Issue clarity in electoral competition. Insights from Austria

Katrin Praprotnik

University of Hamburg, Department of Political Science, Allendeplatz 1, 20146 Hamburg, Germany

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This paper analyses parties' policy supply in electoral campaigns. In so doing, it proposes to look at issue clarity which is defined as the share of objectively testable pledges within an election manifesto. The main argument states that parties not only decide their positions and issue saliencies, but also the level of specificity with which they present their policies. The data come from Austria (1990–2008) and, thus, provide a good example for a Western European multi-party system with proportional representation. The analyses show that extreme parties present manifestos with higher issue clarity compared to moderate parties. Furthermore, this result is strengthened by a party's role in government. Issue ownership, however, seems to have no effect on issue clarity.

© 2017 The Author. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

1. Introduction

The welfare state was one of the most important issues during the 2008 Austrian national election campaign. All the parliamentary parties included a comprehensive discussion about the welfare state in their manifestos and put the topic as one of their top two priorities. Consequently, issue salience theorists would conclude that the Austrian parties' campaign strategies are similar in respect to the welfare state issue (e.g. Robertson, 1976; Budge and Farlie, 1983). However, looking more closely at the content within these issue emphases highlights that in the Social Democrats' (SPÖ) manifesto only ten out of one hundred statements on welfare state policy contain concrete plans for the subsequent legislative period. Yet, in the programme of the right-wing Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ), forty per cent of the statements are specific.

Therefore, there is a substantial difference between the SPÖ's and the BZÖ's campaign strategy concerning the welfare state issue. In addition, it matters if parties emphasize an issue with or without specific policy proposals for the subsequent period. The content of electoral campaigns provides the basis of voting decisions and as a result affects the quality of representative democracies (APSA, 1950; Ranney, 1954; Roberts, 2010; McDonald and Budge, 2008). Previous studies on issue saliency, however, were unable to differentiate between the nature of issue emphases (e.g. Green-Pedersen, 2007; Janda et al., 1995; Saglie, 1998). The present

paper examines parties' campaign strategies by looking at *issue clarity*. I introduce the term issue clarity to refer to the level of specificity with which parties present the content of an issue such as the welfare state, the economy or the environment. I argue that parties strategically decide not only their policy positions and issue saliences, but also the clarity of their words. In order to study issue clarity, I draw on the theoretical reasoning of the literature on positional competition (Downs, 1957), competition through selective emphasis (Robertson, 1976; Budge and Farlie, 1983) and issue ownership theory (Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik et al., 2003). More specifically, I ask whether ideological position, role in government and issue ownership are further able to explain issue clarity in electoral campaigns. My methodological approach follows the literature on pledge fulfilment and I operationalize issue clarity with the notion of pledges. Similar to Thomson (2001, 180), a pledge is understood as a political demand, for future policy action or outcome, which is objectively testable. The testability criterion requires that the party itself provides the researcher with a benchmark by which fulfilment can be verified. As a result, issue clarity increases as the share of pledges related to that issue within a party's campaign strategy increases.

I test my theoretical argument using data on six Austrian national elections between 1990 and 2008. The Austrian case provides a good example of a typical Western European multi-party system with proportional representation. The data on pledges are generated through a quantitative content analysis of twenty-six electoral manifestos. Manifestos are seen as the most comprehensive indicator of a party's electoral campaign which is furthermore available

throughout the whole research period (a similar argument is made by e.g. Robertson, 1976; Rose, 1980).

The present study goes beyond existing research in the following ways: First, I introduce the term issue clarity. Issue clarity differs from Rovny's (2013) definition of position blurring since it depicts a narrower aspect of party competition. While position blurring refers to 'vague, contradictory or ambiguous positions' (Rovny, 2013, 5), issue clarity refers only to the number of specific pledges. The relevance of specific policy pledges in electoral campaigns is based on the mandate perspective of representative democracies. Mandate theories hold that parties receive a mandate to carry out their programmes through the electoral process (APSA, 1950; Ranney, 1954; Roberts, 2010; McDonald and Budge, 2008). Manifestos without specific plans for the future legislative period would, therefore, hinder voting decisions and dilute the democratic mechanisms in representative democracies. If we want to assess whether 'the rules of the democratic game often conflict with underlying normative principles' (Shepsle, 1972, 555), then my notion of issue clarity provides an adequate test of assessment. Second, to the best of my knowledge, I present the first multivariate test of pledge making at the level of policy issues. Only a few, and mostly earlier, studies on policy pledges take the nature of these proposals into account and include analyses on pledge making into their studies (Pomper, 1967; Rallings, 1987; Rose, 1980; Pomper and Lederman, 1980; Mansergh and Thomson, 2007; Håkansson and Naurin, 2016). None of these studies, however, go beyond descriptive evidence or bivariate correlation analyses. More recent studies in that area focus exclusively on the mechanisms of pledge fulfilment and so, lack an explanation of pledge making (Royed, 1996; Thomson, 2001; Thomson et al., 2014; Naurin, 2011; Praprotnik, forthcoming). Furthermore, prior studies on issue competition were limited in terms of the number of policy dimensions. These studies analysed political competition on a one-dimensional or two- and three-dimensional space (Downs, 1957; Shepsle, 1972; Rovny, 2012, 2013; Alonso et al., 2015). I contend that parties compete over a number of different issues and that a comprehensive understanding of party competition requires us to examine these areas individually and simultaneously.

The following study is divided into four sections. The first section will elaborate the concept, and present several hypotheses, on issue clarity. Following this theoretical part of the paper, I will present my data on electoral pledges in Austria. Then, in the third section, the multivariate models will test the hypotheses. The results show that: extreme parties have manifestos with high issue clarity; the effect of which is strengthened by a party's role in parliament; extreme parties in opposition present the most concrete programmes, while moderate parties in government often blur their future plans; being the issue owner has no effect on issue clarity. The final section summarizes the results and their meaning for representative democracy.

2. Theory

Following Strøm and Müller (1999), I claim that parties are rational utility-maximizers that will follow a vote-seeking strategy in the run-up to an election. This means that, regardless of whether they ultimately seek to influence policy outcome or gain public office, they will first try to increase their vote share at the polls. This temporal ordering of Parties' goals seems reasonable since electoral

success will later facilitate the collection of both office and policy pay-offs. Consequently, I expect parties to choose a campaign strategy which they believe will reward them with as many votes as possible.[1]

In order to put together a common strategy, several decisions have to be made. Parties have to decide on their policy positions over a broad range of issue areas, on the saliency attributed to these issue areas and finally, on the clarity of their words. I will discuss these three strategic campaign decisions in greater detail below. Fig. 1 presents a graphical representation of the argument.

First, parties have to develop their *positions* on specific policy problems over all relevant issue areas. Fundamentally, the first decision refers to the choice of whether or not a party supports a given policy. This understanding of positions differs from what is usually known in the literature on party position estimates (Downs, 1957), since it does not refer to a party's position on a given issue dimension, but on a party's position towards a specific problem. These positions are variable, albeit to a limited extent. Parties are durable actors who not only compete for one election but generally aim to contest in the electoral arena for a longer period of time. Too frequent or too erratic position switching might therefore, run counter a vote maximizing strategy. Moreover, this process is not necessarily fully coupled with the current election. While some positions are stable over time, others are prepared just before the upcoming vote. Finally, the first decision is made independently from the second and third decisions on campaign strategies.

Fig. 1 shows position decisions on two issue areas. For example, suppose that issue 1 refers to the aforementioned welfare state and issue 2 to culture. Within the area of the welfare state, parties may have positions on the retirement age, youth unemployment and rent limits. To be more specific, a party might advocate to increase the legal retirement age and to fight against youth unemployment and might have spoken up for both positions since its foundation. Also, due to continuing rent increases over the past years, the party may have just reached an agreement on implementing rent limits. Similarly, parties may hold, or develop, positions concerning cultural policy, and might advocate for artistic freedom, an extension of patent rights and a stronger involvement of private funding.

After the decision on parties' positions towards specific problems, parties will decide on the *salience of issues*.[2] The salience decision implies that a party agrees on the issues it wants to emphasize and de-emphasize in its electoral campaign. This second decision will depend on parties' positions, but is expected to be made independently from the third decision on campaign strategies, i.e. the decision on clarity. Again, this reasoning presumes that looking at a single (left-right) dimension only allows for a limited perspective on political competition and that parties compete over a great variety of different issue dimensions. Parties will attribute different saliences to different issues, as not all of these issues are equally valuable to them. Lipset and Rokkan (1990 [1967]) have insightfully argued that parties emerged alongside continuing societal cleavages. These founding conflicts make up a party's core ideology and it seems reasonable that they impact campaign strategies. In a similar way, scholars from both salience theory and issue ownership theory distinguish between core and neglected dimensions. These studies expect, and empirically show, that parties put emphasis on their favourable issues (Robertson, 1976; Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996).

Fig. 1 demonstrates two examples of salience decisions. With respect to the first issue, the party decides to allocate a substantial amount of its campaign content to this issue. Whereas concerning

---

[1] This article's primary goal is to explain which campaign strategy is chosen under which conditions. Since I am therefore interested in parties' campaign strategies as a whole, I assume that parties are unitary actors, i.e. single actors that each put forward one campaign strategy.

[2] A similar argument can be found in Wagner (2012, 66) who argues that parties' positions precede salience decisions.