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Issue Salience and Candidate Position Taking in Parliamentary Parties

Abstract

Research on parliamentary representation has traditionally assumed that political parties take clear and differentiated policy positions, but recent studies suggest that parties sometimes have an electoral incentive to present voters with a distribution of positions to select from at the ballot box. This paper explores whether parliamentary parties pursue such a strategy through candidate position taking using unique elite and mass survey data from Denmark. The results illustrate that parties are highly unified on issues that are salient to their electoral brand, but that they develop a distribution of positions that is related to voter preferences at the district level on less salient issues. These findings have important implications for the way that representation works in parliamentary democracies.

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An emerging literature suggests that parliamentary parties are sometimes rewarded electorally from purposefully presenting voters with ambiguous rather than clear-cut policy platforms (Bräuninger and Giger, 2016; Lo et al., 2016; Rovny, 2012; Somer-Topcu, 2015). This strategy helps a party to win votes if it can convince various groups of voters that it is ideologically closer to the positions that they prefer, and parties can pursue such an outcome by presenting voters with a distribution of different positions on particular issues to select from at the ballot box (Rovny, 2012; Somer-Topcu, 2015). Parliamentary parties may thus sometimes be motivated to develop a distribution of candidate positions that is related to voter preferences at the district level, but this possibility has not yet been systematically analyzed.

The purpose of the paper is to address this gap theoretically and empirically. Theoretically, I argue that party leaders sometimes have an incentive to encourage their candidates to take district instead of party positions— or at least to refrain from sanctioning this candidate behavior – but only on issues that are not salient to their party. On salient issues, on the other hand, party leaders have an incentive to enforce party discipline in order to maintain the informational value of their party’s label (Cox and McCubbins, 1993) as well as the support of their partisan constituencies (Bräuninger and Giger, 2016). Consequently, candidates should be more likely to take district instead of party positions on issues that are not salient to their party if party leaders perceive this incentive structure.

Empirically, I test these possibilities using data from Denmark. The Danish case is useful because it contains a unique and non-anonymous candidate survey with an unusually high response rate, which I merge with district level data on voter preferences, using an original mass survey and multilevel regression and poststratification (MRP) methods. Furthermore, the Danish case has some interesting institutional variation that few other countries have. The analysis of these data show that Danish candidates in both institutional

intra- and interparty competition contexts almost always take the same positions as their party leaders on issues that are highly salient to their party, but that they often diverge from their party's position when it is unpopular among the voters in their district on less salient issues. The empirical results thus suggest that party leaders cultivate clear-cut policy positions on issues that are salient to their party, but encourage (or do not sanction) district position taking among their candidates on issues that are not salient to their party.

These findings are not only important because the relationship between parliamentary candidate and district voter positions is understudied, but also because the relationship has normative implications for representation. On one hand, clear and distinguishable party positions have traditionally been considered normatively desirable features of representative democracy (Dahlberg, 2009; Ranney, 1954). On the other hand, individual candidates have several opportunities to influence policy in the direction that their constituents prefer if they get (re)elected to a parliament. Specifically, Members of Parliament (MPs) can influence the content of bills in ministries (Laver and Shepsle, 1996) and on legislative committees (Strøm, 1998). Furthermore, they can influence their party's policy positions within party factions such that the party votes differently when a bill comes up for a legislative vote (Budge et al., 2010). A relationship between candidate and district positions may thus be indicative of substantive representation at the district level in parliamentary contexts.

Parties, Candidates and Voters in Parliamentary Democracies

A key assumption in the literature on parliamentary representation – particularly the prominent literature on congruence – has traditionally been that each political party takes a single clear-cut ideological position which it seeks to transform into policy in the government and/or legislature (Huber and Powell, 1994; McDonald and Budge, 2005; Powell, 2000). However, half a century ago, Downs (1957) famously argued that each party in a two-party

system has an incentive to present voters with an ambiguous policy platform in order to expand the size of its electoral constituency. Accordingly, studies on representation in the United States have examined when and how parties and candidates obfuscate their issue positions for several decades since Downs' seminal work (Milta et al., 2014; Page, 1976; Shepsle, 1972).

The idea that parties pursue ambiguity is more novel in multiparty systems where Downs predicted that parties take clear, consistent and differentiated positions. Empirical studies have thus only recently begun to systematically examine whether and when parties take strategically ambiguous issue positions in the parliamentary context. Collectively, these studies suggest that parliamentary parties sometimes have incentives to obfuscate both their ideological positions (Bräuninger and Giger, 2016; Lo et al., 2016; Somer-Topcu, 2015) and their positions on particular policy issues (Rovny, 2012). This becomes a winning electoral strategy for a party if it is able to convince diverse groups of voters that it is ideologically closer to them than they would otherwise perceive it to be.

However, the emerging literature on strategic policy ambiguity among parliamentary parties has developed without fully considering the role of candidates and district voter preferences. Consequently, we do not know whether and when parliamentary candidate positions on political issues are related to the positions of the voters in their districts instead of their party. Yet, if a party chooses ambiguity as an electoral strategy in order to convince voters that the party is closer to them, then a sensible strategy would be to present district voters with a distribution of candidate positions that is related to their preferences. Doing so may lead voters to perceive that there is a particular option on a party's list that is ideologically closer to them than the party as a whole (in open list systems where voters can vote for individual candidates), or that the party's list is ideologically closer to them than the party as a whole (in both open and closed list systems).

One way in which parties can achieve such an outcome is through candidate responsiveness. Such responsiveness may occur in open-list proportional representation (OLPR) and single member district (SMD) electoral systems where (re)election-seeking candidates have personal vote-seeking incentives to respond to district demands (Cain et al., 1987; Carey and Shugart, 1995; Heitshusen et al., 2005). Candidates may thus take popular district positions to get more personal votes, and party leaders may refrain from sanctioning this behavior or even encourage it by offering career advancement opportunities such as speakerships or ministries to MPs who are more popular among district voters (Kam, 2009). Likewise, party leaders can encourage candidate responsiveness to district voter preferences in electoral systems that use closed or flexible party lists, which are difficult for voters to alter directly, by moving popular candidates further up on the party's list (André et al., 2017).

Another way in which parties can develop a similar distribution of candidate positions is by systematically recruiting candidates who have pre-existing attitudes that correlate with those of their district voters. Party leaders can encourage such a recruitment strategy when they control the nomination process, but parties can also plausibly rely on candidates to self-select into districts that tend to share their issue positions. Candidates may thus take district positions for ideological reasons, and party leaders could encourage (or refrain from sanctioning) this behavior. These possibilities are also consistent with research from presidential democracies showing that legislators often engage in district-targeted legislative behaviors even when they cannot possibly win re-election due to term limits or other institutional barriers (Carey, 1996; Kerevel, 2015; Taylor, 1992).

When Do Candidates Take District Instead of Party Positions?

It is not clear, however, that party leaders have an electoral incentive to encourage – or avoid sanctioning – district position taking among candidates on *all* issues. Rather, a

party's total vote share is determined by its national reputation in addition to the reputation of its individual candidates in the districts (Cain et al., 1987). Consequently, party leaders only have an electoral incentive to encourage district position taking on issues where this behavior does not result in offsetting damage to the party's reputation. District position taking among candidates could damage a party's national reputation if it causes voters to become uncertain about what the party's issue positions are, and thus less likely to vote for it (Cox and McCubbins, 1993). Parties may thus prefer unity on some issues to protect the informational value of the party label, and parliamentary party leaders have several institutional tools available to enforce party discipline among their members (Kam, 2009).

I argue that party leaders are more likely to enforce party discipline among their members on the political issues that are salient to their party's brand. There are at least two reasons for this. First, these are the issues where parties stand to get more party votes (Rovny, 2012), and thus where damage to the informational value of the party's label is most electorally dangerous. Second, when party leaders decide whether to encourage clear-cut or ambiguous positions, they respond to the demands of both the general public and their partisan constituencies (Bräuninger and Giger, 2016), which can be difficult because partisan constituencies have issue positions that are distinct from those of the general public (Ezrow et al., 2011). Yet, partisan constituencies tend to agree more with, and care more about, the issues that are salient to their preferred party (Neundorf and Adams, 2016; Ray, 2003). Party leaders can thus appeal to their party's constituency by enforcing party discipline on issues that are salient to their party while also appealing to the general public by encouraging (or not sanctioning) district position taking on less salient issues.

For these reasons I argue that party leaders are likely to sanction district position taking on salient issues, but to encourage (or to avoid sanctioning) district position taking on less salient issues. On salient issues this should result in candidates taking positions that are

strongly related to the preferences of their party leader, but on less salient issues I expect candidates to take issue positions that are systematically related to voter preferences in their home districts in addition to those of their party. This theoretical model of candidate position taking in parliamentary democracies can be summarized in the following two hypotheses, which should apply in both institutional intra- and inter-party competition contexts because party leaders in both contexts have an incentive to cultivate a distribution of candidate positions that is electorally advantageous for the party as a whole:

H1: Candidate positions are positively related to the positions of their party leaders, but more so on salient issues.

H2: Candidate positions are positively related to the positions of their district voters, but less so on salient issues.

Empirical Analysis

I test the two hypotheses using data from the 2011 and 2015 parliamentary elections in Denmark. The Danish case is used because of its institutional variation and the existence of a particularly useful candidate survey, which I detail below. Before turning to the empirical analysis, however, a few words are in order about the Danish case more generally.

Denmark has had a unicameral parliament since 1953. There are 179 MPs sitting in the parliament with four of them being from the Danish commonwealth countries (2 MPs from Greenland, and 2 MPs from the Faroe Islands). During the 2011 and 2015 general elections, the 175 Danish MPs represented voters from 10 different Danish districts within

eight different parties.¹ The eight parties were the Unity List, the Socialist People's Party, the Social Democrats, the Radicals, the Liberals, the Conservatives, the Liberal Alliance, and the Danish People's Party.² The former four parties are often considered to be members of a left bloc that usually supports a Social Democratic prime minister, and the latter four parties are often considered to be members of a right bloc that supports a prime minister from the Liberals. However, regardless of whether the prime minister is from the left or right block, (s)he usually leads a minority government consisting of either a single party or a coalition of parties within the party bloc. Accordingly, the incumbent government in 2011 had minority status and was composed of the Liberals and the Conservatives, while the incumbent minority government in 2015 was composed of the Social Democrats and the Radicals.

When Danish candidates seek (re)election to the parliament within this party system, they are usually placed on an open list, but parties also have the option to place their candidates on so-called flexible lists in some or all districts. The flexible list is similar to a closed list except that voters can reorder it if an individual candidate gets enough votes to meet a high threshold.³ However, this threshold is almost never met.⁴ In the 2011 and 2015 elections two parties placed their candidates on flexible lists, namely the Unity List and the

¹ The total number of candidates running (including independents) was 807 in 2011 and 798 in 2015. The average district magnitude among the 10 districts was 13.5 with a range from 2 (Bornholms Storkreds) to 20 (Sjællands Storkreds).

² I restrict the analysis to these eight parties, but two parties with only a single or no incumbent candidates also competed in 2011 and 2015 elections, namely the Christian Democrats and the Alternatives. However, these parties do not issue party magazines, which is my data source for issue salience. Consequently, these two smaller parties are excluded from the empirical analyses.

³ A party's district threshold is calculated as the total number of votes for the party and its candidates in the district divided by the number of seats won plus one. This number is then rounded up to the next integer.

⁴ For example, only 16 candidates received enough personal votes to alter the flexible list order from 1945 to 1984 (Det juridiske Laboratorium ved Københavns Universitet, 1986) despite the fact that parties' use of the flexible list was much more frequent during this time.

Socialist People's Party. The Unity List did so in all districts in both 2011 and 2015, while the Socialist People's Party only did so in 2011, and only in three of the 10 districts.⁵

I will use the institutional variation from 2011 later in the empirical analysis to provide some leverage on the question of the whether there is evidence in favor of Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 in both institutional intra- *and* interparty competition contexts.⁶ Before doing so, however, I test hypotheses 1 and 2 in the next subsection using candidate data pooled across all candidate lists from the 2015 election, as well as original mass survey data from the same year, to examine whether there is evidence in favor of the two hypotheses across institutional contexts.

Candidate Positions, District Voter Positions, and Issue Salience

In this subsection Hypotheses 1 and 2 are tested using Danish candidate survey data from a so-called voting advice application (VAA) that was implemented by the political news agency "Altinget.dk" and the television station "TV2" before the 2015 general election in Denmark. The VAA asked all candidates running in the election to take positions on 20 political issue statements. For each statement candidates were allowed five response options ranging from 1 "completely disagree", 2 "partially disagree", 3 "neither/or", 4 "partially agree", to 5 "completely agree".⁷ Voters and other citizens could then go to Altinget.dk's website and answer the same questions, and a computer algorithm would calculate their level of agreement with each candidate in their district.⁸

⁵ The Socialist People's party placed candidates from the following three districts on a flexible list in 2011: Københavns Omegns Storkreds, Sydjyllands Storkreds, and Østjyllands Storkreds

⁶ A party's use of open or flexible list in a district could be endogenous to candidate behavior. I describe the issue, and what it means for the empirical conclusions, in more detail in the later empirical subsection that analyzes whether the empirical evidence for Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 is conditional on electoral rules.

⁷ The exact wording for each of the issue statements is presented in Appendix A.

⁸ Unfortunately, the voter response data are not accessible, but even if they were, they would not necessarily be useful because respondents can take the survey as many times as they want, and there is no age restriction.

These candidate survey data are very useful to test the hypotheses on at least three different counts: First, unlike most publicly accessible elite surveys, the candidate responses to the VAA questions are not anonymous, which allows me to match each candidate to a district and also to identify a party leader positions on each issue. Second, the candidate response rate was 91 percent, which is exceptionally high for an elite survey (Bailer, 2014), and almost certainly caused by the electoral incentives associated with answering the survey. Specifically, answering the survey gives a candidate important electoral exposure and allows for the possibility that a computer algorithm will tell the voters in the candidate's district that they are ideologically congruent with the candidate. The high response rate reduces concerns about bias caused by systematically missing elite survey data (Montgomery et al., 2008). Third, the candidate responses to the voting advice application statements measure the candidate position taking concept very well because each candidate response to an issue statement represents an actual case of a candidate taking a publically visible position on a political issue. The distribution of candidate responses over issues is shown in Appendix B.

To test Hypotheses 1 and 2 I also need data on how popular the various possible issue positions in the candidate survey were among district voters. Consequently, I administered an internet-based mass survey mass in the days leading up to the 2015 general election in Denmark in which I asked over 1,300 Danish citizens 10 of the 20 questions from the 2015 VAA and gave them the same five response options as well.⁹ Furthermore, I asked the respondents to provide their postal code, which allows me to match them to a district. Finally, I inquired about their gender, education level, age, and party vote choice. The survey was implemented by Survey Sampling International (SSI), and their sampling procedure is described in detail in online appendix C.

⁹ The issues were selected to maximize the number of different issue dimensions.

I use these mass survey data in combination with census data and MRP methods to develop my measures of district level public opinion. MRP is a technique that was developed by Gelman and Little (1997) and Park et al., (2006), and it is designed precisely to handle situations where researchers want to make inferences about public opinion in subnational units using a normal-sized national survey. Consequently, it has been applied by several studies to measure state level ideology and public opinion in the United States context (Enns and Koch, 2013; Lax and Phillips, 2009; Pacheco, 2011).

The MRP method works through two stages: A first stage, which uses a multilevel model of individual survey responses to estimate the relationship between demographic status and public opinion, and a second stage that weights the estimates for each demographic respondent type from the first stage against the percentages of each demographic type in each district using census data. For this particular project, I then take the weighted average of the estimated percentage of voters that gave each response option in each district for each question, such that I get a mean voter position for each district on each issue. The key advantage of the MRP method is thus that it uses data from all 1300 respondents to measure public opinion in each district rather than just the subset of respondents who resided in the district. The results from the two MRP stages (and thus the distribution of mean voter positions over districts and issues) are shown in Appendix D.

The distribution of voter preferences at the district level is thus summarized as the mean district voter position. That is not to say that the central tendency of the district voter distribution is the only aspect of this distribution that might influence candidate behavior, but I use this as my measure of generalized district voter preferences nonetheless because it is consistent with the way that existing congruence and responsiveness research aggregates voter preferences at the national level (Brooks and Manza, 2007; Huber and Powell, 1994; McDonald and Budge, 2005; Powell, 2000), and because it summarizes information about the

distribution of district voter issue positions in an effective and intuitive way.¹⁰ Specifically, a mean district voter position closer to “5” (completely agree) is indicative that voters in a district tend to agree more with an issue statement on average.

Next, the model also needs a measure of salience for each party on each issue. A common way in which political scientists measure this concept is through the use of Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) data.¹¹ However, manifesto data are not very useful for this analysis because there is no firm manifesto tradition in Denmark (Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011). This has led the CMP group to use different proxy documents such as speeches, drafts, and even documents from local elections to measure party positions and issue salience in the Danish context, which “*in many years produce a completely distorted picture of the actual positions of Danish political parties*” (Hansen, 2008). For example, the document that the CMP group uses to code issue positions and issue salience for the Social Democrats in Denmark in 2011 (the most recent Danish election with available CMP data) is actually a joint statement with the Socialist People’s Party, which itself issued an independent manifesto before the election.

The manifesto data are thus clearly not appropriate for this analysis, but the Danish case offers another interesting data source that provides a solution to the issue. Specifically, I take advantage of the fact that each party in Denmark issues a magazine several times each year (these party magazines are also occasionally used as manifesto data by the Comparative Manifesto Project). Concretely, I obtained the last magazine issued before the 2015 election

¹⁰ The congruence and responsiveness literature often use the median instead of the mean voter to summarize the policy preferences of the national electorate. However, the mean voter position summarizes differences across district voter distributions more effectively than the median voter for this particular dataset because the median voter position would be confined to only five possible values (1, 2, 3, 4 or 5) whereas the mean voter position can be measured as a continuous variable between the bounds of 1 and 5.

¹¹ Another way in which previous studies have measured issue salience is through the use of expert scores, but the issue dimensions in existing expert surveys (e.g. the Chapel Hill Expert Survey) only map onto a narrow subset of the issue dimensions in the elite survey. Consequently, using these data would necessitate dropping a lot of relevant data.

for each party and analyzed it carefully in order to determine whether each issue from the elite survey was mentioned in the magazine.¹² I then coded issues that were mentioned by a candidate's party as a "1" (salient) and issues that were not mentioned as a "0" (non-salient).¹³

A key advantage of measuring issue salience in this way is that the party magazines tend to have similar lengths, and they follow similar formats.¹⁴ Specifically, the party magazines have an editorial on the second or third page where the party leader specifies the political themes that (s)he considers most important in the forthcoming (or ongoing) election campaign, followed by several sections that detail the party's position on the issues that comprise the themes. The documents thus provide an excellent data source for issue salience because they highlight the issues that are most important to each party in a way that is

¹² For the Liberal Alliance I use the party's first ever magazine, which was issued after the 2015 general election in June, 2016. Doing so makes sense because the Liberal Alliance used the new magazine platform to specify the party's key issues (tax cuts and public sector reduction) much like the other parties did in their election magazines from 2015. Furthermore, omitting the Liberal Alliance from the analysis does not change the direction or statistical significance of the empirical results.

¹³ Issues are thus coded as salient for a party whenever they are mentioned in a party's magazine. Another approach would be to measure how much an issue was mentioned as opposed to whether it was mentioned at all, but preliminary analyses suggested that what matters for candidate positions is the latter rather than the former. This makes sense considering that the issues in the elite survey are fairly specific and usually only mentioned once in each magazine (if at all) while the number of sentences (or quasi-sentences) dedicated to an issue is at least partially a function of how complicated the issue is (as opposed to its salience).

¹⁴ A potential problem with these data is that issue salient could itself be a function of divergence in candidate positions (i.e. parties do not wish to highlight issues that could cause splits within the party). However, if member preferences are a key determinant of issue salience then an observable implication should be a lot of variation in the issues that parties highlight over time as new members with new preferences enter into the parties, and/or as existing members change their preferences. Yet, the issues that parties highlight as important over time tend to be remarkably stable. A cursory overview of the CMP dataset, for example, reveals that over the past several decades green parties have continuously highlighted issues pertaining to the environment, socialist parties have continuously highlighted redistributive issues, liberal parties have continuously highlighted issues pertaining to a free market economy, and nationalist parties have continuously highlighted issues pertaining to immigration and supranational integration. It thus appears that there are some durable issues that are essential to a party's identity, and I argue that these are the types of issues where we should generally see candidates take party positions regardless of variation in district voter positions. Furthermore, these are also the types of issues highlighted in the party magazines as described in footnote 15 below.

comparable across parties. Furthermore, the coded variable correlates well with expert codings of issue salience and shows clear signs of face validity.¹⁵

Finally, the model also needs to take party leader positions into account. The elite survey data offer a convenient opportunity to do so because the survey was not anonymous, which allows me to generate a variable that measures the position of the party leader on each issue.¹⁶ Including this variable not only allows for an analysis of the relationship between district and candidate issue positions while holding the party leader position constant, but it also allows for an analysis of the *relative* strength of the relationship between candidate and party leader positions versus candidate and mean district voter positions.¹⁷

I use these data to test Hypotheses 1 and 2 in a single model by regressing candidate positions on mean district voter positions, party leader positions, and issue salience with the unit of analysis being the candidate-issue, and with an ordered probit estimator given the ordered-categorical nature of the dependent variable.¹⁸ Furthermore, the right-hand side includes an interaction term for the mean district voter position and issue salience in order to appropriately test the hypothesis that the relationship between district voter and candidate positions is *conditional* on issue salience (Hypothesis 2). Likewise, the model includes an

¹⁵ The Pearson's correlation coefficient for the issue salience variable and expert codings of relevant issues in the VAA (EU integration, environment versus growth, law and order versus civil liberties, and public sector growth versus tax cuts) is $\approx .49$. Furthermore, this relationship is positive and statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level with $t = 29.01$. The variable also shows clear signs of face validity as parties are highlighting precisely the types of issues that are traditionally considered important to their party family.

¹⁶ The leaders of the Liberals (Lars Løkke Rasmussen) and the Social Democrats (Helle Thorning-Schmidt) did not answer the survey in 2015, so I use answers from Claus Hjort Frederiksen (Liberals) and Mette Frederiksen (Social Democrats) to identify the leader position for those parties instead. I choose this strategy because Claus Hjort Frederiksen became finance minister in the government that formed after the election, and Mette Frederiksen took over as party leader from Helle Thorning-Schmidt who retired from Danish politics. Omitting these parties from the empirical analysis does not change the substantive or statistical interpretation of the results.

¹⁷ Another possibility is to measure the party's issue position as the party's modal response to the issue. Doing so does not change the substantive or statistical interpretation of the results because the party leader's response usually is also the party's modal response as one would expect (in 69 of 80 possible cases).

¹⁸ Party leaders themselves are not included as observations in the empirical model.

interaction term for the party leader position and issue salience to test for the possibility that the relationship between party leader positions and candidate positions depends on the salience of the issue (Hypothesis 1).

The data also have a complicated multilevel structure that could result in correlated errors if not accounted for properly. First, it is possible that all candidates from all parties in all districts tend to agree more or less with some issue statements for reasons that are unrelated to the mean district voter position, the party leader position and issue salience. Second, it is possible that candidates from the same party agree more or less with some issue statement across all districts for reasons unaccounted for by the fixed variables in the model. Third, it is possible that there is systematic error because candidates from all parties agree more or less with some issue statement in a particular district. Finally, it is possible that candidates from a particular party in a particular district agree more or less with a particular issue statement for reasons that the independent variables do not measure. I address these possibilities by letting the intercepts vary at four different levels: 1) the level of the individual issue, 2) the level of the issue-party, 3) the level of the issue-district, and 4) the level of the issue-party-district.¹⁹ The statistical model can thus be summarized in the following error components equation where J candidates take positions on I issues in P parties and D districts:

$$y_{jipd}^* = \beta'x_{jipd} + u_i + u_{ip} + u_{id} + u_{ipd} \quad (1)$$

Where,

$$\begin{aligned} \beta'x_{jipd} = & \beta_1 \text{district voter position}_{id} + \beta_2 \text{party leader position}_{ip} + \\ & \beta_3 \text{issue salience}_{ip} + \beta_4 \text{district voter position}_{id} * \text{issue salience}_{ip} + \\ & \beta_5 \text{party leader position}_{ip} * \text{issue salience}_{ip} \end{aligned}$$

¹⁹ The model assumes that the random intercept distributions are centered on zero with uncorrelated variances.

Using the parameter estimates from this model specification, Figure 1 shows the average (expected) candidate position for different party leader positions over the mean district voter position.²⁰

Figure 1: Candidate positions, party leader positions, district voter positions, and issue salience

Note: Shaded areas represent 95 percent confidence intervals. There were no cases of party leaders choosing the “neither/or” category on salient issues. The results are obtained using an ordered probit estimator.

The figure shows evidence of several interesting relationships between candidate positions, party leader positions, district voter positions and issue salience.²¹ First, the figure

²⁰ The regression table with parameter estimates is shown in Table 1e in Appendix E rather than in the main paper because raw coefficients – particularly for interaction terms – are notoriously uninformative in non-linear models. See Ai and Norton (2003) and Berry et al. (2010) for evidence in favor of this point.

²¹ These results are not driven by a single party and thus robust to the exclusion of any one party from the empirical analysis.

shows that candidate positions are strongly related to the positions of their party leader.²² Specifically, the intercept in each of the subfigures varies according to the party leader's position such that candidates are much more likely to (dis)agree with an issue statement that their party leader also (dis)agrees with. Second, the candidate position slopes are positive, which suggests that when candidates take a position that is different from that of their party leader, then it tends to be related to variation in the average district voter position instead. Candidates thus sometimes take district instead of party positions despite the unitary actor assumption that has traditionally been applied in parliamentary research.

Third, party leader positions are more strongly related to candidate positions on issues that are salient to the candidate's party (Hypothesis 1), and district voter positions are more strongly related to candidate positions on non-salient issues (Hypothesis 2). This is most clear on issues where the party leader position is extreme – that is, issue statements that the candidate's party leader either agrees or disagrees with completely. On these issues candidates tend to take the same position as their party leader when the issue is salient to their party regardless of the mean district voter position. If, on the other hand, the issue is not salient, and if party leader and district voter positions diverge, then candidates tend to take less extreme positions than their party leaders (the differences in slopes between salient and non-salient issues are statistically distinguishable, which is shown in Figures 1e and 2e in Appendix E). District voter positions thus matter for candidate position taking, but less so on salient issues.

Fourth, Figure 1 reveals evidence that candidates take district positions on issues where the party leader position is not extreme – that is, issue statements that the party leader does not agree or disagree with completely – regardless of whether the issue is salient to their

²² The average candidate position corresponds to the expected value (weighed average) of the ordered probit probability distribution.

party. However, it is important to be somewhat careful when interpreting this finding because party leaders almost always (dis)agree completely with issue statements that are salient to their party (15 of 18 cases). In fact, party leaders never gave the “neither/or” response to an issue that was salient to their party. Nonetheless, an interesting possibility that follows from the empirical results is that candidates are more likely to take district positions on issues where their party leader’s position is less extreme.

Figure 1 thus provides evidence in favor of Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 (with some modification to account for cases where the party leader position is less extreme), but in a fairly generalized way. Consequently, Figure 2 shows the predicted distribution of candidate positions in a specific Danish district on a particular issue. The black colored distribution represents the MRP based distribution of voter positions in the ‘Vestjyllands Storkreds’ district on the following issue statement: “*The parliament should introduce minimum sentencing guidelines for aggravated assault and rape*”. The mean voter position in this particular district on this particular issue was roughly 4.25, indicating that the average voter from this district favored minimum sentencing guidelines.

Figure 2: Expected candidate positions in ‘Vestjyllands Storkreds’ on law and order issue

What, then, does the empirical model suggest about the distribution of candidate positions when the party leader takes a position in the complete opposite direction (completely opposed to minimum sentencing guidelines)? The green colored distribution indicates that candidates faced with this scenario almost always take the party leader position if the issue is salient to their party – even though their district voters generally are opposed to this position. The blue colored distribution, on the other hand, shows that if the issue is not salient to the party, then nearly half of all candidates will take a position that is different from their party leader’s position and more popular among the voters in the district.²³

Overall, the results so far are thus consistent with the two hypotheses derived from the party leader based theoretical model of candidate position taking developed in this paper. However, since the vast majority of candidates in 2015 competed on an open list it is not clear whether this evidence is generalizable to institutional inter-party competition contexts. The next subsection provides some preliminary evidence that bears on this question using data from the 2011 Danish parliamentary election.

Candidate Positions, Issue Salience, and Electoral Rules

As mentioned in the beginning of the empirical section, Danish parties can choose between presenting their candidates on open lists where voters can alter the candidate order through their personal votes, or on so-called flexible lists that are difficult for voters to alter.

Consequently, the Danish case can be used to gain some leverage on the question of whether and when candidates take district and party positions in institutional inter-party competition contexts. Unfortunately (for the purposes of this paper), only one party (the Unity List) used

²³ Another possible interpretation of Figure 2 is that candidates simply do not know what the position of their party leader is on non-salient issues, which causes them to diverge from that position. However, it is important to remember that the results from the empirical model suggest that candidates only diverge from their party leader on non-salient issues if the party leader’s issue position is unpopular in the candidate’s district. The salient and non-salient candidate distributions in Figure 2 would thus look very similar to each other in a district composed of voters who are generally opposed to minimum sentencing guidelines.

flexible lists in 2015, and it did so across all districts. Preliminary analyses of the 2015 data did reveal that Unity List candidates took more party and fewer district positions than other candidates, but it is not possible to know whether this is because of electoral rules, or for other reasons that are specific to the party, such as its far-left ideology. Or, put differently, it is possible that Unity List candidates would have taken mostly party positions on an open list as well.

It follows that a more useful analysis examines the relationship between electoral rules and candidate positions while holding party characteristics constant. The Danish context makes such an analysis possible because the Socialist People's Party used different types of lists in different districts in 2011. Specifically, this party used flexible lists in 3 of the 10 Danish districts, which means that some candidates within the Socialist People's Party were running on an open list, while others were running on a list that was de facto closed. This variation allows me to evaluate whether and when candidates in an institutional inter-party competition context diverge from their party on political issues while knowing if and when they do in an institutional intra-party competition context.

It is important to note at the outset of this analysis, however, that the Danish case does not constitute a natural experiment because the treatment (electoral rules) is not randomly assigned to the subjects (candidates). Rather, it is possible that party leaders select flexible lists in the districts where they anticipate more positional divergence among their candidates.²⁴ For this reason, the purpose of the analysis that follows is not to test whether electoral rules have a causal effect on candidate position taking, but rather to test whether

²⁴ The Socialist People's Party's district distribution of flexible and open lists over time suggests that this party's choice of list type is a mix of tradition and strategic choices made by the central party organization: In the 2007 election (the general election immediately prior to the 2011 election), for example, the distribution of flexible and open lists across districts was identical to the distribution in 2011, but in 2015 the party switched to an open list in all districts after public criticism that the flexible list favored male over female candidates.

candidates engage in behaviors that are consistent with the two hypotheses when they compete in an institutional inter-party competition context (while knowing whether candidates from the same party do in an institutional intra-party competition context).

Unfortunately, I cannot use a similar model specification as before to test these possibilities because there are no available mass survey data that replicate the 2011 VAA questions. For this reason, I test Hypothesis 1 and 2 separately in this subsection. First, I use the 2011 VAA data to analyze the extent to which Socialist People's Party candidates on flexible and open lists took positions that were different from those of their party leader on salient and non-salient issues (Hypothesis 1).²⁵ Next, I examine the level of district position taking among candidates on open and flexible lists on an issue that was not salient to the party's brand and for which district voter preferences are easy to infer (Hypothesis 2). Admittedly, these analyses are limited in scope because they only involve 83 candidates from one parliamentary party in one election (and, for Hypothesis 2, only on a single issue), but in addition to providing some preliminary evidence I hope that the analyses will stimulate further research on similar research questions in other parliamentary contexts.

In order to first examine the level of candidate divergence on salient and non-salient issues (Hypothesis 1) among candidates on different party lists, I estimate a probit model where the dependent variable takes a "1" whenever a Socialist People's Party candidate took a position that was in a different direction from the party leader ("0" otherwise). The dependent variable thus takes a "1" for issue statements that Socialist People's Party candidates did not (dis)agree either partially or completely with when their party leader did. The right-hand side of this empirical model is composed of a dummy variable that takes a "1" for candidates on flexible lists ("0" otherwise), and another dummy variable that takes a "1"

²⁵ The 2011 VAA data were obtained from the Hansen and Rasmussen (2013) dataset.

for issues that were salient to the Socialist People's Party in 2011 ("0" otherwise), as well as an interaction between the two independent variables.²⁶

This statistical model is summarized in the following equation where J Socialist People's Party candidates take personal or party positions on I issues in D districts, and where the intercepts are allowed to vary at the level of the issue and district-issue:

$$y_{jid}^* = \beta' x_{jid} + u_i + u_{id} \quad (2)$$

Where,

$$\beta' x_{jid} = \beta_1 \text{Flexible list}_{id} + \beta_2 \text{issue salience}_i + \beta_3 \text{flexible list}_{id} * \text{issue salience}_i$$

Using the parameter estimates from this model specification, Figure 3 illustrates how often candidates on flexible and open lists took positions that were in a different direction from those of their party leader on salient and non-salient issues.²⁷ The results suggest that personal position taking occurs frequently among candidates on both open and flexible lists, though almost never on issues that are salient to their party. The findings are thus consistent with Hypothesis 1 in both institutional intra- and inter-party contexts: Candidates from the Socialist People's Party on both open and de facto closed party lists diverged from their party fairly often, but only on issues that were not salient to their party.

²⁶ The Socialist People's Party in 2011 differed from the parties in 2015 by highlighting their election platform in an election manifesto instead of the last party magazine before the election. Consequently, I use the Socialist People's Party's 2011 election manifesto to code issue salience for this analysis. 5 of the 20 candidate survey issues were mentioned in the Socialist People's Party 2011 election manifesto.

²⁷ The coefficients are shown in Table 2e in Appendix E.

Figure 3: Personal position taking among candidates from the Socialist People's Party

Figure 3 thus provides evidence in favor of Hypothesis 1 in both institutional intra- and inter-competition contexts, but it is not possible to learn from this figure whether candidate divergence on non-salient issues is related to voter preferences at the district level (Hypothesis 2). As previously mentioned, I do not have mass survey data available from 2011 that bear on this question, but district voter preferences are nonetheless easy to infer on one VAA issue statement from this year. Specifically, the 2011 VAA asked the Danish candidates to take positions on the following statement: “*The parliament favors the Copenhagen area over the rest of the country*”. It appears reasonable to assume that voters in districts outside of Copenhagen had a tendency to agree with this issue statement (8 districts in total), while voters residing in Copenhagen districts (2 districts in total) had a tendency to disagree with the statement because the question taps directly into the center-periphery cleavage (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967).

For this reason, and because the issue was not salient to the Socialist People's Party's party's brand,²⁸ the party leader based theory of district position taking suggests that candidates on both open and flexible lists should have been more likely to disagree with the issue statement if they were running in one of the two Copenhagen districts. I thus regress candidate positions from this issue on the electoral rules variable from before, and a variable that takes a "1" for candidates who ran in a Copenhagen district ("0" otherwise), as well as an interaction term for the two independent variables, using an ordered probit estimator. This statistical model is summarized in the equation below where J Socialist People's Party candidates take positions in D districts, and where the intercepts are allowed to vary in different districts:

$$y_{jd}^* = \beta'x_{jd} + u_d \quad (3)$$

Where,

$$\beta'x_{jd} = \beta_1 \text{Flexible list}_d + \beta_2 \text{Copenhagen district}_d + \beta_3 \text{flexible list}_d * \text{Copenhagen district}_d$$

Figure 4 uses the parameter estimates from this model specification to illustrate the substantive relationship between candidate positions, list type and district location.²⁹ Though preliminary, these results suggest that candidate positions are positively related to district voter positions, and more weakly to electoral rules. Specifically, 2011 Socialist People's Party candidates on open *and* flexible lists were on average more likely to disagree that Copenhagen was favored by the Danish parliament if they were from a Copenhagen district. This result illustrates district position taking among parliamentary candidates in both an

²⁸ The issue was not mentioned in the party's election manifesto.

²⁹ The coefficients are shown in Table 3e in Appendix E.

institutional intra- and interparty competition context, but the generalizability of the finding will clearly need to be tested in a much larger sample of parliamentary countries and parties in the future. I hope that this paper will motivate such research.

Figure 4: Socialist People’s Party candidate agreement with the statement that the Danish Parliament favors the Copenhagen area.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed candidate position taking within parliamentary parties using Denmark as the empirical case. The main findings are that candidates in both institutional intra- and interparty competition contexts take positions that are strongly related to those of their party leader on issues that are salient to their party’s electoral brand, but that candidates are also influenced by the position of the mean district voter position on less salient issues. While the generalizability of these results will need to be tested in a larger sample of

countries they have important implications for how representation works and thus at least two implications for the broader literature on representation in parliamentary democracies.

First, the empirical results presented in this paper are consistent with recent research, which suggests that party leaders sometimes are motivated to develop ambiguous as opposed to clear-cut and differentiated issue positions (Bräuninger and Giger, 2016; Lo et al., 2016; Rovny, 2012; Somer-Topcu, 2015). Consequently, the findings contribute to an emerging literature that relaxes the assumption that parliamentary parties occupy a single location in each policy space (or a single ideological position). Specifically, the results suggest that parties are unified on issues that are highly salient to their electoral brand, but that parties develop a distribution of candidate positions that is related to voter preferences at the district level on less salient issues.

Second, the paper contributes to the literature on the personal vote by identifying an additional mechanism that links district voter preferences and (re-)election seeking candidate behavior, namely party leader strategies. Accordingly, the empirical analysis shows evidence in favor of district position taking among parliamentary candidates in institutional contexts where the personal vote-seeking incentives to respond to district demands are both high and low. To be sure, this does not mean that personal vote-seeking incentives do not matter for candidate behavior as the party choice of using an open or flexible list in a Danish district is likely to be endogenous to candidate behavior. In fact, the theoretical model in this paper suggests that personal vote-seeking incentives do matter, and that parties can use them to cultivate an electorally advantageous distribution of candidate positions in OLPR and SMD systems. That being said, the flexible list results from the Danish case suggest that personal vote-seeking incentives are not a necessary condition for substantive representation at the district level because there are other variables that foster congruence between district voter preferences and elite behavior as well.

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