Causes and consequences of heterogeneous issue salience among the electorate*

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Abstract

Analyses of whether policy dimensions that are more important to the individual voter play a larger role in the voter’s vote calculus produce mixed results. Yet it can be empirically shown that voters weigh concrete issues differently. I propose a theory of issue salience that does not rely on self-reported importance, but builds on insights from cleavage theory. Groups with higher and lower salience can be distinguished based on their involvement or affectedness with the policy issue. This alters the formal game of party competition, since voters differ in their levels of responsiveness to changes in parties’ policy standpoints. The consequences for parties’ equilibrium strategies depend on the distribution of high and low salience voters within the policy space. The theoretical expectations are further tested in an empirical application of the model to German election survey data between 1980 and 1990. The issue of an abortion law that was intensely debated in the respective time span is taken as an empirical case study.

1 Introduction

In the standard Downsian model of party competition voters cast their votes for the party offering the policy that is closest to their own ideal point. This leads to a convergence of parties’ policy positions to the median or the mean of the voter distribution in order to maximize the parties’ vote shares (Downs 1957; Hinich 1977). Responding to the discrepancy between this prediction and empirical observations of electoral competition, formal models became more complex by incorporating additional parameters, such as valence (Ansolabehere and Snyder 2000; Schofield 2007), partisanship (Adams 2001; Adams et al. 2005) or policy-motivation on the side of the parties (see for example Groseclose 2001; Wittman 1977; Adams and Merrill 2009) and by extending it to multiparty competition within multidimensional policy spaces. Erikson

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and Romero (1990) show, that the more complex a model gets, the more likely it predicts realistic, divergent equilibrium configurations. Thus it is not surprising that many parameters have been added to the standard spatial model and have been further modified to fit individual characteristics of the voter. One such strand of research is challenging the assumption that all voters put the same weight on a certain policy dimension in their individual vote calculus. For example, scholars analyzes whether self-reported issue importance is a useful weight for issue salience in the vote calculus (e.g. Bartle 2005; Bartle and Laycock 2012). Recent working papers approach the question from a more technical side by applying complex Bayesian models to estimate individual salience parameters or latent class models (e.g. Mebane et al. 2014). Their results support the notion of variance within the spatial parameters.

However, two criticisms have to be mentioned here. First, we are interested in parsimonious models, therefore estimating fully flexible individual salience parameters cannot be a satisfying solution to the problem of heterogeneous issue saliences. Second, the previous research did not provide a theoretical explanation for the cause of variance in issue salience. It is obvious that the estimation of individual spatial parameters will increase the model fit, but if we are interested in explaining party competition such a model is sub optimal because it implies that parties know about the distribution of each and every voter’s spatial parameter. A way to avoid this strong assumption is to approximate the distribution of salience among the electorate, e.g. by categorizing voter types. If that categorization follows a theoretically meaningful reasoning, it is more appropriate to assume parties to being able to identify those types of voter and alter their policy strategy accordingly.

The large literature of behavioral theories on voting behavior provides us with a variety of reasons for why voters should have heterogeneous preferences. Especially the cleavage theory provides a good framework for modeling a heterogeneous electorate in which voters holding more extreme views on one cleavage are expected to put more weight on a policy issue concerning that cleavage than voters who are not affected by that cleavage. Using that logic, this paper develops a theoretical framework for identifying voters with higher salience for a given policy issue. Furthermore, the paper analyzes the consequences of a heterogeneous electorate for the optimal party strategies. It does so by applying the theory and testing the model with data of the German federal elections in 1980, 1987 and 1990 focusing on the issue of an abortion law that was heavily discussed in the respective time span. The results show that the electorate is not homogeneous with regards to the salience voters attribute to the abortion issue in their vote decision. There is no clear pattern of parties’ reactions to that circumstance. The shifts in equilibrium positions depend on the dissimilarity of the ideal point distributions of the different voter types on that issue dimension.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section gives an overview of the literature on formal models of party competition with special attention to the policy salience parameter and the question of heterogeneous electorates. In the following section, a theoretical framework is presented, that formulates conditions, under which we would expect certain voters to have a significantly higher salience for one policy issue then the average voter. The following section discusses the consequences of heterogeneous electorate for the formal model of party competition. The fifth section gives a short overview of the course of the abortion law and its discussion among
the German society in between 1980 and 1990 which is taken as the showcase issue. Then it presents the results of the empirical application of the theory and model to the German federal elections in 1980, 1987 and 1990. The last section concludes.

2 Literature overview

The basic assumption of Downs’ original model of party competition is that voters hold policy preferences over certain policies and maximize their utility by voting for the party that offers the nearest policy standpoint (Downs 1957). Parties, on the other hand, respond to the electoral demand by shifting their policy positions and thus maximize their vote shares. This leads to a convergence of parties’ policy positions toward the mean or median of the voter distribution in a one dimensional policy space (Downs 1957). Davis and Hinich (1966, 1968) showed that this result also holds in a multi-dimensional space in which parties compete over more than one issue dimensions. Many extensions have been made to that original model, yet the basic assumption about voter behavior consisted.

One additional aspect that is by now most often included in formal vote models is the valence term that goes back to the work of Stokes (1963). Valence is most often defined as a non-policy related factor that describes the utility voters get from voting for a party to which they attribute more competence or sympathy. The definition and measurement of this valence term, as well as its combination with policy aspects and its relative importance as compared to policy considerations have been widely discussed in the recent literature (e.g. Clark 2009, 2014; Clarke and Whitten 2013; Green and Jennings 2012; Schofield 2003).

Accounting for valence and policy distance in the individual’s vote calculus, we get the following voter utility function

\[ u_{ij}(x_i, z_j) = \lambda_j - \beta |x_i - z_j|, \]  

where \( \lambda_j \) and \( z_j \) describe the valence advantage respectively the policy positions of party \( j = 1, ..., J \). \( x_i \) is the policy ideal point of voter \( i = 1, ..., N \), such that the term \( |x_i - z_j| \) describes the policy distance between voter \( i \) and party \( j \). \( \beta \) is the spatial parameter that indicates the relative importance of policy as compared to valence considerations. There are several specifications of the spatial part of the model, depending for example on the dimensionality of the policy space and which functional form of the distance is used, e.g. city block or squared Euclidean metric (for a discussion of that question see Singh 2014).

The focus of this paper lies on the spatial parameter \( \beta \) and the assumption that \( \beta \) is fixed among the electorate. This assumption was paid attention in two strands of the literature on spatial models. The first strand acknowledges the fact that there are differences in the importance individuals place on different policy issues in their voting decision. Thus, studies in this area use self reported importance of policy attitudes as an additional parameter in the vote model and interact it with policy distance respectively proximity. By analyzing the American presidential election campaigns in between 1968 and 1984 in that way, the seminal work of Krosnick finds that “more important policy attitudes are more potent determinants of candidate evaluations and voting behavior” (Krosnick 1988, 206). However, this finding contradicts some
of the previous work testing the hypothesis that more important attitudes have more impact on the individual vote decision (for example Niemi and Bartels 1985). He attributes deviating results of those studies to “problems with the statistical analysis method used” (Krosnick 1988, 197).

Yet, results in this line of research kept on being mixed. For example, Fournier et al. (2003) analyze 1997 Canadian election study and find that issue importance has an effect on the evaluation of the government, which is a strong indicator of voting behavior. More positive evidence is given by Bartle (2005) who finds empirical evidence that voters of the 2001 British election differ in the weight they put on leadership and policy considerations in their vote decisions (Bartle 2005). In a later study Bartle and Laycock (2012) analyze British election studies from 2001 to 2010 and ask again whether the self reported most important issue is really more important than other issues in the respondent’s vote calculus. However, now they only find evidence for that proposition on the aggregate level, meaning that the issue that is most important on average is in fact more important for the average voter. On the individual level, however, that relationship does not hold. Although their empirical results cannot support the claim, the authors conclude that “[t]here are good reasons for expecting that the effect of issues varies from voter to voter and that otherwise identical voters might behave in different ways because they place different weights on different issues” (Bartle and Laycock 2012, 687).

As pointed out by Bartle and Laycock (2012), a general problem of those studies might be the usage of individually reported importance as a measure of salience. Apparently there is evidence from psychologists that respondents are simply not very good in knowing about and therefore truthfully reporting their mental processes (Wilson and Dunn 2004). This might explain the mixed results in this field.

The second strand of literature emerged as a result of the increased computer capacities that allow for estimating more complex models and is mainly interested in increasing the model fit. Thus, we find more technical approaches to the topic of heterogeneous electorates in the recent literature, for example by applying mixed logit models that allow for the spatial parameter to vary between individuals. For example, Grynaviski and Corrigan (2006) compare fit statistics of models that include individual weighting parameters for the importance of policy issues with models that assume a fixed policy weight throughout the electorate. Their results are mixed, depending on whether a Euclidean or a city block metric is used and which fit statistic to look at. They conclude to prefer the unweighed model because of its higher level of efficiency.

However, such models can also be estimated without relying on self reported issue importance, by estimating random spatial coefficients for each respondent. Such an approach is for example chosen by Mebane et al. (2014), who analyze Polish survey data and apply a continuous mixed logit model as well as a latent class mixed logit model. Their findings show that there is considerable variation in the weights individuals place on different policy issues, but also variation in the latent classes over time. This suggests that salience heterogeneity also depends on political context. They link their results to Converse’s (1964) idea of issue publics and interpret the latent classes as ‘publics’ of contextual or political origin.

This study gives clear evidence for the basic idea of heterogeneity in voters’ policy salience. Thus, the positive findings of Krosnick (1988) and Bartle (2005) are supported. Yet at the same
time it suggests that individually reported importance of issues is not the appropriate measure to capture true variation in issue salience. Another question, that is not addressed by the previous literature, is where the variation in salience stems from. To fill that gap, the next section presents a theory of individual policy salience that can be applied to estimate vote models with varying levels of policy salience among the electorate without having to rely on self reported importance.

3 A theory of heterogeneous issue salience

It has been widely acknowledged that voters might find issues more or less important which, on the other hand, might affect their vote decisions (for example Krosnick 1988, 1990; Bartle 2005; Bartle and Laycock 2012). Many arguments are provided for why more important issues should have a higher salience in voters’ vote decisions (see for example Krosnick 1990), but only sporadic arguments about why voters find an issue more important than others in the first place. I want to provide a theoretical framework that links both questions and generates hypotheses about when we should expect voters to place more importance on a certain issue such that they have a higher salience for that issue in their vote calculus.

If we take a look at the literature in the field of political sociology, we find evidence that voting behavior is influenced by cleavage structures, or more generally by socio-structural ranges of interest (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). Such structures form groups that might be based on the individual’s economic position, e.g. as a laborer or an entrepreneur, but also on the basis of an individual’s membership in a religious denomination or an ideological movement. Depending on the historical trajectories different socio-structural ranges of interest are distinguishable in different countries. For Germany, for example, there is traditionally a strong cleavage line between religion and state. Yet, even strong traditional cleavage lines might lose their potential for societal conflict over time, and new cleavages might arise along different socio-structural attributes. An example for a newly emerged rather soft cleavage line can be found within the workers of the service sector. In the course of the expansion of the tertiary sector, different ranges of interest emerged within this sector. There are the administrative workers with strong interest in matters of organisation on the one side and the cultural-social workers with stronger interest for social matters on the other side. Those diverse interests emerged due to the fact that the cultural-social workers are not only involved with their profession, but also with clients in need of care and thus developed stronger interests for social matters than for matters of organisation (Müller 1998).

Such cleavage lines have a strong influence on the historical development of a country’s party system. For example, the strong cleavage between religion and state strengthened the Christian Democrats CDU/CSU to become one of the major parties in the German party system by representing the interests of the Christian community that is mainly influenced by the Catholic church. Accordingly, the green party gets most of it’s support from the above mentioned cultural-social workers of the service class (Pappi and Brandenburg 2010), which exemplifies that the emergence of new cleavage lines can lead to changes in the party system. What is more interesting about the cleavage theory in the context of this paper is that it divides the electorate into groups with similar ranges of interest. For example, Christians who are organized in the church
and who share a common system of beliefs and values that makes them act in a similar way regarding their political behavior. Regarding the traditional cleavage line between employers and employees, we also observe a high degree of organisation within unions who enforce their members’ interests and a similar political behavior of the members within both groups.

If a voter is a passionate Catholic, one might assume that he pays more attention to policy issues that address religious matters. Accordingly, one would assume employers and employees to find policy issues that target at regulations of the labor market more important than voters who do not participate in the labor market. This is in line with Krosnick’s definition of attitude importance as “the degree to which a person is passionately concerned about and personally invested in an attitude [...]” (Krosnick 1990, 60). What cleavage theory adds to that definition is the identification of those important attitudes by socio-structural attributes. Such attributes can be the economic position, but also more abstract ideological or religious attributes like the frequency of churchgoing. Thus, voters can be regarded in terms of whether a policy issue targets at their range of interest. Note that for this distinction it does not matter to which side of the cleavage a voter belongs. A further interesting aspect is that cleavage theory offers a reasonable argument for a connection between the shared interests and the similar political behavior. This makes cleavage theory interesting with respect to modeling heterogeneous salience parameters in the electorate. If common interests translate into similar political behavior in terms of support for the same party, then this logic should also apply to the relative importance voters place on different issues.

There is still one missing link, since the literature showed that individually reported importance of a policy issue does not necessarily translate into a higher salience in the individual’s vote calculus. We know that voters cannot consider every single policy issue in their vote calculus due to limited cognitive capacities. To reuse the example of the Catholic voter, it would be very economic and efficient for him to place more weight on the policy issue that addresses his religious beliefs and values, since religiosity plays a big role in his life, than on an issue that addresses his interests to a lesser degree. Yet, the above mentioned studies show that this is not always the case. I argue that the missing link between individual importance of an issue and the salience in the vote decision is the likelihood that the status quo on that policy dimension will actually be changed, and that there is a chance to pull the policy position to a more favorable point. Only if this condition is fulfilled is an adjustment of the vote calculus according to the increased importance of that special issue really rational for that voter, at least if we measure a voter’s utility by considering actual policy changes instead of mere satisfaction by representation. If there is no policy change to be expected, giving that policy dimension more weight in the vote calculus does not lead to an increase in the utility a voter would get from policy change.

Under which conditions can we respectively the voter expect a policy shift toward his ideal point? The answer to that question is not straightforward, because most of the time there is no official announcement of a concrete policy change. There are some indicators, however. A strong social movement that puts the government under pressure to act, or a successful complaint of unconstitutionality about an existing policy might be such indicators. Whether the policy change is going to be favorable or not to that group that holds a special interest in the issue might be
influenced by the level of organization of the group and its power to influence policy making. The better they are organized, the better they can articulate their preferences. Another influence on the direction of the policy change might be the general mood of the electorate regarding that issue that is reflected by ongoing debates and discussions about the issue in the media.

To get back to the example of the passionate Catholic voter, the theoretical framework explained here suggests that although he might find religious topics very important, he will not under every circumstances have a higher salience for a religious issue when making up his mind in the polling booth. Consider for example the issue of same-sex marriage. The Catholic voter might strongly oppose the right of same-sex couples to get married, because this contradicts his beliefs about marriage being a religious bond exclusively for heterosexual couples. Now there is an ongoing debate in the media about homosexual married couples and their demand to adopt children. The government gets pressure to pass an adoption law for same-sex couples and the general mood of the society is to extend the right to adopt a child also to same-sex couples. The conservative party might expect that opposing that prospective policy proposal will be unsuccessful and unpopular among its more modern voters and therefore de-emphasize the whole topic in their electoral campaign. Under these circumstances, the Catholic voter might not have a higher salience for that issue in his vote calculus, although he will find that issue very important. The expected policy shift is even worsening his utility from that policy dimension compared to the status quo, since he is against same-sex couples’ right to get married in the first place and given the public’s opinion there is no real chance to change that policy position in a more favorable direction for him. Thus, it is more rationale for him to put higher salience on a issue dimension where he has better chances to initiate a policy shift in his direction. Building on that logic, the following hypotheses are postulated.

\[ H_1: \text{ Voters who belong to either one side of a cleavage line find issues that address the content of that cleavage more important than voters who are not categorized by that cleavage line.} \]

\[ H_2: \text{ High issue importance leads to higher salience in the voter’s vote calculus if there is a real chance of a favorable policy shift on that issue.} \]

The remainder of this paper only focuses on the second hypothesis, as the first hypothesis is merely controversial and additionally it is not relevant for modeling vote decisions. Yet it builds a necessary bridge between previous results and the theoretical framework this paper is build on. I am only concerned with finding evidence that corroborates the second hypothesis, which is the output of interest, than with reconstructing the complete causal chain.

4 Consequences of heterogeneous issue salience

Assuming that there is variance in the issue salience parameter among the electorate, what are the consequences for the formal game of party competition? Building on the theoretical argument of the previous section, let’s assume that there is a two-dimensional policy space made up of issues \( a \) and \( b \) in which \( k = 1, ..., K \) parties compete for votes. Further, there is a group of voters that is defined by some socio-structural attribute indicated by \( \pi = \{0, 1\} \) and the members of this group have a special interest in policy issue \( b \), independent from their policy
ideal point. Thus, we expect those voters for whom \( \pi_i = 1 \) to have a higher salience for issue \( b \). We can formulate the following utility function for voter \( i \)

\[
U_{ik} = \lambda_k - \beta_1 \sqrt{(x_{ia} - z_{ak})^2 + (x_{ib} - z_{bk})^2} - \pi_i \beta_2 \sqrt{(x_{ib} - z_{bk})^2},
\]

where \( \lambda_k \) is party \( k \)'s valence, \( x_{ia} \) is voter \( i \)'s policy ideal point regarding issue \( a \) and \( z_{ak} \) is party \( z \)'s policy offer on that dimension, such that the term in brackets is the Euclidean policy distance between voter \( i \) and party \( k \) within the combined policy space with dimensions \( a \) and \( b \).\(^2\) Then, \( \beta_1 \) describes the relative weight that the average voter places on the policy distance in his vote calculus as compared to valence. In case voter \( i \) does not belong to the group with special interest in issue \( b \), his utility is solely described by the valence term and the Euclidean policy distance, since for him, \( \pi_i = 0 \) and thus the last term does not influence his utility. In case \( \pi_i = 1 \) the additional spatial parameter \( \beta_2 \) indicates the added salience that voters belonging to the special interest group have for issue \( b \) as compared to the average voter.

Considering the side of the parties, they are facing a divided electorate with two distinct utility functions. On the one hand, there are the baseline voters who weigh the two policy dimensions equally in their vote calculus.\(^3\) On the other, there are some voters who weigh dimension \( b \) more heavily in their decision making process. Voters for whom \( \pi_i = 1 \) are thus more responsive to changes in the party’s policy position on issue \( b \) than the baseline voters. This is because if \( \pi_i = 1 \) a one unit increase in the policy distance between \( i \) and \( k \) leads to a decrease in the utility of \( i \) of \( -\beta_1 - \beta_2 \), whereas in case \( \pi_i = 0 \) the decrease in utility is only \( -\beta_1 \), ceteris paribus.

As long as the ideal point distribution of high valence and baseline voters on issue \( b \) is nearly identical there are no consequences for the optimal strategy of the parties. This is no longer true if the ideal point distribution of both types of voters deviates. If the voters with higher salience concentrate in one specific area of the policy space, this will set an incentive for lower valence parties to take a position near the centre of that area, since in that area, the valence disadvantage is discounted to some extent by the higher salience parameter of the voter. This might possibly also influence the equilibrium strategies of other parties who have to adjust their position to the low valence parties’ tendency to locate near the high salience voters. The following simplified example will explain the mechanism leading to that conclusion.

Assume that two candidates, \( A \) and \( B \), compete for votes on one single policy dimension and the election is decided by simple majority rule. Candidates are purely office motivated and candidate \( A \) has a valence advantage over candidate \( B \). Voters base their decision on policy as

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\(^1\)Who belongs to that group must be defined theoretically by the criteria given in the previous chapter. Note that the group could consist only of opponents or supporters of a policy as well as of both of them.

\(^2\)The policy space could be spanned by any number of dimensions. Just for reasons of simplicity, I assume that it is a two-dimensional policy space in the example.

\(^3\)The assumption that the baseline voters weigh both dimensions equally is not really necessary here. It eventually depends on the scaling of the dimensions and one could easily find the relative weight of the average voter empirically.
As well as on valence considerations. \(^4\) The utility of voter \(i\) for candidate \(A\) is

\[
    u_i(\theta_A) = \lambda_A - \beta_i (x_i - \theta_A)^2
\]

and for candidate \(B\)

\[
    u_i(\theta_B) = \lambda_B - \beta_i (x_i - \theta_B)^2.
\]

Thus, voter \(i\) votes for \(A\) if and only if

\[
    u_i(\theta_A) > u_i(\theta_B)
\]

or

\[
    \frac{\lambda_A - \lambda_B}{\beta_i} > [(\theta_A - x_i)^2 - (\theta_B - x_i)^2]
\]

Since \(\lambda_A > \lambda_B\) and \(\beta_i > 0\) by definition, the term on the left is always positive. It thus depends on the relative size of the valence advantage discounted by the spatial parameter as compared to the relative size of the policy distances toward both parties, whether \(i\) casts his vote for \(A\) or \(B\). Assume both candidates take identical positions, \(\theta_A = \theta_B\). If one candidate has even only a minimal valence advantage over the other, there is no pure strategy Nash equilibrium as demonstrated by Groseclose (2001). That is because in case \(\lambda_A > \lambda_B\) and \(\theta_A = \theta_B\) the term on the right of Equation (6) is zero and due to the higher valence \(i\) will always vote for \(A\). Thus, no matter which position \(B\) chooses, \(A\) will always adopt the same position and win the election.

Figure 1: Location of voter \(i\) and candidates \(A\) and \(B\).

Consider the case in which \(A\) and \(B\) simultaneously choose positions and because of \(A\)’s uncertainty of \(B\)’s position she locates at some positive distance \(d\) from \(\theta_B\) as shown in Figure 1. Thus, \(\theta_A = \theta_B + d\). Since \(\theta_A\) is farther away from those voters whose ideal points lie to the left of the middle point of \(d\), \(x_i < \frac{\theta_A + \theta_B}{2}\), they are better off by voting for \(B\) if and only if the larger policy distance to \(A\) is not counterbalanced by her valence advantage. Using Equation (6) we can calculate the threshold distance between \(\theta_A\) and \(\theta_B\), \(d\), at which voter \(i\) with ideal point to the left of \(\frac{\theta_A + \theta_B}{2}\) will rather vote for \(B\). Denote their distance to \(B\)’s position as \(c_i\) and their distance to \(A\)’s position as \(c_i + d\) as illustrated in Figure 1.\(^5\) The threshold where \(d\) exactly

\[^4\text{For this example, I use squared Euclidean distances, since this simplifies the analytic solution. For the empirical analysis in this paper I assume the voter’s utility to decline by constant terms, modeled by simple Euclidean distance as suggested by Singh (2014). For the intuition of the mechanism it does not matter whether one squares the distance or not.}\]

\[^5\text{Note that } c_i \text{ is negative in case } x_i \text{ lies to the right of } \theta_B.\]
counterbalances the valence advantage of $A$ is then given by

$$\lambda_A - \lambda_B - \lambda_i = \left[ (d_i + c_i)^2 - d_i^2 \right]$$  \hspace{1cm} (7)

$$d_i = \frac{\lambda_A - \lambda_B}{2c_i\beta_i} - \frac{1}{2}c_i.$$  \hspace{1cm} (8)

Of course the inverse holds for deviations to the right of $\theta_B$. As Equation (8) tells, the size of $d_i$ depends on the valence advantage, which is fixed, and on the general distance of $i$ from the initial policy offer of $B$, $c_i$, but also on the size of $\beta_i$. $d_i$ gets larger, the smaller $c_i$ and $\beta_i$. Put differently, the more importance $i$ places on the policy issue, the smaller the threshold at which he will deviate from voting for $A$ and instead vote for the smaller valence candidate $B$ that better represents his policy preferences. This will happen even sooner the closer he is located to $\theta_B$. Thus, $d$ marks the distance $A$ might deviate in her initial policy proposal from $\theta_B$ without loosing support from some of the voters to the left of $\theta_B$.

Assume that voters are uniformly distributed along the two extreme points and the importance they place on policy considerations as opposed to valence considerations, $\beta_i$, varies among all voters. Suppose there is one group of high importance voters denoted by $j$ whose $\beta_j$ is larger than that of the other group of baseline voters, denoted by $i$, $\beta_j > \beta_i$. We know that type-$j$ voters accept policy deviations of the higher valence candidate to a lesser degree than voters of type-$i$ in case the lower valence candidate proposes a preferred policy position, that is $\theta_B - x_j < \theta_A - x_j$. This implies that the lower valence candidate $B$ has an incentive to propose a position that is preferred by type-$j$ voters than candidate $A$, because type-$j$ voters more easily deviate from supporting the high valence candidate $A$. In case high and low importance voters are distributed evenly among the policy dimension, there is no unconditionally best strategy for $B$ where to locate, because the expected $\beta$ is the same at every point and thus the probability to win votes depends only on the distance between $\theta_A$ and $\theta_B$. As in the case with fixed salience parameters, there is no pure strategy equilibrium.

Yet, in case the distribution of the high valence voters has a higher density at one specific area of the policy dimension, the lower valence candidate will choose a location near that area because type-$j$ voters are more easily convinced to vote for her. If the density of voters is the same at every point of the policy dimension, and there is a fixed distance $d$ between $\theta_B$ and $\theta_A$, but at one point there is only voters with higher salience parameter, then if $B$ locates at the centre of their preferred distribution the proportion of those voters that is going to deviate from voting the higher valence candidate is larger than the portion of low salience voters who would deviate if $B$ locates near their preferred policy position. Thus she can maximize votes even with a smaller distance from $A$ because with increasing salience parameter the valence advantage of candidate $A$ shrinks. Candidate $A$, on the other side, will expect that strategy and also choose a position near the type-$j$ voters in order to minimize her loss of support. Thus, both candidates have an incentive to locate at the point where the type-$j$ voters’ density is high. The equilibrium position is pulled toward the center of high importance voters.

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6It might well be that although $i$ votes for $B$ there is a voter $k$ with an ideal point to the left of $x_i$ who will still vote for $A$ if $\beta_k$ is enough smaller than $\beta_i$ that the valence advantage of $A$ counterbalances the larger policy distance. Therefore, not all voters to the left of $\frac{\theta_A + \theta_B}{2}$ will for sure vote for $B$. 

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This example illustrates that there is an incentive for low valence candidates to locate near those voters who place more importance on the policy issue, because they discount the valence disadvantage of the candidate. Although the model gets much more complex as soon as we introduce a third and more candidates and a second or more policy dimension, I expect the basic mechanism to influence equilibrium positions. Further, we learned that the size of the influence depends on the difference of salience weights as well as on the size of the valence disadvantage and the deviation of the density distribution of voters with different salience parameters. This complicates the search for an analytic solution to equilibrium positions as well as the formulation of straightforward expectations about the consequences of salience heterogeneity on parties’ equilibrium strategies. Therefore, the suggestion is to analyse consequences for equilibrium strategies via simulation methods.

5 Empirical analysis

5.1 Historical overview and theoretical expectations

In the following, the theoretical framework as well as the formal model presented in the previous chapters are applied to German election data. More specific, I analyze the issue of an abortion law in between 1980 and 1990. This issue provides a fruitful example for the theoretical framework, since the issue addresses the traditionally strong religious cleavage line in the German society with conservative Christians opposing a progressive societal group that was especially committed and organized at the end of the 1970’s and the beginning of the 1980’s. This progressive group had its roots in the new social movement, the sexual revolution and the anti-nuclear energy movement and bundled and organized its interest by founding the Green party in 1980. Thus there are two sides of a cleavage line who are expected to have a special interest in an ethical topic like abortion since this issue clearly challenges their beliefs and values, with the conservatives favoring a strict law to protect the unborn life and the progressives claiming a legalization of abortion to strengthen the self-determination of women.

Yet, this issue is not as dichotomous as one might believe at first sight. There are many nuanced attitudes one can hold in between the two extreme points of prohibiting and legalizing abortion under any circumstances. Many conservatives who oppose abortion would still agree to it if the life of the mother was endangered by the pregnancy. As well, there are circumstances under which more progressive people would not accept an abortion, for example if the fetus would not have the desired gender. And there are many circumstances that lie in between those two extremes, e.g. the pregnancy being the result of sexual violation or the financial situation of the mother not allowing her to take proper care of a child. This illustrates that there is a meaningful dimension underlying that issue that differentiates between many nuanced issue positions on a scale from total legalization to complete prohibition under any circumstances.

According to §218 of the Criminal Code abortion was illegal in the Federal Republic of Germany from the beginning in 1949. Yet it was ever since claimed by more liberal people to reform the law. An important impulse to the public discussion of the matter was a magazine cover story where 374 women publicly declared to have had an abortion, some of them being well known people. Only three years later, the social-liberal coalition of SPD and FDP reformed
the law and introduced the *Fristenregelung*, which generally permitted abortion as long as it was conducted within the first twelve weeks of pregnancy. However, the CDU submitted the case to the constitutional court, which declared the new law to be unconstitutional. Thus, in 1976 the parliament passed a much stricter abortion law, the modified *Indikationsregelung*, which permitted abortion only if there is a medical or ethical indication or an indication of dire straits. However, the public debate was far from being stopped with that reform and the progressive groups kept on being unsatisfied with the law. This was the status quo at the beginning of the time span analyzed in the following.

Another culmination point of the public discussion of the law was reached in 1990 when both Germanies reunified and the modified *Indikationsregelung* had to be reconciled with the much more liberal East German abortion law. This again arose the hopes of the progressives for a more liberal regulation. In 1992 a modified *Fristenregelung* was passed, that introduced an obligatory counseling for pregnancy conflict situations after which abortion was exempt from punishment if it was conducted during the first twelve weeks of pregnancy. After that time limit, abortion is only legal if there is a medical or ethical indication.

Thus, during the period of investigation abortion was an issue of public interest and the status quo was insecure since it was overruled by a more progressive majority once before. Therefore it is safe to say that progressive groups could hope for a favorable policy change. The expectation of a policy change was even stronger at the last investigation point in 1990 due to the reunification and the associated harmonization of both laws, especially given the general change toward a more progressive mood regarding that topic.

Further, we can identify the conservative party CDU/CSU as representing the voice of the conservatives and Christians, and the Green party as being the voice of the progressive societal group with reference to that issue. Relying on the hypotheses stated above we can formulate the expectations that first, according to \( H_1 \) conservatives and progressives should find the issue of abortion personally more important, and second, according to \( H_2 \) this importance should translate into a higher salience of the abortion issue in the vote calculus of the progressives throughout the whole period of investigation since there was a real chance for a favorable policy change. The conservatives, on the other side, already had a major victory by pulling the policy back toward their ideal point in 1976 against the majority opinion. Since the public mood got rather more liberal ever since which amongst others manifested in the entry of the Greens in parliament, they could not hope to keep that status quo in the next discussion of the law, not to mention pulling it even more toward their ideal point. This assumption is corroborated by the fact that the CDU did not mention the topic of the abortion law in any of its manifestos during that time span, whereas the Greens very well did. Therefore, although conservative might find that issue more important, I do not expect that to translate into a higher salience in their vote calculus.
5.2 Data and operationalization

I use data from German election surveys that were conducted shortly before the federal elections in 1980, 1987 and 1990. To identify conservative and progressive respondents, I use information on the frequency they go to church and their party identification. Respondents are categorized as conservatives if they go to church at least once a week. Progressives are operationalized by their identification with the Green party. In 1980 there was only one analyzable respondent who identified with the Green party, so that the analysis of the progressives in 1980 is not technically feasible. This operationalization might sound problematic since party identification also correlates with vote intention, which is the dependent variable. However, the interesting effect is issue voting and running the same analyses with single groups for all the other parties’ identifiers does not find the same effect for issue voting. As a more convincing argument for that operationalization, I additionally present a robustness check for the groups in the next section.

Figure 2: Density of voter ideal points and perceived party positions on a scale from legalization to prohibition.

The policy preferences regarding the abortion issue are measured by a seven-point-scale

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7 The data are stored and publicly available at the GESIS archive with the numbers ZA 1225, ZA 1537 and ZA 2517. For 1990, only the West German sample is used.
8 The results of this analysis is available from the author upon request.
9 Left positions are in favor of legalizing abortion, right positions are in favor of prohibiting it.
ranging from the two extreme points of a social indication to a general approval of abortion in 1980. In 1987 and 1990 the end points of the scale were marked as a general criminalization of abortion to making it the individual decision of every woman. As both yield to the same legal status, the formulation should not alter the interpretation and comparison of the ideal points too much. Furthermore, respondents were asked to place the three respectively four parliamentary parties’ policy standpoint on the same scale. As a second stabilizing policy dimension I choose a salient economic issue from every survey.10 These preference and perception data are further rescaled by the method developed by Aldrich and McKelvey (1977) in order to correct for individual differences in the usage of the scale. Thus we get ideal points and perceived party positions in a two dimensional policy space with a common metric.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of ideal points of conservatives, progressives and the remaining respondents concerning the issue of abortion at each of the election years. As expected, conservatives are mainly located to the right of the center favoring a strict abortion law, whereas the progressives’ ideal points cluster on the left, favoring a liberalization of the law. It is remarkable that the ideal point distribution of the conservatives flattens in the course of time. The conservatives adopt more liberal views at the end of the 1980’s. Furthermore it shows that the remaining voters’ ideal point distribution was quite polarized in 1980. In 1987 the polarization was moderated and the ideal points are distributed more evenly along the spectrum of the perceived party positions. In 1990, the majority of the remaining voters have ideal points on the liberal side of the scale. There is not much movement in the parties’ positions over time. The only party whose perceived position changes significantly is the liberal party, that was perceived to be close to its coalition partner SPD in 1980, and in 1987 and 1990 it is perceived to be located closer to its new coalition partner CDU. Overall, we have quite polarized distributions in 1980 and in 1990, whereas in 1987 the polarization between the two groups with special interest is less pronounced and the remaining voters are spread nearly equally along the scale.

5.3 Results

Table 1 presents the results of a conditional logit model of vote intention for 1980. Model 1 only includes party constants that are interpreted as valence and a coefficient for the Euclidean distance in the two-dimensional space spanned by the two issues of abortion and pension system as described above. SPD ranks first in terms of valence, with CDU close behind and the liberal party being lowest in valence and therefore chosen as the reference category. As expected, the distance parameter is significant and negative. Model 2 introduces a second spatial coefficient to test whether the average voter weighs the two dimensions equally in his vote decision as implicitly assumed by using the Euclidean distance. As the coefficient for abortion is not significant, the equal weighting of both dimensions in the Euclidean distance is appropriate here. The last model additionally estimates an interaction between the spatial distance on the issue of abortion and the conservative voters.11 The interaction term is significantly negative at the 1%-level and thus confirms that conservatives place more weight on the abortion issue in their vote calculus than

10In 1980 this issue concerns the regulation of the pension system, in 1987 it addresses a reform of the right to strike and in 1990 it asks for the role of the state in the recovery of East Germany’s economy.

11Because the variable ‘conservative’ is constant for each alternative it cannot be included as main effect for the interaction in a conditional logit model.
Table 1: Conditional logit model of vote intention, 1980

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Valence parameters</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDU</td>
<td>0.88***</td>
<td>0.88***</td>
<td>0.82***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
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<td>SPD</td>
<td>0.91***</td>
<td>0.91***</td>
<td>0.92***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>(0.12)</td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
</tr>
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<td>FDP</td>
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<td>ref.</td>
<td>ref.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policy distance</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euclidean Dist.</td>
<td>-0.66***</td>
<td>-0.65***</td>
<td>-0.65***</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion x cons.</td>
<td>-0.52*</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.27)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log Likelihood</td>
<td>-519.03</td>
<td>-519.02</td>
<td>-516.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.125</td>
<td>0.125</td>
<td>0.127</td>
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</table>

Significance levels: 0 ***; 0.001 **; 0.01 *. N=578.

the remaining voters do. Yet, the effect is relative small in size, which also shows in the marginal improvement of the log Likelihood from model 2 to model 3.

Table 2 shows the results of the vote models for 1987 and 1990 respectively. The analysis includes the Greens as the fourth parliamentary party from 1983 onwards and additionally the progressives as a group that is assumed to have a higher salience for the issue of abortion. Again, the models are built stepwise to illustrate the improvement of the log Likelihood and to test whether the equal weighting of the two-dimensional policy space is reasonable. The CDU as the governing party replaces the SPD as the highest valence party. The Greens are on equal terms with the liberal FDP concerning their valence. The Euclidean distance is appropriate in both election years as the significant negative coefficient for the Euclidean distance combined with the insignificant coefficient of abortion in models 2 tells for both years. The interaction effect of the distance on the abortion issue with the conservatives is not significant any more. This was already expected due to the low chances of a favorable policy change and the avoidance of the CDU as the conservatives’ voice to emphasis the topic. The interaction term with the progressives, on the other side, is significant in both years, with the coefficient in 1990 being even larger in size and significance. This corroborates the assumption that the progressives put much more emphasis on the abortion issue in their vote decision than the remaining voters did. It also confirms the expectation that the issue was even more salient for the progressives in 1990, when the need for a reform of the abortion law was real due to the reunification and the accompanying harmonization of the two laws. The results thus support the second hypothesis stated above, which postulates that high issue importance leads to higher salience in the voter’s vote calculus if there is a real chance of a favorable policy shift on that issue.

In order to present an additional robustness check for the operationalization as well as
Table 2: Conditional logit model of vote intention, 1987 and 1990

<table>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDU</td>
<td>2.10***</td>
<td>2.10***</td>
<td>2.10***</td>
<td>1.73***</td>
<td>1.74***</td>
<td>1.71***</td>
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<td>(0.14)</td>
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<td>(0.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPD</td>
<td>1.63***</td>
<td>1.62***</td>
<td>1.62***</td>
<td>1.26***</td>
<td>1.24***</td>
<td>1.24***</td>
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<td>Greens</td>
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<td>0.12</td>
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<td>(0.18)</td>
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<td>(0.18)</td>
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<td>(0.20)</td>
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<td>ref.</td>
<td>ref.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policy distance</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euclidean Dist.</td>
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<td>-1.23***</td>
<td>-1.04***</td>
<td>-0.96***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abortion</td>
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<td>0.05</td>
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<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(0.15)</td>
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<td>(0.19)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abortion x cons.</td>
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<td>-0.16</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
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<td>(0.17)</td>
<td>(0.39)</td>
<td>(0.39)</td>
<td>(0.39)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abortion x prog.</td>
<td>-1.49*</td>
<td>-5.64***</td>
<td>-5.64***</td>
<td>-5.64***</td>
<td>-5.64***</td>
<td>-5.64***</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.62)</td>
<td>(0.93)</td>
<td>(0.93)</td>
<td>(0.93)</td>
<td>(0.93)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Log Likelihood</td>
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<td>-887.35</td>
<td>-754.09</td>
<td>-753.65</td>
<td>-718.69</td>
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<td>$R^2$</td>
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<td>0.218</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.151</td>
<td>0.151</td>
<td>0.172</td>
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<td>712</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significance levels: 0 ***; 0.001 **; 0.01 *.

for the theoretical argument, I conduct a Bayesian mixed logit model that is set up exactly as model 2. Thus, it includes party constants to estimate their valence as well as a coefficient for the Euclidean distance in the two-dimensional policy space. It also includes a separate coefficient to estimate the variation in the salience of the distance regarding the abortion issue separately. In contrast to model 2 in Tables 1 and 2, the mixed model specifies this separate spatial coefficient to vary randomly for each individual. This is done in order to check whether the groups I defined as the high salience groups based on the theoretical argument can also be identified to have a higher $\beta$-parameter for abortion if they are not pre-classified to be the conjectured high-salience group. If this is true, then their $\beta$-parameters should be larger than that of the remaining voters in this uninformed setting.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of those $\beta$-parameters separately for conservatives in 1980 and progressives in 1987 and 1990. It can clearly be seen that the distribution of the spatial parameters of the progressives in 1987 and 1990 deviates from the distribution of the remaining voters, indicating that the attributes I utilize to identify high salience voters actually pick those respondents who really are identified to have a higher salience if we set the parameter to vary. Thus, even the arguable operationalization of the progressive group as the identifiers of the Greens resists the robustness check. Concerning the conservatives in 1980, however, the picture is less clear, which could hint to a bad operationalization of the group. On the other side, the
interaction effect that is quite small in size and significance, indicates only a weekly increased salience of the conservatives for the abortion issue in 1980, which corresponds to the only slight rightward shift of the density distribution curve in Figure 3.

How does this result affect the optimal party strategy and finally the equilibrium configurations? In order to show the consequences, I conduct a simulation procedure in which all parties successively choose a best response in the two-dimensional policy space given all other parties’ locations until they converge to a configuration where no party has an incentive to change its position any further. Since there might be more than one such equilibrium configuration, I run 1000 simulations with random starting values and random party orders. Only those equilibrium configurations are kept in which the left-right order of the parties on the abortion issue is meaningful. Thus, configurations in which the CDU takes the most liberal position and the Liberals in 1980 and the Greens in 1987 and 1990 take the most conservative positions are discarded. This avoids unrealistic mirror images of equilibrium configurations. The justification for that practice is the assumption of responsible party government and path dependencies that disallows parties to take any random position but restricts it to the area of its previous positions and its identifiers ideal points. In order to illustrate the consequences of considering higher salience of the conservatives respectively the progressives for the issue of abortion, the simulations are run for models 1 and 3 of each election year. The consequences of including an interaction term in
the vote model are contrasted in the upper and lower panel of Figures 4 to 6.\textsuperscript{12}

Figure 4: Equilibrium positions of disregarding and considering heterogeneous salience for \( \bullet \) CDU, \( \triangle \) SPD and \( \circ \) FDP\textsuperscript{13}, 1980

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{\( -0.6 \)}}
\end{array}
\]

In each Figure, the upper panel shows the simulated equilibrium positions of each party that are based on the parameters of model 1 for each year, which does not include an interaction term for conservatives and progressives. The lower panel shows the equilibrium positions at which the parties converge once we include the interaction term in the model and thus consider the fact that progressives and/or conservatives have a higher salience for the abortion issue in their individual vote calculus. The size of the plotted symbol indicates the frequency of that position in the simulation runs. The larger the symbol, the more often the party’s position converged at that point.\textsuperscript{14}

Since not enough respondents could be classified as progressives, model 3 for 1980 only detects a higher salience for conservative voters who are located close to each other and far on the right side of the issue dimension as Figure 2 illustrates. Figure 4 shows that considering the higher salience of conservative voters leads to a rightward shift of the equilibrium positions of CDU as well as of SPD toward the location where the density of conservative voters is high. The lower valence party FDP however is not affected in its predicted equilibrium strategy and still locates to the left.

In 1987 and 1990 both groups could be identified, however only the progressives are found to have a higher salience for the issue of abortion in their vote decision. For the election in 1987, the inclusion of this fact in the vote model changes the predicted equilibrium positions of the two lower valence parties, the Greens and the Liberals. Both parties are predicted to take more liberal positions on the abortion issue then if we did not consider the added salience of progressives. The SPD’s and CDU’s equilibrium positions are not affected by the inclusion of the interaction term and both parties are predicted to take positions at the mean of the scale. From Figure 2 we know that the peak of the progressives’ ideal point distribution is at about -0.8. Thus, the new equilibrium position of the Greens in the lower panel of Figure 4 lies very close to that point of highest density of progressive voters.

\textsuperscript{12}Only the equilibrium positions regarding the abortion issue are shown, since the positions on the economic issue dimension are of no interest here.

\textsuperscript{13}Symbol size represents frequency of equilibrium position.

\textsuperscript{14}The positions are rounded to the third digit.
Figure 5: Equilibrium positions of disregarding and considering heterogeneous salience for • CDU, △ SPD, ◦ FDP and ◊ Greens, 1987

Figure 6: Equilibrium positions of disregarding and considering heterogeneous salience for • CDU, △ SPD, ◦ FDP and ◊ Greens, 1990

Figure 6 shows the consequences of considering different levels of salience for the abortion issue in 1990. From all three election years under investigation, the discrepancy between the two panels is most pronounced here, since this time all parties’ equilibrium positions are affected by the inclusion of the interaction term with the progressives and conservatives. All parties are predicted to take more liberal positions in equilibrium once we introduce the interaction term, except for the Liberals who move to the right. The order of the parties stays the same, with SPD and CDU as highest valence parties locating at nearly the same positions with the Greens to the left and the Liberals to the right.

5.4 Discussion

As expected, the conservative and progressive groups in the electorate have higher salience for the abortion issue in their vote decision, as shown in Tables 1 and 2. However, although the issue clearly addresses their religious or ideological feelings and beliefs, the increased saliency of both groups is not observable at every election year. The conservatives are only found to have an above-average salience parameter in 1980, which is in line with the argument that issue
importance only translates into higher salience if there is a real chance of a favorable policy change. Since the CDU did not pronounce the issue in its election campaigns or manifestos in the 1980’s, the conservatives had no powerful voice that would be heard once it would have come to a reform of the law. However, one could assume that the issue was still more salient for the conservatives in 1980 due to the recent ruling of the Constitutional Court which led to shifting the status quo back to their preferred position. Since it was the CDU who brought the case to the Constitutional Court, this can be regarded as a successful policy shift of the conservatives. The higher salience could also hint at more of a hope to being able to keep the status quo against the claims of the progressives than to hope for another more favorable policy change. In the course of time, the hopes even for keeping the status quo vanished as did the salience of the conservatives for the issue.

The opposite is true for the progressives whose voice were the Greens. They got more powerful during the 1980’s by entering the parliament and at the same time they publicly discussed the topic of abortion and tried to initiate a policy change. Thus it was reasonable for the progressives to give that issue more weight in their vote decision. This theoretical argument is supported by the significant interaction terms with the progressives in 1987 and 1990. Also, the finding that the interaction effect is even stronger in 1990 is in line with the theoretical arguments stated above, because due to the reunification, a reconsidering of the law was necessary. Since by that time the majority of the remaining voters also favored a more liberal regulation of the abortion law, the chances for a favorable policy change were high.

Regarding the consequences that the heterogeneity in voters’ issue salience parameters has for the optimal party positions, no clear picture can be drawn. The theoretical expectation derived from the simplified example in section 3 only states that lower valence parties have an incentive to locate close to the point where the high salience voters are located, given that their ideal point distribution deviates from the overall ideal point distribution of the remaining voters. Figure 2 illustrates that the ideal points of the conservatives have a higher density than the remaining voters on the right of the scale, whereas the progressive’s ideal point distribution density exceeds the remaining voters’ density on the left. Around the center of the scale, the remaining voters’ density is highest. Thus, the condition is fulfilled and we can expect incentives for the lower valence party to locate near the peaks of the progressives respectively conservatives distribution, given that they actually have an above-average salience for the issue. This is the case in 1980 for the conservative voters and in 1987 and 1990 for the progressive voters.

In 1980, the equilibrium positions of CDU and SPD are affected by the inclusion of the interaction term. This is in line with the expectation, since the CDU has a lower valence than the SPD and thus has an incentive to move toward an area where its valence advantage weighs less in the voters’ decision. This in turn also affects the optimal position of the SPD, who follows the CDU toward the right side. The lowest valence party, the FDP, is not affected by the inclusion of the interaction term, although it could gain more by moving toward the area where its valence disadvantage weighs less. However, I restricted the equilibrium configuration to avoid unrealistic leap-frogging between the parties. This points at the complexity of the consequences for party competition. Since there are many more factors influencing optimal party strategies, as for example responsible party government, the consequences of heterogeneous issue salience
are hard to predict.

In 1987, the major parties’ positions are untouched by the inclusion of the interaction term, whereas the two low valence parties are predicted to take more extreme positions. The resulting pattern deviates from the perceived pattern of party positions as shown in the second panel of Figure 2. The electorate perceives the CDU to present the most conservative standpoint regarding that issue, whereas the simulation procedure based on models 1 and 3 for 1987 places the Liberals at the most conservative position and the CDU at a middle position. This points to another restriction of the complexity of party competition. Although the simulation procedure identifies reasonable equilibrium positions, it cannot consider the right ordering of the parties that are restricted due to path dependency and responsible party government. It also shows that the CDU could gain more by taking a middle position on that topic, but due to its image in the electorate it has to stick to its conservative position respectively it took no effort to change its perceived policy position more to the liberal side by avoiding the topic completely.

Figure 6 shows how massive the consequences of considering different salience levels might be. Although only the progressives have a higher salience for the abortion issue and their ideal points clearly cluster on the left of the scale, the equilibrium configuration shown in the lower panel demonstrates that also the most conservative equilibrium position, occupied by the Liberals, is affected. Their optimal position is predicted to lie even farther on the conservative end of the scale, while all the other parties adjust their positions to the liberal end. This illustrates that the consequences of considering different salience levels not only show in new incentives for the lower valence parties, but also in the reactions of all the other parties to that deviant behavior of the low valence party. Thus, the whole party configuration can be changed by the Greens listening more closely to the progressives’ policy demand on the abortion issue.

6 Conclusion

This paper is concerned with the causes and consequences of heterogeneous issue salience among electorates. Due to conflicting results in the literature on issue importance, I show the need for a more general theory of issue importance and, connected to that, the need for a differentiation between mere issue importance and increased issue salience in the vote decision. Cleavage theory offers a fruitful theoretical framework for that task and leads to the hypotheses that, first, voters who belong to one side of a cleavage find issues that address that cleavage more important than voters who do not belong to either side of that cleavage. Second, and even more important, this high importance only translates into higher issue salience if there is a real chance for a favorable policy change. This implies that voters with high importance for an issue need a certain degree of organisation and bargaining power in the policy making as a condition for their increased interest and importance to transform into higher salience in their vote calculus. The consequences of this theoretical argument are illustrated by a formal modeling example. The general expectation that can be derived from that is a tendency of lower valence parties to offer policy standpoints near a point where the density of those voters with higher salience is high, in order to diminish the valence disadvantage they hold.

Based on this theoretical framework, the issue of an abortion law in West Germany during the 1980’s is analyzed based on election survey data from 1980, 1987 and 1990. The results cor-
roborate the hypothesis by showing that conservatives and progressives, who built the two sides of the religious cleavage line in the German society, have a higher salience for the abortion issue that addresses their religious believes and ideological views. This increased salience, however, only shows at those elections where the respective group has a legitimate hope for a favorable policy change, as the progressives had in 1987 and even more so in 1990. The conservatives could not really hope for another more favorable policy change in 1980, yet they still had their success of the last change of the law in mind, which might have led to an increased salience rather from a fear of losing that status quo.

The consequences for the optimal party strategies are not that straightforward due to the high complexity of the vote model and the additional restriction to at least some degree of responsible party government. Overall, however, the results of the simulation study show that including different levels of salience for certain electoral groups in the model changes the predicted equilibrium configuration of parties’ policy positions. Some parties are clearly pulled toward the preferred positions of the voters with the higher salience for that issue. At the same time it might happen that another party is pulled to the opposite side of the scale as a response to the moves of the other parties'. Due to the complex interplay of the different salience parameters, the different ideal point distributions, and also the differences in party valences, no general pattern of the consequences can be derived. Yet it is clear that modeling the different levels of salience among in the vote model affects the optimal party strategies, because parties have to take the higher salience voters into account when searching their optimal position.
Bibliography


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