

Strategic issue emphasis in parties' election campaign statements

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Abstract

Parties should develop a consistent issue profile during an electoral campaign. Yet, manifestos, which form the baseline for a party's programmatic goals in the upcoming legislative period, are usually published months before Election Day. We argue that parties must emphasize policy issues that are of key relevance to their likely voters in the last weeks of the election campaign, in which an increasing share of citizens make up their minds in terms of which party they will choose. To test this notion empirically, we draw on a novel data set that covers information on party representatives' statements made during the final weeks of an election campaign in nine European countries. Focusing on the campaign messages of social democratic and socialist parties, we find that these parties indeed intensify their emphasis of unemployment policy, which is a salient issue for their core voter clienteles, particularly in times of economic hardship.

Keywords

campaigns, party competition, party families, strategy

Introduction

Political actors generally try to maximize their impact on the outcomes of the political decision-making process. In doing so, parties as the key political actors in representative democracies try to win as many votes as possible so that their chances to gain control over governmental offices and the policy-making process increase (e.g. Strøm and Müller, 1999). From a Downsian perspective (Downs, 1957), the most effective way for parties and their candidates to maximize their vote share is by adopting a programmatic stance that comes close to the median voter's position. However, according to the valence theory put forward by Stokes (1963; see also Meyer and Wagner, 2020; Tavits and Potter, 2015), parties have higher chances to benefit electorally from stressing policy issues that are currently relevant to the public if voters perceive these parties and their representatives as more competent to handle the respective policy issues.

In times of partisan dealignment and an increasing number of late deciders (e.g. Farrell and Schmitt-Beck, 2003; Lachat, 2007; Lewis-Beck et al., 2008; Mair et al., 2004), the last few weeks of an election campaign have become more relevant for parties' campaign strategies. For instance, the share of voters deciding late increased in Norway and Sweden from 20% to 60% between the 1960s and 2010; in Germany, 40% of the voters decided when the campaign was under way in 2009 and 2013, whereas this share was only at 5% in elections for the German Bundestag in the 1960s (see Dassonneville et al., 2017: 204; Schmitt-Beck and Partheymüller, 2012). Fournier et al. (2004) have shown that vote intentions of campaign

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deciders are indeed more volatile because they respond to actual campaign events and coverage. Given this finding and the increasing share of late deciders in elections, which issues parties and their representatives address in their campaign statements can significantly alter the outcome of the election (e.g. Nadeau et al., 2010). Against this background, we argue that parties emphasize policy issues in the last weeks of the election campaign that are of key relevance to their likely voters, so that parties increase their chances to win as many votes as possible on Election Day.

We evaluate this argument by analyzing recently collected data on the statements parties and their representatives made in the media during the final weeks of an election campaign in nine European countries. More specifically, we focus on the campaign statements made by social democratic and socialist parties related to unemployment policy, which is a salient issue for likely voters of these parties, in particular if the country is in a poor economic situation. Parties that have their roots in the labor movement should—depending on whether in government or in opposition (Calca and Gross, 2019; Tavits and Potter, 2015)—strengthen their profile on unemployment policy in the final weeks of the election campaign in times of economic hardship, since such a strategy could help to mobilize the core voter clientele of these parties, which favors a strong welfare state (Seeberg, 2017a).

The results indicate support for our reasoning: socialist and social democratic parties emphasize unemployment policy during the final weeks of the election campaign, particularly if unemployment is high and if the respective parties are in opposition and, thus, can blame government parties for their bad economic record. The results indicate that parties behave strategically not only when formulating their election manifestos (e.g. Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009; Somer-Topcu and Zar, 2014; Spoon et al., 2014; Wagner and Meyer, 2014) but also adopt a vote-seeking behavior in the last weeks of election campaigns by emphasizing issues that are relevant for their likely voters.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. We develop our theoretical argument in the next section. Before presenting the results of the analysis in the fourth section, the third section provides an overview on the research design, the data, and the methodological strategy applied here. The final section concludes by summarizing the findings and by pointing out new perspectives for future research.

Theory and hypotheses

An increasing number of studies focuses on the determinants of the issue profile parties and their representatives adopt in their election manifestos, basic programs, or during the political process in parliament and government, for example by giving speeches, introducing bills, requesting roll call votes, making statements on social media

platforms, or drafting press releases (see, for instance, Bräuninger et al., 2012; Ecker, 2017; Haselmayer et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2018; Meyer and Wagner, 2016; Proksch et al., 2019). Schröder and Stecker (2018) distinguish two theoretical perspectives on parties' issue competition strategies: the literature that focuses on issue ownership (e.g. Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994; Bélanger and Meguid, 2008; Petrocik, 1996; Spoon et al., 2014; Tavits and Potter, 2015) and the branch of research that concentrates on issue entrepreneurship and on the factors why parties change their issue profile to become more attractive for voters (e.g. Budge and Farlie, 1983; Green-Pedersen, 2007; Hobolt and De Vries, 2015; Meyer and Wagner, 2016; Rovny and Whitefield, 2019). While the first perspective primarily deals with parties' campaign strategies to emphasize issues which voters closely associate with these parties, the second perspective focuses on parties' campaign strategies to emphasize previously ignored issues to win votes.

To derive our expectations regarding parties' strategies during election campaigns, we stress Klüver and Sagarzazu's (2016: 381) assessment that "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." Therefore, we assume that parties are well informed about the policy preferences of the electorate, that they know about the increasing number of voters deciding late in the campaign period, and that parties are aware of their competitors' policy profiles, which were previously outlined in their election manifestos. Furthermore, parties and their representatives are informed about the social characteristics of their likely voters and know that significant changes in a party's policy profile (in terms of both issue saliency and policy position) can irritate and alienate voters (Greene and Haber, 2015). In addition, we assume that the party leadership can use the party apparatus in a way to inform the party candidates and other party representatives about their strategy for the final weeks of the election campaign.

To achieve the goal of winning as many votes as possible on Election Day, the relevant actors within the campaign headquarters will prepare a strategy for convincing undecided voters while keeping those voters on board who are already sure to vote for the party. This might create a dilemma, since potential changes in the parties' policy profile can irritate voters that already plan to vote for the party while it is uncertain whether a programmatic shift will attract undecided voters. More specifically, drastic changes of a party's policy profile during a short period of time—that is, between the publication of the election manifesto and the critical phase of the campaign—may come with the risk that voters who already made their choice are irritated in the important last weeks of a campaign and therefore assign a lower degree of trustworthiness to the party they originally preferred based on the policy profile it adopted in

the election manifesto (Seeberg et al., 2017).¹ To keep this risk at bay, the party leadership should advise the representatives and candidates of the party to stick mostly with the “default” issue emphases and policy positions that the party set out in its election manifesto. We therefore expect that parties should adopt a consistent and cohesive programmatic strategy during the whole election campaign. Thus, we hypothesize:

H1 (Consistency): A party’s issue attention devoted to a policy area in the last weeks before the election reflects the attention the respective party attached to the same issue in its election manifesto.

Since voters who decide late in the campaign for which party they will cast their ballot tend to be ambivalent regarding parties’ policy profiles (Dassonneville et al., 2017: 208–212; see also Mutz, 2002), a key aspect of parties’ electoral campaigns should be highlighting the differences between themselves and their competitors to convince undecided voters (see also Meyer and Wagner, 2016). One simple way of signaling these differences to still undecided voters is to emphasize issues that parties “own” and voters traditionally associate with specific parties (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996; Riker, 1993). Referring to theories of interest-based voting, which are rooted in individuals’ socioeconomic status and their social group membership, we expect that parties and their representatives emphasize particularly those policy issues in the final weeks of an election campaign that are of key interest for their likely supporters (Evans, 1999; Heath, 2015; Stubager and Slothuus, 2013). This strategy should not only increase turnout among these groups (see e.g. Reher, 2014) and the chances that members of these social groups cast their ballot for the respective party² but also help undecided voters who tend to have problems to differentiate parties and with making a reasonable choice. This choice is facilitated by voters’ long-term association of specific issues with different party families. Therefore, issue ownership by parties and party families, respectively, “is a basic structure for party competition which reflects historical political conflicts, although cleavages and class politics may have waned,” and “issue ownership is something that voters use to navigate the political landscape and distinguish parties from each other” (Seeberg, 2017a: 478–479; see also Stubager and Slothuus, 2013). Thus, regarding parties’ campaign strategies we expect:

H2 (Issue ownership): Parties that represent specific ideological families should emphasize those policy areas in their statements in the last weeks before the election that are of key importance for their core voter clienteles.

The incentives for a party to emphasize specific issues during the final campaign should also depend on

institutional and contextual features, most prominently on the status of being in government or opposition (e.g. Meyer and Wagner, 2016; Tavits and Potter, 2015). Voters are likely to evaluate government parties, for instance, by economic indicators and hold them accountable for a detrimental economic performance and a lack of policy responsiveness, even if the government has not been able to control the circumstances (see e.g. Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck, 2014, 2019; LeDuc and Pammett, 2013: 495; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000). For opposition parties, a deterioration in the economic conditions creates an advantage *vis-à-vis* government parties on these issues because parties in office might have demonstrated that they “cannot handle the job” (Petrocik, 1996: 827). Therefore, from a vote-seeking perspective, opposition parties are likely to emphasize the weak government performance during the election campaign (Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu, 2016; Petrocik, 1996: 831; Thesen, 2013), whereas parties in power should highlight economic issues only under a well-performing economy (Greene, 2016; Hellwig, 2012; Seeberg, 2017b; Vavreck, 2009; see, however, Williams et al., 2016). In times of economic crisis, however, government parties shift their focus away from economic to noneconomic issues (De Vries and Solaz, 2019; Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu, 2019). Following these considerations, we hypothesize:

H3 (Government parties): Government parties should put less emphasis on issues signaling a weak government performance in their campaign messages, the stronger the degree of hardship in the respective policy area is.

Case selection, data, and methods

We apply the previously outlined argument to the issue of unemployment in the election manifestos and campaign statements of socialist and social democratic parties in the last 4 weeks of national election campaigns in nine European countries before and after the outbreak of the European debt crisis. During this crisis, economic and social policy issues ranked the highest on the citizens’ lists of the most important issues during electoral campaigns (Singer, 2013: 406). Therefore, the Eurozone crisis considerably changed the main topics of parties’ electoral campaigns within the European Union member states: following the outbreak of the crisis, many campaigns revolved around welfare, unemployment, and economic issues (see Haughton, 2014: 76–78).

Focusing on unemployment policy and on parties from these “party families” (Budge and Keman, 1990; Mair and Mudde, 1998) before and after the outbreak of the European debt crisis has several advantages. Socialist and social democratic parties represent the interests of citizens from low-income groups (e.g. Brooks et al., 2006;

Table 1. Daily newspapers and election years included in the study.

Country	Daily newspapers		Election years	
Czech Republic	Mladá fronta Dnes	<i>Právo</i>	2010	2013
Denmark	Jyllands-Posten	<i>Politiken</i>	2007	2011
Germany	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung	<i>Süddeutsche Zeitung</i>	2009	2013
The Netherlands	De Telegraaf	<i>de Volkskrant</i>	2010	2012
Poland	<i>Gazeta Wyborcza</i>	Rzeczpospolita	2007	2011
Portugal	Jornal de Notícias	<i>Público</i>	2009	2011
Sweden	<i>Aftonbladet</i>	Dagens Nyheter	2010	2014
Spain	<i>El País</i>	El Mundo	2008	2011
United Kingdom	<i>The Guardian</i>	The Daily Telegraph	2010	2015

Note: Titles of newspapers with a more left-wing orientation are written in italics.

Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck, 2014; Evans and Tilley, 2012; van der Waal et al., 2007), and for voters who are more vulnerable to an economic downturn, economic matters become particularly salient (Fossati, 2014). Since these social groups rely on a strong welfare state and are especially in need of social assistance during an economic crisis, socialist and social democratic parties, which all have their roots in the labor movement or at least strong ties to it, should care more about the labor market repercussions of an economic downturn (see Green-Pedersen and Jensen, 2019). Furthermore, it is (mostly) socialist and social democratic parties that are associated as “owners” of welfare and social security issues (Seeberg, 2017a). Hence, to mobilize their likely voters, these parties should highlight issues related to unemployment policies more during the final weeks of the electoral campaign, especially if the degree of economic problem pressure is high.

The evaluation of the hypotheses requires first and foremost data on the policy profile, that is, issue emphasis, of parties during the last weeks of an election campaign. We make use of the *Comparative Campaign Dynamics Dataset* (Debus et al., 2018; see Baumann and Gross, 2016, for a detailed description of the data) that covers the required information based on the coding of party statements in media reports. The set of countries covered in the analysis includes two Scandinavian countries (Denmark and Sweden), two continental European countries (Germany and the Netherlands), two Mediterranean democracies (Spain and Portugal), two Central European postcommunist democracies (Czech Republic and Poland), and the United Kingdom. The observation period includes one election that took place before or during fall 2010, which has repeatedly been identified as the period when the consequences of the Eurozone crisis became manifest (see Featherstone, 2011), and the following election which took place after or during the crisis. With the rapid economic shifts and the ensuing development of increased unemployment (as one of the most obvious economic consequences of the Eurozone crisis) in some of the countries in our sample, the selection of cases in combination with the observation period enables us to assess how parties adapt their

campaign messages in an environment with varying economic problem pressure.

For each election, we collected information on parties’ campaign statements from the two daily broadsheet newspapers with the highest circulation during a preelection period of 30 days. Since research shows that the ideological profile of newspapers matters for the chances that party messages make it into the news (e.g. Haselmayer et al., 2017, 2019), we selected newspapers in each country so that a wide range of the ideological spectrum is covered (see Table 1).³ All front-page articles related to the campaign were coded as well as a 5% random sample of the rest of the election-related articles until the minimum article number requirement of 60 articles per newspaper/election had been reached.⁴ Table 1 provides an overview of the countries, elections, and newspaper sources that our data cover.

The data set includes those statements that parties and their representatives made in the public sphere during the final period of an election campaign. Although the data refer to 16 policy issues, we here focus on the issue of unemployment as one of the main and publicly well-received indicators for the economic situation in a country (e.g. Powell and Whitten, 1993; see also Lewis-Beck and Nadeau, 2009; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2013). The measurement of the dependent variable *issue saliency in campaign messages* is straightforward and relates to saliency theory and thus to the coding scheme of the Comparative Manifesto Project (MARPOR; Volkens et al., 2013).⁵ The variable reflects the total number of statements about the issue of unemployment (positive, neutral, or negative), divided by the sum of all statements the party made in this campaign.⁶

The set of explanatory variables reflects the causal mechanisms that we identified in the theoretical section and which we expect to determine parties’ campaign behavior.⁷ This includes the measures for related issues in parties’ manifestos.⁸ These variables reflect the attention that parties devoted to the issue of unemployment when drafting their electoral programs. We here refer to the MARPOR data in which, among others, party statements on a

large set of policy issues were coded. To measure issue saliency, we follow the literature on political economy and comparative welfare studies that has used single coding categories or combinations thereof to assess how political parties shape social policies and the welfare state (see Horn et al., 2017, for an overview). For our purposes, we contend that three sets of MARPOR categories reflect parties' strategies on unemployment. These are, first, those categories that include statements on the expansion or the retrenchment of the welfare state (per504 "welfare state expansion" and per505 "welfare state limitation"). The sum of these categories forms the first independent variable *saliency welfare policy*. Secondly, parties may directly pick certain groups in the labor market (e.g. the unemployed or low-skilled workers) as a central focus. We thus also use the sum of the categories per701 ("Labour Groups: Positive") and per702 ("Labour Groups: negative") as a variable (*saliency labour groups*). Thirdly, parties may offer strategies against unemployment indirectly by focusing on economic policies (e.g. stimulating economic growth to reduce unemployment). Our third manifesto-based variable—*saliency economic policy*—thus collects all categories from MARPOR's programmatic dimensions "markeco" and "planeco," that is, per401 "Free Market Economy," per403 "Market regulation," per404 "Economic planning," per412 "Controlled Economy," and per414 "Economic Orthodoxy." Lastly, we combine the saliencies of the three categories, that is, attention devoted to welfare issues, labor groups, and the economy in the manifestos, to a single indicator (*combined saliency*).

In addition, we identify a party's affiliation to an ideological "party family" based on the MARPOR data. The variable *socialist/social democratic party family* is coded binary and has a value of "1" if a party belongs to the socialist or social democratic party families. To check the robustness of our findings regarding party families, we also use the parties' *left-right positions*. We make use of the logit transformation of the MARPOR left–right dimension "rile" as proposed by Lowe et al. (2011) and evaluate whether parties with more left-wing positions emphasize unemployment issues in the final weeks of the election campaign more than parties with a more right-wing ideological profile. In addition, we refer to a refinement of the "rile" index which then takes only election manifesto statements into account that relate to economic and welfare state policy. This enables for a differentiation between socialist/social democratic parties and other leftist parties like green or social liberal parties.⁹ To test the third hypothesis, we need information on the status of a party as a member of the government or opposition. The variable *government party* is coded "1" if a party was a member of the incumbent (coalition) government during the respective election campaign and "0" otherwise.

We control for the degree of economic hardship by means of the *unemployment rate*. We made use of the

Eurostat database to gather this information. To ensure comparable values between elections in countries, we use seasonally adjusted unemployment rates. Employing economic data to measure problem pressure has the advantage of avoiding endogeneity problems, which may arise when focusing on voters' perceptions of the problem pressure. Furthermore, we control for party size by using a party's vote share as provided by the MARPOR data set. This controls for a potential bias in media coverage in favor of larger parties.

The statistical modelling strategy echoes the bounded nature of the dependent variable. Since *issue saliency in campaign messages* reflects the share of statements on unemployment on all policy statements made by representatives of the same party, and thus can only range between 0 and 1, we employ fractional probit regression models (Williams, 2017). Since our sample covers two elections per country, we apply the population averaged panel probit estimator with robust standard errors proposed by Papke and Wooldridge (2008) with parties as groups.¹⁰

Analysis

We estimate two sets of regression models to evaluate the three hypotheses. We start with models pursuing the question of which factors shape parties' campaign statements and particularly the salience of unemployment issues in those statements. The models presented in Table 2 evaluate the first hypothesis which posits that parties' emphases of an issue area in the last weeks of an election campaign reflect the share of attention the party attached to the same policy area in its election manifesto. Models 1 and 2 only include the combined saliency parties devoted to unemployment issues in their manifestos, a country's unemployment rate, and a party's vote share, respectively. Models 3 and 4 provide a more nuanced measurement of a party's saliency by decomposing the combined manifesto saliency to saliencies for welfare policy, labor groups, and unemployment-related economic policies.

The results of models 1 and 3 both indicate positive effects for the combined share of saliency that parties devote to unemployment issues and for the shares that parties have assigned to welfare issues (*saliency welfare policy*), economic policy (*saliency economic policy*), and certain labor groups (e.g. unemployed or low-skilled workers—*saliency labour groups*) during their election campaigns. More generally, this result indicates that parties do behave consistently and highlight those issues in the final weeks before Election Day which they also prominently addressed in their manifestos. Furthermore, and as shown by the results of models 2 and 4, parties attach more saliency to unemployment issues in their campaign communication, the higher the unemployment rate. Hence, parties seem to be responsive to the economic context they are campaigning in.

Table 2. The impact of a parties' policy profile and the unemployment rate on unemployment policy saliency in parties' campaign statements.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Saliency combined (manifesto)	1.922*** (3.59)	1.858*** (3.31)		
Unemployment rate		0.0424** (3.22)		0.0420** (3.19)
Saliency welfare policy (manifesto)			1.656* (2.45)	1.654* (2.43)
Saliency labor groups (manifesto)			1.849 ⁺ (1.68)	1.941 ⁺ (1.67)
Saliency economic policy (manifesto)			2.576* (2.57)	2.153* (2.12)
Party size (vote share)	0.00612 (1.25)	0.00487 (1.09)	0.00582 (1.19)	0.00480 (1.08)
Constant	-2.259*** (-14.94)	-2.598*** (-13.95)	-2.275*** (-14.80)	-2.598*** (-14.14)
Observations	110	110	110	110

Note: Table entries are population-averaged panel fractional probit regression coefficients with z statistics in parentheses. Dependent variable is issue saliency of unemployment in campaign messages.

⁺p < 0.1; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

Comparing the effect strengths from Table 2 is not straightforward due to the nonlinearity of effects, the different scales of the explanatory variables, and the differences in the substantial meaning of the variables involved. However, to assess whether the saliencies from parties' manifestos or the unemployment rate have a stronger effect on parties' short-term campaign messages, we calculate predicted probabilities. Using the results from model 2, we predict the change in attention devoted to unemployment in campaign messages for changes of one standard deviation above the mean for both variables of interest (i.e. unemployment and manifesto saliency).¹¹ For a (positive) one standard deviation change in combined manifesto saliency, we find an increase of 1.3% in short-term campaign attention. Given that the mean attention devoted to the issue is only 4.1% (see Online Appendix Table A1), we can conclude that there is a substantial effect that originates from the parties' manifesto emphases. Increasing unemployment by one standard deviation from the mean value increases the predicted attention devoted to the issue by 1.6%. Again, this is a substantial effect that is comparatively stronger than the effect resulting from the comparable change in manifesto saliency.

Models 3 and 4 indicate that the effect from our combined saliency indicator does not stem from only one manifesto policy domain. We find that all three categories, that is, welfare policies, economic policies, and labor group-targeted policies, contribute to a party's campaign saliencies in roughly comparable ways. Unsurprisingly, the effect of economic pressure remains almost identical. The size of a party does not have a statistically significant effect.

Overall, these findings lend support to hypothesis 1. Statements in the last weeks of a campaign do reflect the

parties' priorities they have put down in their manifestos. The results of models 2 and 4 imply that the impact of the economic situation is more pronounced. Taken together, the results presented in Table 2 suggest that the emphases in statements parties and their representatives make in the last weeks of the campaign are significantly related, but not completely congruent with their long-standing issue profiles.¹² At least for the issue of unemployment, parties seem to focus strategically in the last weeks of an election campaign on an issue that is highly salient for the electorate, particularly in countries that were hit hard by an economic crisis.

Models 5–7 in Table 3 evaluate the hypotheses on issue ownership and on the government-opposition status. Is there evidence that the ideological background of a party and the demand of their likely voters as well as the institutional environment matter for the degree of emphasizing unemployment issues in the final weeks of an election campaign? Our empirical findings indicate that this is, in fact, the case: the results of the models presented in Table 3 show that parties from the socialist and social democratic party family emphasize the issue of unemployment stronger than their competitors from other party families.

To evaluate whether parties with roots in the labor movement stress unemployment more explicitly during the last weeks of the election campaign, model 6 therefore interacts the binary variable *socialist/social democratic party family* with the unemployment rate in the nine countries under study. The results demonstrate that parties from the socialist/social democratic party family accentuate unemployment significantly stronger than other parties if the unemployment rate increases, which lends support to hypothesis 2. The predicted probabilities show that the

Table 3. The impact of a parties' ideological background and the government–opposition status on parties' campaign statements.

	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Socialist/social democratic party family	0.234* (2.24)	0.155 ⁺ (1.77)	0.270* (2.37)
Unemployment (centered)	0.0422*** (3.41)	0.0191 (1.36)	0.0476** (3.29)
Government party	0.199 ⁺ (1.83)	0.124 (1.02)	0.223* (2.11)
Socialist/Social Democratic Party × Unemployment		0.0467* (2.11)	
Government Party × Unemployment			−0.0254 (−1.46)
Saliency combined (manifesto)	1.532** (2.94)	1.521** (2.85)	1.484** (2.86)
Party size (vote share)	0.00161 (0.35)	0.00250 (0.55)	0.00160 (0.37)
Constant	−1.967*** (−19.92)	−1.936*** (−21.55)	−1.991*** (−19.84)
Observations	110	110	110

Note: Table entries are population-averaged panel fractional probit regression coefficients with z statistics in parentheses. Dependent variable is issue saliency of unemployment in campaign messages. Saliency combined and unemployment are mean-centered.

⁺p < 0.1; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

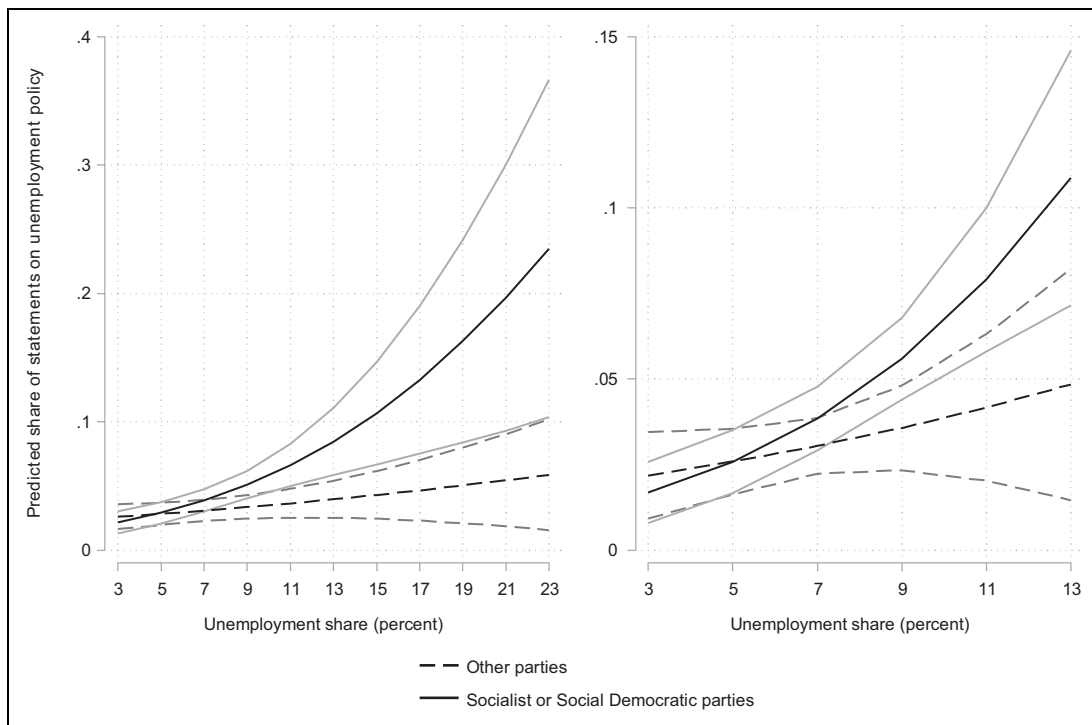


Figure 1. The effect of socialist/social democratic party family membership and unemployment on the emphasis of unemployment policy in the final weeks of an election campaign (left-hand panel: Spain 2011 included; right-hand panel: Spain 2011 excluded). Note: Marginal effects for model 6 (Table 3). Solid line represents socialist and social democratic parties, and dashed line represents remaining parties. Lighter lines depict 90% confidence intervals. Figures were created using the *plotplain* scheme for Stata (Bischof, 2017).

importance a party assigns to unemployment significantly increases for the socialist and social democratic party family only. Figure 1 presents this effect for the complete

country sample in the left-hand panel. Since the Spanish elections of 2011 constitute an outlier in terms of unemployment—unemployment had rocketed to 22% in Spain in

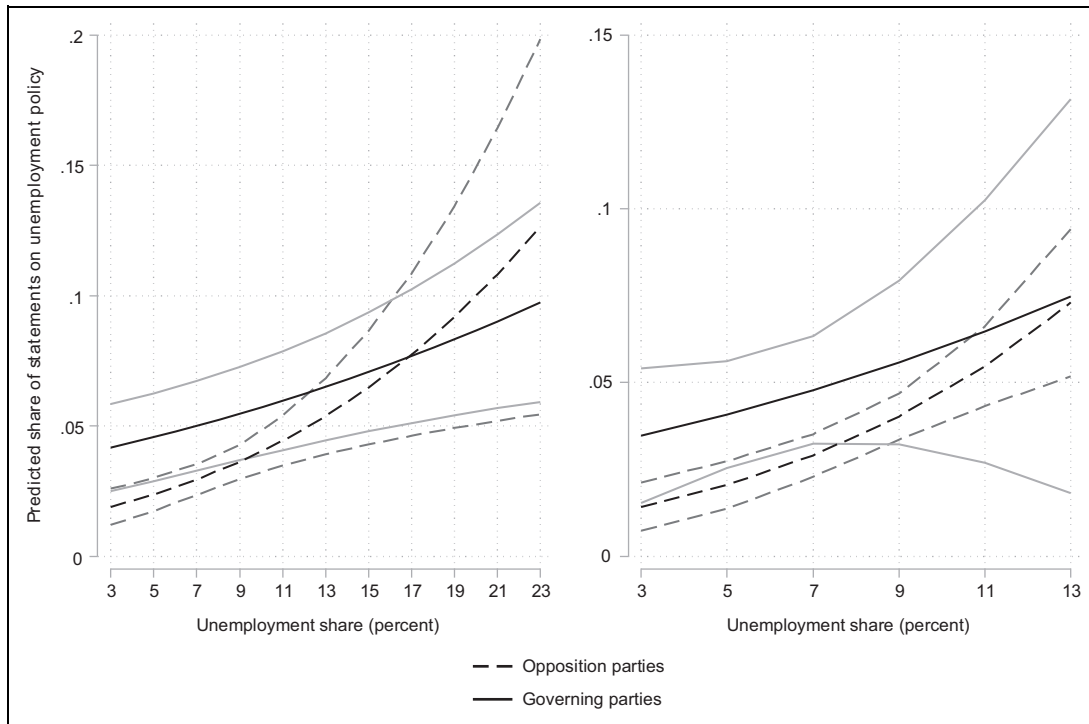


Figure 2. The effect of parties' governmental status and unemployment on the emphasis of unemployment policy in the final weeks of an election campaign (left-hand panel: Spain 2011 included; right-hand panel: Spain 2011 excluded). Note: Marginal effects for model 7 (Table 3). Solid line represents government parties, and dashed line represents opposition parties. Lighter lines depict 90% confidence intervals.

2011—the right-hand panel presents predicted values for models that exclude observations from the 2011 Spanish elections.¹³ As the left-hand side of Figure 1 shows, the differential increment does not produce differences between socialist/social democratic and all other parties at low levels of unemployment (below 10%), but yields significant group differences at higher levels of unemployment. This result does not fully transfer to the right-hand side of Figure 1. When excluding the case of Spain in 2011, we find the same differential effect (i.e. an effect that relates only to socialist and social democratic parties), but no group separation.

When interpreting these results, it is important to note that our hypothesis does not focus on such group differences, but instead implies that social democratic and socialist parties will react to changes in unemployment, while other parties will not. We do not necessarily expect that socialist and social democratic parties will generally—or across a certain range of unemployment values—give significantly higher saliency to the issue as compared to their competitors from other party families. This expectation can be evaluated by focusing on the slopes of the curves. Here, we find that—also in the reduced sample—socialist and social democratic parties are responsive to rising unemployment (represented by a positive slope), while the remaining parties are not, as the nonsignificant positive

slope indicates. Socialist and social democratic parties seemingly stress the issue of increasing unemployment because it may help to mobilize their core supporter groups that are often affected by an economic crisis more directly and therefore have greater interest for a strong welfare state.

Model 7 evaluates whether the effect of the unemployment rate on the importance of the unemployment issue is mediated by a party's governmental status. We argued that government parties will downplay unemployment issues in times of high unemployment rates. By contrast, opposition parties will try to exploit a high unemployment rate by communicating more on the issue than government parties. The results from model 7 and Figure 2 indicate that there is limited evidence for this argument. As in Figure 1, we do not observe group-separating effects between government and opposition parties whereas we do find differential slopes for government and opposition parties. The positive slope for opposition parties implies that these parties will jump on the issue of unemployment if the unemployment rate is higher, whereas government parties do not react to higher unemployment. This suggests a strategic vote-seeking behavior of opposition parties: they highlight unemployment issues if they can use this topic to underline the bad economic record of the government in the final campaign weeks, but they de-emphasize unemployment

in the last weeks of the electoral campaign if the share of the unemployed is low. However, compared with the findings for hypothesis 2, the evidence for this effect is more limited: the interaction effect in model 7 points into the theoretically expected negative direction, but fails to attain statistical significance ($p = 0.14$). The differential effect of the size of unemployment is—in both samples—also much more limited for opposition parties than it is for social democratic and socialist parties.

Robustness checks

To assess the robustness of our findings, we estimate models with an alternative operationalization for what we consider as socialist and social democratic parties.¹⁴ This specification builds on the notion that the strategic emphasis of unemployment may not relate to parties' basic ideological affiliation as indicated by party family membership, but rather to their left–right position. To test this alternative perspective, we estimate models that refer to the ideological position of the parties. When replacing the simple differentiation between parties from the socialist and social democratic party families and the remaining parties with parties' left–right positions according to the MARPOR-based left–right position as proposed by Lowe et al. (2011), we do not find support for a differential effect of leftist parties in a situation of high unemployment. The effect of a party's general left–right position on the saliency of unemployment in campaign messages also does not display an effect. Yet, when focusing only on election manifesto statements related to the economy and to the welfare state, we find that parties with a left-wing profile on an economic left–right dimension emphasize unemployment issues in their campaign statements if the unemployment rate increases (see Table A3 and Figure A1 in the Online Appendix). This finding supports our argument that the effects identified above only relate to the subgroup of parties that belong to the left wing of the ideological spectrum due to their policy positions on economic and welfare policies, that is, those with a socialist or social democratic pedigree. Other parties that are also positioned on the left side on a *general* left–right dimension, for instance green or social liberal parties, do not have the same incentives to mobilize voters by emphasizing unemployment policy in the final weeks of the election campaign, simply because likely voters of these parties tend to care more about other issues.

Conclusion

This contribution has dealt with parties' strategic emphasis of specific issues important to their core voter clienteles in the final weeks of an election campaign. Using new data on the dynamics of electoral campaigns in Europe and the issue of unemployment as an illustrative example, we have shown that, first, parties' campaign statements on

unemployment policies in the last week of an election campaign reflect the priorities parties have put down in their manifestos. Secondly, we have demonstrated that socialist and social democratic parties, that is, parties usually representing the interests of voters from low-income groups, strategically highlight unemployment issues in the final weeks of an election campaign, particularly under more difficult economic conditions because rising unemployment rates are an important issue for their core voter clienteles. This finding therefore concurs with recent evidence of Green-Pedersen and Jensen (2019) who show that parties from the left devote more attention to labor market protection issues in their election manifestos when the unemployment rate increases. Thirdly, we found tentative support for a government–opposition effect on the saliency of unemployment policy in parties' statements during the last weeks of an electoral campaign. Emphasizing the issue of unemployment seems to be a strategy primarily pursued by opposition parties to blame the bad record of incumbent parties, which corroborates previous findings in the literature (see e.g. Seeberg, 2017b).

The results presented in this contribution have several implications for political representation, party responsiveness, and party–voter linkages. First, in times of economic crises, parties do emphasize issues that are of utmost importance for their core voter clientele. When the going gets tough, socialist and social democratic parties, which have their roots in the labor movement, pay attention to the interest of their supporter groups. This is encouraging because it shows that parties do care about their core supporters' needs and demands, which has positive consequences for voter turnout and citizens' satisfaction with democracy (Reher, 2014), and—most importantly—the quality of representation in general (Stecker and Tausendpfund, 2016). Secondly, the empirical evidence presented here also qualifies to some extent recent findings in the literature on party–voter issue saliency congruence in times of economic hardship. Traber et al. (2018) demonstrate a clear and widening gap between the increase of economic issue saliency among voters and parties' devotion to economic issues in their manifestos. The data presented here reveal that parties emphasize the issues that are important for their core voter clientele, at least in case of socialist and social democratic parties, and in a time period of an election campaign when a significant share of voters make up their minds.

Future research might test whether the patterns identified here on unemployment policy saliency also hold for other policy areas and for the party positioning on these policy dimensions. For instance, how European party representatives responded to the immigration issue, which has received high public attention since summer 2015 in several European countries, in the final weeks of an election campaign might help to explain the strength of anti-immigrant parties from the far right (e.g. Abou-Chadi and

Helbling, 2018). Moreover, while we could conclude from the robustness checks that the findings presented here are substantially valid, they suffer from a small-*N* problem. Future research might increase the number of cases by including, for example, countries such as Italy or Greece, which were—just as Spain—hit hard by the European debt crisis or—if the focus is on immigration policy—by an influx of migrants.


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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

- Note that this argument also applies to parties that adopt a “broad-appeal” strategy (Somer-Topcu, 2015). If a broadly appealing party decides to change its strategy in the time period between the publication of its manifesto and Election Day, voters are also likely to be irritated by that programmatic shift.
- Research on descriptive representation provides indeed support for this causal claim and has empirically shown that the electoral participation of members of specific social groups increases if members of these groups, potentially defined according to their socioeconomic status, are proportionally represented in parliaments or governments according to their share among the total population (e.g. Heath, 2018; Zingher and Farrer, 2016).
- Research that focuses on campaign effects, biases, and media reporting frequently builds on combining information from a left- and a right-leaning newspaper (e.g. Banducci et al., 2017; Schuck et al., 2011).
- Country experts were trained by coding several English training articles during a 2-day workshop. To ensure intercoder reliability, three coders per country were assigned to analyze the same content of newspaper articles. Coders had first to identify basic information of articles, such as the newspaper title, the election year, and the title of the article, among others. Most importantly, coders had to identify the subject of the article that was mentioned in the respective newspaper

article, that is, the party (or the government, respectively), which they were going to code. In a second step, coders identified all party statements in the respective newspaper articles regarding whether a party talks about itself or about another party. Afterwards, coders decided whether these statements were related to a party’s position on various issues or to a discussion about valence characteristics. All three coders marked their confidence for their several coding steps (full, medium, or little confidence), and we discarded codings on which coders did not agree or were not fully confident.

- Note that we focus on policy-oriented *issue statements* for this purpose. Our measure does not entail *issue-valence statements*.
- We aggregate all statements for the final 30 days of a campaign since we expect unemployment, and the pressures resulting from it, to be relatively slow-moving phenomena that build up over time. Since our argument does not focus on short-term reactions of party representatives like reactions to reports on the economy or unemployment, we content that aggregation of all statements for the final 4 weeks of the campaign is the adequate level of analysis.
- Descriptive statistics on the (in-)dependent variables used in the analysis are presented in Table A1 in the Online Appendix.
- Note that the MARPOR data do not provide a category that directly relates to unemployment. However, the categories selected here amply collect those categories where parties can provide economic or welfare-oriented solutions for the problem of unemployment.
- The revised *rile* index that consists of variables related only to economic and welfare policy issues is measured as follows: $(\text{per401} + \text{per402} + \text{per407} + \text{per414} + \text{per505}) - (\text{per403} + \text{per404} + \text{per406} + \text{per412} + \text{per413} + \text{per504} + \text{per506})$.
- This specification does not implement a complete fixed-effect approach, which is generally unavailable with fractional probit, but allows for unobserved heterogeneity between groups or—in our case—parties (Papke and Wooldridge, 2008: 122–126).
- Since the substantial meanings of 1% changes in unemployment rates or manifesto saliencies do not correspond, we use changes of one standard deviation to enable a comparison. For an alternative approach using average marginal effects, see Table A2 in the Online Appendix.
- It is important to note that the attention parties assign to welfare, labor groups, and economic policies in their manifestos are not driven by the labor market situation. Auxiliary regressions using *saliency welfare*, *saliency labour groups*, and *saliency economic policy* as the dependent variable and *unemployment* as an explanatory variable do not indicate any univariate or multivariate (using additional explanatory variables) relationship.
- Full models excluding the Spanish general election in 2011 are presented in the Online Appendix. See Table A4 for models equivalent to models 1–3 (Table 2) and Table A5 for models equivalent to models 5–7 (Table 3).

14. In addition, we have evaluated whether the responsive behavior of socialist and social democratic parties extends to other groups of parties. Building on Klüver and Spoon (2016), one may expect niche parties to respond to higher unemployment. The results of the regression models do not indicate that niche parties—defined as green, nationalist, or ethnic parties (Meguid, 2005) or the previous three supplemented with special-issue and agrarian parties—react to higher unemployment rates.

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