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What's the issue? : the lobbying and representativeness of political parties on specific policy issues

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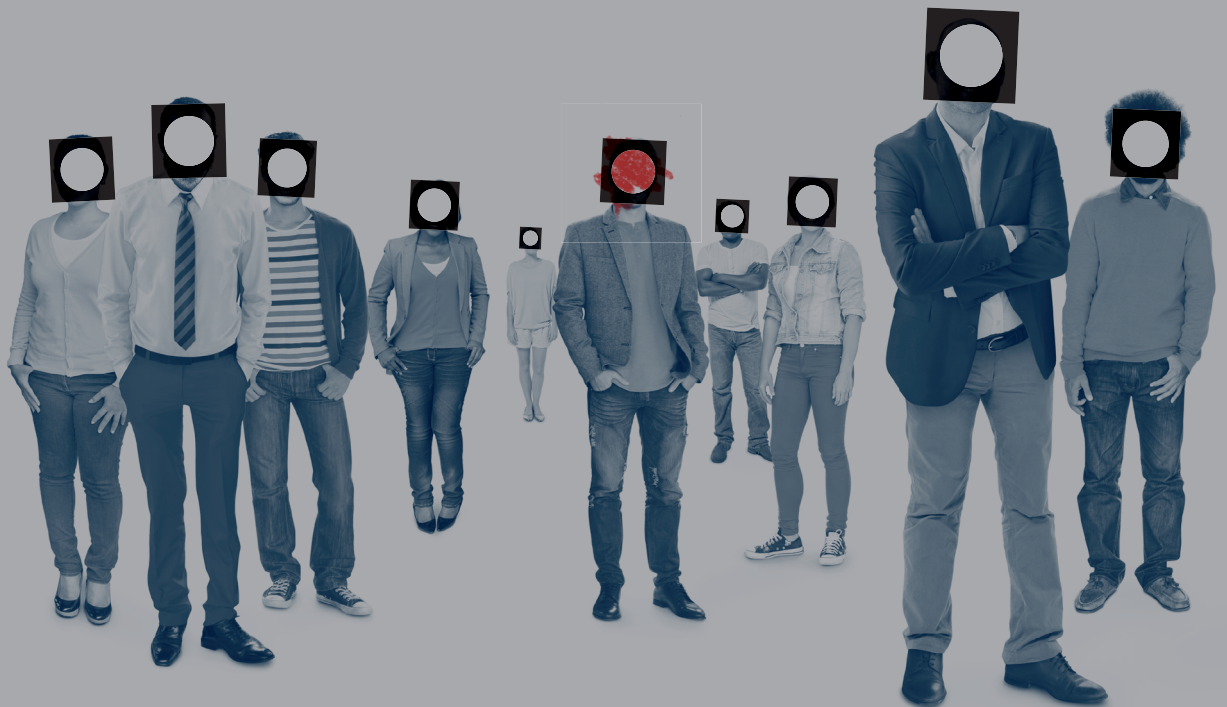


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Introduction



1.1 INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis in the Netherlands, a policy proposal to raise the retirement age attracted large amounts of political and media attention. A hearing was organized in parliament, and major trade unions, employers' organizations, companies, experts, pension funds and individual pensioners were included in the media debate on the issue. The major trade union, the FNV even faced considerable internal tension over an initial plan to raise the retirement age from 65 to 66 years. In spite of the strong and vocal opposition to the increase from trade unions and senior organizations (ANBO), a majority of the advocacy organizations and experts that were active on the issue and featured in newspapers, the hearing in parliament or in touch with civil servants, actually supported the increase of the retirement age to 67. At the same time, a higher retirement age was very unpopular with the general public: according to the NKO (Nationaal Kiezersonderzoek) around 66% of Dutch voters disagreed with the policy plan.

So what happened on this issue where on the one hand interest groups and experts (on average) supported the policy proposal, and voters tended to disagree with it? In this case the government, composed of the center-right VVD and CDA parties and with the support of several political parties to their left, took the side of most policy advocates active on the issue and in July of 2012, the First Chamber of Dutch parliament passed the law regulating the increase of the Dutch retirement age.

The story presented here highlights how politics is often fought not just over broad ideological conflicts, but over specific policy issues. These policies determine many important aspects of citizens' lives, from the age at which they can retire to where their energy comes from. In most Western-European democracies, political parties are given the task of deciding on such policies and incorporating public preferences into policy-making – ensuring the representation of public preferences and interests (Mair, 2010).

However, we know little about how political parties fulfill their representative role when it comes to such specific policy issues, or what determines their positions on these issues. Considering the example of the Dutch retirement age above, there are multiple studies on the effects of public opinion on policy outputs that may help us understand how typical it is that a policy is introduced that is not supported by a public majority (e.g. Giger & Klüver, 2016; Gilens, 2012; Lax & Phillips, 2012; Rasmussen, Reher, & Toshkov, 2018). The influence of interest groups and other policy advocates on policy outputs has also been studied extensively, even if it remains hard to prove (e.g. Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Leech, & Kimball, 2009; Lowery, 2013; Rasmussen, Mäder, & Reher, 2018). However, if we want to understand the policy positions of the government parties VVD and CDA on raising the retirement age, we have little evidence from political science to help us.

Most of the literature on how political parties represent public opinion and take positions has not studied their positions on specific policy issues. Instead, the focus has been on party positions on ideological dimensions (left-right) and whether these overlap with or react to the electorate's ideological preferences or positions. While this has contributed tremendously to our understanding of whether and how political parties represent the general public, this dissertation contributes to this literature by studying the positions and actions of political parties on *specific policy issues* instead. Such a policy-centered approach (Hacker & Pierson, 2014) allows for studying how political parties take into account the preferences of voters on these specific policy issues. Doing so is important firstly because these specific policy issues actually directly impact the lives of citizens. Moreover, there is evidence that the preferences of the public on these issues are not strongly related to their self-positioning on ideological scales (Lesschaeve, 2017), meaning that representation on ideological dimensions does not necessarily imply representation on specific issues (Broockman, 2016).

Secondly, this dissertation helps to extend our knowledge about whether a second set of actors may help (or thwart) the translation of public preferences into policy and to political parties: interest groups and other policy advocates. Studies in the field of interest groups studies have tended to generally take a more policy-centered approach (Hacker & Pierson, 2014). We therefore know a lot more about the extent to which they (try to) influence specific policy than we do political parties. Due to the GovLis project, of which this dissertation is a part, there is also evidence that while imperfectly, interest groups may have the potential to help establish links between public preferences and policy (Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2019; Rasmussen & Reher, 2019). This dissertation contributes to these studies by tracing a set of specific policy issues over time, to provide a more detailed assessment of the ability of interest groups and other policy advocates to fill the representational gaps that may be left by political parties.

Thirdly and finally, a policy-centered approach (Hacker & Pierson, 2014) allows for studying these two sets of important interest aggregators, political parties and interest groups, in conjunction. There is increasing evidence for the existence of ties and contacts between organized interests and political parties and existing studies often assume that these ties matter a great deal for policy-making (e.g. Allern, 2010; Rasmussen & Lindboom, 2013; Thomas, 2001). However, we do not know whether this is actually the case. Focusing on specific policies allows for placing the actions and preferences of political parties and policy advocates on a shared metric and studying these actors together. This dissertation therefore contributes to existing studies by investigating whether contacts and ideological overlap between these two sets of actors matter for policy-making.

This introductory chapter discusses the specific literatures that the different parts of this dissertation contribute to. It starts with a discussion of the representative role of political parties in Western European democracies, outlining why existing studies may

overestimate the ability of political parties to act as representatives of public preferences. The discussion then continues with a similar discussion of the role of interest groups. Subsequently, the literature that has integrated the study of these two sets of actors is presented. For each of these parts, the specific contribution of this dissertation is highlighted. A discussion of some of the methodological choices is then presented, followed by an overview of the chapters of the dissertation.

1.2 POLITICAL PARTIES AS REPRESENTATIVES OF PUBLIC PREFERENCES

One central assumption in representative democracies is that public preferences ought to affect the policies that are introduced by elected politicians. The idea being that in order for substantive representation to take place, there should at a minimum be a correlation between the policy preferences of the public and the policies it receives (Dahl, 1956). It is important to avoid conflating this with the idea that democratic politics should always or simply follow the preferences of public majorities. In many cases, political parties and politicians have to combine or balance their function as representatives of the public with other obligations (Mair, 2010). For example, where the protection of minorities or fundamental human rights is concerned, following public opinion may turn decidedly undemocratic. Similarly, politicians are expected to behave 'responsibly' towards other interests like international treaties, the environment or future generations (Mair, 2010). Notwithstanding these important reservations it is difficult to conceive of a democratic system without any correlation between the preferences of the general public and the policy decisions made (Dahl, 1956; Lax & Phillips, 2012; Rasmussen, Reher, et al., 2018).

Over the last century, political parties have been the main actors ensuring the strength of this linkage in Western democracies (Mair, 2008). This is especially true in the political systems of Western Europe, where multiple and generally well-organized and disciplined parties tend to dominate politics. Through elections these parties were and are expected to organize and aggregate the preferences of citizens into government and public policy in what has been called the 'representative' function of political parties, helping to ensure that policy decisions are perceived as legitimate (Keman, 2014; Mair, 2010; Mansbridge, 2003). While there are other sources of such legitimacy, making policies that reflect public preferences is an important constituent part of the legitimacy of representative democracies (Dahl, 1956) and has been shown to affect citizens' satisfaction with democracy (Reher, 2015).

1.3 (LIMITATIONS TO) EXISTING STUDIES OF THE REPRESENTATIVE ROLE AND CAPACITY OF POLITICAL PARTIES

Political scientists have studied the extent to which political parties are able to live up to this ideal by evaluating whether political parties' positions reflect the preferences of citizens. To measure the congruence, or overlap, between public opinion and the policy positions of parties and governments, such studies have generally relied on measures of *ideological congruence* (Golder & Stramski, 2010). Following the pivotal work of Downs (1957), these studies assume that most political conflict is organized along a central ideological left-right axis. Scholars working in this tradition have developed methods to compare the positions and distributions of the policy preferences of (members of) the general public with those of political parties and government (coalitions) (Golder & Stramski, 2010).

Regardless of the measure used, these studies of ideological scales typically find rather high levels of congruence between public preferences and the policy positions of political parties (and government coalitions) in Western Europe (Ferland, 2016; Golder & Ferland, 2017). What is more, some scholars have suggested that along this left-right axis, congruence has even increased strongly in a country like the Netherlands (Andeweg, 2011). The general picture painted is therefore one that is rather positive about the representative capacity of political parties. Much academic attention has subsequently shifted to studying what may explain differences in levels of ideological congruence across political systems, focusing predominantly of the role of electoral (and other) institutions (Blais & Bodet, 2006; Ferland, 2016; Golder & Ferland, 2017; Powell, 2006, 2009). Specifically, there is an ongoing debate about whether majoritarian or first-past-the-post political systems offer more accurate representation than more proportional electoral systems (Ferland, 2016; Wlezien & Soroka, 2012). Although the jury is still out, there is evidence that such differences may depend on the time period studied (Ferland, 2016), and that institutional configurations may not have direct or only conditional effects when it comes to congruence between public preferences and policy-making on specific issues (Rasmussen, Reher, et al., 2018).

These studies of ideological congruence have contributed much to our understanding of representative democracies. However, their focus on a single left-right ideological dimension conceals large parts of the political conflict and decision-making that affects both politics and representation. Formulated most clearly by Hacker and Pierson (2014), the criticism of existing studies relying heavily on Downsian analytical frameworks boils down to the idea that they do not capture that often "the key struggle is not over gaining office but over reshaping governance in enduring ways" (p. 644). Focusing on the idea that political parties also aim to take ideological positions that increase their vote share

(vote-seeking) and entering office (office-seeking), analyses relying on ideological scales almost always stop short of analyzing what is another very important driver of politics in (modern) Western democracies: influencing policy (ibid.). Or as Schattschneider (1948, p. 21) wrote well before Hacker & Pierson when referring to the importance of policy: “Public office simply cannot be an end in itself”.

A policy-centered perspective allows for the more direct study of the policy-seeking behavior of political parties, and its possible consequences for representation. A large share of every day politics, including the formation of government coalitions and legislative processes is driven by politicians in political parties that seek to change or affect policy (Hacker & Pierson, 2014). The fact that political parties do indeed spend considerable efforts on policy-related activity is evidenced by a strand in the literature that has fruitfully applied a policy-centered approach to the study political parties: studies that investigate whether political parties fulfill the pledges they make during election campaigns (Costello & Thomson, 2008; Louwse, 2012; Naurin, 2014; Thomson et al., 2017). These studies show that across Western democracies, parties that enter government (coalitions) manage to implement around 60% of the promises they make in their election manifestos (Thomson et al., 2017).

Secondly and crucially, rather than general left-right ideological shifts, it is concrete policy decisions like raising the retirement age and setting environmental standards or taxation levels that affect the daily lives of citizens. Importantly, there is evidence that citizens’ positions on left-right scales are rather weakly correlated to their preferences on such specific policy issues (Lesschaeve, 2017). This matters, because it suggests that congruence measured on left-right scales only partially captures the public policy preferences that ought to be represented by political parties. The low correlation between ideological positions and public preferences for specific policy also means that even when finding high levels of congruence on left-right scales, policy-making or party positions need not actually be congruent with the policy preferences of citizens on specific issues (Broockman, 2016). In a study of roll-call voting by American senators, Lax, Phillips, and Zelizer (2019, p. 4) call this the “False Substitutes Problem”:

“It is, in our view, too lenient a test to praise democratic representation for, say, making abortion policy more liberal when it is opinion on immigration issues that got more liberal, or vice versa—yet indices and ideological scores do just that. To care about responsiveness as a matter of normative democratic theory, one must surely think that the actual contents of the policy basket matter, and not just the ideological tone of the basket.”

Surprisingly, we know little about the policy positions of political parties on specific issues, nor do we know whether these positions are related to the preferences of the

general public, or those of a party's supporters. There is, however, a separate literature that studies the congruence between public opinion and policy *outputs* (not party positions), that has made considerable contributions to our understanding of representation. In a seminal study, Gilens (2012) shows that although there are strong connections between the policies that the public wants and gets, this relationship is mainly driven by the preferences of wealthy citizens. Studies using a similar approach show that this is also the case in the Netherlands and Germany: countries with a different political system, lower levels of economic inequality and a much smaller role for campaign donations (Elsässer, Hense, & Schäfer, 2017; Schakel, 2019). Other studies have successfully applied similar methods to study the effect of institutions on the relation between public opinion and policy at the country (Rasmussen, Reher, et al., 2018), or US state level (Lax & Phillips, 2012).

In parallel to these developments in the literature, studies of the representativeness of political parties have started to move beyond the study of the left-right dimension. Although stopping short of studying specific policy-issues, such studies increasingly consider salient policy dimensions or scales like Europeanization or immigration. They show, for example, that while the positions of political parties (in government) are strongly related to the preferences of citizens on the left-right dimension, there are much larger gaps between public preferences and policy positions on these other issue dimensions (Dalton, 2017). Similarly, the observation in studies of specific policy issues that policy correlates more closely with the preferences of rich citizens is echoed in these studies of dimensions (Giger, Rosset, & Bernauer, 2012; Peters & Ensink, 2015): the inequality in congruence between the policy positions of the rich and poor is much larger on more specific ideological dimensions like Europeanization than on the general left-right dimension (Rosset & Stecker, 2019). These studies clearly present a step forward in the study of how political parties represent public preferences. They also show that the extent to which the political system represents public preferences may depend on the policy area. However, even these studies stop short of considering specific policy positions of political parties.

1.4 THE BENEFITS OF ADDING THE STUDY OF SPECIFIC POLICY ISSUES TO THE STUDY OF POLITICAL PARTIES

As noted above, empirical accounts of the representative capacity of political parties to continue to represent citizens are generally rather positive. At the same time, studies incorporating more than the central left-right dimension, or focusing on specific policy outputs rather than party positions, paint a much bleaker picture of the state of democ-

racy and highlight problems with inequality or conditional responsiveness (e.g. Dalton, 2017; Gilens, 2012).

In addition, more theoretically-driven accounts of the representative capacity of political parties also underline this skeptical image. One pivotal scholar in this regard is Peter Mair, who famously argued that when balancing representative and responsible governing, political parties in Western Europe have increasingly favored the latter (Mair, 2010). One important cause for this, according to Mair, is the increasing lock-in of political parties in commitments in international treaties and EU-power, as well as the tendency to depoliticize much of policy-making in regulatory agencies (Ibid). Acting responsibly also entails that government should be reliable, meaning that when a new government is elected it will not overturn policy decisions made by the previous administration – further limiting the ability of parties in government to act responsively. In addition, he argued that political parties have become increasingly detached from civil society. Firstly because, according to Mair, the weakening of traditional cleavages and ideological conflicts in Western European countries has simply made it harder for political parties to know what public preferences are. This dealignment of voters has also meant that when parties make hard decisions that may be unpopular, they are less able to appeal to the group identities, loyal voters, or cleavages that allowed them to enhance the legitimacy of their policy decisions in the past (Mair, 2010). Finally, Mair argued (together with Richard Katz) that most political parties have increasingly become agents of the state. Not only because political parties in Western Europe are increasingly dependent on state subsidies for their survival, but also because elections have increasingly started to revolve around a ‘right to govern’ and around proving which party is the most capable administrator (Katz & Mair, 1995, 2009).

Much of the skeptical image of the representative role of political parties painted above has been nuanced in subsequent studies. For example, van der Meer, Lubbe, van Elsas, Elff, and van der Brug (2012) show that ideology still plays an important role in the vote choices of Dutch citizens, even if they now choose more actively between ideologically related sets of possible parties. As mentioned, there is also evidence that political parties and systems have remained responsive to the preferences of either their voters or the general public (Golder & Ferland, 2017; Wlezien & Soroka, 2012). However, the findings that levels of congruence between the policy preferences of parties and the public vary across policy areas suggest that further research is warranted (Dalton, 2017).

Contribution 1: The ability of political parties to represent the general public on specific policy issues

So how can we unite these contradictory conclusions of high congruence between political parties and the public on the one hand, and more skeptical accounts of the representative role of political parties on the other? Chapter 2 of this dissertation proposes a way forward by studying the policy positions of political parties on 102 specific policy proposals in Germany. These are exactly the kind of issues that affect the lives of citizens like cutting specific social benefit programs, increasing taxes for employees who commute by car, or changes to the health insurance system. Combining survey data on the policy preferences of both the general public and the supporters of specific political parties with the policy positions of these parties, allows for analyzing whether the latter are related to public preferences. To do this, the chapter proposes a new application of Multilevel Regression with Poststratification (MRP) (Park et al., 2006) that helps to estimate the preferences of the supporters of a political party – especially in those instances where survey data contain a relatively small number of party supporters. Chapter 2 therefore offers a new way of studying the representative role of political parties and reveals a picture of this role that is much less positive than is often suggested in studies of the congruence between the policy positions of the public and political parties. Importantly, the findings show that the policy preferences of opposition parties are strongly correlated with those of the general public. However, this correlation breaks down once political parties enter government. To the extent that government parties have a stronger influence on government policy, this suggests that this may harm the representation of public preferences in policy.

Research question 1: Are the policy positions of political parties related to the preferences of the general public or their supporters on specific policy issues? And what are the covariates of these relationships?

1.5 INTEREST GROUPS AS ALTERNATIVES FOR POLITICAL PARTIES

If we follow the concerns of Mair outlined above, as well as some of the findings from Chapter 2, other organizations than political parties alone may have to (help) ensure the representation of public preferences in policy. Mair even came to the rather grim conclusion that:

“Meanwhile, the representation of the citizens, to the extent that it still occurs at all, is given over to other, non-governing organizations and practices – to interest groups, social movements, advocacy coalitions, lobbies, the media, self-representation, etc. – that are disconnected from the party system” (Mair, 2010, p. 6).

Among these alternative organizations, interest groups and other policy advocates especially stand out as potential organizations that may help transfer public preferences to political elites and ultimately policy. Unlike the literature on political parties, the literature on interest groups generally does not focus on a single ideological dimension, but studies specific policies instead (e.g. Baumgartner et al., 2009; Hacker & Pierson, 2014). The main reason for this is that most political activity by interest groups takes place at the level of specific policy issues: rather than pushing general public policy in a left- or right-wing direction, most lobbying and other interest group (political) activity is geared towards achieving more specific political goals (Burstein, 2014).

The literature on interest groups and policy advocacy has almost from its conception been interested in the potential of organized interests to work as transmission belts that help translate public preferences into policy (Truman, 1951). Simultaneously, there has been a persistent worry that such groups represent elite, rather than general public preferences (Schattschneider, 1960). While there is a large number of studies that investigate the influence (or lobbying success) of interest groups (e.g. Baumgartner et al., 2009; Dür, Bernhagen, & Marshall, 2015; Lowery, 2013; Mahoney, 2007), there is much less work investigating the representative effects of lobbying and interest group politics (but see: Burstein, 2014; Gilens & Page, 2014; Gray et al., 2004).

The GovLis project that this dissertation is part of, *has* empirically studied this transmission belt function of public opinion using an approach focusing on specific policy issues. In a study that underlines the representative potential of interest groups, Flöthe and Rasmussen (2019) studied the positions of interest groups and other policy advocates on 50 policy issues in Western Europe for which public opinion surveys were available. They show that in around half of all instances, policy advocates take the same side as the public opinion majority on issues. When disaggregating the results, they also show that public interest groups, like NGOs, are on the same side as the public opinion majority around 78% of the time, with business actors aligning with the public in just under 45% of cases. In a study including a large number of European countries, Rasmussen and Reher (2019) also show that the larger the share of the public that is a member of (politically active) voluntary associations in a policy area, the higher the likelihood that policy in that policy area is in line with public opinion. Their findings also suggest that interest groups, in this case in the shape of voluntary associations, can help translate public preferences to policy. These studies are clearly indicative of the representative potential of interest groups and policy advocacy.

Contribution 2: Studying the representative potential of policy advocacy on specific issues over longer time periods

To further investigate this representative potential of interest groups, Chapter 3 (co-authored with Anne Rasmussen and Dimiter Toshkov) studies the influence of both public opinion and media advocacy on four regulatory policy issues over relatively long time periods in Sweden. For policy advocates to have the potential to contribute to the representation of the policy preferences of the general public, they ought to at least have some influence over policy-making – *and* not shift it away from public preferences. Hence, the dataset used for this study brings together measures of public support for specific policies with data on the attention politicians pay to these issues in the Swedish parliament. In addition, it traces policy developments over time and maps the preferences of advocates as expressed and reported in two Swedish newspapers. Focusing on a relatively limited number of cases allows for adding more detailed qualitative analyses of policy-making on the issues to the quantitative analyses. It also allows for tracing the issues over much longer time periods than previous studies. While the quantitative models focus on the main effects of public opinion and media advocacy on political attention, the in-depth discussion of the cases makes clear that their effects on policy are neither straightforward nor deterministic. A closer look at the cases also suggests that party government and political parties are still very important for policy-making – including in instances where it is incongruent with public preferences.

Research question 2: Do public opinion and media advocacy influence (attention to) regulatory policy?

1.6 THE POLICY IMPACT OF TIES BETWEEN INTEREST GROUPS AND POLITICAL PARTIES

The studies cited above show that interest groups may have some potential for transmitting public preferences into policy, but they do not include political parties in their models or theoretical frameworks. However, a related literature has emerged that does study the ties between interest groups and parties, and scholars of party politics and interest groups alike have called for a closer integration of the empirical study of interest groups and political parties (Allern & Bale, 2012; Fraussen & Halpin, 2018; Heaney, 2010).

Usually focusing on Northwestern Europe, empirical studies of party-group ties often start with investigating the traditional links between political parties and interest groups (Allern et al., 2007; Thomas, 2001). Especially the traditionally close ties between

social democratic parties and trade unions have received much attention (Allern et al., 2007; Allern & Bale, 2017). In part due to their shared origins in labour movements in the early 20th century, ties between trade unions and social democratic parties were often close and for example evident from the strong organizational integration between them. However, the links between these parties and the labour movement have slowly weakened during the second half of the 20th century (Allern et al., 2007; Öberg et al., 2011), even if there is cross-national variation in the extent of this decline (Allern & Bale, 2017). This development has been ascribed to a decreased utility of these strong relations for both sets of actors. Importantly, the increased volatility of voters and declining membership means that trade unions have lost some of their appeal to social democratic parties: after all, it has made them less able to reliably deliver voters (Allern et al., 2007). Similar developments have also been recorded for the links between business groups and center-right parties (Christiansen, 2012) and the environmental movement and green parties (Blings, 2018).

While such privileged relationships may still persist, there is evidence that most ties between interest groups and political parties are now not driven by such ties, but have become more strategic (depending on the policy issue at stake). Rasmussen and Lindboom (2013) demonstrate the more ad-hoc nature of such contacts between parties and groups in a cross-national study. There is also indirect evidence that relationships and contacts between groups and parties are driven by more than historical ties alone. Importantly, the fact that traditional ties have weakened means that contacts and links between groups and parties have become more strategic and resource dependent. Allern et al. (2019), for example, show that in Europe monetary donations by trade unions are related to the strength of ties between trade unions and political parties, even when controlling for the presence (or absence) of historic ties between them.

Drawing on assumptions that both parties and interest groups are relatively strategic actors, current studies generally focus on two factors that dominate contacts between parties and groups. Both tend to assume that most of these contacts are initiated by groups (DeBruycker, 2016), who need political parties to achieve the implementation of their policy preferences. The first factor that increases the appeal of political parties to interest groups is the *power* of a political party. Political parties that wield more influence over policy-making are more attractive contacts for interest groups than parties that do not (DeBruycker, 2016; Marshall, 2015; Otjes & Rasmussen, 2017). In these studies, sources of a party's power tend to be its size in the legislature, its participation in government or its control over (the agenda of) specific legislative committees. Secondly, groups generally prefer contacting parties that are ideologically close to them (DeBruycker, 2016; Marshall, 2015), reflecting debates in the American literature on lobbying that lobbyists generally prefer to lobby their friends over their foes (Baumgartner & Leech, 1996; Hojnacki & Kimball, 1998). The assumption is that it

is easier for groups to convince parties of their policy preferences when the parties are already ideologically pre-disposed to agree with their positions. While empirical studies generally find support for this assumption (*ibid.*), there is evidence that in the stages where a legislative proposal is about to be voted on, it may become more important to contact opponents instead of 'friends' (Crombez, 2002). The electoral system, specifically government turnover after elections, may also be related to the extent to which political parties and interest groups lobby political parties that are ideologically close to them (Otjes & Rasmussen, 2017). Finally, this combination of power and ideology may explain how interest groups deal with radical right-wing populist parties, which tend to be both ideologically far-removed from interest groups and less powerful as they generally do not enter government – making groups much less likely to contact these parties (Berkhout, Hanegraaff, & Statsch, 2019).

While these assumptions about the utility of political parties to groups' lobbying efforts help explain contact patterns between these two sets of actors, we do not know whether these contacts actually have consequences for policy-making. This is surprising, because both interest groups and political parties are seen as important aggregators of public preferences in Western democracies. What is more, both are often considered powerful sets of actors in policy-making (even if the influence of interest groups on policy is hard to prove empirically (Lowery, 2013)). Current studies of ties between groups and parties generally assume that these contacts are very important for policy (e.g. Allern & Bale, 2012; Otjes & Rasmussen, 2017; Thomas, 2001), but do not provide empirical evidence for this assumption.

To understand the effects of the contacts between these two sets of actors on policy-making and, ultimately, representation, it is important to study parties and groups simultaneously. Again, the framework of policy-centered research provides a useful angle for studying these questions (Hacker & Pierson, 2014). The main reason for this is that it allows for placing the policy preferences and actions of interest groups and political parties on a common metric: as argued above most interest group activity focuses on specific policy issues, and while parties may generally pursue broader and more diverse goals, they too spend considerable amounts of their time and energy on pursuing specific policy-goals. To cite Schattschneider (1948, pp. 22-23) in what is arguably the earliest call to study political parties and interest groups together: "The relations between pressure groups and political parties can be illustrated by an examination of the role of the political parties in the formation of policy".

Contribution 3: The lobbying of political parties

Chapter 4 (co-authored with Anne Rasmussen) investigates whether interest groups and other policy advocates that work with some political parties are more likely to attain their preferences than others. Relying on data from the GovLis survey on the lobbying activities of 478 advocates in 5 countries and 50 policy issues (10 per country), the chapter makes a first step towards understanding the policy implications of contacts between interest groups and parties. Following existing studies, the chapter first considers whether contacting political parties in general is associated with higher rates of preference attainment. It then moves on to consider two established drivers of contacts between interest groups and political parties: the power and position of the party. Here the assumption is that advocates that work with powerful parties are more likely to attain their preferences. Similarly, we expect that advocates that work with parties that agree with them are more likely to get their way. Finally, we expect a multiplicative effect: advocates that lobby powerful parties that also agree with them on the issue are most likely to attain their preferences. The results show that working with political parties is not as clearly correlated with preference attainment as one may expect based on the assumptions in previous studies. In fact, we only find evidence for the idea that working with parties that are powerful *and* agree with the advocate is correlated with higher levels of preference attainment.

Research question 3: Is working with (which) political parties related to the preference attainment of policy advocates?

Contribution 4: How ties to political parties shape the preference attainment of policy advocates after elections

Chapter 5 of this dissertation studies the preference attainment of policy advocates after the Dutch general election of 2017. This chapter uses a unique data source in order to study lobbying during coalition negotiations and the conditions under which policy advocates attain their preferences in the coalition agreement. It compares the letters with policy requests that policy advocates sent to the negotiators at the coalition table with the policy positions of the negotiating parties in their election manifestos *and* the final coalition agreement. By placing the policy preferences of policy advocates and political parties on a common scale – requests and positions on specific policy plans – the study can help inform us about the relative strength of the two sets of actors. The data also allows for a test of the extent to which historic ties between a specific set of interest groups, business actors, and the parties at the negotiation table affect the policy choices made in the coalition agreement: providing empirical evidence for the assumption that these historic ties between policy advocates and parties indeed shape policy-making. However, the results also suggest that rather than historical ties it may be the electoral importance of the subgroup that is represented by a policy advocate that matters for its preference attainment – suggesting that the effects of ties between advocates and parties may be affected by the electoral strategy of the political party. Like the results of chapter 4 also suggested, these findings indicate that the policy implications of both ties and contacts with political parties are less straightforward than is often assumed (but not tested) in the literature.

Research question: Under which conditions do policy advocates attain their preferences after elections?

1.7 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This dissertation is part of the GovLis project¹, which studies links between interest groups, public preferences and policy with an emphasis on Northwestern European democracies (Rasmussen, Mäder, et al., 2018)². The chapters of this dissertation all draw on data from five countries within this region: Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden

1 Funded through Sapere Aude Grant 0602-02642B from the Danish Council for Independent Research and VIDI Grant 452-12-008 from the Dutch NWO.

2 Appendix 1.1 outlines the contribution of the author to the data collection and research design of each of the chapters.

and the United Kingdom. With the exception of the inclusion of the United Kingdom in Chapter 4, the political systems studied in this dissertation share a number of important features. For one, they are proportional electoral systems with high levels of party discipline – meaning that political parties in the legislature tend to vote unanimously. Similarly, and again with the exception of the United Kingdom, these countries have neo-corporatist systems of state-society relations, meaning that interest group access to the political systems has historically been relatively limited to a specific set of ‘privileged’ actors (Schmitter, 1974). While these characteristics will affect the studied mechanisms differently for each of the chapters (as discussed research design and conclusion sections of each chapter), one can generally expect the findings of this dissertation to best generalize to other (North) Western European democracies with (neo-)corporatist traditions and proportional electoral systems.

As can be seen in the overview of the dissertation provided in Table 1, Chapters 2, 3 and 5 all rely on data from a single country. While this may imply some ‘loss’ of external validity compared to cross-national studies, an approach that keeps many institutional variables constant has important benefits. One advantage is that it allows for stronger internal validity. As an example, Chapter 2, which focuses on Germany, has both the disadvantage of studying only a limited number of parties *and* the advantage that it allows for high quality measurement of public opinion across a large set of policy issues. Simultaneously, this research design has additional benefits for policy-centered research (Hacker & Pierson, 2014). Given that one of the major advantages of this analytical approach is that it allows for an analysis of the policies that actually affect the lives of citizens directly, a focus on a specific institutional setting facilitates the discussion and comparison of such specific policy issues. In addition to quantitative analyses, chapter 3 therefore provides more detailed discussions of specific policy issues, which helps to illustrate and understand some of the quantitative findings and facilitates the evaluation of the hypotheses (Toshkov, 2016, pp. 318-323).

To analyze specific policies, it is necessary to make choices regarding the policy issues that are (not) included in the analyses. Even if it were possible to construct a universe of cases consisting of all policy issues (in a country), it would be practically impossible to study them all (Burstein, 2014). Instead, the chapters in this dissertation rely on samples of policy issues. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 all follow the sampling strategy taken by the GovLis project. Given the project’s (and Chapters 2 and 3’s) focus on public opinion, the sampling started by identifying public opinion polls that concerned specific proposals to change the status quo (Gilens, 2012; Rasmussen, Mäder, et al., 2018). This approach allows for tracing the development of policy on these issues for a number of years after the poll was held (or until the end of the time series in the case of Chapter 3). In addition, the question had to be about a single specific policy proposal that respondents could answer on an agreement scale. Generally, the sampling also ensured that

there was variation on a number of important characteristics like the type of policy (kept constant in Chapter 3), the policy area, the amount of public support for the issue and its salience in the media. The latter can be argued to be especially important, as there are concerns in the literature that issues sampled from public opinion polls are more salient, i.e. attract more media and political attention than the average policy issue (Burstein, 2014). While this may be the case, it is also necessary that citizens are informed about issues and hold real preferences on them when analyzing public opinion: meaning that the oversampling of salient issues may not be as problematic as it first appears (Gilens, 2012; Rasmussen, Mäder, et al., 2018). The issue sampling in chapters 2, 3 and 4 therefore includes issues of varying salience and the analyses contain control variables for the amount of media coverage of the issues.

Chapter 5 follows a somewhat different definition of both policy issues and sampling strategy. It relies on methods developed for studies of the pledge fulfillment of political parties (to what extent do parties implement their election promises?) to identify specific policy requests made by policy advocates (Thomson et al., 2017). Like in the sampling of the public opinion items, these only included requests for which it was possible to determine whether they were implemented (in 2017 Dutch coalition agreement). Unlike the other samples, the requests were formulated by policy advocates themselves meaning that they were on average more detailed and specific than those included in the other chapters. At the same time, this means that while the study analyzed all requests made in letters sent to the 2017 Dutch coalition formation negotiators, it does not study a stratified sample of policy issues or requests. The fact that it includes many more policy issues than the other chapters (over 750 compared to the 102 in chapter 2) does have the benefit that the studied issues span a wide range of policy areas and issue types.

Finally, chapters 3 through 5 all include interest groups and other policy advocates in the analyses. They use an encompassing and behavioral approach to identify policy advocates (Baroni et al., 2014), meaning that they include all non-state actors who observably tried to influence policy-making, including individual experts, think tanks and international organizations in addition to traditional membership based interest associations like trade unions, employers' associations and identity and public interest groups. There are two general exceptions to this rule, however: firstly, individual members of the public (with no clear expertise on the topic) writing op-ed in newspapers or letters to the *informatie* (chapter 5) were excluded from the analyses. Similarly, unlike in chapters 3 and 4, the models in chapter 5 include subnational government actors (like municipalities) – although the findings do not change when these are excluded.

Especially in chapter 5, which empirically strongly relies on the historical ties between business advocates and center-right political parties this may be somewhat problematic: while some large individual firms may also have maintained such historic ties with political parties, many companies have not. It is therefore important to note

that results do not change substantially when individual firms are removed from the analysis (and only business associations and employers' organizations included). Keeping other types of organizations (like experts or think tanks) in the analysis helps to show how the preference attainment of (interest group) advocates that have these ties differs from those that do not – be they traditional interest associations or other types of policy advocates.

1.8 OVERVIEW AND OUTLOOK

The studies in this dissertation all highlight the benefits of applying a policy-centric approach (Hacker & Pierson, 2014) to the study of political parties and how such an approach can help both our understanding of their representative role, as well the consequences of their ties to interest groups. Table 1 outlines the buildup of and specific questions asked in the different chapters of this dissertation. It also provides a very brief summary of the case selection and choice of methods for each of the chapters. Chapter 2 studies the relation between public opinion and the positions of political parties on 102 specific policy issues in Germany. The third chapter then looks at the joint impact of media advocacy and public opinion on (political attention to) four regulatory policy issues in Sweden. Chapter 4 analyses whether working with which political parties is related to the preference attainment of policy advocates in five countries. The final empirical chapter 5 studies whether policy advocates that sent letters to the (in)formateur during the Dutch 2017 coalition negotiation attain their preferences and under which conditions.

Table 1: Overview of the dissertation

Chapter	Question	Country studied	Policy Issues	Method
1	Introduction			
2	Are the policy positions of political parties related to the preferences of the general public or their supporters? And what are the covariates of these relationships?	Germany	102 specific policy proposals from public opinion surveys	Multilevel regressions predicting the positions of political parties on 102 specific policy issues. Applying an extension of multilevel regression with post stratification to estimate the policy preferences of the supporters of political parties
3	Do public opinion and media advocacy influence (attention to) regulatory policy?	Sweden	4 regulatory policy issues included in multiple consecutive public opinion surveys	Public opinion data and public preferences on four policy-issues over longer time series, combined with an in-depth analysis of the issues.
4	Is working with (which) political parties related to the preference attainment of policy advocates?	Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, United Kingdom	50 specific policy proposals from public opinion surveys	Multilevel regressions predicting preference attainment of advocates who answered the GovLis survey
5	What explains the preference attainment of policy advocates after elections?	The Netherlands	2281 policy requests formulated by policy advocates	Multilevel regressions predicting the preference attainment of policy advocates
6	Conclusion			

