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# Tunnels of attention: Reconsidering issue competition<sup>1</sup>

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For decades, scholars have expected parties to focus on contrasting issues in their campaigns, leading to a diverse political supply (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996; Riker, 1996). This has shaped our conception of mandate representation in which programmatic differences provide voters with a choice between alternatives, allowing successful parties to claim a “democratic mandate” for the priorities advertised during the campaign (Manin, 1997; Stokes, 2001). Yet, this vision is hard to reconcile with, on the one hand, burgeoning research on issue entrepreneurship leading to parties taking-up certain issues from their rivals (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Green-Pedersen & Krogstrup, 2008; Hobolt & de Vries, 2015; Meguid, 2005, 2008) and, on the other hand, the empirical evidence for overlapping concerns during campaigns available on single issues or countries<sup>2</sup>. Christoffer Green-Pedersen and Peter Mortensen (2010, 2015) have put forward the concept of party system agenda, advocating for better accounts of systemic patterns shaping parties’ campaign priorities. In particular, they called for more comparative research beyond the set of multiparty democracies like Denmark in which the notion of party system agenda appears ‘most obvious’ (2010: 275).

It is still difficult to gauge the weight of systemic patterns across different institutional contexts and policy issues. Studies of issue competition study systemic salience as a ‘control’ variable rather than a substantive and crucial factor (Abou-Chadi, 2018; Klüver & Spoon, 2016; Wagner & Meyer, 2014). This is reflected in how scholars continue to see elected parties as having a democratic mandate to deliver on the agenda submitted to voters (Naurin et al., 2019; Thomson et al., 2017): they ultimately ignore the possibility that many issues are endorsed by multiple parties and may have their origins in proposals made by opposition parties. There is also no consensus on the mechanisms leading to overlap. Whether parties converge as the result of their response to public priorities or media discourses, or whether they respond to each other in a more endogenous process, would bear very different implications for representation.

This article brings this line of research a decisive step forward by developing a supply-side model of issue competition in which parties primarily respond to their rivals, testing its propositions for the first time across multiple and diverse political settings, and examining the implications for party competition and mandate representation.

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<sup>2</sup> Different terms have been advanced to refer to this pattern of overlap, from “engagement” (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010, 2015; Grossman & Guinaudeau, 2021; Meyer & Wagner, 2021; Sigelman & Buell, 2004) and “dialogue” (Simon, 2002) to “convergence” (Kaplan et al. 2006) and “trespassing” (Sides, 2006).

Our model draws attention to the fact that programs are usually elaborated simultaneously by parties in the run-up to elections. This exercise is much more complex than simply addressing the party's issues of predilection. The latter will not necessarily be the winning ones in the context of a given campaign. Electoral outcomes are usually tight, and it is exceedingly difficult to anticipate which issue or promise will tilt the balance one way or another. Uncertainty is all the larger as voters' demands are volatile and susceptible to elite discourse. We argue that in this context, rival parties' issue emphases offer the most valuable cue as to the topics that will determine the election. Thus, although parties may have good reasons under certain conditions to (re)activate the salience of their core issues, they cannot afford the cost of leaving potentially electorally rewarding issues to competitors. Parties will therefore constantly monitor competitors and take up issues from each other, rather than try to anticipate voters' expectations. This, we argue, will result in extensive overlap in the issue emphases of parties running for a same election. We conceptualize this systemic component as a "tunnel of attention" within which parties can move and try to increase the salience of their preferred topics. But the capacity to mush excavations towards their pet topics is limited by other parties' behavior. If a party diverges from the core of the tunnel, for example by holding on to a niche issue, it runs the risk of being perceived as beside the point.

It is therefore paramount to examine system-wide patterns of issue attention. We provide unique evidence for tunnels of attention based on original measures applied to the most comprehensive dataset to date on issue attention in party programs, covering all parliamentary parties in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK, from the 1980s to the 2010s<sup>3</sup>. This represents a crucial extension of the empirical scope of existing research, given the coverage of all issues and the broad comparative focus. This allows us not only to put US findings into perspective, but also to gain leverage on the dynamics of attention across a wide range of institutional settings.

In line with the idea of tunnel of attention, parties tend to address similar issue priorities as their opponents, rather than sticking to a set of core issues. This applies to all parties independent from their government or opposition status, or from the extent to which they 'own' the topic (Petrocik 1996). We show, moreover, that this convergence does not derive from "riding the wave" strategies responding to public priorities or media discourse. This endogenous character is corroborated by the case studies of sequences of politicization in contrasted electoral settings, illustrating the underlying mechanism driving tunnels of attention.

Altogether, our findings offer a novel perspective on issue competition delineating an original research agenda with core implications for party competition, agenda-setting and representation. Tunnel pressure limits the room for what Schattschneider termed "conflict of conflicts" (Schattschneider, 1960) and for parties' ability to put minority issues on the policy agenda.

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<sup>3</sup> The datasets analyzed during the current study are available in the following repository, [https://osf.io/p3d8g/?view\\_only=50be99d0293943d2bcacdf060f7c3ed](https://osf.io/p3d8g/?view_only=50be99d0293943d2bcacdf060f7c3ed).

# 1. When in doubt, follow the others: Uncertainty, volatility and tunnels of attention

## The “contrasted emphasis” hypothesis and its limitations

Scholars of party competition tend to assume, in line with salience theory (Budge & Farlie, 1983), that competing parties have incentives to emphasize different issues. Most parties have historical affinities with certain constituencies and topics (Petrocik, 1996; Riker, 1996). They enjoy “ownership” on these issues, i.e. an electoral advantage thanks to their reputation, good record, or modal position (Seeberg, 2017). The literature typically associates green parties with environmental concerns (e.g. Bakker et al., 2015; Spoon et al., 2014) or right-wing parties with the issue of immigration (e.g. Bale, 2008; Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup, 2008; van Spanje, 2010). In this view, parties have incentives to focus their campaign on their pet issues while avoiding their competitors’ issues.

This would imply that parties’ issue profiles are both distinct and stable over time. Parties should emphasize different problems in their attempt to move the campaign agenda to favorable issues (Budge & Farlie, 1983). At the same time, parties’ issue credibility and reputation should push them to cultivate issue ownership and induce some stability in party priorities. As Petrocik underlines: “‘Handling’ is the ability to resolve a problem of concern to voters. It is a reputation for policy and program interests, produced by a history of attention, initiative, and innovation toward these problems, which leads voters to believe that one of the parties (and its candidates) is more sincere and committed to doing something about them” (Petrocik, 1996, 826, our emphasis). Being the only party to address an issue at an election is not likely to be enough to claim ownership over it in the absence of previous commitment (Sides, 2006: 411).

Most authors who mobilize the concept of issue ownership do so in a probabilistic rather than deterministic sense. They do not expect parties to fundamentally diverge in their campaign foci and “talk past each other”, but admit the existence of issue overlap:

*“If this probabilistic relationship emerges empirically, then Democrats should advertise more on ‘Democratic’ issues than Republicans do, and conversely for Republicans. Consequently, there may be instances of issue trespassing, though these should still be rare relative to advertising on ‘owned’ issues. In addition, issues on which neither party has a clear advantage should be less prominent in campaign discourse relative to other issues, rather than completely absent” (Sides 2006: 414).*

The fundamental problem of this position is that there is little or no empirical evidence for contrasted emphasis. One reason is that the design of studies inspired by the “issue ownership” concept does not allow to directly grasp the relative weight of overlap and contrast in attention. The empirical focus on the relationship between perceived ownership and the level of attention to issues (Druckman et al. 2009; Klüver and Sagarzazu 2016; Petrocik 1996; Simon 2002; Wagner and Meyer 2014) ultimately ignores or downplays the possibility of overlap. Most studies examining the extent of overlap vs. distinction focus on single issues of limited salience (Farstad, 2018; Hoeglinger, 2016). It is unclear how these findings on single issues fit into

the more general picture of party attention across all issues<sup>4</sup>. Sigelman and Buell (2004) were the first to directly measure overlap in attention across all issues and several US federal elections. They revealed that “the opposing sides in a given race were actually more similar to one another than either side was to itself in consecutive races” (Sigelman and Buell, 2004: 658). These findings have been replicated with regard to House and Senate elections (Banda 2015; Kaplan et al. 2006; Sides 2006, 2007). The few studies available outside the US corroborate Sigelman and Buell’s picture in multiparty systems (see in particular Dolezal et al., (2014) on Austria and Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2015) on Denmark). The available empirical evidence does not, in sum, corroborate the idea that parties devote stable and contrasting levels of attention to issues. Yet, while issue ownership remains a core variable routinely included in studies of campaign priorities, systemic patterns tend to be treated only as a control or moderating variable (Abou-Chadi, 2018; Klüver & Spoon, 2016; Wagner & Meyer, 2014).

## Tunnels of attention

Against this background, we argue that interactions between parties and what Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2011, 2015) have termed the ‘party system agenda’, deserve crucial attention in explaining campaign priorities. Programmatic work within each party takes place over the course of a campaign based on expert consultations, intra-party negotiations and the work of campaign professionals (Däubler, 2012; Håkansson & Naurin, 2016; Harmel et al., 2018). Programs formalize policy commitments that need to be as appealing as possible to voters while binding candidates beyond election day (Thomson et al., 2017).

The need to balance these imperatives makes program formulation much more complex than just an exercise of recalling the party’s core policy commitments. These issues of predilection may not be adapted to a given political or economic context – campaigning on budget orthodoxy in periods of economic growth might for example miss the point and be electorally harmful (Kristensen et al., 2023). The inherently insecure environment that characterizes modern electoral campaigns deprives parties of reliable information about which stakes will ultimately decide the next election. On the one hand, polls are a poor predictor of voters’ actual and future concerns or electoral behavior. Rising volatility across all democracies (Chiaramonte & Emanuele, 2017; Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2017) makes it difficult for any party to assume that they have a constituency expecting consistency with past priorities. More generally, voters’ demands are volatile and susceptible to elite discourse: each party must consider the possibility that the policy proposals put forward by its challengers raise expectations among voters (Spoon et al., 2014; Sulkin, 2005). On the other hand, rewarding campaign topics may not be directly derived from real-world developments or their media coverage. The political system is constantly saturated with countless real-world problems manifested in statistical indicators, news stories, and focusing events (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1984). There is therefore no given hierarchy of pressing concerns, but a struggle for prioritization in which parties can be expected to play a central role (Seeberg, 2023).

In this context of high uncertainty, we expect rival parties’ issue emphases to be regarded as the most valuable cues as to the topics that will make the election. There is already ample evidence that parties look at each other when drafting their program. For example, Seeberg (2023:272) cites an MP from the liberal Venstre in Denmark who explains in an interview from 2021: “We constantly keep an eye on the Social democrats to

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<sup>4</sup> The implications of the focus of many studies on one single issue (often immigration, environment or European integration) is well summarized in Dolezal et al. 2014’s findings (italics are our own): “Saliency theory correctly identifies some features of party competition. For instance, *parties disproportionately emphasize issues they ‘own’*, with also some indication that parties de-emphasize issues on which they are electorally disadvantaged. *Yet, the core assumption of saliency theory that parties compete via selective issue emphasis rather than direct confrontation over the same issues fails to materialize in the majority of cases.*”

avoid that they get ahead of us on an issue or slice an edge towards us.”<sup>5</sup> A Sunday Times article published one month before the 1992 British general elections (see Appendix A17) provides further illustration for the iterative adaptation of manifestos in the making: none of the parties has published a manifesto, yet, but the text discusses various proposals ‘to be included’ and how officials from the other parties intend to react.

Parties may in particular seek to avoid criticism for being unresponsive to concerns raised by their rivals, or be reluctant to leave those rivals determine the dominant frame (Green-Pedersen, 2019; Grossman & Guinaudeau, 2021; Jerit, 2008; Nadeau et al., 2010). They may also see an interest in engaging in their competitors’ issues to contest their ownership (Sulkin, 2009), especially when it is not deeply anchored (Seeberg, 2017; see also Sides, 2006) or when the issue is potentially promising or harmful (Hayes 2010; Kaplan et al. 2006). While a rich literature documents how single parties react to each other on single issues (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Abou-Chadi & Stoetzer, 2020; Hobolt & de Vries, 2015; Meguid, 2005, 2008; Meyer & Wagner, 2016; van de Wardt, 2015), the full implications have not been derived in terms of acknowledging the fundamentally systemic and endogenous nature of campaign priorities.

Our argument leads us to expect that electoral agenda-setting is primarily shaped by the overall configuration of party competition (for similar perspectives, see Colomer and Puglisi, 2005; De Sio and Weber, 2014; Green-Pedersen, 2019; Tavits and Potter, 2015). Of course, campaign agendas are not disconnected from inputs related to voters, the media, or problem indicators, but given the uncertainty as to which of these signals will eventually matter, their influence is not decisive in the short run. Instead, each party reaches out to voters with proposals forged as part of their programmatic work while remaining attentive to their competitors’ policy ideas. This electoral supply settles in an iterative process of reciprocal adjustments, resulting in the publication of a program generally towards the end of the campaign. Consequently, programmatic priorities will strongly reflect those of rivals.

According to our model, parties are constrained by tunnels of attention. Tunnels are defined by other parties’ past and present priorities, leaving only limited margins of manoeuvre in the short run.<sup>6</sup> Parties need to nurture their identity (Achen and Bartels 2017; Greene 2004; Huddy et al. 2015) by addressing their core topics, but they have to do so within the boundaries fixed by the systemic dimension of party competition, i.e. the tunnel. They cannot afford to durably remain outside the tunnel at the risk of seeming irrelevant. Importantly, tunnels of attention may move to the extent that they are shaped by party competition.<sup>7</sup> Parties, of course, try to move the tunnel to electoral battlegrounds that are favourable to them, not least because this tunnel will constrain the emphases of the other parties. But even if they successfully push certain issues, they will never determine the entire campaign agenda.

We therefore expect contrasts in emphasis to remain weak and overlap among parties in a same system to predominate. This leads us to the following hypothesis:

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<sup>5</sup> On page 277, he further cites a chief advisor of the same party about issue-uptake: “Although the environment is surely not an issue preference of Venstre, the leftwing parties’ intense attention made us realize that we could not escape this problem and had to engage on the issue. We painted our logo green, stepped up and narrowly averted an embarrassing defeat for overlooking a key campaign issue.”

<sup>6</sup> It broadly corresponds to what Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup (2008: 611) define as the “party political agenda” or what Green-Pedersen (2019) calls “party system agenda”.

<sup>7</sup> Although our metaphor is inspired by the one used to designate the first attempt at European monetary cooperation in the 1970s, this is a noteworthy difference. While the European tunnel defined fix bands within which currencies were allowed to fluctuate, the tunnel in our model may move over time, in particular depending on the balance of forces between parties.

**Hypothesis 1:** A party's attention to an issue at a given election is more correlated to other parties' current levels of attention to the same subject than to the party's past attention to the same issue.

## What drives tunnels?

Our model does not only imply overlap in partisan priorities. Importantly from the perspective of representation, it also implies that this pattern comes about because parties respond to each other rather than because all parties simultaneously respond to the same exogenous signals. In that sense, our perspective differs from the "riding the wave" hypothesis that also expects overlap, but due to parties converging towards problems of high public concern expected to decisively influence vote choice (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994; Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2008; Kaplan et al., 2006; Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016; Klüver and Spoon, 2016; Wagner and Meyer, 2014; see Sides, 2007 for negative findings).

This endogenous perspective draws on compelling evidence suggesting that responsiveness is at best mediated by strategic considerations. Parties respond for example to mass media priorities selectively, depending on considerations related to the issue publics affected (Green-Pedersen & Jensen, 2019). Moreover, problem indicators or their media coverage do not appear to have a significant influence on party attention (Meyer & Wagner, 2016). For instance, Grande and coauthors (2019) found no relation between real immigration rates and emphasis on migration issues in party manifestoes. Seeberg (2023: 277) shows that Danish parties respond to the degradation of problems only when their rivals also do so and concludes that "party attentiveness to problems is entirely in the hands of party competition." Similarly, Abou-Chadi (2018) found that parties respond to public priorities only to the extent that they are sufficiently salient on the party system agenda. This does of course not preclude the electoral supply from shaping back public opinion over the course of the campaign but we do not expect public opinion prior to the campaign to trigger campaign priorities.

Instead, we expect tunnels to result from parties monitoring and responding to their rivals' issue agenda. With regard to single areas, there is already abundant evidence of such engagement in the literature on issue entrepreneurship. Parties will react to competitors they perceive to represent an electoral threat (cf. Abou-Chadi & Stoetzer, 2020 on party positions), and will do so independent of public opinion as a potential confounder (Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020). Different endogenous mechanisms may then contribute to build tunnels of attention.

Several authors suggest that parties have reasons to orient their issue-based strategies so as to respond to the claims of their closest competitors (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009; Meguid 2005; Meyer and Wagner 2016; Spoon et al. 2014). Others claim that parties that are pivotal for coalition-building are most able to force other parties to address an issue (Green-Pedersen & Krogstrup, 2008; Green-Pedersen & Otjes, 2019). All of this work points towards possible "contagion" effects affecting most of the party system (Hutter and Vliegenthart 2018; Williams et al. 2016; see Meijers 2017 on European Integration; see Bale 2003 and Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020 on immigration).

A competitor's electoral threat is not only defined by its spatial proximity, but also by its electoral weight, as materialized in polls, past elections and eventually in the effective election outcome. Spoon and colleagues (2014) show that electoral success facilitates issue owners' influence on competitors' attention. Alternatively, government parties may use their privileged position in the public arena to determine the campaign agenda, even if governmental preeminence appears to have diminished (Bennett, 2004, 2017) and there is evidence

that parties in office can be more constrained by their responsibility to solve any problem that is brought forward (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010).

We draw on this literature demonstrating that parties take issues from each other and take the argument a step further to argue that parties' propensity to respond to their rivals is a core pattern of party competition under conditions of uncertainty, resulting in truly systemic and endogenous dynamics of attention. This is in line with existing findings suggesting that engagement rises the more competitive the election (Banda 2015; Damore 2004; Kaplan et al. 2006; Minozzi 2014) and the closer the next election (Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu 2019; Seeberg 2022). The main implication is that parties' issue attention to issues significantly overlaps with that of all other parties in the system.

Several mechanisms can be expected to contribute to endogenous tunnels of attention, leading us to the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:** Tunnels of attention are independent of public priorities anterior to the campaign: tunnel effects hold when controlling for those priorities.

## 2. Research design

We test the explanatory power of salience theory vs. the tunnel perspective just outlined with an empirical focus on issue attention in Belgian, Danish, Dutch, French, German, Italian and British manifestos. This case selection covers a uniquely large set of institutional and party settings. This is important because of the potential implications of electoral systems, multi-party competition and potential coalition constraints on salience strategies.

The empirical focus on manifestos is consistent with most of the literature on contrasted emphases vs. engagement we seek to contribute to. While other sources such as party press statements or interviews by party leaders are certainly promising for unravelling the mechanisms producing overlap in attention (a question we return to in the conclusion), party manifestos provide a more suitable basis for our broad comparative approach as this source is more comparable across time and space. Moreover, we do not treat manifestos only as an indicator of party strategies: manifestos are intrinsically relevant, as the most authoritative source to interpret the democratic mandate and a conventional benchmark to evaluate representatives' responsiveness to their campaign announcements. Manifestos have been observed to produce considerable effects on effective policy (Grossman & Guinaudeau, 2021; Thomson et al., 2017). They embody the ultimate choice offered to citizens and a meaningful lens for assessing the extent to which elections presents them with alternative agendas.

We use data collected by the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) based on the content analysis of issue attention in governing parties' manifestos over a period of four decades running from the 1980s to the 2010s. The main variable of interest is the proportion of attention devoted to each theme in these manifestos. Each quasi-sentence (Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, the UK) or sentence (Denmark, Germany) was



assigned an issue category based on a coding scheme including 20 major topics and about 250 subtopics<sup>8</sup>. This results in a dataset of a total of 427.323 (quasi-)sentences (see appendix A1 for details per country).

## Stability and overlap

Issue ownership theory implies over-time stability of party priorities and little to no overlap across parties. Our tunnel perspective, by contrast, expects changing and overlapping priorities. Measuring stability and overlap is not straightforward, though. There is a large literature that accounts for issue ownership and party strategy in a great variety of ways. Particularly relevant to our model is Sigelman and Buell's (2004) comparison of issue attention across Democrats and Republicans in the US, relying on articles in the New York Times for eleven presidential races between 1960 and 2000. Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2015) adapted their measure to the context of the Danish multiparty system. They examine party manifestos between 1953 and 2007 and average, for each party and each issue, party attention by issue for "all other" parties and subtracts this mean from the party's attention to the issue. Both studies concluded that issue attention tends to overlap, irrespective of the type of political or electoral system.

These studies call for evidence covering more diverse contexts. Testing our argument requires an approach allowing not only to measure overlap, but to weight its respective impact against the effect of stability. We therefore put forth an alternative strategy relying on a series of multivariate linear analyses, i.e. panel cross-sectional models, explaining the share of attention devoted by a given party to a given issue at a given election. Models are run separately for each country, with sections corresponding to each issue and multiple points in time defined by the elections for which manifesto data is available. We regress each party's current attention to a given issue on the same party's past attention (stability) and on rival parties' current attention (overlap) to the same issue.<sup>9</sup> Models include fixed effects for elections. To account for the fact that attention to the different issues in the same manifesto are not independent, we cluster standard errors at the level of programs (Zorn, 2006).

We expect overlap to predominate (Hypothesis 1). Two additional interactions assess the range of tunnel constraints across party types and issues. First, we check whether government or opposition parties show differences based on an interaction with a variable on incumbency.<sup>10</sup> Second, average correlations in

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<sup>8</sup>The codebook is available [here](#). It was originally developed by the original US Agendas Project and was marginally adapted by some country teams to single country specificities (Bevan, 2019). Such adjustments were kept to a strict minimum to maintain maximum international comparability. In line with the international master codebook, codes at the subtopic level can be recoded so as to make national codebooks fully comparable. We did this for Germany, where immigration was coded as a subtopic of topic 2 on rights and minorities, while it represents a distinct major topic in the other countries covered in this book. The only further significant difference concerns culture, which was coded as a subcategory of topic 6 (education) in Germany, while a major topic in the other countries. Germany also has a separate category on reunification matters.

<sup>9</sup> This choice assumes a data generating process in which at the time each party, when drafting its manifesto, knows about rival parties' campaign priorities. Some manifestos will be published later than others – most of them will be published (very) late in the campaign – yet each party's policy proposals are announced prior to the program publication by campaigning officials and candidates. Our model expects that these cues influence other parties' anticipation of which issues will make the election. It takes the form:  $Attention_{p,i,t} = Attention_{o,i,t} + Attention_{p,i,t-1}$ , where attention by party  $p$  to issue  $i$  at time  $t$  is determined by the attention by all other parties ( $o$ ) to the same issue at the same time and the same party's attention to the issue at  $t-1$ , i.e. in program of the last election. The two case studies presented below provide support for this mechanism.

<sup>10</sup> We use data from the ParlGov website (Döring & Manow, 2012).

attention across parties do not preclude that they still devote higher levels of attention to their pet issues. To explore this possibility, we model an interaction between the party's past attention to an issue and a dummy indicating whether this matter belongs to the party's topics of predilection. We used the same approach as Kristensen et al.(2023) to construct this variable. In the absence of continuous measures of parties' issue ownership available for a sufficient number of topics, countries and elections, we coded parties' topics of predilection based on their party family as coded by the CMP and on the core topics attributed to them in the literature on issue ownership and secondary literature on party families (see Appendix A6 for full details).

## Endogenous and exogenous tunnel mechanisms

We run two sets of additional analyses to investigate the role of different mechanisms that might bring tunnels about.

We first test for the possibly exogenous nature of tunnels of attention, i.e. to account for the possibility that overlap may derive from the fact that all parties respond simultaneously to exogeneous signals. Real-world developments and problem indicators are a potential source. However, all types of real-world information are mediated by people's access to information, knowledge, framing and political interest. While indicators of some kind may exist on most issues, public awareness of those indicators will tend to vary enormously. And even in the case of the economy, the direct effect of real-world indicators is nowadays disputed (Barnes & Hicks, 2018).

We therefore assume that real-world developments are at best mediated by public concern. To account for this, we followed the conventional approach in research on how public priorities shape campaign strategies (Abou-Chadi, 2018; Klüver & Spoon, 2016; e.g. Wagner & Meyer, 2014) and collected data on perceived issue importance ("most important problems" items). We chose Eurobarometer surveys as, in contrast to sources used in past studies, in particular the CSES surveys, they are available since the early 1980s.<sup>11</sup> Eurobarometer surveys ask respondents to choose the most important problem from a fixed list of issues that varies only marginally over the period of study. In terms of time, we gathered observations from Eurobarometer either from the same year (if preceding the campaign period) or one of the two previous ones, depending on availability (see Appendix A3).<sup>12</sup> We matched the mentioned issues with the respective CAP codes to compute a measure of issue salience by country for each issue. The topics covered in Eurobarometer data are at the same time more detailed and less comprehensive than the classic CAP topics. For example, there are more items on the state of the economy – unemployment, debt, inflation, taxes etc. – but no items on, say, science or cultural policy.<sup>13</sup> The periods covered differ but there are several decades of overlap across all national datasets. As exemplified for tax issues, there is no obvious correlation between public salience and attention

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<sup>11</sup> Eurobarometer surveys cover all topics included in the CSES items on MIPs except four that are neither particularly salient in the public nor prominent in manifestos (civil rights, culture, institutional reforms, technology and infrastructure). Most issues are included in both sources, while a number of matters is included only in Eurobarometers (terrorism, health, labor, social insurance, energy and housing). Consequently, our data is more comprehensive in terms of issue coverage than sources used previously.

<sup>12</sup> This is a further advantage of using Eurobarometer data. The CSES collects post-electoral survey data, forcing scholars analyzing the impact of public priorities on manifestos to measure their independent variable either *right after* the election (Wagner & Meyer, 2014) or *several years before* (Abou-Chadi, 2018; Klüver & Spoon, 2016). Using Eurobarometer data allows for a more plausible, intermediary approach focusing on the year preceding the election.

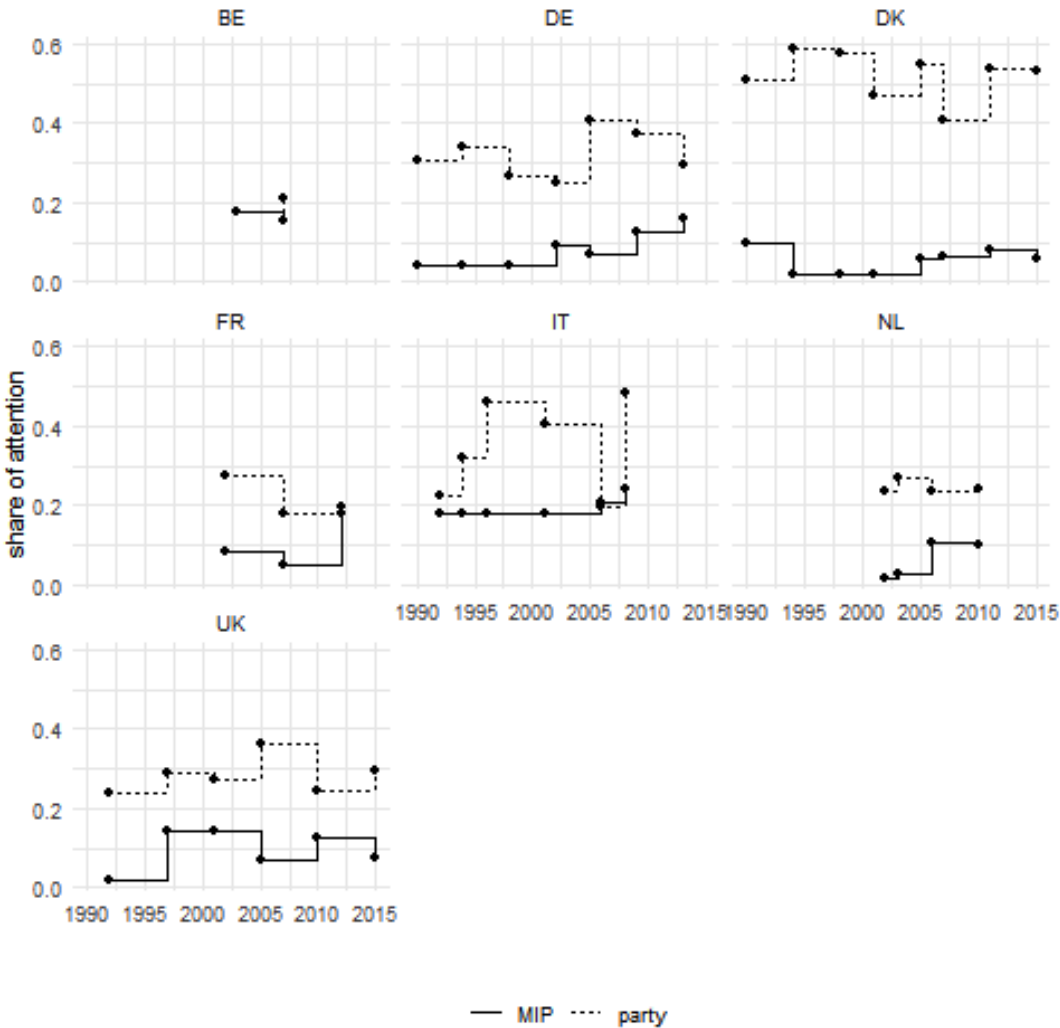
<sup>13</sup> We therefore had to perform analyses of the variable on public priorities based on a slightly different database with a lower N than in the previous models. See the list of categories covered in Eurobarometer data and the overview of available data points for each country in appendices A2 and A3.

to the issue in manifestos over time in our seven countries. We examine below how far the effect of other parties' issue attention still holds when controlling for public priorities.<sup>14</sup> If overlap comes about because all parties "ride the wave", then the effect of overlap should vanish when public priorities are added to the model. The opposite would corroborate that tunnels are primarily driven by endogenous dynamics.

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<sup>14</sup> In addition, we present models controlling for media salience for France and the UK in the appendix A16.

Figure 1 - Party and public opinion attention to taxes



Note: The dotted line is the average % of manifesto sentences devoted to tax policy in the respective country, according to the coding system of the Comparative Agendas Project (Baumgartner et al. 2019). The solid line is the share of respondents citing the current “levels of taxes in the country” as a most important problem in Eurobarometer surveys.

Finally, we tackle endogenous mechanisms based on models with alternative measures of overlap. To further unpack the notion of tunnels of attention, we regress party attention on the following variables inspired by the literature on issue-uptake previously reviewed (as an alternative to the previously discussed measure of systemic attention):

- **attention in the platform of the closest party** on the left-right axis at the respective election, measured based on left-right scores as measured by the CMP (Klingemann et al. 1994; Volkens et al. 2013)
- **attention in the platform of the biggest party in terms of vote** at the respective election
- **average attention in the platforms presented by incumbent government parties**
- **attention in the platform of the incumbent prime minister’s party**

In addition, for France, Germany, the UK and the Netherlands<sup>15</sup>, we model the impact of the first party to publish its manifesto. Our discussion about the process of manifesto writing would imply that there is no first-mover advantage because programmatic proposals influence each other in the phase of preparation. To substantiate this assumption, we have collected the dates of publication of manifestos.<sup>16</sup> The data, presented in Appendix A12, reveals considerable variance in the date of publications across countries and elections.

While endogenous mechanisms cannot be directly observed based on manifesto data that is available only every few years, our analyses allow to explore whether overlap derives from truly systemic tunnels of attention (in which every party responds to every party), or whether there is contagion triggered by spatial proximity or influential issue entrepreneurs. Two case studies provide further qualitative insight into the mechanisms at play.

### **3. Findings: tunnels constrain party competition**

Is parties' attention to issues driven by their past priorities, or by what their rivals currently focus on? Our analyses investigate the relative importance of stability and overlap in party programs. A predominance of stability associated to low overlap would suggest that parties pursue issue ownership strategies. In contrast, our model leads us to expect strong overlap across the board.

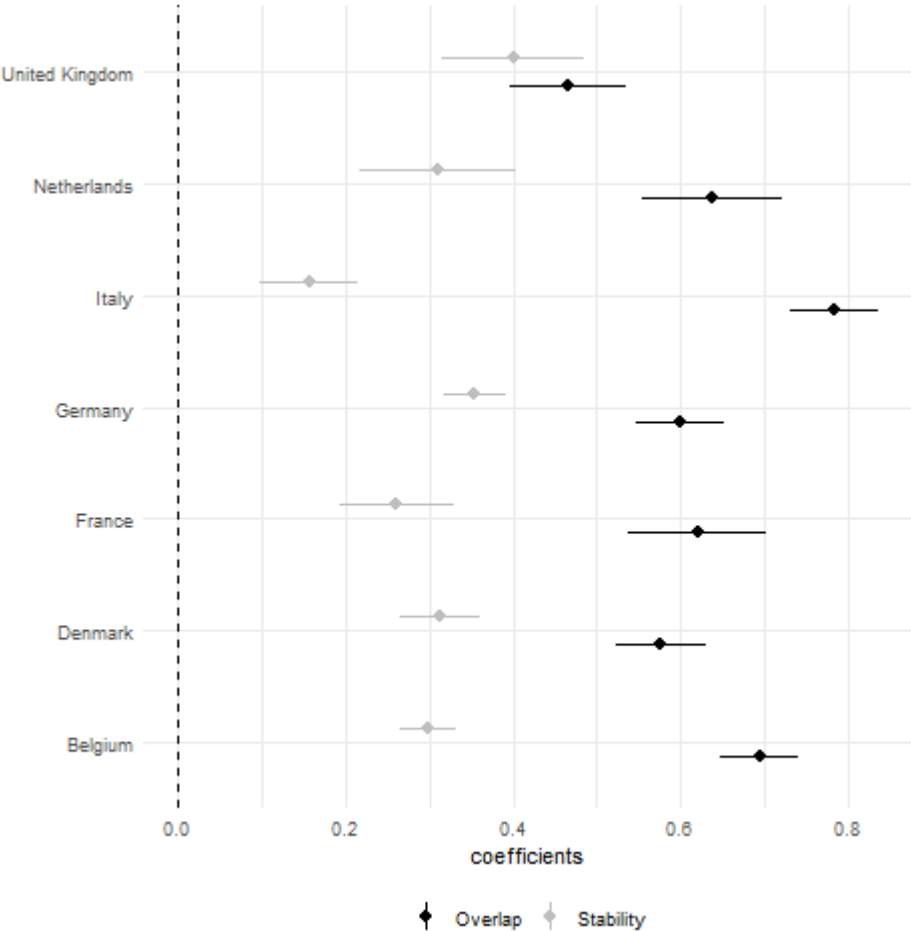
The aggregate results of our linear models pooling all issues at the country-level, presented in Figure 2, provide compelling evidence for the tunnel model of issue attention and for Hypothesis 1. Both overlap and stability appear to significantly shape parties' attention to issues. Yet, overlap predominates across all systems. Parties respond significantly more to their competitors than to their own past priorities, making it difficult to talk of "contrasted emphasis". The UK is the only case, where the effect of overlap, while stronger on average, is not significantly different from the effect of stability.

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<sup>15</sup> For the Netherlands, the data covers only the 2010-2017 period.

<sup>16</sup> We are very grateful to Zeynep Somer-Topcu for generously sharing the dates of publication of British (2005-2017), Dutch (2010-2017) and German (2009-2017) manifestos. We have completed this data for earlier years in Germany and the UK, as well as France (1981-2012).

Figure 2 - Stability and overlap in party programs



Note: Full multivariate analyses are reported in appendix A4. Overlap represents the effect of rival parties’ current attention to a given topic to a party’s attention to the same topic. Stability represents the effect of the party’s attention to the subject at the previous election<sup>17</sup>.

To provide further robustness to our analyses and to grasp finer patterns of issue attention, we rerun the same models separately for each topic, using the 20 classic comparative-agendas topic categories (cf. appendix A2). Our findings hold across the vast majority of cases, even if there is some variation across countries and issues (cf. appendix A8). No particular pattern is discernible that could suggest, for example any systematic variation due, for example, to the nature of external events (Kristensen et al., 2023; Seeberg, 2023) or to the more general nature of issues (Brouard et al., 2018). Several additional robustness checks allow to rule out that issue emphasis is driven either by outliers or by issues routinely addressed by all political parties. Our results hold, in particular, when taking out one issue at a time (see Appendix A15), confirming that no specific issue drives our findings. First-difference models confirm that the identified effects are due to political parties’ changing issue priorities and not to a stable hierarchy (Appendix A7). Using a trend term

<sup>17</sup> Appendix 4b provides an alternative model with a *trend* variable instead of election fixed effects. The results remain substantively the same.

instead of fixed effects for elections allows us to exclude that overlap comes about because of similar trends in attention (Appendix A4b).

As appendix A5 shows, our findings on the predominance of systemic patterns of attention hold regardless of whether parties are in government or in the opposition. While past research on Denmark, a context marked by the prevalence of minority government, suggests that opposition parties are less constrained by systemic attention, our analyses reveal that being out of office does not make parties immune to tunnel pressure. Importantly, the interaction with issue ownership (Appendix A6b) shows that our findings are substantively the same for topics owned by the parties. In summary, there is strong and robust evidence pointing to the importance of tunnels constraining all parties' attention across all issues and political systems.

### **The endogeneity of tunnels of attention**

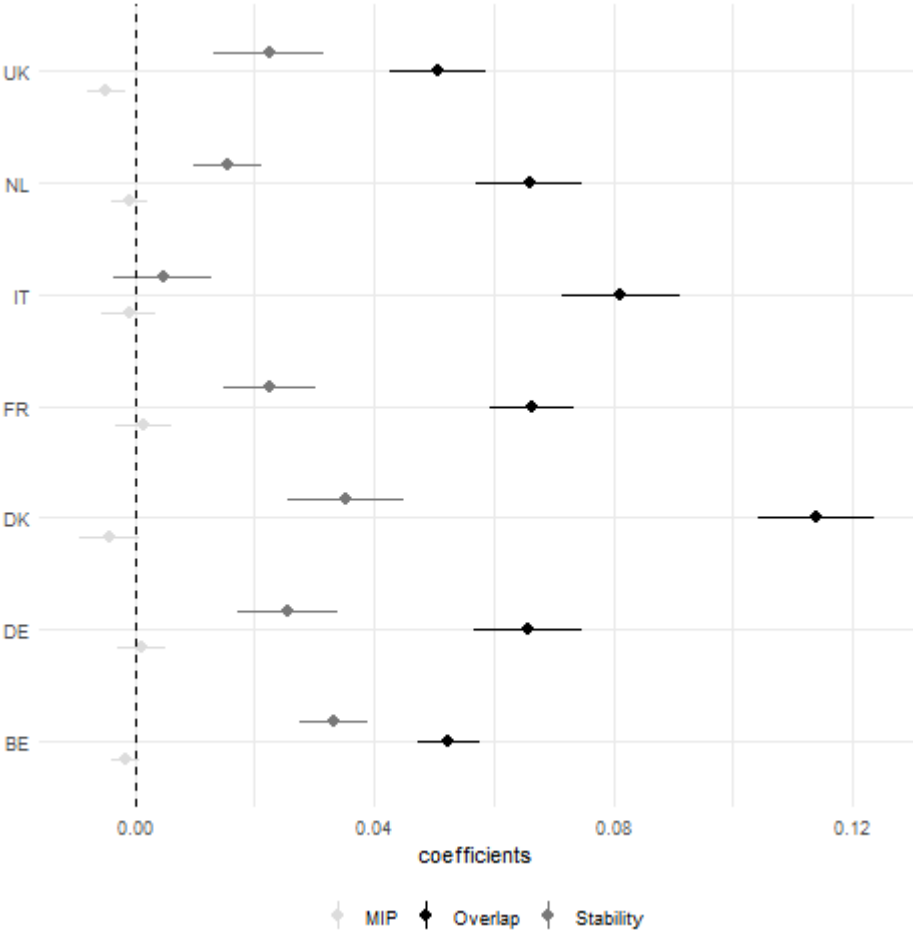
Our theory expects that the extensive overlap in priorities just documented results from issue engagement, i.e. parties engaging with one another's issues. This subsection explores in greater detail the mechanisms underlying tunnels of attention. First, we put to test the possible impact of exogenous factors, such as the role of public opinion. Second, we explore the role of several potential endogenous mechanisms.

To test hypothesis 2 and rule out that overlap merely reflects parties' responses to public priorities, we replicate the analyses in Figure 2 with an additional control for public salience, for all topics covered as "most important problems" items in Eurobarometer surveys<sup>18</sup>. Figure 3 does not suggest that public priorities drive campaign issues and thus corroborates the endogenous nature of tunnels of attention: parties' tendency to respond to their rivals' priorities more than to their own past priorities still holds across all countries when controlling for MIPs. This provides a strong robustness check not only because it adds a variable that has been demonstrated to matter at other levels (Jennings and John 2009; Jones et al. 2019) but also because constraints in data availability considerably reduces our N.

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<sup>18</sup> As explained in footnote 12, the data used for models including public priorities is different because not each CAP topic could be matched to a MIP item. This explains sensibly lower Ns in the models including the variable on MIPs (see the Appendix A10 compared to A4). Analyses of stability and overlap look, however, substantively identical based on this data (see Appendix A11 replicating Figure 2 in appendix).

Figure 3 - Effects of stability, overlap and public concerns on parties' issue attention



Note: full models reported in appendix A10.

The finding that tunnels of attention are not driven by responsiveness to public salience is in line with existing negative findings as to the “riding the wave” thesis (see in particular Sides, 2007, 2006). Most authors have to resort to interaction analyses to show a significant impact of public preferences given the absence of unconditional effect (e.g. Wagner and Meyer, 2014). Those controlling for systemic salience treat this variable only as a control that is not commented on at length, but also incidentally find a strong impact (Abou-Chadi, 2018; Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016; Klüver & Spoon, 2016). To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first to systematically account for past attention, rival parties’ average attention, and public salience while covering multiple issues in a wide range of political systems. Analyses controlling for media salience in two countries (France and the UK, cf. appendix A16) show that media attention has no significant impact on manifesto priorities and does not significantly upset the results from earlier models. Overall, our observations lead us to reject the suspicion that overlap in attention merely reflects parties’ simultaneous responses to context, confirming that what matters most is what other parties do.

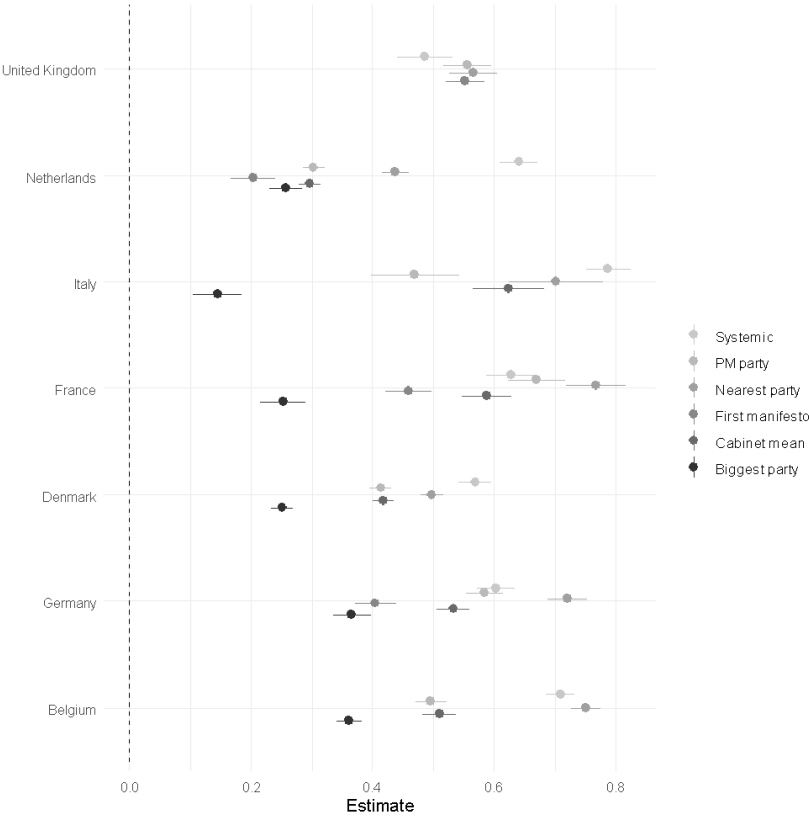
In order to understand this phenomenon better, we look further into which parties matter to each other. Do parties primarily take up their issues from ideologically close competitors, from electorally successful parties or from incumbents? Is there a first-mover advantage for the party that publishes its manifesto early? Figure 4 shows the coefficient for overlap in a series of models replicating those in appendix A4. However, unlike in



the earlier models, we test several different measures of overlap. If tunnels come about because of “contagion” effects in which each party takes up issues from their immediate challengers, or because some (government, electorally successful or first-mover) parties are better able to shape the campaign agenda, the respective overlap coefficient should be stronger than the systemic overlap we have focused on so far.

The empirical findings are mixed. Importantly, all measures of overlap have a significant effect. This corroborates that issue engagement follows a largely systemic dynamic. In most countries, the effects of systemic salience and of attention of the nearest, government or first-mover parties are not very different from each other. This does not preclude contagion effects or the presence of issue entrepreneurs during the campaign resulting eventually in systemic patterns of attention in manifestos. In line with our expectations, there is no first-mover advantage. It is also notable that the coefficient for the biggest party is the weakest except in the Netherlands. Some other intriguing differences emerge across countries. Our systemic indicator is the strongest in Denmark, Italy and the Netherlands and also performs very strongly in Belgium. It is noticeable, though, that the “nearest party” indicator does best in France, Germany and Belgium, confirming the importance of direct competitors (cf. Abou-Chadi & Stoetzer, 2020). While the findings for PM and government parties are consistent with existing findings from Denmark showing that these parties are not in the best position to shape systemic salience (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010), they also reveal that this pattern varies across political settings. A similar picture emerges in Italy and the Netherlands, where government parties exert a comparably weaker effect on campaign agendas but not in Belgium, Germany and, especially, France.

Figure 4 - Effects of different measures of overlap on parties' issue attention



Note: Full models available in appendix A13.

Our approach delineates a comparative research agenda on the drivers of tunnel of attention and on the conditions allowing parties to move the tunnel towards their preferred topics. We have shown that other

parties' attention to issues is the main determinant of individual party attention across a variety of political systems. Yet, parties may not focus on the same type of competitors everywhere. Our analyses suggest that electoral strength might be decisive in majoritarian systems, where small parties could represent a negligible threat. The necessity to negotiate electoral agreement and/or government coalitions could be more conducive to systemic dynamics in proportional systems.

## 4. Endogenous tunnel mechanisms: evidence from two different political settings

The analyses presented so far allow to observe the implications of tunnel of attentions at the level of published manifestoes, but not the mechanisms inducing overlap. Our argument implies that tunnels of attention come about in a process of intense competition where parties engage with issues politicized by rivals, as they expect these issues to matter for upcoming elections. Yet, the source of manifestoes, available only every few years, does not directly allow to rule out alternative mechanisms. We illustrate the role of endogenous issue competition among parties in producing tunnels of attention from two cases: the promise to raise the minimum old age pension level in the French 2007 presidential election and proposals for reintroducing a wealth tax at the 2021 German federal elections.<sup>19</sup> France and Germany differ in their electoral systems and political institutions, the former being a particularly majoritarian system while the latter uses a mixed electoral system with proportional effects and stands out with a comparatively high number of veto players. Some authors expect consensual systems to leave more room for political entrepreneurs to emerge and force their challengers, especially close ones, to devote attention to new problems. Yet, the case studies reveal remarkably similar endogenous mechanisms across both contexts.

### 4.1 Social policy in France

Our first example, social policy, is a “usual suspect” for contrasted emphasis. Saliency theory would lead us to expect that “any Socialist party that totally abandons its concern about welfare imperils its own existence” (Budge et al. 2010: 792). As a matter of fact, social issues such as, for example, minimum wages, inclusion or redistribution are typically associated to the left (Seeberg, 2017). Yet, tunnels of attention also occur in this area, with right-wing parties devoting similar levels of attention to these policies as soon as they are expected to be rewarding.

This can be exemplified by Nicolas Sarkozy's campaign for the 2007 French presidential election. The appropriation of issues historically associated with the Socialist Party was central to Sarkozy's campaign. The team in charge of drafting the programme was instructed to work “without taboos” and not to hesitate to “pre-empt” issues associated with the left, e.g. in the areas of social justice and security, discrimination, school education, and higher education<sup>20</sup>. Another senior official, involved in the social policy section of the program, explained:

*“The mainstream left and mainstream right converged on the particular importance of social security. [...] The idea that there should be a policy fighting social inequality – this, I am going to tell it right away, this not a monopoly of the left!”<sup>21</sup>*

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<sup>19</sup> These illustrative case studies rely on secondary literature, press coverage of the respective subject as retrieved from Factiva as well as on qualitative interviews carried out as part of a research project on French electoral promises.

<sup>20</sup> Interview cited in Guinaudeau & Costa (2018), p. XVI.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

This campaign strategy deeply shaped Sarkozy's presidential platform. The program put a strong focus on purchasing power and fighting poverty. It also pledged to create a professional social security granting more rights in case of layoff, a "savings account" for paid professional training, entitling parents to family benefits from the first child onwards, spending more money on suburbs, or an enforceable right to housing.

One of these "social" pledges announced a 25-percent rise in old-age minimum income (minimum vieillesse). A closer look at the campaign sequence reveals that Ségolène Royal, candidate of the Socialist Party, was the first to advocate a general rise (by 5%) for pensions below the minimum wage, including the minimum vieillesse. François Bayrou, candidate of the center party UDF, judged Royal's proposal insufficient and outbid it by pledging an increase of the minimum vieillesse to 90% of the minimum wage. This commitment was presented on as landmark by the newspaper *Les Echos* that nonetheless underlined its cost, estimated at 3.3 to 4 billion euros.<sup>22</sup> In his manifesto, published later, Nicolas Sarkozy promised a raise by 25%.

The staff in charge of the different candidates' manifestos saw considerable electoral potential in this issue in a context in which purchasing power was generally salient. Poor pensioners generally attract sympathy in public opinion (van Oorschot, 2006), while senior citizens represent a crucial target given their high level of electoral mobilization. Initially put forth by one candidate, the issue became central, forcing all other candidates to state their intentions. It was notably addressed during the TV debate opposing Ségolène Royal to Nicolas Sarkozy between the two rounds. The fact that this reform had not (according to the daily *Les Echos*) been integrated into his party's estimation of his programme suggests that this pledge has been added at a later stage, in response to positions taken by rival candidates.

This exemplifies the mechanism of appropriation of issues put forward by competitors in the campaign. While the minimum vieillesse bore an electoral potential, the issue was embraced by all major candidates in the absence of any focusing event or public salience.

## 4.2 Wealth tax in Germany

Our second example, wealth tax, also lends itself at first sight to contrasted emphasis. In Germany as in many other countries, a growing gap between the top-income categories and the rest of society are a concern that is not tackled by tax policy. Successive reforms have in fact brought about tax reliefs for the wealthy (Bach et al. 2014; Buggeln 2022). This includes, in particular, the suppression of the wealth tax in 1997, following a ruling by the constitutional court. Against this background, left-wing parties could see a potential in mobilizing the bottom 90% of society in favour of reintroducing a wealth tax. However, the centre-right parties CDU-CSU and FDP enjoy issue ownership on the topics of economy. These parties, in coalition with organized business interests, have successfully run long-term public opinion campaigns against taxing wealth, framing this as a "business and job killer" (Fastenrath et al., 2022). As a result, left-wing parties – and most notably the Social democratic SPD – never put the emphasis on this subject while the FDP and CDU have regularly advocated tax reliefs. The reintroduction of a wealth tax thus consistently attracted little attention in the German campaigns of the last decades. Given considerable internal divisions, SPD and Greens did not take the opportunity of being in government (1998-2005) to push for such a reintroduction

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<sup>22</sup> « *Les Echos* décryptent chaque jour une mesure phare de la campagne électorale. François Bayrou : le minimum vieillesse à 90 % du SMIC », *Les Echos*, 4 April 2007.

and renounced to campaign on this topic in the 2000s<sup>23</sup>. This proposal experienced only a discrete come-back in their 2013 programs, in the wake of the great recession<sup>24</sup>.

Interestingly, this changed at the 2021 general elections that have seen the wealth tax achieve unprecedented salience<sup>25</sup>. According to Fastenrath & Marx (2023), this can be attributed to a shift in the strategy of the SPD. Based on an analysis of news coverage, interviews with high-ranking officials and TV debates, the authors explain that a window of opportunity derived from Kanzlerkandidat Olaf Scholz's high perceived competence in economic matters. This coincided with the programmatic weaknesses of the ruling FDP and CDU-CSU, who advocated considerable public investments that seemed inconsistent with their tax-relief policy. In this context, salience theory would have expected the SPD to emphasize the topic and right-wing parties to attempt drawing attention to more favourable subjects.

However, this is not what we see. Figure 5, based on data from the daily Die Welt, i.e. the newspaper that covered the topic most intensively<sup>26</sup>, shows how attention to the topic increased as the election approached. This representation comforts the thesis that the SPD acted as an agenda-setter. Attention to the wealth tax was consistently triggered by SPD initiatives – something reflected in the social-democratic party's unique visibility over the whole course of the campaign. But the graph also shows that SPD proposals prompted reactions from other parties, resulting in a growing visibility as the election approached.

Figure 5 - Articles mentioning "wealth tax" and single German parties in Die Welt

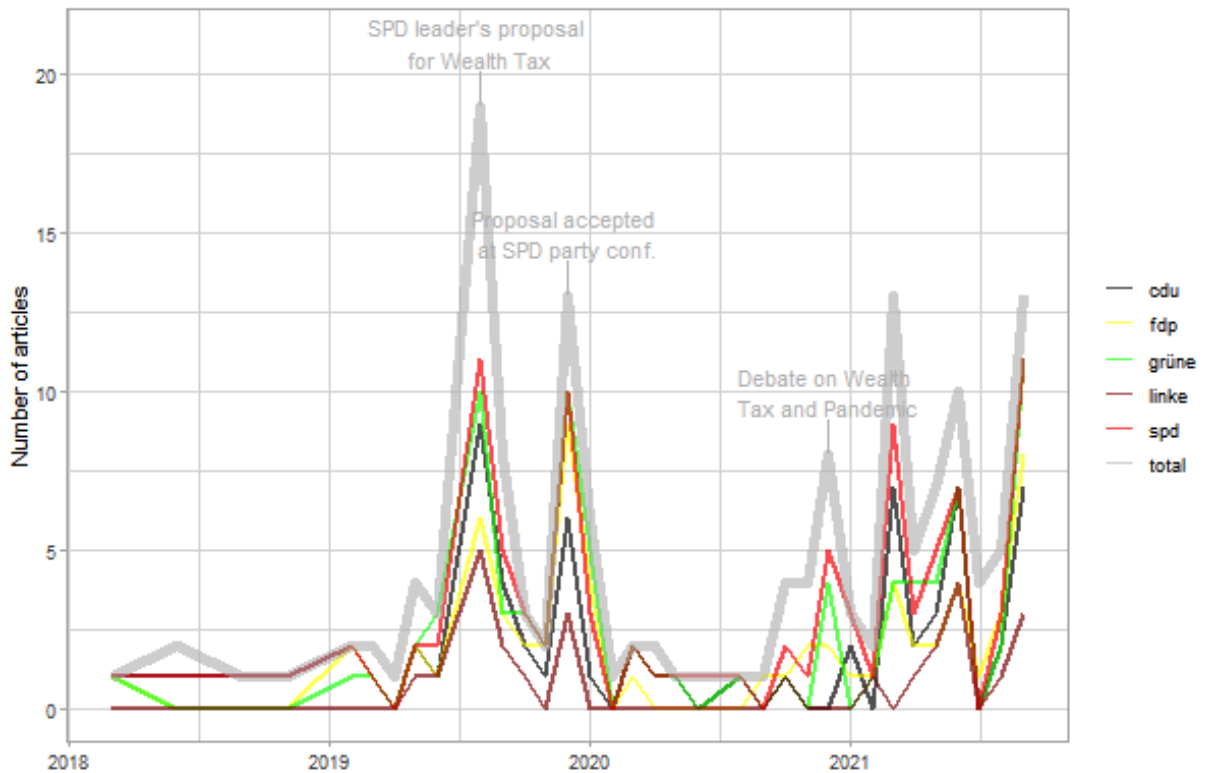
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<sup>23</sup> The left party was by then the only one sometimes addressing the need for a constitutionally compatible wealth tax. Vague appeals to tax wealth, mostly not in the form of a permanent tax but as an exceptional contribution to fund specific expenses, sometimes appeared in the other left-leaning parties but were consistently downplayed in the campaign (Fastenrath and Marx 2023).

<sup>24</sup> Following intense internal discussions, the Greens defined the revival of the wealth tax as a "middle-term objective" while the SPD stressed that a wealth tax should place no burden on small and middle-size enterprises and families. In 2017, the social-democratic programme called for taxing wealth but the deriving concrete proposal is no tax on wealth but on high income. Thomas Kutschaty, SPD *Spitzenkandidat* for the regional elections in Nordrhein-Westfalen observed that the SPD had been short of "courage" to commit to a wealth tax in 2017: "And yet we did not have the courage to advocate a wealth tax when we formulated the last Bundestag election program." *Welt online*, 3 October 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Previous attention peaks date back to the decision of the Constitutional Court in June 1995 and to the resulting suppression of the wealth tax in January 1997 following government's inaction to reform it in line with the constitution.

<sup>26</sup> Appendix A14 shows very similar patterns for two other outlets. Peaks of attention occurred simultaneously for all newspapers, and the SPD consistently emerges as the most visible party.



Source: Factiva. The grey line represents the number of articles mentioning the ‘wealth tax’ while the other lines represent the count of articles mentioning the issue in combination with a given German party.

Except for not so relevant mentions of the wealth tax in Fall 2018 – in reference to French president Macron’s reform of the French wealth tax in the context of yellow vests’ mobilizations – and in Spring 2019 – when organized business interests and FDP leaders criticized the government’s reform of the property tax as a “disguised wealth” tax – the topic first gained in attention in August 2019, when Thorsten Schäfer-Gümbel, acting SPD leader and chair of a SPD commission on wealth taxation, presented his wealth tax concept to the party board. This proposal, to be formerly adopted by the SPD at the party conference in December 2019, attracted considerable attention. A second peak of attention occurred in the context of the SPD internal leadership elections in 2019 and subsequent party conference. Proposals in favour of a wealth tax emerged among the main candidates and became a prominent topic. These elections were won by a leftist duo and the SPD’s position in favour of taxing wealth was settled at the conference. In the aftermath of the SPD congress, opinion polls were published revealing that their proposal was backed by a majority of respondents.

While the other parties on the left expressed their support for the SPD proposal, these developments initially triggered less reactions on the center-right. Yet, the new SPD leaders announced they would seek renegotiation of their party’s participation to government, forcing the ruling CDU-CSU to react. Secretary-general Paul Ziemiak drew “red lines” with a particular focus on the wealth tax project.

Left parties, and the SPD in particular, managed to keep the issue on the agenda in the months leading to the legislative elections. By the end of 2020, they took advantage of debates on the cost of the pandemic and bundled their pledge to reintroduce a wealth tax to proposals for an exceptional ‘corona’ contribution on wealth. Again, this put the right-wing block under pressure to respond. In October 2020, the

Christian-Democrats issued a bundle of proposals meant to support citizens' "financial freedom", rejecting any form of wealth tax.

As the election approached, the subject had become inescapable and was consistently debated in TV debates opposing the major parties' chancellor candidates. All left-leaning parties advocated reintroducing a wealth tax, providing much more details on the design of this policy than in the past. FDP, CDU-CSU as well as AfD emphasized their opposition to this proposal. For example, Peter Altmaier, CDU minister of the economy, repeatedly criticized the SPD focus on tax increases, as "unsettling small- and middle-sized enterprises."<sup>27</sup> Attention further intensified in the run-up to the legislative elections in September 2021, as conservative parties' election prospects deteriorated. More and more dramatic terms were used: FDP official Michael Theurer spoke for instance of the wealth tax as a "bureaucratic monster".<sup>28</sup>

This case provides support for the mechanism of issue uptake triggered by successful politicization by a party rather than real world developments or public pressure. Peaks in attention derive from SPD internal politics and communication of their programmatic intentions. While the pandemic provided the party with opportunities to politicize the issue, our data shows that its agenda-setting efforts date back to 2019. Similarly, the issue was not particularly salient in the public and opinion polls were commissioned only as a reaction to SPD proposals.

## 5. Discussion

Government decisions to act in certain policy areas rather than others is one of the central expressions of political power and one of the core stakes of electoral competition. Electoral campaigns play a topical role in agenda-setting and political competition is meant to balance representation and broaden the focus of government attention via the "conflict of conflicts". Electoral outcomes should decisively shape the policy priorities of the future executive. And parties running for office are expected to present a contrasting set of issue priorities to voters. This expectation has been challenged by empirical evidence suggesting, with a focus on single issues or countries, that overlap could be the rule rather than the exception. However, studies of issue competition and mandate representation do not seem to have fully derived the implications of empirically observed overlap as systemic salience continues to be treated at best as a control or moderating variable.

We put forward the concept of tunnels of attention and a new empirical strategy to account for the weight of systemic dynamics in electoral campaigns against other factors such as the party's past priorities or public opinion. We argue that in the highly uncertain context of political campaigns, contrasted emphasis strategies bear the risk of leaving potentially rewarding issues to rivals. In the short run, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to know which issues will tilt the balance one way or another in an election. We expect competitors' issue emphases to be the most valuable cue as to which issues will determine electoral outcomes. Parties' constant mutual monitoring and uptake of each other's issues imply tunnels of attention rather than contrasted emphases.

We have presented solid evidence that, across a wide and diversified set of democracies, parties do not focus on different topics but tend to converge towards similar issues. Our analysis of CAP-coded manifesto data is the first comprehensive account covering all policy issues across a large set of political systems and over four decades. This responds to calls for comparative studies and confirms that a tunnel of attention constrain

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<sup>27</sup> Our own translation. Cited in *Handelsblatt Online*, Corona-News im Überblick, 18 May 2021.

<sup>28</sup> "FDP gegen Baerbock: Vermögenssteuer als 'Bürokratiemonster'", *Welt Online*, 22 September 2021.

campaign priorities, resulting in systemic fluctuations affecting all parties. This applies far beyond consensual democracies like Denmark (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010) or the issues like the environment or immigration that are typically examined in studies of issue competition.

In addition, our study makes an important contribution to the understanding of the mechanisms leading to overlap. While complementary analyses corroborate the endogenous character of tunnels of attention given the robustness of the effect of systemic priorities to controls for public priorities or media salience, our two case studies provide direct insight into the mechanisms at play – the iterative process of manifesto preparation, communication and reciprocal monitoring of single proposals and the resulting overlap in manifesto priorities. Taken together, this evidence suggests that issue uptake is not a punctual phenomenon relevant to issues subject to intense politicization efforts by entrepreneurs, but a systemic feature of campaigns. Against this background, moving the campaign agenda towards favorable issues is a core dimension of party strategies. Models of issue competition need to systematically account for systemic salience, not just as a control variable or moderator.

These findings have key implications for our understanding of party competition as well as representation and delineate several intriguing avenues for further research.

First, further research is needed to better grasp the conditions allowing parties to move tunnels of attention towards their preferred issues. Our exploration suggests that high electoral scores can be an advantage, but this seems to vary across institutional settings. More attention needs to be devoted to the construction of tunnels of attention in the longer term. How far are they shaped in between elections by media agenda-setting activities, communication on social media, parliamentary debates or policymaking activities? Pioneering endeavors to code parties' agenda-setting activities available at shorter time intervals, like press releases or tweets (Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016; Meyer & Wagner, 2021; Seeberg, 2022) offer a promising avenue to explore these open questions. Such an empirical approach will also allow to shed light on the sources of parties' agenda-setting power. Can parties capitalize on higher voting intentions or on institutional advantages linked to office to move tunnels of attention? Or do parties in opposition enjoy wider latitude, as Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010) have suggested?

Second, our findings shed light on representation. Issue salience shapes citizens' identities and class consciousness (Ares, 2022). Tunnels of attention can be expected to mobilize a more limited range of social groups than contrasted emphasis would do. Future research should thus focus on the effects of tunnels on substantive representation. This could be done by comparing the characteristics of issues that become unavoidable at some point and low-salience issues, and identifying the respective target groups and their properties. The anticipation of potential electoral rewards, in particular, is likely to shape incentives to engage with issues. At the same time, the endogenous character of issue competition implies that potentially rewarding issues need a partisan agenda-setter to emerge. Groups will have a hard time drawing attention to their concerns in the absence of a party advocating their interests and appearing as “threatening” or pivotal to other parties.

Last but not least, our findings suggest that the way elections shape government policy needs to be fundamentally reconsidered. In classic mandate models, elections serve to select and authorize a policy program among several distinct alternatives. Yet, in terms of priorities, at least, party platforms grow more similar as each party needs to respond to its rivals. Tunnel priorities are forced onto the agenda of parties, irrespective of whether those parties have any past affinity with the issue. Our perspective suggests that elections are more about aggregating a systemic agenda of priorities for the term to come than about

offering citizens a choice among alternative agendas. This still leaves room for conflict over positions and we leave it for further research to uncover the extent to which tunnels of attention lead to the crystallization of consensus or to a more conflictual politicization.<sup>29</sup> From a pure agenda-setting perspective, awareness that a fair share of government priorities originate from their competitors' programs has far-reaching implications with regard to their motivations to deliver on those priorities. Incentives may differ for the systemic and the distinctive part of governments' agenda. Our analyses pave the way for research comparing the respective topics in order to establish if governing parties are more likely to act on their 'own' topics than on those they took up from rivals. On the other hand, they may face less resistance when acting on priorities advocated by opposition parties. Opponents may even push them to act on their commitments. Assessing the policy consequences of systemic priorities will require additional data-collection accounting for the emergence of tunnel priorities. Acting primarily on systemic preoccupations would give rise to a pluralist form of representation aggregating a variety of interests, whilst focusing on distinctive priorities would correspond better to the classic mandate (or party government) model.

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<sup>29</sup> A further intriguing question relates to the way positional and salience strategies are interconnected (Meyer & Wagner, 2019; Seeberg, 2020).



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## A1. Programs covered by the CAP manifesto data used in the article and number of (quasi-) sentences

Country	Sentences	Parties	Elections	Period
BE	188513	15	10	1977 to 2007
DE	65979	6	10	1980 to 2013
DK	22116	17	16	1973 to 2015
FR	26320	13	9	1981 to 2017
IT	42590	32	9	1983 to 2008
NL	45512	22	10	1982 to 2012
UK	36293	4	8	1983 to 2015

The column “Sentences” designates the complete number of (quasi-)sentences across all parties and elections. Parties corresponds to the total number parties present in the database, across all elections. Elections is the total number of elections covered in the dataset. Period indicates the earliest and the latest election covered.

## A2. Topics covered in the CAP data used in our general analyses and in the replication with Eurobarometer data on Most Important Problems

CAP Topic (or subtopic)	CAP code	General analyses (Figure 2)	Analyses with MIPs (Figure 4)
Economy	1	x	x
Inflation/Purchasing power	101		x
Unemployment	103		x
Debt	105		x
Taxes	107		x
Rights/liberties	2	x	
Health	3	x	x
Agriculture	4	x	x
Labor	5	x	x
Pensions/Social insurance	503		x
Education	6	x	x
Environment	7	x	x
Energy	8	x	x
Immigration	9	x	x
Transport	10	x	
Police/Justice	12	x	x
Social Policy	13	x	x
Housing	14	x	x
Econ. Regulation	15	x	
Defense	16	x	
Science/Technology	17	x	
Trade	18	x	
Foreign Policy	19	x	x
State/Administration	20	x	
European Integration	1910		x
Terrorism	1927		x
Culture (all but Germany)	23	x	
Reunification (Germany only)	25	x	



### A3. Overview of available MIP data points

The MIP data is collected from Eurobarometer questions. Below are the Eurobarometer waves that have been used for each country. It must be added that not all topics are available for every wave.

Country	Year
Belgium	1983, 1988, 1989, 1994, 2003, 2007
Denmark	1983, 1988, 1989, 1994, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2015
Germany	1983, 1988, 1989, 1994, 2002, 2005, 2009, 2011, 2013
France	1983, 1988, 1989, 1994, 2002, 2007, 2011, 2012, 2017
Italy	1983, 1988, 1989, 1994, 2006, 2008
Netherlands	1983, 1988, 1989, 1994, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2010, 2011, 2012
United Kingdom	1983, 1988, 1989, 1994, 2005, 2010, 2015

## A4. Models underlying figure 2 on stability and overlap

	Belgium	Denmark	France	Germany	Italy	Netherlands	United Kingdom
Constant	-0.001	0.002	-0.005	0.002	-0.001	0.002+	0.004***
Stability	0.301***	0.375***	0.318***	0.265***	0.166	0.352***	0.443***
Overlap	0.690***	0.584***	0.572***	0.618***	0.777***	0.608***	0.434***
Num.Obs.	2068	865	2816	790	880	1672	462
R2	0.538	0.614	0.367	0.391	0.471	0.420	0.582
R2 Adj.	0.534	0.605	0.361	0.379	0.463	0.413	0.573
Std.Errors	by: party	by: party	by: party	by: party	by: party	by: party	by: party
Fixed eff.	Election	Election	Election	Election	Election	Election	Election

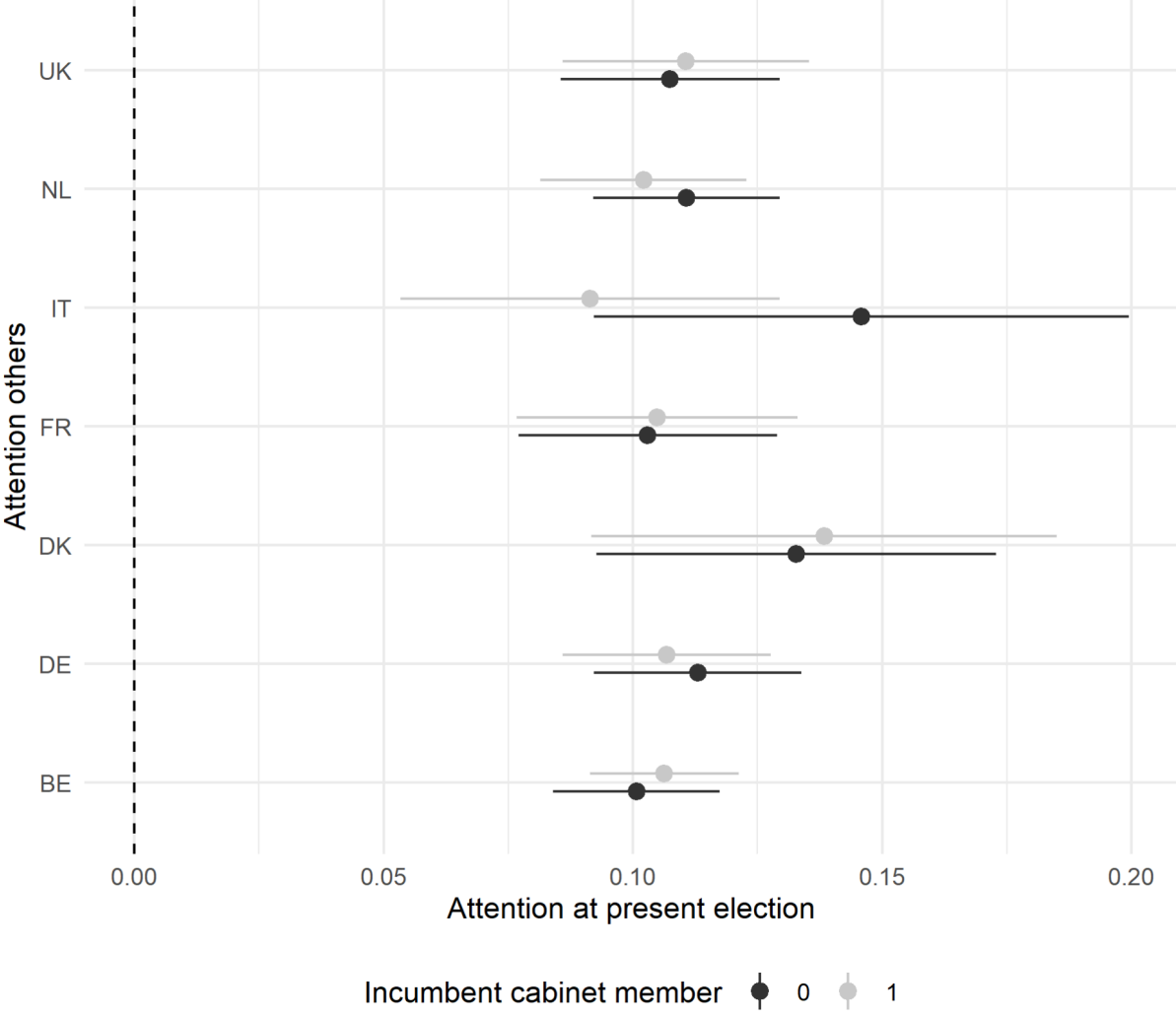
*Note:* panel cross-sectional models predicting a given party's attention to a given issue at a given election. Standard errors in parentheses. +p<.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

## A4b. Variant of Models A4 with a trend variable instead of election fixed effects.

	Belgium	Denmark	France	Germany	Italy	Netherlands	United Kingdom
Constant	0.118	0.070	-0.393	-0.285	-0.196	0.066	-0.522
Stability	0.281***	0.350***	0.248**	0.386***	0.315***	0.301***	0.151+
Overlap	0.707***	0.602***	0.627***	0.480***	0.569***	0.640***	0.783***
Year (trend)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Num.Obs.	2068	865	790	462	2816	1672	880
R2	0.535	0.607	0.387	0.567	0.365	0.406	0.469
R2 Adj.	0.534	0.606	0.384	0.564	0.365	0.404	0.467
Log.Lik.	4126.196	2083.627	1510.639	1117.884	3645.079	3383.020	1361.268
RMSE	0.03	0.02	0.04	0.02	0.07	0.03	0.05
Std.Errors	Clustered by party	Clustered by party	Clustered by party	Clustered by party	Clustered by party	Clustered by party	Clustered by party

*Note:* panel cross-sectional models predicting a given party's attention to a given issue at a given election. Standard errors in parentheses. + $p < .1$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

# A5. Effect of overlap on issue attention depending on government status



Note: This figure is based on an amended version of models in appendix A4. We add an interaction between overlap and the incumbent vs. status of parliamentary parties. The effect of overlap is significant for both incumbents (in light grey) and opposition parties (in dark grey). There is no significant difference between the two in any country.

## A6. Issue ownership

The topics on which each party included in the database could be expected to set a particular focus was coded based on the party family.

Far-left	Health, Labor, Social Policy
Social-democrat	Health, Labor, Social Policy
Green	Rights, Environment, Energy
Liberal	Economy, Rights, Police/Justice
(Center-)right or conservative	Economy, Immigration, Police/Justice
Far-right	Immigration, Police/Justice

These are the lists of parties in each group:

Far-left:

Die Linke, PDS (Germany), PCF (France), SPP, Coms, LS (Denmark), PSP, SP, (Netherlands), PCI, RC (Italy)

Green:

ECOLO, GROEN (Belgium), Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Germany), Les Verts/EELV (France), GL (Netherlands), Verdi (Italy)

Social-democrat:

PS, SPA (Belgium), SPD (Germany), PS (France), Labor (UK), SDP (Denmark), PvdA (Netherlands), PSDI, PSI (Italy)

Liberal:

MR (Belgium), FDP (Germany), Liberal Democrats (UK), SLP, Venstre, NA/LA (Denmark), D66, VVD (Netherlands)

Center-right:

CDH, CDV, VLD (Belgium), CDU-CSU (Germany), RPR, UDF, UMP (France), Conservatives (UK), Kons., CD/CPP (Denmark), CDA (Netherlands), Forza Italia, PPI, CCD/CDU (Italy)

Far-right:

FN (France), CD, DPP (Denmark), CD, PVV (Netherlands), MSI, Lega, AN (Italy)

A few parties could not be categorized in these party families and were coded individually, as follows:

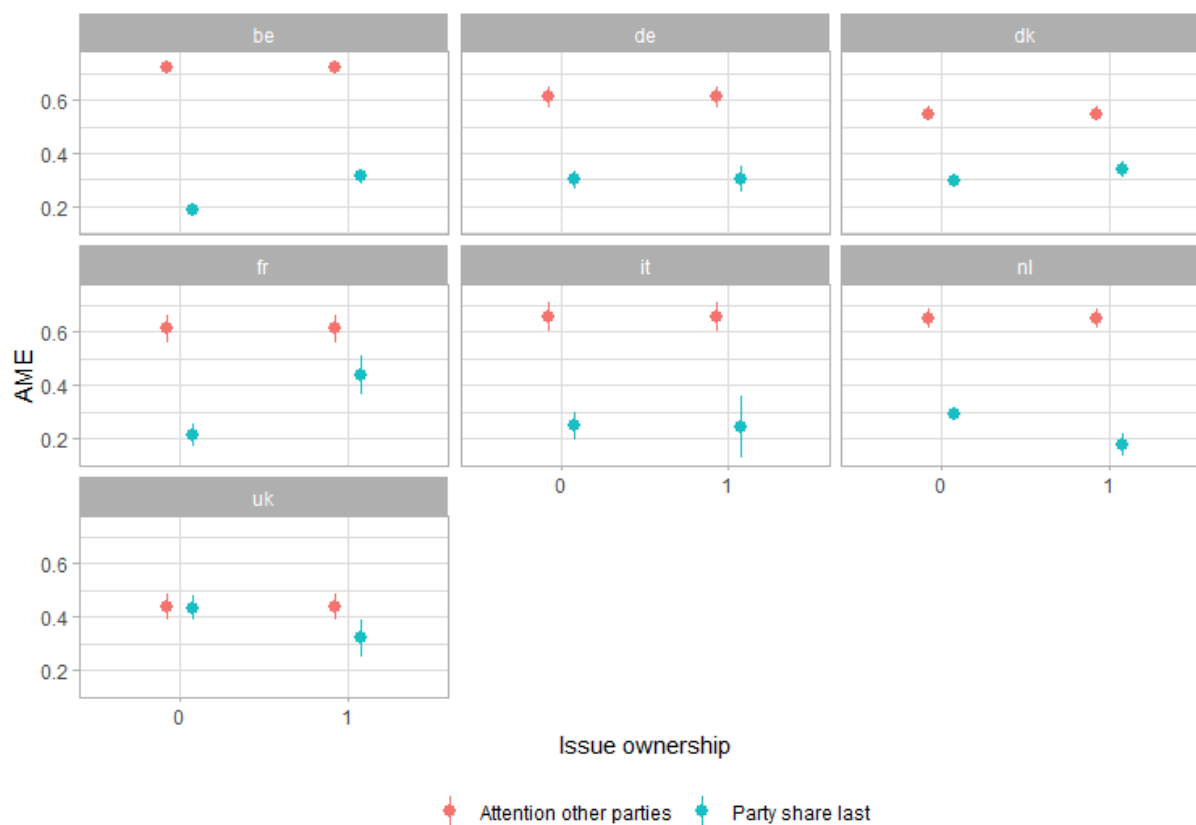
Justice Party (JP) in Denmark	Economy, Environment, Immigration
Progress Party in Denmark	Economy, Immigration
GPV (Netherlands)	Rights, Defense
RPF (Netherlands)	Rights
CU (Christian Union, Netherlands)	Rights

## A6b. The effect of issue ownership

	be	de	fr	uk	dk	nl	it
Constant	0.002	0.003*	0.005	0.004*	-0.004+	0.002	0.001
Stability	0.185***	0.301***	0.211+	0.434***	0.296***	0.291***	0.247*
Issue ownership	0.013*	0.010*	0.002	0.018**	0.015**	0.015*	0.031*
Overlap	0.723***	0.610***	0.612***	0.435***	0.547***	0.650***	0.656***
Stability:Issue ownership	0.128	0.001	0.224	-0.115	0.041	-0.115	-0.004
Num.Obs.	1660	650	552	420	2758	1260	500
R2	0.582	0.616	0.402	0.594	0.374	0.475	0.460
R2 Adj.	0.581	0.614	0.397	0.590	0.373	0.473	0.456
Std.Errors	HC3	HC3	HC3	HC3	HC3	HC3	HC3

*Note:* panel cross-sectional models predicting a given party's attention to a given issue at a given election. Standard errors in parentheses. + $p < .1$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

### Average marginal effect of overlap and stability

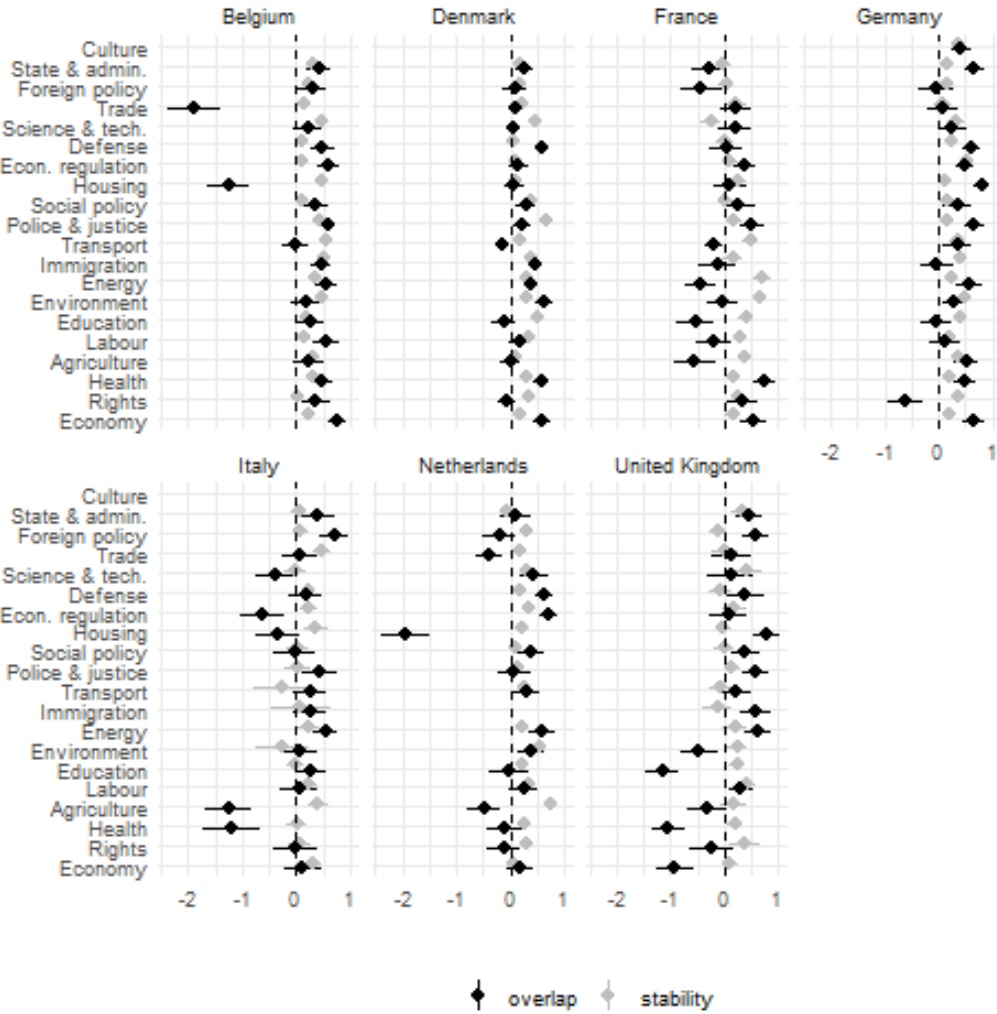


## A7. First-difference models of party attention

	be	de	fr	uk	dk	nl	it	sw
Constant	0.003**	0.001	0.006**	0.001	0.001	0.004**	0.016***	0.003
Stability (diff.)	-0.233***	-0.194***	-0.397***	-0.194**	-0.279***	-0.224***	-0.116***	-0.228***
Overlap (diff.)	0.241***	0.116**	0.076*	0.096*	0.089***	0.136***	0.221***	0.181***
Num.Obs.	1880	779	702	418	2478	1496	792	1058
R2	0.133	0.110	0.218	0.096	0.139	0.126	0.056	0.126
R2 Adj.	0.132	0.108	0.216	0.092	0.139	0.125	0.054	0.125
Log.Lik.	3551.148	1774.125	1239.775	951.305	2849.400	3008.582	1296.994	2142.588
RMSE	0.04	0.02	0.04	0.02	0.08	0.03	0.05	0.03
Std.Errors	Custom	Custom	Custom	Custom	Custom	Custom	Custom	Custom

**Note:** panel cross-sectional models predicting a given party's variation in attention to a given issue at a given election. Standard errors in parentheses. +p<.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

# A8. Effects of stability and overlap on parties' issue attention, by issue



Note: Full multivariate analyses reported for each topic and country in appendix A9.



## A9. Models underlying A8 (Effect of stability and overlap on parties' issue attention, by country and topic)

Belgium

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	23
Stability	-0.005 (0.011)	-0.037 (0.042)	0.074 (0.080)	0.060 (0.031)+	-0.028 (0.018)	0.015 (0.041)	0.023 (0.023)	0.254 (0.094)*	0.065 (0.024)*	0.210 (0.095)+	0.029 (0.012)*	0.011 (0.034)	0.253 (0.077)*	-0.057 (0.068)	-0.031 (0.023)	0.133 (0.062)+	0.073 (0.041)	0.094 (0.055)	0.098 (0.073)	-0.025 (0.059)
Overlap	-10.450 (0.449)***	-7.189 (2.267)*	-9.240 (1.174)***	-8.126 (0.542)***	-8.058 (1.774)*	-8.890 (1.086)***	-9.665 (0.207)***	-5.969 (1.315)*	-9.030 (0.525)***	-7.412 (1.608)*	-9.416 (0.536)***	-8.384 (1.854)*	-5.713 (1.390)*	-7.000 (2.265)	-10.118 (0.383)***	-8.179 (1.103)***	-9.297 (0.778)***	-6.768 (1.847)*	-5.398 (1.967)	-9.263 (0.418)***
Num. Obs.	94	94	94	94	94	94	94	94	94	94	94	94	94	94	94	94	94	94	94	94
R2	0.986	0.790	0.932	0.788	0.866	0.862	0.974	0.775	0.930	0.858	0.974	0.867	0.784	0.824	0.896	0.810	0.865	0.799	0.780	0.880
R2 Adj.	0.985	0.764	0.924	0.763	0.850	0.845	0.971	0.748	0.922	0.841	0.971	0.851	0.757	0.803	0.884	0.787	0.849	0.774	0.753	0.866
RMS E	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01

Note: OLS predicting, for each issue, a given party's attention at a given election. Standard errors in parentheses. +p<.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001. Issue labels in appendix A2.

Denmark

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	23
Stability	0.02 4 (0.02 0)	0.15 2 (0.06 5)*	0.10 6 (0.06 1)	0.02 7 (0.07 6)	0.14 1 (0.06 4)*	0.16 4 (0.04 7)**	0.11 5 (0.06 2)+	0.28 2 (0.0 73)* *	0.17 4 (0.06 5)*	0.14 0 (0.07 4)+	0.37 1 (0.07 5)** *	0.12 9 (0.05 9)*	-0.0 23 (0.0 52)	-0.0 35 (0.04 7)	0.05 7 (0.0 56)	0.26 6 (0.13 3)+	0.04 4 (0.0 77)	0.06 4 (0.02 5)*	0.14 5 (0.04 6)**	-0.0 86 (0.05 1)
Overlap	-8.3 23 (0.65 3)** *	-3.7 71 (0.53 7)** *	-4.9 13 (0.98 3)** *	-2.8 62 (0.36 5)** *	-5.3 62 (1.16 3)** *	-6.1 40 (0.27 1)** *	-5.3 64 (0.59 1)** *	-2.3 13 (0.7 57)* *	-4.8 29 (0.77 3)** *	-1.2 06 (0.13 5)** *	-2.8 47 (0.93 1)** *	-6.6 10 (0.66 6)** *	-4.1 25 (1.0 16)* *	-4.4 16 (0.60 8)** *	-3.5 22 (0.9 88)* *	-1.7 79 (0.34 6)** *	-3.4 94 (0.9 31)* *	-5.8 07 (0.29 1)** *	-5.2 44 (0.39 9)** *	-1.2 59 (0.18 3)** *
Num. Obs.	145	145	145	145	145	145	145	145	145	145	145	145	145	145	145	145	145	145	145	145
R2	0.93 5	0.57 9	0.73 4	0.51 4	0.81 9	0.80 9	0.75 2	0.52 5	0.76 6	0.48 4	0.63 6	0.78 8	0.63 1	0.59 2	0.68 3	0.48 9	0.63 3	0.83 2	0.61 8	0.28 1
R2 Adj.	0.92 7	0.52 6	0.70 1	0.45 3	0.79 6	0.78 5	0.72 1	0.46 6	0.73 6	0.42 0	0.59 0	0.76 2	0.58 5	0.54 0	0.64 3	0.42 6	0.58 7	0.81 1	0.57 0	0.19 1
RMS E	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.05	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.02	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.02	0.04	0.01	0.02	0.04	0.03	0.01

Note: OLS predicting, for each issue, a given party's attention at a given election. Standard errors in parentheses. +p<.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001. Issue labels in appendix A2.

## France

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	23
Stability	0.00	0.071	-0.016	0.254	0.078	0.190	0.298	0.559	0.094	0.372	0.093	-0.015	0.101	0.028	0.112	-0.049	-0.059	-0.039	-0.025	-0.086
		(0.088)	(0.062)	(0.113)	(0.026)*	(0.086)	(0.159)	(0.164)*	(0.055)	(0.128)*	(0.083)	(0.027)	(0.069)	(0.043)	(0.085)	(0.151)	(0.161)	(0.040)	(0.021)	(0.169)
				+		+	9)	4)*												
Overlap	-0.366	-3.832	-3.832	-2.415	-3.532	-3.111	-2.616	-0.919	-3.093	-1.102	-3.280	-3.443	-4.087	-2.362	-2.957	-2.668	-2.832	-3.817	-3.286	-2.849
	(0.201)**	(0.497)**	(0.455)*	(0.324)**	(0.582)*	(0.8091)	(0.3091)	(0.44)*	(0.504)**	(0.052)**	(0.296)**	(0.382)**	(0.276)**	(0.355)**	(0.073)**	(0.385)**	(0.547)*	(0.347)**	(0.307)**	(0.565)*
		*	*	*	*	*	91	38	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
							4)*	4)*												
Num.Obs.	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40
R2	0.978	0.857	0.899	0.726	0.962	0.771	0.839	0.763	0.805	0.644	0.804	0.948	0.911	0.706	0.870	0.571	0.769	0.935	0.966	0.760
R2 Adj.	0.971	0.813	0.868	0.644	0.951	0.702	0.791	0.692	0.747	0.538	0.745	0.932	0.885	0.618	0.831	0.442	0.699	0.916	0.956	0.688
RMSE	0.001	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.020	0.011	0.011	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.020	0.010

Note: OLS predicting, for each issue, a given party's attention at a given election. Standard errors in parentheses. +p<.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001. Issue labels in appendix A2.

## Germany

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	23	25
Stability	-0.09	0.028	0.025	0.032	-0.003	0.103	0.032	0.005	0.056	0.032	0.001	-0.022	-0.014	-0.010	0.002	-0.010	0.020	0.042	-0.012	0.150	
	(0.009)	(0.029)	(0.022)	(0.043)	(0.016)	(0.039)*	(0.13)*	(0.022)	(0.043)	(0.054)	(0.022)	(0.018)	(0.013)	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.046)	(0.017)	(0.015)*	(0.008)	(0.110)	
																				5)	

## Germany

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	23	25
Ove rlap	-3.6 93 (0.2 34)* **	-3.5 81 (0.2 52)* **	-3.5 15 (0.2 24)* **	-3.4 61 (0.3 97)* **	-3.6 15 (0.2 15)* **	-3.1 47 (0.1 97)* **	-3.5 79 (0.2 70)* **	-3.7 31 (0.2 21)* **	-3.7 28 (0.1 89)* **	-3.4 12 (0.5 14)* **	-3.7 77 (0.1 62)* **	-3.7 70 (0.1 58)* **	-3.7 25 (0.2 68)* **	-3.6 56 (0.2 22)* **	-3.0 77 (0.0 64)* **	-3.8 08 (0.1 76)* **	-3.8 17 (0.1 48)* **	-3.7 79 (0.1 16)* **	-3.8 94 (0.0 88)* **	-1.0 00 (0.0 00)* **	-2. 50 (0. 6 8)* 51 *
Nu m.O bs.	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43
R2	0.99 1	0.98 5	0.98 9	0.93 1	0.98 6	0.92 9	0.98 8	0.95 7	0.92 1	0.93 8	0.99 4	0.99 1	0.98 5	0.99 3	0.99 7	0.97 8	0.99 3	0.99 4	0.99 7	0.63 7	0.8 96
R2 Adj.	0.98 8	0.98 1	0.98 5	0.91 0	0.98 2	0.90 7	0.98 5	0.94 4	0.89 6	0.91 8	0.99 2	0.98 8	0.98 1	0.99 0	0.99 6	0.97 1	0.99 0	0.99 2	0.99 6	0.53 7	0.8 64
RM SE	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.0 1

Note: OLS predicting, for each issue, a given party's attention at a given election. Standard errors in parentheses. +p<.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001. Issue labels in appendix A2.

# Italy

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	23
Stability	0.32 6 (0.047)** *	-0.0 72 (0.076)	0.09 5 (0.133)	0.16 9 (0.119)	0.16 8 (0.069)+	0.08 8 (0.134)	0.24 3 (0.168)	0.1 09 (0.071)	0.48 4 (0.332)	-0.0 22 (0.105)	0.03 8 (0.126)	-0. 137 (0.092)	0.13 1 (0.096)	0.0 61 (0.223)	0.19 5 (0.090)+	0.1 18 (0.083)	0.3 61 (0.176)+	0.07 2 (0.085)	0.0 10 (0.050)	-0.1 08 (0.045)+
Overlap	-2.1 08 (1.224)	-5.8 47 (0.885)** *	-4.3 39 (0.579)** *	-3.2 94 (0.731)* *	-4.4 01 (0.881)* *	-3.9 53 (0.922)* *	-6.3 16 (0.793)** *	-1. 846 (0.698)	-4.0 15 (0.635)** *	-4.1 08 (0.123)** *	-5.4 62 (0.381)** *	-3. 420 (1.488)	-4.4 37 (1.170)* *	-2. 795 (1.230)	-3.6 00 (0.397)** *	-3. 546 (1.020) *	-2. 086 (0.878) *	-3.9 50 (0.883)* *	-3. 408 (1.472) *	-4.8 42 (1.130)* *
Num. Obs	44	44	44	44	44	44	44	44	44	44	44	44	44	44	44	44	44	44	44	44
R2	0.63 8	0.86 6	0.68 0	0.54 2	0.77 4	0.58 3	0.85 7	0.6 72	0.88 8	0.90 0	0.85 9	0.5 78	0.68 1	0.5 43	0.65 6	0.5 80	0.5 86	0.71 4	0.7 25	0.67 2
R2 Adj.	0.55 5	0.83 5	0.60 7	0.43 8	0.72 3	0.48 8	0.82 4	0.5 96	0.86 2	0.87 7	0.82 6	0.4 81	0.60 8	0.4 38	0.57 7	0.4 84	0.4 91	0.64 9	0.6 62	0.59 7
RMS E	0.05	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.0 1	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.0 3	0.01	0.0 2	0.01	0.0 2	0.0 0	0.02	0.0 7	0.01

Note: OLS predicting, for each issue, a given party's attention at a given election. Standard errors in parentheses. +p<.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001. Issue labels in appendix A2.

## Netherlands

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	10	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Stability	0.024 (0.021)	0.012 (0.015)	0.015 (0.021)	0.077 (0.045)	0.020 (0.031)	0.023 (0.013)	0.130 (0.027)**	0.090 (0.045)+	0.007 (0.013)	0.009 (0.009)	-0.017 (0.023)	0.039 (0.043)	0.065 (0.051)	-0.014 (0.016)	0.134 (0.036)**	0.127 (0.091)	0.038 (0.029)	-0.015 (0.007)+
Overlap	-6.414 (0.434)***	-8.479 (0.493)***	-8.103 (0.511)***	-8.547 (0.454)***	-8.370 (0.482)***	-8.300 (0.625)***	-7.727 (0.356)***	-8.487 (0.322)***	-8.447 (0.450)***	-8.289 (0.298)***	-8.562 (0.480)***	-6.748 (1.058)***	-8.223 (0.392)***	-8.358 (0.368)***	-7.730 (0.266)***	-2.154 (1.080)	-8.342 (0.600)***	-8.440 (0.559)***
Num. Obs.	88	88	88	88	88	88	88	88	88	88	88	88	88	88	88	88	88	88
R2	0.919	0.983	0.946	0.983	0.906	0.924	0.940	0.881	0.946	0.990	0.926	0.794	0.915	0.910	0.819	0.358	0.840	0.982
R2 Adj.	0.908	0.981	0.939	0.980	0.894	0.914	0.932	0.866	0.939	0.988	0.916	0.767	0.904	0.899	0.796	0.274	0.819	0.980
RMS E	0.02	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01

Note: OLS predicting, for each issue, a given party's attention at a given election. Standard errors in parentheses. +p<.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001. Issue labels in appendix A2.

## United Kingdom

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	23
Stability	0.03 9 (0.0 28)	-0.0 37 (0.0 40)	0.00 9 (0.0 10)	-0.1 12 (0.0 94)	0.04 1 (0.0 41)	0.01 0 (0.0 12)	0.00 5 (0.0 11)	-0.0 07 (0.0 20)	-0.0 63 (0.0 96)	-0.0 07 (0.0 08)	-0.0 07 (0.0 05)	-0.0 27 (0.0 19)	-0.0 42 (0.0 30)	-0.0 26 (0.0 20)	-0.1 11 (0.0 53)+	0.3 53 (0.1 43) *	0.00 8 (0.0 66)	-0.0 46 (0.0 11)* *	0.03 2 (0.0 11)*	-0.0 40 (0.0 37)
Overlap	-2.0 60 (0.0 69)* **	-2.3 37 (0.3 01)* **	-1.9 97 (0.0 09)* **	-2.3 04 (0.2 67)* **	-2.0 91 (0.1 07)* **	-1.9 99 (0.0 04)* **	-2.0 71 (0.0 84)* **	-2.1 31 (0.1 53)* **	-2.1 80 (0.2 25)* **	-2.0 22 (0.0 31)* **	-2.0 09 (0.0 09)* **	-2.0 49 (0.0 52)* **	-2.0 06 (0.0 35)* **	-2.0 81 (0.0 79)* **	-2.1 84 (0.1 27)* **	-1. 242 (0.3 13) **	-2.3 20 (0.3 42)* **	-2.1 93 (0.1 82)* **	-2.0 32 (0.0 61)* **	-2.1 26 (0.1 32)* **
Num.Obs.	22	22	22	22	22	22	22	22	22	22	22	22	22	22	22	22	22	22	22	22
R2	0.98 8	0.97 0	1.00 0	0.98 0	0.99 1	0.99 9	0.98 7	0.99 1	0.98 4	0.99 7	1.00 0	0.99 5	0.99 8	0.99 2	0.98 8	0.9 03	0.95 5	0.98 9	0.99 4	0.98 4
R2 Adj.	0.98 0	0.95 1	0.99 9	0.96 7	0.98 6	0.99 9	0.97 9	0.98 5	0.97 4	0.99 5	0.99 9	0.99 3	0.99 7	0.98 7	0.98 0	0.8 43	0.92 7	0.98 3	0.99 1	0.97 5
RMS E	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.0 0	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

Note: OLS predicting, for each issue, a given party's attention at a given election. Standard errors in parentheses. +p<.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001. Issue labels in appendix A2.

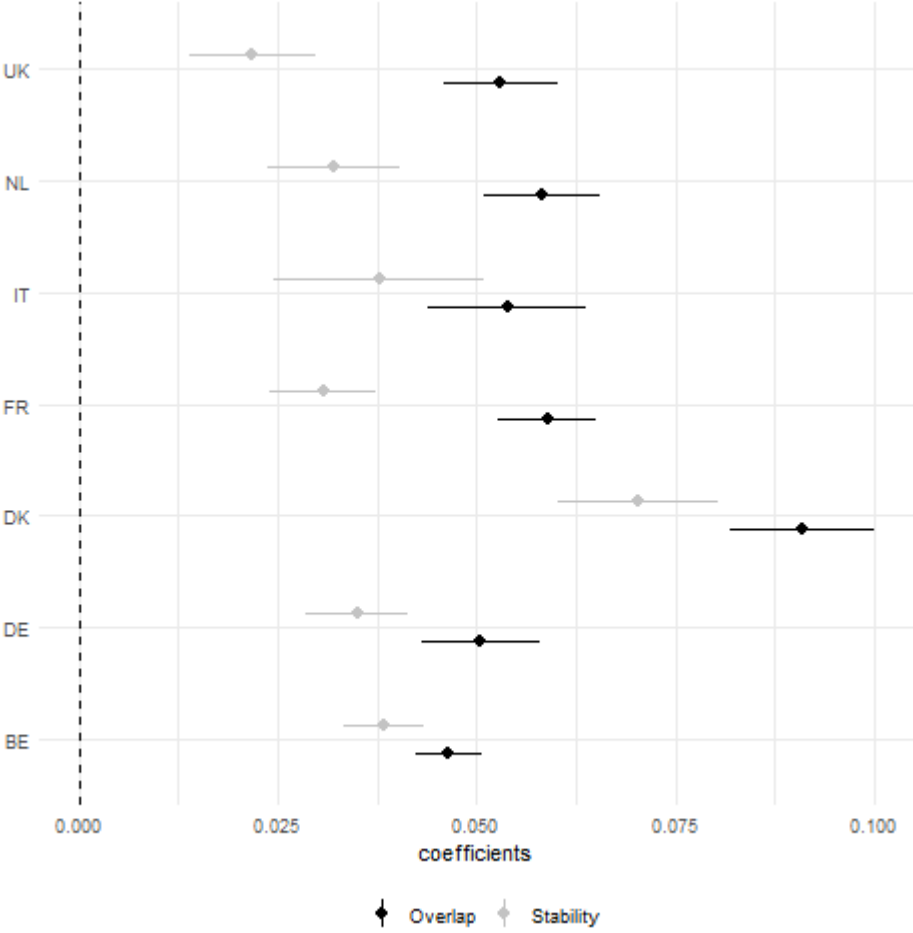
## A10. Models underlying figure 3 (Stability, overlap and MIPs)

	Denmark	Belgium	Germany	France	Netherlands	Italy	United Kingdom
(Intercept)	0.041***	0.006	0.010	0.024**	0.026*	0.030*	0.027***
	(0.009)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.009)	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.007)
Stability	0.166***	0.299***	0.233**	0.188**	0.123**	0.045	0.239*
	(0.046)	(0.051)	(0.077)	(0.064)	(0.046)	(0.079)	(0.098)
Overlap	0.701***	0.693***	0.716***	0.678***	0.712***	0.770***	0.597***
	(0.060)	(0.067)	(0.099)	(0.072)	(0.097)	(0.094)	(0.094)
MIPs	-0.029	-0.011	0.007	0.008	-0.005	-0.006	-0.033
	(0.035)	(0.017)	(0.023)	(0.028)	(0.018)	(0.032)	(0.021)
Num.Obs.	775	708	341	316	691	360	247
R2	0.401	0.500	0.593	0.434	0.318	0.397	0.507
R2 Adj.	0.399	0.498	0.590	0.428	0.315	0.392	0.501
RMSE	0.16	0.07	0.07	0.08	0.09	0.11	0.07

**Note:** panel cross-sectional models predicting a given party's attention to a given issue at a given election. Standard errors in parentheses. +p<.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

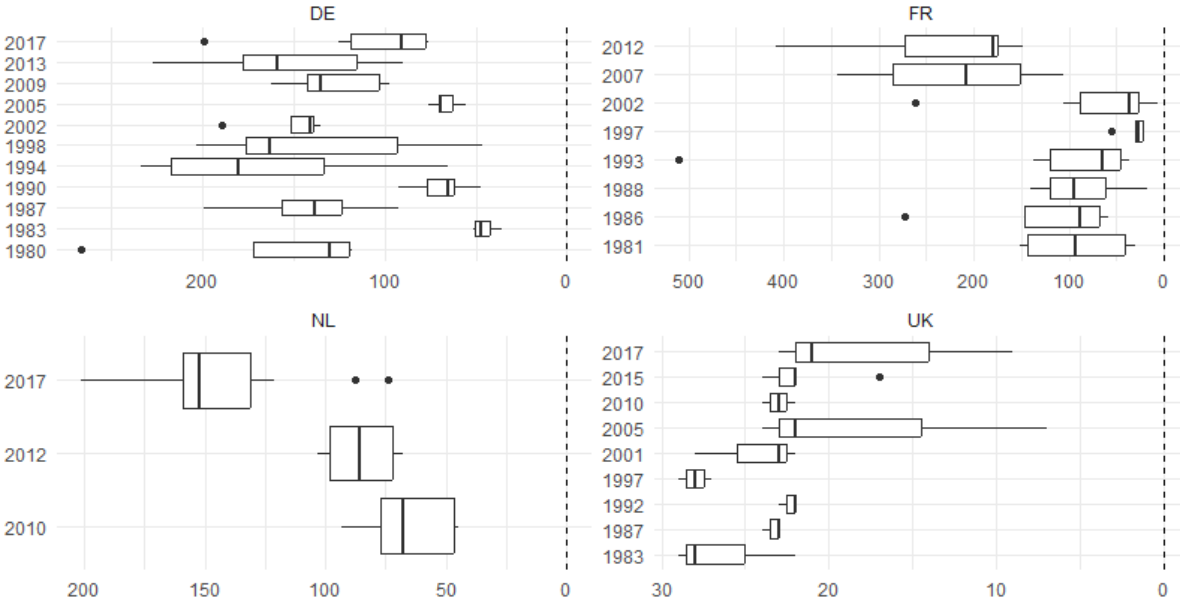


# A11. Analysis of stability and overlap for topics with MIP data available



*Note:* This figure replicates the models in appendix A10 without the variable on issue prominence in MIPs. This confirms that running our baseline models (cf. Appendix A4 and Figure 2) only for the set of issues covered in Eurobarometer MIPs items (see overview in appendix A2) displays substantively identical findings.

# A12. Distribution of manifesto publication dates across countries and elections



**Note:** The figures represent the distribution of the dates of publication of manifestos in number of days preceding the election.

## A13. Models underlying figure 4 (Effects of different measures of overlap on parties' issue attention)

Belgium

	Systemic	PM party	Nearest party	Cabinet mean	Biggest party
Constant	0.001 (0.002)	0.008 (0.002)***	0.010 (0.002)***	0.003 (0.002)	0.009 (0.002)***
Party share last	0.279 (0.038)***	0.358 (0.054)***	0.451 (0.052)***	0.203 (0.049)***	0.341 (0.049)***
Attention other parties	0.709 (0.051)***				
PM party		0.496 (0.049)***			
Nearest party			0.361 (0.050)***		
Cabinet mean				0.751 (0.062)***	
Biggest party					0.510 (0.049)***
Num.Obs.	2068	1408	1408	1408	1518
R2	0.535	0.483	0.456	0.605	0.425
R2 Adj.	0.534	0.482	0.455	0.604	0.425
RMSE	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03

*Note:* panel cross-sectional models predicting a given party's attention to a given issue at a given election. The different models use alternative measures of overlap with, respectively, average attention among rival parties, attention of the PM party, attention of the nearest party along the left-right scale, average attention of government parties and attention of the party that has received the highest number of votes at the respective election. Standard errors in parentheses. +p<.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

Denmark

	<b>Systemic</b>	<b>PM party</b>	<b>Nearest party</b>	<b>Cabinet mean</b>	<b>Biggest party</b>
Constant	-0.004 (0.003)	0.013 (0.002)***	0.017 (0.002)***	0.011 (0.002)***	0.014 (0.002)***
Party share last	0.315 (0.037)***	0.336 (0.041)***	0.420 (0.040)***	0.289 (0.040)***	0.306 (0.037)***
Attention other parties	0.569 (0.050)***				
PM party		0.414 (0.048)***			
Nearest party			0.251 (0.034)***		
Cabinet mean				0.497 (0.049)***	
Biggest party					0.418 (0.038)***
Num.Obs.	2816	2560	2560	2560	2560
R2	0.365	0.418	0.347	0.443	0.419
R2 Adj.	0.365	0.417	0.346	0.443	0.419
RMSE	0.07	0.06	0.07	0.06	0.06

*Note:* panel cross-sectional models predicting a given party’s attention to a given issue at a given election. The different models use alternative measures of overlap with, respectively, average attention among rival parties, attention of the PM party, attention of the nearest party along the left-right scale, average attention of government parties and attention of the party that has received the highest number of votes at the respective election. Standard errors in parentheses. +p<.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

## Germany

	Systemic	PM party	Nearest party	Cabinet mean	Biggest party
Constant	0.003 (0.002)+	0.001 (0.001)	0.007 (0.002)***	-0.001 (0.001)	0.003 (0.002)+
Party share last	0.349 (0.047)***	0.378 (0.057)***	0.482 (0.044)***	0.285 (0.056)***	0.395 (0.061)***
Attention other parties	0.602 (0.059)***				
PM party		0.585 (0.060)***			
Nearest party			0.365 (0.041)***		
Cabinet mean				0.721 (0.059)***	
Biggest party					0.533 (0.069)***
Num.Obs.	865	651	651	651	652
R2	0.607	0.704	0.614	0.735	0.704
R2 Adj.	0.606	0.704	0.613	0.734	0.703
RMSE	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02

*Note:* panel cross-sectional models predicting a given party's attention to a given issue at a given election. The different models use alternative measures of overlap with, respectively, average attention among rival parties, attention of the PM party, attention of the nearest party along the left-right scale, average attention of government parties and attention of the party that has received the highest number of votes at the respective election. Standard errors in parentheses. +p<.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

## France

	<b>Systemic</b>	<b>PM party</b>	<b>Nearest party</b>	<b>Cabinet mean</b>	<b>Biggest party</b>
Constant	0.007 (0.003)*	0.005 (0.003)	0.017 (0.004)***	0.004 (0.002)+	0.007 (0.002)**
Party share last	0.245 (0.070)***	0.222 (0.079)**	0.374 (0.104)***	0.161 (0.071)*	0.236 (0.080)**
Attention other parties	0.627 (0.074)***				
PM party		0.670 (0.093)***			
Nearest party			0.253 (0.077)**		
Cabinet mean				0.768 (0.094)***	
Biggest party					0.588 (0.089)***
Num.Obs.	790	460	500	460	500
R2	0.385	0.467	0.311	0.501	0.468
R2 Adj.	0.383	0.464	0.309	0.498	0.466
RMSE	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.04

*Note:* panel cross-sectional models predicting a given party's attention to a given issue at a given election. The different models use alternative measures of overlap with, respectively, average attention among rival parties, attention of the PM party, attention of the nearest party along the left-right scale, average attention of government parties and attention of the party that has received the highest number of votes at the respective election. Standard errors in parentheses. +p<.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

## Italy

	<b>Systemic</b>	<b>PM party</b>	<b>Nearest party</b>	<b>Cabinet mean</b>	<b>Biggest party</b>
Constant	0.002 (0.004)	0.006 (0.006)	0.018 (0.005)***	0.000 (0.007)	0.002 (0.007)
Party share last	0.144 (0.071)*	0.476 (0.130)***	0.581 (0.098)***	0.335 (0.118)**	0.411 (0.102)***
Attention other parties	0.787 (0.085)***				
PM party		0.470 (0.163)**			
Nearest party			0.146 (0.089)		
Cabinet mean				0.702 (0.192)***	
Biggest party					0.624 (0.174)***
Num.Obs.	880	320	400	320	420
R2	0.469	0.465	0.374	0.517	0.473
R2 Adj.	0.467	0.462	0.371	0.514	0.471
RMSE	0.05	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.06

*Note:* panel cross-sectional models predicting a given party's attention to a given issue at a given election. The different models use alternative measures of overlap with, respectively, average attention among rival parties, attention of the PM party, attention of the nearest party along the left-right scale, average attention of government parties and attention of the party that has received the highest number of votes at the respective election. Standard errors in parentheses. +p<.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

## Netherlands

	Systemic	PM party	Nearest party	Cabinet mean	Biggest party
Constant	0.004 (0.002)**	0.013 (0.003)***	0.013 (0.002)***	0.009 (0.003)**	0.014 (0.003)***
Party share last	0.301 (0.066)***	0.441 (0.085)***	0.484 (0.078)***	0.385 (0.086)***	0.440 (0.086)***
Attention other parties	0.641 (0.070)***				
PM party		0.304 (0.096)**			
Nearest party			0.257 (0.054)***		
Cabinet mean				0.438 (0.111)***	
Biggest party					0.297 (0.095)**
Num.Obs.	1672	1235	1235	1235	1235
R2	0.405	0.482	0.412	0.522	0.477
R2 Adj.	0.405	0.481	0.411	0.521	0.477
RMSE	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03

*Note:* panel cross-sectional models predicting a given party’s attention to a given issue at a given election. The different models use alternative measures of overlap with, respectively, average attention among rival parties, attention of the PM party, attention of the nearest party along the left-right scale, average attention of government parties and attention of the party that has received the highest number of votes at the respective election. Standard errors in parentheses. +p<.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001



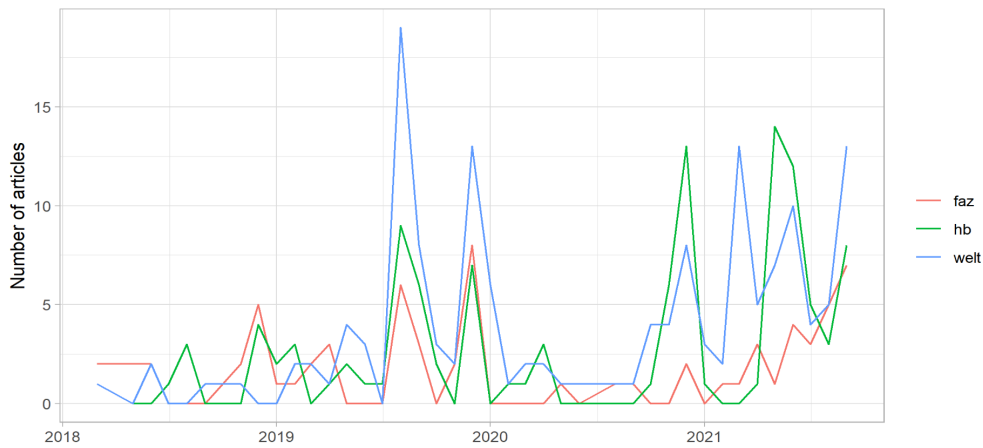
United Kingdom

	Systemic	PM party	Nearest party
Constant	0.007 (0.002)***	0.004 (0.002)*	0.008 (0.002)***
Party share last	0.380 (0.077)***	0.340 (0.064)***	0.515 (0.053)***
Attention other parties	0.486 (0.066)***		
PM party		0.555 (0.063)***	
Nearest party			0.318 (0.041)***
Cabinet mean			
Biggest party			
Num.Obs.	462	441	441
R2	0.565	0.660	0.572
R2 Adj.	0.563	0.658	0.570
RMSE	0.02	0.02	0.02

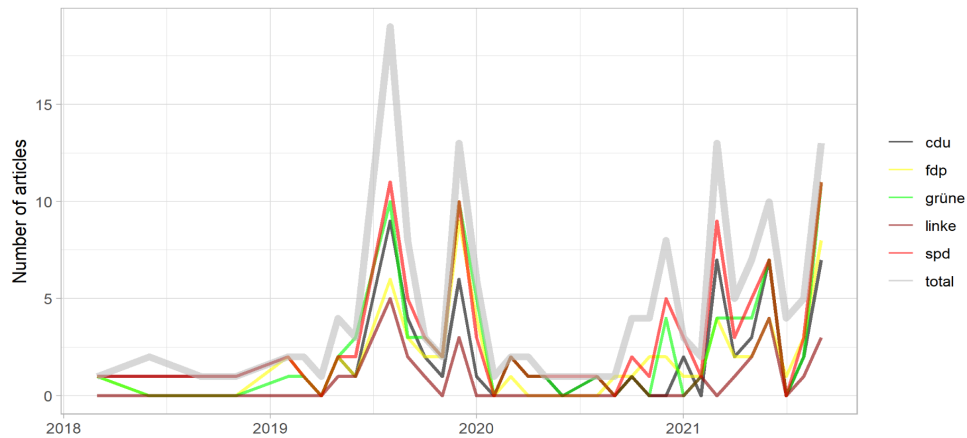
Note: panel cross-sectional models predicting a given party’s attention to a given issue at a given election. The different models use alternative measures of overlap with, respectively, average attention among rival parties, attention of the PM party, attention of the nearest party along the left-right scale, average attention of government parties and attention of the party that has received the highest number of votes at the respective election. Standard errors in parentheses. +p<.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

# A14. Media coverage of German wealth tax in other outlets

Level of attention in the FAZ, *Handelsblatt* and *Die Welt*

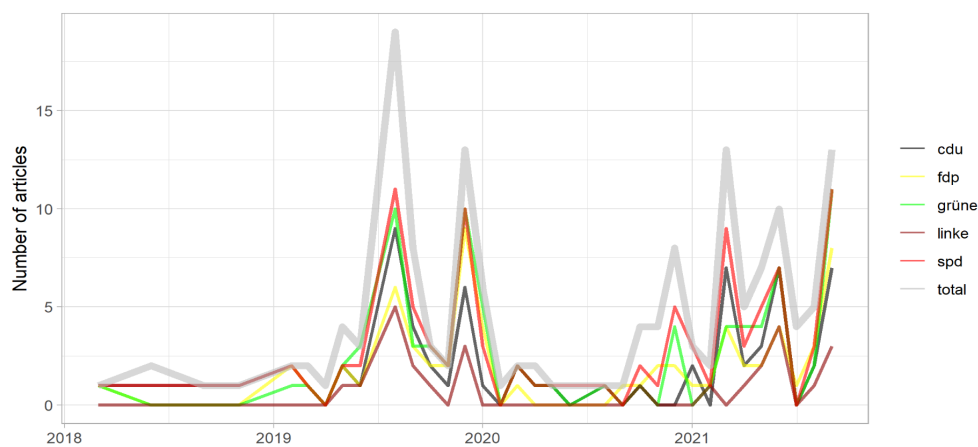


*Handelsblatt* (German economic daily)



Source: Factiva. The grey line represents the number of articles mentioning the ‘wealth tax’ while the other lines represent the count of articles mentioning the issue in combination with a given German party.

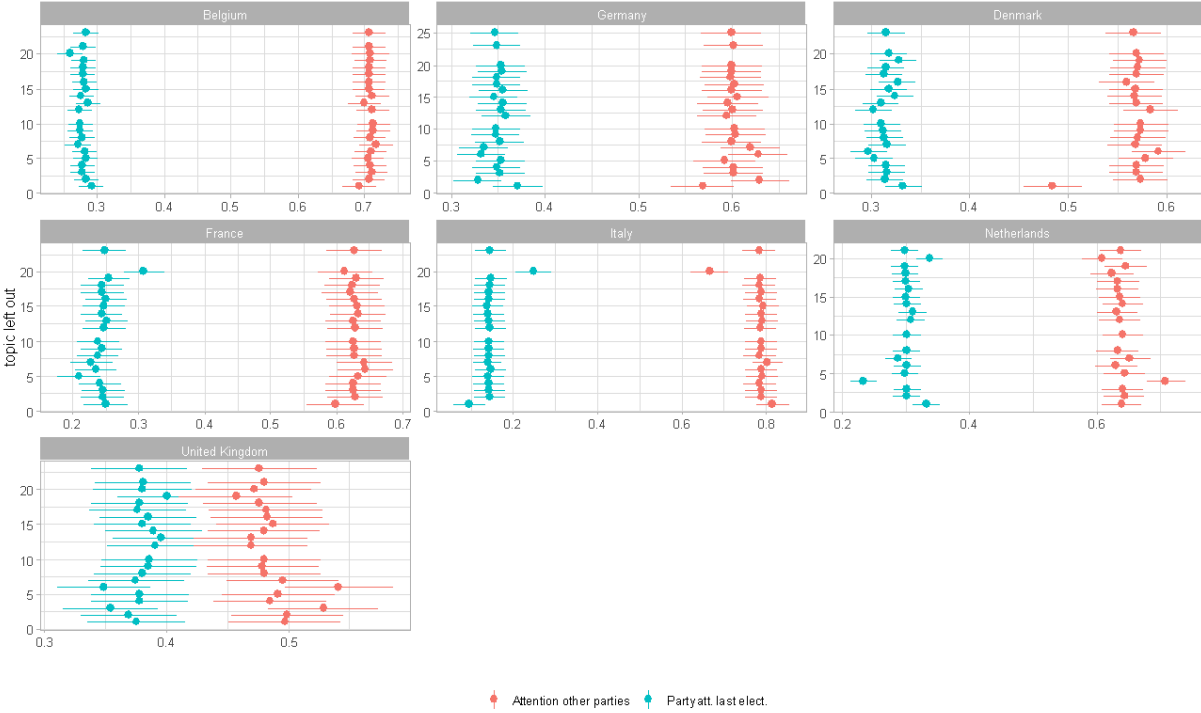
*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (German daily newspaper)



Source: Factiva. The grey line represents the number of articles mentioning the ‘wealth tax’ while the other lines represent the count of articles mentioning the issue in combination with a given German party.

# A15. Additional robustness checks: testing the importance of specific issues

To check whether results are driven by individual topics, we ran additional analyses leaving one topic out at time. We only present the two main coefficients here – “attention by other parties” and “past attention”, rather than the complete tables for the 147 models.



The results show that some topics behave somewhat differently in some countries. In Italy and France, for instance, leaving out topic 20 (government and administration) weakens the distance between the two coefficients. The same is true for topic 1 (economy) in Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands. In none of the cases, however, do these analyses revert or question the results presented the main models.

## A16. Additional robustness checks: testing the effects of media attention

We test media influence for the two countries for which we had access to a topic-coded media dataset, relying on the Comparative Agendas coding scheme (Baumgartner et al. 2019). We use a dataset based on articles from the first page of the French quality daily newspaper Le Monde and a dataset of all articles of the London Times.

In order to measure the media effect of campaign attention, we compute several rolling means of attention which we add to our main model (Appendix A4). “Media 3 months” consists in a rolling mean of attention to each topic from 6 months before the election to 3 months before the election, i.e. more or less the time when the party programs are established. Media 6 months extends this period starting to 9 months before the election and Media 9 months starts 12 months before the election.

	FR:1	FR:2	FR:3	UK:1	UK:2	UK:3
Stability	0.315(0.054)***	0.313(0.054)***	0.314(0.055)***	0.469(0.111)+	0.469(0.111)+	0.469(0.112)+
Overlap	0.491(0.093)***	0.490(0.091)***	0.489(0.089)***	0.382(0.019)*	0.385(0.018)*	0.383(0.018)*
Media 3 months	0.071(0.081)			0.029(0.033)		
Media 6 months		0.076(0.078)			0.023(0.029)	
Media 9 months			0.081(0.076)			0.028(0.031)
Num.Obs.	450	450	450	285	285	285
R2	0.384	0.385	0.385	0.513	0.512	0.513
R2 Adj.	0.375	0.375	0.375	0.501	0.500	0.501
R2 Within	0.383	0.383	0.384	0.511	0.510	0.511
R2 Within Adj.	0.379	0.379	0.380	0.506	0.505	0.506
Std.Errors	by: party	by: party	by: party	by: party	by: party	by: party
FE: year	X	X	X	X	X	X

**Note:** panel cross-sectional models predicting a given party’s attention to a given issue at a given election. Standard errors in parentheses. +p<.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

## A17. *Sunday Times* article, 8 March 1992

### *PR reform signalled in Labour manifesto*

The Sunday Times (London)

March 8, 1992, Sunday

Copyright 1992 Times Newspapers Limited

**Section:** Home news

**Length:** 820 words

**Byline:** Andrew Grice and David Hughes

### **Body**

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**LABOUR** leaders will reveal their plan to lure centre-ground voters away from the Liberal Democrats this week by signalling that a government led by Neil Kinnock could introduce proportional representation.

With John Major planning to inform the Queen on Wednesday evening that he intends to call a general election on April 9, **Labour** believes the move could help it build a lead in the polls, which still show the two main parties neck-and-neck.

A Sunday Times survey of council by-elections published today shows the Tories and **Labour** at level pegging in key marginal seats (details: page 5). A Harris poll in today's Observer puts **Labour** on 40%, the Tories on 39%, and the LibDems on 14%, while an NOP in The Mail on Sunday gives **Labour** (41%) a three-point lead over the Tories (38%) and puts the LibDems on 16%.

Senior **Labour** sources confirmed yesterday that a promise to set up a Speaker's conference or constitutional convention on proportional representation (PR) is expected to be included in the party's election **manifesto**.

Kinnock is working on the **manifesto** at his London home this weekend. The party is already committed to bringing in PR for elections to its proposed Scottish assembly, and Kinnock has emphasised his open mind on PR for the House of Commons. A **manifesto** pledge to set up an inquiry in government would be seen as a significant step towards **Labour** backing PR outright.

Major, meanwhile, is spending today at home in Huntingdon, where he will discuss the election announcement with Chris Patten, Tory party chairman, by telephone. Close colleagues say nothing will now deflect Major from an April 9 election.

On Tuesday, Norman Lamont, in a budget the City believes could pave the way for a cut in interest rates this week, will target the hard-hit business and industrial sector as well as delivering a headline-grabbing 1p cut in the basic rate of tax and a big increase in tax allowances. On Wednesday Major will inform the Queen he is seeking a dissolution of parliament.

The Tory **manifesto** will use four themes choice, ownership, opportunity and responsibility. Major set out his campaign approach in a speech to Tory councillors yesterday giving people "the right to own and the power to choose", and offering a partnership where welfare and wealth creation went together. He warned that a **Labour** government would "risk the whole future of the whole country".

Tomorrow Gordon Brown, **Labour's** trade spokesman, will launch the party's drive to woo LibDem supporters in a speech to the Charter 88 pressure group in London. He will say that constitutional change "is not incidental but integral to our future as a country. It is not a sideshow at the election but centre stage".

## PR reform signalled in Labour manifesto

The issue is divisive, however. Roy Hattersley, Labour's deputy leader, is firmly opposed to PR, while other shadow ministers fear that "playing the PR card" could be seen as an admission that Labour could not win power on its own.

Although Labour leaders dismiss speculation about a post-election pact with Paddy Ashdown's Liberal Democrats, a stronger manifesto commitment to PR would improve the chances of a Lib-Lab pact in the event of a hung parliament. However, Ashdown would dismiss this as a pre-election gimmick aimed at capturing LibDem votes.

Tory ministers are studying plans to introduce tax relief for companies that improve training schemes for their workers. Ministers are disappointed that only 20 firms have been awarded an "Investors in People" kitemark for good training launched last October.

The move, which could be included in the Tory manifesto, comes as the government faces a revolt by the 82 local Training and Enterprise Councils (Tecs) that run schemes such as employment training and youth training. Some of their chairmen have privately threatened to resign unless the government increases their budgets.

Last night it was revealed that a report circulated in confidence among chairmen by Lord Stockton, grandson of Harold Macmillan and president of the family publishing house, accused the government of deliberately underfunding youth training.

Tony Blair, the shadow employment secretary, said last night that to cut training was "an act of almost unbelievable irresponsibility".

But Michael Howard, the employment secretary, said Tec's would receive Pounds 2.5 billion this year, in real terms 212 times what was being spent in 1977.

Labour's efforts to woo business have failed, according to a survey showing Britain's top companies believe a Labour government would be bad for the economy and their businesses (see section 3).

The survey, carried out by the stockbroker James Capel among finance directors of the top 200 quoted companies, 105 of whom responded, showed that 86% believed a Labour government would be bad for the economy, and 63% bad for their business. Only 5% thought Labour would benefit the economy, while 16% saw Labour as good for their business.