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# Gaining voice in the mass media:
# The effect of parties' strategies on party–issue linkages in election news coverage

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## Abstract

The mass media are central in providing citizens with information on political parties and issues. This study deals with the question of how the mass media link issues *to* parties in their news coverage. Such party–issue linkages in the media are crucial if parties want to gain or maintain ownership of political issues. The study tests hypotheses according to which journalists use parties' issue emphases and issue positions as a heuristic to decide which party to give voice to when debating certain issues. It combines and analyzes datasets based on electoral programs and election news coverage of national elections in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the UK between 1991 and 2007. It finds that journalists link issues with parties that emphasized these issues in the past or increased their emphasis at the current election. In contrast, issue positioning does not effect party–issue linkages. These findings contradict past research on the reflection of parties' issue emphasis in media coverage, and have important implications for parties' issue strategies, party competition, and the role of mass media in democracy.

**Keywords**: political parties; issue emphasis; electoral programs; media coverage

## Introduction

Gaining voice in the news coverage is one of the most important aims of parties' electoral campaigns. Despite parties' direct campaign efforts and the increasing relevance of social media, the mass media remain the primary source of

information on all political matters for most citizens. Particularly during electoral campaigns, parties depend on the mass media as their electoral success is strongly related to the number of media appearances they secure (Hopmann et al, 2010). If parties were absent from the election coverage, they would be unable to persuade citizens, put spin on debates, attack their opponents or reframe salient issues.

This article focuses on one specific aspect of campaign coverage: the co-appearances of issues and parties. These co-appearances in news coverage – called party–issue linkages – are highly relevant for a party's issue ownership (Walgrave and de Swert, 2007). A party is said to ''own'' an issue if the party profits from a high saliency of this issue, for example because it has a strong track record on this issue, or because it is considered the most competent to deal with the issue, or simply because it is associated with the issue (Petrocik, 1996; Walgrave et al, 2012). For a long time, issue ownership was considered as rather stable being possessed by parties or not (Budge and Farlie, 1983). However, current research found that issue ownership is dynamic with parties and candidates trying to maintain ownership of issues they already own and trying to steal ownership of issues owned by their competitors (Damore, 2004; Holian, 2004; Walgrave et al, 2009; Tresch et al, 2013; Dahlberg and Martinsson, 2015). Party–issue linkages in media coverage are one of the main sources of issue ownership. Parties that are linked to certain issues in the news are considered to be more competent to deal with the issue than other parties (Walgrave and de Swert, 2007; Walgrave et al, 2009) and – in some cases – more often associated by voters with the issue (Tresch et al, 2013). Like media coverage in general, party–issue linkages are selective and limited. When discussing an issue, mass media usually give voice to one or few parties, but not to all parties. The question to which parties mass media grant voice when discussing an issue will likely depend on factors that influence a party's general visibility and newsworthiness such as a party's size and whether it is in government or opposition. These rather institutional factors do not take into account the behaviour of parties. Moreover, institutional factors can hardly explain differences in party–issue linkages within parties across different issues. Therefore, this study analyzes whether mass media systematically link issues to parties based on the parties' issue strategies.

Political parties have to make two key decisions with regard to every issue: will they emphasize or downplay an issue, and will they choose a distinct or a moderate issue position? I hypothesize that journalists use parties' issue strategies as a selection criteria to decide whom to give voice when discussing a particular issue during the electoral campaign. All else equal, when debating an issue, the media should grant more voice to parties with a distinct issue position, to parties that continuously emphasized these issues in the past, and to parties that increase their emphasis at the current election. An analysis of a dataset combining manifesto data (Volkens et al, 2014) with content analytical data from election news coverage (Kriesi et al, 2012; Wueest et al, 2012) for 26 elections in the 1990s/2000s in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the UK lends support to the

theorized effect of parties' past and current issue emphasis on the number of party–issue linkages. The findings have important implications that are discussed in more detail in the final section of the article.

**Theory**

**Election news coverage and the role of party–issue linkages**

Politically informed citizens are essential for the functioning of democracy (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). The role of information is particularly crucial before elections. Even if parties' electoral campaigns try to address voters directly using leaflets, posters, and advertisement, the mass media are still the most important source of information on politics, elections, and parties. As media coverage on political parties and issues is necessarily limited and selective, parties compete over news coverage. This study deals with a particular aspect of media coverage: the association of parties and issues. These party–issue linkages can have different forms. A party–issue linkage can be a quote from a party's politician or a whole interview in regard to a specific issue, or the mentioning of a party's issue position, or any other coverage that ties a party to an issue. Most policy-based media coverage will include politicians as sources and thereby establish party–issue linkages. Party–issue linkages are found to shape voters' perceptions of parties, as well as of issues and frames, and thereby affect electoral choices and the electoral competition in numerous ways:

First, party–issue linkages in the media can serve to create, uphold or change a party's ownership of an issue. Issue ownership "refers to the link between specific parties and issues in the minds of voters." (Walgrave et al, 2015) Parties are said to "own" an issue if they have an electoral advantage when the issue becomes salient in the public. Issue ownership has two dimensions: First, issue ownership can either describe a voters perceived competence of a party to handle an issue (Petrocik, 1996). For example many voters consider green parties as the most competent to deal with environmental issues. Second, issue ownership can also be understood as voters' associations of parties with issues – independent of their competence evaluations (Walgrave et al, 2012). Commonly, voters associate the issue of immigration with radical right parties, although this link is not necessarily an ascription of competence to handle this issue. On the one hand, issue ownership theory explains voters' electoral choice as they vote for the party that owns the issues they consider as salient (Walgrave et al, 2012; Bélanger et al, 2008). On the other hand, issue ownership theory explains parties' issue emphases because they try to set "owned" issues on the public agenda to prime voters. Issue ownership was long considered to be stable and exclusive. However, recent studies have

shown that issue ownership is neither stable nor exclusive, but dynamic and partial (Walgrave et al, 2009; Geys, 2012). Moreover, media coverage is a major source of issue ownership (Walgrave and de Swert, 2007). If a party manages to be linked to an issue in the election coverage, it may gain ownership of new issues and maintain or reinforce existing ownership of issues (Walgrave et al, 2009; Tresch et al, 2013). Party–issue linkages in election news coverage are one of the major sources of a party's issue ownership.

Second, party–issue linkages influence how voters perceive frames associated with the focal issue. Voters perceive and adopt frames differently depending on which party sponsors the frames (Slothuus and de Vreese, 2010). Voters are more likely to adopt a frame if it is sponsored by a party they support than if it is expressed by a rival party. All things considered, parties can benefit very much from party–issue linkages in media coverage. Gaining party–issue linkages in the mass media is therefore a central goal of parties' campaign efforts.

The analysis of party–issue linkages is related to – but still distinct from – two fields of research that have been thoroughly addressed in the past: a party's general visibility in media coverage and parties' attempts to set the media agenda. The first one is crucial for a party's electoral success. Being neglected by the media inhibits parties from spinning debates, reframing issues and criticizing their competitors. More broadly speaking, parties require media attention to get their messages out. Therefore, it is not surprising that the amount of attention attributed to a party in election news coverage is a very strong predictor of a party's electoral result (Hopmann et al, 2010): The more visible a party in election news coverage, the more votes a party will receive at the election day. Consequentially, research analyzed why and which parties and politicians get into the news. This line of research looked mostly at general characteristics of parties and politicians such as whether a party is the incumbent (Schoenbach et al, 2001; Hopmann et al, 2011; Green-Pedersen et al, 2015), or whether a politician is the leader of a party (Tresch, 2009; Midtbø, 2011). However, this line of research has done little to explain a party's varying visibility across issues – an idea that is at the core of party–issue linkages.

The field of party media agenda setting (or agenda building) specifically addresses differences between issues and deals with the question of whether a party manages to increase the saliency of certain issues on the public or the media agenda (Cobb et al, 1976). The focus of interest is whether the party agenda influences the saliency of issues on the media agenda (Kleinnijenhuis and Rietberg, 1995). However, some scholars also analyzed the similarity between party agendas and *reported* party agendas in media coverage – so far producing mixed evidence. In a study on the UK general elections of 2005, Brandenburg found that parties' agendas correlate quite high with parties' agendas reported in the media (Brandenburg, 2006). Similarly, a study analyzing press releases and news coverage at the 2007 Danish parliamentary elections found parties to be differently successful in getting their messages in the news (Hopmann et al, 2010). In contrast,

Helbling and Tresch (2011) found no connection between parties' issue emphasis in electoral programs and in the respective news coverage on the issue of European integration. Similarly, Petrocik (2003) found that presidential candidates' issue emphasis strategy was not reflected by the issue content of the campaign coverage in the New York Times. Most of these studies evaluate simple correlations of two agendas that could be driven by some salient issues on both agendas, but do not model the linking of parties and issues as a selection process of journalists. Moreover, many of these studies are based on few elections or issues. Finally, they do not differentiate whether the reflection of a party's issue emphasis is due to a party's issue reputation or due to its issue engagement during the campaign.

Both factors, the saliency of issues on the media agenda and a party's visibility, are certainly important and relevant for a party's electoral success. However, only the association of parties and issues – the party–issue linkages – are relevant for a party's issue ownership. The following section illustrates parties' issue strategies and derives hypotheses about how they influence party–issue linkages in media coverage.

**Media selection and parties' issue strategies**

Research on party competition has developed two approaches to parties' issue strategies: position-based approaches and emphasis-based approaches. The former approach is heavily influenced by Anthony Downs' Economic Theory of Democracy (1957). He claimed that party competition is shaped by conflicts over policy alternatives which can be understood in a spatial way. In general, parties can choose between two strategies. First, a party can choose a moderate position in order to win more voters in the center of the political spectrum and to draw voters away from other parties. Such a strategy is popular in two-party systems. This however comes at the costs of loosing voters at the margins and risking alienating party activists (Robertson, 1976). Second, instead of moderating a position, a party can differentiate its issue position. In particular in multi-party systems, parties' issue positions are expected to diverge from one another because parties try to find positions that make them distinguishable from their competitors. Kitschelt (1994) called this strategy 'product differentiation.' In particular, small parties take distinct positions to differentiate themselves from their mainstream competitors (Wagner, 2012).

I expect the mass media to link issues to parties that have issue positions distinct from their competitors for the following two reasons: First, professional norms in journalism suggest that in competitive democracies the media should inform citizens about a broad range of opinions and positions (Strömbäck, 2005). Most countries in Europe show increasing levels of professionalization in journalism in the last decades (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Journalists adhering to these norms will cover parties with diverse viewpoints to capture the whole range of opinions and positions.

Second, journalists try to frame elections as conflicts (De Vreese, 2004). The framing of elections as conflicts is one of the most prominent ways to cover the competition between parties in times of elections (Schuck et al, 2013; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). Conflict frames are popular because conflicts are a news factor, making a story more newsworthy, and thereby more likely to be selected by journalists (Staab, 1990). Journalists are expected to choose parties with very distinct issue positions in order to frame an issue as a conflict between political parties. Parties covering similar issue positions would not be suitable for the construction of such a conflict in the news. So, the more a party's position deviates from the position of the other parties, the easier a journalist can frame an issue as a conflict between political parties.

**Issue Distinctiveness Hypothesis:**     The mass media link issues with parties who have distinct issue positions.

The second approach to party competition was inspired by the observation that parties' issue emphases during the electoral campaign varies drastically between parties and elections. On the one hand, issue emphasis varies between parties because parties are expected to emphasize their "own" issues. Instead of engaging in a dialogue or conflict on different policy alternatives on the same issue, parties are said to "talk past each other" by selectively emphasizing some issues and downplaying others (Budge et al, 2001, p. 23). Party competition is then structured by parties' differences in issue priorities, rather than by different issue positions. Party's issue emphasis strategy is constrained by its constituencies (Petrocik, 1996). Parties with ties or origins in certain demographic, religious or professional groups are constrained by the preferences of these groups. Parties need to address their core issues to mobilize their own activists and supporters. A party with many unionist members and voters cannot suddenly downplay labour issues because it would lose to risk its core voters and members.

On the other hand, issue emphasis varies between elections with some issues being emphasized by parties at one election and downplayed in other elections because parties are said to "ride the wave" of public opinion (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994). They cannot only emphasize owned issues as this would risk neglecting socially relevant issues and loosing media visibility and credibility. According to this approach, parties pick issues considered problematic or salient by the public in order to appear responsive to the voter's desires (Wagner and Meyer, 2014) and to the party system agenda (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010).

As issue emphasis is a zero-sum game parties often face the decision whether they emphasize their owned issues or whether they adress issues salient on the public agenda. Most often this results in a mix or an alternation of both strategies. In the long-term, parties regularly and continuously emphasize their core issues and downplay issues owned by their competitors. However, in the short-term, a change

in public opinion, external shocks, and their competitors strategies might cause parties to deviate from their long-term strategy of emphasizing owned issues and cause them to adapt their issue emphasis strategy. Here, I argue that journalists consider both components of a party's issue emphasis strategy when they decide whether to link an issue with a party: a party's long-term issue emphasis strategy and a party's short-term issue emphasis strategy.

A party's long-term issue emphasis strategy might increase the linking of the party with the issue by journalists because parties that emphasize an issue over a long time signal a credible priority for this issue. Similar to voters, journalists will associate specific parties with issues or consider some parties as the most competent to handle the issue. The continuity of such strategies over time creates and upholds a party's issue reputation among journalists. Research in the US showed that parties receive more favorable news coverage on "owned" issues (Hayes, 2008). When debating an issue that comes on the agenda, journalists will give voice to parties that are known to care about a problem not since yesterday, but for a long time. Being linked to certain issues in media coverage is then not a reflection of a party's immediate campaign efforts, but rather of a party's issue reputation among journalists.

A party's short-term issue emphasis describes whether a party emphasizes an issue more than it emphasized the issue in the past. So, the short-term issue emphasis is the deviation from the long-term emphasis strategy. This can be the emphasis of an issue that a party usually downplays or the decision to even more focus on an issue that a party already emphasizes a lot. Short-term emphasis may matter for party–issue linkages for two reasons: First, parties that put more emphasis on an issue during their electoral campaign send out their message on different channels, directly and indirectly affecting the amount of information available to journalists. If a party puts more emphasis on an issue than usual, journalists simply have more information available upon which to rely when debating an issue. Particularly in times of elections, the mass media are susceptible to the attempts of parties to shape the agenda (Walgrave and van Aelst, 2006), as journalists heavily rely on parties as sources for political stories.

Second, a change in a party's issue strategy could be more newsworthy than a party's ordinary issue emphasis strategy that reflects rather the "business as usual." Experimental research has shown that journalists are more likely to make a story out of a press release issued by a party if the issue of the release is not owned by the party (Helfer and Aelst, 2015). This is explained by the fact that a party that emphasizes an unowned issue is unexpected. Because unexpectedness is a news factor, this increases the newsworthiness of an event (Staab, 1990). As journalists select stories and speakers by the number of news factors, a party emphasizing an issue more than usual should increase the likelihood of being selected as a source.

Accordingly, I expect that mass media link issues to parties that emphasized these issues continuously in the past because and to parties that increased their emphasis compared to their long-term emphasis.

| **Long-Term Issue Emphasis Hypothesis:** | The mass media link issues to parties who emphasized these issues continually in the past. |
|---|---|
| **Short-Term Issue Emphasis Hypothesis:** | The mass media link issues to parties who emphasize these issues more than they did in the past. |

**Data and Methodology**

**Data**

The testing of these hypotheses requires two kinds of data: measures of parties' issue positions and emphases, and data on media coverage to measure the number of party–issue linkages.

Parties' expressed preferences can drastically differ depending on the channel of communication under investigation. A study on Danish parties indicated surprisingly little overlap between the agendas of the same parties across different channels such as tv leader debates, advertisements, electoral programs, and letters to the editors by party leaders (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2011). Therefore, the choice of documents and data to measure parties' issue positions and issue emphases will likely have an effect on the results of this study and therefore needs to be well chosen and justified. Speeches, press releases, advertisements, and electoral programs all come along with certain advantages and disadvantages for studying parties' issue strategies. I decided for electoral programs to measure party's preferences as the following advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

First, electoral programs represent a party's policy program for the upcoming legislative term and are adopted at party conventions or at least by the party leadership thereby representing the preferences of the whole party - not only a party's faction or the opinion of individual politicians. Second, electoral programs are regarded as to measure the 'ideal' agenda as "parties are in sole control of the content of electoral manifestos" (Norris et al, 1999, p. 62); much more so than for example speeches by parliamentarians or party leaders. Third, electoral programs are expected to set the tone and themes of the electoral campaign. A claim underlined by qualitative interviews with party campaigners who state that electoral programs set the guideline of the electoral campaign (see Adams et al, 2011). Fourth, electoral programs are usually published before the main electoral campaign starts. This guarantees that data on issue emphasis and positions derived

from electoral programs are measured before data on election news coverage becomes available and thereby reduces problems of endogeneity. The use of (post election) expert or voter surveys to measure issue emphasis and/or issue position would for example be problematic as experts might be influenced by the media coverage. Fifth, electoral programs are published by almost all parties in established democracies in a similar way, thereby guaranteeing a high comparability over time and across countries.

On the other hand, electoral programs also have some disadvantages. On the one hand, they are published only once during the electoral campaign and therefore cannot capture any dynamic or changes in parties' issue strategies which could be covered by the analysis of speeches or press releases. Moreover, electoral programs are said to set the tone of the electoral campaign; however, they are mostly directed towards a focal party's supporter and thereby targeting an internal audience instead of the mass media. Compared to other documents that would allow to measure parties' issue strategies such as press releases or advertisement that might more closely follow media logics, electoral programs provide a rather tough test as they address an internal audience and do not allow for any dynamic.

The most common data source for electoral programs is the dataset by the Manifesto Project (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Klingemann et al, 2006; Volkens et al, 2014). The Manifesto dataset provides content analytical information from electoral programs covering all major parties for democratic elections in over 50 countries since 1945. For the production of the manifesto dataset, country experts split the text of each electoral program into quasi-sentences (statements) to which one of the 56 issue categories are then allocated. The dataset indicates the share of quasi-sentences allocated to each issue within each electoral program – thereby indicating a party's respective emphasis on the various 56 issues. The use of opposing issue categories (for example welfare state expansion and welfare state limitation) allow for the scaling of issue positions as well (Lowe et al, 2011). Although the methodology has been criticized for a low reliability (Mikhaylov et al, 2012, see also Lacewell and Werner, 2013) and problematic source documents in some countries (Hansen, 2008), the Manifesto dataset has been successfully used to measure parties' left-right positions (Adams, 2012), issue positions and emphases on (among many others) such different issues as immigration (Alonso and Fonseca, 2012; Abou-Chadi, 2014), decentralization (Amat and Falcó-Gimeno, 2014), or military expenses (Whitten and Williams, 2011).

The second dataset used in this study provides content analytical data of election news coverage generated by the "Political Change in a Globalizing World" project (Kriesi et al, 2012). This dataset covers the election news coverage in six countries (Austria, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the UK) with 4–5 elections in the 1990s/2000s. Kriesi and his colleagues coded articles from two newspapers in each country. They chose to analyze one quality newspaper and one tabloid newspaper (if available) in each of the six countries. The sample mainly

consists of articles related to national political parties or the upcoming elections published in the two months before the elections. The coded text segments include the title, the lead, and the first paragraph from the articles in the quality newspapers, and the whole article in tabloid newspapers. Adverts in press coverage paid by political parties are excluded from the sample because paid media are expected to follow different selection logics. All analyses shown here are based on the media coverage from both press outlets per country. Conducting the analyses for broadsheet and tabloid newspapers separately produces very similar results.

Unfortunately, Kriesi and colleagues decided to code presidential elections in France while the Manifesto Project analyzes parliamentary manifestos. The remaining five countries (Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the UK) are quite diverse in regard to their political system. The UK is a strongly majoritarian system with a two-party system. In contrast, the Netherlands and Switzerland have highly fragmented multi-party systems. Germany and Austria are also multi-party systems with coalition governments, however less fragmented than the Dutch party system. Table 1 provides the remaining parties, elections, and media outlets under investigation.

The media dataset provides information in the form of core-sentences (Kleinnijenhuis and Pennings, 2001). A core sentence contains three elements: a subject (here: a party), an object (here: an issue or a party), and a direction (-1, 0, +1). The direction reflects the stance of a party on an issue but is not of interest in this study. I use the 20,000 core-sentences connecting parties with political issues. The parties sampled by Kriesi et al are the same as the parties covered by the Manifesto Project and can be easily matched. Originally, the researchers of the Kriesi project coded issues inductively without any given categories. In an incremental procedure, they aggregated all coded issues into 84 issue categories. The issue coding scheme of the Manifesto Dataset and that of the Kriesi et al dataset are different. However, both schemes can be scaled down to match eleven issues common in both datasets. These eleven issues include the traditional issues in political debates such as the degree of state intervention in the economy and the expansion or limitation of the welfare state, budgetary politics, and domestic security as well as issues considered as more recent such as European integration, the protection of the environment, immigration, peace and military expenses. Tables 2 and 3 provide an overview of the analyzed issues and a scheme used to match the two coding schemes.

**Dependent and independent variables**

The manifesto dataset has only one observation for each issue-party-election combination, because it is based on one document per election and party. Therefore, it is necessary to aggregate the core-sentences in the media dataset to the same level. The party–issue core-sentences are aggregated to election-party-media-

**Table 1:** Coverage of Dataset

| Country | Party | Elections |
|---|---|---|
| Austria | SPÖ | 1994, 1999, 2002, 2006 |
| | ÖVP | 1994, 1999, 2002, 2006 |
| | FPÖ | 1994, 1999, 2002, 2006 |
| | Green Party | 1994, 1999, 2002, 2006 |
| | Lib Forum | 1994 |
| | BZÖ | 2006 |
| Germany | CDU/CSU | 1994, 1998, 2002, 2005 |
| | SPD | 1994, 1998, 2002, 2005 |
| | FDP | 1994, 1998, 2002, 2005 |
| | Green Party | 1994, 1998, 2002, 2005 |
| | PDS/Left | 1994, 1998, 2002, 2005 |
| Netherlands | PvdA | 1994, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2006 |
| | D66 | 1994, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2006 |
| | CDA | 1994, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2006 |
| | VVD | 1994, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2006 |
| | Green Left | 1994, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2006 |
| | SP | 2002, 2003, 2006 |
| | List Pim Fortuyn | 2002, 2003 |
| | PVV | 2006 |
| United Kingdom | Cons | 1992, 1997, 2001, 2005 |
| | Labour | 1992, 1997, 2001, 2005 |
| | Lib | 1992, 1997, 2001, 2005 |
| Switzerland | SPS | 1991, 1995, 1999, 2003, 2007 |
| | CVP | 1991, 1995, 1999, 2003, 2007 |
| | Lib | 1991, 1995, 1999, 2003, 2007 |
| | SVP | 1991, 1995, 1999, 2003, 2007 |
| | Greens | 1991, 1995, 1999, 2003, 2007 |

Press outlets in the sample: Austria (Die Presse, Kronenzeitung), Germany (Süddeutsche Zeitung, Bild), the Netherlands (NRC Handelsblad, Algemeend Dagblad), the UK (The Times, The Sun), Switzerland (NZZ, Blick).

outlet-issue combinations. The dependent variable is then the number of *party–issue linkages* (core-sentences) in the media coverage of one press outlet during an electoral campaign. This variable is a count variable with an empirical range from 0 to 128.

The *issue distinctiveness* requires information on the parties' issue positions. The manifesto dataset is well-known for allowing researchers the calculation of parties' left-right positions. Similarly, the data also allow for the calculation of *issue* positions. The approach chosen here is similar to the standard approach for calculating general left-right positions, namely by subtracting the total share of left (or pro) categories from the total share of right (or contra) categories. However, in this case, the position would be influenced by the total number of statements (also the ones not included in the pro or contra categories). This might be plausible for the general left–right dimension. However, for this study, I am interested in position scores that are independent from the salience of the issues in order to

**Table 2:** Overview of issue categories

| Issue | Description |
|---|---|
| Economic Liberalism | Support for deregulation, more competition, and privatization; opposition to market regulation; opposition to economic protectionism in agriculture and other sectors of society |
| Welfare | Support for an expansion of the welfare state; defence against welfare state retrenchment; support for tax reforms with a redistributive character; calls for employment and healthcare programmes |
| Budget | Support for rigid budgetary policy, reduction of state deficit, cuts in expenditures, reduction of taxes without direct effects on redistribution |
| Peace and Internationalism | Support for international cooperation (not EU and NATO), support for UN |
| Minorities and Liberalism | Support for cultural diversity, support for right to abortion and euthanasia, traditional moral values, support for liberal drug policy, support for minorities |
| Europe | Support for European integration, including enlargement; support for EU membership in the cases of Switzerland and Austria |
| Culture and Education | Support for education, culture, and scientific research |
| Anti-Immigration | Support for tough immigration and integration policy |
| Military | Support for the armed forces (including NATO), for a strong national defense, and for nuclear weapons |
| Domestic Security | Support for more law-and-order, the fight against crime, and denouncing political corruption |
| Environment | Support for environmental protection; opposition to nuclear energy |

*Source*: partially from Kriesi *et al* (2008, pp. 59–60).

distinguish analytically between issue positions and issue emphasis. Therefore, I follow the suggestion by Laver and Garry (2000) and divide the score by the total shares of pro and contra statements in order to make them independent from the emphasis of these issues. The formula is

$$POS = \frac{PRO - CON}{PRO + CON} \tag{1}$$

where PRO is the share of statements in favor of an issue and CON is the share of statements opposing an issue. The scale runs from -1 to +1 and ranges from positions strongly against to positions strongly in favor of an issue. The distinctiveness of an issue position is then calculated as the distance to the election-issue mean. This mean is calculated as the mean of all parties at this election, weighted by their vote share.

A party's *issue emphasis* is measured as the share (in percentages) of quasi-sentences in the electoral program related to one of the eleven issues. The higher the number, the more a party emphasizes an issue. Units can be interpreted as percentages of quasi-sentences of the electoral program. To differentiate between a party's short-term and long-term issue emphasis strategy, a party's issue emphasis can be split into two components. The following equations illustrate this

decomposition into two variables. A party's long-term issue emphasis *le* is a party's mean issue emphasis over the past three elections. For parties with missing data for the lags 2 and/or 3, it is the mean over the available lags.

$$le_t = \frac{(e_{t-1} + e_{t-2} + e_{t-3})}{3} \tag{2}$$

And a party's short-term emphasis is the difference in emphasis at time t to its long-term emphasis. If a party decides against a short-term deviation from its long-term emphasis, the short-term emphasis will be zero. A negative value of short-term emphasis indicates that a party emphasizes an issue less than usual, a positive short-term emphasis indicates the opposite.

**Table 3:** Issue matching scheme

| Issue categories | Kriesi et al (2012) codes | Manifesto: positive codes | Manifesto: negative codes |
|---|---|---|---|
| Economic Liberalism | 201–211 | 401 Free Enterprise | 404 Economic Planning: positive |
| | | 407 Protectionism: negative | 403 Market Regulation |
| | | 408 Economic Goals | 405 Corporatism: positive |
| | | 402 Incentives: positive | 406 Protectionism: positive |
| | | | 412 Controlled Economy |
| | | | 413 Nationalisation: positive |
| Welfare | 100–108 | 504 Welfare State expansion | 505 Welfare State limitation |
| | | 503 Equality: positive | |
| Budget | 300–303 | 414 Economic Orthodoxy | 409 Keynesian Demand Management: positive |
| Minorities and Liberalism | 405–413 | 604 Traditional Morality: negative | 603 Traditional Morality: positive |
| | | 705 Minority Groups: positive | |
| | | 706 Non-Econ. Demographic Groups: positive | |
| Europe | 500–504 | 108 European Integration: positive | 110 European Integration: negative |
| Peace and Internationalism | 400–403 | 107 Internationalism: positive | 109 Internationalism: negative |
| | | 106 Peace: positive | |
| Culture | 600–607 | 502 Culture: positive | 507 Education Limitation |
| | | 506 Education Expansion | |
| Anti-Immigration | 700–703 | 608 Multiculturalism: negative | 607 Multiculturalism: positive |
| Military | 800–802 | 104 Military: positive | 105 Military: negative |
| Domestic Security | 900–905 | 605 Law and Order: positive | 201 Freedom and Human Rights:positive |
| | | 304 Political Corruption: negative | 202 Democracy: positive |
| Environment | 1000–1005 | 501 Environmental Protection: positive | 410 Economic Growth: positive |
| | | 416 Anti-Growth Economy: positive | |

$$se_t = e_t - le_t \qquad (3)$$

The correlation between a party's general issue emphasis and issue distinctiveness is significant, but very small (Pearson's r: -0.056; p < .01). The two issue strategies are not only theoretically distinct, but also empirically independent.

**Model and control variables**

The data are structured as a stacked dataset with 2293 election-party-media-outlet-issue combinations from 26 elections in the five countries and two newspapers per country.

The dependent variable (the number of party–issue linkages in media coverage) is a count variable with a standard deviation (11.2) higher than its mean (8.1) and a large number of zeros. Negative binomial regression models are best suited to analyze such kind of data as they can account for overdispersion and predict higher numbers of zeros than conventional poisson models.

The number of party–issue links is strongly dependent on the overall saliency of an issue. The more salient an issue is in the news, the more often all parties will be associated with this issue. To control for this, I include the total number of party–issue linkages for each issue within the coverage of one press outlet as an exposure variable. Moreover, I expect the effect of a party's issue emphasis to matter if it differs from their competitors' issue emphasis. Therefore, I include the average issue emphasis of the focal party's competitors as a further control variable in the model.

The degree of issue consensus might have an impact on how an issue is debated in the media (Schuck et al, 2011). At the same time, it is closely related to a party's issue distinctiveness. I use the standard deviation of the competitors issue positions as an indicator of whether and how consensual an issue is debated in a country. Calculating the standard deviation on the competitors positions only (not including the focal party) counters potential problems with multicollinearity and endogeneity as such an indicator would be highly correlated with the measure of distinctiveness in small party systems.

The number of party–issue linkages in media coverage will likely be influenced by the relevance and prominence of a party. To control for the incumbency status of a party, I created a dummy variable indicating whether a party is an incumbent or in opposition. Besides the incumbent status, the size and resources of a party influence a party's general visibility in election news coverage (Hopmann et al, 2011). In order to account for this, I included a party's vote share as an additional control variable.

Additionally, I included one dummy variable for each party, thereby controlling for all time-constant characteristics of parties which might increase their general visibility in election news coverage. Moreover, I included a dummy for every election-outlet combination to control for effects specific to campaign coverage

**Table 4:** Summary statistics

| Variable | Mean | SD | Min. | Max. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of party–issue linkages | 8.05 | 11.17 | 0 | 128 |
| Issue emphasis | 6.49 | 5.74 | 0 | 42.98 |
| Issue distinctiveness | 0.3 | 0.34 | 0 | 1.85 |
| Mean issue emphasis of competitors | 6.5 | 4.68 | 0 | 21.76 |
| Incumbent | 0.48 | 0.5 | 0 | 1 |
| Issue polarization of competitors | 0.39 | 0.29 | 0 | 1.13 |
| Vote share | 18.98 | 11.61 | 1.96 | 43.21 |
| Issue salience in media coverage | 39.41 | 34.21 | 1 | 223 |
| Long-term issue emphasis | 6.57 | 5.23 | 0 | 31.91 |
| Short-term issue emphasis | −0.08 | 4.48 | −20.75 | 25.57 |
| N | | 2293 | | |

within a media outlet at a specific campaign such as the different numbers of parties across elections. The size of the party system will probably have an impact on how likely it is that a party will be linked to a certain issue. In smaller party systems, journalists have to choose between fewer possible actors, whereas in large party systems journalists have to select between more actors. Table 4 provides summary statistics for all variables.

To control for serial correlation, I show in the robustness section that a model including a lagged-dependent variable replicates the results. A lagged-dependent variable in a negative binomial model can only capture a general trend and not a dynamic or cyclical process (Brandt and Williams, 2001). However, as the panels in the data are very short (median panel length 3, maximum 5), there is only little possibility to observe any other dynamic than a general trend.

The use of cluster-robust standard errors for election-issue clusters accounts for the non-independence of the observations.

**Empirical Analysis**

**Results**

Do parties' issue strategies influence the number of party–issue linkages in news coverage? Table 5 provides first answers to this question. The dispersion parameter alpha is significantly different from zero (Likelihood-ratio test: $\chi^2$ = 1996.92; $p < 0.001$ in Model 2), justifying the use of a negative binomial model over a poisson model. All coefficients are log-transformed and should be interpreted as multiplicative effects: eg., the coefficient 1.936 on the incumbent variable in model 1

**Table 5:** Negative binomial regression: predicting the number of party–issue linkages in election news coverage at national elections in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the UK (1991–2007)

|  | (1) controls only | (2) with ind. variables |
|---|---|---|
| Number of party–issue Linkages |  |  |
| Mean issue emphasis of competitors | 0.998 (0.004) | 0.974*** (0.007) |
| Incumbent | 1.936*** (0.111) | 1.942*** (0.113) |
| Issue polarization of competitors | 1.070 (0.071) | 1.059 (0.076) |
| Vote share | 1.025*** (0.005) | 1.025*** (0.005) |
| Issue distinctiveness |  | 1.107 (0.077) |
| Long-term issue emphasis |  | 1.031*** (0.008) |
| Short-term issue emphasis |  | 1.031*** (0.005) |
| Election/outlet dummies | Yes | Yes |
| Party dummies | Yes | Yes |
| Alpha | 0.329 | 0.314 |
| Deviance R2 | 0.435 | 0.452 |
| BIC | 12051.2 | 12004.1 |
| Loglikelihood | −5750.9 | −5715.7 |
| N | 2293 | 2293 |

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

The overall salience of an issue is used as an exposure variable.

Cluster robust standard errors in parentheses.

indicates an increase of the expected number of party–issue linkages by the factor 1.936 if a party is an incumbent compared to if the same party were in opposition.

Model 1 is a baseline model, including only the control variables, not yet the main independent variables of interest. Before discussing the effects of the independent variables, I will briefly discuss the effects of the control variables. As already said, incumbency drastically increases the number of party–issue linkages. Mass media link parties in office almost twice as much to all issues (all else equal) compared to a party in opposition. As the party-dummies control for time-constant effects of parties, the effect of the incumbency variable is a net incumbency effect.

Similarly, the size of a party, measured by its vote share, also has a positive significant effect on the number of party–issue linkages. A change of vote share of 1 per cent increases the expected counts by the factor 1.025. Accordingly, a change of one standard deviation in vote share (11.6 per cent) increases the expected number of counts by the factor 1.33.

The statistics at the bottom of Table 5 indicate that the model including the main independent variables of interest fit the data better than the baseline model. The Deviance R2, the Bayesian Information Criterium and the loglikelihood attest model 2 a better fit than model 1.

The first finding is that we find no support for the issue distinctivness hypothesis. The coefficient of issue distinctiveness is substantively small and not statistically

significant. Recall that issue distinctiveness is measured as the distance between a party's issue position and the (weighted) mean across all parties at the election. The standard deviation of issue distinctiveness is 0.34. A change in issue distinctiveness of one-standard deviation would increase the expected number of counts only by the factor 1.03. The strategy of "product differentiation" by choosing a distinct issue position does not influence the selection of the mass media. Moreover, the degree of polarization on an issue does not have any effect on the number of party–issue linkages. So, when debating an issue, the mass media grant voice to parties regardless of their issue position.

In contrast, there are a significant effects of short- and long-term issue emphasis on the number of party–issue linkages. A one unit increase in short-term issue emphasis increases the expected number of counts by the factor 1.03. The standard deviation of short-term issue emphasis is 4.5; an increase in issue emphasis by one standard deviation would increase the expected number of party–issue linkages by the factor 1.14. A change of one standard deviation in the long-term issue emphasis (5.23) would similarly increase the expected number of counts by the factor 1.17. At first, this effect of issue emphasis strategies on election news coverage seems small. However, the effects mentioned refer to one party–issue-election-outlet combination. Considering that this effect is at work for every party–issue combination in all news publications, parties' issue emphasis strategies substantially shape election news coverage.

Moreover, the effect of the mean issue emphasis of a focal party's competitors is significant in model 2. The more other parties emphasize an issue (holding a focal party's issue emphasis constant), the more the number of a focal party's issue linkages decreases. So, the more a party emphasized an issue in the past and the more it emphasizes the issue compared to its past emphasis in its electoral program, the more the media link this issue to the focal party. Similarly, the more a focal party's competitors emphasize an issue, the less a focal party is associated with that issue in election news coverage. The empirical results so far suggest that parties' issue emphasis strategies matter for party–issue linkages in election news coverage. When covering an issue, journalists grant voice to political parties that emphasized an issue in the past and to parties that increase their emphasis of the focal issue compared to its past emphasis. Long-term and short-term issue emphasis strategies matter for gaining voice in election news coverage.

**Robustness**

A replication of model 2 including a lagged-dependent variable to control for serial correlation produces very similar results (see model 1 in Table 6). The lagged-dependent variable is not significant suggesting that serial correlation is not an issue. Although the effect of short-term emphasis is slightly smaller, the effect

**Table 6:** Negative binomial regression: predicting the number of party–issue linkages in election news coverage at national elections in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the UK (1991–2007)

|  | *(1) + lagged dv* | *(2) only issue subset* |
|---|---|---|
| Number of party–issue Linkages |  |  |
| Mean issue emphasis of competitors | 0.974** (0.008) | 0.959* (0.020) |
| Incumbent | 1.861*** (0.148) | 1.893*** (0.258) |
| Issue polarization of competitors | 1.147 (0.099) | 1.075 (0.130) |
| Vote share | 1.031*** (0.007) | 1.028* (0.013) |
| Lagged-dependent variable | 1.003 (0.002) | 1.005 (0.004) |
| Issue distinctiveness | 0.994 (0.087) | 1.127 (0.118) |
| Long-term issue emphasis | 1.030*** (0.009) | 1.052* (0.021) |
| Short-term issue emphasis | 1.022*** (0.006) | 1.037* (0.017) |
| Election/outlet dummies | Yes | Yes |
| Party dummies | Yes | Yes |
| Alpha | 0.326 | 0.356 |
| Deviance R2 | 0.423 | 0.407 |
| BIC | 9101.3 | 3826.0 |
| Loglikelihood | -4319.9 | −1707.1 |
| N | 1710 | 768 |

\* $p < .05$; \*\* $p < .01$; \*\*\* $p < .001$.

The overall salience of an issue is used as an exposure variable.

Cluster robust standard errors in parentheses.

remains statistically significant. Up to now, the presented models pooled party–issue linkages from different issues into one model. Although the control variables for the issue polarization and the mean emphasis of competitors account for important differences between issues, it is still possible that the findings are not robust across issues. Unfortunately, due to the small number of cases per issue, it is not possible to run issue-specific models. The biggest difference between issues is that the matching of issues from different schemes produces sometimes issue strategies for issue domains and sometimes for very specific issues depending on the coding scheme. If the codes for specific issues exist in both coding schemes, they can be mapped easily; otherwise they have to be aggregated and be mapped to an issue domain. A replication of the model on the most specific issues (namely the issues of european integration, peace & internationalism, military, anti-immigration, culture & education) corroborates the findings above (see model 2 in Table 6). The effects found for issue emphasis are even stronger than in the prior models. Still, the model does not provide any support for the issue of distinctiveness available.

Do these findings hold across different countries? The results are robust to a jackknife test running the same model excluding one country at a time (see Table 7). The effect sizes differ only marginally depending on which country is excluded. Calculating country-specific models is challenging as the number of cases drops significantly and standard errors get larger (see Table 8). The finding

**Table 7:** Jackknife-Test: negative binomial regression: predicting the number of party–issue linkages in election news coverage at national elections

| | (1) w/o Austria | (2) w/o UK | (3) w/o Germany | (4) w/o Netherlands | (5) w/o Switzerland |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of party–issue Linkages | | | | | |
| Mean issue emphasis of competitors | 0.974** (0.008) | 0.974*** (0.007) | 0.972*** (0.006) | 0.974*** (0.008) | 0.977** (0.008) |
| Incumbent | 1.984*** (0.128) | 2.035*** (0.142) | 2.296*** (0.172) | 1.548*** (0.077) | 1.951*** (0.114) |
| Issue polarization of competitors | 1.062 (0.094) | 1.066 (0.083) | 1.075 (0.084) | 1.025 (0.076) | 1.054 (0.088) |
| Vote share | 1.026*** (0.006) | 1.025*** (0.006) | 1.024*** (0.005) | 1.023*** (0.005) | 1.029*** (0.006) |
| Issue distinctiveness | 1.118 (0.092) | 1.104 (0.082) | 1.052 (0.076) | 1.154 (0.088) | 1.129 (0.101) |
| Long-term issue emphasis | 1.030*** (0.009) | 1.032*** (0.008) | 1.033*** (0.007) | 1.031*** (0.008) | 1.027** (0.010) |
| Short-term issue emphasis | 1.028*** (0.005) | 1.031*** (0.005) | 1.034*** (0.005) | 1.028*** (0.005) | 1.032*** (0.007) |
| Election/outlet dummies | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Party dummies | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Alpha | 0.329 | 0.323 | 0.285 | 0.289 | 0.337 |
| Deviance R2 | 0.460 | 0.418 | 0.458 | 0.437 | 0.484 |
| BIC | 9769.8 | 10476.7 | 9449.1 | 9004.0 | 9272.8 |
| Loglikelihood | −4654.7 | −4994.4 | −4491.2 | −4291.3 | −4412.3 |
| N | 1897 | 2042 | 1858 | 1622 | 1753 |

$* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.$

The overall salience of an issue is used as an exposure variable.

Cluster robust standard errors in parentheses.

**Table 8:** Country-specific models: negative binomial regression: predicting the number of party–issue linkages in election news coverage at national elections

| | (1) Austria | (2) UK | (3) Germany | (4) Netherlands | (5) Switzerland |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of party–issue Linkages | | | | | |
| Mean issue emphasis of competitors | 0.975* (0.011) | 0.983 (0.016) | 0.987 (0.024) | 0.970* (0.012) | 0.966*** (0.010) |
| Incumbent | 1.677*** (0.238) | 1.574*** (0.115) | 1.465*** (0.115) | 3.470*** (0.357) | 2.545*** (0.411) |
| Issue polarization of competitors | 1.070 (0.126) | 0.943 (0.162) | 0.953 (0.177) | 1.085 (0.212) | 1.026 (0.160) |
| Vote share | 1.021 (0.011) | 1.033** (0.011) | 1.059** (0.020) | 1.030** (0.010) | 1.013 (0.009) |
| Issue distinctiveness | 1.053 (0.136) | 1.267 (0.184) | 1.456 (0.337) | 0.977 (0.169) | 1.098 (0.131) |
| Long-term issue emphasis | 1.031* (0.013) | 1.013 (0.022) | 1.015 (0.025) | 1.030* (0.013) | 1.039*** (0.011) |
| Short-term issue emphasis | 1.035** (0.011) | 1.030 (0.017) | 1.009 (0.012) | 1.049*** (0.013) | 1.029*** (0.006) |
| Election/outlet dummies | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Party dummies | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Alpha | 0.253 | 0.246 | 0.417 | 0.318 | 0.244 |
| Deviance R2 | 0.398 | 0.522 | 0.459 | 0.508 | 0.252 |
| BIC | 2241.9 | 1532.7 | 2528.0 | 2942.7 | 2727.7 |
| Loglikelihood | −1058.1 | −716.6 | −1203.2 | −1390.0 | −1297.8 |
| N | 396 | 251 | 435 | 671 | 540 |

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

The overall salience of an issue is used as an exposure variable.

Cluster robust standard errors in parentheses.

that issue distinctiveness has no significant effect is robust. The estimate of issue distinctiveness never reaches conventional levels of significance. Despite the smaller number of cases, three out of five models produce significant effects on both issue emphasis variables of similar size compared to the pooled model (Austria, the Netherlands, Switzerland). In two models (the UK and Germany), the effects of issue emphasis are positive, however not significant. Due to the larger standard errors, it is hard to say whether this is a substantial difference. It is plausible to argue that journalists are more in need of selection heuristics in countries with more fragmented party systems such as the Netherlands or Switzerland as media coverage is necessarily more selective. However, the small number of cases and countries in our sample limits the generalizability of this finding and leaves room future research to dig deeper into the question whether and why the effectiveness of party's issue emphasis strategies to gain party–issue linkages in election news coverage varies between countries.

**Discussion**

The main finding of this study is that the mass media link issues to parties that emphasize these issues in their electoral programs. In other words, a party's issue emphasis strategy is reflected in election news coverage. This finding contradicts the results of a study by Helbling and Tresch (2011) that found that a party's issue emphasis in manifestos is not reflected in election news coverage. Their study is based on similar data but limited to the issue of European integration and their claims were based on correlations without controlling for any confounding factors such as the overall saliency of an issue or the incumbency of a party. The effect of issue emphasis on the number of party–issue linkages can be separated into two effects: short-term changes in a party's emphasis, as well as the long-term average emphasis. Both effect the number of party–issue linkages in election news coverage. This suggests that two mechanisms are at work. On the one hand, journalists give voice to parties that have a good and stable reputation for handling certain issues. On the other hand, parties' campaign efforts affect journalist's selection of parties when covering an issue. This might explain why issue ownership is neither fully stable nor completely volatile (Petrocik, 1996; Walgrave et al, 2009).

The second important result of this study is a non-finding: parties' issue positions have no impact on the number of party–issue linkages in election news coverage. Neither do media favor parties with distinct issue positions, nor do they favor parties with moderate issue positions. When covering an issue, the mass media give voice to political parties independent of their issue position. "Product differentiation" (Kitschelt, 1994) in terms of issue positioning does not increase a party's

chances of being linked to an issue. Although there might be situations when parties have incentives to take up a distinct or extreme position (Wagner, 2012), the media do not create these incentives (see also Van der Pas and Vliegenthart, 2015). This non-finding suggests that the media do not contribute to a polarization of the political debate.

Both findings have important implications for party competition and electoral campaigning. First, parties that try to gain ownership of issues should focus on emphasizing issues instead of thinking too much about issue positioning. Putting more emphasis on an issue is the only strategy found here to matter for how parties can increase the number of party–issue linkages. The findings are in line with the claim that party competition develops from an ideology-based competition to an issue-based competition where the question of salience and ownership matters more than positions (Green-Pedersen, 2007). Second, the use of electoral programs to measure party positions and issue emphasis strategies has been criticized recently (Dalton and McAllister, 2014). Moreover, positional changes in electoral programs have no or only a small impact on voter's perceptions of policy shifts by parties (Adams et al, 2011; Fernandez-Vazquez, 2014). The fact that parties' issue emphasis can explain how mass media link issues to parties validates an important assumption made by many scholars dealing with manifesto data, namely that their content is transmitted to voters. The argument that no one reads these documents can be countered with the finding that issue emphases are reflected in election news coverage. Reading these documents is therefore not necessary to get information on parties' issue strategies. This study focused solely on the question of which parties gain voice when mass media debate an issue. There are many other aspects of election news coverage which might be influenced by parties' issue strategies such as the reported issue position or the intra-party homogeneity of such a position. The task of future research will be to identify whether and how these other aspects of election news coverage are affected by parties' issue strategies.

## About the Author

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