Chapter 8

Issue saliency and policy extremism

Not all issues matter equally to parties. This has been the idea behind analysing the congruence of party issue saliency between elections and parliament: the party mandate requires parties to emphasize similar issues in the different arenas. However, whether an issue matters to a party can also be used as an explanatory variable: it is to be expected that parties are more congruent on issues that they care more about.

Whether parties care about issues can be expressed in two ways: issue saliency and policy extremism. Issue saliency has already been used extensively in this book and basically means how important an issue is to a party, understood as how much they talk about it. However, issues can also be argued to matter to parties if parties hold extreme opinions about them. Parties that are positioned towards the extreme of an issue dimension generally hold strong opinions on issues or at least positions that are very different from most other parties' stances. Policy extremism is thus understood as the extent to which a party's issue position is different from the mean position on that issue[1]. It does not necessarily mean that this party places itself beyond the realm of acceptable parties, as for example the label 'extreme right' can imply. Policy extremism is used here in a neutral sense: the extent to which a party position is different from the mean position. The argument is that parties with extreme positions are likely to hold firm beliefs about an issue, which expects them to stick to those beliefs in parliament.

A related measure is a party's overall policy extremism. This captures whether parties hold extreme position on all issue dimensions, rather than just one or two issues. For example, on the whole the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA)

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[1]Policy extremism is related to polarization, but is measured at a different level of analysis (Kim et al., 2010; Ezrow, 2008). Polarization is basically an issue-dimension measurement: the competition on a certain issue is polarized (or not). Policy extremism refers to the position of a single party on an issue dimension: is the party located at the centre of the dimension or towards the outskirts.

has been quite moderate in the last few elections; nevertheless, it was quite extreme on some issues (and very moderate on most). The Pacifist Socialist Party (PSP), on the other hand, was very outspoken and extreme on almost all issues. For the former party some specific issues were of extra concern, while the latter party took a radical stance in general. Overall party policy extremism captures whether parties are ideologically motivated. Parties that are will probably take a more extreme stance on many issue dimensions. Because of this ideological motivation, parties with overall extreme policy positions are expected to better stick to their positions in parliament.

The above expectations have been formalized in the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 9:   The higher a party's manifesto saliency of an issue, the higher the congruence between the electoral and parliamentary party issue saliency on that issue.

Hypothesis 10:   The higher a party's manifesto saliency of an issue, the higher the congruence between the electoral and parliamentary party position on that issue.

Hypothesis 11:   The more extreme a party issue position is, the higher the congruence between the electoral and parliamentary party position on that issue.

Hypothesis 12:   The higher the average extremism of a party's policy positions is, the higher the congruence between its electoral and parliamentary party positions.

8.1   Saliency and issue saliency congruence

The first aspect of mandate fulfilment is whether parties talk about similar issues during elections and in parliament: issue saliency. If parliament discusses wholly different matters than the issues that were central in the election, the latter is not a good predictor for the former. In that case, the electoral choice voters make is based on an entirely different political debate than the parliamentary representation. Issue saliency can be expressed in two ways: absolute and relative issue saliency. Absolute issue saliency refers to the amount of attention, often expressed as the amount of text, parties devote to an issue. One can, for example, say that the saliency of Agricultural issues is 7% for the Labour Party. That is, 7% of the Labour party manifesto is devoted to agricultural issues. Relative issue saliency captures how important an issue is to a party, in relation to other parties. For example, religious issues are not the *prime* concern of the Dutch religious party Christian Union. However, in comparison to other parties, who talk even less about these issue, religion is a very salient issue to them. Relative issue saliency thus captures the saliency of an issue, relative to other parties' saliency of that issue. The congruence of relative issue saliency is an important measure

Table 8.1: *Explaining the percentage difference between manifesto and parliamentary issue saliency*

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
(Intercept)	0.481***	0.345***	0.435***
	(0.011)	(0.008)	(0.011)
Manifesto Saliency	−0.023***		−0.017***
	(0.001)		(0.002)
Manifesto Relative Saliency		−0.082***	−0.035***
		(0.008)	(0.009)
N	1498	1456	1456
R^2	0.143	0.063	0.129
adj. R^2	0.142	0.062	0.127
Resid. sd	0.294	0.293	0.283

Standard errors in parentheses

[†] significant at $p < .10$; $^*p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{***}p < .001$

of mandate fulfilment, because it indicates which issues are emphasized by parties, which issues they really 'own' (Stokes, 1966; Klingemann et al., 1994; Budge, 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006). Just as I have argued that comparing the parties' relative issue *positions* is important from the perspective of voters who have to make a choice between parties, parties' relative issue *saliency* can play a role in voters electoral choice. Indeed some even argue that this is what matters most (Budge et al., 1987; Budge, 2001).

The extent to which parties deviate from their manifesto priorities in parliament is expressed as a percentage of the average level of saliency in the manifesto and in parliament[2]. After all, on issues with an original saliency of one percent, an increase of one percent means that a party talks twice as much about the issues, whereas the same increase would only mean a five percent increase of saliency for an issue that a party originally devoted twenty percent of its manifesto to. Therefore, using the percentage difference gives the best estimate of the extent of the issue saliency change.

Three OLS regression models were fitted to test the influence of saliency on the difference between manifesto and parliamentary saliency[3]. The first model

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[2]The formula used to calculate the percentage difference d for manifesto issue saliency level m and parliamentary issue saliency level p is:

$$d = abs(m - p)/(m + p) \tag{8.1}$$

which results in a measure ranging from 0 (no change) to 1 (a change from no attention in one arena to any level of attention in another arena). Using the sum of the manifesto and parliamentary issue saliency as the base for the calculation (and not just manifesto saliency) nicely keeps values between 0 and 1 and avoids calculation errors in case manifesto saliency is zero.

[3]The regression model used in other chapters is not suitable for this analysis, because the regression coefficient measure does not work properly when analysing party-level variation.

Figure 8.1: *Expected value of issue saliency distance for various levels of issue saliency*
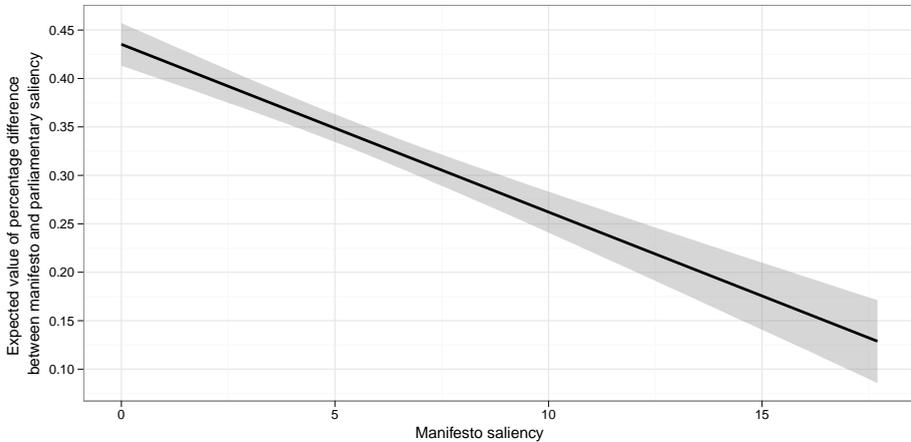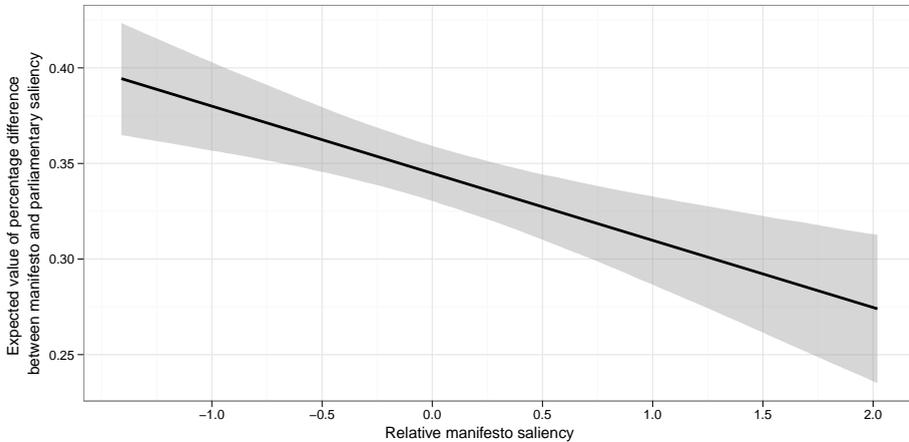

Note: Shaded area indicates 95% confidence interval.

takes manifesto saliency as its explanatory variable, while the second model takes relative issue saliency as its independent variable (see table 8.1). As there were no significant differences between the two counties, I present only the pooled analysis. Both variables have a significant negative effect on the difference between manifesto and parliamentary saliency. This means that as an issue is more important for a party, both in absolute and in relative terms, the percentage difference between its manifesto issue saliency and parliamentary issue saliency becomes smaller. The more salient an issue for a party, the higher the congruence between their electoral and parliamentary issue saliency level.

A visual presentation can make the extent of the effects more clear. The expected value of the dependent variable was estimated for each level of the independent variable of interest, keeping the other variables at their mean (King et al., 2000; Imai et al., 2007). Figure 8.1 presents the expected value of the percentage difference between manifesto and parliamentary saliency for a range of manifesto saliency values (keeping relative manifesto value at its mean)[4]. When in a party's manifesto the saliency of an issue is close to zero, the expected difference is about 0.4, or 40%. This means that parties deviate on average 40% from non-salient issues. For issues with a saliency over 15 per cent, the deviation drops to under 20 per cent. The 95% confidence intervals are small, indicating that this difference is statistically significant.

The effect of relative issue saliency can be visualized similarly. In figure 8.2 the *relative* issue saliency varies between its minimum and maximum value, while the manifesto saliency is kept at its mean. For issues that parties do not

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[4]The graphs present the effects of model 3 in table 8.1. The effects of models 1 and 2 are similar.

Figure 8.2: *Expected value of issue saliency distance for various levels of relative issue saliency*

Note: Shaded area indicates 95% confidence interval.

find very salient in comparison to other parties (relative manifesto saliency is negative), they deviate about 40 per cent from their manifesto saliency value. Issues on which parties show the highest relative saliency, on the other hand, show only about 30 per cent deviation. The effect of relative manifesto issue saliency is thus less strong than the effect of absolute manifesto issue saliency, but it is substantive and significant.

Parties deviate least strongly from the issues that were most salient in their manifesto. Both the absolute saliency and the relative saliency comes into play. Parties deviate least strongly from issues they talk most about in their manifesto (absolute saliency). There is a separate effect for issues they talk most about in their manifesto relative to other parties (relative saliency). This corroborates hypothesis 9 that higher levels of issue saliency lead to higher levels of congruence between the electoral and parliamentary competition.

8.2 Issue saliency, policy extremism and the congruence of positions

Issue position congruence is measured separately per issue dimension (see chapter 4). Mandate fulfilment refers to the congruence of parties' (relative) electoral and parliamentary issue positions. The dependent variable in the analysis is the distance between a parties' (relative) electoral position and its (relat-

ive) parliamentary position[5]. Because the data concerns parties' positions relative to the other parties in an election or parliament, caution is warranted when using the distance between those positions as a measure of position congruence. After all, relative positions change not only when a party changes its own opinion, but also when the other parties change.

The congruence of parties' policy positions can be explained by three variables: issue saliency, issue extremism, and party extremism. Issue saliency is expected to influence issue position congruence similarly as it influences issue saliency congruence. If an issue is important to a party, it should be more inclined to stick to that position in parliament. Parties with *extreme* policy position are also believed to stick better to their priorities. This argument can be made at two levels. First, parties can have specific issues on which they have relatively extreme policy positions. As these issues are likely to define these parties' profiles, one would expect parties to show congruence between elections and parliament on particularly these issues. The second way in which policy extremism comes into play is on the party level. Some parties take more extreme policy stances overall. These are likely to be the more ideologically motivated parties. It is to be expected that these parties are less willing to compromise on issues in parliament.

Policy extremism is measured as the distance between a party's manifesto issue position and the mean issue position of all parties[6]. The party policy extremism measure is the mean of those distances for a single party, weighted by issue saliency. The party policy extremism scores are plotted in figure 8.3. In the Netherlands, the traditional parties of the left and right have high policy extremism scores. However, the far right-wing parties such as the CD, LPF and BP, do not stand out. While these parties may stand out in terms of their policies towards migration, their speech suggests that overall they are less extreme than expected (see also chapter 5). In Britain, the picture is also mixed. In some years the Liberals are extreme, while in other years the party is more moderate. This seems to be related to the incumbent government at the time of the election: when Conservatives were in office, the Liberals tended to be less extreme in their manifesto issue positions than when Labour formed the outgoing government.

The regression model using manifesto issue saliency, manifesto issue extremism and party policy extremism as explanations for the distance between manifesto and parliamentary positions is presented in table 8.2. The first model includes all observations, while the second and third models include only the observations from the United Kingdom and the Netherlands respectively. I included these country models, because there were important differences in the directions of the coefficient between the countries.

Contrary to my expectation, manifesto issue saliency does not have an effect

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[5]The scales of both scores were transformed to range from 0 to 1, so that the maximum party position distance is equal between issue dimensions.

[6]Alternatively, the distance to the median legislator's position could be used. This does not change the direction of the coefficients in the regression model.

Figure 8.3: *Parties' overall policy position extremism*
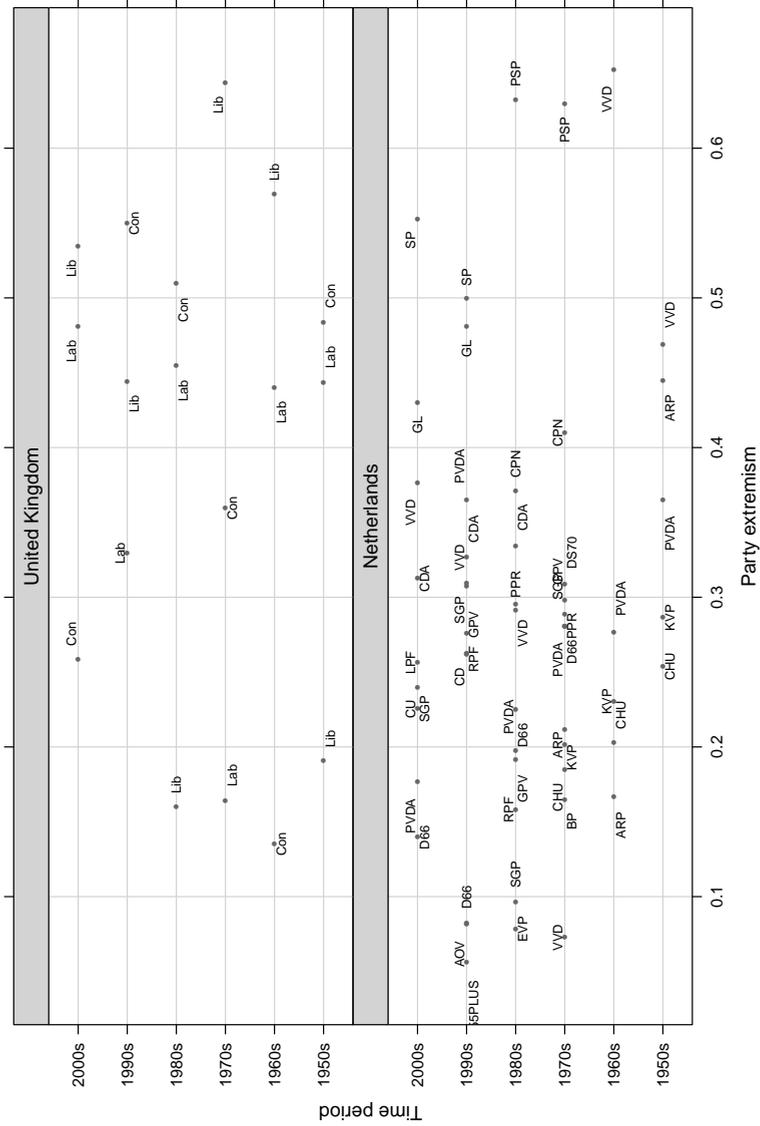
Note: Figure only includes the selected cases for this study, i.e. '1950s' refers to 1955-1959 UK case and 1952-1956 Dutch case.

Table 8.2: *Explaining the distance between the manifesto and parliamentary position*

	All cases	United Kingdom	Netherlands
(Intercept)	0.293***	0.336***	0.304***
	(0.029)	(0.070)	(0.032)
Manifesto Saliency	−0.016	−0.122	0.061
	(0.062)	(0.101)	(0.078)
Manifesto Policy Position Extremism	−0.183*	−0.181	−0.185†
	(0.078)	(0.134)	(0.095)
Party Overall Policy Position Extremism	0.037	0.110	−0.131
	(0.094)	(0.171)	(0.116)
N	438	146	292
R^2	0.017	0.025	0.047
adj. R^2	0.010	0.004	0.037
Resid. sd	0.235	0.264	0.214

Standard errors in parentheses

† significant at $p < .10$; $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{***}p < .001$

This analysis only includes the front benches.

on the congruence of the party positions. While the sign is negative both in the pooled analysis and the analysis of the British cases, this finding is not statistically significant. For the Netherlands, the sign is even positive, suggesting that parties deviate more on issues they find important (although it is not significant). The evidence is thus mixed at best[7]. It confirms Thomson's (1999) finding that more salient election pledges are not more likely to be fulfilled. Apparently, the fact that issues have more attention from parties does not enable or force them to take more congruent positions on these issues. Thus, hypothesis 10 has to be rejected.

More extreme manifesto policy positions seem to be more congruent. The coefficient is moderate and significant: if positions are one point more extreme on the extremism scale, the distance between the manifesto and parliamentary position is expected to be 0.18 point smaller[8]. This confirms the expectation that parties will stay closer to their manifesto position if that position is more extreme. Because the positions used here are expressed in relative terms, some caution is warranted: the relative position of parties with more extreme positions on an issue is expected to be more congruent than the relative position of parties with more moderate views on an issue.

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[7]The result is similar if *relative* issue saliency is used instead of absolute issue saliency.

[8]Part of this effect is explained by the fact that the most extreme parties will have a position of either 0 or 1. If these parties remain the most extreme party in parliament, their distance score is automatically zero. If these parties are deleted, the effect is smaller and no longer significant.

Concerning party policy extremism, there is a difference between the two countries. In the Netherlands, parties that are more extreme overall, are more likely to be congruent in terms of their issue positions. Thus, more ideologically driven parties seem to be somewhat more congruent than parties taking generally middle-of-the-road positions. However, in the United Kingdom the opposite seems to be the case, although neither finding is statistically significant. One explanation is that some of the more extreme positions are the result of the competitive nature of the manifestos, especially in Britain. Especially when Labour is the incumbent party, the Liberals are positioned on the other extreme from Labour in the electoral space of competition. However, in parliament they move towards a more moderate position, which causes low levels of congruence between their electoral and parliamentary positions. Notably in the Netherlands, there is a number of small parties that is concerned with voicing certain policy stances rather than actually implementing these policies in government. Being a party with relatively extreme policy views in general seems to have a negative (but not significant) effect on the congruence between their electoral and parliamentary position. Because neither finding achieves statistical significance, hypothesis 12 has to be rejected.

8.3 Conclusion

Whether issues matter has some effect of the congruence of parties' electoral and parliamentary issue saliency and issue positions. Concerning issue saliency congruence, parties tend to be more similar on those issues that matter most to them, both in absolute terms and in relative terms. The difference between manifesto and parliamentary attention for issues is smaller for issues that parties talk a lot about. This difference is also smaller for issues that parties talk much about in relative terms, thus more than other parties. Although these effects are moderate in size, these are highly significant and can thus safely be argued to play a role, also beyond the specific cases that were studied here.

Concerning issue position congruence, what matters seems to be expressed more in terms of issue position extremism than issue saliency. There is no support for the hypothesis that parties are more congruent in positional terms for issues with higher levels of issue saliency. However, parties with more extreme positions on specific issues *are* inclined to show higher levels of (relative) issue position congruence between election and parliament. Their relative positions in the elections and parliament are more congruent than those of parties with more moderate positions. When looking at *party* (overall) policy extremism, a difference between the Netherlands and the United Kingdom is revealed. In the Netherlands, parties with more extreme views overall tend to be more congruent in their issue positions, while in Britain the opposite holds. It strengthens the idea that some of the more extreme parties in the Netherlands are primarily policy-driven (even if that means staying out of government), while the three

parties in Britain aim for the enactment of their policies in office.

The conclusion concerning issue position congruence seems to run contrary to the findings of Kim et al. (2010), who show that polarized political systems show lower levels of policy linkage between citizens and governments. Polarization is, however, an issue dimension measurement, which is based on the same idea as policy position extremism, but measures in fact how different parties are, not how different a single party is. Despite this difference in the level of measurement, Kim et al.'s (2010) results would not likely be different had they conducted a party-level analysis. The difference between their findings and mine stem from the fact that they compare preferences of the median voter with government issue positions, while I am looking at party mandate fulfilment. Higher levels of polarization lead to party positions that are further away from the median voter, which leads to a larger difference between the government's positions and the median voter, particularly in majoritarian democracies. For example, relatively high polarization in the 1980s in Britain, got the Conservatives elected on a manifesto that was relatively far away from the median voter (the Labour manifesto was even more radical). Policy linkage between voters and politicians thus suffered from high polarization. At the same time, high polarization seems to have resulted in relative stability in terms of mandate fulfilment: parties stuck to their clearly defined manifesto positions in parliament. In addition, Dalton (1985) has found that dyadic correspondence between a party and its voters is higher when a party's position is more extreme. Thus while polarization can have a negative effect on policy linkage between the median voter and the government (especially in majoritarian democracies), it probably aids mandate fulfilment[9]. This is also relevant in the context of the difference between majoritarian and consensus democracy: majoritarian democracies with two-party systems have a tendency to show higher levels of polarization, which is good for mandate fulfilment. However, this does apparently not result in higher levels of mandate fulfilment in the United Kingdom than in the Netherlands.

The effects found in this chapter are relatively small. One explanation might be that party issue positions are measured in relative terms. The effect is that a party's position may change because other parties' positions change; thus it tends to blur the movement of individual parties somewhat. Whereas looking at relative positions is thus informative from an institutional point of view, the party-level effects are likely underestimated by the relative congruence measure. The party-level effects might therefore be more pronounced when studied at using an absolute measure of parties' electoral and parliamentary positions.

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[9]The effect of polarization on mandate fulfilment should not be overestimated, because the last chapter showed relative stability over time while Kim et al. (2010) show that polarization has changed quite strongly over time.