B2.15 Where Is My Party? Determinants of Voter Agreement about the Ideological Positions of Political Parties

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Project outline

This project aims at

- exploring why voters are better able to understand the policy positions of some parties than others
- measuring ideological cohesion and ambiguity of party positions
- explaining whether, when and how voters are capable of making reasoned choices over alternative parties and candidates

Theoretical framework:

- Perception formation literature
- Party elite literature
- Literature on campaign media content analyses

Data and methods:

- Media analysis of parties' communication during campaigns
- Expert survey on parties' policies and their clarity in communicating these
- Election surveys
- Party manifestos

Countries:

Elections covered:

Czech Republic	2010	2013
Denmark	2007	2011
Germany	2009	2013
Hungary	2006	2010
The Netherlands	2010	2012
Poland	2007	2011
Portugal	2009	2011
Sweden	2010	2014

Recent working papers:

- Baumann, Markus, Marc Debus and Martin Gross (2016): Innerparteiliche Zerstrittenheit, divergierende Koalitionspräferenzen und Ergebnisse von Koalitionsverhandlungen. (AK Handlungs- und Entscheidungstheorie, Köln, May 2016).
- Baumann, Markus and Martin Gross (2016): Where is my party? Introducing a new data set on ideological cohesion and ambiguity of party positions in media coverage. Mannheim Centre for European Social Research: Unpublished Manuscript.

Clarity and consistency

Parties and clarity

- Parties can be unclear and inconsistent in their statements and send 'mixed signals' to voters due to intra-party ideological divergences
- Parties may deliberately choose to remain ambiguous and 'blur' their positions in certain issues
- Parties strategically vary other parties' policy statements to blame other parties of being 'unclear' and 'unreliable' on specific policy issues
- Along with statements on issue positions, parties also make statements on their own (and other parties') valence characteristics, e.g. their competence, integrity, or previous record

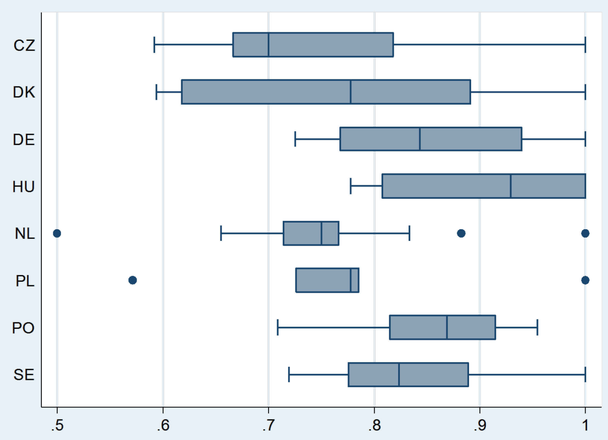
Voters and clarity

- Most studies consider ambiguous positions to be electorally harmful: Voters are less likely to vote for parties they conceive as disunited
- Party statements generally arrive voters via the media and thus the framing of party statements by journalists shapes voters' perceptions of party positions and their clarity
- The impact of ambiguity in different issue areas and framings on voters' decision making processes remains undertheorized in the literature

Measuring clarity in media statements

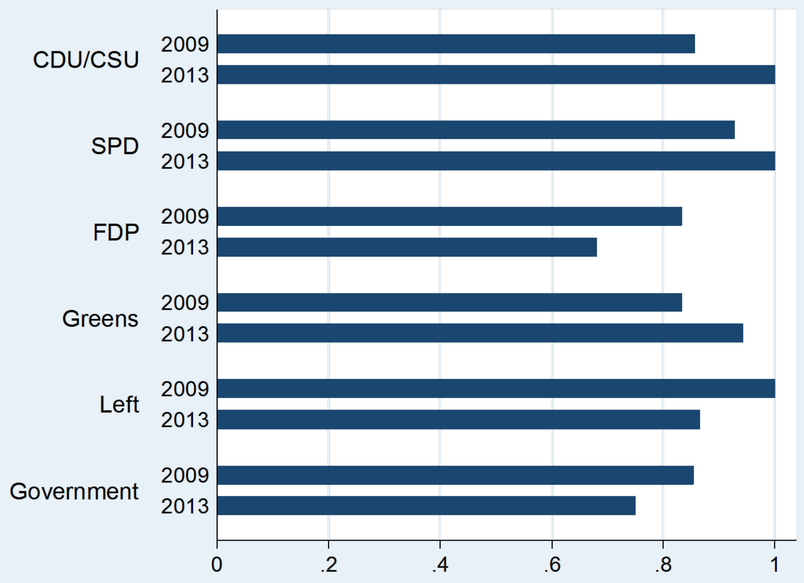
Assessing clarity and ambiguity in parties' media statements

- Coding includes statements' directions (positive/expansive; negative/restrictive; neutral)
- Variance in coded directions reflects the amount of contradictory statements with regard to parties' own issue positions
- Measured via (adapted) *rice cohesion scores* across parties, issues, countries, and elections
- Higher scores indicate clearer positions (more cohesion; less ambiguity)



Above: *Comparing cohesion scores across countries:* The overall clarity of parties' communication differs between countries

Right: *Comparing cohesion scores across time:* German parties show differing levels of cohesiveness in the run-up to the elections of 2009 and 2013

Above: *Comparing cohesion scores across policy areas*

- Parties' media statements exhibit differing levels of ambiguity across the four most salient policy areas
- Within countries, parties communicate ambiguously only in certain issues