

Communicating in an eventful campaign: How parties used press releases during the German federal election campaign 2021*

Tobias Burst[†]

Christoph Ivanusch[‡]

Lisa Zehnter[§]

2022-05-12

Abstract

Party competition during the German federal election campaign in 2021 took place in a special context. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) achieved a remarkable comeback and three major external events - the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, a large-scale flood disaster and the chaotic withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan - influenced the campaign. But to what extent and how did the parties react and adjust their campaign communication to these circumstances? We analyse all press releases published by the six major parties (01.04.21-26.09.21) and apply a supervised cross-domain topic classification. Firstly, we show that parties used press releases for different purposes during the campaign. While only the SPD made heavy use of non-policy-related press releases, all other parties issued mainly policy-related press releases. Secondly, we find that parties responded to the communication of the other parties and to external events during the campaign, but not to public opinion.

Introduction

Party competition during the German federal election campaign in 2021 was shaped by a very special dynamic and context. On the one hand, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) achieved a remarkable comeback during the campaign. At the start of the campaign, the SPD was far behind the Christian Democratic alliance (CDU/CSU) and the Greens (Grüne) in polls, but improved continuously and ended up being the strongest party at the ballots. On the other hand, the campaign was significantly shaped by external events. In addition to the Covid-19 pandemic, which was still in full swing during the campaign, two other major external events came to the fore just weeks before the election. While a large-scale flood disaster hit several regions of Germany in July, the Taliban launched a successful summer offensive in Afghanistan with NATO troops withdrawing in chaotic fashion from the country. All three external events - the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the flood disaster and the events in Afghanistan - attracted a lot of attention during the election campaign.

Such circumstances pose a challenge to political parties, especially during campaign periods. Parties aim for a coherent campaign and want to stay ‘on message’ by campaigning on a previously defined issue agenda, the so-called ‘ideal agenda’ (Norris, 1999). This ‘ideal’ party agenda is usually laid out in election manifestos. However, developments during a campaign may require adjustments to the party strategies. Changes in

*Preliminary draft. Please do not cite or circulate without permission from the author.

[†]WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Berlin, Germany. Email: tobias.burst@wzb.eu. Website: <http://https://www.wzb.eu/en/persons/tobias-burst>

[‡]WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Berlin, Germany. Email: christoph.ivanusch@wzb.eu. Website: <http://https://www.wzb.eu/en/persons/christoph-ivanusch>

[§]WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Berlin, Germany. Email: lisa.zehnter@wzb.eu. Website: <http://https://www.wzb.eu/en/persons/lisa-zehnter>

public opinion or external events (e.g. natural disasters) can lead parties to change their campaign communication (Dalmus et al., 2017; Gessler and Hunger, 2021). In these cases, parties can use daily communication to adjust their campaigns. Here, press releases are an especially important tool to keep the public and journalists informed on a daily basis (Ennser-Jedenastik et al., 2022; Norris, 1999). In principle, press releases have two main functions for political parties: On the one hand, parties can use them to send policy signals. They can thereby either stay ‘on message’ (Norris, 1999), respond to other parties (e.g.: Meyer and Wagner, 2016) or react to public opinion (e.g.: Klüber and Sagarzazu, 2016) and external events (e.g.: Dalmus et al., 2017; Gessler and Hunger, 2021). On the other hand, parties can utilize press releases to inform the public and journalists about non-policy-related aspects such as campaign events or organisational matters.

Hence, parties have a multitude of options with regard to their daily communication during election campaigns. The German federal election campaign in 2021 certainly provided parties with a very specific and dynamic context. Daily communication in the form of press releases is key in such circumstances. But how did the German parties utilize press releases during the election campaign? To what extent and how did the parties adjust their campaigns to the specific context?

We examine all press releases published by the six major parties and their parliamentary party groups (PPGs) ahead of the German federal election in 2021. The data set covers the time period from April 1st, 2021 to election day on September 26th, 2021. Overall, our data set consists of 2,276 individual press releases. We employ an advanced text-as data approach - a supervised cross-domain topic classification - to analyse issue communication in the party press releases. In conjunction with data from the Manifesto Project (MARPOR) and the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES), we show that parties used press releases for different purposes during the German federal election campaign and that the parties adjusted their communication to the specific context of the campaign. Firstly, we find that the SPD made heavy use of non-policy-related press releases (i.e. information about campaign events), while all other parties issued mainly policy-related press releases. Secondly, we show that parties overall adjusted their campaign communication to the communication of the other parties and external events during the campaign, but did not respond to public opinion.

This paper is structured as follows. In a first step, we describe how parties may use press releases during campaigns and the ways in which parties may adjust their issue communication according to the campaign context. Then, we describe our data set and methodological approach to studying issue strategies in press releases. Finally, we present our results and conclude by reflecting on the broader implications of our findings.

Theoretical Framework

During election campaigns, parties engage in intensive communication efforts. They do not only publish election manifestos at the start of the campaign, but also communicate on a daily basis during the campaign. In contrast to the one-off communication in election manifestos, parties can use press releases to keep the public informed on a daily basis (Ennser-Jedenastik et al., 2022). While manifestos are negotiated at length inside parties and published only ahead of elections, press releases are a much more flexible tool in party competition as they allow quick responses to sudden developments (e.g.: Dalmus et al., 2017; Klüber and Sagarzazu, 2016). Furthermore, the content of press releases can potentially reach a large audience, if picked up by journalists (Hopmann et al., 2012; Meyer et al., 2020). Hence, press releases are a useful and important tool in party competition. Political parties therefore make extensive use of press releases, which serve two main purposes:

On the one hand, parties draw on press releases to inform journalists and the public about campaign events or organisational matters. Existing research on party communication in press releases, however, mostly analyses policy-related content (e.g.: Gessler and Hunger, 2021; Klüber and Sagarzazu, 2016; Meyer et al., 2020). While policy-related press releases focus on political issues (e.g.: health policy, environmental protection), non-policy-related press releases inform about campaign events or organisational matters. Such non-policy-related content is, however, an important function of press releases as well. The existing research on press releases usually discards non-policy-related content from the analysis. Meyer et al. (2020) for example exclude nearly 300 out of 1,922 press releases from their study of the Austrian national election

campaign in 2013 because the content is not policy-related. These figures show that non-policy-related press releases play a significant role in party communication in general, but the role of non-policy-related press releases may differ between campaign and non-campaign times ('routine times of politics'). Especially during campaigns, parties may want to provide the public and journalists with non-policy-related information such as information on campaign events for example. Such events (e.g. talks, TV appearances, conventions) are a crucial aspect of campaigning as they can reach voters and potentially influence candidate preferences and vote choice (Atkinson et al., 2014; Kilibarda et al., 2020; Shaw, 1999). Hence, events are an important part of election campaigns and parties will aim to draw (media) attention and visitors to these events. Because of their potential influence on voters, such events are especially important and frequent during campaign times. Hence, we expect non-policy-related content (i.e. information on events and organisational matter) to play a bigger role in press releases during election campaigns than in non-campaign times. Our first hypothesis therefore is:

Hypothesis 1: Parties publish more non-policy-related press releases in campaign times than in non-campaign times.

On the other hand, parties use press releases to send policy signals in a similar way as in manifestos. There are, however, important differences between manifestos and press releases. Manifestos are negotiated at length inside parties and are viewed as a 'uniquely representative and authoritative characterization of party policy at a given point in time' (Budge et al., 1987, p. 18). Consequently, manifestos are also referred to as an 'ideal' party agenda (Norris, 1999). In contrast, press releases enable communication on a daily basis. This characteristic of press releases allows parties to be flexible and adjust their policy messages to changing conditions and contexts. Norris (1999) therefore refers to press releases as the 'tactical' party agenda. This flexibility is highly important for parties during a campaign. Existing research provides some evidence that parties adjust their communication during campaigns and deviate from their 'ideal' agenda in press releases (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2011; Norris, 1999; Tresch et al., 2018; but see: Green and Hobolt, 2008). When it comes to the exact mechanism of such adjustments to the issue agenda, parties are faced with different options. In principle, parties can choose between three different strategies.

Firstly, parties can respond to public opinion. According to Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994), parties can react to voter concerns by focusing on issues that are salient in the public. This strategy is called 'riding-the-wave'. By 'riding-the-wave', parties can show that they take voter concerns seriously and this way increase their popularity among the electorate, as Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994) argue. Hence, employing a 'riding-the-wave' strategy can be an attractive option for political parties during campaigns. Recent research has found support for it by showing that parties adjust their communication to public opinion (e.g.: Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016; Klüver and Spoon, 2016; Spoon and Klüver, 2014; Wagner and Meyer, 2014).

Secondly, parties can react to other parties and pick up issues communicated by their competitors. Scholars conceptualise this behaviour as 'issue engagement' or issue convergence between political actors (e.g.: Damore, 2004; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015; Meyer and Wagner, 2016; Seeberg, 2022; Sigelman and Buell Jr., 2004). The level of 'issue engagement', however, depends on strategic choices by parties (Meyer and Wagner, 2016). There are reasons for parties to engage on issues, but there are also reasons that might lead parties to abstain from 'issue engagement'. On the one hand, parties have incentives to engage on an issue if this issue is a potential vote-winner (e.g.: Spoon et al., 2014) and if the parties want to influence the framing of this issue in the public debate (Jerit, 2008; Nadeau et al., 2010). On the other hand, issue ownership theory suggests that parties first and foremost focus on their strongest issues and do not engage on issues discussed by other parties (e.g.: Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). Parties might therefore differ when it comes to levels of 'issue engagement'.

Thirdly, external events can lead parties to adjust their issue agendas (e.g.: Dalmus et al., 2017; Gessler and Hunger, 2021). Crisis or catastrophes such as the flood disaster or the events in Afghanistan during the German election campaign in 2021 bring new issues to the fore and abruptly increase their salience in the media for example (Dalmus et al., 2017, pp. 191–192; Helbling and Tresch, 2011, p. 175). Furthermore, such events can increase the so-called 'problem-pressure' with regard to an issue (Green-Pedersen, 2019, p. 22). External events consequently can lead parties to take up a specific issue and address it in public.

To summarize, parties can use different strategies with regard to the adjustment of their issue agendas during election campaigns. They can respond to public opinion and voter concerns (‘riding-the-wave’), react to other parties (‘issue engagement’) or to external events. As discussed above, parties have several reasons to employ one or more of the named strategies and adjust the so-called ‘ideal agenda’ according to these strategies. Each strategy thus offers potential explanatory power to analyse party communication during campaigns. Accordingly, we postulate three hypothesis (one per strategy) with regard to party agenda adjustment during the German federal election campaign in 2021:

Hypothesis 2a (‘riding-the-wave’): Parties devote more attention to an issue, if public salience is high for that issue.

Hypothesis 2b (‘issue engagement’): Parties devote more attention to an issue, if issue salience is high for other parties.

Hypothesis 2c (external events): Parties devote more attention to an issue, if there are major external events concerning that issue.

Data

Overall our main data set covers 2,276 press releases published by German parties and their parliamentary party groups between the 1st of April 2021 and the 26th of September 2021. The number of press releases per party is displayed in [Table 1](#). The AfD clearly published the highest number of press releases, while the FDP issued the fewest. Regarding the development of press releases published per week, [Figure 1](#) shows a stark decrease at the beginning of July. This reflects the beginning of the summer break in the German parliament, as from July until October no debates took place. From mid July on the number of weekly press releases increased again. Our time coverage allows us to include the variety of different election campaign phases and intensities before the German parliamentary election in September 2021 in our analysis. To collect all press releases and store them in a common data set, we automatically scrape the individual party websites. Since not all press releases are published directly by the party itself, but also by the parliamentary party group (PPG), we introduce an additional dichotomous meta-variable to differentiate between both types of senders.

Party	N
AfD	645
CDU/CSU	390
FDP	233
Grüne	284
Linke	404
SPD	320
All	2,276

Table 1: Number of press releases per party (01.04.2021-26.09.2021).

We draw on party manifestos as an important additional data source. The manifestos of the six German parties were obtained through the Manifesto Project corpus ([Volkens et al., 2021](#)) and serve two purposes. Firstly, we can use the 2021 manifestos to map the general, fundamental political views and thematic salience of the parties to then contrast them with the short-term focus of the press releases. Secondly, we rely on older manifestos to train our automatic text classification model on political topics. Accordingly, manifesto data is necessary both for the analysis itself and for the data preparation and generation step.

As a third supplementary data source we use the GLES Panel study (Wave 17) ([GLES, 2022a](#)) and the GLES Cross-Section survey 2021([GLES, 2022b](#)).¹ Relevant here is the open-ended question about the currently

¹We plan to replace the cross-section survey with GLES panel wave 18 and 19 for August and September as soon as they are released.

most important political issue from the respondents' point of view, which allows direct insights into the public salience of political issues. For this purpose, we assigned the unstructured text responses in the questionnaire to a political topic using keywords and the semi-supervised classification method newsmap (Watanabe, 2018).²



Figure 1: Number of press releases per week (April-September 2021).

Methods

Data Preparation

Prior to the actual issue classification of press releases, we first need to make a distinction between policy-related and non-policy-related documents. Our research period close to the election date causes press releases to be used frequently for ‘void of any policy substance’ communications, such as dates for events or invitations to public gatherings. In order to identify these messages, we use a simple string-matching procedure to pre-select potentially relevant documents according to certain keywords.³ This approach allows us to, firstly, filter non-policy-related press releases out of the salience analyses to avoid potentially skewing our model and secondly systematically integrate the parties use of non-policy-related communications as a separate step into our analysis.

After this filtering, we classify the policy-related press releases into political issue categories. The issue classification of the press releases is based on an adapted version of the Manifesto Project Coding scheme. We have re-assigned all manifesto categories to 20 overarching topics⁴. This aggregates positional differentiations (such as between positive or negative references to the EU) and fine-grained categories under a common theme and allows to focus exclusively on the salience of central political issues. Furthermore, a more coarse categorization of our unit of analysis (whole press release documents) seems more appropriate than the more

²The semi-supervised classification of topics still needs to be validated manually in a next step.

³We will manually validate these automatically pre-selected documents at a later stage of our research process.

⁴The adapted codebook with the 20 issue categories and the respective MARPOR codes can be found in Table 3 in Appendix

fine-grained manifesto categorization, which are normally applied to single (quasi-)sentences. The categories function exclusively, so that each press release is assigned exactly one overarching topic.

The classification process of the press releases into categories is done automatically using a multilingual BERT model. BERT (Devlin et al., 2019) and transformer-based models in general have revolutionized machine learning in the text-as-data domain in recent years. Made possible by the introduction of the solely attention-based architecture (Vaswani et al., 2017) transformer-based language models introduced the principle of transfer learning, known from other domains such as image classification, to text data. All those models have in common that they are elaborately pre-trained on vast amounts of unlabeled text, so their weights are accordingly good at providing a general syntactically and semantically representation for words and can be used directly for subsequent use cases. To use those models for an application, only ‘finetuning’ is necessary: The model and its parameters are only slightly adjusted to the relevant data and task without training it from scratch. Utilizing this transfer-learning principle, models from the transformer-based family are now at the top of the leaderboards in most NLP benchmarks and represent the current state-of-the-art in language modeling.

For the training process of the machine learning model we use a cross-domain transfer learning approach drawing on the Manifesto Corpus. Since our aggregated issue categories are compatible and transferable back to the standard Manifesto categories, we can train the model ⁵ directly on its large volume of expert annotated data. As our classification task is monolingual and restricted to German, we limit the training data to German-language manifestos from Germany, Austria and Switzerland. We keep the manifestos of the most recent elections out of the training to validate the model after the training process. This provides a total of 32,627 training quasi-sentences that we can use to fine-tune the model on our coding scheme. The model achieves an overall accuracy of 55.54% on the kept out manifestos, which is in the upper end⁶ of previous results for manifesto classification research (Bilbao-Jayo and Almeida, 2018; Merz et al., 2016; Rasov et al., 2020; Subramanian et al., 2018).⁷

Measuring Press Release Usage

The analysis is split into two parts. To test H1, namely if parties publish more non-policy-related press releases in campaign times, than in non-campaign times, we use an inter-party comparison. Here we look at how the types of content (policy-related vs. non-policy-related) differ between the parties in different phases of the election campaign. Relevant here are primarily the meta-variables we identified earlier during the initial filtering phase. To test H2a-c, we use a linear regression model to causally track differences in topic salience between manifestos and press releases over time. Finally we test for potential differences between parties.

Our dependent variable in the regression model is the difference between manifesto salience and press release salience of political issues (*salience difference*). This aims to answer how much parties do deviate from their ‘ideal agenda’ in manifestos to adapt to the public discourse. Both salience values are measured as percentages. The manifesto salience of an issue is calculated for each issue for each party and obtained from the last election program (2021) of the respective party. Thus, each value for manifesto salience represents the percentage share of an issue in the party’s election program. It therefore remains constant over time and serves as a constant comparative value for the changing press release saliences. Press release saliences, on the other hand, are recalculated for each of the three months studied (July, August and September 2021) to model potential temporal variation in issue salience during the heated phase of the election campaign. A value for press release salience thus indicates how large a percentage of a party’s press releases on a given topic was in that month. This results in a total of three data points per party for the *salience difference* variable for each of the 20 issues.

⁵The pre-trained model was obtained via the HuggingFace python library (Wolf et al., 2020)

⁶As we use a modified version of the Manifesto category scheme, a direct comparison of accuracy scores should be taken with a grain of salt.

⁷We are also in the process of manually annotating part of our press release data to use it as a direct validation data set in a later stage of our research. Our preliminary results on a small sub-sample of the German party press releases between January 2019 and August 2021 (N=122) show an accuracy of 66% for the document-level issue classification.

As independent variables, we draw on three potential key causal relationships:

Firstly, using a *public salience* variable, we measure which topics are particularly important for voters at the moment. This enables us to determine whether the current public attention paid to a topic has an impact on a party’s public communication strategy. Does a party, for example, deviate more strongly from its ideal agenda in order to focus its public statements on a topic that is currently prominent for voters? We obtain the variable via the GLES Panel study (Wave 17) and the GLES Cross-Section survey 2021, in which respondents were asked about the issue that was most important to them at the time. We assign each answer to one of the 20 issue categories, which allows us to calculate the percentage share of each issue in all answers (equivalent to press release salience) for the three months separately.

Secondly, the variable *other salience* reflects how salient a topic is for all other parties. This measure complements *public salience* by adding another channel of public discourse: the political discourse of the parties themselves. This makes it possible to look at the extent to which parties respond to issues that are present (or in the process of becoming present) among their competitors. We measured this as the average press release salience of all parties (with the exception of the one under investigation) for an issue, again calculated separately for each month.

Finally, a third potential factor influencing a party’s public communications strategy are significant external events. The 2021 German federal election campaign saw three of these at once: a flood disaster, the chaotic withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan and the still ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. These events dominated the public debate for a certain period of time and thus also increased the general salience of the issues associated with them (‘Environment’, ‘Foreign Affairs’ and ‘Welfare State’). To account for this, we include a dummy variable *external events* in the regression model, which explicitly marks the three issues made more salient by external influences for the model. The variable thus always has a 1 if the issue under investigation is either ‘Environment’, ‘Welfare State’ or ‘Foreign Affairs’.

As a further potential variable influencing the public communication of parties, we also integrate a control variable for mapping current poll ratings. Depending on the current state of the election outlook (gains or losses in potential votes), it is conceivable that parties will behave differently, e.g., more offensively or more defensively with regard to certain issues. For this purpose, we add the variable *poll difference* to the regression model. It measures the positive or negative difference in votes in the monthly polls compared to a party’s election results in 2017.

Results

In the first step, we analyse the purposes for which the parties used press releases during the campaign and whether this usage differs compared to non-campaign times. We therefore split our data set into two time periods, namely into a non-campaign period (01.04.21-30.06.21) and a campaign period (01.07.21-26.09.21). **Figure 2** displays the type of content of press releases (policy-related vs. not policy-related) in non-campaign times (left pane) and during campaign times (right pane). While the SPD already stood out before the campaign started, as their share of non policy-related press releases (8.5%) was higher than of the other parties, this difference was even bigger during the campaign (72.7% not policy-related). All other parties predominantly used their press releases to communicate policy-related messages, both before and during the election campaign. Accordingly, Hypothesis 1 can only be supported for the SPD.

Interestingly, the observed shift between policy-related and non-policy-related content in SPD press releases coincides with a shift in the publication source. Ahead of the election campaign (April-June 2021), 75.9% of all SPD press releases were published by the SPD’s parliamentary party group (PPG) and only 24% by the central party office. During the campaign, however, we can observe a clear reversal. Between July and September 2021 the central party office now issued nearly 86% of all SPD press releases, while the PPG only played a minor role. While PPGs usually focus strongly on current topics and policies, the coordination of (campaign) events and organisational matters mainly resides with the central party office. Therefore, the sudden predominance of the central party office with regard to press releases might be a fitting explanation for the SPD’s strong focus on non-policy-related content during the campaign. Also here, this observation

is unique to the SPD as we can observe no significant shifts between campaign and non-campaign times for all other parties (see [Figure 5](#) in Appendix B).

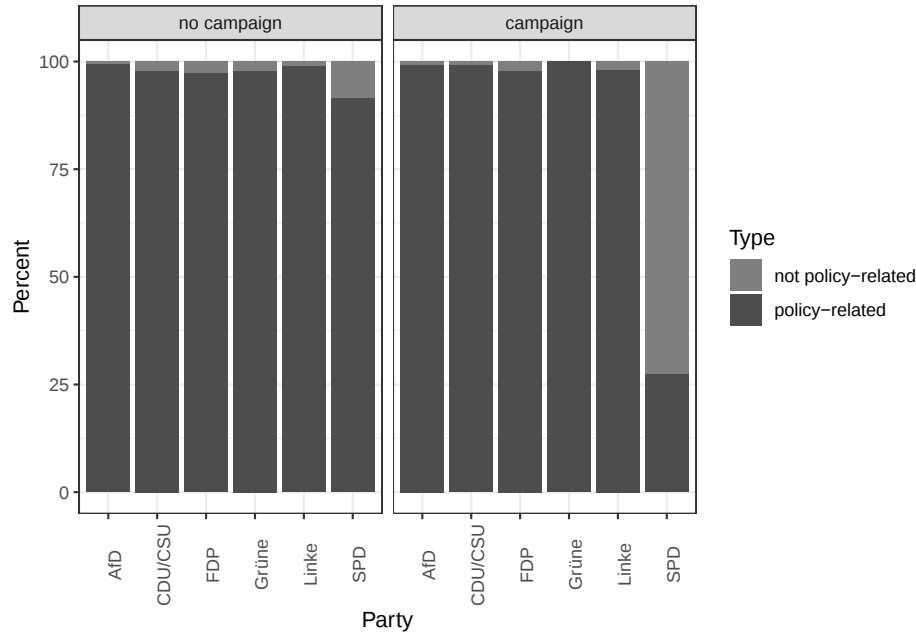


Figure 2: Type of press release usage per party before and during the election campaign.

In the second step, we investigate to what extent and how the parties adjusted their communication to the specific context of the campaign. As introduced earlier, parties develop a so-called ‘ideal agenda’ in their manifestos prior to the election campaign, but potentially adapt this agenda during the campaign. [Figure 3](#) displays the congruence between a party’s agenda in manifestos and press releases. Overall, there is clear overlap between the manifesto and press release agendas. However, we can also observe deviations. Specific issues clearly came much more to the fore in press releases than in manifestos. While the issue of ‘Economy’ dominates both manifestos (13.5%) and press releases (14.6%), ‘Foreign Affairs’ are for example much more present in press releases (12.0%) than in manifestos (5.6%).⁸

The high importance of ‘Foreign Affairs’ in press releases compared to manifestos is especially pronounced in the case of the Greens, while the SPD focused its press releases much more on ‘Economy’ than its manifesto.⁹ The salience of ‘Economy’ was also higher in the FDP’s press releases in July and September, but lower in August. ‘Equality’ was mentioned more often in the Left party’s manifesto than in their press releases.

Hence, parties clearly deviate from their ‘ideal agenda’ (manifestos) when it comes to campaign communication in press releases. But what are the driving factors behind this adaptation? We hypothesize that parties adapt their communication in three waves, namely by responding to *public salience* and ‘riding-the-wave’ (H2a), by reacting to other parties and performing ‘issue engagement’ (H2b) or by focusing on external events (H2c). We investigate the influence of each of these factors in four regression models, the results are displayed in [Table 2](#).

We expected that *public salience* has a positive effect on parties’ issue attention (H2a). While the effect is significant in the full model, it is actually negative. The interaction term with polls is also significantly negative. Hence, parties do not appear to ‘ride-the-wave’ and we have to reject H2a.

⁸Appendix C compares the top-10 issues in manifestos and press releases of all parties during the election campaign.

⁹The issue ‘Democracy’ is also more present in SPD press releases than in the SPD’s manifesto. However, this should be read with caution as the SPD published many non-policy-related press releases, which are easily confused with the issue of ‘Democracy’ by the automatic classification. We still have to make some final sanity checks here.

Table 2: Factors influencing party issue strategies in press releases compared to manifestos.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Saliency difference (manifesto vs. press releases)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Public saliency	−0.008 (0.033)			−0.139*** (0.042)
Other saliency		0.349*** (0.070)		0.349*** (0.076)
External events			2.546*** (0.911)	3.037** (1.203)
Polls	0.000 (0.061)	−0.000 (0.059)	−0.000 (0.061)	0.055 (0.088)
Public saliency:Polls				−0.024*** (0.008)
Other saliency:Polls				0.006 (0.014)
External events:Polls				0.244 (0.215)
Constant	0.044 (0.380)	−1.839*** (0.491)	−0.402 (0.363)	−1.588*** (0.487)
Observations	342	342	342	342
R ²	0.0002	0.069	0.023	0.125
<i>Note:</i>		*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01		

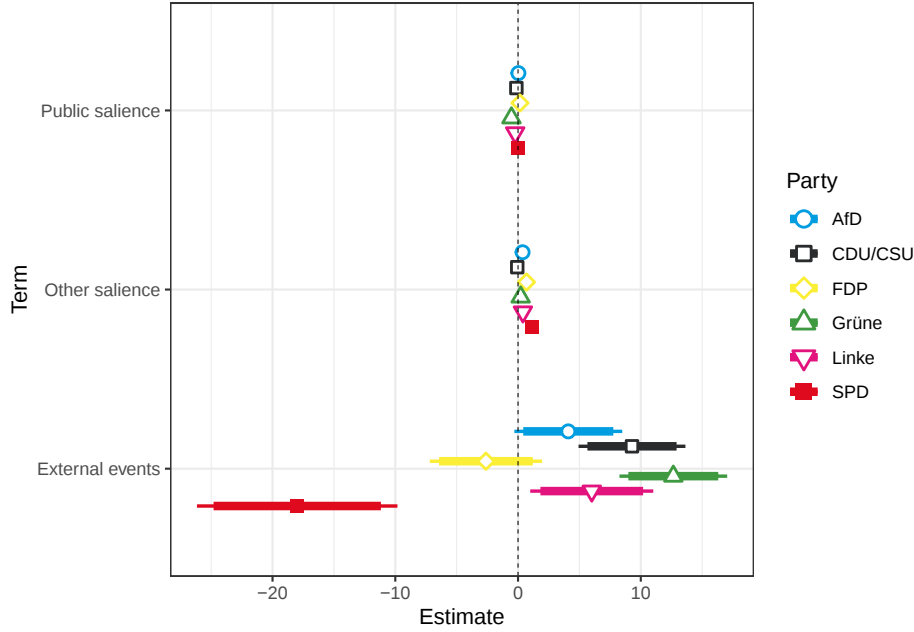


Figure 4: Coefficients for separate regression models per party.

Conclusion

In this paper we addressed two questions. Firstly, we asked how parties utilized their press releases during the election campaign. While the SPD made heavy use of non-policy-related press releases, in which the party informed about campaign events and the like, all other parties predominantly communicated policy-related content in their press releases. Interestingly, and probably connected, a striking majority of the SPD’s press releases during the campaign were issued by the party office and not the parliamentary party group (PPG). This shows that non-policy-related press releases are a potentially relevant factor during campaigns and should not be discarded prior to the analysis of campaign communication of political parties. As non-policy-related press releases often contain information on (public) events (e.g. candidate speeches, press conferences), they might attract significant voter and media attention. Future research should investigate how parties make use of such non-policy-related communication during election campaigns.

The second question asked to what extent and how the parties adjusted their campaign communication to the specific context of the German federal election campaign in 2021. While we expected public opinion to have a positive influence on parties’ issue agendas, we actually find the opposite. Only the FDP was ‘riding-the-wave’. This goes against previous studies, which show that parties adjust their communication to public opinion (e.g.: Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016; Klüver and Spoon, 2016; Spoon and Klüver, 2014; Wagner and Meyer, 2014). In contrast, parties increase their issue attention, when issue salience is high for other parties and when there are major external events concerning that issue.

These results stress the dynamics of election campaigns. Compared to the ‘ideal agenda’ in manifestos, press releases offer parties the opportunity to quickly adjust their communication to specific circumstances and requirements. However, nowadays political parties also make ample use of even faster and more direct communication channels through social media. The inclusion of digital campaign tools and how they may act as a supplement or substitute to more traditional communication channels, such as manifestos and press releases, should therefore be considered in future research.

Next Steps

Data:

- Inclusion of GLES Panel waves 18 and 19

Validation:

- Classification into policy-related vs. non-policy-related press releases
- Issue classification of press releases
- Issue classification of GLES data

References

- Ansolabehere, S., and Iyengar, S. (1994). Riding the wave and claiming ownership over issues: The joint effects of advertising and news coverage in campaigns. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 58(3), 335–357. <https://doi.org/10.1086/269431>
- Atkinson, M. D., Mann, C. B., Olivella, S., Simon, A. M., and Uscinski, J. E. (2014). (Where) Do Campaigns Matter? The Impact of National Party Convention Location. *The Journal of Politics*, 76(4), 1045–1058. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381614000413>
- Bilbao-Jayo, A., and Almeida, A. (2018). Automatic political discourse analysis with multi-scale convolutional neural networks and contextual data. *International Journal of Distributed Sensor Networks*, 14(11), 155014771881182. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1550147718811827>
- Budge, I., and Farlie, D. (1983). *Explaining and predicting elections: Issue effects and party strategies in twenty-three democracies*. George Allen & Unwin.
- Budge, I., Robertson, D., and Hearl, D. (1987). *Ideology, Strategy and Party Change: Spatial Analyses of Post-War Election Programmes in 19 Democracies*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dalmus, C., Hänggli, R., and Bernhard, L. (2017). The Charm of Salient Issues? Parties’ Strategic Behavior in Press Releases. In P. Van Aelst and S. Walgrave (Eds.), *How Political Actors Use the Media: A Functional Analysis of the Media’s Role in Politics* (pp. 187–205). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60249-3_10
- Damore, D. F. (2004). The Dynamics of Issue Ownership in Presidential Campaigns. *Political Research Quarterly*, 57(3), 391–397. <https://doi.org/10.1177/106591290405700304>
- Devlin, J., Chang, M.-W., Lee, K., and Toutanova, K. (2019). BERT: Pre-training of Deep Bidirectional Transformers for Language Understanding. *arXiv:1810.04805 [Cs]*. <http://arxiv.org/abs/1810.04805>
- Elmelund-Præstekær, C. (2011). Mapping Parties’ Issue Agenda in Different Channels of Campaign Communication: A Wild Goose Chase? *Javnost - The Public*, 18(1). <https://javnost-thepublic.org/article/2011/1/3/>
- Ennsner-Jedenastik, L., Haselmayer, M., Huber, L. M., and Scharrer, M. E. (2022). Issue substitution or volume expansion? How parties accommodate agenda change. *Electoral Studies*, 76, 102437. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102437>
- Gessler, T., and Hunger, S. (2021). How the refugee crisis and radical right parties shape party competition on immigration. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2021.64>
- GLES. (2022a). *GLES Panel 2021, Wave 17*. GESIS Data Archive. <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13852>
- GLES. (2022b). *GLES Rolling Cross-Section 2021*. GESIS. <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13876>
- Green, J., and Hobolt, S. B. (2008). Owning the issue agenda: Party strategies and vote choices in British elections. *Electoral Studies*, 27(3), 460–476. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2008.02.003>
- Green-Pedersen, C. (2019). *The Reshaping of West European Party Politics: Agenda-Setting and Party Competition in Comparative Perspective*. Oxford University Press.
- Green-Pedersen, C., and Mortensen, P. B. (2015). Avoidance and Engagement: Issue Competition in Multiparty Systems. *Political Studies*, 63(4), 747–764. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12121>

- Helbling, M., and Tresch, A. (2011). Measuring party positions and issue salience from media coverage: Discussing and cross-validating new indicators. *Electoral Studies*, 30(1), 174–183. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2010.12.001>
- Hopmann, D. N., Elmelund-Præstekær, C., Albæk, E., Vliegenthart, R., and Vreese, C. H. de. (2012). Party media agenda-setting: How parties influence election news coverage. *Party Politics*, 18(2), 173–191. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068810380097>
- Jerit, J. (2008). Issue Framing and Engagement: Rhetorical Strategy in Public Policy Debates. *Political Behavior*, 30(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-007-9041-x>
- Kilibarda, A., Linden, C. van der, and Dufresne, Y. (2020). Do Campaign Events Matter? New Evidence from Voting Advice Applications. *Political Science Quarterly*, 135(2), 259–280. <https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.13034>
- Klüver, H., and Sagarzazu, I. (2016). Setting the Agenda or Responding to Voters? Political Parties, Voters and Issue Attention. *West European Politics*, 39(2), 380–398. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2015.1101295>
- Klüver, H., and Spoon, J.-J. (2016). Who Responds? Voters, Parties and Issue Attention. *British Journal of Political Science*, 46(3), 633–654. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123414000313>
- Merz, N., Regel, S., and Lewandowski, J. (2016). The Manifesto Corpus: A new resource for research on political parties and quantitative text analysis. *Research & Politics*, 3(2), 205316801664334. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168016643346>
- Meyer, T. M., Haselmayer, M., and Wagner, M. (2020). Who Gets into the Papers? Party Campaign Messages and the Media. *British Journal of Political Science*, 50(1), 281–302. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123417000400>
- Meyer, T. M., and Wagner, M. (2016). Issue Engagement in Election Campaigns The Impact of Electoral Incentives and Organizational Constraints. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 4(3), 555–571. <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2015.40>
- Nadeau, R., Pétry, F., and Bélanger, É. (2010). Issue-Based Strategies in Election Campaigns: The Case of Health Care in the 2000 Canadian Federal Election. *Political Communication*, 27(4), 367–388. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2010.516797>
- Norris, P. (1999). *On Message: Communicating the Campaign*. SAGE.
- Petrocik, J. R. (1996). Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections, with a 1980 Case Study. *American Journal of Political Science*, 40(3), 825–850. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111797>
- Rasov, A., Obabkov, I., Olbrich, E., and Yamshchikov, I. (2020). Text Classification for Monolingual Political Manifestos with Words Out of Vocabulary: *Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Complexity, Future Information Systems and Risk*, 149–154. <https://doi.org/10.5220/0009792101490154>
- Seeberg, H. B. (2022). First avoidance, then engagement: Political parties’ issue competition in the electoral cycle. *Party Politics*, 28(2), 284–293. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068820970353>
- Shaw, D. R. (1999). A Study of Presidential Campaign Event Effects from 1952 to 1992. *The Journal of Politics*, 61(2), 387–422. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2647509>
- Sigelman, L., and Buell Jr., E. H. (2004). Avoidance or Engagement? Issue Convergence in U.S. Presidential Campaigns, 1960–2000. *American Journal of Political Science*, 48(4), 650–661. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0092-5853.2004.00093.x>
- Spoon, J.-J., Hobolt, S. B., and Vries, C. E. de. (2014). Going green: Explaining issue competition on the environment. *European Journal of Political Research*, 53(2), 363–380. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12032>
- Spoon, J.-J., and Klüver, H. (2014). Do parties respond? How electoral context influences party responsiveness. *Electoral Studies*, 35, 48–60. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2014.04.014>
- Subramanian, S., Cohn, T., and Baldwin, T. (2018). Hierarchical Structured Model for Fine-to-Coarse Manifesto Text Analysis. *Proceedings of the 2018 Conference of the North American Chapter of the Association for Computational Linguistics: Human Language Technologies, Volume 1 (Long Papers)*, 1964–1974. <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/N18-1178>
- Tresch, A., Lefevere, J., and Walgrave, S. (2018). How parties’ issue emphasis strategies vary across communication channels: The 2009 regional election campaign in Belgium. *Acta Politica*, 53(1), 25–47. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41269-016-0036-7>
- Vaswani, A., Shazeer, N., Parmar, N., Uszkoreit, J., Jones, L., Gomez, A. N., Kaiser, L., and Polosukhin, I.

- (2017). Attention Is All You Need. *arXiv:1706.03762 [Cs]*. <http://arxiv.org/abs/1706.03762>
- Volken, A., Burst, T., Krause, W., Lehmann, P., Matthieß, T., Regel, S., Weßels, B., Zehnter, L., and (WZB), W. B. F. S. (2021). *Manifesto Project Dataset*. Manifesto Project. <https://doi.org/10.25522/MANIFESTO.MPDS.2021A>
- Wagner, M., and Meyer, T. M. (2014). Which Issues do Parties Emphasise? Salience Strategies and Party Organisation in Multiparty Systems. *West European Politics*, 37(5), 1019–1045. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2014.911483>
- Watanabe, K. (2018). Newsmap: A semi-supervised approach to geographical news classification. *Digital Journalism*, 6(3), 294–309. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1293487>
- Wolf, T., Debut, L., Sanh, V., Chaumond, J., Delangue, C., Moi, A., Cistac, P., Rault, T., Louf, R., Funtowicz, M., Davison, J., Shleifer, S., Platen, P. von, Ma, C., Jernite, Y., Plu, J., Xu, C., Scao, T. L., Gugger, S., . . . Rush, A. M. (2020). HuggingFace’s Transformers: State-of-the-art Natural Language Processing. *arXiv:1910.03771 [Cs]*. <http://arxiv.org/abs/1910.03771>

Appendix

Appendix A

	Issue	MARPOR codes
1	Agriculture	703, 703.1, 703.2
2	Culture	502
3	Defense	104, 105
4	Democracy	202, 203, 204, 202.1, 202.2, 202.3, 202.4
5	Economy	401, 402, 403, 404, 405, 406, 407, 408, 409, 410, 412, 413, 414, 415, 704, 416.1
6	Education	506, 507
7	Environment	501, 416.2
8	Equality	503, 705
9	European Union	108, 110
10	Foreign Affairs	101, 102, 103, 106, 107, 109, 103.1, 103.2
11	Freedom	201, 201.1, 201.2
12	Immigration	607, 608, 601.2, 602.2, 607.1, 607.2, 607.3, 608.1, 608.2, 608.3
13	Labour	701, 702
14	Law and Order	605, 605.1, 605.2
15	NA	000
16	Political Authority	305, 305.1, 305.2, 305.3, 305.4, 305.5, 305.6
17	Political System	301, 302, 303, 304
18	Society and Values	603, 604, 606, 601.1, 602.1, 606.1, 606.2
19	Technology and Infrastructure	411
20	Welfare State	504, 505, 706

Table 3: Adapted codebook based on Manifesto Project (MARPOR) coding scheme.

Appendix B

Also with regard to the sender of press releases, the SPD is an outlier. As [Figure 5](#) shows, the share of press releases issued by the party office increased tremendously from before (24.1 %) to during the campaign (86.0 %). The distribution of the AfD's and the FDP's press releases between party and PPG stayed stable. Almost all press releases by the CDU/CSU before the campaign came from the PPG (99.7 %), this only decreased to 96.5 % during the campaign. The Greens party office did not publish any press releases, neither before nor during the campaign. The share of the Left's party office's press releases slightly increased from 23.2 % to 31.2 %.

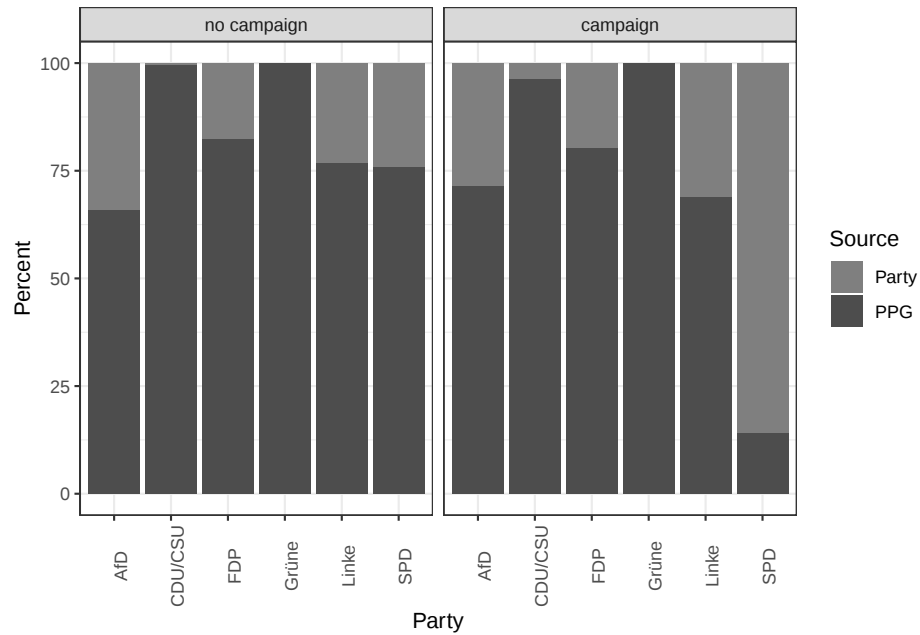


Figure 5: Distribution of press releases published by party office and parliamentary party group (PPG) before and during the election campaign.

Appendix C

Figure 6 displays the top-10 issues in manifestos and press releases of all parties during the German federal election campaign in 2021. The top-10 issues in manifestos are based on manual coding of all (quasi-) sentences in party manifestos published ahead of the election. The top-10 issues in press releases are based on a computer-based issue classification of all press releases published by the parties between July 1st and September 26th.

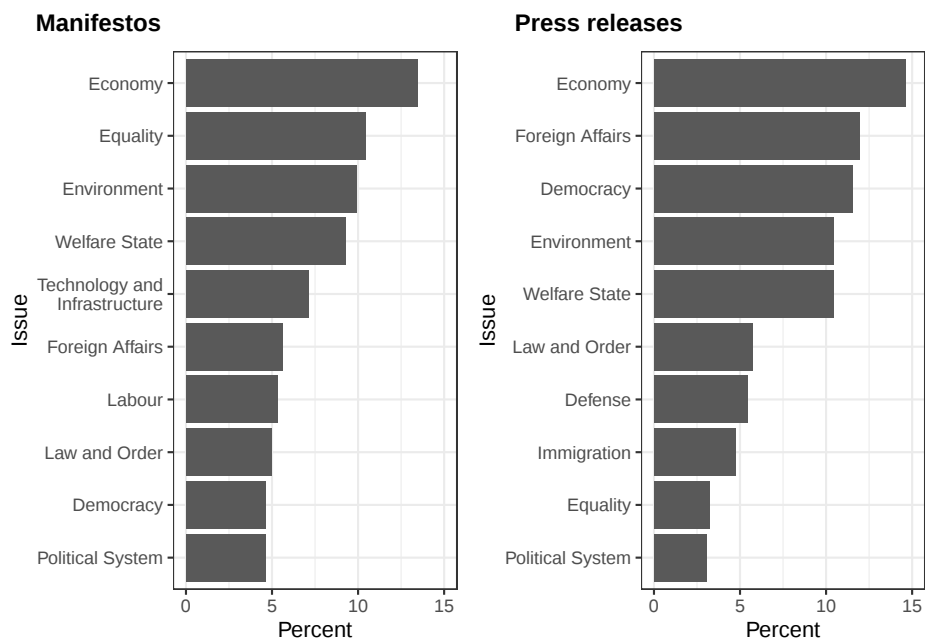


Figure 6: Top-10 issues in party manifestos and press releases (July-September) during the German federal election campaign in 2021.

Appendix D

Table 4 calculates the same regression models as displayed in Table 2, but the variable “other salience” is calculated differently. In the regression models presented here, the variable “other salience” is the median percentage of attention all other parties devote to an issue. Hence “other salience” is the median of the issue attention of all parties, excluding the party under investigation itself. It is calculated for each month separately. The results displayed Table 4 do not deviate significantly from the results presented in Table 2.

Table 4: Factors influencing party issue strategies in press releases compared to manifestos (alternative calculation of independent variable ‘other salience’).

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Salience difference (manifesto vs. press releases)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Public salience	−0.008 (0.033)			−0.141*** (0.042)
Other salience		0.261*** (0.066)		0.253*** (0.073)
External events			2.546*** (0.911)	3.408*** (1.219)
Polls	0.000 (0.061)	−0.001 (0.060)	−0.000 (0.061)	0.046 (0.078)
Public salience:Polls				−0.024*** (0.008)
Other salience:Polls				0.011 (0.013)
External events:Polls				0.191 (0.218)
Constant	0.044 (0.380)	−1.142*** (0.439)	−0.402 (0.363)	−0.908** (0.436)
Observations	342	342	342	342
R ²	0.0002	0.044	0.023	0.103

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Appendix E

Table 5 displays the individual regression tables presented in Figure 4.

Table 5: Factors influencing party issue strategies in press releases compared to manifestos (per party).

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Salience difference (manifesto vs. press releases)					
	AfD	CDU/CSU	FDP	Grüne	Linke	SPD
Public salience	0.029 (0.075)	−0.136* (0.076)	0.153** (0.076)	−0.537*** (0.079)	−0.231** (0.087)	−0.024 (0.129)
Other salience	0.369*** (0.136)	−0.065 (0.130)	0.685*** (0.153)	0.215 (0.137)	0.398** (0.158)	1.138*** (0.267)
External events	4.093* (2.191)	9.283*** (2.171)	−2.616 (2.281)	12.649*** (2.187)	6.005** (2.498)	−17.990*** (4.072)
Constant	−2.741*** (0.880)	−0.410 (0.874)	−4.001*** (0.949)	−0.300 (0.899)	−1.830* (1.026)	−3.021* (1.553)
Observations	57	57	57	57	57	57
R ²	0.324	0.276	0.358	0.496	0.245	0.369

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01