**Avoidance and Engagement: Do Societal Problems Fuel Political Parties’ Issue Overlap?**

**Abstract**. The well-being of representative democracy relies on parties debating the same issues to allow voters to make informed choices in elections. Research finds such issue dialogue to be the rule more than the exception. Yet, it remains largely unknown when issue overlap emerges. This study argues that societal problems are an important source of issue overlap. Issue overlap emerges because political parties, regardless of their color or the issue, consistently emphasize a negative development on an issue more. Moreover, and particularly important for the issue overlap, parties attend more to a problem if rival parties already attend to the problem, particularly at elections and if the rival party has issue ownership. The overlap is due to a pressure to not ignore electorally important problems. The argument is tested across eleven issue areas through the collection and coding of 5,016 press releases from seven parties in Denmark, from 2004 to 2017.

**Keywords**: issue overlap, political parties, issue emphasis, problems, party competition.