



Ideological congruence between party rhetoric and policy-making

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ABSTRACT

Scholars, citizens and journalists alike question whether political parties keep their electoral promises. A growing body of literature provides empirical evidence that parties do indeed keep their electoral pledges. Yet little is known about the congruence between party rhetoric between elections and the policies delivered by them. Given the increasing influence of party rhetoric in the media with respect to voting decisions, it is highly relevant to understand if parties ‘walk like they talk’. The article suggests that due to electoral reasons parties face strong incentives to deliver policy outputs which are congruent to their daily rhetoric. Analysing data on 54 policy outputs on nuclear energy, drafted by 24 parties after the Fukushima accident, the analysis finds overwhelming evidence that parties deliver ideologically congruent policy outputs to their rhetoric (incongruent only in 7.89%). These findings have important implications for our understanding of the linkage between party communication and the masses in modern media democracies.

KEYWORDS Party competition; pledges; responsiveness; party positions; party rhetoric

A major question for citizens, scholars and journalists alike is whether political parties keep their electoral promises. A rich body of literature suggests that political parties overwhelmingly keep their electoral pledges (e.g. Hofferbert and Budge 1992; Naurin 2014; Thomson 2001). However, while this literature gives valuable empirical evidence about whether or not parties deliver on their electoral pledges, it does not engage with the question whether the daily media activities of political parties – made in press releases, interviews, public speeches, party meetings or parliamentary debates – are congruent to parties’ policy activities (bills, legislative motions or legislative voting). Thus, while political science has developed a flourishing literature on election pledge fulfilment (Artés 2013; Kalogeropoulou 1989; Mansergh and Thomson 2007; Schermann and Ennser-Jedenastik 2013; Thomson *et al.* 2017), we know little

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about whether party rhetoric between elections corresponds to parties' policy outputs. Partly, this lacuna in the literature might exist because policy statements between elections are not understood to be as binding as campaign pledges. Along those lines many rhetorical activities between elections could be interpreted as policy tendencies, which picture the general direction and principals of a party before drafting policies.¹

However, I argue that rhetorical activities are of utmost importance for voters and parties. Rhetoric between elections is a useful predictor for policies, as it is a direct reflection of the circumstances parties are confronted with, and can result in policies unforeseen by pledges in manifestos. Since determining factors for policies can change in between elections, parties might be forced to adapt their rhetoric and subsequently their policies on the issues at stake. Under modified conditions parties might be required to adapt their policies and rhetoric. For instance, Chancellor Angela Merkel promised to extend the lifetime cycles of all nuclear reactors in Germany both during the 2009 election campaign and after her re-election to office, only to publicly announce that she had radically changed her opinion shortly after the meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear facility and planned to phase out nuclear energy (Jahn and Korolczuk 2012; Vorholz 2015).

In contrast to pledges, statements made between elections can and should reflect upon the status quo which shapes and limits the policy suggestions politicians can give. Campaign pledges, in turn, mostly reflect potential policies made after an election. As scholars have suggested, voters may already take into account that pledges might not be fulfilled due to changing conditions (Manin 1997: 180; Thomson *et al.* 2017: 2). However, more generally the question arises if parties 'walk like they talk' between elections: do parties say one thing but then do another? Or do parties deliver policies which are in line with their rhetoric between elections?

This article attempts to address this gap in the literature. Theoretically I suggest that in most instances political parties aim to keep their rhetoric congruent to their policy-making efforts. Parties have an interest in developing relatively stable policy positions across time, to suggest reliability and responsibility to the public (Downs 1957: 55–60); Strøm 1990: 573). While 'flip-flopping' positions might attract voters in the short term, they will be a costly strategy in the long term. Thus, in the long term voters are understood to reward parties which deliver policies that are in line with their rhetoric. Incumbency might be a major factor conditioning this mechanism. Similar to arguments put forward in previous work, parties in office might see their reliability tested more severely and thus should be more likely to deliver policy outputs in line with their rhetoric (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Strøm 1990).

Empirically I use a novel dataset based on the ResponsiveGov data to test whether party rhetoric is in line with policy outputs. The ResponsiveGov data provide users with the unique possibility to measure party positions delivered

by the media and policy outputs on the same ideological scale. I run regression analysis on 54 policy outputs on nuclear energy by political parties in nine countries following the Fukushima meltdown.²

Nuclear energy is an excellent case to study the congruence between party rhetoric and policy outputs. As a sensational issue, nuclear energy is rarely salient in most democracies, but external shocks – such as the accident at Fukushima – force the issue onto the agenda of political parties, the media and the public (Soroka 2002b). Thus, parties have strong incentives to provide rhetoric which accommodates voters' preferences during the highly salient period after the shock (short term), but subsequently not to draft policy outputs which are in line with their rhetoric (long term).

The results of logistic regression analyses suggest that parties overwhelmingly align their rhetoric with their policy outputs. Party rhetoric is *incongruent* to policy outputs only in 7.89% of the cases analysed in this study. Furthermore, incumbency seems not meaningfully to condition the congruency between rhetoric and policy outputs. These findings have important implications for our understanding of media democracy. Normatively we would hope that political parties do align their rhetoric with their actions. If daily party rhetoric only reflected short-term adaptations to public preferences which are incongruent to the policies parties deliver, voters' preferences would rarely translate into the policy outcomes reflecting their preferences. Subsequently, voters would struggle to keep their politicians accountable to their interests. The results of this research pinpoint the fact that – at least for the topic of nuclear energy – rhetoric is a credible signal by politicians and their organisation to the public. Thus, it appears that voters could make use of the information provided by parties in the media partly to guide their decisions at the ballot box.

Parties between symbolism and policy-making

The ideological positions parties hold and compete on in modern democracies are one of the core interests of political science (Adams 2012; Budge and Hofferbert 1990; Budge *et al.* 2001; Downs 1957). A rich body of literature uses measures of party positions and electoral pledges to investigate if and how parties fulfil their electoral promises (Artés 2013; Hofferbert and Budge 1992; Kalogeropoulou 1989; King *et al.* 1993; Mansergh and Thomson 2007; Naurin 2014; Schermann and Ennser-Jedenastik 2013; Thomson 2001). Scholars' findings suggest that political parties fulfil a large share of their electoral pledges across a wide set of cases. As Budge and Hofferbert (1990: 112) show, studies report that, impressively, around 70% of pledges lead to substantive policies, and a more recent review confirms this observation (Pétry and Collette 2009). However, while a rich body of literature aims to understand the congruence between parties' electoral promises and the policies they deliver, less research attempts to understand the congruence between parties' rhetorical positions

– made in press releases, interviews, public speeches, party meetings or parliamentary debates – and their more substantive policy-making efforts when drafting bills or legislative motions. This is mainly so because scholars stuck to well-established approaches to measure party positions (Keman 2007: 77–8) or focused on the adaption of parties' attention to different issues without accounting for their ideological positions (Bevan *et al.* 2011; Klüver and Sagarzazu 2015). However, in the modern media democracy, politicians' preferences shared via the media have important signalling effects for voters (Hopmann *et al.* 2010; van Aelst *et al.* 2008).

In the American context, the president's State of the Union Address has found large appeal amongst scholars of presidential responsiveness. On the one hand, presidential speeches are paraphrased as symbolism, containing little – if any – policy content (Hinckley 1990; Tulis 1987). In this vein, presidential rhetorical activities do not share policy information, but are symbols to increase presidential popularity. Presidents seek support from the public to put Congress under pressure to deliver policy, in order to pass legislation which then underpins the presidents' re-election goals (Brace and Hinckley 1993; Ragsdale 1984). Theoretically akin, but distinct in their arguments, studies show that rhetorical activities are successfully used for priming (Druckman and Holmes 2004), to create trust among the public (Bianco 1994; McGraw *et al.* 1995) and to alter public perceptions of the president's issue competence (Holian 2004). On the other hand, scholars suggested that speeches are used to set the president's or government's policy agendas (Bevan *et al.* 2011; Cohen 1995, 1999; Jennings and John 2009). Rhetorical activities are therefore understood as a step preceding policies: the priorities and positions presented in speeches are likely to result in substantive policy-making. Yet the agenda-setting literature focuses on arguments about adaptation of actors' attention (salience) to specific issues, but does not aim to investigate actors' ideological positions.

In summary, studies focusing on party rhetoric between elections and accounting for positions shared by rhetorical activities are scarce (but see Helbling and Tresch 2011, 174; Helbling *et al.* 2010; Kriesi *et al.* 2008). Thus, while political science provides extensive evidence that political parties tend to fulfil their electoral pledges, researchers have so far not scrutinised whether parties' rhetorical positions between elections are congruent to their substantive policy-making efforts.

Linking parties' rhetorical activities and policy outputs

Consequently, this article aims to scrutinise whether parties' rhetorical activities are congruent to parties' more substantive policy outputs (e.g. legislative motions, legislative voting or bills).

Theoretically, we have good reason to assume that parties aim to keep their rhetoric congruent to their policy outputs. Parties have an interest in developing

relatively stable policy positions across time, so that voters perceive them as reliable and responsible organisations (Downs 1957: 55–60; Strøm 1990: 573). In the short run, however, radical positional shifts might be a feasible strategy for political parties to attract voters. Yet in the long term, radical positional shifts could be a costly strategy. If parties rarely follow up on their rhetoric, voters have little incentive to (re-)elect such unreliable parties into office.

Furthermore, the literature discussed in the last section provides evidence that parties which dedicate more attention to a certain topic are subsequently more likely to provide policies on that very issue. This has been shown for government speeches (Bevan *et al.* 2011) and for salient topics in party manifestos (Budge and Hofferbert 1990). Subsequently, one can assume that parties' rhetorical activities should also reflect parties' intentions to influence policies in a congruent manner. While parties' rhetorical activities do not state a credible commitment comparable to speeches or party manifestos, they still raise audience costs through voters' attention to party talk (Fearon 1997):

Congruence Hypothesis: Parties are likely to deliver policy outputs which are *congruent* to their rhetorical activities.

As has been argued elsewhere, government and opposition parties find themselves in completely different situations when it comes to setting issue agendas and delivering policy (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Walgrave *et al.* 2009). Governments need to be responsive to changing environmental conditions, since they are held accountable for a nation's well-being. Therefore, they often cannot remain silent on salient issues, otherwise voters view the government as being incapable of delivering solutions for relevant issues (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010: 262). The Fukushima incident not only incrementally raised the salience of nuclear energy as a topic, but also increased the pressure on several Western governments to address questions of nuclear safety. While government parties enjoy less freedom than the opposition in selecting their agendas and therefore might have been forced to talk about nuclear energy after the explosions in Fukushima, they are still able to choose *how* to frame an issue. Thus, government parties are likely to share rhetorical positions which they are able to follow up on. In contrast, opposition parties are more susceptible to saying one thing and then doing another: they feel more independent from public pressure. Thus, they are less likely to deliver policy outputs in line with their talk. Voters are unlikely to measure opposition parties on the basis of their policy outputs, because they hold the government accountable to deliver policy.

Incumbency Hypothesis: Incumbent parties are more likely than opposition parties to deliver policy outputs which are *congruent* to their rhetoric.

Data and methods

In order to analyse whether party rhetoric is congruent to parties' substantive policy efforts, data that measure party positions on both party rhetoric and their policy-making efforts are needed. In the best case scenario the same scales and coding decisions should guide the positional measure of their rhetoric and their policy-making. The ResponsiveGov data provides such information for a large amount of party activity. Data collection is based on pre-defined time periods, which are called 'policy junctures'. Every juncture is bound to a certain policy issue. Of all policy junctures included in the ResponsiveGov data, I focus here on nuclear energy policy after the Fukushima catastrophe in 2011.

The ResponsiveGov project collects data by manual coding of the content of a country's main newswire, legislative and parliamentary databases, surveys and newspaper editorials. First, coders selected relevant news articles with an extensive keyword search. Second, coders extracted any relevant event that took place during a pre-defined policy juncture from these newswires. Thus, all events reported within the publication, relating to nuclear energy, are covered by the dataset. Acts included in the data involve demands, claims, declarations, criticisms, or proposals related to the issue of nuclear energy. A wide range of different types of events, ranging from speeches, acts, parliamentary debates and court rulings to protest events and public opinion polls were coded. For example, in the case of nuclear energy after the Fukushima juncture, Mona Sahlin (*the actor*), leader of the Socialdemokraterna party in Sweden (*the organisation*), gave a speech (*the event*) on 25 March 2011. She stated that nuclear energy should not be seen as the only solution for Swedish energy needs, but instead green energy should be considered as a viable alternative (*the position*). The ResponsiveGov data then provides a systematic coding of Mona Sahlin's statement, specifying a classification and date of the event, the actor, actor's organisation and the actor's position. Consequently, coding is built upon a detailed codebook which is largely based on the procedures of claim coding (see e.g. Helbling *et al.* 2010; Koopmans and Statham 1999).³

I chose nuclear energy as the subject of this article for two reasons. First, nuclear energy can be understood as a sensational issue – a largely unobtrusive issue which becomes highly salient after shocking events (Soroka 2002a; Walgrave *et al.* 2007). Thus, parties have a strategic incentive to debate in line with the public sentiment during highly salient periods, but refrain from drafting policy outputs that are in line with their rhetoric after the short-term increase in public interest decreases again. After the meltdown in Fukushima, political parties, social movement organisations and the public in general became heavily engaged in an extensive debate about the future of nuclear energy after the meltdown in Fukushima. Thus, party positions in the media on nuclear energy were highly visible and debated publicly. However, in many instances the salience decreased after approximately six months and the agendas

were overtaken by other public concerns. Second, the issue of nuclear energy is conflicted along party lines and an issue characterised by partisan conflict, ensuring that parties are outspoken on the matter and mostly outline clear-cut positions on the topic.

The ResponsiveGov data on the Fukushima accident provides data for the US, Belgium, Canada, France, Finland, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. At the time of the Fukushima incident, all of these countries had either already used nuclear energy or their governments had plans to phase it in again (Italy). The data collection on the Fukushima juncture starts on the day it occurred (11 March 2011) and ends two years later (31 March 2013). However, in the case where a government decided to phase out nuclear energy (Germany, Italy⁴ and Switzerland) *or* in the case where general elections took place a minimum of half a year after the Fukushima accident (France, Spain and Netherlands), these events mark the end of the coding period.⁵ In this way, the research design ensures that significant policy shifts which happened after the Fukushima accident are also captured, but stops analysing a specific country once a nuclear phase-out has been decided. Subsequently I will analyse Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States, since in these nine countries parties actually drafted policy outputs after Fukushima.

Parties' policy output

Using the ResponsiveGov data, I used parties' policy proposals, resolutions, motions, administrative decrees, legislative voting and legislative acts to measure parties' policy outputs. Clearly the bindingness of and influence on policy outcomes of these activities vary. Yet all these activities come with the intention by political parties to adapt policy-making in line with their interests. Using such a measure also makes it feasible to compare the policy efforts by incumbent and opposition parties. In all countries studied here, incumbent parties enjoy more access to binding policy outputs. To mitigate this disadvantage, I also included activities which are available to opposition parties. Notice, however, that the robustness tests discussed in the analysis section reveal that the findings of the article are not dependent on the decision to include any of these activities.

Parties' substantive policy efforts are coded into pro- and anti-nuclear events. Thus, the variable is '1' if the activity produced an anti-nuclear output and '0' if the output was a pro-nuclear activity. In total I analyse 54 events of substantive policy-making, of which 39 are anti-nuclear events.

Party positions

Even though this study is not interested in the sheer amount of news coverage per party, the selection of parties has to ensure that a substantial amount of

media coverage is guaranteed across all parties. As a general rule, parties that managed to secure at least five seats in the national parliament and at least 5% of the national vote share, are included in the analysis (please consult the online appendix for more details on party selection). ‘Party rhetoric’ encompasses statements to the media (interviews), press conferences, any kind of speech made during assemblies or party meetings, public letters which also include tweets, statements/speeches given during rally and campaign events, party resolutions and declarations, parliamentary questions and statements given during hearings (see Figure A1 in the online appendix for an overview of the share of activities included in the analysis) (comparable to Helbling and Tresch 2011). All these activities are assumed to aim at persuading the public, or to share information on a party’s position with citizens.⁶ I only included statements made by national-level politicians and the government.

All rhetorical events are again coded into two ideological categories: one outlining support for nuclear energy, the other rejecting the use of nuclear energy. In a first step, I *counted* these pro- and anti-nuclear rhetorical statements per party and month. In a second step, all rhetorical activities were then aggregated by party and months using the following formula:

$$Rhetorics_{ie} = \log\left(\sum anti\ nuclear_{ie} + 0.5\right) - \log\left(\sum pro\ nuclear_{ie} + 0.5\right) \quad (1)$$

Then I subtracted the sum of ‘pro-nuclear’ *rhetoric_{ie}* from the sum of ‘anti-nuclear’ *rhetoric_{ie}* of each party *prior* to the event. Thus, all rhetorical activities used in the analysis occurred prior to the actual policy event. This means that the period of time between two policy events varies across parties. On average 25 days pass between two policy events. These specifications result in a nested dataset, where parties’ rhetorical positions are clustered into policy outputs.

Values greater than zero resulting from equation (1) indicate rhetorical positions against nuclear energy, while values below zero indicate positions favouring the use of nuclear energy. Simply subtracting pro- and anti-nuclear talk results in a highly skewed measurement, with values on the extremes being heavily overrepresented. This might substantially infringe on the validity of the results reported in the next section. To address this issue, I use a log transformation to control for skewness – as shown in equation (1).⁷

In addition to controlling for skewness, the interpretation of a measurement based on a logged ratio is appealing, since change is not defined by the absolute difference between the counts of pro- and anti-nuclear positions, but by their *ratio*. In the measurement outlined in equation (1) the marginal effect of a single piece of rhetoric *decreases* with the number of statements already publicly made on the issue of nuclear energy. This is a particularly interesting side effect that fits very well with psychological literature on how human beings interpret written text and messages in general (Lowe *et al.* 2011: 130–32).

Modelling specifications

Since the dependent variable (policy outputs) is binary, I run logistic regression models to estimate the congruence between party rhetoric and their policy efforts. Thus, I estimate the probability for each party_{*i*} to deliver a congruent policy output as:

$$P_i = \frac{e^{x_i\beta}}{1 + e^{x_i\beta}} \quad (2)$$

As suggested in equation (1), party positions prior to the policy events are nested into the latter. For example, if parliament voted to phase out nuclear energy, this parliamentary vote cannot be counted as a single party activity: *all* parties represented in the chamber participated in this activity. This results in as many observations as there are parties in the chamber clustered into a single activity. Therefore, the analysis includes in total 76 party positions nested into 54 policy outputs. Running standard logistic regressions that ignore the nested structure of the data would result in erroneous estimates and overconfident standard errors. Thus, I estimate equation (2) using clustered standard errors by each substantive policy decision covered in the data.

The operationalisation of the independent variables is straightforward. Incumbent parties are measured using a dummy, which is '1' if a party is in government and '0' otherwise. Several controls are included in the analysis as well: Green parties are measured using a dummy variable. Green parties might be especially active in drafting policy outputs on nuclear energy. Also larger parties might have a greater influence on policy-making. Therefore, I control for party size measured as the percentage of seats a party currently holds in the national parliament. Higher salience of the nuclear energy issue might force parties to deliver more policy to ensure their re-election. Similar to previous studies by Lax and Phillips (2009, 2012) I used the logged number of media stories about nuclear energy in each country to measure the salience of the nuclear energy issue.⁸

I conduct several robustness tests to illustrate the robustness of my findings. First, including country fixed effects in the models leads to a perfect prediction of the dependent variable. Thus, I decided not to include country fixed effects in the main models. Notice, however, that the reported findings are robust with respect to using country fixed effects (reported in the online appendix). To estimate such a fully specified model I used OLS regression, which lately has been shown to produce consistent estimates for binary dependent variables in many applications (Beck 2011, 2015). Second, the pooled findings might be driven by a few specific observations included in the analysis. Thus, as suggested above, some of the party activities included in the policy-making variable are less binding than others. I re-estimated all models excluding one policy event at a time (jackknife 1-delete) (Efron and Gong 1983; Wu 1986).

Results

Table 1 reports the findings from the modelling specifications outlined above. Model (1) is a baseline model. The second model introduces the main independent variables and controls. Model (3) tests the conditional effect of incumbency. The last model reports the jackknife robustness test.

It becomes evident that throughout all models parties' rhetorical positions are congruent with their policy outputs. Thus, there appears to be a highly significant positive effect of parties' rhetorical activities. This essentially means that the more anti-nuclear a party's rhetorical position is, the more likely the party is to present a policy output which is in line with its rhetorical position. Thus, *ceteris paribus* hypothesis one – that parties are likely to deliver political decisions which are congruent to their rhetorical activities – is confirmed by all estimated models. The remaining covariates are in line with the theoretical expectations, but fail to reach statistical significance.

The upper graph in Figure 1 provides a graphical interpretation of the key finding that parties appear to talk like they walk. If parties move two standard deviations from a strong pro-nuclear position (−2.2) to a mean position (0.08) position to a strong anti-nuclear position (2.4), the predicted probabilities of delivering an anti-nuclear policy output increase from 16% to 76% to 98%. The figure also shows that parties with a pro-nuclear position of more than −2.3 are not likely to draft an anti-nuclear proposal at all. Yet the slope of the probability curve becomes very steep as soon as parties have a nuclear position of −2.2 or more. The black markers report the positions of parties which drafted anti-nuclear policy proposals, while the grey markers report the positions of

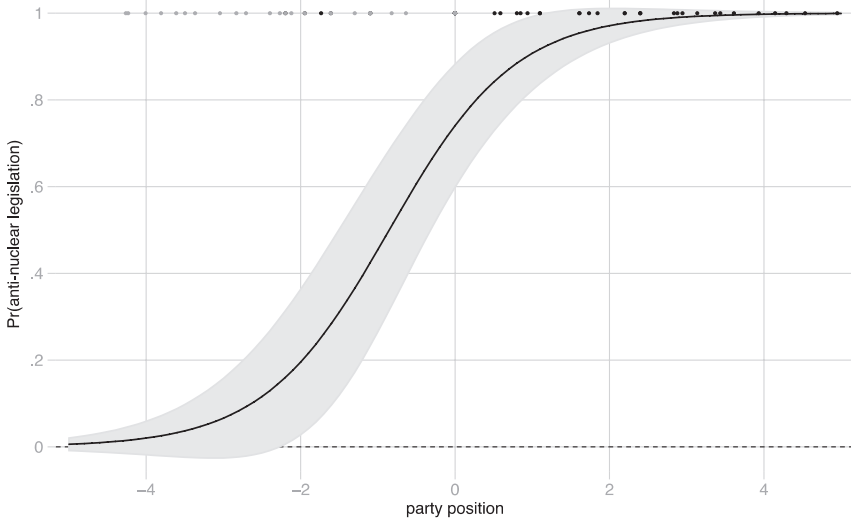
Table 1. Do parties propose legislation in line with their rhetoric? Yes.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Baseline	Controls	× Incumbent	Jackknife
Party position	1.232*** (0.258)	1.026*** (0.259)	1.758** (0.582)	1.026*** (0.295)
Incumbent		0.295 (0.857)	−0.227 (0.961)	0.295 (0.969)
Green		1.578 (1.294)	1.325 (1.445)	1.578 (0.913)
% seats		−0.00518 (0.004)	−0.00444 (0.004)	−0.00518 (0.006)
Salience		0.101 (0.355)	0.146 (0.355)	0.101 (0.470)
Incumbent × party position			−0.944 (0.657)	
Constant	1.050 (0.377)	0.574 (1.422)	0.687 (1.462)	0.574 (1.913)
χ^2	22.75	25.34	23.17	
Pseudo R^2	0.453	0.507	0.520	0.507
N	76	76	76	76

Note: Clustered standard errors by policy output in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Predicted probabilities of an anti-nuclear policy output



Cluster jackknifed models

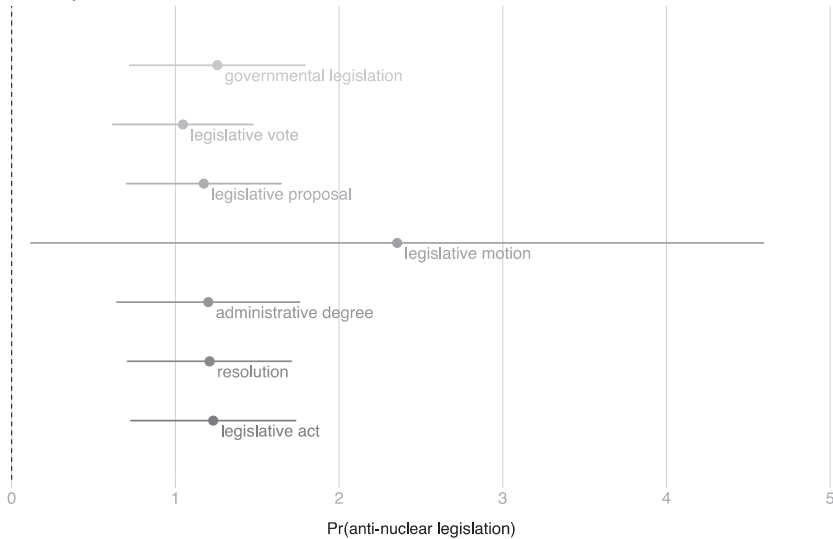


Figure 1. Adjusted predictions and jackknifing clusters.

Note: The upper figure is based on the results reported in model (1) Table 1 and reports adjusted predictions for the party position variable surrounded by 95% confidence interval. The lower figure uses the same model as reported in model (1) Table 1 but drops the respective events used as label for each marker and reports the coefficients surrounded by 95% confidence intervals.

Source: Author's own.

parties which drafted pro-nuclear policy proposals. Only very few cases exist in which parties expressed a pro-nuclear stance and developed anti-nuclear policy outputs – or vice versa. In total, parties' rhetorical positions are only at odds with their policy outputs in 6 out of 76 possible cases (7.89%).

The third model in Table 1 tests the ‘incumbency hypothesis’ by means of an interaction effect between incumbency and parties’ rhetorical position. The interaction is not significant on conventional statistical levels. Thus, the ‘incumbency hypothesis’ is rejected by the models estimated here. In fact, incumbent parties appear to be less likely to deliver policy outputs in line with their rhetoric. While previous research suggests that opposition parties are freer to manoeuvre their issue agendas (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Vliegenthart *et al.* 2011), I do not find such an effect for the relationship between their rhetoric and their policy outputs. I also estimated interaction models with the remaining independent variables, but I did not find any significant conditional effect of any of those variables. In line with the theoretical suggestions made above, green parties tend to deliver more anti-nuclear policy outputs, but this effect is not statistically significant across models (1)–(4). This finding is interesting as it shows that in general issue owners do not seem to be more likely to deliver on their core issues than other parties (Petrocik 1996; Walgrave *et al.* 2009).⁹

I conducted several robustness tests to further substantiate the findings. First, I jackknifed my models by dropping each observation once and then ‘pooling’ the estimates. Model (4) in Table 1 reports the findings of the jackknife models. They largely correspond to the findings discussed above. Notice, however, the change of the size of the standard errors compared to model (2). Interestingly, after jackknifing each policy output the green party dummy reaches significance at the 10% level.

Second, as discussed in the last section some of the events included as policy outputs are more binding than others and therefore result in a stronger commitment to party members and voters. Furthermore, not all parties enjoy the same access to legislative outputs. In fact, opposition parties rarely have the possibility to draft legislative acts. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that parties’ congruence between rhetoric and policy might vary across the different events included in the dependent variable. Thus, similar to the jackknife-1 model discussed above, I deleted each cluster of events from the dependent variable and re-estimated the models. The graph at the bottom of Figure 1 reports the coefficients of the party position variable. Each marker reports the findings of one model and the labels report the events omitted on each occasion from the estimation, omitting all other control variables from the graph. The findings of the seven models reported in the figure suggest that in all instances the results do not differ between the events included in the policy output measure. Yet the confidence interval for legislative motions is comparably large and the point estimate suggests a higher congruence between party rhetoric and anti-nuclear motions. However, the uncertainty of this estimate is driven by the fact that 40.8% of the events included are legislative motions (sampling variability). Thus, excluding motions leads to an enormous decrease in the sample size used for the estimation. Notice that each model reports a statistically significant and

positive coefficient for parties' rhetorical positions. This finding shows that the results are not driven by parties' access to legislative acts.

Third, I estimate models that control for the sum of all statements made by each party on nuclear energy prior to drafting policy. This measure captures the salience of the nuclear issue for each party included in the analysis. The importance of the nuclear issue varies across the parties included in the analysis, but including such a measure does not change the findings reported here (see model (3) Table A1 in the online appendix).

Fourth, whether parties feel pressured to deliver on their rhetoric could also depend on the relevance of nuclear energy for energy maintenance within a country. Yet controlling for the share of nuclear usage within each country again does not change the interpretation of the findings discussed here (see model (4) Table A1 in the online appendix).¹⁰

Finally, the timing of the policy outputs varies. Thus, some outputs happened shortly after Fukushima (minimum three days) while others happened months after the accident. Hence, some parties enjoyed more time to draft and develop their proposals and rhetoric. To control for this fact, I subtracted the date of the Fukushima accident from the date of the policy output. Yet again, the findings remain robust to the inclusion of this variable (see model (5) Table A1 in the online appendix).

In summary, the results provide strong evidence that parties across the board 'walk like they talk' in the case of nuclear energy studied here. The positions parties share in the media are in line with their policy outputs. This finding adds nuance to the growing literature on the responsibility mechanism of incumbent parties.

Conclusion

This article aims to understand whether party rhetoric – here understood as public expressions in the media – is congruent to the policy outputs parties deliver. Theoretically, I suggest that political parties face strong incentives to follow up on their rhetoric. Parties have an interest to develop relatively stable policy positions to suggest reliability and responsibility to the public (Downs 1957: 55–60; Strøm 1990: 573). While 'flip-flopping' positions might attract voters in the short term, it will be a costly strategy in the long term. Thus, voters are understood to reward parties that deliver policies which are in line with their rhetoric.

I use data collected by the ResponsiveGov project on nuclear energy after the Fukushima accident and construct a measure of parties' policy outputs – e.g. legislative votes, legislative motions or bills – and the positions they presented in the media *prior* to the policy output. Running logistic regression analyses on 54 of such policy outputs, I find strong evidence that parties deliver policy outputs

which are in line with their rhetoric. Parties overwhelmingly follow up their rhetoric with congruent policy outputs. Party rhetoric is incongruent to policy outputs in only 7.89% of the cases analysed in this study. It appears also that this finding is not conditioned by party-specific factors such as incumbency.

Yet more research is needed to further substantiate these findings. First, as highlighted throughout the article, nuclear energy is a conservative test to study the congruence between party rhetoric and policy outputs, since the salience of the topic depends heavily on dramatic events – such as the accident at the Fukushima plant. Therefore, parties have a strategic incentive to talk in line with the public sentiment during highly salient periods, but refrain from drafting policy outputs which are in line with their rhetoric after the short-term increase in public interest has levelled off. Yet this sensational element of nuclear energy also makes it a difficult point of comparison for other issues. Parties might behave differently once we analyse economic issues, for instance. On such issues parties might be more prone to be outspoken on the matter, but also to ‘flip-flop’ their positions across time. However, given the issue characteristics of nuclear energy discussed in this article, it appears unlikely that parties would be more inclined not to ‘walk like they talk’ on economic issues. If parties deliver congruent policy to their rhetoric on less salient issues such as nuclear energy, they should be even more likely to do so on highly salient topics given the increased audience cost. Second, however, how parties can sell the congruence between their rhetoric and policy could also depend on the issues we study. In the case of nuclear energy, I looked into the plans to keep or stop using nuclear reactors. Such policy decisions should be easier to understand for voters (phasing out nuclear energy vs. continuation of nuclear power production). In more complex and bureaucratic policies, such as tax policies, parties enjoy more freedom to sell their policies as standing in line with their rhetoric. Third, the article and its analysis do not attempt to estimate a causal effect between party rhetoric and policy outputs. The article aims to understand the correlations between rhetoric and policy. Yet, in the future, researchers might be interested in whether policy pledges in party rhetoric themselves lead to policy output.

My findings have important implications for our understanding of modern democracy. Given that parties increasingly communicate their positions via classical media outlets and social media, voters are ever more confronted by party rhetoric. While the literature of pledge fulfilment is central to the study of politics and emphasises that in most instances parties deliver on their promises (Thomson *et al.* 2017), so far we know little about how parties talk and walk between elections. My results suggest that in some instances voters can trust in party rhetoric shared via the media as a credible source on a party’s position. For the nuclear energy issue studied here, it appears that parties will rarely say one thing but subsequently do another. This is good news for democracy. Voters need to judge politicians by their words and promises. My findings at

least challenge the frequently heard allegation that politicians say one thing and then do another. As such, the anecdotal evidence about politicians not following through on what they say might be subject to a public confirmation bias: we often seek to blame parties for not delivering policy while neglecting the fact that parties frequently might ‘walk like they talk’.

Notes

1. While using the term ‘rhetoric’ throughout the manuscript, I want to emphasise that rhetoric is here not understood as a pure means of attention seeking. In contrast, in the very classical interpretation of the term, I understand rhetoric to be a means by which speakers/authors strive to inform and persuade their audience. Rhetoric, thus, is understood as having audience costs (Fearon 1997).
2. The countries studied are Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States of America.
3. Reliability of coding is high, with Krippendorff’s Alpha being 0.88 for the major variables used in this article. Reliability was judged by asking all coders to code the same sample of newswires. Care was taken to ensure that prior knowledge of the case was not affecting the reliability scores. To ensure this, all coders had to code the same sample of newswires in English for India.
4. To be precise, in the case of Italy, the government withdrew its plan to reinstate nuclear energy.
5. Given that data collection ultimately ends once a government decides to phase out nuclear energy, protest mobilisation can hardly depend on these policy decisions undertaken by governments. This provides the advantage that protest mobilisation is not endogenous to parties’ policy decisions, but shows protesters’ dissatisfaction with the status quo of the policy.
6. In the article I aim to approximate parties’ positions between elections. Therefore, the measure includes a range of channels which parties potentially can use to share their positions. The overwhelming majority of positions analysed here are shared via the media – e.g. interviews/statements to the press. Notice, however, that statements made in parliamentary debates are also included in the analysis. Notice also that the results reported in the analysis remain the same if I only include statements mediated through the press.
7. $\text{Log}(0)$ is undefined. Therefore I chose to introduce ‘0.5’ into equation (1) – as other scholars did as well (e.g. Lowe *et al.* 2011). This ensures that in case a party did not talk at all, it is not undefined in the measurement but represents the middle of the scale with zero.
8. Notice that the results are robust if using public opinion measures for salience. I re-estimated the models using the answer ‘environment’ for the ‘most important issue’ question in each country. The advantage of the measure employed here is that the media salience (a) gets hold of the short-term shifts of the topical salience and (b) the answer category ‘environment’ not only covers the issue of nuclear energy but all kinds of environmental concerns.
9. Note, however, that green parties frequently lack the access to deliver and push for legislation in the cases analysed here.
10. To measure the nuclear usage in each country, I rely on the data provided by the World Nuclear Association <https://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/facts-and-figures/nuclear-generation-by-country.aspx>.

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