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Setting the Agenda or Responding to Voters? Political Parties, Voters and Issue Attention

HEIKE KLÜVER and IÑAKI SAGARZAZU 

Why do political parties prioritise some policy issues over others? While the issue ownership theory suggests that parties emphasise policy issues on which they have an advantage in order to increase the salience of these issues among voters, the riding the wave theory argues instead that parties respond to voters by highlighting policy issues that are salient in the minds of citizens. This study sheds new light on the selective issue emphasis of political parties by analysing issue attention throughout the entire electoral cycle. On the basis of a quantitative text analysis of more than 40,000 press releases published by German parties from 2000 until 2010, this article provides empirical support for the riding the wave theory. It shows that political parties take their cues from voters by responding to the issue priorities of their electorate. The results have important implications for political representation and the role that parties play in democracies.

Keywords: issue attention; political parties press; releases; quantitative text analysis; representation

The idea of party competition through selective emphasis of policy issues has long been discussed in the literature on party competition (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996; Robertson 1976). The general idea is that political parties compete for votes by strategically emphasising some policy issues while down-playing others. Political parties spend a great deal of time and effort on carefully selecting what issues to talk about. Accordingly, the issue agenda of political parties has been the subject of numerous studies investigating what political issues parties talk about (e.g. Budge and Farlie 1983; Green-Pedersen 2007; van de Wardt *et al.* 2014), why new policy issues emerge (e.g. Adams 1997; Hobolt and de Vries 2015; Spoon and Klüver 2014) and whether political debate is characterised by issue convergence or divergence (e.g. Damore 2005; Sigelman and Buell 2004).

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While scholars largely agree that selective issue emphasis is an important instrument of party competition, there is still disagreement about why some issues are prioritised over others. There are essentially two major theories that seek to explain why political parties devote attention to some issues, but not to others. Issue ownership theory argues that political parties emphasise policy issues on which they are considered to be competent (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). By raising the public salience of the issues that they 'own', political parties try to steer public debate towards issues on which they have a competitive advantage over their opponents. By contrast, the riding the wave theory argues that issue competition is instead a bottom-up process in which political parties respond to the issue priorities of citizens (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994). In this line of reasoning, political parties are responsive to their electorate by strategically emphasising policy issues that are currently salient in the minds of voters to reap electoral gains.

The empirical evidence regarding the competing issue ownership and riding the wave theories is however inconclusive. While some studies show that issue ownership influences what political parties talk about (e.g. Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996; Petrocik *et al.* 2003; Spiliotes and Vavreck 2002), others demonstrate that parties respond to the policy priorities of their voters (e.g. Klüver and Spoon 2014; Spoon and Klüver 2014; Wagner and Meyer 2014). In addition, the vast majority of studies investigating selective issue emphasis of political parties focuses on political communication in the United States (e.g. Damore 2005; Petrocik 1996; Sides 2007; Sigelman and Buell 2004; Spiliotes and Vavreck 2002).

While these studies shed important light on how campaign dynamics work in a two-party system, multi-party systems work quite differently. In two-party systems, one party is in government while the other is in opposition so that these parties directly oppose each other without the need to compromise. By contrast, political parties in multi-party systems typically face the need to form coalitions with at least one other party so that party competition between potential coalition partners might be less intense than between parties in a two-party system (see e.g. Müller and Strøm 2000). As a result, one could expect that the riding the wave theory might better explain parties' selective issue emphasis in multi-party systems as parties could settle on policy issues that are salient to the electorate while the issue ownership theory might be more suitable to explain the fierce competition between parties in a two-party system where each party is solely interested in maximising its own electoral benefits. What is more, previous research almost exclusively focused on issue competition in election campaigns (Damore 2005; Hayes 2008; Klüver and Spoon 2014; Sides 2007; Sigelman and Buell 2004; Spiliotes and Vavreck 2002; Spoon and Klüver 2014; Wagner and Meyer 2014). Election campaigns are very different from the day-to-day politics during the legislative term as they only cover a short period of heated political competition. We therefore know very little about how the dynamics of political dialogue work in 'normal' times of party competition.

To better understand how parties choose the issues they talk about, this paper makes two major contributions to the literature. First, we provide a comprehensive analysis of political communication strategies of political parties embedded in a multi-party system. Second and more importantly, we rely on a novel dataset that was generated based on a quantitative text analysis of more than 40,000 press releases published by German political parties between 2000 and 2010 which allows for analysing issue competition throughout the entire electoral cycle. Press releases constitute an ideal instrument of political communication as political parties can independently choose what to communicate to their voters on a daily basis (see also Grimmer 2010; Hopmann *et al.* 2012; Sagarzazu and Klüver 2015). Unlike speeches or questions in the legislature which are constrained by the parliamentary agenda, political parties can freely decide which political issues they want to emphasise. Unlike party manifestos which are only published for elections and therefore only available for a few points in time, political parties issue several press releases per day. By studying press releases we are therefore able to shed light on the dynamics of political communication and issue competition throughout the entire electoral cycle on a day-to-day basis. Our results provide empirical evidence for the riding the wave argument since we show that political parties take their cues from voters while the expectations of the issue ownership theory could not be confirmed.

Understanding why political parties prioritise certain issues over others has important implications for our understanding of political representation and party responsiveness. Political parties play an important function in modern democracy as they are supposed to articulate and aggregate citizens' preferences and thereby to link governmental policy with society (Dalton *et al.* 2011; Miller and Stokes 1963). Accordingly, recent studies started to explore to what extent political parties respond to the issue priorities of citizens (Klüver and Spoon 2014; Spoon and Klüver 2014, 2015; Wagner and Meyer 2014). While this research has significantly advanced our understanding of the relationship between parties and voters, these studies were solely limited to studying parties' selective issue emphasis during election campaigns by analysing the content of their election manifestos. Our study therefore importantly contributes to our understanding of political parties and democracy as we shed light on the degree of party responsiveness throughout the entire legislative cycle.

Explaining Parties' Issue Attention

The literature on party competition has identified selective issue emphasis as an important strategy of party competition. Scholars have argued that political parties compete with each other by campaigning on different policy issues rather than by opposing each other on the same issues (e.g. Budge and Farlie 1983; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Petrocik 1996). However, while the selective issue emphasis has been recognised as an important strategy of party competition (e.g. Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996; Robertson 1976), scholars

disagree about why political parties choose the policy issues they talk about. It is largely undisputed that issue competition matters, but there is still dissent about *why* certain issues are prioritised over others. There are two major lines of reasoning which arrive at competing predictions. First, the issue ownership theory argues that political parties set the issue agenda by communicating on policy issues on which they have an advantage to increase the salience of these issues among voters in order to reap electoral gains (Petrocik 1996). Second, the riding the wave theory instead posits that political parties primarily respond to voters by highlighting political issues that are salient in the minds of citizens to benefit electorally from being responsive to the electorate (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994).

Issue Ownership

Issue ownership theory argues that political parties can effectively 'own' different issues (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). When a party owns an issue, it is perceived by the electorate as having issue-specific policy expertise and therefore being particularly competent at handling problems in that issue area (Petrocik 1996). For instance, in the United States, Democrats are considered to own the issue of health care and Republicans are believed to own the issue of national security (Petrocik 1996). In a similar vein, voters particularly trust green parties when it comes to environmental protection (Budge *et al.* 1987).

According to the issue ownership model, political parties attempt to mobilise voters by emphasising 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. For instance, if health care is the most salient issue in a given US election, issue ownership theory suggests that voters would evaluate political parties with regard to their competence to solve the health care problem. As the Democratic Party is generally considered to have more expertise and competence to deal with health care in the US, issue ownership theory predicts that voters would cast their vote for the Democrats and not for the Republican Party in that election. However, it is moreover not sufficient that political parties are perceived as competent problem-solvers on an issue, but the issue also needs to be salient to voters, as pointed out by Bélanger and Meguid (2008).

Since voters support political parties on the basis of their competence to deal with issues that are important to them, political parties attempt to increase the salience of 'their' issues in the minds of citizens. Parties therefore try to steer public attention towards their owned issues by emphasising policy issues on which they are perceived to be competent while downplaying issues on which opponents enjoy an advantage (Petrocik 1996). By highlighting 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, based on the issue ownership theory we hypothesise that political parties will focus on their own issues to reap electoral gains.

Hypothesis 1: *Political parties pay more attention to political issues that they own than to other political issues.*

Riding the Wave

While the issue ownership theory considers political parties as agenda-setters which selectively highlight their own issues to increase the salience of these issues among voters, the riding the wave theory predicts the opposite. Instead of conceiving issue competition as a top-down process in which voters take cues from political parties, the riding the wave theory conceptualises issue emphasis as a bottom-up process in which political parties respond to the issue priorities of voters (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994). It is argued that the most effective strategies to win elections are those where politicians and parties focus on the issues that are salient to the electorate regardless of who owns those issues (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Fournier *et al.* 2003). By ‘riding the wave’ on publicly salient issues that are timely and newsworthy, 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.

Accordingly, Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994: 337) state that ‘by advertising on the major issues of the day, candidates are more likely to be seen as concerned, responsive and informed’. Similarly, Sides (2007: 467) argues that ignoring the issues that are salient to the general public could lead voters to perceive political parties to be ‘out of touch’ with citizens’ concerns and worries. Damore (2004) furthermore shows that candidates even talk about adversarial issues that are owned by their opponents if these issues are important to the public. If policy issues are already salient in the minds of voters, parties will adhere to these issues in order not to simply abdicate these issues to their opponents. Finally, recent research analysing the content of party manifestos has similarly found evidence for the riding the wave argument. When drafting their election platforms, political parties respond to the policy priorities of citizens (Klüver and Spoon 2014; Spoon and Klüver 2014; Wagner and Meyer 2014).

Hence, following the riding the wave theory, we hypothesise that political parties flexibly adjust their issue attention in response to voters’ policy priorities. They emphasise policy issues that are important to voters while ignoring issues that are of little concern to their electorate.

Hypothesis 2: *The attention that political parties pay to policy issues increases with the salience of these issues to voters.*

Research Design

In this section, we explain how we test the competing predictions of the issue ownership and riding the wave theories. We first explain why we have selected Germany as a test case. We then discuss how we measured political parties' issue attention before we illustrate the operationalisation of the explanatory and control variables.

Political Parties in Germany

We have selected Germany as a test case for studying the determinants of parties' issue attention for several reasons. First, previous research has almost exclusively analysed selective issue emphasis of political parties in the United States (e.g. Damore 2005; Petrocik 1996; Sides 2007; Sigelman and Buell 2004; Spiliotes and Vavreck 2002). While these studies have made important advances, the two-party system in the US works quite differently from multi-party systems. In two-party systems, the electoral contest takes place between two candidates of two major parties who compete for governmental office. By contrast, in multi-party systems there are multiple parties that are able to obtain control over executive office most often by forming a coalition government with at least one other partner (see e.g. Müller and Strøm 2000). Second, we selected the German multi-party system due to data availability considerations. All parties included in the German Bundestag regularly issue press releases which constitute an ideal source for measuring the attention that parties pay to different policy issues, as we further outline below. Since the press releases of all Bundestag parties are publicly available on their websites or in archives of political foundations, we are able to trace the issue agenda of political parties in Germany on a day-to-day basis.

Measuring Issue Attention

In order to analyse the attention that political parties in Germany pay to different policy issues, we study the press releases published by their party groups in the German Bundestag (see also Sagarzazu and Klüver 2015). Press releases are an ideal data source to study the selective issue emphasis of political parties as we can trace the attention that parties pay to different policy issues on a daily basis, which constitutes a major advantage over election manifestos which are only published in election years. We study press releases that were published between 2000 until 2010. This time span allows for studying selective issue emphasis across four legislative terms with three different government compositions (the SPD and the Greens from 1998 until 2005, a grand coalition consisting of the CDU/CSU and SPD from 2005 until 2009 and a coalition government between the CDU/CSU and the liberal FDP from 2009 onwards). However, we did not include the press releases published by the

socialist party for two reasons: First, the PDS (as it was then called) did not pass the 5 per cent threshold and only gained two direct mandates in the 2002 election. As a result, it did not constitute a party group in the Bundestag. Second, in the 2000 to 2010 period, the socialist party underwent considerable changes. In 2005, it formed an electoral alliance with members of the newly founded WASG running on PDS lists before both parties merged in 2007 and formed the new socialist party 'Die LINKE'. It furthermore has to be noted that we were not able to analyse the press releases published by the CDU/CSU in 2000 as these releases could not be provided by the party group or by the associated party foundation. Table A.1 in the appendix shows the total number of press releases published by German parties and Figure A.1 illustrates, for each month, the average number of press releases per day published by each of the four parties.

In order to classify the press releases into issue areas we use the Bayesian expressed agenda model developed by Grimmer (2010).¹ By using this unsupervised quantitative text analysis approach we are able to automatically group press releases into distinct issue categories based on word co-occurrences within and across the different press releases included in our text corpus. The central idea of this model is that the probability that two words from the same issue area are mentioned in a given press release is higher than the probability of two words from different issues co-occurring. For example, words such as 'university', 'school' or 'teacher' share a high probability of being mentioned in a press release on education while words such as 'military', 'army' and 'war' have a high likelihood of occurring in press releases on defence policy.

We prepared our dataset by following standard procedures in order to convert our raw data into a word frequency matrix required as input for the expressed agenda model (e.g. Grimmer 2010; Grimmer and Stewart 2013). These include removing stop words, deleting all party labels, stemming words to their syntactical root and eliminating words present in more than 95 per cent of texts or in less than 1.5 per cent. With the final set of words we generate the word frequency matrix which serves as input to the expressed agenda model algorithm. In order to classify documents into issue areas, it is furthermore required to indicate the authors of the press releases (in this case the parties) and the number of issues in which the texts should be classified. Similar to other works in the discipline (Grimmer and Stewart 2013), we performed a two-stage process to determine the number of issues. At the first stage, we estimated the model with a varying number of issues ranging from 15 to 35. At stage two, we selected the final model after assessing the validity of the different topic groupings. We assessed the validity of the classification in three ways: first by analysing the internal consistency of the topics; second, by comparing the issue classification to the issue agenda of the German Bundestag; and third, by comparing the automatic classification with the classification performed by human coders.

First, we evaluated whether the press releases that were grouped into one thematic category are internally consistent by analysing the key terms which

TABLE 1
TIME-SERIES CROSS-SECTION REGRESSION ANALYSIS

| DV: Party issue attention (t_0) | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 |
|--|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| <i>Explanatory variables</i> | | | |
| Voter issue attention (t_{-1}) | 0.025* (0.010) | 0.025* (0.010) | 0.025* (0.010) |
| Competence attribution (ownership) | 0.003 (0.005) | 0.003 (0.005) | 0.004 (0.004) |
| <i>Control variables</i> | | | |
| Opposition party | 0.065 (0.366) | 0.065 (0.365) | 0.044 (0.212) |
| Manifesto issue salience | 0.007 (0.040) | 0.007 (0.039) | 0.006 (0.041) |
| Gov't/Opp'n issue attention (t_{-1}) | 0.203*** (0.029) | 0.203*** (0.029) | 0.203*** (0.029) |
| Ministry control | 0.022 (0.277) | 0.021 (0.278) | 0.045 (0.254) |
| No of months until national election | -0.000 (0.005) | -0.000 (0.009) | -0.000 (0.005) |
| EP election | -0.012 (0.313) | -0.007 (0.314) | -0.012 (0.313) |
| State election | 0.005 (0.212) | 0.005 (0.216) | 0.004 (0.214) |
| Unemployment (t_{-1}) | -0.005 (0.084) | -0.001 (0.093) | -0.006 (0.082) |
| BSE crisis | -0.003 (0.358) | -0.000 (0.366) | -0.011 (0.348) |
| CDU funding scandal | 0.006 (0.239) | 0.015 (0.307) | 0.007 (0.238) |
| 9/11 terrorist attack | -0.041 (0.432) | -0.039 (0.440) | -0.033 (0.433) |
| Afghanistan war | 0.008 (0.472) | 0.004 (0.478) | 0.007 (0.472) |
| Flood | 0.001 (0.845) | 0.009 (0.816) | 0.002 (0.844) |
| World cup | 0.014 (0.603) | 0.001 (0.675) | 0.016 (0.603) |
| Economic crisis | -0.006 (0.140) | -0.013 (0.225) | -0.006 (0.139) |
| CDU/CSU-SPD coalition | | 0.023 (0.257) | |
| CDU/CSU-FDP coalition | | 0.028 (0.428) | |
| FDP | | | 0.083 (0.784) |
| Greens | | | 0.058 (0.492) |
| SPD | | | -0.028 (0.340) |
| Party issue attention (t_{-1}) | 0.555*** (0.062) | 0.555*** (0.062) | 0.555*** (0.062) |
| Constant | 1.767 (0.947) | 1.722 (0.967) | 1.734 (0.960) |
| N | 6,060 | 6,060 | 6,060 |
| R^2 | 0.470 | 0.470 | 0.470 |
| F | 49.449 | 53.411 | 45.815 |
| LogLik | -19,290.483 | -19,290.478 | -19,290.375 |
| AIC | 38,618.966 | 38,622.956 | 38,624.750 |

*** $p \leq 0.01$; ** $p \leq 0.05$; * $p \leq 0.10$.
Standard errors in parentheses.

the expressed agenda model identified for assigning the texts to the different issue areas. Table A.2 in the appendix summarises the (translated) top 10 key terms for each of the 20 issue areas we identified. The key terms clearly express a focus on the associated issue areas. For instance, the terms *education*, *university* and *research* undoubtedly signal that press releases deal with education and research policy. Similarly, the terms *environment*, *nature conservation* and *nuclear safety* clearly indicate that a press release is about environment and nuclear safety policy while the terms *international*, *usa* and *foreign policy* demonstrate a press statement's focus on international politics.

Second, while the words grouped in each topic clearly point to the existence of common issue areas, the second step in assessing the validity of the results is comparing the identified issue areas to what are considered to be the main policy issues in German politics. For this external cross-validation, we relied on the most important institutional structures that organise the issue agenda in the German Bundestag, namely the permanent committees. When we compare the 20 issue areas identified through the quantitative text analysis with the committee portfolios (see Table A.3 in the appendix) we can perfectly match 13 out of the 20 issue areas with a specific committee portfolio. Four other issue areas map into two different committees, as some committees take responsibility for more than one issue area. Given that some issue areas are broader in scope than the committees in the Bundestag, we also find that three issue areas cover more than one committee's policy remit. Finally, even though there is no committee dealing with *Länder* issues, it is in fact evidence for the validity of the text analysis that this issue was identified as it plays a crucial role in German politics (Däubler and Debus 2009). In addition, out of the four Bundestag committees which could not be linked to any text analysis issues, two deal with procedural issues (*Petitions* and *Scrutiny of Elections*) and two are related to minor policy areas (*Sports* and *Tourism*). All in all we are therefore confident that the issue areas identified by the text analysis have both internal consistency and external validity.

Third, we compared the classification by the expressed agenda model with the classification of press statements by human coders. Following Grimmer and Stewart (2013), we obtained a stratified sample from the press releases text corpus that included 10 press statements per thematic category. We then relied on human coding to place the press releases into the 20 thematic categories. Overall, there was an agreement of 75 per cent between the manual and the automated classification.

We measure the attention that political parties pay to policy issues by the percentage of press releases devoted to each of the 20 issue areas out of the total number of press releases published in a month. We analyse the issue attention of political parties on a monthly basis in order to keep the dataset manageable and since many of the independent variables are not available on a daily level (e.g. the salience of issues to voters.)

Measuring Explanatory and Control Variables

In order to test the effect of *voter issue attention* on parties' issue emphasis, we obtained data on the most important policy issues from the *Politbarometer*, which is a representative survey that is carried out monthly among German citizens and includes an open question that asks respondents about the most important problem (MIP). We matched the most important issues indicated by respondents with the issue areas identified by the text analysis and used the percentage of respondents indicating each issue area as important as a measure for voter issue attention. As political parties need some time to process voters' policy priorities, we predict the emphasis that parties place on a policy issue at t_0 (the current month) with the salience of the issue among voters at t_{-1} (the past month).

We operationalise *issue ownership* of political parties drawing on data on competence attribution obtained from election studies, which is a commonly used measure in the literature (see e.g. Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Green and Hobolt 2008). We combine two questions included in the German election studies. First, we use the most important problem question included in election studies to identify the issue priorities of German citizens. Second, we use a follow-up question which asks respondents to report which party is most competent in dealing with the most important issue in their view. We rely on the percentage of respondents who indicated that a political party is competent in dealing with a given issue area as a measure for issue ownership of political parties.

We furthermore control for a number of possible confounding variables. First, as issue emphasis might systematically vary over the course of the legislative term, we measure the stage of the *electoral cycle* by the number of months until the next national election. Second, we take into account the impact of *state-level elections* and *European Parliament elections* by including dummy variables indicating whether such an election took place during the same month. Third, since issue attention might vary systematically between government and opposition parties, we included a binary measure for *opposition parties*. Fourth, as political parties might pay more attention to issues that they emphasised in their previous election manifesto to signal compliance with election promises (Thomson 2001), we obtained data on issue salience in parties' election manifestos from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) (Budge *et al.* 2001; Klingemann *et al.* 2006). The CMP developed a classification scheme with 56 categories grouped into seven policy domains. In order to bring together the press release data with the CMP data, we matched the CMP categories and the issue areas identified by the text analysis (see Table A.4 in the appendix). Altogether, we were able to identify 12 issue areas that were common to both the quantitative text analysis of parties' press releases and the CMP. Manifesto issue salience was measured by the percentage of quasi-sentences devoted to an issue area in the party manifesto published for the previous national election.

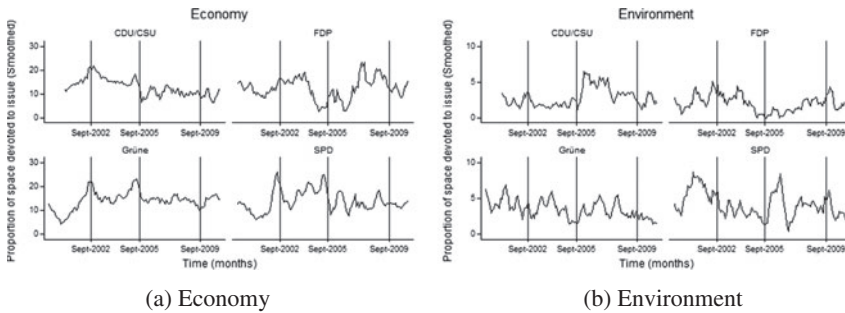
Fifth, as parties' issue emphasis might furthermore be affected by the attention that other parties pay to policy issues (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010), we include a measure for the lagged attention that government parties paid to a policy issue if the other party is in opposition and the lagged attention that opposition parties paid to a policy issue if the other party is in government, respectively (*Government/opposition issue attention*). Sixth, as political parties might place greater emphasis on policy issues which fall into the remits of their ministerial portfolios, we include a dummy variable for *ministerial control* over the respective issue area (see Table A.4 for the matching of ministry portfolios and issue areas). Seventh, in order to control for the state of the economy we include the *unemployment rate* in our model. Finally, we control for important *focusing events* that might have caused shifts in political communication strategies of coalition parties, namely the BSE (mad cow disease) crisis, the CDU funding scandal, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the war in Afghanistan, the devastating German flood in 2002, the 2006 football world cup in Germany and the current economic crisis.

Data Analysis

Figure 1 presents the attention that all four analysed parties paid to the issues of the economy and the environment from 2000 until 2010. Each of the figures is subdivided into four graphs, one for each of the four parties in our dataset. Each graph shows the (smoothed) evolution of attention to the economy (Figure 1(a)) and to the environment (Figure 1(b)) over time. The three vertical lines separate the four legislative periods that we analysed in our dataset. The first two periods correspond to the SPD–Green coalition, the third period to the grand coalition between the SPD and the CDU/CSU, and the last period to the CDU/CSU–FDP coalition. Figure 1(a) shows that the economy issue receives on average about 10 per cent of the parties' attention, with considerable variation between the four parties. For instance, the FDP considerably increased its emphasis on the economy before and during the economic crisis while the CDU/CSU paid less attention to the economy once in government. Figure 1(b) moreover demonstrates that German parties pay much less attention to the environment (under 5 per cent on average) compared to the economy. It is interesting to note in this figure that the period in which the SPD was most attentive to environmental protection was during its first coalition with the Greens.

In order to empirically test our hypotheses while controlling for possible confounding variables, we next present multivariate regression models. The observations in our dataset are not independent, as assumed by ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. On the one hand, the observations are clustered into four political parties and 12 issue areas. In order to address this problem, we estimate regression models with clustered robust standard errors that account for this twofold clustering into political parties and policy issues. On the other

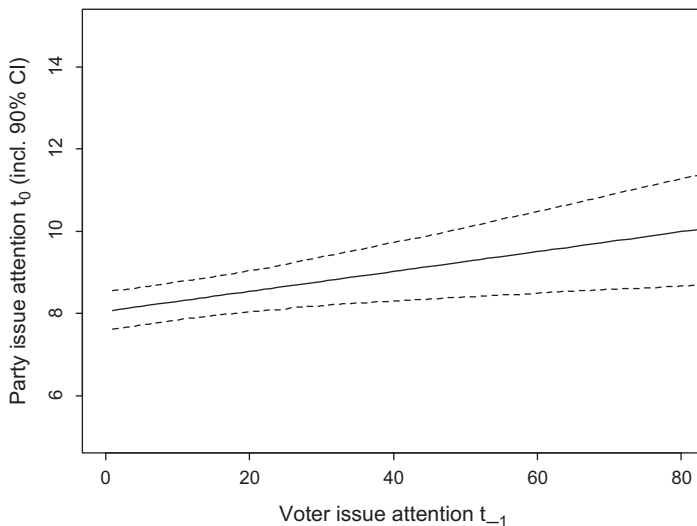
FIGURE 1
POLITICAL PARTIES' ATTENTION TO ISSUES



hand, we analyse party issue attention over time as our observations correspond to monthly party issue emphasis from 2000 until 2010. This timing component potentially leads to autocorrelation in the dependent variable. In order to control for potential autocorrelation, we include the lagged dependent variable in the regression analyses (Beck and Katz 1995, 1996).

Table 1 presents the results of the time-series cross-section regression analysis. Model 1 includes the explanatory variables and the various control variables discussed above. Model 2, moreover, comprises fixed effects for legislative terms as party issue attention might significantly vary across terms due to varying government and opposition configurations. Finally, Model 3 includes fixed effects for political parties as issue emphasis might systematically vary between different types of political parties. Across all three model

FIGURE 2
EFFECT OF VOTERS' ATTENTION TO ISSUES



specifications, we arrive at the same substantial results. Party issue ownership does not exhibit a systematic effect on party issue emphasis. The competence attribution by voters cannot predict the attention that German parties pay to different policy issues. Hence, the regression analysis does not provide any empirical support for the issue ownership theory. By contrast, we consistently find across all three models that the salience of political issues to voters at t_{-1} has a statistically significant effect on the attention that parties pay to policy issues at t_0 . The greater the salience of an issue to voters in the past month, the more attention parties pay to this policy issue in the current month. Hence, the empirical analysis supports the riding the wave argument while refuting the ownership hypothesis. Parties respond to their voters by emphasising policy issues that are important to their electorate.

In order to illustrate the effect of voter issue attention on parties' issue emphasis, we have simulated predicted values as suggested by King *et al.* (2000). Figure 2 shows the predicted party issue attention at t_0 as voter issue attention at t_{-1} increases. Figure 2 clearly demonstrates that the attention that political parties pay to policy issues systematically increases with the salience of the issues among voters. Across the entire range of observed values of voter issue attention, an increase in public salience of an issue goes hand in hand with an increase in party issue emphasis. Political issues that are salient among voters in the preceding month receive considerably more attention from political parties than policy issues that are of little concern to voters. The size of this effect, while small in absolute terms, is quite significant when you compare it to the average attention that parties pay to the different policy issues. On average, an issue receives 8 per cent of the overall party attention in a given month. This attention can be almost doubled (*ceteris paribus*) when the issue is salient in the public. All in all, a change from minimum to maximum voter issue attention corresponds to an increase in party issue attention by one standard deviation.

As one may argue that political parties may not only respond to voters, but that voters simultaneously take their cues from parties, we performed two different tests to check whether such a reciprocal relationship is at play. We first conducted a Granger causality test (for a similar procedure, see e.g. Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). The test indicates that voter issue attention at t_{-1} indeed Granger-causes party issue attention at t_0 (see Table A.6 in the appendix). However, the Granger causality test does not provide any empirical support for the reversed relationship. In addition, we have also estimated reversed regression models with voter issue attention as the dependent variable and the lagged party issue attention as the independent variable to test the reversed relationship between voters and political parties (see Table A.7 in the appendix). In line with the results of the Granger causality test, party issue attention at t_{-1} does not have a statistically significant effect on issue salience to voters at t_0 . Hence, both checks support the claim that the issue linkage between voters and political parties is a bottom-up rather than a top down process. Political parties respond to voters, not the other way around.

TABLE 2
CAMPAIGN ROBUSTNESS CHECK REGRESSION ANALYSIS

| DV: Party issue attention (t_0) | Model 4 |
|--|--------------------|
| <i>Explanatory variables</i> | |
| Campaign period | -0.296 (0.37) |
| Voter issue attention (t_{-1}) | 0.026** (0.01) |
| Voter issue attention (t_{-1}) \times Campaign | -0.011 (0.01) |
| Competence attribution (ownership) | 0.003 (0.00) |
| Competence attribution (ownership) \times Campaign | 0.004 (0.01) |
| <i>Explanatory variables</i> | |
| Opposition party | 0.069 (0.37) |
| Manifesto issue salience | 0.002 (0.04) |
| Manifesto issue salience \times Campaign | 0.045 (0.05) |
| Government/opposition issue attention (t_{-1}) | 0.203*** (0.03) |
| Ministry control | 0.024 (0.28) |
| No of months until national election | -0.000 (0.01) |
| EP election | 0.002 (0.31) |
| State election | 0.005 (0.21) |
| Unemployment (t_{-1}) | -0.005 (0.10) |
| BSE crisis | -0.001 (0.36) |
| CDU funding scandal | 0.009 (0.24) |
| 9/11 terrorist attacks | -0.041 (0.43) |
| Afghanistan war | 0.007 (0.48) |
| Flood | 0.005 (0.97) |
| World cup | 0.011 (0.61) |
| Economic crisis | 0.002 (0.21) |
| Party issue attention (t_{-1}) | 0.555*** (0.06) |
| Constant | 1.794* (1.02) |
| N | 6,060 |
| R^2 | 0.5 |
| F | 44 |
| LogLik | -19,290 |
| AIC | 38,625.7 |

*** $p \leq 0.01$; ** $p \leq 0.05$; * $p \leq 0.10$.

Standard errors in parentheses.

With regard to the control variables, we essentially only find a statistically significant effect of government–opposition issue attention. In addition to the positive effect of issue salience among voters on the emphasis that parties place on different policy issues, parties’ issue attention is affected by the salience of the issue among government and opposition parties respectively. If political parties are in opposition, the attention that they pay to policy issues at t_0 is positively affected by the emphasis that government parties paid to this policy issue at t_{-1} . Conversely, if political parties are in government, the results indicate that their issue agenda at t_0 responds to the issue priorities of the opposition at t_{-1} . Hence, issue emphasis of political parties is not only driven by the issue priorities of voters, but also by the attention that other parties pay to policy issues (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010).

As it could be argued that the dynamics of political communication differ between the heated election campaign period and normal times of political debate during the legislative term, we furthermore conducted a robustness check in which we acknowledge these important temporal differences (see Table 2). We have estimated an additional model that interacts voter issue attention and issue ownership with a variable indicating whether or not press releases are published during an election campaign (six months or less before an election). We did not find any systematic effect for the election campaign dummy or the interactions, while our major findings remained stable. Hence, party issue attention can best be explained by the riding the wave theory as parties respond to voters’ issue priorities both during normal times of political debate but also during election campaigns.

Conclusion

In order to shed new light on the still contested question of why political parties choose to prioritise some policy issues over others, this study presented novel empirical evidence. While previous research almost exclusively focused on parties’ issue attention in election campaigns focusing either on the American two-party system or concentrating on issue emphasis in election manifestos of political parties in Europe (e.g. Damore 2005; Klüver and Spoon 2014; Sides 2007; Sigelman and Buell 2004; Spiliotes and Vavreck 2002; Spoon and Klüver 2014; Wagner and Meyer 2014), we have provided a novel analysis of parties’ issue attention throughout the entire electoral cycle. Based on a quantitative text analysis of more than 40,000 press releases published by German political parties from 2000 until 2010, we were able to explore the day-to-day dynamics of issue competition between political parties. While we do not find any evidence for the issue ownership theory, our findings provide strong empirical support for the riding the wave theory. Political parties take their cues from voters and emphasise policy issues that are salient in the minds of citizens. Hence, issue competition is a bottom-up process in which political

parties respond to the policy concerns of voters rather than a top-down process in which parties affect the salience of policy issues to the electorate.

This study makes an important contribution to the literature on party competition as it sheds light on party communication throughout the entire electoral cycle to examine the selective issue emphasis of political parties. However, our results have to be read with care. We essentially find that parties primarily respond to the issue concerns of voters in their press releases while issue ownership cannot account for the topics prioritised in press statements. But at the same time, previous research examining election manifestos has found considerable evidence for an issue ownership effect (e.g. Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008; Klüver and Spoon 2014). Thus, in order to understand the seemingly contradictory evidence one must bear in mind that two different data sources are analysed. While press releases constitute an important instrument of party communication through which parties interact with voters and the media on a daily basis, party manifestos are solely drafted every couple of years in the run-up to general elections. It is therefore reasonable to argue that it is much more likely that parties respond to voter concerns in press releases as they publish them daily and can therefore quickly respond to changes in public opinion. By contrast, drafting election manifestos typically takes several months if not years and a wide variety of actors within the party are involved in drafting these platforms. It is therefore more likely that in election manifestos parties will concentrate on policy issues on which they enjoy a long-term advantage.

Our results have important implications for understanding the role of parties for political representation (Dalton *et al.* 2011; Miller and Stokes 1963). It is frequently argued that political parties become more and more elitist as they solely pursue their own agenda without taking into account the concerns and worries of their voters (see e.g. Sides 2007). Against this backdrop, the findings of our study draw a positive picture of parties in modern democracies. In line with the substantive view of representation (Miller and Stokes 1963), we have shown that parties not only listen to voters during election campaigns (Klüver and Spoon 2014; Spoon and Klüver 2014, 2015; Wagner and Meyer 2014), but that they constantly monitor public opinion and respond to citizens' issue priorities throughout the entire legislative term. Political parties are therefore not out of touch, but they instead carefully listen to the concerns and the interests of voters. They aggregate voter concerns and articulate them in the political sphere by putting them on their issue agenda. Political parties thus constitute important intermediary organisations that serve as a bridge between society and political institutions. Parties therefore fulfil an important function in democracies as they link voters with public policy (Dalton *et al.* 2011).

While our study has shed important light on why parties choose to talk about some issues and not about others, much remains to be done. First, this study focused on selective issue emphasis of political parties in Germany. While Germany is an important political system which shares many similarities with other political systems, future research should extend the study of parties'

issue attention to other political systems. Second, while this study has offered a novel perspective on party issue competition by providing an analysis of selective issue emphasis across the entire electoral cycle to shed light on the day-to-day dynamics of parties' issue attention, future research should systematically theorise and analyse how the electoral cycle conditions the selective issue emphasis of political parties. Finally, future research should investigate how party characteristics affect the selective issue emphasis of political parties. For instance, niche parties are typically considered to be more rigid in their policy goals than mainstream parties as the latter prioritise office over policy goals (Adams *et al.* 2006; Klüver and Spoon 2014). As a result, it would be interesting to explore whether niche parties tend to emphasise policy issues that they own while mainstream parties tend to highlight issues that are salient to voters in a more extensive comparative analysis.

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Supplemental Data

The online appendix can be accessed at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2015.1101295>

Note

1. The Bayesian expressed agenda model is implemented in the software package R.

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