Who Responds? Voters, Parties and Issue Attention

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Do parties listen to their voters? This article addresses this important question by moving beyond position congruence to explore whether parties respond to voters' issue priorities. It argues that political parties respond to voters in their election manifestos, but that their responsiveness varies across different party types: namely, that large parties are more responsive to voters' policy priorities, while government parties listen less to voters' issue demands. The study also posits that niche parties are not generally more responsive to voter demands, but that they are more responsive to the concerns of their supporters in their owned issue areas. To test these theoretical expectations, the study combines data from the Comparative Manifestos Project with data on voters' policy priorities from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems and various national election studies across eighteen European democracies in sixty-three elections from 1972–2011. Our findings have important implications for understanding political representation and democratic linkage.

One of the central functions of parties in democracies is to link citizens with political decision makers.[1] In recent years, however, there has been concern about whether parties still perform this important role in the face of increasing partisan dealignment.[2] Stimson et al. developed the concept of dynamic representation to describe how a party shifts its policy position in response to changes in public opinion.[3] Parties that have not been responsive to voters' issue concerns can lose voters to newly formed parties. Kitschelt, for example, argued that left-libertarian parties are likely to form when 'the *unresponsiveness* of existing political institutions coincides with favourable *political opportunities*'.[4] The formation of European green parties is often attributed to the interaction of these two conditions.[5] More recently, we have seen the development of Pirate parties in many countries, which is largely a result of other parties' failure to respond to voters' policy concerns regarding information privacy, transparency and sharing. However, not all parties are equally responsive. Those that are more focused on policy, for example, may be less responsive to the demands of the electorate as a whole than they are to those of their own supporters.[6] Adams et al. and Ezrow et al., for example, find distinct differences between the responsiveness of mainstream and niche parties to the electorate as a whole.[7]

Much of the current research on party responsiveness to voters has focused on preference congruence. Specifically, it has examined how parties' *policy positions* are influenced by

[1] Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011; Lawson 1980, 2005.
[2] See Dalton and Wattenberg 2000.
[3] Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson 1995.
[4] Kitschelt 1988a, 209.
[5] See e.g., Markovits and Gorski 1993.
[6] De Swann 1973; Strøm and Müller 1999; Wittman 1973, 1983.
[7] Adams et al. 2006; Ezrow et al. 2011.

changes in voter preferences.[8] In other words, if the electorate shifts to the right, then the expectation is that parties will move their positions to the right. While this research has significantly advanced our understanding of the relationship between parties and voters, it has not addressed how parties respond to voters' *issue priorities*. A second area of research, which has focused on the relationship between citizens' policy priorities and *government policy*, has sought to address how voters' issue priorities affect government policy.[9] However, the literature to date has not examined political parties' responsiveness to voters' issue priorities in their election manifestos. In this article, we seek to bridge these research areas by studying whether political parties listen to their voters when deciding which policy issues they emphasize in their election manifestos, and how responsiveness may vary across party types (see also Wagner and Meyer's study on how party organization can influence responsiveness).[10] Importantly, we also build on current research that focuses on how voters' choices are influenced by the issues that parties emphasize and those in which they are perceived to have competences.[11]

Current research has offered some insight into what determines the amount of attention that parties pay to political issues. Parties' policy priorities are based on the issues they own, they are placed on the agenda by issue entrepreneurs or other parties in the system, and they are affected by the political and economic context.[12] In line with these previous findings, we posit that political parties not only respond to shifts in voter preferences, but that they also listen to voters when deciding which policy issues to emphasize. Thus, similar to Spoon and Klüver, we argue that there is a positive relationship between the attention that voters pay to a given policy issue and the attention that parties devote to the issue.[13] However, while Spoon and Klüver demonstrate that the electoral context (whether it is a national election or an election to the European Parliament) has an important impact on the degree of issue responsiveness of political parties, they focus less on the ways in which parties' characteristics could affect party responsiveness.[14] In this article, we recognize that there are important differences among parties; our central argument is that several features condition party responsiveness – namely party size, type and governing status. We thus seek to understand not only *when* parties are more responsive to voters' issue priorities, but *which* parties are more responsive.

To understand the relationship between parties and voters and how it differs across parties, we examine the responsiveness of party election manifestos to voters' issue priorities from 1972 to 2011 in eighteen European countries. More specifically, we analyze the responsiveness of 130 parties across thirteen issue areas in sixty-three national elections. We consider political parties to be responsive to their voters if an increase in voter attention to a given policy issue leads to an increase in party attention to that issue. We measure party issue attention using data from the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP). Issue priorities of the entire electorate are measured using data on the most important issue/problem, which we obtained from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems and various national election studies.

Our findings have important implications for understanding the nature of political representation across parties in Europe. We show that parties indeed respond to voters' issue

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[8] E.g., Adams, Haupt, and Stoll 2009; Adams et al. 2004, 2006; Ezrow and Hellwig 2011.

[9] See e.g., Bevan and Jennings 2014; Chaqués Bonafont and Palau 2011; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008; Jennings and John 2009; Jones and Baumgartner 2004; Jones, Larsen-Price, and Wilkerson 2009.

[10] Wagner and Meyer 2014.

[11] E.g., Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Green and Hobolt 2008; Green and Jennings 2012; van der Brug 2004.

[12] Budge and Farlie 1983; Duverger 1954; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Hobolt and De Vries 2011; Inglehart 1997; Petrocik 1996; Riker 1982.

[13] Spoon and Klüver 2014.

[14] Spoon and Klüver 2014.

priorities, but that parties' responsiveness importantly varies across party type. While larger parties are more responsive to voters' priorities, governing parties are, on average, less responsive to citizens' policy concerns. Our analysis demonstrates that niche parties are, overall, neither more nor less responsive than other political parties. However, when we examine green party responsiveness in the area of environmental protection, we find that that they are more responsive to their supporters. Hence, political parties do listen to their voters and therefore play an important role in linking citizens to political decision making. Importantly, party type affects the nature of responsiveness, as not all parties respond equally to voter priorities.

This article proceeds as follows. First, we present our theoretical argument about party responsiveness and how it is conditioned by party characteristics, and derive hypotheses that guide the empirical analysis. Then we elaborate on our data and methods, including how we created our issue categories. Next, we present the results of our empirical analysis and conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for political representation.

PARTIES AND ISSUE RESPONSIVENESS

In this section, we first outline our assumptions about party behaviour, from which we derive the argument that parties are responsive to voters' issue priorities. We then present our argument for why responsiveness differs across parties.

Issue Responsiveness of Political Parties

To understand parties' responsiveness to voters' policy priorities, we need to understand what drives their behaviour. Political parties are typically conceptualized as rational, goal-oriented and purposeful collective actors that aim to maximize the achievement of their preferences.[15] We assume that parties may pursue two different goals. First, Riker suggested that parties are primarily *office-seeking* actors that pursue executive offices.[16] Accordingly, parties seek to win elections for instrumental reasons, as they are primarily interested in obtaining control of political offices. Secondly, De Swaan argued, in contrast, that parties are *policy-seeking* actors. According to this party behaviour model, political parties value certain policy goals, which motivate their actions.[17] As Strøm and Müller have pointed out, these goals are not necessarily independent of each other. Political parties might instrumentally strive for offices in order to implement their preferred policies. Similarly, political parties might instrumentally seek to achieve policy goals in order to attract voters and ultimately gain control over executive offices.[18] It is therefore not surprising that research on party competition has been characterized by a long-standing debate about which of these goals most adequately captures party behaviour.[19] Thus we do not assume that either of these goals solely explains party behaviour. Instead, we posit that both goals affect behaviour, but that there are important differences with regard to party type: some parties value office goals over policy goals, while other parties primarily act as policy seekers.

To win office, parties need to attract as many voters as possible. However, policy positions may be difficult to change, as parties are committed to certain positions due to their ideology or reputation.[20] Thus another important and promising instrument through which parties can gain

[15] Downs 1957.
[16] Riker 1962, 1982.
[17] De Swaan 1973.
[18] Strøm and Müller 1999.
[19] See e.g., Strøm 1990; Strøm and Müller 1999.
[20] See e.g., Kollman, Miller, and Page 1992; Robertson 1976.

votes is the attention they pay to different political issues. We therefore assume that rational, goal-oriented parties will seek to emphasize the issues that voters prioritize as a means to win political office. We build on the saliency theory of party competition and the issue ownership model and argue that, to win elections, parties will focus on the issues that voters emphasize.[21] When voters change their issue priorities, we expect parties to follow. Just as voters are often retrospective, we argue that parties also act retrospectively.[22] Importantly, the goals the party prioritizes will influence how responsive it is. Thus a policy-driven party may be less responsive to the electorate than an office-driven party, for example. Adams and Somer-Topcu have demonstrated that parties gain votes in the current election when they have moderated their positions in the previous election (that is, there is a lagged effect of responsiveness).[23] Building on this finding, we argue that parties need time to process voters' demands, and thus will respond in the subsequent election.

This expectation also reflects what often happens in electoral campaigns. If a party has lost votes to a rival party at t_{-1}, it will seek to recover these votes in the subsequent election, t_0. Thus at t_0, the party is essentially responding to the voters' preferences at t_{-1}. Several examples illustrate this lagged effect. In response to the French *Front National*'s advancement to the second round of the presidential contest in 2002, the centre-right *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* moved to the right on immigration and law and order issues in the 2007 election.[24] Spoon et al. similarly find that a party's emphasis on environmental issues is directly affected by the green party's vote share in the previous election.[25] Accordingly, we expect that the conservative Swedish *Moderaterna* will most likely respond to the immigration issue in its election manifesto for the September 2014 general election, an issue prioritized by voters of the far-right *Sverigedemokraterna*, which won 5.7 per cent of the vote and twenty seats in 2010. Following this understanding of party responsiveness, our first hypothesis is as follows.

HYPOTHESIS 1:   The more attention voters paid to a given policy issue in the previous election (t_{-1}), the higher the attention that parties pay to this issue in the current election (t_0).

Are Some Parties more Responsive?

Parties vary in several important ways – for example in size, governing status, intraparty democracy, ideological breadth and issue focus. Based on these differences, scholars have developed different party types, including the mass and cadre party, the catch-all party, the electoral-professional party, the cartel party and, most recently, the niche party.[26] These characteristics have been shown to influence parties' goals and the decisions that they make. Parties' behaviour is motivated by emphasizing different goals, and depending on the goal that is emphasized, behaviour may vary. For example, if a party primarily focuses on policy, it may choose to only focus on a specific set of issues in the election campaign or to stay out of government if participating involves too much compromise of its core policies, as has been the case with the Swedish Green Party – *Miljöpartiet de Gröna*.[27]

Compared to smaller parties, large parties tend to be office seeking and follow a broad ideological appeal, whereas small parties are often more ideologically consistent and more

[21] Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996.
[22] Fiorina 1981; Kiewiet and Rivers 1984; Powell and Whitten 1993.
[23] Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009.
[24] For a similar logic, see Meguid 2008; van Spanje 2010.
[25] Spoon, Hobolt, and de Vries 2014.
[26] Duverger 1954; Katz and Mair 1995; Kirchheimer 1966; Meguid 2005, 2008; Panebianco 1988.
[27] Bale and Bergman 2006.

focused on policy.[28] Large parties are often referred to as catch-all parties and seek to bring as many voters into their tent as they can.[29] Over time, these parties may change their ideological position or issue focus to attract more voters, as the British Conservative Party has done under David Cameron's leadership.[30] Conversely, smaller parties' size is often due to the choices they have made regarding policy positions and issue priorities. Small parties may have decided not to appeal to the broader electorate, but to focus instead on a smaller set of issues, which may not have as wide of an appeal. Cox, for example, points out that 'being *small* is best for maintaining ideological consistency'.[31] As a result of these core differences, scholars have found that smaller parties behave differently than larger parties in election campaigns and in government.[32] Following this research, which highlights the overall differences between small and large parties, we argue that larger parties will pay more attention to voters' concerns than small parties, which is our second hypothesis.[33]

HYPOTHESIS 2: Large parties will be more responsive to voters than will small parties.

Next, we consider the responsiveness of governing parties. Although these are often larger parties, smaller parties have also been included in governing coalitions, such as the green parties in Belgium, Finland, France, Germany and Italy. While larger parties are more likely to be responsive than smaller parties, once a party is in government, it may be more constrained in its actions than opposition parties, regardless of its size. As governing parties are focused on policy making, they may be less able to compromise their policy priorities in their manifestos. Incumbent parties, moreover, have been responsible for policies that have been implemented in recent years. They have been exposed to intensive scrutiny by the media, which monitor governmental action and communicate legislative decisions to voters. As a result, voters have fairly good knowledge of the policy decisions of government parties. It is thus very difficult for a governing party to entirely change its policy priorities in an election manifesto in response to shifts in voter attention. For instance, imagine a government has largely ignored environmental policy during its four-year term. Even though voters might care a lot about environmental protection, it would not be very convincing to emphasize this issue in the election campaign since the government has not done anything about that issue while in office. A governing party may thus compromise its credibility among voters if it changes its issue priorities right before an election.[34]

In contrast, opposition parties have much more flexibility to propose policies that voters favour. They are not currently in office, and past activities in government in previous legislative terms may have faded in voters' memories. Opposition parties are not as constrained by outside forces such as economic downturns or international commitments, and can typically make policy proposals throughout the election campaign without having to refer to their past legislative decisions. For this reason, political parties that are in opposition at the time of the election can pay more attention to voters' policy priorities in their manifestos. Moreover, they have the incentive to be more responsive to (re)gain control of government. We therefore expect governing parties to be less responsive than opposition parties to changes in voters' issue

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[28] Cox 1997; Downs 1957; Harmel and Janda 1994; Kirchheimer 1966.
[29] Kirchheimer 1966.
[30] Harmel and Janda 1994; Przeworski and Sprague 1986.
[31] Cox 1997, 171.
[32] E.g. Bolleyer 2007; West and Spoon 2013.
[33] As one could argue that the effect of party size may be curvilinear, as parties might become less responsive past a certain size, we have included the squared size of party as a robustness check. See footnote 54.
[34] For a similar argument, see Nanou and Dorussen 2013.

emphasis, since they are less constrained by their own past decisions. Opposition parties can more easily adjust their policy priorities without jeopardizing their credibility, which leads us to our third hypothesis.[35]

HYPOTHESIS 3: Government parties will be less responsive to voters than will opposition parties.

Turning to a final distinction among parties, niche parties, as defined by Meguid, are those that 'reject the traditional class-based orientation of politics', whose policies 'do not coincide with existing lines of political division' and that 'limit their issue appeals'.[36] Niche parties are, moreover, classic policy seekers, which value their policy goals over any office considerations. They often form because existing parties are not responsive to the issue priorities of part of the electorate, as discussed above regarding the formation of the green parties, and thus are focused more on the policies that led to their formation.[37] Unlike mainstream parties, niche parties may make decisions, such as choosing to stay out of government, because of policy differences or feeling constrained by the policy considerations of the dominant party, which run counter to the traditional expectation of parties as office seekers.[38] Heller, for example, found that regional parties in Spain chose to stay out of the national government in exchange for policy concessions from the governing party.[39] These parties, moreover, are largely unresponsive to the issue agendas of other parties.[40] Additionally, niche parties may be considered the archetypal 'associative issue owners', in that there is a spontaneous identification between issues relating to the environment or immigration, for example, and green or far-right parties, respectively, in the minds of most people.[41] For these reasons, we argue that niche parties may pay more attention to voters than other parties on the specific issues on which they focus, but may not necessarily pay any more attention to voters' concerns on unowned issues.

It is important to note that party size and niche party status are not necessarily the same. Niche parties may be small in size (most green parties) or a major political actor (such as the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* or the *Schweizerische Volkspartei*). Small parties, moreover, may be niche parties, but may also be mainstream parties (such as the Swedish *Kristdemokraterna)*.[42] Accordingly, Meguid and Adams et al. emphasize that size is not a defining characteristic of niche parties.[43] Similarly, Wagner points out that 'while there is a likely correlation between size and niche party status due to the fact that that these parties compete in areas removed from the mainstream, this is by no means a necessary attribute of niche parties'.[44] In our dataset, the correlation between size and niche party status is only

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[35] Governing parties' inability to change their policy priorities may also be explained by theories of issue ownership and competency. Because they were elected on issues that they own (and are perceived by voters to be competent in these areas), governing parties are less likely to change their priorities right before an election. Greene furthermore distinguishes between governing and opposition parties' likelihood of expanding the issues on which they focus in their manifestos. He finds that opposition parties increase their issue diversity as a way of expanding their appeal to voters. See Budge and Farlie 1983; Green and Jennings 2012; Greene ND; Petrocik 1996.

[36] Meguid 2005, 347–8. There are other definitions of niche parties in the literature. Wagner (2012), for example, has proposed that niche parties are best defined as those that compete primarily on a small number of non-economic issues.

[37] Kitschelt 1988a.

[38] Downs 1957; Riker 1982.

[39] Heller 2002.

[40] Adams et al. 2006; Ezrow 2008; Meguid 2005, 2008.

[41] See Spoon, Hobolt, and de Vries 2014; Walgrave, Lefevere, and Tresch 2012.

[42] See Spoon 2011.

[43] Adams et al. 2006; Meguid 2005, 347.

[44] Wagner 2012, 851.

moderate (r = 0.27, $p < 0.01$). Our final hypothesis reflects both niche parties' differences in relation to mainstream parties and their ownership of specific issues.

HYPOTHESIS 4: Across issue areas, niche parties will be no more responsive than other parties; however, they will be more responsive to voters on their own issues.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In this section, we first discuss the measurement of the dependent variable (*Party Issue Responsiveness*) and then explain the data selection and the operationalization of the independent variables.

Assessing Party Issue Responsiveness across Countries

To measure the responsiveness of political parties to voters' issue priorities, we examine the congruence of voter and party attention on different policy issues. More precisely, we compare the attention that voters pay to different policy issues in the previous election, which we denote as t_{-1}, with the policy issues that parties emphasize in the current election, which we denote as t_0. To measure political parties' issue responsiveness, we include a time lag between the issue priorities of voters and parties, assuming that political parties need time to process changes in voters' issue salience and adjust their issue priorities, as discussed above.[45]

We measure political parties' issue attention according to the emphasis they place on different policy issues in their election manifestos. Manifestos are an ideal source for mapping parties' issue priorities. Parties regularly draft manifestos for national elections and lay out their stance on different policy issues to signal their policy commitments to voters. They constitute a rich data source that has been used by a wide variety of scholars to measure the salience of policy issues for parties.[46] We rely on information extracted from election manifestos by the CMP,[47] which has generated the most comprehensive and widely used dataset on parties' policy priorities by applying a manual content analysis to election manifestos. Human coders have divided election manifestos into units of analysis (so-called quasi-sentences) and have allocated these quasi-sentences to policy categories specified *a priori* in a coding scheme. The attention that political parties pay to policy issues is measured as the percentage of quasi-sentences devoted to a certain issue area.

Importantly, the issue areas do not reflect positions; in other words, they include both positive and negative mentions of the issue (see Table 1). Thus the multiculturalism category includes both support and opposition to multiculturalism. We combine these issue dimensions, as we are interested in measuring how salient an issue is for a party and not necessarily the position it has taken. Our dependent variable is therefore the party's attention to an issue area in a specific election, which is measured by summing the percentage of the party's manifesto for each issue area.

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[45] In addition to the reasoning discussed above, modeling party responsiveness by explaining party issue attention at t_0 with voter issue attention at t_{-1} also better reflects the structure of our data than a concurrent analysis of party and voter issue attention at t_0. Election manifestos are typically drafted long before the election takes place, while election studies, on the basis of which we measure voter issue attention, are often conducted after the election.

[46] See also Adams, Haupt and Stoll 2009; Adams et al. 2004, 2006; Bäck, Debus, and Dumont 2011; Ezrow et al. 2011.

[47] Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006.

TABLE 1   *Issue Areas and CMP Policy Categories*

CMP policy category	Issue area
703: Farmers	Agriculture
201: Freedom and human rights 202: Democracy 603: Traditional morality (positive) 604: Traditional morality (negative) 705: Underprivileged minority groups 706: Non-economic demographic groups	Civil rights
502: Culture	Culture
401: Free enterprise 402: Incentives 403: Market regulation 404: Economic planning 408: Economic goals 409: Keynesian demand management 410: Productivity 412: Controlled economy 413: Nationalization 414: Economic orthodoxy 704: Middle class and professional groups	Economy
506: Education expansion 507: Education limitation	Education
416: Anti-growth economy (positive) 501: Environmental protection	Environment
108: EC/EU (positive) 110: EC/EU (negative)	European integration
203: Constitutionalism (positive) 204: Constitutionalism (negative) 301: Decentralization 302: Centralization 303: Government and administrative efficiency 304: Political corruption 305: Political authority	Institutional and administrative reform
101: Foreign and special relations (positive) 102: Foreign and special relations (negative) 103: Anti-imperialism (positive) 104: Military (positive) 105: Military (negative) 106: Peace (positive) 107: Internationalism (positive) 109: Internationalism (negative) 406: Protectionism (positive) 407: Protectionism (negative)	International politics
605: Law and order	Law and order
601: National way of life (positive) 602: National way of life (negative) 607: Multiculturalism (positive) 608: Multiculturalism (negative)	Multiculturalism
503: Social justice 504: Welfare state expansion 505: Welfare state limitation 606: Social harmony	Social welfare
411: Technology and infrastructure	Technology and infrastructure

In order to measure the attention that voters pay to different policy issues, we rely on the so-called most important problem/issue (MIP) question, which is included in a number of different national and cross-national surveys.[48] This question asks respondents to indicate the most important problem/issue that their country is currently facing. The question is a standard tool for measuring voters' issue priorities and has been used by a wide variety of scholars in comparative politics.[49] In order to assess party responsiveness, we measure the attention that parties pay to different policy issues in the current election, t_0, while measuring the issue priorities of voters at t_{-1}, the previous national election.[50]

To test whether political parties respond to voters' issue priorities, we matched the policy categories included in the CMP database with the responses to the MIP question included in national election studies. We grouped the CMP categories and the public opinion data into thirteen common issue areas, which allows us to directly assess whether parties responded to the changes in voter attention to a common set of issue areas (see Table 1). On average, we were able to match 85 per cent of the quasi-sentences included in the manifestos with the public opinion data, while 68 per cent of the issues indicated by voters in the election surveys could be linked to one of the thirteen issue areas.[51]

In order to empirically test our hypotheses, we analyse party responsiveness in eighteen European democracies.[52] We initially started with the twenty-seven member states of the European Union and checked the availability of national election studies that included the MIP question since the 1970s. For some countries, there was no election survey conducted during the study period (for example, Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania and Romania), while for others, the question was significantly different from the typical open-ended MIP question and thus answers would not be comparable (for example, Belgium). For some of these eighteen countries, however, a MIP question was not asked in every parliamentary election survey (for example, Czech Republic, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Slovenia and Spain). We thus only include the elections for which we have a comparable MIP question from the previous election survey. Our data comes from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems and various additional national election studies.[53] See the Online Appendix for a list of election studies used for the MIP data.

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[48] We acknowledge that 'most important issue' and 'most important problem' are not necessarily the same question, and that MIP questions do not always accurately represent the public's preferences. However, as these are the best cross-national questions available to gauge citizens' policy priorities, we use both most important issue and most important problem questions in order to have as much of a cross-national time series as possible. See Jennings and John 2009, 844; Jennings and Wlezien 2012. For a discussion of how there is little difference between the two questions, see Wlezien (2005) and Jennings and Wlezien (2011).

[49] E.g., Chaqués Bonafont and Palau 2011; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008; Jennings and John 2009.

[50] As there is a long-standing debate in comparative party research about whether parties respond to the entire electorate or only to their supporters or specific groups, we also ran our models looking at the issue attention of the parties' supporters (see Online Appendix Table A.2). However, the results of this analysis do not differ from that of the analysis based on the entire electorate, which is consistent with Green's findings in the UK. This result may be because the majority of the parties in our analysis are generally vote seeking, and will respond equally to the electorate and to their own supporters. See Adams et al. 2006; Dalton 1985; Downs 1957; Ezrow et al. 2011; Green 2011; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008; Miller and Schofield 2003.

[51] We have chosen to drop the issues that voters mention that we could not link to one of the issue areas, as we are interested in understanding how responsive parties are to voters on the specific issues they mention. In future research, it would be interesting to examine these unmatched issues and their implications for representation.

[52] The countries included in our analysis are Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

[53] We only use MIP data from national election studies and do not rely on polling data to generate a comparable dataset across countries. All the national election studies we include in our dataset use open-ended questions.

In all, we examine the issue responsiveness of 130 parties across thirteen issue areas in sixty-three national elections from 1972–2011.

Measuring Independent Variables

To understand how party characteristics condition responsiveness, we include three variables in our models. First, we include a variable for *Party Size*, which is measured as the party's vote share in the previous national election.[54] Secondly, we include a variable for *Governing Party Status*. A party is considered a governing party if it was in government at the time of the election under consideration. Thirdly, we code parties as *Niche* or mainstream parties. We use Meguid's definition of niche party and code green, regional and far-right parties as such.[55] The data on party size was obtained from the CMP dataset and the government participation data comes from the ParlGov dataset.[56]

We also include several control variables. At the party level, we include a measure for *Ideological Extremeness*. Arguably, more ideologically extreme parties are more policy focused and are thus less likely to respond to the electorate's priorities, though they may be more responsive to their own voters' priorities.[57] To measure this we include the left-right (or RILE) score of each party in the CMP dataset.

Next, we include three party-system control variables, all of which condition how responsive a party will be to voter demands. First, we include a variable that measures the *Average Issue Salience* of the party system in a given election. We posit that parties' issue emphasis is not only influenced by voters' issue priorities, but also by those of other parties. If other parties are focusing on an issue, then we would expect all parties in the system to do the same. Secondly, we control for *Average District Magnitude*. We argue that the larger the magnitude, the less responsive parties will be, as they do not need to appeal to as many voters to be elected. We draw these data from Golder and add the data after 2000.[58] Thirdly, we control for the distance in *days between the current and the previous election*. We argue that the closer the previous election is, the more responsive parties will be to voters' issue priorities expressed through the MIP questions. Conversely, the further away the previous election is, the less responsive parties will be.[59] See Table A.1 in the Online Appendix for descriptive statistics for all variables included in the empirical analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

In this section, we empirically test our theoretical expectations of political parties' issue responsiveness. After briefly discussing the specification of the statistical model, we present the results of our multivariate regression analyses.

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[54] One may argue that the effect of party size may in fact be curvilinear, as parties might become steadily less responsive past a certain size. As a robustness check, we included not only party size but also the squared size of a party in the empirical analysis. While there is indeed a curvilinear effect as the main term is positive and the squared term is negative, the size of the squared term is extremely small, so that the overall effect of party size is essentially linear. Thus the models we present do not include the squared term.

[55] Meguid 2005.

[56] Döring 2012; Döring and Manow 2012.

[57] Adams et al. 2006; Kitschelt 1988b; Kitschelt 1994.

[58] Golder 2006.

[59] We have re-run our analysis with several other control variables, including the party's vote share change from the last election to the current election and voter turnout. The overall results do not change, and these variables are not significant.

To assess the impact of the explanatory variables on parties' issue responsiveness, we take into account the special structure of the data. Our dataset comprises information about the responsiveness of 130 parties in eighteen European countries across thirteen issue areas from 1972–2011. The observations are therefore not completely independent, as assumed by ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. To acknowledge the hierarchical structure of the data, we estimate OLS regression models with clustered robust standard errors by creating a cluster variable that takes into account that our observations are simultaneously nested into parties and issue areas. One might also argue that the results vary across countries. We have thus also estimated an OLS model that includes country fixed effects. However, the results are substantially the same and none of the country dummies has a statistically significant effect.[60] We therefore only present the most parsimonious model accounting for the clustering into parties and policy issue areas.

Our dataset is furthermore characterized by a time component, as we analyse succeeding elections in the different countries in our sample. As a result, the observations are not only clustered into parties and issue areas, but they might also be dependent over time. In order to control for potential autocorrelation induced by the time-series structure of the data, we include the lagged dependent variable.[61]

Table 2 presents the results of the multivariate OLS regression model that examines parties' responsiveness to the entire electorate. Model 1 only includes the main effects for our explanatory and control variables. Model 2 then adds interaction effects for the three party-type hypotheses relating to party size, government status, and niche party and voter issue attention at t_{-1}. Finally, Model 3 includes interaction effects for all explanatory and control variables. In line with Hypothesis 1, Model 1 indicates that political parties are indeed responsive to the electorate's issue priorities, as voter issue attention at t_{-1} has a statistically significant effect on party issue attention at t_0. Hence political parties adjust their issue priorities in response to voters' policy concerns. This finding confirms previous work that parties are not only responsive with regard to the policy positions they adopt on the left-right dimension, but also pay attention to which issues voters prioritize.[62] If voter attention to a policy issue at t_{-1} increases by one percentage point, the attention that parties pay to this issue at t_0 on average increases by 0.05 percentage points.

Following the extant literature, we recognize that there might be a reciprocal relationship between voters and parties, as parties might not only respond to voters' priorities (voters may also respond to parties' issue emphasis).[63] In order to test whether a reciprocal relationship exists, we have estimated a Granger causality test and a reversed OLS regression model in which voter issue attention was predicted by lagged party issue attention. The Granger test, as well as the reversed regression model, clearly indicates that there is no empirical evidence of a reciprocal relationship. Parties respond to voters, but voters do not necessarily respond to parties.

However, we have theorized that issue responsiveness is not equal, but rather is conditioned by party characteristics. We have thus included interaction effects between voter issue attention

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[60] One could potentially also estimate a multilevel model with parties nested into countries. However, as at least thirty second-level units are required to estimate a multilevel analysis, and since we only have eighteen countries, we chose to run an OLS model with clustered robust standard errors. In order to test the robustness of the findings, we have, however, also estimated the multilevel specification and the results are nearly identical. See Maas and Hox 2004.

[61] Beck and Katz 1995, 1996.

[62] Adams et al. 2004, 2006; Spoon and Klüver 2014.

[63] E.g. Adams, Haupt, and Stoll 2009; Adams et al. 2004; Bélanger and Meguid 2008.

TABLE 2   *Examining Party Responsiveness to all Voters*

DV: Party issue attention t_0	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Main effects			
Voter issue attention t_{-1}	0.045***	0.036**	0.151***
	(0.011)	(0.018)	(0.036)
Party size	0.000	−0.009	−0.009
	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Government status	0.120	0.342**	0.378**
	(0.158)	(0.157)	(0.156)
Niche party	−0.063	−0.019	−0.065
	(0.220)	(0.218)	(0.214)
Left-right position	0.007*	0.008*	−0.003
	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Average party system issue salience t_{-1}	0.390***	0.394***	0.443***
	(0.040)	(0.041)	(0.042)
Average district magnitude	0.001	0.001	0.000
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Number of days since last election	0.000	0.000	0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Interaction effects			
Party size × Voter issue attention t_{-1}		**0.002****	**0.001***
		(0.001)	**(0.001)**
Government status × Voter issue attention t_{-1}		**−0.037****	**−0.046*****
		(0.019)	**(0.016)**
Niche party × Voter issue attention t_{-1}		**−0.007**	**−0.018**
		(0.022)	**(0.023)**
Left-right position × Voter issue attention t_{-1}			0.002***
			(0.001)
Average party system issue salience t_{-1} × Voter issue attention t_{-1}			−0.005***
			(0.001)
Average district magnitude × Voter issue attention t_{-1}			−0.000
			(0.000)
Number of days since last election × Voter issue attention t_{-1}			−0.000
			(0.000)
Party issue attention t_{-1}	0.436***	0.432***	0.418***
	(0.047)	(0.047)	(0.049)
Constant	0.693***	0.749***	0.524*
	(0.263)	(0.256)	(0.272)
N	4,993	4,993	4,993
R^2	0.58	0.59	0.60

Note: Results are from an OLS regression with clustered robust standard errors. ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.10.

at t_{-1} and party size, government and niche party status in Model 2.[64] In line with Hypothesis 2, the empirical analysis shows that party size is positively related to issue responsiveness, as the interaction effect exhibits a statistically significant positive relationship. Hence large parties are

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[64] As the responsiveness of political parties might also vary across different party families, we also estimated an OLS model with fixed effects for party families. The effects of our main explanatory variables remain constant, while none of the party family dummies is significant.
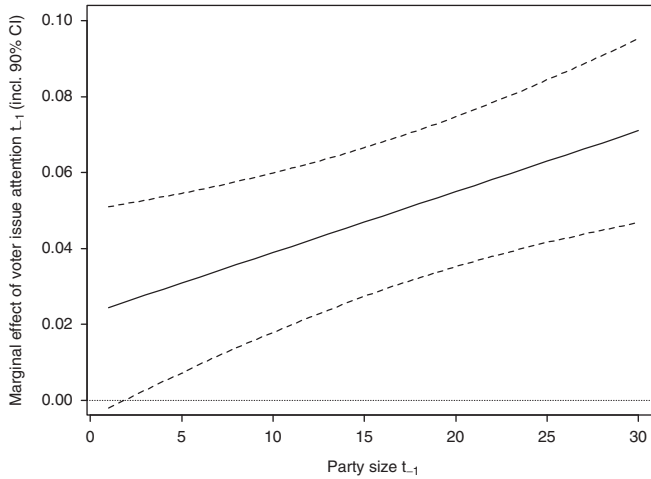
Fig. 1. The effect of party size on party issue responsiveness
Note: This figure is based on Model 2.

more responsive to voters than smaller parties. Similarly, the OLS regression analysis also provides some empirical support for Hypothesis 3: the interaction effect between voter issue attention at t_{-1} and government status is statistically significant and negative. Thus government parties are, on average, less responsive to voters than opposition parties. Since both party size and government status exhibit statistically significant effects, it is important to note that even though large parties are generally more responsive to voters than small parties, large parties are less responsive to voters if they are in government at the time of the election.[65] Finally, we find empirical support for the first part of Hypothesis 4: that niche parties will be no more responsive than other parties. As expected, the coefficients for the niche party variable in Models 1 and 2 are not significant. The empirical findings for party size, government and niche status are robust across model specifications, as the effects hold when only including interaction effects for these explanatory variables (Model 2) or including interactions for all independent variables in the model (Model 3).

To further illustrate how party responsiveness varies with party size and government status, we have computed marginal effect plots as recommended by Brambor et al.[66] Figure 1 demonstrates parties' issue responsiveness to voters. More precisely, it shows the marginal effect of voter issue attention at t_{-1} on party issue attention at t_0 as the size of political parties varies. The figure clearly demonstrates that large parties are more responsive to voters' issue priorities across all levels of party size.

Figure 2 plots how government status affects parties' issue responsiveness. It presents the marginal effect of voter issue attention at t_{-1} on party issue attention at t_0 for opposition and government parties. In line with our theoretical expectations, the figure demonstrates that government parties are less responsive to voters than opposition parties. It does, however, demonstrate that the difference in responsiveness between government and opposition parties is not statistically significant.

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[65] Other factors, such as the state of the economy, may influence government responsiveness to voter issue attention. These should be explored in future research.

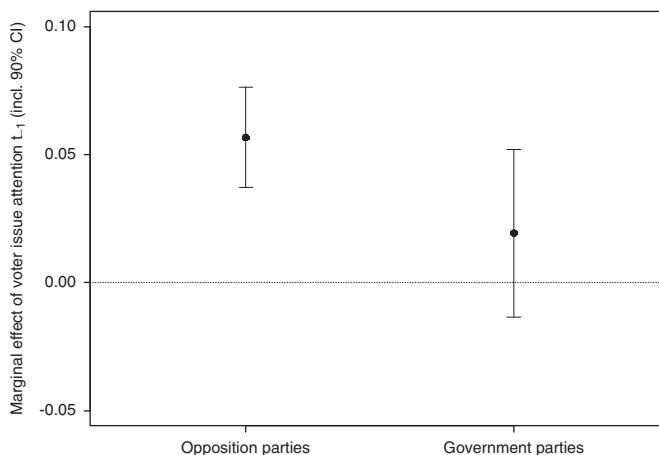[66] Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2006.

Fig. 2. The effect of government status on party issue responsiveness
Note: This figure is based on Model 2.

In the second part of Hypothesis 4, we posited that niche parties would be more responsive to voters in the issue areas they 'own'. Since niche parties compete primarily in policy areas that are important to them, such as green parties in the environmental issue domain, they should be largely indifferent to citizens' policy concerns in other issue areas.[67] To assess whether niche parties are more responsive to voters in the policy areas they own, we have estimated two additional OLS regression models that test whether green parties are more responsive to voters in the environmental policy domain. We have chosen to test this hypothesis with regard to green parties and environmental policy, as this issue ownership relationship is theoretically and empirically the most distinct example of a policy area owned by a specific party type. Furthermore, it can be considered an 'associated issue'.[68] Environmental policy is also a typical valence issue.[69] When a voter responds that the environment or pollution is the most important issue, it is clear what the voter's position is – she would not state that the environment is the most important issue in the election if she was opposed to environmental protection or reducing air pollution, for example. We can then easily match the voters' issue priority with the CMP codebook, which includes two policy categories that are both supportive of environmental policy and conservation (*per* 416 and *per* 501). Thus there is a clear match between the voters' issue priorities and the content of the manifesto as measured by the CMP.

Conversely, given the nature of other issue areas that voters indicate as the most important issue in the national election surveys, it is not clear which position voters have on these issues and thus with which CMP categories and parties to match it. For example, when voters respond

[67] Meguid 2005, 2008; Spoon 2011.
[68] Meguid 2005; Spoon and Klüver 2014; Walgrave, Lefevere, and Tresch 2012. Both the CMP and expert survey data confirm that green parties are the clear owners of the environmental issue. First, the CMP data show that during the 1980–2010 period, the environment issue represents an average of 22 per cent of the green parties' manifestos, which is nearly double that of the next-closest party family. Secondly, expert surveys demonstrate that the environmental issue is much more salient for green parties than for any other parties in their respective party systems. The mean salience of the environmental issue for green parties is 18.6 (out of 20) and 9.2 (out of 10) on the Benoit and Laver and Bakker et al. expert surveys, respectively. For both the CMP and expert surveys, the difference in the mean salience of the environmental issue for green parties compared to all other parties in the system is statistically significant. See Benoit and Laver 2006; Bakker et al. 2012.
[69] Stokes 1963.

that Europe, European integration or European policy is most important, we cannot know if they are Europhiles or Eurosceptics, and thus cannot use this as a proxy of the Eurosceptic issue, which could be considered the owned issue of Eurosceptic parties. Moreover, many large mainstream parties may also be considered Eurosceptic, but are not the perceived owners of the issue. Thus for all of these conceptual and methodological reasons, we have chosen to look at the responsiveness of green parties to voters on the environment issue.

Table 3 presents the results of the empirical analysis. Instead of including a niche party dummy, we have controlled for green parties more specifically in the model. We have also included a dichotomous variable indicating issue responsiveness in the environmental issue area as well as two-way interactions between voter issue attention at t_{-1}, green parties and environmental policy, and a three-way interaction between voter issue attention at t_{-1}, green parties and environmental policy. Models 4 and 5 are estimated on the basis of the issue attention of the entire electorate. Models 6 and 7 are based on the issue attention of party supporters, which follows the expectation that green parties will be more responsive to their own supporters, as they are focused on constituency representation.[70] In all four models, we see that the interaction between the green party dummy variable and both voter and supporter issue attention on all issues other than the environment is not significant. This confirms our expectation that green parties, as niche parties, are no more responsive than other parties on a non-owned issue. However, when we look at how green parties respond to their *supporters'* attention to the *environmental issue*, we see a positive and significant coefficient. The more attention supporters of green parties pay to environmental protection at t_{-1}, the larger the green parties' emphasis on environmental policy at t_0. Hence these results demonstrate that green parties, as one type of niche party, have clear issue and voter priorities. They do not adjust their policy priorities with regard to all voters, but only with regard to their specific supporters. Our findings follow those of Ezrow et al., who showed that niche parties respond to shifts in the mean position of their own voters rather than the entire electorate.[71] What is more, green parties care in particular about the issue they own and are more responsive to the policy concerns of their supporters in this particular policy domain than in other policy areas. This finding thus confirms the second part of Hypothesis 4.

Figure 3 presents simulated predicted values for parties' responsiveness in the environmental policy domain to illustrate this issue-ownership relationship.[72] The black lines indicate the responsiveness of green parties to party supporter concerns regarding environmental protection, while the grey lines indicate the responsiveness of other parties to their party supporters on the environmental issue. At the bottom of the plot, the markers indicate the distribution of issue attention among party supporters. Figure 3 clearly shows that green parties are considerably more responsive to the attention that party supporters pay to environmental protection than other parties. While the attention that green parties give to environmental protection at t_0 increases with the attention their supporters pay to environmental policy at t_{-1}, the issue attention of other parties remains largely unaffected by their supporters' concerns in this policy area. When lagged party supporter issue attention is at its mean (where 5.31 per cent of party supporters responded that the environment was the most important issue), green parties' attention to the environment issue is 8.94 compared to 6.26 for other parties,[73] holding all other variables at

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[70] Adams et al. 2006; Ezrow et al. 2011; Kitschelt 1988b, 1994.
[71] Ezrow et al. 2011.
[72] King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000.
[73] These numbers represent the percentage of the parties' manifesto that focuses on the environment issue area.

TABLE 3   *Examining Party Responsiveness in the Environmental Issue Area*

	All voters		Party supporters	
DV: Party issue attention t_0	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Main effects				
Voter/Supporter issue attention t_{-1}	0.046***	0.153***	0.044***	0.182***
	(0.012)	(0.035)	(0.012)	(0.040)
Party size	0.002	−0.009	−0.001	−0.011*
	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.006)
Government status	0.128	0.398**	0.124	0.284*
	(0.158)	(0.156)	(0.161)	(0.155)
Left-right position	0.008*	−0.004	0.008*	−0.000
	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.004)
Average party system issue salience t_{-1}	0.406***	0.460***	0.426***	0.479***
	(0.042)	(0.044)	(0.043)	(0.045)
Average district magnitude	0.001	0.000	0.001	0.001
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Number of days since last election	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Green parties	−0.284	−0.599**	−0.160	−0.410*
	(0.237)	(0.233)	(0.248)	(0.241)
Environmental issue	−0.151	−0.197	−0.359	−0.419
	(0.284)	(0.283)	(0.275)	(0.271)
Interaction effects				
Green parties × Environmental issue	3.816**	4.134**	2.815*	3.089*
	(1.623)	(1.634)	(1.663)	(1.683)
Green parties × Voter/Supporter issue attention t_{-1}	0.006	0.053	−0.028	0.007
	(0.035)	(0.036)	(0.023)	(0.026)
Environmental issue area × Voter/Supporter issue attention t_{-1}	−0.069*	−0.088*	−0.042	−0.051
	(0.041)	(0.048)	(0.037)	(0.041)
Green parties × Environmental issue × Voter/Supporter issue attention t_{-1}	**0.183**	**0.182**	**0.142****	**0.142****
	(0.151)	**(0.152)**	**(0.055)**	**(0.059)**
Party size × Voter/Supporter issue attention t_{-1}		0.002**		0.002**
		(0.001)		(0.001)
Government status × Voter/Supporter issue attention t_{-1}		−0.049***		−0.039***
		(0.016)		(0.015)
Left-right position × Voter/Supporter issue attention t_{-1}		0.002***		0.002***
		(0.001)		(0.000)
Average party system issue salience t_{-1} × Voter/Supporter issue attention t_{-1}		−0.005***		−0.007***
		(0.001)		(0.001)
Average district magnitude × Voter/Supporter issue attention t_{-1}		−0.000		−0.000
		(0.000)		(0.000)
Number of days since last election × Voter/Supporter issue attention t_{-1}		−0.000*		−0.000*
		(0.000)		(0.000)
Party issue attention t_{-1}	0.418***	0.399***	0.410***	0.389***
	(0.049)	(0.051)	(0.050)	(0.052)
Constant	0.717***	0.547**	0.755***	0.587**
	(0.265)	(0.273)	(0.268)	(0.272)
N	4,993	4,993	4,889	4,889
R²	0.59	0.60	0.58	0.60

Note: Results are from an OLS regression with clustered robust standard errors. ***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.10$.
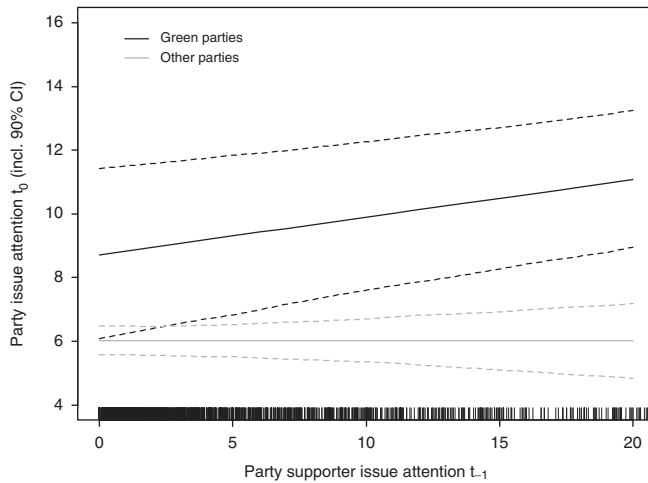
Fig. 3. Parties' responsiveness to supporters in the environmental issue area
Note: This figure is based on Model 6.

their mean (continuous variables) and median (categorical variables) values. The confidence intervals for the green parties' responsiveness is fairly large, given the small number of observations in our dataset (N = 312). However, despite the large confidence intervals of green party responsiveness, they hardly overlap with the responsiveness of other parties, which further corroborates the important issue-ownership relationship between green parties and environmental policy.

Finally, with regard to the control variables included in the empirical analysis, the OLS regression models presented in Tables 2 and 3 only indicate the following statistically significant relationships. First, right-wing parties are, on average, more responsive to voters and party supporters than left-wing parties, as all OLS models indicate a statistically significant positive effect for the parties' policy position on the left-right dimension. Secondly, parties respond not only to voters, but also to the policy priorities of other political parties. The larger the average attention that parties pay to policy issues at t_{-1}, the larger the attention that parties pay to these policy issues at t_0 (see Model 1). However, the regressions also indicate a negative interaction effect between average party issue salience and voter attention. Hence, the larger the average attention that parties and voters paid to a policy issue at t_{-1}, the smaller the responsiveness of parties to that policy issue at t_0 (see Model 3). Thirdly, the analysis demonstrates a systematic effect of average district magnitude. The larger the average district magnitude, the lower the responsiveness of parties to voters (see Model 3). This follows our expectation that with larger district magnitudes, parties can be less responsive to voters' issue priorities and choose to focus on issues that they prioritize, and still gain representation.

CONCLUSION

How do party characteristics influence responsiveness to voters' issue priorities? Building on previous research, which has demonstrated that parties respond to shifts in voters' ideological positions and that governments respond to the issue priorities of voters, we find that parties' responsiveness to voters' issue priorities is conditional on several characteristics, namely party

size and party type.[74] We show that although larger parties are more responsive to the issues voters prioritize, governing parties are less responsive, which highlights the constraints that parties are under when they participate in government. We also demonstrate that niche parties are no more responsive than other parties in general; however, when we examine green party responsiveness on its own issue, we find that they are more responsive than other parties to their supporters.

Interestingly, we find no difference in non-niche party responsiveness to the electorate in general compared to party supporters. Thus large parties are still more responsive compared to small parties, even when looking only at party supporters (see Online Appendix Table A.2). Green parties, as a type of niche party, however, are more responsive to *their own voters* on *their own issues,* thus further highlighting their distinctiveness.[75]

Our findings have important implications for understanding political representation and political competition. First, if larger parties are more responsive than smaller parties, voters will continually be more likely to vote for them, thus perpetuating their larger party status and reducing smaller party representation. In addition, as party size often determines the resources that parties receive, smaller parties are more likely to remain small.[76] Secondly, although we might expect smaller parties to be more responsive to their own voters because they have chosen to be more ideologically focused, this is not generally the case.[77] We do, however, find niche parties to be more responsive to their own voters on their own issues, which suggests that issue focus, as well as size, distinguishes parties. Thirdly, although one might argue that governing parties are more responsive to voters in order to remain in office, we find that this expectation does not hold. Our analysis shows that whereas governing parties may have been more responsive in the past, enabling them to join the government, after they join they have become too constrained and less responsive to voters. As it is well known that government parties often lose support over time, our findings highlight an important piece of the puzzle. Since being in government places specific constraints on governmental parties, they are less able to flexibly adjust their issue priorities to the policy concerns of citizens.

This study offers a crucial next step toward understanding the linkage between voters and parties, and how it is conditioned by party characteristics. However, there are still important questions that remain unanswered – are parties more likely to respond to voters when they share their policy preferences? And, moreover, do parties strategically emphasize (or de-emphasize) policy issues on which the electorate is united (divided)? Finally, how do issues become salient for voters and parties? Future research should thus explore the interaction between policy position and issue salience, and the influence of the media and exogenous policy problems and events on issue salience during election campaigns to more fully understand these relationships.

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[74] E.g., Adams, Haupt, and Stoll 2009; Adams et al. 2004, 2006; Chaqués Bonafont and Palau 2011; Ezrow and Hellwig 2011; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008; Jones and Baumgartner 2004.
[75] Adams et al. 2006; Ezrow et al. 2011; Meguid 2005, 2008; Spoon 2011.
[76] Katz and Mair 1995.
[77] Cox 1997; Kitschelt 1988b, 1994.

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