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

Romeijn, J.

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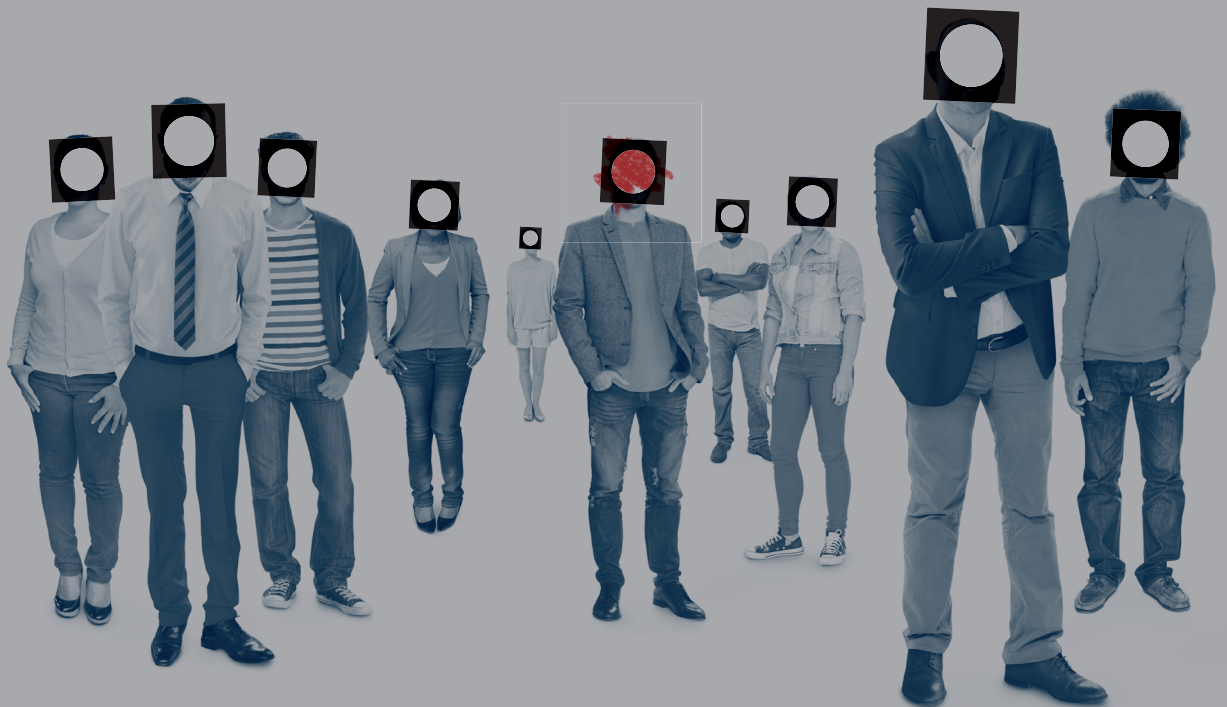


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6

Conclusion



6.1 INTRODUCTION AND CONCLUSIONS PER CHAPTER

This dissertation studied the representative role of political parties and their interactions with interest groups and other policy advocates on specific policy issues. Studying these policy issues, like abortion policy, constructing nuclear power plants, or retirement plans, was an important goal in itself for the simple reason that these policies directly influence the lives of citizens. Specifically, given the expectation that in democratic systems political parties help transmit public preferences into policy, studying their positions on these issues is important (Dahl, 1956; Mair, 2010). This chapter first outlines and recapitulates the most important findings per chapter, to then discuss the general conclusion of the dissertation.

Chapter 2 studied the positions of 5 German political parties on 102 specific policy proposals. In addition to the main finding— that the correlation between public preferences and party policy positions was only found for opposition parties – the results also demonstrated that differences between mainstream and niche parties did not play out in the ways often suggested in existing studies (Adams, Clark, Ezrow, & Glasgow, 2004). The chapter found little to no evidence for the expectation that niche parties' positions were more strongly related to those of their supporters than to those of the general public, nor for the opposite expectation for mainstream parties. The 'niceness' of a party was measured as a concept that varies both within parties (over time) and across parties, but the generalizability of this inference is limited as it was based on only 5 political parties (not including a radical right-wing party). The focus on specific issues also highlighted a weakness in existing studies of programmatic differences between mainstream and niche political parties. Many of these studies have in the past relied on issue-ownership theory to study the emphasis these different types of parties place on different policy areas (Klüver & Spoon, 2016), but as Appendix 2.5 shows, this theory told us little about the actual positions political parties took on specific policies within these broader policy areas. Importantly, even if a political party (for example a Green party) generally owns a policy area (environment), another party may be closely associated with a specific policy within the area (a plan to construct a nuclear power plant from another party).

Finally, the chapter also introduced the use of Multilevel Regression with Poststratification (MRP) (Park et al., 2006) to estimate the preferences of the supporters of (especially smaller) political parties. Existing studies that previously included estimates of the political preferences of the supporters of specific parties usually simply disaggregated public opinion surveys, meaning that estimates of the political preferences of these supporters would rely on as few as twenty respondents (e.g. Dalton, 2017). Aggregating multiple surveys to determine the demographic composition of the supporters of a political party in a year, and then applying MRP to estimate the preferences of these supporters helped to address this: the model used information about voters

that had comparable characteristics to those supporting the party to better estimate the policy preferences of the sub-group. The approach had the additional advantage that the smaller the number of respondents in the data that supported the party, the more the model relied on information from other comparable respondents (for a discussion, see: Lax & Phillips, 2009b).

Chapter 3 focused on four regulatory policy issues in Sweden: the phasing-out of nuclear energy, the six-hour work week, allowing the sale of alcoholic beverages in supermarkets and raising taxes on alcohol. It studied how public opinion and media advocacy related to both the attention that Swedish politicians paid to these issues, as well as actual policy-making on them. The relatively narrow focus on a limited set of policy issues meant a clear trade-off in terms of the generalizability of the findings, but also had important advantages. The first is that it allowed for observing these policies over much longer time periods than was common in previous studies. The approach also made it possible to combine a quantitative analysis with more qualitative assessments of policy-making on these issues.

The chapter showed that – at least on these four issues – increases in public support for an issue (and when the policy was not the status quo) were related to the attention of Swedish politicians in the year after. This finding suggested that Swedish politicians were rhetorically responsive (i.e. talked about issues the public finds important) to public opinion on the issues studied. At the same time, media advocacy did not seem to have the same effect on the attention of politicians to the issues. In addition, the discussion of each of the policy issues highlighted several aspects that tended to be overlooked in the literature. Firstly, it showed that both public opinion and media advocacy related to policy-making (and political attention) in a way that was far from deterministic: on specific policy issues, many other factors including party politics came into play. Secondly, even at the level of specific policy issues, lobbying and lobbying success could and often did occur on even more subtle or detailed elements of a policy, which current studies (including those in this dissertation) of specific policy issues generally overlook. The issue of phasing-out nuclear energy provides an example of this. Even with a long-term phase out policy in place, a parliamentary majority in favour of it and several actions like closing the nuclear reactors at Barsebäck, the Swedish government was not able to reduce the amount of energy produced in nuclear power plants. In part this might be attributed to the successful lobby by several energy companies to renovate their existing nuclear power plants in a way that allowed them to increase their production capacity – effectively offsetting the effects of closing the nuclear reactors at Barsebäck.

Chapter 4 studies whether working with political parties increased the preference attainment of policy advocates on 50 policy issues in 5 countries (Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom). The analyses were based on responses to the interest group survey of the GovLis project that was sent to 1400 actors active on

the issue, and interviews with senior civil servants (one per issue) in all five countries to obtain the policy positions of political parties on our issues. In addition to investigating the direct relationship between preference attainment and working with political parties on a policy issue, the chapter also formulated and tested expectations about the type of political party. Specifically, it studied whether working with more powerful parties (larger parties or those in government), or parties that agreed with the advocate increased the likelihood that advocates got the policy output they preferred.

The results showed that working with a political party on an issue was not significantly correlated with lobbying success in itself. Moreover, when the measure was replaced with a question about contacting members of parliament or the national cabinet, no relationship was found. These findings cast some doubt about assumptions in the existing literature that study the links and contacts between policy advocates and political parties that these contacts are very important for policy-making (e.g. Otjes & Rasmussen, 2017; Thomas, 2001). In addition, working with parties that are powerful *or* have the same position as an advocate on a policy issue was not associated with higher levels of preference attainment in the data. However, when policy advocates worked with political parties that were both powerful *and* shared their positions on the issue, they were more likely to attain their preferences. The chapter did have the limitation that it included only a rather low number of business advocates and only a single question to probe collaboration between groups and parties. This meant that there was and is ample scope for a future research agenda that looks into the policy consequences of ties and contacts between interest groups in political parties.

Chapter 5 focused on the lobbying success of interest groups and other policy advocates during the 2017 coalition formation in the Netherlands. The analyses in the chapter relied on a hand coding of all letters that interest groups and other policy advocates sent to the (in)formateur chairing the coalition agreement negotiations. While the letters themselves may not have been read, the assumption was that they allowed for directly observing the policy preferences that advocates lobbied for. This assumption was confirmed in interviews with two major interest groups. By comparing the requests to the final coalition agreement, it became possible to analyze which requests were granted in the coalition agreement. Also coding whether the policy request already occurred as an election promise in the manifesto of the negotiating political parties, enabled an analysis of the importance of political parties for the preference attainment of policy advocates after the election.

In addition to the finding that parties remained very important for policy decisions, but that historic ties between groups and political parties *can* affect policy, the chapter made several contributions to our knowledge about lobbying. The first was simply that it helped to empirically establish that lobbying after elections also occurs in Europe (see also: Allern & Saglie, 2008, but cf. Binderkrantz, 2015). In addition, the findings were

important for observers of Dutch politics as they contradicted the public image that successful lobbying dominated the coalition negotiations. Specifically, the highly salient plan to abolish the dividend-tax was one of only 29 policy requests (out of over 1200) to change the status quo, that made it into the coalition agreement *and* was not part of a negotiating party's election manifesto before the election. This suggested that on the whole, lobbyists did not manage to introduce many *new* issues into the coalition agreement that were not previously part of the electoral platforms of the new government parties. To the extent that these platforms made explicit the electoral mandate of political parties (Mansbridge, 2003) this meant that lobbying did not induce large deviations to this mandate. At the same time, the finding that the VVD appears to have treated requests from business advocates differently to those from other advocates did suggest that policy advocates were able to play a role in which election promises a party was willing on compromise on during the negotiations.

6.2 BROADER CONCLUSIONS

In addition to the results and conclusions presented above, the findings from this dissertation also collectively provide broader theoretical reasons to study the policy positions and activities of political parties and interest groups on specific policy issues (Hacker & Pierson, 2014).

Firstly, we knew from previous studies that public preferences on specific policy issues do not correlate strongly with public preferences on ideological scales like the left-right dimension (Lesschaeve, 2017). As Lax et al. (2019) argued, this means that even when there is ideological congruence between the preferences of citizens and policy (or the positions of political parties) on dimensions like left-right scales, this does not necessarily mean that citizens actually get the policies they prefer. Chapter 2 showed that when studying the congruence between political parties and the public on specific issues, the image was indeed less positive than that often found in studies of ideological congruence between public preferences and party positions (cf. Golder & Ferland, 2017; Golder & Stramski, 2010). While German political parties' positions on policy issues correlated with the preferences of the general public, the chapter showed that this correlation was driven by opposition parties alone: political parties in government took policy positions that no longer correlated with the preferences of the general public. Although more negative than conclusions from studies of left-right congruence, these findings were more in line with studies on specific issues that also argued that correlations between public opinion and policy outputs (instead of party positions) are less strong than it may seem on the surface (Gilens, 2012; Lax & Phillips, 2012; Schakel, 2019). Combined with findings from studies on a number of policy *areas* (like migration or environmental

policy) (Dalton, 2017), the findings suggested that political parties may be less able to fulfill their representational role than previously thought, but in line with more skeptical theoretical accounts of political parties' representative capacity (Mair, 2010).

However, it should be noted that findings from chapter 2 did show that government parties' positions correlate with the preferences of their supporters. This is important, as it suggests that those voters that (strongly) support a German party that then enters government *do* see their preferences represented. Especially in a proportional multi-party system, where one may expect parties to firstly represent their voters this is good news for representation. Moreover, one may argue that the fact that public preferences on left-right scales are only weakly correlated to positions on specific issues (Leschaeve, 2017), may mean that for parties to represent popular public opinion on issues is a very high bar to clear. That may be so, but chapter 2 does show that opposition parties are able to clear it. This suggests that rather than the difficulty of aggregating relatively unstructured public preferences (for example acting responsibly) may impede congruence between majority voter preferences and the policy positions of German government parties.

Studying political parties using a 'policy centered' approach (Hacker & Pierson, 2014) also enabled the second major contribution of this dissertation: analyzing the policy implications of the ties and contacts between interest groups and political parties. The importance of the interactions between these two sets of possible aggregators of public preferences had often been taken for granted or assumed in the literature, but not studied empirically (e.g. Rasmussen & Lindeboom, 2013; Thomas, 2001). This dissertation made at least two contributions to our knowledge about these consequences for policy. Firstly, the chapters contained multiple indications that political parties remained very important for policy change. The Dutch coalition negotiations studied in chapter 5 were a setting where we might have expected political parties to be relatively strong compared to other stages of policy-making. Still, the fact that interest groups and other policy advocates seldom managed to get policy requests into the coalition agreement that were not previously held positions of political parties indicates that the latter did dominate at least this stage of the policy-making process. The control variable measuring the share of political parties on the same side as an advocate in chapter 4, which encompassed policy issues at different stages of the policy cycle, also provided support for this conjecture. When the political parties had the same position as an advocate and controlling for a range of other factors, the predicted probability that an advocate attained their preferences increased by 19 percent points. Although this was not the main focus of chapter 3, some of the cases of regulatory policy-making in Sweden also highlighted this continued importance of political parties for policy-making. As a clear example, the Center-Party's position on nuclear energy was pivotal in shaping nuclear energy policy in Sweden. All in the chapters of this dissertation therefore suggested

that while interest groups may help to transmit public preferences to political parties and policy-makers (see also: Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2019; Rasmussen & Reher, 2019), the continued strength of political parties indicated that organized interests are not likely to fully offset representational gaps left by political parties due to their comparatively limited influence on policy.

A second finding regarding the policy implications of ties between groups and parties was that even if parties still appear as more dominant forces in policy-making, the contacts or ties between interest groups and political parties *can* matter for policy-making. However, these effects were less straightforward or strong than expected. Firstly, chapter 4 showed that policy advocates that worked with political parties that were both powerful *and* on their side were more likely to attain their preferences on an issue than other advocates. While these results were suggestive of the potential policy implications of contacts between groups and parties, there was no significant difference in preference attainment between advocates that did and did not work with a political party on an issue, nor between advocates that worked with members of parliament or the national cabinet and those that did not. The finding in chapter 5 that the VVD party was less likely to compromise on election promises that were supported by business actors than other types of advocates (even when controlling for the policy area) suggested that the VVD did differentiate between requests from advocates that it had traditional ties with and those it did not. However, there was no such effect for the CDA party, which had – if anything- stronger traditional ties with employers' organizations. Where the results from chapter 4 suggested that the policy implications of working with political parties on a policy issue are not directly related to preference attainment, the results from chapter 5 contained similar results for the policy implications of more traditional linkages between business groups and center-right parties. The discussion in the result section of the fifth chapter suggested that one mediating factor may be the electoral strategy of the political party itself.

Taken together, the evidence presented in this dissertation does not paint a purely positive vision of representation in what are affluent Northwestern European countries with strong democratic credentials. Political parties remain very powerful actors when it comes to decision-making on specific policy issues, which is not in itself problematic. However, the concerns voiced by Mair (2008, 2010) that parties, especially when in government, are not able to fully live up to their representative role are supported by the data presented in chapter 2. What is more, the results suggested that even though interest groups and other policy advocates were sometimes able to represent and translate public preferences to political elites and parties, they were unlikely to act as credible replacements of political parties, at least as long as the latter remain influential in policy-making (cf. Mair, 2010, p. 6).

Of course, not all the findings amounted to an equally negative image. For one, there were several indications that the links between the public and party politicians were not fully severed. Firstly, chapter 2 showed that while parties in government took policy positions that were unrelated to general public opinion, their policy positions *did* correlate with the preferences of voters who supported the party. Admittedly these were smaller parts of the public, but German voters supporting a government party were likely to see the party they voted for taking the policy positions they preferred. Secondly, the fact that parties in opposition generally took positions that correlated strongly with the preferences of the general public suggested that politicians were likely to be aware of public opinion, even if they did not or could not act on it once they entered government. Similarly, the evidence from chapter 3 also indicated that even though – on the four issues studied in the chapter – public opinion did not necessarily influence policy directly, it did affect the attention that Swedish politicians paid to an issue: the larger the share of the public that wanted to see a change to the status quo, the larger the share of the Swedish parliament's attention in the following year – again suggesting that politicians were aware of public policy preferences. Using a similar research design to that used in chapter 2, Toshkov, Mäder, and Rasmussen (2019) also found that public opinion did have a small effect on the likelihood and speed of policy change, suggesting some connection between public preferences and policy decisions. Finally, to the extent that the reduced correlation between public preferences and the positions of government parties in chapter 2 was due to a choice for responsible over responsive policy making, something this dissertation did not directly measure, this is not necessarily negative. While Mair (2010) was very skeptical of what he saw as the increasing tendency of political parties to prioritize responsible policy-making over representative policy-making, responsible policy-making is in itself important: it often implies actions that can be considered positive or even democratic like safeguarding the environment or pension plans for future generations, creating economic stability or protecting human rights as defined in international treaties.

In addition, some observers of politics may also welcome that the findings in chapters 4 and 5 did not provide an image of interest groups dominating democratically elected political parties. Even if studies have shown that interest groups may often have measures in place to make sure they accurately represent their members (Albareda, 2018), and that their preferences are more likely to align with those of the public than often thought (Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2019), they remain unelected organizations, and there remains considerable concern about the possible bias that groups may introduce to policy-making. Especially in chapter 5, it seems that policy advocates, under certain conditions, predominantly affect the choices made by negotiating politicians regarding which election pledges to fulfill. This can even be seen as (very) positive, as too strong

advocacy influence that would make a coalition agreement deviate from election promises is hardly good news for democracy.

Finally, each of the dissertation's chapters also contributed to the literature beyond the general points outlined in the introduction and the discussion above. The following section therefore highlights important additional findings from each chapter.

6.3 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While the above clearly demonstrated the advantages of studying political parties and their activities on specific policy issues, there are of course also limitations to the approach in general and this dissertation in particular. This section therefore outlines a number of these limitations. Each of the chapters also included some discussion of the limitations of the respective chapter, which is why this part focuses predominantly on limitations that cut across multiple chapters. Of course, some of these could be addressed in future research, which is why this part of the chapter also provides several suggestions for future studies.

A first limitation of this dissertation is that it focused on a relatively small number of countries that, with the partial exception of the inclusion of the United Kingdom in chapter 4, shared many institutional and cultural features. This means that the findings from the chapters, even those including single countries, were likely to generalize to exactly this set of wealthy, (neo) corporatist countries with proportional electoral systems and traditions of (multiparty) cabinet governments. It also means that while some of the findings may apply to democracies outside of North-Western Europe, such generalizations would be more speculative.

The conclusions above did not paint a very positive image of the ability of political parties to represent public opinion, nor of the ability of interest groups to help address this. More research is necessary before firm conclusions can be drawn, however. Future studies could, for example, expand the number of political parties and countries studied in a similar research design as the one used in chapter 2. This would also allow for investigating the possible causes of the differences in congruence between opposition and government parties. For example, are the policy positions of certain types of government coalitions (for example those with relatively high levels of ideological conflict) less congruent with public opinion than others (for example minority governments that can cooperate with different parties depending on the issue)? Or are the lower levels of congruence related not to coalition politics, but to the restrictions placed on governing parties by international treaties, the obligation to pay for policy plans and other features of responsible government?

Another important avenue of future research that is needed before we can draw firmer conclusions about the representative roles of political parties and interest groups, is to examine the representative consequences of the ties and interactions between them. Chapters 4 and 5 showed that these ties mattered for the lobbying success of policy advocates under certain conditions, but it is less clear how they affected the representative capacity of either interest groups or political parties. The consequences of these ties and contacts may also be different for each of these two sets of interest aggregators. As an example, lobbying political parties may help interest groups to better represent their members' preferences and get them translated into policy. At the same time, too much interest group influence might move the policy positions of political parties away from their voters' or members' preferences. These are important questions for future studies. One concrete way future studies could study this would be by studying how parties' election manifestos are written. There is evidence from qualitative studies that interest groups are often involved in the writing of these manifestos in Austria, Ireland and Norway (Allern & Saglie, 2008; Däubler, 2012; Dolezal et al., 2012). Dutch political parties are also approached by organized interests when writing their manifestos, evidenced both by the interviews done for chapter 5 and the Dutch Social Democratic party (PvdA) which discloses that it consults with several dozen interest groups and experts when drafting its election manifestos. Finally, there is evidence that in corporate countries with high levels of trade union membership, social democratic parties are more likely to pay attention to issues pertaining to the welfare state in their election manifestos (Otjes & Green-Pedersen, 2019). While this is not necessarily problematic, future studies could investigate whether these ties help political parties make policy plans that also represent their members' or voters' wishes, or work in the opposite direction.

There are also limitations that are inherent to the policy-centered approach used in this dissertation. An important limitation is that while each of the chapters in this dissertation had a clear definition of what constituted a specific policy issue for inclusion in the analysis (or a request in the case of chapter 5), a general definition of what constitutes a specific policy issue is less readily available (Burstein, 2014, p. 20). This especially has implications for studies of the preference attainment of interest groups. While a specific organization may be rated as having attained its preference to 'raise the retirement age to 67 years', the organization may have actually lobbied for much more than just this: perhaps the organization also wanted an exception for workers doing manual labor, or wanted the pace at which the retirement age was raised to be more incremental. Chapter 5, which studies lobbying success based on requests made by policy advocates rather than predefined issues, therefore comes closer to measuring whether advocates were successful in achieving their self-defined goals (see also: (Baumgartner et al., 2009). Variation in the definition of an 'issue' also permeates to existing studies have chosen different definitions of issues, ranging from those available in opinion polls (Gilens &

Page, 2014; Rasmussen, Mäder, et al., 2018) to those on legislative agendas (Beyers, Dür, Marshall, & Wonka, 2014; Burstein, 2014). Yet others, especially those studying policy agendas, use the term 'policy issue' to mean what this dissertation has called an issue area or dimension like environmental policy or immigration policy (e.g. Bevan & Jennings, 2017; Klüver, 2016; Volkens et al., 2019). As also argued by Burstein (2014), future research could more critically reflect on the effects of defining a policy issue for studying lobbying success and political representation, because even a focus on 'specific' legislative proposals or policy issues may still hide a lot of lobbying influence.

Thirdly, while even the specific issues that were studied here can be argued to not be specific enough, it is important to stress that broader ideological conflicts and congruence *do* also matter. Political actors care about the broad direction of policy or policy areas and act accordingly. An example from this dissertation comes from chapter 5, appendix 5.3, which showed that policy requests that were about economic issues *and* supported by the VVD were more likely to end up in the coalition agreement than requests in other policy areas. These results suggest that beyond the specific issues, the VVD party also aimed to generally grant lobbying requests (or at least was less likely to compromise) on economic issues that it also owned (Petrocik, 1996). Future studies could help improve our understanding of politics by theoretically linking the different *levels* at which policy can be both measured and conceptualized. An example is the increasing evidence in the literature on congruence that an exclusive focus on ideological scales may conceal considerable gaps in representation (Broockman, 2016; Lesschaeve, 2017), a finding also highlighted in chapter 2 of this dissertation.

On the other hand, studies of interest groups and advocacy generally focus on specific policy issues. Given that lobbying tends to work at this level and since most advocacy organizations do not aim to push policy in a more general left-right direction, this is a sensible choice. Many advocacy organizations do, however, have aims that are broader than the specific issue that is studied. Examples are environmental organizations that aim to raise environmental standards across the board, or business organizations that seek to generally create favorable economic conditions for their members or economic sector. Like chapter 2 of this dissertation moved the study of political parties to the level of specific policy issues, future studies that estimate interest group ideal points on such 'intermediate' issues like Europeanization or immigration (see McKay (2008) and Vannoni (2017) for efforts in this direction) *and* connect these to more specific policy issues, could further our understanding of interest group influence. They may also provide another avenue for studying organizational ties and cooperation between political parties and interest group.

6.4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

All in all, this dissertation demonstrated that a policy-centered approach (Hacker & Pierson, 2014) could be applied effectively to studying the representative capacity and policy positions of political parties. It showed that taking such an approach challenges the relatively positive findings about the congruence between public opinion and party positions in previous studies. These findings are important, not in the least because we know that levels of ideological congruence between the public and parties are related to citizens' satisfaction with democracy (Reher, 2015). Overestimating the extent to which such congruence occurs on the policy issues that matter for the daily lives of citizens may therefore lead to overlooking possible causes of citizens' dissatisfaction with democracy. Similarly, the policy centered approach made it easier to analyze the positions of government parties: again, the finding that these tend to take positions that were unrelated to public preferences in Germany, opens up important future questions about the implications this has for democratic representation and legitimacy.

Moreover, the approach made it possible to study the policy implications of the contacts and ties between interest groups and political parties. Placing the policy preferences of these two sets of interest aggregators on a common metric helped move the literature studying these ties forward. Understanding the policy implications of these ties is important. One area where such an understanding may help is in formulating lobbying regulation that helps improve or safeguard representation. An example from chapter 5 is the finding that although lobbying seems to have had some effects on the coalition agreement, these effects were relatively modest and generally did not make political parties deviate from their election pledges. In spite of the large amounts of media attention for one granted lobbying request that did not previously feature in an election manifesto (scrapping the dividend tax), the data clearly showed that this policy was the exception, not the rule. The fact that this specific request was picked up by the media and opposition parties and the government abandoned the plan, suggests that stricter regulation of lobbying contacts during the government formation would possibly not have changed the final outcome of the negotiations. Instead, existing laws and practices regarding the public availability of government information seem to have worked as a better safeguard than the publication of all letters sent to the government (which did of course facilitate chapter 5 of this dissertation). This example serves to illustrate the importance of studying the activities of political parties from a policy-centered perspective, as it can help us better understand their representative capacity *and* the impact of lobbying and interest groups on democratic representation through political parties.