

# Who talks about what?

## Issue strategies across the party hierarchy<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** We combine the recent literature on issue competition with work on intra-party heterogeneity to advance a novel theoretical argument. Starting from the premise that party leaders and non-leaders have different motivations and incentives, we conjecture that issue strategies should vary across the party hierarchy. We, therefore, expect systematic intra-party differences in the use of *riding-the-wave* and *issue ownership* strategies. We test this claim by linking public opinion data to manually coded information on over 3,600 press releases issued by over 500 party actors across five election campaigns in Austria between 2006 and 2019. We account for self-selection into leadership roles by exploiting transitions into and out of leadership status over time. The results show that party leaders are more likely than non-leaders to respond to the public’s issue priorities, but not more or less likely to pursue issue-ownership strategies.

**Keywords:** issue competition, responsiveness, issue ownership, intra-party dynamics, party leaders

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## Introduction

Which issues should parties emphasize during an election campaign? On the one hand, parties may focus on issues they ‘own’ (Petrocik, 1996; Sides, 2006), on the other hand, they may ‘ride the wave’ of public opinion (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994; Sides, 2006; Sigelmann and Buell, 2004; Spoon and Klüver, 2014). Whichever course party strategists in campaign headquarters may decide to pursue, it is questionable that all actors in a party will execute a centrally decided strategy. Therefore, this research note asks how issue strategies in election campaigns vary across the party hierarchy.

We start from the premise that party leaders are more office-oriented and therefore more likely to cater to the issue priorities of voters (‘ride the wave’) than non-leaders (Müller and Strøm, 1999; Strøm, 1990). As for issue ownership, there are good reasons for both groups to prioritize a party’s core issues. Non-leaders may have a stronger attachment to their party’s core ideological commitments and therefore follow issue-ownership strategies. However, party leaders – the party’s most well-known public faces – may choose to emphasize a party’s owned issues in order to affirm the party’s policy commitments and thus preserve its issue advantage.

We test these expectations using over 3,600 press releases issued by more than 500 individual politicians in Austrian parliamentary election campaigns between 2006 and 2019. To account for (self-)selection into political roles, we exploit transitions into and out of leadership status over time. The results show that party leaders are more likely than non-leaders to pursue riding-the-wave strategies, but not more or less likely to address ‘owned’ issues. These findings demonstrate that relaxing the parties-as-unitary-actors assumption can deepen our understanding of issue strategies in party competition.

## Issue competition across the party hierarchy

Political parties seek some combination of office and policy (Müller and Strøm, 1999). Since either goal requires electoral support, parties put forward issue agendas that suit their electoral purpose (Adams et al., 2006). For example, they may focus on their core issues (*issue ownership*), or they may talk about issues that are important to the electorate (*riding the wave*).

Both strategies have been studied extensively, yet most of these studies rely on the unitary actor assumption – the premise that political parties act in a cohesive fashion and execute one single strategy. This is a useful

theoretical assumption, yet most real-world political parties are internally heterogeneous. Different individuals and groups within a party often have different goals or preferences. The central contribution of this paper is to examine whether vertical divisions (party leaders versus non-leaders) explain intra-party variation in issue strategies.

### **‘Riding the wave’ and issue ownership**

Representative democracy requires that political actors respond to the concerns of voters. The incentives that electoral competition generates turn this proposition from a normative demand into a strategic necessity. Addressing the issues that concern voters most makes good electoral sense (Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016).

Responsiveness, however, varies with the circumstances. System-level factors clearly play a role: Party responsiveness is higher in first-order election campaigns (Spoon and Klüver, 2014), when electoral competition is more intense (Abou-Chadi, 2018), or when voter polarization is high (Spoon and Klüver, 2015). Yet party characteristics matter, too. Larger parties with a more catch-all outlook respond more strongly to voters’ issue priorities, whereas parties in government are less responsive (Klüver and Spoon, 2016). There is even limited evidence that party organizational features influence to what extent parties ‘ride the wave’ (Wagner and Meyer, 2014).

Yet, while responding to public issue priorities is often a necessity, it is not what parties would ideally like to do. Rather, political actors know that some issues are more favorable to them than others (Stubager and Slothuus, 2013). Those are typically the issues that supporters, activists, and elites care about greatly (Egan, 2013). As a party devotes particular attention to an issue, it acquires expertise and credibility. Voters automatically associate the party and the issue, typically viewing the party as more competent than its competitors at handling the issue. On the downside, issue ownership may lead parties to overestimate the public’s appetite for certain policy prescriptions (Egan, 2013). Still, issue ownership theory (Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik et al., 2003) and saliency theory (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Budge et al., 2001) predict that parties will try to selectively emphasize these more advantageous issues (Sides, 2006). Evidence for the importance of issue ownership is plentiful. For instance, Dolezal et al. (2016) show that issue salience in manifestos is a function of perceived party competence. Wagner and Meyer (2014) also find strong effects of issue ownership on issue salience, especially for smaller,

more policy-oriented, and less leader-dominated parties. In addition, issue ownership has effects beyond the issue owner. For example, attention to the environment increases with Green party success (Spoon et al., 2014), and the surge of the radical right has led mainstream parties to put more emphasis on nativist concerns (Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020).

Finally, even though riding-the-wave and issue ownership strategies often lead to different results, they are neither mutually exclusive nor collectively exhaustive approaches. At times, a party's 'best' issue will be high on the public's agenda, such that both strategies dictate the same behavior. At other times, personal specialization, local concerns, or other factors may lead political actors to emphasize issues that are neither of great public concern nor inherently favorable to their party.

### **Intra-party heterogeneity in issue strategies**

As outlined above, parties pursue different issue strategies depending on their organizational characteristics. Leader-dominated parties respond to office exclusion and the general electorate (Schumacher et al., 2013), whereas activist-dominated parties respond to party voters (see also Bischof and Wagner, 2020). Similarly, the intra-party power balance conditions the impact of voter priorities and issue ownership on parties' campaign agendas (Wagner and Meyer, 2014).

There is thus ample variation across party hierarchies in terms of goal prioritization and ideological preferences. Party leaders are the most office-oriented group, since only they enjoy the private benefits of office (Müller and Strøm, 1999; Strøm, 1990). Since taking office requires at least some degree of electoral success, leaders are more willing to cater to voters and less likely to insist on their parties' traditional priorities.

The opposite logic applies to actors below the leadership level. These individuals should be comparatively more policy-oriented and therefore more focused on a party's core issue agenda. Even intrinsically office-oriented non-leaders have strong incentives to focus on a party's core issues. After all, their best chance to rise to the top is to cater to the intra-party actors responsible for selecting personnel for high-level positions. This selectorate will often be comprised of strongly policy-motivated individuals (e.g. members, activists, or congress delegates, see Pilet and Cross, 2014). Hence, the public communication efforts of non-leaders are more likely to (also) target an intra-party audience that values attention to the party's core agenda more

than the average voter.

In general, the term ‘non-leaders’ may comprise a very large set of people. While theories of party behavior and intra-party organization typically distinguish between party elites and the party base (activists, members) (Katz and Mair, 1993; Müller and Strøm, 1999; Schumacher and Giger, 2017), our empirical focus is on the distinction between the highest echelon (e.g. party chairpersons, ministers) and the second tier, such as ordinary MPs, regional party officers, or factional leaders who have some public visibility but are not the party’s top representatives. Some of these people will also have specialized in certain issues, for instance through committee membership (which we will account for in the analysis). To be sure, the motivational differences that our argument is based on may be greatest between the very top and the very bottom of the party hierarchy. Yet, we still contend that our arguments apply to the distinction between leaders and non-leaders. Our first two hypotheses are therefore as follows:

**Hypothesis 1** *Party leaders are more responsive to voters’ issue priorities than non-leaders.*

**Hypothesis 2** *Non-leaders are more likely to follow issue ownership strategies than party leaders.*

An alternative view to H2 starts from the premise that owned issues are highly valuable assets for parties (Stubager and Seeberg, 2016). They have often invested considerable time and effort into their image as issue owners. While issue ownership perceptions tend not to swing wildly in the short term (Seeberg, 2017), maintaining them requires regularly reminding voters of who the party most committed to an issue is (Walgrave et al., 2009) to keep competitors from ‘stealing’ an issue (Tresch et al., 2015; Holian, 2004). One way to avoid losing ownership of ‘issues that are salient to their party’s brand’ (Tromborg, 2019, 308) is to have the party’s most prominent faces address the relevant issue in public. After all, party leaders are those individuals that voters identify most closely with the party. Maintaining the association between an issue and a party, therefore, requires issue attention from the very top of the party hierarchy. As argued above, party leaders are often more concerned with winning elections than non-leaders. Ultimately, they will be held accountable for the party’s electoral performance. As a focus on a party’s most favorable issues is expected to produce electoral benefits, party leaders should emphasize ‘owned’ issues more than non-leaders.

**Hypothesis 3** *Party leaders are more likely to follow issue ownership strategies than non-leaders.*

It is important to note that intra-party differences in issue strategies could emerge from two mechanisms: competition or coordination. Prior research shows that electoral systems and intra-party democracy often determine the level of intra-party conflict and coordination. Hence, dissent is more likely in majoritarian single-member-district systems whereas parties typically enforce unity in closed-list PR systems (Proksch and Slapin, 2015). The ability of the party leadership to induce coherence further depends on factors such as candidate-selection mechanisms (Carey and Shugart, 1995; Kam, 2009). Unfortunately, we cannot resolve this puzzle in a single-country study as cross-party variation is low. Still, we take up this point in the conclusion.

## Case selection and data

### *The Austrian case*

We test our expectations on data collected from over 3,600 press releases issued during the five most recent parliamentary election campaigns in Austria (2006–19). We include all parties represented in the *Nationalrat* during this period: the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ), the Christian Democratic Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP), the populist radical right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and its 2005 split-off, the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ), the populist Team Stronach (TS), the Greens and their 2017 split-off *Liste Pilz* (LP), as well as the liberal NEOS.

The Austrian party system is characterized by moderate pluralism. A tradition of coalition government – often spanning across the left–right divide – further attests to moderate levels of party system polarization. Partisan ties have weakened and volatility increased substantially in the past decades.

While Austria is thus a fairly typical West European parliamentary system, it has often been regarded as an archetypical party democracy (Müller, 2003), with well-resourced, cohesive, and leadership-dominated parties. A recent study ranks Austrian parties among the least internally democratic among 19 Western democracies (Bolin et al., 2017). While party leaders may respond to the lower party strata when under pressure (Kaltenegger et al., forthcoming), opportunities for members and activists to influence party decisions remain limited (Ennser-Jedenastik and Müller, 2014; Jenny, 2018).

Members of the *Nationalrat* are elected through a three-tier semi-open list PR system with multi-member constituencies. While providing some incentives for individualized campaign strategies (Eder et al., 2015), the system of preference votes is too weak to produce reliable career paths that do not depend on the support of party leaders.

Much of the above should make Austria a less likely case with respect to variation in issue strategies between leaders and non-leaders. However, strong and leader-dominated parties may also produce role specialization. Indeed, there is considerable issue divergence between frontbench and backbench MPs in the Austrian parliament (Meyer and Wagner, 2020).

### ***Data***

Our data cover all press releases issued by party candidates and non-candidate leaders during the final six weeks of the election campaigns under study (we thus exclude press releases that do not identify an individual as an author). These statements are publicly available from [www.ots.at](http://www.ots.at), an online platform run by the Austria Press Agency (APA). Press releases are issued by individual politicians and access is not restricted to party leaders. About one in six campaign press releases is picked up by a national newspaper (Meyer et al., 2020). A vast majority of non-leaders had autonomous access to this communication tool both with regard to issue selection and timing and used it extensively in the research period (e.g. Müller and Steininger, 2001; Meyer and Wagner, 2020).<sup>1</sup>

Trained coders manually recorded the author of each press release as well as the issue content of the title and subtitle (Müller et al., 2021). This allows us to distinguish between messages sent by party leaders and non-leaders. We define party leaders as members of government, presidents of parliament, party chairpersons, top candidates in the election (*Spitzenkandidaten*), party general secretaries, parliamentary party group leaders, and members of *Land* governments. The group of non-leaders is overwhelmingly comprised of ordinary MPs at the national, regional, and European level.

We combine these issue emphasis data with two other data sources. First, Eurobarometer (EB) surveys are used to obtain information on the ‘two most

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<sup>1</sup>We confirm this in brief interviews with five members of the *Nationalrat*, one of them in a leadership role. All of them stress MPs’ autonomy, but note that there may be some degree of coordination (partly technical, partly because party press officers are asking MPs to respond to current events), especially during campaign periods.

important issues facing Austria at the moment’ out of a pre-defined list of issues (see Appendix A for details). To match the AUTNES issue codes in the press release data to the EB data, we had two independent coders assign the 700+ AUTNES issue codes to one of 13 EB issues: crime, economy, education, environment, government debt, health and social security, housing, immigration, pensions, inflation, taxation, terrorism, and unemployment.<sup>2</sup> The two coders displayed high agreement (Krippendorff’s alpha = 0.81). Any remaining disagreements were settled by the authors’ authoritative judgment.

To operationalize issue ownership, we rely on a patchwork of surveys that asked respondents to name the most competent parties on a range of issues. Question wording and issue coverage vary somewhat across years (see Appendix A), but there were also differences between single and multiple response formats. To harmonize our data, we normalized the sum of all responses across the 13 issues to 100 percent per party and election year. This approach also eliminates differences in perceived competence between smaller and larger parties. Yet, since we aim to study which issues parties choose to talk about, we only care about within-party differences in issue ownership.

Using a conditional logit approach, we model issue emphasis as a discrete choice over the 13 EB issues. We, therefore, set up our data in a press release (3,675)  $\times$  issue (13) format, with a binary dependent variable indicating the selected issue. The dataset thus contains 47,775 observations<sup>3</sup>. This setup requires us to control only for those confounders that vary *within* press releases across the 13 issue alternatives. The most relevant control variables are thus indicators of individuals’ policy specialization, which we operationalize through ministerial jurisdiction (ministers) and committee membership (legislators).

## Analysis

Our regression models predict for each press release which of the 13 issues was selected (see Table 1). Model 1 shows that, even after controlling for

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<sup>2</sup>This step eliminates issues not covered by the EB surveys, most importantly all references to scandals and corruption, but also questions of democracy, civil rights, or gender equality. We also discard ‘energy-related issues’ since they were not consistently covered in the EB surveys.

<sup>3</sup>Due to missing data on party competence, the N drops to around 42,500.



ministerial jurisdiction and committee membership, issue attention is higher for more salient and ‘owned’ issues. Expressed as an average marginal effect (AME), a ten-point increase in issue salience translates into a 1.5-point higher probability of an issue being addressed. Likewise, a ten-point increase in issue ownership is associated with a seven-point increase in the probability of an actor addressing that issue.

**Table 1:** Effects of voter salience and issue ownership on issue emphasis of leaders and non-leaders

	Model 1		Model 2	
Issue salience	0.66	(0.35)	0.32	(0.31)
× Leader			2.74***	(0.43)
× Portfolio			-4.49***	(0.63)
× Committee			-1.85***	(0.49)
Issue ownership	3.21***	(0.55)	3.47***	(0.45)
× Leader			0.76	(0.83)
× Portfolio			-5.92	(5.91)
× Committee			-1.67	(0.93)
Portfolio	2.21***	(0.58)	3.55***	(0.71)
Committee	1.46***	(0.08)	1.93***	(0.13)
Observations	42,485		42,485	
Press releases	3,675		3,675	
Log likelihood	-8273.2		-8198.5	
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.073		0.082	

Note: Party–election clustered standard errors in parentheses.

\*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

Model 2 in Table 1 introduces interaction effects with leadership status, ministerial jurisdiction (‘portfolio’), and committee membership.<sup>4</sup> Note that the conditional logit model only allows covariates that vary between the

<sup>4</sup>The two latter interactions produce negative coefficients. The AMEs of these interactions (Figure A.4) show that issue specialists are not responsive to the public issue agenda, which suggests a division of labor between responsive generalists and non-responsive specialists (see discussion below Figure A.4 in Appendix C) in Appendix C). We also present evidence in Appendix C that leaders are more likely to promote the overall party issue agenda (see Model 6 and Figure A.5). This is further support for the division-of-labor perspective.

13 issue options in the choice set, and therefore drops the main effect of leadership status. The interaction effect between issue salience and leadership status is positive and statistically significant, while the linear term for issue salience in Model 2 is not. While we thus observe a positive effect of voter salience on issue emphasis among party leaders, no such effect exists for non-leaders. Figure 1 illustrates this finding: The AME of a one-point increase in voter salience on issue emphasis is indistinguishable from zero for non-leaders, but amounts to over 0.5 percentage points for leaders.

For the issue ownership variable, Model 2 reports a positive direct effect (i.e. for non-leaders), but no significant effect for leaders. Thus, non-leaders *do* pursue issue ownership strategies, and party leaders do not differ much from them. Figure 1 shows that all AMEs of issue ownership are positive and significant, yet the difference between these effects in Model 2 is not ( $p = 0.735$ ). Our analyses thus support the hypothesis that leaders are more responsive to the public issue agenda than non-leaders (H1), but they do not detect differences in issue ownership strategies (H2 and H3).<sup>5</sup>

However, the differences between leaders and non-leaders could also arise from the fact that individual-level personality traits are correlated with both, leadership status and communicative behavior. For example, individuals who aspire to leadership roles may be more willing to adapt their agenda to the electorate’s priorities. To eliminate such selection effects, we present models that only use over-time changes in leadership status within individuals, canceling out all between-individual variation with individual-level fixed effects (see Appendix C). This drastically reduces the number of observations, since we only include individuals who are present in at least two elections *and* change their leadership status over time. To allow for model convergence, we limit the sample to individuals who sent at least five press releases both as leaders and as non-leaders, yielding around 400 press releases from 14 individuals.

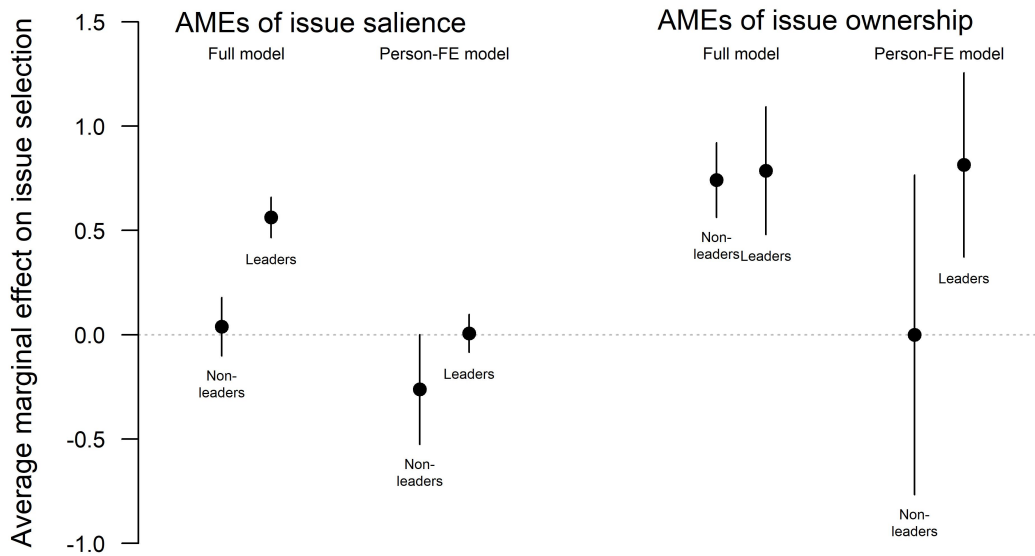
Figure 1 shows that the relationships are similar to those in the full model. Party leaders are more likely to respond to the public issue agenda, thus confirming our findings regarding H1, yet in the fixed-effects models, they

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<sup>5</sup>Note that these effects do not change much when we disaggregate the leader category. The AMEs (standard errors) for issue salience are 0.47 (0.07) for ministers and presidents of parliament, 0.59 (0.06) for party leaders and parliamentary group leaders, and 1.15 (0.32) for *Land* politicians. For issue ownership, the respective figures are 0.75 (0.23), 0.76 (0.18), and 0.60 (0.46), respectively.

are also more likely to follow issue ownership strategies. The correlation between leadership status and issue strategies is thus not just an outcome of self-selection. Rather, the results displayed in Figure 1 imply that over-time variation in leadership status is related to changes in issue strategies. As people move from non-leadership to leadership roles, they become more responsive to the public’s issue priorities and also pay more attention to a party’s core issue agenda.

**Fig. 1:** Average marginal effects of issue salience and issue ownership on issue selection with 95% confidence intervals (based on Models 2 and 5)



## Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore differences in issue strategies across the party hierarchy. Our analysis shows that party leaders are more likely than non-leaders to ‘ride the wave’, but finds no differences regarding issue ownership. By exploiting transitions into and out of party leader status over time, the analysis also accounts for self-selection into leadership roles.

These findings have important implications for our understanding of democratic representation and party competition. First, our analysis shows that

only party leaders are responsive, while non-leaders are (mostly) not. This finding may seem troubling at first, given that the group of non-leaders is mostly made up of national and regional legislators. Yet, this result may simply be a consequence of a coordinated intra-party division of labor, with non-leaders focusing on their policy specializations and leaders interacting with the public agenda. Importantly, our analysis examines issue salience, not issue positions. Our results should therefore not be taken to mean that legislators do not respond to positional shifts in public opinion. Even so, our findings imply that studies examining only party leaders or leader-authored party communication may overestimate how responsive parties as a whole are to changes in public issue salience.

Second, our results demonstrate that issue strategies are not decided centrally for the party as a whole but depend on choices made by individual politicians with varying incentives and constraints. The fact that non-leaders pursue issue ownership strategies but do not respond much to the public's issue priorities is especially relevant in an age in which social media has the potential to strongly decentralize party communication. Therefore, understanding the drivers behind non-leaders' issue strategies becomes ever more important.

Third, our findings on party leaders show that riding-the-wave and issue-ownership strategies are not mutually exclusive. This is because popular issues and 'owned' issues sometimes coincide, and because politicians will, for a variety of idiosyncratic reasons, sometimes talk about issues that are neither popular nor particularly favorable to their party. This leaves enough degrees of freedom for party leaders to be more attuned to public opinion, while at the same time addressing a party's core issues.

However, our study is also limited in that it only examines a handful of parties in one country over a limited period. Cross-national research is needed to push this agenda further, for example, to examine the impact of party characteristics (e.g. intra-party democracy) or country-level factors (e.g. electoral systems, polarization) on intra-party variation in issue strategies. As we focus on election campaigns, future research could also investigate whether intra-party differences are more pronounced in non-campaign periods where party communication is typically less streamlined. Despite these limitations, our study represents an important first step beyond the unitary actor assumption. Given parties' central role as intermediary institutions, we are convinced that a focus on intra-party differences will help researchers

develop a better understanding of how parties affect issue competition and representation in contemporary democracies.

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Who talks about what?  
Issue strategies across the party hierarchy  
(Online Appendix)

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## Appendix A: Overview of data sources

**Table A.1:** Campaign periods, Eurobarometer field work periods and sample sizes

Election year	Campaign start	Election day	EB field work	<i>n</i>
2006	21 Aug	01 Oct	06 Sep to 05 Oct	1,016
2008	18 Aug	28 Sep	06 Oct to 28 Oct	1,003
2013	19 Jul	29 Aug	02 Nov to 17 Nov	1,032
2017	04 Sep	15 Oct	05 Nov to 12 Nov	1,016
2019	19 Aug	29 Sep	21 Nov to 24 Nov	1,018

**Table A.2:** Number of press releases by party and election year

Party	2006	2008	2013	2017	2019	Total
SPÖ	488	515	188	209	158	1,558
ÖVP	209	386	136	93	76	900
FPÖ	74	229	117	165	160	742
Greens	84	113	31	77	44	349
BZÖ			26			26
Team Stronach			34			34
Neos				9	10	19
Liste Pilz				16	28	44
Total	855	1,243	532	569	476	3,675

**Table A.3:** Distribution of issues in party press releases (column %)

Issue	SPÖ	ÖVP	FPÖ	Greens	BZÖ	TS	NEOS	LP	<i>Total</i>
Crime	8%	8%	10%	4%	0%	0%	11%	11%	8%
Economy	6%	7%	5%	5%	0%	0%	5%	5%	6%
Education	18%	13%	9%	15%	38%	44%	16%	5%	15%
Environment	9%	9%	9%	31%	0%	0%	21%	32%	11%
Government <sub>debt</sub>	0%	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%
Health	27%	21%	18%	15%	23%	35%	42%	36%	23%
Housing	3%	1%	4%	1%	0%	0%	0%	5%	3%
Immigration	5%	7%	25%	16%	4%	0%	0%	2%	10%
Pensions	8%	8%	6%	1%	8%	6%	5%	2%	7%
Inflation	5%	3%	3%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	4%
Taxation	6%	15%	6%	6%	15%	6%	0%	2%	8%
Terrorism	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Unemployment	6%	6%	3%	3%	12%	9%	0%	0%	5%
<i>Total</i> (press releases)	1,558	900	745	349	26	34	19	44	3,675

**Notes on issues in press releases.** Table A.3 displays the percentages of press releases across the 13 EB issue categories by party. Overall, health and social security is the most prominent issue, followed by education and the environment. There is considerable variation across parties, with some clear signs that issue ownership matters. For example, one in three press releases issued by the Greens concerns environmental issues, whereas the three largest parties (SPÖ, ÖVP, and FPÖ) devote only nine to eleven percent of their agenda to that topic. Unsurprisingly, the FPÖ's most salient category is immigration. For the Social Democrats, health and social security dominate, whereas the ÖVP has a more balanced issue profile, with most values close to the average issue salience across all press releases (one exception is taxation).

**Table A.4:** Issue coverage and question wording for issue ownership data

Issue	Years	Item wording
Crime	2006–8	Promoting domestic security and less crime
	2013	–
	2017–19	Protecting citizens from crime
Economy	2006–8	Securing economic growth
	2013	–
	2017–19	Promoting economic growth
Education	2006–8	Improving and modernizing the education system
	2013	Education reform
	2017–19	Introducing comprehensive schools
Environment	2006–8	Protection of natural forests and clean water
	2013	–
	2017–19	Protecting the environment
Government debt	2006–8	Balancing the budget
	2013	–
	2017–19	[Trade-off government debt vs. unemployment]
Health & soc. sec.	2006–8	Securing decent medical care for all Austrians
	2013	Health reform
	2017–19	Creating social justice
Housing	2006–8	Creating more affordable housing (imputed, see below)
	2013	Affordable housing
	2017–19	Creating affordable housing
Immigration	2006–8	Coming to grips with the ‘foreigners problem’
	2013	Immigration
	2017–19	Controlling immigration
Inflation	2006–8	(values for ‘Economy’ used)
	2013	–
	2017–19	(values for ‘Economy’ used)
Pensions	2006–8	Securing pensions
	2013	Pensions
	2017–19	Fighting poverty in old age
Taxation	2006–8	Tax reform, cutting taxes and contributions
	2013	Cutting taxes
	2017–19	(values for ‘Economy’ used)
Terrorism	2006–8	Promoting domestic security and less crime (same as for ‘Crime’)
	2013	–
	2017–19	Protecting Austria from terrorism
Unemployment	2006–8	Securing and creating jobs
	2013	New jobs
	2017–19	Fighting unemployment

**Notes on issue ownership data.** Table A.4 displays the coverage and question wordings in the surveys from which we draw data on perceived party competence (issue ownership). We use surveys fielded by Fessel-GfK in May

2006 and April 2017 for the 2006 and 2008 elections, respectively ( $N = 500$  in both cases). The 2013 data was collected by Market in May 2013 ( $N = 501$ ) and lacks plausible items on several issues. For 2017 and 2019 we use ICCP data (<https://doi.org/10.11587/5XWPKK>) collected in September and October 2017 ( $N = 1,002$ ). To maximize data coverage, several items were used multiple times (especially for items related to economic issues). The 2006–08 data for the housing issue were imputed using party competence data on this issue collected in earlier Fessel-GfK surveys (1989–95). Since this earlier time-series correlates highly with the party competence data on pensions ( $r = 0.98$ ), a linear regression with the pension data as a predictor was specified and imputed values for the years 2006 and 2008 (for which pension data are available) thus calculated.



## Appendix B: Issue overlap

**Table A.5:** Issue overlap between leaders and non-leaders across parties (2006-2019)

	Mean	Obs.
SPÖ	70.59	59
ÖVP	63.23	58
FPÖ	64.04	58
Grüne	58.64	46
BZÖ	72.70	34
Team Stronach	69.73	9
NEOS	90.91	11
JETZT - Liste Pilz	41.21	13
<i>Total</i>	65.55	288

**Table A.6:** Issue overlap between leaders and non-leaders across parties and elections

	2006		2008		2013		2017		2019	
	Mean	Obs.	Mean	Obs.	Mean	Obs.	Mean	Obs.	Mean	Obs.
SPÖ	58.84	12	70.41	12	75.26	13	70.43	11	78.26	11
ÖVP	77.54	12	70.14	13	69.55	11	35.71	11	60.62	11
FPÖ	81.67	9	60.86	13	69.53	12	49.91	12	62.90	12
Grüne	42.38	10	80.52	11	44.44	8	66.58	9	54.17	8
<i>Total</i>	65.01	43	70.08	49	66.67	44	55.02	43	64.66	42

Note: Smaller parties are not shown due to small N (cf. Table 4)

Issue overlap figures in Tables 4 and 5 were obtained using the approach outlined by Sigelman and Buell (2004, 653):

$$100 - \frac{(\sum_i^{n=1} |P_E - P_N|)}{2}$$

where  $P_E$  and  $P_N$  are the percentages of total attention that elites (E) and non-elites (N) devote to a particular issue. Absolute differences are summed

over all  $n$  of the potential issues. Furthermore, Sigelman and Buell (2004) divide the sum by 2 to calibrate the measure to range between 0 and 100, which makes up for the double-counting of issue attention for both leaders and non-leaders. By subtracting the value from 100, we obtain a measure of similarity rather than dissimilarity. As an example, a convergence score of 50 would indicate a 50% overlap in attention profiles between leaders and non-leaders.

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## Appendix C: Additional analyses

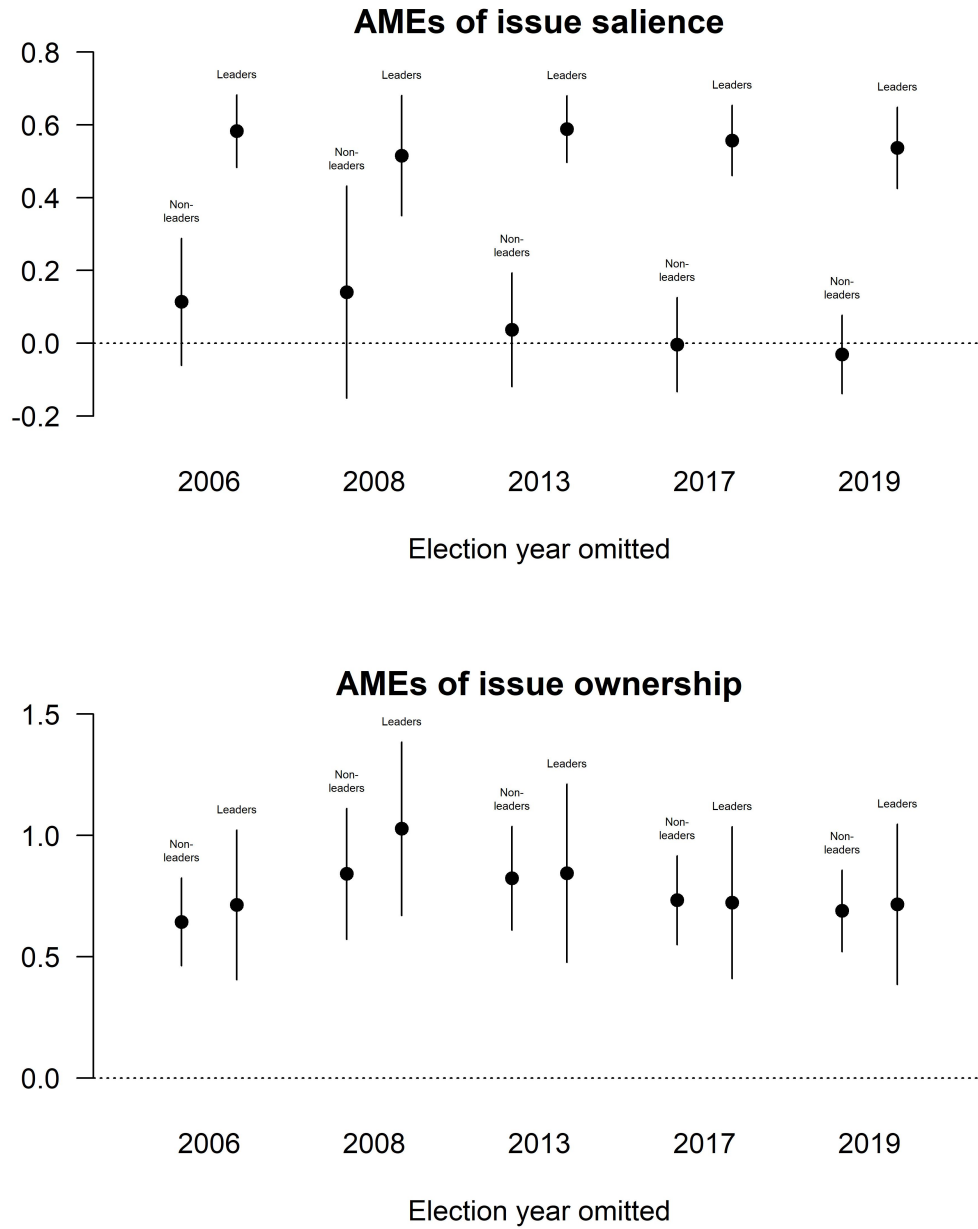
**Table A.7:** Effects of voter salience and issue ownership on issue emphasis, using only within-individual variation in leader status

	Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
Issue salience	0.36	(3.03)			-0.62	(2.00)
× Leader	-0.0065	(3.06)			1.66	(2.31)
× Individ. FEs	Yes				Yes	
× Individ. FEs × Leader	Yes				Yes	
Issue ownership			10.6**	(4.74)	9.88**	(4.18)
× Leader			-8.55	(6.03)	-0.034	(12.76)
× Individ. FEs			Yes		Yes	
× Individ. FEs × Leader			Yes		Yes	
Portfolio	3.44***	(0.67)	3.13***	(1.01)	3.73***	(0.98)
Committee	1.46***	(0.28)	1.19***	(0.25)	1.31***	(0.30)
Observations	5,301		4,615		4,404	
Press releases	421		379		376	
Log likelihood	-918.4		-804.5		-750.3	
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.14		0.14		0.18	

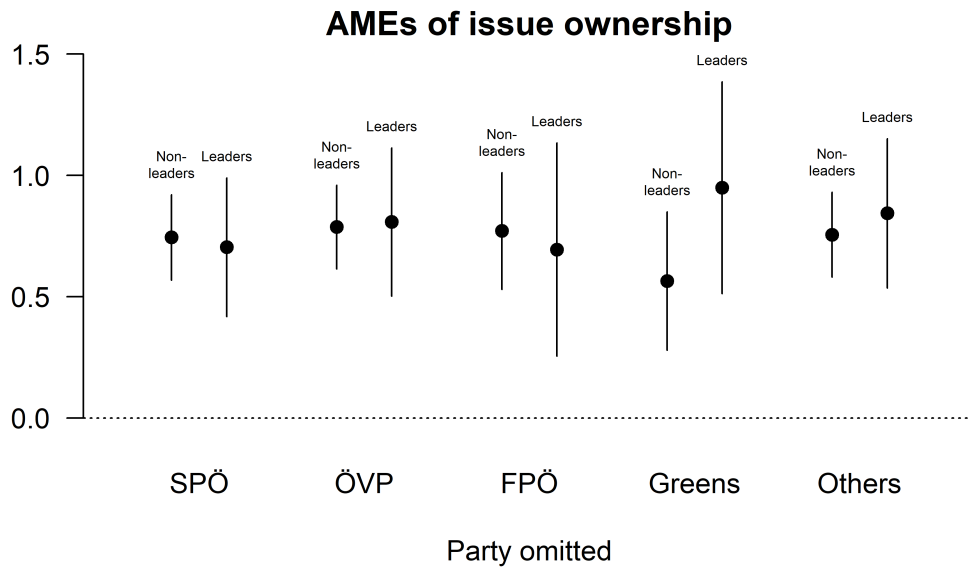
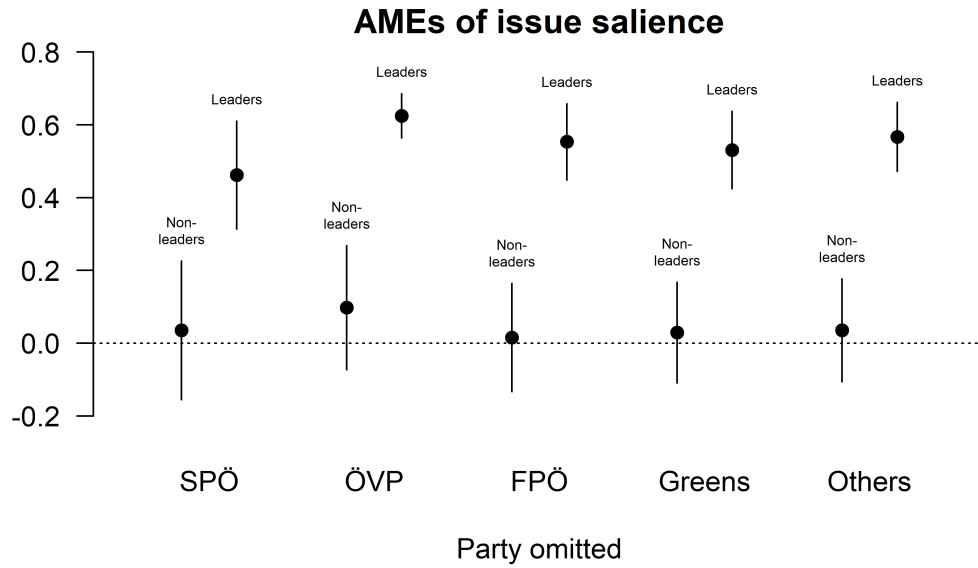
Note: Party-election clustered standard errors in parentheses.

\*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

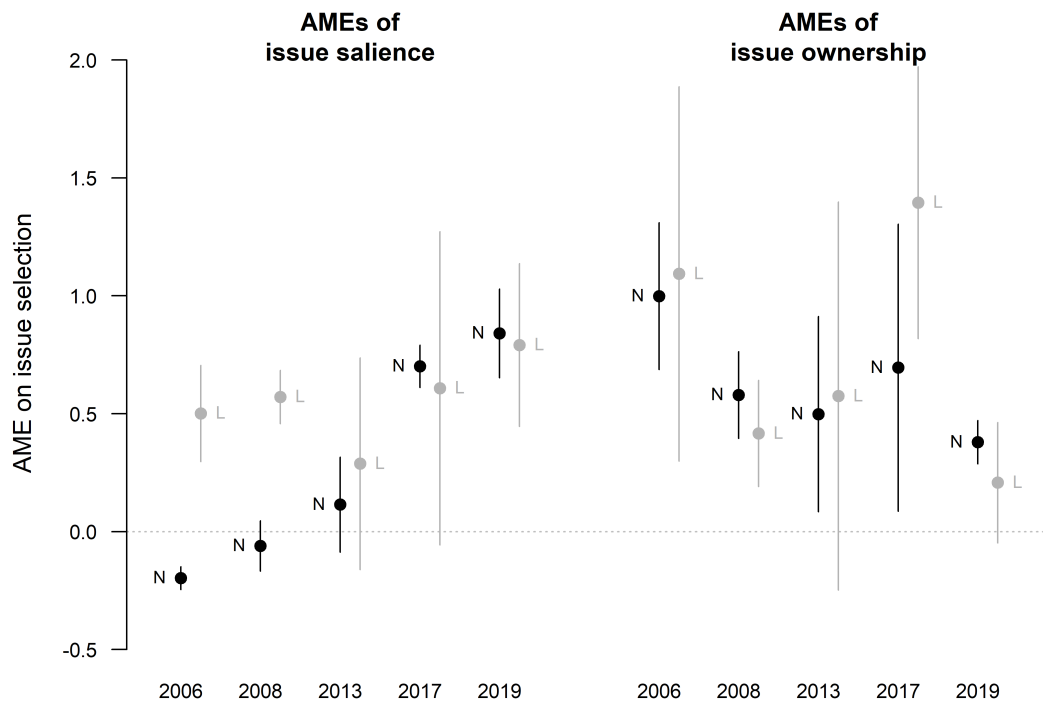
**Fig. A.1:** Average marginal effects for issue salience and issue ownership, leaving out one election year at a time



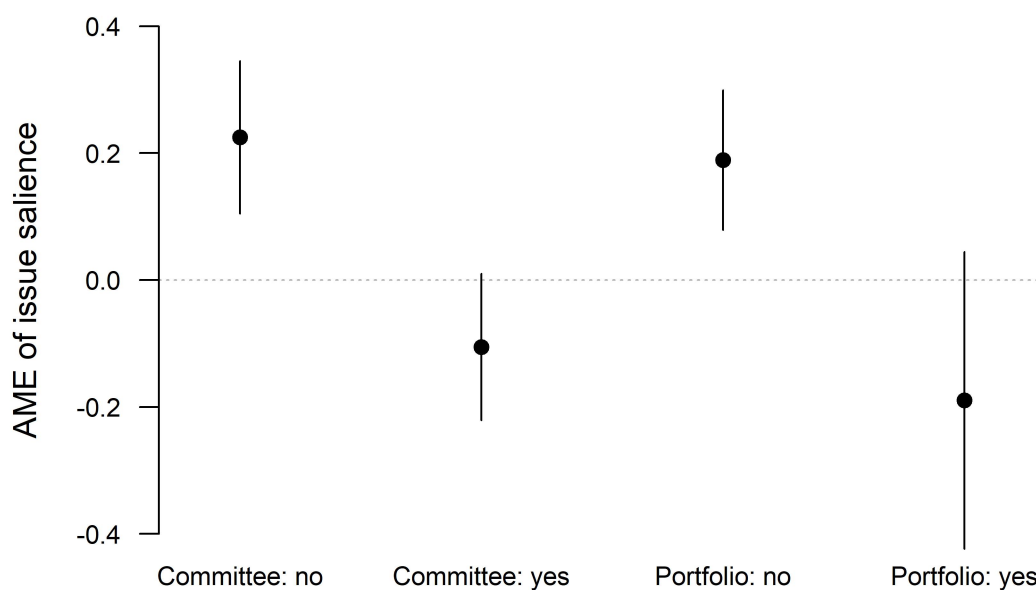
**Fig. A.2:** Average marginal effects for issue salience and issue ownership, leaving out one party at a time



**Fig. A.3:** Average marginal effects for issue salience and issue ownership by year (N = non-leaders, L = leaders)



**Fig. A.4:** Average marginal effects of issue salience by policy specialization (legislative committees and ministerial portfolios; estimation based on Model 2)



As Figure A.4 shows, issue salience has no impact on issue selection for individuals with policy specialization. In other words, ministers and members of legislative committees display no higher probability of addressing their issue specialization when that issue becomes more publicly salient. This is most likely a consequence of the fact that these individuals generally have a high probability of addressing ‘their’ issues, and do not require high public salience to talk about their specialization. Note, however, that the effects are similar for committees and portfolios, suggesting that the logic works for ordinary MPs as well as for government ministers.

**Table A.8:** Model including salience of issue in manifesto (relative to median issue salience by election) and its interaction with leadership status

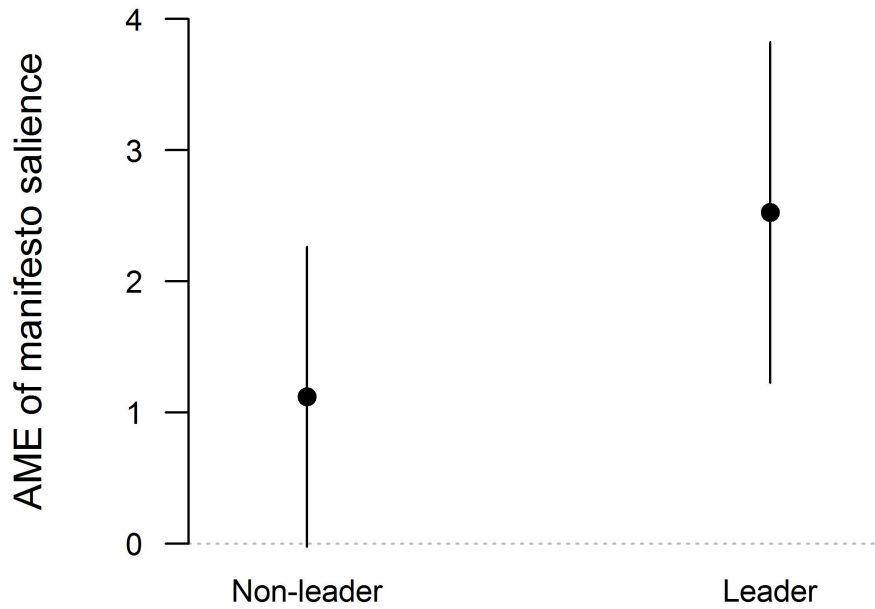
	Model 6	
Issue salience	0.25	(0.22)
× Leader	2.71***	(0.37)
× Portfolio	-5.06***	(0.61)
× Committee	-1.83***	(0.51)
Issue ownership	2.19***	(0.61)
× Leader	-1.00	(0.73)
× Portfolio	-8.66*	(4.93)
× Committee	-1.44*	(0.85)
Manifesto salience (relative)	4.95*	(2.58)
× Leader	7.56***	(2.51)
Portfolio	3.85***	(0.61)
Committee	1.90***	(0.14)
Observations	39,937	
Press releases	3,659	
Log likelihood	-7911.4	
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.089	

Note: Party-election clustered standard errors in parentheses.

\*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$



**Fig. A.5:** Average marginal effect of party agenda (relative issue salience in manifesto) by leadership status; estimation based on Model 6)



We also include a model that specifies the party issue agenda as an additional independent variable. We operationalize the party issue agenda as the difference between a party's manifesto emphasis on an issue (based on AUTNES manifesto data) and the median issue emphasis across all parties in the analysis for that year. The average marginal effect for leaders is considerably larger than that for non-leaders. The difference between the two effects is statistically significant at  $p = 0.005$ . This is evidence in favor of the view that people in leadership positions are more likely to have internalized the party agenda and thus speak for the party as a whole.