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Parties' Policy Adjustments in Response to Changes in Issue Saliency

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Political parties' policy positions are crucial for which compromises they are willing to make and which policies they implement if/when they gain office. The question of what makes parties adjust their policy positions has therefore been high on the agenda of political science since Downs (1957). A rich literature has investigated how factors such as past election results or shifts in public opinion lead parties to change policy positions (for an overview, see Adams, 2012).

In recent years, this literature has increasingly interacted with the other major theoretical approach to party competition, namely the literature on issue competition, i.e. that parties compete over the saliency of particular issues, not by taking positions on the general left–right scale (Budge and Farlie 1983; Carmines 1991). Several studies have started integrating insights from the two literatures (e.g. Hobolt and De Vries, 2015; Meguid, 2008; Spoon et al., 2014; van der Wardt et al., 2014; Wagner, 2012; Spoon & Klüver 2015; Wagner & Meyer 2014).

Still, one of the open questions that remain is whether parties in fact change policy positions on a given issue when it becomes more salient in the party system. For instance, does increased party system saliency of the environmental issue affect party positions on the environment?

In this paper, we argue that parties that are large in electoral terms in contrast to small parties adjust their policy positions on specific issues in response to changes in the party-system saliency of such issues. When the other parties in the same party system focus more on a given issue, larger parties adjust their positions in the direction preferred by most voters. Only large parties have such an incentive; smaller parties focus on improving their limited vote share by differentiating from large parties.

We test this claim utilizing CMP data from 18 countries since 1980 (Volkens et al., 2013). Focusing on immigration, the environment and welfare, we analyse whether changes in issue saliency on the party-system agenda lead parties to adjust their policy positions. We find

this to be the case for two of the three issues and present evidence that this effect increases with party size.

By focusing on position shifts in response to the behaviour of other parties in the same party system, this paper improves our understanding of how parties interact and influence each other. Apart from a few notable exceptions (Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009; Williams, 2015), the literature on policy adjustments has paid relatively little attention to how parties adjust their policy positions in response to what their competitors in the party system do. Furthermore, the literature on changes in policy positions has focused almost exclusively on party positions on a general left–right scale. Party competition, however, takes place in relation to specific policy issues and the empirical results of this paper corroborate that political parties' incentives to adjust their positions relate to the particular issues.

When Do Parties Change Policy Positions?

The question of what leads parties to adjust their policy positions has been on the agenda of political science since Downs (1957). As argued by Adams (2012), empirical research focusing on party position-taking in the multi-party context (in which most political parties find themselves) has gained momentum in recent years, primarily driven by the availability of new data on parties' policy positions based on party manifesto data (Volkens et al., 2013) and expert surveys (e.g. Bakker et al., 2015).

This literature has focused on the various drivers of changes in party positions, including shifts in public opinion (Adams et al., 2004), past election results (Somer-Topcu 2009), changes in core supporters' preferences (Ezrow et al., 2011) and parties' respective valence images in the public (Clark, 2014). Other studies have examined the electoral consequences of such policy shifts (e.g. Adams et al., 2006; Tavits, 2007) and the constraints parties face when adopting a new policy position (Meyer, 2013; Schumacher et al., 2013).

In recent years, several studies of party competition have started integrating insights on parties positions with the other major theoretical approach to party competition, namely the literature on issue competition (e.g. Hobolt and De Vries, 2015; Meguid, 2008; Spoon et al., 2014; van der Wardt et al., 2014; Wagner, 2012; Spoon & Klüver 2015; Wagner & Meyer 2014). The core idea in the issue competition tradition is that parties compete by emphasizing issues they prefer, not by taking positions on the general left–right scale (Budge and Farlie 1983; Carmines 1991).[1] However, one central question posed by the literature on issue competition remains unanswered, namely whether changes in which issues are salient in party competition cause parties to change positions. In light of the increased importance of issue competition for party competition, which has developed parallel to the rise of issue voting (Klüver and Spoon, 2014; Thomassen, 2005), this question has become increasingly important (see also Green-Pedersen, 2007).

The issue-competition literature has increasingly emphasized that while parties have preferred issues and tend to emphasize them more than others (Dolezal et al., 2013; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015), they also pay considerable attention to the issues owned by their opponents (Sigelmann and Buell, 2004). Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010) speak of a 'party-system agenda'; that is, a hierarchy of issues at a given time that causes parties to pay attention to certain issues, whether they own them or not. At the same time, parties try to influence the future content of this agenda (see also Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015).[2] The notion of a party-system agenda highlights how the actions of an individual party cannot merely be explained by studying the party itself and the electorate; it is also necessary to

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[1] The question of how changes in policy positions affect issue salience is obviously also very relevant. Within the scope of this paper, however, it can only be addressed as a question of reverse causality (see discussion below).

[2] Along similar lines, Steenbergen and Scott (2004) speak of systemic saliency.

consider the behaviour of the other parties in the party system. This insight points out a limitation in the literature on policy position changes, namely the limited focus on how parties respond to what their competitors do, while at the same time trying to influence what the same competitors do.[3] Adams and Somer-Topcu (2009) are among the few to focus on how shifts in policy positions are affected by what competing political parties do (see also Williams, 2015).

Furthermore, the literature on changes in policy positions is almost exclusively focused on changes along the left–right scale (mostly the RILE scale found in the CMP dataset). The literature on issue competition focuses on issues such as the environment, immigration or European integration (cf. Green-Pedersen 2019a). The left–right scale is normally a collection of issues concerning mainly the economy, taxation and public expenditures on various programmes. However, because this scale is a combination of many issues that may have their own competitive dynamics, it is hard to relate issue competition to an aggregate left–right scale. Parties compete on the underlying issues (e.g. taxation, environmental problems, health issues) but rarely discuss their respective positions on a general left–right scale. It is therefore important to focus on individual policy issues when integrating insights from both the positional and issue competition literature. All of the studies that have moved in this direction also focus on specific issues like European integration or the environment (Hobolt and De Vries, 2015; Meguid, 2008; Spoon et al., 2014; van der Wardt et al., 2014; Wagner, 2012; Spoon & Klüver 2015).

The next section, therefore, proposes a theoretical argument for how changes in issue saliency at the party-system level influence parties' issue positions on a specific issue.

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[3] Böhmelt et al (2016) have shown that parties affect each other's position cross-nationally, i.e. party policy diffusion. This, however, is a quite different process from party competition within a national party system.

How and When Parties Respond to Changes in Party-System Saliency of Policy Issues

We can think of the process of issue voting as a micro-foundation to link systemic salience and parties' policy shifts. Issue voting implies that individuals chose parties based on spatial distance on a policy dimension but that this distance is weighted by the salience that an individual assigns to this dimension (Adams et al., 2005). For political parties, issue voting implies that the more salient an issue is in party competition, the more important it is for them to take positions that appeal to the electorate (Belanger and Mequid, 2008). Changes in issue saliency on the party-system agenda (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010) will therefore likely cause parties to change positions.

This argument is based on the assumption that parties have not automatically taken the most popular position (i.e. that of the median voter) on all policy issues. The positions taken by the median voter on different issues are unlikely to be consistent in broader ideological terms. The electorate might want both a strict immigration policy and a pro-environmental policy. If a party automatically delivers both, however, it can easily be seen as ideologically inconsistent and will have a hard time mobilizing activists around a common ideological platform. Thus, parties typically face a situation where they are in line with the median voter on some policy issues and not on others.

When the saliency of an issue increases, the political party must balance the potential electoral gains against the potential costs when it considers moving towards the median voter on that issue (see also de Sio and Weber, 2014). Changes in party positions will likely produce internal conflicts, which party leaders want to avoid (Panebianco, 1988). In fact, activist-dominated parties have been found to be less likely to react to public opinion and to change their position (Schumacher et al., 2013). A second type of potential cost is being accused of flip-flopping or pandering (Somer-Topcu, 2009). Parties therefore only change positions when a clear incentive exists (see also Janda et al., 1995: 174). Hence, only when the saliency of an

issue on the party-system agenda increases or decreases can it be expected to trigger new party positions.

When an issue becomes more or less salient on this agenda, it reflects a general perception across the party system that an issue has become more or less important (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). Sometimes this is something a party welcomes and tries to reinforce due to for instance issue-ownership. In other cases, this is an issue a party would rather avoid, but feels forced to address because its competitors do so. If other parties start to pay increasing attention to an issue, the party runs the risk of the issue becoming more salient with the electorate without the party having presented an attractive position to the electorate. Thus, issue saliency on the party-system agenda matters to party positions because a change in party system saliency implies a change in the electoral gains/costs of the position of the party on the given issue. Hence, we can expect parties to be responsive to shifts in the party system agenda.

This immediately raises the question of in which direction parties move when responding to changes in issue saliency on the party-system agenda? One way for parties to appear attractive to the electorate on salient issues is to send 'directional signals'; that is, to shift the party position in a certain direction. Such signals are crucial for how voters evaluate the party. This voter evaluation is based less on the party's positional starting point (cf. Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989). When we study specific issues (e.g. immigration or the environment), there is typically a direction supported by a majority of the electorate (e.g. anti-immigration or pro-environment; see below).

At the same time, parties face considerable uncertainty about the exact position of the median voter; by sending a 'directional signal', political parties can accommodate the preferences of the electorate while taking this uncertainty into account. The uncertainty involved in judging the exact position of the median voter also implies an incentive to move in

the majority direction, even if a party actually finds itself more closely associated with the majority-preferred direction to begin with. Thus, even when a party holds issue ownership, it still needs to send directional signals. This incentive is reinforced by competing parties moving in the majority direction on a salient issue. Parties on both sides of the political spectrum are therefore expected to move in the majority direction when saliency increases. The argumentation above can be summarized in H1

>*Hypothesis 1: With the increasing saliency of an issue on the party-system agenda, parties adjust their issue positions in the direction of the majority position on the issue.*

A related question is whether parties have incentives to simply move in the non-majority issue direction if party-system saliency of an issue decreases. The incentive to please the median voter decreases with saliency, and party factions may have been dissatisfied with a positional move when saliency increased. Thus, while party members may accept the issue position movement as a 'necessary evil' in times of increased party-system saliency, they may want to swing the position back once saliency decreases. Moving in the opposite direction might also make the party more ideologically consistent across issues. As argued above, however, moving also implies a possible accusation of pandering or flip-flopping and potential internal conflict. Thus, although parties have incentives to move in the non-majority issue direction when saliency decreases, the incentives to do so are weaker than the incentives in a situation of increasing party-system saliency.

The next question is whether this logic applies equally to all parties. The literature on party competition increasingly highlights how parties behave differently depending on characteristics like mainstream versus niche (Meguid 2005, 2008),[4] government aspirations (or

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[4] In broad terms, mainstream parties are the traditional mass parties dominating government formation (e.g. Social Democrats, Conservatives). Niche parties (e.g. the Greens) have emerged around particular issues in

not) (Schumacher et al. 2015), and party size in electoral terms (Spoon 2011, Abou-Chadi and Orlowski 2016).

We argue that size (in electoral terms) is the most important characteristic relating to how parties respond to changes in issue saliency (see also Abou-Chadi and Orlowski, 2016; Klüver and Spoon, 2014). Like a government, large parties must offer voters a broad policy package that is attractive on multiple important issues (cf. Bertelli and John, 2013). If a large party wants to stay large or even grow, it can only maintain non-majority-supported positions on low-saliency issues on the party-system agenda. Large parties must be flexible and adjust their policy package in a way that accounts for voters' (often inconsistent) issue positions. In other words, the argument outlined above largely applies to large parties focused on the median voter.

Small parties care less about the median voter. For them, differentiating themselves from large parties is the most important way of gaining votes (Wagner, 2012). Not moving in the majority direction and 'doing something different' is therefore an attractive strategy for small parties.[5] In all probability, this strategy does not attract the median voter, but what small parties care about is to increase their limited vote share. If the saliency of the immigration issue increases, a small Green and a small radical right-wing party will behave similarly and not send the same majority-directional signal as large parties. The Greens can send a signal of product differentiation by standing firm on their position and not pandering. The radical right-wing

recent decades. The exact definition of the two types of parties has been subject to substantial debate (cf. Wagner 2012; Meyer and Miller, 2013).

[5] Small parties cannot be expected to move in the opposite direction than large parties due to the moving-related costs. A small party will not accept these costs if product differentiation can be achieved without changing position.

party will probably have little to gain from sending an anti-immigrant signal, as voters are already aware of their position.

> *Hypothesis 2: Large parties adjust their issue positions in the direction of the majority position on the issue more strongly than small parties.*

It is also important to stress that though electoral size pr. definition is variable from election to election, what matters for party behaviour is party size over longer periods like decades. At least, until recent elections, parties like Social Democratic, Christian Democratic parties have, despite ups and downs in their electoral support been large parties compared to most other parties. This is argued to influence their party behaviour.

Data and Issue Definitions

Our data draws on the CMP dataset (see https://manifestoproject.wzb.eu/), a dataset including 18 West European countries from 1980–2014. The choice of this period is driven by the increased importance of issue voting and issue competition in West-European politics (Green-Pedersen, 2007; Thomassen, 2005). The vivid debate around the CMP dataset and its use has generated impressive insights into its strengths and weaknesses (cf. Gemenis, 2013; Volkens et al., 2013). At the same time, it is the only dataset on political parties offering long-term data from which measures of both positions and saliency can be derived.[6]

As argued above, studying how issue saliency at the party-system level affects party positions requires the examination of individual issues rather than a general left–right scale. The CMP coding scheme was not developed around policy issues, but provides useful

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[6] The CHES data (Bakker et al., 2015) by now encompasses a substantial time-series for parties' left–right positions but not for specific issues such as immigration or the environment.

categories for some issues (Green-Pedersen 2019b). In the following, we test our hypotheses on three relevant issues: immigration, welfare and the environment.

On immigration, studies of public opinion clearly show that much of the general public wants restrictive immigration policies (Ivarsflaten, 2005; Sides and Citrin, 2007). According to our theoretical argument, this should incite parties to signal agreement with the electorate by moving towards a stricter position in response to the increased attention to the immigration issue. On the environment, Franzen and Meyer (2010) find stable, pro-environment attitudes throughout the Western world. Finally, on the welfare state, at least in the Western European context discussed here, there would appear to be broad public support for the welfare state (Jæger, 2009).

How to Extract Saliency and Position Measures from the CMP Data

Using the CMP dataset to generate measures of both saliency and positions raises a more fundamental question about how to separate the measure of saliency from the measure of party position (Budge and Meyer, 2013; Lowe et al., 2011). As Lowe et al. (2011) convincingly argue, the potential problem is that changes in the relative saliency of an issue compared to other issues may automatically (i.e. due to the construction of the measures) lead to shifts in positional measures. Our research question renders such an automatic connection highly problematic.

For the positional measure, we therefore follow the log-ratio approach suggested by Lowe et al., which builds on the Kim–Fording approach (Fording and Heemin, 2002). Following the latter, the relevant issue categories are divided into positive and negative, and the relative share of positive and negative attention is then calculated. Thus, the measure has a value of 1 if all of the relevant quasi-sentences are positive, −1 if negative. As argued by Lowe et al. (2011), however, this implies that the marginal value in terms of conveying the party

position of each extra sentence devoted to the issue is the same, which is questionable. It also enforces an absolute endpoint to the positional scale without a strong theoretical justification. Lowe et al. (2011) therefore suggest the log-transformation applied in this study.

For the saliency measures, Lowe et al. (2011) also suggest a log-transformation approach based on the argument about the decreasing marginal effects of adding quasi-sentences. In terms of saliency, however, the argument about decreasing marginal returns from communication (Lowe et al., 2011: 130–1) is less convincing. Saliency is about the attention parties are willing to pay to an issue, which is captured directly by the number of (quasi)-sentences they are willing to devote to it. Therefore, we use a straightforward additive measure of attention to the issues.

The CMP dataset contains a number of categories relevant for the three issues, and Appendix 1 presents more detailed argumentation for the choices made in this study and for the exact calculation of the measures. Following Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2015) and Steenbergen and Scott (2004), the manifesto dataset allows us to calculate a common 'party-system agenda' representing the average issue attention of all other parties participating in an election. For instance, if parties A, B, C and D participate, then the party-system agenda facing Party A on issue i is calculated as the average attention to issue i of parties B, C and D. This calculation is then repeated for each party in each election and for all three issues. It is important to stress that because the idea of the measure is to capture common perceptions of the importance of issues across the entire party system, parties are not weighted by party size.

Including all parties in the measures also allows us to examine the relative salience of the three issues. Figure 1 illustrates summary measures of the saliency of our three issues on the party-system agenda for the period under investigation.[7] As argued earlier, the welfare issue

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[7] All figures have been produced using Bischof's (2017) graphic scheme for Stata.

is far more salient than immigration and the environment. In fact, welfare makes up a larger share of the party-system agenda than the other two issues combined.

[Figure 1 around here]

As argued by Adams and Somer-Topcu (2009: 830–2), endogeneity is an unavoidable problem when trying to model how a party is influenced by other parties while at the same time also trying to influence the other parties. To handle this problem, Adams & Somer-Topcu suggest a "conservative" approach that we follow and use the lagged change of the party-system agenda measure excluding the party itself. We thus exclude concurrent relationships, because parties need time to react to changes in their respective environments, and the process of drafting programmes is stretched over a longer period leading up to an election. To test Hypothesis 2, we include a measure of party size that represents the average vote share of each party in the previous three elections. All our findings are robust against using a measure that averages party size over the whole period under investigation. Party size and parties' positions are partly endogenous, i.e. parties' positions should affect their vote share. Thus, in the robustness section, we show additional evidence that largely allows us to rule out that our findings are driven by this endogenous relationship.

As discussed in the theory section, there is considerable overlap between small parties and niche parties. To be precise, niche parties have typically been small parties, while small parties can be either niche or mainstream parties. Hence, in the robustness section, we also include a control variable for niche party that allows us to demonstrate that our findings are actually based on party size, not niche party status.

Controls and model estimation

The empirical analysis includes several control variables that may predict shifts in party positions and may constitute confounders for our main relationship of interest. First, we include a party's issue position at t-1, as the previous issue position is likely to affect the magnitude and direction of potential shifts. Second, this paper focuses on how changes in issue positions are influenced by changes in issue saliency. The opposite might also be true (i.e. position shifts may affect saliency), however, and we therefore control for the 'system (average) position shift' of all other parties at time t-1.

The literature on adjustments to party policy positions singles out two main driving forces leading parties to adapt their respective positions on new issues: vote loss and niche party success. Parties that have lost in previous elections are more likely to change their strategies. A credible niche challenger on an issue pressures mainstream parties to react to the issue on which they are campaigning (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Spoon et al., 2014). Hence, we include a variable for 'vote change' at t-1 and the electoral strength of niche parties on the specific issue in the previous election. We use radical right-wing parties for immigration, Green parties for the environment and left-wing populist parties for the welfare state.[8]

For immigration, we additionally control for the 'extent of immigration' to a country (divided by the size of the population). We add economic control variables ('GDP per capita', 'unemployment rate') to the models for the environment and the welfare state.[9] Positive positions on post-materialist issues (e.g. the environment) should be more positive when the economy is doing well, the same is true for generous attitudes towards the welfare state. The model for environmental issues also includes a control variable for the time of the 'Chernobyl' disaster due to its importance as a focusing event. In addition, all models include a crisis dummy

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[8] A list of all niche parties included in our analysis can be found in Appendix 2.

[9] Data material on immigration and economic variables is from OECD statistics, https://data.oecd.org/

variable, which takes the value of 1 from 2008 onwards to reflect the years following the global financial 'crisis'. Finally, government or opposition status may affect the political parties' issue strategies. Consequently, the models include a variable for government participation before the election at time t.

To estimate the effect of changes in the party-system agenda on parties' policy positions, we present the following model:

$$\Delta Position(t) = Position(t-1) \; + \; \Delta Party\;System\;Agenda\;(t-1) + \; Party\;Size$$
$$+ \; Niche\;Party\;Presence\;(t-1)$$
$$+ \; \Delta Party\;System\;Position\;Change\;(t-1) \; + \; Vote\;Change\;(t-1)$$
$$+ \; Government\;(t) \; + \; Issue\;Specific\;Control\;Variables$$

We then include interaction terms with party size to examine Hypothesis 2. Our models are estimated using OLS with country-fixed effects and standard errors clustered within parties. We include country-fixed effects to control for time-invariant country particularities (e.g. political culture or the electoral system) that might make changing positions on the issues more or less likely. This also means limiting our analysis to within-country variation, thus excluding potential biases from cross-sectional evidence that might arise from country-specific issue salience and parties' average policy positions. In Appendix 3 we present additional analyses that use an issue-party stacked data set and apply multilevel random intercept models. This stacked data more adequately captures the hierarchical nature of our data. Since we can confirm our main findings and since within a stacked data set investigating issue differences becomes less straight forward, we present our findings for OLS with country fixed effects here. We also provide results from an estimation procedure based on Meyer and Wagner (2017) that distinguishes opinion based position change from salience based position change. Since having

salience based manifesto data for our main independent as well as dependent variable, there is a risk of an association just by construction. We thus demonstrate that changes in the party system agenda affect purely opinion based changes.

Findings

Table 1 presents our results for the effect of changes in issue salience on shifts in policy positions for immigration, the environment and welfare.

[Table 1 around here]

With respect to the variable of main theoretical interest, Table 1 shows that changes in the party-system agenda only have a statistically significant impact on shifts in policy positions for one of the three issue areas. In line with Hypothesis 1, with increasing salience of environmental issues, parties tend to shift their policy positions towards a more pro-environment stance.[10] While immigration is found to have an effect in the anticipated direction (with increasing salience, parties move right on the immigration issue), it does not reach a conventional level of statistical significance. Changes in the salience of welfare issues affect parties' policy strategies much less, and there is no statistically significant effect.

To investigate Hypothesis 2, namely whether the effect of changes in issue salience varies with party size, an additional interaction term is included in all models. The results are presented using marginal effects and predicted values plots. The regression table including all our coefficients can be found in Appendix 3 (Table A2).

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[10] As explained above, environmental position is coded from left to right, lower scores indicating a pro-environmental position; the negative coefficient is therefore in line with Hypothesis 1.

[Figure 2 around here]

Figure 2 shows the marginal effect of changes in saliency conditional on party size for the immigration issue. The figure shows how the marginal effect of changes in saliency increases with party size. While there is no statistically significant effect for smaller parties, there is a statistically significant positive effect for parties receiving an average vote share of more than 20% in the past three elections. For a party with a 35% vote share, a one standard deviation increase in the salience of immigration leads to a 0.31 change in our dependent variable. This resembles the difference in mean positions between Social Democratic and Christian Democratic parties in our sample and can be seen as quite substantial. Hence, when the saliency of immigration increases, large parties assume a more anti-immigrant position. This supports Hypothesis 2.

[Figure 3 around here]

Figure 3 offers another approach to this relationship. We show the predicted values of position changes depending on issue salience for a small (5% vote share) and a large (35%) party. For the former, we see that changes in issue salience barely affect changes in positions. For the latter, we find that increases in salience lead to predicted shifts towards a more popular anti-immigrant position. However, reduced salience does not lead to an instant shift back from this position.

[Figure 4 around here]

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Figure 4 presents the marginal effects for environmental issues. Similar to the effects for immigration, we find effect size to increase with party size. When environmental issues become more salient, parties shift towards a more pro-environment position. For environmental issues, even smaller parties seem to react in this way, but less than their large mainstream competitors do. For a party with a 35% vote share, a one standard deviation increase in the salience of environmental issues leads to a 0.33 shift towards a more pro-environment position. Again, this is roughly the same as the mean difference between Social Democratic and Christian Democratic parties in our sample. Figure 5 shows that large parties react to both decreases and increases in the salience of environmental issues. Hence, although the patterns are similar, parties are more responsive to changes in issue salience for environmental issues, shifting their position with increasing and decreasing salience.

We find no statistically significant relationship between changes in issue salience and changes in parties' positions on welfare issues (see Figure 6).

Before discussing the robustness of the findings, we want to discuss three noteworthy effects among our control variables (see Table 1). First, there is a statistically significant negative effect of a party's position at t-1. This indicates an inverse relationship between previous positions and subsequent shifts; that is, parties with more right-wing positions in one election generally tend to move in the other direction in the next election. Second, controlling for changes in issue salience, we find no significant effect of niche party strength on policy shifts. This indicates that the well-documented effect of the success of niche parties might primarily operate via a mechanism of issue saliency changes. Third, we do not find any issues

where electoral losers shift their positions more. This contrasts with the idea that losers should be more likely to adopt new positions to change the dominant discourse of party competition and shows that rather than merely another independent variable, party-system saliency actually reveals different dynamics of individual issue-level responsiveness compared to the dynamics found at the aggregated left–right dimension.

Robustness

One potential problem with interpreting the results lies in how parties' policy positions potentially affect party size. While we use the average vote share for the previous three elections, we cannot fully rule out that this relationship is endogenous. Hence, as discussed above, we use a dummy variable for small parties that takes on the value of 1 if a party has never received more than 20% of the vote and 0% if it has always received more than 20% of the vote in all elections in the period. While this does not preclude an endogenous relationship between policy position and party size per se, it rules out that changes in size and changes in position are correlated in our analysis because parties crossing this threshold are excluded from the analysis. Figure 7 shows the marginal effects of this interaction for immigration and the environment (find the regression table in the Appendix, Table A3).

[Figure 7 around here]

The left-side panel in Figure 7 shows how changes in issue salience do not significantly affect small parties' positions on immigration issues. Conversely, large parties shift towards more anti-immigrant positions when issue salience increases. While we find a significant effect for both small and large parties regarding the environment, the substantive effect is much bigger for large parties; the difference between small and large parties is also statistically significant.

In short, the findings using a time-invariant party size dummy variable support our previous findings. This largely excludes the risk of an endogenous relationship between parties' policy positions and their vote share.

As discussed in the theory section, there is a considerable overlap between small parties and niche parties, the latter defined by their niche-issue appeal rather than their size. To demonstrate that it is actually size and not niche-party status that is driving our results, we re-run our models controlling for niche-party status (see Appendix 2 for list of niche parties). This does not significantly affect the results. Figure A1 in Appendix 3 shows the marginal effects for immigration and the environment (see regression Table A4).

We conclude the empirical analysis with some additional findings to underline the robustness of our results. One question arising from the results presented above is whether the positional starting point of parties makes a difference. Given the directional logic advocated above, the previous issue position might matter for responsiveness to shifts in issue salience. Parties that already have more popular positions in one direction on an issue might have less incentive to send directional signals in response to changes in saliency. We investigated this by re-running the models in Table 1 while including an interaction between party position at t-1 and change in party-system attention at time t-1. The marginal effects plots for these interactions are available in Figure A2 in Appendix 3. We do find that parties with a position further from the electorate's preferences react more strongly to shifting issue salience on immigration. When considering the confidence bounds, however, this effect is limited. We see no effect for the environment.

In the main analyses reported above, we controlled for positional shifts at t-1, averaged across all parties participating in the previous election, based on the argument that previous policy shifts could affect the salience of an issue and parties' policy shifts at time t. This logic, however, is equally valid at the individual-party level. Hence, in an additional analysis, we have

controlled for individual party shifts at t-1 instead of the other parties' average positional shifts. These analyses show, however, that controlling for individual party policy shifts instead of average policy shifts does not substantially affect any of our effects of theoretical interest. The marginal effects for these analyses are available in Figure A3 in Appendix 3.

Finally, to ensure that our results are not driven by single countries in our sample, we re-run our analyses successively, excluding one country at a time. While the exclusion of single countries slightly affects the magnitude of our estimated effects, we reproduce the main statistically significant effects for all re-estimated models (an overview is available in Figures A4A-C Appendix 3).

Conclusion

This paper has shown that changes in issue saliency, understood as issue attention at the party-system level, are important for the policy positions that large parties take on these issues. When saliency increases, large parties move their position in the direction preferred by the majority of the electorate. Small parties are only responsive to changes in the salience of environmental issues and much less so than their larger competitors.

For the literature on party policy positions this paper demonstrates the importance of investigating individual-issue-level party competition. The literature on party policy positions has focused strongly on the aggregate left–right dimension, and the findings here would indicate that this seems to have been a limitation for investigating party competition. At the same time, the issue perspective raises a major complexity for our understanding of party competition: variation across issues. The findings above showed that for the welfare issue, changes in party-system saliency did not matter for changes in party positions. One possible explanation would be that the welfare state is a very well-established and highly salient issue for parties as also shown in figure 1. Thus, on this issue, parties might already have adjusted

their position in the direction preferred by the majority of the electorate. When party system saliency increases, parties see little point in moving further in the pro-welfare-state direction. Thus, cross-issue variation is clearly an important topic for further investigation. This also highlights the danger of drawing conclusions about party competition dynamics based on single-issue studies.

An important question arising from this analysis is what actually causes change in the saliency of issues on the party-system agendas; not least how this relates to public saliency. This question clearly deserves further scholarly attention. The same is true regarding the relationship between the party-system agenda and other variables found to stimulate changes in party positions (e.g. the electoral success of niche parties) (cf. Abou-Chadi, 2016). However, the fact that this study has shown that parties do change their otherwise stable position in response to increased attention to an issue from other parties renders this variable worthy of further study. For instance, while it might be influenced by increased electoral support for niche parties, it might just as well generate more support for niche parties.

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Figures and tables
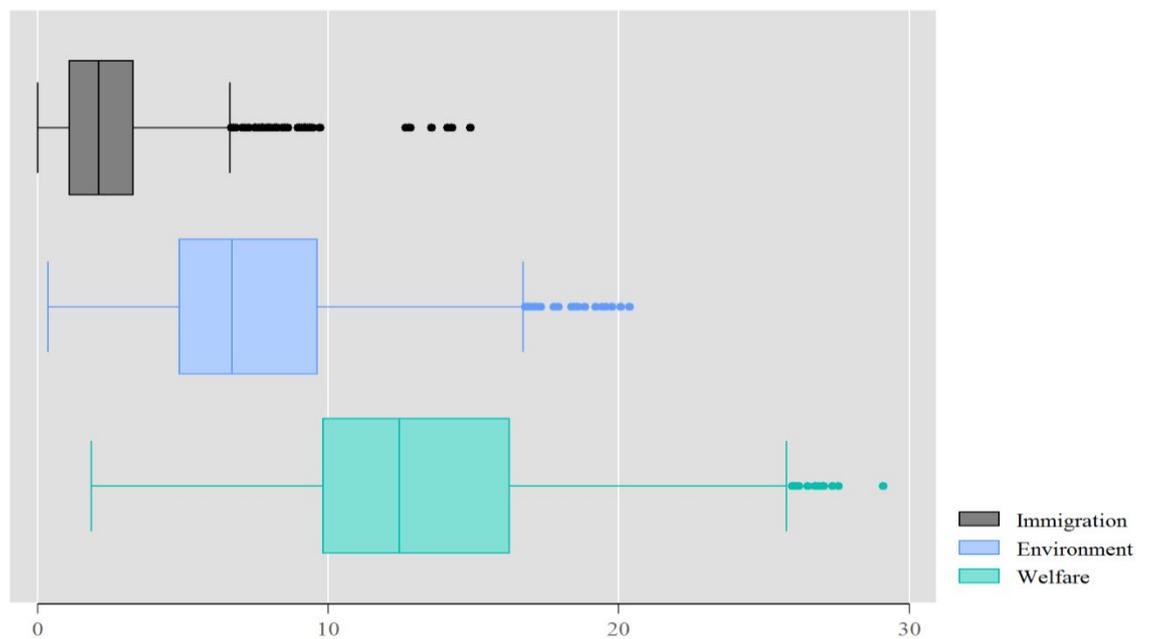
Figure 1. Salience by Issue

Figure 1 shows the salience of the three issue areas immigration, the environment, and welfare using box plots. The vertical lines indicate the median of the distribution; the grey areas comprise the interquartile range from the 25th to the 75th percentile.

Figure 2. Marginal Effects of Salience Change Conditional on Party Size: Immigration
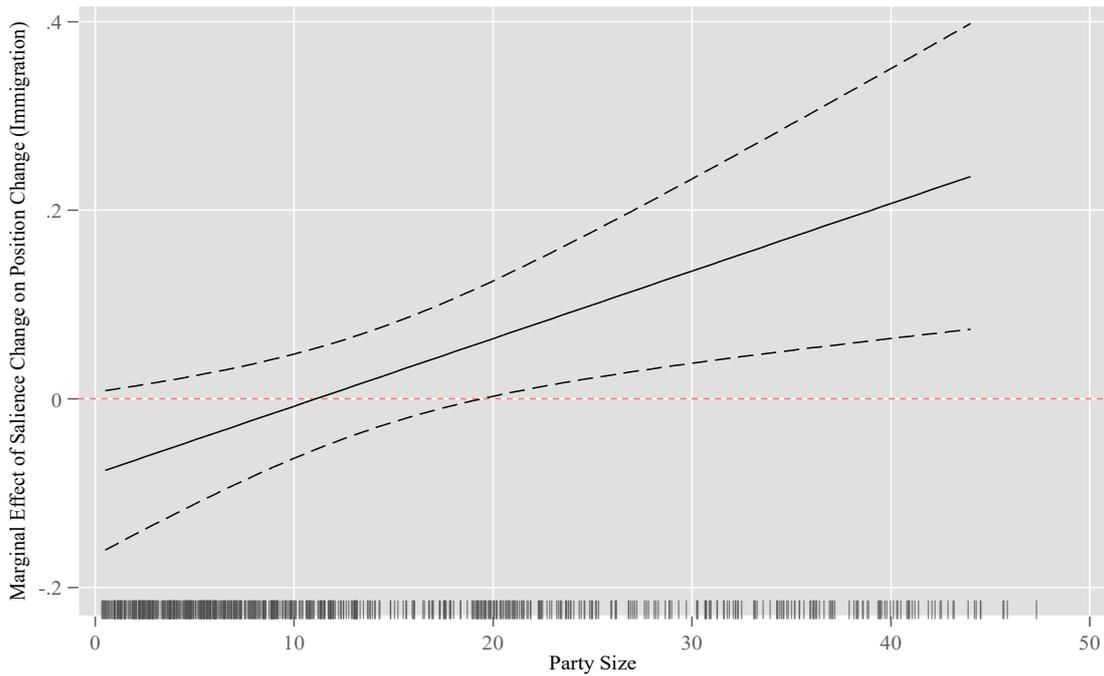
Figure 2 shows the marginal effects of changes in issue saliency of immigration depending on party size with a 95% confidence interval. The graphs are based on the models in Table A2.

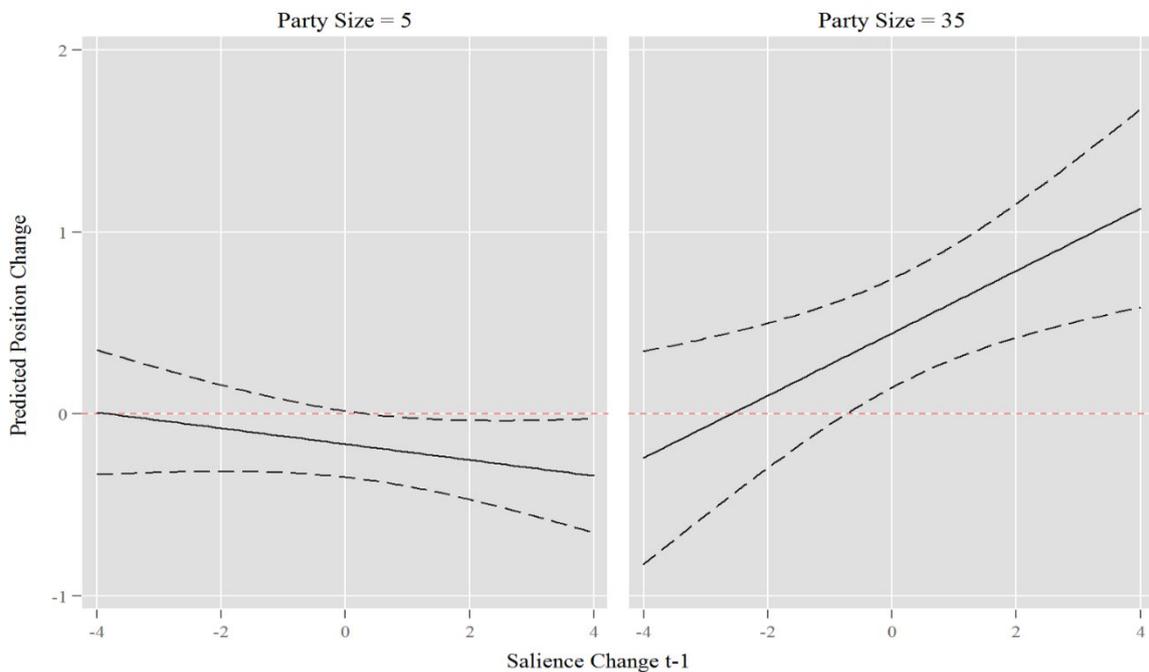*Figure 3*. Predicted Values of Salience Change Conditional on Party Size: Immigration

Figure 63shows the predicted values of changes in issue saliency of immigration for a small and a large party with a 95% confidence interval. The graphs are based on the models in Table A2.

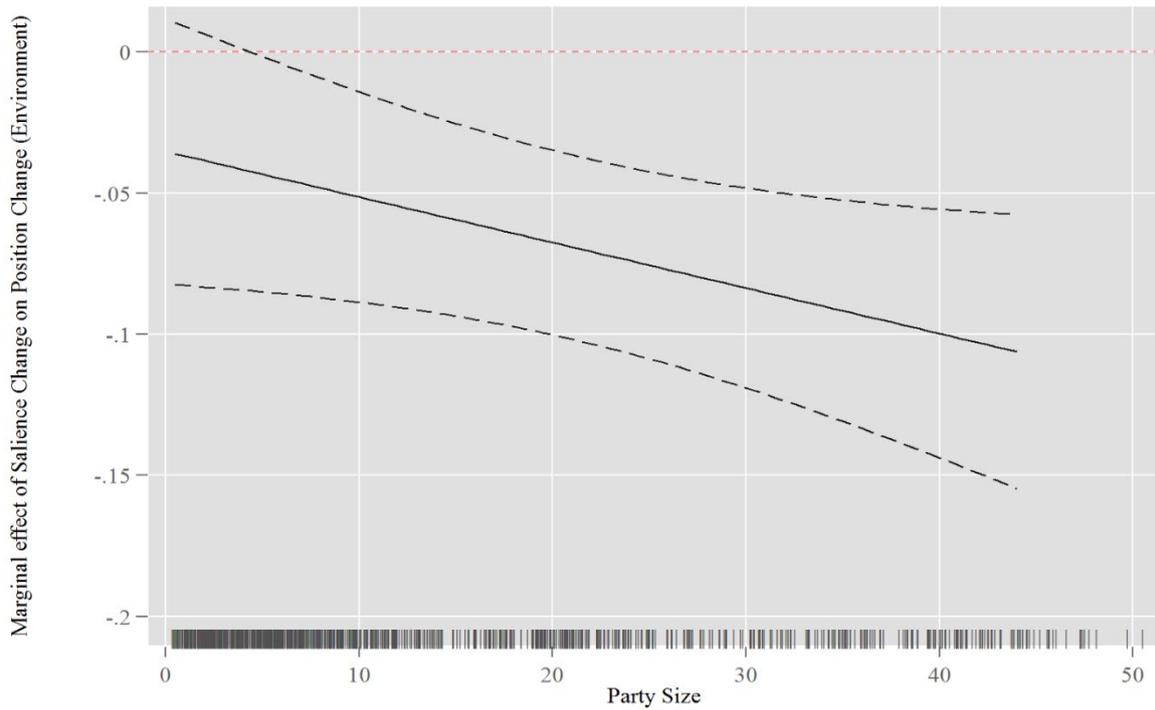*Figure 4*. Marginal Effects of Salience Change Conditional on Party Size: Environment

Figure 4 shows the marginal effects of changes in issue saliency of the environment depending on party size with a 95% confidence interval. The graphs are based on the models in Table A2.

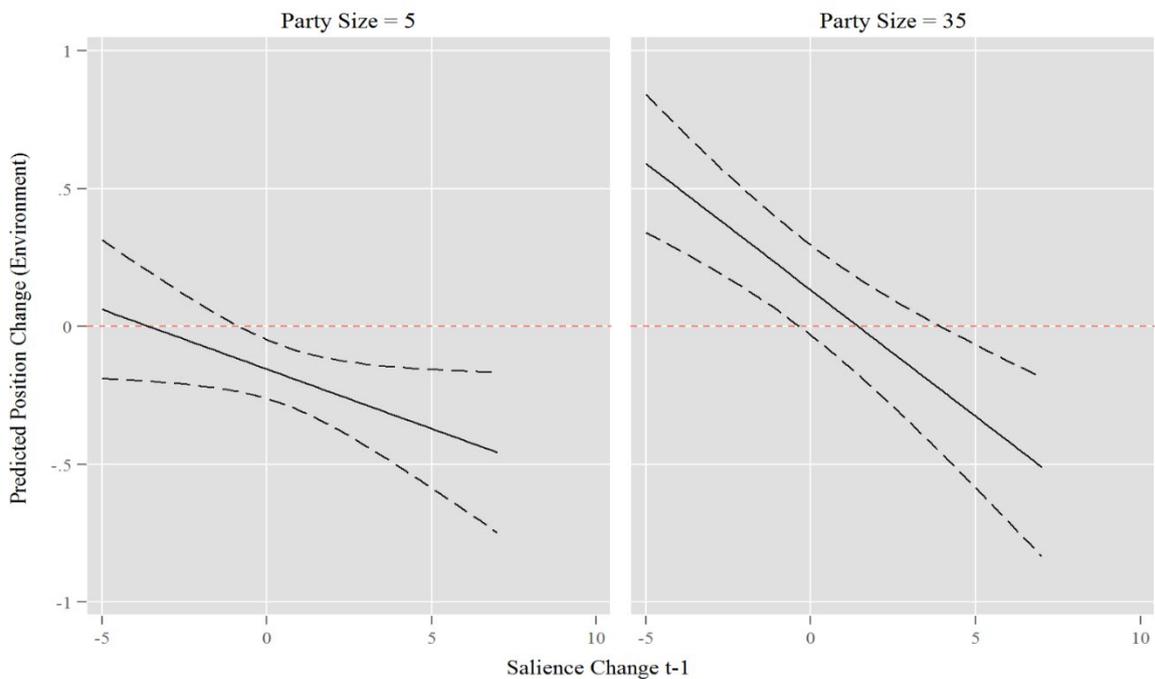*Figure 5*. Predicted Values of Salience Change Conditional on Party Size: Environment

Figure 5 shows the predicted values of changes in issue saliency of the environment for a small and a large party with a 95% confidence interval. The graphs are based on the models in Table A2.

Figure 6. Marginal Effects of Salience Change Conditional on Party Size: Welfare
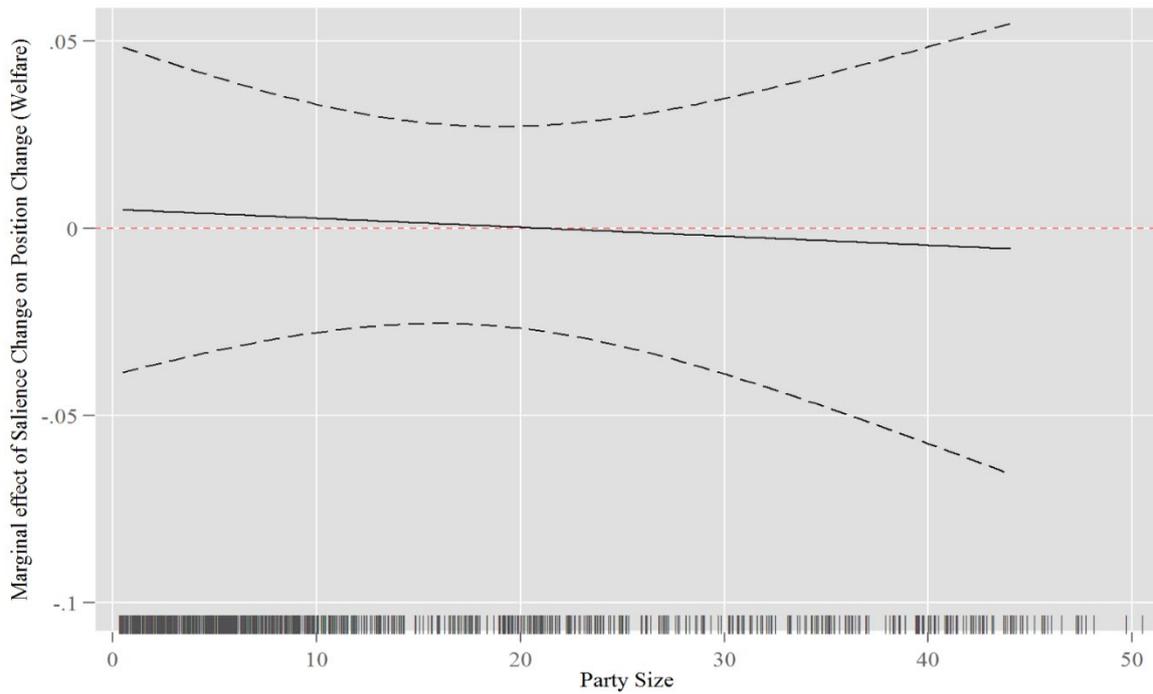

Figure 6 shows the marginal effects of changes in issue saliency of welfare issues depending on party size with a 95% confidence interval. The graphs are based on the models in Table A2.

Figure 7. Marginal Effects of Salience Change Conditional on Party Size Dummy
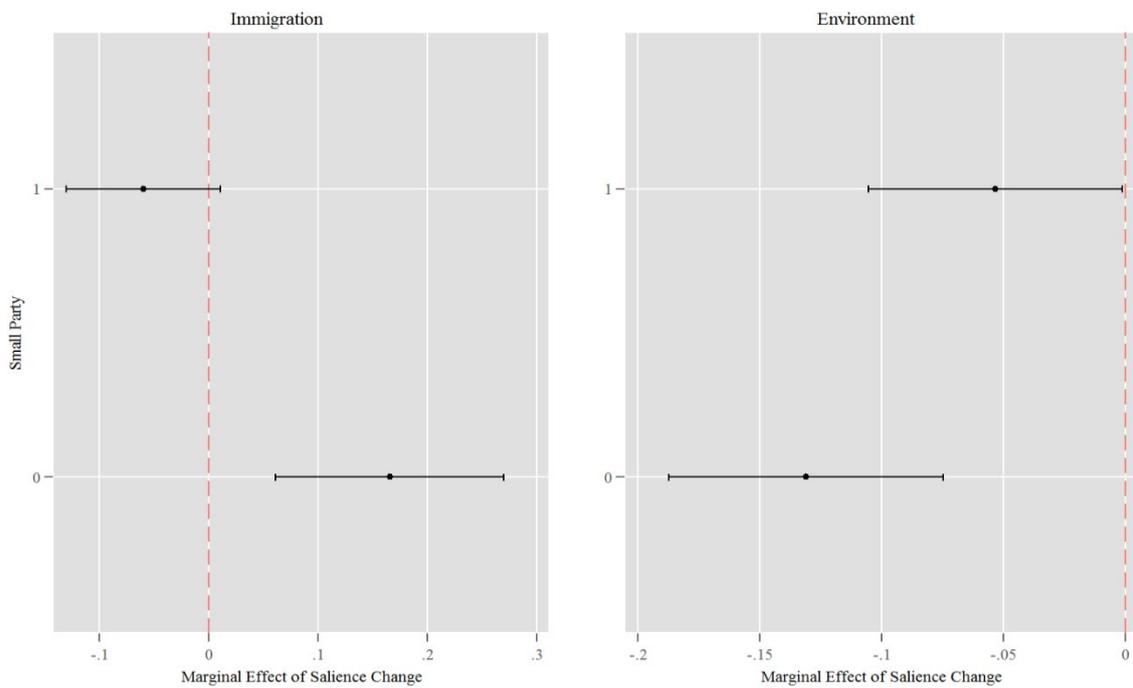

Figure 17 shows the marginal effects of changes in issue saliency of immigration and the environment for small and large parties with a 95% confidence interval. The graphs are based on the models in Table A3.

Table 1. Party-System Saliency Change and Position Change

	Immigration	Environment	Welfare
Position (t-1)	–0.489**	–0.452**	–0.465**
	(0.059)	(0.033)	(0.038)
Salience change (t-1)	0.017	–0.062**	0.001
	(0.028)	(0.017)	(0.013)
Party size	0.022**	0.008*	–0.003
	(0.007)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Systemic position change (t-1)	–0.273**	–0.356**	–0.013
	(0.065)	(0.103)	(0.069)
Niche party strength (t-1)	0.021	0.030	0.002
	(0.020)	(0.023)	(0.017)
Vote change (t-1)	0.020	0.006	0.005
	(0.019)	(0.010)	(0.013)
Government	–0.195	0.061	0.009
	(0.135)	(0.082)	(0.116)
Immigration size	28.030		
	(234.138)		
Crisis	–0.279	0.524**	0.509*
	(0.206)	(0.150)	(0.201)
GDP per capita		–0.460**	–0.351**
		(0.086)	(0.104)
Unemp. Rate		0.055**	0.049**
		(0.017)	(0.019)
Chernobyl		0.016	
		(0.197)	
Constant	–0.054	3.718**	1.420
	(0.201)	(0.896)	(1.156)
Observations	651	818	818
R^2	0.289	0.286	0.248

Clustered standard errors in parentheses, Country-fixed effects included but not presented, $p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$