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Promising links: how parties combine policy issues with group appeals

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing interest in how parties use social group appeals to reach out to different groups within society, the combination of policy issues and social groups in parties' campaign strategies remains poorly understood. Building on existing theories of issue competition, this study develops and tests new hypotheses about the relationship between policy appeals and group appeals. It proposes that the use of group appeals in policy communication depends on parties' perceived issue competence and the public salience of the issue. It is hypothesised that parties frequently employ appeals to social groups to improve the communication about their owned issues and about issues that are important to voters. However, if their best issues lack public salience, parties will link them with appeals to related groups to increase their relevance. Conversely, when parties lack competence for salient issues, they will try to reframe these weaker issues using appeals to unrelated groups. These expectations are tested by combining new data on issue emphasis and social group appeals from election manifestos (1990–2019) with public opinion data on public issue salience and perceived party competence in Austria. The results confirm that group appeals in party communication about policy issues are shaped by issue salience and competence perceptions. These findings have key implications for our understanding of issue competition and voter representation.

KEYWORDS Social groups; group appeals; political communication; party competition

How do parties appeal to voters? There are two general perspectives on how parties selectively highlight specific issues to shape the public agenda and thereby maximise their electoral prospects (Budge and Farlie 1983; Robertson 1976). Issue ownership theory, for example, assumes that parties prioritise issues in which they have a competitive advantage over their political rivals (Petrocik 1996). Conversely, the riding-the-wave approach

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suggests that parties emphasise policy issues that are important to the electorate (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994).

An alternative approach suggests that parties use (positive or negative) appeals to different social groups to gain the support of specific voter segments (Huber 2022; Thau 2019). One reason why parties will appeal to social groups is that it may directly affect candidate support or vote choice (Robison *et al.* 2021; Thau 2023). However, another way in which group appeals can matter is when voters support certain policies depending on their group identification or their attitudes towards certain groups (Huber *et al.* 2024; Kinder and Winter 2001; Nelson and Kinder 1996). That is, policy proposals may be more popular when people perceive them as benefiting their own group or a group they view positively.

Hence, there are two distinct types of appeals used in political communication: policy appeals and group appeals. Policy appeals focus on specific policy issues and positions. In contrast, group appeals are political messages that explicitly mention a specific social group and through which the parties align themselves with or oppose this target group. So far, however, we know very little about when and how parties combine policy appeals and group appeals in their rhetoric. Since previous research has shown that parties' group-based electoral strategies are a key explanatory factor for voting behaviour and the mobilisation of social cleavages (Evans and Tilley 2012a, 2017; Thau 2021), it is crucial to examine the interplay between group and policy appeals.

If group appeals have the potential to influence voters' political attitudes and electoral behaviour, we should expect political actors to use them strategically in their communications about policy issues. As Thau (2021: 686) argues, '[f]rom the party perspective, the most lucrative strategy probably lies in combining the two electoral appeals'. Our paper uses policy issues as a starting point for our theoretical considerations and empirical investigation. To enhance our understanding of the interplay between issue emphasis and group appeals in party competition, we develop and test several assumptions about when parties have an incentive to use group appeals to communicate their policy proposals.

While parties have strong incentives to emphasise their best issues (Petrocik 1996), they also need to respond to the issues that are important to voters (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994). We therefore expect issue ownership and public issue salience to influence the use of group appeals in party rhetoric. More specifically, we argue that parties are more likely to use group appeals when communicating about issues for which they are considered competent. This combination of policy and group appeals should enhance parties' perceived commitment to specific issues. Furthermore, we expect parties to be more likely to use group appeals when they talk about issues that are important to voters. This is because

the link between group and policy appeals serves as a tool for strategically emphasising specific issues and signalling responsiveness to voter concerns.

In addition, we distinguish four different scenarios about when parties are more likely to use appeals to distinct types of groups. In this context, we argue that parties try to combine the communication about their strong issues with appeals to associated social groups when these topics are not important to voters. This approach might help them increase the salience of their best issues among the public by creating a sense of urgency and importance around those issues. Moreover, in a situation in which they are forced to address topics in which they are not viewed as competent, parties might also deliberately choose to create associations between certain policies and unrelated groups to divert attention from unfavourable issues and put them in a better light.

Empirically, we test these expectations by analysing electoral manifestos published by political parties in Austria. We use data provided by the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES), which contains detailed information on parties' issue emphasis. Besides these data on policy issues, we have coded all appeals to social groups and allocated them to specific policy issues. These data allow us to investigate the co-occurrence of issues and groups in individual statements of the party manifestos. Combining the resulting supply-side data with survey data on public issue salience and perceived party competence, we examine party strategies in ten elections between 1990 and 2019.

Even though there is a growing literature on group appeals (Huber 2022; Stuckelberger and Tresch 2024; Thau 2019) and their effect on voter opinions and electoral preferences (Huber *et al.* 2024; Robison *et al.* 2021), this is, to our knowledge, one of the first studies to systematically examine the combined use of policy and group appeals in political rhetoric (for another example, see Horn *et al.* (2021)). Our analysis demonstrates that parties employ appeals to different societal groups to build on their ownership of particular issues and react to voters' issue priorities and thus contributes to the literature on issue competition.

Overall, our study provides a more nuanced understanding of how parties communicate with voters and thereby speaks to an emerging literature that considers group appeals a central feature of party rhetoric. The findings also have important implications for voters' perceptions of political parties, their policy priorities, and which groups they represent, but also for their ability to decide between different party alternatives and the representation of their concerns.

Policy and group appeals in political rhetoric

Numerous studies on political behaviour have shown that social groups are a central element of politics. Vote choices, for example, are strongly

influenced by individuals' group memberships (Campbell *et al.* 1960). This is also reflected in the finding that parties' affiliations with specific groups are among the main reasons voters give when asked to explain their vote choice and stances towards different parties (Butler and Stokes 1969). In this context, a social group is regarded as a collection of individuals within the broader society whose members have one sociodemographic characteristic or attribute in common that serves both as a distinguishing feature and identification basis for members and as a reference point for non-members.

The structural (or bottom-up) perspective emphasises the long-standing connections between certain social groups and political parties based on traditional cleavages (Bartolini and Mair 1990; Lipset and Rokkan 1967). It posits that individuals' group memberships (e.g. based on their socio-economic status, ethnicity, or religious beliefs) often shape their political preferences and affiliations. According to this perspective, people who belong to certain social groups tend to support political parties that align with their interests, values, or identities.

In contrast, the top-down perspective suggests that linkages between parties and social groups reflect strategic actions taken by political parties to gain support from specific social groups (Miller and Wlezien 1993). For example, parties may tailor their policies to the needs and interests of certain groups in order to secure their electoral support (Evans and de Graaf 2013; Evans and Tilley 2012b; Rennwald and Evans 2014). The two perspectives offer complementary insights into the complex interplay between political parties and social groups. While parties may capitalise on existing patterns of support identified by the structural perspective, they can also influence and reshape these patterns through their actions and appeals.

A more recent strand of literature has pointed to a different strategy, namely that parties and candidates often directly address social groups in their campaign rhetoric. This has been shown for a range of different social groups across various countries and communication channels (Dolinsky 2023; Evans and Tilley 2017; Horn *et al.* 2021; Huber 2022; Stuckelberger and Tresch 2024; Thau 2019). Group appeals are defined as explicit statements that link a political actor with a given social group category (Thau 2018: 173), either positively or negatively (for similar conceptualizations, see Stuckelberger and Tresch (2024) and Mierke-Zatwarnicki (2023)). According to this definition, there are two different types of group appeals: First, positive group appeals may be used by parties to associate themselves with a particular category of people and thereby indicate their support for the group. Second, parties may also use negative group appeals to dissociate themselves from specific groups, for example, to criticise a group or to demonstrate their negative stance towards the group.

References to social groups can influence voters' perceptions of parties and their connection with societal groups, i.e. which social groups parties are linked to and seen to represent (e.g. women, pensioners, families, migrants, or the unemployed). As social identities and group sentiments strongly influence political attitudes and behaviour (Achen and Bartels 2016; Conover 1988; Converse 2006), parties and their representatives have an incentive to capitalise on these predispositions to maximise their electoral potential (Thau 2018). Multiple studies demonstrate the effectiveness of group appeals for candidate evaluations and vote choice (Robison *et al.* 2021; Thau 2021, 2023).

Prior work has mostly treated group appeals and policy appeals as alternative rather than complementary communication strategies (Huber 2022; Thau 2018). In this context, it has been suggested that both types of electoral appeals target different aspects of voters' political decision-making (Dickson and Scheve 2006). Accordingly, policy appeals may help parties to attract supporters by speaking to the policy preferences and material interests of voters. In contrast, group appeals may help parties cater to voters' symbolic concerns linked to social identities and group attitudes (Thau 2021).

Yet, we also know from existing studies that very often group references and policy information are included in the same statement: As part of their study of social group appeals by political parties in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, Horn *et al.* (2021) show that in the field of welfare policy, most group appeals are combined with substantial policy proposals. Similarly, in his study of British party manifestos, Thau (2019) found that around two-thirds of group appeals contain information on policies.

Specifically, parties may defend or justify their policy proposals based on their implications for specific groups or claim to represent certain groups by referring to particular policy stances (Thau 2019). For example, in their 2013 manifesto, the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) makes the following statement: 'Our pensioners deserve a secure retirement without worries. They have worked hard all their lives to achieve this, whether at work or in the family. Despite this, the SPÖ and ÖVP continue to devalue pensions year after year. We will ensure that pensioners are no longer treated like petitioners in the future but are given the right to value adjustment'. Here, the party combines a positive group appeal to pensioners with a policy demand for pension adjustment.

This phenomenon is especially relevant, given that a long line of research demonstrates the strong impact of social group ties on voters' policy preferences, especially among people who lack information on policy details and their implications (Achen and Bartels 2016; Conover 1988; Nicholson 2012). Social groups are thought to function as a heuristic or informational cue that helps individuals organise their political thinking

on complex policy issues (Popkin 1991). Accordingly, citizens' opinions on a specific policy are strongly influenced by their predispositions towards the groups that are (positively or negatively) affected by that policy (Sniderman *et al.* 1991). Rather than answering the question of whether a given policy is worth supporting, it is easier to decide whether it helps one's in-group or at least a group that one likes. This group-centric nature of public opinion on policies has been observed in various settings, for example, regarding citizens' support for democratic rights (Chong 1993; Kuklinski *et al.* 1991) and attitudes towards social welfare policies (Cavaillé and Trump 2015; Petersen *et al.* 2010; van Oorschot 2006).

Even though the influence of social groups on public opinion is considerable, the effect is not equally strong in all situations. As Nelson and Kinder (1996: 1058) argue, 'the importance of group sentiment in public opinion depends on how issues are framed in elite debate'. Viewed objectively, proposed policies may have different positive or negative consequences for distinct social groups. Yet, in their communication with voters, political actors are relatively unconstrained in emphasising or downplaying the implications of certain policies and how they may vary across affected groups. A prime example is the call for inheritance and wealth taxes by parties on the left of the political spectrum to promote greater social justice for poorer people, which is regularly criticised by right-wing parties for its adverse effects on the middle class and business owners.

In other words, different groups may be implicated by certain policy proposals, but group-centric political thinking is more likely when political actors highlight the connection between policies and particular groups. Hence, the use of group appeals is an effective tool to structure political debates and influence public opinion on specific policy measures. This leads to the interesting conclusion that political actors may employ social group appeals as a strategic means to enhance the popularity of their policy proposals. For parties, this means that they should have an incentive to link their policy stances to appeals to specific social groups in order to sell their policies to the broader public. Campaign messages can thus strengthen connections between social groups, policies, and parties in the minds of voters (Valentino *et al.* 2002).

By linking policy proposals with appeals to social groups, parties can influence voters' perceptions of these policies and thereby exploit their predispositions towards these groups (Huber *et al.* 2024). That is because groups function as a heuristic for voters to decide whether they are in favour or against a policy based on their group identification and group attitudes. Consequently, we should expect parties to actively try to shape their electoral success through a strategic combination of policies and group appeals. The question is then: under what conditions are parties

compelled to make greater use of group appeals in combination with certain policy issues? Although parties should generally have an incentive to draw on group appeals to advance their policies, we argue that there are specific circumstances under which they have stronger reasons to do so.

How can parties combine policies and group appeals?

Existing theories on issue competition typically assume that competence attribution (Budge and Farlie 1983) and issue ownership (Petrocik 1996) play a crucial role in parties' campaign strategies. According to issue ownership theory, parties can establish ownership over specific policy issues by demonstrating sincerity in and commitment to addressing those issues (Petrocik 1996: 826). As a party dedicates particular attention to an issue and builds a reputation of expertise and credibility in handling it, voters tend to perceive the party as more competent for this issue than its competitors (Walgrave *et al.* 2015). For instance, centre-left parties are often trusted with employment and welfare state issues, while centre-right parties are considered to be most competent in security and defense matters (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). Consequently, parties gain a strategic advantage in competing for votes on owned issues, as voters are likely to favour them over their competitors. Thus, parties should have a strong incentive to prioritise their strongest issues during election campaigns to enhance their salience among voters (Bélanger and Meguid 2008). There is ample empirical evidence for the importance of issue ownership in parties' communication strategies (Petrocik *et al.* 2003; Wagner and Meyer 2014), even though the conceptualisation and validity of the standard measurement of issue ownership has been criticised in more recent studies (Seeberg 2020; Stubager 2018).

Social group constituencies play a pivotal role for issue ownership, as already mentioned by Petrocik (1996: 827). Voter perceptions of which party best represents the group constituency that is linked with an issue strongly influence beliefs about issue ownership (Stubager and Slothuus 2013). This means that parties can bolster their ownership advantage by emphasising constituency linkages, improving perceptions of their handling capacity on specific issues. Importantly, this strategy not only resonates with a party's own supporters but also attracts voters from the opposite side of the political spectrum (Stubager and Seeberg 2016). Hence, linking policies to specific constituencies represents a crucial tool for parties to strengthen issue ownership.

Accordingly, parties should be motivated to emphasise connections to specific constituencies to maintain and improve their good reputation regarding an issue. For example, a party perceived to be competent in economic policy could emphasise the importance of supporting business

owners and entrepreneurs by providing tax incentives and reducing market regulations. By recognising the particular needs of certain groups, the party can show its commitment to the issue. Besides that, parties may also strategically exploit their issue reputation to appeal to overlapping electoral groups and attract new voters. For instance, Green parties might target farmers by promoting subsidies for organic agriculture, leveraging their ownership of environmental issues. This approach helps parties to build on their competence advantage and raise awareness for the issue among previously unattached segments of the electorate. We therefore expect parties that own specific issues to be more inclined to integrate group appeals into their communication strategies.

Hypothesis 1: Parties are more likely to use group appeals in their communication about owned issues.

While parties should always prefer to talk about their strongest issues, they also need to respond to the issue priorities of the public (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Sides 2006; Spoon and Klüver 2014). The riding-the-wave approach suggests that political parties can gain electoral advantage by addressing voters' most pressing concerns, thereby signalling attention and responsiveness (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994). This strategy may help parties enhance their popularity and generate media attention for their messages (Hopmann *et al.* 2012; Meyer *et al.* 2020). Failure to engage with salient topics, on the other hand, can threaten a party's credibility and may lead to a loss of electoral support (Sides 2007), motivating parties to respond to the public issue agenda. Empirical evidence confirms parties' responsiveness to voter priorities in campaign communication (Klüver and Sagarzazu 2016; Spoon and Klüver 2014, 2015), even though this seems to apply less to niche parties (Klüver and Spoon 2016; Wagner and Meyer 2014).

Given parties' reliance on electoral support, it can be expected that the use of social group appeals hinges on the public salience of policy issues. Parties should find it particularly advantageous to combine policy appeals with group appeals when voters deem these issues important. In doing so, parties can signal their attention to the needs of particular societal groups and more effectively communicate how their policy proposals will help to address the problems faced by those groups. For example, when talking about a salient issue (e.g. housing), parties can express their commitment to help tenants and apartment seekers by explicitly mentioning them in their policy communications. Voters should then perceive them as more compassionate about certain groups and their needs. This argument is based on a study by Robison *et al.* (2021), who show that group appeals improve the perceptions of group representation among people belonging to that group. Hence, using group appeals allows parties to

highlight their connections with specific constituencies and shape voter assessments of group representation.

Ultimately, it should be an effective strategy for parties to demonstrate their responsiveness to the issue priorities of the public. Thus, we expect parties to employ group appeals more frequently when they talk about issues that are important to voters.¹

Hypothesis 2: Parties are more likely to use group appeals in their communication about issues that are salient to voters.

Besides these general expectations, we also explore how party competence and issue salience interact. We identify four scenarios based on different combinations of competence and salience:

Scenario 1: low competence and low salience. In this case, there is little incentive for parties to address the respective issue, let alone to employ group appeals to garner more attention.

Scenario 2: high competence and high salience. In these situations, there is no inherent advantage for parties in utilising group appeals in their communication, as this is already the best possible scenario from an issue competition perspective.

Scenario 3: high competence and low salience. In this case, parties will try to raise the salience of their best issues among voters. Group appeals might be helpful in these situations to try to draw more attention to their strongest topics.

Scenario 4: low competence and high salience. In these situations, group appeals might be valuable for parties to compensate for their lack of competence.

In sum, in the former two scenarios, the incentives for parties to use group appeals in their issue communication are very low and should therefore only play a minor role. In contrast, group appeals have a higher strategic utility in the latter two scenarios, in which parties seek to increase issue salience or compensate for low competence.

Hypothesis 3a: Parties are less likely to use group appeals in their policy communication when issue competence and issue salience point in the same direction (low/low or high/high).

Hypothesis 3b: Parties are more likely to use group appeals in their policy communication when issue competence and issue salience point in different directions (low/high or high/low).

In addition to the frequency of group appeals, we differentiate between appeals to specific types of social groups. On the one hand, parties can appeal to groups that are directly associated with particular issues. For example, a party could talk about education and link this with appeals to pupils and teachers. On the other hand, parties might also choose to

provide links between an issue and a group that is unrelated to that issue. For instance, a party could talk about education and link this issue with an appeal to migrants.

The association of groups to certain topics can be determined by various factors: Associated groups share similar interests and concerns in this policy area and are directly affected by the policy measures taken on that issue. They are also direct stakeholders and can have a significant impact on the policies designed and implemented within that area as well as on public opinion and the political discourse. Importantly, we argue that this association is relatively stable over time and independent of the specific context. Furthermore, the association between a group and a policy issue does not always have to be positive (e.g. workers and employment) but can also be negative (e.g. criminals and security).

A highly effective strategy in that respect is to link communication about owned issues with appeals to related groups when these issues lack public attention. This strategy allows parties to underscore their policy proposals and boost the visibility of their preferred issues in public discourse and media coverage. For instance, right-leaning parties could link discussions on security policies with appeals against criminals to draw more attention to their proposals. By coupling communication about owned issues with appeals to associated groups, parties can highlight the significance of the issue and illustrate how their proposed policies will affect those groups. Consequently, this strategy strengthens party messaging, enhances issue importance, and fosters greater public engagement and awareness. Thus, we anticipate parties will employ a strategy of ‘competence amplification,’ using appeals to related groups when their preferred issues lack public salience.

Hypothesis 4a: Parties are more likely to combine their best issues with appeals to related groups when these issues are not salient to voters.

Finally, using appeals to groups that are unrelated to the issue can help parties address situations in which their weaker issues are important to the electorate, making it problematic to completely avoid talking about them. In such cases, parties should aim to reframe these weaker issues to present them in a better light (Jerit 2008). Issue reframing entails shifting the frame towards other policy domains that are more advantageous (Lefevere *et al.* 2019). Parties often resort to frames that emphasise their own strengths, especially when their opponents have a better reputation regarding specific issues (Sides 2006).

Group appeals can be particularly effective in this regard, as they help to shift the focus to other policy domains that are more favourable for the party. To redirect attention to areas in which the party holds ownership, parties can use appeals to groups that are associated with their

stronger issues. For instance, when a mainstream right party is forced to address the issue of employment, it might highlight the need to support entrepreneurs to generate more jobs, shifting the focus from employment to the economy. Similarly, radical-right parties might connect social welfare issues with negative appeals against immigrants (Ennser-Jedenastik 2016; Rathgeb 2021). Based on these considerations, our last hypothesis posits that parties are more likely to use appeals to unrelated groups when the public salience of their weaker issues is high.

Hypothesis 4b: Parties are more likely to combine unfavourable issues with appeals to unrelated groups when these issues are salient to voters.

Research design

Case selection

Our research focuses on the communication strategies of political parties in Austria, a parliamentary democracy that shares many characteristics with those of other European countries. Among these characteristics are the PR electoral system and the multiparty system, which includes the main party families of Western Europe. We include in our analysis the most important and durable parties of the recent decades: the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), the Christian Democratic People's Party (ÖVP), the populist radical right Freedom Party (FPÖ), and the Greens. All of these parties have held seats in the lower chamber of the Austrian parliament before or after all elections throughout the entire research period (1990–2019).² Austria may also be regarded as a typical case with regard to competition over issues and social groups in a multiparty context. This is because the party system closely reflects the most important cleavages in the Western European context (church vs. state, capital vs. labour, urban vs. rural, materialist vs. post-materialist values, open vs. closed societies).

The SPÖ has traditionally been the party of workers, pensioners, and other members of the working class, representing their interests in parliament. The SPÖ is also a strong advocate for social welfare, economic redistribution, and labour rights. In addition, the party prioritises policies that promote gender equality. In recent years, the party has also taken a more progressive stance on issues such as LGBTQ rights.

The centre-right ÖVP has traditionally been the party of the upper-middle class and rural areas and was particularly popular among farmers and small business owners. The party is regarded as socially conservative on issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage, while it is economically liberal and advocates pro-business policies. The party also enjoys strong support among religious voters as it has been associated with the Catholic Church.

The FPÖ is a far-right populist party that is known for its strong anti-immigration stance, connected with a critical rhetoric against foreigners, refugees, and asylum seekers. Besides that, the party is also known for its Eurosceptic views, calling for greater autonomy for Austria within the European Union.

The Greens are a progressive party that focuses on environmental issues, social justice, and civil rights and liberties. Specifically, the party is a strong supporter of gender equality and the protection of minorities, such as the acceptance of refugees and asylum seekers and the promotion of LGBTQ rights.

The inclusion of these parties, which represent different ideological positions, key topics, and social groups, reflects the dynamics of a competitive multiparty environment. We are therefore confident that our results also apply to other countries with similar party systems. However, the generalisability of the results to countries with different party systems, such as two-party systems or those with strong sectoral parties, is less clear. Besides that, regions with different historical, cultural, or socioeconomic cleavages may exhibit different patterns of how parties connect social group appeals with policy issues. The specificities of party competition in those settings may require separate analysis and investigation.

Data

Dependent variable

In order to test our theoretical expectations, we use manifesto data provided by the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES) (Müller *et al.* 2020). Party manifestos are especially valuable in this study because they provide an extensive overview of policy priorities and appeals to different social groups by specific parties. Even though only a small fraction of voters might actually read them, electoral manifestos are particularly important for political parties and fulfil central functions during the campaign both inside and outside the party (Eder *et al.* 2017). Moreover, manifestos are the only type of document that can be regarded as an authoritative statement representing the party as a whole at a given point in time (Budge 1987: 18).

The AUTNES coding scheme is based on strict grammatical rules to split natural sentences into smaller components ('statements'), which are then used as the coding units. Take, for example, this sentence from the 1990 SPÖ manifesto: 'We want to increase opportunities for students by improving university buildings, equipment and staffing'. According to the AUTNES unitising rules, the sentence would be split into the following four statements:

- SPÖ for opportunities for students
- SPÖ for improvements to university buildings
- SPÖ for improvements to university equipment
- SPÖ for staffing improvements at universities

Every statement is then captured with three variables: a subject (usually the party authoring the manifesto), an object (a policy issue), and a predicate (a numerical value that records the relationship between the subject and the object as either positive, negative, or neutral). All statements are coded into a fine-grained scheme with more than 650 issue categories nested in three hierarchical levels. The details of the unitising and coding process are explained in Dolezal *et al.* (2016).

In addition to the information on policy appeals described above, we have collected data on appeals to social groups. We code group appeals in a similar way, namely whether parties associate themselves with or dissociate themselves from certain groups of people. Consequently, for the coding of group appeals, the object is the social group mentioned in the statement. The predicate indicates the relationship between the party and the group, which may also be either positive, negative, or neutral. For example, when groups are mentioned favourably or as beneficiaries of specific policies, the predicate is coded as positive. In contrast, when groups are referenced in a negative context or as objects of blame allocation or scapegoating, the predicate is coded as negative. However, for this study, we consider only the salience of appeals to different groups and their connection to different policy areas. After several weeks of training, two research assistants and one of the authors read the election manifestos statement by statement to identify and code all appeals to social groups based on a detailed codebook. The inter-coder reliability scores (Krippendorff's alpha) were 0.81 for the coded group appeals and 0.97 for the coded group object. The reliability test was based on a random sample of 2% of the total dataset (approximately 1,000 statements) stratified by party and election year.³

In a next step, we define the policy areas we are examining. In particular, we cover ten different issue categories: economy, education, employment, Europe, healthcare, housing, immigration, pensions, security, and taxes. Unfortunately, we cannot cover all policy areas due to limitations in the survey data. For instance, general references to the welfare state and national defense are not included in the analysis. We match these ten policy topics to the corresponding AUTNES issue categories. For example, the category 'health' contains all manifesto statements regarding the health care system, health insurance, and patients' rights. The category 'immigration' covers all migration-related issues, such as residence permits, integration of migrants, and asylum policy (see [Table B1](#)

in the Online Appendix). Subsequently, we allocate all relevant policy statements in the election manifestos issued by the four largest parties (SPÖ, ÖVP, FPÖ, and the Greens) between 1990 and 2019 to one of the categories under study. We also determine for all social groups whether they are associated with a specific issue category. For example, ‘foreigners’, ‘migrants’, ‘refugees’, and ‘asylum seekers’ are allocated to the category ‘immigration’. Similarly, ‘teachers’, ‘pupils’, and ‘students’ are assigned to the category ‘education’ (see Table B2 in the Online Appendix for an overview).

Based on the manual coding of social groups, we thus obtain three different dependent variables: Our first dependent variable is a summary of all group appeals by a party in a given election. We use this to test our general hypotheses on whether the relationship between parties’ issue communication and the relative frequency of group appeals depends on issue ownership and public issue salience. On average, across all issues, one in five party messages contains a group appeal, which attests to their importance in election programs (see Figure 1). To test H4a and H4b, we distinguish between appeals to groups associated with the same policy issue (e.g. security and criminals) and appeals to groups unrelated to the topic (e.g. migrants and education). For each variable, we calculate the share of a party’s group appeals in an election relative to all party messages on a given policy issue in a manifesto.

Independent variables

We combine these supply-side data on policy and group appeals with public opinion data on party issue competence and public issue salience. First, public opinion data on perceived issue competence comes from the Fessel-GfK surveys for the elections between 1990 and 2008. These surveys asked respondents to name the party ‘most competent concerning the problem’ or ‘with the strongest commitment to solving this problem’. While the operationalisation of issue ownership with this standard measure has been criticised (see, for example, Stubager 2018), our choice was due to data availability.

The data for the 2013 election were collected by Market in May 2013. For the 2017 election, we use data collected by the Issue Competition Comparative Project (ICCP) (Kritzinger *et al.* 2019) in September and October 2017. Issue coverage and question wording vary slightly over time, but the items are comparable across surveys. To maximise coverage, we use mean imputation for missing values. We also normalise the sum of all responses across parties to 100% per issue and election year. Table B4 in the Online Appendix provides an overview of all policy areas, the question wording, and the election coverage over time.

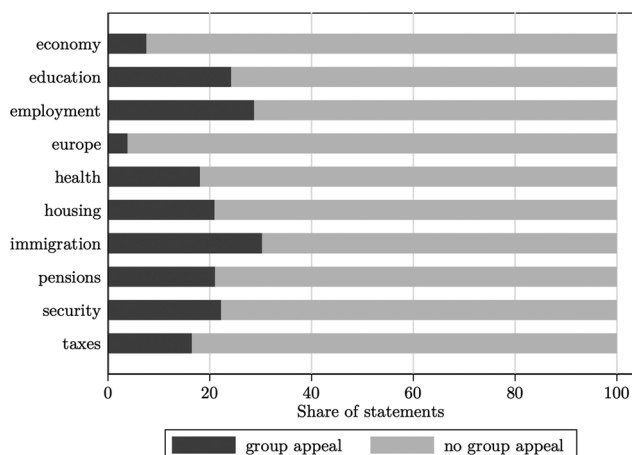


Figure 1. Shares of statements with group appeals.

Figure 2 shows the perceived party competence for all parties by individual issues. Issue competence was quite volatile and disputed for issues such as education and security, with up to three different parties alternating the lead throughout the period of observation. Other issues were more stable with clearer patterns of issue ownership: the ÖVP dominated economic issues, and the SPÖ was constantly seen as the most competent party on housing and pensions.

Second, to operationalise issue salience, we also use the annual surveys conducted by the Fessel-GfK polling agency on behalf of the ÖVP between 1989 and 2007. Specifically, respondents were asked to choose the most important problems from a list of issues. For the later years, we base our analyses on the Eurobarometer (EB) surveys. Here, we focus on the item asking respondents about the two most important issues facing Austria at the moment. Figure 3 displays the trends in voter issue salience for the period under study.

Analysis

How do parties link communication about policy issues with group appeals? To test our hypotheses, we set up our data in an elections (10) $\times$ parties (4) $\times$ policy issues (10) format, resulting in 400 observations in total.

To inspect general patterns of linkages between issues and groups, we first analyse whether parties' use of group appeals in their issue communication depends on issue ownership (H1), issue salience (H2), and their interaction (H3a/H3b). The dependent variable here is the share of policy statements on an issue in a given manifesto that are linked to an appeal

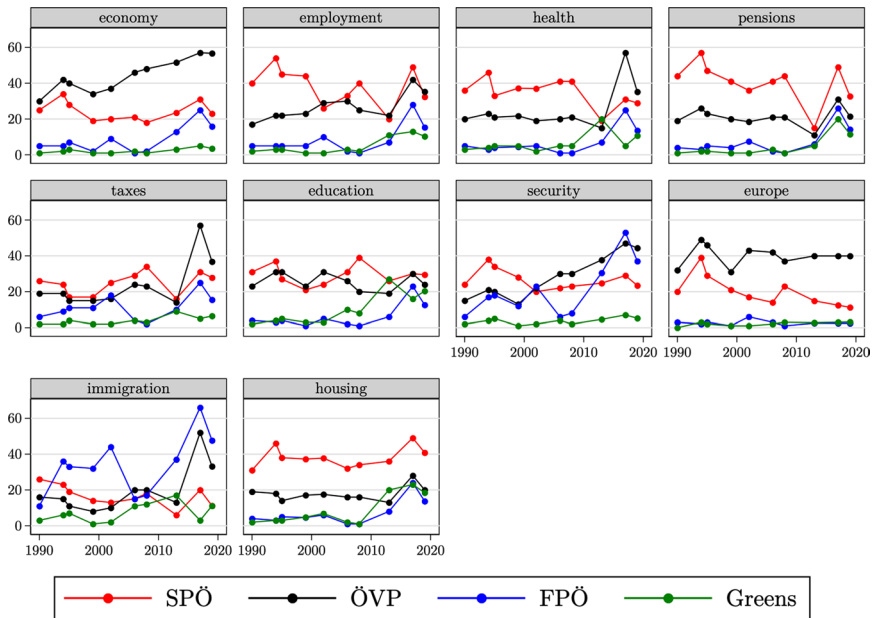


Figure 2. Trend of perceived party competence ratings by issue (1990–2019).

to any type of social group. Moreover, to examine the specific patterns of issue–group linkages for particular group categories, we distinguish whether a statement appeals to groups that are related to a given policy issue or groups that are unrelated to the issue. Here, we expect that when their best issues are not important to voters, parties should attempt to make them more salient with appeals to related groups (H4a). We also expect that when they need to respond to unfavourable issues because they are important to voters, parties can try to reframe those issues with appeals to unrelated groups (H4b). The key explanatory variables are voters’ issue salience and parties’ issue competence scores. Descriptive evidence is available in the Online Appendix (see [Figure C1](#)). Our three dependent variables are shares that are bound between zero and one, which imposes a pattern on the residuals and cannot be estimated appropriately with linear models. We account for this problem by estimating fractional probit regression models (Papke and Wooldridge 1996). All models include fixed effects at the level of parties and elections, and we control for systemic issue salience.⁴ As observations are not independent of each other, we cluster standard errors at the level of party-years.

[Table D1 in the Online Appendix](#) presents the results from the three fractional probit regression models without interactions. We observe a positive coefficient for issue competence (p-value below 0.01). Predicted shares in the left panel of [Figure 4](#) show a substantive effect size: parties

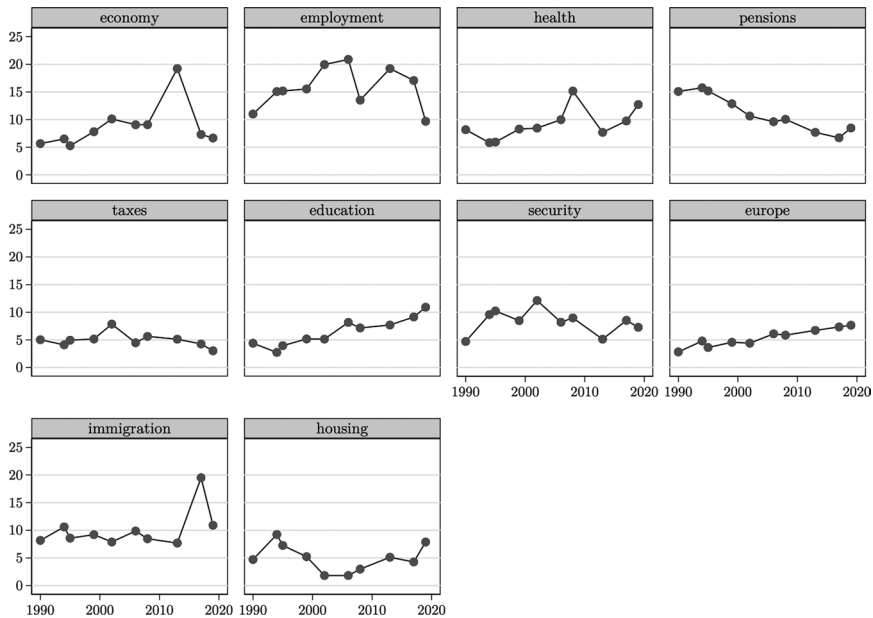


Figure 3. Trends in issue salience among voters (1990–2019).

were up to 17% more likely to address a group when voters perceived them as very competent on an issue. The positive effect suggests that parties appeal to groups when they are seen as more competent to deal with an issue, which is in line with H1. Moreover, a positive coefficient for voter salience suggests a strong effect of public issue salience on group appeals: when voters cared less about an issue, parties appealed to social groups in roughly 13% of their statements on these topics. For the most important campaign issues, this value rose to 33%. Thus, parties were more likely to address a group on issues that were important to voters (+20%). This means that parties use group appeals in responding to voter issue priorities and confirms H2. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first evidence that parties link group appeals with policy issues that are important to voters and in which they are particularly competent.

Table D2 in the Online Appendix presents the results from the three fractional probit regression models with interactions between issue competence and voter salience. Figures 5–7 plot the predicted shares for a more intuitive interpretation of effect sizes. Model 1 in Table D2 (Online Appendix) shows the results for appeals to all types of groups. We observe a negative coefficient of -30.91 (p -value below 0.01) for the interaction term between issue competence and voter salience.

The predicted shares in Figure 5 clearly show that when voters cared less about an issue and perceived party competence was low, parties

Appeals to all groups

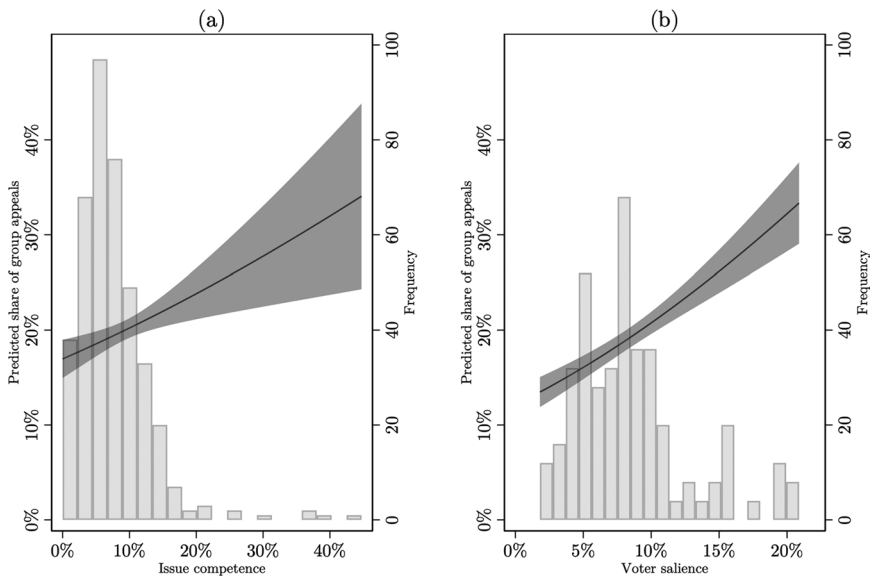


Figure 4. Predicted share of appeals to all groups at different levels of issue competence and issue salience.

Notes: Results based on Model 3 in Table D.1 (Online Appendix). Shaded areas indicate 95% confidence intervals. Bars display variable distributions.

appealed to social groups in only 9% of their statements on these topics. This makes sense, given that parties should not have any incentive to draw more attention to issues in which they are not perceived as competent and that are also not a priority for voters. Similarly, for the most important campaign issues in which parties are regarded as competent, this value also amounts to 9%. As this is already the best possible scenario from an issue competition perspective, parties should not have specific advantages from using group appeals in their communication in this particular situation. This is clearly in line with our expectation formulated in H3a.

Moreover, the predicted shares of issue statements with group appeals shown in Figure 5 indicate that parties are most likely to use group appeals in communicating on their best issues when these issues are not salient to voters. In addition, parties are also more likely to connect their policy statements with group appeals when they are not considered to be competent on an issue that is important to voters. These results confirm H3b.

Following up on these general results, we now examine the specific patterns of issue–group linkages for particular group categories. In the theory section, we argue that issue ownership may account for the

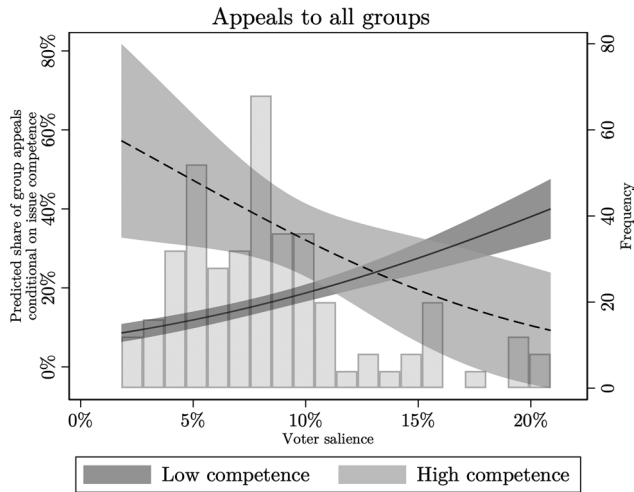


Figure 5. Predicted share of appeals to all groups conditional on issue competence at different levels of issue salience.
Notes: Results based on Model 1 in Table D.2 (Online Appendix). Shaded areas indicate 95% confidence intervals. Bars display variable distributions.

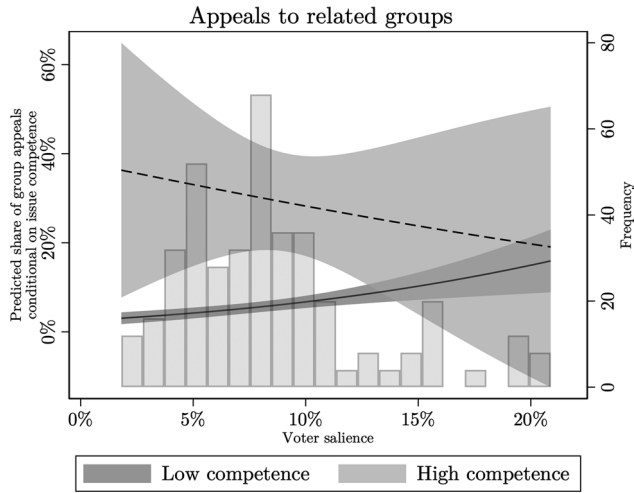


Figure 6. Predicted share of appeals to related groups conditional on issue competence at different levels of issue salience.
Notes: Results based on Model 2 in Table D.2 (Online Appendix). Shaded areas indicate 95% confidence intervals. Bars display variable distributions.

between-party variation of issue-group associations. H4a argues that parties should try to draw more attention to their best issues by connecting them with appeals to related groups. We test this expectation in Model 2 in Table D2 in the Online Appendix, using the share of issue

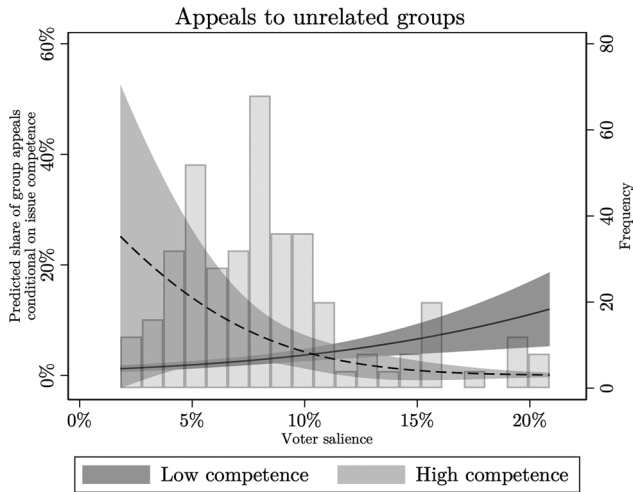


Figure 7. Predicted share of appeals to unrelated groups conditional on issue competence at different levels of issue salience.

Notes: Results based on Model 3 in Table D.2 (Online Appendix). Shaded areas indicate 95% confidence intervals. Bars display variable distributions.

statements connected with appeals to associated groups as the dependent variable. The results are visualised in Figure 6. Model 2 shows that there is no statistically significant interaction between voter salience and issue competence. Thus, we find no empirical evidence for the hypothesis that parties are more likely to combine their best issues with appeals to associated groups when public salience is low.

In contrast, H4b formulates the expectation that parties will link their weaker issues with unrelated groups in order to impose a more favourable angle of interpretation on these issues. We further hypothesise that such behaviour is more plausible for unfavourable issues that parties cannot avoid due to their high importance to voters. Model 3 in Table D2 in the Online Appendix tests these expectations by using the share of appeals to unrelated groups as the dependent variable.

The results show a highly statistically significant negative interaction. Figure 7 plots the predicted shares for appeals to groups unrelated to an issue with low and to an issue with high competence across the empirical range of voter issue importance. The slopes exhibit opposite patterns for both groups: parties with high levels of issue competence were, on average, less likely to appeal to unrelated groups when these topics were more important in an election (−26%). Larger confidence intervals indicate that there is more variation between parties and elections for issue-owning parties addressing topics of low voter concern. However, we find clear evidence for our expectation that appeals to unrelated groups are more frequent when parties with low competence evaluations cannot avoid such

issues due to their high electoral relevance. We clearly see that parties rarely link unrelated groups to these unfavourable issues as long as there was no voter demand, yet this increases for the most important campaign topics (+20%). In line with H4b, parties only opt for issue reframing when they cannot avoid an issue on which they are not seen as competent.

In sum, our findings suggest that both issue ownership and riding-the-wave strategies are important determinants for parties' use of group appeals in their communication about policy issues. In line with H1 and H2, we find that parties strategically link communication about their best issues with appeals to social groups and on issues that are important to voters. We also find empirical support for our expectation that parties resort to a strategy of issue reframing when an issue in which they are not seen as competent is of high voter importance (H4b). Conversely, we could not confirm H4a, which states that parties will be more likely to combine their best issues with appeals to related groups when these issues are not salient to the public.

Discussion and conclusion

Social identities and group attitudes have great potential to shape political behaviour and public opinion on policies. Appeals to different social groups therefore play an important role in parties' campaign communication. While there is a growing interest in how parties use group appeals to associate themselves with or dissociate themselves from specific groups (Dolinsky 2023; Huber 2022; Stuckelberger and Tresch 2024; Thau 2023), we still lack a good understanding of the connection between group appeals and policy appeals. To the best of our knowledge, there are only two other studies, namely those by Horn *et al.* (2021) and Thau (2019), to date that investigate this linkage. However, both works first examine the social groups parties appeal to and then collect additional information on the policies the parties offer for these groups. In contrast, we start with parties' policy appeals and then investigate how their communication about policy issues is combined with group appeals. Hence, our approach differs from previous studies in that we focus on the strategic usage of group appeals within specific policy domains rather than using different group categories as a starting point.

Drawing on existing theories of issue competition, this study has presented new theoretical arguments on parties' usage of group appeals: First, we expected that parties should underpin communication about their best issues with frequent appeals to social groups. Second, we argued that parties would have an incentive to rely on group appeals when they talk about issues that are salient to voters. Besides these general considerations, we distinguished between different situations to generate our

hypotheses about how parties link appeals to different types of groups with their communication about policy issues. Specifically, we assumed that parties would maximise the impact of their electoral messages by associating issues on which they enjoy a good reputation with appeals to associated groups in order to generate more public attention for their best issues. Conversely, we expected parties to conceal their lack of competence for their weaker issues by relying on appeals to unrelated groups. These theoretical considerations tie in with related approaches in previous research, such as the issue entrepreneur framework (De Vries and Hobolt 2012; Hobolt and De Vries 2015), which suggests that parties try to mobilise issues that disrupt the political equilibrium to challenge the status quo and mitigate their competitive disadvantage.

We have tested our expectations using original data on party communication from national election manifestos (1990–2019) and survey data in Austria. Our results indicate that parties strategically link policy issues with group appeals and are indeed more likely to address social groups on issues in which they are more competent than other parties. The findings also indicate that parties are more likely to use group appeals when talking about publicly salient issues. Moreover, we show that parties strategically link unfavourable policy issues with appeals to unrelated groups when these issues are important to voters. In doing so, they try to provide a more favourable angle of interpretation for issues in which they have a low competence by linking them to unrelated groups, but only when they are forced to address these issues because the electorate regards them as salient. In contrast, we could not confirm our expectation that parties combine issues with related groups when issue competence is high but public issue salience is low.

These findings have important implications for our understanding of party competition on policy issues and social groups. Prior research indicates that parties frequently make explicit appeals to social groups in their communication during election campaigns (Huber 2022; Thau 2019). We add to this research by showing that parties use appeals to societal groups to exploit their competitive advantage on particular issues and react to voters' issue priorities. This study also extends the previous literature, which has mainly focused on individual groups, for example, defined by social class, gender, religion, or race and ethnicity. Our results thus provide a more nuanced understanding of how parties communicate with voters in their campaign rhetoric.

In the existing literature on political behaviour, there is a widespread consensus that social identities and group sentiments have major impacts on both citizens' policy preferences and their electoral choices. This implies that the use of group appeals is of particular importance for voters to gain knowledge of and form an opinion about parties' policy

proposals, and make meaningful electoral choices. Our study therefore has important implications for the representation of citizens' preferences through political parties. More specifically, the result that parties use group appeals in line with voter issue priorities and their policy reputation may crucially affect voters' opportunities to learn about parties' policy stances on all relevant issues during electoral campaigns and how they affect different groups in society. While it should be relatively easy for voters to gain a good understanding of the salient topics and parties' owned issues, this could be much more difficult for other issues. Ultimately, this might affect policy congruence between citizens and political elites and thereby the quality of representation through political parties.

However, as our analysis looks only at a small number of parties in a single country, it has certain limitations. Cross-national research is needed to advance this agenda, such as examining the impact of party characteristics (e.g. in terms of the number and heterogeneity of groups they represent or the diversity of their issue strategies) or country-level factors (e.g. electoral system and polarization) on the linkage of group appeals and issue strategies. For example, differences between niche and mainstream parties might explain the null findings for our expectation that parties combine issues with related groups when issue competence is high but public issue salience is low.

Future research should also investigate whether and how the results presented in this study for explicit group appeals differ when focusing on implicit group appeals instead. Another interesting avenue for future research could be to examine the question of how political parties use positive and negative group appeals to frame certain groups as beneficiaries of specific policies or as targets of blame allocation or scapegoating in order to communicate their policy positions. Furthermore, we think it would be important for the literature on issue ownership to pay more attention to the differentiation between a party's short-term handling capacity for specific issues and its long-term perception as representing particular constituencies (as already suggested by Petrocik 1996). This refinement could provide a more nuanced and improved understanding of issue ownership dynamics and its linkage with social groups.

Despite these limitations, our study represents a crucial starting point for examining the linkage between issue strategies and group appeals.

Notes

1. Importantly, the following expectations refer to mainstream as well as niche parties, but not to sectoral parties, whose main motivation is to appeal to a very distinct group constituency.
2. The Greens lost parliamentary representation after the 2017 elections as they fell below the 4% threshold, yet they immediately reentered the

Nationalrat after the subsequent election in 2019. The remaining parties were permanently represented in parliament.

3. The coding instructions and multiple examples of the coding are provided in the Online Appendix.
4. Following Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2015: 752), we calculate the party system agenda as the average issue attention of all other parties in a given election.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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