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Denise Traber, Nathalie Giger & Silja Häusermann

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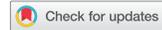
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How economic crises affect political representation: declining party–voter congruence in times of constrained government

Denise Traber^a, Nathalie Giger^b and Silja Häusermann^a

^aDepartment of Political Science, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland; ^bDepartment of Political Science and International Relations, University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

How do economic crises affect political representation in times of constrained government? Our paper shows that among voters salience of economic issues increases during economically harsh times. However, parties respond only to a limited degree to economic shocks, with the result that congruence between parties and voters decreases. We theorise the incentives and disincentives different political parties have in choosing a saliency strategy and we provide evidence on the extent to which congruence depends on the severity of economic shocks and the government/opposition status of the party. We draw on cross-national data to measure issue salience for parties (CMP) and voters (CSES). While our findings clearly indicate a decline of congruence in times of economic crisis, we also find that it remains best for government and office-seeking opposition parties. We substantiate this finding by unpacking the ways in which incumbent and office-seeking opposition parties address the economy in their manifestos.

KEYWORDS Political representation; issue salience; economic crisis; government parties; office-seeking vs. policy-seeking opposition parties

What happens to the quality of contemporary democratic representation in times of economic crisis? Do political parties mirror the programmatic demands of their voters? Are they even able to do so? In current times, these are key questions for the future of democracy in the Western world and their significance can hardly be overstated. While earlier literature has postulated a downright ‘hollowing out’ of democratic representation in times of globalisation and economic austerity (Mair 2013; Schäfer and Streeck 2013), recent research is starting to show that the answers to these questions cannot be black and white. The quality of representation in times of constrained government is likely to vary between contexts, parties and issues. We contribute to this research on the interconnectedness of economic crises and possible political

CONTACT Denise Traber  traber@ipz.uzh.ch

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crises by studying the issue salience of economic policies among voters and parties, as well as voter–party congruence.

For a long time, representation has been almost exclusively studied with regard to issue *positions* of parties and voters. However, for citizens' perception of being represented or neglected, *which issues* parties talk about may be just as important as the precise position they take. In other words, salience congruence matters for the quality of representation. Studies on the importance of issue competition among parties (Carmines and Stimson 1993; Green-Pedersen 2007; Petrocik 1996) and on the relevance of issue attention in political campaigns more generally (Budge and Farlie 1983) corroborate the importance of issue salience for the quality of representation. In addition, recent research in this area has shown that issue salience congruence indeed matters for electoral participation, satisfaction with democracy and even the voting decision (Reher 2014, 2015). For citizens, it clearly does make a difference whether parties talk about the topics that are salient to them. In contexts characterised by strong exogenous constraints on actual policy strategies, representation regarding salience may become even more important to parties than representation regarding policy positions, as it is supposedly easier to achieve.

However, we still know little about how exogenous shocks and party competition condition issue salience congruence. According to the issue competition literature (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996), parties are relatively flexible in terms of the issues they choose to emphasise. Spoon and Klüver (2015) argue that parties focus strategically on those issues on which voters are polarised. This presupposes a high level of strategic flexibility of parties. We agree with this focus on party strategies, but we argue that this flexibility may be seriously constrained. If parties lack leeway to react effectively to exogenous shocks – as in the case of serious macro-economic crisis occurring in a context of international interdependence and austerity – they may rather avoid certain issues. Hence, under these conditions, political parties may not mirror the issue priorities of their voters, and as a consequence even salience congruence may decline.

We study salience congruence in a context of exogenous shocks and constrained governments, and the Great Recession is a particularly fruitful and important instance for doing so. It is in and of itself consequential enough to justify a study on voter–party congruence. However, we use it to make a more general point on the impact of economic shocks on the representation of voters' economic policy concerns in times of severely constrained government. The Great Recession has brought about massive cross-national and cross-temporal variation in the intensity of economic shocks. These shocks hit national policy-makers in a time of severe constraint: mature welfare states, failing public finances and the macro-economic policies and interdependencies related to the Eurozone constrain a strong fiscally and macro-economically expansive reaction to the crisis by any party or government. However, such a context of austerity and macro-economic constraints is neither new nor idiosyncratic to the Great

Recession (Beramendi *et al.* 2015). Long before the Great Recession, scholars of welfare states, electoral behaviour and partisan politics started to theorise party politics under conditions of severely restrained leeway (e.g. Hellwig and Samuels 2007; Mair 2009; Pierson 2001). Hence the scope conditions of our argument are set by the type of shock we are interested in – (macro-)economic shocks¹ – and the period we study, i.e. the era of permanent fiscal austerity that globalised, interdependent Western democracies entered after the 1990s. Consequently, we focus on salience congruence regarding macro-economic policies. Contrary to an assumption that is still widespread in the economic voting literature, macro-economic policies are not per se a salient issue to most citizens. However, there is tentative evidence that during the economic crisis, the salience of economic policies for voters increased in almost all advanced capitalist democracies (Giger and Traber 2016; see also Singer 2011, 2013). In a similar vein, a range of studies has demonstrated instances of retrospective economic voting during the crisis years (e.g. Bartels 2014; Kriesi 2014; Marsh and Mikhaylov 2012; Nezi 2012).

We hypothesise that issue salience congruence is negatively related to economic performance. While voters are supposed to react directly to economic shocks in emphasising macro-economic concerns more, parties face a different set of incentives. Since the constraints outlined above leave little leeway for popular and quickly effective responses, all parties have an incentive to downplay macro-economic performance and policies. Moreover, parties are generally constrained in their ability quickly to shift their issue attention in reaction to external events. However, not all parties face an identical set of incentives and issue constraints. Hence, we test whether parties' reactions to the economic crisis depend on government/opposition status and their policy- and office-seeking goals.

We draw on data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) to measure parties' issue attention, and on the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) data and additional election studies to measure the importance of issues among voters in 16 OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries between 2001 and 2013.

We find that salience congruence does indeed decline in times of economic crisis, because salience increases much more strongly among voters than among parties. However, in countries strongly hit by the crisis, both government parties as well as office-seeking opposition parties do increase the salience of programmatic economic appeals. This is much less the case for policy-seeking opposition parties, whose salience performance is particularly poor in times of crisis. When looking more deeply into the way mainstream government and opposition parties address economic concerns, we find that government parties take markedly more pro-state positions, whereas office-seeking opposition parties emphasise more general statements about macro-economic performance.

The study of representation: congruence and salience

Democratic rule implies that citizens are represented by political elites. However, representation is a multifaceted concept that cannot be captured by a single form of representation (Pitkin 1967). In political science, there is a long tradition of research looking at either congruence – i.e. distances between preferences of elites and citizens – or at responsiveness – i.e. the reaction to shifts in public opinion by political elites (e.g. Brooks and Manza 2006; Soroka and Wlezién 2010; Wlezién 2004).

There is, however, also a more recent interest in conceptualising congruence in terms of shared *issue salience* or *issue priorities* between citizens and elites (Lindeboom 2012; Reher 2015; Spoon and Klüver 2014, 2015).² The underlying idea is rather simple: for the quality of representation, it is not only important how citizens' preferences are taken into account but it also makes a difference whether congruence is strong on issues the public actually cares about. This concept of representation builds on the idea that parties compete by emphasising certain issues rather than by shifting their position on a shared policy dimension (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). Assuming that selective issue emphasis is an important aspect of electoral competition, studying congruence of issue salience contributes to our assessment of the quality of representation (Giger and Lefkofridi 2014; see also Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008). Indeed, recent research has shown that the degree of issue salience congruence has consequences for citizens' participation and satisfaction with democracy (Reher 2014, 2015). Issue salience congruence is defined as *shared issue priorities of parties and their voters at a given point in time*. We are interested in congruence between voters and their preferred party. The underlying concept of representation is thus how segments of the representative body correspond to specific groups, rather than comparing the median voter to the median legislator (Golder and Stramski 2010).³ In multiparty systems, such a concept is more informative than congruence between parties (or governments) and the whole electorate.

While the existing literature on parties' issue attention and issue salience congruence has focused on party-level determinants of congruence, the role of the economic context has received much less attention (but see Ward *et al.* 2015; Williams *et al.* 2016). In line with previous research, we show in this article that the salience of macro-economic issues among voters increases during economically harsh times (Giger and Traber 2016; Singer 2013). However, moving beyond this finding, we theorise about parties' reaction to this development. Drawing on an important distinction between two types of opposition parties – office- and policy-seeking parties – we hypothesise that their reaction differs drastically. Let us now first elaborate on how the economic context, and economic shocks in particular, shapes issue salience congruence before moving to our expectation regarding the three types of parties.

How the economic context shapes issue salience congruence

Recent research on economic voting has found that – contrary to earlier assumptions in the literature (e.g. Alvarez *et al.* 2000; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000) – the economy is not an important issue for all voters at all times.⁴ Rather, economic matters become salient during economic downturns (Giger and Traber 2016; Singer 2013). As a consequence, economic voting is more often observed among people who are affected by an adverse economic situation (Fossati 2014; Singer 2011). In order to study salience congruence between voters and parties in times of economic crisis, we have to investigate how issue salience changes on *both* – the parties and the voters’ side – as a reaction to economic hardship. Following previous research, we expect a dramatic increase in voters’ salience of economic issues as macro-economic context conditions worsen.

Parties, however, are expected to react less flexibly to these changing context conditions, for mainly two reasons. First, a large literature argues that economic interdependence and fiscal austerity exogenously constrain national politics in such a way that economic policies tend to converge and differences between the policies of left- and right-wing governments shrink (Berger 2000; Hellwig and Samuels 2007). Moreover, mature welfare states constrain the fiscal leeway for expansive macro-economic policies. In the context of the recent economic crisis, which entailed an unprecedented economic integration of the Eurozone, this argument becomes even more relevant. Hence, it becomes increasingly electorally risky for any party to focus on economic policies in their party programmes: on the one hand, they would have to throw light on unpopular choices and policies; on the other hand, given severe policy constraints, it becomes harder and harder for parties to distinguish themselves in terms of their policy positions on this issue.

The second reason why we do not expect political parties to swiftly change their issue focus in times of crisis is based on the theory of ‘issue ownership’ and more generally the importance of issue competition in the Western world (Green-Pedersen 2007). According to this perspective on party competition, parties selectively emphasise issues on which they think they have a comparative advantage and downplay others for which they do not have a good reputation (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). The origins of issue ownership lie in past campaigns, party competition in general and the records of incumbent parties (Petrocik 1996). They are thus rooted in the parties’ history and core constituencies. Hence, to sustain their ownership over certain topics, parties need to consistently emphasise the issues on which they have a comparative advantage; and issues cannot be changed in a short period of time.

To sum up, we expect parties to adapt the issue focus in their programmes only to a limited degree during economic downturns, while salience of economic issues should increase dramatically among voters. Hence our first

hypothesis posits that issue salience congruence between parties and voters decreases with deteriorating national economic conditions:

H1: The worse the macro-economic context conditions, the lower the issue salience congruence between parties and their voters.

Variation between parties: government vs. opposition

However, it is likely that the decrease in issue salience congruence between parties and voters is not uniform and varies depending on the specific incentives and constraints of government and opposition parties. Government parties are held responsible for macro-economic management and, moreover, they have to implement austerity measures. Opposition parties, on the other hand, can to some extent attribute blame to the government, even if they do not have a full set of alternative policy options at hand. There has recently been a growing interest in the distinct issue strategies of government and opposition parties. The results are mixed: Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu (2016) find that in times of crisis and with the imminent danger of retrospective voting, opposition parties are more successful in shaping voters' perceptions about the economy than government parties, which are held responsible for the present conditions. Consequently, incumbent parties have incentives to decrease the public salience of economic issues, and, as shown by Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu (2016), emphasise economic issues less than opposition parties. Williams *et al.* (2016), on the other hand, show that government parties respond to worsening economic conditions – and even more, the more cabinet seats they control – while opposition parties are not responsive to economic shocks. Finally, analysing how parties respond to voters' issue priorities, Klüver and Spoon's (2016) results again support the argument that government parties are less flexible in adjusting their issue priorities than opposition parties (and therefore less responsive to voters' issue salience).

We build on this research but argue that the distinction between government and opposition parties as *one* group might be too simple, and the somewhat contradictory findings might result from this simple dichotomous distinction. Thus, we consider government parties relative to two types of opposition parties.⁵ Opposition parties differ along one important characteristic: whether they are more office- or more policy-seeking (Strøm 1990). Office-seeking opposition parties try to appeal to a wider audience and to present themselves as an alternative to the existing government. To this aim, they adopt a broader policy profile and can more flexibly change issue emphasis than policy-seeking opposition parties. In times of crisis, in particular, the office-seeking opposition may increase the attention to economic issues by blaming the existing government for the present state of the economy or the handling of the crisis. Therefore, we expect the decrease in congruence to be less dramatic between

office-seeking opposition parties and their voters than between government parties and their voters. Opposition parties with a low aspiration to office, on the other hand, should be focusing more on ‘their’ issues, notwithstanding the economic context. Not only are these parties more concerned about ownership of a specific issue, but these are also smaller parties, which often have less resources to swiftly adapt their policy profile than office-seeking parties do (Wagner and Meyer 2014).⁶ As a consequence, policy-seeking opposition parties’ congruence with their voters should decrease most dramatically, relative to government parties, as well as relative to office-seeking opposition parties.⁷ More generally speaking, because aspiration to office shapes party platforms (Schumacher *et al.* 2015), it should also affect party–voter congruence of issue salience. From this we derive three hypotheses with regard to the change in congruence of issue salience between parties and their voters in times of crisis:

H2 (*Government parties vs. office-seeking opposition*): The decrease in salience congruence during economically harsh times is more pronounced for government parties and their voters than for office-seeking opposition parties and their voters.

H3 (*Government parties vs. policy-seeking opposition*): The decrease in salience congruence during economically harsh times is less pronounced for government parties and their voters than for policy-seeking opposition parties and their voters.

H4 (*Office-seeking opposition vs. policy-seeking opposition*): The decrease in salience congruence during economically harsh times is less pronounced for office-seeking opposition parties and their voters than for policy-seeking opposition parties and their voters.

Data and measurement

To study issue salience congruence before and during the Great Recession we combine information on the issue salience of citizens with information on how much attention parties pay to certain topics.

Data for the individual-level salience comes from election surveys, mostly the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems dataset (CSES II and III). To increase the number of elections that took place during the Great Recession, we collected additional election surveys ourselves. In total, our sample includes 16 advanced industrialised countries and 48 elections between 2001 and 2013. A list of all elections included can be found in the online appendix (Table B1).

We use the so-called ‘most important issue’ question (see Note N1 in the online appendix for the exact question wording) and recode the open, election-specific answers into categories to gauge the salience of different topics by voters. The open question format is ideal for our purposes, as the salience of topics is best captured in this way (Lavine *et al.* 1996; Wlezien 2005). We follow the established coding scheme as it was used already by Giger (2011).

Important for the present study is the category ‘economy’, which entails all notions of economic growth/recession, taxes, deficits and also more specific topics such as the economic or eurozone crisis but also topics such as fear of job loss or general anxiety about an economic breakdown. One could argue that people and parties may care more about either economic policies or social policies in reaction to a context of austerity, and that it is therefore problematic to separate the two. We use the category ‘economy’ alone since we are specifically interested in the extent to which macro-economic policies become salient in the crisis. Furthermore, the ‘social policy’ category also contains less directly crisis-affected policies such as health care. However, in terms of a robustness check, we have calculated all results combining the ‘social policy’ and ‘economy’ categories (see online appendix, Table D1). The results are robust.

We rely on salience information manually extracted from election manifestos by the Comparative Manifesto Project (Volkens *et al.* 2013). Parties regularly draft manifestos for national elections and lay out their stance on different policy issues to signal their policy commitments to voters. Election manifestos constitute a rich data source that has been used by a wide variety of scholars to measure the salience of policy issues for parties (see e.g. Adams *et al.* 2006; Green-Pedersen 2007). Human coders have divided the election manifestos into units of analysis (so-called ‘quasi-sentences’) and then allocated these units to policy categories specified a priori in a coding scheme. The attention that political parties pay to policy issues is measured by taking the percentage of quasi-sentences devoted to a certain issue area. To measure the parties’ attention to the economy, we sum the percentage of all categories relating to economic issues.⁸ Table B2 in the online appendix provides the details of the coding of the categories both for the party side (CMP categories) and voter side (‘most important issue’ answers).

Other options to measure the salience of specific topics among parties are twofold. First, we could rely on expert judgements of the salience of different topics for a specific party as for example available in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES). We see two major advantages of CMP data vis-à-vis expert survey data. First, party manifestos refer to the very same elections we have survey data on. And second, manifestos provide insight into direct communication by parties, while expert judgements are more indirect.⁹ The second option would be to rely on media reporting about electoral campaigns. Again, besides problems of data availability, this measure strikes us as indirect and solicited, and thus less valid than direct communication by parties.

Our dependent variable is issue salience congruence with regard to economic issues. Following an established procedure in the literature (Klüver and Spoon 2016; Spoon and Klüver 2014, 2015), we compare the salience of voters and parties. However, rather than looking at responsiveness, we focus on *congruence* between parties and their voters with regard to issue salience. We operationalise this concept as the difference between the relative attention parties and their

voters¹⁰ pay to economic topics. Thus, we measure the direct links between the parties and their voters, not between parties and the electorate as a whole. We take the absolute value of this difference for each party and multiply it by -1 to facilitate interpretation. Higher values indicate better congruence. As always with congruence measures, the assumption of a comparability of the scales is a tough one. We acknowledge that the metrics of party and voter salience might be different, such that a substantial interpretation of the absolute level of distance between party and voter salience could be questionable. However, our main focus in this article is not an absolute measure of congruence but we are interested in salience congruence relative to other economic contexts and party types.¹¹ We see no reason why the potential flaw in the comparability of the scales should not be constant across contexts.

To test our hypothesis, we need further information on the government-opposition status as well as the degree of government aspiration of the parties in our sample. This information is coded from the Seki-Williams Governments Dataset (Seki and Williams 2014). We code a party as being in government when it held a cabinet seat *at election time*, i.e. at the time the party manifesto was written. Moreover, to measure government aspiration, we count the number of years a party has ever been in government. We use a dichotomous variable for office-seeking ambitions that takes the value 1 if – at the time of a given election – a party has been in government for more than the duration (in years) of one typical (average)¹² election cycle since 1979.¹³ The idea behind this measure is that the longer a party has governed, the more experienced and the more ambitious it will be to participate in future cabinets (see also Schumacher *et al.* 2015). The distinction between policy- and office-seeking parties faces a number of challenges: First, it has to be applied post hoc, and it is difficult to determine the motives of parties to stay out of power, i.e. whether they were actually office-seeking but never successful or stayed out of power for policy reasons. Second, a measure based on government experience automatically categorises new parties as policy-seeking, which might be misleading. To test the validity of our measure, we performed several robustness tests with different operationalisations and on subsets of the data, excluding parties which are difficult to categorise (see Online Appendix D). The results are robust and discussed more extensively in note 18 below.

Secondly, we use two measures for the economic context: the change in the annual unemployment rate and the annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate (both from International Monetary Fund (IMF)). We use the change in unemployment (percentage point change) rather than absolute values to have a relative measure, which is best suited to compare the impact of the crisis in the different economies. Since elections take place at different time points during the year, we calculate for both – change in unemployment as well as GDP growth – the averages of the year previous to the election and the election year. Further, we use a simple dummy variable to distinguish between

the elections that took place before the financial crisis (i.e. October 2008) and the years since the beginning of the crisis.

We include party size as a control variable in the models to account for the fact that larger parties tend to have broader issue profiles and we can therefore expect them to respond more flexibly to changing voter priorities (e.g. Klüver and Spoon 2016). Finally, because some parties pay less attention to economic issues *in general*, we include a dummy variable for ‘niche parties’, which takes the value 1 if a party belongs to one of the following party families (‘parfam’ variable in the CMP dataset): ecological party, nationalist party, ethnic and regional party or special issue party, and 0 otherwise (see e.g. Meyer and Wagner 2013).¹⁴

Our statistical models have party in election years as observations and include random intercepts for parties and election years to control for the clustering in the data. Parties have their own histories and the issue preferences of their clientele vary for many reasons, which are not the focus of this article. Since we are mainly interested in the *change* of congruence as a consequence of the changing economic context, we control for individual differences by including random intercepts for parties.

We proceed in three steps. First, we show descriptive information on the issue priorities of voters and parties before and during the crisis. In a second step, we show the results of regression analysis as primary tests of our hypotheses. Finally, we provide a more in-depth investigation of the nature of issue salience congruence of government and opposition parties in order to substantiate the interpretation of the main regression findings.

Results

Issue priorities of voters and parties before/during the crisis

To test our hypotheses, we start by tracing the development of issue salience over time for both voters and parties. Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents (voters only) who have named economic policies and economic performance as the most important issue in the election year of their country. The bars in Figure 1 represent the yearly mean over all countries and the horizontal line indicates the overall average. Figure 1 shows a clear trend over time. Average salience remained below the mean of 35% up until 2007 and has never fallen below this line since the onset of the crisis.¹⁵ The picture looks very different when it comes to the issues political parties have emphasised in their election programmes. Figure 2 shows the salience of economic policies for political parties over time, with the bars representing again the year average and the country data points representing the average salience across the political parties in that country. In comparison to the voters, we see only a very slight increase on average after 2008, driven mainly by two cases, Iceland and Ireland.

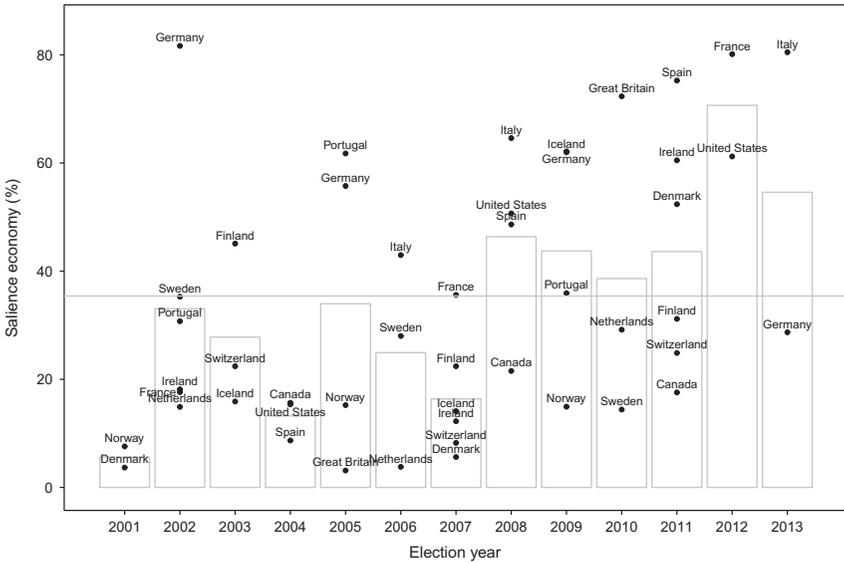


Figure 1. Salience of economic issues: voters.

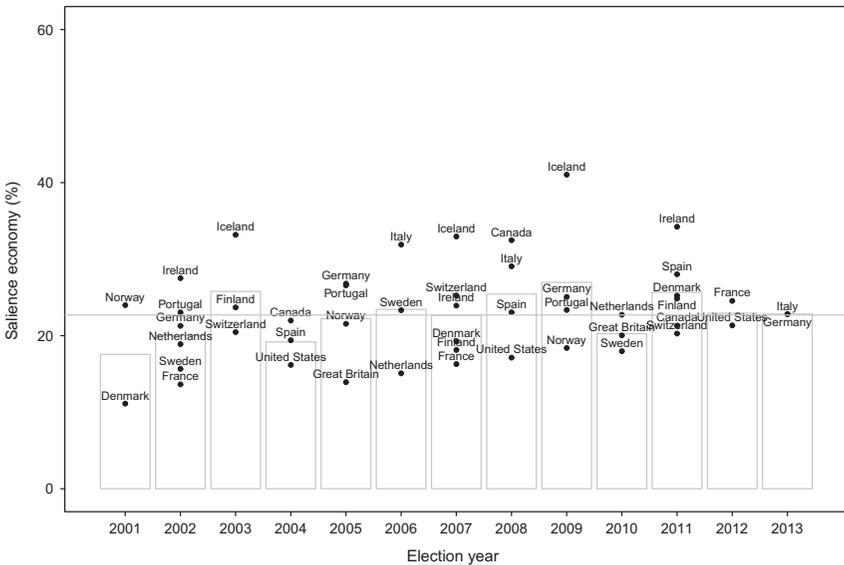


Figure 2. Salience of economic issues: parties.

Table 1 summarises the information provided in the above figures for the different countries. It shows that, on average, salience has increased by only 3 percentage points when it comes to parties, as opposed to more than 20 percentage points among voters. On the voter side, a comparison of average

Table 1. Salience of economic issues before and during the crisis.

Country	Before 2008		Since 2008		Difference	
	Voters	Parties	Voters	Parties	Voters	Parties
Canada	15.7	22	19.6	26.9	3.9	4.9
Denmark	4.5	15.2	52.4	25.2	47.9	10
Finland	33.0	20.9	31.2	24.8	-1.8	3.9
France	30.6	15	80.1	24.5	49.5	9.5
Germany	68.7	23.7	45.8	23.7	-22.9	0
Great Britain	3.1	13.9	72.3	20	69.2	6.1
Iceland	15.0	33.1	62.0	41	47	7.9
Ireland	15.8	25.7	60.5	34.2	44.7	8.5
Italy	58.5	31.0	80.5	22.8	22	-8.2
Netherlands	8.3	16.9	29.2	22.7	20.9	5.8
Norway	11.5	22.8	14.9	18.4	3.4	-4.4
Portugal	52.3	24.8	35.9	23.4	-16.4	-1.4
Spain	27.5	21.1	75.3	28.0	47.8	6.9
Sweden	31.0	19.5	14.4	18	-16.6	-1.5
Switzerland	12.9	22.9	24.9	20.3	12	-2.6
USA	15.4	16.2	58.1	19.2	42.7	3
Mean	25.2	21.5	47.3	24.6	22.1	3

salience pre- and post-2008 indicates a clear trend: in only three out of 16 countries has average salience among voters declined significantly over time (Portugal, Germany and Sweden), whereas it has remained more or less stable (< 5 percentage point change) in three other countries (Canada, Finland and Norway). In all other countries, we see a very strong increase in the salience of economic policies among voters, with increases of 45–70 percentage points in Denmark, France, Great Britain, Iceland, Ireland and Spain. On average, issue salience in the electorate has increased by no less than 22.1 percentage points in our sample.

Changes in issue salience over time are much smaller when it comes to political parties. The emphasis the parties put on economic policies in their election programmes has increased by 5–10 percentage points in Canada, France, Great Britain, Iceland, Ireland, the Netherlands and Spain. These increases are, however, counterbalanced by six out of 16 countries, in which issue salience among parties has even dropped or remained stable (Germany, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, and Switzerland).

Overall, the above figures, as well as Table 1, confirm our initial assumption that the reaction of political parties to the crisis in terms of issue salience is much more contingent and less uniform than the relatively clear trend we see among voters. For reasons of space, we do not show a systematic empirical comparison of voter and party salience of other policy fields, but we have looked at this issue and we find that the increasing concerns of voters about macro-economic performance and economic policies have to some extent come at the expense of immigration policy on the one hand and social policy on the other (see Figure C2 in the Online Appendix and Singer (2013) for a similar finding).

Economic context and issue salience congruence

Even though parties constantly give higher priority to economic issues than to other policies, the average increase in attention to economic issues during the crisis lags far behind the voters' priorities, as our descriptive results have shown. So we find preliminary evidence for our first hypothesis, which states that issue salience congruence worsens with decline in economic performance. We now proceed to a more systematic test of this claim.

Table 2 shows the results of our statistical analyses.¹⁶ The dependent variable is issue salience congruence, measured as the absolute difference between the issue priorities of parties and their voters regarding economic issues.¹⁷ Congruence varies between -89.7 and -0.02. Higher values indicate better congruence. First, the results in Table 2 show that issue salience congruence is lower among all parties the harsher the economic conditions in a country. The indicators for unemployment rates and growth are statistically significant and in the expected direction.

Models 2 to 4 test our hypotheses regarding the differential impact of economic downturns on congruence of different party types. We expect office-seeking opposition parties in crisis countries to exploit the situation by blaming the government for the poor economic performance, with the result that the decrease in issue salience congruence between office-seeking opposition parties and their voters during the economic crisis should be less pronounced than between government parties and their voters (H2). Policy-seeking opposition parties, to the contrary, will stick to their 'owned' issues and, consequently, congruence with their voters is expected to decrease more in economically harsh times than congruence between government parties and their voters (H3), and congruence between office-seeking opposition parties and their voters (H4).

Looking more closely at the interaction terms in Models 2, 3 and 4 reveals interesting differences between parties. While increasing unemployment and declining GDP have a detrimental effect on government parties' congruence (the reference category), congruence decreases even more strongly among policy-seeking opposition parties, while the difference between government parties and office-seeking opposition parties is not significant (interaction terms). Thus, against our hypothesis 2, government parties adjust their issue focus just as office-seeking opposition parties do in times of crisis. With regard to the simple distinction between the time before October 2008 and after (Model 4), we can even say that congruence between mainstream parties (i.e. incumbents and office-seeking opposition parties) and their voters has *on average* not decreased, while policy-seeking opposition parties fare much worse in the period after 2008.

For a full comparison of all three party types, Figure 3 plots the predicted issue congruence for different values of unemployment and GDP growth. The left-hand panels compare the values for incumbent governments and opposition

Table 2. Determinants of issue salience congruence.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Intercept	-26.09*** (5.01)	-16.84*** (3.68)	-26.40*** (4.34)	-16.59*** (4.16)
Opposition, with gov. experience	-1.85 (2.11)	-2.08 (2.28)	-3.22 (3.12)	-2.18 (3.38)
Opposition, little/no gov. exp.	-3.53 (2.25)	-2.95 (2.60)	-10.20*** (3.06)	-2.45 (3.50)
Unemployment	-11.29*** (1.46)	-10.00*** (2.53)		
GDP growth	5.22*** (0.71)		4.82*** (1.04)	
Crisis	1.25 (5.11)			-6.25 (5.12)
Vote share	-0.07 (0.08)	-0.08 (0.09)	-0.08 (0.08)	-0.06 (0.10)
Niche party	2.27 (2.18)	3.55 (2.55)	1.87 (2.40)	4.83 (2.96)
<i>Reference category (Models 2,3,4):</i>				
<i>Current government</i>				
Opposition, gov. exp.		-0.93 (3.35)		
× Unemployment				
Opposition, little/no gov. exp.		-9.36** (2.96)		
× Unemployment				
Opposition, gov. exp. × GDP growth			0.94 (1.22)	
Opposition, little/no gov. exp. × GDP growth			2.93** (1.13)	
Opposition, gov. exp. × Crisis				0.63 (5.54)
Opposition, little/no gov. exp. × Crisis				-14.58** (4.92)
AIC	2264.15	2293.81	2314.58	2363.08
BIC	2304.06	2333.72	2354.48	2402.98
Log likelihood	-1121.08	-1135.91	-1146.29	-1170.54
Num. obs.	278	278	278	278
Num. groups: Party	115	115	115	115
Num. groups: Election year	13	13	13	13
Var: Party (intercept)	13.59	42.93	15.58	56.34
Var: Election year (intercept)	175.58	84.00	125.68	48.78
Var: Residual	165.91	171.75	202.07	232.76

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

with little or no government experience,¹⁸ the centre panels plot government parties against office-seeking opposition parties, and the right-hand panels show the predicted values for both types of opposition. First, the general trend is clear: a strong rise in unemployment and lower growth rates are associated with deteriorated levels of issue salience congruence, which is in line with our hypothesis 1. Second, we observe the most striking difference in effects of economic downturns between incumbent parties and opposition parties with little or no government experience. While issue salience congruence is similar in economically good times, it is significantly lower for policy-seeking

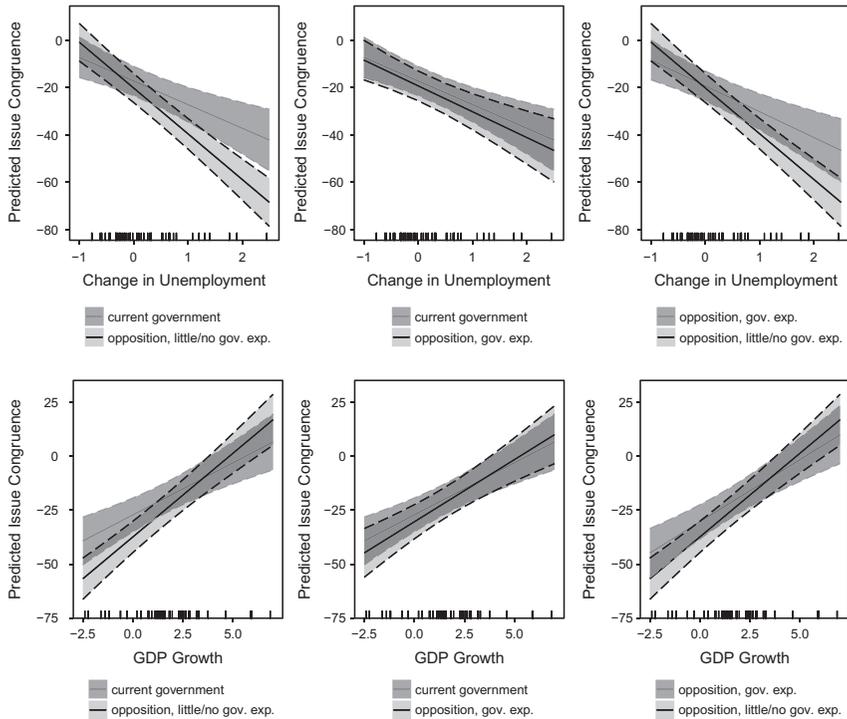


Figure 3. Predicted values of issue salience congruence.

opposition parties in a context of high unemployment and a stagnant economy, which supports our third hypothesis. Interestingly, there is no difference in the effects for incumbent parties and opposition parties with government experience (H2). Both adapt their issue focus to a certain degree, with the result that congruence is indeed lower in times of crisis, but less so than between policy-seeking opposition parties and their voters.¹⁹

The models also include two control variables: the parties' vote share and a niche party dummy. Table 2 shows no significant effects for the control variables. Larger parties and niche parties do not perform worse in terms of issue salience congruence than other parties. This latter finding, as well as our result that economic context effects are stronger for policy-seeking opposition parties, is in line with a recent finding by Grittersova *et al.* (2016) who examine relations between economic crisis and niche party success for a much longer time period. They conclude that, contrary to what is generally expected, there is little evidence for the claim that niche and radical parties would benefit from austerity measures.

What issues do parties emphasise in times of crisis?

Two main findings emerge from the previous analysis. First, parties and voters diverge with regard to the importance of political issues and, second, cabinet parties and office-seeking opposition parties perform better in terms of congruence in economically harsh times than policy-seeking opposition parties. One explanation for this is that parties differ in their opportunities and constraints to react to changing economic conditions. Parties with low ambition to govern will have much less incentives and opportunities to swiftly change their issue focus, while for governing parties it is necessary to address the major issues of the day. However, there is also an important difference between government and opposition insofar as the governing parties are likely to be held accountable for the current economic conditions. Overall, incumbent parties face a dilemma: if they increasingly address economic issues, they inevitably draw attention to the poor economic performance for which they are held co-responsible. However, if they just shirk the issue, they will be (perceived as) non-responsive. This is precisely why we expected office-seeking opposition parties to adapt more strongly and swiftly to deteriorating economic conditions (H2). However, we found no evidence for this hypothesis: government and office-seeking opposition parties display similar levels of congruence with their voters' priorities. In order to substantiate this finding more thoroughly, we want to use this final part of the analysis to unpack the ways in which incumbent and office-seeking opposition parties address the economy in their manifestos. What ways do government parties find to address the economy without drawing attention to failing macro-economic indicators? How do office-seeking parties challenge the government on this key topic?

Figure 4 shows the average share of general, pro-state and pro-market economic statements²⁰ in the manifestos before October 2008 (crisis = 0) and since

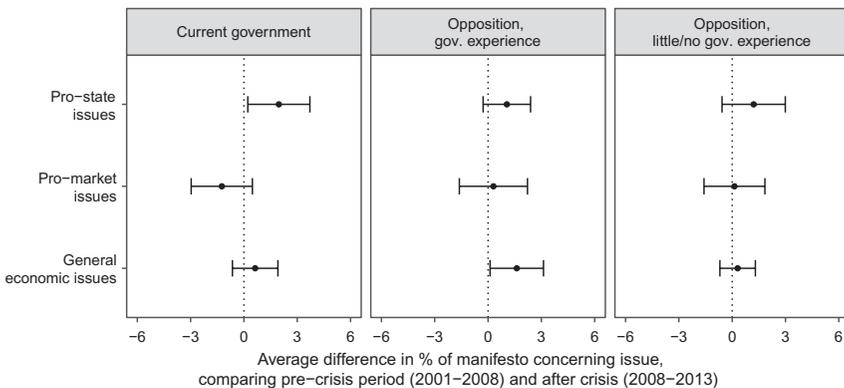


Figure 4. Average salience of pro-market, pro-state and general economic issues before and during the economic crisis for government and opposition parties.

the beginning of the economic crisis (crisis = 1). Points indicate the averages for different party groups (government, office-seeking opposition and policy-seeking opposition) and the bars show the confidence intervals of t-tests for a difference in means. The most striking result in Figure 4 is that – despite similar levels of congruence – government and office-seeking opposition parties differ in their attention to *specific* economic issues. Government parties put more emphasis on state-centred economic policies during the crisis while de-emphasising pro-market issues.²¹ Office-seeking opposition parties, on the other hand, seem to increase ‘general’ economic messages in their party platforms. These are passages in the manifestos that refer to economic issues but cannot be clearly assigned to a specific economic category in the manifesto codebook. Opposition parties with low aspiration to enter government, finally, do not change their economic issue emphasis at all in times of crisis, which is consistent with the result that issue salience congruence decreases.

To conclude, we find that while the level of issue salience congruence is similar for incumbent and office-seeking opposition parties, their reaction to the crisis clearly differs. Government parties do address the economy, but they emphasise the need for more state control and regulation. In other words, they problematise the functioning of markets rather than drawing attention to the actual performance of these markets. Office-seeking opposition parties make more general references to economic matters – quite possibly addressing the incumbent government’s handling of the economy. So, while the final level of issue salience congruence is similar, the policy content that parties convey is different. With the data at hand it is, however, not possible to judge whether government or opposition parties are closer to what citizens actually demand.

Discussion

How do economic crises affect political representation in times of constrained government? This article studies congruence between parties’ and voters’ issue salience. The main result is that congruence has decreased considerably during the recent economic crisis. While voters clearly prioritise economic issues in this situation, parties do not change their issue priorities to the same extent. As a result, issue salience congruence between voters and parties decreases.

We expected that in difficult macro-economic conditions, government parties would be even less congruent with their voters than office-seeking opposition parties, because they want to divert attention from their economic record, and because their hands are tied as to what they can deliver in the future. However, our results indicate that congruence levels of government and office-seeking opposition parties are similar in times of crisis. When looking more closely into how they address the economy, we find that during the crisis, government parties anticipate economic voting by signalling a more pro-state position on the economy, while office-seeking opposition parties emphasise

general economic statements – quite possibly an indicator of attributing the blame for bad economic conditions to government parties. Finally, our results clearly show that policy-seeking opposition parties perform much worse in terms of issue salience congruence in times of crisis. This finding is in line with recent research showing that niche and radical parties benefit less from austerity measures than generally expected (Grittersova *et al.* 2016).

Our results have implications for the broad field of political representation and democratic quality in at least three respects. First, they update previous findings on responsiveness (e.g. Ezrow and Hellwig 2014; Klüver and Spoon 2016), which found that government parties are *less* responsive to voters than opposition parties because of the policy constraints they face in office. Based on our more fine-grained distinction between office- and policy-seeking opposition parties and limited to macro-economic issues, we conclude that in times of crisis, government parties find ways to be congruent without drawing attention to their governance performance.

Second, we show that salience congruence depends strongly on structural economic factors. This is a relevant message to a field that keeps focusing almost exclusively on party characteristics and institutional factors as determinants of representation (see Rosset *et al.* 2013, however, on the impact of inequality on representation). We show that representation depends not only on these more static variables but has a dynamic component as well and is reacting considerably to economic downturn.

Finally, our findings are relevant in the context of an increasing literature on a declining quality of democratic representativeness (e.g. Mair 2013; Schäfer and Streeck 2013). This literature draws a sharp distinction between mainstream parties that govern (responsibly) and challenger parties that address public opinion (responsiveness), implying a trade-off between the two. The underlying assumption is that mainstream parties manage the economy, while populist challenger parties represent the demands of the people by mobilising votes with reference to issues such as migration, identity and elite-mass conflict. In the light of this – oftentimes dystopic – literature, it is important to read our findings in a nuanced way. While it is certainly true that political parties appear unable to keep up with the dramatically shifting demands of the public, we see at least two aspects that contradict an early swan song on democracy: first, we find that in actually dire economic times, both voters and parties do *not* emphasise identity and anti-immigration policies more, but rather economic policies. Tellingly, anti-immigrant parties and identity politics have become the main cleavages in those countries less affected by the crisis (Häusermann and Kriesi 2015), while political competition in the crisis countries revolves around economic issues. The new (office-seeking) opposition parties in Southern Europe mobilise on the economic left–right dimension, rather than on the cultural dimension of party competition (Kriesi and Pappas 2015). Second, both government parties as well as office-seeking opposition

parties are responsive in the sense that their issue attention corresponds to the increasing economic concerns among the voters. They do not shirk the issue or divert attention to cultural policies. Hence, even though mainstream parties cannot prevent declining salience congruence, we do find that economically tough times seem to revive the economic dimension of party politics in a way that reflects the demands of voters.

Notes

1. Other shocks – such as the refugee crisis or ecological shocks – may follow a different logic because the constraints in these areas mostly result from public opinion itself, rather than from institutional legacies or formal international interdependencies.
2. The literature on issue emphasis congruence comes in two flavours: a first strand seeks to understand how citizens' issue priorities influence government policy (Bevan and Jennings 2014; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008; Jones and Baumgartner 2004). A second area focuses on party-voter congruence (Reher 2015; Spoon and Klüver 2014).
3. As with the measure of positional congruence, it might be the case that congruence partially reflects the voters' decisions to vote for a specific party. However, it seems reasonable to assume that this influence is constant over time and parties.
4. In the main part of this manuscript, we do not consider the direction of economic policies and thus treat it as a valence issue. This conceptualisation is closer to the idea of issue salience congruence where it is important that the same issues are salient among the party electorate and the party. Only at the very end of this article do we engage in a more detailed discussion of the direction of economic policies.
5. Merz and Abou-Chadi (2016) make a similar distinction between types of opposition parties when looking at party issue emphasis.
6. Our distinction between office-seeking and policy-seeking opposition parties is similar to two established concepts in the literature: the notion of 'challenger parties' (De Vries and Hobolt 2012) on the one hand, and the concept of 'niche parties' (Meguid 2008) on the other. While empirically close, our theoretical approach differs from the concept of 'challenger parties' insofar as we try to explain parties' flexibility to adapt their issue profile after external shocks, and we are less interested in the conditions under which parties can promote 'new' issues; moreover, our conceptualisation of policy-seeking parties is less focused on new parties and more on smaller parties – possibly with a long history – outside of the mainstream party system. The relation between the concept of 'niche' parties and our distinction is similar: while there is certainly an empirical overlap between our notion of 'policy-seeking opposition parties' and niche parties, our theoretical focus is less on single or new policy issues defining the party profile, but whether the parties' goals are more office-maximisation or policy advocacy (Strøm 1990).
7. We acknowledge that this argument rests on the assumption that policy-seeking parties do not primarily focus on the economic dimension to start with. Given their status in the party system as well as checking our list of policy-seeking opposition parties (available as Online Appendix B3), we believe this assumption is largely justified.

8. Parties naturally address a number of specific economic policies in their manifestos that might not be of direct concern to voters (e.g. the deficit or ideological stances), while voters focus on more immediate problems, such as unemployment or taxes. An alternative measure of party–voter congruence could thus only include the sections of party manifestos that directly address economic problems. In terms of a robustness test, we constructed such a measure of congruence – the results are robust (see Table D2 in the online appendix).
9. Looking at the CHES waves 2006 and 2010, however, we see a very similar development of party salience as we document in this article (see Figure C1 in the online appendix).
10. Voters are identified by their indicated party choice.
11. We realise that an assumption we have to buy into is that changes in the values are indeed comparable, so that a lower distance between the percentage of voters prioritising the economy and the percentage of a party manifesto dedicated to the economy indeed indicates higher congruence.
12. Between three and four years in all countries in the sample.
13. The earliest year in which all countries in the sample were democracies.
14. The concept of ‘niche’ party is close to our concept of ‘policy-seeking’ opposition parties, and there are certainly overlaps – however, while we expect ‘policy-seeking’ opposition parties to be less interested in office, these are not necessarily parties focusing on single (or a low number of) issues in their campaigns. The results do not change when we exclude the niche party dummy.
15. Germany in 2002 deserves a specific explanation: 2002 was the year when the SPD–Green government went up for re-election on the basis of their highly controversial ‘Agenda 2010’ programme, including the Hartz reforms, which drastically cut back unemployment insurance. Hence, unemployment was predominant in the public debate.
16. We exclude Switzerland in this analysis. The government composition in Switzerland has not changed since 1959 (with the exception of a short period between 2007 and 2015) and hence there exists no opposition with governing experience in this country. The results remain stable when Switzerland is in the sample.
17. One could argue that in times of crisis, economic and social policies are mingled – especially in the eyes of voters. Therefore, we ran a robustness test merging the two categories (see Online Appendix, Table D1). The results remain stable.
18. The latter denotes all parties that have been in government for at most the duration of one electoral cycle since 1979. As discussed in the ‘Data and Measurement’ section, the distinction between policy- and office seeking parties raises several difficulties, mainly because the measure has to be applied post hoc (see as well Schumacher *et al.* 2015). Our measure defines parties with only a very short stint in government as policy-seeking; moreover, the measure is time-variant – that is, parties can change their status. One of the main challenges is that new parties are coded as policy-seeking, even though they might participate in future governments. We performed several robustness tests to ensure that our measure is valid (see Online Appendix D, Tables D3–D6). First, we tested the models with a different operationalisation of office-seeking, defining all parties that have held a cabinet post at least once in the whole of the period under study (1979–last election in dataset) as office-seeking opposition. Contrary to our measure in the main analysis, this measure is not time-variant with regard to the type of opposition party. Moreover, we performed the statistical analyses on three subsets of the data, first, excluding new parties that are mergers of

established parties with previous government experience, second, excluding new parties that belong to party families of the mainstream left, centre or right and, finally, excluding all parties without government experience that are mainstream left, centre or right. These parties are potentially office-seeking, but it could be that they have just not been successful in attaining office so far. All tests show that our results are robust.

19. We performed several additional robustness checks whereby we excluded single countries from the models; the effects of the economic context variables as well as the interactions between government status and unemployment are robust.
20. see Note N2 in the online appendix for the re-coding of issues.
21. Since these are averages of all parties, the finding might be an artefact of the measure if more leftist parties came to office during the crisis. We therefore looked at the average shares of pro-market, pro-state and general economic issues for left- and right-wing parties separately (see Figure C3 in the online appendix). The pattern is confirmed overall, but interestingly, the separate mean comparisons for left- and right-wing parties also show that the differences are more pronounced for right-wing parties.

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Notes on contributors

Denise Traber is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Zurich. Her research focuses on party competition and political representation in light of societal and economic changes, and on political behavior and the measurement of political preferences more broadly. [traber@ipz.uzh.ch]

Nathalie Giger is assistant professor of political behaviour at the University of Geneva. Her research interests lie in the linkage between citizens and political elites, and in particular in political representation, party politics and the perceptions of public policy. [nathalie.giger@unige.ch]

Silja Häusermann is professor of political science at the University of Zurich. Her research interests are in comparative political economy and comparative politics. Her

current work focuses on electoral realignment and its impact on distributive politics, as well as welfare state change in post-industrial economies. [silja.haeusermann@ipz.uzh.ch]

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