From Preferences to Policies – Proactive and Reactive Policy-Making in Higher Education Policy

Introduction

The party politics literature on the role of political parties for policy is rather extensive. This includes differences in partisan positions (e.g. Volkens et al. 2014), processes of coalition formation (e.g. Bäck, Debus, and Dumont 2011, Döring and Hellström 2013), coalition policy making (e.g. Schermann and Ennser-Jedenastik 2013), and the influence of the partisan composition of governments on policy outputs (e.g. Boix 1997, Schmidt 2007, Busemeyer 2009). While the partisan hypothesis is strongly highlighted in these studies, in theories of public policy the importance of political parties for policy-making is much more restricted. Here the focus often lies on a multitude of actors, incremental changes of policy, the role of bureaucracy or the stability of policy against partisan influence (e.g. Lindblom 1979).

This article acknowledges the assumption of the partisan hypothesis that parties and their preferences matter for policy, while also accepting the idea that they are restricted by, among others, path dependencies, prior policies, or structural arrangements. Furthermore, it argues that the transfer of partisan preferences into policy does not happen in a straight-forward way. Especially in multi-party consensus democracies negotiations between the different governing parties and coalition agreements influence the transfer of partisan preferences. This creates the possibility that partisan preferences get replaced by coalition positions, which are the result of negotiations between the different parties. In these situations the direct one to one enactment of partisan preferences into policies, as implicitly argued by the “parties matter” literature, becomes more unlikely, making it necessary to unpack this process.

Therefore, the contribution of this article is to investigate how parties and their preferences influence policy and in how far coalition agreements help to translate these preferences into
policies. The article highlights both the process of formation of coalition positions and the interplay between partisan preferences and coalition positions in subsequent policy-making.

The research questions are:

- How do partisan preferences transfer to coalition positions in a specific area of public policy?
- How do partisan preferences and coalition positions influence policy in situations of proactive or reactive policy-making?

The main argument of the article is that in cases, where a coalition expresses a policy position in its agreement (proactive policy-making) the chances for a follow-up are relatively high, while in situations where an issue appears on the agenda that has not been addressed (reactive policy-making), parties retreat to their electoral positions making a follow-up less likely.

This argument will be investigated focusing on higher education policy. This area exhibits emerging political saliency and a growing politicization (Busemeyer, Franzmann, and Garritzmann 2013). Thus, it holds the potential to provide instances of both proactive and reactive policy making. The article employs qualitative methods and is based on document analyses of manifestos, coalition agreements and policy proposals, as well as semi-structured interviews with key party officials. The regional focus is on three West European consensus democracies.

The following section of the article formulates theoretical expectations based on different strands of literature. Afterwards, the specificities of the case are addressed and data as well as methods employed in the study are presented. The next sections will present the analysis of the data and the final section will summarize the article and offer conclusions.
From election manifestos to coalition agreements and policies

Public policy theories often focus on the complexity of the interplay between structure and different types of agents. The role of political parties is often marginalized in these theories, since parties are seen as just one among many different factors that are taken into consideration, and change in policy is often described as incremental (Lindblom 1979). In this, the focus lies on the limited room to maneuver of partisan actors in government, for example due to the insulation of lower level bureaucracy towards politics (Richards and Jordan 1979, Lipsky 2010). However, public policy theories also acknowledge the potential of parties to disrupt this stability. In the Advocacy Coalition Framework, for example, a change in government is seen as one form of an external event that can create instability and lead to more radical change (Jones and Jenkins-Smith 2009). Also in the punctuated equilibrium theory a change in government is seen as a factor that disrupts stability and can lead to new policy (Baumgartner and Jones 2009), and the multiple-streams approach acknowledges that changes in the partisan composition of the government can open a policy window (Kingdon 1984). Finally, recent research suggests that the influence of bureaucracy on policy seems to be trumped by partisan preferences in politically salient areas (Baekgaard, Blom-Hansen, and Serritzlew 2014).

These arguments provide links to the party politics literature that puts a stronger focus on the importance of partisan actors for policy and highlights the role of agency. The partisan hypothesis expects political parties to compete with specific election programs for votes and offices and afterwards, if they are in government, follow up on them, because they will be held accountable in the next election. Even though the possibility of partisan preferences being constrained due to path dependencies is also acknowledged, parties are still expected to follow up on their promises to prevent repercussions from their voters.
In this process election manifestos play a key role as they are the way in which parties make their policy preferences transparent (Budge 2001). However, the transfer from partisan preferences to policies does not happen directly. Especially in multi-party consensus democracies one hardly ever finds a single party in government, but rather coalition governments of several parties. While party and government decisions are intimately linked, parties also have to agree on a common set of policies, outlined in their coalition agreement and afterwards organize the process of policy making once they are in government (Strøm and Müller 1999). This creates the possibility that “pure” partisan preferences get “diluted”. In these situations the direct one-to-one enactment of partisan preferences into policies becomes more unlikely.

So far, even in the party politics literature, relatively little attention has been paid to the process of transfer of partisan preferences into coalition agreements and the following policy output of governments (Schermann and Ennser-Jedenastik 2013). Given the multiple steps of development, from partisan manifestos, over the coalition agreement to policy proposals from the government, it is worthwhile to follow policy throughout this process and see in which situations party preferences matter and where they are overshadowed by other processes.

*The role of coalition agreements*

Once a party has managed to form a government, be it alone or in a coalition, it faces three main challenges: (1) to keep the government stable, (2) to make decisions on policies and (3) to provide good government by ensuring the quality of the decisions (Bergman, Ecker, and Müller 2013). These challenges will be harder to overcome in a situation where several parties have to agree on a government program. In single-party governments intra-party conflicts are the main problem. These are limited through the mediating function of election manifestos that bind the different groups within a party to a common agenda (Bergman, Ecker, and
Müller 2013). In multi-party governments one can find additionally inter-party conflicts, which can be exacerbated by the very tools that mediate intra-party conflicts. As parties that plan to form a coalition will have to consolidate their partly conflicting manifestos to form a coalition agreement that is acceptable to all parties, they will have to mediate between their own partisan identities and the potential benefit of finding a common denominator with the other parties to be able to form a government (Bergman, Ecker, and Müller 2013). In this sense election manifestos are for intra-party conflicts what coalition agreements intended to be for inter-party conflicts: ex-ante tools that limit conflicts and disincentivize defection.

Thus, government and party decisions are linked and party preferences do influence government activity. However, parties have to agree on a common platform – coalition agreement – before forming a government. So, party preferences as outlined in the manifesto can be seen to be mediated through coalition agreements which, due to their character as agenda for the upcoming government, have higher chances to be enacted than “pure” partisan preferences of the participating parties (De Winter and Dumont 2006). Therefore, one can distinguish between partisan preferences that are laid out in the manifestos and coalition positions that are formulated in the coalition agreement.

Coalition agreements serve different functions. First, they set the agenda for the incoming government and thus, even though they are incomplete and non-enforceable contracts, reduce potential conflicts and uncertainty between the partners (Bergman, Ecker, and Müller 2013). Second, coalition agreements also help to reduce intra-party conflicts. As the parties have committed themselves ex ante to the program laid out in the agreement and often have the government program accepted by a decision-making body in the party they can use it to limit defection (Bergman, Ecker, and Müller 2013). While election manifestos have to strike a balance between political reality and ideological identity of the party, coalition agreements are
concrete plans for government (Moury 2011).

When parties decide with whom to form a coalition, electoral and legislative strength are important factors, but also partners with similar policy proposals in their manifestos are more likely partners than parties that are more different (Döring and Hellström 2013). This is in line with the above described characteristics of the government agreement: Parties with similar policies are more likely to find a common plan for a joint government that appeals to members of both parties and thus provides the possibility to have a stable government and make decisions that are perceived positively by all parties. To be able to form a government parties do not need to agree on all parts of all different policy areas, however, it is likely that only those policies that are not actively opposed by any of the parties become part of the coalition agreement. It can thus be expected that the more similar the policies of parties in a coalition are in a specific policy area, the more encompassing the respective part of the coalition agreement will be.

All in all, coalition agreements are important tools to solve the challenges parties face once they are in government. They create a stable platform for the government’s activities, limit defection and increase the possibility that there is a policy follow-up to the positions expressed in the agreement. Therefore, they are a way of pro-active policy-making (Peters, Bovens, and Hart 2001).

**Pro-active versus re-active policy making**

In situations where governments take prior policies as basis for marginal political bargaining and compromises, change is often characterized to be rather incremental (Lindblom 1979). However, as outlined earlier, change in policy can also occur more radically, if the situation is favorable. One such favorable situation is proactive policy-making. If parties identify, for example in their manifestos, a certain shift in policy as desirable and can agree on a common
reform plan in a coalition agreement, they generate a situation where they can overcome the incremental nature of the policy process. By outlining a need for reform in the coalition agreement the parties create a situation where, on the one hand, internal veto possibilities are limited. On the other hand, a follow-up to the promised policy becomes necessary for a positive evaluation of the government’s track-record. Such a situation allows to address “grand challenges” that have to overcome certain resistance (Peters, Bovens, and Hart 2001).

Even though it is not a given that there will be an output that is equivalent to the goal described in the coalition agreement, due to problems linked with the implementation of policies (Hupe 2011), there is a higher possibility of a policy (re-)formulation if an issue is addressed in the agreement.

Therefore, it can be expected that if an issue is addressed in a coalition agreement, it is more likely that there will be a policy to follow it up. However, due to the nature of the coalition agreement, it is more likely that this policy follows the position of the coalition, as outlined in the coalition agreement, instead of the preferences of one of the parties.

A second favorable situation to overcome incrementalism is reactive policy-making that follows internal or external shocks (Peters, Bovens, and Hart 2001). These shocks can either be completely external representing unforeseen issues that arise during the term of the government, or they can be internal. Internal shocks are caused by issues that are not covered by the government agreement and nevertheless make it on the agenda. Contrary to external shocks the reason for them not being addressed is that they were deliberatively left out of the agreement (Peters, Bovens, and Hart 2001). There can be several reasons for internal shocks. Either the coalition partners could not agree on a common policy, or they do not want to be forced to address the issue by highlighting it in the coalition agreement. Furthermore, they

1 It is important to note that these shocks are not equivalent to the ones described by Sabatier (2007).
could try to avoid blame for unpopular policies by treating them as shocks that need to be solved. Finally, parties could use internal shocks as a way to test the public debate or gather additional information.

In such a situation, where there is no agreed upon position of the government, governing parties can fall back on their partisan preferences and promote those, especially if they have addressed the emerging issue in their manifestos. This allows the parties to distinguish themselves from the other governing parties and please their membership by highlighting partisan preferences instead of the positions of the government. It can thus be expected that if an issue is not addressed in the coalition agreement, but appears on the agenda, the governing parties will promote their partisan preferences and thus it is less likely that there will be an agreement and a policy to follow it up.

All in all, the process of transferring partisan preferences to policies in multi-party parliamentary democracies can be conceptualized in the following way. In the first step, the governing parties will have to agree on a government platform as outlined in the coalition agreement. This negotiation is based on the parties’ election manifestos and it can be expected that the more similar the policies of the parties in a coalition are in a specific policy area, the more encompassing the respective part of the coalition agreement will be (expectation 1).

After the coalition agreement has been finalized, policy formulation can happen in two different situations. In the case of proactive policy-making, where the issue is addressed in the coalition agreement, it is more likely that there will be a respective policy. However, due to the nature of the coalition agreement, it is also more likely that this policy follows the position of the coalition, instead of the preferences of one of the parties (expectation 2). In the case of reactive policy-making the governing coalition has to react to internal or external shocks as

2 Except for the rare cases where both parties have exactly the same position to start with.
the issue on the agenda is not included in their agreement. In these situations it can be expected that the governing parties will promote their partisan preferences instead of a government position and thus it is less likely that there will be a policy as follow up (expectation 3).

**The case of higher education policy, research design and data**

These three expectations will be put to a test focusing on higher education policy. This area was chosen because it exhibits several characteristics that make it an interesting case. First, due to its history of restrictive access higher education is, contrary to primary or secondary education, an area that directly affects the life of only a part of the electorate (Ansell 2010) and thus can be seen as a more specialized policy area. Even though higher education has always fulfilled key functions for societies (Castells 2001, Trow 2006), it was only with the expansion from elite to mass higher education systems that a larger part of the population had the possibility to participate in it. Therefore, higher education can be seen as an area of emerging political saliency.³

Second, the last decade has witnessed a growth in political saliency of higher education policy, due to increasing participation rates and thus larger parts of the public budgets spend on higher education as well as a growing amount of trans- and international policy coordination (Vögtle and Martens 2014). Higher education is also more and more expected to deliver problem solutions for other policy areas. This leads to a situation, where it becomes more important but at the same time is treated less special and thus is more similar to other policy areas (Gornitzka and Maassen 2011). This growth in saliency is accompanied by a growing politicization of higher education policy and an inclusion in political discussions.

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³ Contrary, it would, for example, be rather unlikely for key policy areas to be only marginally addressed in coalition agreements.
both regarding societal re-distribution and the relationship between the state and its public sector, leading to more refined partisan preferences (AUTHOR). This also influences partisan competition on higher education, which has increased over time (Busemeyer, Franzmann, and Garritzmann 2013). In this increasing conflict, left parties have been found to be more supportive of educational expansion, and more public spending on higher education (Boix 1997, Iversen and Stephens 2008, Busemeyer 2009). Thus, higher education policy can be characterized to be increasingly a topic of partisan competition and to hold the potential for being addressed either more or less detailed in coalition agreements.

To analyze higher education policy, this article will use a two-dimensional framework already employed in earlier studies (AUTHOR & AUTHOR). This framework captures both different positions along a redistributive dimension as well as positions linked to the form of control exercised by the government to steer the higher education sector. This reflects results from studies on partisan higher education policy (Busemeyer, Franzmann, and Garritzmann 2013, Ansell 2010), the two-dimensionality of party politics (Bornschier 2010) and politics of public management reforms (Hood 1996, Pollitt, van Thiel, and Homburg 2007). The key indicators for the first, redistributive, dimension cover different aspects that influence the socio-economic impact of higher education including public higher education funding, private higher education funding, access to higher education as well as the student support system (AUTHOR). The indicators for the second dimension are based on the work of Olsen (1988) as well as Gornitzka and Maassen (2000) and cover the dominance of the government in controlling higher education, the autonomy of higher education institutions to steer themselves, a focus on steering through stakeholder and interest group negotiations as well as steering through market mechanisms.

Methodologically, this article employs a qualitative comparative research design using
qualitative content analysis, and combines two different types of data. The main data sources are documents. These include documents for all three steps of the translation process of partisan preferences: election manifestos, coalition agreements as well as policy proposals. The documents were chosen because they represent authoritative statements of preferences as well as policy and are designed to make them transparent. They will be analyzed using the framework outlined above. Additionally, to get a better understanding of the role of these documents in the enactment of partisan preferences semi-structured interviews have been conducted with one expert for higher education policy from the large party of the left as well as the large party of the right in all case countries.

The three countries that this article focuses on are Norway, the Netherlands and the German Bundesland of North-Rhine Westphalia (NRW). As it is the aim of the article to follow the transfer of partisan preferences through coalitions into policies it is necessary to focus on consensus democracies that are regularly governed by coalition governments. However, while being consensus democracies the three countries show more cultural differences in their national policy style regarding the level of consultation and the amount of conflict (Peters, Bovens, and Hart 2001, Premfors 1981). Thus, while being structurally similar, the cases still allow for variation in policy styles. To increase the number of cases and thus have a broader empirical basis for the first step of the analysis, two subsequent coalitions that led to different governments have been included.

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4 A single coder coded the corpus. Three months after the initial coding an intra-coder reliability test was conducted using 10% of the corpus. Based on Holsti’s (1969) method the proportion agreement observed was .80 and Krippendorff’s alpha was calculated at .7981 (Hayes and Krippendorff 2007, Krippendorff 2012).

5 A list of documents and respondents can be found in the appendix.

6 Since higher education policy in Germany is within the authority of the governments of the Bundesländer and not the federal level, it is necessary to focus on the latter level of governance.
From manifestos to coalition agreements

The focus of this section will be on the transfer of preferences from manifestos to coalition agreements. Table 1 provides an overview of the level of agreement between the manifestos of the coalition parties as well as how encompassing the higher education section in the coalition agreement is.\footnote{A detailed comparison of the documents along the indicators mentioned in the previous section can be found in the appendix.}

The two coalitions from NRW in the sample are the coalition of Christian Democrats (CDU) and Liberals (FDP) in 2005 as well as the one of Social Democrats (SPD) and Greens (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) in 2010. For the first coalition, the data shows that both parties already had very similar electoral preferences before they entered the coalition. This is due to the joint preparation of the higher education parts in the manifestos prior to the election, an issue that will be addressed in more detail in the following section. Because of this prior agreement on joint policy, only minor proposals from the manifestos are not reflected in the coalition agreement, while the general tendency of all three documents is very similar. Thus, the coalition agreement is rather encompassing, including policies like the first time introduction of tuition fees as well as a far-reaching deregulation of the higher education sector leading to an increased institutional autonomy and more use of market mechanisms.

Also for the 2010 coalition the data shows a high level of consensus between the two parties as well as between the manifestos and the coalition agreement. This is due to the fact that both parties strongly opposed the policies of the previous coalition and thus ran for elections on a platform that proposed to roll back most changes. Therefore, also the 2010 coalition agreement outlines major changes in higher education policy, including both abolishing
tuition fees as well as re-tightening the link between the government and the higher education sector. All in all, both cases from Germany support the first expectation that more similar electoral positions lead to more encompassing higher education sections in the coalition agreements.

The two Norwegian coalitions that are part of the sample are the 2009 center-left coalition between the Social Democrats (AP), the Socialist Left Party (SV) as well as the Farmers’ Party (SP), and the 2013 center-right coalition between the Conservatives (Høyre) and the populist-right Progress Party (FrP). Contrary to the high level of coherence between manifests and coalition agreement in the two German cases, the Norwegian coalition of 2009 is an example for larger differences between the parties. Even though the general direction of the proposed policies does not show extreme contradictions, the specific proposals are rather divergent. As a result, the set of policies that are explicitly listed in the coalition agreement are much more limited and only cover three of the eight indicators. In that sense, also this case supports the first expectation, as it shows that if parties with more divergent higher education preferences enter a government coalition, the respective part in the coalition agreement is shorter. The parties of the 2013 center-right coalition show more similar preferences. As a result the coalition agreement provides a much more encompassing set of policies regarding higher education. Therefore, these results also support the first expectation.

The Dutch coalitions in the sample are the 2010 coalition between the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) and the conservative liberal VVD as well as the 2012 coalition of the VVD and the social democratic PvdA. The manifestos of the parties in the 2010 coalition show a substantial amount of agreement regarding their preferences on higher education. In the only area with opposing positions (student support) the parties managed to agree on a compromise that gives credit to both preferences. Thus, the result is a rather encompassing part on higher
education in the coalition agreement. Compared to the coalition parties in 2010, the manifests of the 2012 coalition show more conflicting preferences. Given the ideological differences between the VVD and PvdA this is not very surprising. However, both parties managed to agree on a coalition agreement with several policy proposals, including a major reform of the student support system. At first this seems to be contradictory to the idea laid out in the first expectation. However, taking a second look at the preferences in the manifests of PvdA and VVD it becomes clear, that the differences are ideological rather than linked to specific changes in higher education policy. Thus, the differences were not insurmountable and in cases where they existed, the parties seem to have agreed to leave these issues out of their coalition agreement (e.g. in relation to access).

Overall, all six coalitions presented support the first expectation that parties with more similar preferences in their manifests will form a more encompassing set of positions in the coalition agreement. The following section will now turn to the process of enacting the positions of the governments comparing policies that are outlined in the coalition agreements with policies that were not included in the agreements.

**Proactive policy-making in higher education**

In the countries selected for this article one can find two examples of proactive policy-making in higher education: The comprehensive higher education reform in NRW and the reform of the student support system in the Netherlands.

The comprehensive higher education reform in NRW was part of the government program of the incoming CDU and FDP coalition in 2005. After spending decades in opposition both parties prepared their higher education policy positions for their manifests in a parallel and partly joint process prior to the elections. The FDP as the smaller party played a key role in this, influencing the positions of the CDU. The reason for this lies in the central position that
the later state minister for education Andreas Pinkwart had in developing the blueprint of the policy.

“[…] the higher education policy of the CDU in the last ten years is inseparably connected with the higher education policy of the liberal FDP […] This was a joint process between the CDU and the FDP, strongly linked with […] Professor Andreas Pinkwart.”

Respondent 1

Due to the high level of agreement between the higher education parts of the parties’ manifestos the translation of partisan preferences was rather smooth.

“We [the CDU] knew what we wanted and we agreed with the FDP […] this was all of a piece and this did not change even until today. Both our parties are now in the opposition, but we stick to our joint positions […] In other areas [of the coalition agreement] we had intense fights […] but concerning higher education policy we could more or less copy what we had in our manifesto […]”

Respondent 1

This process was made easier by the fact that the policy was fiscally neutral and did not compete with other policies for public funds. Content-wise the policy consisted of two parts. First, the government introduced for the first time general tuition fees of up to 1000 EUR per year. Second, the policy increased the level of subsidiarity by de-coupling the steering of higher education from the government and granting the institutions more autonomy. The universities were expected to use this autonomy to compete with each other and thus increase their quality. The solid parliamentary majority of the coalition, the detailed pre-agreed policy and the determent minister created a situation, where the coalition managed to translate nearly all of their ambitions into policy. The legal changes that were made in this framework included amongst others the introduction of lump-sum budgets, the creation of university
boards, and a general decentralization of decision making in higher education governance. This created a situation where universities in NRW where the most autonomous higher education institutions in the whole of Germany.

“[…] we have de-coupled the higher education institutions from the Land […] turned them into independent public corporations […] so that decisions could be taken autonomously on-site […] and this was very successful and led to more excellence in North-Rhine Westphalia […]”

Respondent 1

This rather radical change in policy sparked significant opposition. Especially the introduction of tuition fees led to student protests and opposition parties that strongly opposed the policies. Because of this the policies of CDU and FDP sparked a joint reaction of the SPD and the Greens, who entered the following elections with similar higher education policies in their manifestos that focused on rolling back the previous reforms.

“[…] the ideological differences with the Greens […] are not so big […] we are rather close especially in the area of higher education policy […]”

Respondent 2

After winning the elections, even though they only governed with a minority government, the SPD and the Greens used the support of the socialist Left Party to abolish tuition fees with one of the first legislative acts. This symbolized the importance that higher education policy had in the framework of the coalition formation.

“[…] it [higher education policy] played a central role in the coalition negotiations, because the discussion about abolishing tuition fees was rather prominent and thus it became a central topic.”

Respondent 2
The coalition agreement turned out to be a central document and replaced the election manifests as the yard-stick for political activity.

“[…] such a coalition agreement is really important […] it is always very relevant when there is no unity […] then you open the document and check what is exactly written in there […] the election manifesto is not important anymore, because it is not the basis for the government’s activities, once there is a coalition agreement the manifesto is outdated […]”

Respondent 2

Although both the SPD and the Greens agreed on rolling back the policies concerning the autonomy of higher education institutions, the re-formulation of the respective law took much more time and was only finalized after a re-election in 2012 gave the coalition a majority in the parliament. Additionally, even with their majority in parliament the SPD and Greens were not able to undo all prior changes.

“[…] actually we also wanted […] to abolish the university boards […] and if you look where we started and with which ideas we politically motivated the people [in the manifests] and what we have now as a result, than this is no bad law but still light-years away.”

Respondent 2

This inability to completely roll-back the previous government’s policies can be linked to two factors. First, contrary to abolishing tuition fees, rolling-back the governance arrangements required more thorough legal changes and thus took a longer time. Also the proposal to retrench the autonomy of universities encountered severe opposition from the higher education sector and other stakeholder organizations.

“[…] We have a public sector that was released into unprecedented self-governance […] thus any initiative [that would change this] is regarded an unreasonable demand.”
Combined with the long process of reformulating the policy, the opponents of the roll-back had a long time to spark a public debate about the government’s proposition. In this the CDU and FDP tried to link the rather specific and not very salient question of how to steer the higher education sector to more general questions about the relation between the government and public sectors.

“[…] we have [created] a climate in which higher education policy is regarded as a social policy.”

Overall, the well-orchestrated changes in higher education policy of the CDU and FDP government and the following roll-back of the SPD and Green government were successful because both were based on a detailed political program outlined in the coalition agreements.

While the policy changes in NRW were carried out by two ideologically rather homogenous blocks of parties, the reform of the student support system in the Netherlands is an example where two ideologically opposed parties collaborated. The idea of the reform is to transform the grant-based student support scheme into a loan-based scheme, while using the gained public funding for investments in the quality of higher education. The idea for this policy can already be found in several election manifestos for the 2010 elections, but only after the 2012 election and the coalition agreement between VVD and PvdA a policy addressing all students was put forward. Even though both parties stated in their election manifestos that they were in favor of the policy, they did so for very different ideological reasons.

“[…] for example the changing of the [student] financing, […] we both had that in our programmes. Which you would say: Hey, that is strange. It is a right-wing and a left-wing party, and they both have it. But we have it for different reasons. We [VVD] have it,
because we want to spend tax money effectively, and they [PvdA] have it because they say: It is more equal if you do not give financial support to richer kids. But actually the result is the same: We want to change the system […]”

Respondent 3

In detail, the VVD saw the policy as a good way to free additional money to invest in the quality of higher education:

“What we had on our agenda is that even in the current recessionary times where the budgets had to be cut, that we have tried, and we have succeeded not to reduce the education budgets, but what we think is that actually there is space within the budget to bring money from, […] support for students, where they get money here in the Netherlands to buy spaghetti […] but use it for education. So: use it for smaller groups, better professors, better laboratories etc. […] We think that it is more effective money-spending […]”

Respondent 3

PvdA, however, shared the need for additional investments in the quality of higher education, but mainly because this offered more possibilities for social mobility:

“[…] if you have a very good education system, it means people can get jobs. And that is very important for a party like mine on the left, a social-democratic party, to give people the opportunity to develop themselves […] if it [a policy change] is limiting people to start working on their future, to start an education, then it is a problem for us. […] We think that it [the proposed policy change] does not change the accessibility. Because people can now start a loan, that they can pay back on social terms. So I mean, it is very accessible for everybody […] it does not have any negative impact on accessibility, […]”

Respondent 4

These ideological differences between the parties increased the importance of the coalition agreement as a uniting factor. Since both parties approached the policy from a different
ideological starting point, the pre-arranged agreement had to take priority over the more ideological election manifestos.

“[…] the coalition agreement is the leading one, because it is already quite a large agenda. And to get this through is the highest success parameter.”

Respondent 3

A second uniting factor that bridged the ideological differences of the parties was the existence of a report from an experts’ committee, the so-called Veerman report from 2010, and a follow-up white paper with the title “Quality in Diversity” that framed the discussion on higher education policy.

“There is an overall strategy […] which was made up by the field [of higher education] itself in 2010 […] this strategy document, which has a lot support in the field. So the institutions and everybody says: This is the way to go. […] actually most parties including PvdA, our colleagues, they support this strategy […] Now I think what is the difference is that basically everyone says: Yah, we should do this. […]“

Respondent 3

Due to the existence of this strategy document and the broader agreement to invest more public funds in the quality of higher education, the opposition from stakeholders of the higher education system as well as other parties was limited. Mainly student unions protested against the policy change and due to the agreement of two opposition parties, the liberal D66 and the green-left party, the proposed law passed the second chamber by a wide margin and also passed the first chamber.

All of the above examples highlight the importance of including a policy in the coalition agreement to increase the chances of a follow-up and limit the veto-potential, even in situations where parties have diverging ideological foundations. However, especially the
Dutch case also shows that once the coalition agreement is formulated partisan preferences have to step-back and let the coalition position take precedent.

**Reactive policy-making in higher education**

Besides situations in which a policy has been agreed upon in the coalition negotiations prior to the government’s term, there are also incidents in which issues rise to the agenda without a pre-existing agreement. In such situations it is more likely that governing parties will pursue their partisan preferences and thus policy follow-up is less likely. An example for such a process is the proposal of the Norwegian government to introduce tuition fees for students from outside of the European Economic Area (EEA).

The government that took office in 2013 is based on a minority coalition of the conservative Høyre and the populist-right Progress Party (FrP). While only these two parties are officially part of the government, they rely on the liberal Venstre and the Christian-democratic KrF to create the necessary majority in parliament.

> “Because the government does not have a majority at the Storting [the Norwegian parliament], we need to work with Venstre and KrF, which are the small parties in the middle between left and right, which are supporting parties following the government’s policy. But they do not support everything. Therefore we need to make sure and find ways to compromises. […]”

*Respondent 5*

One of the first political landmarks of the new government was the introduction of a revised budget for the year 2014. In this process the government included the provision to allow Norwegian higher education institutions to charge tuition fees from non-EEA students. A key rationale for this proposal was the attempt to harmonize Norway’s tuition policy with its Nordic neighbors, as Denmark, Sweden and to a certain extend Finland have already
implemented such policies (Christensen, Gornitzka, and Maassen 2014). While the proposal to charge tuition fees from non-EEA students might seem only a minor issue, it is actually rather remarkable due to three reasons. First, the initiative was not part of the coalition agreement and thus not a part of the political priorities of the new coalition. Second, the initiative breaks with the “free-of-charge” principle of Norwegian higher education (Christensen, Gornitzka, and Maassen 2014) and therefore it is contrary to the existing higher education policy tradition.

“The most important thing is to make higher education available for all that want to study. […] But this is very important for us […] to have no fee, so that is the main important thing. And it has been policies since the beginning of the social democratic party in Norway, that education should be free in Norway, and available for everyone […]”

Respondent 6

The proposal fits however with the ideological approach of the governing parties in relation to economic policy. Thus, it can be seen as an example for a clash of different policy logics (Gornitzka and Maassen 2014) and therefore as a far reaching policy shift, even if it only affects a minority of students. Finally, also the way in which the policy change was put forward, without prior debates and consultation of the higher education sector, breaks with the tradition of the open and transparent Nordic Model of policy-making (Christensen, Gornitzka, and Maassen 2014). Thus, it can be seen as a tactical move of the governing parties to create an internal shock as explained earlier.

The policy by the government met strong resistance from the higher education sector and both student unions but also rectors publicly opposed it. The opposition parties, who already in their manifestos declared their principal disagreement to any form of tuition fees, joined the group of opponents.
“[…] maybe they [Høyre and FrP] want to do something about the paying upfront students from abroad, from outside EU. That is the difference. And none of the other parties like that, including the Venstre, KrF. So that is the difference.”

Respondent 6

Finally, also the two parties that previously declared their general support for the coalition in the parliament, Venstre and KrF, rejected the proposal and thus the usage of the internal shock failed. After the failure of the proposal at the end of 2013, the governing parties embarked on the same path at the end of 2014. They introduced a similar policy in the framework of the 2015 budget, they were again met with strong resistance and their attempt failed.

The failure of both attempts to harmonize Norway’s tuition fee policy with its neighbor countries underlines the importance of including reforms in the coalition agreement. Even though the two governing parties agreed to introduce the policy, they did not highlight it in the coalition agreement. Therefore, the parties supporting them in parliament (Venstre and KrF) instead of supporting the policy, as they did in many other instances, retreated to the anti-tuition preference emphasized in their manifestos and, especially after the strong resistance from the higher education sector, opposed the policy. The unsuccessful attempts to alter the Norwegian tuition fee regime thus support the third expectation.

Conclusion

This article provided a detailed account of the transfer of partisan preferences to coalition agreements as well as the subsequent proactive or reactive policy-making. To illustrate this process the article focused on higher education policy using three European countries as cases. The contribution of the article is to show how parties and their preferences influence policy and in how far coalition agreements help to translate these preferences into policies. The main argument was that in cases where a coalition expresses a policy position in its
agreement (proactive policy-making) the chances for a follow-up are relatively high, while in situations where an issue appears on the agenda that has not been addressed (reactive policy-making), parties retreat to their electoral positions making a policy less likely.

By drawing from different strands of literature the article formulated three conceptual expectations, which afterwards have been tested on empirical cases. The analysis supported the expectation that the more similar the preferences of the parties in a coalition are, the more encompassing the respective part of the coalition agreement will be. In the case of proactive policy-making, the article showed that it is rather likely that the government position is followed up by a policy. However, due to the nature of the coalition agreement this policy follows the position of the coalition, instead of the preferences of one of the parties. In the case of reactive policy-making, due to the absence of a pre-agreed position, the governing parties will promote their partisan preferences and thus it is less likely that there will be a policy.

The results of this article provide evidence that the partisan hypothesis carries and that parties in government make a difference. However, in line with the public policy literature, the results also show that the circumstances of governing matter. While partisan preferences are central in the process of coalition formation, the coalition agreement indicates where substantial policy change is possible, as it serves as the key tool that helps to ensure successful follow-up to governmental positions. If a policy is included in the coalition agreement, it gains higher saliency since following up on it becomes important for the parties, as they will be held accountable by the voters and need to fulfill the agreement. At the same time, pre-negotiating the agreement limits the veto possibilities of the participating parties generating favorable political conditions for change.

In that sense the possibility for more radical policy change, as outlined in the idea of external
events (Jones and Jenkins-Smith 2009), disrupting factors (Baumgartner and Jones 2009) or a policy window (Kingdon 1984), manifests in the coalition agreement. As Liebermann (2002, p.709) formulated it: “An idea’s time arrives not simply because the idea is compelling on its own terms, but because opportune political circumstances favor it.” Therefore, the results of this article suggest that instead of assessing the chance for policy change merely based on the percentage of ideological turnover in a coalition, as proposed for example by Sabatier (1998), one should rather focus on the breadth and level of detail of the coalition agreement.

Furthermore, the results of this article support a stronger focus on political parties in public policy analyses. However, the inability of the SPD and Green government in NRW to roll back all autonomy related policies of their predecessors also highlights the usefulness of classical public policy theories that stress path dependency and the resilience of actor coalitions to partisan initiatives.

Although, the article focused on a specific policy area, higher education policy, it seems sensible to assume that the results also hold for other areas of public policy, as they are derived from more general findings of the party politics literature. However, the nature of the policy area might lead to different political dynamics and sector effects are not impossible (Lowi 1988). Furthermore, this article employed a qualitative approach, as this is more appropriate when investigating mechanisms instead of effects; however, this obviously puts a limit on the number of cases included in the analysis. Thus, follow up research on a larger scale, possibly using more quantitative methods to analyze the level of detail of coalition agreements and subsequent changes in policy, would be advisable. Additionally, as reactive policy-making leaves more room for disruption, agency matters more in these circumstances. Therefore, it is possible that the role of prime ministers, ministers or the collegium of government is more pronounced in these circumstances, as the success of policy change might depend on, for example, the agent’s negotiation skills. Also this relation demands further
analyses. Finally, it is unclear whether the results of this article would apply to different countries with, for example, more clientelistic approaches to partisan accountability, also in this regard more research is necessary.
Literature


Table 1: Overview of the agreement between parties and detailedness of coalition agreements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Agreement between parties</th>
<th>Detailedness of coalition agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NRW (2005)</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRW (2010)</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway (2009)</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway (2013)</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands (2010)</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands (2012)</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>