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

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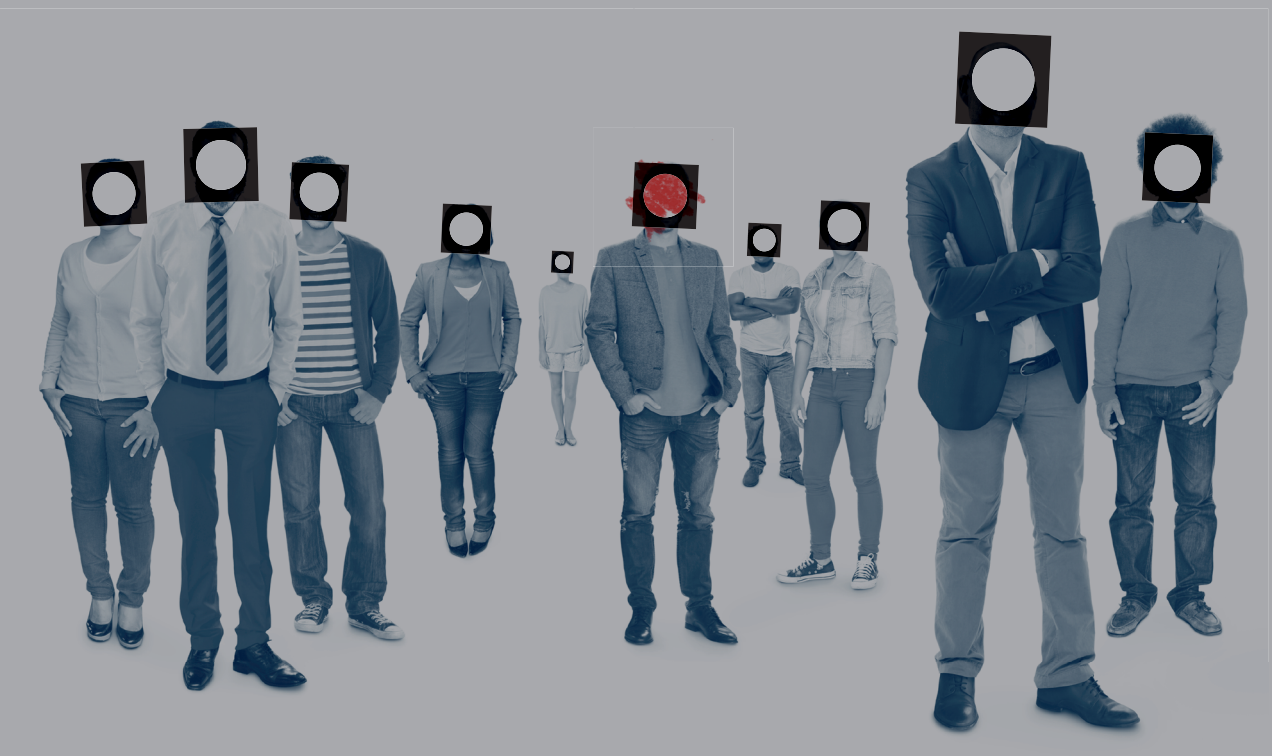

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Do political parties listen to the(ir) public? Public opinion-party linkage on specific policy issues

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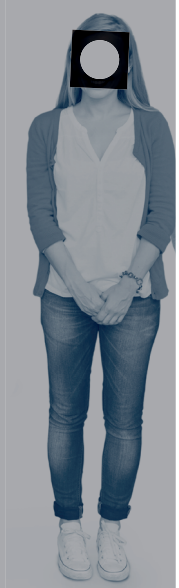

ABSTRACT

Political parties are a crucial link between the public and policy outcomes. However, few studies have considered who political parties are responsive to when they take positions on *specific* policy proposals. This chapter explores the links between public opinion and the policy positions of political parties on 102 specific policy proposals in Germany using a novel application of multilevel regression with poststratification to estimate the policy preferences of party supporters. Whilst there is a link between general public preferences and the positions of political parties, this connection weakens considerably once political parties are in government. In fact, the study shows that the link between party positions and general public opinion is severed once parties enter government, whereas it is only weakened in the case of party supporters. Finally the chapter finds mixed evidence for differences between niche parties and mainstream parties.

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

In many normative definitions of democratic systems, political parties are expected to represent their voters and pursue the policies they promised to deliver (e.g. Mair, 2008) to ensure a link between the preferences of the public and policy outcomes (Dahl, 1956). It is thus unsurprising that a literature has emerged studying who political parties represent when they take policy positions[3]. One influential strand of literature argues that niche parties are different to mainstream parties, because mainstream parties seeking to maximize their vote share will cater to the median voter, whereas niche parties, which are more policy-seeking will respond to the preferences of their supporters (e.g. Adams et al., 2006). Recently, scholars have also argued that political parties in government are constrained by coalition agreements and their responsibility to implement election promises. This means that unlike parties in opposition, they are less able to respond to the issue priorities of the public (Klüver and Spoon, 2016).

Such studies of party positions tend to study left-right or other policy dimensions like Europeanization. They have yielded many valuable insights, but are not directly aimed at understanding how political parties make decisions on concrete policy issues. Yet it is these specific policy issues like whether the pension age should be raised or extending more rights to same-sex couples that end up affecting the lives of citizens. There is also evidence that public preferences on specific policy issues are not strongly linked to the public's positions on dimensions, indicating that studying specific issues is a valuable addition to the field (Lesschaeve, 2017).

Studies on the link between public opinion and policy *outputs* have studied specific policy issues (e.g. Gilens, 2012, Lax and Phillips, 2012), allowing them to complement findings from previous studies that considered policy scales (e.g. Stimson et al., 1995). Although the approach has its drawbacks, it is increasingly propagated because it provides insights into the concrete policies that are delivered to citizens and ensures a direct match between public preferences and policy (Wlezien, 2016).

This chapter contributes to both the literature on the public-party and the public-policy linkages by exploring the link between public opinion and political parties on *specific policy issues*. It considers whether the policy positions of political parties are related to the preferences of the general public or their supporters, and whether this relationship is dependent on whether a party is a niche or mainstream party and in or out of government.

To do this, this chapter assesses the positions of political parties in the German Bundestag on 102 specific policy proposals in the period between 1998 and 2010. The issues concern possible policy changes like raising the taxes on petrol or increasing the

3 For a review, see Fagerholm, (2016).

size of the German military deployment in Afghanistan. The chapter records statements by political parties about these policy issues in two major newspapers to investigate whether the preferences of the general public and party supporters are represented in these claims.

This chapter complements existing methods of measuring the preferences of party supporters through an innovative application of multilevel modelling with post-stratification (MRP) to individual survey responses. This method fits multilevel models to predict support amongst different sub-groups of party supporters, and then weights these predictions to obtain a final estimate (Lax and Phillips, 2012). The approach helps address concerns about small sample sizes for supporters of the smaller political parties.

The results show that there is a link between public preferences and the positions of political parties. However, the chapter finds little evidence for the expected differences between niche and mainstream parties. The results indicate that the link between public preferences and party positions disappears once parties enter government, whereas the link with the preferences of party supporters is weakened but not severed. The chapter thus contributes to the literatures on policy and party representation and illustrates the advantages of studying specific policy issues.

2.2 POLICY OUTCOMES AND REPRESENTATION OF THE PUBLIC

Whilst there is disagreement over *how* the preferences of the public should be taken into account by politicians in democratic systems (Mansbridge, 2003), there is more agreement *that* there ought to be a general connection between what the public wants and what it gets in democracies (Dahl, 1956). Even if may not be desirable that public opinion influences all policies, like the rights or protection of minorities, there is a long tradition of studies investigating this link between public preferences and policy (for reviews, see: Burstein, 2014, Wlezien, 2016).

Early studies argued that policy was often in line with public opinion (Monroe, 1979) and that policies shifted in line with changes in public preferences (Page and Shapiro, 1983). By moving towards designs that measured public preferences and policy on a common scale, later scholars could study public opinion over time and found strong links with policy (Stimson et al., 1995). Moreover, Wlezien (1995) demonstrates that public preferences and levels of spending react to one another - even if the relationship is conditioned by institutional factors (Wlezien and Soroka, 2012).

However, some studies argue that the ties between policy and the public are not that strong. Gilens (2012) shows that policy in the United States is more responsive to the preferences of the wealthy than to those of the poor. This study faces criticism for not

distinguishing between the preferences of the poor and the rich – and overlooking the fact that policy changed in line with the preferences of the rich and those of the poor in equal measure when the two disagreed (Branham et al., 2017). However, another study focusing on Europe and employing different methods finds results similar to those of Gilens (Peters and Ensink, 2015). Even if the jury is still out concerning whether policy outcomes reflect the preferences of the public, it is important to consider the mechanisms through which this connection may (not) come about. Existing studies do cover some of these and have argued that the saliency of policy issues (Lax and Phillips, 2012), institutions (Wlezien and Soroka, 2012) and interest groups (Gilens 2012; Lax and Phillips, 2012) may matter in this regard. However, these studies have paid scant attention to the role of political parties, even if these act as important intermediaries between the public and policy outcomes.

2.3 POLITICAL PARTIES AND REPRESENTATION OF THE PUBLIC

In parallel to these studies there is an extensive literature that considers the role of political parties in representing the public. Through elections political parties are argued to obtain a mandate to represent their voters, which should ensure a connection between public opinion and policy (Mair, 2008). Numerous studies investigate these links between political parties and the public on left-right and other ideological dimensions and generally find a link between party positions and public opinion (for a review, see: Fagerholm, 2016). This work argues that parties have strategic reasons to respond to public preferences, but that they are constrained by both party characteristics and external conditions.

Public preferences and policy positions are usually measured on left-right scales. Recently, authors have started to study more concrete dimensions (like immigration or environmental policy), furthering our understanding of how these impact both the policy choices of political parties (Dalton, 2017) and their attention to policy issues (e.g. Klüver and Spoon, 2016, Giger and Lefkofridi, 2014). Some studies employing policy dimensions may have the drawback that they measure the consistency of public preferences as opposed to ideological positions (Broockman, 2016): especially when scales are constructed from the preferences of citizens on specific policy issues, a citizen who holds extreme views in two directions will be rated as moderate. However, more consistent elite actors like the leaders of political parties will be rated as more extreme because their preferences consistently fall on one side of the scale. This becomes problematic when comparing the distance between public preferences and those of elite actors. To address this the following section outlines an exploratory theoretical framework on

how political parties take public preferences into account when deciding upon specific policy issues.

2.4 THEORIZING THE POSITIONS OF POLITICAL PARTIES ON SPECIFIC POLICY ISSUES

Apart from addressing potential methodological problems, a focus on specific issues also matters because these are the policies that end up affecting the lives of citizens. There are theoretical reasons to expect that political parties will indeed aim to represent (parts of) the public. Parties are often assumed to be office-seeking actors who seek to maximize their vote share (Riker, 1962). Whilst they may pursue other goals (such as policy change), these are not mutually exclusive and will often overlap (Strøm and Müller, 1999b; Spoon and Klüver, 2014). Generally, politicians in political parties will, at least partially, be driven by a desire to get (re-)elected and are expected to pursue policies that are popular with their supporters or the general electorate (Stimson et al., 1995). If a specific policy is popular amongst the general public then, all else being equal, political parties will prefer to take a position that is in line with these public preferences. Hence, the first hypothesis is:

> *Hypothesis 1: The higher the public support for a specific policy issue, the more likely that a political party takes a position in favour of the specific policy issue.*

Moreover, different parties may be inclined to relate differently to parts of the public. One relevant party characteristic concerns the distinction between niche parties and mainstream parties (Meguid, 2005) and scholars have argued that they act differently in a number of ways (e.g. Adams et al., 2006, Giger and Lefkofridi, 2014). Based on the idea of issue ownership (Petrocik, 1996), Meguid (2005) defined niche parties as those that reject the class-based orientation of politics, emphasize new issues that do not coincide with the traditional left-right division and focus on a narrow set of issues. Similarly, Wagner (2012) postulates that niche parties compete on a few non-economic issues, and that the 'nicheness' of a political party is a matter of degree rather than a dichotomous choice. Both definitions have been critiqued for excluding economic issues, because a party can emphasize 'niche' economic topics and because mainstream parties can also choose to emphasize typical niche issues like the environment or immigration (Meyer and Miller, 2015). Meyer and Miller (2015) and Bischof (2017a) have relaxed this definition and define a niche party as a party that emphasizes other policy areas than its competitors and consider nicheness as a matter of degree. These authors posit that the 'nicheness' of a political party is related to its issue profile. A party's nicheness depends

on the extent to which it emphasizes issues that other political parties do not. Since parties can change their issue offers over time, their nicheness can vary. An example would be a green party that enters parliament heavily emphasizing environmental issues. If it is the only party emphasizing the issue, this means that its issue emphasis gives it a strong 'niche' issue profile. However, if other political parties start to pay more attention to the environment, or if the environmental party starts competing on economic issues, its issue profile becomes more like that of other parties and the party becomes more mainstream. This thus addresses the concern that niche parties may become more mainstream, whilst mainstream parties may adopt 'niche' issues in response to the rise of niche parties (Bischof, 2017a; Meguid, 2005; Meyer and Miller, 2015). In contrast to previous studies, this chapter adopts the continuous definition of Bischof (2017a).

Turning to the public opinion - party position linkage, the argument in previous studies (using a dichotomous definition) is that mainstream parties are driven by vote and office-seeking goals and respond to shifts in preferences on a left-right scale of the median voter. On the other hand, niche parties are more policy-seeking and more responsive to shifts in preferences of their core party supporters (Adams et al., 2006, Ezrow et al., 2011). This expectation can be translated to specific policy issues: mainstream parties take issue positions in line with the preferences of the general public and niche parties take position in line with the preferences of their supporters.

Recent studies have refined this claim, and argue that niche parties are only more responsive to the issue *priorities* of their supporters on issue dimensions that they own (Klüver and Spoon, 2016; Giger and Lefkofridi, 2014). However, it is less clear whether such theories of issue-ownership apply to the level of specific policy issues. Even if a policy area or dimension is owned by a party, this does not necessarily mean it is associated with a specific proposal in the area. As an example: a Green party may generally 'own' environmental issues, but another party may be associated with a specific plan to store emitted CO2 underground. Still, Appendix 2.5 outlines a discussion and test of this argument regarding niche parties and issue ownership. Summarizing, and taking into account the continuous conceptualization of nicheness, the following hypotheses can be derived:

Hypothesis 2A: The policy positions of a more mainstream political party on specific policy issues are more likely to be positively related to the preferences of the general public than those of a more niche party.

Hypothesis 2B: The policy positions of a more niche party on specific policy issues are more likely to be positively related to the preferences of their supporters than those of a more mainstream party.

Even if political parties generally aim to take popular positions on issues, they face constraints regarding the policy positions that they can take. One such constraint is participation in government and Klüver and Spoon (2016) argue that government parties are indeed less responsive to the issue priorities of the public than opposition parties. They claim that government parties are less able to emphasize the issues voters find important, because they are held more accountable for the implementation of their campaign promises than opposition parties, and thus have less room to manoeuvre.

Moreover, there are good reasons to expect that political parties in government are more restrained than those in opposition regarding the policy positions they can take. Firstly, the need to agree with coalition partners on an issue constrains a party's ability to choose a position that is popular amongst either the public or its supporters. Secondly and unlike opposition parties, parties in government have to directly take into account constraints like the government budget and international commitments and are thus more limited in the positions they can take. Finally, parties sometimes blur their positions, for example when their policy position is unpopular with the public (Rovny, 2012). Translating this to a specific issue like raising the retirement age, it is likely that government parties will be put under more pressure (for example by opposition parties) to take a position on the issue as they are responsible for its implementation, especially once it comes on the political agenda (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010). So where opposition parties may be able to avoid declaring their unpopular positions, government parties have less opportunity to do so. This should limit the ability of a party in government to take policy positions that are related to the preferences of both the general public and their supporters leading to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3A: The policy positions of a government party on specific policy issues are less likely to be related to the preferences of the general public, than the positions of an opposition party.

Hypothesis 3B: The policy positions of a government party on specific policy issues are less likely to be related to the preferences of its supporters, than the position of an opposition party.

2.5 RESEARCH DESIGN

The relationship between political parties and public opinion

Since specific policy issues are different to the scales that are normally used in the literature on the public opinion - party position linkage, this chapter adopts a different approach. It relies on existing studies on the link between public opinion and policy

outcomes and studies the correlation between public preferences and party positions across issues (Lax and Phillips, 2012)[4]. In this definition of the linkage, one cannot say that a single party position is 'related' to public opinion, but rather that the positions of a political party are linked to public preferences in general – meaning the party is more likely to support a policy the more the public supports it. This definition does not assume a causal link between public preferences and party positions, but is more agnostic regarding whether political parties are influenced by public preferences, or vice versa. This differs from the general approach in the literature on political parties, where the relationship is called responsiveness and defined as a positional shift by a political party in response to a change in public opinion (e.g. Adams et al., 2006). Finally, the analyses also consider whether the results are robust to operationalizing the linkage as *congruence*, which is achieved when a political party takes a position that is in line (congruent) with the majority of either its own supporters or the general public on an issue (for the same definition regarding policy outcomes instead of party positions, see: Lax and Phillips, 2012).

Case selection

This chapter focuses on Germany for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is one of few countries for which enough high-quality survey data is available for many policy issues, that could also be disaggregated to allow for the estimation of the preferences of party supporters. Moreover, the bi-weekly German Politbarometer can be leveraged for the approximation of the demographic profile of party supporters in a given year, which is a prerequisite for the expansion of MRP used in this chapter.

Focusing on Germany has the added benefit of keeping institutional and other country-level variables that may impact the public opinion-party linkage constant. The country can be regarded as a typical case for studying the public-party linkage in (West) European countries with proportional or mixed electoral systems for several reasons (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). For one, the parties that are in parliament are all of major party families, and many (Western) European countries have similar parties and patterns of party competition. Moreover, during the observation period, which runs from 1998 to 2010, the composition of government coalitions varied and covered left-wing, right-wing and broad coalitions meaning that four out of five political parties in the country were in government at some point. The German case thus covers all kinds of government coalitions in proportional or mixed-electoral systems except for minority coalitions, which strengthens the inferences about the effect of being part of government.

4 Lax and Phillips (2012) define this as "responsiveness". To avoid confusion and the causal implications of the term, this study calls this the public opinion-party position linkage instead.

In addition, levels of party discipline are comparable to Western-European countries, especially within the Bundestag (Brettschneider, 1996; Sieberer, 2006). This means that the assumption in this study that the politicians from the same party in the Bundestag tend to be or present themselves as unified on most policy issues should hold.

The policy issues are selected from the high-quality Politbarometer surveys that were held across a stratified random sample of the German population between 1998 and 2010. For a policy item to be included in the study, it has to meet three criteria. Firstly, it has to be about a *specific* policy proposal. Secondly, the policy issue has to fall under the national jurisdiction so that national political parties can reasonably be assumed to engage with the issue. Thirdly, the answer has to be measured on an agreement scale. A total number of 102 policy issues meet these criteria and cover topics like the construction of a Holocaust memorial in Berlin and whether German soldiers should be withdrawn from Afghanistan. Appendix 2.7 provides an overview of all issues[5]. An advantage of this selection strategy is that it also includes issues that never make it on to the legislative agenda (Gilens, 2012).

Sampling issues from opinion polls means that these issues do not constitute a completely random sample of a potential universe of all policy issues, because the sampled issues will be more salient (Burstein 2014). However, it is necessary that citizens have at least somewhat informed opinions if we expect political parties to engage with these preferences, rendering the oversampling of somewhat salient issues less problematic (Gilens 2012, 50-56).

Estimating parties' policy preferences

There is extensive debate about measuring party positions on specific policy issues (e.g. Gemenis, 2013). This chapter relies on claims that representatives from political parties make about issues in two major newspapers (the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and the Süddeutsche Zeitung)[6]. These newspapers are on the right (FAZ) and left (SZ) side of the political spectrum. Although there is evidence that their political orientation does not steer the choice of topics (i.e. the likelihood covering an issue) there is variation in how these papers discuss political actors (Kühne, 2011). So it is important to code both newspapers to increase the likelihood that all party positions are covered. Student coders recorded each statement by representatives of the political party for a four year period after public opinion was measured, or until a policy change was implemented

5 For some issues the proportion of respondents who answered "don't know" is high. The results from the chapter are robust to excluding issues where more than 10% of respondents answered "don't know".

6 This only included statements by national party leaders, spokespeople on the issue in the Bundestag, and cabinet members. Statements by local, EU and Bundesrat politicians were excluded as they are subject to somewhat different electoral pressures (Bäck, Debus, & Klüver, 2016). If no statements were found, student coders also looked at other broadsheet newspapers and reports from ARD and ZDF.

(Gilens, 2012). Statements were coded as either in favour of, neutral or against the policy proposal. The final analysis excluded neutral positions. If multiple positions were found, all were recorded and the statement closest to the date of the poll was used in the analysis, but conflicting statements on the same issue from the same party were rare.

Of course, parties may vote differently on issues than they claim in the media, or take other positions in their election manifestoes. Yet especially in a country where internal party discipline is high, one can expect that statements in the media do reflect the unified party's position (Brettschneider, 1996) and there is evidence that European political parties do 'walk like they talk' on nuclear policy (Bischof, 2017b). Moreover, other methods like manifestoes or voting in the Bundestag, are not feasible for measuring the positions of political parties on this predefined set of issues, because most were not mentioned in party manifestos or voted on. Even though media coding provides the best coverage of party positions, eight issues in the dataset received so little media coverage that no party positions were found, meaning that the final models include 94 policy issues. Policy positions were found for 72% of all 510 possible issue-party combinations (the positions of 5 political parties on 102 issues). Coverage was lower for smaller parties and issues that received less attention in the media, which is why the analyses control for party size and the media salience of an issue.

Estimating the preferences of the public and party supporters using MRP

To measure general public support for a policy change this analysis relies on the Politbarometer. To estimate the preferences of the supporters of a specific party, however, a novel application of multilevel regression with poststratification (MRP) was used. MRP was developed to improve estimates for smaller subgroups of the population in survey research (Park et al., 2006; Kastellec et al., 2010). It has been shown to be especially effective in providing accurate estimates of public opinion when compared to disaggregation (Lax and Phillips, 2009b). The method uses a multilevel model employing several demographic categories to obtain predicted support for a policy issue for each demographic cell in the data[7]. Census data is then used to weight each cell to obtain a representative prediction. The advantage is that the multilevel models use more data than just that in the specific cell, leading to better estimates when there are few observations in specific sub-groups – like the supporters of smaller parties.

The Politbarometer surveys have an average sample size of around 1500. To estimate the level of support for the policy issue among supporters of a party, one would ideally know the demographic composition of the supporters of a party in a given year. Since such data is unavailable, this study pools all observations from the bi-weekly Politbarom-

7 For example: a 40 to 50 year old woman with a university degree who voted for the CDU.

eter in a year to obtain a large annual and nationally representative sample. This pooled annual dataset is used to estimate the demographic composition of the supporters of a party in terms of age, gender and education level – the same variables used by the regular Politbarometer weights. Two survey questions are combined to identify party supporters. The first asks whether a respondent generally and in the long term tends to support a political party. Respondents who indicated they support a specific party were then asked how strongly they support that party on a five-point scale. Those who respond 3 (somewhat) through 5 (strong) are coded as party supporters[8]. For each issue, multilevel models are then run to predict support for each cell that intersects gender, age (ten categories), education (four categories) and party support. These estimates are weighted to obtain estimates of support for an issue amongst a party's supporters. This method allows the estimation of the composition of party supporters on an annual basis, which is an advantage over other sources like election surveys.

Measurement of other variables

Following Bischof (2017a), the *nicheness* of political parties is established through the coding of party programs by the Comparative Manifestos Project (Volkens et al., 2017). This definition considers nicheness as a matter of degree, rather than a dichotomous distinction. The extent to which a party uniquely focuses on niche topics in an election manifesto is used as the basis of the definition. The nicheness of a party can thus vary from election to election, based on its issue emphasis. The measure combines two components: the first is the extent to which a party emphasizes niche topics (the environment, Euroscepticism, radical right sentiment, agrarianism and regionalism) in its party manifestos (measured as the percentage of all quasi-sentences in the manifesto dedicated to these topics). These topics are selected because they meet three criteria. Firstly, they were located at the periphery of the party system at some point in many European countries. Secondly, they could and in some cases have been used to destabilize traditional left-right competition between political parties. Thirdly, all five topics are non-economic in nature and thus concern competition on another dimension than the main economic right-left dimension (Bischof 2017a, 225). Scholars working on issue-ownership have described the environment as a valence issue, arguing that parties tend to take similar positions on the issue (i.e. no party wants to damage the environment) (Budge, 2001; Van der Brug, 2004). However, the conceptualization of niche topics used here focuses issue emphasis rather than position, meaning that it is compatible with the idea of competition on issue ownership. In addition, the issues of Euroscepticism and the environment may have become less 'niche' over the 1998 – 2010 period.

8 Rerunning the models with only those who scored 4 (rather strong) or 5 (strong) on this variable did not change the estimates substantially. Appendix 2.1 contains the exact questions.

To address this, the second part of the measure indicates the degree to which the party's emphasis on these issues is unique to the party. In other words this component measures whether the party emphasizes issues that its competitors do not focus on. As an example, this means that a party's focus on Euroscepticism counts relatively less towards its nicheness when other parties start to emphasize the issues more. Based on this definition, the nicheness of a party can thus vary between elections. The combination of these two factors provides an estimate of the nicheness of a political party on a scale with higher values indicating a higher nicheness score (for technical details: see Bischof, 2017a). The score derived from a given manifesto is then assigned to all statements made during the year before the election for which the manifesto was written (as this is the period during which is was written) until a year before the previous election**.** The final continuous measure thus indicates the degree of nicheness of a party at an election. Averaged across elections within parties during the observation period, the measure indicates that Die Grüne and Die Linke focus most on niche topics (relative to other parties), with CDU/CSU, FDP and SPD having (somewhat) more mainstream profiles. Although the nicheness of these parties varies from election to election and is measured as a matter of degree, the Greens and Die Linke would also be the two German parties that Adams et al. (2006) would rate as niche parties – giving face validity to the new measure. The *government status* of a party is a binary variable that indicates whether the political party was in government when the statement indicating the party's position was made.

Studies on the public opinion-party position linkage also include other factors. As an example political parties which are organized in a way that gives more power to their members, are more responsive to their supporters, whereas more leadership-driven parties tend to respond more to the median voter (Schumacher et al., 2013, Lehrer, 2012). These alternative explanations are important and since most vary at the party level, the analyses include dummies for political parties. The control variable of the media *salience* of a policy issue was measured as the average number of articles per day about issue in the observation period in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and the Süddeutsche Zeitung (see Appendix 2.5). Finally, *party size* is the percentage of seats a party had in the Bundestag when the statement about the issue was made. An overview of the variables is provided in Table 2.1.

Modelling strategy

The final unit of analysis is a political party on an issue. Appendix 2.2 shows the structure of the stacked dataset for two hypothetical policy issues. The observations are nested in political parties and policy issues. That is why all models are run with random intercepts for issues and fixed effects for parties. Since the observations may also be clustered in government coalitions, the models contain fixed effects indicating whether the party

Table 2.1: Overview of variables.

Variable	Values	Range	Mean (std. dev)	Description
Party position	0,1	0-1	.52 (.50)	Dep var: party position on an issue
Public support	0 - 1	.06-.97	.52 (.22)	Proportion of public in favour of policy change
Party support	0 – 1	0-.98	.52 (.24)	Proportion of party supporters in favour of policy change
Nicheness	0 - 2	.12 - .88	.31 (.46)	Degree of nicheness of a political party
Government party		0-1	.47 (.50)	Whether party is in government (1) or not (0)
Party	1,2,3,4,5	1-5		Identifies each political party
Party size	0 – 100	4-41.5	22.02 (13.73)	Percentage of seats in Bundestag
Media salience	0 - ∞	.002-2.46	.200 (.35)	Average number of articles on the issue per day
Coalition	1,2,3,4,5	1-5		Whether a party is a member of a specific coalition

was a member of any of the coalitions that occurred during the observation period. Effectively, this should control for any effects that were specific to a coalition[9]. It should be noted that the preferences of the public and those of the supporters of a specific party on an issue are highly correlated (.82) and cannot be included in the same model[10]. Instead, separate models are run for the general public and party supporters. Results are shown for models predicting the former, whereas those for the latter are included in Appendix 2.3. Where the results differ, this is noted in the text. The correlation between the preferences of the public and those of party supporters also has substantive implications: it may mean that public preferences regarding these specific policy issues are not related (strongly) to the ideological preferences of voters (see also: Lesschaeve, 2017) and that parties often do not have to choose between their supporters and the general public.

2.6 ANALYSIS

Table 2.2 shows the results of a series of models that predict whether a political party supports a policy proposal. Model 1 directly assesses the relationship between public preferences and party positions outlined in Hypothesis 1, which is in the expected direc-

9 The observations may also be clustered in party-coalition combinations. Running the models with fixed-effects for these combinations does not change the results.

10 The preferences of the supporters of SPD, FDP and CDU/CSU correlate strongest with general public opinion (>.9), but correlations are also >.7 for Die Grüne and Die Linke.

Table 2.2: Multilevel logistic regression models predicting whether a party was in favour of a policy issue.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Public support	1.82***	1.85***	-2.14	3.96***	2.22
	(0.55)	(0.55)	(1.69)	(0.89)	(2.38)
Nicheness		2.80*	-0.88	3.03*	1.59
		(1.34)	(2.00)	(1.39)	(2.29)
Public support * Nicheness			7.09*		2.65
			(2.90)		(3.40)
Government party		0.55	0.55	2.63***	2.38**
		(0.49)	(0.49)	(0.77)	(0.82)
Public support* Government party				-4.28***	-3.79**
				(1.19)	(1.33)
Controls					
Party (Ref: SPD)					
CDU/CSU	-0.04	-1.02	-0.96	-1.15+	-1.12+
	(0.43)	(0.64)	(0.65)	(0.66)	(0.66)
FDP	-0.49	-0.47	-0.44	-0.20	-0.21
	(0.98)	(0.99)	(1.00)	(1.07)	(1.06)
Grüne	0.29	-0.44	-0.44	-0.20	-0.22
	(1.05)	(1.09)	(1.10)	(1.19)	(1.18)
Linke	0.19	-0.48	-0.49	-0.22	-0.25
	(1.02)	(1.06)	(1.07)	(1.15)	(1.14)
Party size	0.00	0.02	0.01	0.03	0.03
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Media salience	0.10	0.11	0.12	0.08	0.09
	(0.33)	(0.32)	(0.33)	(0.34)	(0.34)
Constant	-1.25	-2.79+	-0.71	-4.44*	-3.46
	(1.28)	(1.52)	(1.75)	(1.74)	(2.12)
Coalition fixed-effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Policy-Level Random intercept	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Number of cases	334	334	334	334	334
AIC	460	457	455	446	448
BIC	510	510	516	507	513

+ p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

tion and significant: the higher public support for an issue, the higher the chance that a political party supports it.

The interaction effects between public preferences and nicheness in Models 3 and 5 show that contrary to Hypothesis 2A (mainstream parties' positions are more likely to be positively related to the preferences of the general public than those of a niche party), the effect of public opinion on the position of a party is stronger for parties emphasizing niche issues than for parties focusing on mainstream topics. The effect disappears once

the interaction between public preferences and government parties is included in Model 5, however. Appendix 2.3 shows similar results for the relationship between the preferences of party *supporters* and party positions. This provides some evidence for Hypothesis 2B that the positions of parties with niche issue profiles are more strongly related to the preferences of their supporters than those of parties with mainstream issue profiles. Again, the effect disappears once the interaction with government status is included. Taken together, these results provide little evidence for the expectation that niche parties respond to their supporters and mainstream parties to the general public. If anything, the evidence suggests that the positions of parties with more niche issue profiles are more likely to be related to the preferences of the general public *and* those of supporters, which may be due to fact that niche parties are also more often opposition parties.

Models 3 through 5 in Table 2.2 show that the difference between government and opposition parties is much more pronounced, however. The interaction between government status and public support for an issue is negative and significant in both Models 3 and 5, indicating that the policy positions of parties in government are generally *less* related to public opinion than those of opposition parties, in line with Hypothesis 3A. Based on Model 5, an increase in public support for a policy proposal from 40% to 70% raises the probability of an opposition party supporting the policy from 36% to 56%. The same increase in public support does not change the probability that a government party is in favour of a policy issue.

To demonstrate this Figure 2.1 plots the probability of a party supporting a policy issue at different levels of public support. In a scenario where party positions are tightly linked to public opinion, the likelihood of being in favour of a policy increases as public support rises, and increases most sharply around the 50% mark, from which point a majority of the public is in favour of the policy change. The figure shows that, at least when it comes to the statements in the media, German opposition parties (red, dashed line) are close to this 'ideal' linkage. However, once they are in government (black, solid line), the relationship between public support and party positions flattens. This suggests that whilst political parties may aim to make statements about policy issues that are popular, they weigh other interests much more strongly once the constraints of being in government are in place. To the extent that these government parties are also much more likely to get their way and decide whether a policy change is enacted, this may negatively affect the link between public opinion and policy. The negative interaction in Appendix 2.3 (results table) that is plotted in Appendix 2.4 (figure) shows a similar result regarding Hypothesis 3B that the positions of government parties are also less related to the preferences of their supporters than those of opposition parties. The main difference is that whereas the positions of government parties are unrelated to public preferences, they remain related to those of their supporters (but more weakly so than the positions of opposition parties). This may indicate that when political parties are constrained by

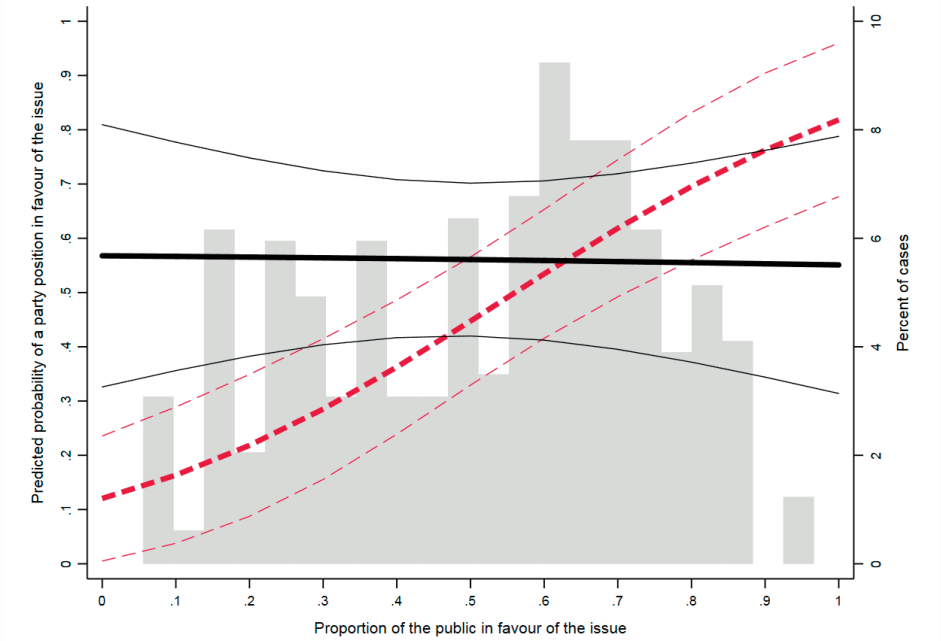

Figure 2.1: Predicted probability of a position in favour of a policy issue for government parties and opposition parties (left axis) and the distribution of cases (right axis).
Figure note: The black solid line indicates the predictions for government parties and the red dashed line for opposition parties (left axis) with 95% confidence intervals, based on Model 5 in Table 2.2. The shaded grey area indicates the distribution of the cases (as a percentage of the total N) across public support (right axis).

being in government, they choose to align with their supporters more than with the general public. The finding ties in with previous studies of statements by coalition parties in several countries, who argue that these parties also use parliamentary debates to flag responsiveness to their supporters (Martin and Vanberg, 2008).

Assessing the results and robustness

To better understand whether (government) parties indeed follow their supporters when facing constraints (and following the logic of Branham et al. (2017)), we can consider only those 38 cases, or about ten percent of the total, where the majority of the public and party supporters support different sides of the issue[11]. In these cases parties side with their supporters 84% of the time. An example is the position of the CDU/CSU regarding increasing the rights of registered same-sex couples. The supporters of the party were against this policy, whilst the general public supported it. The party took a

11 Appendix 2.7 indicates which parties faced this situation on which policy issues.

position against extending the rights of registered same-sex couples[12]. Although based on a limited number of cases, this supports the inference that when faced with the choice between the preferences of the general public and those of their supporters, political parties choose the position of their supporters most of the time.

In addition, a number of alternative specifications and robustness checks were run to validate the results. Appendix 2.5 demonstrates that the results for niche and mainstream parties remain when issue ownership is taken into account (Klüver and Spoon, 2016, Giger and Lefkofridi, 2014). It also explores the effect of media salience on the relationship between public preferences and party positions. In Appendix 2.6, Table A2.6.1 shows that results stay the same when taking congruence (whether the majority of the public and the position of a political party are on the same side of an issue) as an alternative dependent variable. Table A2.6.2 then shows that the results are robust to the exclusion of each political party[13].

2.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter used a novel application of MRP to study the representation of the public through political parties on specific policy proposals in Germany to explore whether niche and opposition parties incorporate public preferences differently than mainstream and government parties, respectively. The chapter finds little evidence for the expectation that the positions of parties with more niche issue profiles are more related to their supporters' positions and parties with mainstream issue profiles more strongly linked to the general public's. Given that these results differ from those found in other studies (e.g. Adams et al. 2006) it should be noted that the conclusions in this chapter are based on a comparison across a limited set of political parties[14]. Although this chapter used a more dynamic conceptualization of nicheness within parties (Bischof, 2017a), more comparative work on specific policy issues is needed to draw definitive conclusions.

That being said, this chapter was the first to show that parties in opposition are very effective in taking policy positions that are popular with the public. Yet once they are in government, the relationship with general public opinion disappears, whereas the link with supporters' preferences weakens. The idea that political parties tend to take positions in line with what their supporters want when put under pressure is further underlined by the finding that when the public and a party's supporters disagree on an

12 In 2017 (after the observation period) the party did allow a vote on the introduction of opening marriages to same-sex couples, but only after a majority of its voters also supported the issue.

13 The results also do not change substantively when controls for political parties are not included in the models

14 The models (not shown) were rerun using the dichotomous definition used by Adams et al. (2006), according to which die Linke and die Grüne were classified as niche parties. This did not change the results substantively.

issue, parties take the side of their supporters 84% of the time. Whilst mainly considering the preferences of one's constituency is not problematic for representation, it might become more problematic if at this stage, the link between general public opinion and final policy outcomes is severed since government parties probably have a much stronger impact on policy outcomes.

Of course, the weakened linkage for government parties may also be a reflection of the need for parties in coalition governments to take the preferences of their coalition partners into account. Moreover, opposition parties may be better placed to avoid making statements in the media when they have an unpopular position on a policy issue than government parties, which could somewhat impact the results (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010; see also Appendix 2.5). Future studies could compare the German case to a country with single-party coalitions or adopt other measures of party positions to rule out a media effect.

Although this chapter included controls for political parties and the results were not reliant on any one specific political party (see Table A2.6.2 in Appendix 2.6) the inferences in the chapter are based on a limited number of parties. Whilst the chosen approach enabled studying a large number of policy issues it limits the extent to which inferences can be drawn across political parties. Future comparative work taking a similar approach could study other party characteristics such as whether ideologically extreme parties act differently than more moderate parties.

Still, the chapter demonstrates the added value of studying the positions of political parties on specific issues. The finding that on these issues, the general public and the supporters of a political party often want the same thing is important. It means that on most specific policy issues the supporters of a party agree with the general public and that political parties do not face a choice between the two and that studies using ideological dimensions miss part of the story (see also: Lesschaeve, 2017). This chapter has pinpointed at least one potential point in the chain from the public to policy where the link between public preferences and policy outcomes may be weakened, and shown that studying representation through political parties on specific policy issues is possible and can help generate new insights in the study of political representation.