Who gets into the papers? Party campaign messages and the media

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Abstract

Parties and politicians want their messages to generate media coverage and thereby reach voters. We examine how attributes related to content and sender affect whether party messages are likely to get media attention. Based on content analyses of 1,613 party press releases and 6,512 media reports in a parliamentary, multiparty context, we suggest that party messages are more likely to make it into the news if they address concerns already important to the media or other parties. Discussing these issues may in particular help opposition parties and lower-profile politicians to get media attention. These results confirm the importance of agenda-setting and gatekeeping, shed light on the potential success of party strategies, and have implications for political fairness and representation.

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Keywords

Campaign communication; Election Campaigns; Party-media agenda-setting; Issue competition; Political parties; Press releases; Media gatekeeping

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In trying to win elections, political parties and politicians work hard at getting their messages across to the public:[2] they appeal to voters by shifting positions, sticking to ideological principles, claiming credit for policy outcomes, emphasising advantageous issues and drawing attention away from unpopular positions.[3] Getting public attention for political messages is particularly important in the context of increasing electoral volatility and issue-based voter decision-making.[4]

If parties and politicians want the public to take note of their messages, media coverage is essential. The traditional news media are still the most important source of information for many voters,[5] even if parties and politicians can to some extent use advertising, canvassing or social media to contact voters directly. Political actors will thus try hard to place their messages in the media.[6] Many agenda-setting studies show that in election campaigns political actors successfully set the broader issue agenda, and that the media respond to the issues set by parties and politicians rather than vice versa.[7] These studies tend to focus on the macro level of campaign agendas, i.e. whether and how the issue agenda of the mass media is affected by parties' issue agenda in terms of the salience of policy areas such as the economy and immigration.[8]

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[2] Dalton, McAllister, and Farrell 2011.

[3] Adams 2012; Grimmer 2013; Kitschelt 1994; Klüver and Sagarzazu 2016; Klüver and Spoon 2016; Meguid 2008.

[4] Dalton 2013; Green-Pedersen 2007.

[5] e.g. Mazzoleni 2008.

[6] Iyengar and Kinder 1987; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Vavreck 2009, chapter 4; Weaver 1994.

[7] for an overview see Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006.

[8] Brandenburg 2002, 2006; Hopmann et al. 2012.

However, we know far less about whether political actors are successful in getting their specific policy messages out and thus in promoting their statements and positions. For example, a party might not just want to raise the salience of immigration per se; they might also want people to know what it is exactly they are proposing to do. Getting such direct coverage of particular messages is a more challenging task for parties than broader agenda-setting. Media attention is a scarce resource[9] over which parties compete with each other as well as with other actors and events.[10] Moreover, whether political actors' specific messages are reported on ultimately depends on the decisions of journalists and editors who decide what is politically relevant and has a high news value.[11]

In this paper, we report the results of the first observational study in a multiparty context that examines when such specific party campaign messages make the news.[12] Our core argument is that message content matters: political actors should be able to increase their chances of getting the media's attention by focusing on topics that are important to voters, other parties or the media. Importantly, this should also be the case for ordinary political actors, such as opposition parties and politicians without high public or party office. While powerful political actors (e.g., cabinet ministers) have an inbuilt head start in getting media attention,[13] message

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[9] Oliver and Myers 1999.

[10] Strömbäck and Van Aelst 2013.

[11] Altheide and Snow 1979; Mazzoleni 2008; Strömbäck 2008.

[12] Hopmann et al.'s (2012) research comes closest to our study, but they only consider broader party-issue linkages in the media, not the success of specific campaign messages. We do not consider the extent to which parties follow media in the content of their messages; for macro-level research on this question, see Brandenburg (2002), Hopmann et al. (2012) and van der Pas and Vliegenthart (2015).

[13] e.g. Bennett 1990.

content should matter for all types of actors. These actors are then perhaps able to choose topics strategically as a means of increasing their chances of getting into the media.

Understanding the attributes of successful messages sheds light on the success of electoral strategies, and has broader implications for electoral fairness and political representation. While existing research suggests that political actors set the broader issue agenda,[14] our results show that we need a more nuanced explanation for the success of specific individual campaign messages. Political actors are more likely to be able to present their own position on an issue (e.g. to be quoted in a media report) if they address issues that are already prominent in the news and important to other parties in the party system. Thus, the power of the media might be higher than suggested in aggregate analyses of the party and media agenda.[15]

By understanding which specific messages reach the news, we also gain important insights into how the media shapes the incentives underlying issue competition between political parties. For example, parties often pursue issue engagement with their rivals;[16] the attractiveness of this strategy is evident if the media report more on messages that address issues other parties are also discussing. Moreover, content-based incentives may be particularly important for new or less prominent politicians and parties. Such actors will want to send out messages on those issues where they are most likely to get coverage. However, if their ability to make the news is greater on those issues that are already part of the media or party debate, then this limits their ability to address innovative, system-destabilising issues.

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[14] Brandenburg 2002, 2006; Hopmann et al. 2012.

[15] cf. Brandenburg 2002, 2006.

[16] Kaplan, Park, and Ridout 2006; Sigelman and Buell 2004; Simon 2002.

In sum, the need for media coverage indicates the opportunities and limits of issue strategies, particularly if pursued by new parties and issue entrepreneurs.[17] Overall, this study adds to a growing literature on the media success of individual messages such as parliamentary questions[18] and party press releases.[19]

Our empirical analysis uses original party, voter and media data on the 2013 Austrian general election. We study campaign messages in party press releases and their appearance in media reports throughout all relevant newspapers in the final six weeks of the election campaign. Following Grimmer,[20] we use cheating detection software and manual checks to compare 1,613 relevant press releases with 6,512 media reports published the following day. We supplement these data with other content analyses and survey data on parties, voters, and the media. While our empirical analysis is restricted to a single country, this case is particularly well-suited to answering our research question. In Austria, the range of daily newspaper editions is still important, which makes them attractive and relevant targets of political communication in press releases. This allows us to establish a closer causal link between campaign messages at day *t* and media content at day *t+1*. Moreover, based on a common coding scheme in the content analysis of party, media and voter data in the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES), we can match party data with the media coverage of all major national newspapers and of the public issue agenda.

Our findings suggest that about 16 per cent of all party press releases get media attention, a figure that is remarkably high given the large number and low cost

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[17] Bolleyer and Bytzek 2013; De Vries and Hobolt 2012.

[18] Van Aelst and Vliegenthart 2014; Van Santen, Helfer, and Van Aelst 2015.

[19] Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin 2003; Grimmer 2010, 2013; Helfer and Van Aelst 2016.

[20] Grimmer 2010, 2013.

of press releases sent out during a campaign. We also find that the media are more likely to cover a press release if the issue is salient in the media's issue agenda and if several parties address the issue. This indicates that systemic media and party system agendas affect which issues make the news,[21] while individual parties' issue strategies have limited autonomous impact. Existing parties' dismissive strategies[22] may therefore often work, and parties face constraints in their ability to shape the media agenda. Moreover, addressing issues important to the media and other parties helps rank-and-file politicians and opposition parties, which lack the newsworthiness of their competitors in government.[23] In contrast, we find no evidence that the media's selection of messages is driven by a party's issue profile or voter issue concerns.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we discuss how parties communicate their messages to the media and how successful they are in shaping media coverage. Then, we turn to the role of press releases as communication channels for campaign messages before we consider relevant message attributes that may explain variation in their success in getting the media's attention. Next, we present our data and methods before discussing the results. We consider broader implications of our findings in the conclusion.

Existing research on media attention to party communication

When are parties and politicians successful in getting their messages into the media? Two strands of research, agenda-setting and media visibility, provide partial answers

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[21] Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Steenbergen and Scott 2004.

[22] Bale et al. 2010, Meguid 2008.

[23] Bennett 1990.

to this question. Agenda-setting research[24] examines whether the issues addressed by parties and candidates (e.g. in speeches, press releases, or campaign ads) are also reflected in the media issue agenda, so whether party coverage of issues affects how much these issues are covered and whether they are linked to them.[25] This research can tell us whether the media agenda on average matches the party agenda and on which issue areas congruence is higher or lower.

However, there are two important limitations when applying the findings of agenda-setting research to explain the success of party campaign messages in making the news. First, existing studies generally examine the issue agenda using rather broad issue areas such as immigration or the economy rather than more specific issues. Hence, agenda-setting studies do not tell us which *individual* campaign messages are more likely to get the media's attention. Second, correspondence between party and media agendas does not tell us whether the issues addressed in the media are also explicitly linked to a party and its politicians.[26] It is particularly difficult to exclude the possibility that the media agenda influences party communication or that external events and developments affect both parties and the media.[27] Yet, even though there is strong evidence that parties shape the media agenda, we do not know whether this congruence is the result of direct coverage of specific party messages, nor do we know which of the parties' many campaign messages are covered.

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[24] e.g. Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006.

[25] Brandenburg 2002, 2006; Hopmann et al. 2012.

[26] Brandenburg 2002, 2006.

[27] Though see Brandenburg 2002 and Hopmann et al. 2012 for careful analyses.

While agenda-setting research focuses on agenda similarity, media-visibility research analyses whether political actors (i.e. parties and politicians) are covered by the media.[28] Some studies also analyse whether a political actor's role is active or passive; that is, whether actors 'appear as speakers in the news and are given the opportunity to explain their policy positions, to address their preferred issues, or to justify their beliefs and problem solutions'.[29] Explanatory factors here are attributes related to the party or candidate rather than to the content of the message. For example, politicians with leading positions in public or party office are generally more likely to be covered by the media.[30]

However, we have to be cautious when using these findings to explain the success of party campaign messages. While being present in the media is necessary if a politician wants to get his or her message across, it is in itself not a sufficient factor. While visibility research helps us to understand which actors are most likely to appear in the media, it is therefore unclear whether they can leverage that visibility as a means of increasing coverage of their campaign messages.

In sum, research on agenda-setting and media visibility tells us which issues or politicians are, on average, more present in the media and whether the media follow parties in the issues they cover. In contrast, our aim is to study the success rate of individual party messages in garnering media coverage. We do so by comparing press releases with media reports on the next day.

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[28] Cook 1988; Gattermann and Vasilopoulou 2015; Kriesi 2012; Tresch 2009.

[29] Tresch 2009, 74.

[30] e.g. Gattermann and Vasilopoulou 2015; Helfer and Van Aelst 2016; Kriesi 2012; Schönbach, De Ridder, and Lauf 2001.

Press releases as mediums for campaign messages

Press releases are one of a variety of tools political actors can use to reach the media and are a particularly useful means of capturing what parties want the media to talk about.[31] They have been used to study patterns of party communication,[32] party issue emphasis[33] and framing strategies.[34] Press releases provide us with a readily available tool for measuring party communication systematically on a day-to-day basis. They are a particular weapon in the arsenal of party campaign communication: press releases allow parties to address their core campaign issues (e.g. those emphasized in their manifesto) and to respond to the dynamics of the campaign (e.g. the media issue agenda).[35]

Press releases are attractive to politicians: if press releases make it into the news, this is particularly useful to politicians as citizens may be more inclined to believe newspaper stories than political advertisements.[36] Moreover, press releases are quick to write and cheap to distribute, but can potentially have a large audience if covered by even one large media outlet. They are also attractive to newspapers:

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[31] E.g. Brandenburg 2002; Grimmer 2010; Hopmann et al. 2012. Other 'tools' include campaign speeches, television ads, televised debates (Vavreck 2009), constituency newsletters (Cook 1988; Yiannakis 1982) as well as activities in parliament (i.e. speeches, formal questions: Tresch 2009; Van Santen et al. 2015).

[32] Yiannakis 1982.

[33] Green and Hobolt 2008; Klüver and Sagarzazu 2016; Sagarzazu and Klüver 2015.

[34] Senninger and Wagner 2015.

[35] It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse which of the two sources, party manifestos or the media issue agenda, is more influential for the issue agenda in press releases. Yet, additional analyses using the issue in a press release as a dependent variable suggest that for most parties the media issue agenda is more influential than the party manifestos (see Online Appendix E).

[36] Grimmer 2013, 35.

given tighter reporting budgets in the digital age, newspaper editors and journalists may gladly resort to information – quotes and arguments – contained in press releases.[37] Indeed, in the US congressional press releases are sometimes run almost verbatim in local newspapers.[38]

We argue that press releases are successful if the author's statements made in the press release are used in at least one media report that features the author in an active role. Specifically, we consider a press release as successful if there is at least one newspaper article that (1) names the press release's author (i.e. name or party label) as an active speaker in the article and (2) deals with the same specific topic as the press release.

We know little so far about the success rates of press releases in European democracies or indeed in any parliamentary, multiparty context. Grimmer[39] analyses press releases from ten US senators and six local newspapers and shows that up to one third of these senators' press releases appear as sources in local newspapers, particularly in those with scarce resources. Flowers et al.[40] study the success of 277 press releases sent out by five Republican presidential candidates in 1996; they find significant differences between the national and the local media in whether they cover candidates' press releases and in whether they privilege substantive (i.e. issue-related) or informational party messages. However, extrapolating from US-based findings to parliamentary, multiparty systems is not warranted since the latter differ in many respects from the US presidential system. These differences affect how

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[37] Grimmer 2013, 34.

[38] Grimmer 2013, 35.

[39] Grimmer 2010, 2013.

[40] Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin 2003.

electoral politics works across contexts, for example in terms of negative campaigning,[41] issue emphasis[42] and issue engagement.[43]

In non-US research, Brandenburg[44] and Hopmann et al.[45] do consider the extent to which the media follow parties in a multiparty, parliamentary context. Yet, they examine whether the overall issue agenda in the media is shaped by the issue agenda among parties, and not whether specific messages are successful in garnering coverage. Recently, Helfer and Van Aelst[46] have provided important insights by conducting survey experiments in which they ask journalists in Switzerland and the Netherlands to indicate whether they would consider writing a news item based on a fictional party press release. They show that press releases from more powerful parties are more successful in getting the media's attention, as are messages that are unexpected and contain important policy announcements. However, they do not address the question of whether and when real-world parties and politicians are successful in 'making the news'. In sum, our research builds on and extends the findings in Flowers et al.,[47] Hopmann et al.,[48] and Helfer and Van Aelst[49] by considering how the selection of party messages by the media is influenced by a

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[41] e.g. Elmelund-Præstekær 2010; Walter 2014.

[42] e.g. Klüver and Sagarzazu 2016; Van der Wardt, De Vries, and Hobolt 2014; Wagner and Meyer 2014.

[43] e.g. Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2015; Meyer and Wagner 2016.

[44] Brandenburg 2002.

[45] Hopmann et al. 2012.

[46] Helfer and Van Aelst 2016.

[47] Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin 2003.

[48] Hopmann et al. 2012.

[49] Helfer and Van Aelst 2016.

broad set of contextual factors in election campaigns based on unique data from media reports, party messages and voter surveys.

Why are some party press releases more successful than others?

In order to make it into the media, campaign messages need to appeal to those who select stories and write articles: journalists and editors. To attract the media's attention, parties have to enter into a 'negotiation of newsworthiness'[50] by internalizing news factors and professionalizing their party organisations and communication behaviour.[51] The key question to ask is what message attributes have a high news value and are therefore particularly likely to appeal to the media.

A first factor is prior media attention. We expect that the media will be more likely to use a press release as a source if it addresses a topic that is already salient in the news. Continuity is a news value in itself:[52] the media should be interested in adding to a story that has already been reported on and is familiar to the public.[53] Moreover, media outlets adopt each other's stories and issues.[54] This inter-media agenda-setting means that press releases that deal with issues high on the media's issue agenda are particularly interesting sources. Note that we can even conceive of an important feedback loop in this regard, with parties and politicians talking about

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[50] Cook 2005, 102.

[51] Plasser and Plasser 2002; Strömbäck and Van Aelst 2013.

[52] e.g. Galtung and Ruge 1965.

[53] Oliver and Myers 1999.

[54] e.g. McCombs 2004; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2008.

issues that are salient in the media because they know that these topics are more likely to be picked up.[55] Our first hypothesis is therefore:

H1 (media issue importance): Press releases are more successful if they focus on issues that are already salient in the media.

Second, the media may be more likely to use press releases on topics that are important to voters. Agenda-setting research analyses the relationship between the media's and the voters' issue agenda.[56] While it is often argued that the media sets the agenda of the campaign,[57] recent research shows that the causal arrows between different arenas may actually run in both directions.[58] For example, while the media may affect the issues that are important to voters, they will themselves be more likely to report on issues that are of interest to their readers. This is particularly true as increasing competition between news outlets has led to a shift from a supply to a demand market of news production,[59] encouraging the media to respond to public concerns.[60] Therefore, issues which are highly salient among the electorate should be more likely to make the news:

H2 (voter issue importance): Press releases are more successful if they focus on issues that are important for voters.

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[55] Sevenans, Walgrave, and Epping 2016; Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006. We elaborate on this feedback loop in Online Appendix E.

[56] Iyengar and Kinder 1987; McCombs and Shaw 1972; McCombs 2004.

[57] e.g. McCombs and Shaw 1972.

[58] Soroka 2002a; Soroka, Stecula, and Wlezien 2015.

[59] Van Cuilenburg 1999.

[60] Brants and de Haan 2010.

Third, the media may value novelty and surprise in press releases.[61] Hence, they may be more likely to use a press release if that issue is new or less prominent for the party.[62] However, parties typically focus on their key campaign issues, and the media may pay scant attention to such repeated or reiterated messages, which will be increasingly familiar and dull as the campaign progresses. On the other hand, some parties develop ownership over certain issues,[63] and on these issues, parties may be seen as particularly relevant and as having greater expertise. Readers may expect these parties to be mentioned if these topics come up in a report, while journalists will turn to them for information. Nevertheless, we expect parties' messages to be more successful if they address issues that are new or unexpected and hitherto less discussed:

H3 (party issue importance): Press releases are less successful if they focus on issues that are important for that party.

Finally, the media may be more likely to use a press release as a source if it addresses an issue that is important to several political parties. Although parties prefer to focus on their 'best' issues,[64] they also have incentives to address issues that are important to voters[65] and to respond to issues raised by their competitors.[66] If several parties engage in a discussion of the same topic, this may naturally increase

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[61] Galtung and Ruge 1965.

[62] Helfer and Van Aelst 2016.

[63] Petrocik 1996; Walgrave, Soroka, and Nuytemans 2015.

[64] e.g. Budge and Farlie 1983.

[65] Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Klüver and Spoon 2016; Meyer and Wagner 2016; Spoon and Klüver 2014.

[66] Bale 2003; Green-Pedersen 2007; Meguid 2008; Spoon, Hobolt, and De Vries 2014.

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the news value of an issue. Moreover, one key news value is conflict,[67] and this frame is easier to create if there is debate between political parties. A further factor may be that the media strive for balance during campaigns,[68] and this is easier to achieve on topics that are widely discussed. Indeed, Hopmann et al.[69] find a positive spillover effect: even parties that do not issue a press release on a topic are likely to be linked to it if another party sends out a relevant press release.[70] In sum, we expect issue engagement to have a positive effect:

H4 (party system issue importance): Press releases are more successful if they cover issues addressed by rival parties.

Data and methods

The empirical analysis is based on content analyses of party press releases and newspaper articles published in the 2013 Austrian national election campaign. Focusing on one country (and a single campaign) allows us to study the success of campaign messages based on the full universe of party messages and media coverage. This research strategy is crucial for our analysis as any restriction in the number of media outlets would underestimate the success of individual press releases.

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[67] Helfer and Van Aelst 2016; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000.

[68] Green-Pedersen et al. 2015; Hopmann et al. 2012; Van Aelst and De Swert 2009.

[69] Hopmann et al. 2012.

[70] It is important to note that Hopmann et al. (2012) find a negative interaction effect for issue engagement: the more press releases other parties send out, the less effect a party's own press releases have on their probability of being covered. Hence, they find a 'ceiling effect' for the impact of party press releases.

Austria is a parliamentary, multiparty system that is particularly well-suited for our study. It is also a country where (print editions of) newspapers are still highly relevant: about 73 per cent of the population (above 14 years of age) read newspapers on a daily basis.[71] This allows us to focus on paper editions of newspapers, and thus to establish a closer causal link between campaign messages at day t and media content at day $t+1$ (see below). At the same time, making it into one of these media reports is highly relevant because many citizens consume these media on a regular basis. Finally, data from the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES) allows us to match these party data with the media coverage of all major national newspapers and of the public issue agenda.

We focus on press releases distributed by parties represented in parliament (SPÖ, ÖVP, FPÖ, Greens, BZÖ, and Team Stronach).[72] The Austrian party system shares many characteristics with those in other European countries. It is characterized by moderate pluralism[73] with a centre-left (SPÖ) and a centre-right (ÖVP) party. The Greens on the left and the Freedom Party (FPÖ) on the right were the main opposition parties in parliament. The BZÖ, a splinter party founded in 2005, lost most of its popularity between the general election in 2008 and the 2013

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[71] Aichholzer et al. 2014, 32.

[72] There is a lot of variation in terms of press release authorship. In total, 292 party actors issued over 2,000 press releases during the 2013 campaign, including MPs, members of government, state (*Land*) members of government, leaders of interest groups tied to parties (e.g. trade unions), but also 'ordinary' candidates who are relatively unknown.

[73] Sartori 1976.

election campaign. Some MPs left that party and joined the movement of billionaire Frank Stronach (Team Stronach).[74]

Press releases are distributed by the Austrian Press Agency (APA). We use press releases sent by parties including regional branches, parliamentary party groups, and ancillary organizations during the last six weeks of the election campaign. These press releases are sent by parliamentary candidates, members of government at the federal and regional level, members of parliament, party officers at the national level, as well as collective actors such as party sub-organizations for women, youth, and the elderly.

One concern with this sample may be that we also include messages reflecting government business. However, members of government usually have official communication channels to distribute press releases related to their official role and duties. Government members using the party's communication channels do so in their role as party members (see also the example in Online Appendix B). Another concern may be that not everyone affiliated with a party was actually part of the national campaign. To address this, we re-ran our models using a restricted sample of party actors, excluding all actors apart from government members, MPs, party leaders, and party chairpersons. The results of this analysis are very similar to the ones presented below (see Online Appendix C).

The content analysis is based on 1,922 party press releases.[75] We drop press releases informing journalists about party campaign events (e.g. press conferences,

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[74] We discard press releases of the new liberal party (NEOS), which only gained seats after the election, and of other smaller parties without representation in parliament.

[75] While it is difficult to compare numbers across countries, Austrian parties appear to use press releases quite extensively. In the 2013 election campaign, Austrian parties distributed about 2,000 press releases in the last six weeks of the campaign (on average 45 press releases a day). This estimate

photo ops) and those merely containing pictures and hyperlinks to audio content (N = 104). Moreover, we discard releases that are not policy-related and, for example, merely contain information on specific campaign events (TV debates, canvassing), opinion polls, and changes in party office (N = 288). To measure the success of press releases, we identify the politician or party who issued the press release. Some press releases are sent by two politicians, and these press releases enter the analysis separately for each politician. In total, this leaves us with 1,613 campaign messages.

Dependent variable. We aim to measure whether a press release is successful in the sense that there is at least one media report using that press release as a source. For this purpose, we group press releases by day, creating 41 clusters of press releases (one for each day). Next, we identify all media reports published in daily newspapers the day after the press release was issued.[76] The focus on paper rather than online editions makes it easier to assess a temporal relationship between the press release and the media report on the next day. To avoid bias in the selection of newspapers, our sample captures all nationally relevant quality, tabloid, and mid-market newspapers. Furthermore, we include media reports from all newspaper sections rather than just a sub-section (e.g. front pages). This information is based on the AUTNES media content analysis of eight newspapers (*Der Standard, Die Presse, Salzburger Nachrichten, Kronen Zeitung, Österreich, Heute, Kurier, Kleine Zeitung*). We use headlines, media reports, and background analyses but exclude other types of

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is rather high compared to party activity in other countries: Klüver and Sagarzazu (2016) report that the main German parties published about 3,700 press releases in 2009 (on average 10 press releases a day). Analysing press releases in the Danish 2007 election, Hopmann et al. (2012) identify 334 issue-related press releases in the 20 days prior to the election (on average 17 press releases a day).

[76] There are only a few newspapers with a Sunday edition. Thus, we also consider media reports published on Monday for those press releases published over the weekend.

media reports such as commentaries, interviews, cartoons, and letters to the editor (N=6,512).

Each press release needs to be checked against an average of roughly 170 media reports published the following day, meaning that there are about 270,000 press release-media report dyads. To handle these data, we follow Grimmer[77] and employ a two-stage coding process. First, cheating detection software[78] is used to identify media reports with content that overlaps with that of a press release published the day before. The goal of this automated analysis is to narrow the number of coding units for the following hand-coding process. Yet, to avoid false negatives (i.e. successful press releases not detected by the software), we choose non-restrictive settings to generate more 'hits'.[79] The cheating detection software identifies 1,882 potential 'matches', thus allowing us to discard 99.5% of all press release-media report dyads.

Next, we go through these matches manually, reading the press release and the media report, to assess whether a press release was successful (1) or not (0). Based on the definition stated above, a coder deemed a press release as successful if the media report (1) names the press release's author (i.e. name or party label) as an active speaker in the article and (2) deals with the same topic as the press release. Examples of 'successful' press releases are shown in the Online Appendix (Appendix B).

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[77] Grimmer 2010.

[78] Bloomfield 2014.

[79] More information on the settings and the software is provided in the Online Appendix (Appendix A).

Manually coding the success of press releases is not without its challenges. It is often a relatively easy task when journalists refer to their sources in the text ('…announced in a press release that…') or if the press release is a direct source for citations. Similarly, it is relatively easy to identify press releases that did not get the media's attention if the topic in the press release differs from that in the newspaper article. Yet, sometimes the coding decision is difficult, especially if the press release and the newspaper article deal with the same policy issue, but no direct evidence for a party's influence can be found.

We deal with these problems in two ways. First, we assess the reliability of the manual coding process by having a sample of 500 coding decisions made by two coders instead of just one. The inter-coder reliability using Krippendorff's alpha is 0.82 and thus reasonably high. Second, we checked coder decisions carefully and found disagreement often occurred when press releases and media reports refer to a third event (e.g. a press conference). Hence, it is unclear whether the press conference or the press release was used as a source in the media report. This is why we add a control variable in the analysis, indicating whether a press release refers to statements made at a press conference (1) or not (0).

In line with our definition of successful press releases, it is sufficient for there to be at least one matching newspaper article that uses a party press release as a source. Thus, for each press release we test whether there is at least one newspaper article where the press release has been used as source (1) or not (0).[80]

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[80] There are very few instances where successful press releases are in fact used in several media reports. About 60 per cent of the successful press releases (160 of 258) are used in one media report only. Only 19 press releases were used as sources in four or more media reports. This is why we stick to the dichotomous distinction of successful and unsuccessful party press releases.

Independent variables. Turning first to the issue-related content of press releases, we classify party press releases into 18 policy issue areas.[81] We measure the *media issue agenda* as the share of newspaper articles dealing with the respective issue area on the day a press release is published.[82] Thus, publishing a press release on an issue that is already salient in the media agenda should increase the probability that a party press release is successful. Data on the media issue agenda comes from the AUTNES media content analysis of 6,512 articles in the eight newspapers listed above. Each article is assumed to contribute equally to the media issue agenda.

For *voter issue importance*, we use a rolling cross-section voter survey carried out during the campaign[83] that asked respondents to identify the two issues in Austria that are 'most important to you personally in the upcoming national parliamentary election'. Responses were classified using the 18 issue areas mentioned above and weighted using survey weights. Interviews were conducted Monday to Friday; we pool observations over the last seven days to obtain indicators for voters' perceived issue importance on a specific day.

We measure *party issue importance* using data from the parties' manifestos published before the election campaign. Based on the relational method of content

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[81] The issue areas are: economy, employment, social welfare & poverty, health care, pensions, family affairs, budget & taxes, agriculture, education, environment, law & order, individual rights & societal values, European integration, foreign affairs & defence, infrastructure, immigration, fighting political misconduct & corruption, government reforms & direct democracy

[82] Almost all press releases are published after 8 a.m., so the most recent media impetus is the same-day media issue agenda. In an additional analysis, we use the media issue agenda at the previous day to test Hypothesis 1. The results (shown in Online Appendix D) are very similar to the ones presented in the manuscript.

[83] Kritzinger et al. 2014.

analysis developed by Kleinnijenhuis and others,[84] each sentence in the manifesto was separated into the smallest possible full grammatical sentence. Using the same coding scheme as for the press releases and the media reports, these statements are then coded into one of the 18 issue areas.[85]

Finally, we measure *party system issue importance* as the number of rival parties that address the same issue on a specific day. Thus, the measure ranges from 0 (i.e. no rival party addresses that issue) to 5 (i.e. all parliamentary parties address that issue).[86] We use this measure instead of the share of messages other parties devote to an issue because the daily number of press releases (on average about 40) is rather small for calculating shares based on 18 issue areas. This is particularly true for weekends (when fewer press releases are sent) and for larger parties (as their smaller rivals also sent fewer press releases). Our simple measure (from 0 to 5) is less accurate than shares, but also less prone to distortion by a small number of observations.

Control variables. There are several control variables that we need to take into account. To begin with, media attention is often biased towards the most

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[84] e.g. Kleinnijenhuis and Pennings 2001.

[85] The coding scheme actually captures more than 650 issue categories which we merge into 18 broader issue areas. For more information on the theoretical approach used to code these manifestos, we refer to Dolezal et al. (2014), where coding reliability scores are also reported.

[86] It is worth noting that the correlations between these issue agendas are rather weak. The highest correlation is that between media and party system issue importance (r= 0.35; N=1,613). The media agenda differs more significantly from the parties' central campaign issues and the voters' issue concerns. While the voter and media issue agenda overlap for some issues, the correlation between both types of agenda is essentially zero (r = -0.03; N=1,613). For example, pensions are one of the most important issues among voters, but media reports on this policy area are quite rare.

powerful actors.[87] Thus, parties in government are usually more visible in the news than opposition parties.[88] We account for this bias using a dummy variable that distinguishes between press releases sent by parties in government (1) and those in opposition (0).

Moreover, the media will privilege actors that are powerful within their own party.[89] Campaigns are powerfully shaped by the presence of the current party leaders; such 'centralized personalization' has been observed for Belgian,[90] British, Danish, Dutch[91] and Israeli[92] election campaigns. A similar logic should apply to party chairpersons who often run the campaign and are responsible for its 'spin'. The power of politicians in high public office makes them equally newsworthy for the media.[93] Other individuals who send out press releases are members of parliament and parliamentary candidates, party actors at the state and regional level, heads of intra-party groups (e.g. youth organizations), and members of the European Parliament. All these actors may be less interesting and newsworthy to the national media and therefore less successful in getting their messages into the media. We classify party actors who send out press releases as members of the national government (cabinet members and junior ministers), party leaders, party

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[87] Entman 2007; Galtung and Ruge 1965; Gans 1979.

[88] e.g. Bennett 1990; Hänggli 2012; Hopmann et al. 2012; Van der Brug and Berkhout 2015; Zaller and Chiu 1996.

[89] Gattermann and Vasilopoulou 2015; Helfer and Van Aelst 2016; Kriesi 2012; Schönbach, De Ridder, and Lauf 2001.

[90] Van Aelst et al. 2008.

[91] Vliegenthart, Boomgarden, and Boumans 2011.

[92] Balmas et al. 2014.

[93] Galtung and Ruge 1965; Schönbach, De Ridder, and Lauf 2001.

chairpersons, MPs, those in state (Land) governments, other individuals.[94] When no individual party actor is discernible, we use the category 'party organization'. Most press releases are sent out by individual MPs, and we use this group as a reference category.[95]

We also include a variable indicating the time a press release was published. Press releases published in the late afternoon or the evening have fewer chances to get the media's attention than those published in the morning. The variable indicates the time (in minutes) since midnight. We also include a variable specifying whether a press release is based on an external event (1) or not (0). The coding is based on a variable in the AUTNES content analysis of party press releases that captures the trigger of a press release. We consider a press release as being triggered externally if it is based on an event in the international arena (e.g. an EU summit) or by national actors outside the party and media arena (e.g. a report of the Austrian audit court). As mentioned above, we also measure whether a press release refers to press conference (1) or not (0). Moreover, we account for text length (in words) because, all else being equal, longer press releases provide more information that is (potentially) useful for journalists.

Model specification. Our dependent variable indicates whether a press release is successful (1) or not (0). Thus, we use logistic regression models. Moreover, we

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[94] Seven politicians had multiple roles. For these individuals, we assume that party leadership is more important than cabinet membership or being a MP. Moreover, we assume that party chairmanship is a more important role during election campaigns than being a minister or a MP.

[95] As mentioned above, we also re-ran the analysis based on press releases sent by party leaders, members of government, party chairpersons, and MPs. The results are similar to the ones presented in the manuscript (see Online Appendix C).

cluster standard errors by issue area to account for the fact that some covariates vary only across issue areas.

Results

Are party press releases effective means of shaping the media agenda? Figure 1 shows the share of successful party press releases by party. Overall, about 16 per cent of party press releases attract media attention. There is some variation across parties, but the differences are rather small. Moreover, there is no incumbency or size bonus in terms of the media presence of the two government parties (SPÖ and ÖVP). While the chances of each press release making the news are rather similar across parties, it is also worth noting that parties vary significantly in their campaign intensity. SPÖ (451), ÖVP (344), and FPÖ (475) issued substantially more press releases than the Greens (133), BZÖ (96), and Team Stronach (114). Therefore, given roughly equal probabilities to make the news, the higher number of press releases issued by larger parties should lead to higher media visibility.

[Figure 1 about here]

What factors account for the variation in press release success of getting the media's attention? To answer this question, we estimate logistic regression models to explain the success of party campaign messages in making the news (Table 1). Model 1 shows the results for the full sample with 1,613 party press releases. To provide a meaningful interpretation for the magnitude of the effects, we show marginal effects plots for the variables of interest in Figure 2. Based on the estimates in Model 1, it shows changes in predicted probabilities for an increase by an interquartile range, i.e. from the first to the third quartile.

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1 and Figure 2 provide support for the effects of message content. In Model 1, we find empirical support that media (H1) and party system issue importance (H4) increase the probability of making the news. Ceteris paribus[96], increasing media issue salience from 2.7 to 12.0 percent (i.e. the interquartile range) increases the chances that a press release is successful by 5.2 percentage points (see Figure 2). Thus, parties have higher chances to make the news when they address issues that are salient in the media issue agenda. Similarly, increasing party system issue attention from one to three rival parties addressing the same issue (i.e. the interquartile range) increases by 1.9 percentage points the chance of getting the media's attention.

In contrast, there is no evidence that voter and party issue importance affect the success of party messages to make the news. In particular, party messages dealing with issues important to voters are ceteris paribus not more likely to make the news than those of less concern to voters (H2). This non-finding may be due to the way we measure the public issue agenda. Using the 'most important issue' question format (or its equivalents) to capture voters' central concerns is quite common in the literature.[97] Yet, these questions seem to tap what is important to the 'typical' voter[98] rather than what might attract a reader's interest in the news. Thus, voters may prefer media reports on exciting or conflictual issues rather than on worthy topics such as pension reform. There is also no evidence that the parties' core issues affect the likelihood to make the news. As expected (H3), the effect is

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[96] All remaining covariates are held constant at their mean (continuous variables) or their mode (categorical variables).

[97] e.g. Norris et al. 1999; Soroka 2002a.

[98] Bartle and Laycock 2012.

negative meaning that the media are less likely to take up party messages on the parties' main campaign issues. Yet, the effect is not statistically significant at conventional levels.

[Figure 2 about here]

Turning to the control variables, we find that members of the national government are most likely to get the media's attention. The probability of getting the media's attention is 25 percentage points higher than for members in parliament. There is also evidence that party office matters: party leaders and party chairpersons are more likely to make the news than other party actors. Being a party leader increases the probability of getting the media's attention by 22 percentage points, while party chairpersons are about 9 percentage points more likely to make the news than MPs. At the party level, there is no evidence that campaign messages of government parties are more likely to get the media's attention than those of parties in opposition. Moreover, press releases based on external events are not more likely to make the news. Yet, there are positive and significant effects of text length and references to press conferences. Thus, longer press releases and those summarizing statements made at press conferences have higher chances to get the media's attention. Finally, there is a tendency for press releases published later during the day to be less likely to make the news, but the effect does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance.

Taken together, these results suggest that political actors have higher chances to make the news with messages on issues which are important on the systemic (media or party) level. One might ask whether the media indeed has an independent effect (as suggested in H1) or whether the media's issue agenda itself results from the parties' issue agenda. The empirical analysis in Table 1 accounts for the issues parties emphasize in their manifestos. Yet, there may also be dynamic effects of the

party system's issue agenda on the previous day (at *t-1*) on both the media issue agenda at time *t* and a press prelease's chances to get media attention. To test this, we re-ran the analysis controlling for the party system's issue agenda at time *t-1*. The results (shown in Online Appendix F) lead to similar conclusions as those discussed above: press releases are more successful if they focus on issues that are already salient in the media or to other parties.

Do these content-related factors also matter for politicians who cannot rely on actor-based media attention? To test this, we re-ran the analyses twice (see Table 1). Model 2 excludes top-level politicians (members of government, party leaders and party chairpersons), thus focusing on rank-and-file politicians. In Model 3, we restrict the sample to opposition parties. The results of both models are very similar to those in Model 1: rank-and-file politicians and opposition parties have higher chances to get the media's attention if their messages focus on issues which are already salient in the media's agenda (H1) and those important to other parties (H4). This suggests that party actors, even those without top positions in public or party office, can increase their likelihood of making the news by talking about the 'right' issues.

As in Model 1, there is no evidence that political actors can increase their chances to get the media's attention by focusing on unfamiliar issues or those important to voters (H2 and H3). In fact, for opposition parties (Model 3 in Table 1), we find a *negative* and statistically significant effect of voter issue importance. *Ceteris paribus*, the media are *less* likely to draw on press releases of opposition parties that deal with issues that are central concerns of voters. The distinction between different issue types might explain this puzzle. For example, Soroka[99]

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[99] Soroka 2002b.

distinguishes between prominent, governmental, and sensational issues. Opposition parties such as the Greens and the radical-right FPÖ focussed their campaigns more heavily on 'sensational issues' such as corruption. These issues might draw massive media attention,[100] but they are usually not the voters' central concerns. The voters' issue agenda is often dominated by 'prominent' issues such as unemployment or pensions, that is, issues voters directly observe in their daily life. The media is more likely to set the agenda on sensational issues rather than prominent issues, and parties are in turn more likely to cater to the media agenda on issues such as corruption. In transmitting these issue agendas, the media is more likely to consider opposition party messages on sensational issues that are not the voters' core concerns.

Could opposition parties do better when focusing more on the voters' key concerns? With data from one country and one election, it is difficult to answer this question. Government parties may have done a better job in addressing the public's issue concerns or they were simply lucky that voters were concerned about issues that were also the government parties' key priorities. Yet, the insignificant effect of voter issue importance in Model 1 suggests that parties cannot increase their chances of getting campaign messages into the media by addressing voters' key priorities.

Conclusion

Party press releases are rather effective means of getting into the media. Using data from the 2013 general election in Austria, we find that about 16 per cent of party press releases are successful in getting media coverage. Compared to other party tools (such as advertisements or newsletters), press releases are relatively cheap and quick to produce, may reach a large number of people and are available to a broader

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[100] Walgrave, Soroka, and Nuytemans 2008.

set of party actors. Moreover, many party actors and hundreds of press releases compete for journalists' attention. Considering the low cost and administrative ease of sending out press releases, we see a 16 per cent success rate as relatively high. Our analysis focused on the message attributes that these successful press releases tend to have: we find coverage is more likely for press releases that address issues important to other parties and the media. In contrast, voter issue importance and a party's own core campaign issues are not associated with press release success.

These findings shed light on the success of electoral strategies and the gatekeeping function of the media, and they have broader implications for electoral fairness and political representation in general. First, parties, and in particular those in opposition, may find it easier to make the news if they focus on issues that are important to other parties. Studies on issue engagement analyse whether parties address the same issues or 'talk past each other'.[101] Our analysis suggests that issue engagement may be useful to opposition parties as it increases their chances of getting the media's attention.

Second, our results imply that issue entrepreneurs[102] and new parties[103] may fare better if they address those issues that are already gaining interest among the media and other parties. For example, a party that focuses on a specific issue such as immigration or European integration may find media success once its issue becomes prominent on the news agenda or among other parties. This may help to explain the breakthrough of new parties, niche parties and issue entrepreneurs.

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[101] Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2015; Kaplan, Park, and Ridout 2006; Meyer and Wagner 2016; Sigelman and Buell 2004; Simon 2002.

[102] De Vries and Hobolt 2008.

[103] Bolleyer and Bytzek 2013.

A third, inverse implication of our analysis is that we show how the dismissive strategy identified by Meguid[104] and Bale et al.[105] may work in practice. These authors argue that mainstream parties can prevent competitors' success if they refuse to address their issues. Our findings indicate a possible mechanism for this strategy. As the media will be more likely to ignore party messages if no other party takes up the issue, new parties may find it hard to place their topics on the public agenda without backing from the media or other parties.

Finally, our study adds to agenda-setting research. In showing that party press releases make the news if they follow the media's issue agenda, our results suggest that the media might be more powerful than suggested in aggregate analyses of the party and media agenda.[106] Parties' dependence on media gatekeeping may raise questions about the mechanisms of media gatekeeping and indicate a potential bias in the selection and coverage of campaign messages.[107]

There is obviously much potential for future research on the media visibility of party campaign messages. Perhaps most importantly, we cannot be certain about the extent to which our findings travel to other multiparty systems, since virtually all existing research focuses on presidential candidates and senators in the US.[108] Following Hallin and Mancini's[109] categorization of media systems, we may expect that our findings travel well to other 'democratic corporatist' countries in Western and Northern Europe with similar media systems, especially those countries with

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[104] Meguid 2008.

[105] Bale et al. 2010.

[106] e.g. Brandenburg 2002, 2006.

[107] Haselmayer et al. forthcoming.

[108] Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin 2003; Grimmer 2010, 2013.

[109] Hallin and Mancini 2004.

similar party systems. Yet, like previous research,[110] we see a need for more comparative research on media gatekeeping and journalistic news selection to test such claims.

Moreover, we note that our study sheds little light on the success of party messages in making the news beyond election campaigns. Outside campaign periods, citizens usually pay less attention to politics,[111] while media coverage of politics differs in terms of intensity and style.[112] Thus, we cannot extrapolate from our findings to inter-election periods. For example, beyond election campaigns, party messages may be generally less likely to make the news and party differences may increase compared to campaign periods. We hope that future research devotes more attention to the success of party messages in inter-election periods.

Similarly, we could ask whether the 84 per cent of press releases that are not covered by the media may nevertheless serve a purpose. One possibility is that press releases, even the ones we deem to be unsuccessful, have an indirect effect on journalists and the media. For example, they may draw attention to scandals or important topics, even if their stimulus is not directly reflected in the final media report. It is also possible that political actors use press releases as a signalling device: they are a cheap tool that can be used to communicate with other party actors both within and across parties. If this is the case, then analyses of party press releases could also be used to study intra- and inter-party competition and party behaviour. Future research should therefore make increased use of the wealth of information contained in party press releases.

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[110] Helfer and Van Aelst 2016; Tresch 2009.

[111] Andersen, Tilley, and Heath 2005; Gelman and King 1993.

[112] e.g. Green-Pedersen, Mortensen, and Thesen 2015, Van Aelst and De Swert 2009.

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Figure 1: Share of press releases in media reports, by party
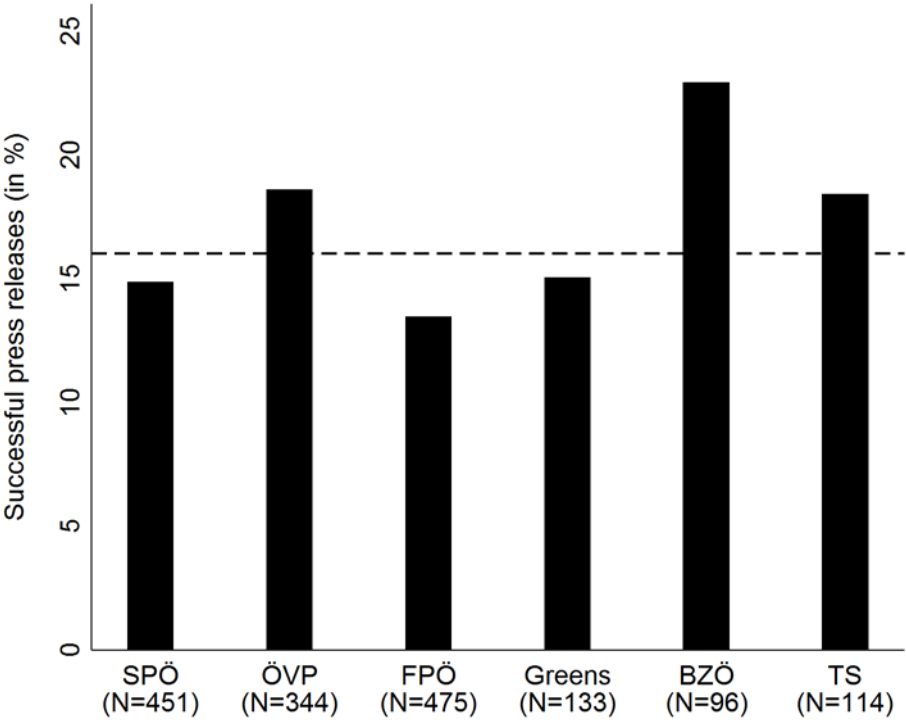
Note: The bars show the share of successful press releases by party, while the N in parentheses denotes the total number of press releases per party. The dashed line indicates the overall mean of successful press releases (N=1,613).

Figure 2: Marginal effects (Model 1)
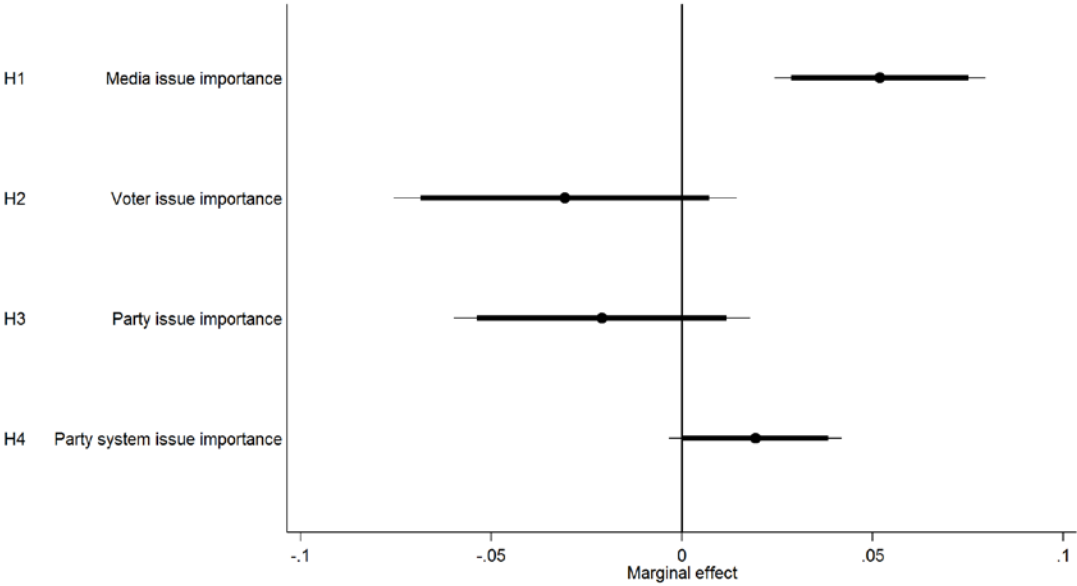
Note: Marginal effects based on changes from the first (p25) to the third (p75) quartile (i.e. interquartile range). Estimates based on Model 1 in Table 1. Thick lines denote 90% confidence intervals, thin lines denote 95% confidence intervals. All remaining variables are held constant at their mean or mode.

Table 1: Explaining success of party press releases (logistic regression model)

	(1) Full sample	(2) PR by lower rank politicians	(3) PR by opposition parties
Media issue importance	0.0383***	0.0452**	0.0397*
	(0.010)	(0.015)	(0.016)
Voter issue importance	-0.0246	-0.0429	-0.0788**
	(0.018)	(0.029)	(0.027)
Party issue importance	-0.0185	-0.0278	-0.00252
	(0.017)	(0.023)	(0.021)
Party system issue importance	0.103+	0.143+	0.233**
	(0.054)	(0.075)	(0.081)
Control variables			
In government	0.0150	-0.00554	
	(0.194)	(0.226)	
Sender (Ref: MP)			
National government	1.559***		
	(0.296)		
Party leader	1.438***		1.155**
	(0.282)		(0.354)
Party chairperson	0.750+		0.259
	(0.400)		(0.479)
State government	1.482***		1.730***
	(0.298)		(0.361)
Party organization	0.651**		1.090***
	(0.237)		(0.326)
Other party actor	-0.333		0.0477
	(0.347)		(0.381)
External event	-0.263	-0.248	-0.140
	(0.167)	(0.190)	(0.151)
Press conference summary	0.996***	1.317**	1.087**
	(0.296)	(0.491)	(0.399)
Text length	0.00272***	0.00204**	0.00290***
	(0.0005)	(0.0007)	(0.0004)
Time PR sent	-0.000752	-0.00251*	-0.000586
	(0.0006)	(0.001)	(0.0009)
Constant	-2.437***	-1.140	-2.853***
	(0.481)	(0.825)	(0.833)
Observations	1613	1110	818
Log Likelihood	-609.9	-322.9	-305.0

Standard errors in parentheses; $^+ p < 0.1$, $^* p < 0.05$, $^{**} p < 0.01$, $^{***} p < 0.001$