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Avoidance and engagement: Do societal problems fuel political parties' issue attention?

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Abstract

An important part of political parties' competition for votes is to what extent parties avoid or engage the issues that rival parties talk about. Despite a large literature on this topic, it remains largely unknown when parties engage. Drawing on research on political attention allocation and party behaviour, this study argues that societal problems are a central source of issue engagement: The engagement is due to a pressure to not ignore electorally important problems. The analysis shows that issue engagement emerges because parties address the same issues in a negative development. Moreover, and particularly important for the issue engagement, parties attend more to a negative development if other parties already attend to the development, particularly at elections. The argument is tested across 16 issue areas through the collection and coding of 5523 press releases from seven parties in Denmark at a quarterly level from 2004 to 2017.

Keywords

Issue engagement and avoidance, political parties, issue emphasis, problems, party competition

Parties constantly compete to decide which issues the voters should be concerned about. A prominent literature in political science suggests that parties engage on the same topical issues to show that they care about the issues that voters are concerned about (Ansolabhere and Iyengar 1994; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2014; Sigelman and Buell 2004). At the same time, they try to avoid talking about the same issues in order to promote only the issues they want the voters to be concerned about (Petrocik 1996). This competition is central to the representation of voters since the outcome is the issues that dominate political debates. Moreover, voters' issue priorities and their perceptions of the parties' issue priorities impact which party they vote for in elections, and issue competition therefore affects election outcomes. For these reasons, it is important to study parties' issue competition.

Since a party cannot engage issues that its rival talks about and at the same time avoid them, the literature has turned to understanding when a party engages these issues. A rival is another party in the party system that aims to win votes from the party to keep it from office (Meguid, 2008). Research suggests that engagement increases in close elections (Kaplan et al., 2006) and that neighbouring parties are more likely to emphasize the same issues (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2014; Meyer and Wagner, 2016; Vliegthart et al., 2011).

Hence, the literature has made important progress but still largely portrays political parties and the phenomenon of issue engagement as static and detached from the environment outside parliament.

To move beyond this focus in issue engagement research, I propose that parties attend to the same issues because they are concerned with responding to the same pressing societal problems such as crime or unemployment. Politicians' keen interest in the daily COVID-19 infection rate since March 2020 might be an extraordinary level of attention to a problem indicator. Yet, it does reflect a more general pattern of political attention to objective problem severity. As MP Katrine Robsøe¹ in the Danish Folketing puts it: 'Politicians are genuinely problem-solvers' (Interview 28 May 2021). Moreover, I argue that political parties are strategic in their problem attention, and attend to the same problems because they are afraid of voters' punishment for looking

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unresponsive to important societal problems (Fiorina, 1981; Sulkin, 2005). An important part of the issue engagement is, thus, that a party does not respond to rival party attention *per se*, but to the rival's attention to a problem. A party simply does not want to neglect a problem to which the rival party already attends. If parties' problem responsiveness is strategic in this way, then a party's problem-induced issue engagement can be expected to intensify at elections.

This idea that problems decide political parties' issue focus is far from new. It is a key message from Baumgartner and Jones' (2009 [1993]) pioneering research on agenda-setting and Stokes' (1963) seminal work on valence issues, that societal problems concern political parties. Subsequently, a huge literature uses problems related to the economy (Traber et al., 2019), immigration (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup, 2008), the environment (Spoon et al., 2013) and inequality (Tavits and Potter, 2014) to explain parties' attention to these issues. Yet, although this is fascinating research, it sends the message that problem attention is almost entirely selective and decided by the parties based on their issue preferences (Petrocik, 1996). Moreover, this research typically only utilizes problems as a control and does not have an interest as such in the influence of societal problems on political competition. We know from these studies that parties (selectively) respond to problems, but we still need to understand the more general mechanism: As research on agenda-setting and political attention allocation reveals, there are a million societal problems out there that demand political attention – far more than any political party can possibly address (Baumgartner and Jones, 2005). So the central question is: Which problems do they actually attend?

Drawing on agenda-setting research and research on political parties, the cardinal contribution of this study is to bring societal problems into party competition research. The aim is to understand the incentives in party competition to address societal problems. The argument is that party problem responsiveness is an inherently political process that puts party incentives centre stage. Not in the traditional sense where parties 'talk past each other' through selective emphasis (Sigelman and Buell, 2004). Rather, the problem focus can help to understand why parties appear to emphasize the same issues contrary to Budge and Farlie's (1983) prominent theory of selective emphasis. Empirically, the ambition is to move beyond a main focus in the literature on the economy as *the* societal problem, e.g., in the reward-punishment literature (Fiorina 1981; Marsh and Tilley, 2009), and provide a first systematic analysis across multiple issue areas.

The analysis looks at how standard, publicly available statistical indicators across 16 issue areas from the Danish national statistical bureau influence 5523 press releases that I categorize from seven parties in Denmark at a quarterly level, 2004–2017. The use of such detailed, quarterly data is

an entirely new way of studying party behaviour at short intervals. The results suggests that parties are more inclined to engage the issues that rival parties attend to during a negative development on the issue. Moreover, the central institution of representative democracy, competitive elections, fosters party competition that encourages parties to attend to problems. This is good news for representative democracy. Parties address societal problems that affect the welfare of citizens, and the institutions of representative democracy motivates this problem responsiveness.

Problems draw parties' attention

Unlike much party research that takes issue preferences as the starting point to understand party attention, agenda-setting research puts the flow of information centre stage (Baumgartner and Jones, 2005). Hence, parties certainly have preferences, based on e.g. issue ownership, for emphasizing certain issues, but a fundamental insight of agenda-setting research is that parties cannot control the development of events (Baumgartner et al., 2011). Most often, a problem is too urgent to be neglected regardless of the colour of the party (Baumgartner and Jones, 2009 [1993], Mortensen et al., 2011). The pandemic is a textbook example. Much party research on competence and valence speaks to this point, namely that problem-solving is a first-order interest of political parties (Green and Jennings, 2012; Petrocik, 1996; Stokes, 1963). Many parties formed more than a century ago to address constituencies' problems such as the social democratic parties and workers' labour market risks (Hibbs, 1977; Mair et al., 2004). Problem-solving is central to parties also for reelection purposes. A large body of research shows that voters elect parties to office based on the expectation that the parties address problems that emerge or remain unresolved, and then hold them to account on Election Day (Fiorina, 1981; Marsh and Tilley, 2009).

In this context, media attention and public saliency are surely important sources of information to parties (Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011), but so is information about the actual or objective level of problem severity (Kelley and Simmons, 2016). The public (or the media) might not notice, or might misinterpret a worrying development on an issue. Hence, the public opinion might not adequately reveal to politicians what might be a problem or a problem to come, and the parties therefore have to look at the underlying numbers (Pitkin, 1967, 223; Arnold, 1990, 18). As former chief advisor in the Danish Liberal party Venstre, Jens Husted, recalls this: 'When I saw the numbers in late February 2020 of a million workers send home in the German automobile industry due to the covid-19 lockdown of Wuhan, I knew that something big was coming' (Interview 28 May 2021). Karsten Lauritzen, chief whip of

Venstre, puts it more generally: ‘My job is to anticipate what issue development will become a problem in a week or a month and make the party attentive’ (Interview 7 June 2021). This generates the first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Parties attend to problems. When a statistical indicator suggests a negative development on an issue, parties attend more to the issue.

Engagement due to rival party attention to the problem

From an agenda-setting perspective, it takes more than ‘just’ the actual problem for a party to react. Parties are bombarded endlessly with far more information than they can process. Hence, as much agenda-setting research reveals (e.g., [Engeli et al., 2013](#); [Baumgartner et al., 2008](#)), a strong signal – sometimes referred to as positive feedback or a cascade of attention – is needed to overcome decision-makers’ inherent scarcity of attention ([Baumgartner and Jones 2009](#) [1993]). This could be an event, a change in the severity of a problem, in combination with rival party attention to the problem (public concern or media coverage are alternative, perhaps less important, ingredients to the cocktail). In a highly competitive political environment in which parties vehemently compete with rival parties to win votes and hold office ([Green-Pedersen, 2007](#); [Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010](#), 261), it is plausible that rival party attention to a problem reveals where a party might look particularly non-attentive to a problem before the electorate. A rival to a party is another party that tries to win votes from the party to keep it from office.

The rival party’s problem attention builds a pressure on a party because a party quickly looks non-attentive to a problem before the electorate if it neglects a problem to which rival parties already attend. Rival parties will probably try to put a party in such situation. Even if voters will most likely be able to tell on their own, the rival party will in its attention to the problem probably not hesitate to let them know of this lack of problem attentiveness ([Sulkin, 2005](#)). Moreover, for a party, the rival party’s problem attention probably reflects that voters are concerned with the problem or will be due to the rival party’s attention. The party therefore needs to match the rival party’s attention to the problem to not look unresponsive and lose votes ([Meyer and Wagner, 2016](#): 556). As Karsten Lauritzen notes: ‘We constantly keep an eye on the Social democrats to avoid that they get ahead of us on an issue or slice an edge towards us’ (Interview 7 June 2021).

This naturally raises the question where the rival party attention then comes from in the first place. To clarify, I take the rival party’s attention as the starting point. This reflects a party’s reality in the sense that it only knows its rival’s

attention at $t-1$ (and not at t_0 or $t+1$) when deciding on its own attention at t_0 . In other words, its rival’s attention at $t-1$ is a given that it has to consider. If the model is correct, then the party attention at t_0 becomes its rival party’s given for its attention at $t+1$, and so on – together with the actual problem severity. So the model is most likely endogenous although for analytical purposes, I make rival party attention exogenous to the model. Embracing the full interactive and repeated nature of the process is beyond the scope of this study, and I place a first stepping stone by arguing that rival party attention to a problem exacerbates a party’s problem attention and therefore is an important driver of parties’ issue engagement. This is the second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Rival party attention increases the influence of a problem on a party’s attention.

Problem-based engagement intensifies in elections

If a party is particularly attentive to problems that rival parties already attend to (in part or primarily) due to a fear of electoral loss, then a central additional implication is that this problem-induced engagement will increase in elections because in election campaigns, media coverage of politics intensifies and voters are more attentive to political issues ([Gelman and King, 1993](#)). At least we can expect that the parties believe so ([Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu, 2019](#), 443). Voters’ eyes are particularly on the parties, and this makes the parties more attuned not to ignore an issue that can be decisive for the election result ([Sulkin, 2005](#)). In support of this argument, research shows that parties are more careful in elections not to give rival parties any electoral advantages ([Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu, 2019](#): 442; [Seeberg, 2020](#)).

This argument implies that the influence of the rival party’s attention to a problem on a party’s problem attention happens not entirely because of information uncertainty, but certainly also through electoral pressure. Such uncertainty is constant through the electoral cycle, unlike the pressure. There is always uncertainty in the information about the severity of a problem ([Rochefort and Cobb, 1994](#)), and a party may therefore look to other parties simply to judge if the problem demands attention. Yet, elections do not change such information uncertainty and it is therefore important to test a third implication of the argument:

Hypothesis 3: The impact of a rival party’s attention to a problem on a party’s attention to the problem is larger in elections.

Research on opposition-government dynamics ([Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010](#)), political parties’ reputations on particular issues ([Petrocik, 1996](#)), and representation

across political institutions (Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2008) suggest to expect variation around this basic mechanism of problem responsiveness and issue engagement that I propose. I control for this in the analysis as far as possible, but leave a deeper investigation to future studies.

Research design

In order to make a broad test of the argument that escapes the peculiarities of a particular issue or a particular party, the hypotheses are tested on data from Denmark on party attention and problems for 16 issue areas and seven parties. The 16 issue areas include a wide variety of policy areas including immigration, crime, housing, energy, and business (full list in [Supplemental Appendix, Table A1](#)). The seven parties have been in the Danish Parliament in the entire period of the analysis from 2004 to 2017 (the Red–Green Alliance, the Socialist People’s Party, the Social Democrats, the Social Liberals, the Liberals, the Conservatives, and the Danish People’s Party)². Using frequent observations at the quarterly level, this generates 5824 observations for the analysis (16 issue areas × 7 parties × 13 years × 4 quarters).

An advantage of studying Denmark is that the multiparty context provides a fertile ground to test whether problems indeed fuel parties’ issue engagement. On the one hand, the multiparty context with coalition governance and minority governments force parties to compromise which may make them attend to the same issues, *ceteris paribus*. On the other hand, the multiparty context invites for each party to carve out niches and therefore only focus on particular problems. This would make it harder to see a general pattern where parties attend broadly to problems and react to rival party problem attention. This is a recognizable incentive structure in many advanced democracies with a multiparty system, which renders Denmark a natural point of departure for the hypothesis test.

The Danish party system has a setup that allows testing the hypothesis concerning rival party attention on a party’s problem responsiveness. Unlike a two-party system such as the British, where the rival party is obvious, all other parties are rivals to varying degrees in a multiparty context such as in Denmark and will therefore influence a party’s issue emphasis. Yet, some parties are probably greater rivals than others, depending on the specific context. According to the argument, these ‘greatest rivals’ among all rivals are the most important to engage with for a party. The analysis therefore needs adjustment to the specific Danish party competition context. Yet, the idea remains that any party system presents rivals, and particularly important rivals among the rivals. The logic of rivals therefore possibly travels beyond Denmark even if the party competition structure is slightly different in other Western countries.

In Denmark, the parties are organized in stable blocs, left and right, that alternate in office (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010). Here, all parties are rivals but particularly those in the opposite bloc. Hence, the analysis will focus on those. It may annoy a party to lose votes to a neighbour party inside its bloc, but ultimately, the votes remain in the bloc. In terms of enjoying a parliamentary majority to access office and decide policy, it is much worse to lose votes to any of the parties from the opposing bloc because this vote loss counts against the party’s bloc majority. This left-vs-right setup is not peculiar to Denmark but serves as a framework for much other research on multiparty competition (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2014; Meguid 2008; Meyer and Wagner 2016; Vliegenthart et al. 2011). As an important side note, regressing a party’s attention on each of the other parties’ attention (bloc and rival) does not change the conclusions ([Supplemental Appendix, Table A8](#)). The period of analysis, 2004–2017, ensures variation in the party in government: The Liberals led a centre-right coalition before 2011 and after 2015, and the Social Democrats led a centre-left coalition in between. This variation is used in the analysis to rule out that government status drives the results. Moreover, additional analysis does not suggest systematic differences in the problem attention of opposition and government parties (not reported).

In correspondence with existing studies (e.g., Bevan et al., 2018; Seeberg, 2018; Kelley and Simmons, 2016), I measure problem severity through commonly available statistical indicators. The focus on one country allows to include information about problems on a lot of different issue areas that would not be available consistently over long periods and at short time intervals across multiple countries. Only indicators that vary on a quarterly level or at a shorter interval and cover the period from about 2004 onward are selected. I use indicators that are publicly available from the Danish national statistical bureau (www.dst.dk). The 16 problem indicators are arguably central indicators for each issue area at the national level in Denmark and probably also in most other West European countries. They include the violence rate, the number of asylum seekers, the number of traffic accidents, the unemployment rate etc. (full list in [Supplemental Appendix, Table A1](#)). If they indicate a negative development, voters and the media can be expected to put pressure on the parties to tackle the problem (see also Seeberg, 2018).

In addition to displaying relevant statistical indicators, the 16 issue areas provide variation on important issue attributes. The selection ensures variation in issue ownership (Petrocik, 1996). Additional analysis does not suggest systematic differences across parties’ issue ownerships (not reported). In terms of voter salience and media coverage, it also ensures a wide variety of issues (I control for this variation in the analysis). Hence, the issues differ in many respects, and this paves the way to generalize to other issue areas.

Data and measurement

Each statistical indicator is measured as the change from the previous period. To ensure an equivalent scale of analysis across issue areas, this change is standardized for each indicator to run from maximum positive change (−1) (the problem gets less severe) to maximum negative change (+1) (the problem gets more severe). A correlation matrix (Supplemental Appendix, Table A4) shows that the majority of indicators appear to be rather independent. Unsurprisingly though, the asylum rate correlates (0.61) with geopolitical risks (due to wars that cause refugees), and the unemployment rate correlates (0.45) with the number of people receiving social assistance and the level of export (0.41). The largest correlations of 0.70 and 0.60 between the unemployment rate and the property crime rate and violence rate, respectively, are negative and therefore appear to go against the common expectations. I address concerns with these correlations in the analysis by excluding one issue at a time to rule out that, e.g., the results rely on the unemployment rate.

The problem indicators change a lot during a short period of time, and national statistical bureaus publish updated figures every month or quarter. This creates a challenge when studying party attention to problems. Existing data sources on party attention are ill-suited to reveal how parties attend to fluctuations in problems because they are either annual, such as the government's executive speeches (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010), published only at elections, such as the party manifesto data (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2014), or highly institutionalized, such as the questions to the minister, which are predominantly used by opposition parties (Vliegthart and Walgrave, 2011). To overcome this problem, one option is to access and code mass media news articles, but this source is edited according to journalistic norms and therefore biased. Instead, to measure party attention, this study relies on a new database of 5523 press releases issued on a weekly basis by seven Danish parties from 2004 to 2017 (see also Seeberg, 2020). The use of press releases to study party behaviour is becoming more widespread (Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016). The main advantage is that it allows for analyses at short time intervals and therefore offers a way to get closer to frequently changing party attention and problems. Studies of party communication across channels confirm that parties have more degrees of freedom to craft their press releases, e.g., according to their issue ownerships, than in news articles or in parliamentary activities (Tresch et al., 2018). This makes them a hard case for testing if problem attention operates through a pressure mechanism (and not issue ownership or selective emphasis). To include more statistical indicators and to avoid too many zeros in the count of press releases per party per issue area, the unit of analysis are quarters (not months or weeks, cf. Bevan et al., 2018;

Seeberg, 2018). This ensures a short time interval without putting too high demands on the data. Each party publishes on average about 1.6 press releases per issue per quarter (SD is 2.5), although this number varies over time and across the 16 issues (Supplemental Appendix, Figures A2-A8, Supplemental Table A2).

The 2004–2017 interval is the period in which a digital archive of press releases is available. The press releases have been accessed through the Wayback Machine (web.archive.org) by entering the online newsroom of each party as it appeared back in time. Every news item was archived and issue coded, although it is unknown whether each item was for example sent to Reuters as a press release. Some of the items are probably more like a news item, but they work the same way as a press release, namely to draw attention to a particular topic. To verify this characterization of press releases, I interviewed press officers from the Social Democrats and the Danish People's Party in the Danish Parliament (on 26 June 2019). According to these officers, the news content is written by the party press office in collaboration with party professionals as well as local and national politicians and intends to communicate initiatives from the party. The aim of the newsroom is to provide a go-to-place for journalists and citizens if they want more information about, for example, a new policy proposal or read a party leader speech etc.

Like previous coding of political documents and news articles (Baumgartner et al., 2019), the content coding of the press releases uses the titles and is carried out by trained research assistants. Essentially, each press release is coded to show whether it is about fisheries, psychiatry, domestic violence, etc. using the more than 220 issue subcategories in the codebook of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP; Baumgartner et al., 2019). Hence, the dependent variable is the number of press releases by a party on one of the 16 issues in a given quarter of the year. To overcome uncertainties in exactly which subcategory to use for a press release and to match the content of the press releases to the 16 problems, I group press releases that are topically closely related (Supplemental Appendix, Table A3 provides an overview of the subtopics for each issue area of the analysis). Most issues are major categories in the CAP codebook and therefore cover multiple subtopics which makes them rather robust as indicators of attention. A few issue areas are narrower, such as psychiatry, climate and violence. Although this makes these categories more vulnerable to idiosyncrasies, I follow this procedure to tighten the fit between problem and political attention. Yet, leaving these latter narrower categories out of the analysis does not alter the results, nor do the results change if these categories are broadened to cover health, environment and crime, respectively.

Taking the large number of issue categories into account, the test of the reliability of the content coding of the data into each of the subtopics was at a very high Krippendorff's

Alpha of 0.79 when comparing the coding of the research assistants and my own coding. Compared to previous research that often uses very broad issue categories (e.g. [Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2014](#); [Meyer and Wagner, 2016](#); [Traber et al., 2019](#)), a key advantage of using this very detailed issue coding of the press releases into 220 sub-categories is that the matching of problems and party attention and different parties' attention is much more precise than previously.

This coding procedure does not identify if a press release explicitly refers to a problem/statistic. The procedure therefore only allows to analyse whether a change in a problem sparks more party attention to the issue area in which the problem is embedded. Such an analysis comes close to the argument; statistics that reveal more immigrant arrivals breeds party attention to various questions on the issue, such as welfare to immigrants, violent immigrants, Islam-culture, etc. The point is that attention does not have to be specifically about the statistic in order to be provoked by the information it conveys about the problem severity.

To measure rival party attention, I identify rival parties from the left bloc and the right bloc in the Danish party system. For a party from the right bloc, the parties from the left bloc are the rivals, and vice versa. The red bloc includes the Red–Green Alliance, the Socialist People's Party, the Social Democrats and the Social Liberals, and the right bloc includes the Liberals, the Conservatives and the Danish People's Party. So for each party on each issue – the unit of analysis – I measure its rival parties' attention. To do so, I follow [Green-Pedersen and Mortensen \(2010, 2014\)](#) and calculate the average attention (i.e., number of press releases) to each issue by the parties from the opposite bloc (e.g., the right-wing) to the party in question (e.g., the Social Democrats). To test Hypothesis 2, I multiply the problem severity and the rival party attention on each issue area. To test **Hypothesis 3**, this interaction is multiplied by an election dummy that takes the value one for the quarter in which the election takes place (zero otherwise).

Estimation

Since the dependent variable is a count variable of the number of press releases issued each quarter that ranges from 0 to 21 (μ is 1.6, σ 2.5) with a variance (6.02) close to the mean (1.55) that includes a large number of zeros (47.1% of the data), the estimation is based on a count model using the negative binomial distribution (using proportions of press releases instead does not change the results). Diagnostic tests indicate that this performs better than a Poisson or a zero-inflated version (using these specifications or standard OLS regression do not change the results). The estimated coefficients are very similar across these models, but the AIC/BIC are slightly lower in the negative binomial model and the alpha disturbance terms is

not significantly different from zero in the model based on the Poisson distribution. Based on a Hausman test, the estimation includes fixed effects with panels for each party on each issue, and robust standard errors to counter panel heteroscedasticity. With this setup, the model in effect estimates the effect of changes to the problems on changes to the number of press releases. Since the total number of press releases is not constant across the time period ([Supplemental Appendix, Figure A1](#))³, I control for the total number of press releases for each party across all issue areas in each quarter.

The fixed effects estimation alleviates concerns for the influence of stable characteristics such as differences between niche and mainstream parties, between government and opposition party, and across issues due to issue ownership. Hence, the controls that are added to the model include an indicator of public saliency ([Supplemental Appendix, Table A6](#)), an indicator of media attention in percent ([Supplemental Appendix, Table A5](#)), and each party's electoral support from polls ([Risbjerg, 2018](#)). To counter autocorrelation in the model, a lagged dependent variable and a year counter is included (leaving them out does not change the results). The estimation also includes a dummy for each quarter of the year to consider seasonal effects (the results replicate without any controls).

I assume that press releases are rather quick and easy to publish and will be one of the first signs that a party is concerned with a problem. Hence, the parties are expected to respond rather quickly to a change in a problem, and together with the rival party attention variable, the problem indicators therefore enter the model one quarter prior to party attention. This setup ensures that the problem (the change from t_{-2} to t_{-1}) enters the model before rival party attention (at t_{-1}), which both precede a given party's attention (at t_0). This is an estimation strategy that reflects the direction of causality and is employed in other studies of issue engagement ([Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2014](#): 754).

Empirical analysis

As first-hand evidence of the joint impact of problems and rival party attention on a party's issue attention, [Figure 1](#) displays the bivariate relationship. To stick to the party competition structure in Denmark, press releases in [Figure 1](#) are divided by the left and the right bloc. To the left (right) is the average number of left (right) party press releases categorized by the number of right (left) party press releases and the problem development across all of the issues in Denmark, 2004–2017. The pattern is striking. If the right parties issue few press releases on an issue at the top of [Figure 1](#), then left party press releases are limited regardless of the problem development on the issue – the bars are short and equally so across the problem development. Yet, during multiple right party press releases on the issue at the bottom

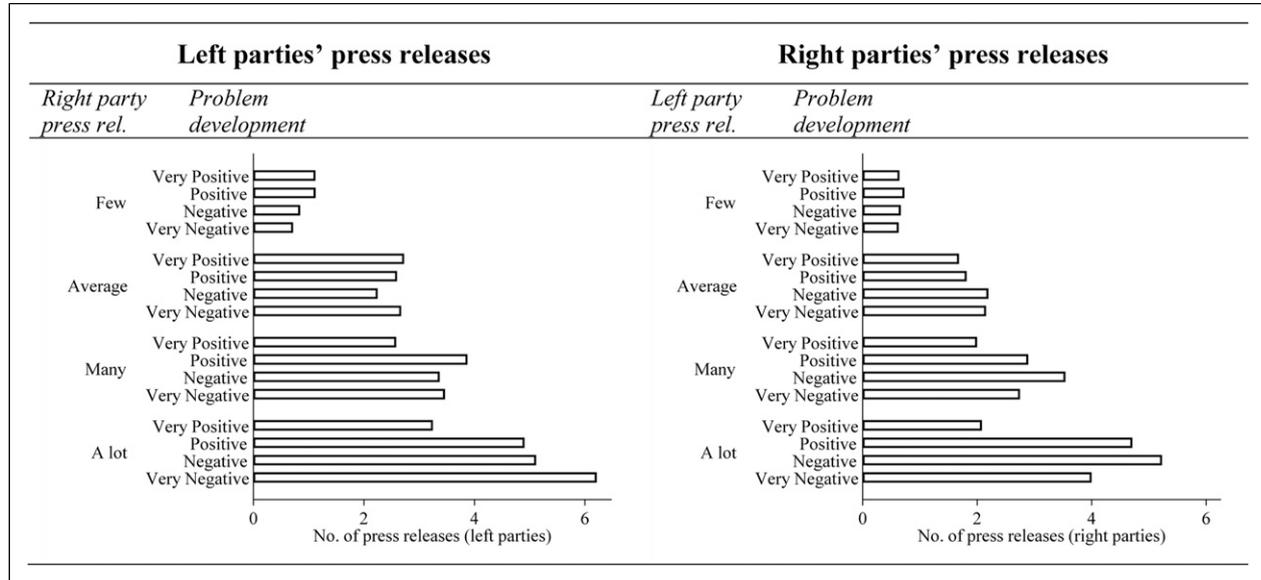


Figure 1. Left (right) party press releases (average) categorized by right (left) party press releases and problem development in Denmark, 2004–2017.
 Note: “Few”: $<\mu$; “Average”: μ to $\mu+\sigma$; “Many”: $\mu+\sigma$ to $\mu+2\sigma$; “A lot”: $>\mu+2\sigma$. “Very positive”: $>0+\sigma$; “Positive”: 0 to $0+\sigma$; “Negative”: 0 to $0-\sigma$; “Very negative”: $<0-\sigma$.

Table 1. The influence of problems and rival party problem attention on each party’s attention in Denmark, 2004–2017.

		Party attention			
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
H1	Δ Problem _(t-2 to t-1)	1.13*** (0.05)	1.11 (0.07)	0.99 (0.07)	1.05 (0.08)
	Rival party attention _{t-1}	1.05*** (0.01)	1.05*** (0.01)	1.05*** (0.01)	1.05*** (0.01)
	Bloc party attention _{t-1}	1.03*** (0.01)	1.02*** (0.01)	1.03*** (0.01)	1.03*** (0.01)
	Problem × Bloc party		1.00 (0.02)		
H2	Problem × rival party			1.06*** (0.02)	1.04 (0.02)
	Election (=1)	0.95 (0.05)	0.95 (0.05)	0.95 (0.05)	0.95 (0.07)
	Problem × election				0.61** (0.14)
H3	Rival party × election				1.00 (0.02)
	Problem × rival × election				1.14** (0.06)
	Constant	8.8×10^{27} *** (1.0×10^{29})	9.7×10^{27} *** (1.1×10^{29})	3.0×10^{28} *** (3.6×10^{29})	9.2×10^{28} *** (1.1×10^{30})
Controls	+	+	+	+	
Observations		4867	4867	4867	4541

Note: Negative binomial regression with party issue fixed effects and standard errors in parentheses. Coefficients are the incidence rate ratios. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$ (two-way). Full table with all controls in [Supplemental Appendix, Table A7](#).

of [Figure 1](#), the bars are much taller but at very different lengths – left party press releases increase steeply if the problem development is negative rather than positive. This pattern largely applies to both sides of [Figure 1](#) and provides first-hand evidence in support of **H1** and **H2**.

The hypotheses are tested more systematically in a multivariate setup in [Table 1](#). The first column in [Table 1](#) shows that the parties systematically across all tribes and

across all of the 16 issues attend to changes in problems; also when controlling for alternative explanations, such as rival party attention. Based on the negative binomial regression, the coefficients in [Table 1](#) are the incidence rate ratios (IRR), which is the exponent of the raw coefficient. If an indicator of problem severity changes one unit in a negative direction (from non-change to maximum negative change, 0–1), the number of press releases by a party on the

issue in the subsequent quarter increases by a factor of 1.13 (IRR is $e^{0.12}$). This effect is statistically significant, but substantially modest. Attention from rival parties from the opposing bloc or parties from the same bloc also has a positive and statistically significant effect on a party's attention to an issue, but this effect is weaker. Since the estimation includes controls for public saliency, the media, elections and party support, the result indicates that the parties attend to raw indicators of problem severity independent of the party's success and public perceptions of the problem, at elections as well as outside elections. Additional tests indicate that this is a general effect for all parties and all issues interacting the problem with dummies for the government party (vs opposition), a mainstream party (vs niche), or the issues on which the party has issue ownership (vs issues without issue ownership) is not statistically significant (not reported). Importantly, this general effect does not change substantively if an issue or a party is excluded one at a time or when using alternative specifications (results available upon request). This supports **Hypothesis 1** and suggests that problems are an important source of parties' issue engagement.

The next question is if rival party attention influences a party's attention to a problem. The description of the 2019-election in Denmark by the former chief advisor in Venstre, Jens Husted, motivates such expectation: 'Although the environment is surely not an issue preference of Venstre, the leftwing parties' intense attention made us realize that we could not escape this problem and had to engage on the issue. We painted our logo green, stepped up and narrowly averted an embarrassing defeat for overlooking a key campaign issue' (Interview 28 May 2021). Yet, the question is if this is a broader phenomenon. **Hypothesis 2** tests this across 16 issue areas and seven parties in the second and third columns in Table 1. The results support **Hypothesis 2**. Whereas the interaction term between problems and within-bloc parties in the second column is statistically insignificant, the positive and statistically significant coefficient for the interaction term "Problem x Rival party" in the third column suggests that if rival parties from the opposing bloc attend to the issue connected to a problem, a party issues more press releases when this problem worsens. As illustrated in Figure 2, the moderating effect of rival party problem attention is substantial. If rival parties do not attend to the issue at all (rival party attention is zero to the left in Figure 2), a party does not systematically publish any more press releases, although the problem worsens. The histogram in the background of Figure 2 shows that this scenario is in the sample. Reflecting the bivariate relationship in Figure 1, this is a noteworthy finding for problem responsiveness in the representative democracy. It suggests that party attentiveness to problems is entirely in the hands of party competition. A party does not attend to a problem unless it has manifest party competition incentives. Yet, if

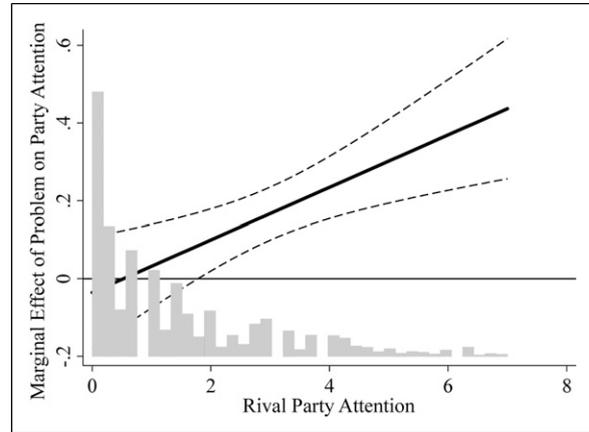


Figure 2. The influence of problems on party attention at increasing rival party attention.

Note: Based on model 3, Table 1. The dotted lines are the 95% confidence interval.

rival parties attend heavily to the issue (4.8 press releases per issue per quarter, 3μ), the effect is substantial and the rate of press releases is expected to be about 1.29 times greater (IRR is $e^{0.25}$, compared to an IRR of only 1.13 in the direct effect of problems above). This effect does not change if I exclude one issue or one party at a time (results available upon request). This supports **Hypothesis 2** and suggests that problems and rival party problem attention are important engines of issue engagement. As an important side note, this finding applies not only at the party level of analysis, but also at the system level. Additional analysis (Supplemental Appendix, Table A9) suggests that a negative problem development forces all parties to attend to the issue and the level of each party's attention aligns.

Hypothesis 3 is tested in the fourth column of Table 1, which reports the triple interaction between problem, rival party attention and elections. The important information is that this interaction term is positive and statistically significant. Since the estimation controls for the total number of press releases by a party, this is not just a product of, for example, more press releases in general in campaigns. Figure 3 graphs the marginal effect of an increase in the problem on a party's attention to the issue at increasing rival party attention in elections (left graph) and outside elections (right graph). The main takeaway from Figure 3 is that both lines are upward sloping, but the line to the left is much steeper than the one to the right. Hence, rival party problem attention always influences a party's problem attention, but much more so in elections. In elections, the effect is considerable. If a rival party attends heavily to the issue to which the problem belongs (4.8 press releases per issue per quarter, 3μ), the rate of press releases is expected to increase by a factor of about 1.44 (IRR, $e^{0.36}$). Considering that the IRR was only 1.13 in the test of the direct impact of problem severity on party attention, this is a considerably larger

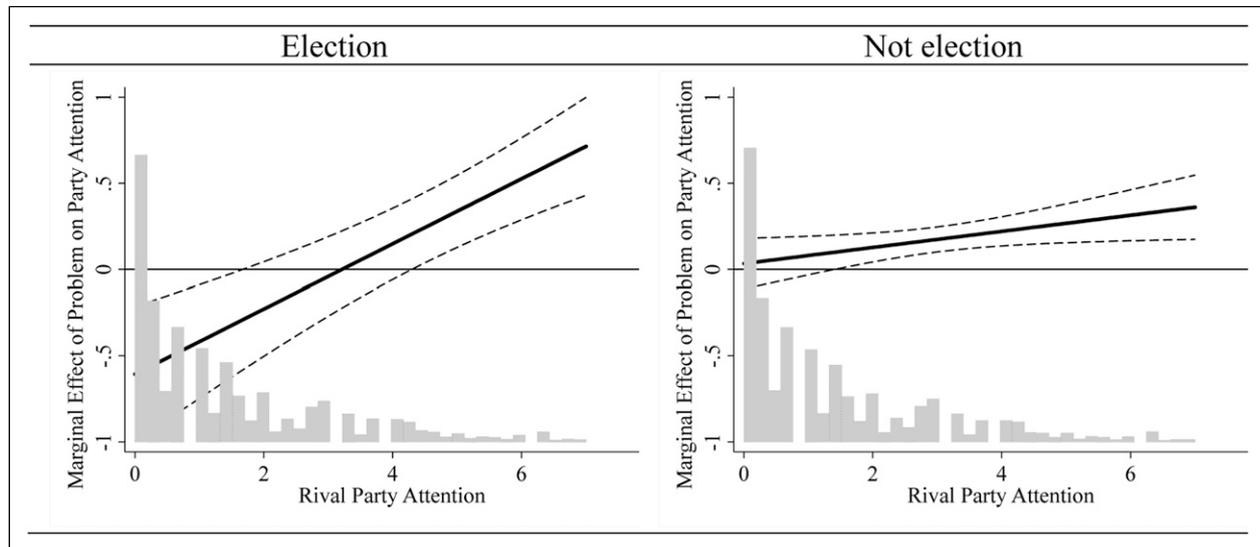


Figure 3. The influence of problems on party attention at increasing rival party attention in and outside elections. Note: Based on model 4, Table I. The dotted lines are the 95% confidence interval.

effect. This supports **Hypothesis 3** and further underlines that party competition heavily influences a party's attention to a problem.

Conclusion

An important part of political parties' competition for votes is to what extent parties avoid or engage the issues that rival parties talk about. Yet, despite a large literature on this topic, it remains largely unknown when parties engage. This study argues that societal problems are a central engine of such issue engagement: The engagement is due to a pressure to not ignore electorally important problems. In support of this argument, the analysis indicates that political parties, regardless of their colour and across a broad selection of issues, consistently emphasize an issue more when it is in a negative development. Moreover, and particularly important for the issue engagement, parties are more inclined to attend to such a development if rival parties already attend to the problem. The results suggest that this is due to a pressure to not ignore electorally crucial problems since this pressure intensifies at elections when the parties expect voters to care more about party behaviour. This is important first-hand, systematic evidence across multiple issue areas on the joint influence of problems and party competition on a party's issue attention.

The evidence in the analysis is important because it suggests that issue engagement takes place on issues that are important to the public: issue engagement emerges because parties generally attend to problems. Hence, this is good news for the representative democracy. Moreover, the analysis indicates that a central component of representative democracy,

political competition, enhances the parties' problem attentiveness in the sense that parties are more inclined to attend to a problem if rival parties find the problem important.

This study opens up a new research agenda on the impact of problem severity on political parties' and issue attention. Given the widespread reference to statistical indicators in public and political debate (Kelley and Simmons, 2016), it seems fair to operationalize problem severity as statistical indicators. However, there may not always be a one-to-one relationship between them (Rocheffort and Cobb, 1994), and sometimes problems exist that cannot be measured easily such as racism or social mobility. The interpretation of indicators and the description of problems based on indicators is probably the outcome of a political process and this most likely creates variation in the pressure that rival parties can build when attending to problems.

Since most existing studies of party issue avoidance and engagement focus on a single country, comparative analysis is a promising avenue of research. This would allow verifying if my argument applies in a two-party setting such as Britain as well as gaining a better understanding of how the argument adapts to variation across European multiparty systems. Since the structure of most European multi-party systems resembles Denmark by centring on competition and government alternation between social democrats and conservatives, such as in Spain and the Netherlands (at least until lately), the adaptation appears realistic. Yet, the current green-conservative government coalition in Austria and the recent social democratic CDU government in Germany suggest a more open structure in which most other parties are rivals (the proximate in particular) in order for a party to reach a legislative majority.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. To fertilize the development of this study, I interviewed in several current Members of the Danish Parliament including Katrine Robsøe, Karsten Lauritzen and a former chief advisor in Venstre, Jens Husted.
2. The newer and smaller parties, the Alternative, the Liberal Alliance, and 'Nye Borgerlige', are not included.
3. The total number of press releases drops at the end of the period of analysis. This drop indicates that the parties are increasingly taking up new communication platforms such as personal home-pages, Facebook and Twitter at the expense of issuing press releases. For the ongoing research of present-day party communication, this drop in press releases emphasizes the importance of identifying the right platform to study over time. I take the drop into account in my analysis by including the quarterly total number of press releases and by including a year-dummy.

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