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Anne Rasmussen

To cite this article: Anne Rasmussen (2019) Policy representation in Europe: the 2018 Peter Mair lecture, Irish Political Studies, 34:3, 327-349, DOI: [10.1080/07907184.2019.1606144](https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2019.1606144)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2019.1606144>



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Published online: 05 May 2019.



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## Policy representation in Europe: the 2018 Peter Mair lecture

Anne Rasmussen<sup>a,b,c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark; <sup>b</sup>Institute of Public Administration, Universiteit Leiden, Leiden, Netherlands; <sup>c</sup>Department of Comparative Politics, Universitetet i Bergen, Bergen, Norway

### ABSTRACT

A key challenge of democratic societies is to ensure a continuous flow of information between the people and elites in order to secure representation of citizen preferences. While there may be occasions where deviations from citizen preferences are desirable, political systems with a sustained and systematic mismatch between citizen opinion and policy would typically not be considered democratic. Political parties have traditionally acted as key channels of representation helping to transmit citizen preferences to policy-makers. Yet their ability to secure democratic representation has been called into question. The lecture explores the state of democratic representation in Europe by presenting evidence from the GovLis Research Programme 'When does Government Listen to the Public' on the link between public opinion and policy on a large number of policy issues. Beyond parties, it explores a series of alternative channels of citizen representation by considering the ability of political institutions and engagement in civil society associations to strengthen the link between public opinion and policy.

**KEYWORDS** Representation; policy responsiveness; associational engagement; interest groups; political institutions

Many thanks for the opportunity to come to Limerick to give this lecture. It is a real honor. As happy and proud I am to give the annual Peter Mair Lecture, I am as sad that this annual lecture occurs because Peter is no longer among us. Peter was not my PhD supervisor. He was also not my official mentor in the Max Weber program at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence. But he was an informal mentor in many respects. He was someone who knew my two academic worlds at the time, first the EUI and subsequently

**CONTACT** Anne Rasmussen  [ar@ifs.ku.dk](mailto:ar@ifs.ku.dk)  Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark; Institute of Public Administration, Universiteit Leiden, Leiden, Netherlands; Department of Comparative Politics, Universitetet i Bergen, Bergen, Norway

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Leiden University. I have benefited from several conversations with him about a broad range of topics and not least from his support. In an obituary after Peter's death, written together with his Max Weber Fellows at the EUI, we pointed out that, beyond Peter's obvious scholarly contribution to the discipline he was an excellent mentor. He was someone who believed and spoke up for us, not least '[i]n those moments, in private as well as in public, when we lacked conviction in our own voices'.<sup>1</sup> I am someone who has benefited from that during periods of my life that were more difficult and so have several others. We also noted that, 'When our time at the EUI came to an end, our connections with Peter and the support we received from him did not'. This was a real asset and I can say without any doubt that I had not expected an academic world without him. I often regret that I cannot introduce Peter to younger scholars, for whom I am sure he would have been an inspiration as he was for me.

It should be noted though that Peter did not just support us. He also challenged us. He was somewhat less enthusiastic about the tendency for modern political scientists to ask narrowly cast and specialized research questions rather than focus on the big questions in our discipline. I heard him say once that in the end all political scientists might end up as economists. It is fair to say that this was a development, of which he was somewhat critical. Today I will stick to his recommendation in the sense that I will address a big question that concerned him a lot, especially towards the end of his career. More specifically, I will speak about the state of policy representation in Europe by looking at the links between the citizens of Europe and their political representatives. Yet, I will also depart a bit from how Peter would probably have given this lecture and present some more narrowly cast research that speaks to this broader question but has normative importance.

## The challenge of democratic societies

Unfortunately, there is no lack of criticism that current political leaders are out of touch with their voters and that politics is decided in closed circles within the political establishment, removed from the citizens whom elected officials are supposed to represent. Discussing Labour's defeat in the 2015 General Election in the UK, one of Miliband's former campaign advisors Arnie Graf argued that 'Labour lost because of a disconnect between the party's leadership and its local representatives... and weak relationships with the voters it claimed to represent'.<sup>2</sup> The quote underlines how democratic societies face the challenge of ensuring a smooth and continuous flow of information between the people and elites in order to ensure that citizens can form meaningful opinions on current political events and that their opinions get articulated to decision-makers. If this transmission process does not work well, citizens may be uninformed about the evolution of the government agenda

as well as legislation and unable to evaluate it. And even if citizens do have opinions about the direction of future policy, a lack of information transmission may make it hard for politicians to learn about these preferences. Moreover, even if policy-makers are aware of the public's preferences, the likelihood that they are held accountable for policy choices out of line with public opinion may be low if these choices are not communicated to the people. As a result, situations where the transmission of information between citizens and elites does not function effectively should be likely to suffer from a lower quality of policy representation.

Traditionally political parties have been seen as important channels of information between citizens and the political system. In Easton's (1957) classical model of a political system parties have the potential to act as intermediary organizations between citizens and the political institutions enabling citizens to voice their concerns. Schattschneider also emphasized the role which political parties can play in political representation as channels of citizen preferences. He saw major parties as institutions that, as a result of their electoral role, 'consider public questions broadly [...] taking a moderate view of public policy...'. Consequently he argued, 'they aim at inclusiveness.' (1948, p. 17). In contrast, Schattschneider's view of interest groups was less positive. He explained how organized interests 'characteristically organize minorities' (1948, p. 17) and that the interest group system as a whole 'sings with a strong upper class accent' (Schattschneider, 1960, pp. 34–35). Though not uncritical of political parties altogether, Schattschneider therefore argued that '...modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties.' (1942, p. 1).

However, over time skepticism of the ability of parties to secure democratic representation has grown. Peter Mair was one of the prominent voices in this debate. Especially towards the end of his career, he became increasingly skeptical about the ability of parties to act as representative bodies. He saw an increased tension between the governing and representative functions of political parties (e.g. Mair, 2008, 2009, 2011). In his eyes, parties were no longer the link between citizens as they once were because of declines in party membership and growing distrust in parties. Instead, parties had become more strongly integrated into the state and focused on following established procedural norms and securing their own organizational survival (see also Katz & Mair, 1995; van Biezen, 2014). According to Peter, the net result was a situation where 'parties have moved from representing interests of the citizens to the state to representing interests of the state to the citizens.' (Mair, 2009, p. 6). Peter was not the only one noticing and reflecting on these developments. In a book chapter to an edited volume on 'Parties and Democracy' titled 'Parties Are Not What They Once Were', Phillip Schmitter also emphasized how the representative capacity of parties had decreased, not least as a result of their weakened ability to aggregate societal interests. At the same time, he

pointed out how attempts had been made to make up for some of the lost ground by 'substituting state funds for the decline in symbolic identifications and voluntary contributions ...' (2001, p. 84).

These seminal works leave us with important empirical questions: To what extent is policy representation in Europe in a critical condition? And how detrimental is the changing role of parties for policy representation in general? In order to try to answer these questions, my lecture has two aims. First, I will try to diagnose '*the state of citizen representation*' in Europe by giving an overview of the relationship between what people want and get from their political systems in Europe. Second, I will analyze *the role of different factors in stimulating citizen representation*. Beyond parties, I will explore a series of alternative channels of citizen representation by considering the ability of political institutions and engagement in civil society associations to affect the link between public opinion and policy.

### The GovLis research program

The research I will refer to comes from the GovLis ('When Does Government Listen to the Public?') Research Programme. It consists of two international research projects on the link between public opinion and policy funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research and the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research, of which I am the Principal Investigator.<sup>3</sup> The projects began in the Autumn of 2013 but the idea dates back to a workshop on Political Responsiveness at the Joint Sessions of the European Consortium for Political Research in St Gallen in 2011. While it was clear to me that the literature on the opinion-policy linkage was impressive and included several seminal contributions, it was also clear that there were still some potential gaps to fill (for recent literature reviews, see Rasmussen, Reher, & Toshkov, 2018; Rasmussen, Romeijn, & Toshkov, 2018). First, most studies have focused on either a single or low number of countries and/or policy domains (e.g. Burstein, 2014; Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008; Lax & Phillips, 2012; Soroka & Wlezien, 2004; Wlezien, 1995) making it difficult to generalize and explore a series of factors that might affect the opinion-policy linkage at both the country and policy level. Second, rather than focus on the specific policy issues, on which decision-making typically takes place, a high number of the existing studies have used broad measures of opinion and policy, such as left-right ideology (Erikson, Mackuen, & Stimson, 2002; Gray, Lowery, Fellowes, & McAtee, 2004; Stimson, Mackuen, & Erikson, 1995) or measures at the level of broader policy domain (e.g. Bevan & Jennings, 2014; Jennings & John, 2009; Wlezien, 1995). Third, while research on the conditioning factors of responsiveness has grown, I felt that there was still scope to expand knowledge of several of these and to add new ones to the studies. The extent to which additional factors affect the relationship between opinion

and policy might ultimately affect our judgment of the state of democratic representation.

Most importantly, the aim of the GovLis projects has been to theorize and conduct empirical research on *the role interest groups play in policy representation*. This has, for example, been done through studies that have examined the impact of associational engagement (Rasmussen & Reher, 2019), the density of active interest groups (Bevan & Rasmussen, 2017), and the opinion of the mobilized group community (Rasmussen, Binderkrantz, & Klüver, 2019) on the opinion-policy linkage. GovLis studies have also looked at other conditioning factors of policy representation, such as the impact of political institutions (Rasmussen, Reher, et al., 2018) and patterns of party government and coalition conflict (Toshkov, Mäder, & Rasmussen, 2018). Finally, it has examined potential inequalities in policy representation across gender (Reher, 2018) and between party supporters and the general public (Romeijn, 2018).

'Representation' is a multi-faceted concept (Pitkin, 1967) not easily measured via a simple set of indicators (Sabl, 2015). Rather than attempting to measure a series of different conceptualizations of representation, the focus of the GovLis projects has been on what Pitkin has referred to as substantive representation, i.e. representation of citizens by 'acting for' them, adopting decisions and policy 'in the interest of the represented' (Pitkin, 1967, p. 209). More specifically, our aim was to study the fit between government policy and public opinion on specific policy issues. Such a focus does not rule out that, in specific circumstances, there may be reasons for legislators to deviate from what the majority of the public would want in their decisions in order to protect minorities, fulfill international obligations, exert constitutional restraint etc. Indeed, this is what Peter Mair himself has referred to as 'responsible' as opposed to 'representative' government (Mair, 2009). Yet, the projects rest on the idea that democracies should not experience sustained and systematic deviations between citizen preferences and government policies (Rasmussen, Reher, et al., 2018). Importantly, however, we do not just measure policy representation by judging whether policy is aligned with the views of the public majority, which I will explain in more detail below.

I will present findings from a couple of recent GovLis studies in my lecture today. Rather than examining the dynamic relationship between opinion and policy over time the first two studies I will talk about investigate the link between the two in a cross sectional design (Rasmussen & Reher, 2019; Rasmussen, Reher, et al., 2018). We do not argue that causality between opinion and policy only flows in one direction. In fact, one can both imagine policy being affected by public opinion and opinion being affected by what policy-makers are doing (see e.g. Wlezien, 1995). The first scenario can be seen as 'representation from below' and in many ways represents the classical view of 'substantive representation' presented by Pitkin and

also conforms to what Peter Mair described as ‘representative government’ (see e.g. Mair, 2009). It might seem more controversial to regard the second scenario, where citizens adjust their opinions to the behavior of policy-makers, as an instance of representation; not least bearing in mind Peter Mair’s critique of modern political parties. Yet, it is important to recognize that an important task of political representatives and parties in democracies is to present citizens with policy options and explain and justify them. This is recognized, for instance, in the German Basic Law (Article 21 (1)): ‘Political parties shall participate in the formation of the political will of the people.’ Such dynamics have been referred to as ‘representation from above’ (Esaiassen & Holmberg, 1996). According to Holmberg,

[t]op down opinion formation is a legitimate form of politics in a democracy characterized by free and fair elections and freedom of speech. Representation run from above may sound a bit sinister, but it exists and we should not shy away from it even if the phenomenon is not espoused in standard text books on democracy .... (1997, pp. 280–281).

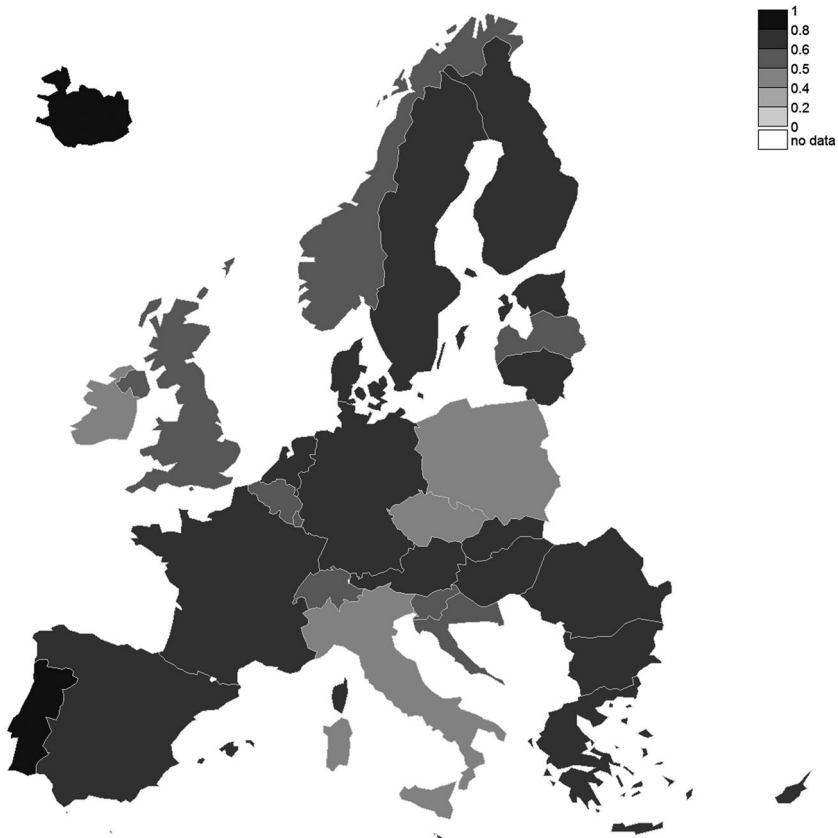
### What is the state of policy representation in Europe?

Accordingly, I look at the link between opinion and policy at any given point in time in my attempt to diagnose the state of policy representation in Europe. I begin by presenting findings from a large study of 20 issues in 31 European countries conducted together with Stefanie Reher and Dimiter Toshkov. Our focus is on specific policy issues on which actual policy decisions are taken as opposed to judging responsiveness within broader policy domains or for politics as a whole. Examples of these issues include questions whether same sex couples should be allowed to adopt, troops should be sent to Afghanistan, and online voting should be used for elections and referenda (see Table A1).

The issues were selected from cross-national, representative opinion surveys from the period 1998–2013. We need to be aware of possible selection biases in which issues make it to opinion polls (Burstein, 2014). Issues that make it into polls may be more likely to ‘concern matters of relatively high salience’ (Gilens & Page, 2014, p. 568). At the same time, this increases the likelihood that these are issues ‘about which it is plausible that average citizens may have real opinions.’ (*Ibid.*, 568). Yet, to be able to control for some of the most obvious biases in our analyses, our sample of issues is selected in such a way that they represent different policy domains and vary in media saliency (for more details on the selection procedure, see Rasmussen, Reher, et al., 2018).

In the study, we look at two measures of policy representation (see Lax & Phillips, 2012). First, we look at whether policy is congruent with what the majority of citizens prefer. Congruence can occur both when a policy is in

place that a majority of citizens supports and when a policy that only a minority of citizens backs is not adopted. Second, we regress the likelihood of a policy being (partially) in place on the degree of public support for it. This measure tells us something how about sensitive the likelihood of policy on an issue being (partially) in place is to different degrees of public support for them. According to this view, representation is not only about whether policy conforms to the majority of the public, but also about whether its likelihood of being in place is affected by differences in the actual level of support for a given policy in the population. This measure goes beyond drawing a simple distinction between whether it is in place or not, as it distinguishes between whether the policy in question is fully, partially or not in place. In the case of whether same sex couples should be allowed to adopt, one can, for example, distinguish between cases where adoption is not allowed, where couples can adopt each other's children



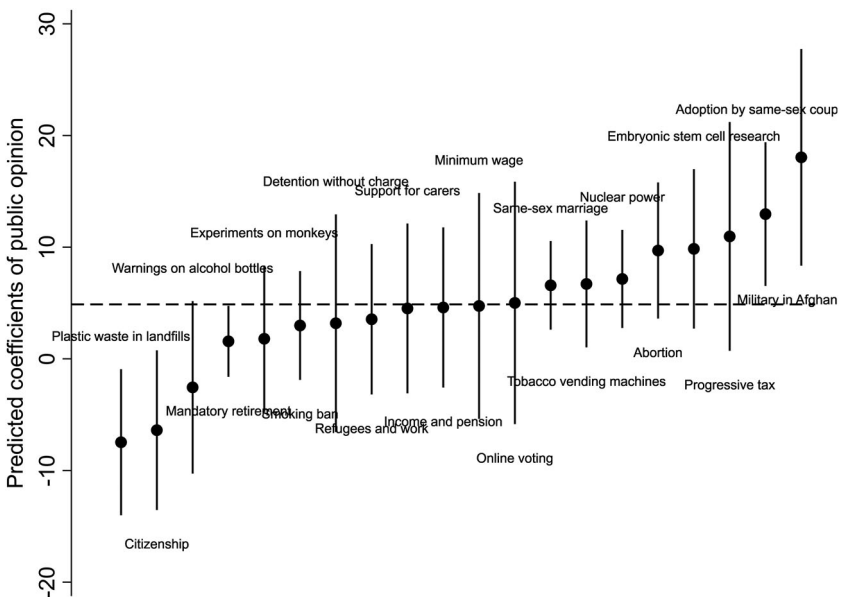
**Figure 1.** Congruence scores across Europe. Source: Rasmussen, Reher, et al. (2018).  
Notes: Darker shades indicate higher opinion-policy congruence.



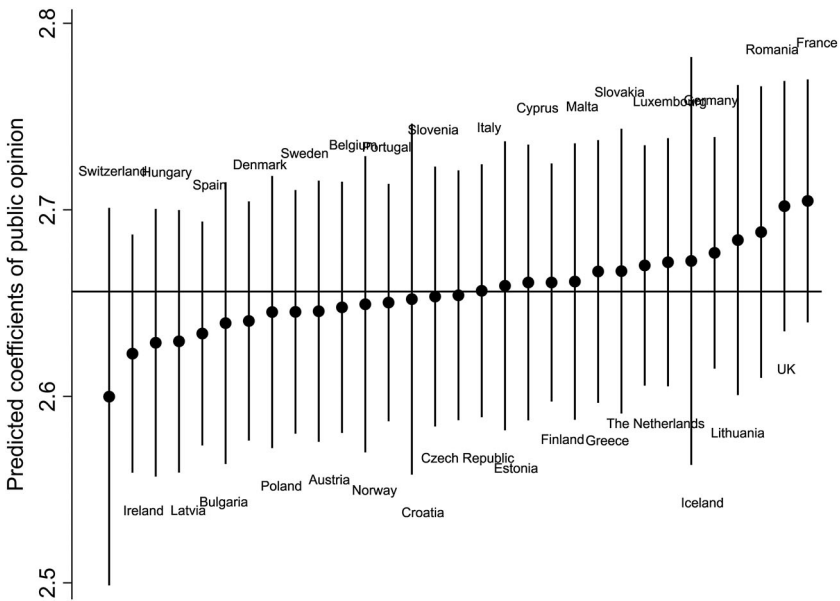
(i.e. 'policy being partially in place') and cases where they can adopt freely (i.e. 'policy being fully in place').

Using this approach and these measures, what is the state of policy representation in Europe? Looking at the first measure, we find that policy is congruent with public opinion in 63% of the cases. [Figure 1](#) shows the difference in congruence scores for the included countries, ranging from 41% in Italy and Poland to 100% in Iceland. The score for Ireland is 47%. While these differences might seem large, it should be pointed out that only a small share of the variance in congruence in our study is related to countries. Instead, the differences in congruence between issues are larger. Here we found a congruence score for the issue of sending troops to Afghanistan as high as 100% whereas the lowest score of 7% was found for the issue related warnings on alcohol bottles (for more details, see Rasmussen, Reher, et al., [2018](#)).

Our second measure of policy representation indicates a similar pattern. We find a positive and significant relationship between the degree of public support for a policy and the likelihood of the policy being (partially) in place. Moreover, again there is limited variation in this relationship at the country level, while we see substantial differences between the policy issues. [Figures 2](#) and [3](#) illustrate this. They show the relationship between opinion and policy at the issue and country level, respectively. The plots are based on the results of two separate multilevel ordinal regressions with



**Figure 2.** Predicted coefficients (log-odds) of public opinion on the policy being in place for each policy issue with 95% confidence intervals. Source: Rasmussen, Reher, et al. ([2018](#)). Notes: The dashed line indicates the mean coefficient across all issues.



**Figure 3.** Predicted coefficients (log-odds) of public opinion on the policy being in place for each country with 95% confidence intervals. Source: Rasmussen, Reher, et al. (2018). Notes: The dashed line indicates the mean coefficient across all issues.

issues and countries at the second level respectively and where we allow the relationship between opinion and policy to vary between cases at the second level. We show in Figure 2 that the plotted slope co-efficients for the relationship between opinion and policy at the issue level in the left-hand side panel vary quite a bit. In contrast, Figure 3 shows that the same co-efficients calculated for the countries are much more similar with large confidence intervals around the estimates (for more details, see Rasmussen, Reher, et al., 2018).

Overall, the picture this gives of the state of policy representation is perhaps not as pessimistic as might have been feared based on some of the initial quotes. Despite the declined representative potential of parties, we do find a positive and significant relationship between support for a given policy and the likelihood of it being (partially) in place. We also find an overall congruence score between policy and the opinion of the majority of the public of 63%. While this measure might not seem high, it is higher than what has been found in similar research on the US, where policy was congruent with the majority of the public approximately half of the time (Lax & Phillips, 2012).

### Political institutions & policy representation

The perhaps most important question that follows from these results is what then ultimately helps us explain potential variation in the state of policy

representation? As mentioned, this is what most of our research in the GovLis projects has dealt with. I will share insights with you with respect to a couple of factors. The first is 'the role of political institutions'. Institutions can be seen as affecting both *the incentive* and *capacity* of policy makers to adopt policies in line with the public. It is therefore not surprising that substantial attention has been paid to them in both research on left-right congruence between voters and politicians (e.g. Blais & Bodet, 2006; Ferland, 2016; Huber & Powell, 1994; Powell, 2000) as well as research on policy responsiveness to public opinion (e.g. Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008; Wlezien & Soroka, 2012). While it might seem logical that institutions could potentially affect policy representation, theorizing their precise role is somewhat less straightforward. For many institutions, we might expect different effects on policy representation depending on which mechanisms we focus on. This might also help explain why the literature on institutions on policy representation has not reached clear-cut conclusions but presented somewhat mixed findings. For example, in the left-right literature on congruence, there has been a discussion about whether PR systems lead to more representation or not (see e.g. Blais & Bodet, 2006; Ferland, 2016; Huber & Powell, 1994). Similarly, one study of actual policy responsiveness found that election system proportionality weakens responsiveness (Wlezien & Soroka, 2012), whereas another one found higher levels of responsiveness in Denmark's proportional system than in the UK plurality system (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2005).

We tested the impact of three types of institutions: the electoral system, the horizontal division of power within the legislature and between legislative and executive branches of government, and the vertical division of power between different levels of government (Rasmussen, Reher, et al., 2018). Rather than present one-directional hypotheses, we suggested that we might expect countervailing effects of many of these types of institutions on policy representation. While there may for example be a higher likelihood that governments represent the median citizen in PR systems (e.g. Lijphart, 1994; Powell, 2006), such systems might also face difficulties in adopting the policies citizens want. Hence, in PR systems the frequency of coalition governments and need for compromise might be higher and the clarity of responsibility lower (e.g. Tsebelis, 1995; Wlezien & Soroka, 2012). Similarly, we can put forward countervailing hypotheses with respect to the effect of horizontal divisions of powers. On the one hand, fewer checks and balances and lower constraints on policy change in unicameral and systems with strong parliaments might stimulate policy representation. On the other hand, fewer constraints on decision-makers in such systems might actually also enable decision-makers to ignore their citizens and adopt unpopular policy changes (e.g. Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008; Tsebelis, 1995; Wlezien & Soroka, 2012).

Thus the same institutions may have different, possibly even countervailing, effects on policy representation. In a cross-sectional analysis as ours, it is therefore possible that there is no *net effect* of a given type of institution on policy representation. The exception might be institutions specifying the degree of vertical separation of powers: We would expect policy representation to be weaker in federal than unitary states, due to weaker information flows between citizens and decision-makers and higher difficulty of assigning responsibility in federal systems (Soroka & Wlezien, 2004). Similar patterns might apply to countries that are members of the EU (Alexandrova, Rasmussen, & Toshkov, 2016).

Overall, we find no net effect of institutions on policy representation in our analysis of 20 issues in the 31 countries, no matter which of our measures of policy representation we use (for more details, see Rasmussen, Reher, et al., 2018). Irrespective whether we look at (a) the alignment of policy with the opinion majority, or (b) the relationship between support for a given policy and the likelihood that it is (partially in place), institutions do not seem to matter. The exception is bicameralism, which has a significant negative effect on whether policy is aligned with the public opinion majority. Yet, it does not affect our other measure of policy representation, and all the remaining institutional effects are insignificant; even the indicators measuring the vertical separation of powers do not have a one-directional effect.

The fact that institutions do not affect policy representation in our study should come as no surprise to us, given that the first results I showed indicated that there is very little variation in policy representation across countries to begin with. Ultimately, this means, of course, that any factor that varies at the country level will have a hard time accounting for any variance. Yet, the findings are remarkable, not least in the light of some of the existing research on policy responsiveness, which has drawn stronger inferences on the role of specific types of institutions on the opinion-policy linkage. Future research should explore whether the difference in findings is related to the fact that these studies conduct time series research of the link between opinion and policy at the level of broader policy domains (e.g. Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008; Wlezien & Soroka, 2012), whereas we examine the opinion-policy linkage on specific policy issues at a given time.

## Associational engagement & policy representation

The second factor, which I would like to discuss today, is associational engagement and its impact on policy representation. As already noted, Schattschneider did not have much faith in the ability of interest organizations to help secure democratic representation. They were seen as representing special interests and the interest group system as a whole was seen as biased.

Peter Mair's direct interest was not to study the role of associations. Yet, he mentioned them in his critique of parties as representative bodies stating that,

The representation of citizens, meanwhile, to the extent that it occurs at all, is increasingly given over to other, non-governing organizations and practices – to interest groups, social movements, advocacy coalitions, lobbies, the media, self-representation [...] that can talk directly to government and the bureaucracy. (2011, p. 8).

Phillip Schmitter argued in 2001 that 'there is no longer a priori reason to suppose that parties should be privileged or predominant' as 'intermediaries' between citizens and the state (2001, pp. 71–72). He explicitly mentioned interest associations and social movements as alternative intermediaries between citizens and policymakers.

The question is whether and to what extent these actors have a potential to fulfill such a role. As mentioned, finding the answer to this question has been one of the key aims of the GovLis projects. Rather than focus on individual associations and their policy positions, I will focus on the role of associational engagement in this lecture. Based on findings from a recent study published by Stefanie Reher and myself (Rasmussen & Reher, 2019), I will look at whether involvement of citizens in associations – through for example membership, voluntary work and donations – affect the link between opinion and policy on our specific policy issues.

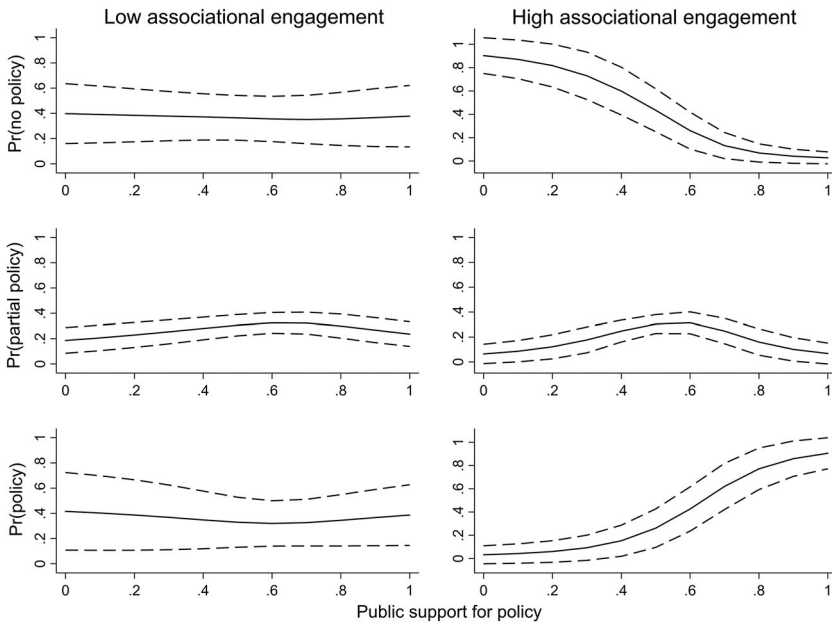
Existing scholarship gives us reason to expect that associations may play a positive role for policy representation. It has for long been emphasized how associations contribute to democracy more broadly (Tocqueville, 1840). As an example, Putnam's seminal study of the Italian regions found a link between the stock of social capital, of which citizen engagement is one of the key components, and democratic performance in Italian regions (Putnam, 1993). Associational engagement and social capital have also be shown to affect the accountability of politicians (e.g. Claibourn & Martin, 2007; Jottier & Heyndels, 2012). In fact, we even have some evidence that it affects policy representation. Verba and Nie's seminal study 'Participation in America' (1972) found a link between community activity (including membership in community problem-solving organizations) and priority congruence between citizens and leaders even if the effect was subject to certain contextual factors such as high voter turnout (see also Berry, Portney, & Thomson, 1993; Hansen, 1975; Hill & Matsubayashi, 2005). Instead, our focus is on the impact of associational engagement on the relationship between opinion and actual policies on specific policy issues.

In doing so we rely on the argument put forward by Boix and Posner that associations might make citizens 'sophisticated consumers of politics' better able to hold elites accountable (1998, p. 690). More specifically, we see civil society associations as *information transmitters* between citizens and

decision-makers that may help smooth the flow of information between citizens and policy-makers that I referred to in the beginning of this lecture. First, associational engagement may improve the public's ability to form meaningful preferences and hold politicians accountable. Second, information can also be expected to improve both the ability and incentive of representatives to respond to citizens.

Yet, we do not believe that all types of associational engagement matter when examining policy representation on a specific policy issue. Instead, we argue that the transmission capacity of associations is likely to be limited to particular policy domains. Hence, we would primarily expect associations to play a positive role in linking opinion and policy on issues that relate to policy areas relevant to the associations (see also Bevan & Rasmussen, 2017; Cohen, 2012). As an example, engagement in environmental associations should play a role on issues that are relevant for them, such as nuclear power and waste disposal, whereas it should not matter for other issues, such as the introduction of a mandatory retirement age or the options for same-sex couples to adopt. While we share the interest in associational engagement with the social capital literature, our theoretical argument therefore also differs somewhat. Whereas the social capital literature typically looks at the overall stock of associational engagement (e.g. Putnam, 1993) or distinguishes between engagement in different types of associations (for example bridging and bonding ones, see Hill & Matsubayashi, 2005), we expect an effect of engagement in organizations whose issue jurisdiction matches the policy issues in question. To test our prediction, we use the dataset of 20 issues across Europe and construct a measure of issue relevant associational engagement by linking information on engagement in different association types from eight surveys conducted between 1998 and 2011 with our specific policy issues (see Table A1 and Rasmussen & Reher, 2019 for more details).

In line with our expectations, we find that the larger the cumulative share of citizens in a given country that are engaged in associations of relevance to a given policy issue, the stronger the link between opinion and policy. The effect is illustrated in Figure 4. It shows the relationship between public support for a policy (x axis) and the likelihood of (a) 'not having the policy', (b) 'having the policy partially in place' or (c) 'having the policy fully in place' when associational engagement is low (left-hand side) and high (right-hand side). As we would expect, the graphs differ quite a bit between these two scenarios. We see that whereas there is no relationship between opinion and policy when associational engagement is low, there is a strong relationship when it is high. In the latter, support for a policy issue exerts a strong positive effect on having the policy fully in place (bottom right panel) and a strong negative one on not having the policy (top right panel).



**Figure 4.** Predicted probabilities of policy for low and high levels of specific associational engagement. Source: Rasmussen and Reher (2019).

Altogether this provides support for the expectation that civil society engagement affects the quality of democracy. However, we also show that these effects are primarily limited to particular policy domains in which organizations are active. The effect of general associational engagement disappears when tested in a model together with issue-specific engagement (for more details, see Rasmussen & Reher, 2019). Our findings underline that associations can play a role on policy issues beyond simply lobbying in favor and against specific policies. Even though the extent to which associations support a policy affects its likelihood of being (partially) in place (see also Rasmussen et al., 2019), engagement in them affects the actual link between opinion and policy on an issue.

### Political parties as representative bodies?

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, what is then the potential role of the political parties themselves when it comes to acting as representative bodies of the population? This is where we started the lecture and this is exactly what Peter Mair had become increasingly skeptical about. Fortunately, one of the many GovLis studies has looked into that question as well. It is conducted by my colleague Jeroen Romeijn (Romeijn, 2018). Rather than examine the linkage between opinion and policy as I have

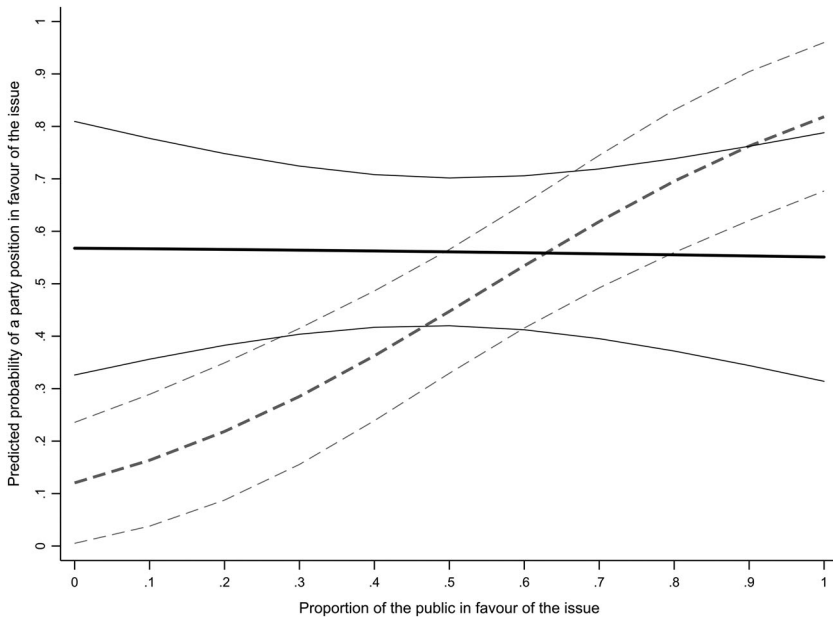
been doing in the studies mentioned, Romeijn is looking at how closely the positions of German parties match those of the public and their voters. While a higher number of existing studies in the party politics literature have examined the relationship between public opinion and party positions (for a review, see Fagerholm, 2016), his study stands out by looking at specific policy issues rather than ideological congruence. The issues come from another GovLis dataset and are very similar to the ones I have presented and are selected based on similar criteria. Yet, rather than measure a respondent's attitude to a given policy, they explicitly measure either support or opposition to potential policy changes of the existing status quo. Altogether, the study looks at 102 issues about which the German population was polled in the period 1998–2010 and it applies multilevel regression with poststratification to estimate the policy positions of party supporters (see Romeijn, 2018 for more details).

Romeijn finds that party supporters and the general public agree on the specific issues approximately 90% of the time. In the overwhelming majority of cases where they disagree, parties tend to side with their own supporters 84% of the time. In addition, there is little evidence for a difference in how closely the positions of niche and mainstream parties are linked to their supporters and the general public. This is surprising because one might have expected mainstream parties to have been most inclined to represent the general public and niche parties to represent their supporters (Adams, Clark, Ezrow, & Glasgow, 2006; Ezrow, De Vries, Steenbergen, & Edwards, 2011). Instead, niche parties are just more responsive to both.

Importantly, Romeijn finds an overall link between the position of the public/ party supporters and the position taken by the political parties on a given issue (for more details, see Romeijn, 2018). Hence, there is evidence that party politicians present substantive views in line with those of their citizens. At first, this might seem like good news from the perspective of democracy. Yet, the findings get somewhat more critical when the study is broken down to distinguishing between the responsiveness of government and opposition parties to public opinion.

According to [Figure 5](#), there is a fundamental difference in the extent to which the positions of political parties are aligned with the citizens in these two scenarios. While there is a strong positive relationship for opposition parties (dashed line), the same graph for government parties (solid line) is essentially flat. For the latter, there is no significant difference in the likelihood of supporting a given policy change. Hence, we see that irrespective how strongly the public supports it the change, the likelihood that the government party supports it is only a little over 50%. The analysis with respect to the link between party supporters and party positions shows the same trend. Yet, while there is no relationship between the opinion of the





**Figure 5.** Predicted probability of a position in favor of a policy issue for government parties and opposition parties. Based on data from Romeijn (2018).

Note: Predictions for government (black line) and opposition (dashed gray line) parties with 95% confidence intervals.

general public and party positions, it is only weakened in the case of party supporters.

Had Peter Mair been around, this might have been somewhat less surprising to him. He spoke of ‘a growing bifurcation in European party systems between parties which claim to represent but don’t govern and those which govern but no longer represent’ (2009, p. 17). In other words, he predicted how mainstream parties that often form governments have become less responsive. A crucial question based on Peter Mair’s work is whether this means that they have instead become ‘responsible’? This is not an easy question to answer, not least because of the difficulty involved in judging exactly what ‘being responsible’ means and its obvious normative connotations.

## Conclusion & future research gaps

Taken together the different GovLis studies present a somewhat less pessimistic picture of policy representation in Europe than one might have expected based on accounts by Peter Mair and others. Based on the largest cross-sectional study on policy representation on specific issues in Europe to date, we can say that opinion and policy are related (Rasmussen, Reher, et al., 2018; see also

Toshkov et al., 2018). We can also say that the actual state of policy is aligned with the public opinion majority in 63% of the cases. Whether this is sufficient for us to think that democratic representation is working well is an open question. However, compared to comparable research on the US, where the likelihood of policy congruence was similar to flipping a coin (Lax & Phillips, 2012), the odds of obtaining policy congruence in Europe are better than chance. In addition, we know that it matters how large the majority of the public supporting a given policy is for the likelihood that it is in place. The higher the public opinion majority is, the more likely it is that the policy exists (Rasmussen, Reher, et al., 2018). From a democratic standpoint, it might seem reassuring that the public and policy-makers are more closely aligned when the public is united in its stance on an issue than when it is close to being perfectly divided.

While government support and public support for a given policy may be unrelated (Romeijn, 2018), actual government responsiveness to public opinion is not constrained by whether the policy changes considered are in line with government positions. In another GovLis study on 306 policy issues in Denmark, Germany and the United Kingdom, we show that governments are not less likely to consider public opinion in decisions on policy changes that go against their own preferences (Toshkov et al., 2018). In that study, there is also no support for the prediction that government coalition conflict weakens responsiveness. In addition, we know from the first study discussed in this lecture that there is generally no net effect of political institutions on policy representation in Europe (Rasmussen, Reher, et al., 2018).

Instead, we found evidence that associations may have a role to play. We nuanced some of the existing work on the impact of associational engagement by emphasizing that, at least in the study of policy representation, its impact is likely to be domain specific. Engagement in associations operating within a policy jurisdiction of a given policy issue has a positive impact on policy representation (Rasmussen & Reher, 2019). Given that engagement might itself be stimulated by decision-makers, this leaves room for them to actively capitalize on the transmitting function of associations by promoting civil society engagement.

Yet, it is important to be aware that associations and other types of interest groups may not only strengthen but also weaken the opinion-policy linkage through their lobbying efforts. A related GovLis study of 160 policy issues in Denmark and Germany indicates that policy is significantly less likely to be aligned with the public majority when interest groups and the public are on opposite sides on a policy issue. Yet, it also demonstrates that the effect is relatively small in substantial terms and that the ability of groups to influence whether the public majority gets what it wants is restricted to cases where the public aims at changing the policy status quo (for more details, see Rasmussen et al., 2019). Together these different GovLis studies

underline the importance of adding associational engagement and interest groups to the study of policy-making, which has been one of key goals of the GovLis projects (see also Rasmussen, Mäder, & Reher, 2018; Flöthe & Rasmussen). They complement recent work on groups and responsiveness (Giger & Klüver, 2016; Klüver & Pickup, 2019) and have since been followed up by similar research on the EU and Belgium by Iskander de Bruycker and Evelien Willems and by an ongoing international project on interest groups, public opinion and policy agendas conducted by Joost Berkhout, Patrick Bernhagen, Adam Chalmers, Beth Leech and Amy McKay.<sup>4</sup>

There is much scope for additional research with respect to teasing out the casual mechanism through which interest groups affect policy representation. While it is often assumed that submission of information and other resources by groups play a key role, these resources are typically not directly measured in the studies. My GovLis colleague Linda Flöthe's work is promising in this respect. While she does not directly test the role of information submission by groups on the link between public opinion and policy, she systematically maps information flows from groups to policy-makers on specific issues and explains variation in them. From her work on Germany, we know that in addition to providing technical expertise, groups frequently submit information about public preferences and that such information is submitted by different types of interest groups (see e.g. Flöthe, 2019). This leaves groups with at least the potential to act as transmission belts between the public and policy-makers (see Junk, 2019 on the transmission capacity of umbrella associations). Moreover, it opens the opportunity for additional research on the extent to which they help close the gaps in information flows between citizens and policy-makers that I talked about in the beginning of this lecture with the example of the Labour party in the 2015 British General Election.

The question is whether Peter Mair would ultimately have been satisfied with the level of policy representation identified in our studies? Confronted with the contents of this lecture, he would probably have reminded us of the complexities entailed in defining policy representation in the first place (see also Sabl, 2015). It is likely that how desirable responsible and responsive government is might depend on one's understanding of democratic representation. Had Peter been with us he would probably also have been aware of the flourishing new research agenda, which looks at inequality in policy representation. Such research often points out that, while policy representation might look promising when we consider the opinion of citizens at an aggregate level, such results often mask potential inequalities between subgroups of the population, such as men and women (e.g. Reher, 2018) and income groups (e.g. Gilens, 2012; Peters & Ensink, 2015). It is beyond doubt that policy representation is a highly complex entity to examine and that understanding its different dimensions may require using multiple conceptualizations, analysis

designs, methodologies and data sources. In this lecture I have explored some of our recent attempts. I hope they will serve as a stepping stone for further research and ultimately help us give better answers to one of the biggest questions Peter Mair encouraged me to ask.

## Notes

1. 'In Memory of our Mentor Peter Mair', 23 August 2011, Orbitaly written by Peter Mair's Max Weber Fellows 2006–2011, available at: <https://blogs.eui.eu/maxweberprogramme/peter-mair/> (accessed 18.03.2019).
2. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/arnie-graf-labour-was-so-out-of-touch-it-didnt-know-a-single-worker-on-the-minimum-wage-says-10436910.html> (accessed 19.03.2019).
3. See [www.govlis.eu](http://www.govlis.eu) for more information about the project.
4. See [http://www.uni-stuttgart.de/soz/avps/aig/Presentation.Symposium\\_PS.pdf](http://www.uni-stuttgart.de/soz/avps/aig/Presentation.Symposium_PS.pdf).

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Irish Political Science Association for inviting me to give and publish this lecture, in particular the conference organizers Rory Costello and Connor Little and the editor of Irish Political Studies Ken Carty. I would also like to thank the members of my team, who have played an important role in the development and execution of the GovLis Research Programme. Stefanie Reher has worked with me from the early days of the projects and has remained committed to our research agenda long after her formal obligations ended. In addition, I am very grateful to the rest of the team: Linda Flöthe, Wiebke Marie Junk, Lars Mäder, Jeroen Romeijn, Dimiter Toshkov, Anne Binderkrantz and Heike Klüver as well as to our advisory board members: Dave Lowery and Chris Wlezien. Last but not least, our 'army' of student assistants deserves special mentioning for helping us gather and code all the data for our research.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

The research discussed received financial support from Sapere Aude Grant 0602-02642B from the Danish Council for Independent Research and VIDI Grant 452-12-008 from the Dutch NWO.

## Notes on contributor

*Anne Rasmussen* is professor in Political Science at the University of Copenhagen and affiliated to Leiden University and the University of Bergen. Her current research analyzes interest representation, policy responsiveness, political parties and agenda setting.

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** List of policy issues and related associations.

Policy issue	Associations
Warnings on alcoholic drink bottles	Health and patient organizations
Experiments on animals	Environmental and animal rights organizations
Smoking bans in bars and pubs	Health and patient organizations
Tobacco vending machines	Health and patient organizations
Embryonic stem cell research	Religious organizations; health and patient organizations
Nuclear power	Environmental and animal rights organizations
Nation-wide minimum wage	Trade unions; business and industry associations
Support for caregivers	Health and patient organizations; elderly rights organizations
Detaining terrorist suspects without charge	Human rights organizations
Same-sex marriage	Religious organizations; human rights organizations
Adoption of children by same-sex couples	Religious organizations; human rights organizations
Abortion	Religious organizations; human rights organizations
Citizenship ( <i>ius soli</i> )	–
Progressive income tax	Trade unions; business and industry associations
Right to earn while receiving a pension	Trade unions; business and industry associations; elderly rights organizations
Asylum seekers' right to work	Human rights organizations
On-line voting	–
Military involvement in Afghanistan	Human rights organizations
Mandatory retirement age	Trade unions; business and industry associations; elderly rights organizations
Disposal of plastic waste in landfills	Environmental and animal rights organizations

Sources: Rasmussen, Reher, et al. (2018) and Rasmussen and Reher (2019).