

# Parties' issue adaptation between elections\*

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## Abstract

Are parties responsive to short-term changes in election polls? While party responsiveness to election results has received much attention, we know little about the dynamics of issue attention between elections. In this study, we address this question based on the novel comprehensive PARTYPRESS Database. We rely on supervised machine learning methods to build a dynamic measure of parties' issue attention on the basis of more than 250,000 press releases from 68 parties across nine countries from 2010 until 2020. We find little support that losing in the polls leads parties to change their issue attention. When political parties lose support in the polls, they do not clearly prioritise their owned issue, they do not pay more attention to popular issues, and they do not adapt the issue focus of successful competitors. These findings have important implications for our understanding of party responsiveness and the dynamics of electoral competition.

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# 1. Introduction

Are parties responsive to short-term changes in election polls? Polls provide parties with real-time feedback on public opinion, highlighting which issues resonate most strongly with voters. By adapting their issue agenda, parties can demonstrate responsiveness to the concerns and priorities of the electorate, increasing their chances of garnering support. Additionally, parties may use polls to identify emerging issues or changing public sentiment, allowing them to stay ahead of the curve and address pressing concerns. Adapting their issue agenda based on polling data seems like a natural move that should help parties to effectively shape their campaign messaging. However, while party responsiveness to election results has received much attention (e.g. Adams et al., 2004; Somer-Topcu, 2009; Spoon & Klüver, 2014), we know little about how parties adjust their political messages to public opinion polls. This paper addresses this question by studying whether parties adjust their issue agendas in response to public opinion polls.

Previous research has investigated whether political parties are responsive to voters with regard to the policy issues political parties emphasise in their election manifestos (Klüver & Spoon, 2016; Pennings, 2005; Spoon & Klüver, 2014; Wagner & Meyer, 2014). These studies have shown that political parties listen to the policy priorities of voters, but that the issue responsiveness varies considerably across parties and elections. The extent to which parties respond to the issue priorities of citizens is conditioned by the electoral context (Spoon & Klüver, 2014), by party type (Klüver & Spoon, 2016), by the polarization of the issue (Spoon & Klüver, 2015) and by organizational structures of political parties (Wagner & Meyer, 2014).

To our knowledge, there are however only two studies that investigate whether political parties respond to public opinion polls. Pereira (2019) studies party behaviour during election campaigns and shows that party leaders respond to public opinion polls during this time period. More specifically, party leaders use polling information strategically as mobilization tools, they are more likely to emphasise their own policy positions and

the policy positions of other parties after disappointing polls, and they use less negative campaigning when the polls look good for them. Pereira (2020), moreover, studies whether parties adjust their campaign messages during election campaigns in response to public opinion polls. He shows that parties that perform well in the polls maintain their policy positions, but that they change their policy positions in response to a decline in the polls.

While these studies have considerably advanced our understanding of the short dynamics of party competition, both studies are limited to studying election campaigns. Election campaigns are short and extraordinary times that are crucially different from the rest of the electoral cycle. First, during an election campaign, there is a concentrated and heightened focus on political candidates and parties. Media coverage, public attention, and political discourse revolve around the campaign, leading to a significant increase in political activity. Second, election campaigns are primarily aimed at mobilizing voters while the legislative process largely stands still. Political parties engage in various activities such as public rallies, speeches, debates, advertisements, and door-to-door canvassing to garner support and persuade voters to cast their ballots in their favour. Third, election campaigns often involve a more focused and refined political messaging strategy. Political parties aim to communicate their policy profile in a concise and persuasive manner to differentiate themselves from their opponents. Finally, the competitive nature of election campaigns sets them apart from the rest of the electoral cycle. Parties intensify their efforts to gain an advantage over their opponents. They may engage in negative campaigning, highlighting their opponents' weaknesses or mistakes, in an attempt to sway public opinion in their favour.

Thus, election campaigns are fundamentally different from the rest of the electoral cycle. Previous research has accordingly already pointed to the importance of cyclical effects of politics (Lupia & Strom, 1995; Sagarzazu & Klüver, 2017), but up until now, there is no study that examines the effect of public opinion polls on party competition

during the entire electoral cycle. In this study, we aim to overcome this important gap by studying parties' responsiveness to polls during the entire legislative term.

Empirically, we use supervised machine learning methods to build a dynamic measure of parties' issue attention, based on the new comprehensive PARTYPRESS Dataset covering more than 250,000 press releases from 68 parties across nine countries from 2010 until 2019. Press releases have the advantage that they are published daily, that parties can freely choose what to talk about, and that the media regularly reports about them (Meyer et al., 2020; Sagarzazu & Klüver, 2017; Schaffner, 2006). We are therefore able to study the responsiveness of parties to public opinion polls across the entire electoral cycle.

We combine the data of parties' issue attention with polling data to evaluate three hypotheses about parties' responses to changes in the polls. As we discuss in the following, prior work proposes three perspectives of what issues parties should turn to, when they notice considerable declining support in the polls. They could focus on the issues they own, that are publicly salient, or try to adapt to issues of successful competitors. Evaluating the different hypotheses using dynamic panel models, we find little support that strong changes in polls lead to issue attention changes in predictable ways. Only for niche parties, our results find some support that they tend to focus on their strength issues, when they lose in the polls. But for other parties we do not find evidence in this direction - neither during the election campaigns nor outside of it. These findings still have important implications for our understanding of party responsiveness and the dynamics of electoral competition.

## 2. Theoretical expectations

While party responsiveness to election results has received much attention, we know little about the dynamics of issue competition during the legislative term. We argue that polls provide parties with valuable information about voter preferences, concerns, and

attitudes, which can help them tailor their issue agenda. When political parties receive polling data, they analyse it to understand the current political landscape, identify trends, and evaluate their own standing relative to their opponents. Several scholars have accordingly shown that politicians systematically take polls on public opinion into account when making policy decisions (Hager & Hilbig, 2020; Jacobs & Shapiro, 1995; Pickup & Hobolt, 2015). Most notably, Hager and Hilbig (2020) show that the German government launches on average 150 public opinion surveys per year and that politicians change the topics they address and also their policy positions in response to exposure to public opinion polls. We posit that a decline in the polls sends a signal to political parties that their current strategy is not effective. We argue that political parties carefully analyse the public opinion data and the strategies of their competitors and adjust their issue agenda to maximize electoral support.

The question is how political parties adjust their issue agenda when they face a decline in the polls. There are three lines of reasoning which arrive at competing predictions: First, building on the issue ownership theory, political parties should focus on policy issues on which they are considered to be particularly competent (Petrocik, 1996). Second, the riding the wave theory instead posits that political parties should highlight political issues that are salient among voters to signal responsiveness (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994). A third argument that we derive from sociological institutionalism and prior literature on diffusion is that political parties should copy the issue strategies of successful competitors (Böhmelt et al., 2016; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In this section, we will present these theoretical approaches in more detail and derive hypotheses that guide the subsequent empirical analysis.

## 2.1. Issue ownership

The issue ownership theory posits that political parties can effectively “own” policy issues (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). According to this theory, parties strate-

gically focus on selected policy issues in order to establish themselves as the most competent and credible actors on those issues, thereby attracting voter support.

Political parties seek to develop a reputation for expertise and effectiveness in specific policy domains. By consistently emphasizing and advocating for certain issues, parties aim to convince voters that they are the most capable of addressing the challenges and concerns associated with those particular policy areas (Petrocik, 1996). This strategy helps parties differentiate themselves from their opponents and strengthens their appeal to voters who prioritise those issues. Issue ownership can be a long-term strategy for parties to build a loyal and consistent voter base. By associating themselves with specific policy issues over time, parties can cultivate a perception of consistency and commitment to those issues. This can lead to increased trust and support from voters who identify strongly with those policy concerns, resulting in a more stable and reliable support base for the party.

When political parties lose in the polls, it follows from issue ownership theory that parties would attempt to mobilise voters by emphasizing policy issues on which they enjoy a reputation of competence. Voters make their vote choices by evaluating the competence of political parties to handle certain policy issues. Issue ownership theory argues that voters identify the party that is the most competent problem-solver on an issue and cast the ballot for that party. When a party consistently highlights its ownership of specific policy areas, it signals to voters that they are knowledgeable and competent in addressing those concerns. This perception of expertise and effectiveness can instill trust in voters, who may feel more confident in supporting a party that they believe can effectively tackle the issues that matter to them. However, it is moreover not sufficient that political parties are perceived as competent problem-solvers on an issue, the issue also needs to be salient to voters (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008).

Since voters support political parties on the basis of their competence to deal with issues that are important to the voters, political parties attempt to increase the salience of

issues which they own in the minds of citizens. Political parties see no electoral gains from spending time and resources on issues owned by adversaries (Petrocik, 1996). Parties therefore attempt to steer public attention towards their owned issues by emphasizing policy issues on which they are perceived to be competent, while downplaying issues on which opponents enjoy an advantage. By emphasizing their own issues, political parties seek to increase the salience of beneficial issues among the electorate so that party evaluations on their owned issues shape voter decisions at the ballot box. As a result, political parties tend to talk about issues that they own to reap electoral gains (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996; Riker, 1996). Based on issue ownership theory, one would accordingly expect that political parties emphasise the policy issues that they own when they have lost in the polls.

**Hypothesis 1:**

*Political parties pay more attention to political issues that they own than to other political issues when they face a decline in the polls.*

## **2.2. Riding the wave**

The "riding the wave" theory suggests that political parties often respond to the issue priorities of voters in order to gain electoral support (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994). According to this theory, political parties closely monitor public opinion and identify the key concerns and priorities of the electorate. They then strategically position themselves by advocating for policies and solutions that align with those concerns, effectively "riding the wave" of popular sentiment. Instead of conceiving issue competition as a top-down process in which voters take cues from political parties as proposed by the issue ownership theory, the riding the wave theory conceptualises issue emphasis as a bottom-up process in which political parties respond to the issue priorities of voters.

In practice, this theory implies that political parties are highly responsive to the changing dynamics of public opinion (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994; Fournier et al.,

[2003; Sides, 2006]. They constantly adapt their platforms and policy positions to address the most salient issues at any given time. For example, if voters express increasing concern about economic inequality, parties may incorporate policies aimed at wealth redistribution or job creation into their platforms. Similarly, if there is a growing public demand for environmental sustainability, parties may emphasise their commitment to renewable energy and conservation. By riding the wave of public opinion, parties aim to capture the support and loyalty of voters who prioritise specific issues, ultimately enhancing their chances of electoral success. By “riding the wave” on publicly salient issues, political parties signal responsiveness to their voters. They can enhance their popularity by demonstrating to their voters that they listen to them and that they take their concerns seriously.

Sides (2007, p. 467) argues that political parties would be conceived as “out of touch” if they would not talk about the issues that are salient in the minds of citizens. Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994, p. 337) similarly argues that “by advertising on the major issues of the day, candidates are more likely to be seen as concerned, responsive and informed”. Finally, Damore (2004) even explicitly argues political parties should also talk about policy issues even when these are owned by their competitors. A number of recent studies have accordingly shown that political parties are responsive to the issue priorities of voters in election manifestos (Klüver & Spoon, 2016; Spoon & Klüver, 2014; Wagner & Meyer, 2014) and in the press releases that they draft (Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016).

## **Hypothesis 2:**

*The attention that political parties pay to policy issues increases with the salience of these issues to voters when they face a decline in the polls.*



### 2.3. Sociological institutionalism

A third explanation that we put forward in this article is based on sociological institutionalism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Sociological institutionalism starts with the observation that organizations of the same kind typically develop very similar structures and practices. The theory explains the organizational similarity with three mechanisms, namely coercive isomorphism, normative isomorphism and mimetic isomorphism. Coercive isomorphism arises from formal regulations, laws, and governmental policies that organizations must comply with to avoid penalties or loss of legitimacy. Normative isomorphism emerges from social expectations, cultural values, and professional standards that shape what is considered appropriate behaviour within a particular industry or sector. Finally, mimetic isomorphism occurs when organizations imitate successful models or practices in situations of uncertainty, assuming that what works for others will work for them as well.

We argue that mimetic isomorphism equally applies to political parties, which have to make strategic decisions about how to position themselves in the electoral arena in a situation of uncertainty (see also Böhmelt et al., 2016). Following the logic of mimetic isomorphism, we argue that political parties resort to copying the issue emphasis strategies of successful parties as a strategic response when they experience a decline in the polls. Political parties typically seek similar goals, namely votes (Downs, 1957), offices (Riker, 1962) or policies (De Swaan, 1973). Parties face uncertainty in elections as they cannot be sure what the optimal strategy is to successfully compete in elections in order to reach their vote, office or policy objectives. Building on sociological institutionalism, we argue that political parties search for successful examples. They imitate the issue emphasis strategies of political parties that perform successfully in the polls. Parties observe that the successful party's issue emphasis has resonated with voters and garnered public support. By emphasizing the same issues, the declining party hopes to tap into the popular sentiment and regain lost support.

Accordingly, a number of recent studies have shown that political parties imitate the behaviour of other parties. More specifically, prior research has shown that political parties imitate the behaviour of other parties. Government parties respond to the uncertainties of programmatic choice by imitating recently successful governing parties abroad (Böhmelt et al., 2017; Böhmelt et al., 2016; Ezrow et al., 2021) or learning from their partners in transnational party alliances (Senninger et al., 2022), while at the same time distancing themselves from populist parties in government abroad (Adams et al., 2022). In addition, prior research has shown that political parties respond to position changes of other political parties in their own country (Adams & Somer-Topcu, 2009; Gessler & Hunger, 2022; Laver, 2005; Williams, 2015; Williams & Whitten, 2015). Parties are responsive to voter transitions and get adapt positions of parties that they lost voters to (Abou-Chadi & Stoetzer, 2020).

Thus, when facing electoral losses in the polls, we argue that political parties rely on parties that successfully perform in the polls as an example from which they can learn. In a situation of uncertainty in which they have to decide about the optimal issue attention strategy, they imitate successful competitors in the hope that such a strategy would be equally beneficial for them.

### **Hypothesis 3:**

*Parties emphasise the issues of successful competitors when they face a decline in the polls.*

## **3. Data and methods**

### **3.1. Measurement of main variables**

In this paper, we draw on data from four main sources. First, we use press releases to measure the attention a party pays to an issue. Second, polling data gives us a dynamic measure of parties' polling performance. Third, we use survey data to determine issue

ownership. And fourth, we take search data from Google to measure public salience.

**Measuring issue attention through party press releases** We use press releases as a source to obtain estimates of parties’ evolving issue agendas. Press releases bring together a range of benefits to measure parties evolving issue agendas. First, they allow for a fine-grained depiction of parties’ decisions to focus on particular issues in their centralised communication efforts. They are further unconstrained, as parties can choose freely what issues to address.

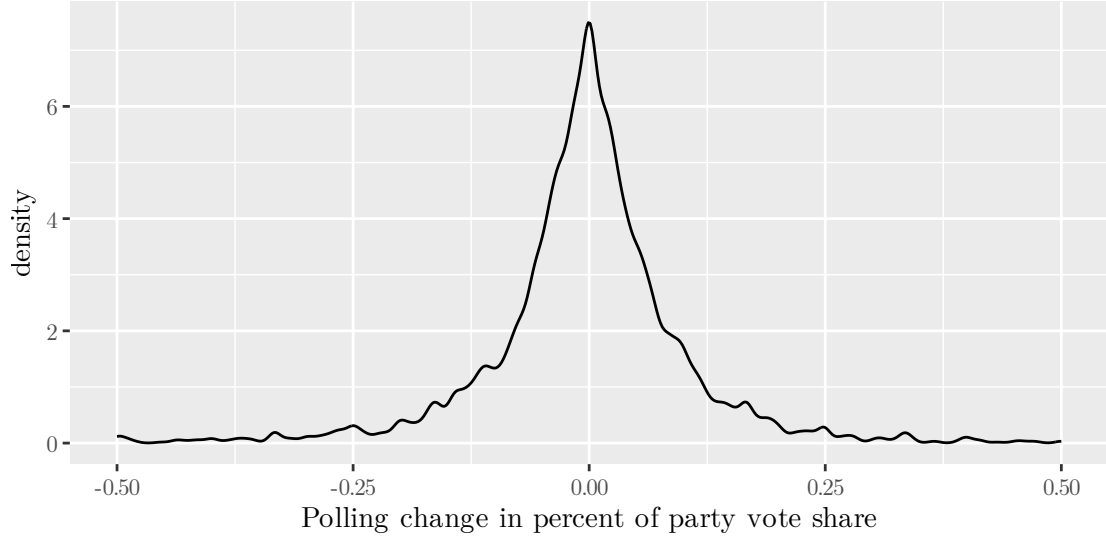
Party press releases from the PARTYPRESS database allow us to test our hypotheses for parties in nine European countries (Austria, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the UK) from 2010 onwards (Erfort et al., 2023). The database provides an issue coding into 21 unique topic areas building on the Comparative Agendas Project (Bonafont et al., 2020) for all the press releases.<sup>1</sup> To arrive at a monthly measure of the attention each party devotes to each issue, we divide the number of issue-specific press releases by the total number of press releases for each party and month. We further discuss and illustrate our measure for parties’ issue attention in SM C.

**Measuring electoral performance by aggregating polling data.** We measure the electoral performance of parties using polling data obtained from Politico’s Poll of Polls (POLITICO, 2022). When there are multiple polling results for a given month, we take the arithmetic mean.

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<sup>1</sup>Additionally, there are two non-issue categories: "Non-thematic" and "Other".

Figure 1: Distribution of polling variable



**Measuring issue ownership using competence scores in surveys.** For each issue, we define the party most preferred by survey respondents as the issue owner. We draw on the Issue Ownership Dataset by Seeberg (2017) based on national election studies. The dataset provides information about the issue owners in seven of the nine countries, and 19 of the 21 issue categories in the PARTYPRESS Database<sup>2</sup>. The issue areas in the ownership dataset also use the coding scheme from the Comparative Agendas Project (Bonafont et al., 2020). We use the most recent measure for each country, assuming stable issue ownership throughout our analysis period.

**Measuring public salience using through search data.** We compile an extensive dataset of Google Trends search data to construct a public salience measure for all issues and countries with monthly data points for our entire sample period. Google Trends data has been used to predict a range of economic parameters such as the unemployment rate by measuring the frequency of search queries for jobs (Siliverstovs & Wochner, 2018).

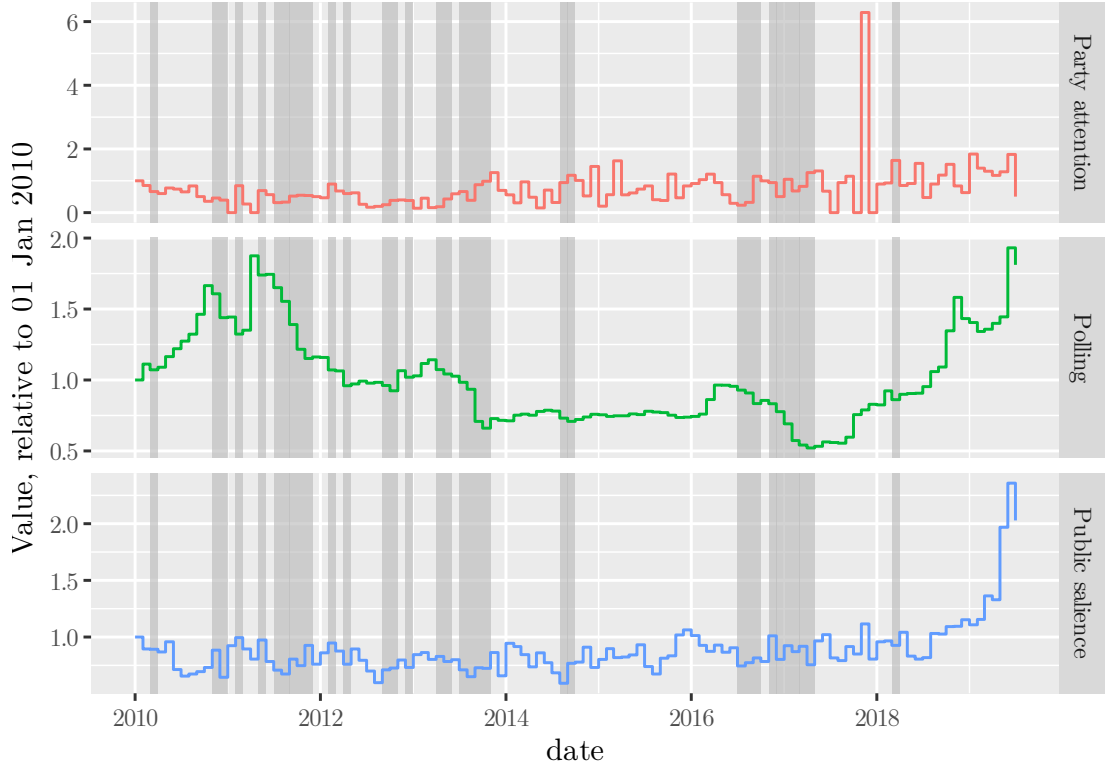
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<sup>2</sup>We lack issue ownership data for Poland and Spain, and the issue categories Technology and Foreign Trade. Additionally, we do not have ownership data for all country-issue combinations covered by the PARTYPRESS Database.

Google Trends data has also been found to work well to estimate issue salience among the public, although the salience of some issues is difficult to capture (Mellon, 2013). Therefore, we restrict some analyses to specific issues in SM E. In political science applications, Google Trends data has been used successfully as a measure for the public salience of immigration (Gessler & Hunger, 2022). We validate our measure against survey data in SM D.1.

We extract relevant keywords for each issue and country from the press releases in each country. More specifically, we build Naive Bayes supervised text models. First, we take the 20 keywords with the largest model weights per party. Second, we only keep search terms that are in the top 20 of at least two parties to avoid too party-specific search terms. Third, after the collection of the search trends, we exclude search terms with an arithmetic mean above the 60% quantile and with a variance above the 80% quantile to avoid too general search terms with a constantly high search volume and search terms with a high volatility as either provide little information about salience trends. Note that the resulting variable is not comparable between issues because the data are based on the relative popularity within search terms over time. We account for this in the analysis by using a model with unit fixed effects. We discuss the validation of our measure against survey measures for salience in the SM D.1.

Figure 2: Main variables for the Environment and the German Green party, monthly



Time periods with poll losses below the 33% quantile are shaded. According to the issue ownership hypothesis, the Greens should increase their attention to this issue during the highlighted loss periods because they own the issue.

### 3.2. Modeling

The dependent variables of our models are the monthly party-specific salience measures for the different issue areas. Our modeling strategy focuses on creating a valid representation of the issue attention in the different areas and involves the use of fixed effects OLS panel estimators. To address concerns of potential autoregression we also present models including lagged dependent variables in SM [F](#) where we work with two lags of the dependent variable. This means that these models assume a serial correlation structure, where the first-order and second-order lag of the dependent variable is correlated with the dependent variable, but there should be no higher-order serial correlation.

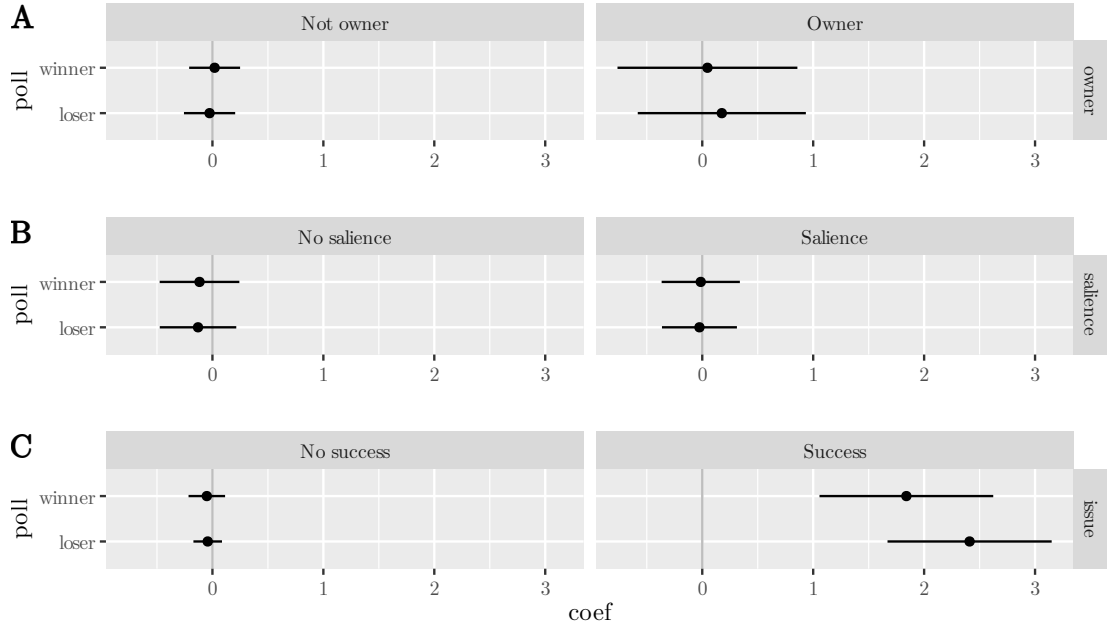
The independent variables are included as exogenous variables in the dynamic panel model. We include two variables if parties lost or won in the polls compared to the last month by creating a dummy variable that indicates if a party lost or won more than 2.9% in the polls relative to its vote share (corresponding to the 33% quantile of the empirical distribution). We do not take the untransformed change in vote share percentage points because this would make the threshold dependent on party size. To evaluate the different hypotheses, we interact these variables in three subsequent model specifications with the measures of hypothesis: issue ownership, public salience of the topic and the issue raised by the most successful party in the polls. According to the hypothesis, we would expect that the interaction with the *Poll loser* variable is positive, as losing support in the polls should lead parties to increase the issue attention to the area that they either own (Hypothesis 1), that has a high public salience (Hypothesis 2), or that is raised by successful competitor (Hypothesis 3). We do not make any predictions about the interactions with the *Poll winner* variable.

## 4. Results

We test our hypotheses in separate regressions. [Figure 3](#) presents the results for three models and illustrates the main marginal effects (full results in [Table 1](#)). Evaluating the different hypotheses, we find little support that strong changes in polls lead to issue attention changes. Of our main independent variables, none of the specified interactions between the *Poll loser* variable and the variables for issue ownership, salience, and emphasis by a successful competitor are significant at conventional levels but they are in the expected direction and are larger than for the interactions with *Poll winner*. The combined marginal effects plotted in [Figure 3](#) reflect these results. Note that we only find combined effects of statistical significance for parties taking up the issue of a successful competitor. However, this is independent of whether a party lost in the polls or not. In sum, we take the results as evidence that our hypotheses about party competition

over the electoral cycle do not explain parties' dynamic issue competition sufficiently. In SM [E](#), we discuss under which circumstances parties may still respond according to our expectations.

Figure 3: Combined marginal effects from fixed-effects OLS estimation



Note: The dependent variable is the predicted change in issue attention in the  $t + 1$ .



Table 1: Results from fixed-effects OLS estimation

Dependent Variable: Model:	Party attention to issue		
	Owner (1)	Salience (2)	Issue (3)
<i>Variables</i>			
Poll loser	-0.0259 (0.1178)	-0.1300 (0.1760)	-0.0427 (0.0657)
Poll winner	0.0198 (0.1171)	-0.1166 (0.1833)	-0.0507 (0.0841)
Owner $\times$ Poll loser	0.2021 (0.4014)		
Owner $\times$ Poll winner	0.0269 (0.4310)		
Public salience		0.0996*** (0.0072)	
Public salience $\times$ Poll loser		0.0050 (0.0061)	
Public salience $\times$ Poll winner		0.0034 (0.0064)	
Successful issue			1.945*** (0.3123)
Successful issue $\times$ Poll loser			0.5073 (0.4262)
Successful issue $\times$ Poll winner			-0.0546 (0.4804)
<i>Fixed-effects</i>			
panelid	Yes	Yes	Yes
month_t	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>			
Observations	28,171	79,493	52,770
R <sup>2</sup>	0.17945	0.26853	0.28387
Within R <sup>2</sup>	$1.64 \times 10^{-5}$	0.00936	0.00465

*Clustered (panelid) standard-errors in parentheses*

*Signif. Codes: \*\*\*: 0.001, \*\*: 0.01, \*: 0.05, .: 0.1*

We find our control variables to behave as expected. Whether a party lost in the polls applies equally to all issues under analysis, and is therefore not a predictor for the attention given to an issue. Public salience and being the main issue of a successful competitor, however, has a significant and positive effect on the attention parties pay to the issue. We take this as tentative evidence that our models capture the dynamics of party competition.

## 5. Conclusion

In this study, we examined the responsiveness of political parties throughout the entire electoral cycle. Using the PARTYPRESS dataset, we construct a dynamic measure of parties' issue attention and evaluate three hypotheses for how parties adapt their focus over the electoral cycle. By analyzing the relationship between public opinion polls and parties' issue agendas, we aimed to shed light on the dynamics of party responsiveness.

Our findings reveal that the hypotheses are not sufficient to understand how political parties are responsive to public opinion polls. Neither do parties adapt their issue attention to successful challengers to match a publicly salient issue, nor do they focus on their core issues when they lose strongly in the polls.

One reason for the null finding for all parties might be theoretical. Maybe the three presented perspectives are really not sufficient to understand how parties adapt their issue attentions to changes in public support. Future research could develop additional hypotheses how parties navigate competition via issue attention in multi-party settings.

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