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Beyond Policy: The Use of Social Group Appeals in Party Communication

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ABSTRACT

Extant research points to the importance of social identity and group attitudes for political behavior. Even though this should have important consequences for political communication, few scholars have investigated how parties use appeals to social groups to capitalize on these predispositions. This study introduces the concept of *social group yield* as a new theoretical framework to explain how parties strategically emphasize groups to mobilize their core voters and broaden their support base among the general electorate. Empirically, I examine the case of Austria based on a content analysis of electoral manifestos for the national elections in 2013, 2017, and 2019 to measure parties' group emphasis, combined with cross-sectional survey data measuring voters' group attitudes. The results confirm that group attitudes of party supporters and the wider electorate direct parties' emphasis of different groups. These findings have important implications for the representation of social groups, political polarization, and party competition.

KEYWORDS

social groups; social identity; group appeals; political communication; party competition


Introduction

Numerous studies on voting behavior and electoral campaigns, as well as political psychology, point to the key role of social identity and group attitudes for understanding opinion formation and political behavior (Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Consequently, the view that “[f]or ordinary citizens, parties make sense – if they make sense at all – in social identity terms, not as ideological frameworks” (Achen and Bartels, 2017, p. 309) is now increasingly popular.

Yet, looking at the supply side of political competition we still know relatively little about how political parties capitalize on group attitudes to mobilize and persuade voters by appealing to different social groups. While a vast number of studies investigates why parties address specific issues and shift their policy positions (e.g., Abou-Chadi et al., 2020), this important aspect of party communication has thus far received surprisingly little scholarly attention. This study aims to extend the existing literature by examining how parties use positive and negative references to social groups in their campaign rhetoric but also by determining which groups it should be most beneficial for parties to appeal to.

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This article provides a new general framework of party strategy for group-based campaigning which is applicable to a broad range of social groups. Building on previous research on parties' issue attention (De Sio & Weber, 2014), I expect parties to strategically emphasize groups in their campaign communication that help them to mobilize the party's core voters and broaden their support base among the general electorate. I suggest that the combination of risks and opportunities for parties in appealing to specific groups may be summarized with the concept of "social group yield," which combines a group's overall (positive or negative) assessment in the electorate and among party supporters. Parties should be most likely to pander to groups that are popular among the wider electorate and perceived favorably within the party. Similarly, parties should be most likely to attack groups that are unpopular among the general electorate and viewed predominantly negatively among party supporters. In contrast, parties should avoid references to groups where their core supporters are internally divided.

In addition, I expect that parties will more strongly resort to groups with a high yield for negative group appeals as compared to positive appeals. That is because a large body of literature suggests that negative messages have a stronger impact on recipients and attract more media attention, relative to positive information (e.g., Helfer & Aelst, 2016; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Therefore, I expect parties to focus only on groups with the greatest electoral potential.

To test this novel theoretical approach empirically, I rely on cross-sectional survey data on group attitudes from the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES), covering more than 20 social groups, as well as a content analysis of party manifestos for the three most recent elections in Austria (2013, 2017, and 2019). With the combination of these two data sources, it is possible to identify the electoral potential related to appeals to this broad spectrum of groups for each party, but also to contrast this with the groups that parties actually address in their electoral manifestos.

Employing this new dataset, my results indicate that group appeals are an important part of political communication, but also demonstrate that parties use this tool strategically as group yield is strongly associated with group emphasis in electoral manifestos. This particularly applies to negative group appeals, where the association of group yield and group emphasis is even stronger than for positive statements.

The article makes a theoretical and empirical contribution to the growing literature on group politics. It goes beyond existing studies on the relevance of social groups for political communication and voting behavior (Bornschieer et al., 2021; Horn et al., 2021; Thau, 2019), which only consider a very narrow range of groups and fail to provide a general theory that applies across different groups and parties. In contrast, I provide an overarching theory for when and why parties address groups in their rhetoric, and I also provide new empirical evidence that this framework captures essential elements of parties' communicative strategies. The results have broader implications for the study of party competition, representation, and political polarization.

The Influence of Social Identities and Group Attitudes on Political Behavior

An important aspect of political communication, which has hitherto been relatively neglected in the scholarly literature (compared to an enormous body of studies on issue competition), is how parties appeal to social groups and why parties associate themselves with or dissociate

themselves from particular groups in their messages and campaign rhetoric, while they remain silent on others. Existing studies demonstrate that political parties and candidates rely extensively on group-based rhetoric and appeals to social groups in their campaign communication but focus on only a small range of groups defined by race and ethnicity (Nteta & Schaffner, 2013), social class (Horn et al., 2021; Thau, 2018), or gender (Schaffner, 2005). However, as democracies are composed of a wide range of different social groups, we should strive for a more general theory on the use of group appeals.

Therefore, the main goal of this study is to provide an overarching framework for party appeals to different social groups. In the context of this study, social groups are defined as “categories that provide a source of identification for group members or information cues for non-members” (Wlezien & Miller, 1997, p. 628). Thus, a social group may be understood as a collection of individuals who have at least one – politically or socially meaningful – attribute in common and identify themselves as members of this group based on this characteristic (e.g., profession, social class, nationality, sexual orientation, ethnicity, language, age, gender, or religious affiliation).

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987) provide a comprehensive picture of the role of social groups. Both start from the assumption that individuals categorize themselves as belonging to various social groups. Social identity is defined as “that part of the individuals’ self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). Thus, it can be argued that individual citizens feel emotional attachments to certain groups in society: they hold positive feelings of attachment toward several in-groups, and negative sentiments or antagonism against specific out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Self-categorization theory looks at the cognitive basis of group behavior and factors that promote categorization processes of oneself and others into in- and out-groups. Here social identities are seen to vary across different social contexts, according to the salience in a particular situation (Turner et al., 1987).

At the same time, nonmembers may also feel sympathetic toward groups to which they do not belong. Sirin et al. (2016, p. 895) described this phenomenon as “intergroup empathy,” a process where members of one group are concerned about members of another group. This should be especially important for disadvantaged or vulnerable social groups. Following this line of reasoning, individuals are expected to hold some level of positive or negative affect toward all politically relevant groups in a given context.

More importantly, it has been shown that social identity and group attitudes strongly influence political behavior (Achen and Bartels, 2017; Campbell et al., 1960). That is because ordinary citizens rely on social categorization to simplify and interpret the complex world of politics and are thus greatly affected by the degree to which they (dis-)like specific groups (Conover, 1988). Voters can therefore be assumed to choose among different parties not only by comparing the policy alternatives on offer but also based on which groups those parties are thought to represent (Thau, 2019).

When it comes to the connection of political parties with different social groups, cleavage theory is a useful starting point. In their influential contribution, Lipset and Rokkan (1967) already pointed out the significance of social groups for the formation of political parties in Western Europe. Accordingly, parties were traditionally related to certain cleavage-based societal groups.

Politically relevant cleavages may change over time, either because of a shift in the partisan attachments of certain groups or due to a change in the relative size of specific groups (Brooks et al., 2006). This does not mean, however, that social groups in general have lost their importance for electoral behavior and as target groups for political parties (even though some have suggested an individualization of vote choice and an increasing importance of issue voting (Franklin, 1992; Thomassen, 2005)).

Instead, appealing effectively to relevant groups in society may be more important than ever for parties to establish viable electoral alliances, as they can no longer take “the support of any one group for granted” (Mair et al., 2004, p. 12). That is because electoral choice is now shaped by a variety of different groups, leading to diminishing explanatory power of groups associated with traditional cleavages (Dalton, 2014, p. 164). In fact, several studies confirm that group attachments and social identities continue to shape voter preferences and political behavior (see for example, Bornschier et al., 2021; Tilley, 2015; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019).

If political attitudes and behavior are influenced by attachments to particular groups in society, parties and their representatives, in turn, should have an incentive to capitalize on voters’ social identities and group sentiments to maximize their electoral potential. As it is argued that “the image of a party could improve through new associations with popular social groups or deteriorate through connections with unpopular groups” (Miller et al., 1991, 1141), parties should actively try to alter or maintain public perceptions of their connection with certain groups in society. To change a party’s group image, party representatives may use positive and negative references toward certain societal groups in their communication with voters (Thau, 2018). In the context of this study, the strategy is referred to as (positive or negative) group appeals. Previous studies show that group appeals based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, and religion exert a significant influence on voters’ political decision-making (Holman et al., 2015; Jackson, 2011; Robison et al., 2021; Weber & Thornton, 2012; White, 2007).

As groups are highly visible in the social as well as the political realm (Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 2006), group appeals might affect group members as well as nonmembers by tapping into existing group sentiments. Consequently, positive group appeals might not only address large (electorally relevant) groups with a strong social identity, such as women or workers, but also target smaller groups that are popular among the wider public, such as disabled people or pensioners (Rhodes & Johnson, 2015).

This also means that under certain circumstances, it might not be a viable strategy for parties to use positive appeals directed to electorally relevant groups, as non-targeted groups may be alienated by these messages (Hersh & Schaffner, 2013) and thereby negatively affect parties’ existing or potential electoral alliances. Apart from that, it might also be an effective approach for parties to employ negative group appeals against groups that are disliked by large parts of the electorate and do not constitute important target groups (Rhodes & Johnson, 2015).

A Social Group Yield Model of Group Appeals in Party Communication

My theoretical argument builds on the issue yield theory developed by De Sio and Weber (2014), which has been introduced as a model for the strategic selection of *policy issues* by political parties. Their model suggests that two criteria affect whether parties emphasize

certain policy issues, namely their popularity among the party's core voters and the level of support within the electorate at large. Issue yield is defined as "the degree to which an issue allows a party to overcome the conflict between protection and expansion of electoral support" (De Sio & Weber, 2014, p. 871). Thus, parties should highlight issues that are not internally divisive and on which their position is shared by the broader electorate, as these policies allow parties to win over new voters without jeopardizing the support of the existing electoral base.

Transferring the issue yield theory to social groups, I argue that their image among the wider electorate and their standing within the party base affect whether and how social groups are addressed by political parties. To increase their electoral support, parties have an incentive to keep their current supporters and simultaneously reach out to new (potential) voters. Relying on explicit support of societal groups with a positive image both among their own supporters and among the general public, potentially attracts new voters, while it also reduces the risk of alienating the existing party base. The same applies to explicit criticism of groups that are unpopular among the party's voter base and the wider electorate.

Therefore, parties should try to make favorable groups as salient as possible in their communication with the public, so that the association between the party and those groups becomes a relevant criterion for voters. As opposed to this, the number of appeals to groups, whose standing within the party differs significantly from its support among the public at large, should be lower compared to groups where the image among the wider electorate corresponds with the standing within the party. These arguments may be summarized with the concept of "social group yield" that provides a general theoretical model of the electoral potential associated with appeals to specific groups for each party.

De Sio and Weber (2014, p. 875) have developed a typology of *policies* that summarizes the risks and opportunities for a party. Adapting their approach for appeals to social groups, I differentiate between four different types of groups. The left panel of [Figure 1](#) summarizes the group typology for positive group appeals, where each group type corresponds to a quadrant of the diagram. The four quadrants are defined by a vertical and a horizontal line. The vertical line differentiates between groups that are over- or under-supported among party supporters, while the horizontal line separates groups for which support among the general electorate is higher than the support for a specific party (above the line) and groups where support among the public is lower than the support for the party (below the line).

First, *bridge in-groups* are popular among the general electorate and regarded positively within the party base. This means that positive appeals to bridge in-groups should be particularly attractive for parties to maximize their electoral support, as these groups allow parties to reach new voters while minimizing the risk of alienating existing party supporters.

Second, *venture in-groups* are popular among the electorate at large but have a negative image within the party. Thus, positive appeals to venture in-groups provide an opportunity to increase the party's vote share, but also bear a high risk of sparking intra-party conflict and disappointing core supporters.

Third, *pamper in-groups* are regarded positively within the party but enjoy lower support among the wider electorate. Therefore, using positive appeals to pamper in-groups does not win over new voters, even though it might reaffirm the party's identity and thereby mobilize the existing party base.

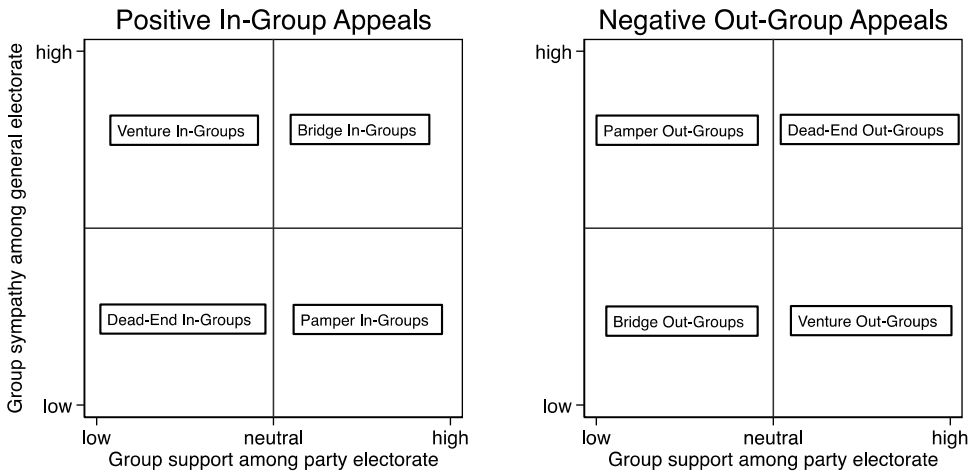


Figure 1. Summary of group typology for positive and negative group appeals. Note: The figure summarizes the four different group types for positive in-group and negative out-group appeals as defined by their support among the general electorate and among party supporters.

Fourth, *dead-end in-groups* enjoy lower support among the electorate than the party and are negatively associated with the party's own base. Parties should thus generally avoid references to dead-end in-groups.

This typology is also applicable to negative out-group appeals (see right panel in Figure 1): *Bridge out-groups* are unpopular among the public and at the same time viewed negatively among party supporters. *Venture out-groups* are unpopular among the general public but viewed rather positively among party supporters. *Pamper out-groups* are viewed negatively among the party base but are popular among the wider public. Finally, *dead-end out-groups* enjoy higher support among the wider electorate than the party and are viewed positively within the party's own base.

To sum up, the theoretical social group yield model describes the risks and opportunities for parties offered by appeals to certain types of groups. Empirically, the group yield index provides a party-specific measure for a group's electoral potential, based on the popularity of a group among party supporters and the general electorate, as well as the level of support for a particular party. Concerning the group typology introduced above, this means that the value of this numeric index should be highest for bridge groups and lowest for dead-end groups. Generally, it can be expected that vote-maximizing parties should primarily rely on appeals to groups with a high yield in their communication with voters to increase their vote share. In accordance with these theoretical arguments, the first hypothesis reads as follows:

Hypothesis 1 Parties primarily refer to social groups with a high yield, which help them to maximize their electoral opportunities and minimize the risk of internal divisions.

Apart from that, it can be expected that the effect of group yield on group emphasis in party rhetoric differs for positive and negative group appeals. A large body of literature on negativity bias suggests that negative messages have a stronger impact on human cognition and information processing with the effect that negative information is

prioritized and attracts more attention, relative to positive information (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Furthermore, negative stimuli receive greater weight during the formation of evaluations and assessments than positive information (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). Consequently, negative messages attract more attention and have a stronger impact on citizens' attitudes.

Especially relevant in this context is that negative information has also been shown to exert a greater influence on evaluations of political actors and parties (Holbrook et al., 2001). Likewise, negative political advertisements have a stronger impact than positive advertising, and their messages are better remembered (Bradley et al., 2007).

Negative messages are also more likely to get attention in the news media than positive messages. This is because reporters and editors are driven by a media logic (Ridout & Smith, 2008) and negativity has been identified as one of the five news factors that are particularly relevant for the news coverage of political actors (Helfer & Aelst, 2016; Hopmann et al., 2012). Besides, negativity bias in political news selection has also been linked to economic pressures and profit-making objectives by news outlets (Dunaway, 2013). Hence, since the media is especially responsive to stories that include conflict and negativity because of their perceived newsworthiness, negative campaign messages should get more media attention.

Moreover, existing studies confirm that readers of news articles not only exhibit a marked preference for negative coverage but are also more attentive to negative news content and more likely to be affected by that content (Trussler & Soroka, 2014). Therefore, I argue that negative group appeals in parties' campaign communication send a stronger signal compared to positive appeals: not only should they be more likely to be picked up by the media, but they should also have a stronger effect on citizens.

This also means, however, that the use of negative out-group appeals is not without risks for parties. If voters perceive negative appeals as inappropriate or repulsive, they can backfire and end up hurting the party through a potential "backlash effect" (Roese & Sande, 1993). Negative group appeals, therefore, present a trade-off for parties to a larger extent than positive appeals. Consequently, parties are expected to focus on groups with the greatest electoral potential. Based on this argumentation, I formulate the second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2 Parties more strongly resort to high yield groups for negative group appeals compared to positive appeals.

Data and Methods

Case Selection

To test my theoretical expectations, I focus on the communication strategies of political parties in Austria, a parliamentary democracy that shares many characteristics with those in other European countries. Among those characteristics is the PR electoral system, as well as multiparty competition including the main party families of Western Europe (Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, Liberal, Green, and Radical-right). These factors make Austria a particularly interesting case, as my study aims to provide new insights into the role of group-based rhetoric in multiparty systems.

Testing the hypotheses on differences in group emphasis depending on group yield requires two data sources: (1) data on party communication to measure group emphasis and (2) survey data to measure the distribution of group support and party preferences among the electorate.

Dependent Variable: Group Emphasis

For the measurement of social group appeals in party communication, I rely on electoral manifestos published by political parties in Austria for the general elections in 2013, 2017, and 2019. This study covers all political parties with parliamentary representation after the 2019 election, which includes the Christian Democratic Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ), the populist radical right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), the left-libertarian and environmentalist Greens, and the liberal NEOS (The New Austria).

Group appeals are defined as explicit statements that link a political actor with a given social group category (Thau, 2018, p. 173). These appeals may stand on their own, but they may also be part of a policy statement. In both forms group appeals play a crucial role as they provide voters “with some interstitial ‘linking’ information why a given party or policy is relevant to the group” (Converse, 2006, p. 41). For parties, this may be especially useful, as they are relatively free to link policies with certain groups or highlight the impact of political measures on specific groups and thereby influence the reception of their policy proposals among their supporters and the general public.

To identify and code the statements used by political parties to connect themselves with certain groups, I rely on a relational content analysis scheme. In detail, I have collected information on the subject (party), the object (group), and their relation (positive or negative appeal), for each reference or appeal to a social group.¹ Next, I have aggregated the statements into higher-level group categories. Based on those results I have selected 24 politically relevant groups, including a wide range of demographic, gender, economic and professional, political, regional, societal, and cultural groups (see below). I aimed for a balanced selection of groups associated with parties on the right, left, or both sides of the political spectrum. The selection also covers the most important groups linked to the main traditional cleavages in Austria, the labor vs. capital and the rural vs. urban divide (Kritzing et al., 2013).

Based on this, I measured for every party and every election how many statements positively or negatively address a specific group category. For each party manifesto and each group category, I divided the number of times a specific category was mentioned (either positively or negatively) by the number of times any of the 24 group categories were mentioned. The final measure for group emphasis is the proportion of statements mentioning a specific group category in the respective party manifesto.

Independent Variable: Social Group Yield

To calculate the social group yield index, I rely on a quantitative cross-sectional survey that measures the (positive or negative) assessment of a group among party supporters and the wider electorate. The groups included in the survey are based on the list of categories

previously identified in parties' electoral programs. The survey questions ask respondents about their sympathy toward specific groups on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (very much) (full question wordings and descriptive analyses are provided in Online Appendix B).

This battery with 24 Likert scale items was included in Wave 12 and 13 of the Online Panel Study conducted by the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES) (Aichholzer et al., 2020). For each of the two respective waves, approximately 3,000 respondents were surveyed online by means of a Computer-Assisted Web Interview (CAWI) after the general election in September 2019.²

The time sequence of the data collection for the independent and dependent variable is not ideal, as the group yield index is based on a survey that was conducted shortly after the election, which is used to predict group emphasis in party manifestos that were published during the campaign. Yet, this is unlikely to affect the results, as it can be assumed that group attitudes and social identities are rather stable over long periods of time (Valentino & Vandenberg, 2017, but see Egan, 2019). Moreover, the purpose of this study was not to predict changes in parties' communication strategies in response to shifting voter constellation within the timeframe of a single election campaign but to demonstrate the usefulness of the model that should guide party strategies concerning social group appeals.

In line with the issue yield methodology (De Sio & Weber, 2014), party supporters are identified based on their vote choice. The 11-point response scales for group sympathy were dichotomized with respondents located below the midpoint classified as hostile toward the group and respondents located above the midpoint as supportive of the group (respondents on the midpoint are disregarded). With this survey data, it is possible to capture the strategic configuration faced by different parties and determine which groups are most advantageous to mobilize and persuade voters. The social group yield index is calculated according to the formula developed by De Sio and Weber (2014, p. 877), which may be summarized as follows:

$$\text{group yield} = \frac{f - ip}{p(1 - p)} + \frac{i - p}{1 - p}$$

i = proportion of the electorate supporting a group

p = proportion of the electorate supporting a party

f = proportion of the electorate supporting both group and party

High values on the group yield index indicate groups on which a specific party has a distinct electoral potential, as these groups are both popular among party supporters and have a broad electoral appeal among the wider public. In contrast, lower values for group yield indicate that the respective group either only appeals to the party base without attracting broader support, is popular among the electorate at large but poses a risk to alienate the parties' own supporters or is unpopular both among party supporters and the public at large.

Analysis

The Demand Side: Group Attitudes among the Austrian Electorate

From the public opinion data, it is possible to calculate the proportion of the electorate supporting a group, the proportion of the electorate supporting a party, the proportion of the electorate supporting both group and party, as well as the differential support for

a group within a party. Using these data as coordinates, groups can thus be plotted in a group support diagram (adapted from De Sio & Weber, 2014, p. 874 for *policy issues*). An example for the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) is provided in Figure 2.

Looking at the group support diagram in Figure 2, it becomes apparent that the proposed group typology is a useful approach: Farmers, entrepreneurs, and civil servants (including police officers) have always been among the ÖVP's core voter groups. Moreover, the party traditionally has its highest level of support in rural areas (Kritzinger et al., 2013). It, therefore, makes good sense to find these groups among the *bridge in-groups* in the top-right quadrant.

In contrast, groups in the top-left quadrant are categorized as *venture in-groups*. Due to its strong ties with the Catholic church and the strong focus on traditional families, the ÖVP takes a more critical stance toward homosexuals and single parents. Also, low-income earners, unemployed, artists, and students are not among the party's core voter groups. However, it is rather surprising to find teachers, pensioners, and disabled people *venture in-groups* (even though they are placed closed to the middle).

The categorization of *dead-end in-groups* also seems to be highly plausible, as the party articulates strong law-and-order positions and a critical position on immigration and therefore adopts a critical stance toward criminals and refugees.

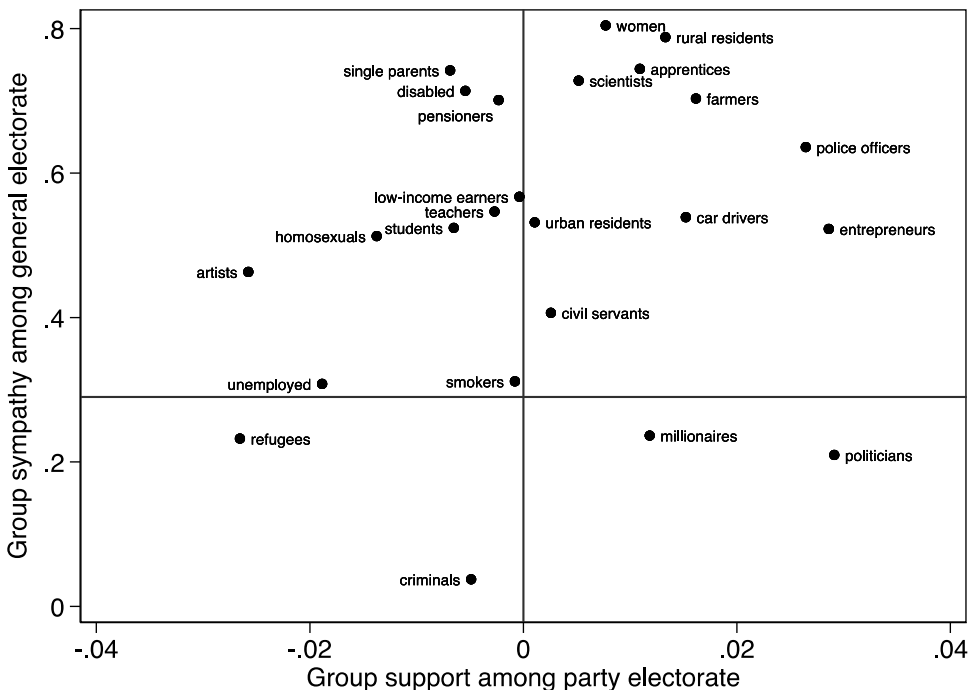


Figure 2. Group support diagram for the People's Party (ÖVP). Note: The diagram shows the group yield configuration for the People's Party. Each dot represents a group, whose coordinates are defined by the group support among party voters (x-axis) and the group sympathy among the general electorate (y-axis). The vertical line separates between groups that are over- or under-supported among party voters. The horizontal line represents the support for the party among the general electorate.

For *pamper in-groups* there are also no big surprises, as business and finance associations in Austria have close ties to the ÖVP. Also, politicians, have a high level of support among the party electorate but are rather unpopular among the general Austrian population.

As a result, it is argued that the typology developed by De Sio and Weber (2014) can be successfully transferred from policy issues to social groups and presents a fruitful approach to assess the combination of opportunities and risks that appeals to different groups constitute for specific parties.

The Supply Side: Group Emphasis in Party Manifestos

The group typology also applies to parties' communication strategies, as the mean (positive and negative) group emphasis for each group type in the manifesto data is in the expected order: It is highest for bridge groups (0.071), followed by venture groups (0.033) and pamper groups (0.003), and lowest for dead-end groups (0.002). Given this distribution, the typology is also fully supported by the supply side data on social group appeals. Mean emphasis values for each party and each group (for positive and negative appeals) are depicted in Figure A.1 in Online Appendix A.

Analyzing Parties' Group Strategies

As a next step, the social group yield index is used to predict parties' group appeal strategies. The unit of analysis is parties \times groups \times positive/negative \times election (5 parties \times 24 groups \times 2 \times 3 elections, resulting in 720 observations in total). The proportion assigned to each group category of all relevant statements with (positive or negative) group appeals in each party manifesto serves as the dependent variable. This means it is constrained between 0 and 1, but it also has a strong asymmetrical distribution (see Figure A.2 in Online Appendix A). Following previous applications of the issue yield model (see for example, De Sio et al., 2018), the dependent variable is treated as a distribution censored at 0 and a Tobit model is used, with clustered standard errors by party. The main independent variable is group yield, which has a theoretical range between -1 and $+1$. All models include fixed effects for elections (2013, 2017, and 2019).

Table C.1 in Online Appendix C shows the impact of group yield (Model 1), as well as the interaction between group yield and positive group appeals (Model 2). To investigate the strategies of the individual parties in more detail, I also estimate party-specific coefficients through interactions with party dummies (Model 3).

Results for Model 1 suggest that there is a strong positive association of group yield and parties' group emphasis, which is in accordance with Hypothesis 1. The value for explained variance (28%)³ indicates that group yield is a strong predictor for parties' group strategies. More specifically, compared to a neutral group with a yield of zero, groups with an optimal yield of 1 lead to a predicted increase in the relative (positive or negative) emphasis in parties' electoral manifestos of approximately 40 percentage points.⁴ Model 2 shows that there is a negative and statistically significant interaction between group yield and positive group appeals. This confirms Hypothesis 2, which suggests that parties should more strongly rely on high yield groups for negative group appeals.⁵

To visualize the results, Figures 3–4 show the marginal effects for Model 2 and 3 along with 95% confidence intervals. The effect of group yield is stronger for negative group appeals: A negative appeal increases the effect of group yield by 26 percentage points ($p < .001$).

Figure 4 illustrates that campaign strategies of all parties build on appeals to groups with a high yield. Interestingly, the FPÖ has the highest marginal effect for group yield, which means that of all parties included in the study, the FPÖ focused most on groups that were clearly (dis-)liked amongst its own voter base, but also by a large segment of the electorate. This is reflected in the high proportion of negative group appeals against refugees, criminals, as well as civil servants, and politicians. The additional positive emphasis on groups like pensioners, women, car drivers, and low-income earners provides the party with an opportunity to expand its electoral base beyond voters with negative attitudes toward refugees and criminals.

The group yield effects for SPÖ, ÖVP, Greens, and the NEOS are significantly smaller. As shown in Figure A.1 in Online Appendix A, the SPÖ relied on positive appeals toward high yield groups such as women and apprentices to some extent, but also toward groups with a smaller yield, for instance, unemployed people, students, or teachers. Additionally, the party focused heavily on negative appeals against millionaires, for which the party has the highest yield. Similarly, the ÖVP used appeals toward some high yield groups such as women, farmers, refugees, and criminals, but did not exploit its full potential when it comes to others (e.g., car drivers, rural residents, police officers). The same applies to the Greens: positive appeals toward high yield groups that appear most often in their manifestos include for example, women, disabled people, homosexuals, and artists. However, the party also missed its opportunities when it comes to other groups such as scientists, students, and single parents. Finally, the NEOS mainly used appeals toward groups that are rather controversial among the Austrian electorate and therefore have a smaller yield (such as teachers, entrepreneurs, and civil servants). Thus, it can be concluded that none of these parties used their full potential on high yield groups.

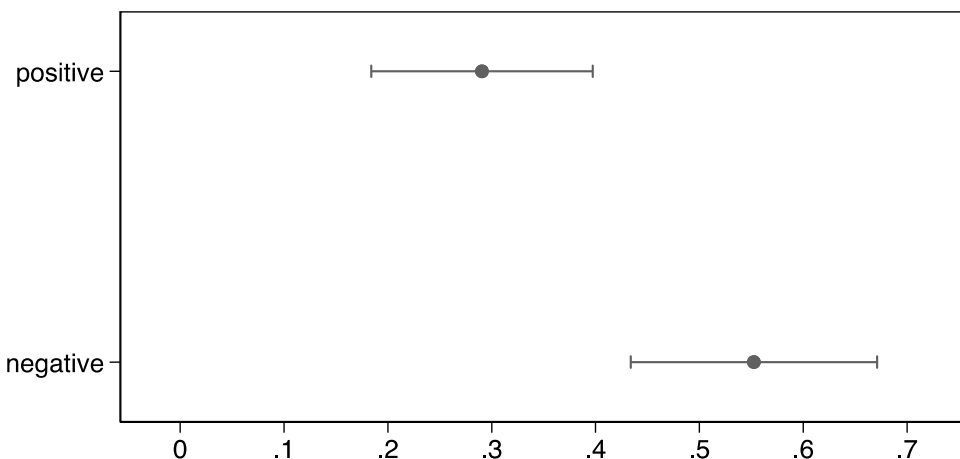


Figure 3. Marginal effects for Model 2. Note: The figure shows the marginal effects for Model 2 reported in Table C.1 in Online Appendix C.

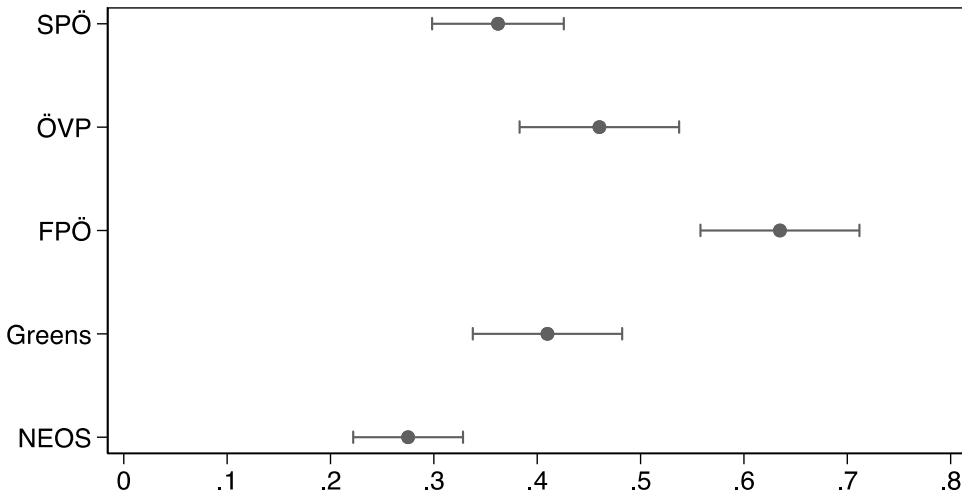


Figure 4. Marginal effects for Model 3. Note: The figure shows the marginal effects for Model 3 reported in Table C.1 in Online Appendix C.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study contributes to the ongoing scholarly debate on how parties strategically use appeals to different social groups in their campaign rhetoric. I first developed a general framework to examine parties' communication strategies and their attempts to convince voters by appealing to their social identity and exploiting their group attitudes. I have argued that appeals to social groups are a fundamental resource for parties and that this strategy has so far been relatively neglected in the existing literature on party competition. Specifically, parties not only rely on positive appeals to groups with a positive image but also use negative references against groups that are unpopular among the general public and their own supporters. These appeals capitalize on feelings of sympathy or antagonism toward in- and out-group members.

Combining survey data on group attitudes with supply side data on group emphasis in party manifestos, this study has introduced a novel research design and demonstrated the usefulness of an adaptation of the issue yield model (De Sio & Weber, 2014) for group appeals. I have shown that political parties in Austria rely extensively on appeals to social groups in their campaign communication. Moreover, the fact that the emphasis dedicated to different groups varies markedly between parties clearly demonstrates that group appeals are used strategically to compete for votes. The results confirm that group yield is strongly associated with the emphasis of specific groups in parties' electoral programs. I also found that parties more strongly rely on high yield groups for negative group appeals.

These findings have important implications for existing theories of party electoral strategy. While policy appeals are a crucial element of political competition, as voters undoubtedly consider party policy platforms, group appeals are another distinct feature of parties' campaign communication. Group appeals represent an important strategy for parties to exploit existing group attitudes among the electorate to attract votes and build viable electoral alliances. Over-time variation in group attitudes should also be

reflected in changes in party communication. Consequently, future research should focus more strongly on appeals to social groups and their combination with policy issues.

While these findings add to our understanding of the use of group appeals in political communication, they could also be extended in two ways: This study focuses on a single country, but my theoretical argument reaches beyond this case. Even though the salience of certain groups may vary across different contexts, the social group yield model should be equally applicable to other democracies with different party systems. Second, the study focuses on a single communication channel. While party manifestos provide a comprehensive overview of appeals to different social groups, future studies should examine whether results differ when looking at other communication channels, such as social media. Third, the study exclusively focuses on parties' use of social group appeals and thus may not speak to the question of whether group appeals are meaningful in the sense that they are linked to specific policy proposals or to what degree they actually persuade voters.

The results have further critical implications for representation and political polarization. This study provides insights into the frequency and tone of group appeals used by political parties. The findings reveal which groups are valued and courted during electoral campaigns, but they also show which groups are stigmatized or absent from the political debate. While policy appeals mainly address the ideological preferences and material interests of voters, group appeals speak to concerns linked to social identities and group attitudes (Huddy, 2013). Group-based campaigning thus has the potential to strengthen the "symbolic" representation of group interests.

The use of group appeals also has important implications for political polarization. Fostering strong social identities might create fragmentation within the national community and promote inter-group antipathies. Even though appeals against particular groups may present a strategic opportunity for electoral gain, parties should also consider the potential adverse effects of group-based campaigning. Ultimately this strategy might lead to growing competition between groups, or even out-group condemnation, in the form of hatred and discrimination (Valentino & Vandebroek, 2017) with major consequences for social cohesion in a country.

Notes

1. More details on the coding process and inter-coder reliability are given in Appendix A.
2. Participants were selected based on a quota sample to closely represent the Austrian voting-age population based on age, gender, region, educational level, and household size. The fieldwork took place between 30. September and 11. October 2019 for Wave 12 and between 10. January and 24. January 2020 for Wave 13.
3. To calculate the values of explained variance, I rely on the approach developed by De Sio and Weber (2020). It is defined as the relative reduction of the estimated variance of the residual that is achieved by the model of interest compared to the empty model.
4. Group yield has an empirical range of 1.29 and a standard deviation of 0.34. Mean group emphasis is 0.037 with a standard deviation of 0.099. 64% of the cases have an emphasis of zero.
5. Alternative specifications of the Tobit regression models are provided in Online Appendix C (see Table C.2).

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Data Availability Statement

The data and replication files necessary to reproduce the results are available on the Phaidra Repository from the University of Vienna (<https://phaidra.univie.ac.at/o:1405417>).

Open Scholarship



This article has earned the Center for Open Science badge for Open Data. The data are openly accessible at <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2021.1998264>.

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