FACETS OF POLITICAL REPRESENTATION: SOCIAL POLICY IN AUSTRIA

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SOCIAL POLICY IN AUSTRIA

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Preface

This paper is the framework paper for my dissertation entitled Facets of Political Representation: Social Policy in Austria. It provides research agenda, main arguments and methodological as well as empirical foundation of the five papers. All contributions are attached in the appendix.


1. Introduction

Political representation in democracies is, has been and will be subject of vivid discussions. This is hardly surprising, since democratic political representation undertake the difficult task of translating citizens’ preferences into general rules, laws, and entitlements. This process of translation is shaped by the performance of two interfaces: the *interface between voters and representatives* (mediated by elections) on the one hand, and the *interface between representatives and policy output/outcome* (mediated by institutions) on the other hand (see figure 1). Or to put it differently, citizens preferences do not directly influence policy output and outcome but are mediated by representative bodies.

*Figure 1: Ideal process of political representation in democracies.*

This, at first glance, banal observation opens the room for the following two fascinating questions: (1) How do citizens and their representation fit together? (2) How does the composition of representative bodies influence the policy output and outcome? Answering these questions will ultimately contribute to discover how well the will of the electorate is or can be implemented.

Recently the increasing differentiation of policy fields combined with the weakening bond between parties and their electorate further complicate the process of political representation. As we argue in one of my contributions (*paper IV*) social policy is a policy field that is particularly affected by differentiation. Due to new social risks (such as reduced stability of family and career patterns) and changing norms and attitudes in society (such as changing gender norms) social policy is faced with diversification. In recent years social policy reforms are structured along the social consumption (or social protection) and social investment dimension. While social consumption policies are designed to compensate old social risks (such as poverty in old age), social investment
policies answer the growing demands of people affected by new social risks (Gingrich & Ansell, 2015; Hemerijck, 2018; Huber & Stephens, 2015; Neimanns et al., 2018). The results of our analysis of subnational social policy spendings (paper II) show that social investment expenses nowadays exceed social consumption spending in most Austrian states. This finding emphasizes the increasing importance of new social risks.

Social policy is not only faced with high diversification, but additionally organized in multi layered systems in most countries. In Austria, this means that subnational units are responsible for important areas of social policy, such as family policy, education policy, health policy, long-term care or poverty policy (Greer & Elliott, 2019). As a result, it is not sufficient to analyze the effects of political representation on social policies on the national level (Greer et al., 2015). And indeed, the empirical results of paper I show that most variance between childcare outcome in Austrian municipalities can be found on the municipal level and not on the state level, or federal level.

Based on the results of my research answers to both research questions raised at the beginning can be provided. The first question can be answered based on the results of papers III, IV and V. First, we see that average characteristics of political representation on the municipal, state, and federal level differ greatly, although they are elected by one and the same electorate (paper III). Results further suggest large differences in perceived importance of social policy topics between voters and representatives (paper IV). Further, the personal characteristics of voters and representation differ (paper V). Therefore, the answer to the first question is that voters and representation do not match up very well (see interface 1 in figure 2).

Figure 2: Observed process of political representation in Austria.

The second question is if and how the composition of representative bodies influence the policy output and outcome. The results of paper I and II show that party balance and gender balance do affect social policy output and outcome. This suggests that the composition of representative bodies
(descriptive representation) indeed influences policy output and outcome (substantive representation). In other words, the second interface of political representation in Austria works as suggested by theoretical considerations and prior empirical results: descriptive representation does affect substantive representation of social policy. In sum the results suggest that the translation of citizens preferences into general rules, laws, and entitlements is mostly hampered by the misfit of citizens and their representative bodies (see figure 2).

Considering these results and the underlying process of differentiation of policy fields combined with the weakening bond between parties and their electorate the process of political representation gains increasing relevance. Whether and how this process could be improved is a question that cannot be answered in the context of this dissertation. Notwithstanding, the results point out that we should improve the current process of political representation to address the inaccuracies arising because of our current process of translating citizens preferences into general rules, laws, and entitlements. Suggestions for better solutions might range from scaling decisions down to a more local level, increasing the options and use of the instruments of direct democracy or politicians that pursue policies based on results of representative survey research among citizens.

2. Theory and State of Research

The theoretical framework for my cumulative dissertation project unites considerations found in three different strands of literature: literature on Federalism, on Political Representation and on the Welfare State. Each of these strands provides important theoretical arguments and empirical results that contribute to study the role of (subnational) political representation in social policy. The contributions overlook the whole process of representation in democracies, including voters (democratic representation), representatives (descriptive representation) and outcome/output (substantive representation). As part of this process the transition between democratic and descriptive representation (interface 1) on the one hand, and the transition between descriptive and substantive representation (interface 2) are of central importance. Chapter 2.1 discusses interface 1 and hence gives an overview of how to measure congruence between voters and representatives. Chapter 2.2 discusses interface 2, giving an overview of the literature engaging with the link between descriptive and substantive representation. Chapter 2.3 focuses on the subnational aspect of political representation in the welfare state, and chapter 2.4 provides detailed information about the case of Austria.

2.1. Congruence of Voters and Representatives

The congruence of voters and representatives (interface 1) can be measured in multiple ways. Two of them have been used within this cumulative dissertation and will briefly be introduced in this
section. In the first approach, the average socioeconomic characteristics of electorate and representative bodies are compared (see paper V). These characteristics include variables like for example age, gender and (formal) education. Empirical results of previous studies show that politicians are older (e.g., Quintelier, 2007), more often male (e.g., Fox & Lawless, 2004) and have a higher (formal) education (e.g., Berinsky & Lenz, 2011) than the average citizen. The results of paper V show significant differences between the average socioeconomic characteristics of voters and representatives.

The second approach used to measure the congruence of voters and representatives is to compare the interests of both groups (see paper IV). The three predominant strategies comparing interest congruence of electorates and representative bodies are: the comparison of issue salience (Häusermann & Kriesi, 2015; Pinggera, 2020; Traber et al., 2018), the comparison of issue positions (Anderweg, 2012; Busemeyer et al., 2021; Fossati & Häusermann, 2014) and the analysis of opinion-policy responsiveness (Adams et al., 2014; Grewenig et al., 2020; Klüver & Spoon, 2016; Pedersen, 2020). The results of paper IV show large differences in perceived importance (issue salience) of social policy topics between voters and representatives.

In addition to these two approaches measuring the congruence of voters and representatives I introduced the concept of vertical differences of representative bodies within federations (see paper III). This concept captures the differences between the levels of federal representation. It appears that the average federal, state, and municipal representative bodies differ greatly in terms of party affiliation and gender balance. These differences are mostly surprising because all of these federal levels are elected by one and the same electorate, pointing out that gender and party characteristics might not, or only partly be influenced by voters’ decisions.

2.2. Effects of Descriptive Representation on the Welfare State

As discussed in chapter 2.1 there is a lack of fit between voters and representation (see interface 1 in figure 2). Concerning interface 2 the link between descriptive and substantive representation is of interest (see figure 1 and 2). To what degree does the composition of representative bodies influence the policy output and outcome? This question has been studied for many years (Childs, 2006; Dovi, 2002; Mansbridge, 1999; Phillips, 1995; Williams, 1998). Predominantly, the presence of women in representative bodies has been a well-studied topic. The impact of female representation is a quite dynamic question that only came up less than fifty years ago in the shadow of the growing debate about the equality between men and women and about female emancipation (see e.g., Camp, 1979; Costantini & Craik, 1972; Mezey, 1978). The increase of women’s share in political office is an ongoing process, because until today equality between men and women in political representation has not been achieved.
It seems that social policy is one of the policy fields especially affected by the share of women in political institutions. Research about the impact of women in political representation on social policy often starts from the premise that a higher level of female representation comes along with more generous welfare state spending and benefit generosity (Bolzendahl, 2011; Bonoli & Reber, 2010). As recent research on the topic demonstrates (Elsässer & Schäfer, 2018; Ennser-Jedenastik, 2017) there is evidence for the fact that a higher share of female political representation mainly encourages public service provision while it is not leading to higher family cash benefits. The underlying reason for this finding is likely to be that public service provision is more effective in enabling the reconciliation of paid employment and family life than cash benefits. Many authors though question the homogeneity of political interests among women around the world and the resulting differences of substantive representation (see e.g., Davidson-Schmich, 2011; Palaguta, 2020). The results of paper I show that the presence of women in political representation indeed makes a difference and further provides evidence for the argument that political interests among women are not homogenous.

Beside the influence of gender in political representation, party balances in representative bodies have been of central importance since Hibbs (1977). While some studies try to show that party politics still got a relevant impact, others argue that party politics is no longer relevant for the political outcome and output. In light of this, a couple of different schools of thought have challenged the parties-matter-hypothesis. An important example is the new-politics-of-the-welfare-state-approach by Pierson (1995, 2001) concluding that party politics are no longer relevant for social policy reforms and arguing that institutional, content-related, and power-political factors are more influential than the socioeconomic situation.

Regardless, there were and still are empirically robust links between party politics and social policy. A very persistent claim is the positive correlation between a high share of classical left-wing parties in parliaments, cabinets or councils and corresponding higher spending, output, and outcome in the field of welfare and social policy. Kittilson (2008) analyzed 19 democracies and found that a higher share of left party power in the cabinets comes along with a higher probability for the adoption of leave policies. Busemeyer and Seitzl (2018) found a positive correlation between left-wing partisanship and early childhood education spending. Likewise, others found that left parties in power come along with a higher provision of childcare (Andronescu & Carnes, 2015; Mosimann & Giger, 2008). Generally, there is broad evidence for the notion that changes in social policy are not the product of random patterns or superordinate directives coming from transnational political units like the European Union. They are rather connected to the specific descriptive political representation in a given territory.
Like for the effect of women in representation a meta-analysis by Bandau and Ahrens (2020) identifies more pronounced partisan effects on entitlements than on social spending. The results of my contributions reveal significant effects of partisan composition in representative bodies on entitlements as well as on social spending: The results of paper I show a positive correlation between a higher share of left-wing council members and a higher share of children in public childcare. In paper II we found that the cabinet share of Social-Democrats increases social investment spending.

2.3. The Subnational Welfare State

Some authors argue that the subnational level of the welfare state becomes more and more important. Kazepov (2008, 2017) for example assumes that social changes like aging of the population, decreasing fertility rates and instability of family arrangements undermine the functioning of national welfare institutions. He states the 1970s to be the starting point of the rescaling-process. Likewise, Loughlin (2014) diagnoses that welfare states have become much more complex while subnational authorities are less centrally regulated than some decades ago. Nevertheless, social policy is still mainly analyzed on the national level and based on county comparison. One reason for the strong impact of this so called “methodological nationalism” in welfare state research is the persisting claim of macro-comparative approaches that decentralization promotes welfare state decline, while centralization promotes welfare state growth (Greer et al., 2015). Béland and Lecours (2010) show that one should not expect a “race to the bottom” as reaction to welfare state decentralization, but on the contrary they assume an increasing pressure for social policy expansion. Generally, methodological nationalism is more and more subject to criticism, especially concerning the analysis of social investment policies that are mainly financed and implemented subnationally (Ciccia & Javornik, 2019; Daigneault et al., 2021; Greer et al., 2015).

For the analysis of federal states like Austria, Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, Canada, or the USA but also of countries with a relatively high degree of regional authority in social policy, like Italy, Spain, Japan, or the UK the subnational approach can be especially fruitful. In line with this argument studies have shown big subnational differences in the field of social policy (see e.g., Baierl & Kaindl, 2011; Lichtblau & Smarzcz, 2010). A wide range of reasons have been argued and tested in order to explain subnational differences in welfare state spending and provision. Mätzke (2019) found strong and persisting differences for childcare provision between the east and the west of Germany which can be explained by the post-socialist history of the country combined with the predominating norms of subsidiarity and decentralized policymaking prerogatives. Other research reveals the effect of party politics as one of the main influential variables (see e.g.,
Andronescu & Carnes, 2015; Busemeyer & Seitzl, 2018; Mosimann & Giger, 2008). Further explanatory factors discussed in literature are female representation (see e.g. Goerres & Tepe, 2013), religiosity (see e.g., Jæger, 2019), economic factors (see e.g., Da Roit et al., 2019) and the influence of critical actors (see e.g., Blum, 2015).

Although it is necessary to avoid methodological nationalism when analyzing social policy developments, it is equally important to avoid strictly applied methodological subnationalism. This means to accept all federal and supra-federal levels as part of the complex determination structure of social policy development (Garritzmann et al., 2021; Kleider et al., 2018). Taking this argument into account, the empirical analysis of this dissertation project is based on national-, state-, as well as municipal data.

2.4. Austrian Federalism

Most contributions dealing with the exploration of the Austrian federal system describe it to be weaker and much more centralized than in other comparable federations (see e.g. Obinger et al., 2005). This judgement is based on several arguments. First, on the historical evolution of the Austrian federation, which did not evolve out of joint bottom-up decisions of the states to build a federation (like in Germany for example) but was a top-down judgment after the first world war. Second, there was vivid discussion about (de)centralization going on between the two biggest parties from the very beginning of the Austrian federal state. While the Social Democratic party (SPÖ) opted for a more centralized state, the Austrian People’s party (ÖVP) wanted higher independence for the regional and local political level. Third, some aspects of the Austrian institutional structure indicate a very low regional authority. The most eye-catching example might be the weakness of the second chamber (see e.g. Bischof & Karlhofer, 2016; Behnke et al., 2019). Despite this apparent weakness of the Austrian federal system many contrasting arguments can be found. Karlhofer (2013) for example argues that there has to be a reason why so far, all attempts for more centralization have failed, even though the subnational units have no formal possibility to counteract centralization. Like Fallend (2003), Karlhofer argues that while in Austria the legislative competences of subnational units are quite weak, the executive and administrative competences of states and municipalities are extensive. Strohner (2015) finds empirical evidence for this argument in the fields of health, social welfare, and education. He finds a low local tax and legislation autonomy on the one hand, but a high responsibility for expenditure and executive authority on the other hand.
3. Research Strategy

A wide range of different data sources are used for this dissertation project that have partly been collected using web scraping methods (paper I and V). Results have been visualized using geo-visualization methods and shapefiles provided by Statistics Austria (paper I, III). The data was analyzed using multilevel modelling (paper I), time-series cross-sectional analysis (paper II) and logistic regression analysis (paper V).

3.1. Data

For the empirical sections four different types of data were used. First, I use representation and outcome data on a municipal level (paper I, III). Second, I use representation and output data on a federal state level (paper II). Third, I use survey data (paper IV, V), and fourth, I used party manifesto data (paper IV). The sources for these different types of datasets are Statistics Austria, the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES), the Local State Society Relations Survey (in cooperation with researchers from other European countries) and several subnational official bodies (e.g., statistics units of Austrian states).

The process of data collection is one of the central topics of this dissertation project. To answer the research questions of most of my articles, no suitable data was available in the beginning, which made it necessary to collect relevant information and create new datasets. Information about the regional and local policy outcome, but especially information about the municipal political representation structure in Austria have not yet been collected in full or structured within one dataset. The new datasets (used for paper I, II and III) comprise yearly measures for social spending and political representation on state level for the years 1990 to 2018, and yearly data for childcare outcome and political representation on municipal level for the years 2003 to 2018.

Further, the datasets contain several socioeconomic indicators such as employment rate, debts, and the numbers of inhabitants. Web Scraping methods using R have been applied to cover a broad period of time and the whole Austrian territory (9 states, 2095 municipalities – as of 2021). The resulting dataset for the municipal level was supplemented by a codebook and a documentation as well as a report volume and has been published in the Austrian Social Science Data Archive (Walenta-Bergmann, 2023). Following this overview, three variables that are included in the datasets will be introduced: the party affiliation of the Austrian mayors, the gender of Austrian mayors, and the share of women in the parliaments of the nine Austrian states.

As figure 3 shows, local party representation structure in Austria is very different from the representation structure found at the national and the federal states level. First, because not only historically but also today the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) holds much more than 50 % of all
mayor positions. In 2018, 58.8% (1233 of 2096) Austrian municipalities are led by a member of the ÖVP. In the same year, 22% (462 mayors) are affiliated with the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ), only 1.8% (37 mayors) are members of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and 17.4% (365 mayors) are not officially associated with a political party.

Figure 3: Overview of the party affiliations of the 2096 Austrian mayors in 2018.

Notes: Figure taken from paper I. Illustration based on data from the statistics units of the Austrian states.

It is important to note though, that the political independence of those 365 mayors cannot be claimed with certainty. The main reason for this obscurity is the bad availability of information regarding the partisanship of local politicians. Especially in the west of Austria, mainly in Tyrol, there is a lack of information, because in these areas there is no legal requirement to be affiliated with a specific party for people in order to compete in the elections. Therefore, it is quite plausible that the number of truly independent mayors as much lower than 365 in 2018.

Beside party affiliation of Austrian mayors and numerous other party-related variables also the gender structure of the political representation is of central interest for my analyses. One of these gender variables of interest is the gender of mayors in Austria. Only 206 out of 2093 (as of 2022), and hence less than ten percent of the mayors are female (see figure 4). At national level the share of women in political representation is much higher, since for example in 2023, 39.34% (72 of 183 deputies) of the national parliament are women.
Figure 4: Overview of male and female mayors in 2022.

Notes: Figure taken from paper I (updated for 2022). Illustration based on data from the Austrian “Gemeindebund”. Municipalities with male mayors in grey color and those with female mayors in white color.

Another gender variable is the share of women in the parliaments of the nine Austrian states. The share of women in the parliaments is rising over time: In 2020 the share of women was on average 34% while in 1990 only 13% of the members of parliament have been women (see figure 5). Similar as in the party affiliation variable, also the figure for gender of mayors, as well as the share for women in federal parliaments demonstrate notable differences between national and subnational representation structure in Austria. This extract of the data I used for my analyses illustrates how big the differences between the municipal-, states, and national representation structure are and thus provides a very strong argument not to limit empirical analysis to specificities of the national political representation, but to take all levels of federal representation into account.
Figure 5: Share of women in the parliaments of the nine Austrian states.

Notes: Figure taken from paper III. Illustration based on data from the parliament websites of the Austrian states.

3.2. Methods

Various quantitative methods were used for the empirical analyses of my contributions. The most central have been multilevel modelling (paper I), time-series cross-sectional analysis (paper II) and logistic regression analysis (paper V). With these methods it was possible to estimate coefficients that help to answer the research questions.

Multilevel Modeling (see also “Hierarchical Regression Modelling” or “Mixed Effects Modelling”) has been used to estimate the coefficients for paper I. It is a powerful methodological approach for the analysis of large-N samples. It is an advancement of the variance analysis and linear regression, which enables the researcher to analyze more than one level. The additional levels might for example be time or any geographical unit such as states or municipalities. From a technical perspective it is adequate to use Multilevel Modelling for clustered data and longitudinal data (Stadelmann-Steffen & Bühlmann, 2008; Tiemann, 2009). As my data fulfils both properties, this approach is appropriate.

Time-Series Cross-Sectional (TSCS) analysis has been used to estimate the coefficients for paper II. It is the second method I chose to simultaneously integrate data of different timepoints and different analytical units into one model. Compared with Multilevel Modelling, TSCS Analysis
has big advantages for data containing only a small number of analytical units. Therefore, the main reason to choose such a model is to increase the empirical saturation of the analysis (e.g., Beck and Katz, 1995; Plumper et al., 2005; Tiemann, 2009). As paper II is based on a dataset containing yearly measures (1991 to 2019) for the nine Austrian states TSCS regression is a suitable method. Logistic regression has been used to estimate the coefficients for paper IV. Unlike the two other methods ‘Logistic Regression Analysis’ is not a tool to analyze datasets that contains information for different timepoints (time-series or panel data). LR analysis is a method, that allows to estimate the distribution of a binary dependent variable for specific values of the independent variables (Backhaus et al., 2021). In other words, while most regression techniques require a continues outcome variable (For example share of children in public childcare, or public spending were used in other contributions) logistic regression allows categorical outcome variables (like gender for example). Logistic regression further allows multiple continuous and/or categorical variables (Field et al., 2012). This special feature is indispensable for the analysis of my paper V, because I was interested to find the differences between individuals that are part of the political representation and individuals that are not.

Beside these three methods from the family of regression analysis I used Web-Scraping for the purpose of data collection, and Geo-Visualization for creating figures. Also, Felix Wohlgemuth and I developed a method to estimate the party-voter issue salience congruence (see paper IV).

4. Main Takeaways

In addition to many much more detailed results (see contributions attached) there are three main takeaways I want to emphasize: First, in federations the level of analysis must be chosen more carefully when analyzing the effects of political representation. On the one hand because subnational analysis increases conceptual accuracy (which federal level is responsible for a specific policy issue?), and on the other hand because it massively expands the methodological possibilities (e.g., by interaction effects) due to the increasing units of analysis. Second, the results of my contributions overall show that the ideological and socioeconomic structure of representative bodies are a relevant predictor for political output and outcome. Third and finally, I found substantial differences between electorate and political representation that we need to pay more attention to if the political system of representative democracies shall be advanced.

Combining these findings helps to understand the relation between input, composition, and output aspects of (federal) political representation (in the field of social policy) and encourages to further engage with the complexity of the field that arises from the multidimensional determinants being at work in political decision-making of representative democracies.
5. Conclusion and Discussion

The aim of this framework paper was to provide an overview of my cumulative dissertation project. This project consists of five independent articles, two of which written in co-authorship and three written alone. Starting from the notion that political scientists tend to analyze the effect of descriptive representation on substantive representation on the national level, even though in many cases this is not the adequate level of analysis, my dissertation developed into a substantial contribution to various aspects of federal political representation. In some areas of Austrian social policy, subnational political representation is more in charge to decide than the national political representation. *Paper I and II* developed from this consideration.

In *paper I*, I analyzed the effect of local political representation on family policy, more precisely the childcare outcome in Austrian municipalities. The empirical analysis reveals significant effects of gender and partisan dimension in municipal representation on childcare outcome, as well as an interaction effect between those dimensions. In *paper II* Tobias Wiß and I engaged in analyzing social policy spending in the Austrian states. We found that the cabinet share of the Social Democratic party (SPÖ) increases social investment spending, while a higher share of Austrian People’s party (ÖVP) members decreases it, and a higher share of Freedom Party (FPÖ) in government reduce expenses for social consumption. The results of *paper I and II* overall show that the ideological and socioeconomic structure of representative bodies are a relevant predictor for political output and outcome.

Additionally, the results of *paper III* revealed that it is by far not irrelevant which federal level is analyzed. I did not only find some, but huge differences between the political representation on the national and subnational levels in Austria. Representation differs both in terms of party shares, and in terms of gender balance. This finding – especially in its magnitude – was surprising and led me to further investigate the fit between citizens and political representation. In *paper IV* Felix Wohlgemuth and I tried to find out how the issue salience of voters and parties fit concerning social policy issues. Overall, we found that voters emphasize different social policy areas than their parties, but the total standardized issue salience congruence for family policy, job/employment and pensions is slightly increasing between 2009 and 2019. In *paper V* I engaged in finding evidence for another aspect of the fit between voters and political representation. Based on questionnaires I compared elected politicians and all other members of local state-society networks and found significant differences regarding political ideology, education, general trust, and the perception of autonomy.

My contributions engaging with democratic, descriptive as well as substantive representation in Austria and beyond discover how well the will of the electorate is or can be implemented. This
comprehensive approach ultimately helps to improve the fit between citizens and the political and social order they live in. On the one hand, the results of my cumulative dissertation project suggest that the translation of citizens’ preferences into general rules, laws, and entitlements is mostly hampered by the misfit between citizens and their representative bodies. The descriptive characteristics of political representation, on the other hand, can be translated quite well into substantive differences. This becomes particularly evident if the phenomena are analyzed at the appropriate federal level.

Whether and how the process of political representation could be improved is a question that cannot be answered at this point. Nevertheless, the results of my cumulative dissertation project point out that our society should start thinking of how to address the inaccuracies resulting from the misfit of citizens and their representative bodies.

A quite popular idea is to call for more direct democracy, like in Switzerland, where “people, by initiative and referendum, wind up voting directly on a large number of policies that affect their lives” (Fossedal, 2005, p. 5). A second approach is to increase the number of policy decisions that are based on representative survey research. Decisions of that kind have for example been made by the former German chancellor Angela Merkel regarding the exit from nuclear energy or the introduction of minimum wages (Zohlnhöfer & Engler, 2014). Another starting point for further discussion might be scaling decisions down to a more local level, enhancing the communication between voter and representative and improving the selection sanction process (Fischer, 2016).

Finally, we could also discuss about introducing separate parliaments for important policy areas such as economic policy, social policy, or environmental policy. This adapted version of democracy would liberate citizens from the duty to make this all-in-one party decision from time to time (representative democracy), but also prevents them from the duty to make informed decisions in every single policy issue (direct democracy). Such a system could bring us away from elections based on broad worldviews towards content-related decisions. This would not only enrich the political debate, but also potentially reduce polarization and increase political participation. And most importantly it would reduce the misfit of citizens and their representative bodies and thus improve the process of political representation in democracies.

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Does Local Political Representation Affect the Childcare Coverage Rate in Austrian Municipalities?

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Historically, the provision of childcare has been a forgotten area of Austrian family policy. During the last decade, much effort was made to catch up with other European countries, but notable differences persist between Austrian regions and municipalities. This paper engages the following question: Does local political representation affect the public childcare coverage rate in Austrian municipalities? Based on a unique longitudinal data set (2003–2018) containing yearly measures for 1,789 Austrian municipalities, several hierarchical regression models are calculated. The results reveal a positive effect of women and left-party share in the local councils as well as an interaction effect between the two. The findings suggest that women have an impact on the share of children in public childcare only in a right-wing-dominated political sphere.

Keywords: political representation, municipalities, multilevel modelling, family policy, early childhood education and care, Austria
During the last two decades, expanding public childcare became one of the major goals for countries of the European Union. In the 2002 summit in Barcelona, the EU declared a target of massively increasing the numbers of children in public childcare\(^1\) by 2010 that nearly no member state achieved. Today; however, more recent figures show that the EU average has nearly met the target.\(^2\) Nevertheless, major differences between the EU member states persist, although close analysis reveals that the greatest differences are within rather than between states (for Germany, see Mätzke, 2019; for Italy, see Brilli et al., 2016; for Austria, see Figure 2 and 3 in this article).

Based on this fact, I analyze in this paper the influence of local political representation on childcare expansion. The federal structure of Austria, as well as its well-developed welfare state, combined with the fact that Austrian municipalities have large leeway and responsibility in the area of childcare, makes it an interesting case for answering the research question of this contribution: Does local political representation affect the childcare coverage rates in Austrian municipalities?

The existing literature suggests that municipalities with a left-wing mayor and/or a high share of left-wing council members will have higher childcare coverage rates (see, e.g., Mosimann and Giger, 2008). Scientific results further find higher rates for municipalities with a female mayor and/or a higher share of female council members (see, e.g., Bratton and Ray 2002). For this paper, I attempted to replicate these findings using hierarchical regression analysis. I calculated the models based on a unique data set containing independent variables, measuring the local political representation structure and socioeconomic factors in 1,789 Austrian municipalities between 2003 and 2018.

After this introduction, a chapter about the case of Austria including legal regulations and the context of childcare provision will give an overview about the specifics of the political system, the status quo, and the development of public childcare
in the country. I develop several hypotheses regarding the effect of gender and party balance of the municipal political representation, explain the data set and method, and present and discuss the results. At the end, I summarize and unite the findings in the conclusion, discuss several limitations, and highlight the most important results.

The Case of Austria

Austria is an especially interesting case for learning about the effects of local political representation on childcare coverage rates, first, because Austria is one of currently only 25 federally organized states in the world³ and second, because it is one of an even more limited number of well-developed welfare states, all of which have enacted and enforce different sets of family policies. Third, in contrast with other policy fields, family policy in Austria is primarily governed at the subnational level, namely, by the nine Austrian states and the 2,095 municipalities (Gemeinden), meaning that in Austria, nine different sets of legal regulations are in effect at the same time. These regulations contain provisions regarding group size, staff requirements, equipment, and general provisions for staff and parents.

However, for childcare at the local level, the individual municipalities are the main responsible entities that make decisions about facility operations (Baierl and Kaindl, 2011). Two thirds of all childcare facilities in Austria are fully public institutions managed and funded by the municipalities; the remaining one third are run by private or religious institutions and cofinanced by municipalities; municipalities pay 80% of the total spending for childcare, and the remaining 20% is covered by parents’ fees and state and federal subsidies (Mitterer et al., 2022). The data set I used for this contribution covers all fully funded and cofunded childcare institutions that offer regular all-year childcare by trained staff (for at least 30 weeks per year and at least 4 days and 15 hours per week). In contrast, fully private institutional childcare not cofinanced by public
money plays a minor role in Austria. Private childcare providers are responsible for only 2% of the total supply for children between three and five years of age \(^4\) (Baierl and Kaindl, 2021).

Overall, childcare in Austria is influenced by very different factors. As shown in Figure 1, official EU policy outcomes and targets (2002 Barcelona summit, European Pact for Gender and Equality 2011–2020) might put the Austrian state under pressure, and childcare in neighboring countries could influence national Austrian childcare strategy. The influences are passed on to subnational levels by the provision of financial support, and legal regulations (“15a-agreements”) dictate childcare provided at the subnational level; at the municipality micro level, factors such as demographics, gender norms including employment rates, and political affiliation influence the demand and support for public childcare facilities.

![Figure 1: Levels of factors influencing public childcare outcomes in Austria](image-url)

In addition to the reasons already mentioned, the country’s highly diverse childcare conditions make another important argument for focusing on Austria to analyze
national family policy mechanisms. For just one example, preschool coverage across Austrian municipalities varies between 0.8% and 100% in the dataset for this contribution. Additionally, unlike in other countries, this outcome diversity is not influenced by any historic geographic divide such as East versus West in Germany (e.g., Mätzke, 2019) or the north versus the south in Italy (e.g., Oliver and Matzke, 2014). On the contrary, Figure 2 reflects that the highly varying percentages of children in Austrian public childcare do not follow specific geographic patterns but rather are an incoherent patchwork of policies. The findings indicate that factors other than geographic location and historic influence are more important for the current situation of institutional childcare in Austria.

**Partisanship and Childcare Coverage**

The impact of political party on substantive political representation has long been a topic of discussion. At least since Douglas Hibbs (1977), many scholars have attempted to prove that party politics have impacts, whereas others have aimed to show that partisanship is not relevant for political outcomes and output (e.g., meta-analysis of empirical studies by Bandau and Ahrens, 2020). A very persistent claim is the positive correlation between a high share of left-wing parties in parliaments, cabinets, or councils and corresponding higher spending on welfare and social policy in general and childcare in particular (for the German Länder, see, e.g., Andronescu and Carnes, 2015 and Busemeyer and Seitzl, 2018; for Swiss municipalities, see, e.g., Mosimann and Giger, 2008).

The mechanisms behind this claim are rooted in the historical idea that Social Democratic parties have been the driving force for welfare state expansion in western Europe during the post-WWII period (Seeleib-Kaiser et al., 2009). Additionally, public childcare expansion in particular has been a tool for promoting emancipative values and
reconciling work and family life, which have become important targets for left-wing parties (Morgan, 2013). Today, this relationship persists bolstered by the fact that parties still do have diverse preferences regarding childcare and female employment: Whereas left-liberal parties prefer (income) equality between men and women, right-conservative parties tolerate (income) inequality (Hieda, 2013).

Following Hieda’s (2013) two-dimensional classification, the three most important local parties in Austria level can be classified as either social-liberal (SPÖ, Social Democratic Party of Austria) or right-conservative (ÖVP, Austrian People’s Party; FPÖ, Freedom Party of Austria). Together with the empirical fact that “a left-liberal government raises its budget for childcare services while a right-conservative government does not” (Hieda, 2013: 483), I proposed the following hypotheses regarding the relationship between local representation and the share of children in public childcare:

H1a – The average share of children in public childcare is lower in municipalities with a higher share of right-wing party members on the municipal council.

H1b – The average share of children in public childcare is lower in municipalities with a right-wing mayor.

A theory contradicting those hypotheses that parties matter is the new politics of Paul Pierson’s (1996, 2001) welfare state approach. Pierson argues that party politics is no longer relevant for social political reforms and concludes that socioeconomic factors such as demographic change and economic development are more important determinants. This approach emphasizes the importance of including all kinds of socioeconomic variables in statistical models, which according to Pierson should explain most variance.
Gender and Childcare Coverage

In addition to party, gender in political representation is a central variable of interest in this paper. The transition from strict gendered roles to more fluid, comprehensive ideas under which men and women are equally responsible for paid work and family care is one of the important preconditions for changes in political representation. Based on this ongoing social transition from single-male-breadwinner to dual-earner families (Lewis, 2006, 2008), the impact of female political representation is still quite dynamic; increasing the shares of women in political office is an ongoing process.

Research about the impact of female representation in political institutions on social policy often finds substantive associations between female representation and public benefits such as more generous welfare state spending (e.g., Bolzendahl, 2011; Bolzendahl and Brooks, 2007; Bonoli and Reber, 2010). However, more recent research on the topic indicates that greater female political representation mainly encourages public service provision, not higher family cash benefits (e.g., Ennser-Jedenastik, 2017).

The mechanisms responsible for these findings are rooted in the fact that male and female political representatives on average pursue different aims and goals. According to Funk and Philips (2019), these different aims and goals persist because women are still disproportionately affected by matters such as work–family balance and organizing care work. Although it is evident that “what counts as a women’s issue is context dependent and varies across time and space[,] policy areas can be considered gendered if they disproportionately affect (i.e., benefit or harm) women as a group” (Funk and Philips, 2019: 23). Similarly Wängnerud (2009) argued that “women’s interests are connected to how societies are currently constituted. If we look at contemporary societies, we see noteworthy differences between women and men in their everyday life situation” (53).
In Austria, women spend twice as many hours as men do on unpaid work such as childcare and domestic work (Ghassemi and Kronsteiner-Mann, 2009). As a result, in 2020, almost every second woman (49.1%) but only 9% of men between 25 and 49 years of age worked part time (Statistik Austria, 2020). Additionally, only 3.6% of men took parental leave in 2020, and that percentage had been decreasing steadily for the previous ten years (Familienministerium, 2021). In this sense, family policy and especially childcare can be considered gendered policy areas in Austria.

Under critical mass theory, women’s representation in politics must exceed certain levels in order to have substantive effects. Furthermore, it is necessary to distinguish between female representation in governments or parliaments and women chancellors or mayors, critical actors who individually have great impact on municipal social policy decisions (e.g., Childs and Krook, 2008). Empirical analysis shows that critical actors indeed have much impact at not only the national but also the subnational levels.

Holman (2014), for example, found that female mayors have a large, positive influence on the likelihood a city that a city will fund social welfare programs in the United States, and that link between women’s descriptive and substantive seems to hold at both local and municipal council levels. Bratton and Ray (2002), for example, found a strong positive correlation between the share of women in municipal councils and childcare coverage in Norwegian municipalities for the years 1975 to 1991. These considerations led to the following two hypotheses for Austria:

H2a – Municipalities with a female mayor have higher childcare rates than municipalities with a male mayor.

H2b – The higher the share of women on a given Austrian municipal council, the higher the share of children taking advantage of public childcare.
Many scholars question the homogeneity of political interests among women around the world and the resulting homogeneity of substantive representation (e.g., Davidson-Schmich, 2011; Palaguta, 2020). Others argue that female representation and activism played a key role only in specific contexts (e.g., Misra, 2003). These considerations suggest that the effect of gender composition might be mediated by the partisan compositions of local councils. Because most researchers compare small-N countries and it is only possible to estimate interaction effects for large-N samples, results cannot be anticipated. Either the supposed positive effects of female share and left-wing share reinforce each other or the positive effect of female representation is especially strong for more right-wing local councils. Therefore, two hypotheses could be considered:

H3a – The positive effect of a higher female share becomes stronger for a higher left-wing share in the local council.

H3b – The positive effect of a higher female share becomes stronger for a higher right-wing share in the local council.

Data and Method

There does not yet exist one data set that contains full and structured information about regional and local policies in Austria, particularly about the party representation at the municipal level. The unique longitudinal data set I used for this contribution contains yearly data for municipal political representation (Walenta-Bergmann, 2023) and childcare in Austria for the years 2003 to 2018. Furthermore, the data set contains several socioeconomic indicators such as employment rate, municipal debts, and number of inhabitants. I compiled the data from different sources into a long-format data set I could analyze using hierarchical regression models.

I obtained most of the fiscal and childcare outcome data from Statistics Austria,
the independent, nonprofit institution responsible for managing Austria’s official statistics. One of the very important sources that provide the foundation for the dependent variable used in this analysis is the records of the *Kindertagesheimstatistik* (KTHS), the national public childcare statistics. Additional data sources were the Public Employment Service Austria, the Austrian Chamber of Labor, and the statistics units of the nine Austrian states. Table 1 gives an overview of the descriptive statistics for the variables used in the hierarchical regression models.

*Table 1 Descriptive Statistics*

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<tr>
<th>Statistic continuous variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St. Dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Source</th>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Share of Children in Public Childcare</td>
<td>24,875</td>
<td>50.830</td>
<td>18.205</td>
<td>0.787</td>
<td>100.000</td>
<td>Statistics Austria <em>Kindertagesheimstatistik</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Share of Children in Full-Time Public Childcare</td>
<td>24,875</td>
<td>18.690</td>
<td>16.781</td>
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<tr>
<td>Share of Children in Public Childcare 0-2 Years</td>
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<td>11.892</td>
<td>8.63</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>100.000</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(Preschool) Education Spending per Capita</td>
<td>26,549</td>
<td>287.04</td>
<td>144.26</td>
<td>31.68</td>
<td>3,774.16</td>
<td>Statistics Austria <em>Gebarungsstatistik</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender Mayor</td>
<td>17,459</td>
<td>0.056</td>
<td>0.230</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>Statistics units of the Austrian States (Landesstatistikstellen)</td>
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<td>Party Mayor</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ÖVP Mayor (Right-wing)</td>
<td>17,459</td>
<td>0.611</td>
<td>0.488</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>Administrative offices of the Austrian States (Landesverwaltung)</td>
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<td>SPÖ Mayor (Left-wing)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FPÖ Mayor (Right-wing)</td>
<td>17,459</td>
<td>0.031</td>
<td>0.173</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
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<td>Independent Mayor</td>
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<td>0.227</td>
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<tr>
<td>Right Party Share Local Council</td>
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<td>Left Party Share Local Council</td>
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<td>37.368</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female Share Local Council</td>
<td>8,968</td>
<td>20.790</td>
<td>10.152</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>63.636</td>
<td><em>Landesstatistikstellen</em></td>
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<td>Male Share Local Council</td>
<td>8,968</td>
<td>79.210</td>
<td>10.152</td>
<td>36.364</td>
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<td>Unemployment Rate</td>
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<td></td>
<td>N</td>
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<td>%</td>
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<td>-----</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Female Employment Rate</strong></td>
<td>13,572</td>
<td>69.572</td>
<td>5.124</td>
<td>39.530</td>
<td>89.060</td>
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<td><strong>Spending per Capita</strong></td>
<td>26,549</td>
<td>1,872.171</td>
<td>950.992</td>
<td>514.826</td>
<td>28,377.530</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Debts per Capita</strong></td>
<td>26,318</td>
<td>1,912.368</td>
<td>1,539.029</td>
<td>0.052</td>
<td>25,668.790</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Share &lt;=5 Years</strong></td>
<td>26,549</td>
<td>6.832</td>
<td>1.621</td>
<td>2.540</td>
<td>30.303</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Share &gt;=65 Years</strong></td>
<td>26,549</td>
<td>17.46</td>
<td>3.611</td>
<td>6.41</td>
<td>38.94</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Population</strong></td>
<td>26,549</td>
<td>4,163.126</td>
<td>43,212.240</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>1,888,776</td>
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<td><strong>Compulsory Education Share</strong></td>
<td>13,563</td>
<td>16.15</td>
<td>4.724</td>
<td>5.31</td>
<td>37.98</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Statistic binary variables</strong></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
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<td><strong>Explanatory Variables</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender Mayor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16,484</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>975</td>
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<tr>
<td>Party Mayor</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ÖVP Mayor (Right-wing)</td>
<td>10,667</td>
<td>61.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPÖ Mayor (Left-wing)</td>
<td>5301</td>
<td>30.40</td>
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<tr>
<td>FPÖ Mayor (Right-wing)</td>
<td>541</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Mayor</td>
<td>950</td>
<td>5.44</td>
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| **Control Variables**          |     |     |     |
| **Political Competition**      | 26,549 |     |     |
| Yes                            | 26,030 | 98.05 |     |
| No                             | 519 | 1.95 |     |

**Outcome Variables**

The main dependent variables of this contribution were the share of children in public childcare and the share of children in full-time public childcare. As already mentioned above, I calculated this variable based on the KTHS data provided by Statistics Austria. These official statistics for public childcare in Austria have reflected the childcare situation since 1972. The last reform, which standardized the data and made some more variables accessible, was carried out in 2003.
One important limitation of using only the KTHS data is that it is impossible to distinguish between children living and being cared for in the same community and children living in one community or municipality and being cared for in another, for instance because parents’ home communities might lack childcare facilities; the result is that the dependent variable could have been distorted. Nevertheless, the average (full-time) share of children in public childcare can be considered the most appropriate measure of the differences in space and time (see descriptive results). To test the robustness of the results, I used preschool childcare spending as an alternative-dependent variable (see model (3)).

**Explanatory Variables**

To examine the influence of gender and political representation structure in Austrian municipalities on the provision of public childcare, I included multiple measures in the statistical models: the mayor’s party, the mayor’s gender, the partisan composition of the municipal council, and the share of women in the municipal council. I distinguished partisan composition as left (SPÖ and die Grünen) or right (ÖVP and FPÖ) majority, and I dummy coded the mayor’s party in the model. Although Austria formally has more than these four parties, the other parties lacked significant municipal-level representation between 2003 and 2018.

Local political representation in Austria is centered around the democratically elected municipal council, consisting of 9 to 100 council members (depending on municipality size and state law). The municipal council is often called the “parliament” of the municipalities, although this designation is technically inaccurate because municipal councils do not have legislative power. Rather, the municipal boards—that is, the local governments—consist of deputies selected by the municipal councils who in fact cannot make decisions without the councils; the municipal board is mainly
responsible for preliminary work and preparation.

The head of the municipal council and the municipal board is the mayor. He or she is directly elected by the people in six out of nine states and elected by the municipal council members in Vienna, Lower Austria, and Styria. Decisions regarding childcare facilities are made in the municipal council based on majority voting, which suggests that party share in the council is more important for childcare provision than the characteristics of individual mayors or municipal boards. However, I included mayors’ characteristics in the model because mayors are responsible for implementing the municipal councils’ resolutions as part of overseeing the entire administration of the municipality.

Control Variables

Additional variables can influence the provision of public childcare, and therefore, I included several demographic, (socio)economic, and political control variables in the models. First, I included four demographic variables as controls: the share of people with only compulsory education (9 years), the total population of the municipality, the share of people younger than 6, and the share of people older than 64.

Second, I included in the model variables measuring the (socio)economic situation in municipalities. Three were the total unemployment rate in the municipality as well as the separate rates for men and women, and the other two variables were debt per capita and spending per capita. These variables are crucial measures because a municipality’s economic health determines whether it can provide adequate public childcare facilities.

Third, I included a political variable controlling for the existence of political competition within the municipal councils expecting a positive (e.g. Shen, 2023) or
negative (e.g. Boulding and Brown, 2014) effect of political competition on service provision in the field of childcare.

Method

Regarding my data set, the methodological combination of time and cross sections is generally a key issue in contemporaneous political research, and researchers have proposed various solutions to the theoretical and econometric problems that have arisen such as autocorrelation, heteroscedasticity, and panel heterogeneity. The methodological approach I used for this research contribution is multilevel modeling, also called hierarchical regression or mixed-effects modeling.

Multilevel modeling is a powerful methodological approach for analyzing large-N samples; it advances classical variance analysis and linear regression, enabling the researcher to analyze the correlations between different variables on more than one level, where additional levels could be for instance, time or geographic unit (state, municipality, etc.). From a technical perspective, multilevel modeling is adequate for clustered or longitudinal data; because my data fulfilled both of these properties, this approach was highly appropriate. However, it has to be mentioned that multilevel modeling poses multiple theoretical and econometric challenges such as autocorrelation, heteroscedasticity, and panel heterogeneity, for which researchers have proposed a number of different solutions.

The most notable assumptions have been the linearity of relationships, the homogeneity of variance, and the normal distributions of residuals. Because a multilevel regression analysis fits a rectilinear line that explains most of the variance in the data, the data should follow a straight line; visual analysis can test for the assumption that the variance in the residuals is equal across groups (e.g., Garritzmann and Seng, 2020; Stadelmann-Steffen and Bühlmann, 2008; Tiemann, 2009). In this study, the model–
residual–predictor plot did not show any specific patterns, and therefore, the assumption of linearity was not violated; the normal distribution assumption was violated to some extent, particularly for the dependent variable, full-time public childcare. Nevertheless, this study’s data did not violate the most important assumptions for multilevel models.\textsuperscript{5} Despite its methodological challenges, multilevel modeling was the best technical solution for analyzing this time-series municipality data set, and I anticipated that it would produce trustworthy and hopefully interesting results.

I tested two of the study hypotheses proposed earlier using a hierarchical regression model that included four levels of analysis: 6,051 different local government compositions of 1,789 Gemeinden, measured in 16 different years of observations (2003 to 2018) in 8 different states. The independent variables, the political representation structure of the municipalities and the control variables, were coded with a one-year lag, and the total data set contained 24,875 observations. Because there were incomplete data regarding the gender of the mayors and the regional council incumbents, the final multilevel regression models included only 16,614 and 7,727 observations, respectively. Most of the missing data involved the regional councils of the states of Salzburg, Lower Austria, and Carinthia.

**Results**

Here, I first give a detailed overview of the existing subnational differences in childcare provision and political representation. Then, I present the results of the hierarchical regression modeling for testing the study hypotheses.

**Subnational Variation in Childcare Outcomes and Political Representation**

*Dependent variable: Public (full-time) childcare ages 0–5*

To obtain an overview of the public childcare situation in Austria’s municipalities, I calculated the yearly share of children in public childcare between 2003 and 2018 for
every local community, which was a significant advantage for my study aim of investigating the development of public childcare over time. My method took into account not only the absolute changes in public childcare supply but also the changes in the number of children in the population, accurately reflecting, for instance, if the number of children in a municipality increased while the public childcare facilities remained the same. For time-series data, the share of children in public childcare provided a more realistic picture of the care situation than absolute figures.

Figure 2 shows notable differences in the percentages of children in public childcare across Austria’s municipalities. For the whole period of observations (2003–2018), the share of children in public childcare was between 0.8 % and 100%, and for the year 2018, the proportion ranged between 15.38% and slightly more than 100%. The proportion exceeded 100% for 458 of the 26,549 cases, I propose because some municipalities are so small, they do not have facilities, or because parents commute to work and place their children in facilities in different municipalities from where they live. In short, that is, in some municipalities, more children are receiving public childcare than live in the municipalities. Figure 2 graphically depicts the wide variations in the provision of public childcare facilities across the state of Austria.
Changing the share of children in public childcare to the share of children in full-time public childcare by excluding all children from the calculation enrolled for less than eight hours a day gave a different, but equally interesting, pattern: The share of children in full-time public childcare is much greater in the east of the country as well as in and near bigger cities such as Vienna, Graz, and Linz. Overall; however, it is notable that full-time public childcare is much less commonly used than part-time care.
Independent variables: The regional representation structure and socioeconomic situation

The regional representation structure in Austria typically is very different from the representation structure found at the national and state levels, first because historically and still today, the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) (center-right) holds much more than 50% of all mayor positions. As seen in Figure 4, in 2018, 1,233 of the 2,096 Austrian communities (58.8%) were led by a member of the ÖVP. In the same year, 462 mayors were affiliated with the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ); only 37 were members of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ, populist radical right), and 365 were not officially associated with a political party.
It is important to note that the political independence of those 365 mayors cannot be claimed with certainty, primarily because there is little information regarding the partisanship of local politicians, particularly in Tyrol in western Austria because there is no legal requirement in that state for candidates for office to be affiliated with a specific party; therefore, it might be that the number of truly independent mayors is much lower than 365. For the final analysis, I excluded municipalities in the state of Tyrol because of these data limitations; as a result, the analysis refers to information on only 1,789 of the 2,095 Austrian municipalities.

The regional representation structure in Austria typically is very different from the representation structure found at the national and state levels not only regarding partisan-, but especially also regarding gender balance. Compared to the national level, the average share of women in power is extremely low at the municipal level. Currently, 72 of the 183 deputies in the national parliament, or 39.34%, are women, and Figure 5 shows abundantly that the number of female community leaders is far below 10%. Specifically, women led 5.1% of Austrian communities in 2010 and only 7.8% in 2018.
Figure 5: Overview of male and female municipality leaders in 2018

Right now, there are few systematic and publicly available data regarding the proportions of women on local councils around Austria, and what data are available are only available at the state level. This fact leads to geographic disparities in the availability, quality, and historical accessibility of the data. For the following analysis, I was able to collect data on women’s regional council representation in six of Austria’s nine states; no data were available for Carinthia, Lower Austria, or Salzburg. I could find data regarding the partisan composition of the regional parliaments for all nine states, but in the state of Tyrol, one can run for office without being affiliated with a specific party. Therefore, I excluded the Tyrolean data from the final models.

Despite the addressed problems of data availability and the time-consuming process of data collection, it is of high value to look at the lowest level of Austria’s federal representation, primarily because of the large variance in the dependent variable (between 0.8% and 100%). The second important reason is that at the same time, the units of analysis (municipalities) are very similar in terms of cultural, historical, and institutional background; this allowed me to control for most of the external variance and ensured that
the omitted variables bias would be low. A third important advantage from this study compared with other transnational studies on impacts of political representation structures is the large number of units of analysis (large-N), which expanded the possibilities of statistical methods (e.g., interaction effects).

**Analysis of Subnational Variation**

Just as the presented descriptive statistics gave an overview about the variables used and their distribution, inferential statistics provided an answer to the research question through hypothesis testing. All multilevel models presented in Table 2 include four levels of analysis: time is nested within cabinet terms, cabinet terms are nested within municipalities, and municipalities are nested within states. The intraclass correlation coefficients show that about 10% of the variance can be found at the time and state levels each; the remaining 80% is due to differences between municipalities and cabinet terms. The models explain between 15% and 20% of the total variance, most of it at the municipal and cabinet-term levels.

For the time dimension of my time-series cross-sectional data set, these results highlight that cabinet terms are a more decisive time unit for the effect of political representation on childcare provision than years. This is in line with the fact that the political representation is very stable across position terms, five or six years depending on the state. For the geographic dimension of my data set, in contrast, these results highlight municipalities as more decisive geographic entities than states for the effect of political representation on childcare provision.

For the geographic dimension of my time-series cross-section dataset on the other hand these results point out that municipalities are a more decisive geographic entity than federal states for the effect of political representation on childcare outcome. This is in line
with the distribution of competences between the federal levels in the field of childcare (see section about the Case of Austria earlier in this paper).

To test the robustness of the effects, I calculated several additional models. The appendix provides models with standardized effects (Table A.1) and simple linear rather than multilevel models (Table A.2). Further, Table A.3 presents models using an alternative-dependent variable measuring the share of children in public childcare between zero and two years of age, and Table A.2 presents the results for a model using the first-difference version of the dependent variable share of children in public childcare. Table A.4 presents the results of my tests of the robustness of the findings using cross-sectional instead of longitudinal data. All the model variations in the appendix confirm the results found for models (1) to (5) in Table 2.

*Table 2* Hierarchical Regression Models for Regional Childcare in Austria: 2003 to 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Share of Children in Public Childcare (1)</th>
<th>Share of Children in Full-Time Public Childcare (2)</th>
<th>(Preschool) Education Spending per Capita (3)</th>
<th>Share of Children in Public Childcare (4)</th>
<th>Share of Children in Full-Time Public Childcare (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Right Party Share</td>
<td>−0.082***</td>
<td>−0.106***</td>
<td>−0.260</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.022)</td>
<td>(0.020)</td>
<td>(0.188)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Share</td>
<td>−0.116***</td>
<td>−0.026</td>
<td>−0.716**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.035)</td>
<td>(0.033)</td>
<td>(0.304)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>’Independent’ Mayor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.579</td>
<td>0.913</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.976)</td>
<td>(0.938)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right-Wing Mayor</td>
<td>−0.426</td>
<td>−0.017</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.944)</td>
<td>(0.904)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Mayor</td>
<td>−0.508</td>
<td>−1.105</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.732)</td>
<td>(0.696)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment Rate</td>
<td>0.216*</td>
<td>0.461***</td>
<td>4.156***</td>
<td>0.249***</td>
<td>0.362***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.130)</td>
<td>(0.143)</td>
<td>(1.287)</td>
<td>(0.087)</td>
<td>(0.088)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Looking at the five hierarchical regression models shown in Table 2, only the hypotheses pertaining to the effects of municipal council representation could be confirmed. Models (1) and (2) fully confirmed H1a (The average share of children in public childcare is lower in municipalities with a higher share of right-wing party members on the municipal council) with effect sizes that ranged between −0.082 and −0.106. That is, childcare coverage decreases by between 0.82% and 1.06% if the share
of right-wing members in the municipal council increases by 10%. Model (3) shows that the effect of right-wing party members on childcare provision is negative but not significant for the alternative (spending) dependent variable. Similarly, I could not confirm H1b (The average share of children in public childcare is lower in municipalities with a right-wing mayor). Although there were positive effects of left-wing mayors (0.579 and 0.913) and negative effects of right-wing mayors (−0.426 and −0.017), the models showed high standard errors, and the coefficients were not significant.

Testing of the second set of hypotheses gave similar results regarding the correlations between female representation and childcare provision. Even though models (4) and (5) showed negative correlations between male mayors and the corresponding childcare coverage, the effect is not significant, and therefore, I could not confirm H2a (Municipalities with a female mayor have higher childcare rates than municipalities with a male mayor). On the contrary, for H2b (The higher the share of women being part of a given Austrian municipal council, the higher the share of children taking advantage of public childcare), models (1) and (3) provided much evidence in support: The share of men in the municipal council had a highly significant negative correlation with the corresponding childcare coverage. The effect ranged between −0.116 and −0.716, indicating, that childcare coverage decreased by between 1.16% and 7.16% when the share of male members in the municipal council increased by 10%.

Regarding the two competing hypotheses predicting the interaction effect of right-wing party share and female share in the municipal councils, I could confirm H3b but not H3a. The interaction term was positive (see Table A.5), which supported H3b (The positive effect of a higher female share becomes stronger for higher right-wing share in the local council) but rejected H3a (The positive effect of a higher female share becomes stronger for higher left-wing share in the local council). Indeed, as the marginal effects
plot (Figure 6) shows, the interaction between the right-wing party and female shares in the local council was highly significantly positive. It appears that the presence of women in municipal government in Austria only has an impact on the shares of children in public childcare when the municipal council is right-wing dominated.

Figure 6: Marginal effects plot for the interaction between male share and right party share in local councils, including the histogram of the share of men in local councils

This result is especially interesting because it suggests that the positive effect of female representatives on childcare provision is only relevant in more conservative political spheres. The effect diminishes, and indeed ultimately becomes insignificant, in a more left-wing, progressive political sphere. This result provides evidence for the claim that political interests and hence substantive representation of women is not homogenous. About the substantive interpretation of the interaction effect can only be speculated at this point. It might be that women situated in a more conservative, right-wing dominated political sphere support the expansion of childcare facilities because they perceive
childcare to be solely their responsibility. It might also be that their personal political activity highly depends on the accessibility of childcare facilities because they have not support from their partners. In more progressive, left-wing dominated councils on the other hand both, men and women are equally responsible for childcare, resulting in overall higher shares of children in public childcare, but ultimately eliminating the effect of women. The result goes in line with the general transition from conservative strict gendered role-models, to progressive, more fluid comprehensive areas of responsibility, with men and women being equally responsible for paid work and family care. It seems, that childcare is not a women’s issue per se, but it is perceived to be a women’s issue only in specific contexts and environments.

Figure A.2 shows the predicted shares of children in public childcare when there were 0%, 50%, and 100% women in the municipal council according to the share of a right-wing party. We see that the share of children in public childcare is highest (70%) for municipalities with 100% right-wing women members and the lowest (47%) for municipalities with 100% right-wing members but 0% women. That is, for left-wing-dominated municipalities, the share of women does not significantly increase or decrease the share of children in public childcare; the predicted share is about 60% for 0%, 50%, and 100% women on a council.

**Conclusion**

Starting from the notions that public childcare has become increasingly important for the countries of the European Union but that subnational differences between regions and municipalities seem to persist, this research answers the question of whether local political representation affects childcare coverage rates in Austrian municipalities. Based on a unique data set of the local political representation structures and socioeconomic factors in 1,789 Austrian municipalities between 2003 and 2018 and measuring
independent and dependent variables, I calculated five hierarchical regression models. The results of these models showed that the gender and partisanship balance of the local councils but not the characteristics of the associated mayor correlated with the shares of children in public childcare. More women on municipal councils were associated with more children in public childcare, and more right-wing party members was associated with fewer children in public childcare. These results indicate that the party representation structure is an important predictor of family policy outcomes.

Hence, the first main contribution of this paper is that I show the importance of the party representation structure for the political outcomes in municipal family policy in Austria. The focus on the municipal level, and the resulting large-N sample, made it possible to take a closer look at the interaction effect of gender and partisanship in political representation. The second main contribution of this paper is the resulting finding that female representation in municipal government only affects childcare provision and use in right-wing-dominated political spheres.

Despite these conclusive findings, this paper does contain some limitations. The most important empirical limitation is the fact that comprehensive data were not available for the whole time span of interest (2003 to 2018). Additionally, as I already mentioned earlier, I excluded the Tyrolean municipalities from the model because that state’s data lacked the party affiliations of the local office holders. Further, the data become more complete in later years. Both of these issues increase the possibility that my data could have been biased and need to be corrected for in further research on the topic.

A methodological limitation with this study is the question of whether one year is an appropriate time span for mapping the impacts of specific municipal council decisions; these decisions could make their impacts clear sooner than a year or much later, and we do not know whether it takes the same amount of time to implement certain decisions in
all municipalities. We also do not know the state of quasi-random variations in the time between policy decision and policy outcome or if there are structural differences between, for example, larger versus smaller municipalities.

Another important study limitation is the theoretical and empirical difficulties of distinguishing between causes and effects. For instance, the female employment rate could be a consequence of rather than a cause of higher childcare use and not just a variable that positively affects childcare use. Nevertheless, this contribution to the literature is based on a very rich and comprehensive data set, and it unambiguously shows the importance of political party and gender distribution in municipal council makeups for childcare uptake in the federal states and municipalities of Austria. These compelling results should stimulate further research on the mechanisms between descriptive and substantive representation.

Declaration of interest: No potential conflict of interest, no additional funding.
Notes


² For detailed figures see: Eurostat database https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-datasets/-/tps00185 [last access July 2021]

³ See for example, the Forum of Federations. The global network on federalism and devolved governance. http://www.forumfed.org/countries/ [last access: July 2021]

⁴ Because it is not possible to distinguish between children who only use public or private and children who use public and private childcare, it is not possible to tally these figures, which would result in an overestimation of childcare rates.

⁵ See, for example, https://ademos.people.uic.edu/Chapter18.html or https://people.duke.edu/~rnau/testing.htm (last access: July 2021).

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The Politics of Subnational Social Policy: Social Consumption vs. Social Investment in Austria

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Country comparisons often suffer from unobserved heterogeneity and obscure subnational variation in multiple dimensions of social policy. This paper distinguishes between social consumption and social investment policies and investigates their determinants at subnational level. Following the literature across countries, we make incumbent parties’ ideology responsible for variation in social policy and we test the moderating role of economic growth assuming that partisanship intensifies when funds are scarce. Austria is a case in point, because states have discretion in social policy (e.g., regarding public childcare and social assistance). Panel regressions covering all nine states in Austria for the years 1991 to 2019 reveal that the cabinet share of Social-Democrats increase social investment spending, while the Christian-Democratic party decreases it, and the populist radical right party reduces expenses for social consumption. Our results confirm that economic growth moderates spending priorities, mainly for social investment policies.

Keywords: Austria; political parties; social consumption; social investment; subnational governments

Introduction

Most studies analysing social policy compare countries as units of analysis. However, the national level is not always the main relevant level of analysis masking within-country
variation (Ciccia and Javornik 2019; Daiger von Gleichen and Parolin 2020; Greer et al. 2015) and comparisons of countries often suffer from unobserved heterogeneity due to omitted variables.

However, the existing literature on subnational variation of social spending reveals substantial differences within countries (Kleider 2018; Park 2014; Vampa 2016) and often explains them with party ideology. The review by Kleider and Toubeau (2022) confirms the important role of political conflicts for subnational policy choices. Left parties show a positive relation with social spending (Busemeyer and Seitzl 2018; Toubeau and Vampa 2021) and the provision of childcare (Andronescu and Carnes 2015).

Since social policy is a multi-dimensional concept resulting in different priorities, recent studies distinguish between the passive consumption of social benefits substituting (lacking) income in the case of life course risks such as unemployment, and active social investments such as childcare that prepare people pre-emptively for the future. The few existing publications that explicitly deal with social investment policies at subnational level (e.g. Baines et al. 2019; Scalise and Hemerijck 2022) are based on (qualitative) case studies. This paper adds quantitative evidence comparing the role of parties for within-country variation in social consumption and social investment expenses.

Following the literature on country comparisons, we argue that incumbent parties’ ideology explains variation in social policy spending. Focussing explicitly on social investment, Kim and Cho (2020) as well as Kühner (2018) confirm a positive left partisan effect on social investment expenditure across OECD countries. Similarly, Bürgisser (2022), distinguishing social consumption and social investment related content of reforms, finds that centre-left parties in Southern Europe are social investment protagonists (except in Greece), while centre-right parties are antagonists or consenters. Although populist radical right parties (PRRPs) are more supportive of social
consumption than social investment policies (Enggist and Pinggera 2022), they have a negative influence on social consumption policies that target undeserving groups of the population such as poor, unemployed and minorities (Chueri 2021). Furthermore, Green parties in governments increase social investment expenses, while they show no effect for social consumption expenses (Röth and Schwander 2021). However, we lack knowledge whether this holds true for subnational social policy.

Spending priorities might be less pronounced under normal economic circumstances and party differences are assumed to be more visible in times of economic hardship or prosperity (Toubeau and Vampa 2021). Therefore, we test the moderating role of economic growth assuming that partisanship intensifies when funds are scarce, and parties are more likely to focus on their core electorate.

We advance the literature by 1) analysing systematically spending levels for social consumption and social investment policies at subnational instead of national levels; 2) investigating the partisan politics of both types of social policy over almost 30 years for four parties; and 3) exploring the mediating role of the economic situation for partisan politics.

In the following, we briefly describe the Austrian case before we introduce our arguments and hypotheses for the four most important parties in Austria based on the social structure of their constituency. After the introduction to our data, panel regressions covering all nine federal states in Austria for the years 1991-2019 test our hypotheses and the last section summarises the results.

**Subnational social policy in Austria**

Studying subnational social policy in Austria is a case in point for several reasons. Austria has a rather generous welfare state and the subnational level has high administrative responsibilities and autonomy (Fallend, 2003; Karlhofer, 2013) that has increased over
the last decades (Hooghe et al., 2016). Social protection expenses accounted for 22% of total expenditures of subnational governments in Austria in 2020, similar to the level of other federal states such as Belgium (23%), Germany (27%) and Switzerland (21%), and much more than in the federal states of the US (5%) and Australia (8%) (OECD subnational government structure and finance data).

Social policy responsibilities in Austria are shared between the central government, states, and municipalities. Although the central government sets the regulation, for example, for pension and unemployment benefits, subnational units have decision-making power in policies regarding long-term care, education, poverty prevention, health, housing, and family issues (Greer and Elliott, 2019). States set, for example, the regulation for childcare regarding group size, staff requirements and equipment of facilities (Baierl and Kaindl, 2011) and variation in social assistance policies is largely driven by party ideology (Heitzmann and Matzinger, 2021).

Although Austrian states only administer funding they receive from the federal level, based on strict criteria, for primary and secondary education and parts of research and science, they often overspend their budgets knowing that the national government will cover their deficits afterwards (bailout) (Kleider et al., 2018). This allows state governments (in small ways) to shape education in which they have no formal decision-making rights. Finally, informal influence of subnational governments is even higher than formal influence (Mätzke and Stöger, 2020).

Theoretical framework

Social consumption versus social investments

The traditional concept of social policy, understood as a redistribution machine that is supported by the left and opposed by the right, has been replaced by multifaceted
distributive conflicts. As such, it is not about who is for or against social policy, but rather what type of social policy is supported. Over the last two decades, the social investment approach has gained in popularity (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002; Hemerijck, 2017; Morel et al., 2012; Nolan, 2013). Based on their functions rather than outcomes, social consumption policies provide compensatory cash benefits that substitute (lacking) income in the case of life course risks such as unemployment (unemployment benefits) and longevity (pension benefits). In contrast, the main goals of social investment policies are a) education and training of the population from early childhood until retirement preventing unemployment and promoting economic growth; b) high employment levels through education and training as well as work/family policies; and c) prevention of individuals’ dependency on social benefits by enabling them to participate in labour markets (Choi et al., 2020).

However, social policy discretion at the subnational level differs from the national level. Apart from policies set at the national level (e.g., pension and unemployment benefits) subnational units in federal states such as Austria often have discretion in both social investment (e.g. education and family services) and social consumption policies (e.g. social assistance and elderly care) (for details, see the section “Dependent variables” below).

**The role of parties**

Despite vanishing effects of partisan incumbency on social policy in times of austerity and fiscal constraints (Pierson, 1996), parties are still key actors for social policy reforms and spending decisions thanks to their legislative power (Choi et al., 2020). Although parties consider several factors when deciding on policy issues or the content of manifestos, such as vote-, office- or policy-related aspects, the preferences of their
constituency have a major impact on their policy positions and spending priorities (Röth and Schwander, 2021).

Individual social policy preferences, in turn, are shaped by material-self-interest (Meltzer and Richard, 1981), with low-income earners, people at risk of unemployment and from lower classes in favour of redistributive policies (Häusermann et al., 2016; Rehm et al., 2012), and ideological predispositions. Recent studies, however, suggest that the class cleavage lost in importance for the social base of large mainstream parties such as Social-Democratic and centre-right parties, while education largely structures the voter base of green parties and PRRPs (Marks et al., 2022).

*Social-Democratic parties*

Two major supporter groups are responsible for the success of Social-Democratic parties today: the traditional working class and the new urban middle class, consisting for example of socio-cultural professionals (Gingrich and Häusermann, 2015; Kitschelt, 1994; Oesch and Rennwald, 2018), both with rather contrasting social policy priorities. Whereas lower educated and low income earners as well as those at high risk of unemployment, i.e. the traditional core constituency of left parties, are core supporters of social consumption policies, the highly-educated middle-class as a new target group is in favour of social investment policies (Garritzmann et al., 2018; Han and Kwon, 2020).

Furthermore, people leaning towards the left on the economic dimension are supportive of both social investment and social consumption policies, and left-libertarians prefer social investments and oppose social consumption policies (Garritzmann et al., 2018). Therefore, it is difficult to identify clear social policy priorities for Social-Democratic parties based on the socio-structural characteristics of their supporters. At country level, left parties have a positive effect on social investment expenses (Kim and
Choi, 2020; Kühner, 2018) and reforms in Southern Europe (except Greece) (Bürgisser, 2022).

Descriptive evidence from Busemeyer et al. (2022) further suggests that supporters of Social-Democratic parties tend to be in favour of both passive social transfers and social investments. Therefore, we assume that Social-Democratic parties try to speak to both core supporter groups for vote-seeking reasons and therefore increase spending for both types of social policy.

H1: The cabinet share of the Social-Democratic party (SPÖ) increases both social investment and social consumption expenses

Centre-right parties

Centre-right parties draw on the entrepreneurial class, i.e. large employers, self-employed professionals, small business owners and managers, as their core electoral constituency (Oesch and Rennwald, 2018). They are leaning towards right-wing economic attitudes and are rather sceptical of generous welfare benefits for financial reasons. In fact, Garritzmann et al. (2018) and Bürgisser (2022) confirm that centre-right parties are social investment antagonists or consenters. The results by Busemeyer et al. (2022) reveal that voters of Christian-Democratic parties are significantly less likely than voters of Green and Social-Democratic parties to support social consumption policies such as pension and unemployment benefits as well as assistance to the poor. Considering concerns of high labour costs due to generous welfare benefits, we would expect centre-right parties to reduce both social investment and social consumption expenses.

H2: The cabinet share of the conservative party (ÖVP) reduces both social investment and social consumption expenses

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Apart from large catch-all parties, smaller parties such as PRRPs (Mudde, 2013; Oesch and Rennwald, 2018) and green parties (Grant and Tilley, 2019; Müller-Rommel and Poguntke, 2002) have become integral parts of party systems in parliamentary democracies such as Austria and are regularly coalition partners in governments.

**Populist Radical Right Parties**

PRRPs heavily draw on the working class, i.e. production and service workers, as their core constituency (Marks et al., 2021; Oesch and Rennwald, 2018). Based on the results of Garritzmann et al. (2018) and given the social-structural composition of their electorate with above-average levels of low-income earners, people with lower education and traditional, authoritarian and national attitudes, we expect PRRPs to be against social investment policies, from which other groups profit more. Busemeyer et al. (2022) confirm the opposition of PRRP voters to social investment spending and also find a negative association with social consumption policies such as assistance to the poor and unemployment benefits. Poor and unemployed as well as non-native citizens are perceived as not deserving benefits (Ennser-Jedenastik, 2016). We therefore hypothesise a negative association of PRRPs for social consumption policies as state governments in Austria have discretion over measures that are directed to the poor. Furthermore, country level studies confirm the negative association of PRRPs with spending for people regarded as undeserving of benefits such as poor, unemployed and non-native people (Chueri, 2021) and with social investment policies (Enggist and Pinggera, 2022).

H3: The cabinet share of the Populist Radical Right party (FPÖ) reduces both social investment and social consumption expenses
Green parties

In contrast to the role of left, centre-right and radical-right parties, the literature on green parties and social policy is rather scarce. The most encompassing study by Röth and Schwander (Röth and Schwander, 2021) reveals that green parties are associated with higher social investment expenses, while they show no effect for social consumption expenses. This fits with the social policy preferences of their core electorate of younger, highly educated and middle-class voters (Dolezal, 2010; Knutsen, 2004; Marks et al., 2021) representing the “urban ‘new’ middle class” (Röth and Schwander, 2021: 6). Most Green voters profit more from social investment than social consumption policies. However, we also expect Green parties to promote policies for people at risk of poverty or unemployment (social consumption policies) due to their middle-class voters with left-liberal attitudes valuing solidarity concepts. In fact, Green party supporters show similar levels of support for assistance to the poor and unemployment compared with voters of Social-Democratic parties and significantly different levels compared with supporters of PRRPs and Christian-Democratic parties (Busemeyer et al., 2022).

H4: The cabinet share of the Green party increases both social investment and social consumption expenses

Social policy priorities and economic situation

The economic situation might affect social policy and advocates of welfare state retrenchment try to use budgetary crises for restructuring (Pierson, 1996). Economic security and material well-being is a major concern of people in times of recession (Margalit, 2013; Savage, 2019; Traber et al., 2018). Building political coalitions for social investment expenses, for example, is more difficult in times of economic
downturn with high levels of unemployment (Choi et al., 2020), because unemployed people or those threatened by job losses prefer social consumption (unemployment benefits) over social investments (Han and Kwon, 2020). In fact, we see a return of partisan social policy making in OECD countries in response to the 2007/2008 recession (Savage, 2019). In line with Toubeau and Vampa (2021) we argue that partisanship intensifies when funds are scarce, and parties are more likely to focus on their core electorate. In times of economic growth, when more funds are available due to higher revenues, parties are more likely to expand social policies that attract new voters. Working hypotheses guide our analyses since we cannot rely on an established literature.

We expect that Social-Democrats react to economic downturn with a return to their roots increasing social consumption spending in order support those in need (e.g. unemployed). Generally, it is more likely that left-wing governments increase social expenditure and defend the welfare state when unemployment and budget deficit are high (Bremer, 2018; Savage, 2019). In times of economic growth, keeping the level of social consumption and raising funds for social investments allows them to remain attractive to their traditional electorate of the working class (no retrenchment) and to reach out new voters in favour of social investments.

H1b: The SPÖ reacts to economic downturn with more social consumption spending and to economic growth with more social investment spending

Since we hypothesise on average a negative relationship between centre-right parties and social consumption spending, we expect an amplifying effect in times of economic hardship due to their core voters’ concern of high labour costs and public debts in case of generous welfare benefits. In fact, we see that right-wing governments reduce social
expenditure when the budget deficit is greater signalling voters their competence in fiscal conservativism (Amable et al., 2006; Savage, 2019). The ÖVP might steer higher revenues thanks to GDP growth to higher social investment expenses in order to attract the new urban middle class as potential new constituency.

H2b: The ÖVP decreases social consumption spending in years with economic downturn and increases social investments with growing GDP

A substantial part of the PRRP’s core constituency – the working class – is at increased risk of unemployment and wage reductions during economic crises. We therefore expect the FPÖ to react with more social consumption targeting at hard working persons, who deserve support in times of crises. The share of people in need of social transfer and those who deserve these benefits are lower in times of economic growth. We therefore expect a negative moderating effect of GDP growth on the relationship between FPÖ’s cabinet share and social consumption spending. Furthermore, despite more funds thanks to GDP growth we assume no effect for social investments, because the core electorate of PRRPs are in general SI antagonists and PRRPs are less likely to attract voters in favour of SI such as the new urban middle class.

H3b: The FPÖ reacts to economic downturn with more and to GDP growth with less social consumption spending

Finally, owing to their concepts of solidarity to those in need (people at risk of poverty or unemployment) we assume that economic downturn has a positive moderating effect on social consumption spending for green parties. We further expect them to react to
economic growth with lower social consumption spending, because of lower shares of people at risk of poverty or unemployment and therefore a lower need to compensate income losses. In contrast, higher revenues in times of a growing economy should result in more social investments, in line with the preferences of their constituency.

H4b: The Greens increase social consumption spending in years with economic downturn and react to economic growth with lower social consumption spending and more social investments

Data and Method

Our dataset contains yearly observations for all nine Austrian states. The availability of data limits our analysis to the years 1991 to 2019.

Dependent variables

The dependent variables measure social investment and social consumption spending for each federal state a) in relation to their GDP and b) per capita. Statistics Austria provides disaggregated regional expenses and revenues for nine different categories (Voranschlagsgruppen, VA) that can be broken down in further sub-categories. Theoretical considerations and the literature on social investment and social consumption policies, as discussed above, guide the selection of individual (sub-)categories for our measures. Policies that are supposed to prepare people for the future, thanks to investments in human capital formation and by contributing to work/family reconciliation with the aim of high employment levels, are grouped to the social investment category. VA2 (education, sport, and science) entails spending on education (e.g. primary and secondary education, adult education), higher education and research, and public childcare. The subgroups VA43 (youth welfare services) and VA46 (family services)
address families and children, e.g. by financing children’s (recreation) homes, by providing advice on educational and developmental issues and family problems and with income-related subsidies for childcare costs. Our measure of social consumption spending consists of five subgroups: spending for public welfare (e.g. social and disability assistance) (VA41), elderly care and benefits for refugees (VA42), promoting the repair of disaster damage (e.g. compensation for continued payment of wages) (VA44), compensatory allowances, commuter assistance and contributions to pension schemes (VA45), and housing (housing allowances, renovations, and subsidies) (VA48). We classify housing as social consumption in line with Röth and Schwander (2021), because it provides an ex-post social compensation covering basic housing provision needs rather than having a preventive (ex-ante) function (i.e. creation, preservation, or mobilisation of human skills and capabilities according to Garritzmann et al. (2023)). Moreover, the housing category, for which the data do not allow a breakdown in subcategories, consists not only of social housing, but also e.g. mortgage regulation, fiscal exemptions, and homeownership subsidies.

The decision to group individual social policy categories to social investment or social consumption is based on the idea that all categories in social investment possess a preventive (ex-ante) function (i.e. creation, preservation, or mobilisation of human skills and capabilities), and all categories in social consumption provide compensatory cash benefits that substitute (lacking) income covering basic social needs. Analysing the categories individually without considering the others as part of packages would give an incomplete and biased picture of how states combine individual social policy categories to prioritise future-oriented preventive measures (social investment) or compensatory cash benefits (social consumption).
The descriptive statistics in Table A.1 in the appendix show considerable differences between states over time for the level of social investment expenses (ranging from 1.85 to 3.89% of GDP and 390 to 1,510 Euros per capita) as well as for social consumption expenses (ranging from 1.22 to 4.09% of GDP and 310 to 1,274 Euros per capita).

**Explanatory variables**

Evolving out of our research question and hypotheses, the main explanatory variable for our analysis is party ideology. We measure the cabinet share of the four most important parties during the analysed timespan (1991 to 2019) in states’ governments. The Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) can be characterised as a populist radical right party and the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP), a center-right Christian-Democratic party, shares a conservative worldview. The Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) represents a party with (formerly) strong ties to the working class, while the Greens (GRÜNE) focus on environmental protection and are engaged in feminism and the protection of minority rights. The ÖVP dominates the analysed time period with a mean cabinet share of 48%, followed by the SPÖ (36%), FPÖ (12%) and GRÜNE (3.5%) (Table A.1).

**Control variables**

We consider several political and socio-economic control variables that might affect the results of our models. We integrate the share of women in cabinets and parliaments at state level as this could influence the decision between cash benefits (usually social consumption policies) and social services (usually social investment policies) (Bolzendahl, 2011; Ennser-Jedenastik, 2017). The employment rate of women, the share of the population below six years and the unemployment rate represent the demand side for social policies (e.g. for family benefits/services and support of unemployed persons).
what could bias our results. Similarly, fertility rates can determine specific policies aiming at their increase. We control for population density as some services or benefits prevail in urban or rural areas, and for deindustrialisation (share of service sector jobs) as this shapes the structure of employment and specific social policy instruments. The level of social policy spending is influenced by the economic situation and we therefore include states’ GDP growth in our models. We add a year variable accounting for trending, because downwards or upwards trending in spending levels might be influenced by time trends.

**Method**

We test our hypotheses with time-series cross-sectional models (TSCS). The fact that Austria only has nine states is a natural limitation of our sample. However, several authors and studies apply TSCS models to data with 5-12 units (Bolzendahl, 2009, 2011; Chang, 2020; Dreher et al., 2008; Jensen and Wenzelburger, 2020; Kim, 2007; McManus, 2018; Onaran and Boesch, 2014). Although the preferred choice of most studies are fixed effects models, for theoretical reasons they are of limited value in our case. The composition of states’ governments (especially the party of the head of government) varies little over time. In six out of nine states, one party had been dominating and appointed the head of government over the whole time (1991-2019). The variance of incumbent parties’ ideology is much larger across than within states. Hence, we apply random effects models. In contrast to random models with countries as units of analysis, subnational units do suffer less from the omitted variables bias, because they belong to the same country (rather small size in Austria) sharing similarities such as the national welfare state and the cultural heritage. Our units of analysis are state years and not cabinet terms, although governments do not change annually, because we are interested in the moderating role of GDP growth that show substantial variation by year. Some studies
suggest to use mixed-effects models (multilevel models with three levels) allowing to combine the effects of variables at different hierarchical levels (Ennser-Jedenastik, 2022; Garritzmann and Seng, 2020). However, the methodological literature for multilevel models advises against such models when the number of units at one level is very low, as in our case with nine states (Hox et al., 2017; Lazega and Snijders, 2016).

To examine the temporal properties, we introduce a lag for all independent variables. Panel-corrected standard-errors account for heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation (Bailey and Katz, 2011). Furthermore, we transform all dependent variables to first differences and include their lagged level as control variables accounting for the dependence of the dependent variable on its previous year level. Table 1 shows the results of 16 models as we run separate models for each of the four dependent variables and for each of the four parties.

Interaction plots with conditional effects of party cabinet share show all values of the moderator (GDP growth). Johnson-Neyman intervals allow us to assess not only if, but also where the slopes of our interactions are significant.

Results

Public expenses for social consumption and social investment policies

The descriptive results for the level of social investments and social consumption expenses across states and over time in Figure 1 reveal that there is no homogenous pattern. Social consumption expenses decrease between 1990 and 2019 in five out of nine states, while social investment expenses are rather stable except for increases in three states. Furthermore, spending levels of social investment and social consumption policies are rather similar in Salzburg and Tyrol, while we see major gaps in Carinthia, Upper Austria, Vorarlberg and Vienna. In the latter group, social investment expenses are
substantially higher than social consumption spending. This variation confirms our assumption of subnational differences regarding the type of social policy expenses across states and over time.

Figure 1. Development of social investment (dotted line) and social consumption (solid line) spending (% regional GDP) between 1990 and 2019 for the Austrian states

**Multiple regression results**

The regression models in Table 1 show a significant positive association between SPÖ’s cabinet share and both measures of social investment spending, but no significant relation with social consumption spending. This result only partially confirms Hypothesis 1 as we assumed a positive association with both social consumption and social investment spending. It seems that the social policy spending priorities of the SPÖ mainly address the (new) voter group of the high-educated middle-class that favours social investments over social consumption policies.

In contrast to the result for the SPÖ, the cabinet share of the ÖVP is significantly negatively associated with both measures of social investment spending. This confirms a
part of Hypothesis 2. However, we do not find a similar negative relationship with social consumption spending as hypothesised. Moreover, ÖVP’s cabinet share shows a significant positive association with social consumption spending per capita. It could be that the ÖVP at states level behaves differently to the federal level, where lower social consumption benefits are the major discourse.

We also have to reject a part of Hypothesis 3, because FPÖ’s cabinet share reduces social consumption expenses, but not social investments. The ‘deservingness of welfare benefits’ argument seems to apply here, since the responsibility of Austrian states regarding social consumption policies lies mainly the area of assistance to the poor and unemployed. We cannot confirm the negative relationship of PRRPs and their electorate with social investments that previous studies found (Busemeyer et al. 2022; Enggist and Pinggera 2022).

Finally, we do not find any significant relationship between the Green party and social consumption or social investment expenses. It might be that policy areas other than social policy such as environmental policies are of higher importance for Green parties and their constituency at state level. The very low average cabinet share of Green parties of 3.5% across all states and years might also serve as an explanation for lacking significant results.

For reason of space, we do not report the results for our control variables.
Table 1. Time-series cross-sectional models (random effects) for social consumption and social investment spending

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A Social consumption % GDP (1)</th>
<th>A Social consumption per capita (2)</th>
<th>A Social investment % GDP (3)</th>
<th>A Social investment per capita (4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SPÖ cabinet share (t-1)</td>
<td>0.0002</td>
<td>-0.342</td>
<td><strong>0.001</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.168</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.373)</td>
<td>(0.0004)</td>
<td>(0.098)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ÖVP cabinet share (t-1)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td><strong>0.415</strong></td>
<td>-<strong>0.001</strong></td>
<td>-<strong>0.184</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.230)</td>
<td>(0.0003)</td>
<td>(0.074)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FPÖ cabinet share (t-1)</td>
<td><strong>-0.003</strong></td>
<td><strong>-0.766</strong></td>
<td>0.0001</td>
<td>0.096</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.329)</td>
<td>(0.0004)</td>
<td>(0.109)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRÜNE cabinet share (t-1)</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
<td>0.679</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>0.085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
<td>(0.655)</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.219)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of women cabinet ministers (t-1)</td>
<td>0.0004</td>
<td>-0.046</td>
<td>-0.0005</td>
<td>-0.094</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
<td>(0.433)</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.149)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of women in parliament (t-1)</td>
<td>-0.009***</td>
<td>-0.887</td>
<td>-0.004***</td>
<td>-0.553***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
<td>(0.665)</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.209)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female employment rate (t-1)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>1.040</td>
<td>-0.005**</td>
<td>-1.119*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.006)</td>
<td>(1.570)</td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
<td>(0.622)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fertility rate (t-1)</td>
<td>0.247</td>
<td>91.548</td>
<td>0.077</td>
<td>45.579**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.252)</td>
<td>(70.735)</td>
<td>(0.081)</td>
<td>(20.810)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of population younger than six years (t-1)</td>
<td>-0.116***</td>
<td>-26.109**</td>
<td>-0.014</td>
<td>1.948</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.041)</td>
<td>(12.670)</td>
<td>(0.016)</td>
<td>(3.883)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment rate (t-1)</td>
<td>-0.023</td>
<td>-10.602**</td>
<td>-0.021**</td>
<td>-7.113***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.018)</td>
<td>(5.397)</td>
<td>(0.010)</td>
<td>(2.021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional GDP growth (t-1)</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>-0.125</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>0.248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.006)</td>
<td>(1.840)</td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
<td>(0.674)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Deindustrialisation (t-1)</td>
<td>-0.003</td>
<td>2.046*</td>
<td>-0.005**</td>
<td>-0.568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.004)</td>
<td>(1.054)</td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
<td>(0.361)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population density (t-1)</td>
<td>0.00002</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.00004***</td>
<td>0.018***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00003)</td>
<td>(0.008)</td>
<td>(0.00002)</td>
<td>(0.004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social consumption % GDP (t-1)</td>
<td>-0.213***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social consumption per capita (t-1)</td>
<td>-0.166***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.166**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.040)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Social investment % GDP (t-1)  -0.091***
                     (0.025)
Social investment per capita (t-1)  -0.110***
                     (0.025)
year                   -0.007  -0.311  0.007***  5.051***
                     (0.005)  (1.724)  (0.003)  (1.061)
Constant              1.454***  55.080  0.860***  91.228
                     (0.553)  (128.523)  (0.316)  (56.575)
Observations          252  252  252  252
R²                    0.154  0.099  0.114  0.135
Adjusted R²           0.111  0.054  0.070  0.092
F Statistic           43.490***  26.261***  30.836***  37.309***

Note: Panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses. We run separate models for each party family. For ÖVP, FPÖ and GRÜNE, only their party coefficients and PCSE are shown, all other coefficients are from the SPÖ model (for full models, see Table A.2 and A.3 in the appendix).
*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Conditional effect of economic growth

In addition to the independent effect of partisanship, we hypothesise that spending priorities are more pronounced in times of economic hardship or prosperity. Although the positive effect of the SPÖ on social consumption spending decreases with economic growth, as expected, the effect is not significant (Figure 2). In contrast to our expectations, the significant positive effect of the SPÖ on social investment expenses vanishes with economic growth and becomes insignificant when the GDP grows for more than 5.2 percent. Urban middle class voters might matter more than their traditional core voters of the working class, even in times of economic recessions. The results largely confirm that at country level left-wing governments increase all kinds of social expenditure when budget deficits or unemployment are high (Savage 2019), because (strong) welfare states work as automatic stabilisers in line with Keynesian economic thinking.
In line with our expectations, the effect of ÖVP’s cabinet share on social consumption spending becomes less positive with decreasing and negative economic developments, but this effect is not significant as share of GDP (Figure 3), albeit in per capita when GDP growth is higher than 3.04 percent (Figure A.3 in the Appendix). Concerns of ÖVP’s core electorate of entrepreneurs about high labour costs might be less pronounced in times of economic growth with higher revenues. Although the moderating role of GDP growth for ÖVP’s effect on social investment spending is negligible (Figure 3), measured per capita, it is becoming less negative with increasing GDP (Figure A.3 in the Appendix). The ÖVP might give up some of its opposition to social investments thanks to higher revenues in times of economic growth.
We have to reject a part of Hypothesis 3b, because the relationship of the cabinet share of the FPÖ and social consumption spending is significant negative for both GDP growth and decline, although declining when the economy shrinks. The expected lacking moderating effect of GDP growth for social investment confirms that the FPÖ is no SI protagonist, not even in times of prosperity.

Figure 5 confirms Hypothesis 4b that the Green party reacts to economic decline (growth) with higher (lower) social consumption expenses, but this effect is not significant. Although social investments increase with GDP growth (or become less negative), as expected, this relationship is significant and negative until GDP growth...
exceeds 2.07 percent. It could be that the Green party steers funds to social consumption policies and people in need when the economy shrinks or grows at only low levels.

Figure 5. Interaction plots for GDP growth and Green party (GRÜNE)

Regarding the robustness of our results, measuring the dependent variables in levels instead of differences yields the same results (Table A.4). Models that exclude housing from social consumption (Table A.5), because the housing category in some states also encompasses instruments that do not have a clear social policy aim (e.g. mortgage regulation), confirm the main results, only the significant positive association between the ÖVP and social consumption spending disappears. This signals that housing benefits matter in particular for ÖVP’s cabinet share.

Grouping parties to centre-left (SPÖ, GRÜNE) and parties right to centre (ÖVP, FPÖ) reveals similar results (Table A.6). The positive relationship of ÖVP and the negative one of FPÖ with social consumption in Table 1 level out resulting in non-significant coefficients, confirming our approach of measuring parties individually.

Finally, asymmetries regarding power and ideology between national and state governments and due to dependencies of regional parties/governments on national parties/governments (alignment effects) might bias the results (Golden and Picci, 2008;
Kleider et al., 2018). Models considering whether a party is part of the subnational and national government (Table A.7) still reveal results similar to our main models.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this study is to investigate the role of incumbent’s party ideology on social consumption and social investment spending at subnational level. Further, we address the question whether economic growth moderates the relationship. Unlike most other contributions in the field we use subnational data, which allow us to control for variables that are difficult to observe and/or measure, like national history and culture. The main contribution to the literature is the finding that parties matter for subnational units in prioritising social investment or social consumption policies and that the economic situation partially moderates the relationship.

Our models, covering four parties between 1991 and 2019, indeed show the expected positive association of the Social-Democrats (SPÖ) with social investment spending, but not with social consumption what might indicate the increasing importance and reliance of the SPÖ on the high-educated (urban) middle class voters who favour social investments. In line with our hypothesis, the cabinet share of the Christian Democratic party (ÖVP) reduces social investment spending, but in contrast to our expectations it increases social consumption spending (only for the per capita measure). However, this positive association is largely driven by housing that also entails instruments without a clear social policy aim such as mortgage regulation. The negative relationship with social consumption but not with social investment spending only partially confirms our hypothesis about the Populist Radical Right party (FPÖ) and the argument that PRRPs cut benefits for people regarded as undeserving of benefits such as poor, unemployed and non-native people. Surprisingly, we do not find any significant relationship of the Green party with social policy spending, what might be related to their
rather low average cabinet share and policy priorities that distinguish them from other parties in different policy fields (e.g. environmental policy or immigration).

In sum, some of our results confirm findings from studies at national levels (e.g. the positive (negative) relation of SPÖ (ÖVP) and social investment spending and the negative association of FPÖ with social consumption spending) and some are new (e.g. the positive (lacking) relation of ÖVP (SPÖ) and social consumption spending). The latter might be related to the specific situation and party system in Austria or our analysis at the subnational level. Furthermore, our grouping of investment categories to social consumption and social investment policies partially diverges from a similar grouping at national level, because subnational levels’ discretion differs to the national one.

Although our results corroborate only parts of our hypotheses about the moderating role of economic growth, overall we can confirm that spending priorities are more pronounced in times of economic hardship or prosperity. This applies mainly to social investment spending. As the major limitation, we could analyse the role of party ideology on social policy spending priorities for only nine subnational units, but the existing states in Austria leave no room for increasing the number of units. Although fixed effects model are usually more appropriate to establish causality, the limited variance of the cabinet composition in Austrian states together with the small number of states calls for random effects model. Thanks to the rather small size of Austria and the fact that all states share important characteristics such as a common cultural heritage and national welfare state, we are confident to keep the omitted variable bias limited. Whether or not our results hold for other countries largely depends on the discretion of subnational units in different environments and might be worth to investigate further.

Distinguishing social policy priorities and specifically social consumption from social investment policies seems to be a fruitful endeavour not only for (comparative)
analyses at the national level, but also at subnational levels, although the policy content and level of discretion might vary.

References


Horizontale und Vertikale Differenzen der Politischen Repräsentation in Österreich

Carmen Walenta-Bergmann, Johannes-Kepler-Universität, Linz


Schlagworte: politische Repräsentation, horizontale und vertikale Repräsentationsdifferenzen, Geschlecht, Partei, Föderation, Österreich, Kinderbetreuung
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I. Einleitung


Dieser Beitrag ist eine detaillierte Analyse der Partei- und Geschlechtsdimension der demokratisch legitimierten Volksvertretung in Österreich. Im Rahmen dieser Analyse werden die Ebene des Bundes, sowie die Ebene der neun Bundesländer und jene der aktuell 2095 Gemeinden miteinander verglichen. Anhand der systematischen statistischen Auswertung von fast 30 Jahren (sub)nationaler politischer Repräsentation wird deutlich, dass sich die nationale und subnationale politische Repräsentation in Österreich stark voneinander unterscheiden und die regionalen Differenzen sehr groß sind.

Dieser Beitrag ist in drei Teile gegliedert. Der erste Teil gibt einen theoretischen Überblick über die Spezifika des österreichischen Föderalismus. Im zweiten Teil werden die, sich daraus ableitenden Forschungsfragen und Hypothesen vorgestellt. Im dritten Teil schließlich werden die Ergebnisse der Analyse dargestellt und besprochen.
II. Der Österreichische Föderalismus


Einerseits, weil die administrativen Kompetenzen und die administrative Autonomie auf subnationaler Ebene sehr hoch sind (Fallend 2003; Karlhofer 2013). Andererseits aber auch, deswegen, weil die Schwäche des Bundesrates durch die Stärke der Landeshauptleutekonferenz kompensiert wird. Diese ist zwar nicht in der österreichischen Bundesverfassung vorgesehen, aber kann in der politischen Realität dennoch als wichtigstes Gremium der Länder bezeichnet werden (Bußjäger 2018). Drittens ist aus der Umfrageforschung bekannt, dass die Legitimität des föderalistischen Systems in der Bevölkerung fest verankert ist. Diese haben gegenüber den

\(^1\) Überblick zu Föderationen weltweit zu finden auf: [http://www.forumfed.org/countries/](http://www.forumfed.org/countries/) („Forum of Federations. The global network on federalism and devolved governance“) [last access: April 2021]

III. Forschungsfragen und Hypothesen

Gemeindepolitik in Österreich über überdurchschnittlich viel Gestaltungsmöglichkeiten und Entscheidungsspielraum verfügt.


*H1: Die vertikale Differenz der politischen Repräsentation wird über die Zeit hinweg kleiner.*

*H2: Die horizontale Differenz der politischen Repräsentation ist niedrig und stabil.*

*H3: Der Anteil an Frauen in der Repräsentation ist auf nationaler Ebene am geringsten.*


\[H4a: \text{Je höher der Anteil an SPÖ Mitgliedern im Gemeinderat ist, desto höher ist die Kinderbetreuungsquote in der jeweiligen Gemeinde.}\]

\[H4b: \text{Je höher der Anteil an ÖVP Mitgliedern im Gemeinderat ist, desto niedriger ist die Kinderbetreuungsquote in der jeweiligen Gemeinde.}\]

\[H4c: \text{Je höher der Anteil an FPÖ Mitgliedern im Gemeinderat ist, desto niedriger ist die Kinderbetreuungsquote in der jeweiligen Gemeinde.}\]

Zusammenhang zwischen Gemeinderepräsentation und Kinderbetreuungsquoten folgende Hypothese formuliert werden.

\[ H5: \text{Je höher der Frauenanteil im Gemeinderat ist, desto höher ist die Kinderbetreuungsquote in der jeweiligen Gemeinde.} \]

IV. Ergebnisse

A. Politische Repräsentation in den Bundesländern


\(^2\) für detaillierte Informationen zum Wahlrecht der Landtage siehe: Ucakar et al. 2017, S.94ff und S.141ff
### Tabelle 1: Entwicklung der Sitzanteile pro Partei in den Landtagen der österreichischen Bundesländer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jahr</th>
<th>Partei</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Mittelwert</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Standardabweichung</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>ÖVP</td>
<td>30.00</td>
<td>48.15</td>
<td>55.56</td>
<td>7.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>ÖVP</td>
<td>15.00</td>
<td>38.68</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>12.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>ÖVP</td>
<td>16.67</td>
<td>39.76</td>
<td>55.56</td>
<td>14.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>ÖVP</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>35.24</td>
<td>51.79</td>
<td>14.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>SPOE</td>
<td>22.22</td>
<td>36.85</td>
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Quelle: Eigene Berechnungen auf Basis von Daten der Landtagshomepages der Bundesländer

Tabelle 2: Entwicklung der Sitzanteile pro Partei in den Landesregierungen der österreichischen Bundesländer

<table>
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<th>Partei</th>
<th>Jahr</th>
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<th>Mittelwert</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
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</table>

Quelle: Eigene Berechnungen auf Basis von Daten der Verwaltungshomepages der Bundesländer

Dieser in Landtag und Landesregierung beobachtete Trend wird bei der Parteizugehörigkeit der Landeshauptleute noch nicht sichtbar. Tabelle 3 zeigt, dass der Anteil an ÖVP und SPÖ Landeshauptleuten ungebrochen hoch ist und im Jahr 2020 sogar bei 100 Prozent liegt.

### Tabelle 3: Entwicklung Parteizugehörigkeit der Landeshauptleute und Frauenanteil

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</tbody>
</table>


**Gerhard Dörfler von 2009 bis 2013 in Kärnten (FPK, bzw. bis 2009 BZÖ); Stv.: Uwe Scheuch 2009 bis 2012 in Kärnten (ebenfalls FPK, bzw. bis 2009 BZÖ)

***keiEn 2. StellvertreterIn für Landeshauptleute im Burgenland, der Steiermark und Vorarlberg

Quelle: Eigene Berechnungen auf Basis von Daten der Verwaltungshomepages der Bundesländer

Grafik 1: Entwicklung des Anteils der weiblichen Landtagsabgeordneten in den österreichischen Bundesländern

Quelle: Eigene Berechnung und Darstellung auf Basis von Daten der Landtagshomepages der Bundesländer

**Grafik 2: Entwicklung des Anteils der weiblichen Landesregierungsmitglieder in den österreichischen Bundesländern**

<table>
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<th>Jahr</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
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Quelle: Eigene Berechnung und Darstellung auf Basis von Daten der Verwaltungshomepages der Bundesländer

**B. Politische Repräsentation in den Gemeinden**


⁴ vgl. Österreichs digitales Amt: https://www.oesterreich.gv.at/themen/leben_in_oesterreich/wahlen/5/Seite.320621.html#Aktive [letzter Zugriff im Mai 2021]
⁶ siehe Landesgemeindeordnungen der Bundesländer: https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Land/ [letzter Zugriff im Mai 2021]


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**Grafik 3**: Geschlecht der österreichischen BürgermeisterInnen in den Jahren 2010 und 2018

Quelle: Eigene Darstellung auf Basis von Daten der Landesstatistikstellen und dem österreichischen Gemeindebund


**Grafik 4:** Frauenanteile in den Gemeinderäten der österreichischen Gemeinden

![Grafik 4: Frauenanteile in den Gemeinderäten der österreichischen Gemeinden](image)

Quelle: Eigene Berechnung und Darstellung auf Basis von Daten der Landesstatistikstellen, Landesregierungsämtern und Landesverwaltungsstellen

Vergleicht man diese Zahlen mit der Landes- und Bundesebene, werden die vertikalen Repräsentationsdifferenzen in Österreich besonders deutlich, wobei auf Gemeindeebene mit Abstand am wenigsten Frauen in politische Ämter gewählt werden. So beträgt im Jahr 2018 der durchschnittliche Frauenanteil im Gemeinderat 22 Prozent, im Landtag 33 Prozent und im Nationalrat 34 Prozent.

**Grafik 5:** Parteizugehörigkeit der österreichischen BürgermeisterInnen

Quelle: Eigene Berechnung und Darstellung auf Basis von Daten der Landesstatistikstellen, Landesregierungsämtern und Landesverwaltungsstellen

Der Grund warum nicht alle 2095 (im Jahr 2018 noch 2096) BürgermeisterInnen einer Partei zugeordnet werden können, ist die Tatsache, dass die Tiroler Gemeindewahlordnung aus dem Jahr 1994 keine Parteizugehörigkeit für die Wählbarkeit einer Person vorsieht oder voraussetzt.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{10} Siehe TGWO 1994 § 8: [https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=LfT&Gesetzesnummer=20000186](https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=LfT&Gesetzesnummer=20000186) [letzter Zugriff im Mai 2021]

Die Kräfteverhältnisse der Parteien in den österreichischen Gemeinderäten spiegeln dieses Bild wider. Die ÖVP beansprucht seit Jahrzehnten mehr als die Hälfte der Gemeinderatssitze in Österreich und ist damit unangefochtene Nummer eins. Wie groß die Stabilität ist und wie gering die Veränderung zeigt sich an den konkreten Zahlen: Im Jahr 2003 hält die ÖVP 52,4 Prozent der Gemeinderatssitze, fünf Jahre später 52,6, weitere fünf Jahre später 54,1 und weitere fünf Jahre später 52,8 Prozent. Im Gegensatz dazu nehmen die Anteile der Gemeindesitze der SPÖ im gleichen Zeitraum leicht von Durchschnittlich 37,2 Prozent auf 31,8 Prozent ab, während die Sitzanteile der FPÖ in diesem Zeitraum zunehmen.

C. Ursachen für Repräsentationsdifferenzen

Wie die detaillierte Darstellung der Besonderheiten der österreichischen politischen Repräsentation auf Bundesland- sowie Gemeindeebene zeigt, gibt es erhebliche vertikale, sowie horizontale Varianz. Diese Varianz zeigt sich sowohl auf parteipolitischer Ebene als auch auf Ebene des Geschlechtergleichgewichts in der Repräsentation. Es zeigt sich, dass die Parteipluralität abnimmt, und die Dominanz der ÖVP zunimmt, je kleiner die politische Einheit ist. Im Untersuchungszeitraum liegt der ÖVP Sitzanteil im Parlament im Schnitt bei 33, im Landtag bei fast 40 und im Gemeinderat bei 53 Prozent. Nicht nur das Parteien- sondern auch das Geschlechterverhältnis ist auf Bundesebene am ausgewogensten. Im österreichischen Parlament


Diese Besonderheiten sind auf den ersten Blick nicht logisch erklärbar. Basierend auf der Annahme, dass sowohl das nationale Wahlergebnis, also auch das durchschnittliche
Wahlergebnis aller Landeswahlen beziehungsweise Gemeindewahlen, die Präferenz aller Bürger widerspiegelt, und die Parteienlandschaft in Österreich weitgehend über das ganze Land hinweg einheitlich ist, würde man davon ausgehen, dass die Sitze und Ämter im Schnitt auf allen Ebenen ähnlich verteilt sind.


Politik mehr mit Alltagsproblemen beschäftigt ist, und daher auch mehr mit den tatsächlichen Problem der Menschen in Berührung kommt (Johnson et al. 2003). Da diese in der wissenschaftlichen Literatur gefundenen Zusammenhänge für Österreich nicht richtig zu sein, muss auch Hypothese 3 („Der Anteil an Frauen in der Repräsentation ist auf nationaler Ebene am geringsten“) verworfen werden.


**D. Auswirkungen von Repräsentationsdifferenzen**


**Grafik 6: Mögliche Auswirkungen von Repräsentationsdifferenzen: Kinderbetreuungsquoten**

Quelle: Eigene Berechnung und Darstellung auf Basis von Daten der Kindertagesheimstatistik (Daten werden von den Landesstatistikstellen erhoben und von Statistik Austria bereitgestellt)

Die Analyse der österreichischen Daten führt zu ähnlichen Ergebnissen. Wie Tabelle 4 zeigt, haben sowohl der Frauenanteil als auch der Anteil an ÖVP und SPÖ Gemeinderatsmitgliedern einen hochsignifikanten Einfluss auf die Kinderbetreuungsquoten.

**Tabelle 4: Hierarchische Regressionsmodelle zur Erklärung der Kinderbetreuungsquoten in Österreichs Gemeinden**

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<tbody>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>% SPÖ Gemeinderäte</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% FPÖ Gemeinderäte</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Frauen im Gemeinderat</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.034)</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.130)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beschäftigungsquote Männer</td>
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</table>

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.
Die Koeffizienten zeigen, dass die Kinderbetreuungsquote 0,085 Prozent sinkt, wenn der Anteil an ÖVP Gemeinderatsmitgliedern um ein Prozent steigt. Steigt der Anteil der SPÖ Gemeinderatsmitglieder hingegen um ein Prozent, steigt die Kinderbetreuungsquote um 0,071 Prozent. Der Koeffizient für den FPÖ Gemeinderatsmitgliederanteil ist wie jener für die ÖVP negativ, allerdings nicht signifikant.

Der Frauenanteil im Gemeinderat hat einen noch stärkeren Einfluss auf die Kinderbetreuungsquoten: steigt dieser um ein Prozent, steigt die Kinderbetreuungsquote laut den Modellen zwischen 0,13 und 0,15 Prozent. Da in den Modellen für eine Vielzahl von wichtigen Zusatzvariablen (u.a. Arbeitslosenquote, Beschäftigungsquoten, Gemeindeausgaben, Bevölkerung, Tourismus) kontrolliert wurde kann davon ausgegangen werden, dass diese Effekte

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<th></th>
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<th>Gemeindeausgaben für vorschulische Bildung</th>
<th>Gemeindeausgaben für Bildung</th>
<th>Gemeindeausgaben pro Kopf</th>
<th>Gemeindeschulden pro Kopf</th>
<th>Tourismus</th>
<th>Gesamtbevölkerung</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>0.003**</td>
<td>0.002***</td>
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<td>-3.028</td>
<td>0.00001</td>
<td>48.113***</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.0004)</td>
<td>(0.0002)</td>
<td>(1.928)</td>
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<td>(7.050)</td>
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<td>-20,065.197</td>
<td>-20,069.139</td>
<td>40,155.709</td>
<td>40,261.993</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>40,268.679</td>
<td>40,276.562</td>
<td>40,261.993</td>
<td>40,276.562</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01


dritter wichtiger Grund ist die Verfügbarkeit von einer weitaus größeren Fallzahl (im Fall von Österreich N = 2095) im Vergleich zu Ländervergleichenden Studien (meist N < 30).


V. Zusammenfassung und Diskussion


zugenommen hat, und seither kontinuierlich abnimmt. Auf Gemeindeebene hingegen nimmt die maximale Differenz bis zum letzten Messzeitpunkt immer weiter zu.


Außerdem sind der ÖVP-SPÖ Föderalismuskompromiss und seine weitreichenden Folgen für die heutigen vertikalen Repräsentationsdifferenzen eine Bereicherung für die Diskussion über die
VI. Literatur


Bolzendahl, Catherine (2011). Beyond the Big Picture: Gender Influences on Disaggregated and Domain-Specific Measures of Social Spending, 1980–1999, in: Politics & Gender, Vol. 7(01), 35–70


governance, Cheltenham, UK ; Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar


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Abstract
In representative democracies citizens hand over responsibility to parties, which represent their interests in policy-making. Current socioeconomic and political developments might foster declining quality of representation. We analyse the state of substantive representation of social policy issues in Austria and ask: How do voters and parties assess the importance of different social policy issues? How does the fit of voters’ and parties’ issue salience develop over time? Comparing the supply and demand side of social policy issue saliences between 2009 and 2019, we unexpectedly find convergence. Austrian parties and voters show more similar relative importance of social policy areas over time. Variations in issue saliences are partly explained by the material and sociocultural values of disaggregated social policy areas.

Keywords
Political Representation, Issue Salience, Parties, Electorate, Social Policy, Austria

Repräsentation der Gesellschaft? Die Bedeutung von sozialpolitischen Themen für österreichische Parteien und deren WählerInnen

Zusammenfassung

Schlüsselwörter
Politische Repräsentation, Themensalienz, Parteien, WählerInnen, Sozialpolitik, Österreich

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.
1. Introduction

In representative democracies, parties act as agents of citizens in the policy-making process, tasked through elections to represent voters' interests. Socioeconomic developments continuously put this mechanism under pressure and challenge the fit of interests between voters and their representatives. This is especially true for complex policy fields (Walgrave/Lefevere 2013), such as social policy which is affected by diversification and stratification due to increasing socioeconomic pressure and new social risks (Armingeon/Bonoli 2006; Taylor-Gooby 2004). In particular due to voters’ post-industrial social policy preferences and parties’ autonomy in choosing electorates and policy programmes, it is necessary to analyse which policy areas parties actually proclaim, what preferences voters actually state and if they fit (Häusermann 2010). An important part of the analysis of the fit of supply and demand side interests is the congruence of social policy areas’ salience such as job and employment-, pension-, or family policy. We assume that vote-seeking parties are inclined to care about the same policy areas as their voters and thus place issues related to these policy areas on the political agenda. This raises our research questions: How do voters and parties assess the importance of different social policy issues? How does the fit of voters’ and parties’ issue salience develop over time?

Previous studies identified socioeconomic and political developments that tend to increase the divergence of voters’ and parties’ issue salience perceptions. Beyond the vague fear of a growing crisis of representation, increasing self-expression values in society (Kölln/Polk 2017), external shocks, like a financial crisis (Tábor/Giger/Häusermann 2018) and party plurality (Baker/Jolly/Polk 2020; Dennison 2020) are expected to decrease party-voters issue salience congruence. We further argue for disaggregating social policy in separate policy fields (such as labour market policies, childcare, or old age pensions (e.g., Pinggera 2020). However, the temporal dimension of issue salience congruence of social policy areas remains largely unexplored. We fill this gap with a disaggregated analysis of several social policy areas over time by combining two of the most common supply and demand issue salience measurements for Austria between 2009 and 2019. Our analysis is based on the supply and demand datasets of the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES). The results unexpectedly show convergence and not divergence of party-public issue salience congruence overt time in Austria. Categorising the policy areas by their material and sociocultural value explains partly the variation in issue salience on the demand and supply side of social policy preferences. This article is structured along five sections: (1) Introduction, (2) Theory and State of Research, (3) Data, Method and Operationalisation, (4) Results and (5) Conclusion and Discussion.

2. Theory and State of Research

When analysing interest congruence of voters and representatives, three prominent approaches exist in literature: comparison of issue positioning (Anderweg 2012; Busemeyer/Rathgeb/Sahm 2021; Fossati/Häusermann 2014); opinion-policy responsiveness and its mechanisms (Adams/Ezrow/Somer-Topcu 2014; Grewenig et al. 2020; Klüver/Spoon 2014; Pedersen 2020); and the congruence of voters’ and parties’ issue saliences (Pinggera 2020; Traber/Giger/Häusermann 2018; Häusermann/Kriesi 2015). The fit of issue positioning between voters and representatives remains the most prominent approach for the evaluation of democratic congruence. However, the meaningfulness of the issue position is limited if we do not know if, and to what extent an issue or policy area is considered to be important by both, parties and voters. The issue salience, or “the relative importance and significance that an actor ascribes to a given issue on the political agenda” (Oppermann 2010, 3) is especially interesting for policy fields, such as social policy, that show a high degree of stratification and a wide range of different issues.

The different social policy areas are faced with diversification and stratification due to socioeconomic developments and new social risks (Armingeon/Bonoli 2006). Current reforms are primarily structured along the social investment and social consumption dimension (Garritzmann/Busemeyer/Niemanns 2018; Gingrich/Ansell 2015; Hemerijck 2018; Huber/Stephens 2015). While social investment policies are answers to the growing demands of citizens affected by new social risks, social consumption policies are primarily designed to compensate for economic losses. Individual social policy areas such as family policy, job/employment or pensions can contain both social invest-
ment and consumption instruments. In the context of growing fiscal constraints (Pierson 1996) and limited regulatory capacity, the decisions by parties and voters to prioritise an issue, thus allocate limited resources to it, are crucial for policy-making. Parties and voters are increasingly in favour of welfare state issues (Manow et al. 2018), however fiscal constraints reinforce issue competitions over welfare issues (Pinggera 2020). Distributive conflicts over welfare state reforms (Busemeyer/Garritzmann 2017) highlight the initial importance of voters’ and parties’ issue salience for the choice of policy area to reform and subsequently for the reform content. We therefore explore the relative issue salience of social policy areas over time.

Most research on issue salience engages with questions for only one point in time, which does not allow to make a statement about the temporal development of public-party issue salience congruence. Only a very small number of studies also take the time dimension of issue salience into account. Dennison (2020) analyses the public issue salience for the policy field of immigration in Western European countries between 2005 and 2018. Rovny and Polk (2020) study the party issue salience of radical right parties for economic issues in Western Europe between 1985 and 2015. Very rarely researchers try to combine these two approaches and pose the question whether issue salience of parties and voters is converging or diverging over time (for economic issues e.g., Traber/Giger/Häusermann 2018).

We tackle this issue for social policy areas and focus on the time dimension of public-party salience congruence. Therefore, this contribution focuses on the disaggregated comparison of public-party salience congruence over time, and asks: How do voters and parties assess the importance of different social policy issues? How does the fit of voters’ and parties’ issue salience develop over time?

The literature does not offer a uniform answer to this question. Cross-sectional studies comparing several countries and welfare state types such as Häusermann and Krisie (2015) or Pinggera (2020) conclude that party-voter congruence of social policy issue is at a higher level compared to other policy issues. Pinggera (2020) finds in his cross-country study of seven Western European countries high congruence of public-party issue salience in 2018/2019. The salience congruence between parties, the general electorate, and their specific electorate is especially high for broadly supported issues. Yet, there are differences in the issue salience of party families, that corresponds to the issue emphases of their electorate.

However, there are also strong arguments for declining congruence between parties and citizens. The rise in party competition and parties shift from their voter representative to their governing role (Mair 2013) makes it difficult for parties to respond to voters’ demands. The fiscal and regulatory capacity of governments and thus incumbent parties’ freedom to act on voters’ demands has been declining due to rise in public debts and pressure for fiscal consolidation (Streeck/Mertens 2015). We will analyse how the limited capacity to act on voters’ issue preferences influences parties’ issue emphases. The decline in party membership (Biezen/Poguntke 2014), accompanied by decreasing voter turnout for elections in Austria1, indicate that party-voter linkages are weakening. The rise of populism and its “thin-centred ideology” (Freeden 1998, 748) contradicts the ideological differentiation of the social-political field by blurring issue emphases and positions. Radical right parties strategically blur certain social policy stances to attract broader electorates, however, regarding sociocultural stances these populist parties favour consumption policies (Enggist/Pinggera 2022). Current surveys also conclude that the trust towards politicians is decreasing2, which suggests a decreasing fit between the interests of representatives and their electorate. Additionally, external shocks, such as financial crises (Traber et al. 2018) alter the congruence and are crucial factors when analysing the temporal development of public-party salience congruence in Austria.

Voter’s issue salience has a direct effect on voting behaviour (Dennison 2020) and declining party-voter congruence for mainstream parties increases voters’ likelihood of voting for anti-establishment challenger parties (Bakker/Jolly/Polk 2020). The level of issue salience congruence affects the plurality of the party system and on the other hand the number of parties also affects the party-voter issue salience congruence. Walgrave and Le-fevere (2013) further found higher differences between public and party salience depending on the complexity of voters accessing the information about parties’ positions and issues salience, and thus also depending on the complexity of the policy field and the different competing issues in the field. Kölln and Polk (2017) additionally found decreasing public-party congruence for societies with increasing self-expression values. The World Value Survey reports this trend for Austria3. With increasing fragmentation among electorates, in particular regarding different social policy issues (Häusermann/Kriesi 2015), parties find it difficult to listen and react to voters’ demands (Mair 2003). Aggregating the interests of voters in parties’ issue emphasis is increasingly difficult, which conversely makes it difficult for voters to compare their interests with parties’ manifestos. Bearing all these examined relations in mind we hypothesise:

1 see for example: https://www.parlament.gv.at/PERK/His/Wahl/BETEIL/index.shtml# [last access: June 2021]
2 see online analysis of the European Social Survey (variable trstplt: Trust in politicians): http://nesstar.ess.nsd.uib.no/webview/ [last access: June 2021]
3 see online WVS self-expression values: https://www.worldvaluesurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp [last access: November 2021]
**H1:** In the field of social policy the issue salience congruence between voters and parties in Austria decreases over time.

Building on the results of Pinggera (2020), we further expect differences in salience levels comparing separate social policy areas and parties as well as their corresponding electorates. The traditional partisan theory assumes that parties have a distinct ideological position, since they represent the interests of their class-based electorate (Hibbs 1977; Häusermann/Picot/Geering 2013). Left parties and their voters are in favour of welfare state expansions and thus put social policy issues at the top of their agenda (Castles 1982; Schmidt 1996). We would expect high relative issue saliences of all separate social policy issues for left parties and voters. However, we assume that the party-voter linkages for different social policy issues are more complex. Thus we follow the multi-dimensional perspective on social policy (Garritzmann/Busemeyer/Niemanns 2018), but on the policy area level, and the “new school” of partisan politics emphasising the importance of party-voter linkages (Häusermann/Picot/Geering 2013). Parties emphasise specific social policy issues and areas to attract a specific group of voters. In contrast to the “old” partisan theory, parties are more flexible in their electoral strategies and thus more autonomous which electorate and issue they consider (Katz/Maier 1994).

Categorising our three disaggregated social policy areas regarding their material and sociocultural value (Kitschelt 1994; Kitschelt 2004) specifies these relationships. Policy areas that are primarily situated on the material dimension address questions like where and how the state should intervene and how much the state should modify the material distribution of the market economy (Häusermann 2010; Hieda 2021). Pensions policies possess strong material values since they primarily alter the socioeconomic position of individuals. Whereas family policy has strong sociocultural values and thus provides answers to the choice of appropriate unit of social protection (family or individual) and generally to question of gender roles and family models. We categorise job/employment policies primarily as policy area with strong material values, since these policies alter the socioeconomic position of individuals, however, active labour market instruments as sub-dimension of the policy area have sociocultural goals. We remain on the aggregated policy area level with job/employment policy’s strong material value.

Individual family policy instruments illustrate the complex and time-dependent relationship between issue salience and position. Instruments such as family allowances, which compensate the economic loss when providing unpaid care, have strong material goals. Our analysis focuses on the last decades in Austria, during which an extensive family allowances system already exists, and instead the public discourse is dominated by sociocultural family policy ideas and reforms in most OECD countries (Kang/Meyers 2018; Gabel/Kamerman 2006). Current family policy reforms introduced instruments, such as paternity leave, which have strong sociocultural goals of increasing the gender equality in parental care. We remain on the aggregated policy area level and categorise family policy as primarily sociocultural policy area. We expect that parties and voters that emphasize material issues show high saliences of pension and job/employment policy relative to family policy. On the other hand, parties and voters with strong sociocultural agendas will show high family policy salience relative to the other issues.

We focus on parties and their respective electorates which successfully won seats for the Austrian Parliament (Nationalrat) in at least two elections between 2008 and 2019. Our sample includes the ÖVP, SPÖ, FPÖ, GRÜNE and NEOS. Following the Comparative Political Data Set (Armingeon et al. 2018) the ÖVP can be classified as religious centre party, the SPÖ as left social democratic party, the FPÖ as right party, The GRÜNE as green party and the NEOS as liberal party.

The party family classifications already indicate some party differences on the two dimensions. The values of the sociocultural salience ($galtan\_salience$ [0,10]) and material salience ($trecon\_salience$ [0,10]) measurements from the 2019 Chapel Hill expert survey (Jolly et al. 2022) show that SPÖ and ÖVP have stronger material (both 6.9) and weaker sociocultural orientations (SPÖ 4, ÖVP 5.5), FPÖ and GRÜNE weaker material (FPÖ 4.2, GRÜNE 4.7) and stronger sociocultural orientations (FPÖ 7.7, GRÜNE 6.8), whereas NEOS show a strong material (7.4) and a strong sociocultural (6.4) orientation. Combining the orientations of these Austrian parties with the positioning of the three social policy issues results in following expectations:

**H2a:** The salience of family policy will be high among FPÖ, GRÜNE, NEOS and their electorates.

**H2b:** The salience of job/employment policy will be high among SPÖ, ÖVP, NEOS and their electorates.

**H2c:** The salience of pension policy will be high among SPÖ, ÖVP, NEOS and their electorates.

Regarding hypothesis 2a, Christian Democratic parties, such as the ÖVP, have been crucial for the implementation and design of early family policies (van Kersbergen 1995; Manow/van Kersbergen 2010). However, in the last decades Christian Democratic parties show high degrees of ideological similarity to conservative parties and are often aggregated in the same category (Camia/Caramani 2012; Kriesi et al. 2008; Häusermann 2012). Giuliani (2021) concluded that Christian Democratic and conservative parties altered their family policy ideas towards
optional familialism, which additionally supports gender equality, however through an economic and market-oriented frame. Which supports our classification of ÖVP as member of the conservative party family with strong material orientations and weak sociocultural orientations.

3. Data, Method and Operationalisation

In our analysis we focus on the party manifestos of Austrian parties and the issue saliences of electorates. We argue that the content of party manifestos, which are published during the election campaigns, are suitable proxies for issue salience of political actors. Primarily because manifestos can be defined as “contract between parties and voters [...] reflect[ing] a party’s realistic assessment of the policies which they could expect to implement if elected” (Ray 2007, 17). Due to data availability for both demand and supply issue salience, we limit our sample to 2009 - 2019. The Austrian national election dates during and shortly before our period of observation were 28th September 2008, 29th September 2013, and 15th October 2017. Our sample consists of all parties who won mandates for the Nationalrat at least two elections between 2008 and 2017, which is true for FPÖ, GRÜNE, NEOS, ÖVP and SPÖ.

The analysis is based on two different types of data, both collected as part of the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES). Information on parties’ social policy focus (supply side) can be found in the party manifestos released as campaigning instruments for elections to the Nationalrat. The AUTNES supply side dataset contains fine-grained coding of all policy statements, including social policy from 2002 to 2017. Information on voters’ social policy emphases (demand side) can be surveyed by representative opinion polls among citizens eligible to vote. The AUTNES demand side dataset contains three independent survey projects of that kind (containing 20 survey waves between 2009 and 2019). By merging these, from a conceptual and methodological perspective, very different data sources, we developed a tool to compare public- and party issue saliences. Our analysis is focused on disaggregated social policy issues, however the data and our conceptualisation can be used to analyse any other issue over time and its congruence between voters and parties.

3.1 Operationalisation: voters’ social policy emphases

The AUTNES demand side dataset is structured along three project periods. The survey for the first dataset was conducted in 2009 (Kritzinger/Aichholzer et al. 2020). The surveys for the second dataset (containing six waves) were conducted between 2013 and 2015 (Kritzinger/Johann et al. 2020). The surveys for the third dataset (containing 13 waves) were conducted between 2017 and 2019 (Aichholzer et al. 2017). The merged dataset contains 20 waves with more than 10,000 individuals participating. For some years multiple waves have been conducted (six waves in 2017, seven waves in 2019). Due to the panel structure of the survey data pooling was not a good option. We use only a maximum of one wave per year, and thus six out of 20 waves (2009, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019).4

To calculate the average voter’s issue salience for the electorate of each party, we combined party preference and issue emphases measurements for each individual. Party preference is measured by posing slightly different questions depending on the period of conduction (for 2009: Q18A; for 2013-2015: Wi-Q3; for 2017-2019: Wi-Q17 to Wi-Q19).

Likewise, public issue salience is measured by posing several different questions depending on the survey project (see Table 1). For the first survey in 2009, participants had to name their most, and second most important political issue. The issues mentioned by the participants have later been coded into 22 policy fields. For consecutive surveys (2013-2015 and 2017-2019) participants had to choose the three most important policy fields out of 16 (including the option ‘none of the above’).

The public issue salience is calculated using these different questions on issue importance. Due to the fact that the number of issues that respondents could select varies between one and three, the issue choice has been weighted according to the total number of issues ticked by the respondent (see Equation 1). This approach enables us to compare the public issue salience over time and to combine it with the supply side data.

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4 For more information on the AUTNES project, see https://autnes.at/
The final dataset contains information on the public issue salience for 16 policy (sub)fields. For the analysis we use the social policy subfields ‘family policy’, ‘pensions’ and ‘job/employment’. Further it contains information on the average public issue salience for the electorate of the six most important political parties in Austria (ÖVP, SPÖ, FPÖ, NEOS, GRÜNE).

3.2 Operationalisation: social policy issue saliences in party manifestos

To measure parties’ issue saliences, we use the AUTNES supply side dataset (Müller et al. 2020b). The dataset contains information on the content of all relevant Austrian parties’ manifestos between 2002 and 2017. We use the election years 2008, 2013 and 2017 (variable: v19) and the manifestos of ÖVP, SPÖ, FPÖ, GRÜNE and NEOS (v20) to ensure comparability with the AUTNES demand survey data.

Comparable to the Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2020), the AUTNES supply side team ascribed to each kernel sentence in the manifesto the containing issues (v10 issue). The issue categories are based on a three-level hierarchical coding structure. For instance, issue “11704 salary of mothers” (level 3) is part of “1170 family/children/adolescents” (level 2) and “11000 welfare state” (level 1). Resulting in a dataset with structured information on how often one of the 650 level-3-issues appears in each party manifesto and thus the aggregated count of 15 level-1-issue categories. Based on the possible 16 answer categories of the voters’ issue questions, we aggregated level-3-issues to three social policy issues: job/employment, pensions, and family policy (see Table 1). The original AUTNES manifesto dataset contains information on additional social policy issues such as health policy or general welfare state statements. However, the demand side survey did not offer these issues as answer categories of the voters’ issue questions, we aggregated level-3-issues to three social policy issues: job/employment, pensions, and family policy (see Table 1).

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Equation 2: from manifesto issue statements to party salience variables

\[ \text{SupIS}_{p,f} = \frac{\Sigma_{s_i} S_{p,f}}{\Sigma_{s_j} S_p} \]

SupIS...party/supply issue salience, SupIS ≤ 1
p...party, p = [ÖVP, SPÖ, FPÖ, NEOS, GRÜNE]

For the full list of issue codes, see (Müller et al. 2020a)

3.3 Combining public and party issue salience

Party manifestos are strategic instruments used by parties to address voters in which they present their positions and issue emphasis in competition to other parties. Following the argument of Budge (2015), the relative party issue salience compared to all other parties is more meaningful when analysing political competition. To capture the competitive issue salience and to control for general trends in party and public issue salience we create mean-centred relative issue salience variables by subtracting the mean share of a topic among all five and in 2008 four parties’ manifestos in the same year (see Equation 3).

Equation 3: relative supply issue salience

\[ \text{RelSupIS}_{p,f} = \text{SupIS}_{p,f} - \frac{\sum_{p'} \text{SupIS}_{p',f}}{N_p} \]

RelSupIS...relative party/supply issue salience, SupIS ≤ 1
p...party, p = [ÖVP, SPÖ, FPÖ, NEOS, GRÜNE]
f...issue field, f = [family policy, pensions, job/employment]
s...manifesto statements
N_p...Number of parties

Equation 4: relative demand issue salience

\[ \text{RelDemIS}_{p,f} = \text{DemIS}_{p,f} - \frac{\sum_{p'} \text{DemIS}_{p',f}}{N_p} \]

RelDemIS...relative demand issue salience, DemIS ≤ 1
p...party, p = [ÖVP, SPÖ, FPÖ, NEOS, GRÜNE]
f...issue field, f = [family policy, pensions, job/employment]
s...manifesto statements
N_p...Number of parties

The mean-centred issue salience variables show the emphasis of each party and electorate compared to the others and how the emphasis changes over time.
By comparing the electorates’ and parties’ mean-centred issue salience figures for each party over time, we are able to analyse if and how well the issue salience of each party fits to the issue salience of its electorate and vice versa. A positive family policy public issue salience value can be interpreted as an emphasis by the electorate on family policy compared to the other electorates. If a party wants to strategically address the issue salience of its voters we would see a positive party issue salience value for family policy, which means that the party emphasises the issue compared to the other parties. Following the approach of party ideology measurements (e.g., Jahn 2011), we use the content of party manifestos for the following years until a new party manifesto has been published for the next election. Thus, we combine the supply issue saliences from 2008 with the demand issue saliences from 2009, supply issue saliences from 2013 with demand issue saliences from 2013, 2014 and 2015, and supply issue saliences from 2017 with demand issue saliences from 2017 and 2019.

Our goal is to analyse the congruence of party and public issue salience for the disaggregated social policy issues family policy, job/employment, and pensions. To create issue salience congruence variables, we subtracted the mean-centred relative public issue salience from the relative mean-centred party issue salience (Equation 5). For each party and issue, we have a congruence indicator which shows how well the supply and demand issue salience fits together. A negative value can be interpreted as greater demand issue salience by the electorate than the party supplies, and a positive value as greater supply than demand.

In order to analyse how the total issue salience congruence of social policy issues in Austria developed over time, we constructed a standardised congruence indicator by taking the square root of the sum of squared congruence values of all parties for each issue and year (Equation 6). By squaring the values, we make oversupplied and undersupplied issues comparable and focus on the congruence. A zero value of the standardised congruence measurement indicates a perfect congruence between all parties and their specific electorate for the issue and year.

### Table 1: Combine manifesto and survey issue coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables:</th>
<th>SUPPLY SALIENCE</th>
<th>DEMAND SALIENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Job/Employment</td>
<td>10200 job market / unemployment 11201 support of the unemployed</td>
<td>10 Unemployment 11 Youth unemployment / apprenticeship positions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensions</td>
<td>11600 pension</td>
<td>90 Private pension 91 Pensions 92 Elderly care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Policy</td>
<td>11700 family / children / adolescents 13200 kindergarten</td>
<td>100 Family policy 101 Youth / young people / students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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9 Equation 5: congruence issue salience

\[ Cong_{IS_{p,i}} = RetSup_{IS_{p,i}} - RetDem_{IS_{p,i}} \]

10 Equation 6: standardised congruence

\[ stdCong_{IS_{p,i}} = \sqrt{\sum_{p,i} Cong_{IS_{p,i}}^2} \]
Results

4.1 Standardised congruence between public and party issue salience

As can be seen in Figure 1 and Table 2 the results contradict our hypothesis 1. We expected that the congruence of public and party issue saliences decreases over time. But, on the contrary, the congruence of the three welfare issues increases over time (0 = perfect congruence), therefore hypothesis 1 must be rejected. In the election year 2017 the congruence between voters and parties was nearly perfect for all issues.

Except for 2014 family policy shows the best salience congruence among the three welfare issues. The standardised congruence of pensions and job/employment fluctuates much more, which indicates changes in party and public issues salience which are not matched by each other. The differences among issues support our argument for disaggregating the welfare state issue.

To answer hypotheses 2a to 2c we must take one step back and look at the disaggregated development within single parties and their electorate.

4.2 Party issue salience

Figure 2 shows the share of the three welfare issues in each party manifesto. Comparing the three issues, family policy has on average a higher issue salience than job/employment and pensions. Family policy is most prominent among FPÖ and ÖVP, while job/employment is most prominent in SPÖ manifestos. Pension policy has a high issue salience in FPÖ manifestos. Therefore, hypotheses 2a to 2c can only partially be confirmed. While family policy is indeed a prominent topic in FPÖ manifestos it is less than expected part of the party manifestos of GRÜNE and NEOS (H2a). The same is true for job/employment, which as expected is an important content of the SPÖ manifesto, but not too prominent in the party manifestos of ÖVP and NEOS (H2b). For pensions our expectations were wrong. Contradicting our argument, pension policy has a high issue salience in FPÖ, and not in SPÖ, ÖVP or NEOS party manifestos. Accordingly, H2c must be rejected for party issue salience.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>year</th>
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<th>job/employment</th>
<th>pensions</th>
<th>election year?</th>
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<td>2009</td>
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<td>2017</td>
<td>0.012</td>
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<td>0.013</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>0.032</td>
<td>0.052</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3 shows the relative party issue salience and thus how parties position themselves in competition to other parties in the Austrian party system. The FPÖ has a strong relative emphasis on family policy and pensions, while the SPÖ focuses on job/employment. The ÖVP had a strong family policy focus in 2008 with a 4-percentage point higher issue salience than the mean of all party manifests, however in the following election campaigns the focus disappeared. The GRÜNE has generally lower relative issue saliences for welfare topics except for family policy in 2017. NEOS have low relative issue saliences for most social policy issues and years. In 2013...
they emphasised family policy, but the relative salience disappeared in the following manifesto. Parties have unique patterns in their emphasis of social policy issues. Family policy seems to be an important issue for FPÖ, job/employment for SPÖ and pensions for FPÖ. In sum we find that relative issue salience figures (as absolute issue salience figures) partially confirm H2a and H2b, while H2c must be rejected for party issue salience.

4.3 Public issue salience

Figure 4 shows the public issue salience for family policy, job/employment, and pensions over time. For family policy, overall, we see stable figures for the electorates. The issue salience among the five electorates develops similarly and increases slightly between 2009 and 2019. Compared to the other two issues, family policy has the lowest level of issue salience and the lowest variation over time. The salience measurements of family policy do not exceed 0.08. A maximum of eight percent of the electorate perceives family policy to be a very important topic. In 2013 the highest family policy issue salience existed among ÖVP voters while in 2019 GRÜNE voters reported the highest issue salience on a similar level. The issue salience of job/employment starts on a much higher level in 2009 than the two other social policy issues and shows a declining trend until 2019. During the ten years of observation, SPÖ voters reported the highest issue salience, whereas the lowest issue salience is found for GRÜNE voters at the beginning of the observation period. FPÖ, ÖVP and NEOS voters declare job/employment to be least salient in the consecutive waves of the survey.

While the public issue salience of job/employment decreases over time, the issue salience of pensions increases. The lowest issue salience of pensions exists primarily among GRÜNE voters and the highest among SPÖ voters. However, in 2014 and 2015 FPÖ and NEOS voters showed high issue saliences for pensions.

To be able to contextualise and evaluate the magnitude of the absolute demand issue salience measurements we further calculated the relative demand issue salience for each year and electorate. Figure 5 shows that SPÖ voters (compared to the four other electorates) show the highest relative issue salience for job/employment and in some years for pensions. Family policy is most prominent among FPÖ and ÖVP voters and in 2019 among voters of the GRÜNE.

Like the results for party issue salience, the results for public issue salience partly confirm our hypotheses H2a to H2c. As expected, family policy is emphasised by FPÖ voters, but contradicting H2a, it is not emphasised by NEOS voters, and only at times (2013, 2019) by GRÜNE voters. As suggested in H2b job/employment is most important for SPÖ voters, but inconsistent with our hypothesis only in some years important for voters of ÖVP (2009) and NEOS (2013, 2014). The same is true for pensions, which are as expected very important for SPÖ voters, but contradicting H2c, less so for ÖVP and NEOS voters. Even though theory would not suggest it, we further see that not only SPÖ, but also FPÖ voters perceive pensions to be an important topic.

Figure 4: Public issue salience for the electorate of FPÖ, GRÜNE, NEOS, ÖVP, SPÖ
4.4 Party and public issue salience congruence

The descriptive results of public and parties issue salience already show some concurring and diverging patterns between electorates and their corresponding parties. For a final assessment whether H2a, H2b and H2c can be confirmed or must be rejected we further calculated the congruence between party and public issue salience. The following Figure 6 to Figure 8 contain the relative issue salience for each party and its electorate and additionally the congruence between the two mean-centred salience variables. Coinciding demand and supply relative issue salience indicates congruence between voters and their respective party. The dotted line in the following figures summarises the congruence between voters and parties by subtracting the demand side (green line) from the relative issue salience in party manifestos (blue line). It can be interpreted as an under- or oversupply of issue salience by parties.

Figure 6 shows the results for public and party family policy issue salience. The FPÖ and SPÖ show a rather good congruence between voters and their manifestos, while the ÖVP in 2009 and NEOS in 2014 mismatched their issue salience with their voters. The direction of change in GRÜNE’s manifestos fits the changes in their electorate but does not catch up after 2017. This indicates that the 2017 party manifesto does not fit to the changes in issue salience of their electorate after the party did not win any mandates in the 2017 election. In sum H2a can only be confirmed for FPÖ and their voters.

Figure 7 shows that job/employment is most prominent among SPÖ voters and its manifestos. Voters of other parties show fluctuating issue salience, which are only partly answered by changes in party manifestos. The direction of change of the three FPÖ manifestos fits with their electorate, while the stable party saliences of NEOS and ÖVP mismatch with their voters. Therefore, H2b can only be confirmed for SPÖ and their voters.

The relative saliences of pensions among ÖVP voters and in the ÖVP manifesto are relatively low, the congruence fluctuates close to zero (Figure 8). This indicates a good congruence between the electorate and ÖVP for pension. The congruence between SPÖ voters and their party shows a different pattern. While the relative salience of voters is quite high, the relative salience of the party remains closer to zero. The result is a dotted line far away from zero, hence a highly incongruent salience perceptions in the policy field pensions for SPÖ voters and their party. Still SPÖ catches up with the direction of change of their voters’ issue salience for pensions with their 2017 manifesto.
Figure 6: Relative demand and supply issue salience, and resulting party-voters congruence for family policy

Figure 7: Relative demand and supply issue salience, and resulting party-voters congruence for job/employment

Note: supply mean = 5 parties; demand mean = 5 electorates
The GRÜNE and its voters have both negative issue saliences, and the direction of change coincides. The FPÖ’s public and party issue salience has a good congruence in 2014 and 2017, however large differences in the other years. NEOS’s party issue salience remains stable while their voters’ issue salience fluctuates, however in 2014 and 2017 the congruence is good. Due to these inconsistencies and the already rejection for party issue salience, H2c must be rejected.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

Literature claims an increasing crisis of representation in democracies, that has been fostered by socioeconomic and political developments of different kinds. Increasing complexity, economic change, as well as party plurality and increasing independence of party members put the mechanisms of representative democracies under pressure and challenge the fit of voters’ and parties’ agendas (Kölln/Polk 2017; Traber/Giger/Häusermann 2018; Bakker/Jolly/Polk 2020). This is especially true for social policy, which is affected by various socioeconomic pressures and new social risks (Armingeon/Bonoli 2006). We analysed the party-voter fit of issue salience for several social policy areas in Austria over time. By using a longitudinal approach, we contribute to reducing a gap in literature and analysed the development of party-voter issue congruence directly. Our analysis revealed surprising results for our research questions: How do voters and parties assess the importance of different social policy issues? How does the fit of voters’ and parties’ issue salience develop over time?

Related to our second question and hypothesis 1, the analysis did not show divergence, but rather convergence for social policy issues during the analysed period in Austria. Hypothesis 1 therefore must be rejected. Our hypotheses 2a, 2b and 2c are only partly confirmed. The distinction between policy areas with strong material and sociocultural values explains parts of the issue salience variations. This is especially true for family policy, which argues for a multidimensional view, rather than a simple left-right classification of social policies.

For parties as well as for their electorates, the average issue salience of social policy areas varies greatly. The field of social policy seems to be a highly disaggregated policy field since the perceived relative importance of the different social policy areas is highly diverse and not developing into the same direction over time (see Figure 2 and 4). Comparing the absolute issue salience of parties and electorates it is surprising to see that family policy on average is the most salient area for parties, but the least salient for the electorate. This suggests that on average voters do care more about job/employment and pensions, whereas parties are focusing on family policy.

The results of our analysis can be considered relevant for various reasons. First of all, because we - contrary to all expectations - found increasing public-party
salience congruence in the field of social policy for the last two decades in Austria. This result is supported by a recent contribution of Brause and Kinski (2021) and studies that analysed the congruence with a cross-sectional design (Pinggera 2020; Häusermann/Kriesi 2015). Brause and Kinski (2021) found an increase of agenda-responsiveness in Western Europe and CEE for the time between 2004 and 2019, and comparatively high values of agenda responsiveness for Austrian parties. Secondly, we found evidence for the assertion that social policy is a highly complex and diversified policy field, which cannot simply be attributed to one (social-democratic) party and their voters. Our results are in line with other authors who used a multi-dimensional approach in analysing welfare politics (Beramendi et al. 2015; Busemayer/Rathgeb/Sahm 2021; Garritzmann/Busemeyer/ Neimanns 2018). Thirdly, we managed to create a tool to compare the most common party- and public issue salience measurements (party manifesto and survey issue importance question) which are available for various different timepoints and countries. The calculation of mean-centred standardised congruence measures allow to compare variables with different scales (demand and supply) and compensates for the fact of developing survey questions over time (demand). The flexibility of our approach, and the accessibility of comparable data, not only for social policy, facilitates comparative research for all kinds of policy fields. Our method further enables us to estimate the issue salience of social policy areas in relation to all other policy fields, and not only its relative importance compared to other social policy issues (for this approach see e.g., Pinggera 2020).

The most apparent avenue for future research is the expansion of our public-party issue salience approach, to a more comprehensive tool taking not only issue salience, but also issue positions into account. Even though much effort has been put into the discussion of arguments in favour of one branch or the other (McElwain 2020), the issue position, issue salience and opinion-policy responsiveness approach should not be played off against each other. All three approaches are legitimate ways for investigation in the field of congruence between voters and political representatives, even though, or precisely because they are approaching the question from different angles (e.g., Costello et al. 2021).

However, it is important to mention that our results on issue salience cannot be used to infer any information on parties’ and voters’ position on a specific issue. A next step in research would be to combine issue salience and issue position, for instance as weights. Our study is further limited by the available data on social policy areas. We cannot interfere any congruence of social policy sub-dimensions such as childcare (social investment) or family allowances (social consumption). We capture the multi-dimensionality of welfare politics, however, additional survey data that asks questions about different sub-dimensions of family policy, labour market policy, pensions or additional social policy areas would allow a more fine-grained analysis of party-voters issue salience congruence. Therefore, it would be of great value to use survey data that allows a comparison of the issue salience of social policy subdimensions and capture the complexity of contemporary welfare politics beyond the aggregated policy area level.

Nevertheless, the estimation of perceived importance of social policy areas might provide information as to whether or not these areas can be decisive for voting decisions. They further might contribute to measure party responsiveness to public interests, and public responsiveness to parties’ interests. Since the causal mechanisms behind democratic responsiveness are reciprocal – party affects public (Grewenig et al. 2020), public affects party (Plescia/Kritzinger/Oberluggauer 2020), both claims are true (Wlezien/Soroka 2012), both claims are not true (Ibenskas/Polk 2021) – a valid and reliable measurement of public-party issue salience congruence is of great importance for future research.

However, our study did not consider if a party was successful with their manifesto and won mandates in the elections. The question remains if salience congruence of social policy issues is a necessary condition for electoral success. From the substantive representation perspective, the representation of voters’ agendas through parties as agent is crucial for a functioning democracy.

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IDEOLOGY, TRUST & AUTONOMY: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ELECTED POLITICIANS AND ALL OTHER PARTICIPANTS OF LOCAL STATE-SOCIETY NETWORKS

Carmen Walenta-Bergmann

INTRODUCTION

Personal characteristics, attitudes, and values of individuals are perceived to be an important predictor for political activity. Scholarly debates since many years engage in finding the reasons why some people enter the political arena, while others do not. Research contributions reveal that several socioeconomic characteristics of individuals have an effect on the probability of becoming an elected politician. Left-wing ideology (e.g., Haute and Gauja, 2015), a higher level of (general) trust (e.g., Bäck and Christensen 2016), masculinity (e.g., Fox and Lawless 2004), a higher level of education (e.g., Berinsky and Lenz, 2011) and the perception of autonomy (e.g., van Houwelingen 2018) have been identified to explain a more active political participation, whereas the opposite features decrease that probability.

The survey covers answers from members of local state-society networks for all these issues and contains information about the role of each network member. Therefore, it is an especially interesting dataset to find an answer to the question: What are the differences between elected politicians and all other participants of local state-society networks? The dataset is analyzed using logistic regression and sheds light on surprising differences between elected politicians and non-elected network members in the sample.
THEORY AND STATE OF RESEARCH

Why do people (successfully) run for office? The question why some people enter the political arena, while others do not is a puzzling topic in political science since many years. Researchers came along with different ideas and empirical evidence for various influencing factors of which I now introduce the most salient for this contribution: ideological position, trust, autonomy, age, gender, and education.

**Ideological Position**

Ideology is “the mental frameworks […] which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works” (Hall 1986: 29). Since the ideological position is such a fundamental aspect of an individual’s worldview, it is not surprising that empirical science finds evidence for the fact that “citizens’ ideological preferences are an important determinant of political action” (van der Meer et al. 2009: 1426). Despite a lot of criticism and discussion about its validity (e.g., Kitschelt, 2004) the left-right scheme is still the most common way of measuring the ideological position of individuals and parties. Many scientists find a connection between left-wing ideology and higher political participation (e.g., Armingeon 2006; Teorell and Torcal 2006). This assumption holds for different national contexts (Haute and Gauja 2015), as well as for subgroups in society (Hopmann et al. 2010).

Authors come up with different explanations for this finding. Martin and van Deth (2006) for example argue, that citizens with a more left-wing ideology aim for system change, and therefore have more outcome incentives to participate. Others argue that the link between ideology and participation is no a direct causal relation, but mediated by the (on average) higher level of
education which makes left-wing citizens more capable for successful political participation (van der Meer et al. 2009).

Some empirical results only find a link between left-wing ideology and some kinds of political participation (Theocharis and van Deth 2017). This suggest that we need a more disaggregated view on the link between participation and ideology. Nevertheless, there exists a broad consensus in scientific debate which suggests that left-wing ideology in general has a positive impact on the individual level of political participation. Therefore, the first hypothesis for the political participation of network members is formulated as follows:

\[ H1.1: \text{Elected politicians hold more left-wing ideological positions than other members of local state-society networks.} \]

Not only the direction of political ideology is relevant for political participation, but also how extreme this ideology is, or in other words, how distant the ideology is from the middle. Van der Meer et al. (2009) for example found that “ideological extremists (i.e., citizens who position themselves at the extremes of the left-right scale) are more likely than ideological moderates to be involved in any [kind of] political action” (p. 1450). Hence, I pose the following hypothesis for people participating in local state-society relations:

\[ H1.2: \text{Elected politicians hold more extreme ideological positions than other members of local state-society networks.} \]

**Trust**

Trust is another important factor influencing political participation (Uslaner 2018). Depending on which group(s) in society an individual has the most trust in, the average political participation is higher or lower (Crepaz et al. 2017). Hooghe and Marien (2013) for example analysed the relationship between political trust and participation in 25 countries and found that political trust
is positively associated with institutionalized participation. Bäck and Christensen (2016) found similar relations between political trust and institutionalized participation. Another important finding deals with the consequences of political distrust. Empirical evidence shows that non-participants express “comparatively high levels of particularized and within-group trust and at the same time clear signs of political distrust” (Butzlaff and Messinger-Zimmer 2020: 261). Referring to these findings I claim that the probability to be part of the (local) representative body increases with higher values for the variables measuring political trust (“trust in local government”, “trust in political parties”), and decreases with higher values for the variables measuring non-political or within-group trust (“trust in civil society”, “trust in individuals”, “trust in trade unions”):

\[ H2.1: \text{Network members reporting a higher level of trust in local government and political parties have a higher probability to be an elected politician.} \]

\[ H2.2: \text{Network members reporting a higher level of trust in civil society, individuals and trade unions have a lower probability to be an elected politician.} \]

**Autonomy**

The perception of autonomy might be another important predictor of active political participation. Van Houwelingen (2018: 186) for example found that “inhabitants of small municipalities tend to be more interested in local political matters when their municipalities have more local autonomy”. In general, empirical evidence shows a higher probability to engage in politics for individuals perceiving more freedom of choice in their spheres of activity (e.g., Burn and Konrad 1987). I therefore expect a higher probability of participation for individuals perceiving their network to be more autonomous:

\[ H3: \text{Elected politicians perceive their network to be more autonomous than other members of local state-society networks.} \]
**Age**

The relation between age and active political participation is very complex. First, because some scholars claim that we do not see a linear relation between the two variables, but an increase in participation until the age of around fifty, and a stable and slightly decreasing participation for older cohorts (e.g., Quintelier 2007).

Second, because new channels and forms of political participation – like online, or consumerist participation – are emerging (Theocharis and van Deth 2017). Empirical results show that new forms of participation are mainly used by younger generations, while older cohorts stick to more institutionalized participation. This disaggregated view on political participation suggests that young people above all do participate different and not less (Weiss 2020). Nevertheless – arguing that active participation at the local level is a conventional form of participation – I claim that the probability of participation increases with age:

\[ H4: \text{Younger networks members are less likely to be an elected politician.} \]

**Gender**

The share of women participating in politics has been changing over time, but remains comparatively low until today (Thomas and Wilcox 2014). Disaggregated analysis of men and women participating in politics show that women are “more likely than men to have voted and engaged in ‘private’ activism, while men are more likely to have engaged in direct contact, collective types of actions and be (more active) members of political parties” (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010: 318). Similarly, Stolle and Hooghe (2011) do find more participation of women only for some subfields, such as consumerist participation, signing petitions or boycotts. For more conventional forms of political participation, such as party membership or institutionalized acts in
general the share of women remains low (Stolle and Hooghe 2011). Being part of a democratically elected representative body is a form of conventional participation, and therefore I hypothesise:

**H5:** *Female networks members are less likely to be an elected politician.*

**Education**

Another important predictor of political participation is the individual level of (formal) education. As already mentioned in the section about the impact of left-wing ideology, education comes along with various outcomes that favour political participation. Among those higher “civic skills”, which enhance the probability to participate successfully (Brady et al. 1995; Verba et al. 1995). Many empirical observations indeed find more political participation among citizens with a higher level of education. Stolle and Hooghe (2011: 137) for example analyzed the development of the link between education and political participation in many European countries over time and concluded that “[e]ducation remains a strong source of stratification for all forms of participation”. Additionally, statistically elaborated analysis builds a solid foundation for the causal claim of education influencing participation (Mayer 2011).

Others critically scrutinize the effects that was long taken for granted. They argue that the effect simply disappears if we consider other mediating effects, such as preadult experience and psychological preconditions (Kam and Palmer 2008). Or by demonstrating that it is simple the same people that stay in school and want to participate in politics, speaking up for simply coexistence and not causal relation (Berinsky and Lenz 2011). Notwithstanding these opposing arguments the claim of a causal relation between (formal) education and political participation remains widely accepted and therefore hypothesis six is formulated as follows:

**H6:** *A higher formal education status of network members increases the probability of being an elected politician.*
DATA AND METHOD

The dataset resulting out of the survey of actors involved in local state-society relations is an especially interesting source to find evidence for the interrelations described above. First, because all participants, including democratically elected politicians have been asked the same questions at the same point in time. Second, because the survey participants are members of the same local state-society networks, hence both groups, democratically elected politicians and all others share a set of common characteristics, which reduces the omitted-variables bias. Third, the proportion of respondents, that are at the same time members of local state-society networks and democratically elected politicians is comparatively high: 24 percent, or 2,746 out of 11,645 respondents are not only network members, but active (local) politicians at the same time.

Table 1 shows an overview of additional descriptive statistics. These statistics demonstrate a comparatively high non-response rate for most independent variables. The first question (representation) has been answered by 11,645 survey participants, some trust variables have been answered only by slightly more than four thousand individuals. Nevertheless, a more detailed analysis shows that for the questions with the lowest response rate at least 1,062 individuals are part of the (local) political representation. Additionally, the share of elected politicians among the survey participants is stable across all questions used for the analysis. Therefore, a distortion due to the low response rates of some questions is not expected.
Table 1: Descriptive statistics

<table>
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<th>Mean</th>
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<td>Type of actors</td>
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<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
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<td>Age</td>
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<td>Education</td>
<td>5,755</td>
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<td>Autonomy</td>
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<td>1.21</td>
</tr>
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<td>General trust</td>
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<td>2.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust in local government</td>
<td>5,594</td>
<td>8.26</td>
<td>2.31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust in civil society</td>
<td>5,266</td>
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<td>Trust in political parties</td>
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<td>6.70</td>
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<td>Trust in companies</td>
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<td>Trust in trade unions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust in individuals</td>
<td>4,638</td>
<td>6.87</td>
<td>2.80</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Coding for the kind of actors: 1 = not political representative, 2 = political representative;
Coding for gender: female=1, male=2;
Coding for education: 1=elementary school, 2=secondary school, 3=university;
Coding for ideology from 0 = far right, to 10 = far left;
Coding for all trust variables from 0 = no trust, to 10 = high trust;
Coding for autonomy from 0 = low autonomy, to 5 very high autonomy.

The data is analyzed using logistic regression. This allows to estimate the distribution of a binary dependent variable for specific values of the independent variable(s). Therefore, the dependent variable was coded using the value 1 for non-elected network members, and value 2 for elected politicians.1 The visual analysis of the two groups’ distribution of ideological self-positioning additionally allows to assess the validity of H1.1 and H1.2.

RESULTS

Figure 1 shows a visual analysis of the self-reported left-right ideology of local state-society members. The density plots show different distributions for elected politicians and non-politicians in the sample. The differences between the solid (non-politicians) and dotted (elected politicians)
line suggest that H1.1 (Elected politicians hold more left-wing ideological positions than other members of local state-society networks) must be rejected, while H1.2 (Elected politicians hold more extreme ideological positions than other members of local state-society networks) can be confirmed.

Figure 1: Distribution of self-reported left-right ideology among elected politicians (dotted line) and non-elected network members (solid line)

The results of the first logistic regression model confirms the surprising rejection of H1.1. The findings show a significantly higher probability for respondents more on the right side of the political spectrum to be at the same time democratically elected (local) politician and network member. The results further reveal a significant negative effect of formal education, which suggests that H.6 (A higher formal education status of network members increases the probability of being an elected politician) must be rejected. The probability to be part of an elected politician is significantly higher for network members without university degree, which is very surprising. Interestingly the distribution of formal education among network members is quite different from the distribution of the total population. Almost two third (66.5 percent) of the respondents indicate
to have a university degree or equivalent, which is much more than the average of their countries of origin. All in all, the surprising finding suggests, that if a person manages to participate in a local state-society network it is a very favorable environment for elected political participation of non-academics. Or the other way around, non-academic elected politicians more often participate in a local state-society network.

Figure 2: Effects of logistic regression Model 1: influence of political left-right ideology and control variables on probability for being an elected politician

As the theoretical considerations would suggest the results show a highly significant positive effect of perceived network autonomy on the probability of holding an elected office. Therefore, the hypothesis that a higher perception of network autonomy increases the probability of being an elected politician at the same time can be confirmed.

What is surprising though, is the fact that the model does not show a significant difference for the gender and age variables. This suggests that existing differences between men and women, and likewise between younger and older citizens do not emerge in transition between local state-society
networks and representative bodies based on general suffrage, but on other paths towards political representation. With other words, if an individual manages to participate in a local state-society network it is not affected by discrimination towards the way to elected political participation. Or the other way round, that female and younger politicians are more interested in network participation.

**Figure 3: Predictor effects plots for logistic regression Model 1**

The predictor effects plots illustrate these results and give an overview of the expected share of political representatives (y-axis) depending on different levels of the independent variables (x-axis). The area highlighted in grey indicates the 95 percent confidence interval. The interval is biggest for age and gender, which corresponds to the non-significance of these two effects.

The results of the second logistic regression model are less surprising. Figure 4. shows a higher probability to be at the same time an elected politician for respondents reporting a higher personal
trust towards local government and political parties. At the same time the probability is lower for
survey participants stating higher personal trust towards trade unions, individuals, and civil society.
The same is true for general trust, whereas for the trust towards companies no significant effect can
be detected.

Figure 4: Effects of logistic regression Model 2: influence of trust variables on probability
for being an elected politician

Again, the predictor effects plots give an overview of the expected share of political representatives
(y-axis) depending on different levels of the trust variables (x-axis). The 95 percent confidence
interval is biggest for the personal trust towards companies, which is the only not significant effect
in the second logistic regression model.
CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This contribution is based on the simple notion that actors in state-society networks often must integrate different roles depending on their occupational career. Employment in the field of industry, commerce, administration, or within a non-profit organization may interact with values and attitudes of actors in local state-society networks. An especially large and interesting group for analysis is individuals affiliated at the same time with a local state-society network, and a democratically elected representative body. This group comprises one quarter of the total survey participants and differs fundamentally from network participants not actively involved in political decisions related to democratically elected representative body. Hence this contribution is engaged
in answering the question: What are the differences between elected politicians and all other participants of local state-society networks? Theoretical considerations about the factors influencing the active institutionalized political participation are leading to eight hypotheses. Four out of eight hypotheses can be confirmed. Consequently, however, fifty percent of the assumptions from the literature cannot be confirmed or must me rejected for local state-society network members. While a high level of general trust (H2.1), the perception of autonomy (H3) and ideological extremism (H1.2) indeed result in higher levels of democratically elected political participation, all other assumptions do not hold. For gender (H5) and age (H4), the logistic regression results do not report a significant effect, which suggests that male and female, as well as younger and older network members have the same probability to be elected politicians.

What is at least equally surprising is, that the correlation between the ideological position (H1.1) and formal education (H6) on the one hand, and the probability to be an elected politician is inverse to what scientific discourse would suggest. More right-wing do participate significantly more often than more left-wing network members, and higher formal education significantly decreases the probability of being an elected politician at the same time. The explanations for these surprising findings are only speculative.

First, the fact that network members are a – in many ways – special subgroup of the overall population might be relevant. If we look at the age distribution for example, we see that the sample-mean is about 55, which exactly coincides with the participation peak described by Quintelier (2007). Second, the results could be an indicator for the sources of unequal descriptive representation. In general, younger cohorts, women and people with lower formal education are underrepresented in democratically elected representative bodies. This is not true for members in the considered local state-society relations, which suggests that we need to increase participation of specific groups in society not in the political representation per se (using gender quotas and
alike), but in a broader public sphere, including local state-society networks, administration and bureaucracy, or business representation.

What remains it the question of causation: What is the direction of influence? What are the mechanisms behind the differences between elected politicians and all other network members? If the differences arise because subgroups of elected political representation are unequally interested in network participation, or because the network subgroups are unequally interested in participation in elected representation cannot be answered by this analysis.

Summed up, this contribution provides input for the discussion about reasons for political activity on the one hand, and characteristics of politicians who are members of the studied networks on the other hand. To understand and analyse local state-society networks as linking institutions between civil society and democratically elected representative bodies helps to learn more about the different facets of democratic representation.
REFERENCES


**NOTE**

1 The value for non-elected network members corresponds to answers 1-8 and 15-20 to questions 1 of the questionnaire (“In what role are you a member of this network?”), and the value for elected politicians to answers 9-14 of this question.