

Bringing agency back into the study of partisan politics: A note on recent developments in the literature on party politics

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Abstract

The question of whether political parties make a systematic difference in terms of public policies is one of the classics of comparative public policy research. However, unstable class cleavages and changing party strategies challenge the assumptions of traditional partisan theory, namely that parties represent a stable group of voters and implement policies according to the preferences of this group. Against this backdrop, several recent studies have called for an “electoral turn” in partisan theory and suggest establishing a party–voter link on the microlevel, depending on the policy area at stake. In this article, we propose a different view on partisan effects. While we do not argue that public opinion is unimportant for parties, we maintain that the electoral turn literature has a tendency to black-box the political actors and their preferences, because they become mere agents of voter preferences. Our argument builds on a growing literature that shows that political actors both at the party member and the elite level do have preferences and that these may or may not be congruent with those of the voters. Hence, the effect of partisan ideology on public policies may also be situated on the level of the parties or policy-makers themselves.

Keywords

partisan effects, party politics, public policy, vote seeking

“[H]uman beings have to act for there to be a policy.”

(Hofferbert, 1974)

Introduction

The question of whether political parties affect public policies is one of the classics of comparative public policy research. Beginning with Hibbs (1977), Castles (Castles and McKinlay, 1979; Castles, 1982), and Schmidt (1978), the question has been at the center of academic interest for the last 40 years or so and numerous studies have tested whether partisan politics affect policies (for a recent overview, see Potrafke, 2017). Times have changed since the late 1970s when the first studies on partisan effects were published, however. First, the traditional cleavages that yielded stable constituencies for certain parties—the most important being workers voting for socialist and social-

democratic parties—have weakened considerably. Hence, the linkage between a stable voter basis firmly linked to a class and “their” party has debilitated (Oesch, 2013). Second, parties have reacted to this tendency by changing their strategies. They have developed into “catch-all”- or “cartel”-parties (Katz and Mair, 1995, 1996), searching for other ways to secure electoral support and thereby reducing class-based support themselves (Evans and Tilley, 2011). These transformations challenge the foundation of “old”

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partisan theory, namely its assumption that parties represent a stable group of voters and implement policies according to the preferences of this group (Hibbs, 1977).

Against the backdrop of declining class-voting and changing party strategies, several recent studies have called for an “electoral turn” (Beramendi et al., 2015) in partisan theory. Given that it no longer can be taken for granted that certain segments of a society naturally vote for one party or another as assumed by the “old” Hibbsian theory, these studies maintain that a voter-party-link has to be reestablished empirically. Oesch (2013), Gingrich and Häusermann (2015), Häusermann (2006), and others have argued that different socioeconomic groups are still relevant as constituencies of particular parties. But as the different groups have varying preferences, vote-seeking parties will adjust to these transformations of the electoral market and seek to realign voters with tailor-made policy proposals. Consequently, the policies a specific party adopts shift as the composition of its electorate changes. This idea of parties proposing specific policy proposals to garner more volatile voter groups (or coalitions) lies at the heart of what we call “new partisan theory.”

In this article, we add to this literature and propose a rather different view on partisan effects. Our argument is rooted in a perspective of actor-centered institutionalism and takes actors’ preferences as well as the institutional context in which they are embedded seriously (Scharpf, 1997). We maintain that while public opinion certainly remains an important explanation for party positions and social policies, the “new partisan theory” literature risks to black-box the political actors and their own preferences, because they are mainly seen as agents of voter preferences. However, a growing literature shows that political actors do have preferences and that these may or may not be coherent with those of their voters (Alexiadou, 2015; Wenzelburger and Staff, 2017). If we take actors seriously, partisan effects on public policies are not only dependent on a direct link to the electorate. Instead, the effect of partisan ideology on public policies may also be situated on the level of the parties or policy-makers themselves. If political actors decide on policies in line with their ideological view, which has been formed during their long career in a political party, policies will reflect partisan differences, quite independently of the current distribution of voter preferences. Therefore, while we do not neglect the vote- and office-seeking motives of parties, we reemphasize their policy-seeking motives, which have indeed been theorized as being equally important in the classic literature on the goals of parties (Strøm, 1990; Müller and Strøm, 1999), but are, in our view, underrated by recent studies that emphasize the micro–macro relationships between voters and parties.¹ Hence, to be crystal clear: We do not argue that the position of the voters is irrelevant to what political actors decide and to how parties position themselves in electoral competition. However, we believe that looking for the

voter-policy-link *only* misses an important part of the causal story and that policy-seeking motives have been taken too lightly in the “new partisan theory” literature.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. In the next section, we briefly summarize the state of the art of the literature related to partisan effects and discuss both the “old partisan theory” and the criticism put forward in recent years. Building on this review, we develop our argument on the missing link between parties and public policies situated on the level of political actors. Next, we briefly discuss the role of electoral competition in our agency-based approach. The fifth section presents selected empirical evidence that provides some plausibility checks for our model. The final section concludes.

Voters and party politics: From Hibbs to the constrained partisanship model

In the conclusion to their review article on partisan politics, Häusermann et al. (2013) argue that

one of the most important questions for further research is to investigate to what extent parties’ policy decisions are still based on the representation of identifiable constituencies and social interests, and to what extent policy choices are motivated by the need to compete with rival parties over specific groups of voters.

This line of thinking goes back to the traditional approach developed by Hibbs (1977) according to which parties represent distinct groups of voters—traditionally workers and capital owners—and adopt policies that benefit their constituencies in exchange for votes. From this perspective, partisan differences are the consequence of the segmentation of society in constituencies with clearly distinguishable preferences. Given that the “silent revolution” (Inglehart, 1977) of value change and globalization have profoundly transformed the societies of the Western world, the significance of the traditional voter segments that are the backbone of Hibbs’ analysis has decreased. New issues may have formed new cleavages and realigned some groups of voters whereas others are much more volatile in their voting behavior, depending on the salience of issues at a certain election (Kitschelt and Rehm, 2016; Kriesi et al., 2008). Given these points, proponents of the “new partisan theory” convincingly argue that the traditional micro-foundation of partisan theory can no longer be taken for granted and needs to be updated to the electoral markets of postindustrial society (see Figure 1 for a graphical illustration).

Beramendi et al. (2015: 2) provide such an update in their “model of constrained partisanship.” Extending the classic model by Hibbs (1977) which is essentially built on the dichotomy of capital versus labor, the proponents of the constrained partisanship model emphasize that

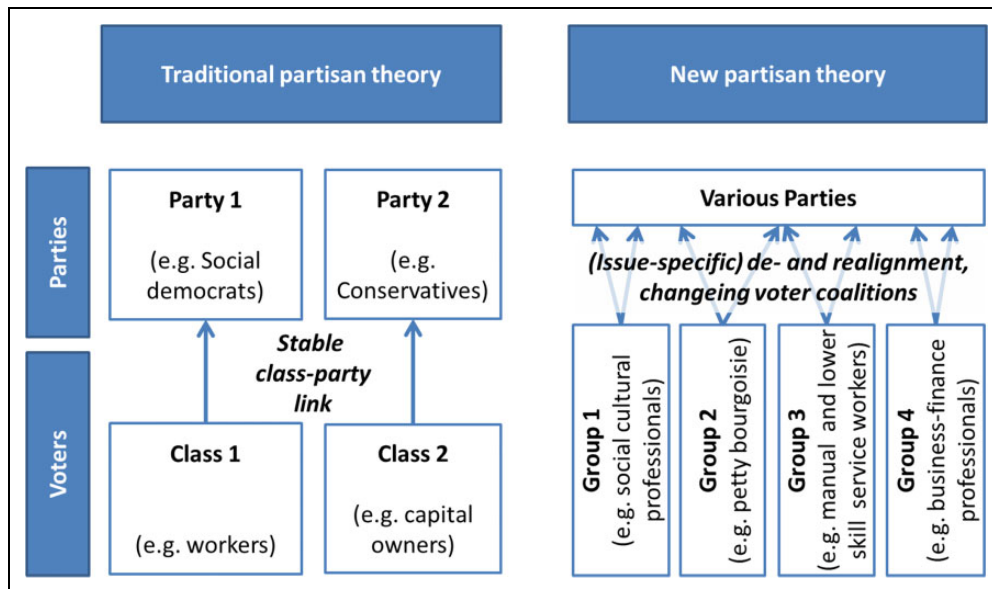


Figure 1. Varieties of partisan theory.

today's parties have to operate in an at least two-dimensional policy space, which makes the stitching together of electoral alliances more cumbersome, but also opens ways to more flexible support coalitions. Nonetheless, the main logic of the two models is very similar: "Parties remain differentiated in their electoral appeals, do represent constituency groups, and act on their electoral alignments in public policy making" (Beramendi et al., 2015: 59). Hence, the preferences of their respective voter groups essentially drive parties' policy-making. What is more, parties are expected to follow their (new) voters' preferences in issue areas that were not decisive for the vote choice of these groups. For example, Gingrich and Häusermann (2015: 54) argue that as "more working-class voters have moved to non-left parties for predominantly cultural reasons, however, they potentially alter the economic preference profiles of these parties, too, creating welfare state support among even the far-right" (for a similar argument for left parties, see Gingrich and Häusermann, 2015: 53). In sum, "new partisan theory" suggests that parties propose tailor-made policies to win support of electoral coalitions and to the extent that preferences of these electorates differ between parties, the authors also expect policies to differ along these lines.

This view of policy-making as being mainly driven by the preferences of voters is closely related to the much broader discussion about how strongly changes in public opinion are taken up by responsive political decision-makers and whether parties make a difference in such a setting. On the one hand, according to the model of "dynamic representation" (Stimson et al., 1995) and the thermostat model (Soroka and Wlezién, 2010; Wlezién, 1995), governments respond systematically to changes in

the preferences of the median voter with next to no independent role for parties (see also Hakhverdian, 2012; Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2005). On the other hand, the mandate theory of democracy (Klingemann et al., 1994) argues that parties propose different policy packages to voters, bundled up in manifestos, and then implement these policies once in office. Here, parties are key actors. Clearly, the "new partisan theory literature" takes a medium position: It allows for partisan differences depending on the preferences of the electoral coalition supporting the party, but it endogenizes the party position as a function of voter preferences. In contrast to the mandate theory, where parties lead and voters follow, the constrained partisanship model theorizes that parties actively tailor policy packages to forge an electoral coalition that will maximize electoral chances. This proposition is not new but builds, in fact, on a massive body of literature that uses spatial models of party competition to analyze when, why, and under what particular conditions parties change their position in response to changes in the (median) voter's position (Adams et al., 2004; Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009; Adams et al., 2005; Best et al., 2012; Ezrow et al., 2011; Schumacher et al., 2013). However, whereas most of the literature on dynamic representation models changes in party positions or policies mainly as driven by the (Downsian) median voter, implying converging policy positions and thus the disappearance of partisan differences, the "new partisan theory" literature argues that parties focus on the preferences of specific groups in the electorate—like workers, sociocultural professionals, and the like. This difference is highly relevant as the constrained partisanship literature follows the Hibbsian argument in this respect and therefore expects that parties

do make a difference as long as the groups and classes voting for them have different preferences.²

To the extent that partisan differences do not disappear empirically, the question remains whether the micro-foundation of “new partisan theory,” which essentially assumes that political parties are mostly instruments that turn voter preferences into public policies, is actually the only game in town. Two arguments cast some doubt on the necessity to always take the preferences of the constituencies into account when analyzing the influence of parties on public policies.

First, going back to the classic studies of party goals and party behavior (Müller and Strøm, 1999), it is clear that both the old Hibbsian approach as well as the “new partisan theory” underestimate the relevance of policy-seeking motives. As Strøm has argued in his seminal article, policy-seeking objectives are crucial for some parties and do affect policies—depending on organizational features of the parties themselves and the institutional context in which they operate (Strøm, 1990: 593). This finding has been empirically corroborated by several scholars. These studies show that party programs are not only (and sometimes even not primarily) directed at voter’s preferences but may also reflect the position of party members, activists, or party elites (e.g. Budge et al., 2010; Helboe Pedersen, 2012; Schumacher et al., 2013). In fact, although parties may have an idea who their voters could or should be, they have to make an offer under rather high degrees of uncertainty regarding who will vote for them. So it might technically be difficult for parties to follow the interests of their voters simply because they do not know who their voters are next time around.

Second, an abundant literature from policy studies has repeatedly emphasized that agency matters in public policy-making. Starting with Kingdon (1984), policy entrepreneurs (Mintrom and Norman, 2009) and political entrepreneurs (Herweg et al., 2015) have been shown over and over again to affect whether certain policies are adopted. While the policy studies literature does acknowledge the importance of elections, too, it is nevertheless important to emphasize that the electoral constraints are mainly seen as a context variable rather than as the key force driving policy choices (Herweg et al., 2017).

The underrating of policy-seeking objectives and agency by the “new partisan theory” may also explain why there is only limited empirical evidence that the public policies a party adopts mainly respond to the preferences of that party’s electoral support coalition. Gingrich and Häusermann (2015) have found for instance that the class composition of left parties’ electorates conditions the social policies of these parties only in the case of unemployment benefits, but not for family policy. A similar result is reported by Engler and Zohlnhöfer (2018) on economic policies. They only find such an electorate–policy linkage in the area of subsidies, but not with regard to product

market regulation or privatization. What is more, particularly with regard to privatization, the effects are in the opposite direction of what new partisan theory would have expected. In sum, it might be problematic to consider party positions as a mere reflection of the interests of the respective party’s voter segments—irrespective of whether we have in mind Hibbs’ stable social classes in the “old partisan theory” or the much more complex voter–party linkages in the postindustrial society of the “new partisan theory.”

Toward an agency-based approach: Putting party actors center stage

These considerations lead to the question how a foundation of partisan differences could look like that does not build on the preferences of voters only. Building on Strøm’s seminal article (Strøm, 1990), we elaborate on two alternative—and possibly complementary—foundations of how an agency-based theory of partisan differences in public policies can be explained: (1) party members and (2) party elites.³

Party members and partisan differences

If party positions are not driven by who votes for a party, they can come from within the parties. In this respect, it can be helpful to see parties as “groupings of people with similar beliefs, attitudes, and values” (Ware, 1996: 4). So if party members hold different preferences, values or ideas about how certain policy goals can be attained, these two parties should advocate different policies. The literature on party membership provides some evidence on which such a view can be based.

First of all, according to the “general incentives model” (GIM) (Seyd and Whiteley, 2002; Whiteley et al., 1994), policy reasons (collective outcome benefits) are among the most important motives for people to join a party. Hence, although not all policy preferences of an individual party member will be congruent with the respective position of her party, it should at least be the case for the issue the person cares about most. While we should therefore observe somewhat diverging programmatic preferences among the members, the initial decision to join a party should be driven by programmatic agreement with the party in the issue area that they deem most important. Consequently, programmatic disagreement is very likely to be larger between parties than within each of them. This leads, on aggregate, to distinct party positions depending on the party members’ policy preferences.

Second, even career-oriented party members (“careerists” in Panebianco’s (1988: 25–26) terms), who join a party for “selective outcome benefits” according to the GIM model, can be expected to support these policy positions. While these people might have no specific policy

preferences or even preferences that contradict the position of the party they join, these careerists will also develop a programmatic stance toward policy issues that is close to the party program. This is mainly due to well-known psychological processes that are at work in the socialization process in small groups leading to the homogenization of attitudes (Laumann, 1989; Van Avermaet, 2002)—and even careerists will (have to) participate in intraparty discussion about policies where such homogenization occurs. Moreover, as the development of party positions can be expected to take the party's previous policy position as the starting point and as many of the people who were involved in adopting this policy stance will also have a say in its next revision, huge departures from the original position are unlikely unless a policy position has failed to reach its goals or led to electoral disaster. Even party members who have no or dissenting opinions in the policy field will have to share this starting point if they do not want to be seen as incompetent or disloyal by other members of the party, which will hurt their party career. Finally, to further one's career, it should also be advisable not to severely depart from the agreed party stance. Thus, party members who have joined to advance their career are particularly likely to accept and defend the general party line.

From this view of parties as groupings of people with similar beliefs, attitudes, and values, it is only a small step toward partisan effects, because parties can be expected to pursue policies that are in accordance with the beliefs, preferences, and values of their members. Generally, empirical research teaches us that there often is “substantive and ideological consensus within parties” (Van Holsteyn et al., 2017: 479) and party leaders even seem to hold—in some contexts—more radical positions than voters and members (Narud and Skare, 1999). More importantly, research indicates that party leaders are *not* detached from the rank-and-file and do indeed hold distinct policy positions that seem, on average, even to be closer to their members than to their followers (Norris, 1995: 43). This can also be explained by the selection processes of party leaders which may affect the linkage between members and elites (Rahat and Hazan, 2001).

Admittedly, there should be some variation between parties. For instance, there might be some differences regarding the programmatic flexibility of a party depending on whether most members are programmatic “believers” or whether the majority of members can be regarded as “careerists,” with the latter party programmatically probably more flexible than the former. Moreover, party organization matters. Party elites of “activist-dominated parties” can be expected to follow their members more closely than those of “leadership-dominated parties” (Schumacher et al., 2013), because the former are characterized by a strong link between party leaders and party members and party leaders are mere agents of their party members. In contrast, the ideas, values, and preferences of members

might matter substantially less in leadership-dominated parties which are “characterized by a limited number of internal veto players and a concentration of power among a select group of party leaders” (Schumacher et al. 2013: 464).

Rather, it is party leaders who could make a difference here, and it is to them that we now turn.

Party elites and partisan differences

Public policy scholars have shown convincingly that political elites are not mere transmitters of voter preferences into policies but that they also may have policy preferences on their own. “Conviction politicians” such as Margaret Thatcher in relation to economic policies (Sykes, 2000) or Angela Merkel in her decisions about migration policies (Helms et al., 2019) are cases in point. Even individual ministers have been found to affect certain policies decisively. This is true for the British Home Secretary David Blunkett in penal policies (Staff, 2018; Wenzelburger and Staff, 2017), or the German family minister Ursula von der Leyen, who was as instrumental for the transformation of German family policy as was minister of social affairs Franz Müntefering for the increase in the statutory pension age (Zohlnhöfer, 2010). Hence, differences in policy outcomes may reflect the very basic conviction of a political actor about a certain issue at stake.

In order for partisan differences to manifest themselves, however, these preferences of political actors have to follow partisan lines. Again, the argument on political socialization and party choice is crucial in this respect. If the decision to join a party is made on the basis of policy congruence in the first place and if—even for careerists—a socialization process takes place within the party, which homogenizes the views, norms, and values of the party members, those policy-makers who will reach office at a certain point in time can be expected to have at least similar views as their party on many core issues.⁴

One additional aspect deserves reflection in this regard: Time and information overload. Following the work of Jones and Baumgartner (2005) on information processing, political elites are far from being rational decision-makers who have the time to think soberly about what decision would please their core voters—partly because they simply have to deal with too much information (see Walgrave et al., 2013: 22). This explains why political actors often resort to simple heuristics, such as their core beliefs, to decide about political problems (Wenzelburger et al., 2019). Empirical evidence on the use of such heuristics by political actors is not overwhelming, but steadily increasing (Vis, 2018), and well rooted in the psychological literature (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). Taken together, there are good reasons to believe that elites do not act as instrumental agents of the voters, but that they indeed hold preferences and resort to them when they take decisions. As

Table 1. Hypotheses and empirical implications of the two approaches.

“New partisan theory”	Agency-based approach
<i>Core hypothesis</i>	
The more the class composition of parties differs, the more their programmatic positions and their policies differ.	Parties whose members and elites have different core ideologies advocate different policy positions and pursue different policies.
<i>Possible empirical implications</i>	
Policy preferences of individuals differ according to their occupational position.	Citizens join their party primarily because they agree with that party’s core values.
The occupational position of an individual determines her voting behavior.	Party members align their positions over time to those of their fellow partisans/the official party position.
The class composition of parties’ electorates differ systematically.	Members of parliament of a party vote together even when the whip is off.
Parties’ policies mirror the preferences of the classes that vote for them rather than the preferences of the median voter.	The less party competition constrains a party (i.e. no close forthcoming elections, salience low, niche party etc.), the more it will pursue policies that are congruent with its core values.

the preferences have been formed by their socialization in a political party, partisan differences in public policy outputs are the consequence.

Partisan differences and electoral politics in the agency-based approach

As indicated before, our argument does not mean that voters do not matter for what parties say and do. Rather, we maintain that many of the ideas parties offer to voters and try to implement in government come from inside the parties, are adaptations of previous positions held by the parties, and reflect the ideas of party leaders, the activists, or even the rank-and-file. Nonetheless, parties are perfectly aware of the fact that they will not be able to get these ideas adopted if they do not win elections and get into government. Therefore, while they may start out from their policy ideas, many of these ideas will still be affected by the need to court voters to win votes or to convince other parties to form coalitions.

Fortunately, the literature on the policy effects of party competition allows us to specify, under what conditions policy-seeking and agency are more or less relevant. First, it seems that parties are more probable to follow their own ideas, if they are quite certain that they will remain in government after the next election, while high electoral uncertainty necessitates accommodating the median voter (Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2008; Zohlnhöfer and Bandau 2020). Second, electoral competition will likely press parties to follow voter preferences rather than their ideology in highly salient issue areas (Lax and Phillips, 2009; Soroka and Wlezien, 2010). Third, mainstream parties should follow the median voter more willingly, whereas niche parties, that are deemed to be more policy-oriented, narrower regarding the issues they care about and controlled by activists rather than the leadership, should react much less to public opinion (Adams et al., 2006; Bischof and Wagner, 2017; Spoon, 2011). Finally, the constellation of the party

system can make the loss of power of a specific party less likely (Green-Pedersen, 2001; Kitschelt, 2001). This, in turn, can make the pursuit of genuine party positions possible, as parties are somewhat detached from party competition.

So, the overall argument of the agency-based approach to partisan differences can be summarized as follows: Rather than taking up the preferences of their voters and turning them into public policies, as the “new partisan theory” would suggest, we maintain that parties generate policy ideas themselves, which they then adapt to the needs of electoral competition.

Empirical illustrations of the agency-based approach

To evaluate the two competing theoretical accounts for the occurrence of partisan differences, it is important to look out for pieces of empirical evidence that may (or may not) support the “new partisan theory” or the agency-based approach presented here. To this end, this section derives some observable implications from each model before we give some empirical illustrations showing that there is evidence corroborating the agency-based approach.

Table 1 summarizes the main theoretical claims of the two approaches discussed above. The main claim of the “new partisan theory” is that partisan effects are conditional upon the composition of competing parties’ electorates, while the agency-based approach expects parties to make a difference irrespective of the composition of their electorates, but depending on the ideology of party members and party elites as well as the constellation of party competition. From these core hypotheses, a number of possible observable implications follow which have to be seen more as ways to empirically assess the plausibility of the agency-based approach than predictions of a fully fledged model.

A systematic empirical analysis of any one (let alone all) of the above propositions is beyond the scope of this article and several aspects, especially on the “new partisan theory,” have already been discussed. Nonetheless, we will briefly present two kinds of evidence that provide some support for our agency-based model: Results from empirical studies on (1) the motives for joining a party, where we expect that agreement with the basic ideology or the wish to promote the party’s programmatic position should be among the answers party members give when inquired about the reasons for joining their party; and (2) evidence from studies on voting behavior of members of parliament in free votes, where we would expect that members of the same party should vote together because of their common values, even when they do not have to, that is, in free votes when the “whip is off”. We use studies from Germany and the United Kingdom to illustrate our arguments in two rather different political systems.

Motives for party membership

As indicated above, research on the motives of members to join a party are often embedded in the GIM (Whiteley et al., 1994), which differentiates between different general incentives to join a party. Most relevant for our argument here are “collective policy outcome incentives,” which are linked to a party member’s interest in furthering the political goals of a party. The empirical evidence on Germany and the United Kingdom strongly confirms our expectation that furthering programmatic goals are crucial motives to join a party.⁵ In Germany, two large studies⁶, conducted in 1998 (16,000 participants) and 2009 (17,000 participants), are instrumental. In 1998, the single most important motive to join was to promote a specific programmatic goal of the respective party, like “a just society” for social democrats or “Christian values” in the case of the Christian democrats. On average, 71% of respondents stated that this was an important reason for joining. This finding is clear corroboration for our expectation that beliefs and values matter for the decision to join a party, particularly as the next most often picked answer also falls in the same category of “collective incentives,” namely “to strengthen the impact of the party” (70%). In contrast, “selective outcome incentives” like the chance to acquire a party post or a public office were only relevant for 11% and 8% of respondents, while 22% named the influence of family and friends (all data taken from Klein, 2006: 50–51). The more recent study from 2009 mostly confirms these results: Again, “collective political incentives” are the most prominent motives for joining a party according to respondents while “selective outcome incentives” and the family are substantially less important (cf. Laux, 2011). What is more, party members who have joined the party due to collective political incentives are also significantly more likely to be active in their party (Spier, 2019, pp. 290–291).

Studies on the United Kingdom report similar findings. In a recent survey by Bale et al. (2018: 21), party members reported that policy-related issues were the most important reason why they joined the party in the first place (importance between 8 and 10 depending on the party on a 0–10 scale). Career reasons, instead, ranked very low (1 or 2, depending on party). This finding also holds in more advanced statistical analyses (Poletti et al., 2019) and corroborates earlier findings (Seyd and Whiteley, 2002; Whiteley et al., 1994; Whiteley et al., 2006). Hence, the empirical foundation for our first argument why partisan differences may stem from inside parties seems to be supported by the data.⁷

Free votes along party lines

The second piece of illustrative evidence relates to the question whether members of Parliament will vote along party lines even in cases when there is no whip. If they do so, this indicates that the party elites may actually be driven by common values—as proposed by our second argument developed above. Turning to the behavior of German MPs in free votes, the literature is comparatively limited. Ohmura (2014) provides a first overview over all 99 free votes in the Bundestag that took place between 1949 and 2013. While it is true that party discipline is lower in free votes (89.0%) than in all other roll-call votes (97.9%), these metrics still suggest that in almost 90% of cases (i.e. individual MPs’ votes in free votes), MPs voted along party lines even though they would not have needed to. This figure is all the more impressive as the sample includes cases like the law on the transfer of government and parliament from Bonn to Berlin, in which geography mostly determined MPs’ voting behavior (Ohmura, 2014: 11) and where we would have difficulty in hypothesizing party positions to begin with. Similarly, Engler and Dümig (2017), analyzing eight free votes between 1990 and 2015 that dealt with issues of morality via a series of regression analyses, found that “party affiliation proves to be the most important predictor of voting behaviour, even if personal characteristics and constituents’ preferences are taken into account” (Engler and Dümig, 2017: 564). Other studies, looking at behavior in free votes for individual pieces of legislation and controlling, among other things, for preferences of the MPs’ constituencies, corroborate these results (Arzheimer, 2015; Bauer-Blaschkowski and Mai, 2019: 238–251; Baumann et al., 2013, 2015).

For free votes in the United Kingdom, several researchers have also found that party membership seems to be a very good predictor of voting patterns in the House of Commons. Analyzing the 1979–1996 period, Cowley and Stuart (1997: 119), for example, find “that high levels of party discipline exist even when the whips are ‘off.’” Interestingly, the same authors also find that party membership dominated in the vote on the Human Fertilisation and

Embryology Bill, although that bill contained a substantial gender dimension (abortion). Nonetheless, “the gender dimension came a very poor second to the strength of party in determining the outcome of the vote,” according to Cowley and Stuart (2010: 181). Other authors concur (Plumb, 2014; Raymond and Overby, 2016; Raymond and Worth, 2017). Thus, also the results of studies on individual MPs’ voting behavior in free votes clearly are compatible with our argument about the relevance of intraparty actors. This interpretation is very much in line with what we theorized above on the possible reasons why the behavior of party elites may create partisan differences irrespective of the position of voters.

Conclusion

In this research note, we have offered an agency-based approach to the study of partisan politics. We argue that actors in the parties themselves—members as well as the party elite—are key for the development of party positions and the policies parties adopt in government. We have also presented some evidence from existing studies that is compatible with our expectations and that should provide some plausibility for our argument.

While we emphasize that beliefs and values of those agents who are actually in the parties must not be neglected, we do not deny the relevance of electoral politics. Rather, we argue that while many of the ideas parties offer to voters and try to implement in government come from within parties, parties are conscious of the limitations imposed on their policy-seeking behavior by electoral competition. Therefore, while they may start out from their policy ideas, some of these ideas will be shaped by the need to court voters or other parties to be able to form coalitions. Similarly, the room for party elites and party members to advocate and implement their preferred public policies may be constrained by features of party organization. Leadership-dominated parties may be more ready to sacrifice pet policy proposals to secure an electoral support coalition than parties dominated by activists. Finally, the core ideologies of party members and elites should be more important if new and complex issues have to be decided quickly, because uncertainty about what the support coalition thinks about these issues is high in such cases.

The ideas put forth here suggest that future research on the role of parties in policy-making should focus on two main issues. Empirically, it will be necessary to assess more systematically the observable implications of our model. That will entail a much stronger focus on intraparty decision-making than is currently the case. Conceptually, it will be necessary to define conditions under which our approach works best and under which the vote-seeking perspective of the “new partisan theory” is more successful in explaining partisan policy-making. The ideas set out in

this research note are only a first step and should be followed by more systematic accounts, which carve out the situations in which electoral coalitions are key considerations and when policy actors follow their own ideological core ideas or those of their party members.


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Notes

1. A prime example of black-boxing policy-seeking parties is the literature following the “thermostatic model” (Soroka and Wlezién, 2010; Wlezién, 1995), which considers a rather direct link between public opinion and policies and has “paid scant attention to the role of political parties” (Romeijn, 2018: 2).
2. Admittedly, policies can be affected by both partisan stance and median voter shifts, as evidenced by Hobolt and Klemmensen (2008) and Soroka and Wlezién (2010).
3. Our first point mainly refers to extra-parliamentary party organizations, whereas the argument on elites is much more (but not exclusively) related to the professional and mostly parliamentary sphere (Heidar and Koole, 2003).
4. A similar argument explaining voting behavior of members of Parliament of different parties has been put forward by Krehbiel (1993).
5. The evidence has been collected using large surveys of party members. To what extent the respondents reveal their actual motives for membership or might hide them cannot be gauged from the data. Nevertheless, given the clear-cut findings from different countries and parties, we are rather confident that the reported differences reveal a somewhat systematic pattern.
6. A third study has been conducted in 2017 but results are not yet publicly available.
7. Very similar results have been found in surveys from other countries, too: see Elklit (2008) on Denmark, van Haute et al. (2013) on Belgium, or Heidar and Saglie (2003) on Norway.

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