

Do Parties Converge? An empirical analysis of Party Organizational and Policy Issue Saliency Change in Western Europe (1970-2010)

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This article aims at assessing whether party organizational profiles and policy issue saliency converged in 7 European democracies (Austria, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, UK), from the 1970s to the 2010s. Building on the theoretical premises of the cartel party thesis and historical new-institutionalism, the paper argues that general tendencies in party policy issue saliency and organizational evolution driven by contextual factors have been taken for granted by party literature based on ideal-typical models. We maintain that party convergence is mainly associated to higher levels of socialization to government. Our empirical analysis shows that patterns of cross-country convergence among parties actually emerge concerning the saliency of the issues placed on the classical left-right divide, as well as party resources, while higher variance characterizes all the other organizational dimensions and post-materialist/value-based policy issues.

Keywords: Political Parties, Convergence, Organizational Dimensions, Issue Saliency

Subject classification codes: party change in Europe (1970-2010)

Introduction

The “convergence hypothesis” has a long-standing tradition in contemporary Political Science (Plümper & Schneider 2009). It became increasingly popular in the second half of the twentieth Century, in the literatures devoted to political development and public policy (Wilensky 1975; Thomas 1980; Castles & McKinlay 1997). The rationale underlying the convergence hypothesis was well-depicted by Bennett (1991: 216), who argued that

the general convergence argument suggests that, as societies adopt a progressively more industrial infrastructure, certain determinate processes are set in motion which tend overtime to shape social structures, political processes and public policies in the same mould.

After World War II, Western countries were characterized by similar trends in socio-

economic, demographic, cultural and technological dynamics (Dalton & Wattenberg 2000): these tendencies were considered the main drivers of a general convergence in their institutional development, political processes and policy mix (Howlett et al 2009). The debate on convergence gained further attention on the eve of the new Millennium, as supranational processes such as globalization and Europeanization (Strange 1996; Held et al 1999; Knill 2006) were seen as powerful factors favouring institutional and political homogenisation across countries (Strange 1996; Caramani 2010).

The convergence hypothesis permeated party literature as well. The search for party models – the predominant research strategy in the field – is built upon an identical rationale. Scholars have identified a succession of party organizational models (Krouwel 2006), by providing a diachronic representation of presumed synchronous common processes of party change (van Biezen 2005). Within this scholarly tradition, the cartel party model (Katz & Mair 1995) represents the most accomplished theoretical effort based on the convergence hypothesis. Parties' observable transition from agents of the civil society to appendages of the state, and the parallel reconfiguration of democracy as a '[...] service provided by the state for civil society' are the normative pillar of the cartel party thesis. Katz and Mair privilege a dialectical approach to party change, as the cartelization sets the stage for its overcoming by bringing to the emergence and consolidation of anti-cartel parties. However, the authors emphasize the relevance of contextual factors in shaping both organizational strategies and competition over policy issues. As for the former, the intra-party balance of power had shifted in favour of the party in public office (Katz & Mair 1993; van Biezen et al 2012; Bardi et al 2017); concerning the latter, the logic of cartelization brought parties to tone down competition over policy issues by privileging instead a rhetoric of state management. The emphasis on these common patterns of development was further strengthened in the re-statement

of the original thesis, as Katz and Mair (2009: *passim*) included also ‘external factors drawn from the world of international politics and economics’ – the end of the Cold War, the Maastricht Treaty and the launch of new international regimes such as the WTO – among the determinants of party change. The two authors conclude that (Katz & Mair 2009: 760)

we remain with a reality that is defined by a set of mainstream parties that are largely indistinguishable from one another in terms of their main policy proposals, and that are closer to one another in terms of their styles, location, and organizational culture [...].

Party convergence, then, is assumed to be a correlate of political development, whose patterns are largely determined by extra-political factors. Convergence is primarily expected among office-seeking (or government) parties. The same should not hold for new parties or for those that find themselves relegated in opposition roles most of the time, as well as for those that behave as anti-system or anti-politics parties (Bardi et al. 2014).

The aim of this contribution is to question the model-based approach to party change both theoretically and empirically, by investigating *if* and *how* political parties have actually converged along both their organizational dimensions and the saliency attributed to policy issues. Differently from other works in the field, we do not posit that a relationship exists between specific party organizational profiles and policy issues: rather, we are interested in verifying the reliability of the convergence hypothesis, which has been somewhat taken for granted in the literature. The added value of this contribution rests on an original combination of data provided by the Political Party Database Project (Scarow et al. 2017) with those gathered by the Party Organizations Data Handbook (Katz & Mair 1992). This extensive dataset is flanked by the data of the Manifesto Research on Political Representation (MARPOR).

We focus on seven European countries from 1970 to 2010. Our analysis considers a number of relevant policy issues and organizational dimensions, in line with the approach promoted by the Political Party Database Project (Scarrow et al 2017). We expect that both the saliency of the policy issues included and party organizational profiles vary across countries: in line with a historical new institutional perspective (Pierson 2000; 2004), we maintain that convergence is higher among party populations that show higher levels of party socialization to government.

The article is structured as follows. In the first section, we address the shortcomings of the convergence hypothesis at both theoretical and empirical levels. In the second section, we clarify the rationale of the contribution, by specifying our research questions. In the third section, we present the data and methods used to investigate party convergence, while the empirical findings will be discussed in the fourth section. In the conclusion, we offer cues for further reflections.

Revisiting the convergence hypothesis

The convergence hypothesis rests on a general approach to politics that March and Olsen (1989; 2009) defined “contextualism”, and Pierson (2004) labelled as “societal functionalism”. In this perspective, the broader social system within which political institutions and organizations operate determines their profiles, preferences and choices. Party convergence is considered the end-result of a number of structural dynamics, which occur at both domestic and supranational level: concerning the latter, the narrative centred on the homogenisation effects produced by the economic globalization and political internationalization (Strange 1996; Busch & Jörgens 2005) further reinforced the original thesis. This approach, however, shows significant weaknesses at both theoretical and empirical levels.

At the *theoretical level*, the determinism of the contextualist approach – whether underpinned by either domestic or supranational factors – overlooks three relevant elements: the autonomy of the political systems (March & Olsen 1989; Sartori 2002); the resilience of Nation States and domestic structures (Fjäder 2014); and the constraints imposed by institutional persistence (Pierson 2000; Fioretos et al 2015). First, the autonomy of the political systems is founded on the legitimate exercise of political power retained by state agencies on a territorial basis. Political institutions and organizations are entitled to take collective coercive decisions, which are mandatory for all other organizational fields. It follows that political power takes a functional precedence over other forms of power within a polity (Olsen 2009). Political institutions and organizations should not be considered “solely as reflections of society” (March, Olsen 2009: 4): on the contrary, they must be framed as powerful sources of constraints on other institutional spheres and actors. As a consequence, the main determinants of political change should be primarily sought in factors of a political nature, rather than in societal drivers (Harmel & Janda 1994). Second, in line with a “transformationalist” approach to the impact of external pressures on political change (Fjäder 2014), it could be argued that domestic political institutions and organizations are extremely resilient – albeit to different degree. State agencies can be considered as institutional filters between supranational factors and domestic political systems, thus mediating the intensity with which the former have an impact on the latter. Accordingly, domestic political institutions and organizations show a clear tendency to persist over time (Fioretos et al 2015). Third, and in line with these premises, it follows that persistence is a peculiar feature of domestic political systems, as path dependence characterizes the evolution of political institutions and organizations (Pierson 2000; 2004; Schreyögg & Sydow 2010), which show a conservative nature. Any historical sequence of events and decisions narrows – without fully determining – the set

of possible future scripts to be adopted by actors: path dependence is the process by which a number of peculiar self-reinforcing dynamics lead to “lock-in” and perpetuate a configuration of frames, interpretations and solution to given situations, by increasing the costs to reverse the pattern and conditioning actors' future preferences and strategies. Thus, *divergence* in the patterns followed by the development of domestic political institutions and organizations in different contexts (Lenschow et al 2006) *is at least as plausible as* their externally-driven *convergence*.

At the *empirical level*, the reliability of the convergence hypothesis proves even weaker (Knill 2005). In policy studies, measurements of convergence have been criticized since the publication of the first wave of analyses based on quantitative approaches (Wilensky 1975; Castles & McKinlay 1979). Still, to date, clear empirical evidence is rare (Plümper & Schneider 2009). Even in the years when the homogenizing influences of supranational processes were most exalted, Dalton (2003: 66) argued that ‘[...] the evidence that party systems (or government policies) have generally converged remains uncertain’. As Busch and Jörgens (2005: 862) put it, ‘Cross-national policy convergence is often explained by structural changes related to economic globalization or political internationalization. Empirical studies revealed, however, that these structural changes do not necessarily or automatically result in policy convergence’. While in the policy literature many contributions have challenged the convergence hypothesis (Palmer et al 2013), in party studies the relevance assigned to extra-political pressures in shaping party politics has continued to be overestimated (Harmel & Janda 1994; Ignazi 2019). With the exception of recent works by Böhmet et al (2016), Dúpont and Rahuj (2021), Masi and Pizzimenti (2022) – which emphasize the relevance of political factors in moulding party preferences and organizational strategies – party convergence has continued to be conceived in terms of adaptation to extra-political pressures (Mair 1997). This state of affairs can be

explained by looking at the empirical focus of the plethora of party models (Krouwel 2006; Katz 2017) that characterizes party literature, which has been mainly centred on the trends registered by party resources (membership figures, party revenues, staff etc.). The well-documented convergent changes occurred in party resources in the established democracies has been considered the epiphenomenon of a more general organizational convergence. However, by focusing on different organizational dimensions (Scarrow et al 2017) it clearly emerges how parties can converge along specific dimensions (and sub-dimensions), while largely diverging on others (Poguntke et al 2016). The dimensional approach employed by the Political Party Database Project (Scarrow et al, 2017) is built upon the following rationale: change in party resources, representative strategies and structures does not necessarily follow the same dynamics nor the same timing across different national party systems. In this vein, domestic institutional and political peculiarities emerge as crucial explanatory factors of party change, whose patterns may significantly differ from country to country. In particular, literature has stressed how some specific features of the political system – the parliamentary or presidential form of government (Poguntke et al 2020) – as well as of the party system – its fragmentation and the dynamics of competition among parties (Masi & Pizzimenti 2022) – are significantly related to cross-country party organizational variance.

Theory and research questions

To date, the studies centred on the relationship between party organizational features and changes in party policy preferences (Schumacher et al. 2013; van Heck 2018; Giger & Schumacher 2019) adopt a rather unsatisfactory approach concerning the organizational analysis. At the theoretical level the distinction between activist- or leadership-dominated parties, suggested by Schumacher et al (2013) and Giger and

Schumacher (2019), is in line with the rationale underlying the consolidated literature on party models. At the empirical level, the way in which party organizational change has been measured is weak, in particular when adopting a longitudinal perspective. All these studies resort to just two answers provided by party scholars in an expert survey carried out in 1989 by Laver and Hunt (1992): a diachronic analysis covering several decades and based on a constant value of the organizational variables cannot be considered reliable. Even if parties, like any other organization, tend to be conservative, party change still occurs over time.

To our aims the cartel party thesis (Katz & Mair 1995; 2009) still constitutes the main reference to address the tricky puzzle of convergence. We begin by specifying our conception of *convergence*. By building on Knill's definition (2005), we intend party convergence as *any increase in similarity between the saliency attributed to policy issues, as well as the organizational dimensions, over a given period of time*. Party convergence is the possible outcome of a process of change over time towards some common point. Second, in contrast to the contextualist perspective, we maintain that convergence is mainly associated to political-institutional factors. We argue that path dependence characterizes the evolution of domestic political institutions (Capoccia 2015), thus imposing limits on actors by influencing and moulding their perceptions, preferences (Scharpf 1997) and organizations (Beland 2009; Greenwood et al 2013). Given these premises, we argue that since political parties are both institution-takers – thus constrained by existing institutionalised settings and policies – and institution-makers – key actors in the decision-making and policy-making processes – their degree of convergence depends on the extent of their institutional penetration: more specifically, we maintain that *convergence is linked to party socialization to government*. Party socialization to government represents the degree to which a party population, on average,

is “rooted” in government. Those party populations that show higher levels of socialization to government are supposed to converge more along both organizational dimensions and the saliency attributed to specific policy issues. Our research questions follow this line of thought.

Concerning policy issues, in contrast to recent studies based on the “diffusion hypothesis” (Böhmet et al 2016; Dúpont & Rahuj 2021), we posit that once a party becomes socialised to government the emphasis attributed to specific issues is progressively recalibrated according to the “realism and responsibility” associated with governmental office (Peters 2018). As policy-makers, political parties ‘face numerous substantive or procedural constraints [...]’ (Howlett et al 2009: 112): while the former are inherent in the very nature of the problem, the latter are related to the institutional heritage characterizing the policy process. Political parties thus assign a different saliency to policy issues depending on their socialization to government (Dolezal et al 2018). This largely explains why in the electoral arena opposition parties ‘are less constrained in their programmatic issue strategies [...]’ (Van Heck 2018: 348). It follows that socialization to government is expected to be a relevant homogenizing factor, in time. In line with this argument, our first research question is the following:

(R1a): The degree of convergence along policy issues is higher in those countries where the level of party socialization to government is higher.

Concerning party organization, following the cartel party thesis, parties' progressive reliance on the State is expected to have had an impact on their organizational profile (Katz & Mair 1995; 2009). In particular, as far as an increasing number of parties have accessed the government, their organizational strategies have presumably been redesigned to respond more quickly to the needs of governmental offices. We want to test

this assumption, so our second research question is the following:

(R1b): The degree of convergence in party organizational profiles is higher in those countries where the level of party socialization to government is higher.

This contribution rests on the basic idea that deterministic assumptions should be carefully avoided, to the benefit of empirical research: the *ifs* and *hows* of party convergence need to be investigated. Moreover we consider party variance as more than plausible in a longitudinal and comparative perspective. Depending on country, then, convergence may follow different patterns along policy issues and organizational dimensions. As for the former, not all policy issues show the same characteristics. We expect to find more convergence concerning policy issues – such as market regulation, welfare regimes, education, etc. – which are associated with institutionalized policy settings (Howlett et al 2009). On the contrary, the question is more open regarding either those policy fields – like European integration, environmental protection, etc. – that have arisen as a consequence of the politicisation of new issues, and those issues that gain momentum occasionally (e.g. immigration, civil rights, corruption – Green-Pedersen 2007; Kriesi 2007; Kriesi et al 2006). While the former group of issues can be identified with the classical left-right divide, the latter can be associated with post-materialism and value-based policy orientations. We will thus define the former group as “classical left-right” policy issues, and the latter as “post-materialist and value-based” policy issues. In line with the cartel party thesis, we expect that:

(R2a): Convergence among parties is higher regarding classical left-right policy issues, while it is lower concerning post-materialist and value-based issues.

The same logic applies to party organizational change. While convergence in party resources has been documented by the specialized literature, changes along party

representative strategies and structures are less univocal. As mentioned above, parties socialized to government are expected to adopt organizational arrangements that enable them to respond effectively to institutional pressures (Pizzimenti et al 2020): lighter intra-party decision making processes, the parallel autonomization of the top party leadership and the compression of party internal organs are generally associated to governing parties' organizational profile. However, since comparative empirical research based on a dimensional approach is still in its infancy, we want to investigate the following research question:

(R2b): Convergence in party organizational profiles is higher regarding resources, while organizational variance is higher concerning representative strategies and structures.

In the following sections we address all these questions by adopting a longitudinal comparative approach.

Data and methods

Our empirical analysis is based on a sample of seven consolidated Western European democracies: Austria, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. In line with our theoretical premises, we select countries according to their electoral system, which is a key distinctive political-institutional feature. We thus include three countries with a party-list proportional representation system (Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands); one country with a mixed-member proportional (Germany); two countries with a two-tiered party-list proportional representation system (Norway, Sweden); one country with a single-member plurality system (the UK).

We focus on national parties, by analysing the relative emphasis they attributed to policy issues and their organizational profiles at the beginning of the 1970s (N = 33);

of the 1990s (N = 38) and of the 2010s (N = 38). Given the longitudinal approach we adopt, the countries and parties included in the panel are those for which comparable data exist.

Concerning policy issues, we rely on the data of the Manifesto Research on Political Representation (MARPOR), which is undoubtedly the most popular source for the analysis of parties' policy positions despite some well-known methodological shortcomings (Dinas & Gemenis 2010; Gemenis 2013). MARPOR registers parties' emphasis on a given policy issue by assigning a score corresponding to the frequency this issue is explicitly referenced in the party manifesto (Laver & Budge 1992; Budge et al. 2001). For the study of party organizational convergence we combine the data provided by the Political Party Database Project (Scarrow et al. 2017) with those gathered by the Party Organizations Data Handbook (Katz & Mair 1992), which have been coded according to the same protocol as the PPDB. The data refers, for each of the three selected time markers, to the closest year for which information is available.

To assess party convergence we calculate the standard deviations registered along all the variables included in our analysis (26 for party organizational profiles, 32 for policy issue saliency). In Table 1 we report the number of observations raised to build our indexes.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

First, we are interested in verifying *if* parties actually converge. According to our assumptions, socialization to government (SG) represents the crucial variable associated to patterns of convergence, in both policy issues' saliency (R1a) and organizational profiles (R1b). We operationalize this variable through an indicator measuring, for each party population, the percentage of parties that had participated in at least one cabinet in the past 20 years preceding each time marker.

As for policy issues, we focus on 32 issues, which have been subdivided into two clusters: *classical left-right* (N = 16) and *post-materialist and value-based* (N = 16) policy issues (see Appendix). Classical policy issues include issues related to the traditional State-Market axis; while post-materialist and value-based policy issues have been selected mainly in relation to the GAL-TAN divide (Hooghe et al. 2002).

For each issue in the two clusters we calculate the standard deviation among parties, by country, at each time marker, as follows:

$$PSV_{classical,post-materialist} = \frac{1}{n} \left(\sum_{i=1}^n \sigma_i \right)$$

These measures of variance will be used to calculate a general party Policy Saliency Variance index (PSV), as the simple mean of the two:

$$PSV = \frac{(PSV_{classical} + PSV_{post-materialist})}{2}$$

In a similar fashion, party organizational convergence is analysed by focusing on three clusters of variables (party resources, representative strategies and structures). The variables used to analyse party *resources* are: the ratio between party members and voters (M/V) and government subsidies as a percentage of party budgets. Party *representative strategies* are centred on the regulation of party membership and on the involvement of both individual members and multi-level collective bodies in the selection of candidates. Party *structures* are analysed through variables pertaining to the degree of party layering, the parliamentarization of party organs and the empowerment of the party leaders and of the representatives of the party in public office. Each cluster is made up of a number of dichotomous variables (see Appendix), whose values range from 0 to 1. For each cluster we calculate the index as the mean of the standard deviations of the variables among parties, by country, at each time marker:

$$POV_{resources, strategies, structures} = \frac{1}{n} \left(\sum_{i=1}^n \sigma_i \right)$$

where i stands for the variables included in each of the dimensions and σ represents the standard deviation.

These measures of variance will be used to calculate a general party Party Organizational Variance index (POV), as the simple mean of the three:

$$POV = \frac{(POV_{resources} + POV_{strategies} + POV_{structures})}{3}$$

Since we privilege a country-level approach, for the analysis of the data gathered we resort to simple descriptive statistics, due to the limited number of cases included. The historical depth of our empirical analysis (based on many decades) has forced us to resort to data and information that are not always completely reliable – in particular, concerning issue saliency data. This could be one of the limits of our study. However, we are persuaded that our theoretical premises, as well as our research design, allow us to generalize from our findings, at least concerning established Western European countries. The use of comparable and replicable measures represents an added value. In the next section, we present the main findings of our empirical research.

Empirical findings

We begin the analysis by providing a snapshot of the general tendencies registered in both policy issue saliency and party organizational profiles, across countries and in time.

On aggregate, the two indexes measuring variance in policy issue saliency (PSV) and organizational profiles (POV) follow opposite trends. In fact, while the PSV decreases from the 1970s to the 2010s, party organizations become more dissimilar. These preliminary findings are interesting since, on the one hand, they corroborate the plausibility of the convergence hypothesis concerning policy competition; on the other

hand, this data is in contrast with the party model literature, which had taken for granted organizational convergence. As for the former, the tendency is more pronounced in the passage from the 1970s to the beginning of the 1990s: it thus seems to be more related to domestic contextual factors than to those supra-national processes cited by Katz and Mair in the restatement of the cartel party thesis, since both globalization and Europeanization have accelerated later.

Moving to country-level analysis, data show that a negative correlation exists between SG and PSV (-0.562), thus confirming that higher socialization to government is associated to convergence in the saliency attributed by parties to policy issues (R1a). On the contrary, a positive correlation between party organizational variance and socialization to government emerges (.292). This finding suggests that, despite an increasing number of parties have had access to government in time, the isomorphic effects of cartelization did not work at the organizational level (R1b).

Focusing on countries, data of SG show that, in the whole period, Germany is the country in our sample where the value of this indicator is the highest (1), followed by Belgium (0,85) and the Netherlands (0,81). According to our assumptions, then, we would expect these countries to present higher levels of party convergence, in both policy issues and organizational profiles.

FIGURE 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE

However, as figures 1 and 2 show, the empirical analysis reveals us that only the German case fits with our premises: as for party organization, variance sharply decreases over time and a similar trend is registered also concerning policy issues. In both the Belgian and Dutch cases, while the value of the POV does not follow any specific direction, that of the PSV decreases in the passage from the 1970s to the 1990s, but it

skyrockets at the following time marker. Among the countries that fall under the median value of the SG (set at 0,72 corresponding to the Austrian case), it is interesting to notice how Norwegian parties increasingly converge along policy issues, while higher values of both the PSV and the POV are observed for Swedish parties from the 1970s to the 1990s. The British case is the most ambiguous: organizational convergence increases until the 1990s and decreases significantly in the 2010s, while the PSV follows an opposite trend. All in all, during the whole period the Dutch parties show the most convergent profile in terms of policy issues, while the Norwegian ones present the highest organizational isomorphism.

We now turn our attention to a more in-depth analysis to assess how parties converge. On aggregate, convergence along policy issues is actually higher regarding the left-right divide, while parties vary more on the other group (R2a). As figure 3 shows, confronting policy issues over the whole period, variance is higher for post-materialist and value-based issues in 5 out of 7 cases, the only exceptions being Norway and, less markedly, the UK.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

However, by focusing on each time marker, countries show rather different patterns (see Figure 4 and 5). In Norway, party converge along the left-right issues is striking in the passage from the 1970s to the 1990s, but the process is very pronounced also in the following decades. Also British and German parties become more convergent during the whole period, while in all the other countries variance increases at the third time marker after a former tendency to converge. By considering only those issues that are mentioned in the programmes of (almost) all parties, in each country and at each time marker, some interesting cues emerge. At the beginning of the 1970s, the lowest convergence concerns *welfare state expansion*; none of the parties in our sample mention *education limitation*

in their manifestos, not even negative mentions of *labour groups* can be found in any of the countries but Norway. These two issues are, on average, the least salient of the cluster also at the following time marker, when we notice high cross-country convergence in party programmes concerning *market regulation* (4 cases out of 7, but the Nordic countries and Austria). Finally, *welfare state expansion* registers the highest value of the indicator measuring variance again at the beginning of the 2010s in Belgium, Germany, Sweden and the UK, being the issue *equality: positive* the most divergent in the other cases.

As for post-materialist and value-based policy issues, at the beginning of the 1970s *anti-growth economy* was not cited in any of the party programmes analysed. Mentions were scarce also concerning *European Community*, *traditional morality* as well as *multiculturalism* framed as *negative*, and *political corruption*. However, common cross-country tendencies are difficult to find. Also at the following time marker no clear patterns of convergence can be found with the partial exception of the issue of *environmental protection*, for which variance is the highest in Austria, Norway, Sweden and the UK (even if, in the British case, the score is the same as that registered for *European Community* framed as *positive*). The overall picture is even less limpid two decades later, when the issue *non economic/demographic groups* shows the lowest variance in the programmes of Austrian, German and Dutch parties.

FIGURE 4 AND 5 ABOUT HERE

We now want to assess to what extent parties have followed similar patterns of organizational dimensional change (Figure 6). On aggregate, variance in party resources is actually lower than that registered by the other dimensions in 5 out of 7 cases with the exceptions of Norway and Austria, where the lowest values are those of the representative

strategies (R2b). This finding strengthens our assumption that party scholars engaged with models have primarily focused on changes in membership figures and party finance to sustain the convergence hypothesis. In fact, the dimensional approach reveals that different dimensions tend to vary to a greater extent than what commonly expected. Variance in party structures is by far the highest (but for the Netherlands): the mean value of the entire sample in the whole period is set at 0,27, compared to 0,18 for the representative strategies and 0,14 for party resources. This finding is interesting as it shows how parties have adopted rather different patterns in the regulation of the sub-dimensions concerning leadership autonomy to act on behalf of the party, as well as the organizational rights and powers accorded to the representative of the party in public office. It could thus be argued that the alleged processes of party “leaderization” and the ascendancy of the party in public office have followed at least different paths.

FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE

By focusing on individual countries (Figure 7, 8 and 9), Austrian parties are the only parties in our sample that present constant increases of variance in their resources, while an opposite trend is followed by the Swedish ones; in Belgium, Germany and Norway higher variance is registered in the 1990s compared to the previous period. Belgian and Dutch parties show the most divergent profile concerning representative strategies, whose fluctuations in time are nevertheless quite limited; the Norwegian and British cases are peculiar since stability prevails until the 1990s and then variance skyrockets in the latter while falling in the former. As for structures, Austrian and British parties present the highest increases in the value of the index in the passage from the second to the third time

marker: German parties tend to converge over time, in particular at the beginning of the 2010s.

FIGURE 7, 8 AND 9 ABOUT HERE

We now provide a more detailed analysis of the values registered by the sub-dimensions included in each of the three organizational dimensions, per country and in time. The comparative analysis along party *resources* is made more complicated by the differences in public funding regimes that characterize the countries in our sample (Piccio, van Biezen 2012). In particular, at our first time marker, only Germany, Norway and Sweden provided parties with direct funds, while in all the other cases (but the Netherlands, where public subsidies were introduced in 1999) observations can be drawn since the beginning of the 1990s. In this respect, Norwegian parties show the highest variance of the indicator measuring the impact of public funds on party total income, while the British parties are the most similar ones: still, also in this case the features of the legislation in the UK affects data. At the following time marker, variance is the highest for Swedish parties (0.22), while German and Dutch parties are the most convergent in the sample (0.04 and 0.06 respectively). Concerning the ratio between Members and Voters, the parties of the two Nordic countries show higher variance at the beginning of the 1970s (0.13), while variance is very limited in the German case (0.02). Twenty years later, the Swedish parties still constitute the most heterogeneous party population (0.17): variance of the M/V ratio is practically absent in the Dutch case (0.01) and very limited among both German and British parties (0.02). As for the latter, stability prevails also at the third time marker: curiously, in all the countries in our sample (but Austria, where the variance of the M/V is set at 0.24) parties present lower variability of the indicator.

At both our first and second time markers, the variance along party *representative strategies* is the highest concerning the possibility, for members, to belong also to another national party (with the exceptions of Austrian and German cases). Moreover, no variance at all, in all countries, is registered for a high number of sub-dimensions: the recognition of party membership as a formal category, the absence of a separate level of formal affiliation with reduced obligations and rights, sponsorship by a party member, the obligation for members to pay a due, the involvement of affiliated or other organizations in selecting/deciding on candidates and the lack of powers assigned to non members/supporters in selecting candidates. Variance increases, on average, at the beginning of the 2010s, in particular with regards to the involvement of local level organizations in selecting/deciding for candidates.

Finally, as we have already pointed out, variance in party *structures* is higher compared to the other dimensions. Curiously, during the whole period, with the exception of the possibility for the leader of the party to summon the congress (that shows no variance in the sample), all the other sub-dimensions present variable scores of the indicator measuring variance. In particular, the ex officio presence of the leader of the party group at the lower house in the party highest executive body shows the least convergent scores.

Conclusions

The aim of this contribution was twofold: to investigate if political parties actually converge in their organizational profiles and in the relative emphasis they attribute to specific policy issues, and to assess how they converge, by identifying possible patterns of increasing similarity as described by the literature based on party models. Party convergence has been somewhat taken for granted by party scholars: however, in recent years a growing number of studies have questioned this interpretation, by highlighting

the need to bring variance back in. We thus opted for a dimensional approach for the study of party change, by focusing on the party populations of seven Western European democracies, from the 1970s to the 2010s.

Our empirical findings only partially confirm the too often taken for granted convergence hypothesis. In fact, on aggregate, the two indexes measuring variance in policy issues and organizational profiles follow opposite trends. In line with the convergence hypothesis, parties actually look increasingly similar over time along policy issues: on the contrary, in terms of organizational profiles, the convergence hypothesis is not confirmed, as parties become more dissimilar. Our data show that a correlation exists between socialization to government and convergence in policy issues: this corroborates our theoretical assumptions as well as the premises of the cartel party thesis concerning the tone down of mainstream parties' competition over policy. However, our findings also suggest that socialization to government does not bring parties to converge in organizational terms: despite an increasing number of parties have had access to government in time, the alleged isomorphic effects of cartelization did not work at the organizational level.

The most interesting findings, however, concern the *hows* of party convergence. In fact, even if our data show that, on aggregate, some cross-country tendencies can be identified (as in most of the countries in our sample parties converge along left-right policy issues as well as their resources, in line with the cartel party hypothesis), it also emerges that cross-country differences, in time, are extremely pronounced. These results are relevant since they weaken the party model approach in favour of a multi-dimensional perspective for the study of party change.

To summarise, despite evidences of party convergence emerge, our analysis suggests that national differences should not be overlooked and that domestic peculiarities are still

relevant to address political changes. As a matter of fact, a more fine-grained analysis of the institutional and political features of the countries is required in future research to identify with more precision which factors impact on both party organisations and policy issues.

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Appendix

Parties included, per country and period

Germany	1969	Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) Free Democratic Party (FDP) Christian Social Union of Bavaria (CSU)
	1990	Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) The Free Democratic Party (FDP) Alliance '90/The Greens (G) Christian Social Union of Bavaria (CSU)
	2013	Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) Social Democratic Party (SDP) Free Democratic Party (FDP) Alliance '90/The Greens (G) Christian Social Union of Bavaria (CSU)
Netherlands	1971	People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) Labour Party (PvdA) Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP) Catholic People's Party (KVP) Christian Historical Union (CHU) Democrats 66 (D'66)
	1989	People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) Labour Party (PvdA) Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) Democrats 66 (D'66) GreenLeft (GL)
	2012	People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) Labour Party

		<p>Christian Democratic Appeal</p> <p>Democrats 66</p> <p>GreenLeft</p>
Sweden	1970	<p>Social Democratic Workers Party (S)</p> <p>Left Party (V)</p> <p>Centre Party (C)</p> <p>People's Party Liberals (FP)</p> <p>Moderate Party (M)</p>
	1991	<p>Social Democratic Workers Party (S)</p> <p>Left Party (V)</p> <p>Green Party (MP)</p> <p>Centre Party (C)</p> <p>People's Party Liberals (FP)</p> <p>Moderate Party (M)</p>
	2010	<p>Social Democratic Workers Party (S)</p> <p>Left Party (V)</p> <p>Green Party (MP)</p> <p>Centre Party (C)</p> <p>Liberal People's Party</p> <p>Moderate Party (M)</p>
United Kingdom	1974	<p>Conservative Party (CON)</p> <p>Labour Party (LAB)</p> <p>Liberal Democrats (LIB)</p>
	1992	<p>Conservative Party (CON)</p> <p>Labour Party (LAB)</p> <p>Liberal Democrats (LIB)</p>
	2010	<p>Conservative Party (CON)</p> <p>Labour Party (LAB)</p> <p>Liberal Democrats (LIB)</p>

Policy Issues

Classical left-right policy issues

- per401. Free market economy
- per403. Market regulation
- per404. Economic planning
- per406. Protectionism positive
- per409. Keynesian demand management
- per410. Economic growth positive
- per412. Controlled economy
- per413. Nationalisation
- per414. Economic orthodoxy
- per503. Equality positive
- per504. Welfare state expansion
- per505. Welfare state limitation
- per506. Education expansion
- per507. Education limitation
- per701. Labour group positive
- per702. Labour group negative

Post-materialist and value-based policy issues

- per108. EU positive
- per110. EU negative
- per201. Freedom and human rights
- per202. Democracy

- per301. Decentralization positive
- per303. Governmental/administrative efficiency
- per304. Political corruption
- per411. Technology/infrastructure positive
- per416. Anti-growth economy
- per501. Environmental protection
- per502. Culture positive
- per604. Traditional morality negative
- per605. Law and order positive
- per607. Multiculturalism positive
- per608. Multiculturalism negative
- per706. Non-economic demographic groups

Party Organization variables

Representative Strategies

- CR6MBRRUL Party statutes recognize party membership as a formal category, distinct from unaffiliated supporters.
- CR7FRIEND Party statutes recognize a separate level of formal affiliation with reduced obligations and reduced rights
- A33MBRJOIN Is it possible for an individual to join the national party directly?
- A38SPONSOR Membership must be sponsored by one or more current members.
- A39GROUPMB Member must also belong to another related organization, if eligible (such as trade union membership or church membership).
- A40AFFIRM Member must actively affirm agreement with party principles.
- A41EXCLUSIVE Member may not belong to another national party.

- A43MBRDUES Member must pay dues.
- A49WOMENORG Sub-organization: Women.
- A50YOUTHORG Sub-organization: Youth.
- A51SENIORORG Sub-organization: Seniors.
- A52SMLBIZORG Sub-organization: Small business owners.
- A53FARMORG Sub-organization: Farmers.
- A54ETHNICORG Sub-organization: Ethnic/linguistic group.
- A55RELIGORG Sub-organization: Religious.
- A57CCONDEL According to party statutes, who is eligible to fully participate in party congresses?
- B22CANSELC Do individual members play a role in Selecting/Deciding on candidates?
- B23CANSELC Do local level organizations (meeting and/or local leadership) play a role in Selecting/Deciding on candidates?
- B24CANSELC Do regional/state organizations (meeting and/or regional leadership) play a role in Selecting/Deciding on candidates?
- B25ACANSELC Does a national party collective body (e.g., Party Congress or National Executive) play a role in Selecting/Deciding on candidates?
- B25BCANSELC Does/do the national party leader(s) play a role in Selecting/Deciding on candidates?
- B26CANSELC Do affiliated or other organizations (trade unions, religious organizations, etc.) play a role in Selecting/Deciding on candidates?
- B27CANSELC Do non-member supporters play a role in Selecting/Deciding on candidates?

Party Structures

- A83EXCLVL Number of layers between the party congress and the party's highest executive body. If the highest executive reports directly to/is elected by the party congress, the answer is 1.
- A85EXCSTATE Ex officio: Leaders of state/provincial or regional parties.
- A86EXCPM Ex officio: The prime minister or chancellor, when s/he is a member of this party.
- A88EXCMIN Ex officio: Government/cabinet ministers, when they are members of this party.
- A89EXCPPG Ex officio: Leader of the party group in the lower house of the legislature.
- C13LDREXC Party statutes give the party leader the right to attend all meetings of the national party executive.
- C14LDRCON Party statutes give the party leader the right to attend the national party congress.
- C16LDRSUM2 Party statutes give the party leader the right to summon the party congress.

Table 1 – Policy preferences and organizational dimensions: parties and observations (per period)

	Policy Issues (N = 32)		Organizational Dimensions (N = 26)	
Period	Parties	Observations	Parties	Observations
<i>1970s</i>	33	1056	33	858
<i>1990s</i>	38	1216	38	988
<i>2010s</i>	38	1216	38	988

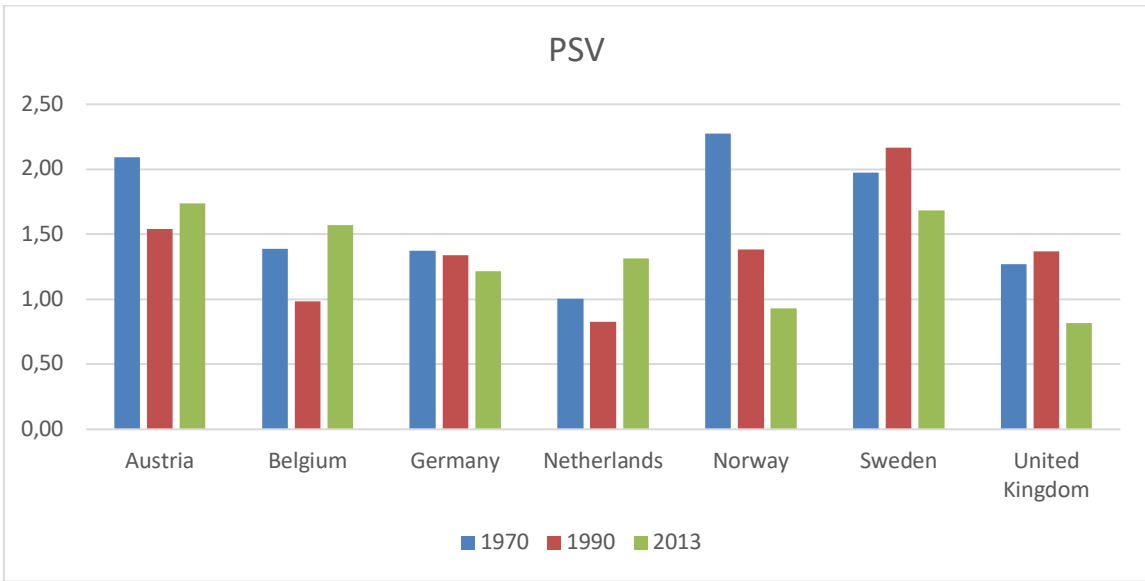


Figure 1. Policy Saliency Variance per country and per period

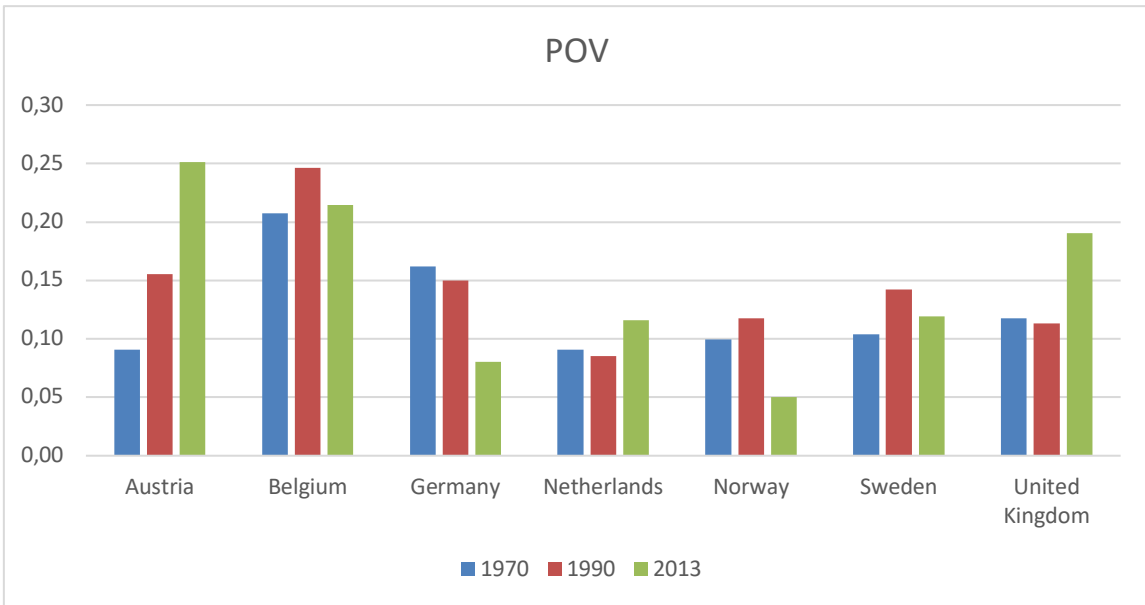


Figure 2. Party Organizational Variance per country and per period

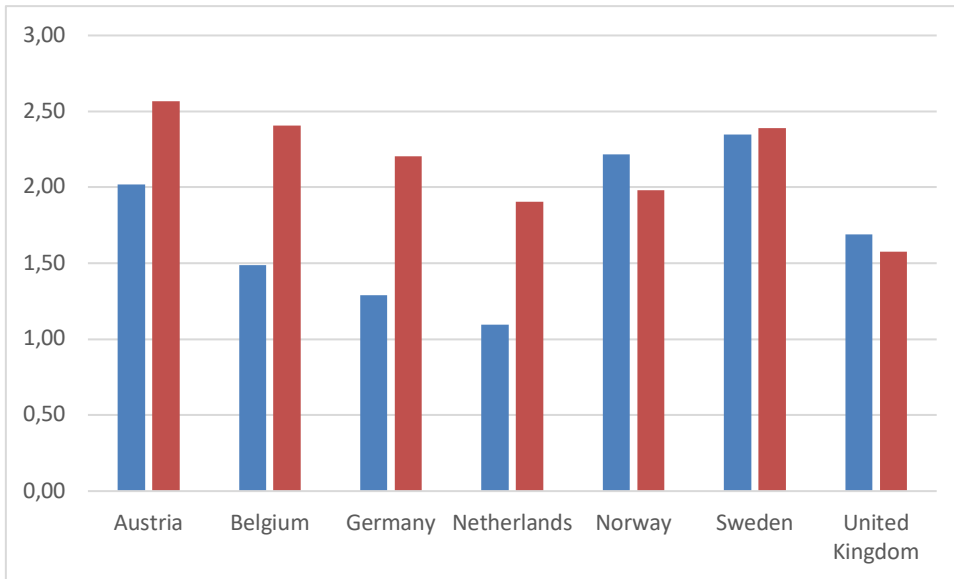


Figure 3. PSV for classical left-right (in blue) and post-materialist/value-based (in orange) policy issues

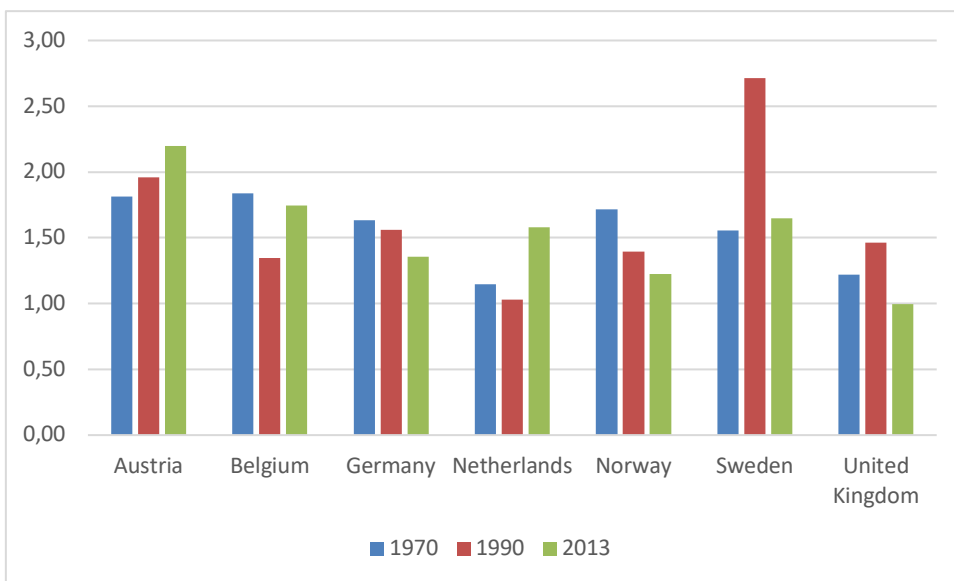


Figure 4. PSV for post-materialist/value-based policy issues per country and per period

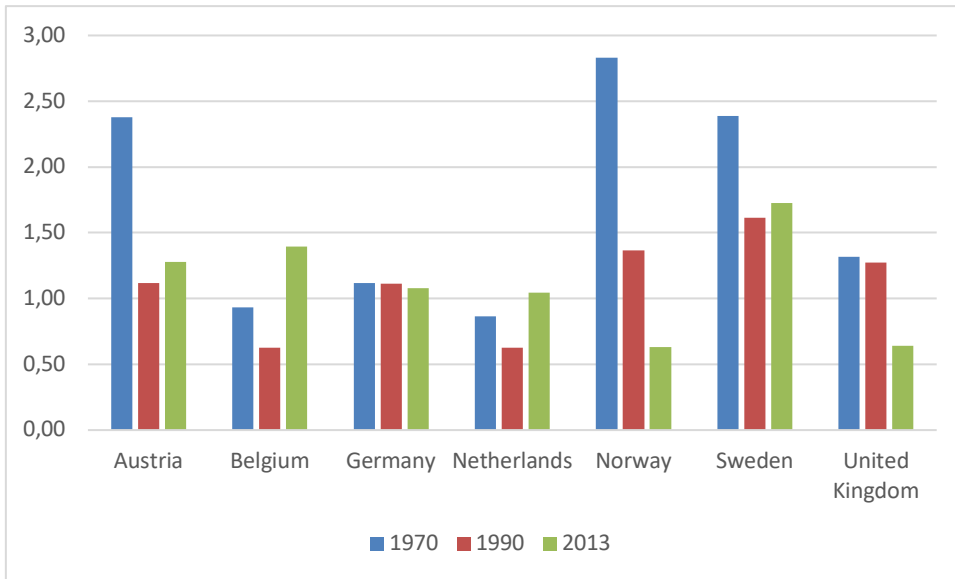


Figure 5. PSV for classical left-right policy issues per country and per period

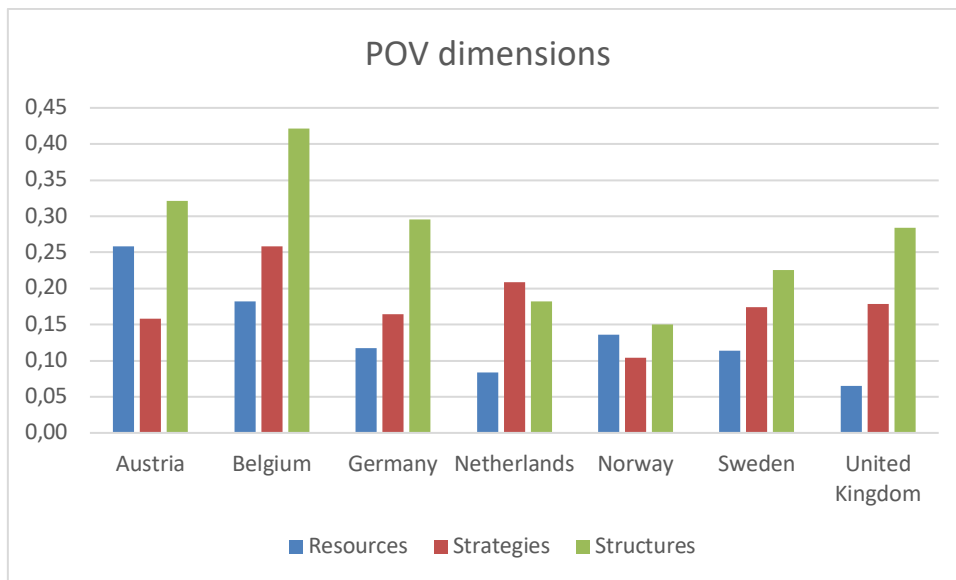


Figure 6. POV for resources, representative strategies and structures

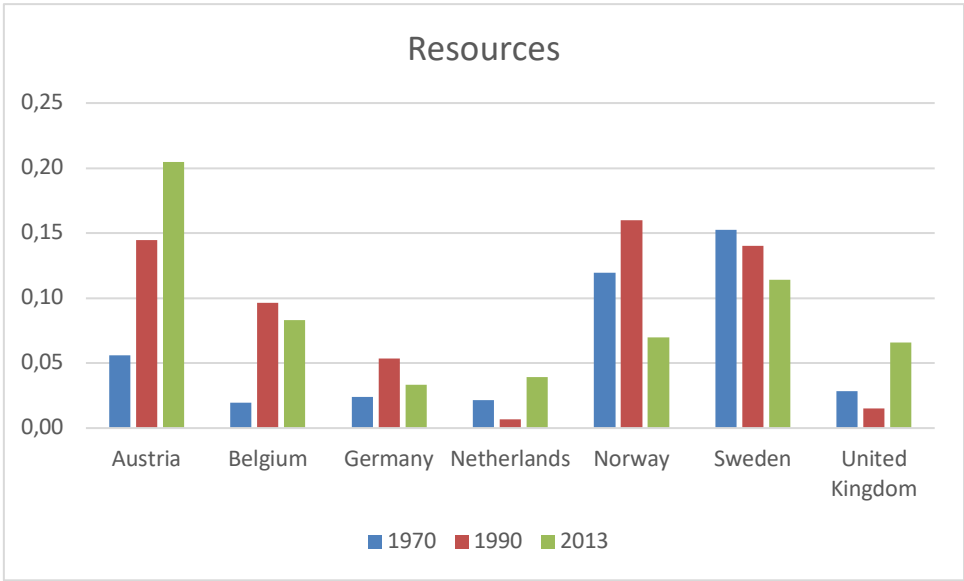


Figure 7. POV for resources per country and per period

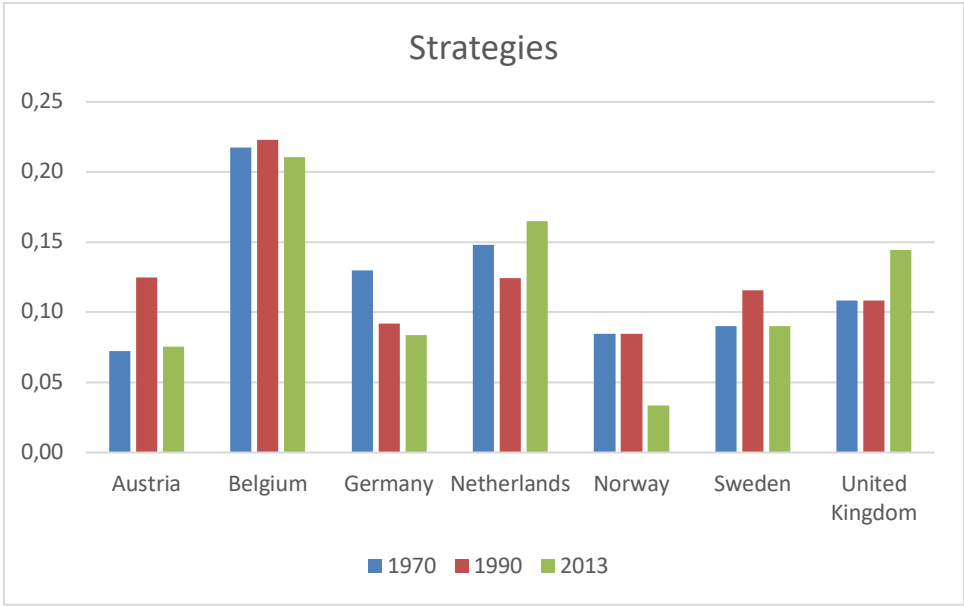


Figure 8. POV for representative strategies per country and per period

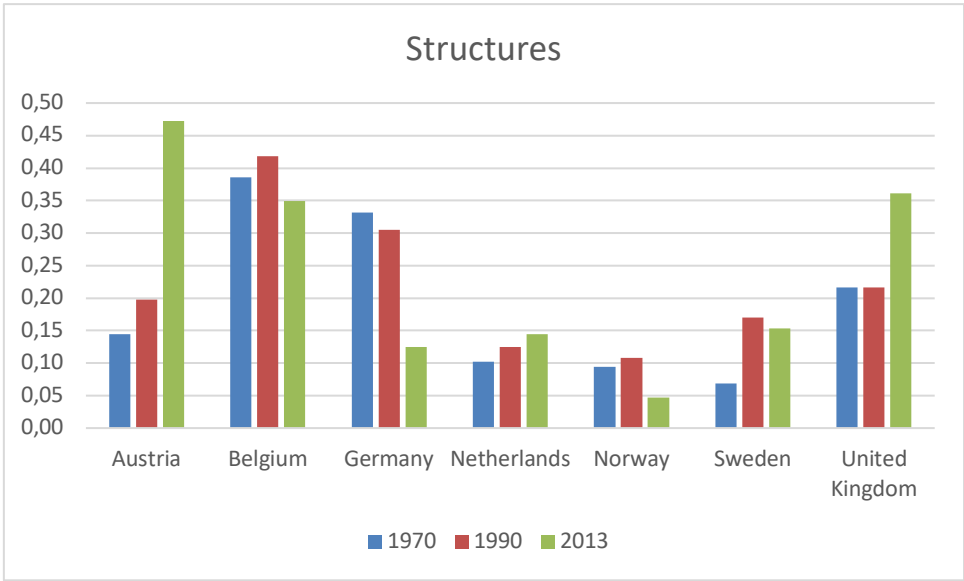


Figure 9. POV for structures per country and per period