Playing on your Strengths, or your Opponent’s?

Party issue attention in the 2009 Belgian election campaign.

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Abstract

Issue ownership theory expects political parties to focus their campaigns on “owned” issues, for which they hold a reputation of competence, and to avoid issues that play to the advantage of their opponents. However, recent studies from the bipartisan US context show that parties, more often than not, campaign on the same issues. Evidence from multiparty European countries is rare, but points in the same direction. In this paper, we intend to make two contributions to the literature. First, we acknowledge that parties communicate their issue priorities through various channels and argue that they shift their priorities in communication channels that allow for short-term tactical adjustments during the campaign. Second, we explicitly recognize that issue competition always takes place between pairs of parties. Based on electoral manifestos and press releases of all parties competing in the 2009 regional elections in Flanders, we show that issue competition between parties follows different patterns across communication channels.
Introduction

Agenda setting scholars know that "agendas foreshadow outcomes" (Riker, 1993: 1). The linkages between the shape of agendas and outcomes is well established in the policy literature (e.g., Baumgartner and Jones, 1993), but is also recognized in electoral politics as well as in communication research. For instance, a burgeoning literature shows how extensive media coverage of specific policy issues "primes" voters to give more weight to these issues when evaluating presidential candidates (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). Scholars have also shown how parties use priming as a campaign strategy. They try to set the electoral agenda by focusing public attention on certain policy issues, which voters then use as evaluation criteria to choose among parties (e.g., Jacobs and Shapiro, 1994). The dominant perspective in the literature is that parties hardly ever prime the same policy issues during election campaigns. The saliency theory of party competition (e.g., Budge, 1982; Budge and Farlie, 1983a) argues that parties do not primarily compete over different policy positions on given issues, but instead selectively emphasize certain favorable issues and play down other issues which are unfavorable. Similarly, the theory of issue ownership (e.g., Petrocik, 1996) posits that parties are, in the minds of voters, associated with specific issues, and considered best able to deal with them, i.e. they are considered to "own" these issues. To gain electoral advantages, parties have incentives to focus their campaign efforts on such party-owned issues that highlight their strengths and point to the opponents' weaknesses. The logical implication of this behavior is that parties "talk past each other" (Budge and Farlie, 1983b: 24), as every party naturally gravitates towards party-owned issues and away from the ownerships of other parties (for a similar idea, see Riker's (1996) dominance/dispersion principle). In other words, parties' issue attention profiles should have two characteristics (see Froio et al., 2014): they should be distinct (as every party is supposed to focus on its own, specific strengths) and rather stable over time (as reputations of association and competence are built in the long run).

Yet, these assumptions have recently been called into question. In response to loosening ties between political parties and their voters (e.g., Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000), parties can no longer limit themselves to the mobilization of core voters, but increasingly have to "chase" and attract new ones (Rohrschneider, 2002). As a consequence, many parties tend to be less focused on the representation of specific social groups based on a coherent ideology, but favor a pragmatic and strategic use of political issues, regardless of issue ownership (e.g., Krouwel, 2006). Hence, parties' issue priorities may be more similar and less stable than expected by the issue ownership theory. Indeed, many recent US studies find that "issue trespassing" (Damore, 2004; Sides, 2006, 2007) or "issue convergence" (Damore, 2005; Kaplan et al., 2006; Sigelman and Buell, 2004) is a rather frequent phenomenon. Parties and their candidates do not only focus on the issues they own, but they often focus on the same set of issues during election campaigns and try to "steal" issue ownership from their opponents, by reframing issues (Holian, 2004). Evidence from the European multiparty context is rare,
but points into the same direction (e.g., Brouard et al., 2012; Dolezal et al., 2014; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2014). While the consequences of issue trespassing on voters' issue ownership perceptions have rarely been studied in a systematic way (for an exception, see Tresch et al., 2013; Walgrave et al., 2009), the causes that motivate parties and their candidates to engage with unowned issues have received more scholarly attention. External factors, such as the "state of the world" (Budge and Farlie, 1983) or the public mood (Stimson et al., 1995), structural factors, such as the party system agenda (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2014), or the dynamics of the campaign process (Damore, 2004, 2005; Spoon et al., 2014) have been shown to matter. While these studies have considerably advanced our understanding of the factors that shape and constrain issue competition during election campaigns, they suffer from two shortcomings.

First, previous studies have assessed the stability of and similarity between parties' issue agendas in successive elections and based on a single campaign communication channel. Whereas US studies have generally relied on political ads, European studies have usually resorted to party manifestos. Both traditions assume that these specific data sources provide representative views of parties' issue priorities. However, there are reasons to question this assumption; parties could very well emphasize different issues in different communication channels (see Elmelund-Præstekær, 2011). In fact, communication channels differ in several crucial ways. Political ads and party manifestos, for instance, target different publics: whereas political ads have a wide reach and target the general public, party manifestos are primarily directed at party members and sympathizers and are hardly ever noticed by a larger public. In addition, party manifestos are released at the beginning of the campaign and they give a broad overview of a party's policies and priorities. Political ads, in contrast, are produced and published during the whole campaign period, and they usually focus on selected issues. The same is true for press releases, which are continually published during the campaign and often deal with only one issue. Hence, like manifestos, ads and press releases can be used to communicate a party's preferred policies, but, unlike manifestos, they can also be used to take up new issues and pressing demands in response to changes in public opinion, unfavorable media coverage, or the electoral strategies of other parties. This implies that parties do not necessarily emphasize the exact same issues in all communication channels. It also means that the stability of and convergence between parties' issue profiles may not only change between successive election campaigns, but even within the short-term context of a single campaign.

Second, previous research has somewhat neglected the role of party politics. This is understandable, because most research stems from the US bi-partisan context, where issue competition always takes place between the Democrats and the Republicans and there is no variation in terms of the parties that are competing. In the European multiparty context, however, things are more complicated. We argue that it is unlikely that all parties behave equally. On the one hand, while some parties may pursue an issue ownership strategy that is characterized by stable issue attention profiles between and within election campaigns, other
parties may feel forced to engage with issues for which they don't necessarily have a history of attention or a reputation of competence. Moreover, even if most parties adjust their issue priorities, they cannot be expected to be equally responsive to all other parties in the system. A party may well engage with the issues owned by one particular opponent, but avoid the issues owned by another one. Hence, we argue that issue convergence in a multiparty system always occurs between pairs of parties, and it is crucial to understand which party-pairs are the most likely to shift their issue priorities and to contend each other's issues, and to what extent.

Against this background, this paper focuses on stability and change of parties' issue attention profiles within a single election campaign and addresses three related questions: Do parties adjust their issue priorities during the campaign, and which parties? How do parties adjust their priorities, do they deviate from or reiterate their owned issues? And which party-pairs do primarily contend each other's issues and converge towards each other? Based on party manifestos and press releases, we study these questions in the context of the 2009 regional elections in Flanders (Belgium). We believe that the Belgian case offers a good setting to assess the dynamics of issue competition in a multiparty context. In fact, the Belgian (Flemish) party system is highly fragmented and polarized, with seven major parties competing in the regional elections. The seven parties occupy the entire range of the left-right political spectrum and offer a mix between traditional mass parties (CD&V, Sp.A., VLD) and more recent parties that ground their success on the politicization of selected, new issues (Groen, VB, N-VA, LDD).

The study proceeds as follows. We first introduce our theoretical perspective, which focuses on the short-term dynamics of issue competition between party-pairs during a single election campaign. Next, we describe the Belgian party system in the context of the 2009 regional elections. We then introduce our data and methods and present evidence on parties' traditional issue ownerships, before we turn to our empirical findings. Our study supports our two basic ideas. First, we show that parties convey different issue priorities through different communication channels. Whereas they have to address a diverse set of issues in party manifestos at the start of the campaign, they can more freely follow their strategic advantages and focus on their own issues in press releases. Second, although parties tend to emphasize similar sets of issues—especially in their manifestos—they most strongly converge with ideologically proximate parties, which are their strongest and most direct competitors. Although these two general mechanisms—differences among communication channels and the logic of dyadic issue competition—can most likely be applied to other campaigns and other party systems, we conclude with some critical remarks and highlight some avenues for further research.
A dynamic and party-oriented perspective on issue competition

Agenda-setting scholars are well aware of the fact that “there is no such thing as the political agenda” (Walgrave and van Aelst, 2006: 94). This general statement is also true for the agenda of political parties. Parties communicate their issue positions and priorities in many different ways: through party manifestos, political advertisements, press releases, flyers, statements in the mass media, at party conventions and public meetings, etc. Despite parties’ broad use of different communication channels, scholars have traditionally relied on single campaign channels to assess (the stability) of parties’ issue priorities over successive elections, as well as the degree of convergence between these issue agendas. In the United States, studies are generally based on political ads (e.g., Damore, 2004, 2005; Kaplan et al., 2006; Sides, 2007; Sigelman and Buell, 2004), whereas European studies typically rely on electoral manifestos (e.g., Brouard et al., 2012; Dolezal et al., 2014; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2014; Spoon et al., 2014, but see Green and Hobolt, 2008). We argue that this one-sided focus on single communication channels is potentially problematic for at least two reasons. First, it may only provide a partial view of parties' issue strategies in election campaigns. Political ads and party manifestos—the two most widely studied communication channels—do not necessarily address the same audience. Party manifestos are primarily directed at party members and sympathizers and are hardly ever noticed by a wider audience, whereas political ads are more widely diffused and targeted at the general public. Given that party members may have different priorities and desires than unaligned or swing-voters, parties may put forward different issues. Second, the focus on only one communication channel also omits part of the campaign dynamic. Whereas party manifestos are written and released before the actual start of the campaign, other campaign material (such as ads, press releases, flyers, etc.) are continually produced and published during the weeks before Election Day. While manifestos provide the baseline issue priority of parties prior to the campaign, continually released campaign material gives parties the opportunity to adjust their issue priorities during the campaign in response to sudden external events, media coverage, public opinion polls, or the issues raised by other parties. Given that different communication channels differ with respect to their main target public, as well as the timing and frequency of their publication, it is well possible—or even likely—that parties do not focus on the same issues in all channels (for such evidence, Elmelund-Præstekær, 2011). Hence, we can formulate our first general expectation:

H1: Parties have different issue priorities in different communication channels

A second important question is to know which issues parties emphasize in different channels and how they adjust their issue priorities over the course of a campaign. Do they deviate from or place more emphasis on owned issues during the campaign? A dominant view in the literature is that parties pursue an issue ownership strategy in their party manifestos, whereas
the more continually used communication channels such as political ads, press releases or flyers are used to respond to short-term developments during the campaign. Norris et al. (1999: 62), for instance, argue that electoral manifestos reflect a party's "ideal strategic" agenda, which defines a party's key issues and is probably dominated by issues that are most favorable for the party and simultaneously most damaging for rival parties. This is typically the case of party-owned issues, for which the party has a long history of attention and a reputation of competence. Political ads, press releases or flyers, in contrast, probably form a party's "tactical" agenda, which is in part inspired by and based on the ideal agenda, but is at the same time used to tactically respond to short-term developments during the campaign (such as external events, the party system agenda, or strategic moves of other parties). Given that parties are confronted with similar events and conditions during the campaign, they have incentives to deviate from their owned issues and to converge towards a similar set of issues, which—for whatever reason—have come to dominate the electoral agenda and public discussion during the weeks before Election Day. As a result of this process, the degree of issue congruence between parties should be higher in tactical than in ideal agendas. From this discussion, we can derive the two following expectations:

H2a: Parties primarily focus on party-owned issues in party manifestos and take up new issues in their press releases

H2b: Issue convergence between parties is higher in manifestos than in press releases

However, the opposite expectations seem plausible as well. However, we argue that the opposite expectations are at least equally plausible. In fact, party manifestos are lengthy documents, as they are intended to give a broad overview of the policies and priorities a party would pursue in government office. As (ideal) programs for government, they address a wide range of issues, also those for which a party has not necessarily a history of attention or a well-established reputation of competence. Manifestos should thus display a certain ‘completeness’ and cover all kinds of policy issues. Although manifestos may address unowned issues in less detail and length than owned issues, parties have more liberty to choose their issues in communication channels such as political ads, press releases or flyers, which usually deal with only one or two issues at a time. Hence, parties can use these channels to highlight selected issues. They may take up new or unpleasant issues in response to campaign developments (as expected above), but they are also free to reiterate their owned issues and leave aside other issues. Such an issue ownership strategy may actually make sense, as it has been shown that by emphasizing owned issues parties can reinforce their reputation as issue owner (Tresch et al., 2013), which may provide them with electoral advantages. Hence, we can formulate two alternative expectations:
H3a: Parties' attention to issues in manifestos is more dispersed over a wide range of (unowned) issues and is more concentrated on owned issues in press releases.

H3b: Issue convergence between parties is higher in manifestos than in press releases.

Yet, not all parties have the same incentives to adjust their issue priorities in their tactical agenda, and how to adjust them. From the literature, two factors seem to matter: parties' standing in opinion polls and their status as parties in government or in opposition. Previous studies have suggested that parties' assessment of the electoral risks and benefits guide their selection of campaign issues (e.g., Damore, 2005; Spoon et al., 2014; Simon, 2002). In general, it is assumed that political losers have more incentives to shift their issue priorities. When a party has a bad standing in the polls and is likely to lose seats and/or voices as compared to a previous election, it may be more willing to revise its campaign strategy, and also to accept the potential risks associated with issue trespassing.¹ In contrast, parties that are predicted to win or to hold their position have reasons to believe that they touched a chord with voters. Hence, they have incentives to "stay put" in order to avoid possible negative side-effects of advocating other issues (see, Damore, 2005: 393; Spoon et al. 2014: 367). Thus, our fourth expectation:

H4: Issue attention in press releases of parties that are losing in the polls deviates more from issue attention in their manifesto compared to parties that are winning in the polls.

Another important aspect is a party's position in government or in opposition. Recent agenda-setting literature, which is not focused on election campaigns but adopts a broader perspective, has shown that parties in government are less free than parties in opposition in the topics they decide to address (e.g., Walgrave and van Aelst, 2006; Vliegenhart and Walgrave, 2011). Whereas parties in opposition are free to only emphasize their preferred issues in political ads, press releases or flyers, parties in government, in contrast, are in charge of running the country; they cannot afford ignoring unpleasant issues and problems, especially those in their ministerial portfolio. Hence, regardless of issue ownership, incumbent parties may feel forced to deal with those issues, for which they not only hold responsibility, but on which voters judge their record.² Hence, our fifth expectation:

¹ In a similar way, it has been argued (and empirically confirmed for the British case, at least) that parties that are losing in the polls are more ready to take the risks associated with negative campaigning (Walter et al., 2014).

² Note that a similar argument has been advanced to hypothesize about the expected differences in the issue attention profiles of mainstream and niche parties (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2014) and of smaller and large parties, respectively (Spoon et al., 2014).
H5: Parties in government are more likely to take up unowned issues in their press releases (especially those in their ministerial portfolios), whereas parties in opposition are free to primarily emphasize owned issues in their press releases.

The third question that we want to address is between which pairs of parties issue convergence is likely to occur. This question has received limited attention so far, presumably because most literature focuses on the bipartisan US context, where issue competition always takes place between Democrats and Republicans. Although a handful of recent European studies have started to analyze which parties are most likely to engage with each other's issues (Brouard et al., 2012; Dolezal et al., 2014; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2014; Spoon et al., 2014), none of these studies has explicitly acknowledged that issue convergence should be studied between party-pairs. Here, we consider two different (but not necessarily mutually exclusive) assumptions. First, ideologically proximate parties can be expected to more strongly converge in their issue attention profiles than parties that are located at different poles in the ideological space. On the one hand, spatial theories of party competition have traditionally argued that parties can only affect the electoral fortunes of ideologically proximate parties (e.g., Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009; for a discussion and critique, see Meguid, 2005). A similar argument has been made for issue competition. Whereas Spoon et al. (2014) posit (and empirically confirm) that parties primarily engage with issues that are owned by an ideologically proximate party, Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2014) observe that parties are more responsive to the issue attention of parties from the same party bloc. The reason is that closely located parties on the left-right axis compete for similar voter segments, and are thus more “dangerous” for one another in electoral terms (e.g., Dassonneville and Dejaeghere, 2014)—for the same reason, they are also more often the targets of negative campaigning (e.g., Walter, 2014). On the other hand, ideologically proximate parties may not only converge for strategic reasons, but because they have historically mobilized similar cleavages and positions. Hence, our sixth expectation:

H6: Issue convergence is higher between ideologically proximate party-pairs.

Alternatively, and regardless of political parties’ ideological location, it can be argued that parties have most incentives to converge with (current or future) coalition partners in government. Recent literature on negative campaigning in multiparty systems argues that parties are reluctant to engage in negative campaigning against potential future coalition partners because such behavior could damage their ability to govern together (e.g., Walter, 2014). Pushing this logic further, we expect current coalition partners to display higher degrees of issue convergence, especially in their tactical agendas during the campaign. The reason is that they have agreed on a common coalition program and a set of issue priorities, and have incentives to defend past government policy. Hence, our last expectation:
H7: Issue convergence is higher between parties that currently form a government coalition

Before we examine these seven expectations empirically, we first provide some context information about the Belgian party system and the 2009 regional election campaign, and then present our data and methods.

**Belgian parties in the context of the 2009 regional elections in Flanders**

We rely on data collected during the 2009 Flemish regional election campaign in Belgium. Flanders is the largest region of Belgium, a small consociational democracy in Western Europe (Deschouwer, 2009). Due to strong centrifugal tendencies, the regions have gained a substantial amount of competences in the past decades. As a result, they became quite influential policy levels in their own right, and the regional election campaign of 2009 received ample attention from the media, the public, and, most importantly, the parties (Deschouwer et al., 2010).

The Flemish party system is highly fragmented: in the 2009 regional elections, seven main parties were competing for the voters’ support: three traditional ones—the Christian-Democrats (CD&V), Socialists (Sp.a) and Liberals (Open VLD)—and four relatively new parties—Greens (Groen), Neoliberals (LDD), Extreme Rightists (VB), and Flemish Nationalists (N-VA). Not unexpectedly given the fragmented party system, the incumbent Flemish government initially consisted of five parties when it was formed in 2004: Christian-Democrats, who then still formed an alliance with the Flemish Nationalists, the Liberals and the Socialists and their small alliance partner Spirit (which ran in 2009 but failed to pass the electoral threshold). However, in 2004-2009, Belgian politics experienced a tumultuous period. After the 2007 national elections, the strains of a difficult government formation caused a split in the Christian Democratic/Flemish Nationalist cartel and the Flemish Nationalists left the regional government. Furthermore, the regional Prime Minister, Yves Leterme (Christian Democrats), left the regional government and was replaced by Kris Peeters. Finally, the new neoliberal party LDD managed to obtain seats in the national parliament. Thus, Christian Democrats, Liberals and Socialists entered the 2009 campaign as incumbents, and were faced with four opposition parties (Deschouwer et al, 2010). Of these four parties, two had prior government experience: the Flemish Nationalists were initially part of the incumbent regional government, and the Greens were in government between 1999 and 2004 at the regional and national levels. In contrast, the extreme right VB as well as the neoliberal LDD had never been in government and, at least in case of VB, could not hope to become part of any government coalition soon. In fact, the Flemish extreme right was, and still is, contained in a so-called "cordon sanitaire" (Walgrave and de Swert, 2004), which

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3 LDD, or Lijst Dedecker in full, is a splinter party that formed around Jean-Marie Dedecker. Dedecker was part of the Liberal party but left after an internal dispute to form his own party.
means that all other parties solemnly agree not to cooperate with the VB under any circumstance and on any political level.

The 2009 election took place in the aftermath of the banking crisis, which was then still developing into a full-blown economic crisis. Unexpectedly, the economy was the killer issue of the 2009 campaign: it was the issue most emphasized in media coverage of the campaign, and was also the most salient issue amongst voters. A related salient issue was unemployment, but other issues gained importance as well. As a consequence of the turbulent 2007 national campaign, and perhaps as an omen of the 541 day government formation following the 2010 national elections, the state reform issue also received quite a lot of attention in the media (Lefevere, 2011).

The Flemish Nationalists were the big winners of the 2009 regional elections. Running for the first time with their own party list, they gained 13% of the votes, at the expense of their former alliance partner, the Christian-Democrats, but mostly to the disadvantage of the Extreme Right. The Greens, Socialists and Liberals also lost some voters, but to a much lesser extent. After the elections, a new regional government was formed between the Christian-Democrats, the Socialists, and the Flemish Nationalists.

Data and methods

To observe parties’ issue attention profiles, and the degree of convergence between them, we draw on two different types of data, party manifestos and press releases. According to Norris et al. (1999: 62), manifestos best reflect parties’ "ideal" agendas whereas press releases are the best example of their tactical agendas. Manifestos and press releases were both coded according to the policy agenda coding scheme that was originally developed by Baumgartner and Jones (1993) and slightly modified as part of the Belgian Agendas Project. This coding scheme comprises 26 major topic categories (e.g., agriculture, defense, etc.) and over 200 subcategories (e.g., agricultural trade, agricultural marketing and promotion, etc.). For the purposes of this paper, we focus on the major issue topics, but grouped 5 topics with very few cases in an “other” category and dropped the subcategory dealing with political activities and elections (2012). The reason for this exclusion is that this is the only topic that does not deal with policy, but politics, and cannot be owned by any party.

Press releases were collected for the seven parties from February until Election Day (June 5). One coder coded all press releases (N=984). The coder had prior coding experience and was already well-versed in assigning issue codes according to the issue coding scheme of the Belgian Agendas Project. After a training session the coder coded a first batch of press releases, which were then checked by an expert coder. Subsequently a second training session was scheduled to improve coding accuracy by providing additional guidelines for problematic variables. To ascertain inter-coder reliability, a random sample of 5% of the press releases (N=44) was double coded by an expert coder. The lowest Krippendorff alpha for variables
used in the analysis was 0.74 (issue code), which is still acceptable given the complexity of the codebook. For the purposes of this paper, we only focus on press releases that were published during the last ten weeks before the elections (N=397). In this way, we can make sure to only analyze press releases that have been published during the actual campaign after the party manifestos had been issued.

Whereas in press releases only the main issue was coded, every semi-sentence was issue-coded in party manifestos. The length of the party manifestos differed substantially between parties, from a low of 334 semi-sentences for the Green manifesto to 4700 semi-sentences for the Socialist manifesto. Each semi-sentence was assigned a single issue code. In the run up to the 2009 elections, the manifestos of the seven Flemish parties running in the election were coded by student coders according to the Belgian Agendas Project codebook. Given the complex procedures, it is hard to calculate intercoder reliability with the traditional Krippendorff alpha measure. Since coders first have to split the sentences when necessary, certain coders end up with more units than others. Therefore, the correspondence of the coding distributions at the lowest coding level was compared. The average Pearson correlation is .77 and all correlations range between the exceptionally low .57 and .91. Given the detail and the large number of possible codes, this is a very satisfying result.

Our four explanatory factors are captured in the following way. Our first explanatory factor is issue ownership. To determine political parties’ issue ownership reputations in the minds of voters, we resort to secondary literature. On the one hand, we refer to a study by Walgrave et al. (2012) that measures parties’ (associative) issue ownership for ten issues (environment, taxes, crime, social security, unemployment, economic crisis, immigration, state reform, culture, and mobility) based on a representative panel survey conducted in the context of the 2009 regional elections (Partirep09). We use the issue ownership perceptions of Flemish respondents on the aggregate level reported in the study (Walgrave et al. 2012: 775). On the other hand, we also refer to an earlier study by Walgrave and de Swert (2007), which reports issue ownership for additional issues. Based on these types of information, table 1 lists the issue owner(s) of all coded issues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Single or shared issue owners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Macroeconomics</td>
<td>Christian Democrats, Liberals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights &amp; liberties</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Socialists, Christian Democrats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>Socialists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Christian Democrats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Greens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>Greens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration</td>
<td>Extreme Right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>Socialists, Christian Democrats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>Extreme Right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social welfare</td>
<td>Socialists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banking &amp; commerce</td>
<td>Liberals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defence</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science &amp; technology</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign trade</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign policy</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government operation (incl. state reform)</td>
<td>Nationalists, Extreme Right, Christian Democrats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public lands</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Socialists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our second explanatory factor is parties' standing in opinion polls. We resort to the IPSOS Poll from March 2009.¹ One party was clearly predicted to win: the Neoliberals (up 11.1 percent compared to the 2007 elections). Two parties were on an upwards trend in the months before the election (the Flemish Nationalists and the Christian Democrats⁵). The Greens were almost stable at 0.3 percent difference compared to 2007. The socialists were losing 2.6 percent compared to 2007, the liberals 2.5 percent, and the extreme right lost 3.7 percent.

The third explanatory factor refers to parties’ status in government or in opposition. Three parties (the Christian Democrats, Liberals and Socialists) entered the 2009 regional election campaign as incumbents, and were faced with four opposition parties. Among the four, the Flemish Nationalists were initially part of the regional government after the 2004 elections, but left the regional government coalition in late 2008 due to a lack of advances in the state reform negotiations. For this reason, we do not use a dummy variable to distinguish between parties in government and in opposition, but measure the number of months a party had been in government since the 2004 elections.

Our fourth explanatory factor is ideological proximity between parties, which measured experts’ perceptions of parties’ positions on the left-right dimension on an 11 point scale.

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⁵ Because these parties formed a cartel in the previous elections, it is hard to know whether they were ‘up’ or not. As a solution, we put the Flemish Nationalists at 1.5, since their poll result of 6.5 put them 1.5 percent over the voting threshold of 5 percent. We put the Christian Democrats at 0.9, a very small increase, because they had seen a slight increase in the polls since October and remained the largest party – even though compared to the combined 2007 cartel score of 29.6 percent they were down.
ranging from 0 (left) to 10 (right). In the analysis, we used the absolute difference in the left-right measure of each party in the pair to tap ideological proximity. The mean distance is 3.29, with the smallest distance being 0.64 for the Flemish Nationalist – Liberals pair, and the highest distance being 7.57 for the Greens – Extreme Right pair.

We use two stacked datasets to test our hypotheses. To assess H1 to H5, we stack the data in such a way that the number of cases is equal to the number of party/issue combinations (7 parties x 22 issues = 154 cases). We have two dependent variables for this analysis: issue attention in party manifestos (M=4.55, SD=4.66) and issue attention in press releases (M=4.54, SD=5.31). Given the small number of cases, we cannot include a random intercept for issues or party dummies, but run simple linear regression models to predict attention in manifestos and press releases. To assess H6 and H7, we use a different dataset, where we stack party-pairs with issues (21 pairs x 22 issues = 462 cases). The dependent variables for this analysis are difference in press release attention (M=4.47, SD=4.78) and difference in manifesto attention (M=2.50, SD=3.33) between party-pairs. Despite a slightly higher number of cases, we again run a simple linear regression to predict, for each issue, the absolute percentage difference in attention between two parties.6

**Issue attention profiles across communication channels**

To get a first impression of parties' issue emphases during the 2009 regional election, we simply look at each party's top 5 issues (decreasing order) in manifestos and press releases (Table 2). The upper part of the table informs about parties' key concerns in their manifestos at the beginning of the campaign. As can be seen, most Flemish parties prioritize at least one owned issue (in bold) in their manifestos.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Greens</th>
<th>Socialists</th>
<th>Christian Democrats</th>
<th>Liberals</th>
<th>Neoliberals</th>
<th>Nationalists</th>
<th>Extreme Right</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social welfare</td>
<td>Immigration</td>
<td>Social welfare</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>Government operation</td>
<td>Social welfare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macro-economics</td>
<td>Social welfare</td>
<td>Government operation</td>
<td>Social welfare</td>
<td>Government operation</td>
<td>Social welfare</td>
<td>Government operation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>Government operation</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environ-</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>Banking &amp;</td>
<td>Macro-</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Trans-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6 For the second set of analyses we did check two random intercept models, one with a random intercept for issues, one for pairs. The results of these models were nearly identical to the simple linear regression and are available upon simple request.
As could be expected, the Greens paid much attention to the environment issue, and the Socialists even prioritized two traditionally owned issues, social welfare and health. The Christian Democrats and the Nationalists, for their part, both focused on government operations (especially the issues of state reform, intergovernmental relations and government efficiency) for which they have shared ownership in the eyes of the Flemish voters. Although we have no survey data on the issue of banking and domestic commerce, it seems plausible to assume that the Liberals are considered the owners of this issue. Thus, only two parties did not emphasize any party-owned issue: the Neoliberals and the Extreme Right. For the Neoliberals, this finding has to do with the fact that the party was only created in 2007 and had not had the time to build a good issue reputation. In case of the Extreme Right, the relative lack of interest in issues it traditionally owned, such as immigration and justice/crime, which have made the success of the party, is more surprising—at least at first sight. In fact, the issue of justice/crime is a national competence and is therefore not addressed by any party competing in the regional election. As for immigration, only questions of integration (after immigration) are dealt with at the regional level while admission/expulsion policies are national. The regional competences regarding immigration are not the primary focus of the Extreme Right, which left the issue to other parties, notably the Socialists (and the Christian Democrats and Nationalists, to a lesser extent). Table 2 also nicely shows that some issues simply become unavoidable due to external circumstances: as a result of the financial and economic crisis with its many social implications, all parties devoted much attention to social...
welfare, a traditional socialist issue. A similar observation can be made for government operations: in fact, the state reform issue not only received a lot of media attention in this campaign (Lefevere, 2011), but it was also a key concern for all parties except for the Greens. The lower part of Table 2 shows parties' tactical agendas as reflected by press releases. In comparison with manifestos, clear issue attention shifts appear for each party. Only one or two of the top 5 issues in parties' ideal strategic agenda remain on top of the tactical agenda. The three center-left parties (Greens, Socialists, Christian-Democrats) continue to strongly emphasize the social welfare issue, whereas the four rightist parties (Liberals, Neoliberals, Nationalists, Extreme Right) keep government operations (i.e., notably the state reform issue) very high on their agenda. In light of parties' ownership reputations and history of issue attention, this finding is not surprising. Interestingly enough, it appears that two parties that were predicted to lose the elections (the Socialists and the Extreme Right) tended to more strongly focus on their traditional, party-owned issues. The Socialists have no less than four party-owned issues among their top 5 priorities in their tactical agenda, against only 2 in their ideal strategic agenda. Similarly, the Extreme Right strongly focuses its tactical agenda on two flagship issues, immigration and justice/crime, which were not among the top priorities in the ideal agenda at the start of the campaign. This shift towards party-owned issues could be a reaction to other parties' attempt to steal the immigration issue and to maintain their traditional ownership. The Christian Democrats are also an interesting case: in their tactical agenda, the top 2 priorities are party-owned issues, whereas the following three key concerns are all issues related to their ministerial portfolio. Thus, this quick look at the top issue priorities of Flemish parties give some interesting hints about several of our expectations. However, we now proceed to a more formal test and run several linear regression models to successively assess the validity of our assumptions.

Table 3: Explaining issue attention in party manifestos and press releases, OLS regressions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Press releases</th>
<th>Press releases</th>
<th>Party manifestos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coeff.</td>
<td>S.E.</td>
<td>Coeff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention manifests</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue</td>
<td>0.55***</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ownership</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention other</td>
<td>5.00***</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parties</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.53***</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.89***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adj. R2</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To assess our first hypothesis, holding that parties emphasize different issues across communication channels, we regress parties' issue attention in manifestos on their issue attention in press releases (the reverse doesn't make sense as press releases are published after manifestos). As shown in the first model in Table 3, the effect is positive and highly significant, meaning that there is a lot of path dependency in parties' issue attention profiles: issues that received higher (lower) attention in manifestos also get higher (lower) attention in press releases. This result runs counter our expectation, and it also somewhat contradicts our impressions from Table 2. In fact, although the rank order of parties' issue priorities changes in press releases as compared to manifestos, the relative distribution of attention across issues remains highly similar in both communication channels.

To test our second and third expectation, we run new models with two independent variables to predict parties' issue attention in press releases and in party manifestos (second and third model in Table 3). Issue ownership has only a significant (and positive) effect on parties' issue attention in press releases, but no effect on their issue attention in manifestos. In contrast, the mean attention that other parties' devote to a particular issue yields a significant and positive effect in both models. However, the effect is stronger in the manifesto model than in the press release model, especially if we also control for parties' issue attention in their manifestos in the press release model. Graphs 1a and 1b in the appendix illustrate this fact. In sum, thus, these results go against the dominant view in the literature according to which tactical agendas are used to take up new issues and adjust the campaign strategy to short-term developments. At least in the context of the 2009 regional election in Belgium, parties use their press releases to reemphasize and maintain their issue ownership reputations. In this sense, their press releases come closer to the idea of an "ideal" agenda that is used to communicate a party's traditional strengths and priorities. Thus, we find support for our hypotheses 3a and 3b, but have to reject the alternative expectations formulated in H2a and H2b, which seem to dominate in the literature.

Yet, this general result may vary across parties. According to H4, parties that are losing in the polls have incentives to revise their campaign strategy during the final weeks before Election Day and to deviate from their initial issue emphases, whereas winning parties should "stay put" and reiterate the priorities of their electoral manifestos also in press releases. H5, meanwhile, states that parties in opposition have more incentives to primarily focus on owned issues in press releases than parties in government. To test these two assumptions, we estimate two new press release models: in the first one, we add a new predictor "poll" and interact it with a party's issue attention in manifestos. In the second model, we add a predictor "government" and interact it with parties' issue ownership reputations. Table 4 shows the results.
Table 4 Explaining issue attention in press releases, OLS regressions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coeff.</td>
<td>S.E.</td>
<td>Coeff.</td>
<td>S.E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention manif.</td>
<td>0.30***</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.40***</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue ownership (IO)</td>
<td>4.93***</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>7.63***</td>
<td>2.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention other parties</td>
<td>0.29*</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.31*</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poll</td>
<td>-0.23*</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poll*Attention manif.</td>
<td>0.06***</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government*IO</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adj. R2</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>154</td>
<td></td>
<td>154</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the first model, the interaction term is positive and significant, and all previously observed effects are robust. The positive interaction term means that the impact of issue attention in manifestos on issue attention in press releases is larger for parties that are winning in the polls. In other words, parties that are winning tend to stick more to their issue attention profile than parties that are predicted to lose the election. Hence, we can confirm H4. In contrast, model 2 yield no support for H5. Although the interaction term between the government status of a party and issue ownership is negative and goes in the expected direction, it is not statistically significant.

**Issue convergence between party-pairs**

We now turn to our third research question: Which party-pairs do primarily contend each other's issues and display the strongest issue convergence? We have formulated two alternative, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, expectations. On the one hand, we expect more convergence between ideologically proximate parties that compete for a similar electorate (H6). On the other, and irrespective of parties' ideological proximity, there might be more issue convergence between parties that govern together (H7). To assess these two expectations, we now use the second, dyadic dataset, and run two models, predicting the percentage difference in issue attention between two party-pairs in party manifestos and press releases, respectively. In both models, we use two predictors: the distance between party-pairs on the left-right axis and parties' status as government coalition partners.
As shown in Table 5, both expectations have to be rejected in case of party manifestos. Although the effects go in the expected directions—coalition partners have more similar and ideologically more distant parties more different issue attention profiles—none of the estimated effects reaches statistical significance. In the press release model, in contrast, we find support for H6: with increasing distance on the left-right axis, parties have increasingly dissimilar issue attention profiles. Or put differently: issue convergence tends to be higher between ideologically proximate parties that compete for a similar electorate. The fact that our findings slightly diverge across communication channels supports our idea that issue competition between parties is best analyzed based on a combination of different channels, which differ from each other in their target public, but also in the timing and frequency of their use.

**Concluding remarks**

In this paper, we have contributed to the existing literature on issue competition between parties in two ways. First, our results lend support to the idea that analyses of parties' issue priorities in election campaigns should not be based on a single communication channel. There are substantial differences in issue emphasis across communication channels. Parties strategically use different channels to display diverging issue priorities to different publics. Interestingly, our findings suggest that party manifestos are not ‘ideal’ agendas that form the point of departure of the campaign. Rather, they are broad exercises touching upon many different issues, many of which are not owned by the parties. Manifestos seem to be heavily constrained and to be encompassing documents containing policy proposals on the most diverse set of issues. As a consequence, also in Belgium, issue trespassing in party manifestos abounds. Press releases, in contrast, are less constrained and parties do not have to address each issue. This is the outlet were parties can freely follow their strategic advantages and focus on their own issues. Hence, it is in what we called the ‘tactical agendas’ of parties here that we found parties to be emphasizing the issues they own. This does not mean that there is no connection between manifestos and press releases, though. When issues get attention in the manifesto, chances increase that they will also be covered in the subsequent press releases.
Yet, if parties are expecting to lose the elections, they distance themselves issue-wise from their manifesto in their releases and start talking about other issues than those that were prominent in their manifestos – presumably in an effort to turn the tide. So, the issue emphasis strategies of parties are complex, and they use different channels to convey different messages at different times to different publics.

Second, unlike previous studies, this paper explicitly acknowledges that issue competition always takes place between party-pairs. To understand the nature and dynamics of issue competition in multiparty (European) systems, we found it to be important to get a better sense of which party-pairs primarily compete with each other, and why. That said, we find that in general almost all parties tend to emphasize the same issues as the other parties. So, there seems to be a kind of party system agenda that all parties have to deal with (see also Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2014). More importantly, our findings suggest that parties tend to prioritize issues that their closest competitors prioritize as well. So, not all competitors are equal, and some are more followed—although we could not establish the temporal sequence here—than others. This only applies to parties’ tactical agenda’s, though. Manifestos seem to be much more immune for the issue priorities of the direct competitors. In sum, issue overlap tends to be higher between proximal parties in the tactical agendas during the campaign. Our second expectation regarding the dyadic nature of party competition, namely that government parties would display similar issue agendas did not receive strong support by the evidence. It does not seem to be the case that the former government and its priorities are constraining the parties during the campaign.

Our results are obtained from a single case study. So, it remains to be seen whether our findings apply beyond this single case. First, the Flemish 2009 campaign took place in a very tumultuous time, relatively shortly after the Nationalists had ended their alliance with the Christian Democrats and left the regional government coalition due to a lack of advances in the state reform negotiations. Second, the 2009 campaign also saw a new party running: the Neoliberals, which were funded in early 2007 as a splinter party of the Liberals. Third, the campaign took place in the middle of the financial and economic crisis, which forced parties to respond and emphasize issues such as the economy, social welfare or labor. All this may have led to more issue convergence than is usually the case, and it may have changed the relationship between manifestos and short-term press releases. Yet, the mechanisms we specified in this study—differences among communication channels and the logic of dyadic issue competition—can most likely be applied to other campaigns and party systems in other countries. Still, a next step is to compare our findings to the recent 2014 Flemish regional election campaign, which took place in a different and less tumultuous context. Other important extensions would be to compare parties’ behavior in regional and national election campaigns, which took actually place on the same day, both in 2009 and in 2014, and also to include the French-speaking part of Belgium in our study. We hope that these extensions help us validate our findings and shed more light on the empirical validity of our expectations.
References


Appendix:

Graph 1a: Predicted marginal effect of other parties' attention to an issue, press release model (controlled for issue ownership and a party's issue attention in manifests)
Graph 1b: Predicted marginal effect of other parties’ attention to an issue, manifesto model (controlled for issue ownership)