Party responsiveness to party voters and interest groups in a multidimensional policy space

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We contribute to the evolving literature on party responsiveness by taking a novel integrated approach and investigate parties' responsiveness to core voters, the electorate and interest groups on multiple policy dimensions in 12 countries. First, due to increasing party system fragmentation and party competition, we expect that parties are particularly responsive to shifts in the preferences of their core voters. However, parties may also respond to interest group pressure and the strategic choices of these groups. We thus expect that parties' responsiveness to voters, in general, is enhanced by leadership ties with interest groups but that ties with only sectional groups are associated with more stable party positions. We test these expectations by combining data from voter and interest group surveys with expert surveys on parties' policy positions over time. Our analysis confirms some of our expectations. While parties are responsive to shifts in the preferences of their core voters and are more stable in their policy positions when they have leadership ties with sectional groups only, parties are not more responsive to their voters on dimension(s) where they have leadership ties with groups particularly active on that dimension. Zooming in on the redistribution and environment/climate dimensions in particular, provide further nuance to these findings.

A core principle of representative democracies' is that parties adapt their policy positions to public opinion to represent citizens' preferences and thereby ensure a link between the preferences of the public and actual policy outcomes (Dahl, 1956). The pertinent question is thus: Are political parties responsive to the voters? While some studies indicate that the answer to this crucial question is "yes" (Adams et al., 2004; Adams et. al. 2009), other studies on party responsiveness to voters have refined the approach to measuring responsiveness, applied different data sources, and found mixed and nuanced results (Ibenskas and Polk, 2022; O'Grady and Abou-Chadi, 2019). For example, analyses on responsiveness on the basis of party manifesto data show no evidence of party responsiveness to the electorate at large on four policy dimensions (O'Grady and Abou-Chadi, 2019). However, analyses based on survey data, investigating responsiveness on the left-right dimension over time, show that mainstream parties are responsive to their voters in that they reduce previous incongruence between their policy positions and those of their supporters in their subsequent behavior (Ibenskas and Polk, 2022). A conference paper (Ibenskas and Polk, 2024) also show that parties respond to their supporters on both core and secondary issues.

Research on representation usually studies the link between public opinion, on the one hand, and parties, governments, decision makers or policy outcomes, on the other. Party scholars dealing with the question of what motivates parties to adapt or update their policy positions have mainly paid attention to voters (see e.g., Adams et al., 2009; Dalton et al., 2011; Ibenskas and Polk, 2022, Romeijn, 2020). Yet, in addition to responding to shifts in public opinion, parties are likely to also respond to pressure from interest groups (Bischof, 2016; Karol, 2009; Klüver, 2020; Romeijn, 2021; Røed, 2021; Røed, 2022; Victor and Reinhardt 2016). While such interest groups are key in connecting citizens and the political elite, this pressure from interest groups has largely been overlooked in the literature, particularly as concerns interest group influence on *party positions* and the relationship between voters, interest groups and parties regarding responsiveness.

In this paper, we thus not only seek to integrate recent studies on party responsiveness by looking at multiple policy dimensions, parties' core voters and the electorate, but also seek to integrate interest groups in the pattern of responsiveness between voters and parties. We argue that parties can respond to voters through not only changing or updating their position on a policy dimension but also through collaboration and contact with interest groups active in the core policy area(s) belonging to a particular policy dimension. Shifts in preferences of the electorate and/or party voters can be utilized by interest groups mobilizing to lift the topic on the (party-)political agenda. At the same time, interest groups may also seek to downplay

recent shifts in public opinion to protect the status quo if the groups prefer the current political situation over new directions. We thus seek to integrate interest groups as an intermediator between citizens and parties: parties may change their policy positions to follow the changes in voter positions, but they may also adapt their positions due to interest group pressure that may or may not enhance their responsiveness to the voters. Furthermore, interest groups are an avenue for influence of voters between elections (Schlozman, 2015).

Against this backdrop, we seek to make a contribution to the evolving and important literature on party responsiveness. First, we expect that parties, due to increasing party fragmentation and party competition, are particularly responsive to shifts in the preferences of their core voters in comparison to shifts in the electorate at large. Second, since interest groups can enhance party responsiveness to voters by strategically mobilizing on issues close to the voters, we expect that parties' responsiveness to voters, in general, is enhanced by leadership ties with interest groups. When parties interact with groups at the core of the different policy dimensions, this may enhance parties' responsiveness to their voters. Third, lobbying by sectional groups (such as business and labour groups) provides incentives for parties to defect from their general constituents, and may thus, in fact, reduce party responsiveness to voters. Thus, we expect that party leadership ties with only sectional groups are associated with more stable party positions.

We test these expectations by combining data from voter and interest group surveys with expert surveys on parties' policy positions over time. More specifically, we merge survey data that compromise 12 countries in Western-Europe. The major policy positions of parties on six policy dimensions are taken from the 2010 and 2019 Chapel Hill expert surveys (CHES, see Jolly et al., 2022) while data on voter positions on the same policy dimensions are taken from the 2008 and 2017/2018 European Values Study (EVS, 2008; 2022). For data on party-interest group leadership contact on the six policy dimensions, we utilize the Party-Interest Group Relationships in Contemporary Democracies (PAIRDEM) datasets (Allern, Hansen, Marshall et al., 2021; Allern, Hansen, Rødland et. al. 2023)

The analyses confirm some of our expectations. We do find that parties are responsive to shifts in the preferences of their core voters (and more so in comparison to the preferences of the electorate at large). We thus find that both mainstream parties and challenger parties are responsive to their party voters when we zoom in on policy dimensions instead of the overarching left-right dimension that most of the existing literature on party responsiveness has previously investigated. Hence, our analyses show that parties, in general, ensure, through

being responsive to their core voters, a link between the preferences of the public and policy outcomes.

We also find empirical evidence for party leadership ties with sectional groups being associated with more stable party positions. This indicates, just as research on lobbying in the EU has shown (Dür, Bernhagen and Marshall, 2015), that business and labour groups seek and are, to some extent, able to protect the status quo. However, we do not find that party-group leadership ties on the respective policy dimension, enhance party responsiveness to voters on that particular dimension. But it should be noted that if we had more and closer time points of party and voter positions as well as measures of party-group ties over time on the different policy dimensions, a more accurate picture could be provided. Still, zooming in on two dimensions particularly important for party competition and interest group pressure in recent years, redistribution and climate/environment, leaves us with the impression that the relationship could actually be the other way around: that interest group pressure actually reduces party responsiveness to voters. This indicates that while interest groups may provide legitimacy to some interests, party-group leadership ties do not increase the ability of parties to respond to their core voters.

Party responsiveness to voters and interest groups

Several studies suggest that parties adapt their position as a response to voter shifts and changes in competition from other parties (Adams et al. 2006; Adams et al., 2009; Bischof and Wagner, 2020; Ezrow et al. 2011; Ibenskas and Polk, 2022; Schumacher et al. 2013). The literature has, naturally, been concerned both with the theoretical and empirical/methodological implications of studying party responsiveness.

Theoretically, there is a debate on the conditions of responsiveness where earlier studies (Adams et al. 2006; Ezrow et al. 2011; Schumacher et al. 2013), among others, find that mainstream parties respond to changes in the central tendency of the electorate at large whereas niche parties shift their positions in line with the mean party voter. A recent study, on the other hand, argue that also mainstream parties respond to their partisan supporters rather than shifts in the central tendency of the general voter (Ibenskas and Polk, 2022). Furthermore, it is argued that these parties respond by maximizing congruence with their partisan supporters. The underlying logic is that (increasing) party fragmentation increases electoral incentives for parties to be responsive to their party constituents "because the competition for the support of the central voter becomes more electorally risky" (Ibenskas and Polk, 2022:205). The theoretical argument is supported in an analysis of mainstream parties'

responsiveness on the left-right dimension in 14 member states of the European Union in Western Europe between 1999 and 2014.

Empirically, there is a debate on the measurement of responsiveness. While earlier studies have primarily looked at the left-right (but see Adams, Ezrow and Somer-Topcu (2014) for a study on the European integration dimension), O'Grady and Abou-Chadi (2019) address the flaws of this approach and instead study party responsiveness to the general electorate on four different policy dimensions ("absolute" economic ideology, "relative" economic ideology – the desire for more or less government spending – social issues, and immigration issues). The shifts in the general electorate are taken from Caughey et al.'s (2019) ideology measures of public opinion on these particular policy dimensions in 27 European countries from 1981 to 2016. This approach to extract public opinion is based on a Bayesian dynamic group level item response theory model including more than 2.7 million survey responses. The shifts in party positions on these dimensions are calculated by using the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP, Volkens et al., 2018). Their analysis includes all countries that have both ideological data and data on party positions from CMP, 26 in total. This approach, they argue, better taps politics and societies through being multidimensional and avoiding differential item functioning where left-right today, due to increasing multidimensionality, is interpreted differently than in the past. Furthermore, survey questions on concrete policy dimensions are also easier to answer for the public than self-placement on a general left-right scale that requires a certain level of political knowledge. Despite multidimensionality and more countries than previous studies, O'Grady and Abou-Chadi (2019) fail to find any consistent evidence that parties respond to short-term shifts in public opinion.

In this paper, we merge the approaches of Ibenskas and Polk (2022) and O'Grady and Abou-Chadi (2019) by looking at party responsiveness on multiple policy dimensions, not only towards the electorate at large but also to the party supporters as such. Our focus is however all parties and not mainstream parties or niche parties in particular. We follow up where Ibenskas and Polk (2022) "stop": in their conclusion (p. 217) they write "we fully expect niche parties could be and probably are more responsive on dimensions more central to their party brand or on which mainstream parties are constrained".

Furthermore, we include interest group pressure on parties as an *intermediator* between change in voter preferences and change in party preferences. A key rationale for involving interest groups in public policymaking is that it increases the legitimacy of the process (Rasmussen & Reher, 2023), but they can also undermine it. While previous research

has looked at interest group pressure on parties in (or as part of) the policymaking process (see e.g., Clifton, 2004; Røed, 2022; 2023), we look at whether and how interest group pressure impacts on changes in party positions over time. Previous research on interest groups has looked at changes in parties' policy agendas but not at changes in parties' policy positions on different policy dimensions.

Klüver (2020) argue and show that 1) parties adjust their policy agendas in response to interest group mobilization and 2) that interest groups are more successful in shaping party policy when their priorities coincide with those of the electorate. This argument is tested in a longitudinal analysis studying the responsiveness of German parties to interest groups across eleven issue areas and seven elections. We apply their argument in the context of party responsiveness to voters and argue that party interaction with (and responsiveness) to interest groups can reinforce party responsiveness to voters. Furthermore, parties are exposed to a variety of interests seeking to influence their positions. The influence of interest groups may vary across cause groups and sectional groups and cause groups may strengthen the link between voters and party representatives (Giger and Klüver, 2016). While lobbying by sectional groups (such as business and labour groups) provides incentives for parties to defect from their general constituents, lobbying by cause groups (such as environmental groups) do not suffer by this problem and may, in fact, increase party responsiveness.

Taken together, we thus have three main expectations to our analysis. First, due to increasing party fragmentation and party competition, parties cannot longer risk being unresponsive to their core voters. They cannot simply neglect shifts in voter preferences because the costs of doing so can be a major loss of voters to a competing party:

Parties respond to core voters (H1): Political parties respond to changes in the (mean) policy positions of their core voters.

Second, interest groups can enhance party responsiveness to voters by strategically mobilizing on issues close to the core voters of the party. We thus expect that when parties interact with groups at the core of the different policy dimensions, this enhances parties' responsiveness to their voters:

Party-interest group ties enhance responsiveness (H2): When parties and interest groups interact regularly on a policy dimension, party responsiveness on that particular dimension is greater.

Third, sectional groups have interests that may imply a defection from the core voters for the party in question. Party interaction with sectional groups, in particular, can thus hamper party responsiveness to their voters. Such sectional groups (exemplified by business and labour groups) are particularly dominant on the economic (left-right) dimension in comparison to the cultural (Green-Alternative-Libertarian vs. Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist (GAL-TAN)) dimension. Sectional groups are shown to be defending the status quo, while cause groups (citizen groups) want to change it (Dür, Bernhagen and Marshall, 2015). Thus, if a party only interacts with sectional groups (and not (also) cause groups), the party is more likely to keep their policy position more stable:

Party ties with sectional groups provide stability (H3): When parties interact regularly with sectional groups only, party positions are more stable.

Research design: Merging data on parties, voters and interest groups

To test our hypotheses, we integrate data on party positions taken from CHES (Jolly et al., 2022) on six different policy dimensions with data on voter positions (EVS, 2008; 2022) on the same policy dimensions as well as party-interest group leadership contact on these dimensions taken from the PAIRDEM party survey datasets (Allern et al. 2023). The following 12 European countries are part of both CHES and EVS and thus included in the study: Austria, Denmark, France, Finland, Germany, Italy, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, The Netherlands and United Kingdom.[1] These countries, with the exception of France and Spain, are also included in the PAIRDEM party survey datasets on party interactions with interest groups. The unit of analysis are dyads of parties and policy dimensions which means that we map each party's positional change (from 2010 to 2019) on each of the six policy dimensions: Redistribution, deregulation, environment, immigration, multiculturalism and social lifestyle. These policy dimensions reflect both new (value based) and old (economic) politics. The policy dimensions included had to have a suitable match with survey items included in the EVS rounds.

When merging the party positions with the voter positions, we are left with 459 observations spanning the mentioned six dimensions and the overlapping parties in CHES

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[1] Portugal was also included in both rounds of both datasets but the latter round of EVS was conducted in 2020 and hence after the measurement of party positions by CHES in 2019. Due to this, Portugal is not part of the dataset.

2010, CHES 2019, EVS 2008 and EVS 2017/2018. The number of overlapping parties across the four datasets is 77. This number is affected by the changes in the party systems where some countries (such as for instance Italy and Spain) have more party dissolutions, splinter parties and new parties emerging than others. First, since our dependent variable is *party change in position*, the parties that overlap across datasets need to satisfy the threshold of CHES inclusion in *both the 2010 and 2019 survey* and thus need to obtain at least 3 percent of the vote in the national election immediately prior to the survey year or elect at least one representative to the national or European Parliament (Jolly et al., 2022). Second, to measure the substantial variable *voter change in position*, the parties have to be included/mentioned by the EVS respondents on the questions on party affiliation in *both the 2008 and 2017/18* EVS rounds. If more than 1 percent of the respondents in the country sample mentioned affiliation with a specific party it was included in the respective EVS dataset. Third, thus the parties need to satisfy both the CHES threshold and the EVS threshold for both time points to be included in our analyses.

We also use the PAIRDEM party survey datasets which are based on two organizational party surveys conducted in 2016-17 at the national level (Allern et al. 2022). One survey was sent to the central party organizations (CPOs) and the other to the legislative party groups (LPGs), with partly overlapping questions. The combined response rate across the two surveys is 68% (104/154). The number of overlapping parties across all three datasets is 50. The different data points of the surveys ensure that the voters are observed prior to the parties and that the party-interest group contacts on policy dimensions happen in between the voter change (2017/2018 position - 2008 position) and the party change (2019 position - 2010 position).

To map voter positions along the same policy dimensions that are included in CHES requires that the EVS items were asked in both the 2008 and 2017/2018 rounds and that the respective items reflect the same policy dimensions as the CHES items are set out to measure. Careful reading of the EVS questionnaires resulted in the items that are described in Table 1. Note that for the environmental/climate dimension there was only one EVS item that was asked in both rounds. For the other policy dimensions there were several EVS items that grasped the content of each of the other five policy dimensions, but the ones selected, we argue, capture the policy dimensions the most accurately. Table 1 also illustrates which interest group category that is mapped to which policy dimension. This mapping mirrors the one done by Allern et al. 2021.

Table 1. Combining the three data sources on six policy dimensions

Policy dimension	CHES (2010 and 2019):	EVS (2008 and 2017/2018):	PAIRDEM: Interest group category mapped to dimension:
Redistribution	position on redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor.0 = Fully in favor of redistribution:10 = Fully opposed to redistribution	equalize incomes vs. incentives for individual effort, scale 1-10*	Trade unions and labour groups
Deregulation (competition)	position on deregulation. 0 = Strongly opposes deregulation of markets….10 = Strongly supports deregulation of markets	competition is good vs. harmful, scale 1-10*	Employers/business organizations
Environment	position towards the environment. 0 = Strongly supports environmental protection even at the cost of economic growth:10 = Strongly supports economic growth even at the cost of environmental protection	statement on environment: giving part of income "I would give part of my income if I were certain that the money would be used to prevent environmental pollution", scale 1-4*	Environmental/nature conservation/climate/animal welfare/wildlife groups
Immigration	position on immigration policy.0 = Fully opposed to a restrictive policy on immigration:10 = Fully in favor of a restrictive policy on immigration	statement: immigrants are a strain on welfare system, scale 1-10*	Anti-Immigration groups
Multiculturalism	position on integration of immigrants and asylum seekers (multiculturalism vs. assimilation). 0 = Strongly favors multiculturalism….10 = Strongly favors assimilation	please indicate how important this is to be truly [NATIONALITY]: To have [COUNTRY]'s ancestry, scale 1-4*	Pro-Immigration groups
Social lifestyle	position on social lifestyle (e.g. homosexuality).0 = Strongly supports liberal policies:10 = Strongly opposes liberal policies	do you justify: homosexuality, scale 1-10: never to always)*	Religious groups

*All scales from EVS were standardized between 0 and 1 and recoded if needed so that 0 always corresponds to the direction of the CHES dimension (left to right). The value 0 on the EVS variables thus reflect a "leftist" position on this particular policy dimension. Note that in EVS 2017/18 the scale for the statement on environment was 1-5 instead of 1-4 as in 2008. The middle/indifferent category was thus recoded as don't know (missing) to be in line with EVS 2008 where all respondents either had to pick a side or answer "don't know".

Measurement of variables

The dependent variable, *Party change in position*, is calculated by subtracting the respective 2019 party position from the 2010 party position on each of the six policy

dimensions as included in CHES 2010 and CHES 2019. We use the mean expert placement on each policy dimension as an estimate of the party's position.

The substantial variable, *Voter change in position*, is calculated for the core voters of each party and is the difference for the mean position of these voters in EVS 2008 and EVS 2017/18. The core voters of each party were identified as similar as possible across the two EVS rounds. In the 2008 round, the respondents were first asked "Would you vote at a general election tomorrow" and then if they answered "yes" they were asked "Which political party would you vote for"? We used the ones that answered this question by identifying their party preference to calculate the mean party voter position on each of the six policy dimensions. In the 2017/18 round, there were only one main question on party affiliation included: "Which political party appeals to you most?". We used this item to calculate the mean party voter position on each of the policy dimensions but to be labelled as a core voter for a party, the respondent needed to have responded "always" to the question "Please indicate how often you vote when elections take place at the [National level]". By doing so, we secure comparability between the two EVS rounds in the sense that the mean position of each party's core voters is not affected by the voters that are less likely to vote at elections. Note that, as mentioned in Table 1, to calculate the positional changes for the voters (both party voters and the electorate), all scales across the selected EVS items were standardized between 0 and 1. The items were also recoded if needed so that 0 always corresponds to the direction of the CHES dimension (left to right).

In line with the argument made by Ibenskas and Polk (2022), we control for initial (in)congruence between a party and their core voters. As Ibenskas and Polk (2021) stress, we cannot always claim that parties are responsive to their voters if they follow the shifts in the voters' preferences as this may depend on where the party *initially stands* relative to their voters. If, for example, the voters are to the right of the party, and then the voters move to the left towards the party: can we say that the party is responsive if it moves to the left as well? To account for this issue, we include a variable, *Party-voter congruence*, that measures the distance between the party and their core voters at the start of the time period (the distance between the respective dimensional CHES 2010 and EVS 2008 measures).

As mentioned previously, party responsiveness can also be measured as responsiveness to the shifts in the electorate at large (Ibenskas and Polk, 2022; O'Grady and Abou-Chadi, 2019). We thus also include a variable, *Mean voter change*, to tap the central tendency of the electorate. This variable is operationalized as the difference, between the two EVS rounds, in the mean voter position (also called the general voter) on each policy

dimension in each country. In this variable, the entire electorate is included and not only the ones that would vote in a general election tomorrow/always vote in a national election. Furthermore, we control for *Party-mean voter congruence* (the distance between the party and their mean voter position on the respective policy dimension at the start of the time period).

To control for changes in party competition, we include a variable measuring whether *New parties* have reached the CHES threshold for survey inclusion in 2019 compared to the 2010 survey. This variable is coded as 1 if new parties are included in CHES 2019 and 0 if not. Note that 2 of the 12 countries are coded as 0 on this variable and thus did not have such changes in the respective party systems when comparing the parties included in 2010 with the parties included in 2019.

Since the responsiveness of mainstream parties, has been of special interest in the literature we also include a variable, *Mainstream Party*, that takes the value 1 if the party is labelled as mainstream and 0 if not. We take the same approach as Ibenskas and Polk (2022) and code social democrats, conservatives, Christian democrats, agrarians, and liberals as mainstream parties. We use the party family codes available in the CHES 1999-2019 trend file to identify mainstream parties. Switzerland and Norway are not part of the CHES trend file and we thus used the ParlGov dataset (Döring et al., 2022) to code the parties in these countries in particular.

Party-interest group leadership ties (on respective policy dimension) is taken from the PAIRDEM party survey datasets where the parties were asked about their relations with specific types of interest group categories with clear policy profiles (see Table 1 where six group categories are assigned to a unique policy dimension emphasizing their assumed core interest). The variable capture organizational ties between parties and groups and is based on a survey question measuring regular leadership contact between parties and group categories: "Have representatives of the party leadership/leading members of the legislative/parliamentary party informally been in contact with leaders of one or more specific interest groups to discuss current issues of political relevance on a regular basis in the last 12 months?" The instruction was either: "By leadership/leaders we mean the elected top leaders and other executive members in the national party organization/interest groups (including CEOs and other executives of companies)" or "By leading members of the legislative/parliamentary party we mean the party's legislative/parliamentary leader(s) and spokespersons' in different policy fields, and by group leaders we mean the top leaders and other executive members of interest groups (including the CEOs and other executives of companies)". "Regular basis" was defined as "meetings have been numerous and

normalized". If the parties answered yes to this question, they were asked whether this applied to the different group categories.

The PAIRDEM item taps contact outside organizational bodies. However, it is positively and strongly correlated with a survey item measuring perceptions of parties' overall formal and informal organizational connections with the different interest group categories which indicates a higher level of institutionalization (Allern et al. 2021). The survey item was part of both PAIRDEM party surveys. We thus merge this variable across surveys and the variable, *Party-interest group leadership ties*, is coded as 1 if the central party organization and/or the legislative party group have reported to have such ties with the group category in question and 0 if not.

To account for different patterns of party-group leadership ties we also construct a dummy variable separating the parties with 1) broad leadership contact (ties) with groups in different categories spanning both the economic (redistribution and/or deregulation subdimensions) and cultural dimension (environment, social lifestyle, immigration and/or multiculturalism) from the parties that 2) only have leadership contact (ties) with groups on the economic dimension and parties that 3) do not have leadership contact at all. Note that no parties have only group leadership contact (ties) on the cultural dimension. In other words: if the parties have leadership ties on the cultural dimension, they also have it on the economic dimension. While the economic dimension concerns redistribution and state management of other economic questions, the cultural dimension concerns social lifestyle-questions and the conflict between libertarian and authoritarian values (Rovny and Polk, 2019). Descriptive statistics for the variables included in our analysis are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

Variable	N	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Party change in position on dimension	462	-.140	.926	-3.18	3.25
(Party) voter change in position on dimension	459	-.032	.119	-.5	.556
Party-voter congruence	459	.162	.126	.000	.673
Mean voter change in position on dimension	459	-.036	.089	-.250	.190
Party-mean voter congruence	459	.212	.146	.000	.685
New parties	462	.805		0	1
Mainstream party	462	.539		0	1
Party-group leadership contact on dimension	300	.347		0	1
Party-group leadership contact: Broad*	300	.54		0	1
Party-group leadership contact: Only economic/sectional	300	.08		0	1
Party-group leadership contact: Not at all	300	.38		0	1

*Broad (across economic and cultural dimensions) is used as reference category in the regressions

To test our expectations on party responsiveness, we use linear regression analysis. We employ a first-difference model where we look at mean differences within parties (from 2010 to 2019) and within each party's core voter group (from 2008 to 2017/2018) as well as the changes in the general voter (the electorate) over the same period. Such a first-difference model is equivalent to having party and country fixed effects.

Results

Bivariate analyses and multivariate analyses: All observations

Before showing the results from the multivariate analysis, we first present bivariate plots of party responsiveness for each of the six policy dimensions. Figure 1 explores how changes in parties' positions are related to changes in their core voters' positions across the six policy dimensions that our data allows us to consider. First, we see that there is indeed good reason to distinguish between policy dimensions when examining party responsiveness. While there is no relationship on multiculturalism and deregulation, parties' and core voters' mean changes in policy position are associated to varying degrees on the other four dimensions. If we look to the environmental/climate dimension specifically, the correlation of 0.16 suggests that while there is a relationship it is somewhat weaker than the one for redistribution, for example. This is partly driven by the observation to the left-most side of the plot (the Welsh party Plaid Cymru) on the environment dimension. Removing this outlier brings the correlations closer to each other.
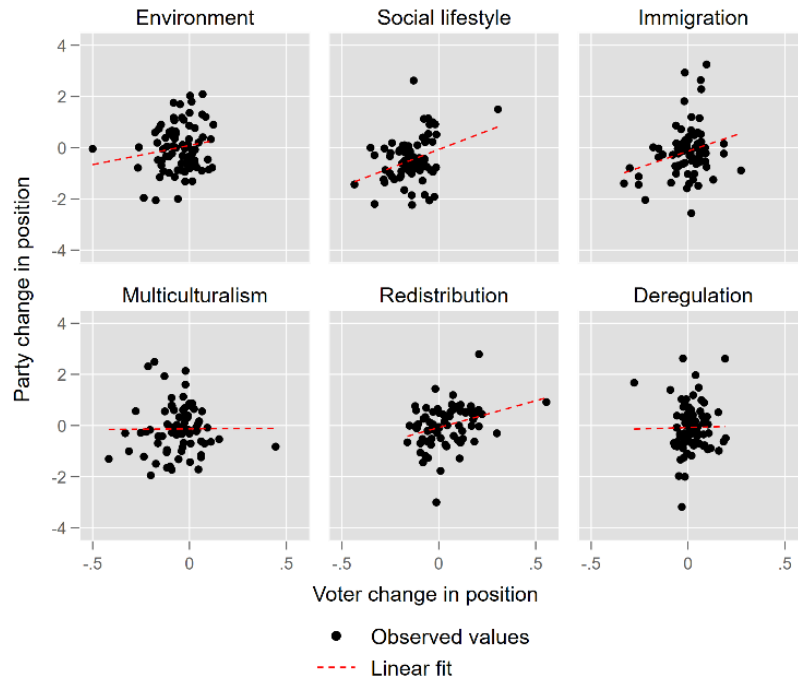
Figure 1: The relationship between changes in party and core voter positions by policy dimension.

Note: Dots are party-dimension observations, and dashed lines are OSL regression lines. The correlations are as follows: Environment (r=0.16), Social lifestyle (r=0.34), Immigration (r=0.26), Multiculturalism (r=0.01), Redistribution (r=0.32), Deregulation (r=0.02). N=459.

The relationship between shifts in mean party voter positions and shifts in party positions is further explored in Table 3. These results show that we find support for the *Parties respond to core voters hypothesis* (H1) and for the *Party ties with sectional groups provide stability hypothesis (H3).* However, we find no support for *Party-interest group ties enhance responsiveness hypothesis (H2).* Models 1 and 5 (as well as Table A1 (model 1) in the Appendix) analyze all parties in the 12 countries that are included in both CHES and EVS while models 2-4 and 6-8 analyze the subsample created when merging the CHES and EVS data with PAIRDEM data. Note, that all six dimensions are included in all models.

Table 3 shows that parties are responsive to their core voters across policy positions in all models using both the full sample and the PAIRDEM sample. However, party-interest group leadership ties do not increase party responsiveness to party voters (meaning H2 is not confirmed). But when party-group leadership ties are more exclusive and are only held to sectional groups (on the economic dimension), we see that party positions change less. This finding indicates that sectional groups defending the status quo are being successful of such a defense through their leadership ties with parties.

The models included in Table 3 also find positive associations between changes in the position of the *mean voter* (the electorate at large) when party voter change and mean voter change are included in separate models. However, *party voter change* is heavily correlated with mean voter change (.77). Table A1 in the Appendix show models where both variables are included. Then only the finding pertaining to party voter change is robust. Also, R^2 shows that the models with party voter change explain more of the variation in the dependent variable than mean voter change.

Finally, when controlling for the entry of new significant parties in the time period, we find that party systems with this feature have parties that move more in the measured multidimensional policy space than parties in stable party systems. This confirms previous findings in the literature: Parties adapt their position as a response to voter shifts and changes in competition from other parties (Adams et al. 2006; Adams et al., 2009; Ezrow et al. 2011; Ibenskas and Polk, 2022; Schumacher et al. 2013) *and in particular to the voter shifts among their core voters*, the party voters (Ibenskas and Polk, 2022).

Table 3. Regression analysis. All observations (77 parties on six dimensions). DV = Party change in policy position on dimension from 2010 to 2019.

	(1) Party change	(2) Party change	(3) Party change	(4) Party change	(5) Party change	(6) Party change	(7) Party change	(8) Party change
Voter change	1.71*** (0.36)	1.83*** (0.44)	1.78** (0.59)	1.82*** (0.43)				
Party-voter congruence	-0.20 (0.34)	-0.15 (0.41)	-0.14 (0.42)	-0.17 (0.41)				
Party-group leadership ties		0.05 (0.11)	0.06 (0.11)			0.02 (0.10)	0.04 (0.11)	
Entry of new parties		0.33** (0.12)	0.33** (0.12)	0.34** (0.11)		0.33** (0.12)	0.33** (0.12)	0.33** (0.12)
Mainstream party		-0.02 (0.10)	-0.02 (0.10)	0.03 (0.10)		0.03 (0.11)	0.03 (0.11)	0.07 (0.11)
Voter change # leadership ties			0.09 (0.88)					
Group ties: Broad				ref.cat. (.)				ref.cat. (.)
Group ties: only sectional/economic				-0.64*** (0.18)				-0.60** (0.19)
Group ties: No				0.02 (0.10)				0.04 (0.10)

Mean voter change				1.86*** (0.48)	2.17*** (0.56)	1.92** (0.72)	2.09*** (0.55)
Party-mean voter congruence				-0.14 (0.29)	0.06 (0.36)	0.05 (0.36)	0.04 (0.35)
Mean voter change # leadership ties						0.62 (1.13)	
Constant	-0.05 (0.07)	-0.40** (0.14)	-0.40** (0.14)	-0.36* (0.15)	-0.04 (0.08)	-0.43** (0.15)	-0.44** (0.15)	-0.42** (0.16)
Number of Cases	459	299	299	299	459	299	299	299
R^2	.0502	.0749	.0749	.1140	.0323	.0668	.0677	.1020
BIC	1226	783	788	776	1234	785	791	780

+ p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Case evidence: Redistribution and environment/climate dimension

Party competition has traditionally been centred around the economic left-right dimension with redistribution as a core economic issue (sub-dimension) embedded in this dimension (Bakker et al., 2015). Over the last two decades, party fragmentation and party competition have increased following multiple challenger parties gaining electoral support at the expense of mainstream parties in many European countries (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). Recently, the party competition has thus increased on several policy dimensions and in particular on the environment/climate dimension (Schaffer et al. 2022). Public awareness of the consequences of climate change and measures needed to mitigate or adapt to these, has increased in many countries since the mid-1990s (see. e.g. Lorenzoni and Pidgeon 2006; Stoutenborough et al. 2014). Over the years, climate change has moved from a niche issue on the public agenda to the forefront of it (Schaffer et al., 2022). The public awareness of the environmental/climate dimension[2] has also been strengthened by social movements (e.g. the Fridays for Future movement (also called School Strike for Climate) and Extinction Rebellion). However, one type of challenger parties, the populist parties, are also often favoring a rhetoric that downplays the problem of climate change (Lockwood and Lockwood, 2022). This rhetoric is catered to the part of the electorate that is climate-skeptical and/or favors protecting the industries instead of climate action. Hence, the responsiveness to voters on climate and

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[2] Note that, in lack of better data over time, the environment/climate dimension is measured as the general environmental dimension across the datasets we use. This dimension was not investigated on its own in O'Grady and Abou-Chadi (2019) but was part of/or removed from "social" issues depending on the model specifications. In Ibenskas and Polk (2024, conference paper), the environmental dimension is included in the analyses on basis of European Election Study (EES) but not in the analyses of European Social Survey (ESS).

environmental questions also means being responsive to the part of the electorate that do not favor or do not see the need for urgent action on these questions.
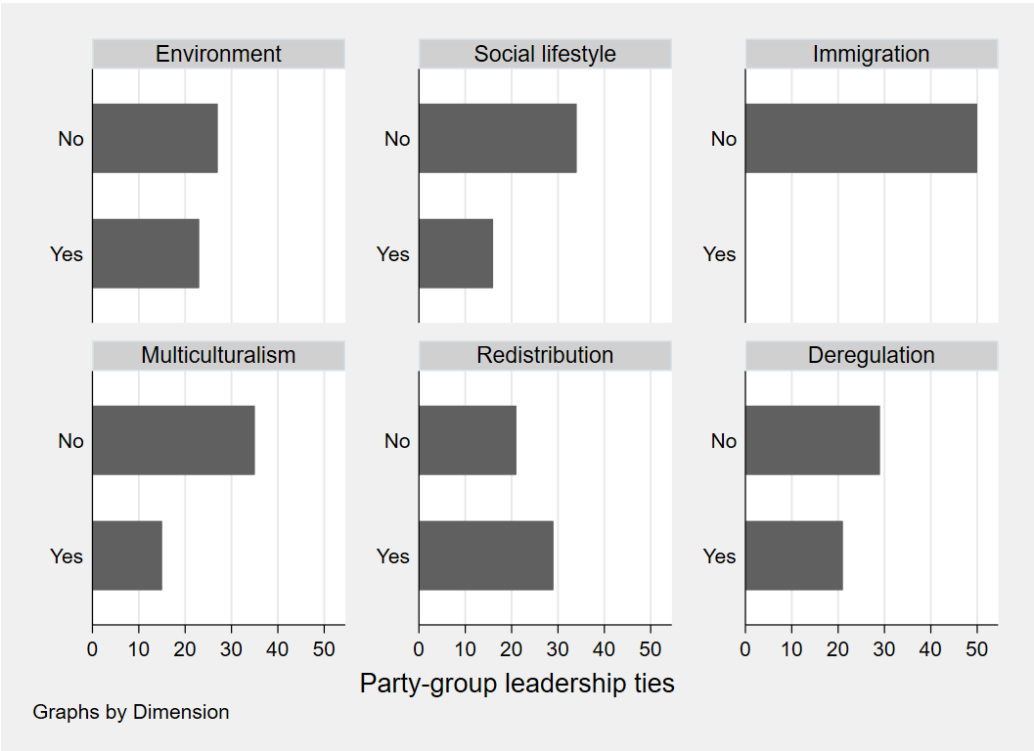

Figure 2: Party-leadership ties on different policy dimensions: frequencies reported by the parties.

The descriptive statistics on party-group leadership ties, mirror the traditional and more recent pattern of party competition (see Figure 2). Party-group leadership ties are the most common on the redistribution dimension (58 per cent of the parties' report to have this to trade unions and labour groups) and the environment/climate dimension (46 per cent report to have this to environmental/climate groups). In this part, we thus zoom in on these two policy dimensions in particular. Table 4 shows the regression analysis for this subsample only and corroborates the findings from the analyses of all six policy dimensions: parties respond to shifts in the positions of their core voters. Despite the low N, we also see that leadership ties with sectional groups only (ties only on the economic dimension) are associated with more stable party positions.

In contrast to the main analysis in Table 3, we also see a significant interaction between voter change and party-group leadership ties but this is negative, instead of positive as expected. Thus, we find some case specific evidence for interest group pressure actually reducing party responsiveness to their core voters (but this needs to be interpreted in light of

the low N and other limitations of the current research design). Still, the case specific evidence leads support for the notion that interest group pressure can cater to some interests among the party electorate but not the mean party voter as such. See Table A2 in the Appendix for case specific analysis with other variables included, including the mean voter change (the change in positions by the general electorate). Note, that we in Table A2 find no significant association between mean voter change in position and party change in position.

Table 4. Regression analysis. Subsample: Redistribution and environment/climate only. DV = Party change in policy position on dimension from 2010 to 2019.

	(1) Party change	(2) Party change	(3) Party change	(4) Party change	(5) Party change
Voter change	1.49*	0.99	2.32*	2.66*	1.25+
	(0.57)	(0.72)	(1.06)	(1.08)	(0.72)
Party-voter congruence	-0.87	-0.25	-0.50	-0.57	-0.80
	(0.62)	(0.75)	(0.75)	(0.75)	(0.72)
Party-group leadership ties		0.05	0.00	0.03	
		(0.16)	(0.16)	(0.16)	
Voter change # leadership ties			-2.41+	-2.44+	
			(1.41)	(1.41)	
Environment/climate				0.23	0.23
				(0.16)	(0.16)
Entry of new parties					0.36*
					(0.17)
Group ties: Broad					ref.cat.
					(.)
Group ties: Only sectional/economic					-0.77**
					(0.28)
Group ties: No					-0.02
					(0.16)
Constant	0.14	-0.08	-0.02	-0.13	-0.29
	(0.11)	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.17)	(0.20)
Number of Cases	154	100	100	100	100
R^2	.0590	.0260	.0549	.0742	.1485
BIC	395	248	249	252	248

+ p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Conclusion

In this paper we seek to contribute to the evolving literature on party responsiveness. Our contribution is threefold: First, we investigate party responsiveness in a multidimensional policy space. Do parties respond to their voters across policy dimensions? Previous studies, except for O'Grady and Abou-Chadi (2019) and Ibenskas and Polk (conference paper, 2024), have primarily studied the left-right dimension. Second, we include interest groups as an intermediator in the responsiveness between voters and parties and argue that party leadership ties with interest group leaders among groups that are particularly active on the respective policy dimension, in general, should enhance party responsiveness. Third, we argue that party leadership ties with sectional groups only (on the economic dimension) are associated with more stable party positions in line with sectional groups seeking to protect the status quo (Dür, Bernhagen and Marshall, 2015).

Just like Ibenskas and Polk (2022) we find that parties are responsive towards their core voters, their party supporters. This finding holds across dimensions in the multivariate analysis and irrespectively of a party being mainstream or not. However, the bivariate analysis shows that there are well-founded reasons to distinguish between issues when examining party responsiveness. While there is no relationship on multiculturalism and deregulation, parties' and core voters' changes in mean policy position are associated to varying degrees on the other four dimensions. The variation in policy dimensions may be explained by more short term trends were for instance some political issues are more important than others on the political agenda. This may result in party responsiveness on some policy dimensions (issues) more than others. Future studies should thus seek to include measures of *changes in* dimensional salience to account for this issue. Media content analysis is one possible way forward to construct such a measure. We also find some evidence of parties being responsive to the electoral at large in the pooled analysis. But this evidence is less robust and is not corroborated when zooming in on the redistribution and the environment/climate dimensions which are the most competitive according to the reports made by parties on their ties with interest groups.

While parties are responsive to their core voters, we do not find any support for party-group leadership ties enhancing party responsiveness to their core voters for the dimensions included in our analysis. When parties maintain close and routinized leadership contact with interest groups in the group category clearly associated with mobilization on the particular dimension in question, this does not translate into increased responsiveness to voters. In fact,

there is evidence of the opposite pattern when looking at the most competitive dimensions only. However, if we reduce the policy space of interest group ties to a general economic and a general cultural dimension (Rovny and Polk, 2019), we find that parties move less in policy space when they are exclusively connected to sectional groups particularly active on the economic dimension. This indicates that sectional groups are able to defend their interests, often synonymous to the status quo, through their leadership ties with parties.

Our study has limitations; for instance, in the number of (available) data points and in the dimensional survey items used. We cannot rule out that better measurement of the voter positions and more time points will yield different or at least more nuanced results. The same applies to the dimensional party-group leadership ties where more detailed measures, for instance changes in such contact over time, would make us better equipped to disentangle the relationship between voter shifts and interest group pressure on parties' shifts in policy positions. Despite these caveats, our findings resonate well with previous findings in the party responsiveness literature (e.g., Ibenskas and Polk, 2022) and with the findings of interest group lobbying in policymaking (e.g., Dür, Bernhagen and Marshall, 2015). Future studies should dig more into the relationship between short-term and long-term responsiveness and also try to look more at the direction of the general party responsiveness (e.g., pro-climate or pro-industry/anti-climate on the climate/environment dimension).

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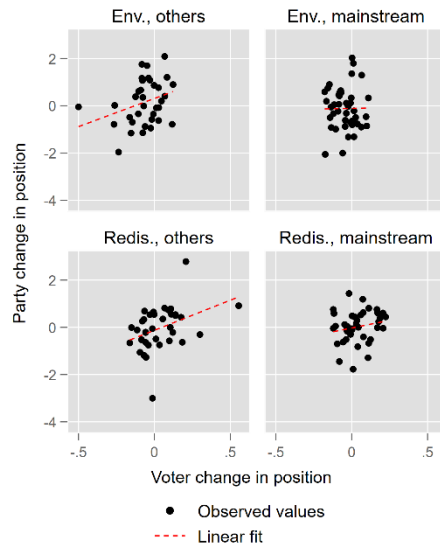
Appendix

Figure A1: The relationship between changes in party and core voter positions by mainstream status.
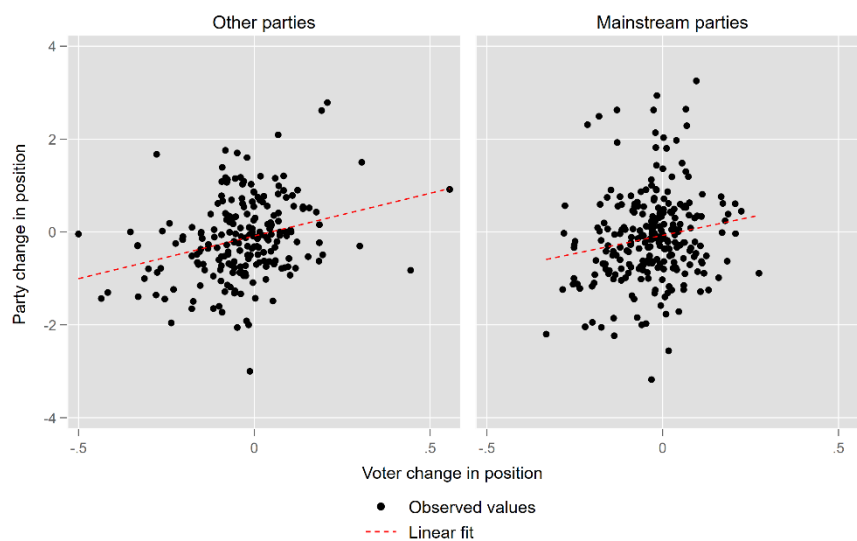
Note: N=459

Figure A2: The relationship between changes in party and core voter positions by mainstream party status and the two issue dimensions (environment and redistribution).

Note: N=153.

*Table A1. Regression analysis. All observations. DV = Party change in policy position on dimension from 2010 to 2019. Results with **Mean voter change (change in position of electorate at large)** included**

	(1) Party change (main analysis)	(2) Party change (case specific)
Voter change	1.59**	2.39**
	(0.56)	(0.87)
Party-voter congruence	-0.26	-1.05
	(0.35)	(0.64)
Mean voter change	0.29	-1.46
	(0.74)	(1.10)
Mainstream party	0.00	-0.19
	(0.09)	(0.14)
Entry of new parties	0.19+	0.15
	(0.11)	(0.17)
Constant	-0.18	0.14
	(0.12)	(0.19)
Number of Cases	459	154
R^2	.0570	.0846
BIC	1241	405

+ $p<0.10$, * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$
* Voter change and Mean voter change correlates strongly (.77).

*Table A2. Regression analysis. Subsample: Redistribution and environment/climate only. DV = Party change in policy position on dimension from 2010 to 2019. Results with **Mean voter change** (change in position of electorate at large) also shown in separate models [Note: for illustration: low N & many variables: reduce variables in next version]*

	(1) Party change	(2) Party change	(3) Party change	(4) Party change	(5) Party change	(6) Party change	(7) Party change	(8) Party change
Voter change	1.49*	1.27+	2.48*	1.25+				
	(0.57)	(0.74)	(1.07)	(0.72)				
Party-voter congruence	-0.87	-0.51	-0.72	-0.80				
	(0.62)	(0.74)	(0.75)	(0.72)				
Party-group leadership ties		0.09	0.04			0.09	0.08	
		(0.15)	(0.16)			(0.16)	(0.16)	
Entry of new parties		0.35+	0.32+	0.36*		0.36+	0.35+	0.35*
		(0.18)	(0.18)	(0.17)		(0.18)	(0.18)	(0.18)
Environment /climate		0.23	0.23	0.23		0.24	0.24	0.22
		(0.16)	(0.16)	(0.16)		(0.18)	(0.18)	(0.17)
Voter change # leadership ties			-2.18					
			(1.40)					
Group ties: broad				ref.cat.				ref.cat.
				(.)				(.)
Group ties: Only Sectional/economic				-0.77**				-0.72*
				(0.28)				(0.29)
Group ties: No				-0.02				-0.04
				(0.16)				(0.16)
Mean voter change					0.87	1.25	1.56	1.18
					(0.74)	(0.89)	(1.19)	(0.87)
Party-mean voter congruence					-0.35	-0.19	-0.16	-0.36
					(0.54)	(0.59)	(0.60)	(0.58)
Mean voter change # leadership ties							-0.62	
							(1.59)	
Constant	0.14	-0.44*	-0.37+	-0.29	0.08	-0.49*	-0.49*	-0.33
	(0.11)	(0.21)	(0.22)	(0.20)	(0.13)	(0.22)	(0.22)	(0.21)
Number of Cases	154	100	100	100	154	100	100	100
R^2	.0590	.0821	.1054	.1485	.0114	.0626	.0641	.1204
BIC	395	251	253	248	402	253	258	251

+ p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001