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Parties' issue strategies on the drawing board: the 2017 Austrian case

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ABSTRACT


Parties may rely on different issue agendas when tailoring their electoral campaigns in an attempt to win elections. This paper compares two key party issue strategies to examine which one the victorious Austrian Peoples' Party (ÖVP) relied on the most during the 2017 Austrian election campaign vis-à-vis its main competitors. These two key party strategies are the 'riding-the-wave' model, which posits that parties focus on issues that currently concern voters the most and the recent 'issue-yield model', which instead suggests that parties adopt strategic behaviour targeting all those issues with genuine opportunities for electoral expansion. It is found that, compared to the other main parties in the 2017 Austrian election campaign, the ÖVP was the one most clearly relying on the issue-yield approach. These results have important implications for our understanding of electoral campaigns, party's exploitation of issue strategies, and voter representation beyond the Austrian case.

KEYWORDS Systemic saliency; issue-yield model; election campaign; party issue strategy; Austria

By winning the Austrian general election on 15 October 2017, at 31 years old, Sebastian Kurz became one of the youngest European heads of government ever. The Austrian former foreign and integration minister led his party, the Austrian Peoples' Party (ÖVP), to a clear victory obtaining 31.5% of the vote share. This represents a vote increase of 7.5 percentage points compared to the previous national election held in 2013.

From a long-term perspective, the ÖVP's victory is quite remarkable. The party's vote share has declined constantly over the last decade, with an all-time low in the 2013 general election, when the ÖVP obtained only 24% of the vote. From 2013 to mid-2017, opinion polls¹ indicated ÖVP

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support at around 20%— a crushing standing for a party that has been one of the dominant actors of post-World War II Austrian politics. In addition, during the presidential election, which took place in April 2016, the ÖVP presidential candidate was soundly defeated, obtaining just 11.1% of the votes and finishing only fifth. In the meantime, the saliency of the issues related to immigration, which started dominating Austrian politics soon after the refugee crisis began in 2015, played well for the far-right party, the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ): from mid-2015 until spring 2017, the FPÖ was leading in opinion polls with support rates above 30%.

Yet as soon as Sebastian Kurz took over the leadership of the ÖVP in May 2017, support for the FPÖ started dropping and that for the ÖVP skyrocketed to over 30%. At that time, Kurz announced the end of the grand coalition with the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) and called for early election. He also began a modernisation of the party in preparation for the upcoming national election, changing both the party's name (from ÖVP to 'List Sebastian Kurz – the new ÖVP') and its corporate design (Bodlos and Plescia 2018; Bodlos *et al.* 2019). While it is not surprising that a change in leadership brought renewed energy to the party (Bynander and Hart 2006), it is remarkable that support for the ÖVP remained high and even slightly increased during the election campaign. How was it possible for Kurz and the ÖVP to achieve this enormous gain in support resulting in a landslide victory on 15 October?

In this article, we seek to evaluate which issue strategy the ÖVP adopted during the electoral campaign in order to set its victory in perspective. We do so by exploring, on the one hand, the issue priorities and ideological configurations of the Austrian electorate, and, on the other hand, by studying how that is mirrored in the electoral issue strategies of the ÖVP and its main competitors. These were the incumbent chancellor's party, the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ), which managed to obtain 26.9% of the votes in 2017, an almost identical vote share to 2013; the FPÖ, which gained 26% of the votes, about 5.5 percentage points more than in 2013; the Greens, which failed, for the first time since 1986, to reach the 4% threshold to enter the Parliament; a Green spin-off, the Liste Peter Pilz, that similarly to NEOS (New Austria and Liberal Forum), managed to gather just enough votes to enter the Parliament (4.4% and 5.3% respectively). Specifically, and in line with the main aim of the special issue this article is part of, we compare two main models on how parties effectively plan their electoral issue strategies. The first is the traditional, 'riding-the-wave' approach (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994), which expects parties to primarily highlight political issues that are salient for voters and thus be successful by leveraging the systemic saliency of specific issues. The second one is the more recent

issue-yield model developed by De Sio and Weber (2014), which states that parties shape their campaigns by focusing not necessarily exclusively on salient issues but rather on 'optimal' policy issues that entail an opportunity for expanding their electoral base.

In order to compare these models, we collected two types of original data in the Austrian context: on the one hand, we fielded a public opinion survey aimed at capturing voters' priorities, their ideological positions and party issue credibility on more than 30 policy issues; on the other hand, we collected data on party communication on the exact same policy issues by focusing on Twitter feeds of parties and their leading candidates during the entire campaign period. Data collection closely follows the efforts conducted in the other countries involved in the Issue Competition Comparative Project (ICCP).

The reliance on both party communication and voter survey data allows us to evaluate simultaneously both the issue stances and priorities of the Austrian citizens and how the ÖVP has acted vis-à-vis the other parties on the electoral issue opportunities that the electoral campaign provided. This permits us to examine which issue strategies parties adopt while capturing two important and related questions: first, the extent to which citizens' positioning is still consistent with traditional models of the political space, based on either a single left-right dimension or on a two-dimensional space with an economic and a socio-cultural dimension; second, the extent to which parties emphasise 'conflict mobilisation strategies', typical of positional issues, or 'performance politics strategies', stressing their problem-solving capacity, which is more commonly associated with valence issues (Sanders *et al.* 2011; Stokes 1963). These two related questions allow us to understand the issue opportunities parties faced during the electoral campaign by looking simultaneously at the demand-side ideological positionings and the supply-side problem solving vs. conflict mobilisation that characterised the 2017 Austrian election campaign.

While the focus of the paper is on the Austrian case, its importance reaches beyond and is twofold. First, we explore the dynamics of multi-party competition between issue saliency and preference distribution, investigating how parties maximise their support by integrating the priorities and preferences of their competitors' voters. This is important especially today due to an increasing presence of parties that challenge existing party system structures by relying on specific issue packages and electoral issue strategies (e.g. Kriesi *et al.* 2008; Mudde 2007). In this regard, Austria is an important case as it exemplifies a mainstream party successfully capitalising on available issue opportunities to contain populist opponents. This suggests that populist parties are not 'doomed to

succeed', but have been succeeding because they strategically exploit available opportunities. A mainstream party, the ÖVP, that is doing the same can successfully contain them. Second, a general model of political competition that unites public opinion, party unity, and electoral support – such as issue yield – highlights the issue risks and opportunities for the different parties, and how parties might be able to exploit them. This assessment is important as it allows us to gauge the extent to which parties represent those who vote for them and hence investigates representation in policy terms (e.g. Dalton *et al.* 2011). The scientific analysis of the empirical linkages between parties and their supporters thus not only offers important empirical evidence of recent changes in party issue competition but also contributes to the literature on representation by showing whether and to what extent the parties respond to the public agenda.

Theoretical considerations: party strategies applied to the Austrian case

In the classical definition of party competition proposed by Downs, parties compete for voters and voters choose parties on the bases of their ideological positions on certain issues (Downs 1957). As documented in Green-Pedersen (2007) among others, party competition in Western Europe is increasingly characterised by issue competition along the ideological lines of parties. This suggests that the fundamental representational linkage between voters and parties takes place at the issue level (see also Plescia and Staniek 2017). Therefore, the selection by political parties of issues that will make up their electoral agendas lies at the very core of the process of representation (e.g. De Sio 2018). But which issues do parties emphasise during election campaigns?

The existing literature on party competition is vast and arrives at different predictions (e.g. Klüver and Spoon 2016; Wagner and Meyer 2014). In this paper, we consider two major theoretical approaches to test which issue strategy the victorious ÖVP leveraged on during the 2017 Austrian national election and compare it to the other main Austrian parties.

The first theoretical approach is known as the riding-the-wave approach (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994), which posits that political parties primarily respond to voters by highlighting, during election campaigns, those political issues that top the public agenda. Such strategy resonates well with voters which will consider these parties to be responsive towards their concerns. Meanwhile, parties avoiding or neglecting these issues may be considered indifferent towards citizen concerns, possibly leading to electoral defeat. In addition, if parties fail to jump on salient issues, they can hardly participate in how the issue is framed in the public

debate (e.g. Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Sides 2006). The main testable implication of this approach is that parties will place more emphasis on those issues that have *high systemic saliency* amongst the *entire electorate*. Thus, while a party's issue strategy is also influenced and constrained by the activities of other political parties (see Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2015), systemic saliency here refers to the public agenda; that is, parties reproducing in their issue emphasis the overall issue saliency of the general public (see also De Sio and Weber 2019).

Recent theoretical contributions have shown that parties are indeed in part responsive to a general public and media agenda (e.g. Steenbergen and Scott 2004; Wagner 2012), but in part also focus on issues they are known to own (Dolezal *et al.* 2014). These are policy areas where parties have long-term credibility for handling the issue well (e.g. Budge and Farlie 1983; Green 2011; Petrocik 1996). Building on these findings, De Sio and Weber (2014) have proposed a synthetic model – the issue-yield model – which posits that parties select campaign issues based on whether a policy (a) enjoys a level of support in the general electorate that is (significantly) larger than the party's standing level of support and (b) is positively associated in both a substantive and statistical sense with the party so that the party is regarded a credible actor to achieve the proposed goal. As further discussed in D'Alimonte *et al.* (2019) and De Sio and Weber (2019), issue yield is theoretically distinct from issue ownership since the former unlike the latter does not assume a valence conceptualisation of party competition or a relatively static ownership patterns (see also De Sio and Weber 2014).

The main testable implication of the issue-yield approach is that parties will shape their election campaign by focusing on *optimal* policy issues, which are those issues as *little internally divisive* as possible (so as to allow parties to safely campaign on them without splitting or expelling their own party base aligned within a certain ideological space), and thus provide parties with a genuine opportunity for *electoral expansion*. These issues can also be classified as 'bridge' policies as they may serve as bridges between the party's own voters and potential new voters, hence offering parties an opportunity to gain votes without losing (many) existing party supporters (De Sio and Weber 2014: 875). Pursuing such an issue strategy can not only lead to new voters but, ideally, also drive a wedge in other parties' electorate. However, compared to such wedge issues (see van der Wardt *et al.* 2014), the main goal of 'bridge' policies is to expand their own party's electorate rather than to strategically divide other parties' voter base.

Additional electoral issue opportunities and limitations are also closely connected to the saliency voters attribute to certain issues during the

election campaign. For instance, if support on certain policies has increased over time, the potential to gain new voters increases only if parties concentrate and obtain credibility on handling these policy issues, while they should refrain from touching upon those issues that are at odds with the party's overall ideology. This could alienate their party base and create intra-party conflicts. Rather, they should focus on policy issues that enjoy high support and credibility within the party base even if they might not enjoy high priority beyond that party group. These 'pamper' policies are likely to strengthen the party's own identity albeit being unlikely to attract new voters. Parties could also be more adventurous in their strategy and push for issues that enjoy low support within the party but are highly supported by the electorate at large, thus providing an opportunity to gain new votes. Such strategy bears the risk of intra-party conflict and of losing a significant share of the party's own base – hence the name 'venture' policies. Eventually, the issue saliency of voters also indicates whether certain issues are 'dead-end' in so far as they enjoy low support both in the larger electorate and amongst the party's own base (see De Sio and Weber 2014).

To examine the type of issue strategy Austrian parties used in 2017, we compare the ÖVP issue strategy to those used by the other main parties: did parties mainly rely on systemic saliency when choosing which issues to emphasise, or did they tailor their issue campaign by strategically targeting a certain realm of voters to obtain electoral gains? Did they opt for a mixture of the two strategies?

Data and methods

The research design of this paper follows closely that of this special issue. To measure our dependent variable, that is Austrian parties' issue strategies during the election campaign, we rely on Twitter feeds for each party and for its leading candidate(s). The classical, most used methods for capturing parties' strategic issue emphasis are party manifestos and press releases (see Klüver and Spoon 2016). As social media like Twitter have become widely accessible and also powerful forms of party communication, scholars have started to consider them as an important new type of political communication tool in recent years (see Barberá 2015). This special issue follows this latest line of investigation by centring on the content diffused through parties' Twitter accounts to capture their strategic political communication during the campaign.

There are several reasons why party communication on Twitter provides a better alternative to party manifestos and party press releases to measure party strategies during election campaigns. First, Twitter is

suitable to capture the dynamic nature of election campaigns. Unlike the *static* party manifestos, on Twitter parties can quickly adapt their political messages to actual campaign events (e.g. Graham *et al.* 2013). Furthermore, De Nooy and Kleinnijenhuis (2013) have pointed out that on Twitter parties ‘reveal’ their genuine party positions as they do not have to accommodate the diverging interests that stem from within the party. Second, Twitter is interactive by nature and it offers both a direct and indirect element of communication. For one thing, parties can circumvent journalistic selection criteria and directly approach their audiences. Parties have the possibility to interact with their voters. For another thing, issue positions and strategic changes are communicated in an indirect way, since Twitter is also used by journalists and other political actors to learn about party strategies (e.g. Bruns and Burgess 2011; Vaccari and Valeriani 2015).

Using Twitter data is obviously not without drawbacks. In particular, the validity of our conclusions is conditional on a necessary theoretical assumption, the so-called *press-release assumption* that is defined as follows:

regardless of how many followers (and of which type) a party’s Twitter account might have, and regardless of how unrepresentative and elitist the Twitter audience might be in a given country, ... parties will use Twitter to communicate their desired messages to the media, just like in a press release. (De Sio *et al.* 2017: 11)

The appropriateness of this assumption appears well supported by previous empirical research (Kreiss 2016; Parmelee 2013; Parmelee and Bichard 2011). In the Austrian case, Twitter has become increasingly popular among political parties and their candidates (Ausserhofer and Maireder 2013). A study of the national election campaign in 2013 showed that in particular established parties and office holders use Twitter as a communication tool (Dolezal 2015). Moreover, as Twitter is extensively used by journalists and the media in Austria (Schlögl and Maireder 2015) indirect interaction with the public is particularly high. Hence, we consider parties’ Twitter communication a valid indicator of Austrian parties’ issues priorities and rely on Twitter feeds for each party and for its leading candidate(s) to measure party issue emphasis.

To this end, during the six weeks before the election, we collected and coded the Twitter content of the six main parties running for elections – ÖVP, SPÖ, FPÖ, Greens, NEOS, and Liste Pilz – and their leading candidates.² We collected a total of 4322 Tweets, which were coded by two independent coders to assess intercoder reliability of the coding scheme.³ The coders were instructed to code the Tweets into specific issue categories as well as to identify Tweets dealing with non-issue content. Our

dependent variable is the share – of all Tweets with issue content – of parties' Twitter emphasis on each issue for each party.⁴

In order to evaluate which issue strategies parties used, we conducted a pre-election online Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) survey with about 1000 respondents covering an unusually large number of issues relevant to the election campaign.⁵ Importantly, to link the party data with public opinion data, the survey measures the priority and the positioning of voters on the same categories as the coded Twitter feeds. To cover the most important topics in the Austrian political landscape as comprehensively as possible, two country experts were asked before the start of the election campaign to first identify politically relevant and meaningful issues, and then to translate them into politically meaningful *goals* (two rival goals for positional issues, one shared goal for valence issues). In total, 21 *positional* issues were chosen that relate to both economic (e.g. pension age, minimum wage, and income differences) and socio-cultural issues (e.g. gay marriage, gender quotas, and renewable energy) including a large set of issues concerning immigration (e.g. asylum rules, welfare benefits for immigrants, cultural adaptation of immigrants). Additionally, we surveyed 10 *valence* issues that span inter alia control of immigration, protection from terrorism, fighting unemployment, and protection of the environment (see below for the full list of issues). The distinction between positional and valence issues allows us to capture empirically which parties mobilised voters on the basis of conflictual issues rather than following a problem-solving approach. Data collection for the survey started about one month prior to the election date and the classification of issues as either economic or cultural takes into account the prevailing framing in the public debate as assessed by the country experts (see D'Alimonte *et al.* 2019).

For each issue in the survey we measured the main aspects that allow us to evaluate the Austrian parties' issue strategies in general and that of the ÖVP in particular. For valence issues, respondents were asked which priority a specific goal has – high, average, or low priority. For positional issues, respondents were first asked to position themselves using a scale from 1 to 6, and then asked which priority that side of the issue has for Austria. From these variables we constructed our two main independent variables. The first *independent* variable is *systemic saliency*, which simply represents the percentage of all respondents (in the whole sample) that reported the issue as having high priority.⁶ The second *independent* variable is *issue yield*, which is a summary measure combining the general level of support among all respondents for a certain issue (= percentage of all respondents that reported the issue as having high priority) and the within-party support (= percentage of party supporters that reported

the issue as having high priority), with both components being weighted by party credibility (= percentage of all respondents considering that party to be able to handle that particular issue) (see De Sio and Weber 2019, for the detailed formula).⁷ An issue will be associated with a high yield when all voters generally believe that a party is credible in dealing with a specific issue. Moreover, the more the party's own supporters align with the overall electorate in perceiving the issue as very important, the higher the issue yield for that party on that issue. Conversely, the more the party's own supporters and the electorate disagree on the party's credibility in handling the issue, the less likely it is that the issue will be valuable for the party in strategic terms when trying to expand its electoral base.

Voters' issue preferences and priorities during the 2017 Austrian election

To which electoral issue opportunities and limitations were Austrian parties exposed during the 2017 election campaign in terms of saliency and issue positioning of the electorate? To answer this question, we start our foray into the empirical findings by looking at public opinion data.

First, we examine which issues Austrian citizens regarded as salient during the election campaign as well as their positioning on these issues. [Table 1](#) shows for both sets of issues – positional and valence – their systemic saliency. Given that valence issues represent a mono-directional goal, e.g. fighting corruption, [Table 1](#) simply lists the percentage of all respondents (in the whole sample) that attached a high priority to that goal instead of a low or medium priority. For positional issues instead, we consider the systemic saliency of the side (left or right) with the highest support (in bold in [Table 1](#)). For the majority of the electorate four valence issues dominated in priority: fighting unemployment, fighting crime, protecting Austria from terrorist attacks, and controlling immigration. Among the positional issues, those with the highest saliency are more restrictive asylum rules and welfare rights for immigrants, enforcement of refugee quotas, followed by a positive stance on EU membership and keeping the current pension age. Considering both positional and valence issue, the electorate clearly gave priority to immigration issues but also ranked two issues related to the economic dimension – poverty and unemployment – high on the political agenda. At the lowest level of concern for the electorate were the cultural positional issues related to gay marriage and gender quotas as well as reform of the obligatory membership in trade associations typical of the Austrian context.

Second, we look at voters' issue positioning, which allows us to examine the ideological space of the Austrian electorate. A cursory look at the two

Table 1. Issues and priorities during the 2017 election campaign (valence issues in italics; salient side of positional issue set in bold).

Issue	Systemic saliency (%)
<i>Fight unemployment</i>	83.86
<i>Fight crime</i>	83.49
<i>Protect Austria against terrorist attacks</i>	83.43
<i>Control immigration</i>	82.28
Keep current asylum rules	Make asylum rules more restrictive
<i>Fighting poverty of elderly people</i>	81.25
The EU has to enforce refugee quotas in member states	Member states should decide refugee quotas on their own
Maintain current levels of welfare benefits for immigrants	Restrict access to welfare benefits for immigrants
<i>Providing affordable homes</i>	79.82
<i>Fight corruption</i>	79.35
Stay in the EU	Leave the EU
<i>Providing social justice</i>	77.69
Allow foreigners in Austria to preserve their own culture	Require foreigners in Austria to fully adapt to Austrian culture
<i>Protect the environment</i>	77.53
Keep current pension age	Increase pension age
<i>Support economic growth</i>	73.06
Decrease unemployment even at the expense of high national debt	Do not decrease unemployment at the expense of high national debt
Promoting the production of sustainable energy	Maintaining the current mix of sustainable and fossil energy
Keep current regulations in the job market	Deregulate the job market
Reduce income differences	Don't reduce income differences
Increase the minimum wage above 1500 euros	Do not increase the minimum wage above 1500 euros
Introduce stronger direct democracy measures	Keep current level of direct democracy measures
Allow freedom of movement of people from the EU into Austria	End freedom of movement of people from the EU into Austria
Raise taxes and spend more on health and social services	Cut taxes and spend less on health and social services
Austria should have a property tax on inheritance	Austria should not have a property tax on inheritance
Surveillance measures should not be extended	Surveillance measures should be extended
Austria should introduce a comprehensive school for all children until the age of 14	Austria should not introduce a comprehensive school for all children until the age of 14
Diesel cars should be banned	No cars should be banned
Austria should not abolish the obligatory membership in trade associations	Austria should abolish the obligatory membership in trade associations
Politics should implement gender quotas	Politics should not enforce gender quotas
Allow same sex marriage	Do not allow same sex marriage

sides of each positional issue in Table 1 suggests that the electorate was to some extent split between supporting some positions clearly on the left side (left column in Table 1) like keeping the current pension age,

decreasing unemployment at the expense of high national debt, and reducing income differences, and some positions clearly on the right side (right column in Table 1) like restricting access to welfare benefits for immigrants and making asylum rules more restrictive. To examine the ideological position of the Austrian electorate in more detail, and in line with one of the overall research questions of this special issue, in Figure 1 we present the ideological position of the electorate on some key issues. We do so by comparing issues traditionally considered part of the economic dimension such as reducing income differences and deregulation of the job market with issues linked to the socio-cultural dimension like protection of the environment and immigration issues (e.g. Bakker *et al.* 2012).

In Figure 1 each party name represents the mean position of the electorate that intends to vote for that party on socio-cultural issues (plotted on the y-axis) and economic ones (plotted on the x-axis). The closer the names are to the diagonal line the stronger and more positive is the relationship between economic and socio-cultural issues; if the party names are exactly on the diagonal line, it is reasonable to assert that the placements are essentially on a single left-right dimension and we would be able to perfectly estimate the position on the economic issue by knowing the position on the socio-cultural one (and vice versa).

We observe quite conspicuous differences across parties' electorates where the electorate on the left – including the Greens and to some extent the NEOS and SPÖ supporters – positions itself closer to the diagonal line. The contrast between the supporters of these parties and the FPÖ is rather striking in most of the plots. Specifically, we see that supporters of the FPÖ hold very right-leaning positions on issues concerning immigration but rather left-leaning positions on economic issues. To some extent this also applies to ÖVP supporters as well as for the overall mean of the electorate. Moving to the so-called 'new issues' like environmental protection and same sex marriage (e.g. Kitschelt and Hellemans 1990), we see that parties' electorates fall more or less along a single (left) dimension. Hence, we have some indication of a de-ideologisation of the electorate, especially of FPÖ and ÖVP supporters. However, it is not the classical two-dimensional space that replaces the left-right dimension, but we rather identify on the one hand a space that includes economic and some of the socio-cultural issues and is rather leftish oriented, and on the other hand a space that *only* includes issues of immigration and is oriented towards the right. For the electorate of the centre-left parties this cannot be observed to the same extent.

Third, we explore which issue provides the highest issue yield for which party. To this end, Figure 2 shows the values of issue yield for the 10 most salient positional issues (due to space constraints the values for

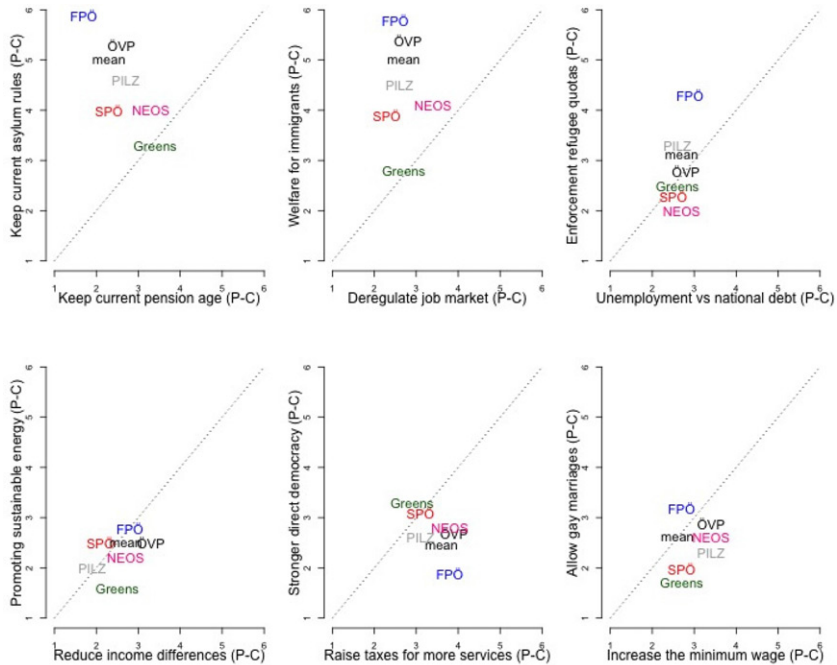


Figure 1. Parties' electorates in a two-dimensional space.

Note: Each party name represents the mean position of the electorate that intends to vote for that party. P and C in the graph stand for progressive and conservative positions respectively.

the remaining positional issues are shown in the [online appendix](#)). For both the ÖVP and the FPÖ, stricter and more conservative policy positions on immigration show high levels of issue yield: this means that such issues were clearly supported by the parties' own bases as well as the overall electorate, and furthermore the two parties enjoyed high credibility on these issues. For the ÖVP, certain economic issues like the reduction of income differences or decrease in unemployment vs. national debt show only medium levels of issue yield. This is because these issues enjoyed wide support in the larger electorate but were of only low saliency amongst these party supporters. For the FPÖ it is interesting to note that the party has no yield on two salient issues – membership in the EU and EU enforcement of refugee quotas. This is due to the fact that the FPÖ party base was fully at odds with the overall larger electorate: while the FPÖ supporters do not favour EU membership and the enforcement of refugee quotas by the EU, the electorate at large holds opposite stances on these issues. Campaigning on these issues would thus certainly have appealed to the party's own electoral base without winning over new voters.

The SPÖ shows high values of issue yield on traditional economic and social issues such as reduction of income difference, the decrease of

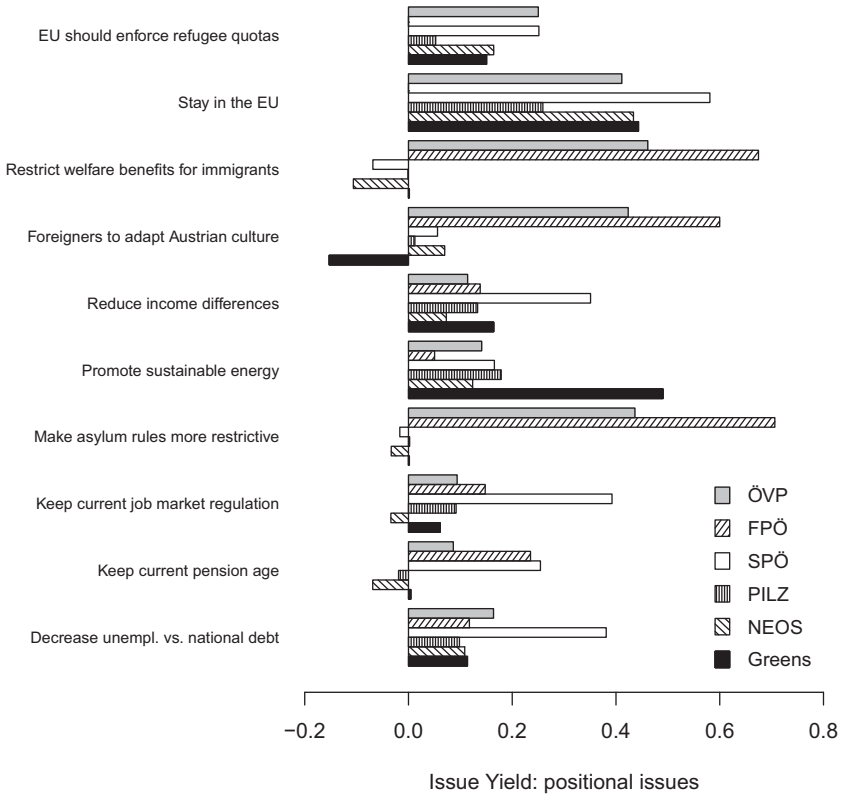


Figure 2. Issue yield by party on the 10 most salient *positional* issues.

unemployment and staying in the EU. Yet on several salient issues related to immigration, like requiring foreigners to adapt to the Austrian culture or restricting asylum rules, the party shows very low levels of issue yield. This is due to the fact that these issues enjoyed extremely high support in the electorate but not amongst SPÖ supporters. Thus, there was little to gain for the SPÖ in terms of new voters in campaigning on salient issues related to immigration – rather, it risked alienating its party base. A comparison between the three larger parties and the three smaller parties shows that for the Greens, NEOS, and Liste Pilz, there were no clear positional issues on which the parties enjoyed very high issue yields, with the exception made for the Greens which were associated with a high yield on the issue of promoting sustainable energy which enjoyed a decent level of saliency among the entire electorate as seen in Table 1. This implies that for the smaller parties it was difficult to obtain their issue places in the 2017 electoral agenda.

Moving to the valence issues (see Figure 3), we can observe that the large parties dominate in all of them except for the issue of environment and corruption, on which the Greens and the Liste Pilz respectively have

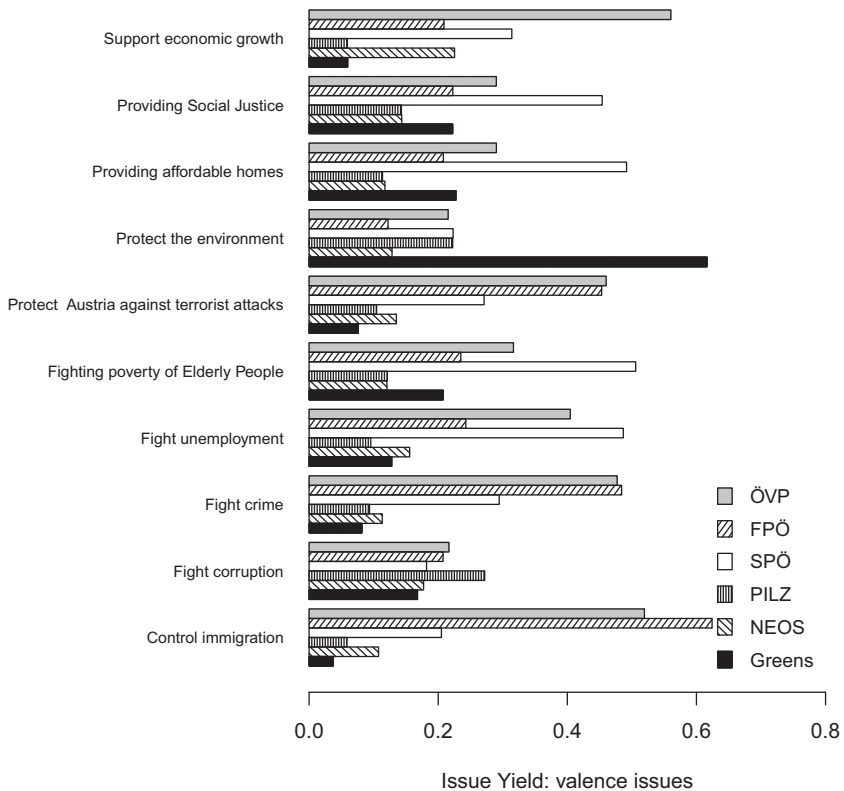


Figure 3. Issue yield by party on the 10 most salient *valence* issues.

the highest yield. Though it is interesting to observe that the parties on the right, the ÖVP and FPÖ, and the main party on the left, the SPÖ, differ along the economic and immigration issues: while the immigration issue clearly offers the highest yield to the ÖVP and FPÖ, this is not the case for the SPÖ, which, however, enjoys high yields on social issues. Comparing the issue yield of positional and valence issues, we also obtain an impression on which policy issues parties should respond to with conflictual strategies (e.g. restrict welfare for immigrants for the FPÖ and ÖVP) and when problem-solving capacities should be at the forefront (e.g. unemployment for the SPÖ, immigration control for the ÖVP and FPÖ).

Parties' communication during the 2017 Austrian election

As a first step to see the extent to which parties acted on these opportunities, we explore party data looking at the distribution of party emphasis as measured using Twitter. Table 2 reports, for each party, the total number of tweets coded as positional, valence, and non-issue content made

Table 2. Twitter saliency by issue and by party (column %).

Positional issue	ÖVP	SPÖ	FPÖ	Greens	NEOS	PILZ
<i>Cultural issues:</i> Asylum rules	0.4	1.9	9.7	2.4	3.4	4.2
Adaptation of foreigners to Austrian culture	7.6	4.3	15.3	1.6	5.6	2.4
Diesel cars		2.1		2.4		3.0
Stronger direct democracy measures	0.6		6.9	0.8	1.7	
Leave or stay in the EU	7.2	1.2	2.8	5.1	13.7	
Freedom of movement	0.2			0.4	1.4	
Gay marriage	0.2	1.4		3.6	1.4	
Gender quotas	0.6				0.3	
Refugee quotas enforcement	0.2	0.2		2.0	1.4	
Comprehensive school	0.2	0.7		0.8		
Welfare benefits for immigrants	5.9	0.5	15.3	1.2	1.4	1.2
Surveillance measures	0.4	0.2		0.8	3.1	1.8
Sustainable and fossil energy	0.4	0.7	1.4	3.6	0.6	
<i>Economic issues:</i> Income differences	4.2	7.4	1.4	2.8	5.6	1.2
Job market deregulation	0.9	3.1		2.4	2.5	
Minimum wage		1.4		1.2		0.6
Pension age	0.7	1.0			8.7	
Property tax on inheritance	0.7	5.0	1.4	3.2	0.6	3.0
Redistribution	11.6	16.0	1.4	5.1	9.5	19.8
Obligatory membership in trade associations	0.6	0.7			3.9	1.2
Decrease unemployment vs. national debt		1.7			1.7	
Valence issue	ÖVP	SPÖ	FPÖ	Greens	NEOS	PILZ
<i>Cultural issues:</i> Fight corruption	0.4	2.4		6.3	5.3	26.3
Fight crime	6.8	2.6	11.1	2.4	0.3	4.8
Protect the environment	1.5	3.8		32.4	5.3	7.8
Control immigration	24.3	5.3	18.1	2.4	4.2	5.4
Providing social justice	8.8	17.4	4.2	9.1	5.0	14.4
Protect Austria against terrorist attacks	3.7	0.5	6.9		0.3	
<i>Economic issues:</i> Support economic growth	7.4	4.3		0.4	2.0	1.2
Providing affordable homes	0.9	7.9		6.3	4.8	1.8
Fighting poverty of elderly people	1.5	2.6	4.2	1.2	5.0	
Fight unemployment	2.4	3.6		0.4	1.4	
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100	100
Total (N)	543	419	72	253	357	167
Non-issue content						
Total (N)	751	371	167	281	577	360

during the electoral campaign. As can be easily noted, the total number of tweets coded as issues (both positional and valence) represents about half of the total number of tweets made by the official accounts of parties and their leaders (1811 out of 4318). The rest of the tweets (2507) actually dealt with the campaign dynamics, often mentioning other political actors or political events rather than more substantive topics.⁸ The ratio between issue and non-issue content is rather balanced across parties; only the FPÖ and the Liste Pilz have higher numbers of tweets not related to any policy issue. There is also a large variability in the absolute number of tweets released by each party, with the SPÖ and ÖVP having a relatively large number of tweets compared to the other parties.

Table 2 also illustrates the percentages of tweets across issues and parties. Not all parties focus on all issues. The ÖVP and SPÖ talk about most of the issues – like the NEOS – while the FPÖ and Liste Pilz are the most selective

ones.⁹ For example, the FPÖ has the highest focus on immigration issues while almost ignoring issues related to social service and unemployment. The SPÖ was much more hesitant to mention the issue of immigration but emphasised its core topics like social justice, unemployment, inheritance taxes, and affordable homes. Meanwhile, the ÖVP certainly focused strongly on issues connected to immigration, but not only: its issue repertoire also included economic and social issues like the reduction of income differences and the increase of social services. We evaluate this as a first indication that the ÖVP issue strategy differed from the one of its main competitors. Specifically, the ÖVP had a much larger focus compared to the FPÖ, spanning several types of issues, while compared to the SPÖ it went well beyond its long-term reputation: it focused on owned economic issues as well as on issues historically owned by another party, like immigration. Eventually, the Greens did not focus much on issues related to immigration but more on the environment and social justice. In this regard, the comparison between the Greens and its spin-off Liste Pilz is interesting. Compared to previous election campaigns, the Greens focused very little on the issue of corruption, while it was a central issue for the Liste Pilz. This is clearly in line with what we would have expected as its leader – Peter Pilz – has been a well-known ‘corruption fighter’, and implicitly provides face validity for our measure of Twitter emphasis.

Which party strategy? ÖVP issue strategies versus its main competitors

Next, multivariate analyses are used to address the following question: did parties use the electoral issue opportunities strategically or did they mainly rely on systemic saliency? We run regression models in which the dependent variable captures parties’ political communication using the *proportion* of Tweets assigned to issue categories by each party. Given that our dependent variable is a proportion, it is constrained between 0 and 1 with a strong asymmetrical distribution (see [Figure A1](#) in the [online appendix](#)). In cases like this, predictions from a linear model are likely to lead to an underestimation of the uncertainty in our inferences. Thus, following previous applications of the issue-yield model (De Sio *et al.* 2017), we opt to treat our dependent variable as a distribution censored at 0 and run a Tobit model, with errors clustered by party size. Our two main independent variables are the issue saliency and issue yield described above. Given that the two independent variables have a different theoretical range, with issue saliency ranging from 0 to 1 and issue yield between -1 and $+1$, to compare their impact on Twitter emphasis we standardised them by centring and dividing by two standard deviations (Gelman 2008).

Table 3. Explaining Twitter emphasis in Austria 2017 election: Tobit models.

	Dependent variable: Twitter emphasis		
	(Model 1)	(Model 2)	(Model 3)
Issue yield	0.053*** (0.010)		0.048*** (0.009)
Issue saliency		0.041*** (0.010)	0.031*** (0.007)
Constant	0.022** (0.007)	0.021*** (0.006)	0.022** (0.007)
Variance (party share)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.004*** (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)
<i>N</i>	186	186	186
<i>AIC</i>	−327.294	−308.767	−338.530
<i>BIC</i>	−317.617	−299.090	−325.627
Variance explained	0.198	0.091	0.250

Note: Standard errors in parentheses: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Robust standard errors clustered by party size.

Table 3 shows the impact of issue yield and salience on Austrian parties' overall issue emphases. The first set of models (Models 1–2) includes the two main independent variables separately while Model 3 considers both systemic saliency and the issue yield together. Models 1–2 suggest that systemic saliency as well as issue yield have a positive and significant effect on parties' Twitter emphasis. The values of the variance explained indicate that both are rather good predictors of party issue strategies with the issue-yield model performing better than the model on issue saliency.¹⁰ Model 3 shows that even after combining the two indicators in one model, both remain significant predictors of Twitter emphasis, with the issue-yield measure exerting a slightly stronger influence on party emphases. Specifically, an increase in the issue yield of a specific issue leads to an increase of the Twitter emphasis share of a party of almost 5 percentage points while the corresponding values for the issue saliency is a little over 3 percentage points. The combined model is also the one performing better overall, as suggested by the variance explained indicator. Overall, these results indicate that parties respond in the set-up of their issue strategies both to the public agenda and to the larger issue opportunities the electorate offers whereby parties seem to focus more on the latter strategy. But what about the strategies of the individual parties?

The estimation of party-specific coefficients (through interactions) allows us to assess for each party whether one of the two approaches is predominant and, if so, which one. Figure 4 shows in graphical form the impact of issue yield versus systemic saliency in predicting party Twitter emphasis separately for each party (full results are available in the [online appendix, Table A1](#)). For all other parties, their campaign strategies build on issues with the respective highest yield. In other words, the larger

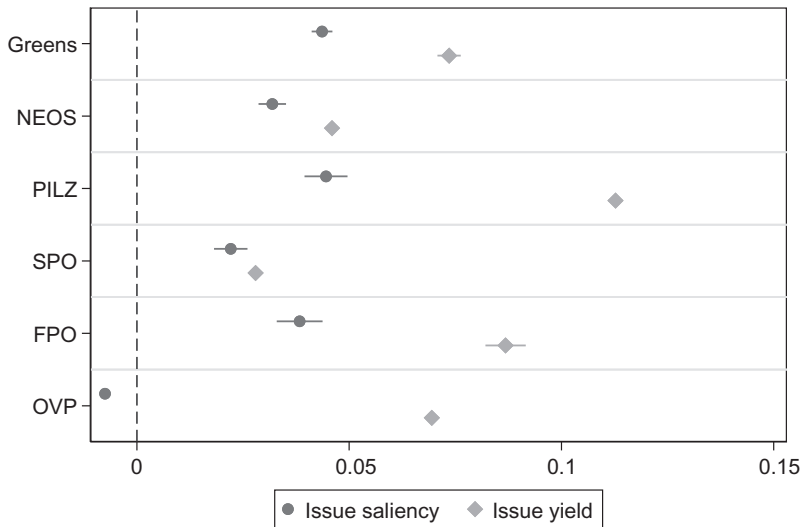


Figure 4. Marginal effects of systemic saliency and issue yield on Twitter emphasis.

the issue-yield impact on the prediction of Twitter emphasis, the less the party's strategic behaviour is relying on the saliency of an issue in the public agenda rather than targeting an issue specifically to increase its support amongst a larger electorate than its own party base. Interestingly, we see that the parties with the highest differentiation between issue yield and systemic saliency are the winners of the 2017 election: the ÖVP and the FPÖ, as well as the newly created Liste Pilz. Most importantly, in the case of the ÖVP the focus on the issue yield is predominant while systemic saliency is slightly negative. This means that the ÖVP concentrated mostly on issues that were clearly supported amongst its own party base, but also by a large segment of the electorate not yet voting for the ÖVP. By emphasising immigration issues that were also encompassing issues like social welfare and terrorism, the ÖVP clearly focused on policy issues that had the highest yield for the party. It needs to be pointed out that it was mainly the right-leaning positions of ÖVP supporters on immigration issues (see Figure 1) that allowed the ÖVP to align its issue strategy strongly on this set of issues. The additional emphasis on issues like income differences and providing social justice (see Table 1) provided the party with an opportunity to expand its electoral base also on socio-economic grounds and hence beyond the issue of immigration (see Figure 1). Meanwhile, on highly salient issues like the decrease of unemployment at the expense of national debt, the ÖVP remained rather silent as its own party base had diverging positions compared to those of the overall electorate. Overall, the ÖVP was best able to emphasise those bridge policies

that allowed the party to expand its existing party base while retaining its core supporters.

The FPÖ, with its focus on immigration issues, also falls into the category of behaving according to the issue-yield model, but at the same time its campaign strategy was more influenced by systemic saliency. To a certain extent, the FPÖ was more restricted in its issue strategy than the ÖVP: it addressed issues that were high in priority for the electorate but where the FPÖ did not necessarily obtain (large) support from its party base, such as staying in the EU or reducing income differences. With this strategy, the FPÖ tried 'venture' policies to win over new voter groups: for instance, reversing the position on the EU membership of Austria certainly appealed to certain voter groups that would not have voted for it in former elections, with the risk of alienating its supporters. Given the high yield the FPÖ had on immigration issues, it could risk going for some venture policies as well. Both strategies worked well for the FPÖ on Election Day.

Meanwhile, for the SPÖ we find the two strategies being equally important. The SPÖ promoted issues with a high yield, like fighting unemployment, fighting for social justice, providing affordable homes or issues of redistribution. It also addressed issues that enjoyed overall high priority amongst the electorate, such as asylum rules or culture adaptation of foreigners, but there the positions of the SPÖ did not have high yields. However, a different position on the immigration issues would have carried a high risk of intra-party conflict. In fact, a shift to the right on the immigration issue would have endangered the support of many SPÖ partisans, as the descriptive results show in [Figures 2 and 3](#). Hence, the SPÖ was trapped amongst the diverging positions between its own party base and the larger electorate. This trap is also visible in [Figure 1](#): the ideology of the SPÖ supporters is rather one-dimensional, while the issue priorities of the overall electorate would have required SPÖ positions that are to a certain extent diametrical to each other on the left-right scale. Thus, while on the socio-economic issues the SPÖ could go for its highest yield, on immigration issues it had to 'pamper' its party base. Unsurprisingly, the SPÖ obtained an almost identical vote share as in the previous election.

Turning to the smaller parties, to enlarge its electoral base, the NEOS stressed issue confrontation on salient issues. As its own party base was rather small the likelihood to engage in intra-party conflict by following such a strategy was manageable. Meanwhile, the strategy of the Greens was a mixture of the two: emphasising issues with the highest yield (e.g. environment and staying in the EU) and, to a lesser extent, engaging in issue confrontation on salient socio-economic issues, avoiding especially

the issue of immigration. However, those issues that enjoyed support both amongst its electorate and beyond were overall of lower saliency. The Greens remained in control of the environment issue, but next to issues of immigration, economic and social affairs, the environment did not rock the Austrian electoral campaign in 2017, which also explains the Greens poor performance at the election.

More generally, the analysis indicates that the opportunities of issue strategies during electoral campaigns are by definition available for all parties including small, niche or challenger parties, as well as for mainstream parties. The victory of the ÖVP in the 2017 Austrian election in fact shows that successful parties are those able to exploit available issue opportunities strategically.

Discussion

The landslide electoral victory of Kurz's ÖVP in the Austrian general election of October 2017 was accompanied by wide speculation about the party's successful electoral strategy. In this paper, we focused on the ÖVP's electoral campaign issue strategy and explored how close it was to an 'optimal' issue strategy compared to the other main election players. To this end, we tested two theoretical approaches aimed at explaining parties' issue strategies: the traditional, riding-the-wave approach and the more recent issue-yield model. Media commentators and pundits alike seem to have observed both party strategies during the 2017 Austrian electoral campaign, particularly on the issue of immigration, and the related topics of asylum and border control (Bodlos and Plescia 2018). For one thing, and in line with the riding-the-wave approach, some have speculated that both the ÖVP and the FPÖ won the 2017 election by focusing on the most salient issue during the election campaign (immigration), while the 'losers' of this election, the SPÖ and the Greens, have been more reluctant to emphasise this highly salient issue. For another thing, some contemplated that the ÖVP, and particularly Sebastian Kurz as the former foreign and integration minister, were successful in gaining credibility on the issue of immigration, thus 'stealing' it from the FPÖ, which has historically controlled this issue (Aichholzer *et al.* 2014). Meanwhile, the SPÖ seemed to have mainly focused on social justice and redistribution – issues on which it could claim long-term credibility (Kritzinger *et al.* 2013). These arguments would be in line with the issue-yield approach: parties' issue strategy is to focus on issue that offer the highest yield.

The results show that the ÖVP issue strategy was driven by issues that provided the highest issue yield. It emphasised issues that obtained large support

amongst the entire electorate and for which it could moreover claim high credibility. This was mainly done by focusing on immigration, which clearly represented a bridge issue for the ÖVP, as well as on certain socio-economic issues on which it enjoyed medium values of issue yield. In this regard, it seems that in line with what is happening in other countries in Europe included in this special issue, also in Austria a progressive de-coupling of issue stances from ideological constraints occurred. The ÖVP has in fact focused on the right on immigration while taking a left-wing position on some social issues largely not representing its core issue repertoire. Thus, the ideological base of the ÖVP seems to have become broader in the 2017 election.

A clear emphasis on bridge issues can also be detected in the FPÖ's electoral campaign. Unlike the ÖVP, the FPÖ was more of a risk taker. It took up positions that some of its party supporters did not share. However, to present itself as a serious future coalition partner, the FPÖ had to pursue this strategy. The FPÖ thus also passed through a certain de-ideologisation process. Meanwhile, proposing restrictive policies on immigration was too much of a risk for the SPÖ given the very low yield the party had on these issues, mostly due to scepticism within its party base. The SPÖ remained focused in its campaign on traditional socio-economic issues such as labour market, unemployment, and pensions – issues that presented a high yield. Proposing issue positions on immigration that were not supported by the larger electorate prevented the party from an internal conflict, but did not allow it to access new voter groups and thus to keep its leading position.

Whether the ÖVP can repeat its electoral victory of 2017 in future elections will largely depend on two factors: first, on whether the ÖVP in a coalition government with the FPÖ can deliver on the issues it emphasised in the election campaign, and second, whether the support on current positions related to immigration remains high especially among its own party base – hence, whether the Austrian ideological space remains the same as in 2017. To a large extent the ÖVP's fate resembles that of other mainstream parties in Europe: in response to the difficulty of competing over increasingly indistinguishable policies (Mair 2009), parties have started combining issue stances belonging to oppositional ideological sides and creatively combining positional and valence issues. Yet if a party's government actions do not follow electoral pledges, its victorious status is short lived and the mass–elite 'electoral connection' (Mayhew 1974) may (again) suffer as a consequence.

Overall, our results show that party success is largely dependent on its ability to exploit electoral issue opportunity structures, namely by

identifying on which issues the party base and the larger electorate overlap. While in the past niche parties seem to have been more successful in running such an issue strategy, the example of the ÖVP shows that mainstream parties can also jump on this bandwagon. This may lead to a de-ideologisation of the issue space in the short-term, but could result in the long run in a re-ideologisation along different ideological lines to which the parties have to adapt in order to be electorally successful. Given the increasing voter volatility, capturing and then responding to the issue space of the larger electorate will be one of the main challenges for parties to run successful electoral campaigns. While the aim of this paper was to evaluate which issue parties stress during electoral campaigns, in a next step it will be important to examine in greater detail why certain parties are better able than others to exploit the opportunities electoral campaigns offer them.

Notes

1. Opinion poll information taken from <https://neuwal.com/wahlumfragen/> (accessed May 2018).
2. The leaders are Christian Kern for the SPÖ, Sebastian Kurz for the ÖVP, Heinz-Christian Strache for the FPÖ, Ulrike Lunacek and Ingrid Felipe for the Greens, Matthias Strolz for the NEOS, and Peter Pilz for Liste Pilz.
3. Intercoder reliability shows an agreement of 80% with a Kappa of 0.72 and associated standard error of 0.006.
4. The survey and Twitter data were collected in the framework of the ICCP project (<https://cise.luiss.it/iccp/>). The Twitter data are available as GESIS study ZA7499, see De Sio et al. (2019) for all countries. The survey data are available at AUSSDA, see Kritzinger et al. (2019).
5. The CAWI survey ($N=1000$) was administered by Demetra SRL Italy between 8 September and 11 October 2017, using predetermined quotas for age/sex combinations, level of education and geographical region. The end of the survey was close to election-day (15 October 2017) due to the requirement to close quotas on citizens.
6. With respondents reporting 'medium' priority being counted as half.
7. Party supporters are identified using the intention-to-vote question in the pre-electoral survey (see De Sio and Weber 2019).
8. Note that coders were instructed to code as issue-related all tweets that presented issue content, regardless of the references to other actors.
9. This unbalance is also visible in the normalised version of Shannon's H (Boydston *et al.* 2014), which reports the following values: higher values for the ÖVP (2.710), the SPÖ (2.987), NEOS (2.666), and Greens (2.506), lower values for the FPÖ (1.567) and Liste Pilz (1.928) which have focused on fewer issues.
10. $VarExp = \frac{v_0 - v_1}{v_0}$ where v stands for the variance of the residual on the lowest level estimated by the mixed effects Tobit model, index 0 indicates the empty model, and index 1 indicates the model of interest.

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