Research question & key references:

How powerful are political parties in shaping citizen’s opinions? (i.e., How citizens react when their party changes its position on a major issue in the real world)

Hypotheses and corresponding diagram

Citizen’s policy opinions change when their party change its policy position: They assume that changes in opinions among treated and nontreated respondents would have been the same, had there not been a dramatic change in party positions.

Data & methods

Quasi-experimental panel study of how citizens responded when their political party suddenly reversed its position on two major and salient welfare issues in Denmark.

Five-wave panel survey in the aftermath of the great recession in Denmark (2010-11) collected around the two following events (welfare policies):

* 50% reduction in a widely used unemployment insurance program.
* The abolition of a popular early retirement program.

They investigated what people thought about the cutback before and after their party proposed them.

Data: Epinion’s pool of respondents through random sample telephone surveys, population aged 18-65 years in Denmark.

Variables:

* Party affiliation
* Policy opinions
* Citizens opinions on either early retirement or unemployment benefits (outcome variable)

Causal effect of changing party positions as the difference between the policy opinions of citizens in a situation where their party has changed its position compared to a situation the party has not. For any individual, they can never observe both outcomes. They are forced to make assumptions to answer what citizens’ policy opinions would have looked like, had their party not changed its policy position. They use the change among citizens who identity with another party to approximate this unobserved counterfactual.

Difference-in-difference design

Treated group: respondents identifying with a party that changes its policy position

Nontreated group: respondents who identify with a party that did not change its position

They use repeated observations of the same citizens and not repeated cross-section with different citizens 🡪 this allows to study individual opinion change.

Expected results

They show that citizens’ policy opinions changed immediately and substantially when their party switched its policy position, even when the new position went against citizens’ previously held opinion.

Contribution to political thought

These findings advance the current experimental literature on partisan elite influence.

References

Slothuus, R., & Bisgaard, M. (2020). How Political Parties Shape Public Opinion in the Real World. *American Journal of Political Science*.