Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fbep20

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Published online: 16 Aug 2013.

To cite this article: Stefaan Walgrave & Jonas Lefevere (2013) Ideology, Salience, and Complexity: Determinants of Policy Issue Incongruence between Voters and Parties, Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties, 23:4, 456-483, DOI: 10.1080/17457289.2013.810630

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2013.810630

Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties, 2013
Vol. 23, No. 4, 456–483, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2013.810630

Ideology, Salience, and Complexity: Determinants of Policy Issue Incongruence between Voters and Parties

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ABSTRACT *How come voters and their parties agree or disagree on policy issues? We claim that voter–party mismatches are due to a lack of information of voters regarding parties' positions. Three mechanisms determine levels of information: ideology, salience, and complexity. We test these ideas drawing on a large sample of policy statements (50) presented to voters and party leaders prior to regional elections in Belgium. Contrary to existing studies, we include predictors on all three levels: issue, voter, and party level. We find support for our claim. Major ideological divides such as the left–right divide yield useful information to the voters about where parties stand. Salience also generates information for voters, or makes information more accessible for voters, which decreases the odds that they have a different stance than their party. Our measures of complexity yielded the expected results too. When the task of voting is made more difficult, voters succeed less in voting for a party that matches their preferences.*

Democracy is based on representation. Representation implies policy congruence: the elected represent the ideas and opinions of the represented. This is not to say that policy congruence invariably leads to good representation, but it is a precondition. It is through elected representatives that public and policy are connected and that responsiveness of policies to public preferences is organized (Ström et al., 2003). In most democracies, representation is organized by political parties (Pierce, 1999). Parties present programs and candidates to voters and, when elected, carry out their program (Klingemann et al., 1994). This "party model" of representation – often called the "responsible" party model (Mair, 2008; Thomassen, 1994; Thomassen & Schmitt, 1997) – is based on these assumptions: (1) voters have policy preferences; (2) voters compare their own position with that of the parties and vote for a party because of its policy program; (3) voters vote for the party that (most) closely represents

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their policy preferences (Pierce, 1999: 9). This study deals with the third assumption. If voters do not vote for parties that represent their policy preferences, the voter–policy link is weakened and representation is hindered.

The study assesses to what extent voters' policy preferences *differ* from the party they vote for and to what extent they vote for parties that do not, or imperfectly, represent their policy stances. We study *the determinants of incongruence between the policy preferences of a voter and the policy position of her preferred party*. Note that most extant work on policy congruence has dealt with explaining why voters and parties agree, while we focus here on why they *dis*agree. We prefer to tackle disagreement – although it is just a matter of turning around the argument and the analyses – as we consider agreement between voters and their parties as the "normal" and normatively preferable situation; it is *in*congruence that should be explained and that is problematic, not congruence.

To tackle the question of what determines policy incongruence we use a theoretical framework consisting of five elements. First, laying bare the determinants of policy incongruence should start with the *voters*. Policy incongruence is best studied at the voter level. Whereas previous work has amply dealt with features of parties and party systems producing policy incongruence or not, none of the earlier policy (in)congruence studies included the level of the individual voter (for one notable exception see Steenbergen et al., 2007, who did incorporate voter features in their models but then only related to the issue of European integration). Yet, ultimately, it is the voter who evaluates the policy offers of parties on the electoral market and it is the voter who decides to vote for a party that does, or does not, match her preferences. Disaggregating the issue congruence puzzle to the individual voter level may be the best strategy to make progress in this field. Therefore, this study puts the voter center stage: congruence is about voters trying to match their specific issue preferences to parties. We consider parties as stable targets voters aim at.[1]

Second, voters often lack the necessary *information* about parties' precise stances to produce a congruent vote. Incongruent voting is thus the consequence of an information deficit. Of course, while this article deals with the information deficit, it should be mentioned that even with perfect information for all voters not all ballots would be congruent: voters may simply be unwilling to incorporate issue preference information into their votes. Our information argument holds that many policy options offered by parties are not clear to citizens. We do not claim that voters are "dumb" or that they vote "incorrectly" (Lau & Redlawsk, 1997) because they are indifferent and uniformed. We contend instead that it is sometimes difficult for voters to discern different parties' policy positions and we compare circumstances in which information is low with cases in which it is high.

Third, we argue that high or low information is generated by three theoretical factors: ideology, salience, and complexity. It is easier for voters to get correctly informed about issues that clearly map onto ideological divides, for example. Also, if issues are salient to voters, we expect them to have more information available about parties' position on these issues. Finally, some circumstances, for example

when many proximate parties compete, render voters' choice more complex and make it more difficult for them to get it right.

Fourth, we argue that ideology, salience, and complexity are affected by factors on different *levels*. In contrast to previous studies which all remained confined to a single level of analysis we propose that features of (1) issues, of (2) voters, and of (3) parties all have an effect on how well voters are informed about parties' policy stances. We unpack the policy incongruence problem by examining each individual issue–party–voter link separately and by including determinants on each of these three levels at the same time. In terms of the three factors leading to adequate information, ideology is a matter of voters – e.g. how ideologically consistent is a given voter? – but it also is a matter of issues – to what extent is a policy issue embedded in an ideological cleavage? Similarly, salience is a feature of a voter – does she considers the issue to be important or not? – but it also is a feature of a party – does the party consider the issue to be important or not? The same applies to complexity which can be a feature of a party – are there characteristics of the party that make its issue positions less transparent? – and of a party system – e.g. a crowded party system makes it more complex for a voter to get information of each party's position. Note that this study cannot directly deal with party system features since it focuses on a single nation only.

Finally, as policy incongruence is driven by information about party positions available to voters, it is not just affected by factors at different levels. It is also affected by *interactions* between those levels. In other words, issue-, voter-, and party-level factors generate information and these information effects at the different levels mutually reinforce each other. For example, when an issue is salient for a voter *and* salient for a party this combined saliency has an additional decreasing effect on the incongruence of that voter's vote.

Hence, departing from the choices voters face, our approach focuses on the information about party positions produced by ideology, salience, and complexity. It postulates that this is affected by features of issues, voters, and parties, and by their interaction. Such a disaggregated multi-level framework contributes to our knowledge about policy incongruence more generally; it provides the opportunity to answer a host of questions that have not been asked before. Most studies did not bother with individual voters. In fact, we hardly know why some voters elicit an incongruent vote while others do not. We simply had no analytical framework for studying individual policy incongruence. The basic question this study tackles – what are the determinants of incongruence of policy preferences between a voter and her preferred party? – has not been answered. Also, as previous work mostly dealt with a single level, it has not taken into account the existence of explananda on different levels and possible interactions between the levels have remained ignored entirely. In other words, we contribute by presenting a more encompassing, disaggregated, and multi-layered model of issue incongruence that allows us to tackle more precise, unanswered and, we think, important questions.

The data demands for testing a complex multi-layered explanatory model of issue incongruence are high. Therefore, we rely on unusually rich data that permit us to

connect parties with their voters on an extensive series of specific policy positions. Our evidence consists of 50 statements about concrete policy issues that have been answered by both voters *and* party leaders in Belgium. The scope of these data and the breadth of the issue positions measured here are unique, as far as we can tell. With these data, we can go beyond previous work that mainly drew on bivariate and aggregate-level analyses and estimate models testing, at the same time, competing hypotheses for party–voter incongruence situated on different levels of explanation.

We draw on the case of Belgium, more concretely its largest region Flanders, a small consociational democracy with a fragmented party system (Anckar, 2000). Its high party system fragmentation creates more theoretical possibilities for congruence than a two-party system as each party offers a different and specific policy package (Dalton, 1985: 287; Wessels & Schmitt, 2007). Conversely, multi-party systems increase the cost of selecting the best party. The presence of more parties implies that the parties are closer to each other and smaller differences exist between parties. In terms of our framework here, in such a system it is more difficult for voters to inform themselves about parties' exact positions and the differences between the parties. Fragmented party systems lead to an increase in information costs (see also: Hines, 2006; Lau et al., 2008a; Pierce, 1999; Wessels, 1999).

The Policy (In)Congruence Literature

Lau and Redlawsk (1997: 74–76) introduced the concept of "voting correctly" as the benchmark against which voters' performance can be compared. Voting correctly means voting for the party with issue positions that most closely match one's own (see for example: Hines, 2006; Koch, 2005; Lau & Redlawsk, 1997, 2007; Lau et al., 2005, 2008a, 2008b). While this work provides important insights into voter–party congruence, the dichotomous and aggregated way that it conceptualizes correct voting (i.e. no/yes) does not allow for the type of fine-grained assessment of agreement and disagreement between voters and their parties on the policy level proposed here. The voting correctly literature also wrestles with data deficiencies in that the measures it uses rely largely on voters' subjective *perceptions* of what the parties or candidates stand for rather than more objective evidence about their issue or ideological position.[2] Finally, the primary goal of this literature is to measure the aggregate degree of voting correctly on the system level, as a result there is less attention given to assessing which features of policies, voters, and parties affect voting correctly.

A second body of work relevant to understanding the question of voter–party policy incongruence is that which followed on from the defining US Congress study of Miller and Stokes (1963). This work comes under different names: "responsible party" (Pierce, 1999), "issue congruence" (Bingham-Powell, 2004), "issue representation" (Luna & Zechmeister, 2005), "opinion congruence" (Mattila & Raunio, 2006), or "policy representation" (Wessels, 1999). All these studies assess the absolute extent to which voters and parties agree on policy issues (for a good overview of

these studies see Bingham-Powell, 2004). The strength of this work is that it draws on direct party evidence such as surveys among party representatives (see, for example, Pierce, 1999) or party manifestos (see, for example, Schmitt & Binder, 2005) instead of relying on assessments of voters' perceptions of party positions (Koch, 2005). A second strength is that it mostly draws on matches between voters and parties regarding specific policy issues and not just on aggregate scores (for a comparison of the use of dimensions versus issue statements see Freire & Belchior, 2009).

Despite its clear contribution to understanding the connection between parties and their voters this literature faces a gap in the extent to which it incorporates the role of the individual voter. As a result the multi-layered nature of the determinants of policy incongruence is not fully unpacked and a concrete understanding of the issue–voter–party link is lost. In addition most studies rely on a very limited amount of policy issues – Holmberg's comparative study is the largest, incorporating 13 different issues (Holmberg, 2000). As a consequence, analyses mainly focus on the aggregated system level comparing pooled mass and elite positions across political systems. Studies, for instance, rely on the mean score of an electorate of a given party and compare this with the mean score of the MPs of that party (see, for example, Pierce, 1999; Wessels, 1999) failing to take into account what features of individual voters makes them differ from the party they vote for on which specific issues.

A final criticism of much of the preceding body of work is that most of the analyses examine the determinants of policy issue incongruence on a single level of explanation. Much of the focus is on political system variables, such as electoral rules and the size of the party system (see, for example, Dalton, 1985; Giger & Bernauer, 2009; Holmberg, 2000; Luna & Zechmeister, 2005; Thomassen, 1999; Wessels, 1999). Other studies have found differences across policy areas with some issues generating more incongruence than others (Holmberg, 2000; Mattila & Raunio, 2006; Miller & Stokes, 1963; Thomassen & Schmitt, 1999; Wessels, 1999). The reason for these differences between issues, however, has so far not been a subject of much theoretical speculation or systematically empirically analyzed. One rare study has focused on party characteristics in an attempt to account for differences in policy representation between parties (Dalton, 1985). Overall then we are not aware of any study to date that has combined different levels of explanation to examine voter–party linkage on the level of issues. More generally, most designs are not multivariate and do not allow different hypotheses to be tested at the same time.[3]

Information and the Role of Ideology, Salience, and Complexity: Hypotheses

Many voters are poorly informed about politics; they have little interest in politics nor do they have a good understanding of the policy stances of parties (Caplan, 2007). Hence, a key cause of incongruence between voters and their parties is the paucity of information about parties' positions at voters' disposal. Naturally, there are many non-policy related reasons bearing upon voters' choices – the image of the party, the quality of the party leader, habitual voting and so on – which may lead

to an incongruent vote as well. Also, it may be the case that voters are in fact aware of a party's position, but that they deliberately decide not to act upon that information either because they consider the incongruent issue to be of minor importance or they vote for the party for non-policy reasons. Still, we hold that an important cause of incongruence is lack of information.

We are not the first in this literature to put information center stage. Dalton (1985: 294) speaks about the "clarity" of the offer by parties (see also Freire & Belchior, 2009; Key, 1966). The more a party's position regarding an issue is transparent for a voter or the more a voter is aware of partisan differences on an issue (Carsey & Layman, 2006) the higher the chance that she will take this into account when making up her mind and the smaller the chance that she will vote for a party that does not match her issue preference (Carmines & Stimson, 1980). The basic logic goes back to the priming process. As the availability and accessibility of information increases, the chance that this information is used when decisions have to be made increases as well (Althaus & Kim, 2006; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

Three factors exert influence on the information about party positions available to voters: ideology, salience, and complexity. In many countries, and definitely in Belgium, ideology is the main organizing principle in the political arena: parties are essentially based on ideological homogeneity and ideological cleavages run through the population as well (De Winter et al., 2006). Therefore, in a general sense, we expect that voters with a clear ideological stance have less trouble finding the party they agree with most. We also expect that voters agree with parties more on issues that are firmly positioned on the main ideological cleavage. Not all issues are salient to all voters and to all parties; many issues are low on the list of priorities. Salience is the second driver of information acquisition. When voters consider an issue to be important, they will invest more in being informed about the issue and in getting to know the parties' stance on it. When parties particularly care about an issue their stances on that issue will be visible and voters will have an easier time learning what the party opts for. Third, some choice situations are more complex than other ones in the sense that they make acquiring information about parties' positions more difficult. When a lot of similar parties compete, or when a party's preferred position is concealed by its participation in a coalition government, voters find it harder to know what these parties stand for. We now translate these general expectations in specific hypotheses. Figure 1 summarizes our general argument and shows how theoretical factors, hypotheses, and levels of explanation are related.

Ideology: electoral and party competition in most countries is organized along the left–right ideological cleavage. Nevertheless, many other issues exist that are not connected to the left–right divide, especially in Western Europe (Kriesi et al., 2008). We expect parties' positions regarding typical left–right issues to be more transparent for voters. The left–right dimension is a central beacon to voters, guiding their choice (Huber & Powell, 1994). Even if they are not factually informed about a party's position regarding a specific left–right issue, most voters would still

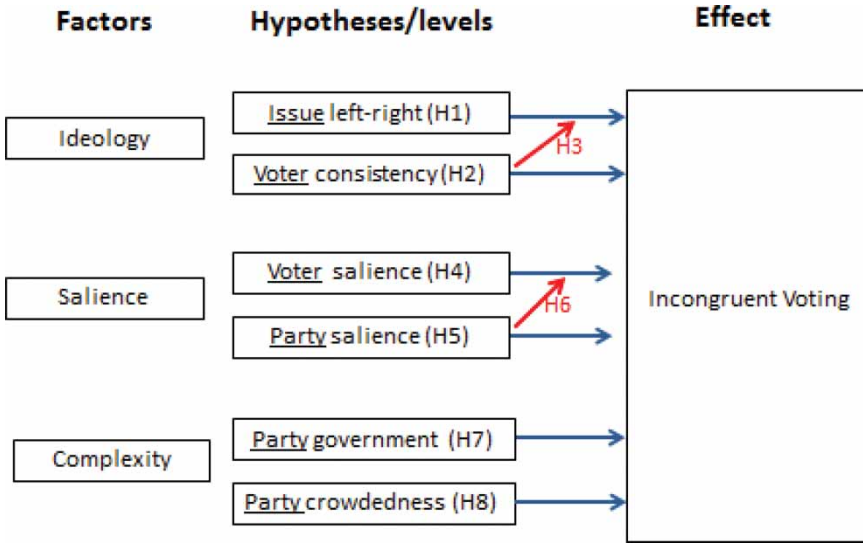

Figure 1. Explanatory model, factors, and hypotheses.

be able to make an informed guess as to where the party stands – not the least because the party system itself is structured along the left–right cleavage and parties mostly have unambiguous positions concerning left–right issues. Note that there are some indications that parties, over time, have been moving closer to each other on the left–right divide (see, for example, Pennings & Keman, 2003) but this does not change the fact that the left–right divide still is the main organizing principle of most party systems. Inter-party dissent increases the chance that voters are aware of parties' positions (Ray, 2003; Steenbergen et al., 2007). Moreover, left–right issues can be considered as being "easy" issues that can be understood by most voters, even the less involved and interested ones: issues correlated to the left–right dimension are long-lasting, symbolic, and deal with policy ends instead of complex means (Carmines & Stimson, 1980). Indeed, some of the existing policy representation studies found that issues linked to the left–right divide yield lower voter–party incongruence (Thomassen, 1999; Thomassen & Schmitt, 1999). Hence our first hypothesis: *On typical left–right issues there is less voter–party incongruence compared to issues that are not connected to the left–right cleavage (H1).*

Ideological features of voters as well may affect policy incongruence. The inconsistency of voters' belief systems is a classic finding in the study of voters (Converse, 1962). Voter inconsistency has consequences for voter–party policy incongruence and for representation (Alvarez & Brehm, 2002). Thomassen (1999: 36) states that since many voters are incoherent in their beliefs it is very difficult, if not impossible, for parties, who have more coherent ideas, to represent these voters. The flip side of this is that voters with diverging and contradictory preferences should be on average

more distant from their parties. The direction of causality may be turned upside down of course: voters that are distant from their party and that have a low or hesitant partisan identification may, as a consequence, be less willing or able to adopt their party's position and, as a further consequence, hold or develop more ideologically inconsistent beliefs (Carsey & Layman, 2006). Regardless of the mechanism producing the mismatch, we hypothesize that: *Ideologically inconsistent voters display more issue incongruence than ideologically consistent voters (H2).*

So far we have dealt with the main effects of ideology. Yet we believe that ideology effects interact and mutually reinforce each other. When an issue is clearly linked to the left–right cleavage *and* when voters have a consistent position on the left–right divide, these factors mutually reinforce one another and increase the information about a party's position on a specific issue for that specific voter. *The more an issue is a typical left–right issue and the more a voter is consistent (on the left–right axis), the smaller the chance of issue incongruence between that voter and her party on that issue (H3).*

Salience: specific segments of the public care more about some issues than others. These voters' vote is determined by those issues, whereas the same issues have less influence on the voting behavior of voters; this defines specific "issue publics" (Krosnick, 1990). The salience of issues for voters affects their ability to vote for a party that corresponds with their own policy preference on that salient issue. Voters are better informed about party positions when dealing with issues they care about (Iyengar et al., 2008; Krosnick, 1990). It does not bother voters to vote for a party that does not correspond with their positions when those positions are unimportant to them. Similarly, Carsey and Layman (2006) showed that only voters who care a lot about an issue tend to change their partisan identification when they perceive that their position on the issue is at odds with that of their party. *Voters that consider an issue to be unimportant are more incongruent with their party on that issue compared to voters who consider the issue to be important (H4).*

Party features as well may cause confusion for voters as to what position a party takes. For voters, the "issue ownership" of parties is one of the beacons to distinguish parties from each other (Petrocik, 1989). Some parties are associated with some issues and are considered to be best placed to deal with the issue. Issue ownership is the result of a history of attention and innovation on the issue (Walgrave et al., 2012). Parties become owners of an issue because the issue is salient to the party; it gets a lot of attention in the party manifesto and in the party's own communication (Walgrave & De Swert, 2007). Voters may not know what parties think about many issues, but we expect them to be on average better informed about a party's stance on the issues they associate that party with. A similar logic has been substantiated by Ray (2003) who found that when parties care a lot about an issue (European integration) chances increase that their electorate shares their position on the issue (see also Steenbergen et al., 2007). *Parties are less incongruent with their electorate on issues that are salient to them (that they own) compared to issues that are less salient to them (H5).*

For salience, we also expect an interaction between factors at the different levels. When an issue is salient to a party (owned), this means that the issue is very important

for that party *and* for its voters (Walgrave & De Swert, 2007). Therefore we hypothesize that both factors – salience at the voter level and salience at the party level – reinforce each other and that they, together, generate more information for a voter as to where a party stands on the issue. *The more a voter cares about an issue and the more her party cares about the issue (is issue-owner), the smaller the chance of issue incongruence between that party and that voter on that issue (H6).*

Complexity: the voter's task of ensuring they are informed about parties' positions is a more complex one for some parties than others. As a starting point we expect there to be differences in this regard between opposition and government parties. Although the government may in general be more successful in gaining the attention of the media than the opposition, this is focused largely on individual cabinet ministers rather than the government parties themselves (De Swert, 2011; Midtbø, 2011). Thus, while the official issue positions of the government as a whole may be more widely communicated this does not mean the positions of the individual governing parties are made clearer. Indeed they are actually more likely to be lost in the government amalgam. Aside from the fact that government parties tend to be larger and more centrist, being in government and particularly in coalition arrangement as in Belgium, generally entails the loss of ideological edge and profile. Compromises must be made and stances are watered down (Blais & Bodet, 2006). This centrist and accommodating tendency leads to more confusion for voters. It becomes unclear what a government party stands for and what the differences are with the other government parties. In short: *Incumbent parties in a coalition government have a more incongruent electorate compared to opposition parties (H7).*

Another complexity factor relates to the fact that a larger choice set creates a more complex decision task and thus leads to more voter–party incongruence. Thus the larger the number of proximate parties a voter can choose from, the more difficult her task becomes and the higher the chances are of her voting for a party that is incongruent on any issue. Of course a close proximity between multiple parties with a similar ideology might lead to greater efforts by voters who are close to these parties to disentangle the precise offer of these parties. However, on balance we expect a stronger effect of any increase in complexity in vote choice to be greater voter confusion and the rise of incongruent voting, rather than a possible countervailing effect of a more intense search for information among the voters. Since the Flemish party system was particularly crowded at the right-hand side of the political spectrum (VLD, N-VA, Vlaams Belang, LDD) during the 2009 elections compared with the left side (Groen! and Sp.a) we, therefore, expect higher levels of incongruence among right-wing parties' electorates. To put this more formally we hypothesize that *the larger the number of ideologically proximate parties, the higher the chance that those parties will have incongruent voters (H8).*

Data and Methods

Our evidence consists of detailed data on issue positions of voters and parties in Flanders, the largest region in Belgium. National and regional elections in Belgium share

many features: the parties in regional and federal elections are identical because the party systems are de facto separated along linguistic lines (Billiet et al., 2006). As a result regional elections constitute first-order elections in that the media give equal amounts of attention to the regional campaign as to the national campaign (Van Aelst & Lefevere, 2012). In addition, most issues are similar for regional and national elections – a possible exception is the linguistic issue which may matter more in the national elections.

The issue positions among voters were measured two months prior to the regional elections of 2009 in an online survey performed by iVox. Respondents were selected from the available iVox online panel of respondents, which has over 100,000 respondents that participate in all kinds of surveys, both political and non-political. Respondents are contacted with requests to participate in surveys and are free to either participate or refrain from doing so. Depending on the survey, incentives (e.g. movie tickets) are provided to increase response rates. To avoid respondents being contacted and surveyed too often, the panel is monitored and survey participation of respondents tracked.

Between April 4 and April 14, 2009, a stratified sample of respondents was contacted to obtain a quota sample that has similar demographic features as the Flemish voting population. A total of 4,623 respondents was contacted; from these, 1,000 respondents participated resulting in a response rate of 22%. The final quota sample was similar to the voting population on three variables: age, gender, and level of education. While selection from an online panel is less ideal than probability samples, the short time span in which data had to be collected necessitated this method. The alternative for timely data collection, telephone surveying, faces problems of non-response due to the rise of cell phone use. As a result, web surveys are increasingly used as an alternative method for recruiting and polling respondents (Strabac & Aalberg, 2011). Of course online surveys face their own problems of coverage and representativeness and while Flanders has a relatively high level of Internet diffusion within the population, a digital divide does exist between younger and older people (Moreas, 2007). In addition online surveys also tend to over-represent the higher educated and those who have more interest in politics. These two variables are expected to be linked with levels of policy incongruence and so in addition to using a stratified sample we include controls for political sophistication in our models.

The survey itself involved respondents being asked to respond to a series of 50 statements on policy issues. The statements were presented in a simple manner and related to concrete policies rather than abstract ideas. Examples of the types of statements offered include: "Childcare should be free of cost for the parents"; "The maximum speed on the Brussels' ring road should be limited to 100 km/hour"; "Rules for the export of weaponry should be more strict." A complete list of the issue statements can be found in Appendix II. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement (or did not have an opinion) and not asked to indicate their level of (dis)agreement with the statement. The survey also measured individual socio-demographic characteristics and a range of political

attitudes and behaviors. The crucial variable linking voters to a party was measured as vote intention – the party the voter declared they planned to vote for in the upcoming elections.

To gauge incongruent voting, we have identical issue position information about the Belgian (Flemish) political parties. At about the same time when the population was surveyed all Belgian parties made their official position to the same statements known to the authors. The authors of this article were producing a so-called Voting Aid Application (VAA); that is an online system that helps people with making their choice (Walgrave et al., 2008). The party leaders, together with their advisors, answered the same statements and decided on parties' positions on each of them. We can assume that the recorded party positions capture the real party stances (maybe even more so than the formal party manifestos); the positions they took in the VAA were largely publicized and discussed in the mass media. Our party data are unique since they are not based on averages of positions of different party elites as is common practice in policy incongruence studies; our measures are based on a single, authoritative, binding, and public statement of the party leader.

There are many parties in Flanders. Since we do not have enough voters for the small parties in our dataset, we limit our analyses here to the seven main parties in the Belgian (Flemish) party system: CD&V (christian-democrats), VLD (liberals), Sp.a (socialists), Vlaams Belang (populist-right), Groen! (greens), N-VA (Flemish nationalists), and LDD (right-wing liberals). This reduces the number of respondents in our sample to 760 when we take non-response on individual survey items into account.

To what extent can the 50 policy issue statements be regarded as a representative and valid sample of all possible policy issue statements? We cannot definitely prove that this is the case. In most policy representation studies the question of the representativeness of the sample of policy issues is not even raised. Nevertheless, we are fairly confident that our batch of statements grasps a good deal of party positions. First, we have a large amount of statements per party, since each party had to provide an answer to the 50 issue statements. This increases the reliability of our measure. Second, the statements have been carefully selected to map to important policy domains ensuring that no major domain is ignored and some important domains are covered by several statements. Third, the statements attempt to grasp actual and current debates in the run-up to the 2009 election. They include many issues that have been widely discussed in the media and should therefore be considered as issues that matter. Fourth, and most importantly, the statements have been formulated in such a way so as to maximize differences between parties. They do not relate to valence issues but to issues on which parties adopted clear and diverging policy positions. This increases the chance that we are dealing with real party positions and ideologies.

Given that our data were collected two months *prior* to the 2009 elections in Belgium, our analysis captures the levels of incongruence between voters and parties at a fairly early stage in the process. We would expect, therefore, to record somewhat higher levels of incongruence at this point compared to election day

itself. Two months before the elections public attention to politics is quite low and while the elections were receiving some coverage in the media already,[4] voters were less likely to be aware of the parties' issue positions than later in the campaign. Also, voters still had time to switch their support to another party than the one they initially planned voting for (for discussion of vote shifts during the 2009 Belgian campaign see Walgrave et al., 2010). Since our concern here is with those factors that increase or decrease the odds of incongruence between voters and their parties rather than the absolute levels of incongruence we do not see this potential overestimation as fatal to the analysis however. The factors determining (in)congruence we contend can reasonably be assumed to remain constant across the course of the campaign.

For the analysis itself we use logistic multi-level modelling with a dichotomous agreement–disagreement variable as the dependent variable. This variable indicates whether a given voter, on a given issue, agrees (0) or disagrees (1) with the position of the party she intends to vote for. In other words, we measure, given a certain vote, whether a voter's issue position is incongruent with her party or not. This design means that we do not examine incongruence in terms of the distance between a given voter and her party on a certain dimension such as left–right placement as is common in proximity voting studies. The analysis here is situated instead on the level of specific issues which gives us a much fuller picture of the scale of party–voter incongruence. We do, however, incorporate the dimensionality of voting and party competition to some extent by including the left–right dimension as an independent variable in the models. While this disaggregation may hide some commonality among issues and patterns of higher or lower incongruence, other than left–right we did not at this stage have strong theoretical expectations about the underlying connections and dimensionality of the issue statements fielded.

Technically, we draw on a stacked dataset with issue–voter–party combinations as the units of analysis. The different explanatory variables are theoretically considered as being situated on different levels – although statistically we cannot add a separate level for the party level variables: ideally, we would include two random intercepts in the statistical model – one for each respondent, and one for each party. However, due to data limitations discussed below only a random intercept for each respondent is included. Each individual is represented in the dataset by 50 statements. Thus, statements ($N = 50$) are embedded in individuals ($N = 760$) who are embedded in parties ($N = 7$). The independent variables are situated on these three levels.

We provide a brief discussion of the various independent variables here, and the full operationalization of the variables can be found in Appendix I. At the statement level, *left–right policy issue* captures the extent to which a statement maps onto the left–right divide. We adopted a somewhat novel approach to the measurement of this variable that involved the expert judgments of a panel of 13 political scientists. We expand on this briefly below with fuller details supplied in the Appendix. Essentially it involved each member of the panel scoring the series of statements as a left–right policy statement or not (i.e. a score of 1 or 0). Experts were asked to decide using the following definition for guidance in assigning statements to the two ends of the

spectrum – *"Right" strives for freedom and as little state interference in the social-economic life as possible, "left" strives for equality and deems state interference in the social-economic life necessary*. This produced a measure that ranged from zero (no expert considered it a left–right issue) to a possible maximum of 13 (all experts considered it a left–right issue). As Appendix II shows, there was considerable degree of variance on this measure with seven statements scoring the maximum and three scoring zero.

At the voter level, *voter consistency* is a scale from 0 to 7 which denotes the consistency of that voter in choosing either left- or right-wing positions. *Voter issue salience* is coded as 0 if a statement does not deal with an issue that was salient for the voter, and 1 if it does deal with a salient issue for that voter. At the party level *party issue ownership* measures the extent to which the issue from the statement is associated with the party that the respondent prefers. This measure is based on survey data, and contains the percentage of Flemish voters that spontaneously associate the party with the various issues contained in the statements (see Appendix). *Party in government* is coded as 1 if the party was in government, 0 if it was in opposition. Finally, *Party left–right* ranks the parties on the left–right dimension on an 11-point scale. The stacking strategy increases the total amount of observations to 38,000. Table 1 shows the structure of the stacked dataset, using example data: for simplicity we present data on three respondents for three statements. The actual data are identical, except it has data for 760 respondents and 50 statements.

As Table 1 shows, the stacked dataset has multiple lines per respondent – one per statement to be exact. The first line for each respondent represents the first statement, the second line the second statement, and so on. Our dependent variable (incongruence) varies at this lowest level: respondent 1 can be incongruent (1) with his preferred party on statement 1, but congruent (0) with his preferred party on statement 2, and so on. However, not all variables vary on the lowest level. Education, for example, is constant for each respondent: respondent 1 is higher educated so this

Table 1. Example of stacked dataset with issue–voter–party combinations as unit of analysis

Respondent	Statement	Incongruence (dependent)	Preferred party	Issue divisive	Education	Party in government
Respondent 1	1	1	1	Yes	High	Opposition
Respondent 1	2	0	1	No	High	Opposition
Respondent 1	3	0	1	Yes	High	Opposition
Respondent 2	1	0	6	Yes	Low	Government
Respondent 2	2	1	6	No	Low	Government
Respondent 2	3	1	6	Yes	Low	Government
Respondent 3	1	0	6	Yes	Middle	Government
Respondent 3	2	0	6	No	Middle	Government
Respondent 3	3	1	6	Yes	Middle	Government

variable gets the same value for each of the lines representing respondent 1. Furthermore, since respondents can have the same preferred party, this introduces an even broader cluster: that of parties. Respondents 2 and 3 both vote for party number 6. Consequently, the values of the party level variable "Party in government" is constant for all the lines for *both* respondents.

Because variables are constant within either respondents or parties, multi-level models are required to obtain correct estimates, especially at the respondent level (level 2). For example, a logistic regression without adjustments would estimate the standard error for education based on the amount of *cases* not *respondents*. A random intercept logistic regression model is therefore needed (Steenbergen & Jones, 2002).

The first level of analysis is the policy issue level (level 1). We add a random intercept to the model to assess whether part of the variance in the error term can be explained by the respondent level (level 2). Though we have variables at the party level we do not include a random intercept parameter for party; with only seven parties, it is impossible to estimate a model that includes two random intercepts. However, we did run two sets of additional models: first, we included a set of dummies for each party which approximates including a random intercept for each party – though it does not allow us to correct the standard errors on the estimates. Furthermore, we also estimated the models including each party level variable separately to test the robustness of the results. Results of these analyses are reported in Appendix III. The models were estimated assuming an unstructured covariance structure. We interpret the results below as being situated on different levels: an issue level, a voter level, and a party level.

Results

We include socio-demographic variables (gender, age, and education) in the models to take out the variance which is due to the differential composition of the party electorates. Some parties may, for example, have a more highly educated electorate which may affect the incongruence of their voters. We also add political interest to account for the fact that more interested voters are more likely to be knowledgeable on party positions and choose a party accordingly (Carmines & Stimson, 1980; Steenbergen et al., 2007). Finally we add a further control variable (Issue position popularity) that indicates the number of parties (0–8) that follow the majority opinion of the electorate on a given statement. This is designed to account for the likelihood that all things being equal, a given voter will be in agreement or congruent with any party on a given issue, even if he or she were deciding randomly. In operational terms the variable was measured such that if statement A is agreed to by 50% or more of voters and six parties agree with the statement, then issue position popularity takes on the value of six. If statement A is agreed to by less than 50% of voters it takes on a value of two, since two out of the eight parties disagree with the majority of voters.

Before we proceed with discussing the results of the analyses, the low N problem at the party level is worth some consideration. We have three hypotheses (H5, H7, H8)

at the party level and only seven observations at that level. To test whether the findings below are robust, we ran all analyses while including a single party level variable only, and a separate set of models including dummy variables for each party (reported in Appendix III). As the results show, results are mostly consistent except for one of the party variables. When discussing the results we take these findings into account.

We estimate two models: a first with main effects only, a second with the two hypothesized interaction terms. Model 1 shows that age and gender do not capture much of the variation in incongruence. Level of education and especially interest

Table 2. Logistic models predicting issue incongruence between respondent and current preferred party per issue. Multi-level statistical estimates. Table entries are coefficient estimates with standard errors in parentheses.*= p ≤ 0.05 ** = p ≤ 0.01 *** = p ≤ 0.001.

Fixed part		Model 1			Model 2		
Controls							
	Education (ref: lower)						
	- *High school*	−0.12	(0.06)	*	−0.12	(0.06)	*
	- *Higher education*	−0.15	(0.06)	*	−0.15	(0.06)	*
	Age (ref: young)						
	- *Middle aged*	−0.05	(0.09)		−0.05	(0.09)	
	- *Older*	−0.09	(0.10)		−0.09	(0.10)	
	Gender (female)	0.01	(0.03)		0.01	(0.03)	
	Political interest	−0.03	(0.01)	***	−0.03	(0.01)	***
	Issue position popularity	−0.13	(0.01)	***	−0.13	(0.01)	***
Ideology							
	Issue left–right (H1)	0.02	(0.00)	***	0.03	(0.00)	***
	Voter consistency (H2)	−0.03	(0.01)	**	0.01	(0.01)	
Issue left-right *	Voter consistency (H3)				−0.01	(0.00)	**
Salience							
	Voter salience (H4)	−0.06	(0.02)	**	0.01	(0.03)	
	Party salience (H5)	−0.01	(0.00)	***	−0.01	(0.00)	***
Voter salience *	Party salience (H6)				−0.01	(0.00)	**
Complexity							
	Party in government (H7)	0.16	(0.03)	***	0.16	(0.03)	***
	Party crowdedness (H8)	0.38	(0.07)	***	0.36	(0.07)	***
	Intercept	0.87	(0.13)	***	0.76	(0.13)	***
Random part							
	Level 2 variance	0.53	(0.02)		0.53	(0.02)	
Log likelihood		−25876.766			−25866.961		
N_i / N_j		760/38000			760/38000		

in politics have a significant effect on incongruence in that the more highly educated and more politically interested respondents are less likely to be incongruent with their preferred party. Issue position popularity is a very powerful predictor. When an issue position is popular among both the electorate and the parties, the probabilities of incongruence are significantly lower. This is to be expected: the more parties agree with the dominant public opinion on a statement, the smaller the overall odds of incongruence.

Our first ideology hypothesis contended that on issues that are clearly situated on the left–right ideological divide we would find less incongruence. This is not confirmed however. The parameter estimate is significant, but positive, meaning that as statements become more clearly situated on the left–right cleavage, voters tend to disagree more with their party. This suggests that, in general and particularly in the run-up to these specific elections, the Belgian electorate's choices are largely not driven by left–right voting motives but that other issues or motives prevail. This is a somewhat surprising finding given that previous studies have found quite strong links between left–right issues and voter choices. Our disaggregated issue-based analyses indicate otherwise. Following directly on from these findings, however, we see that H2 gains strong support. Voters that are more inconsistent in their left–right placement are more likely to be incongruent with their party of choice on the issues we measure here. In other words when voters are clearly situated on one side of the main political fault line, they appear to be able to choose parties that are more congruent with their own views. When they are themselves not clearly situated on this line and "cherry pick" issues from left and right they cannot discriminate so well.

We probed these somewhat contradictory findings further with our third hypothesis which is tested in Model 2. Here we add an interaction effect between voters' ideological consistency and left–right position. The effect is strong and significant and in the expected direction (negative). The results show that on those statements that are not linked to the left–right divide at all, a completely inconsistent voter (scoring zero on the inconsistency scale) has a 45% chance of being incongruent with their party of choice while a completely consistent voter has a similar (42%) chance.[5] However, on those issue statements that correspond clearly to the left–right divide, the completely inconsistent voter has a 58% chance of being incongruent with his or her party while the probability of incongruence among the most internally consistent voters remains relatively low at 42%. These findings confirm our earlier suspicions that the lack of congruence between Belgian voters and their party choice on left–right issues is driven predominantly by the voters' lack of consistency in adopting a clear left–right position. The result is that they cannot then locate a party that really suits their preferences. Parties do not have the same luxury of picking and choosing their left–right issue positions and present a more consistent batch of policies to the electorate. For those voters who do strongly identify as clearly left or right, however, there is apparently much less of a problem in locating a party that matches their preferences. In short, H3 is confirmed and our findings help explain the unexpected results for H1. Ideological divides between parties are associated

with greater congruence to voter positions, but only when the voters are themselves constrained around that central cleavage.

Turning to the hypotheses related to the second factor affecting incongruence – salience – We find that at the voter level issue salience significantly lowers levels of incongruence and thus that H4 is supported. At the party level, the salience of the issue to the party (issue ownership) is also significant and negative, meaning that clear ownership of issues by parties provides information to voters which results in substantially decreasing incongruence. H5 is, therefore, confirmed. In Model 2 we interact both salience variables. The results confirm H6 in that the interaction term is negative and significant, meaning that when party ownership and voter salience match in that both are high then incongruence is lower, or conversely that congruence is increased. To make these findings clearer we calculated the predicted probability of incongruence between a party and a voter for those statements on issues that are *not* salient for the voter. We find that moving from the lowest to the highest amount of issue ownership only decreases incongruence from 51% to 34%. Conversely, for issues that are salient to the voter the same change in issue ownership results in an incongruence drop of 51% to 23%. Thus, when issues are salient for both voters *and* parties, it is clear that incongruence sees a substantial decline.

Turning to complexity as a cause of voter–party incongruence, we test our two complexity hypotheses (7 and 8) in Model 1. Hypothesis 7 is confirmed in that being a government or opposition party significantly affects incongruence in that government parties are more likely to be incongruent with their voters than opposition parties are. However, in absolute terms the effect is small, amounting to approximately a 1% probability change. Additional models reported in Appendix III suggest that the effect of being in government or opposition is less robust than is the case for the other party-level variables. Our final hypothesis is also confirmed. Parties on the more crowded right side of the ideological spectrum in Flanders are more incongruent with voters than those on the less densely populated left side. In more specific terms, holding constant other factors, the predicted incongruence of the electorate of the most right-wing party (50%) is 8% higher than the most left-wing party (42%). We interpret this finding as support for the more general argument that having a larger number of proximate parties competing for the vote increases the complexity of the vote choice and leads to greater incongruence. This means that the potentially more active search for information by voters who are confronted with several "possible" parties does not compensate for the higher complexity of the voting task.

Overall, therefore, our core argument that voter–party incongruence is determined by ideology, salience, and complexity is supported by evidence from the Belgian regional elections. Major ideological divides such as the left–right divide in Belgium yield useful information to the voters about where the parties stand. This works through both the ideological nature of the policy issue itself in terms of it being left or right, and also the voters' own capacity for holding ideologically consistent positions. When issues are ideological *and* the voters are ideologically consistent then incongruence strongly decreases. An issue's salience also serves to increase

congruence between voters and parties. If voters' attention is drawn to a policy issue then an incongruent vote becomes less likely. If issues are seen as salient for parties, that is if voters *consider* a party to care a lot about an issue, then congruence further increases. Our results further indicate that the two levels of salience interact and that issue salience at the party and voter level are mutually reinforcing. Finally, our two measures of complexity yielded the expected results too. When, for some reason, the task of voting is made more difficult because parties are close to each other or because parties' actual positions are more difficult to detect due to their being in government then voters succeed less in voting for a party that matches their preferences.

Conclusion

This article has used evidence about voters' and parties' positions on an extensive range of specific policy issues during the 2009 elections in Belgium to investigate the factors that account for voter–party incongruence. We found that ideology, salience, and complexity all determine levels of voter–party incongruence on policy issues. Our argument is that these factors serve to increase or decrease information for voters about parties' stances allowing them to more easily find the best match in policy terms or prompting them to adapt their own stances to accord better with their party of choice. The framework of ideology, salience, and complexity proves capable of accounting for a good deal of the variance observed in issue incongruence.

The study contributes to the literature by addressing the question of policy incongruence at the voter level for the first time. Since voters are the ones who vote, it makes sense to look at that level. Our results show that disaggregating the policy incongruence puzzle by focusing on the specific issue–voter–party link is a promising strategy. It permits incongruence scholars to tackle questions that have never been dealt with before. Added to that, we offered a theoretical framework centered around the idea of voter information as it is affected by ideology, salience, and complexity. The framework can organize thinking about policy incongruence at the individual level and it is able to generate testable hypotheses that can withstand rigorous empirical testing. Also, policy incongruence is affected by factors at different levels (here: issue, voter, and party), and these factors mutually reinforce each other in ways that make sense. Our study also contributes methodologically by the broadness of its evidence and multivariate multilevel approach. Most work in the policy congruence tradition going back to Miller and Stokes' study is bivariate in nature and did not present systematic tests for competing hypotheses nor did it incorporate different levels of analysis.

Our main conclusion is that lack of information is the cause of voter–party mismatches. When voters lack clear information about a party's position on political issues then policy representation is hampered and they vote for parties they do not agree with. The question then becomes where this "lack" of information comes from. Our approach implicitly suggests that parties are responsible for providing this information; the burden of representation is put on their shoulders. Indeed, parties, sometimes deliberately, may conceal their less popular positions while

highlighting their more popular positions (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Steenbergen & Scott, 2004). Because of internal division or because of strategic reasons parties may also be ambivalent regarding their exact position on an issue (Steenbergen et al., 2007) making their position more unclear for voters to grasp and harder to take into account when voting. Or, parties may simply not be good enough communicators, unable to bring their point of view across.

However, the opposite interpretation, shifting the burden to the voters, is at least equally plausible. The answer to the question where the "lack" of information for voters comes from, is then that there is not so much a problem with the availability of the information – the supply side of information is in good shape – but rather that the limited *uptake* of the available information by the voters is the problem. This interpretation holds that information is widely available but that many voters lack the motivation and capacity to pick up this information and/or they do not have willingness to act upon the available information. In fact, the study contains a number of indicators of this alternative interpretation. For example, the fact that voters' ideological inconsistency was found to be a determinant of incongruent voting points in that direction. Many voters are not ideologically consistent, have heterogeneous preferences, and are very hard to please. Their ideological incoherence due to ignorance and lack of political interest makes them "cherry pickers" that do not know what they want or, rather, what they want is impossible to get. Also, our finding that political interest and education level, two measures of political sophistication which we simply presented as control variables here, had a strong effect on policy incongruence points in the direction of voter deficiencies. To sum up: the representation failure becoming apparent in incongruent voting and the lack of information that is one of its drivers, is not just the consequence of parties communicating badly. It is at least as much a consequence of the low levels of awareness and lack of motivation on the voters' side.

How could research on policy incongruence be further developed? We analyzed the issue–voter–party match from the point of view of the voters. Party variables were included but were stable, so any strategic behavior they undertook affecting the voter–party match was not taken into account. It is obvious, however, that party behavior can directly or indirectly affect voter–party congruence. Parties may to some extent follow the electorate and adopt positions that please the majority of citizens. Such strategic moves may directly affect whether voters and parties match in their issue positions. Indirectly, parties can deliberately increase transparency for the voters but they can also do the opposite and try to avoid that voters get precise information about their stances. In other words, parties can strategically manipulate the salience and ideological framing of issues in order to aim for the level of policy incongruence that maximizes its vote share. In short, supply on the electoral market, and the changing offers made by parties play a role too. Future policy congruence studies may try to implement dynamic designs in which both voters and parties can change over time (e.g. Steenbergen et al., 2007). This will help to not only examine the determinants of voter–party incongruence but also its mechanisms.

Notes

1. To be sure: reality is much more complex. Parties are acting too. They try to attract an electorate: party leaders may shift their party's position according to their perception of the position of the electorate at large or of their own constituency. Conversely, voters' own issue positions are in flux as well. A major mechanism of voter–party alignment is the process of voters adjusting their own position to become more aligned with that of the party they vote for (Carsey & Layman, 2006). In this study we do not focus on the *dynamics* of voter–party incongruence, nor do we contend that it is parties that drive voters (or the other way around). By taking a snapshot of the incongruence between voters and their party at a given moment in time, we make abstraction of the mechanisms leading to policy incongruence and of the mutual over-time adjustments. We do not focus on the mechanisms but rather on the determinants of voter–party incongruence.
2. An exception here can be found in the experimental work of Lau and Redlawsk (1997).
3. For a rare exception see Giger and Bernauer (2009).
4. Based on a content analysis of newspaper coverage during the campaign (Lefevere, 2011). In April, 7% of the coverage of *De Standaard* (a quality newspaper) covered the elections compared to 14% in May. Hence, there was already some attention to the upcoming elections in April.
5. These are predicted probabilities keeping all other variables in the model at their mean or median value. For very consistent voters the predicted probability on left–right statements is actually slightly lower compared to non left–right statements, but the effect is statistically insignificant.

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Appendix I: Independent Variables

- *Education*: three categories: 1 = lower or no education, 2 = high school (partially and fully complete), and 3 = higher education.
- *Age*: three categories: 1 = young (15–20), 2 = middle aged (21–64), 3 = old (65 and up).
- *Sex*: 1 = man, 2 = woman.
- *Issue position popularity*: the amount of parties (0–8) that have the same opinion as the majority of respondents on a given statement.
- *Political interest*: 11-point scale with 0 signifying no interest in politics at all, 10 indicating exceptionally large interest in politics.
- *Left–right policy issue*: to determine the extent to which a specific statement deals with the left–right divide, we used the judgments of an expert panel of 13 political scientists. Each expert categorized the 50 statements as being left–right (1), or not (0). As noted in the main text our deciding criterion centered on whether a statement referred either positively or negatively to state intervention into the socio-economic lives of its citizens. These binary codings were summed and scores assigned from 0–13 to the 50 statements. A higher score indicated the issue was more strongly linked to the left–right continuum. As Appendix II shows there some clear agreement between experts on what constituted a core left–right issue with seven statements marked by everyone as a left–right statement (e.g. "Only for the lowest income groups, a tax reduction should be considered"). Other statements were considered by only half of the panel as a left–right statement (e.g. "High schools should be allowed to organize expensive field trips"). Use of expert panels in this manner is an appropriate measurement tool where one is dealing with ambivalent text which is the case here. Precedents can be found in the work of Young and Soroka (2012: 214–215) who use a panel of three coders to code tone in newspaper articles resulting in tone scores on a five-point scale. This is used to test the reliability of the automatic coding performed by computers of the same text. More generally the validity of the approach is underscored by recent debates in computational linguistics whereby differences across human coders are seen as important in capturing real variation, or a deeper structural ambiguity in the data (see, for example, Andreevskaia & Bergler, 2006). Here we employ Young and Soroka's voting procedure with the difference that we draw on scores of 13 experts, not three, and we use simple aggregate scores.
- *Voter issue salience*: the questionnaires contained questions regarding the importance (no-yes) of policy "domains." Policy issue statements were attributed to these policy domains and were coded with a dummy variable: "0" if the issue statement does not cover a policy domain that the respondent indicated was important in her vote choice, "1" if it does.
- *Voter consistency*: curvilinear scale from 0 to 7, with "7" indicating that a respondent's answers all went into the same direction on the seven most

clearly designated left–right policy issues (statements with number 7, 9, 32, 40, 41, 44, 45 either left or right; see above), and "0" indicating that the respondent answered 50% of her questions to the left, and 50% to the right.

- *Party issue ownership*: based on Belgian national election study 2009 (Partirep), the percent of respondents that spontaneously associated the party with the policy domain covered in a policy issue statement. For example, if 34% of voters associated social security with the socialist party, the policy issue statements covering that issue would get a value of "34" for respondents currently preferring the socialist party.
- *Party in government*: dummy variable that is "0" if the party was in the opposition on the government level for which elections were held, "1" if it was in government.
- *Party left–right*: scale that ranks the parties on a left–right dimension according to the mean left–right placement of their voters on an 11-point scale (Belgian national election study 2009 (Partirep)).

Appendix II: Issue Statements (to be made available via website)

Statement	Left–right (# of experts)
1. Parents of children who skip school often should be punished.	5
2. In grade school, it should be allowed that some courses are taught in French.	0
3. Teachers who work in difficult schools should get a financial bonus.	7
4. Too much attention for weaker groups in education brings down the overall quality.	10
5. High schools should be allowed to organize expensive field trips.	7
6. During registration, schools should always give children from the neighborhood priority, regardless of their origin.	6
7. The government should make childcare free of charge.	13
8. Getting rid of the waiting lists in the disabled sector is more important than lowering taxes.	12
9. The government should help people rent in the private sector, rather than build social housing.	13
10. There should be more detention centers for young offenders.	3
11. Isolation norms should become mandatory for older houses as well.	5
12. Slower driving because of smog alerts should be abolished.	5
13. Anyone who replaces a car that is older than ten years should get a bonus.	4
14. Bringing waste to the recycling site should be free of charge.	4
15. It should become easier to place a windmill in your garden.	4
16. The cabinets of Flemish ministers should be abolished.	2
17. The provincial government level should be abolished.	2
18. The Flemish and Federal elections should be held on the same day.	0
19. English should be recognized as an official language in Brussels.	0
20. The Flemish government should take steps toward Flemish independence.	1
21. Cultural projects with a low amount of visitors should receive less funding.	10
22. Farmers should be allowed to grow genetically modified organisms.	5
23. The speed limit on the Brussels highway around the city should be lowered to 65 miles an hour.	4
24. Allowing supertrucks on the road is a good idea.	3
25. De Lijn (public transportation) should be made free of charge for youngsters under 18.	10
26. If De Lijn (public transportation) strikes, a minimum service should be guaranteed.	6
27. An extra lane should be added to the busiest highways.	2
28. The VRT (public broadcaster) cannot broadcast any type of commercial.	7

(*Continued*)

Appendix II. (*Continued*)

Statement	Left–right (# of experts)
29. Before, during, and after children's programming there should be no commercials.	7
30. The government must subsidize the commercial broadcasters so they can make a youth journal.	10
31. The "Lange Wapper" bridge in Antwerp should be built as soon as possible.	1
32. Living in the city should be subsidized financially.	13
33. Plots of land that have been left as is for a long time, should be taxed.	10
34. It should be made easier to build large shopping malls.	8
35. Schools should require children to speak Dutch on the playground.	3
36. Civil servants should be allowed to wear a head scarf behind the counter.	5
37. People from Poland and Romania should have the right to work in Flanders.	5
38. Only those people who pass a test of integration can stay.	4
39. The Flemish budget can go negative to fight the crisis.	7
40. Lowering taxes is a priority.	13
41. Those who earn more must pay more for health insurance. Those who earn less must pay less.	13
42. The expansion of the harbor of Antwerp must not be constricted.	9
43. Economic growth around airports is more important than strict noise limitations.	11
44. The Flemish public companies should hire a minimum amount of disabled people.	13
45. Only for the lowest income groups, a tax reduction should be considered.	13
46. Flanders should increase its spending on development aid.	7
47. The rules for exporting weaponry should become stricter.	7
48. It should be possible to form a government coalition with Vlaams Belang.	1
49. Politicians should not be allowed to participate in television games.	2
50. Politicians that get elected on a list must take up their mandate.	1

Appendix III: Additional Models for Party Level Estimators

Results for models including party dummies (not reported)

Fixed part	Model 1			Model 2		
Controls						
Education (ref: lower)						
- *High school*	−0.10	(0.05)	+	−0.10	(0.05)	+
- *Higher education*	−0.14	(0.06)	*	−0.14	(0.06)	*
Age (ref: young)						
- *Middle aged*	−0.02	(0.09)		−0.02	(0.09)	
- *Older*	−0.06	(0.10)		−0.06	(0.10)	
Gender (female)	0.00	(0.03)		0.00	(0.03)	
Political interest	−0.03	(0.01)	***	−0.03	(0.01)	***
Issue position popularity	−0.13	(0.01)	***	−0.13	(0.01)	***
Ideology						
Issue left–right (H1)	0.02	(0.00)	***	0.03	(0.00)	***
Voter consistency (H2)	−0.02	(0.01)	**	0.01	(0.01)	
Issue left–right * Voter consistency (H3)				−0.01	(0.00)	**
Salience						
Voter salience (H4)	−0.06	(0.02)	**	0.00	(0.03)	
Party salience (H5)	−0.01	(0.00)	***	−0.01	(0.00)	***
Voter salience * Party salience (H6)				−0.01	(0.00)	**
Complexity						
Party in government (H7)	−0.06	(0.14)		−0.07	(0.15)	
Party crowdedness (H8)	−3.53	(1.88)	+	−3.65	(1.88)	+
Intercept	1.67	(0.40)	***	1.58	(0.40)	***
Random part						
Level 2 variance	0.49	(0.02)		0.50	(0.02)	
Log likelihood	−25838.265			−25829.032		
N_i / N_j	760/38000			760/38000		

Appendix III. (*Continued*)

Results for three models including the party estimators separately

Fixed part	Issue saliency			Government party			Ideological proximity		
Controls									
Education (ref: lower)									
- *High school*	−0.10	(0.06)	+	−0.10	(0.06)	+	−0.11	(0.06)	*
- *Higher education*	−0.13	(0.06)	*	−0.14	(0.06)	*	−0.14	(0.06)	*
Age (ref: young)									
- *Middle aged*	0.01	(0.09)		0.01	(0.09)		−0.03	(0.09)	
- *Older*	0.01	(0.10)		−0.01	(0.10)		−0.06	(0.10)	
Gender (female)	0.00	(0.03)		−0.01	(0.03)		0.01	(0.03)	
Political interest	−0.03	(0.01)	***	−0.03	(0.01)	***	−0.03	(0.01)	***
Issue position popularity	−0.13	(0.01)	***	−0.13	(0.01)	***	−0.13	(0.01)	***
Ideology									
Issue left–right (H1)	0.02	(0.00)	***	0.02	(0.00)	***	0.02	(0.00)	***
Voter consistency (H2)	−0.03	(0.01)	**	−0.03	(0.01)	**	−0.03	(0.01)	**
Salience									
Voter salience (H4)	−0.06	(0.02)	**	−0.08	(0.02)	***	−0.08	(0.02)	***
Party salience (H5)	−0.01	(0.00)	***						
Complexity									
Party in government (H7)				0.07	(0.03)	*			
Party crowdedness (H8)							0.39	(0.07)	***
Intercept	0.94	(0.13)	***	0.84	(0.13)	***	0.82	(0.13)	***
Random part									
Level 2 variance	0.54	(0.02)		0.53	(0.02)		0.53	(0.02)	
Log likelihood	−25898.392			−25935.136			−25921.28		
N_i / N_j	760/38000			760/38000			760/38000		