When do parties emphasise extreme positions? How strategic incentives for policy differentiation influence issue importance

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Abstract

This paper examines why vote-seeking parties vary in their emphasis of extreme positions. Parties have an incentive to take up extreme positions in order to achieve policy differentiation and issue ownership, and it would make sense for a party to stress these positions as well. Yet, these incentives are not the same for all issues and all parties but may be modified by other strategic conditions: party size, party system size, positional distinctiveness and systemic salience. The hypotheses are tested for parties in 23 countries using manifesto-based measures of salience and expert assessments of party positions. I find that parties emphasise extreme positions if (1) they are relatively small in terms of vote share, (2) the extreme position is distinctive from those of other parties and (3) other parties fail to emphasise the issue. These findings have consequences for our understanding of party strategies, party competition and the radicalisation of political debates.

Introduction

Vote-seeking political parties choose their policy positions strategically. However, debate still surrounds the question whether parties should try to be as centrist as possible to appeal to the median voter or should take up relatively extreme positions to differentiate themselves from their competitors.[1] In party competition under the simplest Downsian assumptions, there are clear incentives for parties to converge on the median voter (Downs 1957; Grofman 2004). Yet, once these assumptions are relaxed (for example by introducing primaries or increasing the number of parties) centrifugal incentives to take up non-centrist positions gain in importance (Cox 1990; Grofman 2004). Indeed, parties can have incentives to emphasise not just non-centrist but even extreme positions as these may allow them to increase their ideological distinctiveness in the eyes of the voters (Spoon 2009). This means that they can create 'product differentiation' (Kitschelt 1994), potentially leading to a long-term association between a policy area and a party that can ultimately develop into issue ownership (Petrocik 1996). It is thus likely that in reality parties are faced with a mixture of incentives, some pushing them towards the political centre, some pushing them towards the extremes.

In this paper, I suggest that there are vote-seeking incentives for parties to *emphasise* extreme positions, just as there are various incentives encouraging parties to take up such positions in the first place. While the literature on centrifugal and centripetal forces in party competition has centred on positions, an important link to issue salience (Budge and Farlie 1983) needs to be made. Party strategies on salience and position are not necessarily separate, as initially argued (Budge and Farlie 1983), but can also be complementary elements of parties' vote-seeking efforts (Meguid 2005, 2008). More precisely, parties should emphasise those positions within their programmatic profile that will provide them with the greatest electoral success. If incentives to engage in policy differentiation are present, then extreme positions can promise significant vote-seeking benefits and are likely to be emphasised by

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[1] In this paper, 'extreme' is used in its spatial sense, with the opposite meaning to 'centrist'. No value judgement is meant to be implied by this term.

parties.

However, the incentives to increase their ideological distinctiveness are not equal for all parties. This means that the incentives to give importance to extreme positions will vary, and it is this variation that is explored in this paper. Specifically, I suggest that incentives to emphasise extreme positions differ for each party and for each issue within a party programme. Thus, these incentives should be greater for small parties and in larger party systems. Turning to each particular policy area, the incentives should also be greater for positions that are distinctive compared to those of competitors and for issues that other parties neglect to address. My expectations are tested for 23 countries using salience measures from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP; Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2007) and positional information from the Benoit and Laver (2006) expert survey.

This paper is structured as follows. First, I discuss the relationship between positions and salience in party programmes before presenting a series of hypotheses to explain variation in the tendency to emphasise extreme positions. I then outline the data sources, operationalisation and research design before discussing the results and their implications for understanding the relationship between issue positions and issue salience.

Why should parties emphasise relatively extreme positions?

A political party's policy offer is made up of the different issues that it decides to address and cover. The overall policy portfolio of a party therefore consists of a series of issue components. Each issue component may be presented by the party in different ways: for example, it can argue that it is especially competent on the topic (Stokes 1963) or that it is especially angry or hopeful regarding this policy area (Brader 2005). Of course, two key attributes of the issue components (and the focus of this paper) are policy position and policy salience (Downs 1957; Budge and Farlie 1983).

For each issue component, parties take decisions regarding the position they have on

this issue and how important it is to them (Meguid 2005). For example, a radical right party may be relatively centrist on economic policy and relatively extreme in its stance on immigration. At the same time, such a party might emphasise its immigration policy stance (e.g. in its manifestos, in speeches and in ad campaigns) while addressing economic policy relatively little. In their original formulation salience and position were alternative ways of understanding parties' relationship to political issues. However, these two issue attributes are nowadays more often treated as complementary (Meguid 2005; Benoit and Laver 2006; Kriesi et al. 2008; Tavits 2008). Just like shifting positions, modifying issue emphasis is then a further weapon in a party's arsenal. Issue positions and issue importance can thus both be manipulated by political parties in the pursuit of electoral gains (Meguid 2005: 349).

A core assumption in this paper is that positional decisions precede salience choices in party strategies. This is a reasonable assumption as positions should be more central to a party than salience. Policy positions, which make up a party's ideology, are closely linked to a party's public identity and its core electoral support (Adams et al. 2006, Spoon 2009), more so than issue salience. Moreover, party activists will care about the positions the party takes (Aldrich 1983), probably more than about the salience it gives to each issue. As a result, issue salience may be easier for a party to change than issue positions (Petrocik 1996). The reverse assumption, i.e., that parties decide on the salience they wish to give to a topic before choosing a position, appears quite unrealistic: it makes little sense for a party to decide to talk a lot about abortion, Iraq or taxes without some prior choice regarding its opinion on these matters. Of course, in reality position and salience may not be that easily separable within a party ideology. For example, the salience of environmental issues is also clearly part of the core identity of Green parties. However, even here a policy position, however vague, also precedes this high level of salience: it is not the environment *per se* that is very important to the Greens, but rather its effective protection.

Policy positions are therefore assumed to be exogenous and the level of issue salience

endogenous. While assumed as given, policy positions of course come from a variety of sources. Parties are in general motivated by three fundamental goals: policy, office and votes (Strøm 1990), and these factors will drive the choice of party position. It is by no means the case that vote motivations necessarily predict centrism and policy motivations predict relative extremism. While the purest Downsian vote-maximisation model predicts that parties will move towards the political centre (Downs 1957), the reality of political competition has proved that median convergence is by no means perfect, and various explanations for this building on and extending the Downsian spatial model have been offered (Aldrich 1983; Miller and Schofield 2003; Schofield 2003; Grofman 2004; Adams et al. 2005; Schofield and Sened 2006). Centrifugal and centripetal incentives are of equal importance in many party systems (Cox, 1990). Deviations from the political centre may also be due to policy motivations. For example, relatively extreme positions may be more effective at moving the status quo than a more centrist position (Grofman 1985; Kedar 2005). They may also be fundamental to a party's identity (Spoon 2009) and to maintaining the support of activists and core electoral groups (Aldrich 1983; Greene 2002; Adams et al. 2006).

In choosing the importance they wish to give to their policy positions, parties are also motivated by policy, office and votes. There may be important policy-based reasons to emphasise extreme positions, especially if they help to shore up support among activists and core supporters (Greene 2002; Petrocik et al. 2003) or if they are conducive to producing the desired policy outcomes (Grofman 1985; Kedar 2005). While 'policy' (and also 'office') are doubtless important drivers of party behaviour, I concentrate on vote-seeking strategies that explain variation in issue emphasis. An important motivation behind the focus on vote-seeking incentives is that these will vary more over time than policy-seeking incentives, which are likely to remain relatively fixed. Moreover, the focus of this paper is on the strategic use of issue salience, a phenomenon more clearly visible when it results from vote-seeking behaviour.

If parties are vote-seeking, they will want to emphasise those positions that will bring them the greatest electoral gain. It is uncontroversial to suggest that parties might want to emphasise positions on which they are moderate. One reason to do so would be to affect their overall perceived left-right position. Voters decide who to vote for at least in part based on spatial proximities between them and the various parties; when doing so, many voters make use of heuristics such as a general left-right continuum (Mair 2007), with perceived party positions on this continuum characterised by interpersonal heterogeneity. Modifying issue salience can allow parties to affect their perceived locations on this left-right dimension; in this case, parties may be able to move towards the centre not by changing their policies but by stressing those positions in their profile that are relatively centrist. This will be especially effective if the issue in question is closely linked to the general left-right dimension. An example is given by van der Brug (2004: 212): 'By emphasizing "right-wing" topics such as crime in their election campaigns, some European social democratic parties have moved towards the political centre in the perception of voters.' This was the tactic pursued by New Labour in the run-up to the 1997 election. Thus, if the aim is to capture the median voter (Hotelling 1929; Downs 1957), there are strategic reasons for a party to emphasise those issue positions where it is close to the political centre. When a party's aim is vote maximisation, the centripetal incentives leading to policy moderation should mean that parties will also stress particularly centrist positions (Cox 1990).

However, we know that not all parties emphasise their centrism. Green parties stress that topic on which they are most radical, environmental protection. Conversely, far-right parties treat as most important the topic that they are very extreme on, namely immigration, while anti-European parties stress their Euroscepticism. Emphasising particularly non-centrist positions means that voters are likely to perceive those parties' left-right position as more extreme overall, depending on how closely the issue in question is related to the general left-right dimension.

There are strategic incentives for vote-seeking parties to emphasise extreme positions, and such incentives exist even within a Downsian framework. Parties have good reasons to want to distinguish themselves from other parties. Kitschelt (1994: 118) calls this 'product differentiation' and sees it as a key to electoral success. One way to be distinctive is to take up a position that is relatively extreme compared to other parties. If such extremity increases distinctiveness, emphasising these positions to the public is a way for parties to increase their public profile. For example, it was the issue of environmental protection that got European Green parties noticed and provided them with their initial political impetus. Similarly, it is through controversial statements on immigration that far-right parties often gain attention. Such issue-based distinctiveness can also affect the way the party is seen on the overall left-right dimension, where it might also be useful for a party to set itself apart from its competitors. An example is Die Linke in Germany, which concentrates on its left-wing economic policies but is also generally perceived as clearly the most left-wing of all main German parties.

In the medium term this policy differentiation through the emphasis of extreme positions could increase perceptions of issue ownership (Petrocik 1996). Parties can build up a strong reputation and issue ownership for themselves if they are particularly identified with one policy area. An example of this may again be Green parties, which are seen as the most extreme on environmental issues, but are also strongly identified with the policy area and often judged to be the most competent on it. Similarly, a Liberal party, for example in Germany or the Netherlands, would be relatively extreme on matters of economic liberalism but would also be particularly identified with that topic and seen as competent on it. In sum, it would make sense for parties to stress extreme positions due to the dual strategic benefits of policy differentiation and issue ownership.

This theoretical approach differs from two other existing approaches that attempt to explain why some parties take up non-centrist positions. First, the focus in this paper is on

extreme positions and not just on limited divergence from the political centre. The latter has been studied extensively in order to understand why Downsian predictions of median convergence fail to be realised (e.g. Grofman, 2004; Adams et al., 2005). A focus on extreme positions is different from a focus on explaining non-convergence. Incentives based on policy differentiation and issue ownership point towards the possibility that relatively extreme (not just non-centrist) positions may be electoral beneficial to a party. Generally, increases in positional extremism should benefit a party's efforts to achieve ideological distinctiveness, so this approach differs from explanations of parties' simple divergence from the median voter.

Second, the approach remains explicitly based on an understanding of the political space stemming from Downs (1957). Extreme positions are taken to be just that: policy stances that are spatially distant from the centre. They are not seen as a substitute for intensity of feeling, the interpretation used by the directional model (Rabinowitz and MacDonald, 1989; MacDonald et al. 1991; Iversen, 1994). Yet, as van der Brug (2004) points out, different aspects of issues are not always clearly separated by voters. While he uses the example of party positions and party competence, voters may also equate extreme positions and the intensity of a party's position, and policy differentiation may result from this as well. The theoretical approach of this paper, while not based on or related to the directional model, may nevertheless not stand in contradiction to it.

In sum, issue salience can affect how political parties are perceived by voters. Which issues should be strategically emphasised by parties then depends on whether parties want to be seen as relatively moderate or want to benefit from political distinctiveness. Downsian median convergence predicts the former; theories of party differentiation and issue ownership predict the latter. Empirically, we know that both uses of salience occur, and parties do sometimes emphasise extreme issues; note the aforementioned examples of Green, radical right, liberal and Communist parties. However, it is also true that parties *differ* in the extent they emphasise extreme issue positions, and in the next section I address how the need for

policy differentiation can explain this variation.

Explaining variation in the emphasis of extreme positions

If parties modify their emphasis on an issue out of vote-seeking strategic considerations, then the strength of such strategic incentives will help to explain why parties vary in the extent they give importance to extreme positions. Vote-seeking parties will differ in the extent they emphasise their extreme positions based on the presence of incentives to engage in policy differentiation and develop strong issue ownership. These incentives can relate to either the party as a whole or to the particular issue and the particular position. Thus, the focus of this paper lies on the explanatory power of attributes of the party and the party system rather than on the distribution of voter preferences, that is, the 'demand side' of electoral politics (Kriesi et al. 2008).

What types of parties have a particular incentive to differentiate themselves from competitors and develop a strong reputation for issue ownership? First, one important factor may be party size, here defined as the overall level of electoral support a party generally receives. Compared to their larger, more established competitors, smaller parties will be more tempted to stress a unique stance. Smaller parties tend to have fewer resources and are less likely to receive significant attention from the media (Greene 2002). Moreover, smaller parties tend to benefit less from 'pre-existing partisan allegiances or the broad allure of comprehensive ideological positions' (Meguid 2005: 348). For smaller parties to get noticed, they need to distinguish themselves from their larger competitors. Emphasising extreme positions is certainly one way to do so, as small parties may be most successful in generating media coverage if they concentrate on one (controversial) issue. Examples of such behaviour by small parties abound, ranging from single-issue parties (Mudde, 1999) such as anti-European parties (e.g. UKIP in Britain) to radical right parties that campaign relentlessly on the topic of immigration (e.g. FPÖ in Austria or FN in France). In contrast, larger, 'catch-all'

parties, which aim to attract as great a number of voters as possible, tend to have more comprehensive policy platforms and the resources to publicize them (Kirchheimer 1990 [1966]; Meguid 2005). Concentrating on one issue will thus be less essential to such a party's success; in fact, it could even have negative consequences if such a strategy led to a narrower support base.

There is a link between party size and the niche party type, an umbrella term for non-mainstream party families such as Greens, radical right and ethno-territorial parties (Meguid 2005, 2008; see also Adams et al. 2006). Small parties have a particular incentive to carve out a particular issue-based 'niche' for themselves; this can then provide stable support for the party over several elections. One way to create such a niche is to focus on the policy positions that distinguish them from larger, older competitors, and such positions are more likely to be relatively extreme. Maintaining such positions is electorally important for niche parties, which have been shown to lose votes as a consequence of policy moderation, unlike their mainstream competitors (Adams et al. 2006; Ezrow 2008b). Thus, smaller parties should also be expected to stress such relatively extreme positions as a means of carving out a niche and ensuring party growth and survival.[2]

It is worth noting here that the theoretical link between party size and issue salience strategies made above is based on the vote-maximising assumption. In other words, smaller parties are faced with particular strategic incentives as a result of their lower vote share and a resulting lack of media and popular attention, leading to these parties being more likely to emphasise their relatively extreme positions. An alternative policy-based approach would argue that small – and specifically niche – parties are driven by ideological concerns and policy motivations, perhaps through their historical origins or contemporary pressure from their activists. This would also result in increased emphasis of relatively extreme positions.

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[2] Throughout, the assumption is that parties emphasise extreme positions because they are relatively small, and not that they are relatively small because they emphasise extreme positions. This reverse causality is of course plausible, but difficult to disentangle in a cross-sectional study. Future research should therefore examine over-time developments in party size and issue emphasis.

However, it is important to underline that this can equally well be explained with reference to vote-maximising assumptions.

Second, parties may be more likely to stress relatively extreme issue positions within their programmatic profile if they are competing in a large party system. This was first suggested by Downs (1957: 126-7), who argued that parties in multiparty systems 'will strive to distinguish themselves ideologically from each other'. It is often argued that a system with fewer political parties creates 'convergent spatial incentives', while larger party systems induce 'divergent' spatial incentives (Dow, 2001: 111). This is due to the fact that the ideal positions for vote maximization are nearer to the centre when there are fewer competitors in the system. There is thus a stronger incentive for 'product differentiation' when a system is more fragmented (Cox 1990; Kitschelt 1994: 118; Ezrow 2008a). The greater incentive to differentiate in a large party system should mean that parties are more likely to stress relatively extreme issue positions when they are faced with a larger number of competitors.

These first two factors – party size and party system size – affect each party as a whole. However, each issue and the position the party takes on it can differ in their effect on salience strategies. When are relatively extreme issue positions particularly suited to producing policy differentiation? Several important characteristics of extreme issue positions are hypothetically conducive to such strategies.

Most importantly, it helps if the party position is itself distinctive compared to those of other parties. A party position is ideologically distinctive if it is unusually extreme compared to other parties' policy positions. In other words, other parties have some mean level of extremism on a given issue, and the further away the party in question is from that mean level of extremism, the more ideologically distinctive its position. A policy position that is relatively extreme is better suited to strategies of policy differentiation if other parties indeed generally take a different position on that topic. For example, if a party is very anti-European, it may well stress that position; however, the incentives to do so based on potential policy

differentiation are greater if other parties are generally pro-European or have centrist positions. Moreover, the party's *raison d'être* and the reason for its original success may well be this ideologically distinctive position, and maintaining and emphasising this position may be vital to the party's continued survival (Spoon 2009). Conversely, if a party's position is a relatively typical one within the party system, it is not well-suited to strategies of policy differentiation no matter how extreme the position itself.

Two further factors may be related to the impact of such ideological distinctiveness. The extent to which a party position is ideologically distinctive depends not just on the distance from other parties' mean extremism, but also on how concentrated or dispersed the other parties are. If the other parties are not only relatively distant from the party in question, but also relatively concentrated and undifferentiated themselves, then the incentives for policy differentiation will be even greater. This is due to the strategic effects created by what Kitschelt terms the 'crowdedness' of the competitive space. In his view, the choice of electoral programmes by a party will depend on the positions of its competitors, in particular the extent to which certain political spaces are still unoccupied (Kitschelt 1994: 34). In other words, the impact of ideological distinctiveness should be greater for lower levels of party polarization on that issue.

In addition, the incentive to engage in policy differentiation and issue ownership strategies may also depend on whether the party is the most extreme in the party system on that issue. A party's position is particularly ideologically distinctive if it is the party with the most extreme position, be it to the left or the right. This means that there are two parties that are the most extreme party on any given issue – one is the most 'left-wing', one the most 'right-wing'. One example may be the issue of the EU in the UK, where the Conservatives are relatively Eurosceptic but less so than UKIP. While other factors are also at work, in terms of policy differentiation this means that the Conservatives do not gain as much from emphasising their position as UKIP. Similarly, in party systems with significant Green or

radical right parties, their mainstream competitors are less able to achieve policy differentiation by emphasising pro-environment or anti-immigration positions, respectively. In brief, the impact of ideological distinctiveness on issue salience should be greater for those issues on which the party is the most extreme within the party system.

One final factor might affect incentives to stress extreme positions. Policy differentiation is a more attractive strategy on topics generally neglected by other parties. It is easier for a party to distinguish itself from a competitor by emphasising an extreme position on an issue that has hitherto received little attention. Here, examples again include topics such as the environment and immigration, which had relatively low overall salience until the rise of a party that emphasised its extreme position on the issue. Other parties may then continue to disregard the issue as much as possible to prevent the emergence of a cross-cutting cleavage (Schattschneider 1960; Riker 1986). This means that extreme positions should be emphasised more if the issue's overall salience among other parties is relatively low.

The vote-seeking incentives that may modify the effect of extreme positions on issue salience can be summarized in the following hypotheses:

H1: The smaller the party in terms of vote share, the more it will emphasise extreme positions (*party size hypothesis*)

H2: The larger the party system, the more a party will emphasise extreme positions (*party system size hypothesis*).

H3: The greater the distinctiveness of the extreme policy position, the more the party will emphasise it (*ideological distinctiveness hypothesis*).

H3a: The greater the distinctiveness of a position and the greater the concentration of other parties' positions on that issue, the more a party will emphasise the extreme position (*party dispersion hypothesis*).

H3b: The impact of distinctiveness on issue salience is greater if the party is the most extreme

on that issue (*greatest extremism hypothesis*).

H4: The lower the level of systemic salience on an issue, the more a party will emphasise an extreme position on that issue (*systemic salience hypothesis*).

Data, operationalisation and study design

For this study, information on issue positions and salience is needed. The data source for party positions is an expert survey carried out in 2002/2003 by Benoit and Laver (2006). This is combined with salience data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2007). The manifesto data coding scheme was explicitly designed to measure salience (Budge et al. 2001), while the expert surveys' origins lie in the measurement of positions. In terms of valid measurements, it therefore makes sense to choose as data sources those that are explicitly aimed at measuring the concepts in question. Moreover, taking two separate data sources strengthens the findings of my analysis, as measurements of salience could influence measures of positions and vice versa. For example, an expert survey participant is unlikely to forget the position she just assigned to a party when assessing issue salience, while manifesto positional measures are always constructed using salience-based items. While salience and position are related, taking independent data sources will reduce the amount of non-substantive contamination of one measure by the other. 23 countries, all of which are EU or OECD members, are included in this study.[3]

Salience assessments from manifesto data were coded and assigned to expert scores as follows. The manifesto chosen is that from the election closest to 2002/2003. Salience levels from the CMP data were assigned to equivalent topics measured in the expert survey; CMP categories were aggregated based partly on the examples of Budge and Laver (1992) and Stoll (2010). The issues included are those where positional information is available from the

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[3] The 23 countries are: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, the UK and the US.

expert survey and where it was possible to create approximately equivalent salience categories from the manifesto data. For a full list of the manifestos selected and the CMP categories assigned to each topic, see Appendices 1 to 3. For each issue, the percentage of the manifesto that covers the topic is extracted by summing the values for each component category. The values are summed irrespective of the direction of the statements; for example, the EU issue is the total percentage of statements in favour and against integration. This reflects the aim of extracting salience, not positional, information from the CMP dataset. The salience variable was logged due to its strongly right-skewed distribution and because the outcomes are all-positive (Gelman and Hill 2007).

Positional information is taken from the Benoit and Laver expert survey. They measure positions on all issues on a scale from 1 to 20, with at least five issues included for each country. Positional extremeness is then measured as the distance of each position from the midpoint of that scale (10.5), so that the range of this variable is from 0 to 9.5. There are several other measures based on this positional information. Ideological distinctiveness on an issue is the extent to which a given position is different from other parties' positions on that same issue. It is measured as the absolute distance between the issue position of the party and the mean position of other parties on that issue, weighted by their vote share. Greater values indicate greater ideological distinctiveness. The issue-specific dispersion of other parties is measured using the standard deviation of party positions on each issue (excluding the party under consideration). Finally, the extent to which the issue is distinctive within a party programme is included as an occasional control. Such 'internal' distinctiveness is the extent to which a given position is more extreme than the party's other positions. This is calculated as difference between the issue extremeness and the mean extremeness of the party on all other measured issues, with greater values indicating greater internal extremism.

As a measurement of party size, I use the score achieved by the party in the election immediately preceding the expert survey, information already included in the dataset provided

by Benoit and Laver. Party system size is measured using the most common index, the Effective Number of Electoral Parties (ENEP) (Laakso and Taagepera 1979).[4] ENEP is calculated as $1 / \Sigma p_i^2$: 1 divided by the sum of the squared vote shares for each party (p_i). The scores are from Gallagher (2007) for 2003, the years in which the expert surveys were carried out.[5] The level of systemic salience (Steenbergen and Scott 2004) is measured as the average salience for each issue for all parties in a given country, with the party under consideration excluded.[6] Descriptive statistics for the variables used in the regression models can be found in Table 1.

<center>Table 1 about here</center>

The basic regression model uses a party's positional extremeness on an issue to predict the salience it assigns to that issue. Each observation in the regression is a party x issue unit, so the data is arranged in stacked form. Such datasets are frequently used in electoral research using propensity-to-vote scores (e.g. MacDonald et al. 1991; van der Eijk et al. 2006; van der Brug 2010). Each party is represented by as many cases as there are issues for which there exists both a salience and a positional measurement. OLS regressions are run to predict the level of salience. Errors are likely to be correlated within parties since observations are party x issue combinations and therefore not independent of one another. To account for this, robust standard errors clustered by party were computed, and I report statistical significance based on these.

The hypotheses are all implemented as interactions with the key independent variable, party positional extremeness. Several control variables are included: systemic salience, party dispersion, party system size, vote share and expert uncertainty. The level of systemic salience for each issue accounts for external party influence on salience (Steenbergen and

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[4] Since this paper addresses electoral rather than parliamentary politics, the index for electoral parties was chosen instead of that for parliamentary parties.

[5] All models were also run using simply the number of parties in each country that achieved over three percent of the vote, with no difference in the findings.

[6] As in Steenbergen and Scott (2004), each party was weighted equally.

Scott 2004). Parties do not have monopolistic agenda control (Green-Pedersen 2007: 610). Even if a party may want to de-emphasise a certain issue, it might not be able to do so if other parties choose to focus on that topic. The inverse is true as well: while a party may wish to stress an issue, it might not be able to if the other parties refuse to follow suit.

The level of party dispersion measures the extent parties actually compete on an issue in terms of positions. It is worth controlling for this as issue salience is associated with the extent there are real positional differences between political parties, that is, whether it is possible to tell apart the positions of political actors (Netjes and Binnema 2007). Party system size accounts for the extent to which the size of a party system by itself may affect how many issues become salient, with the expectation that salience is more broadly distributed in larger party systems. Party size is included as a control as larger parties have more resources and are more likely to spread their issue emphases widely. Expert uncertainty, measured as the standard deviation of expert assessments of party positions, accounts for the fact that there is likely to be a tendency for survey respondents to place a party near the centre if they are uncertain as to its position. If experts are uncertain regarding a position, this is likely to mean that the issue is less salient to a party, so it is necessary to control for this factor. Finally, fixed effects are included in the form of dummy variables for each issue and for each country. The country fixed effects account for overall differences in manifesto salience between countries, for example due to country-level coder effects, while the issue fixed effects control for cross-national differences in issue salience, for example between generally important topics such as economic policy and generally less central topics such as decentralization.[7]

Results

Before turning to the regression results, it is worth taking a brief look at the distribution of positions and salience in the data, presented here in Figure 1. Each party is represented by

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[7] The models were also run without the issue fixed effects; the results do not differ meaningfully in either magnitude or significance of the key coefficients.

several dots, one for each issue for which positional and salience information is available. Also shown is the predicted regression line and confidence interval for a simple bivariate model regressing positional extremeness on logged manifesto salience. We can see that parties vary a lot both in terms of the positions they take and in the salience they place on issues. However, there is a clear association between extremism and salience, with more extreme positions receiving higher levels of salience from parties and the highest levels of salience found exclusively among relatively extreme positions. Nevertheless, even though a trend is very visible, the association is nowhere near perfect. Across all levels of extremism, some issues are emphasised and some not, and it is the variation in salience rather than the association that is most impressive in this Figure.

Figure 1 about here

It is the aim of the regression analyses to help explain this variation even among extreme positions. The results of the regression models are presented in Table 2. We can see that, before including any interaction terms, positional extremism remains positively associated with logged manifesto salience, with a one-unit increase in extremism predicted to lead to a 5.5% increase in the proportion of the manifesto devoted to the issue, for example from a value of 10 to 10.55.[8] As expected, issue salience increases with party size, party system size and systemic salience. Two further control variables, namely party dispersion and expert uncertainty, have no direct effect on salience in this model.

Table 2 about here

Models 2-7 then include a series of interactions that test the expectations specified in my hypotheses. To interpret the interaction effects, it is helpful to graph the marginal effect of positional extremeness on issue salience (Brambor et al. 2006). Note that the y-axes in Figures 2 to 5 present the effect as the predicted percentage increase of the salience values, that is, the percentage increase in the proportion of the manifesto devoted to the issue. For

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[8] The dependent variable is a logarithmic transformation of the original values, meaning that the effect on the dependent variable can be expressed in percentage terms, calculated in this example as [1-exp(0.054)]*100.

example, a predicted marginal effect of 10 would mean that the predicted manifesto coverage would increase by 10%, for example from 4% of the manifesto to 4.4% or from 20% to 22%.

Figure 2 presents the results from Model 2, which tests the party size hypothesis. As expected, smaller parties are more likely to assign importance to their extreme positions. For parties between 20% and 45% of the vote, there is indeed no effect of positional extremeness on issue salience at all, while parties above 45% of the vote tend to de-emphasise their relatively extreme positions. This means that emphasising relatively extreme positions is a strategy only smaller parties engage in. For example, a one-unit increase in extremeness will lead to about an 8% increase in salience for a party with 10% of the vote.

Figure 2 about here

Conversely, there is no support for the party system size hypothesis (Model 3). The interaction term is not significant, and no trend is visible when the relationship is graphed. It appears that there is no effect of party system size itself on whether a party emphasises extreme issue positions.

The ideological distinctiveness hypothesis finds support in the analysis (Figure 3, Model 4). In this model, distinctiveness within the party programme itself was also controlled for in order to isolate the effect of distinctiveness compared to other parties. Positions where a party is very distant from the mean weighted position of its competitors are stressed more heavily. The effect is only certain above a threshold of 8 units distance. This would be the case if, for example, all parties were at 11 on the 20-point scale and the party itself at 19. This occurs for 112 issue-party combinations in the dataset, so about 10% of positions. The predicted effect, once significant, lies around a 10% increase in salience and above.

Figure 3 about here

As expected by the party dispersion hypothesis, the effect of ideological distinctiveness is modified by the spread of other parties (Figure 4, Model 5). In this model, relative extremeness rather than simple positional extremeness is the main effect, interacted

with party dispersion on that issue; the raw positional extremeness score, which is strongly correlated with ideological distinctiveness, is excluded in these models to reduce multicollinearity effects. Here, party dispersion is centred at its mean value. It is clear that relatively extreme positions are stressed more if the other parties are relatively undifferentiated and concentrated in their positions.

Figure 4 about here

Similarly, the greatest extremism hypothesis also holds: parties stress in particular issues on which they are relatively extreme *and* on which they are the most extreme party, be it to the left or the right of the spectrum (Model 6). The predicted increase in salience for a one-unit increase in relative extremism is 2.3% for standard positions and 8.4% for positions on which the party is the most extreme in the party system. Indeed, the effect of extremism on salience is not even significant for issues on which the party is not the most extreme within its party system.

It is also the case that extreme positions are stressed more if the issue has relatively low overall systemic salience (Figure 5, Model 7). An effect is only visible for systemic salience below 15% of the manifesto. It is worth noting, however, that this applies to around 90% of the cases in this sample. Moreover, the effect is relatively weak compared to the other interaction effects studied here. Nevertheless, we can say that extreme positions are not emphasised for the most salient overall topics in a country.

Figure 5 about here

In sum, several of the hypotheses are confirmed. I find that party size is inversely associated with the tendency to emphasise extreme positions (H1). The positions and salience of the issue among other parties are also important. Thus, the greater the distance of the extreme position from the other parties' mean position, the more that position is emphasised (H3). This is particularly true if the other parties are themselves not very differentiated (H4) and if the party examined is the most extreme on that issue (H5). Finally, extreme positions

are emphasised more if other parties fail to address the topic (H6). Parties that have greater incentives to engage in policy differentiation also emphasise their relatively distinct positions more.

Discussion and conclusion

Despite what a naïve Downsian might expect, many parties emphasise their relatively extreme positions. Yet, it is too simple to say that parties have a tendency to accord importance to relatively extreme views. Instead, they vary in the extent they do so, and this variation can be explained by the strategic vote-maximising incentives created by the attractions of policy differentiation and issue ownership. This paper tested several hypotheses building on this theoretical foundation. Put simply, parties stress extreme positions more if these positions are conducive to policy differentiation, and this is the case when parties are relatively small, when issue positions are ideologically distinctive and when other parties neglect the topic. The empirical findings lend support to the theoretical hypotheses.

These findings have important consequences for the study of party competition. First, this study underlines that positions and salience are not separable issue characteristics and should not be considered as alternative approaches to explaining party strategies and party competition. Instead, salience decisions may be the direct consequence of vote-maximising incentives produced by prior positional choices. Moreover, both position and salience decisions may be based on the same strategic aims of policy, office or votes.

Second, this paper provides a different perspective on the discussion surrounding centripetal and centrifugal incentives in party systems. Extreme positions can be useful to parties because they help to differentiate them from their competitors. Often, these extreme positions are actually the ideological core of a party, at least in the eyes of voters. As a consequence, it may be easier to develop issue ownership with relatively extreme positions. These reasons mean that parties should be willing to take up extreme positions and then

emphasise them, as long as certain other modifying strategic conditions – namely small party size, ideological distinctiveness and low systemic salience – are also present. Future research should examine the electoral effectiveness of these strategies. Are parties that emphasise extreme positions more successful than similar parties that stress their moderation? Is there perhaps a level of emphasis on relatively extreme positions that costs more votes than it brings?

Finally, this paper may help explain the radicalisation of political debates. Incentives arising from the advantages of policy differentiation and issue ownership mean that parties will emphasise those issues that distinguish them most from their political competitors. This may have a significant impact on political discourse in a country. Since small parties will try to exploit issues where other parties are undifferentiated, it is possible to explain why political debates can become polarised. Indeed, the findings suggest that when a new issue enters the political debate, it is likely to be via a party that has an extreme position on that issue, as occurred with Green and far-right parties. The findings of this study therefore directly relate to the rise of new parties and the changes in political discourse that such parties have occasionally managed to achieve.

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Table 1 Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	Stand. dev.	Minimum	Maximum	n
Issue salience	7.68	7.10	0	45.46	814
Issue salience (logged)	1.82	0.89	0	3.84	814
Position: extremeness	3.78	2.30	0	9.33	814
Ideological distinctiveness	3.59	2.49	0.00	12.00	814
Party size (vote share)	17.31	13.22	3	51	814
Internal distinctiveness	0.00	2.23	-6.51	6.19	814
Party dispersion	-0.01	1.38	-3.96	4.72	814
Party system size (ENEP)	4.71	1.50	2.18	8.84	814
Systemic salience	7.72	5.54	0	30.95	814
Expert uncertainty	2.96	0.94	0.39	6.40	814
Variable	**0**	**1**			**n**
Most extreme party	63.51%	36.49%			814

Table 2 OLS regression results

Hypothesis tested	Model 1	Model 2 *Party size*	Model 3 *Party system size*	Model 4 *Ideological distinctiveness*	Model 5 *Most extreme party*	Model 6 *Party dispersion*	Model 7 *Systemic salience*
Position: extremeness	.054***	.055***	.045	-.091***			.073***
	(.01)	(.01)	(.04)	(.03)			(.02)
Vote share	.003*	.015***	.003	.005**	.005**	.004*	.003*
	(.00)	(.00)	(.00)	(.00)	(.00)	(.00)	(.00)
Systemic salience	.082***	.083***	.082***	.081***	.082***	.082***	.092***
	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)
Party dispersion	-.004	-.012	-.005	-.005	-.009	.036	-.005
	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.03)	(.02)
ENEP	.039*	.040*	.031	.038*	.038*	.042*	.037*
	(.02)	(.02)	(.034)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.01)
Expert uncertainty	-.024	-.011	-.024	.041	.011	-.002	-.025
	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)
Internal distinctiveness				.053**	.034*	.031	
				(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	
Extremeness*Vote share		-.003***					
		(.00)					
Extremeness*ENEP			.002				
			(.01)				
Ideological distinctiveness				-.047	.023	.043**	
				(.03)	(.02)	(.01)	
Extremeness* ideological distinctiveness				.020***			
				(.00)			
Most extreme party					-.289*		
					(.12)		
Ideological distinctiveness* Most extreme party					.058**		
					(.02)		
Ideological distinctiveness* Party dispersion						-.011	
						(.01)	
Extremeness* Systemic salience							-.002
							(.00)
Country dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Issue dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	.575**	.505*	.611*	.755***	.595**	.546**	.516*
	(.20)	(.20)	(.24)	(.21)	(.20)	(.20)	(.20)
Adjusted R^2	.507	.517	.506	.529	.518	.516	.507
N	814	814	814	814	814	814	814

Standard errors in parentheses; * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Figure 1 Positional extremism and issue salience
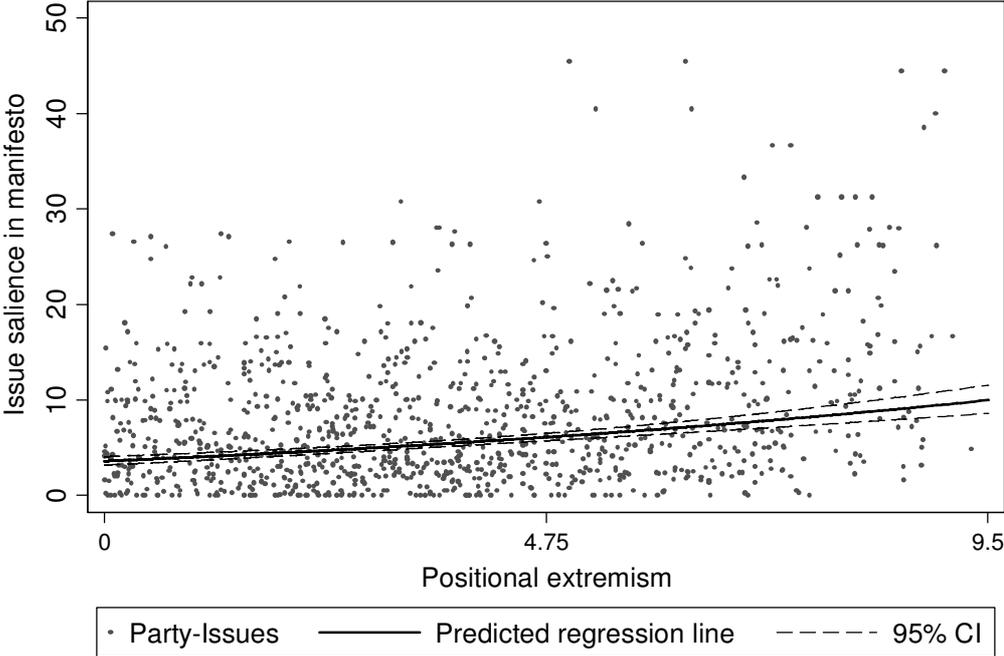

Note: 'Issue salience in manifesto' represents the percentage of quasi-sentences on that policy area. Each dot represents one party-issue pair, so each party is represented by several dots, one for each issue. The predicted regression line is calculated from a bivariate OLS regression with logged manifesto salience as the outcome variable and positional extremism as the independent variable. Predicted values were transformed back into raw manifesto salience values for this graph.

Figure 2 Marginal effect of extreme positioning conditional on vote share
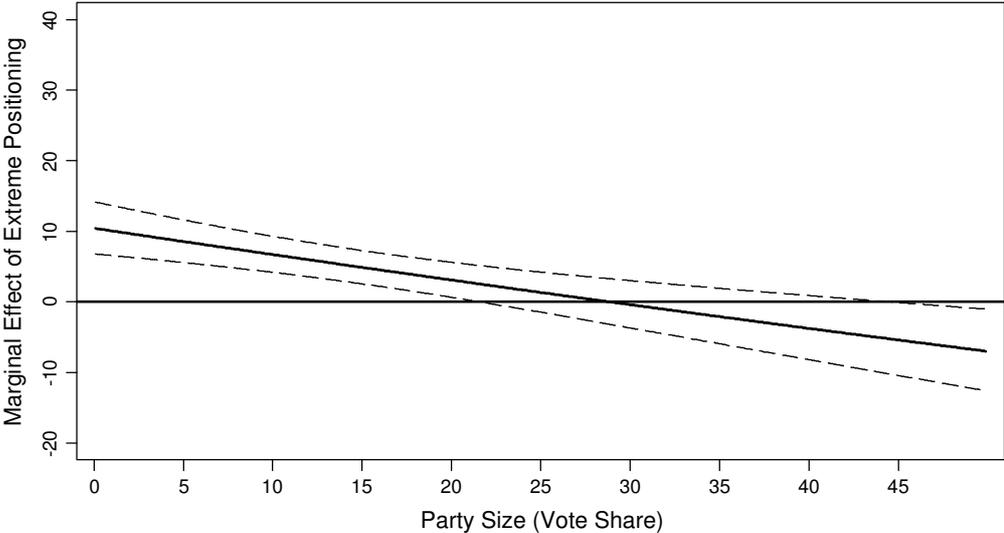

Note: Results based on Model 2. In this and later Figures, the values on the y-axis are the predicted percentage increase in the proportion of the manifesto devoted to the topic. The solid line represents the predicted effect of a one-unit increase in positional extremeness, conditional on the size of the party as measured by vote share. The dashed line is the 95% confidence interval around this prediction.

Figure 3 Marginal effect of extreme positioning conditional on ideological distinctiveness
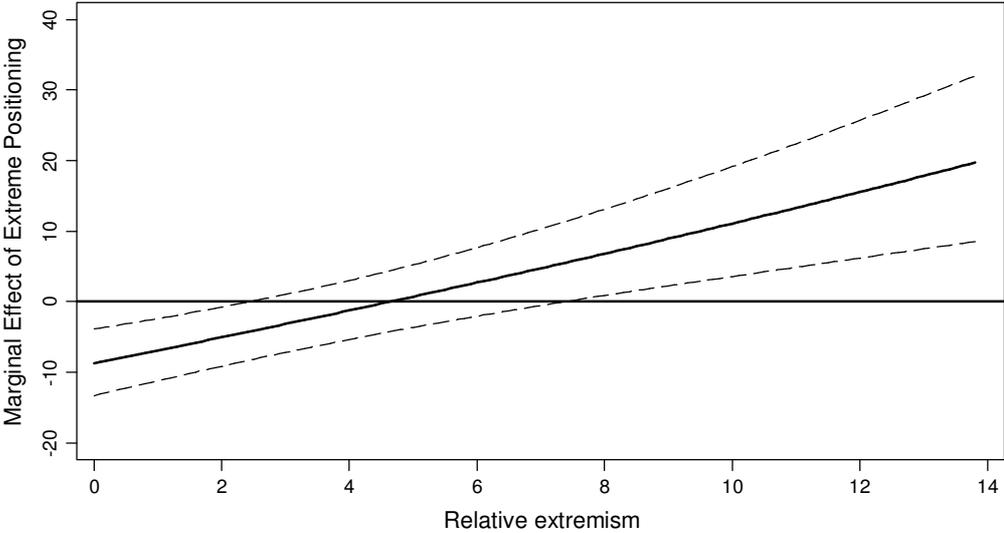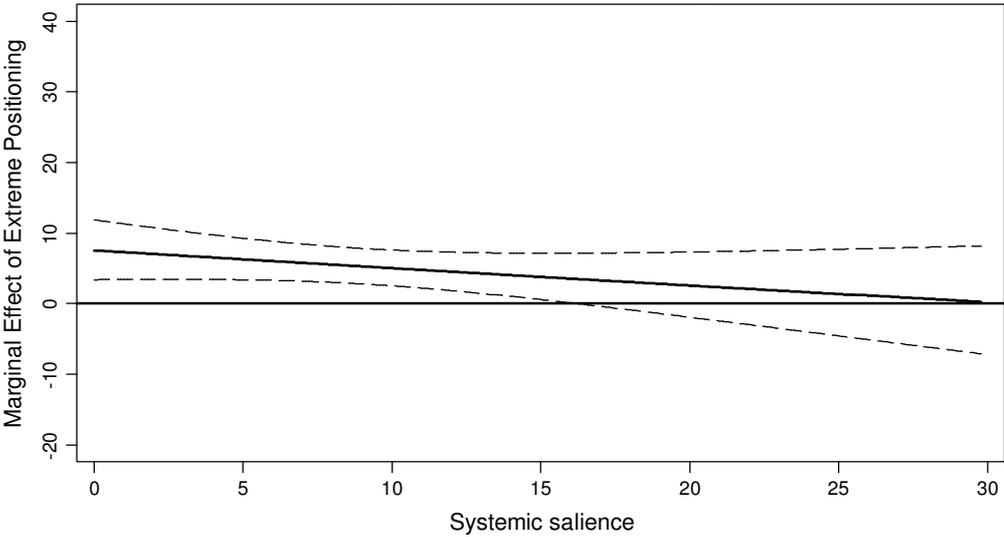

Note: Results based on Model 4. The graph shows the predicted effect (in percentage terms) on manifesto coverage resulting from a one-unit increase in positional extremeness, conditional on the ideological distinctiveness of the position relative to other parties in the party system.

Figure 4 Marginal effect of ideological distinctiveness conditional on party dispersion
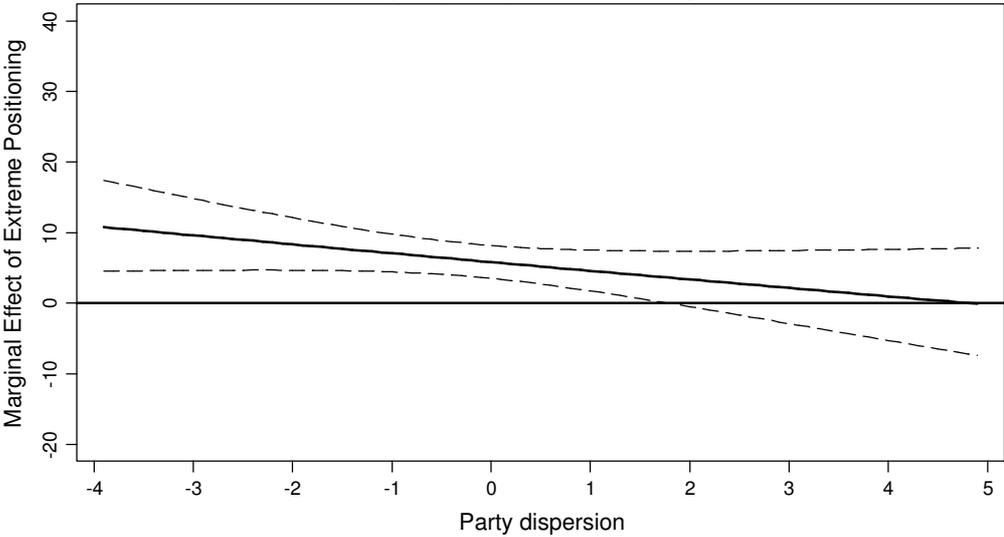
Note: Results based on Model 6. The graph shows the predicted effect (in percentage terms) on manifesto coverage resulting from a one-unit increase in ideological distinctiveness, conditional on the dispersion on that issue of other parties in the party system.

Figure 5 Marginal effect of extreme positioning conditional on systemic salience

Note: Results based on Model 6. The graph shows the predicted effect (in percentage terms) on manifesto coverage resulting from a one-unit increase in positional extremeness, conditional on the systemic salience of that issue.

Appendix 1: CMP manifestos

Country	Election used
Australia	10/11/2001
Austria	24/11/2002
Belgium	18/05/2003
Canada	27/11/2000
Denmark	20/11/2001
Finland	16/03/2003
France	09/06/2002
Germany	22/09/2002
Greece	09/04/2000
Iceland	10/05/2003
Ireland	17/05/2002
Israel	29/05/1996
Italy	13/05/2001
Japan	09/11/2003
Luxembourg	13/06/1999
Netherlands	22/01/2003
New Zealand	27/07/2002
Norway	10/09/2001
Portugal	17/03/2002
Spain	12/03/2000
Sweden	15/09/2002
UK	07/06/2001
US	07/11/2000

Appendix 2: Composition of CMP issues

Economic policy: per401 (Free Enterprise: Positive), per402(Incentives: Positive), per403 (Market Regulation: Positive), per404 (Economic Planning: Positive), per406 (Protectionism: Positive), per407 (Protectionism: Negative), per409 (Keynesian Demand Management: Positive), per412 (Controlled Economy: Positive), per413 (Nationalisation: Positive), per414 (Economic Orthodoxy: Positive), per415 (Marxist Analysis: Positive), per503 (Social Justice: Positive), per504 (Welfare State Expansion: Positive), per701 (Labour Groups: Positive), per702 (Labour Groups: Negative)

Foreign policy: per103 (Anti-Imperialism: Positive), per104 (Military: Positive), per105 (Military: Negative), per106 (Peace: Positive), per107 (Internationalism: Positive), per109 (Internationalism: Negative)

Culture/ethnic matters: per601 (National Way of Life: Positive), per602 (National Way of Life: Negative), per607 (Multiculturalism: Positive), per608 (Multiculturalism: Negative), per705 (Underprivileged Minorities: Positive), per706 (Non-economic Demographic Groups: Positive)

Liberal-authoritarianism: per305 (Political Authority: Positive), per603 (Traditional Morality: Positive), per604 (Traditional Morality: Negative), per605 (Law and Order: Positive)

Decentralization: per301 (Decentralization: Positive), per302 (Centralization: Positive)

EU: per108 (European Integration: Positive), per110 (European Integration: Negative)

Environment: per416 (Anti-Growth Economy: Positive), per501 (Environmental Protection: Positive)

Appendix 3: CMP issues matched with expert survey issues

Expert survey issue	CMP issue
Decentralization	Decentralization
Economic Policy	Economic Policy
Environment	Environment
EU: Authority	EU
EU: Joining	EU
EU: Larger/Stronger	EU
EU: Peacekeeping	Foreign Policy
EU: Strengthening	EU
Immigration	Culture/Ethnic Matters
NATO	Foreign Policy
Social Policy	Liberal-Authoritarianism
US	Foreign Policy