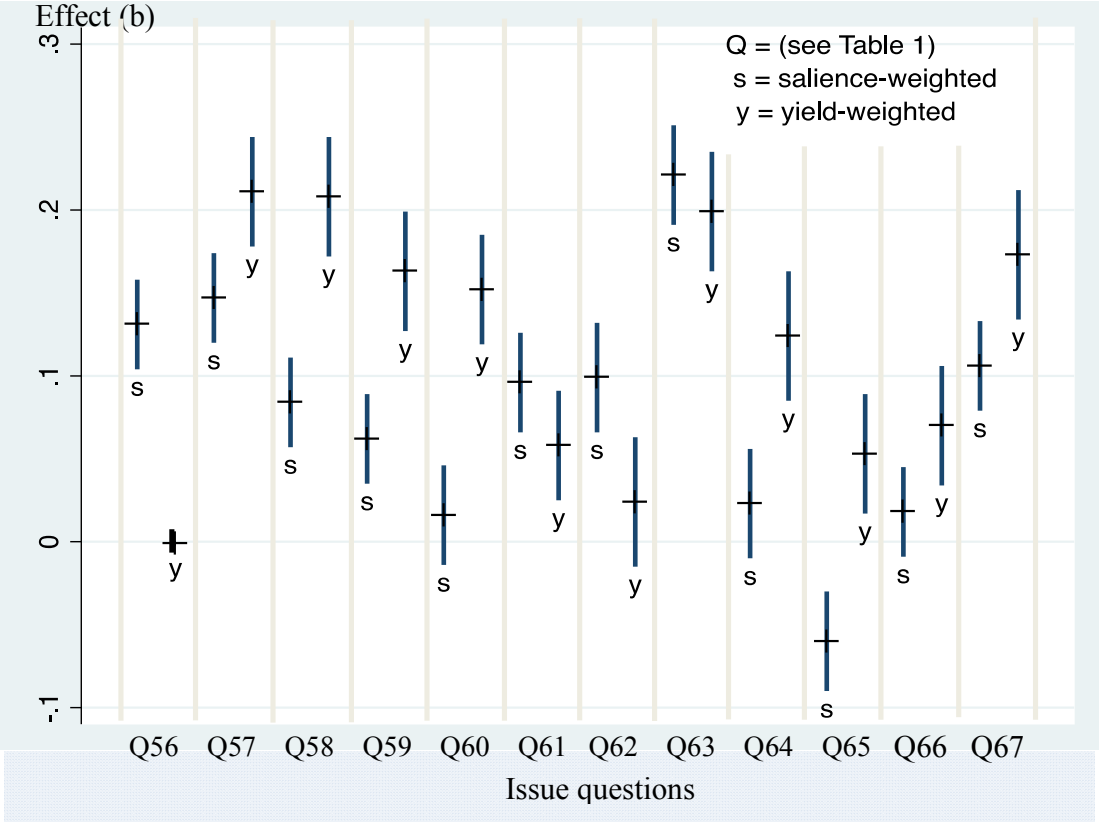

Figure 1 Confidence intervals around effects of each salience-weighted (left spike) and yield-weighted (right spike) issue affinity, identified by question number (see Table 1).

issues have less effect than their corresponding salience-weighted counterparts, two of these effects are not significantly less (their spikes overlap) and the other two correspond to effects of yield-weighted issue affinities that are not significantly different from zero.[30] Moreover, all

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significant differences than Models A and C, It is noteworthy that, with two exceptions, for issues where model C performs significantly better than Model B it also performs significantly better than Model A (it performs significantly better than Model A on an additional issue as well); but the two exceptions cancel out. For Q60, Model C performs significantly better than Model B but not than Model A whereas for Q63 it is the other way around.

[30] Effects for yield-weighted issue affinities do not indicate the importance of the issue. An issue with low yield,

significant effects for yield-weighted issues in Model C are in the expected (positive) direction, in contrast to the unweighted and salience-weighted coefficients, which (for Q65) were seen to be significantly negative in Models A and B. Our interpretation of these findings is: (1) that voters assign different weights to an issue depending on the party they are assessing (as Models B and C perform better than Model A); (2) that issue emphasis seen in party manifestos does not necessarily correspond to the weights that different issues have in the minds of voters – whether because of different emphasis adopted by parties in election campaigns than in manifesto content [Ray 1999; Benoit Laver and Mikhaylov 2009], or for other reasons;[31] such weights appear more accurately captured by the issue yield model, as seen in the better performance of Model C over Model B.[32]

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whose low yield is correctly anticipated, will get as high a coefficient as a correctly placed high yield issue. But this expectation breaks down for issues that promise no yield at all. An effect of zero for a yield-weighted issue implies that the issue concerned is not a relevant basis for distinguishing between parties. That being the case, the yield-based effect will be zero, which would quite often be less than an issue effect calculated on a different basis.

[31] Identification of the actual mechanism responsible for the superior performance of the issue yield model must wait on future research.

[32] As a robustness check we created a fourth set of issue affinities for the twelve issues by generating y-hat predictors for each issue, in just the same way as for demographics and political interest. A y-hat affinity is, as already explained, "tuned" to the dependent variable and can be regarded as the best affinity measure that can be gleaned without benefit of any theoretical basis for linking voter preferences to parties. The overall predictive power of a model employing y-hat issue affinities is given by an R^2 of 0.367: more than the R^2 for Models A or B, but less than the R^2 for Model C. So yield-weighted issue affinities apparently work better even than a measure that posits a basis for these affinities derived purely from data-fitting (with y-hats, a correspondence such as the negative effect of Q65 in Models A and B, that makes no substantive sense, counts as "correct" prediction).

It is precisely based on this criterion that we judge the issue yield model to perform better than the other models. As reported in Model C, when issue affinities are weighted by issue yield they raise the predictive power of the overall model (R-squared increases by 0.017 (a 5 percent increase in Model B's R^2), but the extent to which specific issues become more potent is even more marked, as already noted. In substantive terms, this confirms our hypothesis: issue yield effectively captures an important part of the configuration of issues that citizens take into account when assessing each party; and it does so better than does manifesto emphasis. In other words, the issue yield model apparently captures to a significant extent the overall issue identity of parties, as perceived by voters.

However, this does not mean that all issues are affected equally by the selection mechanism suggested by the issue yield model. Some issues are inevitably more important than others in motivating the judgments that voters assign to parties. This is clearly shown by differences between the issue coefficients in the last column of the table. But too much should not be made of the differences we see there. The two issues that fail to reach statistical significance in terms of the effects of issue-weighted yield ("Immigrants must adapt" and "Harsher prison sentences") may well be issues whose yield is irrelevant to their importance – issues that get very little stress in any case (see footnote 30). But differences among the other issues listed in Table 1 could also be due to idiosyncratic distributional characteristics that affect their relative importance in random ways. Our next analysis will lend some support to this idea.

In this next step (see Table 2), we simplify the measure of issue yield so as to be able to introduce party size and the interaction of this variable with yield-weighted issues without creating a model with so many parameters as to raise to near certainty the likelihood that some of them will be falsely deemed significant (or falsely deemed non-significant). The method by

Table 2 Estimated effects on propensity to vote for a party due to yield-weighted issue affinities, along with party size and interactions with party size.

	Model D		Model E		Model F	
	b	s.e.	b	s.e.	b	s.e.
Control variables:						
Demographics (y-hats)	0.549	(0.009)***	0.568	(0.009)***	0.567	(0.009)***
Political awareness (y-hats)	0.460	(0.025)***	0.466	(0.026)***	0.466	(0.026)***
Party R feels close to (Dummy)	2.597	(0.064)***	2.330	(0.064)***	2.333	(0.064)***
Party best for MIP (Dummy)	4.096	(0.032)***	3.649	(0.033)***	3.666	(0.033)***
Party size and issue affinities:						
Generic yield-weighted (y-hat)	0.649	(0.008)***	0.661	(0.008)***	0.215	(0.059)***
Smaller party (smallest = 1)			-4.754	(0.091)***	-4.343	(0.091)***
Generic yield * smaller party					0.540	(0.071)***
Constant	2.638	(0.317)***	6.413	(0. 346)***	6.402	(0.346)***
Random effects:						
SD of respondent intercepts	0.848		0.861		0.861	
Standard deviation of party intercepts	1.218		0.629		0.784	
Standard deviation of country intercepts	0.729		0.784		0.067	
Observations: Level 1 (response)	150,482		150,482		150,482	
Level 2a (individual)	27,069		27,069		27,069	
Level 2b (party)	2-11		2-11		2-11	
Level 3 (country)	27		27		27	
R^2	0.389		0.410		0.410	
AIC	563949		528557		528504	
BIC	564096		528662		528619	

Note: Significant at *0.05, **0.01, ***001 levels.

which we simplify the model is the same method that we already employed to reduce the number of demographic variables. We are not interested in this research in the specific effects of individual demographic variables, only in controlling for the effects of demographic variables in general. So we generated a single measure of all demographics by using them as predictors of the dependent variable in an analysis with no other controls, and then used the values of the dependent variable predicted by these independent variables as a new variable that stands in for all of the individual demographic variables taken together, as seen in Table 1. In Table 2 we

employ the same procedure to simplify the measure of yield-based issue affinities, by using all of them to predict a single y-hat variable that is then used to stand in for the full set of issue affinities. This stand-in variable (generic yield-weighted issue affinity) can then be interacted with party size without this requiring twelve separate interaction terms. Because party size is an explicit variable in this table, all models have a cross-nested hierarchical structure, with a party level as well as an individual level falling between the country and response levels.[33]

The first model in Table 2 (Model D) shows what happens when we replace separate measures of yield-weighted issues with a single measure. As can be seen, the effect of yield-weighted issues, viewed as a single variable, is on a par with the effects of demographic variables or of political awareness. This model produces a small increase in R^2 (0.017) over what we saw in the yield-weighted issue model (Model C) in Table 1, but this is the consequence of introducing a party level and its associated random intercepts into the model. The transformation has evidently cost us the ability to distinguish the effects of specific issues, but this might be an

[33] Estimation was performed using R's lme4 package. The quantities of interest for Figure 2 were simulated using Clarify (King et al. 2000; Imai, King, and Lau 2007). Because it is difficult (perhaps logically impossible) to simulate quantities of interest from a hierarchical model that contains random coefficients, we did not include random coefficients in any of the models in Table 2. However, a separate analysis (not shown but available on request) indicates that the standard error of the interaction term is only 0.005. So the effect of 0.5 shown for the interaction of party*size in Model E varies by no more than 0.01 (with 95% probability) across countries. The effect of yield-weighted size itself varies rather more across countries, but by no more than 0.15 with 95% probability. These variations are consistent with the standard errors for the same effects seen in Model E, suggesting no need to explicitly model these country-level variations. Moreover, the AIC is hardly reduced and BIC actually increases when random slopes are introduced into the analysis, supporting our choice of models to present in Table 2.

advantage if idiosyncratic distributional differences have been rendered irrelevant by viewing issue yield in generic terms (as suggested earlier).

More importantly, this simplification of the model permits us to take account of party size – a variable that we theorized would impact the influence of issue yield. Model E introduces party size on its own, and Model F adds interactions with yield-weighted issues. As can be seen, party size becomes the most powerful effect in the model, adding 0.021 to variance explained, or 5 percent of Model D's R^2, when Model E is compared with Model D. The interaction of party size with issue yield is seen in Model E to add nothing further to R^2. However, the introduction of this interaction changes the issue yield constitutive term in the equation, which drops by more than two thirds, from 0.661 in Model E to 0.215 in Model F.[34] The bulk of the work in terms of effects of issue yield is clearly being done by its interaction with party size: (party size has been reversed, with small parties scoring more than large parties, so as to produce a positive interaction if our expectations are confirmed).

Since the interpretation of interaction terms is not straightforward, Figure 2 plots the effect of yield-based issue affinities for the largest and smallest parties found in our dataset. It

[34] Because y-hat affinities are tuned to the dependent variable, in the absence of collinearity with other independent variables their effect would be 1.0. However, their indicated effect depends on the extent to which their uncontrolled effect is shared with other variables – the precise point of concern in this analysis. Model D tells us that about a third of the effect of party size is shared with other variables, probably mainly the Most Important Problem variable (because one third is the extent to which 0.65 is less than 1.0). Model E shows no change in this situation, but Model F sees the bulk of the remaining effect of issue yield transferred to its interaction with party size. Substantively identical findings are obtained if, instead of b coefficients, we calculate standardized beta coefficients in these models, as explained earlier. But this would make it computationally challenging for us to plot the interaction of interest.

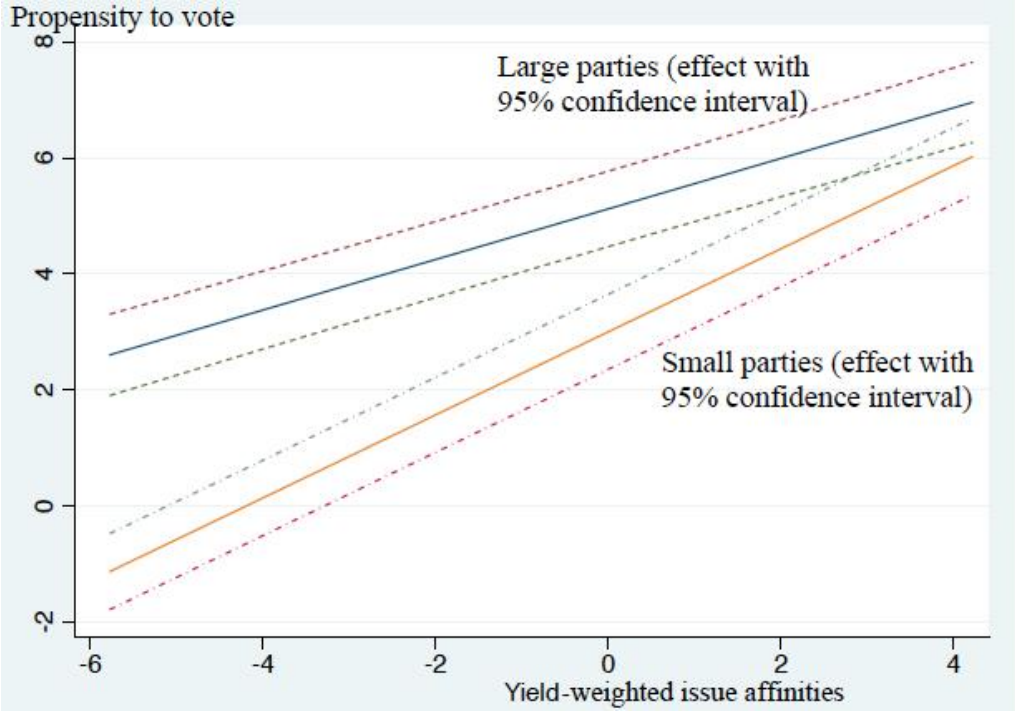

Figure 2 Effects of yield-weighted issue affinities on propensity to vote, small parties (lower lines) and large parties (upper lines) compared.

can be seen that the slope for large parties, while palpable, is much less than the slope for small parties, as hypothesized. What we see is that a large party can maintain moderate levels of support (measured by propensity to vote) even among voters who have no (or, indeed negative) issue affinity for the party, while a small party's support is quite low among voters with no issue affinity for it (and vanishes among voters whose issue affinity for it is negative).

Discussion

The question whether parties campaign on exactly the issues stressed in their manifestos has been raised several times in the literature on electoral politics and party choice (e.g. Ray 1999; Benoit et al. 2009). This question falls under a larger question, not previously posed as such but

implicit in the theorizing of Anthony Downs (1957), whether parties attempt to gain votes on the basis of strategic emphasis on issues that stand to benefit them the most. In this article we have contributed to answering this larger question by studying the final outcome of any and all attempts to gain votes on the basis of issue emphasis – the outcome in terms of voting behavior.

We have establishing that voters make their choices on a basis that suggests an emphasis in their minds on those particular issues that indeed serve the strategic interests of the parties they vote for. How this emphasis was acquired is beyond the remit of this article, but somehow parties have succeeded in communicating to voters that they stand for policies that serve to increase their support, given the distribution of risks and opportunities represented by different issues in the minds of voters. In line with past findings, we observe that the emphasis given by voters to different issues is different (different issues have different salience in the minds of voters). Going beyond past findings, we also observe that differences in issue salience across voters and parties is such as to improve the electoral performance of parties over what would be observed if all issues had equal salience in voters' minds. Not surprisingly, and in line with past theorizing, manifesto emphasis provides a good guide to the salience that parties appear to accord to different issues, but what this article has established is that the empirically observed differences in emphasis for different issues by different voters benefits parties even more than would have been the case if voters simply adopted the emphasis seen in manifestos.

This should not surprise us. Manifestos serve many purposes beyond telling voters what are the issues of most strategic importance to parties, and do not provide voters with their primary source of information about where parties stand. And indeed, according to our findings, voters acquire a somewhat different weight for issue affinities than the one that would be based purely on frequency of positive and negative mentions in party manifestos. The weights used by

voters appear closer to those that would have been gained from campaigns in which parties stressed those issues that promise to maximize their potential gains from conversion while minimizing their potential losses.[35]

We deem it most likely that our findings arise from conscious strategic decision-making by party leaders, who update their earlier strategic decisions reflected in manifesto content in the light of the somewhat different strategic context that they inevitably encounter during an actual electoral campaign; but other interpretations are possible. In particular, we may be seeing no more than that parties have long-term associations with particular issues in the minds of voters, though we doubt this could be the only mechanism at work. Only further research can settle this.

Nevertheless, parties that do not take conscious account of issue yield (or make equivalent judgments regarding which issues to stress during election campaigns) evidently should do so. The effects of issue yield are considerable. By picking an issue that promises high yield, a small party can effectively close the gap in effects of issues that normally separates small from large parties – a gap that averages about 3 points on the eleven-point propensity to vote scale, as shown in Figure 2. Large parties also gain from stressing issues with high yield, but not as much (as befits parties whose supporters have many other reasons to vote for them).

These findings emphasize the fact that elections involve strategic thinking. To be successful, it helps a lot for a party to be aware of the profile its supporters have in terms of support for different issues. Issues where supporters are divided are high-risk issues that parties

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[35] Indeed, voters adopt an emphasis on different issues that accords better with party needs than we would see if we adopted the blindly empiricist procedure of weighting each issue according to its observed covariation with party support (see footnote 32). The subtleties of the issue yield model do better in this respect than data-fitting.

need to avoid (as many apparently do). Issues where supporters are largely united are issues that present instead no risks, and could offer the possibility of gains if these issues find support outside the party.

That the strategy of issue emphasis is more vital for small parties comes as no surprise, but to the best of our knowledge this is the first study that has been able to document what appears to be successful strategic campaigning at work. More research is evidently needed to verify that parties do indeed stress the issues that the issue yield model predicts that they will stress – going beyond the already documented finding that the weights given to different issues in party manifestos themselves appear to take issue yield into account (De Sio and Weber 2011). But it would make sense for parties to direct their campaigns in this way.

Be that as it may, our findings also have implications for the process of political representation, suggesting the presence of mechanisms (presumably centered on efforts of political parties to realize strategic goals) that enable voters to progressively sort themselves into the support bases of parties that have the same profiles of issue concerns as they have themselves.

Appendix

Table A1 Issue response items in the voter survey, and their matching with manifesto data

Voter survey	Manifesto data
Q56. Immigrants should be required to adapt to the customs of <country>	080100 Multiculturalism (r)
Q57. Private enterprise is the best way to solve <country>'s economic problems	050101 Free Enterprise
Q58. Same-sex marriages should be prohibited by law	090403 Homosexuals (r)
Q59. Major public services and industries ought to be in state ownership	050204 Publicly-Owned Industry; 050401 Nationalization
Q60. Women should be free to decide on matters of abortion	090502 Women
Q61. Politics should abstain from intervening in the economy	050201 Controlled Economy (r); 050600 Market Regulation (r)
Q62. People who break the law should be given much harsher sentences than they are these days.	080301 Law and Order
Q63. Income and wealth should be redistributed towards ordinary people	070300 Social Justice
Q64. Schools must teach children to obey authority	080200 Traditional Morality; 080301 Law and Order
Q65. EU treaty changes should be decided by referendum	020200 Democracy; 030102 Transfer of Power to the EC/EU (r)
Q66. A woman should be prepared to cut down on her paid work for the sake of her family.	080200 Traditional Morality; 090502 Women (r)
Q67. Immigration to <country> should be decreased significantly	080502 Immigration (r)

(r) = reversed, i.e. the negative side of the manifesto item is matched to the "agree" pole of the voter survey.

Table A2 Estimated effects of rival three-level, random intercept models of PTVs, based on different versions of party-respondent issue affinities (omitting party best for most important problem)

	Model B Salience-weighted affinities		Model C Yield-weighted affinities	
	b	s.e.	b	s.e.
Control variables:				
Demographics (y-hats)	0.857	(0.009)***	0.841	(0.009)***
Political awareness (y-hats)	0.720	(0.026)***	0.699	(0.027)***
This is party R feels close to (Dummy)	4.028	(0.067)***	3.948	(0.070)***
Party-respondent issue affinities:				
Q56. Immigrants should adapt	0.163	(0.010)***	0.040	(0.010)***
Q57. Private enterprise best solution	0.182	(0.009)***	0.267	(0.010)***
Q58. Prohibit gay marriages	0.049	(0.009)***	0.218	(0.012)***
Q59. State should own public services	0.064	(0.010)***	0.207	(0.012)***
Q60. Women should decide on abortion	0.029	(0.010)*	0.186	(0.011)***
Q61. Economy should be free of politics	0.113	(0.010)***	0.077	(0.012)***
Q62. Harsher prison sentences	0.104	(0.012)***	0.064	(0.013***
Q63. Redistribute income	0.245	(0.010)***	0.213	(0.012)***
Q64. Schools should teach authority	0.027	(0.011)*	0.169	(0.013)***
Q65. EU treaties should require referendum	-0.074	(0.010)***	0.057	(0.013)***
Q66. Women should cut work for family	0.022	(0.010)*	0.080	(0.013)***
Q67. Immigration should be reduced	0.124	(0.009)***	0.182	(0.013)***
Constant	3.407	(0.147)***	3.404	(0.353)***
Random effects:				
Standard deviation of respondent intercepts	0.677		0.776	
Standard deviation of country intercepts	0.765		0.775	
Observations: Level 1 (response)	150,482		150,482	
Level 2 (individual)	27,069		27,069	
Level 3 (country)	27		27	
R^2	0.223		0.254	
AIC	648102		601288	
BIC	648207		601482	

Note: Significant at *0.05, **0.01, ***001 levels.

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