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How party–issue linkages vary between election manifestos and media debates

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Abstract Existing research on party behaviour has largely focused on the drivers of issue salience in direct party communication. However, less is known about party–issue linkages in election campaigns covered by the mass media, from which most voters get their information about party positions. Against this background, this article explores how two important drivers of issue salience in direct party communication – issue ownership and systemic salience – play out in the media. Based on considerations about the news value of specific party–issue associations, one would expect both relationships to be particularly important in the media. Despite substantial similarities in party–issue linkages across platforms, a comparison of manifestos and newspaper content reveals evidence for this claim. In particular, smaller parties are hardly covered in the news on issues they do not own, while large parties are especially covered on salient topics. These findings contribute to our understanding of issue competition in mediated environments.

Keywords: Salience; issue ownership; systemic salience; election campaigns; party manifestos

Representative democracy depends on political parties providing visible statements about substantive issues (Schattschneider [1960] 1975). This makes agenda setting in election campaigns by political parties highly relevant. Unsurprisingly, issue salience has become a major topic in research on party competition. However, most insights on the driving forces behind parties' issue attention are based on the analysis of direct party communication, such as election manifestos. This is unfortunate, as party–issue linkages presented in the mass media seem particularly relevant to voters' perceptions of electoral contests in present-day democracies (Hopmann *et al.* 2012; Meyer *et al.* 2017). Moreover, research shows

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that issue salience in direct party communication is related to the coverage of parties' issue statements in the media (Merz 2017), but it also points out that not all issue-related party messages are equally likely to gain media attention (Haselmayer *et al.* 2017, 2019; Meyer *et al.* 2017). This begs the question of the degree to which issue salience, as observed by voters in the media, deviates from patterns found in direct party communication.

Against this background, this article explores how two key explanations of issue salience – issue ownership and systemic salience – play out in the mass media as compared to direct party communication in election manifestos. On the one hand, according to issue ownership, parties are expected to address those issues that they 'own', in the sense that they should focus on topics they are associated with or seen as competent in dealing with (e.g. Egan 2013; Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010; Klüver and Sagarzazu 2016; Petrocik 1996; Petrocik *et al.* 2003; Rauh 2015; Thesen *et al.* 2017; Wagner and Meyer 2014). On the other hand, the agenda-setting literature, in particular, has suggested that parties adapt to the prevailing issue attention of other parties (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Green-Pedersen *et al.* 2015).

When applied to the context of mass media, we expect these two theoretical explanations to play a more important role when compared to party manifestos. First, issue owners' positions are expected to be particularly newsworthy. Second, the media's tendency to focus strongly on a limited set of broadly debated issues should amplify the role of systemic effects. In addition, the size of a given party is arguably a crucial conditional factor in this regard. More precisely, we expect the 'issue ownership' argument to apply mostly to smaller parties: in the media, small issue owners are particularly covered on issues they own. The 'systemic salience' expectation, in contrast, should hold for large parties especially: whether they own an issue or not, large parties receive disproportionately high attention when an issue is broadly covered in the news. This effectively leads to a stronger relationship between systemic salience and issue attention in mass media.

In order to test our arguments, we draw on two different data sets on party–issue associations in text documents. The first data set is an updated version of data collected by the project 'National Political Change in a Globalizing World' (Hutter and Kriesi 2019; Kriesi *et al.* 2008, 2012) and contains partisan statements as reported in two national newspapers during the two months before national elections. The second data set is the party manifesto data collected by the Comparative Manifesto Project (MARPOR) (Volkens *et al.* 2015). This article's empirical analysis covers 34 national election campaigns in six West European

countries during the period 1988 to 2013. The specific countries under scrutiny are Austria, Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland.

The results show similarities between party–issue linkages in both data sources. Issue ownership and systemic salience are positively related to a party’s linkage with an issue in both party manifestos and the news. However, the relationship with issue ownership is even more pronounced in the mass media than in manifestos, whereas the effects of systemic salience are not significantly different across the two communication channels. Moreover, we find that both effects are conditional on party size. That is, the differences in issue ownership effects across the two data sets are particularly large for small parties, whereas systemic salience plays a greater role in the news media only for large parties.

These findings contribute to a better understanding of issue competition in election campaigns. They show that systematic deviations do exist between party–issue linkages in the media as compared to direct campaign communication, but these deviations should not be exaggerated. Despite the importance of the media as an information gatekeeper during election campaigns, general party–issue linkage patterns found in direct campaign communication, such as party manifestos, are also present in campaign debates covered by the mass media in newspaper articles. Nevertheless, systematic differences exist between small parties that are hardly covered by the media on issues with which they are not associated and large parties whose positions are particularly likely to be reported when a topic is broadly discussed in the news. Put differently, in particular, the visibility of smaller parties in the media depends on the specific issues which dominate a campaign. These results have implications not only for political fairness and the content and polarisation of public debates in mediated campaign communication, but also for the choice of data in research on party competition. Data from direct and mediated party–issue linkages conveys similar but not identical information. This indicates that findings on party competition are context sensitive. Therefore, generalisations based on results of direct party communication in mediated environments and vice versa should be made with caution. By contrast, researchers should exploit the combination of various data sources to fully understand the dynamics of political conflict in contemporary democracies.

Exploring party–issue linkages across communication channels

In order to assess the degree to which parties highlight or downplay an issue or are associated with certain topics, the concept of issue salience

proved to be particularly relevant. It is commonly defined as a party's communication share of a specific issue in relation to its overall topic-related communication during a given period. Relying on this measure, we explore the role of issue salience's driving forces with a special focus on their relevance for party–issue linkages on various communication channels.

Concerning direct party communication in election campaigns, a central argument is that 'parties emphasise certain issues to gain an electoral advantage' (Spoon *et al.* 2014: 365). Based on this assumption, the literature derived various explanations for differences in political parties' issue emphasis. On the one hand, parties are expected to strategically highlight issues with which they are generally associated or that voters view them as most competent in tackling (Budge 2015). On the other hand, parties are assumed to react to the party system agenda by adapting their salience strategies in accordance with issues debated by their competitors (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2015) and in response to voters' issue priorities (Klüver and Sagarzazu 2016). Moreover, they are expected to ignore issues on which they are internally divided (Steenbergen and Scott 2004).

These considerations are particularly relevant for direct party communication. However, when it comes to party–issue linkages reported in the news, not only salience strategies of parties, but especially the media's gatekeeping, plays a crucial role (Haselmayer *et al.* 2017, 2019; Helfer and Van Aelst 2016; Hopmann *et al.* 2012; Merz 2017; Meyer *et al.* 2017). Due to media outlet space restrictions in combination with considerations about the newsworthiness of political messages, the likelihood of party–issue linkages is expected to vary because journalists and editors use their positions to select messages with high news value (Staab 1990). For instance, statements by more powerful politicians and political parties are found to have greater news value (Tresch 2009; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2016). The same holds for messages which convey negative content (Soroka 2014). Surprising messages, in which parties make unexpected statements, are also assumed to create a greater news value than predictable ones, but continuity is just as important because the media aims to keep existing stories going (Helfer and Van Aelst 2016). Finally, relevance increases the chances of a message being covered in news reports about political issues, which makes generally salient topics more likely to be covered (Haselmayer *et al.* 2017). In summary, the selection of party–issue linkages in media reports is assumed to be highly dependent on their news value (Haselmayer *et al.* 2017; Helfer and Van Aelst 2016; Merz 2017; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2016).

Given these differences between direct and mediated campaign communication, the issue in question is the degree to which party–issue

linkages differ across platforms. Against this background, we provide a systematic comparison and explore how drivers of party–issue linkages that play an important role in existing research on direct party communication play out in a mass-media environment. Specifically, we first discuss the impact of issue ownership and the argument that its effect is particularly strong in newspaper articles compared to direct party communication in party manifestos. Second, we develop an argument as to why systemic issue salience should play an even more important role in the media. Third, we elaborate on why these arguments are expected to depend on the size of a party. Overall, this allows us to evaluate the ways party–issue linkages in the media diverge from what we know from the study of party manifestos.

Media reporting as an amplifier of issue ownership

The concept of issue ownership is based on the idea that parties acquire a long-term reputation in handling different policy issues (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996; Petrocik *et al.* 2003). Voters do not perceive parties as equally competent in dealing with issue-specific problems. Rather, as Petrocik (1996: 826) puts it, ‘a history of attention, initiative and innovation toward these problems ... leads voters to believe that one of the parties (and its candidates) is more sincere and committed to doing something about them’. In such a situation, a party owns an issue in the sense that it is perceived as having the best solutions to problems related to the issue area.

This definition of issue ownership focuses on the concept’s associative dimension rather than its competence-based part (Banda 2016; Walgrave *et al.* 2012). In this sense, issue ownership is defined as ‘an established link between a party and an issue’ in that voters frequently have a party in mind when confronted with a certain issue (Walgrave *et al.* 2012: 773). Moreover, the definition does not restrict the number of parties that can own an issue, as various parties can be associated with and perceived as competent in tackling it. For example, radical left-wing parties and social democrats may be equally associated with welfare related policies (Wagner and Meyer 2014: 1021).

As is well known, the main expectation of issue ownership regarding the behaviour of political parties is that they highlight issues they own (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Thesen *et al.* 2017). Parties are assumed to selectively promote a topic when voters consider them competent in tackling it or perceive them as associated with the issue. This allows parties to appear more credible to voters. This, in turn, is expected to enhance the likelihood that people will vote for these parties. Such behaviour is therefore particularly likely during election campaigns, when parties try to gather votes by acting as competent and trustworthy agents. Efforts by

populist right-wing parties to highlight law and order issues that they own in order to gain electoral ground may serve as a striking example in this regard (Smith 2010).

Although most parties cover a broad range of topics in their manifestos, existing empirical studies based on manifesto data provide evidence for the issue ownership hypothesis in direct party communication (Dolezal *et al.* 2014; Wagner and Meyer 2014). How does this relationship play out in a mediated environment, where considerations about the relevance of a party's stance and the availability of its positions to journalists are crucial (see Haselmayer *et al.* 2017; Hayes 2008; Hopmann *et al.* 2012)? One expectation is that the relationship exerts a negative effect on the coverage of issue-related party statements. Based on the idea that rare and unexpected events have a particularly high news value, Helfer and Van Aelst (2016: 63) argue that messages about issues with which parties are not associated and which they seldom address bear a 'surprise element', making them more appealing to journalists who try to attract readers' attention than statements about issues on which a party's stance is already well known. Following this argument, issue ownership can be expected to reduce the likelihood of party-issue statements being reported (Helfer and Van Aelst 2016). Accordingly, the positive relationship between issue ownership and issue salience found in manifesto research is assumed to be much weaker in news coverage or even to work in the opposite direction on such platforms.

However, the positive relationship between issue ownership and issue salience could also play a particularly important role in the media coverage of parties. This argument starts from the assumption that a party that is generally associated with a certain issue area usually has clear, well-known positions on the discussed topic that are easily available to political journalists (Van Camp 2018). What is more, due to the long-term reputation of parties in connection with issues the parties own, the positions of issue owners are particularly newsworthy. Reporting on such parties' positions allows journalists to contrast and contextualise positions of other actors. Thus, even if the initial reason for covering an issue is the (unexpected) activity of other parties, the positions of issue owners are likely to be reported as well. To test this expectation, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: The difference in a party's issue attention due to issue ownership is greater in news coverage than in party manifestos.

Media reporting as an amplifier of systemic salience

Notwithstanding that parties' strategies of selective issue emphasis are driven by issue ownership, an alternative explanation is suggested by the

agenda-setting literature. As highlighted by the notion of party competition as a 'conflict over conflicts', this literature conceives of the process as a game of strategic interaction (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010: 261). In this sense, parties adjust their behaviour according to the actions of their competitors. The agenda-setting approach, therefore, qualifies the salience theory argument by adding that parties are not always equally successful at emphasising their preferred issues, but react to the currently existing issue agenda (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2015). Parties face a decision between simply ignoring unpleasant issues and responding to them, whilst simultaneously trying to shape the agenda according to their own preferences. When the latter is not feasible, parties are likely to address issues advanced by other parties in the interest of maintaining public visibility.

At the level of party systems, the degree of issue convergence among political parties is notably high (Damore 2004; Dolezal *et al.* 2014; Green-Pedersen 2007; Kaplan *et al.* 2006; Sides 2006; Sigelman and Buell 2004). In consequence, following the convergence approach to issue emphasis, parties frequently address the same issues (Sigelman and Buell 2004). Although studies on individual party behaviour often treat systemic issue salience merely as a control variable, they, too, generally provide empirical evidence of parties addressing issues put on the agenda by their competitors (e.g. Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2015; Hoeglinger 2015; Meyer and Wagner 2016; Spoon 2012; Steenbergen and Scott 2004; Tresch *et al.* 2018).

Again, we expect the positive relationship between systemic salience and a party's issue attention to matter more for parties' issue competition if reported by the media than in direct party communication as observed through their manifestos. Media coverage can be characterised by 'cascading', which refers to 'the fact that actors imitate other actors such that an exponentially increasing number of imitators lead to explosive adjustments to the system' (Walgrave and Vliegenthart 2010: 1148). Most of the news programme is therefore devoted to the few issues dominating the agenda. This expectation is very much in line with the idea of continuity and relevance as factors boosting a story's news value (Haselmayer *et al.* 2017; Helfer and Van Aelst 2016). In sum, this leads to the expectation that intensely discussed topics are more likely to feature a broad range of positions from various parties. From the parties' perspectives, the chances of being mentioned are low for topics that are granted little space in the news. By contrast, it is expected to be especially high for salient issues. This is a crucial difference from party manifestos as channels of direct communication, in which parties – despite disproportionate emphasis on preferred issues – aim to offer a broad overview of the

policy positions they stand for (see De Sio *et al.* 2018: 1217). Thus, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H2: The difference in a party's issue attention due to systemic issue salience is greater in news coverage than in party manifestos.

The role of party size in explaining issue salience on different communication platforms

The two hypotheses offer different expectations for issue salience in the media, in comparison to direct communication platforms. The first hypothesis assumes that ownership matters more in the media; the second hypothesis claims that parties receive more attention when they focus on issues that figure prominently on the overall agenda in a mediated environment. These two expectations are logically not incompatible. Nevertheless, we expect them not to apply to all parties in the same way. More specifically, we elaborate why it is likely that both depend on the size of a given party – a critical factor distinguishing the competitors in a party system.

Existing research on party behaviour highlights the importance of party size. Smaller parties, on the one hand, are found to rely on their owned issues, because they lack the money and personnel to address a variety of topics (Wagner and Meyer 2014). Larger parties, on the other hand, are more sensitive to the party system agenda. In the case of the Austrian election in 2008, Meyer and Wagner (2016) show that especially resource-strong parties are likely to engage in debates with each other. Similarly, Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2015) find that, in the case of the Danish party system, large mainstream parties are more responsive to issues on the party system agenda than other parties.

We argue that the considerations about the news value of a party's issue associations mentioned above are likely to be contingent upon party size as well, which allows further qualifications of the hypotheses derived above. When a party is rather small, its position in the coverage of an issue is likely to be reported only if it is an issue owner. Under such circumstances, reporting a party's position, which is generally associated with the topic, provides an important anchor for readers to interpret other actors' positions. An illustrative example is a news report on a government's environmental policy proposal that emphasises not only the view of the mainstream opposition, but also that of a green party as the respective issue owner. However, when small parties are not issue owners (as in the case of the radical right and environmental issues), their positions are unlikely to elicit the interest of news outlets or consumers. Accordingly, issue ownership is expected to matter more for the issue

attention of small parties in news coverage than in party manifestos, where these restrictions are absent.

In contrast, for large parties, news outlets are expected to report about their positions regardless of whether they own an issue. Election campaigns, even in parliamentary systems, are characterised by a strong attention focus on lead candidates and their parties (Kriesi 2012). Reports on important political issues during election campaigns that do not cover all large parties with good chances of governing after the election are extremely unlikely. This is particularly the case when other parties are often mentioned in connection with the issue. In such cases, news outlets report in great detail on the position of a large party on the issue, regardless of whether the party is comfortable with the issue. Therefore, systemic issue salience is expected to be more important for issue attention in news coverage than in party manifestos, especially for large parties. This leads us to hypothesise as follows:

H3: Issue ownership matters more for issue attention of small parties in news coverage than in party manifestos.

H4: Systemic salience matters more for issue attention of large parties in news coverage than in party manifestos.

Design and data

In order to test these hypotheses, we rely on newspaper data and party manifesto content. The study covers party behaviour during national election campaigns in Austria, Great Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland between 1988 and 2013.¹ For the study of newspaper content, articles that report on party politics were identified and collected within a period of two months before an election in two national newspapers in each country. For each country, a leading quality newspaper and a tabloid newspaper were chosen: Austria: *Die Presse* and *Kronenzeitung*; France: *Le Monde* and *Le Parisien*; Germany: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Bild*; Netherlands: *NRC Handelsblad* and *Algemeen Dagblad*; UK: *The Times* and *The Sun*; Switzerland: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and *Blick*.

A representative sample of articles for each election was then coded according to the core-sentence approach (Dolezal 2008; Dolezal *et al.* 2016; Hutter *et al.* 2016; Kleinnijenhuis and Pennings 2001). A core sentence can be defined as the smallest syntactical unit of a sentence containing a relational statement between a subject actor and an object actor. For the analysis performed here, only party actors' (subjects) positions towards issues (object) are considered. To allow for a systematic comparison with party manifestos, we selected exactly the same elections and

parties as included in the analysis of newspaper articles from the MARPOR database (Volkens *et al.* 2015). Based on this data, we explore the salience of the following issues: *welfare*, *economic liberalism*, *cultural liberalism*, *Europe*, *immigration* and *environment*. To run comparable analyses for newspaper data and manifesto content, we recode the issues used in MARPOR accordingly. As these issues cover a large proportion of party statements in manifestos and in the media, this allows for a comprehensive analysis of our hypotheses on a broad range of topics and elections (see Online Appendix A for a description of these categories and an overview of the recoding procedure).²

The structure of the two data sets is quite similar because they both comprise party–issue associations extracted from text documents. To foster further comparability between them, salience in media and manifesto data are measured according to the same logic. To calculate the salience of an issue in newspaper data, we use the percentage share of a party’s core sentences on an issue in relation to all its statements during the election campaign. This indicator has two advantages. First, it is not affected by the overall visibility of a party in the media, which allows us to compare parties of various sizes.³ Second, it reflects the degree to which a party emphasises an issue in relation to other topics. The systemic salience of an issue is then measured by the number of core sentences about an issue in relation to all sentences coded during a campaign, always excluding the sentences of the party for which we calculate the systemic salience in order to avoid problems of endogeneity (see also Hoeglinger 2015). For party manifestos, salience scores are taken from the MARPOR database indicating the percentage share of coded quasi-sentences on a given issue in relation to all coded statements in a party’s manifesto. Systemic salience is calculated as the mean percentage share of party statements on an issue. Again, a party’s own salience scores are excluded from the calculation (see also Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2015: 752). For both data sources, the calculation is based on all parties included in the analysis for a given election.

Various understandings of and approaches to issue ownership measurement exist (Lefevere *et al.* 2017; Walgrave *et al.* 2012). One way is to use survey data asking voters which party is most competent in tackling those issues they find important (e.g. Dolezal *et al.* 2014; Minozzi 2014). On the one hand, this competence-based dimension of issue ownership is difficult to measure (Stubager 2018), and suitable data for cross-national research over longer periods is not available. On the other hand, the argument provided in H1 is related to the associative dimension rather than the competence-based variant. In short, it claims that when a party is generally associated with an issue area, its positions have a higher news

value and are therefore especially attractive to journalists and editors regardless of whether the party is perceived as competent in tackling a certain issue. Therefore, we follow the approach proposed by Wagner and Meyer (2014: 1025) that taps into this associative dimension of issue ownership. Specifically, we assign issue ownership dichotomously by relying on information from single country studies and taking cues from party family and the categorisation by Wagner and Meyer (2014) (see Online Appendix B for an overview).

To explore the role of party size as a moderator of issue ownership and systemic issue salience effects on various communication platforms, we use a party's vote share in the election under study from the MARPOR database (Volgens *et al.* 2015). Additional indicators and control variables at the party level, such as parties' left–right positions, are also taken from this data source. An overview of all variables, their operationalisation, data sources and descriptive statistics is provided in Online Appendix C.

The final data set includes information about parties' issue salience in newspapers and party manifesto data on the issues mentioned above (see Online Appendix D for more information on the elections and parties covered). Because the issue salience measure corresponds to the share of a party's statements, we estimate fractional logit regression models to account for the dependent variable being bound between 0 and 1. Models include fixed effects for country-years (34 elections) and for issue domains (six issues). Standard errors are computed using bootstrapping to avoid inefficient estimation due to the skew of the dependent variable and potential heteroscedasticity. To test the robustness of our results, we consider several alternative model specifications. First, we specify Poisson, negative binomial and zero-inflated negative binomial regression models to account for potential overdispersion in our data due to issues not being mentioned by some parties. Second, we compute Huber–White and clustered robust standard errors for parties. Third, we use a lagged variable of systemic issue salience based on the previous election campaign. Fourth, instead of vote share, we apply an indicator of a party's niche appeal as proposed by Bischof (2017b), who suggests measuring the concept as the differences in parties' emphasis on a group of pre-defined niche segments and how narrow their offer on these segments is based on party manifesto content. None of the alternative specifications substantially alter our findings or consistently turn out to be more conservative. In the following section, we present results based on fractional logit regression models, which show the overall best fit. However, we will report the alternative specifications as robustness checks at the end of the presentation of our results.

The following analysis consists of three steps. First, we provide a brief descriptive overview of the distribution of issue salience in party manifestos and in the news and show how these variables relate to each other. In the second step, we test whether coefficients of issue ownership and systemic salience differ between the two communication channels by estimating interaction effects. Finally, we explore whether these differences between data sources are conditional on the size of a given party. To that end, we include three-way interaction terms between party size according to vote share, communication channel and issue ownership or systemic salience, respectively.

Empirical results

To begin, we explore the distribution of our two dependent variables – issue salience in party manifestos and in the media. The left panel of Figure 1 shows the distribution of both variables. Issue salience in manifestos and in the news is highly skewed, as most issues receive little to no attention from political parties. Only rarely do parties devote the majority of their attention to a single topic. Given the skewed distribution and potentially inefficient estimation due to heteroscedasticity, we therefore use bootstrapping to estimate standard errors.

Exploring the similarity of both distributions in more detail, the right panel of Figure 1 shows a scatterplot of both variables. In line with existing research (Merz 2017), the correlation between the two salience scores is notably high ($r = 0.53$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, issue salience in party manifestos and in newspapers show similar patterns. However, deviations in salience scores are sufficiently large to ask whether the driving forces of parties' issue attention play out differently as hypothesised above.

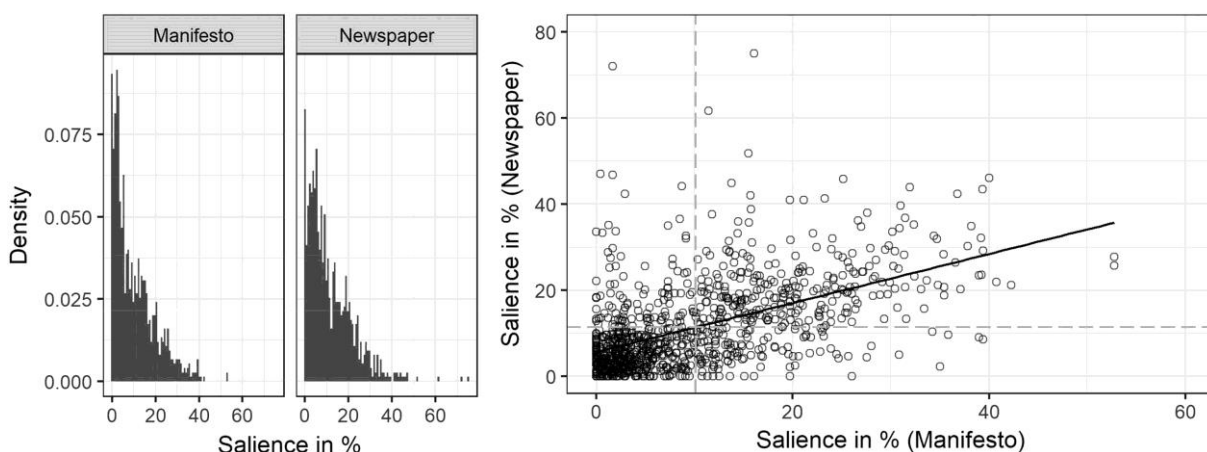


Figure 1. Issue salience in manifesto and newspaper.

Note: The left panel shows the distribution of issue salience in manifestos and newspapers. The right panel shows a scatterplot of issue salience in manifestos and newspapers. Each circle represents the salience on an issue for a party in its manifesto and in the media ($N = 990$). The grey dashed lines mark the mean value for both variables; the black line shows the linear fit.

Table 1. Fractional logit regression models of issue salience.

	(1) Manifesto only	(2) Media only	(3) Interaction w/ownership	(4) Interaction w/sys. salience
Systemic salience (std.)	0.25** (0.04)	0.46** (0.04)	0.43** (0.03)	0.46** (0.03)
Issue ownership	0.49** (0.04)	0.84** (0.07)	0.56** (0.05)	0.68** (0.05)
Source (Media = 1)			0.20** (0.04)	0.33** (0.04)
Issue ownership*Source			0.25** (0.08)	
Systemic salience*Source				−0.10** (0.03)
Vote share	−0.04 ⁺ (0.02)	0.05 (0.03)	0.00 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)
Left–right position	−0.00** (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)
Government party	−0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.06)	0.00 (0.04)	−0.00 (0.04)
Constant	−1.76** (0.14)	−1.98** (0.12)	−2.10** (0.11)	−2.17** (0.12)
Observations	990	990	1980	1980
Pseudo R ²	0.10	0.06	0.08	0.08
AIC	673	749	1346	1346
BIC	888	965	1603	1604
Log pseudo likelihood	−292	−331	−627	−627

Note: Bootstrapped standard errors in parentheses; all models include fixed-effects (not reported) for elections (34) and issues (6).

⁺ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

In the next step, we investigate whether differences in issue attention due to issue ownership (H1) and systemic salience (H2) are greater in news coverage than in party manifestos. First, we run two identical models using issue salience in party manifestos and newspapers as the dependent variable. The results in Table 1 show that parties highlight issues significantly more often when they own them, as well as when other parties pay attention to the issues. This is the case for issue salience both in manifesto data (Model 1) and in newspaper data (Model 2) when estimated separately for each data source. The results not only corroborate existing findings on issue ownership and systemic salience in party manifestos (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2015; Meyer and Wagner 2016; Wagner and Meyer 2014), but also mirror these findings for newspaper data, speaking to the fact that both sources are, in principle, comparable.

Regarding the control variables, all models include fixed-effects dummy variables for elections and issues. Therefore, the coefficients can be interpreted as average differences across all country-years and issues. Because not all issues addressed in manifestos and newspaper articles are covered by our study, variables for a party's left–right position and its government

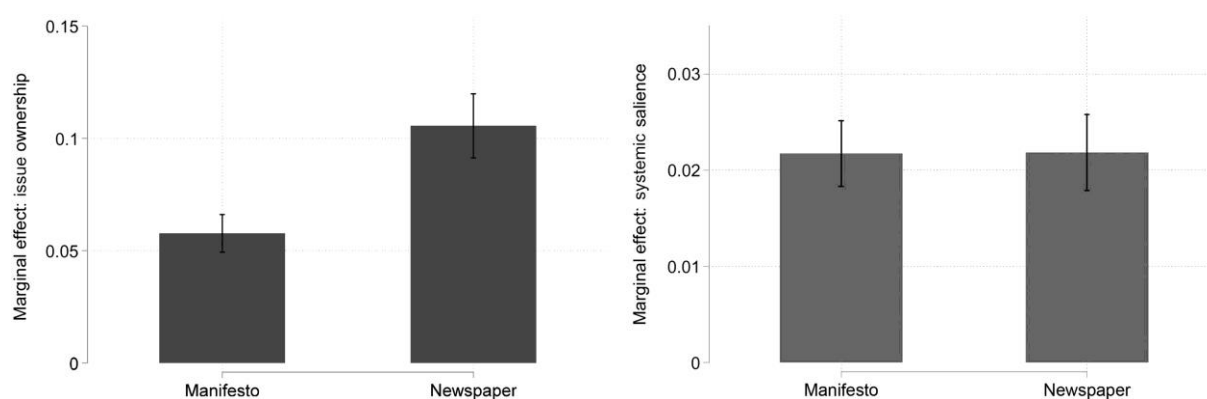


Figure 2. Marginal effects of issue ownership (left) and systemic salience (right) between manifesto and newspaper data.

Note: The left panel is based on Model 3 reported in Table 1, and the right panel is based on Model 4. Linear predictions of issue salience (bars) and 83% confidence intervals (spikes) with control variables held constant (left–right and vote share at their means, non-government party, welfare issue, 2013 German election). The plotplain graph scheme is used for these figures (Bischof 2017a).

status are included to control for systematic differences in attention on other topics. For instance, the negative coefficient of left–right position in the first model implies that parties further to the left devote, on average, more salience to the issues covered by the analysis in their manifestos, holding all other variables constant. Most important, these control variables do not reach statistical significance in the other models, and none of the results are sensitive to the inclusion or exclusion of any control variable.

Second, we include interaction terms to test whether the effects of issue ownership (Model 3) and systemic salience (Model 4) are greater in media data. These analyses are based on an appended data set with a dummy variable differentiating between newspaper and manifesto content. In line with H1, the coefficient of the interaction term between source and issue ownership in Model 3 is positive and highly significant, but, contrary to the expectation formulated in H2, the interaction term in Model 4 is negative. However, because of the non-linear model specification, we are reluctant to interpret these coefficients directly (Shang *et al.* 2018) and instead compare the differences using marginal effects plots.⁴

Figure 2 illustrates how the increase in issue salience due to ownership (left panel) and systemic salience (right panel) differs in manifesto and media data. With regard to ownership, we find that a party devotes more attention to an issue when it is the issue owner. This difference is significantly greater in media data (0.11) than in manifestos (0.06), providing clear support for H1. This result is not necessarily at odds with the observation of Helfer and Van Aelst (2016), who find in an experiment with journalists that messages about issues not owned by a party are more likely to be selected. Rather, our findings suggest that even if such an

unexpected message is the initial reason for a newspaper article about an issue, the article is most likely to also report on the positions of the issue owners.

Turning to systemic salience reveals a different picture. Although a party's issue attention is higher when other parties address the issue, this increase does not differ between media (0.02) and manifesto data (0.02).⁵ This result refutes H2. Apparently, the systemic salience of an issue also has a positive effect in newspaper data. However, contrary to H2, this effect is not stronger than in party manifestos. We therefore find no evidence that systemic features are generally more important for party–issue linkages in the media as compared to manifesto content.

In order to explore how the different expectations on the role of issue ownership and systemic salience in the media can be reconciled through the conditional role of party size, Table 2 shows estimation results, including a three-way interaction term between vote share, communication channel and issue ownership (Model 1) or systemic salience (Model 2). Online Appendix E also includes separate model estimations for the two data sources which support the presented findings. Because interpretation of these coefficients is not as straightforward, we resort to a graphical presentation. Figure 3 plots marginal effects of ownership (left panel) and systemic salience (right panel) as a function of a party's vote share (on the x-axis), which ranges from 3% to 43%.

In both panels, slopes for manifesto (solid lines) and media (dashed lines) data diverge significantly, indicating that party size indeed moderates the relationships. However, most importantly, the results suggest that it does so differently depending on the data sources. In manifesto data, marginal effects both for issue ownership and systemic salience only decrease slightly (from 0.07 to 0.04, and from 0.04 to 0.03, respectively). Thus, irrespective of their size, parties always emphasise an issue in their manifesto more when they own it and when other parties emphasise it in their manifestos. In media data, on the other hand, marginal effects for issue ownership and systemic salience manifest differently. For small parties, ownership of an issue matters more when considering media data (0.16). Here, small issue owners enjoy an advantage, providing empirical support for H3. For larger parties, in contrast, the marginal ownership effect decreases markedly (0.02). In fact, differences in marginal effects between data sources are no longer significant, as indicated by overlapping confidence intervals. When a large party is the issue owner, it does not get to emphasise the issue more in the news – at least not more than it emphasises it in its own manifesto. Indicated by an increasing slope, party size moderates the marginal effects of systemic salience in news data in the opposite direction. Thus, small parties actually get to focus

Table 2. Fractional logit regression models of issue salience with three-way interactions.

	(1) Interaction w/ownership	(2) Interaction w/systemic salience
Systemic salience (std.)	0.43** (0.03)	0.48** (0.03)
Issue ownership	0.57** (0.05)	0.68** (0.05)
Source (Media = 1)	0.21** (0.04)	0.34** (0.04)
Issue ownership*Source	0.23** (0.08)	
Systemic salience*Source		−0.07* (0.03)
Vote share	−0.04 (0.03)	−0.06* (0.03)
Issue ownership*Vote share	−0.04 (0.04)	
Systemic salience*Vote share		−0.00 (0.02)
Source*Vote share	0.20** (0.04)	0.10* (0.04)
Issue ownership*Source*Vote share	−0.25** (0.07)	
Systemic salience*Source*Vote share		0.11** (0.04)
Left–right position	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)
Government party	−0.00 (0.04)	−0.00 (0.04)
Constant	−2.09** (0.11)	−2.19** (0.11)
Observations	1,980	1,980
Pseudo R ²	0.08	0.08
AIC	1350	1351
BIC	1624	1625
Log pseudo likelihood	−626	−627

Note: Bootstrapped standard errors in parentheses; all models include fixed-effects (not reported) for elections (34) and issues (6).

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

less attention on an issue highlighted by others in the newspaper (0.03) than what is emphasised in their manifestos (0.04). For larger parties, the contrary is true. Not only does their issue attention follow the saliency of the agenda more strongly, it also does so significantly more in news reporting (0.07) than in their manifestos (0.03). This conditional and more nuanced relationship is in line with H4. Moreover, it serves as explanation why the average marginal differences due to systemic salience in Figure 2 were virtually indistinguishable.

Due to the conditional and non-linear nature of the relationship, these marginal effects are difficult to interpret in terms of size. Thus, we estimate predicted values of issue salience for minimum and maximum values of the interacting variables. Corresponding to the blue solid lines in

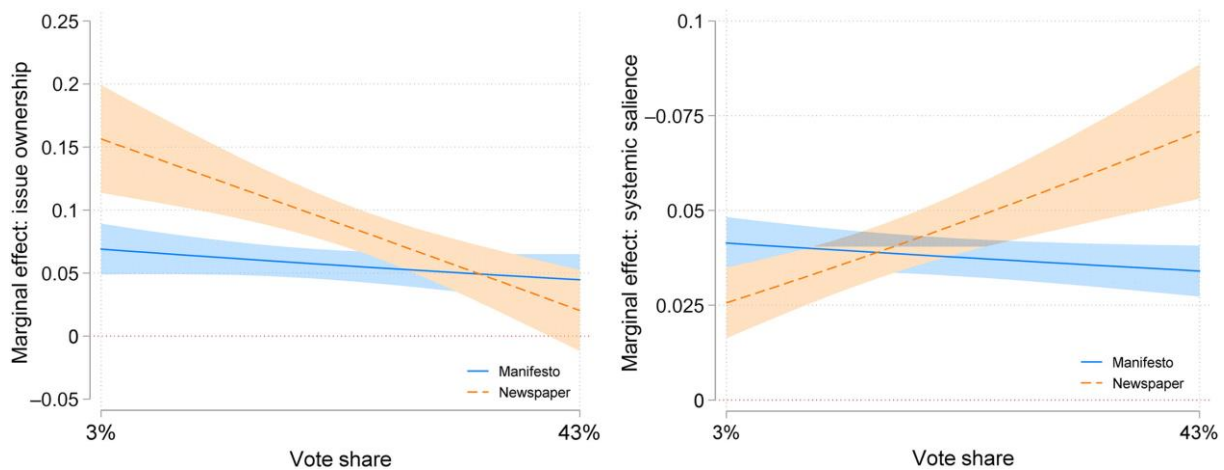


Figure 3. Party size as a moderator of ownership (left) and systemic salience (right) between manifesto and newspaper data.

Note: The left panel is based on Model 1 reported in Table 2, the right panel on Model 2. Linear predictions of issue salience and 95% confidence intervals with control variables held constant (left–right at its mean, non-government party, welfare issue, 2013 German election). The plotplain graph scheme is used for these figures (Bischof 2017a).

Figure 3, issue owners are predicted to devote between 17% (small parties) and 13% (large parties) of their attention to a given issue in their manifestos. These numbers are only marginally (10% and 8%, respectively) lower for parties that are not issue owners. While such numbers are also comparable to differences due to low systemic salience (5% for small and 4% for large parties), small (40%) and large (34%) parties are predicted to exhibit markedly more issue attention when issues are systemically salient. Corresponding to the orange dashed lines in Figure 3, differences in issue salience are greater in media data, where issue owners are predicted to devote between 26% (small parties) and 17% (large parties) of their attention to a given issue, compared to 9% and 15% of non-owners. When systemic salience is at its maximum, small and large parties are predicted to exhibit an even higher issue salience of 26% and 64%, respectively. In sum, these effects are quite sizeable, considering that the empirical scale of issue salience ranges from 0 to 75% (with a mean of 11%) in our data.

Finally, we review the robustness of our results. Online Appendix F includes tables with regression results of alternative estimations to ensure that they do not merely arise from a certain model specification. As mentioned above, the distribution of the dependent variable suggests overdispersion (variances of 104 and 89 for media and manifesto data, respectively, exceeding means of 11 and 10 considerably) but a non-excessive number of zeros (6% and 5% in media and manifesto data, respectively). Hence, we test modelling techniques for count data. Estimating Poisson, negative binomial or zero-inflated negative binomial regression, however, yields exactly the same findings. Similarly, computing Huber–White or clustered robust standard errors for parties does not

change our results. In some models, standard errors appear to be somewhat greater but do not affect the significance of any of the coefficients. We also consider alternative operationalisations of systemic salience and party size. Instead of the current election campaign, we use a lagged version of systemic salience in the previous one. Intuitively, we assume that a party reacts to the issue addressed by its competitors in the past rather than during the same campaign. Instead of vote share, we use an indicator for a party's niche appeal as suggested by Bischof (2017b) to test whether ownership and systemic salience also have different effects depending on parties' general focus on niche issue segments in their party systems. Interestingly, both changes produce results that are quite similar to the findings presented above, as the coefficients barely deviate from models based on our initial operationalisation.

Next, we assess the robustness of the dichotomous operationalisation of issue ownership. To that end, we re-estimate all models six times, each time excluding one issue category. The additional results of the 36 fractional logit regression models can be found in Online Appendix G (each table referring to the re-estimated model and each table column referring to the excluded issue). In general, the results prove robust to the exclusion of issue categories, as the coefficients of interest remain largely unchanged and significant. Only two models stand out: the effect of systemic salience no longer differs significantly between media and manifesto content when immigration issues are excluded, as does the interaction between systemic salience and vote share when welfare issues are excluded. While this might point to the pivotal role of mainstream parties (owning welfare issue) and right-wing challenger parties (owning immigration issues) in these two specific instances, the consistency in the majority of models overall validates the dichotomous operationalisation.

Finally, we explore the robustness of our results for different types of newspapers. For this task, we re-estimate all models presented above based on observations from quality newspapers and tabloids separately. The results of these additional analyses are presented in Online Appendix H. Most important, we find no systematic deviations between the two types of newspapers. By contrast, all results directly relating to our hypotheses also hold in these separate analyses. We therefore find no evidence that the logic of party–issue linkages differs systematically between different types of newspapers.

Conclusion

A central argument in research on direct campaign communication is that parties emphasise advantageous issues and downplay others to gain

electoral ground (e.g. Budge 2015). However, regarding party–issue linkages reported in the news, the media plays an important role as a gatekeeper (e.g. Merz 2017). Given that large numbers of voters get their information about political parties and the positions they stand for on relevant issues from such platforms, it begs the question to what degree patterns of issue salience identified in the literature on party–issue linkages in direct campaign communication can also be found in media reports during election campaigns.

Against this background, we studied in this article how drivers of issue salience play out in direct and mediated channels of campaign communication. We argued that two theoretical explanations of issue salience – issue ownership and systemic issue salience – found to be crucial for direct party communication should be even more relevant in the media. Additionally, we claimed that focusing on the conditioning role of party size in this regard is important. On the one hand, our findings reveal important similarities across communication platforms. Focusing on party–issue linkages in party manifestos and newspaper articles, we find that issue salience at the party level is highly correlated across these data sources. Moreover, issue ownership and systemic salience are relevant predictors for party–issue linkages in newspaper and manifesto content. On the other hand, the analysis also reveals crucial differences between direct party communication and communication through the mass media. Most importantly, the results show that issue ownership plays a particularly important role for small parties in the media, while systemic salience is most pronounced for large parties in this data source.

What are the implications of these findings? First, the findings contribute to a better understanding of issue competition in election campaigns. Despite substantial similarities across data sources, there also exist systematic differences between party–issue linkages in the media and in direct campaign communication. On the one hand, general patterns of party–issue linkages found in direct campaign communication, such as party manifestos, are also present in campaign debates as covered by the mass media in newspaper articles. On the other hand, especially small parties are hardly covered in the media regarding issues with which they are not associated, whereas large parties' positions are particularly likely to be covered when a topic is broadly discussed in the news. This finding is highly relevant to discussions of political fairness in mediated campaign communication. It also points to an additional source of the further restructuring of European party competition and the role played by small challenger parties in this process.

Second, our study has methodological implications for research on party competition. Data from direct and mediated party–issue linkages

convey similar but not identical information, indicating that generalisations based on results related to direct party communication for mediated environments and vice versa should be made with caution. Most importantly, our findings highlight that party communication through the mass media presents the key conflicts of the day under a magnifying glass, while underestimating the 'normalisation' of small niche parties.

Consequently, future research on the systemic and dynamic features of party competition might have a lot to gain from contrasting and combining data from campaign debates in the mass media with data from direct party communication, such as press releases (e.g. Meyer *et al.* 2017). With the increasing importance of election campaigning on social media, it will also be crucial to explore differences in the content voters encounter on such platforms (De Sio *et al.* 2018). At the same time, the results invite comparative research regarding other drivers of party–issue linkages, such as the role of public opinion (see e.g. Klüver and Sagarzazu 2016).

Notes

1. The data used in this article originated from the research project 'National Political Change in a Globalizing World (NPW)' (Kriesi *et al.* 2008, 2012). The data can be obtained from the research project's authors.
2. Overall, these six issue categories account for 69% of the issues reported in the media and 61% in party manifestos.
3. The study includes all parties that are also coded in the Comparative Manifesto Project that fulfil two additional requirements. First, parties must obtain more than 5% of the votes in the election under study. This criterion guarantees that the overall results are not affected by very small parties, which are largely irrelevant to the logic of party competition. Second, a party is only included when it is to some degree visible in the public debate. Therefore, the mass media data set must contain at least 20 core sentences for a party related to any kind of political issue. This threshold is necessary to secure the accuracy of the salience measure; extremely low overall numbers of core sentences do not allow us to infer a party's emphasis on a specific issue. It is important to note that most parties either meet both criteria or fail to meet even one of the two.
4. In fact, the significance of the interaction term in Model 4 does not hold up when we dichotomise the variable.
5. Marginal differences for systemic salience are smaller than those for ownership because the variable, when standardised, ranges from –1.33 to 3.99. Rescaling the variable to the range of the ownership variable (from 0 to 1) results in estimates for the marginal differences (0.12) similar in size to those for ownership.

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