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The Case of the Twitter Campaign Preceding the 2022 French Presidential Election

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1. INTRODUCTION

On February 13, 2022, 66 days to the first round of the 2022 French presidential election, far-right candidate Éric Zemmour posted the following statement on Twitter: “Almost half of the national wealth is subject to compulsory levies. We are world champions. Our first problem is the excess of taxes, charges and taxes”¹. On the same day only two hours later, far-left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon tweeted: “The abolition of the #ISF (=wealth tax) and the Flat Tax is a yearly check of 2 million euros per beneficiary. These people have piled up 70 billion in dividends. They took more than the budget of the National Education, for them”². These excerpts from two presidential candidates’ Twitter feeds illustrate exactly how an election campaign featuring an exchange of policy positions on the same issues can function as a *source of political information* for the electorate. From reading these two Tweets, one can learn that Zemmour, typical of a right-wing candidate, opts for tax cuts, whereas Mélenchon, typical of a left-wing candidate, criticizes prior tax cuts and pleads for raising taxes for the wealthy. Voters can use this information to evaluate with which of the proposed fiscal policies they agree more and gain important knowledge necessary to arrive at an electoral decision that reflects their actual preferences.

In the political science literature, the above-illustrated phenomenon occurring within election campaigns is captured by the term “issue engagement”. Following Meyer & Wagner (2016), it can be defined as two political actors³ “talk[ing] about the same issue during a certain period of time” (p. 556). Issue engagement is crucial to provide citizens with the opportunity to make an “informed vote choice” (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). By talking about the same issue, not only do the policy positions of both political actors become clear but also what differentiates them from each other, which, in turn, enables voters to relate these positions to their own. Conversely, if a candidate avoids a relevant issue, e.g. if Mélenchon would not publicly declare that he wants to raise taxes for the wealthy, voters are deprived of crucial information. Therefore,

¹ Translation by the author; in the original: “Près de la moitié de la richesse nationale fait l’objet de prélèvements obligatoires. Nous sommes champions du monde. Notre premier problème, c’est l’excès d’impôts, de charges et de taxes.”

² In the original: “La suppression de l’#ISF et la Flat Tax, c’est un chèque année de 2 millions d’euros par bénéficiaires. Ces gens-là ont empilé 70 milliards de dividendes. Ils ont pris plus que le budget de l’Éducation Nationale, pour eux.”

³ I deliberately chose the term “political actors”, as it semantically includes both parties and candidates. Depending on the political system and the election in question, whether it is party-centered (e.g. parliamentary elections with proportional representation) or candidate-centered (e.g. presidential elections), it makes sense to either speak about issue engagement between parties or issue engagement between candidates. Due to a remaining semantic vagueness, I will, however, employ the terms “political actors”, “parties” and “candidates” more or less interchangeably throughout thesis.

in a perfect world, candidates would have to provide a clear position on *all possibly relevant* policy issues. Within an election campaign, the main task of those running for elective office would be precisely to convey this kind of information by the means of speeches, public discussions, press releases, TV debates, social media posts and the like. This willingness of candidates to discuss all issues even-handedly automatically translates to high levels of issue engagement, which is why issue engagement, as an “impoverished” way to conceive of political deliberation, can also be considered a quality indicator for election campaigns. In fact, as deliberative democratic theorists would argue, a debate-like setting is, perhaps, best suited to educate voters (Habermas, 2006).

Still, in an adversarial setting like an election campaign, we cannot expect politicians to meet these high normative standards, especially when it detrimentally affects their electoral prospects (Bagg and Tranvik, 2019). Thus, this thesis assumes that politicians act strategically in accordance with their goal to get elected and/or maximizing their vote share. Departing from a simplifying rational choice perspective of candidate behavior, an election *campaign* serves the candidates to mobilize and convince as many citizens as possible to cast a vote for them and not primarily to inform the electorate. This naturally implies that candidates will try to predominantly address those issues that are advantageous for them while deliberately avoiding issues that are likely to hurt their electoral prospects (e.g. Petrocik, 1996; Simon, 2002). Consequently, there are cases where candidates’ strategic interests prevent the occurrence of issue engagement, meaning that voters are usually not provided with *all* the information needed to guarantee an accurate electoral choice. To put it exaggeratedly, candidates only inform voters about their policy positions if it helps them to win elections, which renders the normatively desirable issue engagement a by-product of candidates’ strategic campaign behavior.

Inspired by this tension between the normative demands on democracy as a deliberative institution and a realistic perspective that takes the strategic dimension of political action seriously, I pose the following research question: *Under which circumstances does issue engagement occur during election campaigns?*

The concept of issue engagement has emerged to empirically verify whether political actors competing in election campaigns comply with basic principles of deliberative democratic theory (Fishkin, 1991; Fishkin, 1992; Habermas, 2004). Deliberation can be broadly defined as “mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values and interests regarding matters of common concern” (Mansbridge, 2015, p.28). We see that this defini-

tion contains substantive propositions about the mode and the content of a communication procedure in order to qualify as deliberation. Clearly, it lies beyond the scope of a quantitative study to verify whether or to which extent issue appeals in election campaigns fulfil these demands. One may even question if election campaigns foster deliberation *at all*, since candidates usually neither “weigh” nor “reflect” on their policy positions but rather endorse and defend them at any cost. Thus, issue engagement is not deliberation but rather, since every deliberative process presumes that candidates are willing to actually talk about the subject, a *minimal condition* for deliberation. Testimony to the fact that issue engagement is exclusively about whether political actors are talking about the same issues and should not be confused with a profound policy debate, is also the deliberate abandonment of the term “dialogue” (Simon, 2002), which has been previously employed in the literature to describe the same phenomenon.

Comprehending no criteria with regards to the actual content of political actors’ issue appeals, *issue engagement* can, thus, also be regarded as a necessary *but not sufficient* prerequisite for citizens’ informed decision-making. Even if candidates pursue issue engagement, they still can make highly ambiguous statements, only refer to an issue in order to launch a baseless attack on an opponent, or can “frame” (Chong and Druckman, 2007) the very same issue in completely contradictory terms. The fact that overlapping issue appeals, while potentially involving “destructive” campaign behavior, are still considered “normatively desirable” instances of issue engagement prompted Lipsitz (2013) to question the explanatory power of issue engagement as a quality indicator for election campaigns altogether.

Overall defending the analytical meaningfulness of the concept against this fundamental criticism, I have nevertheless decided to respond to Lipsitz’s (2013) remark on a specific aspect concerning the measurement of issue engagement. The decisive passage reads as follows:

“A drawback of all these measures [for issue engagement] is that the researchers use an entire campaign as the unit of analysis. [...] [T]he problem with calculating a single dialogue score for an entire electoral season is that we have no idea when the dialogue occurred during the election campaign or, indeed, if dialogue occurred at all. Situations in which two candidates discuss the same issue - even if one discusses it in early September and the other does in late October - is considered to be “dialogue” despite the fact that it would be difficult to argue that the second candidate is responding to the first. Moreover, if one is trying to understand the effects of dialogue on voter knowledge, it is unreasonable to expect a voter to be able to compare the candidates’ positions when they are discussed so far apart in the campaign” (Lipsitz 2013, p.845).

Indeed, the question of the temporal proximity between candidates’ issue appeals has been neglected so far. Most studies have equated issue engagement with a mere overlap in candidates’ issue profiles (e.g. Kaplan et al., 2006; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015), thereby treating election campaigns as *static* rather than *dynamic* events. To strengthen the deliberative as well as the interactive connotation of the concept, I will add a new criterion to the above-presented

definition that emphasizes the significance of the temporal proximity between political actors' issue appeals. Accordingly, I propose that for a situation to qualify as an instance of issue engagement, two candidates need to talk about the same issue *on the same day*. Despite still being an imperfect approximation to the complexity of issue competition in an election campaign, this new measure has three main advantages. First, the probability is much higher that two issue appeals are somehow related when they are temporally proximate to one another, which corresponds to the normatively desirable idea that two candidates “engage” in a discussion about an issue. Second, as is already clear from the quote, issue engagement is much more likely to unfold its beneficial effects, i.e. to allow and to nudge citizens to make an informed vote choice, when the issues are discussed at the same time, because then citizens can directly compare the candidates' policy positions. Third, splitting the election campaign in a series of one-day time intervals enables modelling changes in the campaign environment and how these affect the likelihood for an occurrence of issue engagement. After all, depending on a variety of time bound factors such as poll standings, the public salience of certain issues or exogenous shocks, candidates are prone to adapt their campaign behavior and communication strategies within an election campaign if they think that it will enhance their electoral prospects.

Following up on the last point, independent of all normative considerations, it is important to highlight that issue engagement is above all also a general conceptual key to understanding the “supply side of the campaign process”, namely campaign behavior, and “how [...] candidates compete for control of campaign agendas” (Damore, 2005, p.72). The question under which circumstances will political actors talk about the same issues at the same time, i.e. pursue issue engagement, is strongly linked to the more general question of what makes a specific party/candidate emphasize a certain issue at a certain point in time. The understanding of the latter is the condition for explaining the former. Anyway, both questions require a distinction between different types of factors. Whether an issue will be addressed or not depends on the characteristics of the issue and on the characteristics of the political actor at hand as well as on the interrelationship between both these factors.

With regards to the “issue level factors”, I will primarily draw from the two dominant theoretical accounts dealing with political issue competition, namely “issue-ownership theory” (Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik et al., 2003) and the “riding the wave”-thesis (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994). Interestingly, as I will show, both yield conflicting predictions concerning the frequency of issue engagement. Here, the following two questions give guidance: Do parties strategically emphasize those issues where they yield a natural advantage due to an ideologically grounded

issue handling reputation, as predicted by issue ownership theory? Or do all parties talk about those issue that the public is most concerned about, as predicted by the riding the wave-thesis? Moreover, I will explore the impact of so-called “valence issues” (Stokes, 1963), i.e. issues that represent generally desirable goals and, thus, hardly feature fundamental ideological disputes, on issue engagement. However, especially in a multiparty system, where more than two relevant parties compete in elections, the characteristics of issues are only one party of the story (Wagner and Meyer, 2014). Political actors differ along several dimensions that are likely to have an effect on their willingness to pursue issue engagement. In particular, this study focusses on political parties’ ideological position and their electoral competitiveness while also accounting for the potentially deviating campaign behavior of the incumbent. Finally, exploiting an advantage of my dynamic measure of issue engagement, time understood as temporal proximity to the Election Day is also employed as an explanatory variable.

Several of these propositions have already been tested sporadically by different studies (e.g. Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016; Sigelman and Buell, 2004; Druckman et al., 2010). Due to the variety of data types, methods and contexts as well as contradictory results, it is, however, difficult to assess the overall validity and generalizability of most previous findings aimed at explaining issue engagement. In fact, among all determinants of issue engagement to be tested in this study, only the positive effect of ideological proximity on the likelihood for issue engagement can be considered well-documented and robust (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015; Meyer and Wagner, 2016). A comprehensive account that considers both issue level and actor level factors, and examines how their interplay affects issue engagement is still lacking. Providing this comprehensive account with a dynamic concept of issue engagement that emphasizes the temporal boundedness and embeddedness of this phenomenon is the main endeavor of this thesis.

Conceiving of issue engagement as a dynamic concept requires a data source that is equally dynamic in nature. Clearly, static media like party manifestos, websites or TV ads, which may reveal something about the issue priorities of a party but do not reflect the actual behavior of political actors during election campaigns, are unsuited. The ideal medium for the concept should feature as many issue appeals by candidates as possible throughout the entire election campaign within short time intervals. Here, Twitter comes into play, which enables political candidates to make issue appeals and react to the campaign environment in “real time” and without any substantive costs (Van Dalen et al., 2015). Moreover, because Tweets by politicians are taken seriously by journalists and the public (Vaccari and Valeriani, 2015), this media can

also be considered representative of the candidates overall campaign behavior (Kreiss, 2016), which subsequently allows drawing general inferences about issue engagement that are not limited to a social media context.

As a case study the Twitter campaign preceding the first round of the 2022 French presidential election has been chosen. By the means of an automated text analysis (keyword assisted topic modelling) 6199 Tweets with substantive issue content from 8 presidential candidates Twitter feeds within 100 days to the election were assigned to 14 issue categories. Thereupon, occurrences of issue engagement could be identified, which will subsequently be explained in a regression model by the aforementioned determinants. The findings of this study suggest that despite its overall frequent occurrence throughout the election campaign, issue engagement is less likely in situations where it would be of particular relevance and informational value for voters. In fact, it seems that in almost every respect the strategic interests of candidates run counter to what would be normatively desirable.

The thesis is structured as follows. In a first step, to motivate my research, I will confront the normative claim of issue engagement with the harsh empirical reality of political competition. Here, mainly adopting the perspective of the political supply side, I will discuss the question of how election campaigns influence and inform citizens' vote choice while also defending the conceptual usefulness of issue engagement against criticism on both, normative and analytical grounds. Next, I will present the theoretical foundation for studying issue engagement and review the existent literature. The criticism of previous approaches to issue engagement serves to make clear the advantages of my own concept and, somewhat implicitly, also of the data used to measure it later on. In the core chapter of the theory section, I begin by delineating the assumptions of my rational choice model of campaign behavior as well as my new dynamic conceptualization of issue engagement. Subsequently, I formulate concrete arguments culminating in the formulation of 10 hypotheses. The empirical section opens with a discussion of the case, the data and the statistical method used to test the hypotheses. To demonstrate the validity of the algorithmic issue categorization employed and to counteract the conceptual abstractness of issue engagement, within this chapter, I will also use the newly collected data to provide a descriptive overview of the 2022 French presidential election campaign. Then, the results of a multivariate analysis are presented and discussed. In the final chapter, I will highlight the contributions of this study to the literature and consider the normative implications of the findings.

2. ISSUE ENGAGEMENT – A QUALITY INDICATOR FOR DEMOCRACY?

To stress the relevance of my research interest, in this chapter, I will argue that issue engagement can be considered a *quality indicator* for election campaigns (Simon, 2002) and even for the functioning of democracy itself. My approach is to embed the concept of issue engagement thoroughly within normative democratic theory as well as within the empirical political science literature. Before directly addressing issue engagement, two foundational questions, each in its normative and empirical formulation, will guide me here: (1) On what basis *should* citizens make their vote choice and on what basis do they *actually* make it? (2) What role *should* election campaigns play in this context and what role do they *actually* play? As we will see, a productive tension will emerge between the idealist and the realist perspective that will reveal why issue engagement is so crucial. In essence my argument has been inspired by two interrelated ideals of modern representative democracy: an *informed citizenry* (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996) and election campaigns as a deliberative endeavor (Fishkin, 1991; 1992) characterized by a *fair and free exchange of reasoned opinions and ideas*.

One key feature of and necessary condition for representative democracy is the regular holding of competitive elections. However, in terms of selecting office holders who respond to citizens' demands, elections would hardly do better than a coin toss if people were not able to base their voting decision on some sort of information about what a particular party or candidate stands for. In fact, to guarantee congruence between people's preferences and their vote choice, citizens would have to take all possibly relevant information into account, assign each piece of information a value of relative importance, and then choose the candidate or party coming closest to their preferences (Downs, 1957). Ignoring some pitfalls concerning the aggregation of votes in certain electoral systems, this ideal situation of a fully informed citizenry would drastically increase the likelihood that those elected act in accordance with public interest. This, in turn, leads to satisfaction with democracy as the majority of the people will feel truly represented. "In short, a broadly and equitably informed citizenry helps assure a democracy that is both responsive and responsible" (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996, p.1).

Citizen can rely on several criteria to reach an electoral choice, which are usually not considered to be of equal quality. Clearly a person voting for a candidate because he likes her taste in fashion forms his opinion on a questionable criterion, whereas a person voting for a candidate because she agrees with him on the necessity to elevate animal protection standards bases his choice on a relevant political preference. To base one's electoral choice on explicitly non-political criteria, e.g. by turning a political election into a fashion contest, can only be considered

unreasonable since elections, as a fundamental part of democracy, is a means of expressing *political* preferences. Even if we judge the ideal of a *fully* informed citizenry as exaggerated, from a normative point of view, we still want citizens to mainly vote along their ideological views and/or issue priorities, since these criteria fit the purpose of elections best and make sure that at least some link between the public will and those representing it exists.

Notwithstanding the formulated normative requirements for the citizenry of a modern democracy, the average voter has been found incapable of applying basic ideological categories in a consistent and meaningful way (Converse, 1964). Also debates revolving around issues have appeared to exert only limited influence on selected chunks of the electorate since they require a lot of issue-specific knowledge, which most of the people do not possess (Campbell et al., 1960). Thus, in the harsh reality, voters rely on criteria that do not correspond to the normatively desirable standard and instead turn to other less optimal and, perhaps, qualitatively inferior information to arrive at a decision. As Davidson et al. (2014) put it: “As a general rule, voters reach their decisions on the basis of three considerations: party loyalties, candidate assessments, and overall judgements about the state of the nation” (p.85). To make use of any of these criteria only a minimal amount of information is required, such as recalling party labels or knowing the candidates’ names, that cannot even be described as being of genuine political nature.

Prompted by Downs’ (1957) claim that people are *rationaly ignorant* since in almost all cases a single person’s vote will not decide the election outcome, researcher turned away from lamenting the low level of political knowledge among the electorate to justifying the reliance on informational short cuts as a consequence of *efficient* decision-making (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001; Lupia, 1994; Popkin, 1991). Even if we assume that all voters want to make an *accurate* choice, i.e. a choice that reflects their interests, it is perfectly rational to use heuristics like party cues if they have proven to be *reliable*. After all, it does not make sense to put more effort into the gathering of more sophisticated information if in the end it does not alter one’s vote choice. Only those cases can be deemed really problematic where additional information e.g. about a candidate’s position on a certain issue would have made a person switch from one candidate to another or affect the decision whether or not one participates in the election at all. Since there is a considerable degree of congruence between democratic government and the preferences of the electorate (e.g. Page and Shapiro, 1983; Powell, 2000; Stimson et al., 1995) indicating that democracy essentially “works”, the conclusion lies near that heuristics indeed convey just enough information to enable a sufficiently large proportion of the electorate to arrive at an accurate vote choice.

After having quickly outlined how voters arrive at an electoral decision, we now turn to the supply side of political competition or, more precisely, to the role of election campaigns in a democracy. When asking ourselves where citizens actually can get the information they need if they want to make sure that their vote choice accurately reflects their preferences, we will eventually arrive at election campaigns, which can be considered the main source of information about parties' and candidates' respective policy stances and issue priorities. Consequently, election campaigns are an integral part of every representative democracy, as Riker (1996) puts it:

“For most citizens in most polities, campaigns provide a compelling incentive to think about government. Campaigns thus are a main point – perhaps the main point – of contact between officials and the populace over matters of public policy. If, as democratic theorists postulate, rulers are responsible to the ruled, responsibility is imposed during campaigns and the elections in which they culminate” (p.3).

As I will argue, election campaigns not only affect citizens vote choice in general but also on what grounds they can even form an opinion about the candidates and parties eligible to vote. Here, the key argument is that the quality of the election campaign determines the quality of the subsequent electoral decision (cf. Basinger and Lavine, 2005). When I henceforth speak of the quality of an election campaign, I not only refer to the amount, substantiality and relevance of the information involved but also, as I will explain later, the mode of its transmission. Let me illustrate the importance of the supply side for the quality of the factors relied upon in the electoral choice by a simple example: If a campaign exclusively revolves around the candidates' character traits and whether or not he believes in god, one can hardly blame the electorate for not taking into consideration the candidates' possibly far more relevant stance on fiscal policy. Conversely, we would expect an election campaign characterized by a profound debate about substantive policy issues to provoke citizens to evaluate the candidates on the basis of their policy stances.

Again, adopting a normative perspective, we can now ask ourselves what the *ideal* election campaign in terms of providing citizens with substantive information and motivating them to rely on “high quality” criteria like ideological positions and/or issue priorities would look like. Following Simon (2002), a good starting point are democratic theories centered on the notion of deliberation. Democratic theorists like Habermas (1998; 2004) see discourse committed to certain fundamental standards as the central procedure to establish legitimacy of political decisions. This is achieved through a free and fair exchange of arguments that appeal to a form of universal rationality and aim at a consensus. In the end, it is the “unforced force of the better argument” (Habermas, 1998, p.37) that prevails and makes a broad majority (if not everyone) agree to the outcome of the deliberative process. For the legitimacy of the resulting political

decision the conditions under which a consensus was formed are decisive. Thus, every discourse should try to approach what Habermas calls an “ideal speech situation” that comprehends the equal opportunity to take the floor, a general lack of hierarchical structures, a general openness towards the arguments of others as well as an actual desire to reach a consensus.

Obviously, the deliberative procedure itself is essential and can neither be skipped nor can its outcome be anticipated. Imagine a simple town hall meeting where a political decision in the form of a yes or no question needs to be made. Why not save a couple of hours by skipping the debate beforehand and instead proceed directly to the vote if in either way the matter will be settled by a simple majority? Because we expect something to happen throughout the discussion that makes us judge a decision being preceded by a substantive discussion to be of higher quality. Accordingly, Fishkin (1991; 1992) sharply distinguishes between “simple” and “deliberative majorities”, where only the latter can render a political decision genuinely legitimate and approach the unattainable of the ideal of the people’s will. In essence, we can understand deliberation as a learning process that renders us informed and has the potential to alter the way we think about a given issue. Hearing different arguments for and against adopting a certain policy, being confronted with aspects and consequences one has not even considered, not only allows people to change their opinion but, which is even more important, to form one that is not just the expression of a vague gut feeling in the first place. Taking the previously mentioned requirement of a certain impartiality that evaluates arguments only in terms of their rational persuasiveness seriously, deliberation appears to be the royal road to the normatively desired informed citizenry.

The insight that deliberation can and should be the bedrock of every well-functioning democracy can now be used to delineate the ideal election campaign. Of course, political campaigns by their very nature violate central assumptions of the “ideal speech situation” since the political elite (composed of candidates, high-rank party members etc.) has disproportionally more power in the arena of public discourse than an ordinary citizen (Habermas, 2006, p.416ff.). Moreover, an election campaign is not aimed at consensus nor at a compromise, political actors are expected to stick to their positions throughout the entire campaign. Nevertheless, if we accept a certain division of roles, with the voters as the audience who strive to form an opinion and the political actors as the debaters who argue for the position they are committed to, we can still transfer the deliberative standards to the interactions between, for instance, the running candidates.

In this context, one maxim would certainly be: no rhetoric tricks. This would include no deflection from the subject, no straw man arguments, no manipulative re-framing and the like. In addition, every candidate should be fully transparent about their stance on every relevant campaign issue, which means no position “blurring” (Rovny, 2012) or issue avoidance. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, candidates should actively respond to the statements, claims and arguments put forward by their opponents. In fact, despite the demanding standards, a campaign that revolves around reasoned opinions and arguments while following fundamental principles of fairness should be and is likely to be intense. In addition, it is important to emphasize that deliberation is more than a mere informational event. A debate between two candidates, and each candidate holding a press conference on their own is not of equal informational value. It is precisely the interactivity and the instant exchange of arguments that matters.

Issue engagement, i.e. whether or not two candidates talk about the same issue(s) (even-handedly), can be regarded as an attempt to capture this notion of deliberation and debate. The main idea is that the more frequent issue engagement occurs the more the public can learn about the candidate’s positions on all relevant issues to eventually arrive at an informed vote choice on Election Day. If political actors avoid certain issues the citizenry might be deprived of crucial pieces of information, which has the potential to hurt the overall quality of the electoral choice. It is therefore consistent to consider issue engagement as a quality indicator for election campaigns, as it reveals something about informational density as well as about the extent to which the election campaign approximates a deliberative setting. At this point it should be noted that the significance of this indicator also depends on the concrete understanding of issue engagement, a concept that, as I will show in the next chapter, has been used and operationalized quite heterogeneously throughout the literature. Yet, put simply, we can conclude the more issue engagement in an election campaign the better.

Albeit this argument seems plausible, we should ask ourselves how this linkage between issue engagement in election campaigns and a high-quality vote choice can be understood in concrete terms, and if it does even hold up empirically. I have already hinted at the fact that neither deliberation nor issue engagement in election campaigns are mainly about persuasion but rather about information that potentially allows the formation of quality opinions. In line with this notion, Simon (2002, pp.113-120) finds that in US-senate election campaigns in which the level of issue engagement is higher the electorate is also significantly better informed. Compared to

senate races with low levels of issue engagement, not only were more respondents able to accurately identify and recall the candidates' names but also to list more pros and cons with regards to each candidate indicating more sophisticated opinions. Moreover, also partisan defection significantly correlated with the amount of issue engagement, meaning that more people voted in contradiction to their enlisted party membership, which again is an indicator that people relied less on party cues and instead voted along their actual preferences and convictions. In short, when an election campaign approximates the deliberative ideal, electoral decisions indeed seem to be better informed and of higher quality.

This evidence can further be corroborated by studies showing that exposure to opposing arguments yields beneficial effects for political knowledge and, thereby, facilitates the making of an accurate vote choice (Levine and Russo, 1995; see also: Sniderman and Theriault, 2004). Here, the role of disagreement is frequently highlighted that by pushing them out of their political "comfort zone" makes individuals question their own beliefs and possibly re-evaluate them in the light of coherent arguments (Nemeth, 1995; Price et al., 2002). A campaign featuring frequent issue engagement also implies that for each issue multiple opinions, arguments and perspectives are present in the public debate and can, therefore, be considered a pluralistic deliberative space. Here, voters are more likely to be exposed to views that stand in conflict with their own attitudes, which in turn can boost their reasoning powers in relation to political issues.⁴ In contrast, a campaign with no issue engagement cannot feature any disagreement and would resemble a pool of insulated opinions that renders it impossible for citizens to evaluate political actors on the basis of a balanced consideration of their arguments.

However, one must not forget that, contrary to theories of deliberative democracy, issue engagement is a descriptive concept that only captures a minimal condition for deliberation and has no indicative value in relation to the demanding normative requirements presented above. Clearly, a debate in which two candidates "talk past each other" by speaking about different issues, thus, more closely resembling "dueling monologues rather than dialogue" (Sigelman and Buell, 2004, p.650), contradicts the very principle of discourse. On the other hand, candi-

⁴ Other authors argue that being exposed to dissimilar opinions triggers partisan motivated reasoning (e.g. Kunda, 1990; Taber & Lodge 2006) and, thus, would precisely prevent the rational weighing of preferences associated with deliberation. It is true that for strong partisans issue engagement will probably not have a beneficial effect, as they already hold strong opinions, which they are not willing to question. As I have already hinted at, election campaigns are mainly directed towards those that are not yet convinced by a party and have not yet formed a clear electoral opinion. It is also those voters, as I would argue, who benefit most from being exposed to multiple conflicting opinions and for whom issue engagement is indeed highly valuable.

dates can also talk about the same issue while not providing clear positions or coherent arguments. They can engage in manipulative behavior like reframing, work with insinuations and unfair attacks, i.e. rhetoric methods that would obviously violate the idea of deliberation as a truth-oriented procedure, but, as long as the same issue is addressed, would not prevent a discourse-like situation to be classified as an occurrence of issue engagement. This circumstance opens the door for criticisms that points to an overestimation of the beneficial effects that issue engagement is supposed to yield.

Precisely due to the possibility to engage on an issue without committing to the normative standards of deliberation, Lipsitz (2013) argues that “dialogue between candidates harms voters as often as it helps them [...] whereas some candidates exchanges on a topic might enlighten voters, other exchanges might (perhaps intentionally) do just the opposite” (p.843). Indeed, several cases come to mind, where candidates distorted their opponents’ positions on an issue in order to gain a strategic advantage and, by that, *misinformed* the public. Since issue engagement as it is employed in the scientific literature does not control for the quality or informational value of the engagement, the whole argument about high levels of issue engagement being normatively desirable threatens to fall apart. Drawing on research on “competitive advertising”, Lipsitz even goes one step further. She claims that particularly for “less politically sophisticated individuals” also forms of issue engagement that feature a genuine exchange of positional differences on a specific issue might be confusing, since this might negatively affect voters’ ability to accurately connect the candidates with their policy positions. Examining the exposure to TV ads on selected issues during US-presidential campaigns, Lipsitz finds mixed empirical support for her argument: In one case, issue engagement, i.e. an equal amount of ad volume dedicated to a certain issue by both parties, did boost knowledge about the candidates’ positions on the respective issues. In two others, it tended to confuse voters, especially those with low levels of political interest (Lipsitz, 2013, pp. 848-853).

Certainly, issue engagement does not prevent that in individual and, perhaps, highly relevant cases it is precisely the interaction between candidates that lead to confusion. Viewed from a larger scale, however, a campaign where only *one* insulated opinion on each issue would be present in the public sphere, so as not to overwhelm voters, is likely to have other negative consequences that exceed the scope of a slight confusion about individual campaign issues. Due to the given lack of a common basis for discussion, both at the level of the political elites and at the level of the electorate, irreconcilable political camps would be formed as a consequence.

At the same time large parts of the electorate whose opinions would no longer have any correspondence on the political supply side, would feel increasingly alienated from representative democracy.

Lipsitz's (2013) thesis that issue engagement by informing voters as much as confusing them is in essence a zero-sum game with regards to citizens' opportunity to make an informed choice can be rebutted even better when thinking specifically about a multiparty instead of two-party context. Since in a two-party system one's electoral choice is limited to two options, one can draw more meaningful inferences for one's electoral decision by simply evaluating whether or not one is for or against the proposed policy than in a system with several parties where the available choices are much more nuanced. An election campaign featuring no issue engagement in a two-party system, despite still depriving voters of the potential beneficial effects of a deliberative campaign, might be less problematic because there is only one other party a voter can turn to when disagreeing with a party's policy stance. The same campaign in a multiparty setting, where a voter has multiple options left when disagreeing with a party on a certain issue, will leave far too many voters without any orientation and is, therefore, destined to lead to low-quality opinion formation merely relying on party cues or the state of the economy. Not least because the literature on issue engagement is predominantly based on the US political system, the differences between multiparty and two-party systems with regards to my research interest will again be a subject of discussion later in this study.

I will thus maintain that issue engagement is overall still normatively more desirable than complete issue avoidance, and that it can rightly be regarded as a quality indicator for election campaigns as well as, if one agrees that deliberation is a fundamental element of democracy, for democracy itself. Yet, since no authority can oblige them to comply with a set of deliberative standards, for politicians and those running for elective office the normative desirability of (sincere) issue engagement will hardly suffice to motivate them to act accordingly and leave their strategic interests out of the equation. Pointing the absence of any binding rules with regards to campaign behavior, Riker (1996) speaks of the "essential anarchy of the campaign forum" and underlines the fact that

"Campaigns are not like school debates or courtroom disputes. In debates and courtrooms, judges keep the disputants focussed on the predetermined subject by scoring the arguments or by accepting only relevant ones. [...] Campaigns are quite different because there is no judge. Each disputant decides what is relevant, what ought to be responded to, and what themes to emphasize" (p.76).

Apart from specific settings such as TV-debates or interviews where a journalist can intervene to make sure that a candidate does not stray off topic and stick to the issue, candidates are, in

principle, unrestrained in their campaign behavior. If a political actor does not want to engage on an issue, he/she is free to simply avoid it.

Despite the apparent anarchic nature of election campaigns, we can assume that these decisions are not randomly made but follow a stringent political logic. Uncovering this logic, has been the aim of every study on issue engagement in the realm of politics and, as my research question has clearly revealed, is also the main endeavor of this study. If we eventually abandon the normative perspective altogether, we will have to conclude that what drives the campaign behavior of political actors is nothing but the naked will to win, however one may define it. Regardless of the individual motivation of a candidate, whether they strive for glory, fame, power, justice or simply want to advance their country by implementing certain policies, they can only achieve these goals, at least in the sphere of institutional politics, by winning elections. From a realist point of view, the beneficial effects of issue engagement for the quality of electoral decisions are, thus, nothing more than a by-product of candidates' strategic communication behavior. In conclusion, it can be stated that Riker's famous dictum that "the shape of an agenda influences the choices made from it" (Riker, 1993a, p.1) has, perhaps, an unintended double meaning: Besides affecting which candidate or party will be voted for, the agenda also determines on which basis a vote choice is made and consequently its quality.

3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

Having explained why issue engagement in political campaigns is crucial for the well-functioning of liberal democracy, I will now turn to the phenomenon itself by pursuing a twofold objective: (1) To give an account of the essential theoretical foundations for the research on issue engagement and (2) to conduct a systematic review of the existent literature on this topic. As we will see, despite the relative coherence of the *theoretical* framework associated with issue engagement, the case settings and methodological approaches of the empirical studies dealing with issue engagement often deviate from one another in essential aspects that are likely to influence the results. Thus, exceeding a mere summary of the main arguments and findings, I will critically evaluate the consistency and informational value of the various research papers with the aim to deepen our understanding of issue engagement not only as an abstract concept but in its empirical application. This also provides us with the opportunity to address the differences between issue engagement in a (US) two-party context and issue engagement in a (European) multiparty context. Moreover, the detected weaknesses and pitfalls of certain approaches should give guidance when constructing my own argument and methodology in the further course of this thesis.

3.1 The Dynamics of Issue Ownership

In his paper *The Growing Importance of Issue Competition*, through the analysis of party manifestos, Green-Pedersen (2007) shows that from the 1970s onwards political parties in Western Europe have considered a greater variety of issues, including “new” issues such as environmental protection or “law & order”, and turned some of their attention away from the classic economic left-right divide. This trend continuously leading to a greater number of issues as well as a more equal distribution of attention between them can be interpreted as a development away from positional competition, where each party takes a position *within* a single (economic) issue dimension (Downs, 1957), towards *issue competition*. Considering that this development began in the 1970s, it is no coincidence that in the early 1980s with Budge and Farlie’s (1983) “saliency theory of party competition” the social science perspective on election campaigns took a similar turn: Party competition should no longer (exclusively) be regarded as a direct positional confrontation on a shared set of issues. Instead, it is argued that political actors’ main activity in election campaigns consists in strategically emphasizing those issues where they have a competitive advantage. Yet, what is this competitive advantage? “The implication [of saliency theory] that different parties are associated in the different policy areas with generally desirable

goals” (Budge, 1987, p.24). Revealing a certain affinity with Stoke’s (1963) concept of valence issues, each party has a certain reputation for being better at achieving a certain “generally desirable goal” than its competitor. For example, a conservative party is usually associated with the issue and goal of security since they are known “to be tough on crime” whereas a social democratic party stands for the reduction of social inequality. The main endeavor of each party during an election campaign is now to selectively increase the salience of these advantageous issues on the agenda and, subsequently, in the evaluation of the voters. Put simply, if a party succeeds in making the election about one of “its” issues, then the party is destined for electoral success. If we decide to share this conclusion, this would of course have severe implication for issue engagement:

“The picture of party competition in other words changes from the classical ‘great debate’, or direct argument over a common range of problems, to one where parties talk past each other, glossing over areas which might favour their rivals while emphasizing those on which they feel they have an advantage” (Budge, 1987, p.24).

Thus, perhaps paradoxically, the logic of issue competition incentivizes parties to pursue as little issue engagement as possible.

With Riker’s *dominance/dispersion principle* we encounter a similar argument in a more generalized form: “When one side has an advantage on an issue, the other side ignores it; but when neither side has an advantage both seek new and advantageous issues” (Riker, 1993b, p.106). The first part of the quote referring to the *dominance principle* does in essence correspond to Budge and Farlie’s notion of *selective emphasis*. There is, however, a subtle difference. In contrast to Budge and Farlie, Riker does not specify on what grounds an issue can be regarded as being advantageous for a party. This implies that these advantageous issues do not necessarily need to be a “generally desirable goals” strongly associated with the historical roots of a certain party but could simply mean that the position of a party on this issue is particularly popular and supported by a clear majority of the electorate or the median voter. To illustrate the dominance principle, let us assume that a vast majority of a hypothetical electorate is in favor of an inheritance tax. While a social democratic party in favor of this policy would naturally capitalize on the issue and try to increase its salience, a conservative party, opposing this policy but considering the public opinion, would be expected to avoid the issue. Obviously, the conservative party has no interest in making their unpopular stance more visible by additionally engaging on the issue of inheritance tax, since this would only make this issue even more relevant in voters’ electoral decision and, consequently, harm its electoral prospects. We see that even though inheritance tax is a positional issue, it can still yield a clear advantage for one of the competing

parties. Despite this subtle difference to the previous approach, we see once again that the strategic considerations of the political actors, who strive for electoral victory, run counter to the normative desirability of an informed vote choice. If every party abandoned an issue as soon as their position on it is not supported by a majority, voters would be surrounded by a pool of majority opinions represented by different competing parties and cannot take the highly relevant minority positions into consideration. Needless to say, that in such a context deliberation and its beneficial effects cannot possibly unfold.

Petrocik's (1996) issue-ownership theory is another way of formalizing the notion that issues are allocated separately among the parties and that the specific composition of the campaign agenda advantages or disadvantages a party according to the issues it "owns" rather than its ideological stance. Whereas Riker's dominance principle leaves the possibility open whether the advantageousness of an issue lies in a short-term shift or in a long-term reputation of "handling" the respective issue, issue ownership theory is primarily concerned with the latter. The issue ownership status of a party has its roots in the preferences and interests of its historic constituencies as well as in the fundamental social conflicts the parties emerged from (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). Notwithstanding that issue ownership can evolve and change over longer periods of time, the reappearance of these fundamental conflicts (one may think of the owner-worker cleavage) reinforces the issue handling reputations of the parties and, thereby, renders them comparatively stable.

Apart from this "frozen" long term issue reputations, there is yet, according to Petrocik (1996) a limited number of issues, such as the economy or foreign relations, that are not permanently owned by a single party but are largely dependent on the incumbent's track record. If, for instance, the unemployment rate has fallen to a historic low during the president's term in office, the incumbent has "leased" the ownership over this issue for the subsequent election and will try to capitalize on it. However, the dynamic can also go in the other direction. If the incumbent has led the country in times of recession, "the challenger acquires an advantage, a performance-based ownership of the issue, from this irrefutable demonstration that the incumbent party cannot handle the job" (Petrocik, 1996, p.827). Consequently, within issue competition we can distinguish between "owned issues", on the one hand, and "performance issues", on the other.

The implications of issue ownership theory for party competition and election campaigns are consistent with the argumentation delineated above: "A candidate's campaign can be understood as a "marketing" effort: the goal is to achieve a strategic advantage by making problems which reflect owned issues the programmatic meaning of the election and the criteria by which

voters make their choice” (Petrocik, 1996, p.828). Consequently, campaigns affect the election outcome not by persuading voters to adopt a different ideological position but rather by “priming” certain issues that will subsequently gain more weight in the voting decision (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). In fact, it is assumed that the majority of the electorate does not evaluate the candidates in terms of ideological positions at all but instead only cares about who is best and most credible when it comes to handling the issue they care about most. In this sense, politicians are seen as “problem solvers” each having a different competence profile. If voters perceive high taxes as a problem, they will go to a conservative party who offers them tax cuts as a solution. If, on the other hand, they are worried about increasing cost of living, they will vote for a social democratic party that promises to employ a rent cap.

What voters perceive as the most pressing issues/problems is, however, to a considerable extent dependent on the dynamics of the campaign preceding an election. Fostering a *supply side explanation of political competition*, for issue ownership theory, it is the issue appeals of the candidates during the election campaign that exert influence on voters’ issue priorities, not the other way around. This aspect is crucial, as it sets Petrocik’s explanation apart from the predominant theoretical accounts claiming that it is easier for parties to respond to voters’ preferences than to “persuade” them to adopt the positions/issues of the party. Constrained by their own historically grown issue handling reputation, political parties cannot without complications exclusively run their campaigns on “foreign-owned” issues just because they happen to be salient. Rather they always need to convince the electorate that those issues the party stands for are highly relevant and important. In short, there is a “hard core” of the political offer that displays high levels of continuity and stability and is largely independent of the current state of affairs and dynamics of an election campaign. Taking up the previous example again, under normal circumstances a conservative party will always try to convince voters that taxes are too high whereas a social democratic party will stress the necessity of affordable housing.

As with Budge and Farlie’s selective emphasis theory and Riker’s dominance principle, we can equally conclude that a campaign characterized by an issue ownership dynamic will produce little or no occurrence of issue engagement. While not directly measuring issue engagement, the results of Petrocik’s empirical study of all US-presidential campaigns between 1952 and 1998 also points in this direction. By the means of a content analysis of the *New York Times*, he finds that, even though there is a certain variability from election to election, both Democrats and Republicans always spoke significantly more about the issues they “own”, which indicates that they do not talk about the same issues even-handedly (cf. Petrocik, 1996, pp.833-834).

Moreover, the same study also provides evidence of a solid correlation between voters' issue concerns and the election outcome. When people were overall more concerned about Republican/Democratic issues, the Republican/Democratic candidate tended to win (cf. Petrocik, 1996, pp.835-836). Thus, given that whatever voters consider to be "the" issue(s) of the campaign seems to decide between victory and defeat, selectively emphasizing the issues the party owns seems to be a perfectly rational strategy. Issue engagement, on the other hand, is prone to backfire as a campaign strategy since for one of the two sides it essentially means, except if the ownership status of a performance issue is contested, addressing a foreign-owned issue and, thereby, increasing the salience of an issue where the opposing side has the crucial advantage of a long-term reputation.

3.2 "The Winning Message" – A Pioneering Study on Issue Engagement

These theoretical insights I have gathered so far, correspond to the key argument of Simon's (2002) seminal work *The Winning Message*. It is the first study to explicitly examine issue engagement albeit Simon uses the term "dialogue" to capture the very same phenomenon.

"Rational candidates should, and will, spend their entire budget on dimensions that work to increase their advantage by informing voters of their positions and priming that consideration. As no themes can work to the advantage of both candidates, they will never allocate resources to the same theme. Dialogue is defined as candidates discussing (spending money on) the same dimension, so, rational candidates should never and will never dialogue" (p.64).

This theoretical argument, which assumes that campaigns are mainly about issue competition rather than positional competition and that candidates are exclusively concerned with winning the election, is further corroborated by empirical evidence. In an experimental setting, Simon exposed participants to two campaign advertisements by actual candidates of the California gubernatorial election of 1994, where either both, the Republican and the Democratic candidate, talked about the same issue in the respective ads ("the dialogue condition") or addressed different issues ("the ignore condition"). The results revealed that, indeed, dialogue always penalizes the one who, by intruding into the opponent's issue territory, initiates it. Thus, candidates are well advised to "stick to their guns".

To get a more profound understanding of what it means to understand issue engagement from the perspective of issue ownership dynamics, I would like to briefly relate Simon's research with the concept of *issue trespassing* (see Damore, 2004). Unlike issue engagement being about two political actors talking about the same issue, issue trespassing merely refers to the action of a single political actor addressing an issue that is strongly associated with the opposing party, i.e. a foreign owned issue. In his theoretical model originating from a rational choice approach,

Simon assumes that there is hardly an issue where none of the parties enjoys some sort of advantage over the other party. Here, due to this specific set-up that does not allow for any “neutral” issues, and the uncontroversial assumption that candidates naturally talk about issues where they enjoy an advantage, issue engagement always presumes issue trespassing, which is, perhaps, the main reason why issue engagement is considered to be strategically disadvantageous. In short, issue trespassing leads to issue engagement. It is therefore not surprising that Simon, in the course of the above-mentioned experiment, also finds a negative effect of similar size for mere issue trespassing without dialogue (Simon, 2002, pp.83-85). Anyway, precisely because one trespasses into the opponent’s issue territory, issue engagement, by exacerbating the detrimental consequences of an issue disadvantage, is supposed to hurt the electoral prospects of the party resorting to this strategy.

In line with these theoretical considerations, Simon predicts that little or no issue engagement should occur during election campaigns. To put this notion to an empirical test, he examines the amount of issue engagement for 49 US-senate races on 32 issue dimensions by the means of a content analysis of relevant state-level newspapers. Simon uses two different approaches to measure issue engagement: His first measurement of dialogue (issue engagement) identifies each article in which both candidates (Republican and Democratic) are featured on the same topic as an occurrence of “instant dialogue” and offsets these articles (weighted by their length) against those where only one candidate was featured. The second measurement, which is labelled “sustained dialogue”, does calculate the share of lines in articles dedicated to the minority opinion on a given issue and by that uses issue trespassing as a proxy for issue engagement. The results of Simon’s analysis do indeed indicate that issue engagement is the exception rather than the rule. Depending on the measure, the median share of dialogue accounts between 12% (“sustained dialogue”) and 21% (“instant dialogue”) of the total amount of election coverage (Simon, 2002, pp.92-113). However, the validity of the results can be questioned.

Since Simon uses newspapers as his data source, candidate’s campaign behavior is mediated by journalists’ perceptions and newspaper’s editorial policy. In fact, there is no guarantee whatsoever that the whole variety of a candidates’ issue appeals is adequately reflected in newspaper articles. Journalists are free to omit certain facts and have incentives to construct a certain narrative (cf. Kaplan et al., 2006). In a follow-up paper of *Issue Ownership in Presidential Campaigns*, Petrocik et al. (2003) find substantive differences between the issue emphasis in candidate produced (unmediated) content, such as TV ads and speeches, and the issue emphasis in

newspaper coverage, whereby the newspapers turned out to be more partisan than the candidates themselves: “Reporters expect to hear Republican issues from Republicans and that is the theme of their reporting; they expect to hear Democratic issues from Democratic candidates. They might be underreporting Democratic discourse that emphasized Republican issues and Republican discourse on Democratic issues” (Petrocik et al., 2003, p.623). Therefore, one can argue that Simon’s measure does not capture actual candidate behavior but rather newspapers’ editorial policy. Notwithstanding that the role of issue engagement is to convey crucial information to citizens and that newspapers are an important medium to transmit these instances, there is a kind of misfit between Simon’s key argument centered on candidates’ rational campaign behavior and the medium used to measure dialogue.

Another question is in how far this operationalization of issue engagement contains an actual “response component”. Issue engagement derived from the idea of deliberation should not only consider the overall issue distribution of the information available for each candidate but also whether or not the candidates actually interact with each other. As I have noted before, two press conferences do not convey the same type and quality of information as a debate where the candidates can react and respond to each other. Apart from the fact that in the case of Simon’s study candidate interaction always remains a journalistic artefact, the “instant dialogue” measure that counts the articles where the policy stances of both parties on a given issue are featured approaches this notion. The “sustained dialogue” measure, on the other hand, that merely counts the amount of minority positions featured in newspapers does completely ignore the dimension of engagement. In the former case (“instant dialogue”), the reader is provided with a quasi-debate setting where both parties’ issue positions are present at the same time and stand in a confrontational relationship, whereas the latter case (“sustained dialogue”) does not account for whether or not the minority position was presented in relation to the majority position. Moreover, there is a latent time factor that also plays a role: Instant dialogue provides the view of both parties on the same issue at the same time within the election campaign, which again indicates that there was a sort of interaction or debate between the candidates at that point in time since otherwise there would be no story featuring the stances of both candidates. In sum, “instant dialogue” can be judged the more adequate measurement to actually capture the phenomenon of issue engagement as I have presented it in the previous chapter.

This detailed critique of Simon’s data source and operationalization reveals the pitfalls of methodologically capturing a complex phenomenon like issue engagement. In the next section, we will reencounter similar problems but also their possible solutions when reviewing more studies

on issue engagement. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that the data source chosen influences the results and that the interaction component of issue *engagement* should be accounted for in one way or the other. Both these aspects provide us with criteria that will not only help to evaluate the existent literature but will ultimately be applied to my own empirical approach.

3.3 “Riding the Wave” and Other Perspectives

Two years after Simon’s *The Winning Message*, Sigelman & Buell (2004) re-examined US-presidential campaigns from 1960 to 2000 in terms of issue engagement⁵ and make the astonishing finding that the degree of issue engagement has been constantly high. Again, based on newspaper articles, the authors use the relative amount of attention each candidate has dedicated to each of the relevant campaign issues to generate a full measure that indicates the overlap in the “attention profiles” of the two candidates reaching from 0% to 100%. Contradicting the implications of issue ownership theory as well as the empirical findings referenced, the mean issue engagement score obtained by Sigelman & Buell (2004) amounts to 71.4%. This would signify that, at least on a superficial level, the information flow available to citizens during an election campaign is comparatively balanced. Due to the apparent complexity of the underlying factors of issue engagement that exceed the dependence on a mere issue ownership dynamic, new theoretical explanations are needed that are able to explain why issue engagement might in fact be “the rule rather than the exception” (Sigelman and Buell, 2004, p.651).

The second main theoretical paradigm associated with issue engagement besides issue ownership theory is the so-called “riding the wave” thesis claiming that that electoral success of an election campaign does considerably depend on the salience of the issues addressed: “By advertising on the major issues of the day, candidates are more likely to be seen as concerned, responsive, and informed. In short, all other things being equal, campaign advertising becomes more persuasive when the candidates advertise on issues that dominate the news” (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994, p.337). Although originally focused on the interrelationship between the candidates and the news, we can easily generalize this argument by linking candidate’s campaign behavior to *public* salience. In addition to “riding the wave” by addressing issues that dominate the news, it is equally plausible to assume that candidates can also “ride

⁵ Lipsitz (2013), Sigelman & Buell (2004) and Kaplan et al. (2006) use the term „issue convergence” to identify the same phenomenon that I call “issue engagement”. Apart from pragmatic reasons, I deliberately decided not to speak of “issue convergence”, as it semantically expresses positional connotations, which are no integral part of the concept.

the wave” by emphasizing issues that directly preoccupy the electorate. In this way, the casual direction presumed by issue ownership theory, going from the political actors’ campaign behavior to the voters, is reverted: No longer do voters form their issue priorities based on the agenda set by the political elite, but rather does the political elite set the agenda in accordance with voters’ issue priorities. Instead of a supply side logic where candidates were supposed to generate their own demand by making *their* issues salient during the election campaign, a demand side logic is introduced that advises candidates to adapt their offer by addressing issues that *are* (already) salient among the electorate. As Riker (1991) notes: “It is far cheaper for a merchant to provide what consumers want than to persuade them to buy what they don’t want” (p.226).

Due to this reversal of the causal logic, the “riding the wave” thesis, compared to issue ownership theory, yields the opposite prediction with regards to the amount of issue engagement occurring. Since *all* parties have an incentive to campaign on the currently salient issues, all parties will engage on these issues out of the fear to appear ignorant towards the electorate’s major concerns. For example, when the public deems health care and immigration by far the most important issues to be tackled by politics, no party regardless of their ideological family can afford to completely ignore these issues without alienating large chunks of the electorate. Thus, if we assume that a limited number of salient issues dominates the election campaign, high levels of issue engagement (on these issues) are to be expected. The “riding the wave” thesis receives further support by Sigelman & Buell’s (2004) finding that the “intraparty continuity” of the issue profiles is generally lower than the “interparty convergence” (p.658), meaning that the issue profiles are more similar between the opposing parties during a specific election campaign than for the same party from one election campaign to the other. Thus, parties seem to adapt to the dynamics of the election campaign, which results in high levels of issue engagement. Having found a strong effect for salience on the probability that candidates will pursue *issue trespassing*, Damore (2004) arrives at a similar conclusion: “The discussion of party-owned issues is tempered by pragmatic assessments of the issue environment in which the campaign takes place” (p.396).

Do we now no longer need to be concerned that issue engagement ends up as a casualty of political actors’ strategic interests since it is, in fact, in their strategic interest to engage on the same issues? Given the plausibility and empirical evidence of both theoretical paradigms presented, it is not possible to make a final judgement about the causal direction of the relationship between political parties’ issue emphasis and voters issue priorities, and consequently it remains

open whether issue competition is primarily driven by engagement or avoidance. If we take issue engagement as a quality indicator of political campaigns seriously and have an interest in achieving a high normative standard, then it seems of little use to fall into optimism or pessimism on the basis of this or that outcome. Rather we must seek to understand what the determinants of issue engagement are. Acknowledging this, it seems necessary to turn away from the descriptive question of how much issue engagement does occur to the inferential question, under what circumstances do political actors pursue issue engagement. No longer attached to a *single* theoretical paradigm, research on issue engagement should rather aim to explain the *variance* of issue engagement across different issues and campaigns by drawing on *several* theoretical accounts.

Attempting to explain the degree of issue engagement for 15 campaign issues in 65 US senate campaigns by several independent variables, Kaplan et al. (2006) take such an approach and make interesting findings. As it turns out and is also confirmed by other studies (Damore, 2005; Druckman et al., 2010), the competitiveness of the election is an influential factor. The more competitive the election, the tighter the race, the more issue engagement. In line with Basinger and Lavine (2005), it is argued that in low-stimulus campaigns accompanying elections, where the winner is determined in advance, voters rely on unsophisticated partisan cues whereas in high-stimulus campaigns, preceding an election that could “go either way”, issue voting and ideological voting become more important. Due to its highly foreseeable outcome, an election with a huge gap in support between the candidates provides no incentive to engage on or even substantially talk about issues since the voters decide anyway on the basis of partisan cues. If, on the other hand, the election is a real toss-up each candidate tries to gain a decisive advantage by issue trespassing into the opponent’s territory while the opponent will try to “neutralize” this strategic move by reclaiming his ownership status, which will produce high levels of issue engagement. Having democratic theory in mind, it should not come as a surprise that an election campaign cannot unfold its beneficial dynamics through issue engagement unless the election itself displays a certain degree of competitiveness.

Moreover, Kaplan et al. (2006), after having conducted a multivariate regression analysis with a salience and an issue ownership variable, find a significant positive effect on issue engagement for the former whereas the effect for the latter, despite pointing in the expected negative direction, remains insignificant. Yet, this time in the context of US-presidential campaigns and by including a time component, Damore (2005) does acquire significant effects for salience and issue ownership status. Again, in another approach considering possible interaction effects, in

their study of US senate campaigns, Druckman et al. (2010) do not obtain a significant main effect for issue ownership but find it to be a significant moderator of the relationship between salience and the degree of issue engagement. As it appears, strongly owned issues require a certain degree of salience in order for engagement to occur or simply put: “Issue salience plays an important role in motivating hesitant candidates to engage opponents on issues their parties do not own” (Druckman et al., 2010, p.19).

Other innovations made in these studies succeeding the pioneering work on issue engagement, concern the data sources used. Having criticized the use of newspapers as a source to examine the communication behavior of candidates in a similar way as I have done before, US researchers henceforth preferred campaign TV ads (Kaplan et al., 2006; Damore, 2005) or candidates’ websites (Druckman et al., 2010) as specific types of exclusively *candidate generated* content for their analyses. This change in the data sources is likely to increase the validity of the results since issue engagement explained by the motivation of candidates to win an election should not be measured on the basis of a medium that by possibly strongly filtering and distorting the actual campaign provides no direct link to candidates’ actual communication behavior. Still, notwithstanding that TV ads and Websites as a data source are better suited to study issue engagement than newspapers, they also come with disadvantages that are linked to the specificity of their type and format.

The problem with websites of candidates or political parties is that they are usually “static”. As soon as they are launched only minor changes or updates take place. By using websites as data source, one essentially measures the overlap in the issue profiles of the candidates as it has been fixed before the election. Albeit candidates certainly try to anticipate the dynamics of the campaign, such as the opponent’s supposed strategy or the electorate’s major concern, when deciding which policy related content is featured on their website, they cannot account for the instant interaction between two candidates taking place during the campaign nor for the changing dynamics over time. However, especially these two interrelated components are crucial if we still want to consider issue engagement as a proxy for deliberation. Accordingly, we can formulate two important criteria: First, the medium used to measure issue engagement should leave leeway for candidates to respond to the ever-changing issue environment. Second, not only should the data allow for variation over time but also the measurement or statistical analysis needs to include a time component.

Using TV ads as medium to transmit campaign messages comprehends the possibility to air ads with varying issue content at different points in time and, thus, to react to an opponent’s attack

or to a recent change in the campaign dynamics. Still, due to the substantive amount of organization and planning necessary, the interactive potential of TV ads in terms of flexibility remains very limited. Although the studies of Damore (2005) and Kaplan et al. (2006) both rely on TV ads they differ in their methodological approach. The latter does not include a time component neither in the measurement nor in the analysis and instead treats the data “cross-sectionally”. The problem of this approach is that it only provides an overall measure assessing how evenly distributed the attention measured in TV ads to an issue in a given campaign was, but completely ignores *when* a certain ad was aired. However, in a more advanced understanding of issue engagement that does not want to omit the notion of interaction and time dependency, it certainly makes a difference whether two candidates air (the same amount of) TV ads on the same issue at the same time or whether these ads on the same issue are separated by a time interval of several weeks. Acknowledging that Damore’s (2005) measurement and statistical model explicitly includes a time component and can consequently account for changes in the dynamics of the campaign as well as the interaction component that constitutes an integral part of issue engagement. We can, thus, consider his results less biased and more adequate with regards to my dynamic conception of issue engagement that wants to capture more than a mere informational overlap between the parties.

3.4 Issue Engagement beyond the US Two-Party System

I have hitherto only discussed issue engagement in the context of the US two-party system. Compared to a multiparty system, a two-party setting comprehends several implicit conceptual aspects that considerably facilitate the analysis of issue engagement. First, it is self-explanatory between which actors issue engagement takes place. Second, the issue ownership status is clearly “split-up” between the only two competitors: Each issue that is owned by one party cannot be owned by the other party. Third, in a plurality or majority voting system (typically associated with two-party systems), one can unequivocally define what “winning the election” for both relevant parties and their candidates actually means, namely obtaining the respective elective office. This implies that both candidates’ strategy is directed towards the exact same goal, as, according to the principle “the winner takes it all”, there is no consolation prize for second place. When reviewing the literature on issue engagement in a multiparty context, it is, thus, important to critically re-examine these implicit assumptions made in the previously cited studies and to adequately address the emerging complexity in terms of the variance to be explained as well as its determinants.

In continuity with the US-situated studies, also its counterparts situated in a European multi-party context revolve around the two main paradigms of issue competition, issue ownership theory and the riding the wave thesis (Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015; Wagner and Meyer, 2014; Seeberg, 2020). From the perspective of the political actors, we can also view these theories as distinct strategies that despite sharing the same goal of gaining an electoral advantage follow a different logic. On the one hand, political parties can try to shape the agenda by pushing “their” issues (issue ownership theory), on the other, they can emphasize those issues that are (already) salient on the agenda (“riding the wave”). As I have explained in the previous sections, each strategy is inevitably linked to the frequency of issue engagement occurring during an election campaign. If every party only emphasizes the issues it owns, there will be little issue engagement. If all parties talk about the issues that are currently salient, there will be a considerable amount of issue engagement. Both dynamics are likely to play an important role and, in fact, could theoretically complement each other in a sort of “causal loop”, in which political parties act as agenda makers *and* agenda takers (cf. Seeberg, 2020, p.3). Still, to move beyond this very general insight, it is necessary to explain what makes a party chose one strategy over the other and, therefore, also under what circumstances parties pursue issue engagement rather than issue avoidance.

A multiparty context is ideally suited to disentangle this seemingly contradictory nature of both strategies since due to the sheer multitude of parties there is more variance to be observed within a single election than in a two-party system. Clearly, in a multiparty system there is a greater variety of parties, which all differ in their type, size, ideological stance and even objective. Whereas before it was only conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats that had to cover the whole ideological spectrum, the political offer in multiparty systems, by potentially including communist parties, green parties, social democratic parties, liberal parties, conservative parties or radical right parties, is much more diverse. Here, we encounter large mainstream parties, small niche parties and all gradations in between. In addition, there are now *several* relevant parties within each ideological camp. Therefore, since issue engagement in its parsimonious conceptualization is a phenomenon that involves *two* parties, when dealing with multiple parties the question between *which* (kind of) parties issue engagement is expected to occur is now of crucial importance. Accordingly, the dominant share of the literature examining issue engagement in a multiparty context tries to explain a parties’ communication strategy, i.e. whether they attempt to shape the political agenda (leading to issue avoidance) or prefer to take from it (leading to issue engagement), by the characteristics of the respective party.

One specific factor that was found to predict the propensity for issue engagement is the *party type*. In the context of the Danish political system, Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2015) find that “mainstream parties” are more inclined to “ride the wave” by dedicating more attention to currently salient issues in their party manifestos than niche parties do. Since mainstream parties usually aim to “catch” as many voters as possible, it is only rational to be flexible in their issue appeal. Conversely, niche parties usually fare better by emphasizing their owned issue(s) and appealing to their core constituency, as they otherwise run the risk of getting “swallowed” by their ideologically proximate mainstream competitors. This, perhaps, tautological explanation can be deepened by focusing on other characteristics the party type implicitly conditions.

An important explanatory factor might lie in the different organizational goals that mainstream and niche parties have. Whereas mainstream parties are frequently described as “office-seeking”, niche parties, especially if their party formation is linked to a specific issue like immigration or the environment, are frequently “policy-seeking parties”. If the latter neglected an issue that has been the party’s initial *raison d’être* in favor of a short-term issue trend, it would probably fail to mobilize its core constituency. Apart from that, an activist-oriented party base would simply not allow the party leadership to act this way in the first place. In support of this argument, Wagner and Meyer (2014) find that the more policy-motivated the party leadership, the more attention the parties’ owned issues obtain in the corresponding manifesto.

Another line of argumentation also derived from the specific type of a party, focusses on the role of resources. Due to their broad electoral support and because they often occupy key positions in government, mainstream parties tend to have more resource in terms of money, personnel and media attention than niche parties (Meguid, 2005). The more resources a party has, whether it be more financial means or active party members, the more opportunities are there to directly and indirectly transmit issue specific information to the public. This enables large mainstream parties to address multiple issues and quickly react to shifts in the public’s issue concerns. Indeed, as Meyer and Wagner (2016) find out through an analysis of *press releases* published by parties during the 2008 Austrian general election campaign, the highest amount of issue engagement took place between large mainstream parties whereas the overlap in issue profiles is smallest between two niche parties.

The second explanatory factor, besides party type and its related characteristics, that is of particular relevance in a multiparty context, is the *ideological proximity* between parties. The empirical evidence suggests that the more ideologically proximate two parties are the more frequently issue engagement will occur between them (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015;

Meyer and Wagner, 2016). A straightforward explanation for this, might be a simple overlap in issue preferences between ideologically proximate parties precisely due to shared convictions and values that set them apart from ideologically distant parties. For example, fighting social inequality, defending worker's and employee's interests, and a highly developed welfare state is part of the DNA of communist parties, green parties and social democratic parties alike but certainly not of right-wing parties. Thus, we would expect issue engagement to occur more frequently between parties from the same ideological camp rather than between parties of opposing ideological camps (left-wing vs. right-wing). If we develop this thought further, we see that, due to the possibility that several parties, at least to a certain degree, can share ownership over an issue, contrary to two-party systems, issue ownership in multiparty systems can under certain circumstances lead to issue engagement. This notion will be taken up again and elaborated in more detail in the next chapter, when it comes to formulating arguments that build the basis for hypotheses.

Since these just cited studies on issue engagement make use of new types of data, namely party manifestos (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015; Wagner and Meyer, 2014) and press releases (Meyer and Wagner, 2016), and new types of measurement, I would also like to make some critical comments related to these aspects. Keeping in mind what I have argued before, party manifestos need to be judged highly unsuitable to capture issue engagement as a dynamic concept related to parties' communication behavior in election campaigns. First, party manifestos are perhaps the most static and stable source of a party's programmatic content. They usually get updated once every couple of years as soon as the next election is in sight and leave no leeway to subsequently react to the actual campaign dynamics. Thus, due to the nature of the medium one cannot observe any short-term variation in candidate behavior rather it is assumed that a mere issue profile overlap in the party manifestos can account for the actual election campaign. Second, party manifestos are mainly directed at the members of a party and not so much at the ordinary voter. Consequently, the actual strategic communication behavior of a party explicitly aimed at convincing non-party members is only reflected to a limited degree. In sum, party manifestos clearly do not include the genuine deliberative component necessary for issue engagement to function as a quality indicator of election campaigns.

Party press releases, on the other hand, can be regarded as an almost ideal source to measure issue engagement between parties during election campaigns. Since party press releases are generated by the parties themselves, published on a daily basis and used to shape the agenda as well as to signal issue priorities to voters via the media, they fulfil all demands that have been

formulated so far. However, instead of seizing the fact that press releases actually capture the changing dynamics of a campaign over time, Meyer & Wagner (2016) still perform a mere cross-sectional analysis and do not include a time component. Therefore, by again making no difference if both parties talked about an issue the very same day or several weeks apart, this study again does not sufficiently link issue engagement to deliberation, which would at least require that two political actors talk about the same issue *at the same time*.

Finally, I would like to refer to two recent studies on issue engagement authored by Seeberg (2020; 2022). In both studies, the author uses press releases as data source and, by taking advantage of the dynamic nature of the medium, explicitly includes a time component. In his model, it is the rival party's attention to an issue at a previous point in time ($t-1$) that is supposed to explain party's subsequent issue attention profile and consequently issue engagement. However, not only examining issue engagement during election campaigns but taking the whole electoral cycle over several legislature periods into account, Seeberg is more focused on the long-term developments than on tracking issue dynamics in "real time". With quarters of a year as unit of analysis, the time intervals chosen are still very large and, thus, again do not really allow us to understand issue engagement as an interactive concept. Nevertheless, I want to briefly point to the important innovations made through his work.

To explain issue engagement in a multiparty context, the studies presented so far have mainly resorted to intra-systemic variables, namely party type and ideological proximity. Thereby, the behavior of political parties has been explained by the structure of the party system itself while it has been assumed that the agenda simply corresponds to the totality of all parties' issue emphases. Consequently, the influence of real-world events and societal problems has been neglected even though they are very likely to account for a considerable share of variation in parties' issue appeals. Seeberg (2022) addresses this research gap and finds that changes in politically relevant statistical indicators such as the unemployment rate or the crime rate exert influence on a party's issue attention profile and that this effect becomes stronger the more attention rival parties' pay to the problem. To illustrate Seeberg's (2022) findings, let me give the following example: The crime rate has increased in the last couple of months and because right-wing parties tend to own the issue of security they will try to gain public support from this situation by frequently emphasizing this problem. Precisely because the right-wing parties' issue emphasis on security is based on an "objective indicator", the crime rate, left-wing parties will sooner or later have to attend to this issue if they do not want to appear ignorant, which will lead to issue engagement. "An important part of issue engagement is, thus, that a party does

not respond to rival party attention per se, but to the rival's attention to a problem" (Seeberg, 2022, p.2).

In his other study, Seeberg (2020) attempts to resolve the inherent contradiction between issue ownership theory and the riding the wave thesis and, thus, the question whether issue engagement or issue avoidance strategies are prevalent. He argues that the key lies in unwinding the electoral cycle: "Parties by default try to selectively emphasize issues on which they have issue ownership for as long as possible. However, as the election draws closer, a party will be less inclined to selectively emphasize its own issues and will increasingly engage the issues that the rival party emphasizes" (p.1). The main idea is to think of "agenda making" by emphasizing one's owned issues as a long-term strategy and "agenda taking" by adopting the issues that are currently salient as a short-term strategy. Shaping the agenda to one's advantage takes time, endurance and consistency, and, since voters only slowly change their issue priorities, cannot be achieved overnight. Thus, short before the election when the salient issues of the election have already manifested itself, it is not very promising to still try to shape the agenda. Instead, parties will rather try to "ride the wave" and appeal to the median voter's issue priorities. As it turns out, there is empirical evidence for a positive curvilinear relationship between the temporal proximity to Election Day and the frequency of issue engagement. This finding shows that time not only plays an important role in a dynamic conceptualization of issue engagement but also as an explanatory variable.

3.5 Summary

The detailed literature review has revealed two weak points of previous research on issue engagement. The first point concerns the conceptualization as well as operationalization of issue engagement, and also the suitability of the media used to measure this phenomenon. Issue engagement has mostly been operationalized as a simple informational overlap in candidates' issue profiles, in order to determine whether political actors talk about or pay attention to the same issues *even-handedly* (e.g. Kaplan et al., 2006; Sigelman and Buell, 2004). At which point in time these issues were addressed was mostly neglected. However, as will be argued, this temporal aspect is crucial to restore issue engagement some of its original dynamic and deliberative connotation. In short, with regards to the explanatory power of the concept of issue engagement, it makes a difference whether two political actors talk about the same issue on the same day or several weeks apart (Lipsitz, 2013). Against this background, it is especially questionable to speak of issue *engagement* when dealing with entirely static media such as party manifestos (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015) or candidate websites (Druckman et al.,

2010), which are only indirectly related to the actual campaign behavior of parties/candidates during election campaigns. Interestingly, even in the case of data types that would be able to accurately depict issue competition *during* election campaigns, such as press releases, a “cross-sectional” operationalization is frequently chosen (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015; Meyer and Wagner, 2016). Since we can assume that the strategic behavior of political actors in election campaigns always adapts to the respective circumstances, a dynamic conceptualization of issue engagement offers the possibility of gaining more profound and new insights into the effects of possible determinants. Moreover, although it has only been detected for large time intervals throughout the whole electoral cycle, there is also evidence in the literature of a systematic “time effect” (Seeberg, 2020).

The second major point that became apparent concerns the partly unclear state of knowledge with regards to the empirical evidence for various alleged effects. It is still unclear how exactly one should understand the seemingly contradictory relationship between issue ownership theory (Petrocik, 1996) and the riding the wave-thesis (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994) with regards to issue engagement. Some studies mainly find support for issue ownership theory (Simon, 2002; Petrocik et al., 2003), whereas other studies detected surprisingly high levels of issue engagement suggesting that campaign behavior is mainly driven by salience and only moderated by issue ownership (Damore, 2005; Kaplan et al., 2006; Druckman et al., 2010). Some claim that issue ownership dynamics are typical for two party systems, whereas in multiparty systems candidates mainly “ride the wave” of salient issues (Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016). Again others found evidence that the choice of strategy largely depends on the party type (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015; Meyer and Wagner, 2016). One main difficulty in correctly assessing the validity and generalizability of these results lies in the fact that hardly any study on issue engagement considers issue level and actor level factors to the same extent. Due to the obvious lack of variation among political actors in *two-party systems*, the U.S.-centered literature clearly focuses on issue level factors, such as ownership and salience. The European-centered literature, which deals with issue engagement in *multiparty systems*, focuses more on actor level factors, such as ideological proximity and party type. So far, the two branches of issue engagement research, the “old” one situated in the US two-party system, and the “new” one situated in European multiparty systems, have not been productively brought together. An approach that would take into account both issue level and actor level factors has the potential to resolve contradicting results and to provide an overall more nuanced picture of the effects conditioning issue engagement.

4. EXPLAINING ISSUE ENGAGEMENT

After this comprehensive insight into the research on issue engagement, the main aim of this chapter is now to develop a consistent argument that will ultimately allow me to formulate sets of hypotheses. However, before this can be undertaken, some additional clarifications are still needed. To begin with, by formalizing several aspects that have already been mentioned in the previous chapters, I will make my definition of issue engagement and the particularities of studying issue engagement in a multiparty context explicit. Additionally, I will also delineate my understanding of issue engagement as a dynamic concept in more detail. Then, I will present the underlying assumptions of my theoretical model and, taking up the train of thought from the first chapter, again refer briefly to the underlying mechanisms through which campaigns influence citizens' electoral behavior. In the next section, on the basis of these considerations and with recourse to the existent literature, I will finally identify potential determinants of issue engagement and elaborate on the precise nature of the alleged causal relationship. Despite the fact that the majority of the selected factors explaining the occurrence of issue engagement can almost be considered the "usual suspects" of research on political issue competition, it is important to emphasize, that the real innovative power of my argument lies in the dynamic conception of issue engagement granting a decisive role to temporality. Therefore, the subsequent testing of any theoretically derived prediction, no matter how well documented, will not merely reproduce empirically proven findings but, due to the novelty of the concept, bring a surplus of insights.

4.1 Understanding Issue Engagement as a Dynamic Concept in a Multiparty Context

Above all, issue engagement implies that (at least) two political actors address the same issue. To state the obvious, no matter how much a single political actor emphasizes an issue, one single party or candidate cannot pursue issue engagement alone, as a counterpart is needed to also address the issue. The opposite of issue engagement is issue avoidance that occurs when none or only a single party talks about a certain issue. Issue engagement as a concept does not account for the direction of the observed engagement, i.e. it does not matter whether A "responded" to B or B to A. This is because it is usually not possible to verify beyond reasonable doubt whether issue engagement is the result of a genuine reaction or response of one party to another, or occurs "unintentionally", e.g. when both parties independently decide to address a salient issue. Moreover, I note that the main premise of issue engagement, *two parties talking about the same issue*, is equally valid in two-party and multiparty systems. Even though there

can obviously be issue engagement between more than two parties in multiparty systems, following the principle of parsimoniousness, the most basic unit of analysis is still the party dyad. To give an example: three parties A, B and C pursuing issue engagement, is equivalent to saying that A pursues issue engagement with B, A with C, and B with C.

Although the concept does not need to be altered when examining issue engagement in a multiparty context instead of a two-party context, when it comes to explaining the occurrence of issue engagement, there are several important differences that I would like to summarize once again. In multiparty systems, due to the sheer multitude of parties differing in their ideological stance, party type etc., the question *between which actors* issue engagement will occur now becomes highly relevant. Before issue engagement was regarded as a phenomenon that was mainly determined by the characteristics of a certain issue, e.g. whether it is owned or not, or whether it is salient or not. When moving from a two-party to a multiparty context, a new source of variance appears on the level of the political actors that at the same renders studying issue engagement in multiparty systems more complex but also has the potential to yield insights a two-party context cannot provide. In addition, logically following from the established conceptualization of issue engagement, we can in absolute numbers expect more issue engagement to occur in multiparty systems than in two-party systems. Whereas in a system with only *two* (relevant) parties there is only a single combination of parties among which issue engagement could occur, in a multiparty system with, for example, five parties there are already ten combinations, i.e. the number of potential occurrences of issue engagement has multiplied by ten.

However, from an empirical point of view, it might be highly misleading to say that party competition in a multiparty system is *generally* characterized by issue engagement and party competition in a two-party system by issue avoidance as there is no uncontroversial ground to compare the two systems. Clearly, in relative terms, if one calculates the share of all actual instances of issue engagement in relation to all possible instances, issue engagement might even be expected to be substantially lower in multiparty systems than in two-party systems. Meyer and Wagner (2016), for instance, come to the following conclusion in their study on the Austrian multiparty system: “issue engagement in a multiparty system is partial at best: while many issues are addressed by two or three parties, few issues are addressed by all parties” (p.568).

This empirical observation can be corroborated by pointing to systemic differences between two-party and multiparty systems. In a multiparty system, there are usually several relevant parties of small or medium size that obtain seats in parliament. Precisely these parties were found to concentrate more on fully mobilizing their core constituencies than on winning over

new voters by risky issue engagement strategies (Meyer and Wagner, 2016; Wagner and Meyer, 2014). By contrast, in a two-party setting where both parties need to obtain an absolute majority or plurality in order to win, political actors need to make a broader appeal to convince voters outside their core constituencies (the median voter), which generally leads to higher levels of issue engagement. Similarly, Downs (1957), assuming a two-party system, notes: “Each party may cast some policies into the other’s territory in order to convince voters there that its net position is near them” (p. 135). However, Klüver and Sagarzazu (2016) contest this narrative by claiming the opposite. According to them, two-party systems feature fiercer competition characterized by the predominance of an issue ownership dynamic predicting less issue engagement, whereas multiparty systems are gentler and rather follow a “riding the wave”-logic promoting issue engagement. In summary, given the heterogeneous theoretical perspectives, operationalization and data in the literature, it cannot be decided which of the two systems features more issue engagement and is, therefore, inclined to promote an electoral decision of higher quality.

Coming back to conceptual questions, I would like to speak about the temporal dimension of issue engagement. In most cases, issue engagement is operationalized as if it was a static phenomenon. By that, a merely cross-sectional overlap in issue appeals between parties during an election campaign is examined. Here, it does not matter whether two parties talked about the same issue the very same day, several weeks or even months apart; it likewise counts as an occurrence of issue engagement. Sometimes this circumstance is owed to the nature of the medium used for the analysis of issue engagement. Party manifestos or candidates’ websites do usually not change over short periods of time and can, thus, not reflect the real-time dynamics of issue competition during an election campaign. But even if issue engagement is studied on the basis of campaign TV ads or press releases that due to their regular appearance leave political actors some leeway to react to their competitors and shifts in the campaign environment, the temporal dimension of issue engagement tends to be neglected. Notwithstanding that this approach of treating election campaigns as “cross-sectional events” facilitates or in some cases even enables the study of issue engagement, it also entails several weaknesses.

If issue engagement is understood as a mere overlap in issue appeals that does not consider *when* these appeals are made within the period of interest, we can hardly hold on to the idea of a conceptual kinship between issue engagement and deliberation, which is crucial if issue engagement is to be understood as a quality indicator for election campaigns. This is because deliberation in a political context is not only about providing information and arguments for

one's policy stances, which can also be done in a non-deliberative setting such as press conferences, but also about interacting with each other, which implies criticizing, demanding explanations, pointing to contradictory statements and the like. However, since issue engagement as a political phenomenon is not examined in an actual debate setting, i.e. two candidates arguing with one another face-to-face, we cannot verify, except explicitly stated, whether an issue appeal can be considered a response or a reaction to another competitor, which is why most authors consider a static or cross-sectional understanding of issue engagement to be adequate. Still, as I would argue, the interactive nature of the election campaign can be approximated and the likelihood that issue engagement is more closely associated with a deliberative component can be enhanced by understanding issue engagement as a dynamic and temporally bounded phenomenon.

The train of thought behind this argument is simple: For the interactive and deliberative content of issue engagement it does make a difference whether two political actors address the same issue on the very same day or two months apart. The more temporally proximate the issue appeals on the same topic by two different actors, the higher is the likelihood that there is some sort of causal link between them. E.g. when two candidates both speak about the issue of defense policy on the very same day, it can more confidently be assumed that one of the actors did actually react to the other or that their appeals at least share a common exogenous cause. However, if the issue appeals of both candidates are two months apart, it is very unlikely that these appeals are interrelated. In fact, in such a case, I would even consider it highly misleading to speak of issue engagement. With a static conceptualization, issue engagement runs the risk of becoming a mere statistical artefact that does hardly reflect political actors' actual communication behavior. Consequently, I propose to only count those instances of two actors talking about the same issue as an occurrence of issue engagement when both respective issue appeals are *in reasonable temporal proximity to one another*.

This also means that an election campaign lasting several weeks needs to be broken down into a larger number of short time intervals to enable this novel measurement of issue engagement. By modelling the election campaign as a temporally extended period rather than a "simultaneous" event, it is also possible to consider changes in the campaign environment that are likely to influence parties' communication behavior and, therefore, their willingness to pursue issue engagement. Here, parties' standings in polls come to mind, which make parties aware of their current prospects of electoral success and allows them to constantly re-evaluate their campaign strategy. In addition, there can be shifts in the salience of issues. Issues that are of high public

concern at the beginning of an election may decline in importance and vice versa. Indeed, one of the central assumptions of the theoretical framework understanding election campaigns as issue competition is precisely that parties are, to a certain extent, able to shape the public agenda and voters' issue preferences, which underlines the necessity to track salience over time. Likewise linking issue engagement to short time intervals can also account for the impact of genuinely disruptive events like exogenous shocks or major scandals during an election campaign that potentially reset the original playing field. Finally, it can be stated that to conceive of issue engagement as a strictly timely bounded phenomenon is not only prone to better approximate the actual deliberative value of parties' campaign behavior but also to more accurately reflect the dynamic reality of an election campaign as a whole.

4.2 Assumptions about Communication Behavior in Election Campaigns

Essentially following a rational choice approach not unlike Simon's (2002), I will rely on the central assumption that political parties and candidates act *rationally* during election campaigns in accordance with their main goal, namely to win the election. The concrete meaning of "winning the election" does, of course, depend on the party system and the electoral system in which the election takes place. In a two-party system with plurality vote, winning an election is equivalent to obtaining the elective office in question. In a multiparty system with proportional representation, on the other hand, winning the election may be semantically linked to obtaining a majority of seats in parliament or, also considering more complex scenarios, obtaining the prime ministership. Generally, it can be said that increasing the chances of "winning the election" usually goes hand in hand with maximizing one's vote share. For now, it is sufficient to simply assume that each political actor seriously tries to achieve his/her best possible election result by rational means. This implies that political actors are expected to engage in campaign behavior that is beneficial for their electoral prospects and abstain from campaign behavior that hurts them. Despite the normative desirability of issue engagement, it is thus the parties' strategic interests and corresponding strategies that condition the occurrence of issue engagement. In this sense, issue engagement can be regarded as a by-product of parties' strategic communication behavior.

What options do parties now have in their attempt to influence voters' preferences to their advantage, and what does the term "campaign behavior" actually signify in the context of this thesis? In line with the theories referred to so far, I understand election campaigns primarily within the framework of *issue competition*. In contrast to approaches that perceive election campaigns as positional competition being about parties' ideological stances (e.g. conservative

vs. liberal/socialist), an issue competition approach regards *issue appeals*, irrespective of their ideological content, as the key to understanding campaign dynamics (Guinaudeau and Persico, 2014). Simplifying the complex reality, the resulting theoretical model, while ignoring other possibly relevant forms of campaign behavior like ideological appeals or negative campaigning, assumes that parties' *only* option to convince voters to support them in the upcoming election is to address (relevant) campaign issues. Accordingly, there remains only a single question to be answered for each party: Which issues are to be addressed under what circumstances in order to maximize the chances for electoral victory? In sum, "the candidate is only concerned with what themes to select, which equates to deciding the relative emphasis to give to all potential campaign themes in the message. In this model, the candidates perform no other action" (Simon, 2002, p.46).

The idea of issue competition heavily relies on a set of empirically corroborated beliefs about the way campaigns can even influence voters' electoral choice. We know that there is usually a considerable proportion of voters who, whether it be due to longstanding party loyalties or a complete alienation from politics, have more or less "made" their electoral decision long before the actual election campaign starts. Clearly, these voters are not the main target group of election campaigns. Instead, rational political actors will rather attempt to convince those who are unsure which party they should vote for or whether they should turn out at the election at all. On what grounds will the undecided now form their electoral opinion? Corresponding to the notion of *issue* competition, voters are not expected to evaluate the parties standing for election on the basis of ideological considerations but rather in terms of their *issue priorities*. Each voter is believed to grant a different degree of importance to each issue relevant to him/her whereby the sum of this considerations ultimately determines the vote choice. Bringing us back to issue ownership theory (Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik et al., 2003), this is possible because parties yield specific issue handling reputations, which provide them with a natural advantage or disadvantage when certain issue become salient in voters' minds. A voter who is mostly concerned about climate protection and the reduction of social inequality has clearly higher propensity to vote for a left wing than for a right-wing party. If the same voter grants substantively more importance to climate protection than to the reduction of social inequality, we can more precisely expect him/her to choose an ecologist party over a socialist one. On the other hand, a voter whose issue priorities are tax cuts and immigration is more likely to opt for a right-wing party. When the concerns about immigration outweigh the desire for tax cuts, he/she is similarly expected to vote for an anti-immigrant far right party instead of a center-right party.

The issue competition taking place between the parties consists now precisely in the simultaneous attempt by all parties to shape the agenda of the election campaign to their advantage, i.e. to make those issues a priority for voters where they enjoy an issue ownership reputation. Here, parties act as agenda makers and try to convince voters that the issues the party stands for are also the most pressing problems to be resolved. Indeed, as I have shown in the previous chapter, there is empirical evidence suggesting that voters alter their issue priorities in response to the respective campaign agenda. This well-documented campaign effect usually goes by the label “priming” (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987) and is the essential effect political parties rely on when they decide to act as *agenda makers*: The higher the presence of an issue in the information environment of the electorate the more weight will be attributed to this topic in the subsequent electoral decision. Hence, parties try to emphasize those issues that work to their advantage in every possible setting such as campaign events, TV appearances or social media posts etc., in order to make sure that their issues receive the highest possible amount of public attention.

However, political actors cannot only make use of issue appeals as agenda makers but also as *agenda takers*. Thereby, parties emphasize issues that are already salient on the public agenda in an attempt to signal to voters that they take their concerns seriously. This “riding the wave”-strategy can, thus, be regarded as a reversal of the “issue ownership” logic. Before parties were depicted as the ones exerting influence public salience and eventually voters’ issue priorities, now it is the political demand side that incentivizes parties to address certain issues. The possibility to take on salient issues regardless of their ownership status is an important strategic alternative for parties that did not manage to put “their” issues on top of the agenda or explicitly want to appeal to new parts of the electorate. This is all the more relevant, if one considers that no single party can fully control the agenda, which, additionally to the totality of parties’ issue emphases, is shaped by the news, “objective” economic and societal problems (unemployment rate, crime rate etc.), scandals as well as exogenous shocks (wars, pandemics).

Notwithstanding whether parties act as agenda makers or agenda takers, in my rational choice model the communicative arsenal of political parties to maximize their vote share is still restricted to issue appeals. Consequently, to theoretically rule out the possibility of parties shifting their ideological position, I assume parties’ ideological stances to remain constant for the entire election campaign. Moreover, it is also necessary to conceive of party competition as comprehending a multitude of independent issues that potentially matter to parties and voters alike. Lastly, it is important to keep in mind that every competing party is expected to take the election

seriously and attempts to achieve the best possible result. Obviously, if a candidate chooses his/her strategy independently of performing well in the election, e.g. if the candidacy is a mere publicity stunt, this model does not apply.

4.3 Determinants of Issue Engagement

Since the delineated rational choice model considers issue engagement as a by-product of political actors' strategic communication behavior, the two questions, *Which issues under what circumstances specific parties strategically ought to address (or avoid)?* and *Under what circumstances issue engagement occurs in election campaigns?*, are strongly interrelated. To explain the latter, it is necessary to discuss the former. Still, the answers to both questions, despite featuring some overlap, will differ in decisive aspects that are grounded in the relational component of issue engagement. The focus is not on understanding what makes a *single* political actor address a certain issue, but what makes (at least) *two* political actors talk about the same issue, i.e. makes them pursue issue engagement. It is crucial to keep this in mind, because often, as I have argued before, it is precisely the attractiveness of an issue for one party that makes it unattractive for all the others.

For the sake of conceptual clarity, I decided to group the arguments and hypotheses aimed at explaining issue engagement along the three different kinds of determinants that could be identified in the course of the literature review. The first section will talk about the factors situated at the issue level and will elaborate on the association between characteristics of issues and the occurrence of issue engagement. Next, I will explain how differences between political actors in terms of their ideological position, competitive standing and incumbency status influence the likelihood of issue engagement. In the third section, we will seize the opportunity provided by our dynamic understanding of issue engagement and consider the possibility of time as an explanatory variable. Finally, to approximate the complex reality frequently characterized by the interrelatedness of multiple factors, theoretically expectable interaction effects will be delineated and transformed into hypotheses.

4.3.1 Issue Level Factors

The first argument follows directly from the theoretical paradigm that we have encountered under the labels “selective emphasis theory” (Budge, 1987; Budge and Farlie, 1983), “dominance principle” (Riker, 1993b; 1996) and, perhaps in the most specific manner, “issue ownership theory” (Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik et al., 2003). Despite subtle differences, the implications of these theoretical accounts are virtually identical: Political actors focus on policy areas and

issues they “own”, i.e. where they have an electoral advantage because the electorate deems them particularly competent to deal with these issues or because their policy position on these issues is very popular, and consequently try to increase their salience on the political agenda. If every party follows this logic, issue engagement should be a rare occurrence when it comes to owned issues, since *only* the respective issue owner has an incentive to talk about an owned issue while all the others are expected to avoid the issue. In line with this argumentation, I present the first hypothesis.

Hypothesis A1: Issue engagement is less likely for owned than for unowned issues.

In a way reversing the previous argument, with Ansolabehere and Iyengar’s (1994) “riding the wave” thesis it can be argued that candidates might also be well advised to campaign on issues that are salient in the public’s mind because voters are likely to reward parties at the ballot box that appear to be responsive to their main concerns. Indeed, we would consider the behavior of a candidate who completely ignores issues that major parts of the electorate deem important as irrational, since such a strategy will most definitely hurt his/her chances of winning. In addition to appearing ignorant, candidates neglecting salient issues also leave out an opportunity to *frame* issues “their way” (Jerit, 2008). Since issues are no fixed entities but leave a lot of room for interpretation in relation to their actual content, political actors can highlight certain considerations and sub-dimensions within a given issue (= issue framing) in ways that benefit them (Chong and Druckman, 2007, 105f.). As soon as an issue becomes highly salient, instead of completely leaving the field to an opponent, every single party is expected to claim that it is the best at resolving the issue by establishing a connection between the issue and the parties issue handling profile. Thus, while the ownership status of an issue is still likely to matter, the public salience of an issue eventually pressurizes candidates to talk about the same issues and, thereby, pursue issue engagement. Therefore, the second hypothesis reads as follows:

Hypothesis A2: The more salient the issue for the public, the more likely issue engagement occurs.

Finally, according to another typology, issues can be categorized as either valence or positional issues (Stokes, 1963). While the latter are issues where political actors take different policy positions, such as taxes or government spending, the former “are more or less goals [...] and not generally subject of partisan dispute” (Simon, 2002, p.134), such as fighting corruption. However, it is important to note that “whether a given problem poses a position- or a valence-issue is a matter to be settled empirically and not on *a priori* logical grounds” (Stokes, 1963,

p.373). This implies that the status of an issue depends on the respective election campaign and circumstances while it is also possible that, to a certain extent, whether or not an issue represents a valence issue is itself subject of issue competition. Here, the concept of issue framing applies again in the sense that (almost) all issues can rhetorically be stripped of their conflictual elements and be depicted as common goals (Green and Jennings, 2017). This strategy can actively be pursued to take an issue where an opponent enjoys an advantage out of the actual competition by claiming that tackling this issue is a matter of course. Therefore, even strongly ideologically connoted issues like security and environmental protection, despite considerable differences throughout the ideological spectrum in terms of policy, frequently turn out to be de facto valence issues.

What does this mean for issue engagement? Roughly following Riker's "*dispersion principle*" (1996), Green-Pedersen (2007) argues that "drawing attention to an issue where all parties agree is not attractive even though voters might find it important and parties will move attention away from such issues" (p. 610). Precisely due to the broad consensus (at least on a superficial level), it does not seem like there is much to gain (or to lose) by addressing valence issues in general and, perhaps, even less so by pursuing issue engagement on them since one can merely repeat the same assurances as the opponent. Consequently, I expect:

Hypothesis A3: Issue engagement is less likely for valence than for positional issues.

4.3.2 Actor Level Factors

One robust finding in the literature is that ideologically proximate parties are more likely to engage on issues than ideologically distant parties (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015; Meyer and Wagner, 2016). On the one hand, this might testify to a certain differentiation of issue profiles in accordance with the historically grown ideological camp or family (left vs. right) a party belongs to. Ideologically proximate parties simply own similar sets of issues, which automatically and, perhaps, unintentionally leads to more issue engagement between them than between ideologically distant parties. On the other, it might also be the case that parties are more responsive to their main competitors because they share the same target voter groups (Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009), and, thus, use issue engagement as a "strategic move" to either win over new voters from or prevent losing voters to their ideologically proximate competitors (Green-Pedersen, 2007). Following this line of reasoning, the state of intensive competition between ideologically proximate competitors, which is a result of a high potential

of voter movement between the parties, can also be interpreted as a struggle over issue ownership, whereby ideologically proximate parties simultaneously try to convince the electorate to be best at handling the very same issues. Both explanations presented for a positive association between ideological proximity and issue engagement are not mutually exclusive, since usually a strong link between a party's constituency and its ideological position can be assumed. In any case, ideologically proximate actors are expected to frequently emphasize the same issues, which will naturally lead to higher levels of issue engagement among them. Therefore, I hypothesize:

Hypothesis B1: The more ideologically proximate political actors are, the more likely issue engagement occurs.

Ever since opinion polls are an integral part of election campaigns, there is not only a perpetual information flow from candidates to voters but also, in the form of a constant feedback loop, one from voters to candidates (Zaller, 1992). Candidates can constantly track the share of voters intending to vote for them and, based on that, estimate their chances of winning long before Election Day. It can be assumed that a candidate's competitiveness will strongly influence his/her communication behavior in campaigns. Under normal circumstances a strong candidate with good electoral prospects will have little interest in engaging on issues of a weak candidate that stands no realistic chance of winning the election, since this would only give the latter the opportunity to increase his/her popularity (Damore, 2005). Equally competitive candidates who find themselves in a toss-up, on the other hand, will be highly attentive to each other's campaign and will be inclined to immediately "neutralize" any attempt of the opponent to set the agenda to their advantage by pursuing issue engagement. Indeed, there is evidence that competitive settings, i.e. one where minor changes in the voting dynamics might in fact decide between victory or loss, promote issue engagement whereas less competitive situations rather make candidates talk past each other (Druckman et al., 2010; Simon, 2002). So far, the role of competitiveness has only been tested in a two-party system context, whereas the transfer of this argument to a multicandidate context represents a valuable innovation. The according hypothesis reads as follows:

Hypothesis B2: The more competitive the situation between two political actors the more likely issue engagement occurs.

Finally, the role of the incumbent is likely to play a role in candidates' strategic communication behavior and, thus, also for the occurrence of issue engagement. Since this study focuses on

issue engagement in *multiparty systems*, some additional clarifications are needed at this point. In parliamentary systems I consider every sitting prime minister who runs as a leading candidate of a party as the incumbent and the party of the prime minister can also be seen as the incumbent party. To a lesser extent but under most circumstances, junior coalition partners can also be considered incumbents. All other leading candidates or their respective parties, I would classify as challengers. In candidate-centered presidential election, taking place in presidential or semi-presidential systems, it is even more straightforward: The elected president is the incumbent and all other candidates are the challengers. If the incumbent is running for re-election, we would expect that he/she usually has strategical options that challengers do not have. The incumbent is considered to be in a particularly advantageous position, since the policies and leadership style he/she stands for should by then have become apparent to public while also exclusively giving him/her the opportunity to put forward his/her track record instead of addressing issues. Or, put differently, “incumbents can avoid certain issues while running on their ‘experience’” (Druckman et al., 2010, p.6). Even though attacking the incumbent on his/her track record is an indispensable component of every challenger’s campaign, unless the incumbent has performed very poorly, it might be a risky maneuver to engage on the incumbent’s pet issues since this might also backfire. Instead, challengers usually fare better when they put forward “their” issues and claim that they so far have been unjustly neglected by the incumbent. Overall, this should result in considerably less issue engagement between the incumbent and each of his/her challengers. Accordingly, I formulate my next hypothesis:

Hypothesis B3: Issue engagements is less likely between an incumbent and a challenger than between two challengers.

4.3.4 Changing Dynamics over Time

The main argument of this study is that in order to do justice to the normative ideal of deliberation issue engagement needs to be understood and conceptualized as a dynamic and interactive political phenomenon. Therefore, a time component is required that displays the variance of issue engagement over time and can thereby capture how candidates “respond” and adapt to the ever-changing campaign environment. In addition to granting time a more essential role in the conceptualization of issue engagement, with Seeberg’s (2020) paper *First avoidance, then engagement: Political parties’ issue competition in the electoral cycle* we have seen that time can also function as an *explanatory variable* in this regard. Indeed, the temporal proximity to the election appears to positively influence the willingness of candidates to pursue issue engagement. According to Seeberg (2020, p. 2f.), this effect is grounded in the different *time horizons*

of the two central modes of campaign behavior, agenda making and agenda taking, which are closely related to the two theoretical paradigms, issue ownership theory and the “riding the wave”-thesis. Shaping the agenda and voters’ issue priorities to one’s advantage by pursuing an *issue avoidance strategy* requires a certain amount of time and is, thus, a rather *long- or medium-term* strategy. Reflecting public salience in one’s issue appeals leading to more issue engagement, on the other hand, promises immediate electoral yields and is more *short-term* oriented.

However, in contrast to Seeberg, who measures issue engagement in very large time units (quarters of a year) over the *whole electoral cycle*, my research interest is explicitly aimed at explaining issue engagement during *election campaigns* and, consequently, makes use of much shorter time intervals to capture the micro-dynamics within this selected period of time. Still, I claim that Seeberg’s theoretical argument can be transferred and adapted to fit my purposes. Since an election campaign is a self-contained event that has its own inherent dynamics, I likewise argue that the agenda of an election campaign together with voters’ issue priorities, while still being vague and malleable at the beginning, continuously manifest themselves over time. From a strategic perspective this means that at the beginning of an election campaign all candidates will try to make the election campaign about issues they own, whereas towards the end they will make “last-minute” appeals to voters that they have not convinced so far by riding the wave. Hence, we can expect a continuous transition from issue avoidance to issue engagement strategies. From this, we can derive the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis C: The more temporally proximate the election, the more likely issue engagement occurs.

4.3.3 Interaction effects

In a specific issue engagement setting comprehending a party pair, an issue and a certain point in time, there are always several determinants at work. For example, a valence issue can be owned and be highly salient at the same time. Additionally considering actor-level factors, an issue of whatever kind can again be the subject of potential issue engagement in varying degrees of competitive situations, between more or less ideologically proximate parties, involving the incumbent or not. Moreover, a specific issue in its specific setting is always embedded within a certain point in time that is closer or further away from Election Day. The central question is now, whether the effects of all these factors can reasonably be assumed to be largely independent from one another, in which case interaction effects would not need to be included. If they

can, however, be expected to influence each other in their effect size and direction, the possibility of interaction effects should be explored. Clearly, assuming complete independence between the explanatory variables seems highly unrealistic given the complex reality of campaign strategies. Still, not all of the 21 possible combinations of the 7 independent variables presented so far can be transformed in meaningful interaction terms nor does it seem feasible to pursue such an exuberant approach. Therefore, I decided to restrict myself to three interaction hypotheses that are of particular relevance for the research on issue engagement and can be supported by conclusive arguments.

I have already mentioned that the main theoretical paradigms, issue ownership theory and the riding the wave-thesis, in a way contradict each other and can in certain situation even be considered mutually exclusive forms of campaign behavior. The agony of choice becomes particularly severe if a foreign-owned issue becomes highly salient and the parties concerned face a dilemma: Should they still avoid addressing this issue since it is owned by an opposing party despite its high salience? Here, the degree and stability of the public salience attached to the issue are likely to be decisive. From a strategic perspective, it might be rational not to respond to the rise in salience of a foreign-owned issue at first, in order to prevent it from sustainably asserting itself on the political agenda. If, however, the topic reaches a certain degree of salience where it is costlier to ignore the foreign-owned issue than to address it, then the “fear of missing out” will prevail and the party/candidate will decide to address the issue, ultimately leading to issue engagement. In sum, the level of salience required to make parties talk about a foreign-owned might simply be higher than for unowned issues. Consequently, issue ownership weakens the positive effect for salience on issue engagement or, put differently, the strength of the negative effect for issue ownership depends on the issue salience.

Hypothesis D1: The (positive) effect for salience on the likelihood of issue engagement is weaker for owned than for unowned issues.

The next argument picks up on a special feature of issue competition in a multiparty context, namely that the ideological spectrum represented by the parties is much more fine-grained and that, thus, the ideological divide between parties is in several cases not fundamental. This implies that certain ideological affinities exist between parties belonging to the same ideological camp, which is frequently reflected in a sort of common issue agenda. In some cases, we might even speak of a shared issue ownership between ideologically proximate parties, albeit each party will for strategic reasons claim the issue ownership status exclusively for itself. For means

of illustration, we might think of a communist and a social democratic party which both naturally try to present themselves as the “true party of the working man”. Or, on the other side of the ideological spectrum, we might encounter the case of a right-wing populist party and a right-wing extremist party both laying the claim to be best at “protecting” the country from immigrants. Anyway, between ideologically proximate parties we might witness a competition over the ownership of a certain issue due to the ideology-based overlap in parties’ issue profiles. Hence, the idea that owned issues feature less issue engagement needs to be refined for a setting featuring two ideologically proximate competitors, as here, it might be precisely the owned issues where issue engagement is more likely to occur. In the follow-up of Hypothesis A1 and B1, I state:

Hypothesis D2: The (positive) effect for ideological proximity on the likelihood of issue engagement is stronger for owned than for unowned issues.

Finally, I would like to discuss how the effect for ideological proximity on issue engagement might depend on the competitiveness of the situation two parties find themselves in. Extending the argument that issue engagement is more likely between ideologically proximate actors because they compete over the same voter groups, it can be further argued that this effect for ideological proximity will be stronger if the respective parties are in a “head-to-head”-situation. Given the already existing high potential of voter movement between the two parties, an especially competitive situation should increase the attention focus on the main competitor’s issue appeals even more. Consequently, each of the parties involved, in order to prevent the main competitor from gaining the decisive advantage through a skillful issue appeal, should have an additional strategic incentive to neutralize any such attempt by pursuing issue engagement. Therefore, the last hypothesis proclaims:

Hypothesis D3: The (positive) effect for competitiveness on the likelihood of issue engagement becomes stronger as the ideological proximity between the actors increases.

5. DATA AND METHODS

In this chapter, I will carefully explain my empirical approach to investigating the phenomenon of issue engagement. I begin by giving a short insight into my case, the 2022 French presidential election campaign. Next, the data on the basis of which occurrences of issue engagement shall be identified will be discussed. Here, at least two innovations are made that distinguish this study from other studies on issue engagement: First, rather than using conventional sources for issue content, like newspaper articles, party manifestos, press releases or the like, I will resort to Twitter data that I have scraped via the official Twitter API. As I will argue in the following sections, social media data is especially suitable to adequately consider the newly integrated time criterion for issue engagement. Second, instead of relying on human coding to assign Tweets featuring policy content to a particular campaign issue, a special type of machine learning technique was used to automatically perform the required classification with the help of predetermined key words. The Tweets categorized by topic, combined with the information about their authorship and the exact time of their publication, eventually allow the measurement of issue engagement and the subsequent creation of a corresponding dyadic dataset. Due to the relative abstractness of issue engagement as a concept, which tempts to overlook its embeddedness in the very real context of an election campaign, the process from raw textual material of individual Tweets to a dataset suitable for analysis will be described in detail and made transparent. Additionally, to corroborate the validity of my topic modelling approach, descriptive tables and graphs will also be used here to provide an overview of the campaign's issue dynamics. Finally, after discussing the operationalization of the numerous independent variables, I delineate my estimation strategy while also addressing the pitfalls of the interdependent data structure.

5.1 Case

To begin with, there are several pragmatic reasons why I have selected the 2022 French presidential election as my case study, which are closely related to the peculiarities of my data source. Since social media only quite recently became a “non-optional” standard tool for election campaigns and because I explicitly wanted to use social media data to test my hypotheses, it was apparent that only recent elections were eligible for my study. In addition, if one wants to carry out a primary data collection, it is often necessary to scrape the Tweets in “real-time” or at least in short temporal distance to the election campaign, since Tweets or even whole candidate profiles are often deleted shortly after the election. Besides its topicality, the 2022 French

presidential election as a candidate-centered election also facilitated the identification of the representative campaign channels, namely the presidential candidates' official Twitter profiles. Clearly, in a campaign preceding a *party-centered* parliamentary election the question which profiles and political actors one considers relevant and “representative” producers of issue content is much less obvious to answer than in a candidate-centered context.

However, the selection of the 2022 French presidential election is to a substantive degree theoretically motivated and may turn out to be an important contribution to our understanding of issue engagement that exceeds the simple novelty of the case. In the literature review we have seen that the theoretical arguments explaining issue engagement differ from one another depending on whether the study is situated in two-party or a multiparty context. In a two-party setting the arguments tend to focus on the characteristics of specific issues (e.g. owned/un-owned) whereas in a multiparty setting the characteristics of the party are considered the main determinants (e.g. ideological stance). As the presented hypotheses demonstrate, this study is equally interested in both types of arguments but still acknowledges their original embeddedness in a specific kind of party system. Here, the French presidential election combining features from the candidate-centered US two-party system with those from the usually party-centered Western European multiparty system turns out to be an ideal case to bridge the gap between the two respective branches of the issue engagement literature. To understand this point, it is helpful to give a brief account of the French political system.

France is a semi-presidential regime with a directly elected head of state who alongside a prime minister possesses substantive executive power. To determine the future president the French presidential election uses two-round runoff voting. If none of the candidates obtains an absolute majority in the first round, as has been the case since 1965, a second round between the two candidates with the most votes in the first round takes place. The president appoints the prime minister who is accountable to the National Assembly, which has the power to dismiss the government (except the president) by a simple majority vote. Since the reform of electoral law in 2000, presidential elections have always been held in the same year as legislative elections. As a result, and because the members of the National Assembly are elected in a two-round system with single-member constituencies, the president's party or party alliance usually also obtains an (absolute) majority in the National Assembly, which allows the president (through the prime minister) to select a government of his/her choice. Still, even though it did not happen ever since the two election were synchronized, a “cohabitation”, i.e. a president and a prime minister of a different political parties, is possible and may significantly limit the power of the

president. In any case, the French system of government can be referred to as *strong* semi-presidentialism, since, compared to other de jure semi-presidential democracies like Austria or Finland, the president is more than a figurehead who mainly fulfils representative duties but rather the dominant political actor. Accordingly, the French presidential election is at least equally if not more important than the subsequent legislative election, which is currently unique for a Western European country.

It is this unique position of the French political system as a hybrid of a presidential and parliamentary system that makes it interesting as a case study. One advantage in terms of the assumptions of the developed rational choice model, which it has in common with US elections, is that it is clear what it means to “win” the election. Obviously, only one candidate can become president and there is no consolation prize for the other candidates. There is only a single way for each of the candidates to become president, which is qualifying for the second round by obtaining at least the second highest vote share and then winning an absolute majority of votes in the second round. In a parliamentary multiparty system, it is far more complex to define what winning the election actually means. Throughout Europe there are numerous cases where the party who scored the highest election result failed to obtain the prime ministership or did not even enter government. Conversely, if one is able to form a coalition in the aftermath of the election a party ranking second or third can obtain the prime ministership and be, from one perspective, the actual “winner of the election”. The candidates of the French presidential election, however, share a common path to a common goal, which makes them more likely to behave in accordance with the general predictions about issue engagement. Notwithstanding this similarity with elections in the US, the first round of the French presidential election still features multiple candidates implying a broad variety of ideological stances and substantive differences in the competitiveness of the candidates, a characteristic it shares with most Western European parliamentary elections. Therefore, somewhat being a middle ground between both systems, the French presidential election can overall even be considered an “most likely case” to test the numerous hypotheses derived from partly heterogeneous research contexts.

In total, 12 candidates were running for the presidency. Four of these candidates were excluded from my study because they either were complete outsiders, like the two additional communist candidates Philippe Poutou and Nathalie Arthaud, mainly supported by selected regions, as was the case for Jean Lasalle, or largely overshadowed by candidates with similar ideological positions, as was the case for the conservative Nicolas Dupont-Aignan. This leaves us with 8 can-

didates who, be it because they already held high public office, because they were the candidates of the established parties, or simply because of their popularity, also received the most media attention. In the following the candidates are listed from the ideological left to the ideological right⁶: 1) Fabien Roussel, leader of the *French Communist Party*; 2) Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of *La France Insoumise*; 3) Yannick Jadot, nominee of the *Green Party*; 4) Anne Hidalgo, mayor of Paris and nominee of the *Socialist Party*; 5) Emmanuel Macron, the incumbent president and leader of *La République en Marche!* 6) Valérie Pécresse, former minister, current president of the Île-de-France region and nominee of *The Republicans*; 7) Marine Le Pen, nominee of the *National Rally* with her third presidential candidacy; 8) Éric Zemmour, former journalist and founder of the new far-right party *Reconquête!*.

The period of examination, during which the Tweets of each candidate were collected, ranged from the first of January to the Election Day on April 10, 2022. This 100-day period should cover the “hot phase” of the election campaign and has also been selected, as some candidates did declare their candidacy only several weeks before Christmas. Although no one seriously doubted his candidacy and he was de facto campaigning before, Macron even waited until February 17 to officially announce that he will run for re-election, which apparently was part of his strategy. In thematic terms, the campaign was initially shaped by the still ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and questions of public health policy. Another major campaign issue was the increasing cost of living (= “pouvoir d’achat”). The ordinary course of the campaign was heavily struck by the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, forcing every candidate to take a stand on this issue. To minimize a potential bias effected by this exogenous shock, this circumstance will be accounted for in the analysis of the data. With regards to the intensity of the electoral race, it can be noted that, whereas Macron’s qualification for the second round was more or less certain, the race for the second place was quite competitive. The three right-wing candidates, Pécresse, Le Pen and Zemmour, at some points during the election campaign were almost neck and neck in the polls while also left-wing populist Mélenchon constantly caught up as the Election Day approached. In the end, Macron with 27.85% and Le Pen with 23.15% of the votes, only 1.2 percentage points more than Mélenchon, qualified for the second round. Two weeks after the first round, on the 24 April, 2022, Macron got re-elected president by a comfortable but, compared to 2017, narrower margin of 17.5 percentage points before Le Pen.

⁶ To determine the candidates’ ideological position, I resorted to the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) 2019 (Bakker et al. 2020). Each candidate was assigned the value his/her nominating party had in 2019 while far-right candidate Zemmour was assigned the value 10.

5.2 Data

5.2.1 Using Social Media Data to Study Issue Engagement

Ever since the 2008 Obama presidential campaign, social media has slowly become an integral part of every major election campaign in Western democracies (Enli and Moe, 2013; Gibson et al., 2014). Was it once an optional and mainly symbolic tool for politicians who wanted to signal that they are up-to-date and have fully arrived in the digital era (Jungherr, 2016, p.77), a social media campaign is nowadays a “must-have” for every serious candidate or party competing in a major election. This development is also reflected in the political communication research on the use of social media in election campaigns. The first studies dating back to the early 2010s were predominantly driven by comprehending social media campaigning within a “logic of disruption” and aimed to explore the distinctive features of this “new” media type (e.g. Adams and McCorkindale, 2013; Conway et al., 2013; Vergeer et al., 2013) implicitly comparing them to traditional campaign media. With the progressive normalization of social media campaigning, this research focus highlighting the novelty of this campaign tool has been increasingly superseded by approaches proclaiming a “logic of continuity”, which assume that parties use social media similarly to traditional communication media (e.g. Plescia et al., 2020). Since this thesis attempts to make generally valid findings about the determinants of issue engagement and not (exclusively) about the determinants of issue engagement in a social media context, in line with the latter logic, I argue that the issue appeals parties or candidates make on social media, especially Twitter, provide an accurate depiction of their overall campaign behavior.

Following Druckman et al. (2010) three basic criteria can be named to assess the suitability of a data source for a study on issue engagement: The data should be *unmediated*, *complete* and *representative*. Without much ado, it can be stated that the first criterion applies. Social media posts from the candidate’s official profile are fully controlled by the candidate and not mediated by journalistic choices. Consequently, the kind, number and timing of issue appeals on social media is a direct result of the candidate’s campaign strategy. With regards to completeness, there is no reason to belief that candidates systematically address (avoid) issues that they would otherwise avoid (address) in a different medium or context. In fact, because there are no immediate financial costs involved, a candidate’s social media feed might capture the campaign’s issue profile much more comprehensively than cost- or work-intensive media like TV-ads or press releases, which are predominantly used by political actors with higher resources (Meyer and Wagner, 2016). Moreover, social media is also a *representative* data source, in the sense

that, as noted above, it has become a regular campaign medium used by candidates and parties in every Western liberal democracy and, thus, enables comparative studies across different countries and elections.

However, the most important feature of social media, which was decisive for my choice of this data source, is its interactive and instant-response quality. Social media stands in the utmost contrast to *static* issue content sources, such as party manifestos or websites. Candidates in the hot phase of an election campaign tend to issue several Tweets a day and, thus, have the opportunity to emphasize different issues within a single day. Indeed, there is virtually no medium that gives candidates more flexibility to react to changes in the campaign environment, whether it be an unexpected strategic move by a competitor or an exogenous shock, which makes social media posts the ideal data source for the purpose of this study.

Although social scientists frequently make use of social media data to analyze various forms of issue behavior and its implications (Ennser-Jedenastik et al., 2022; Stroud and Muddiman, 2019; Van Dalen et al., 2015), to my knowledge, there is only a single publication among them that is explicitly about issue *engagement*. In their paper *Using Social Media Data to Analyse Issue Engagement During the 2017 German Election*, Meier et al. (2021) use co-occurring hashtags (#) within politicians' Tweets as topic proxies and, despite the advantages of the medium, measure issue engagement again as mere overlap in parties' issue attention profiles. Apart from the fact that the paper lacks a profound embedding into political science theory, I want to point out two major shortcomings of this study, which will later inform my own choices in dealing with Twitter data. First, Meier et al. (2021) do not differentiate between mere "broadcasting Tweets" and Tweets with actual (policy) issue content, which leads to findings of limited relevance. Second, their approach to exclusively rely on hashtags, @-mentions and other Twitter-specific tools runs the risk of missing substantive issue content and, by being more about the medium than the actual phenomenon, hurts the representativeness of the results for political actors' overall campaign behavior. In a first exploratory analysis of the Tweets of French presidential candidates, I noticed that hashtags, for example, were more frequently related to a specific candidate than to a distinct policy issue and, in general, not systematically deployed.

One question that remains to be answered is why, given the many different social media platforms, I chose Twitter as my data source. Since my approach requires a text input, all platforms that are mainly about sharing images (Instagram) or videos (TikTok) were not eligible. Hence, the main choice was between Facebook and Twitter, which also happen to be the social media

platforms most commonly used for campaigning. Unlike Facebook, Twitter is generally considered an “elite” medium that is disproportionately used by “opinion leaders”, like journalists and politicians (Vaccari and Valeriani, 2015; Vergeer, 2015). Additionally, it is particularly designed as a micro-blogging service, which means that it promotes transmitting substantive content in a text format. Facebook, by contrast, perhaps precisely due to its broader user base and stronger focus on social networking aspects, has a less official and more informal character (Van Dalen et al., 2015). The special status of Twitter is also reflected in the fact that Tweets by politicians qualify as a journalistic source (Broersma and Graham, 2013; Metag and Rauchfleisch, 2016), what politicians and elective candidates are well aware of. In sum, candidates can, thus, use Twitter to kill two birds with one stone: On the one hand, by posting Tweets, they get their desired message *directly* to their followers and avoid journalistic gate keepers, on the other, they potentially influence the media agenda and, thereby, *indirectly* pass their issue priorities on to a broader audience. All these reasons suggest that Twitter is more consistently used to make substantive issue appeals than Facebook, which explains why I opted for this specific outlet.

5.2.2 Coding the Tweets – A Topic Modelling Approach

During the 100 days preceding the first round of the French presidential election, from January 1 to April 10, in total 13969 Tweets were scraped from the eight main candidates’ official Twitter feeds. Unlike all other candidates, Macron as incumbent president had a separate campaign account, which did not carry his own name but instead the slogan of his campaign “avecvous”. Because the Twitter profile under his name, as an official government account, was exclusively used to post messages reflecting his role as president of France but not as a presidential *candidate*, I decided to use this official campaign account instead. Having collected the Tweets, the primary task consisted in assigning each Tweet to a campaign issue to be then able to verify whether or not two candidates talked about the same issue on the same day, i.e. pursued issue engagement. For this purpose, I decided to employ a machine learning technique that would enable me to perform this task *automatically*. As opposed to the manual coding of Tweets, an automated text classification approach has two main advantages: First, it saves time, money and exhaustive work. Assuming the manual code of one Tweet takes on average 30 seconds, it would take more than 116 hours to code all the Tweets in our sample while a pre-specified algorithmic classifier only requires a couple minutes. Second, the results of my machine learn-

ing approach (in contrast to those of human coders) are 100% *replicable*. If one used the documented pre-processing steps for the data and the exact same model specifications, one would arrive at the exact same classification of the Tweets.

The exact method, which I ultimately chose, goes by the name of “keyword assisted topic model” (keyATM) and was originally developed by Jagarlamudi et al. (2012) to optimize the classification performance and facilitate the topic interpretability compared to classic topic modelling approaches like *Latent Dirichlet Allocation* (LDA). The main innovation lies in allowing researchers “to label each topic via the specification of keywords *before* fitting the model, thereby avoiding post-hoc interpretation and adjustments of topics” (Eshima et al., 2020, p.1f.). Despite this particularity, the basic principles are similar for keyATMs as to other kinds of topic models. Completely ignoring syntactic relationships between words, the classification is strictly performed on the basis of word frequencies per document. It is further assumed that each topic is present in different proportions in each document and that for each word there is a different probability that it belongs to a certain topic. Consequently, the model calculates values for each *document* and *word*, in both cases indicating to which degree they are associated with a certain topic. To arrive at these values, the keyATM, taking into account the pre-specified topics and associated keywords, is initialized with random topic and word distributions. Then, by the means of maximum likelihood estimation and in an iterative process, the model learns to fit the data. Finally, the obtained values indicative of the topic distribution for each document will be used to assign each document to a topic whereas the values indicative of the most important words for each topic will be used to verify the meaningfulness and coherence of the thematic categories. Later when I discuss my own specifications, the workings of the model will be illustrated in a less technical way by the concrete example of the French presidential election campaign.

Before the model can reasonably be applied and specified, several pre-processing steps are necessary to obtain results of sufficient quality. The first obstacle that had to be overcome was to distinguish between the *relevant* Tweets dealing with issue content and the *irrelevant* Tweets containing non-issue content. From other works examining issue competition by the means of social media data, we know that social media posts also frequently convey content that is not related to policy issues (Meier et al., 2021; Plescia et al., 2020; Van Dalen et al., 2015). This includes, for instance, announcements of the candidate’s appearance at public events or in TV, general comments on the campaign dynamics, documentation of the candidate’s campaign activities, “get-out-the-vote” messages, or acknowledgements for supporters and staff members.

As these kinds of Tweets potentially present a source of “noise” in the data, it was important to get rid of them beforehand to assure the well-functioning of the keyATM later on. Once again to avoid going through all the Tweets manually, I opted for a *naïve Bayes classifier*, a simple supervised machine learning technique, to identify the non-issue Tweets. Therefore, I manually annotated 1000 Tweets, of which 800 were used to train the model. With the remaining 200 categorized Tweets, the *test dataset*, the model was subsequently validated. In total, the model achieved an accuracy of 87%, which means that approximately nine out of ten cases had been correctly classified. After having applied the model to the whole dataset, the original dataset was reduced to 9674 Tweets with alleged issue content.

Next, since the keyATM explicitly requires a tidied “bag” of *semantically informative* words, the actual text content of the Tweets had to be processed. First, symbols (punctuation, emoticons etc.) and URLs were removed. As hashtags (#) and @-mentions did in this case not provide a shortcut to a comprehensive understanding of the election campaign’s issue competition, they were not granted a special role in the analysis. The hashtags were recoded to the words they contained whereas @-mentions were, due to their obvious lack of issue relevance, removed completely. Second, a unification of words, which have the same word root and therefore the same semantic meaning, had to take place. Additionally considering that the text data was in French, a language with a more complex declination and conjugation than English, this *lemmatization* of the words was particularly important to ensure that a mere grammatically necessary adjustment of the same word is not mistaken for a semantic difference. With a French language model from the Spacy library for advanced Natural Language Processing (NLP), this task could be completed efficiently and with highly accurate results. Besides fixing minor systematic errors of the lemmatization process, I also decided to unify words that were semantically closely related (e.g. “terrorisme”; “terroriste” → “terrorisme”) to increase the proportion of relevant keywords, which would improve the performance of the keyATM. Third, words that appear with high frequency but have no affinity whatsoever to an issue, e.g. articles, conjunctions, prepositions or modal verbs, so-called “stopwords”, were systematically removed from the text corpus. As a consequence of my first experiments with preliminary keyATMs, I decided to extend the original list of *stopwords* to further facilitate the algorithmic formation of distinct issue categories. Thereby, also very general or highly ambiguous nouns (e.g. “élection”, “président”), adjectives (e.g. “social”, “utile”) or verbs (e.g. “accepter”, “demander”), which could potentially occur in any thematic context, were excluded. Moreover, because the rarity of certain words might also pose a problem for the KeyATM, I also deleted words from the corpus that occurred in less than ten Tweets (of the given 9674). Finally, all Tweets that, after this

whole procedure, featured less than 4 words (i.e. “non-stopwords”) were removed. This was done to avoid miscategorization due to too few informative words, and to ensure that Tweets with hardly any substantive issue content do not artificially inflate the number of issue appeals.

After having prepared the text corpus in this way, I proceeded to the specification of the keyATM. In contrast, to classic topic modelling approaches, where the algorithm classifies the text and the data all by itself, i.e. *unsupervised*, the keyATM requires the issue categories to be defined in advance via the selection of keywords. Basically, apart from a few general guidelines and recommendations concerning the minimal frequency of the keywords and the number of topics for a certain corpus size, one is completely free in the choice of the topics and related keywords. Starting from an initial specification, which essentially arose from the question of *compatibility with other data* and my *prior news media knowledge* of the French presidential campaign, the model was constantly optimized and evaluated in an iterative back-and-forth between human input and algorithmic output. In the end, I settled for 14 campaign issues: cost of living, health policy, pensions, security, immigration, labor market policy and employment (labor)⁷, climate and environmental protection (environment), terrorism, education, fiscal and economic policy (economy), housing, international and defense policy (international), European integration (Europe), rurality.

At this point it seems appropriate to briefly explain the problems with defining what an “issue” is. Right off the bat, there is no consensus or standardized approach on what constitutes a distinct issue and what does not. As one can see, the selected campaign issues represent broad policy areas that potentially include a variety of individual (sub-)issues. For example, issue appeals on health policy can refer to things as diverse as the measures against the pandemic, the shortage of doctors in rural areas and the financing of public hospitals. Therefore, using a limited number of usually between 10 and 25 broad policy areas as issue units, as has been done for the most part throughout the issue engagement literature (e.g. Kaplan et al., 2006; Sigelman and Buell, 2004; Seeberg, 2022), is prone to *overestimate* the amount of actual issue engagement, since two parties talking about the same broad policy area does not mean that the exact same issue is addressed (Lipsitz, 2013; Meyer and Wagner, 2016). Still, measuring issue focus on a more fine-grained level might again *underestimate* issue engagement, as it completely excludes the possibility of “framing”, i.e. attempting to change the way an issue is evaluated by introducing a new perspective on it (Chong and Druckman, 2007). As a distinct form of political

⁷ In the remainder of the paper, the word in parentheses is occasionally used as an abbreviation to refer to the respective campaign issue.

communication strategy “framing” can be understood as a “quasi-response” to a competitor’s issue appeal that shifts the focus *within* a broad policy area. A candidate with a liberal stance on immigration policy might react to a post by a right-wing populist candidate problematizing illegal immigration with a statement highlighting the importance of immigrants as essential workers. While there is an obvious mismatch between the precise issues, this instance could still be meaningfully counted as an occurrence of issue engagement. Due to this grey area that in some cases emphasizing a different sub-issue of a broad policy area can still be regarded as a form of issue engagement (“framing”), it can once again be concluded that there is no ideal level of measurement for issues beyond any controversy.

Even though the selected 14 major campaign issues adequately cover a vast majority of the Tweets, there were also some minor issues, such as cannabis legalization, Macron’s McKinsey affair or the discussion about the declarations of support (“parrainages”), that could not be meaningfully integrated in one of the just listed main issue areas and were also too small to be accurately identified by the KeyATM. As some of these issues were also difficult to make sense of within the established theoretical framework and since, in total, they did not constitute a large share of the data, I decided to remove the respective Tweets completely from the text corpus. Of course, this might introduce a bias in the dataset in favor of issue engagement. Yet, the difficulty to identify minor or short-term topics is a typical limitation of (partly) unsupervised automated text analysis. As consequence of the rigorous pre-processing and the necessary manual removal of Tweets on issues that were too small or not distinct enough to be identified by the keyATM, the number of Tweets used for the final model shrunk to 6733.

In accordance with my explanations given above, the output of the final keyATM gives us the estimated probabilities that a word belongs to a certain topic (ϕ) and also the probabilities that a document/Tweet is *about* a certain topic (θ). Beginning with the former, Table 1 lists the top ten words with the highest probability for each topic, which can be regarded as a first check of the model validity. As one can see, the words for each category intuitively make sense: The issue of environmental protection is strongly associated with the French words for “climate”, “energy” and “nuclear”; international and defense policy with “Ukraine”, “Russia” and “war”; health policy with “health”, “vaccination” and “caregiver” etc. If one asked a politically interested person to think of typical words for each issue, he/she would probably list very similar words. To gain additional insight into the functioning of the model, I have highlighted the words in bold that were pre-specified as keywords for the respective issue categories, which expectably rank high within each topic. The asterisks mark words that had originally been specified for

Table 1 – Top Ten Most Typical Words for each Campaign Issue

Cost of living	Health policy	Pensions	Security	Immigration
prix baisser pouvoir d'achat essence bloquer carburant pauvreté énergie taxe* gaz	santé vaccin soignant hôpital pandémie Ehpad passe médecin crise système	retraite ainé travail* âge partir tôt Smic carrière annuité chômage*	police sécurité crime violence ordre femme justice droit délinquant prison	immigration islam droit étranger référendum voile loi clandestin femme sécurité*
Labor	Environment	Terrorism	Education	Economy
salaire augmenter emploi travail Smic pouvoir d'achat* entreprise* net femme charge	climat énergie nucléaire écologie renouvelable investir sortir éolienne avenir industrie	terrorisme victime hommage oublier mémoire mort assassiner tuer antisémitisme juif	école enseigner enfant éducation élève parent scolaire classe professeur culture	économie entreprise impôt argent fiscal pouvoir d'achat* payer baisser* fraude augmenter
Housing	International	Europe	Rurality	
logement construire loi rénovation SRU loyer aider ville intérêt fondation	Ukraine Russie guerre poutine Europe* paix défense OTAN sanction Mali	européen Europe union souveraineté nation indépendance industrie intérêt traité agriculture*	agriculture ruralité élevage alimentaire chasse paysan souveraineté* qualité production usine	

Top ten words with the highest estimated probabilities for each topic. Pre-selected keywords are highlighted in bold font. The asterisks indicate that a word was originally specified as a keyword for a different topic

another issue and were later reassigned on the basis of the model's calculation. The word "Europe", for example, was manually set as a keyword for the issue "European integration" but also made it into the "top ten" of the "international and defense policy"-category. Although

these instances point to a relatedness of certain issues (e.g. international policy and European integration, labor and economy, security and immigration”), they are not per se problematic. Neither do they testify to a substantive lack of distinctiveness between the topics nor do they lead to an arbitrary classification of the Tweets, since the words differ in their probability to belong to a certain issue. While the word “Europe” is highly indicative of both “international and defense policy” and “European integration” it still yields a higher probability to belong to the latter category than to the former. Turning to the classification of the Tweets, the issue probabilities for each *document* (theta) come into play. These document probabilities are of course related to the topic probabilities of the individual words. Simply put, the more words that are specific to a certain topic appear in a Tweet, the more likely the Tweet is about that topic. Consequently, a Tweet containing the words “Covid-19”, “pandemic”, and “vaccination” will have a high probability of being about health policy. To facilitate the categorization of the Tweets, it was assumed that each Tweet is about a single main topic. Considering the short length of Tweets and the relative distinctness of the categories, this assumption should indeed apply in most cases. If now the probability, which was derived from the specific words a Tweet contained, reached over 50% for a certain issue, the respective Tweet was coded accordingly. Due to their ambiguity, Tweets for which none of the categories reached 50% were excluded from the sample. By means of this procedure, ultimately 6199 Tweets could be assigned a campaign issue.

With automated text analysis methods, it is particularly important to use *manual* validation procedures to check whether the model has produced meaningful results (Grimmer and Stewart, 2013). For that purpose, I drew a random sample of 420 Tweets stratified by campaign issue, coded the Tweets manually and compared my categorization of the sample with the one performed by the keyATM. Assuming my manual coding to be the “gold standard”, the final model displayed an overall accuracy of 91.2%, which is an astonishingly high value for an unsupervised machine learning technique. Additionally considering that in terms of accuracy there were no remarkable differences between the categories and, thus, no large-scale systematic classification error, it can be stated that the keyATM was also highly capable to distinguish the campaign issues from each other, even though some of them showed considerable semantic overlap.

Before discussing the actual model outcome, namely the campaign issues, I would like to take a step back and examine how the total number of *campaign issue Tweets* is distributed among the candidates (Figure 1a). With 1602 Tweets Mélenchon displayed by far the highest level of Twitter activity in terms of issue content. After all, he posted more than 1.5 times as many

Figure 1a – Total Number of Tweets with Issue Content by Candidate

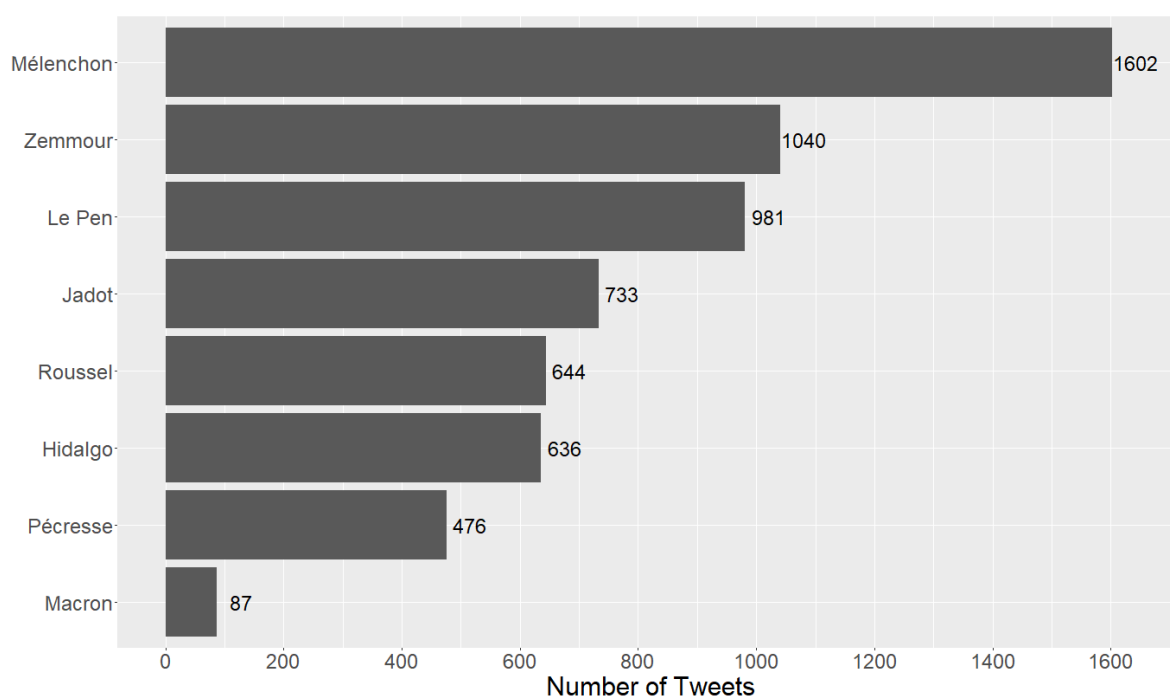
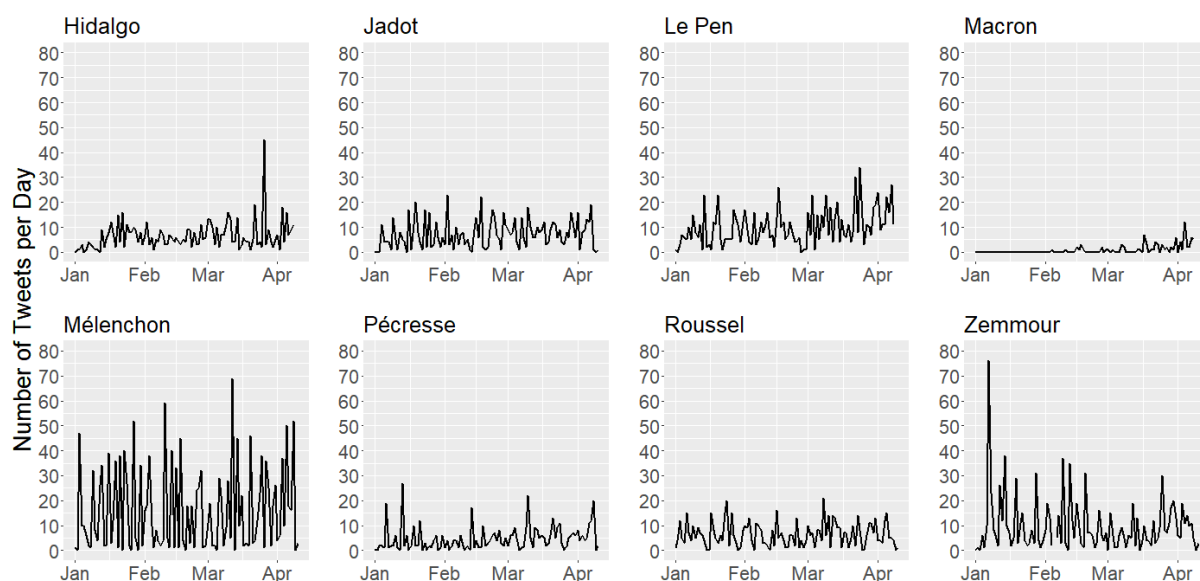


Figure 1b – Number of Tweets with Issue Content per Day by Candidate



Tweets as the two far-right candidates, Le Pen and Zemmour, and about two to three times as many as the other left-wing candidates, Jadot, Roussel and Hidalgo, as well as the center-right Pécresse. Macron, with only 87 campaign issue Tweets, was the least active candidate on Twitter. Moreover, if one trusts the algorithm, Macron's first Tweets with issue content were not published until February 4 and, thenceforth, his Twitter campaign only very gradually picked up some momentum as Election Day approached (Figure 1b). The sparse Twitter feed from Macron's campaign account is not necessarily problematic for the creation of an accurate and

representative measure of issue engagement, since, rather than indicating an arbitrary lack of affinity for Twitter, this low level of activity does accurately reflect Macron's actual campaign behavior. In fact, apart from a few public appearances, Macron ran only a minimal election campaign, making little or only indirect reference to other candidates, and mainly focused on his presidential duties. Behind this, I would argue, was a deliberate strategy. Given the polls that saw him safely in the second round, a rally-around-the-flag effect due to the Ukraine war from which he benefitted as incumbent president, and the risk of damaging his image in a confrontation with radical opponents of his policies, it seemed rational to stay largely out of the campaign fray. With the other candidates, there are no such anomalies. While for Zemmour and Mélenchon, days with many Tweets alternated with days where fewer Tweets were posted, the Twitter activity of most candidates (Hidalgo, Jadot, Le Pen, Pécresse, Roussel), with the occasional exception of individual peaks, remained very constant over the 100-day time course.

When I now speak about the distribution of the 14 campaign issues, I do so to give a general overview of the issue competition in this campaign but also to demonstrate the construct validity of my automated text classification approach. Regarding the former, since the analysis of issue engagement will significantly increase the level of abstraction, a descriptive presentation of the issue appeals should help to corroborate the fact that we are dealing with a phenomenon that is anchored in political practice and not a mere statistical artefact. In terms of construct validity, by reference to illustrative graphs it can be checked whether the distribution of the campaign issues correspond to the prior knowledge about the election campaign and to fundamental theoretical expectations. Did the Russian invasion of Ukraine bring candidates to discuss more about international and defense policy? Did far-right candidates talk more about immigration than left-wing candidates? If these plausible and highly expectable relationships are reflected in the results of the keyATM, there is additional reason to trust the data, which will later be used to measure issue engagement.

While Figure 2a shows how many Tweets were dedicated to each of the 14 campaign issues in absolute numbers, Figure 2b displays the *systemic salience* of each issue, measured as number of Tweets per day, throughout the entire election campaign. International and defense policy received the most attention by the candidates and, examining the associated time series plot, the conclusion lies near that this was due to the sudden start of the Russia-Ukraine war. Right after February 24, when the invasion began, the number of Tweets about the corresponding issue category rose substantively and remained on an exceptionally high level for about a

Figure 2a – Total Number of Tweets with Issue Content by Topic

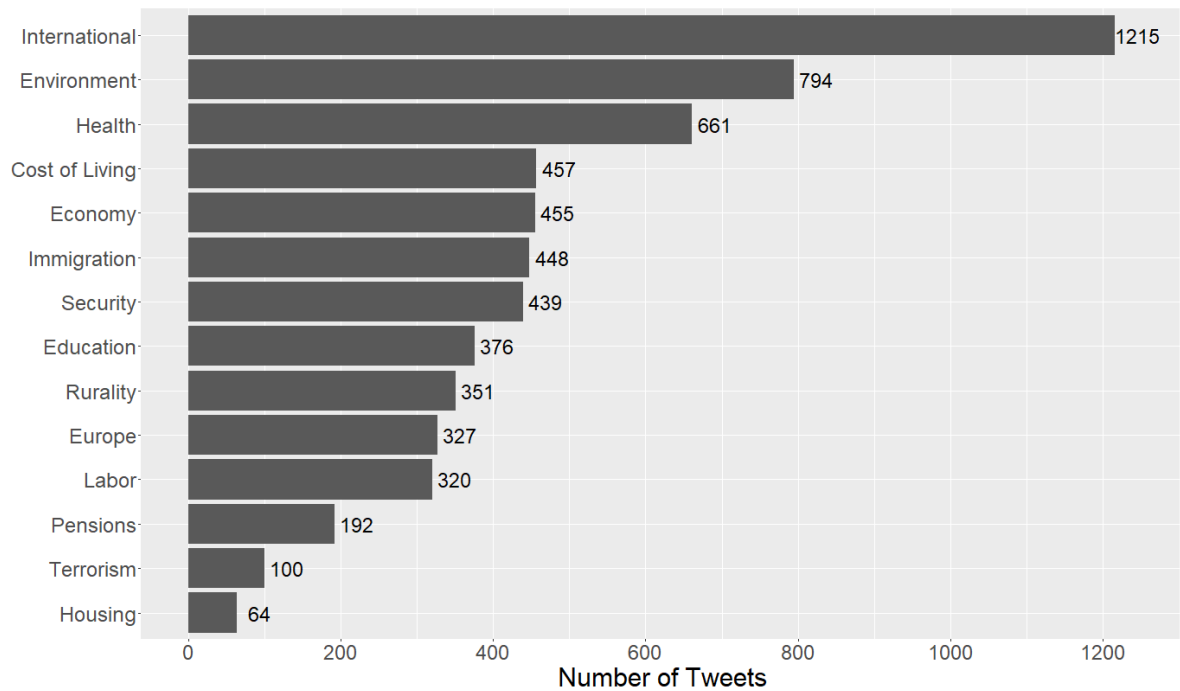
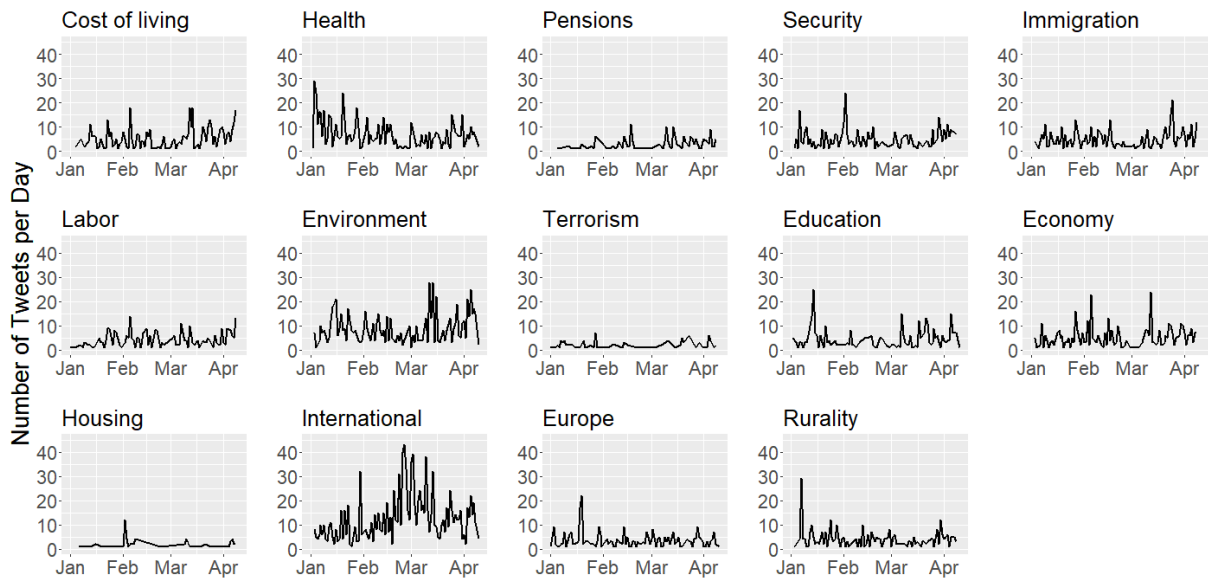


Figure 2b – Number of Tweets with Issue Content per Day by Topic



month. The fact that this issue dominated the campaign agenda during this period, is also reflected in the graphs of the other campaign issues, which show a valley throughout March. After the impact of the war on the campaign agenda had subsided, a peak in the issue of environmental protection can be observed. Considering that the dependencies on Russian gas and oil were then almost unanimously perceived as highly problematic, an ecological transition from fossil fuels to renewable forms of energy obtained a new geopolitical dimension that explains the renewed interest in the discussion of this issue. Another observation that underlines the plausibility of

Figure 3 – Relative Issue Emphases by Candidate

Cost of Living	9.9 %	9.8 %	4 %	4.1 %	6.9 %	2.5 %	11.7 %	4.6 %
Health	11.5 %	12 %	11.3 %	15.6 %	4.6 %	7.1 %	10.6 %	6.8 %
Pensions	4.3 %	4.2 %	1.2 %	4.2 %	5.7 %	1.3 %	3.8 %	1.2 %
Security	3.4 %	3.7 %	4.4 %	4.9 %	5.7 %	15.1 %	9.5 %	11.9 %
Immigration	1.9 %	5.4 %	2.5 %	3.6 %		12.8 %	11.2 %	13.2 %
Labor	8.7 %	5.6 %	2.2 %	6.8 %	9.2 %	5.9 %	2.9 %	4.9 %
Environment	17.1 %	12.7 %	26.2 %	14.9 %	17.2 %	6.7 %	8.1 %	6.4 %
Terrorism	3.6 %		2.2 %	2.2 %		1.5 %	0.9 %	2.6 %
Education	5.6 %	4.4 %	6.5 %	9 %	12.6 %	5.9 %	4.7 %	7.6 %
Economy	9.5 %	6.8 %	3 %	3.3 %	14.9 %	9.2 %	9.2 %	9.1 %
Housing		0.5 %	1.4 %	2 %	3.4 %	1.5 %		1.2 %
International	15.2 %	25 %	22.6 %	23.6 %	4.6 %	16.6 %	15.3 %	16.2 %
Europe	3.9 %	3.9 %	5.3 %	3.5 %	8 %	7.1 %	6.8 %	6.7 %
Rurality	5 %	5.2 %	7.2 %	2.4 %	6.9 %	6.7 %	5.2 %	7.5 %
	Roussel	Mélenchon	Jadot	Hidalgo	Macron	Pécresse	Le Pen	Zemmour

the model is the decreasing trend in the number of Tweets about health policy, which can be explained by a corresponding decline in the urgency of the Covid-19 pandemic. Whereas in January France was hit by a large wave of Covid-19 infections and several public health measures were in place, the infection tally went down in February and Covid-19 restrictions were gradually lifted again.

Finally, we can take a look at the relative percentage of the total number of Tweets that each candidate posted on each of the campaign issues. Figure 3 illustrates these values in form of a heat map. The more Tweets a candidate dedicated to an issue, the stronger the color. To highlight the relationship between issue emphases and ideological position, the candidates were arranged from most left wing to most right wing⁸. Albeit the precise operationalization of issue ownership will only be elaborated in the next subchapter, in line with the idea of construct validity it can be checked whether some common differences in issue emphases between the ideological camps are visible in the data. Examining the values for security and immigration, we find that indeed the three right wing candidates talked a lot about these issues whereas Macron and the left-wing candidates tended to avoid this “foreign-owned” issue. For environmental

⁸ CHES 2019 (Bakker et al. 2020).

protection, an issue increasingly associated with the ideological left, we see a similar divide between the ideological camps but now it is the left-wing candidates including Macron who put considerable emphasis on this issue, whereas the right-wing candidates addressed it less frequently. Within the ideological left, it does not come as a surprise that Jadot, candidate of the green ecologist party and, thus, clear issue owner, gave, with 26.2%, by far the most attention to this issue. Especially interesting is also the topic of “cost of living”. In essence a social issue, it tends to gravitate towards the ideological left, as represented by Roussel and Mélenchon. However, as several political commentators and journalists noticed, Marine Le Pen, candidate of the far-right *national rally*, surprisingly made “cost of living” one of the major issues of her campaign, which can also be accurately deducted from the graph. Unsurprisingly, because of the Russia-Ukraine war, international and defense policy made up a considerable proportion of *all* the candidates’ issue attention profile with the exception of Macron. Since he was directly concerned with the war and its consequences as incumbent president of France, he seemingly felt no need to additionally address this issue on his campaign account.

5.2.3 Data Structure and Operationalization

Dependent Variable

Since the issue content of the Tweets has been coded and validated, occurrences of issue engagement can now be identified. Recalling the refined definition of issue engagement, two political actors talking about the same issue *within short temporal proximity*, one can easily operationalize this concept with the coded Twitter data. Corresponding to the nature of the medium, the collected social media data is characterized by a high temporal density in terms of the sheer number but also in the variety of issue appeals, which allows us to measure issue engagement within single *days*. Given the possibilities of Twitter as a campaign medium, this unit of analysis seems reasonable: If a candidate wants to address an issue immediately or react to an appeal made by his/her competitors, unlike with traditional media, there are no external constraints that would prevent him/her from posting a respective Tweet the very same day. Thus, I am seizing a particularity of social media to arrive at a highly dynamic measure for issue engagement. As I have explained, using such short time intervals, does indeed strengthen, to a small but crucial extent, the formulated interactive and deliberative demand to issue engagement.

Accordingly, issue engagement is measured for each *candidate pair* (dyad) and each *issue* on each *day*. This implies a *dyadic* dataset structure where each observation describes an “opportunity” for issue engagement. Theoretically, issue engagement could have occurred within each of the 28 possible candidate dyads for each of the 14 topics on each of the 100 days of the

Table 2 – Dataset Structure

Dyad (non-directed)	Issue	Date	Issue Engagement (DV)
Hidalgo x Le Pen	Health policy	01/03/2022	1
...	...	...	...
Hidalgo x Le Pen	Health policy	23/02/2022	0
...	...	...	...
Jadot x Mélenchon	Cost of living	20/03/2022	1
Jadot x Mélenchon	Health policy	20/03/2022	0
...	...	...	...
Macron x Pécresse	Immigration	20/03/2022	0

This table illustrates the dyadic structure of the dataset by the means of 5 selected observations.

sampling period, which leaves us with $28 \times 14 \times 100 = 39200$ data points. Whenever two presidential candidates posted at least one Tweet about the same issue *on the same day*, this was counted as an occurrence of issue engagement. In these cases, the variable for issue engagement for this specific observation, which considers the two respective candidates, the concerned issue and the precise date, takes the value 1. In all other cases, i.e. when neither or only one of the candidates addressed that issue on this day, it takes the value 0. This means that we are dealing with a binary dependent variable that varies across dyad, issue and date. Table 2 shows five selected observations from the dataset to illustrate its dyadic structure. In total, 3548 instances of issue engagement were recorded or, put differently, in 9% of all possible instances issue engagement actually took place.

Predictor Variables

The grouping of the predictor variables, established in the theory section, will be resumed here. Depending on the dimension in which they are situated, we can, in a first step, distinguish between issue-level and actor-level factors. With regards to operationalization, this distinction is highly useful because it underlines the fact that both types of predictors are treated independently from one another. Predictors on the issue level exclusively concern the characteristics of an issue and are measured independently from the candidate dyad who potentially discusses this issue. Conversely, predictors on the actor level exclusively concern the dyadic relation between candidate-specific characteristics and are measured independently from the issue in question. Apart from the candidate and issue-level factors, there is also a time factor, which, itself unconditioned, affects certain but not all candidate- and issue-level factors that vary over short periods of time. Thus, in a second step, we can distinguish between *static* and *dynamic* factors.

While the former, such as ownership status or ideological proximity, remain or are at least assumed to remain constant, the latter, such as salience or competitiveness, can display considerable changes in their values throughout the election campaign.

Ownership status

The independent variable that is needed to test Hypotheses A1, D1 and D2 is the ownership status of an issue. Here, it is assumed that there are only two options: Either an issue is owned (1) or it is unowned (0). There is a debate about how stable issue ownership is over longer periods of time and whether it can be completely separated from related but rather short-term phenomena like issue performance (Green and Jennings, 2017). Still, there is no reason to believe that the ownership status of an issue changes during a single election campaign, which is why this predictor variable is of static nature. Mostly, issue ownership is measured by means of a survey where a representative sample of the voting population, several weeks before the election, are asked to select which of the parties/candidates they deem competent on a particular policy issue. Unfortunately, due to the relative recentness of the election, no such data is currently available. However, since the task only consists in determining whether an issue is owned or not, detailed information on which candidate owns which issue to what degree is not required to arrive at an operationalization suitable to test the respective hypothesis.

As I have explained, because in multiparty systems, contrary to two-party systems, there are several parties within a single ideological camp, I assume that there is also a form of issue ownership that is more closely linked to the *general ideological alignment of a party* rather than to the party itself. Consequently, if an issue can be clearly assigned to a side of the ideological spectrum the issue is coded as owned. If the issue has no clear affinity for either side of the ideological spectrum, the issue is considered unowned. In this “weak” understanding of issue ownership, I follow Seeberg (2017) who examined issue ownership in 17 Western liberal democracies from 1990-2014 by the means of national election surveys. He finds that certain issues are consistently associated with the ideological left while others are associated with the ideological right. Looking at the data for France, for the ideological right immigration, security, terrorism (= “law and order”) can clearly be identified as owned issues as well as environmental protection and housing, understood as a social security issue, for the ideological left. Albeit being not explicitly asked for in the French national election survey, health policy was also found to be a specimen of left issue ownership (Seeberg, 2017) and in our case most probably owned by Mélenchon and Hidalgo. Moreover, due to his consistent issue emphasis on this issue since his first presidential candidacy, I would further lay the uncontroversial claim that the issue

of European integration is owned by Macron. The last issue I decided to code as owned, was the issue of labor. Even though Macron attempted to occupy this issue by referring to the low employment rate achieved under his presidency, the issue was dominated by ideologically left-wing frames and was primarily concerned with higher salaries, minimum wages and employee interests in general.

All issues I have not named so far were given the value 0 for unowned. In the case of pensions and education, I again follow Seeberg (2017) who reports no clear ideological alignment for both these issues. Moreover, on theoretical grounds, economic and international policy were also considered unowned issues. Following Petrocik's (1996) original issue ownership theory, these are precisely the two issues for which the *short-term performance* of the incumbent is central and, thus, no party can have a *long-term issue ownership reputation*. Because *cost of living* as a multidimensional campaign issue comprehending several policy areas is rather an ad-hoc problem to be resolved than the object of a long-term issue reputation, I likewise consider it a performance issue (= unowned). Finally, the issue of rurality was coded unowned because the alleged issue owner Jean Lassalle, as a mainly regionally anchored presidential candidate with weak electoral prospects, could not occupy the issue on its own and did probably not prevent anyone from addressing “his” issue. Apart from Lasalle, there is neither a candidate nor an ideological camp that can be said to own the issue. While right wing candidates affirm the traditional way of life on the countryside, left wing candidates might stress the ecological compatibility of a rural lifestyle. Moreover, the populist candidates from both sides of the ideological spectrum also made use of issue appeals on rurality to praise the rural economy as “bastion against globalization”.

Public salience

To measure the public salience of an issue, I resort to data published by the French polling firm “OpinionWay”⁹. During the period of investigation, a representative sample of the French electoral population was regularly asked the following question: “Which of the following issues will matter most to you when voting in the first round of the presidential election?”¹⁰ The participants could then select multiple issues which they deemed particularly important. The percentage of participants who ticked the respective issue is then used as a continuous measure for public salience. Since the issue priorities were asked for on a weekly basis, the salience values

⁹ <https://www.opinion-way.com/fr/barometre-opinionway-kea-partners-election-presidentielle-2022> [Accessed: 15/08/2022]

¹⁰ In the original: “Parmi les enjeux suivants, lesquels compteront le plus pour vous au moment de voter au premier tour de l’élection présidentielle?”

for the issues display a timely variation over the course of the election campaign. All campaign issues resulting from the KeyATM, except international policy and rurality, could be directly matched with the data. Even though there is a distinct category for international and defense policy, from March 9 onwards OpinionWay decided to introduce a separate item for the war in Ukraine. In my sample, Tweets related to the war made up almost the totality of Tweets classified as being about international and defense policy. This is why I decided, from March 9 onwards, to use the OpinionWay's newly integrated "war in Ukraine" response option to measure public salience of my international and defense policy issue category. For rurality, there was indeed no distinct item but only a somewhat related category, namely globalization. As I have mentioned in the last paragraph, the posts about the rural lifestyle and economy were often linked to globalization. Especially, the populist candidates Le Pen and Mélenchon engaged in a protectionist discourse and emphasized the detrimental effects of a globalized competition for farmers and the domestic manufacturing industry. Thus, I use the percentage of survey respondents who indicated globalization to be an important issue for their electoral choice as a proxy for rurality, as it captures the content of a substantial part of these issue appeals.

Valence

The question what constitutes a valence issue and what constitutes a positional issue (=non-valence issue) is a complex one. Theoretically, the crucial criterion for an issue to qualify as a valence issue is whether or not the public evaluates an issue in terms of which party is the most competent and trustworthy to achieve a generally desired outcome associated with it (Stokes, 1963, p.373). An obvious example is the issue of security. Here the question voters ask themselves is not about whether security or insecurity is preferred but instead which candidate is best in providing security. Of course, candidates might still differ substantially in their means to achieve these widely shared goals. Occasionally, the means to achieve a common goal are so strongly associated with an ideology that even though both parties can agree on the same end one might still argue that the issue in question is a positional issue (Green and Jennings, 2017, p.9). This can be illustrated by reference to economic policy. Parties and voters alike might share the common goal of an economy that ensures prosperity for the greatest possible number of people. However, regarding the choice of means to achieve this goal, the ideological divide between a socialist and market-liberal conservative is so fundamental that it hardly makes sense to consider the economy a valence issue. Additionally thinking about other issues (education, health policy etc.), it can be noted that issues often comprehend a positional and a valence aspect. In these cases, the question of which aspect dominates and, thus, makes an issue fall into one category or the other can only be settled empirically.

In the end, I decided to code 6 of the 14 campaign issues as valence issues (1): Cost of living, security, environmental protection, terrorism, housing and rurality. The criteria underlying this choice reflect the explanations of the last paragraph and can be summed up in three questions: 1) Does the issue theoretically allow for several positions? 2) Did substantive ideological or positional conflict take place on this issue during the election campaign? 3) If the issue comprehends both valence and positional aspects, which aspect was predominant in the election campaign? While the presented classification largely corresponds to common intuition (e.g. no candidate is against fighting terrorism or affordable housing etc.), I would like to comment in more detail on the classification of two specific issues, namely rurality and international policy. Rurality was coded as a valence issue due to the absence of ideological or positional conflict. All the candidates declared their willingness to increase public investment in rural areas and generally affirmed the rural way of living. Second, one might argue that the war in Ukraine rendered foreign and defense policy a valence issue, since all the candidates unequivocally condemned the Russian invasion. Still, before the war began, there were substantial differences concerning the role and alignment of France in the world that persisted in spite of the unifying effect of this exogenous shock. Originally, major candidates opted for a more Russia friendly policy. To give two examples: Still in January 2022, Zemmour demanded the lifting of the EU sanctions on Russia while Mélenchon publicly stated his intentions to leave NATO and would end the anti-Russia policy if he gets elected president.¹¹

Ideological proximity

Data on the ideological position of the candidates, except for Zemmour, is taken from the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al., 2020). Strictly speaking, the CHES 2019 assigned values from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right) to political *parties*. Still, since all presidential candidates were either the party leaders or major figures of their party already in 2019, it should be an unproblematic practice to use the CHES 2019 to approximate the ideological position of the respective parties' presidential candidates in 2022. Because he has not officially entered politics until he declared his candidacy in November 2021 and founded a new far right party under the name *Reconquête!*, this approach could not be used to assess the ideological position of the far-right ex-journalist Éric Zemmour. However, considering the fact that Zemmour was unanimously perceived to be even more right wing than Marine Le Pen, who, according to the CHES 2019, already has an ideological position of 9.75, I simply assigned Zemmour a value of 10. Having quantified the ideological stance of all the presidential candidates, we can determine

¹¹ See for example: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/archives/article/2022/03/28/electoral-collateral-damages-of-war-in-ukraine_5979187_113.html [Accessed: 15/08/2022].

the ideological *proximity* of each party dyad by first calculating the absolute ideological difference between them (ideological distance) and then subtracting all values from the maximum value.

Competitiveness

To arrive at a measure that corresponds to my established concept of competitiveness, two pieces of information are needed: (1) the candidates' standings in the polls and (2) the share of votes needed to qualify for the second round of the presidential election, i.e. the poll numbers of the candidate currently ranked 2nd place. Of course, it is assumed that all candidates want to win the election and, thus, want to remain in the race for the presidency. Consequently, for the first round of the French presidential election, electoral success or "winning" the election can be equated with becoming at least second place in the first round to subsequently qualify for the second round of the presidential election. During the observed 100 days of the election campaign, representative polls asking respondents about their current voting intention were conducted several times a week by different polling firms. The data was accessed and scraped via the *Politico* website.¹² Due to the high frequency with which the polls were conducted, considerable over time variance of the candidates' standings in the electoral race can be observed. The same is true for the threshold needed to qualify for the second round, which depends how high the poll numbers of the second place actually are. At some point in time the "ticket" for the second round was with 14% comparatively "cheap" implying that the field of candidates was still close together. As Le Pen eventually became second with 23.15% of the votes, it turned out to be more "expensive".

Having information about the candidates' poll standings and the respective necessary threshold to qualify for the second round, how can the degree of competitiveness between two candidates now be assessed? In accordance with my concept, a situation is considered competitive when an electoral race between two candidates is tight *and* its outcome decides over victory and defeat. Adapted to our case, a situation is all the more competitive (1) the closer both candidates are to the threshold needed for the second round, i.e. the poll numbers of the current second place, *and* (2) the smaller the margins between the two candidates are. This implies that the degree of competitiveness for a dyad consisting of two candidates with equally bad electoral prospects should be as low as for a dyad consisting of a candidate with low chances of winning and a candidate with high chances of winning. In the former case, the margin between the two candidates might be small but they are both far away from the numbers needed to qualify for

¹² <https://www.politico.eu/wp-json/politico/v1/poll-of-polls/FR-2022-presidential-1> [Accessed: 15/08/2022].

the second round. In the latter, the distance between the two candidates is large and only one of them is close (whether exactly on it, below or above) to the required threshold. This notion can be mathematically formalized to arrive at a continuous measure for competitiveness:

$$\text{Max}(|x_t - p_{c1t}|, |x_t - p_{c2t}|)$$

If we take the maximum value from a vector containing both, the absolute difference of the currently necessary threshold x and the poll numbers p of candidate $c1$ and the absolute difference of x and p of candidate $c2$ at time t , we systematically obtain lower values for more competitive situations and higher values for less competitive ones. Let us exemplify the functioning of this formula by calculating the degree of competitiveness for three types of situations: (In all cases a 20% threshold to qualify for the second round is presumed.) 1) An uncompetitive situation where both candidates stand at 5%: $\text{Max}(|20-5|, |20-5|) = 15$. 2) An uncompetitive situation where one candidate stands at 5% and the other at 17%: $\text{Max}(|20-5|, |20-17|) = 15$. 3) A truly competitive situation where one candidate stands at 19% and the other at 24%: $\text{Max}(|20-19|, |20-24|) = 4$. As one can see the value is only low for cases where both criteria for competitiveness apply. Finally, so that higher values indicate a higher degree of competitiveness, the competitiveness values for each observation were subtracted from the overall maximum value.

Incumbent

For every observation of a dyad featuring the incumbent president Macron the independent variable incumbency takes the values 1, and 0 otherwise.

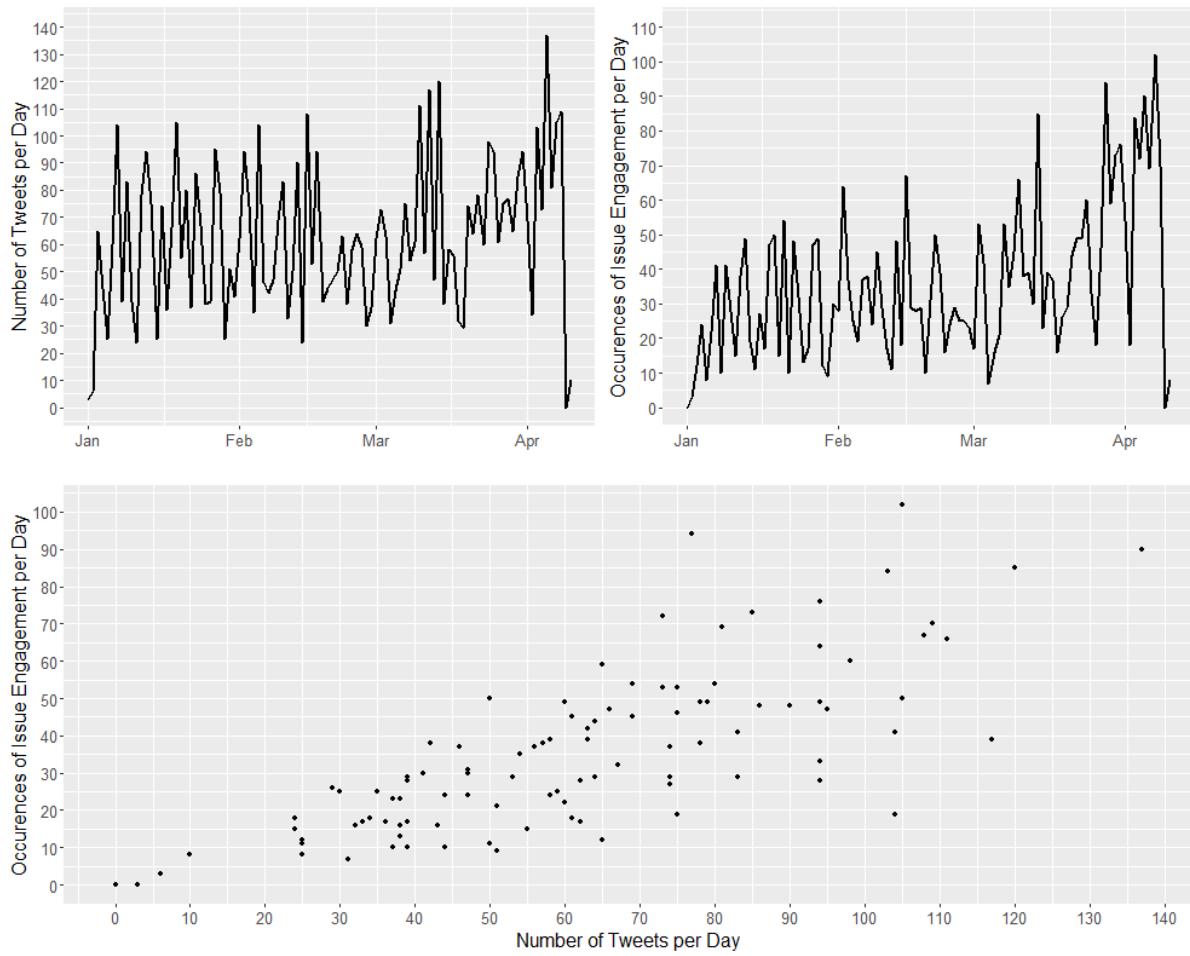
Temporal proximity to the election

Temporal proximity to the election is measured by the means of a simple count variable starting with January 1 (1) and ending with April 10 (100).

Controlling for the number of Tweets per day for each dyad

Plotting the number of Tweets per day against the occurrences of issue engagement per day (Figure 4: bottom), we find a strong heteroscedastic correlation between both variables ($r = 0.765$). This kind of correlation could be expected since days where very few Tweets are issued automatically imply few occurrences of issue engagement while a higher number of Tweets does not to the same extent guarantee high levels of issue engagement. This is also evident if one compares the number of Tweets by day with the occurrences of issue engagement by day over time (Figure 4: top). Was the number of Tweets by day roughly as high at the beginning of the election campaign as it was at the end, there is a noticeable increase in the occurrences of issue engagement, which the sheer number of Tweets cannot explain. Still, not controlling

Figure 4 – Number of Tweets vs. Occurrences of Issue Engagement



Top left: Number of Tweets by day throughout the election campaign. Top right: Occurrences of issue engagement by day throughout the election campaign. Bottom: Number of Tweets per day plotted against occurrences of issue engagement per day ($r = 0.765$).

for the number of Tweets might lead to a systematic bias since there is a difference in the informative value of an occurrence (or non-occurrence) of issue engagement that considerably depends on this factor. If issue engagement within a dyad for a specific issue did not occur because neither of the candidates posted a Tweet that day, it would be misleading to explain this observation exclusively by issue or actor level factors. The same would be true for an occurrence of issue engagement on a day where both candidates posted 30 Tweets since this increases the probability for issue engagement *per se*. To make sure that an increase in the level of issue engagement (issue avoidance) resulting from a mere rise (decline) in the number of Tweets is not falsely attributed to the effect of a predictor variable, a control variable indicating the sum of Tweets issued by both candidates of a certain dyad on the specific day will be included in the statistical models.

5.3 Estimation Strategy

Since we are dealing with a binary dependent variable, indicating whether within a candidate dyad issue engagement for a specific issue on a specific day could be observed (1) or not (0), I employ multivariate logistic regression models to test the hypotheses. Considering that issue engagement with 3540 occurrences in a dataset of 32900 observations did not turn out to be a particularly “rare event” and all of the observations, i.e. opportunities for issue engagement, definitely had a realistic (“non-zero”) chance of occurring (King and Zeng, 2001), running more sophisticated models is not necessary in this case.

However, the dyadic structure of the data does definitely violate the assumption of independence of observations crucial for the validity of generalized linear models. The problem here is the structural transitivity inherent in any dyadic dataset: If candidates A and B Tweet about health policy and candidate C reacts to candidate B by also addressing health policy, issue engagement also occurs between candidates A and C. Ignoring this dependency structure might lead to standard errors and confidence intervals that are too small with regards to the actual information provided in the data. To account for these interdependencies two means come to mind: *dyad fixed effects* and the *clustering of standard errors*. As it controls for all unobserved characteristics of a dyad, the former is a simple but effective way to reduce the impact of occurrences of issue engagement that result from the dyadic structure but are not related to the predictor variables. The latter is a direct a way to reduce overconfidence in statistical inferences by clustering the standard errors of interdependent observations. Here, I apply a *non-parametric, sandwich-type robust variance estimator for dyadic clustering*, as proposed by Aronow et al. (2015), which can be neatly implemented in generalized linear models. Unfortunately, with the employment of these methods, multicollinearity problems arise for certain combinations of independent variables. Therefore, I need to use different model specifications to test different sets of hypotheses for which I cannot always apply clustered standard errors and/or dyad fixed effects. Nevertheless, overall solid results should be obtained, which will allow us to reject or (preliminary) accept the hypotheses.

Before presenting the different model specifications, it has to be noted that the independence assumption is also violated in a second regard, as the data I use is *time series data*, i.e. repeated observations of the same dyads and issues. Again, this dependency is controlled for by two means. First, coming in handy that time is also one of our predictor variables, a time fixed effect is included in every model where this was possible. Second, a lagged version of the dependent variable is included in the model as a control variable. The idea is that whether or not issue

engagement occurs on one day has an influence on the probability of its occurrence the next day. By that, it is possible to control for temporarily limited discussions focused on a certain campaign caused by exogenous events or by two candidates getting involved in an intensive ideological argument. In addition to the dyad-fixed effects, time-fixed effects and the lagged dependent variable, there is also the possibility to include *issue-fixed* effects in the models to control for time-invariant and unobserved characteristics of each *issue*. Similar to the dyad fixed effects, these may also lead to multicollinearity, which is why issue-fixed effects are likewise only applied if the model specifications allow it.

In total, six logistic regression models are performed to test the ten hypotheses. The first model preliminary assesses Hypotheses A1 – A3, which are about the issue level factors. Once put formally: Issue engagement within dyad *d* on issue *i* at time *t* is explained by ownership status of issue *i*, salience of issue *i* at time *t*, valence status of issue *i*, and the temporal proximity to the election. Issue fixed effects cannot be included in this model, since in combination with the static variables for ownership and valence status they would cause multicollinearity problems,

$$\begin{aligned} \text{issue engagement}(d, i, t) = & \alpha + \beta_1[\text{owned}] + \beta_2[\text{salience}(i, t)] + \beta_3[\text{valence}] \\ & + \beta_7[\text{time}] \\ & + \text{control variables} \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

Dyad Robust SE: Yes
Dyad Fixed Effects: Yes
Issue Fixed Effects: No

Model 2 examines the effects of the actor level predictors. Because the variables for incumbency, which marks all dyads featuring Macron, and ideological proximity, which uniquely identifies each dyad by a value, lead to a high collinearity, neither dyad fixed effects nor dyad robust standard errors can be applied in this case. Instead, only issue fixed effects can be implemented.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{issue engagement}(d, i, t) = & \alpha + \beta_4[\text{ideol. prox.}] + \beta_5[\text{competitiveness}(i, t)] + \beta_6[\text{incumbency}] \\ & + \beta_7[\text{time}] \\ & + \text{control variables} \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

Dyad Robust SE: No
Dyad Fixed Effects: No
Issue Fixed Effects: Yes

The next model specification does take all predictor models into account can, however, not account for systematic dependencies in any way. Still, even though its results should be treated

with caution, we can obtain important insights about the interplay between actor and issue level factors as well as about the alleged interaction effects.

$$\begin{aligned}
\text{issue engagement}(d, i, t) = & \alpha + \beta_1[\text{owned}] + \beta_2[\text{salience}(i, t)] + \beta_3[\text{valence}] \\
& + \beta_4[\text{ideol. prox.}] + \beta_5[\text{competitiveness}(i, t)] + \beta_6[\text{incumbency}] \\
& + \beta_7[\text{time}] \\
& + \beta_8[\text{owned} \times \text{salience}(i, t)] \\
& + \beta_9[\text{owned} \times \text{ideol. prox.}] \\
& + \beta_{10}[\text{ideol. prox.} \times \text{competitiveness}(i, t)] \\
& + \text{control variables}
\end{aligned} \tag{3}$$

Dyad Robust SE: No

Dyad Fixed Effects: No

Issue Fixed Effects: No

To enable the calculation of dyad robust standard errors and the inclusion of fixed effects, Models 4 to 6 test each of the three interaction hypotheses separately. This is done to compensate for the lack of dependency correction in the two previous model specifications.

$$\begin{aligned}
\text{issue engagement}(d, i, t) = & \alpha + \beta_1[\text{owned}] + \beta_2[\text{salience}(i, t)] \\
& + \beta_7[\text{time}] \\
& + \beta_8[\text{owned} \times \text{salience}(i, t)] \\
& + \text{control variables}
\end{aligned} \tag{4}$$

Dyad Robust SE: Yes

Dyad Fixed Effects: Yes

Issue Fixed Effects: No

$$\begin{aligned}
\text{issue engagement}(d, i, t) = & \alpha + \beta_1[\text{owned}] + \beta_2[\text{salience}(i, t)] \\
& + \beta_4[\text{ideol. prox.}] \\
& + \beta_7[\text{time}] \\
& + \beta_9[\text{owned} \times \text{ideol. prox.}] \\
& + \text{control variables}
\end{aligned} \tag{5}$$

Dyad Robust SE: Yes

Dyad Fixed Effects: No

Issue Fixed Effects: No

Table 3 – Overview of Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Content	Coefficient
H. A1	IE less likely for owned than for unowned issues.	$\beta_1 < 0$
H. A2	IE more likely the more salient the issue.	$\beta_2 > 0$
H. A3	IE more likely for valence than for positional issues.	$\beta_3 < 0$
H. B1	IE more likely the more ideologically proximate political actors.	$\beta_4 > 0$
H. B2	IE more likely the more competitive a situation.	$\beta_5 > 0$
H. B3	IE less likely with incumbent.	$\beta_6 < 0$
H. C	The more temporally proximate the election the more issue engagement.	$\beta_7 > 0$
H. D1	Effect for salience is weaker for owned than for unowned issues.	$\beta_8 < 0$
H. D2	Effect for ideol. prox. is stronger for owned than for unowned issues.	$\beta_9 > 0$
H. D3	Effect for competitiveness on IE increases with high ideol. prox.	$\beta_{10} > 0$

$$\begin{aligned}
\text{issue engagement}(d, i, t) = & \alpha + \beta_2[\text{salience}(i, t)] \\
& + \beta_4[\text{ideol. prox.}] + \beta_5[\text{competitiveness}] \\
& + \beta_7[\text{time}] \\
& + \beta_9[\text{ideol. prox.} \times \text{competitiveness}] \\
& + \text{control variables}
\end{aligned} \tag{6}$$

Dyad Robust SE: Yes

Dyad Fixed Effects: No

Issue Fixed Effects: Yes

Comparing the results of all the models should provide us with a solid base to determine the significance of the effects. Stating each hypothesis in abbreviated form and displaying what sign the corresponding coefficient is expected to have, Table 3 provides an overview of all the hypotheses to be tested.

Besides statistical significance, it is crucial to also examine whether or not an effect is also substantive. Particularly when dealing with large datasets, one is likely to find significant effects resulting from a slight tendency in the data that might, in fact, turn out to be meaningless if the actual effect size is minuscule. Since it is difficult to interpret the coefficients (=log odds ratios) of a logistic regression model, the predictive margins at means are calculated and visualized by graphs for all relevant predictor variables. Thereby, we can see how changes in a variable affect the predicted probability for an occurrence of issue engagement, which allows us to also assess the substantiality of an effect. Likewise, the interactions can be plotted to more intuitively understand how and to what degree the effects of certain variables depend on each other.

6. RESULTS

Due to the informational density of the models and the many different aspects that have to be taken into account to accurately interpret the results, I suggest a four-step approach. First, based on the direction and significance of the coefficients in the regression table I will check which hypotheses can receive initial support, which are insignificant and which run counter to the theoretical expectations. Here, where convenient, I will work with odds ratios to get a preliminary assessment of the effect sizes. Second, I will examine the effects in more detail by the means of predicted probability plots. Especially, in order to adequately assess the substantiality of an effect and to understand the interaction terms in relation to their main effects these graphs have proven to be very helpful. Third, since the findings of this study are based on a single election campaign, which might render it sensitive to non-generalizable empirical particularities or individual operationalization decisions, additional robustness checks are performed. Finally, a short summary of the results concludes the chapter.

6.1 Multivariate Analysis

Table 4 presents the coefficients of the six logistic regression models. I begin with examining Model 1, which, apart from the control variables and dyad fixed effects, only included the three issue level factors. Lending preliminary support to Hypotheses A1-A3, the coefficients for ownership status, salience and valence status point in the expected direction and display a statistical significance of at least $p < 0.1$. Since the regression table reports log odds ratios, we can get a first idea about the effect size by simply exponentiating the coefficients for the predictor variables. Here, we find that the likelihood for issue engagement decreases by 11.4% if the issue in question is owned. Interestingly, the effect for valence issues is more than *twice* as strong: *Ceteris paribus*, the likelihood that issue engagement occurs on a valence issue is 25.6% lower than the one for a positional issue. As for assessing the effect size of salience, we have to consider that, contrary to the two binary issue level predictors, salience is a continuous variable reaching from a minimum value of 5 to a maximum value of 66. Still, even when going from the minimum to the maximum value, with an increase in likelihood by 28.2%, the effect size, in absolute terms, exceeds the one for valence only by a slight margin.

Focusing on the main effects for the candidate level predictors as displayed by Model 2, we only find evidence for Hypothesis B3. Indeed, the coefficient indicating how the likelihood changes for dyads featuring the incumbent clearly points in the expected negative direction and is statistically significant. Despite being positive as predicted, the coefficient for ideological

Table 4 – Explaining Issue Engagement in Election Campaigns (Logistic Regression)

	DV: Issue Engagement (1 = yes)					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Owned Issue	-0.121** (0.060)	-	-1.905*** (0.113)	-1.896*** (0.030)	-0.269*** (0.034)	-
Salience	0.004* (0.002)	-	-0.014*** (0.002)	-0.014*** (0.003)	0.004* (0.002)	0.025** (0.008)
Valence Issue	-0.296*** (0.059)	-	-0.196*** (0.040)	-	-	-
Ideological Proximity	-	0.007 (0.006)	-0.044*** (0.015)	-	-0.037*** (0.013)	0.021 (0.074)
Competitiveness	-	-0.015*** (0.004)	-0.033*** (0.007)	-0.029** (0.013)	-	-0.005 (0.017)
Incumbent	-	-1.504*** (0.078)	-1.405*** (0.077)	-	-	-
Temporal Prox. to Election	0.008*** (0.003)	0.009*** (0.001)	0.009*** (0.001)	0.008*** (0.003)	0.009*** (0.002)	-
Owned Issue × Salience	-	-	0.052*** (0.003)	0.054*** (0.003)	-	-
Owned Issue × Ideol. Prox.	-	-	0.026** (0.012)	-	0.027*** (0.003)	-
Ideol. Prox. × Competitiveness	-	-	0.004*** (0.001)	-	-	-0.005 (0.007)
Issue Engagement _{t-1}	1.092*** (0.104)	0.548*** (0.051)	0.990*** (0.048)	0.986*** (0.103)	1.226*** (0.176)	0.813*** (0.225)
Number of Tweets	0.045*** (0.004)	0.046*** (0.001)	0.044*** (0.001)	0.046*** (0.005)	-	-
Constant	-3.353*** (0.145)	-3.714*** (0.109)	-2.727*** (0.108)	-2.725*** (0.279)	-2.854*** (0.208)	-3.177*** (0.328)
Dyad Robust SE	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES
Dyad Fixed Effects	YES	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO
Issue Fixed Effects	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	YES
Observations	39,200	39,200	39,200	39,200	39,200	39,200
Log Likelihood	-10,186.480	-9,368.032	-10,040.600	-10,014.670	-11,398.330	-10,708.970
AIC	20,440.960	18,776.060	20,107.200	20,099.340	22,810.670	21,455.950

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01; Reported are the coefficients for six logistic regression models.

proximity fails to reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Thus, issue engagement is not *per se* more likely between ideologically proximate competitors (H. B1).

Completely contradicting the theoretical prediction, the likelihood for issue engagement decreases the more competitive the situation between two candidates becomes (H. B2). This might be a sign that a *different* strategic logic prevailed in the election campaign. Considering that a two round system fosters strategic voting, original supporters of weaker candidates might eventually vote for the ideologically proximate candidate who actually stands a chance to make it into the second round in order to prevent their vote from being wasted. This being said, instead of challenging the equally strong *main competitor* by pursuing issue engagement with him/her, candidates with good electoral prospects might strategically take on issues by weaker candidates to obtain the decisive additional votes.

Across all models including a variable for temporal proximity (Model 1-5), we find clear evidence that issue engagement becomes more likely the closer the election comes. 20 days before the election, issue engagement is more than twice as likely as 100 days before the election (H. C). Since the number of Tweets per dyad and day is controlled for, this effect appears *independently* of a mere rise in the total number of Tweets towards the end of the election. Thus, there seems to be a general transition from an issue *avoidance* to an issue *engagement* strategy. Leading to little issue engagement, the initial phase of a candidate's campaign is usually about developing and communicating a distinct issue agenda with the aim to present the candidate, to set up the agenda in an advantageous way and mobilize the candidate's core constituency. As the candidates' issue emphases becomes clearer and clearer and the overall issue agenda less and less malleable, each actor will gradually focus more on the opponents' campaign behavior and on the *systemic salience* of certain issues. Moreover, the closer the election comes the more important it is to position oneself *in relation to* the other candidates on certain issues in order to appeal to the undecided or strategic voters that are not part of the core constituency but might eventually decide the election. Both these aspects might explain why issue engagement has consistently increased over this 100-day period of observation preceding the election.

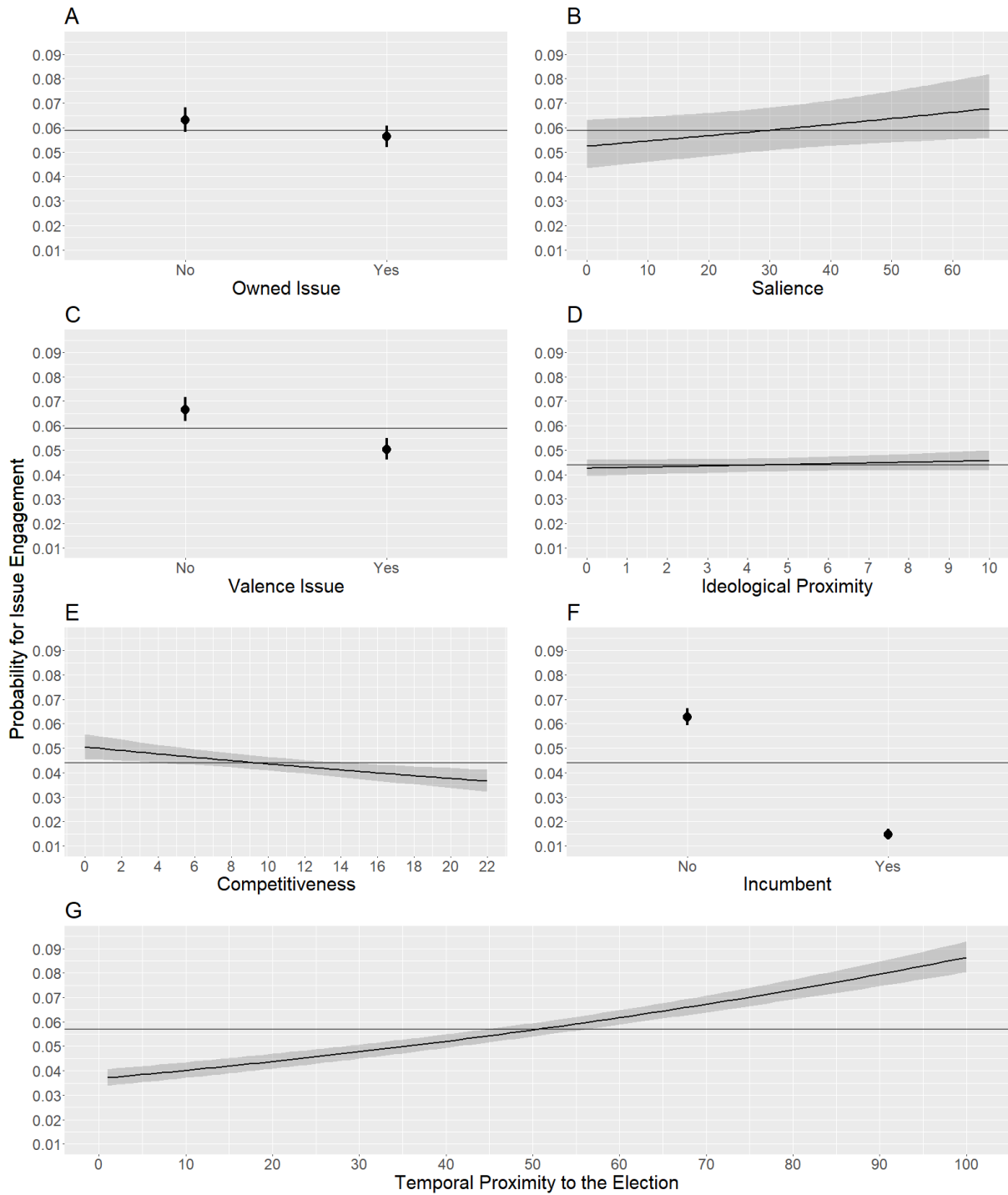
The results concerning the interaction effects again only partially correspond to the formulated expectations (H. D1-D3). Because in the full model with all variables (Model 3) it was not possible to control for the interdependencies of the dyadic data structure, a separate reduced model with dyadic clustered standard errors was computed for each interaction hypothesis separately to make sure that their evaluation is robust. Adding interaction terms to a statistical model does often lead to alterations in the coefficients of the concerned independent variables. Therefore, to arrive at an overall accurate interpretation of the interaction effects it is crucial to interpret them *in combination* with their main effects.

Contrary to what has been predicted by Hypothesis D1, the coefficient for the interaction effect between ownership status and salience is significantly positive. Even more astonishingly, the coefficient for salience, now indicating how salience affects issue engagement on unowned issues, reveals a negative association with issue engagement for both models including the respective interaction term (Model 3 & 4). This means whether salience increases or decreases the likelihood for issue engagement depends on whether the issue in question is owned or unowned. In the latter case, issue engagement becomes more likely with higher levels of salience, whereas in the former it becomes less likely. Nevertheless, the coefficient for ownership status has become considerably larger implying that for low levels of salience unowned issues are still more likely to feature issue engagement than owned issues.

In line with our expectations, the interaction term between ownership status and ideological proximity is positive and statistically significant. Considering that ideological proximity appears to have a negative effect in the case of unowned issues, the original formulation of the hypothesis cannot be maintained. Instead, it appears that the negative effect of issue ownership is attenuated by ideological proximity. Since issue ownership has been conceptualized as a characteristic that is more closely associated with ideological camps than individual parties/candidates, this finding is highly plausible.

Similar applies to Hypothesis D3, where the coefficient modelling the interaction between ideological proximity and competitiveness is positive as predicted (Table 3) but, as I have already mentioned, the main effect for competitiveness contradicts the theoretical account. While the effect for competitiveness is strongly negative for ideologically distant candidates, the effect gets weaker and weaker the more ideologically proximate the candidates are. Extending the thought from before, a possible explanation for this finding might be that ideologically distant candidates who find themselves in a tight race for a ticket to the second round know that they will not convince supporters of his/her main competitor by pursuing issue engagement. Instead both candidates will try to win over strategic voters from weaker but ideologically more proximate candidates. If the two candidates that find themselves in a highly competitive situation are, on the other hand, ideologically proximate than they compete over the same voter groups leading to higher levels of issue engagement. Looking at Model 6, it has to be noted that, in a reduced model with dyadic clustered standard errors, the respective interaction term is no longer significant. However, rather than a sign of its non-robustness, this might simply indicate that the effect only becomes visible when all other factors as well as interaction terms are included in the model. Still, this finding should be treated with caution.

Figure 5 – Predicted Probability for Issue Engagement Depending on Different Predictors



Predicted probability *at means* for issue engagement depending on different predictor variables. If the respective regression included fixed effects, they were weighted according to their proportion in the sample, i.e. 1/28 for each dyad and 1/14 for each issue. The graphs visualising the effects of issue level factors, ownership status (A), salience (B) and valence status (C) are based on Model 1. The graphs visualising the effects of the actor level factors, ideological proximity (D), competitiveness (E) and incumbent (F) are based on Model 2. Model 3 was used to calculate the displayed effect for temporal proximity (G). The horizontal line indicates the overall predictive margins if *all* variables are held at their means.

After this initial evaluation, the effects of the independent variables are illustrated graphically as *predictive margins at means* (Figure 5). Thereby, the predictor of interest varies across its

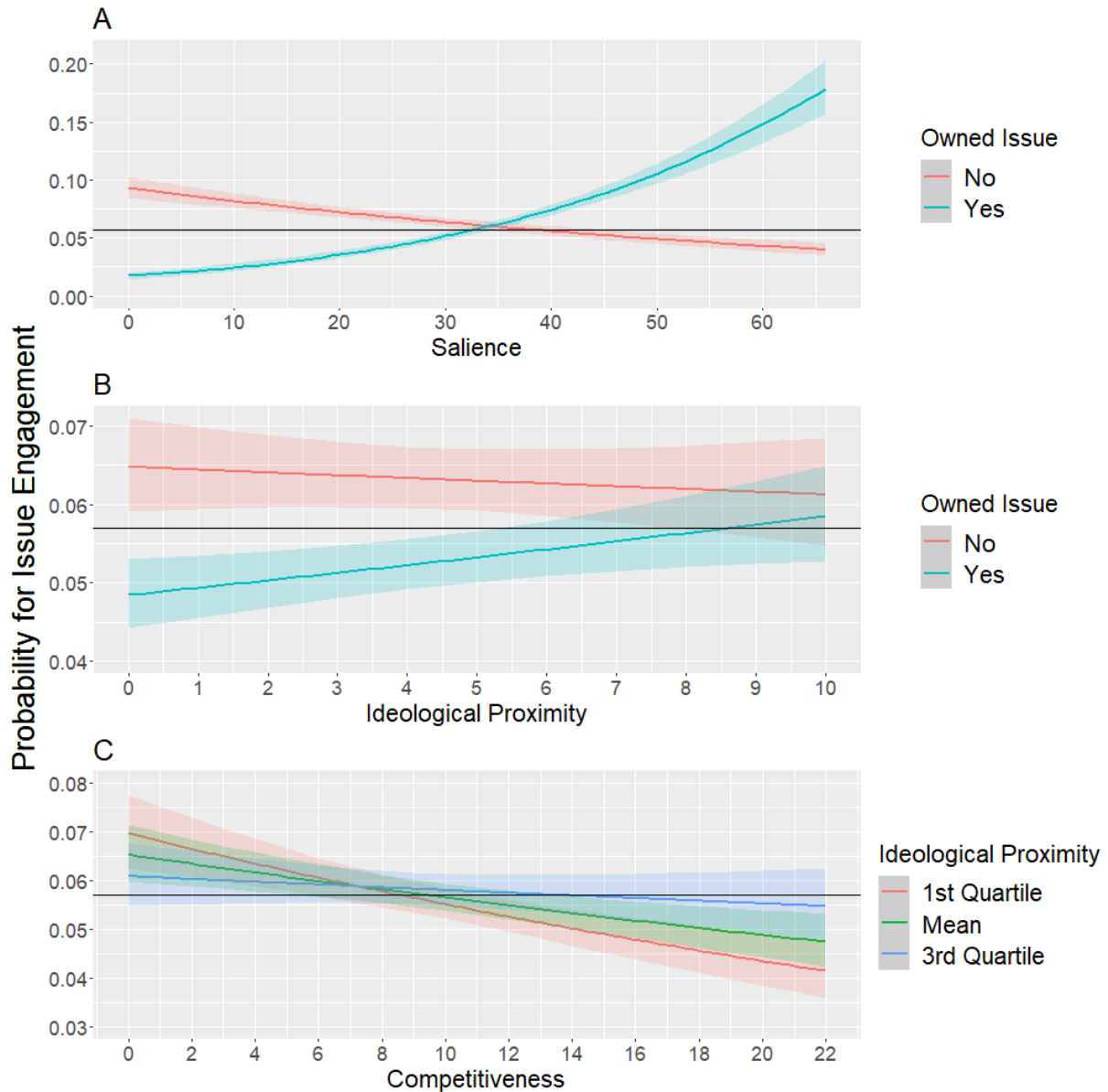
range of values while all other variables are held at their means. If the model included fixed effects, each dyad or issue is weighted proportionally to the sample, which gives us an “average” across dyads and issues. To compare the effect sizes, the y-axis for the plots are scaled equally.

Based on Model 1, graphs A – C (Figure 5) display the predicted probabilities for the issue level factors. As can be seen, the general effect of ownership status, without taking interactions into account, is comparatively small. With a difference in probability of only slightly more than 0.5 percentage points, the insight gained by simply distinguishing between owned and unowned issues is almost negligible. Even though there is a consistent tendency that salience increases the probability of issue engagement, the effect appears to be only substantive for issues that strongly differ in their level of salience. Astonishingly, with a marginal effect of -1.5%, the expected negative effect for valence issues exceeds the one for owned issues. Considering that two of the top 4 most frequently addressed issues, environmental protection and cost of living (cf. Figure 2a) were coded as valence issues, this finding possibly demonstrates how my new concept might substantially change the results. A study using a cross-sectional approach to issue engagement would, perhaps, conclude that, overall, the overlap in candidates’ issue profiles is higher for valence than for positional issues. However, this does not contradict the finding of this study, since valence issues, compared to positional issues, might simply not trigger an *immediate* “response” to a competitor on the very same day. This would explain its significant and substantive negative effect on the probability of issue engagement.

Turning to graphs D-E (Figure 5), we can see how, according to Model 2, the predicted probabilities change for the actor level factors. As indicated by the almost flat line, no consistent effect for ideological proximity and, thus, no support for Hypothesis B1 could be found. Contrary to my expectations, competitiveness leads to *less* not more issue engagement, even though its effect size is comparatively moderate. The “incumbent effect”, on the other hand, points strongly in the expected direction: The marginal effect amounts to almost -5 percentage points. Still, despite its clearness, it should be noted that this finding is least generalizable because it depended on the behavior of a single actor (Macron), who was particularly inactive on Twitter. Finally, graph G displays the already detected clear time trend that issue engagement, independently of other variables, becomes substantively more likely as the election approaches.

Figure 6, with the help of predicted probabilities based on Model 3, shows a visual presentation of the *interaction effects*. The graph on the top (A) reveals how the effect for salience on the

Figure 6 – Interaction Plots (Predicted Probability for Issue Engagement)



Interaction plots displaying predicted probabilities at means for issue engagement. Graph A models the effect for salience in dependence of the ownership status of an issue (owned/unowned). Graph B models the effect for ideological proximity in dependence of the ownership status of an issue. The effect for competitiveness in dependence of the ideological proximity is visualised by graph C. The horizontal line indicates the overall predictive margins if *all* variables are held at their means.

probability of issue engagement depends on the ownership status of an issue. Starting at a considerably lower probability than unowned issues, with increasing salience issue engagement on owned issues becomes gradually more likely whereas, despite a higher basic probability, the effect is reversed for unowned issues. Simply put, holding everything else constant, at low levels of salience *unowned* issues feature more issue engagement than owned issues, whereas at high levels of salience *owned* issues feature more issue engagement. Clearly, this completely contradicts Hypothesis D1 that predicted a *weaker* salience effect for owned issues than for

unowned issues. In addition, unowned issues even seem to become less attractive with increasing salience. At first sight, this finding presents a puzzle. Why should salience lead to *less* issue engagement for unowned issues while substantially enhancing the probability for issue engagement if the issue is owned? One possible explanation could again be related to the crucial temporal component of my issue engagement concept. Highly salient owned issues could provoke more immediate reactions and tempt all candidates to claim issue owner status for themselves, possibly through distinctive framing. This immediate trigger potential could be less pronounced for issues that have less ideological connotations and are often concerned with the performance of the incumbent, i.e. unowned issues.

Far from being a puzzle, the interaction between ownership status and ideological proximity turned out as expected (Figure 5 C). While having no significant impact on the probability of issue engagement on unowned issues, ideological proximity moderates the negative effect for owned issues. If two opponents are ideologically distant then owned issues do indeed predict less issue engagement. If they are, however, ideologically very proximate then there is hardly any difference between owned and unowned issues in terms of the probability for issue engagement. In sum, the plot clearly shows that issue ownership, as it has been operationalized in this study, is closely linked to a party's ideology and, thus, in a multiparty system, is shared among several parties of a common ideological camp. Therefore, the alleged negative ownership effect only plays a role for candidates that display a certain degree of ideological distance.

Lastly, plot C reveals how the effects for ideological proximity and competitiveness depend on each other. Resulting from the fact that both variables are continuous, I decided to calculate the average predictive margins of competitiveness for three characteristic values of ideological proximity, namely for the first, second (median) and third quartile. As indicated by the red line, we see that the downward slope is steepest for ideologically distant parties. This means that for ideologically distant parties a more competitive situation leads to significantly less issue engagement. The blue line, on the other hand, displaying the effect of competitiveness for ideologically proximate candidates is almost horizontal, which tells us that in such a case competitiveness is a negligible factor. Going from minimum to maximum, we find a marginal effect for competitiveness of almost 3 percentage points if the candidates are ideologically distant (1st quartile) compared to about 0.5 percentage points if the candidates are ideologically proximate (3rd quartile). Even though I rather expected the amplification of a positive main effect instead of an attenuation of a negative one, the theoretical elaborations dedicated to explaining the in-

teraction, to a limited extent, still apply. As I have already hinted at, ideologically distant candidates never actually compete against each other in a narrower sense because their voter target groups do not overlap. After all, hardly anyone will be convinced to spontaneously switch from a far-right nationalist to a communist candidate. Instead, it is about mobilizing as much voters from other ideologically proximate candidates in order to get the “decisive edge” in a competitive situation. Additionally, since strategic voting plays a big role in two round runoff systems, it is particularly the weak and, thus, uncompetitive candidates where votes can be easily gained. Put simply, the more competitive the situation and/or the more ideological distant the main competitor in question, the more attractive the ideologically proximate and/or weak candidates become to pursue issue engagement with. Conversely, there is little to gain from pursuing issue engagement with equally strong and ideologically distant competitors.

6.2 Additional Robustness Checks

Since the findings of this study are based on a single election campaign, one main point of criticism might concern the generalizability of the results. Since only 14 campaign issues are considered, each single one has potentially a lot of influence on the significance, substantiality or even direction of a certain effect. Clearly, all relevant characteristics of an issue cannot be captured by the combination of ownership status, salience and valence status and many factors remain unobserved. One obvious circumstance that might have biased the results is the invasion of Russia into Ukraine that occurred right in the middle of the election campaign. Naturally, it was none of the issue level factors (ownership, salience and valence) that led to a lot of issue engagement on the issue of international and defense policy, but rather the exogenous shock itself. Thus, in terms of robustness of the findings, confidence in the results can be corroborated by making sure that the effects are not driven by the particularities of this specific issue. To account for potential biases caused by dynamics associated with specific issues in a comprehensive way, I reran all regression models 14 times while always excluding one issue to check if the results in essence hold up. Indeed, for two variables the results in certain models changed significantly through the exclusion of certain campaign issues.

If “international and defense policy”, which thematically covered the Russia-Ukraine war, is excluded from Model 1, which included only the *main effects* for the issue level factors, then the effect for issue ownership switches from negative to positive. Apparently, the non-substantive negative effect emerged due to the frequent occurrence of issue engagement on this issue, which obviously had nothing to do with the fact that it was labelled “unowned”. Still, as we have learnt by Model 3 the effect for ownership status is moderated by ideological proximity,

which explains the inconclusiveness of the main effect when not including the respective interaction term. As it happens, excluding the issue of international and defense policy from Model 3 does not change any of the coefficients substantively. Rather than questioning the robustness of the results, this matter emphasizes the importance of understanding issue ownership effects in relation to a candidate dyad's ideological proximity.

Raising doubts about the findings that valence issues feature less issue engagement than positional issues, the corresponding coefficient is no longer significant in Models 1 and 3 once either the issue of international and defense policy or rurality are excluded from the dataset. With regards to international and defense policy, coded as a positional (non-valence) issue, once again the circumstance applies that engagement on this issue was above all triggered by an exogenous shock. Rurality, on the other hand, was coded as valence issue and because it hardly led to issue engagement is apparently responsible for a large part of the substantive negative effect. Thus, in sum, whether valence issues decrease the likelihood for issue engagement remains inconclusive.

Because it is also possible that arbitrary strategic choices of a single candidate lie behind a certain effect, I decided to repeat the same robustness check as before but this time for candidates. Having run each model eight times while excluding all observations featuring a certain candidate, it can be stated that, compared to the complete model, all the results remain essentially unchanged.

6.3 Summary

Through this comprehensive presentation of the empirical results, overall a more differentiated picture emerges than the simplicity of some hypotheses might have anticipated. Despite initial support for the expected negative effect for ownership status (H. A1) and the positive effect for salience (H. A2), both issue level factors in terms of their direction and strength turned out to be conditioned by other variables as the respective interaction terms revealed. The effect for ownership status shrinks with increasing ideological proximity (H. D1). This means that owned issues do predict significantly less issue engagement as long as the parties display a moderate degree of ideological distance. Given that issue ownership is related to ideology, this clearly indicates that right wing (left wing) candidates talk about right wing (left wing) issues while avoiding left wing (right wing) issues. Consequently, ideological proximity only matters if owned issues are discussed (H. B2). Interestingly, and contrary to Hypothesis D2 salience only

increased the probability for issue engagement when the issue was considered owned. One possible explanation for this puzzling finding is that candidates tend to focus on issues that are owned by their ideological camp and salient at the same time, which might lead to frequent issue engagement between ideologically proximate candidates. Coming to the next variable, despite initially lending support to Hypothesis A3, the finding of a negative effect for valence issues, as the robustness check showed, was mainly driven by individual issues and is therefore inconclusive. Contradicting our prediction (H. B2), issue engagement becomes *less* likely between two candidates with increasing levels of competitiveness. Again, by the means of interaction terms, we find that the strength of the effect depends on the ideological proximity of the candidates (H. D3). While the effect is de facto non-existent for ideologically proximate candidates, it is particularly substantive for ideologically distant ones. The most straightforward explanation for this phenomenon is that candidates from the same ideological camp compete over the same voter groups by pursuing issue engagement and continue to do so irrespective how competitive the situation is they find themselves in. Candidates from ideologically opposing camps, on the other hand, do not share the same voter target groups and, thus, can gain little from pursuing issue engagement with equally strong but ideologically distant competitors. Instead, they will try to attract strategic voters from weak and ideologically proximate candidates. Finally, only two hypotheses received direct support without any additional complexities: Issue engagement is significantly less likely for dyads featuring the incumbent (H. B3) and becomes more likely the closer the election gets (H. C).

7. CONCLUSIONS

In the following, I first provide a short summary of the aim of my thesis as well as of its main innovations in terms of conceptualization and data. Then, the central insights of this study are presented once again and brought into a constructive dialogue with the existent literature. Thereby, the contributions of this thesis to the research on issue engagement and issue competition will be made explicit. I will end with a short resume about the normative implications of the findings and suggest a direction for future research.

The aim of this thesis was to explain *under which circumstances issue engagement occurs during election campaigns*. Since issue engagement can be considered minimal requirement for deliberation among political elites, high levels of issue engagement facilitate the making of informed electoral decisions by citizens and can, thus, be regarded as a quality indicator for election campaigns. However, assuming that electoral competition is driven by adversarial dynamics and that political actors pursue above all strategic goals, from a non-normative perspective, election campaigns are not employed as means to inform but rather to mobilize and convince voters. For political actors, the question of how exactly voters reach their electoral decision, whether well- or ill-informed, is secondary. Therefore, occurrences of issue engagement were understood as a mere by-product of political actors' strategic campaign behavior.

Departing from a critique of the mostly static operationalization of issue engagement in the literature that essentially measured the informational overlap in political actors' issue attention profiles, I attempted to restore some of the neglected interactive and deliberative character of the concept, which initially motivated the research, by applying a strict time criterion. Accordingly, in the context of this study, issue engagement was conceptualized as two political actors addressing the same issue *on the same day*. Of course, this additional criterion does by no means ensure that issue engagement is of genuine deliberative nature since neither the intentionality behind the issue appeals nor their content is taken into account. Still, issue engagement occurring within a single day considerably increases the probability that statements made by two candidates on the same issues are somehow related, which is why my concept captures the deliberative aspect of issue engagement more accurately.

Since this concept demands an equally dynamic medium, I resorted to Twitter data provided by the official accounts of the 8 major candidates of the 2022 French presidential election. Not facing any financial and factual constraints, on Twitter the candidates were free in the number and content of issue appeals they wanted to make, and tended to post multiple Tweets per day

within the 100-day period of investigation. By the means of a keyword assisted topic model, 6199 Tweets were categorized into 14 broad issue areas. Based on that, occurrences (and non-occurrences) of issue engagement could be identified. By the means of statistical models, a number of independent variables were used to explain the variation in these occurrences.

Albeit it turned out to be more complicated in multi-party systems, this study found substantive empirical support for issue ownership theory (Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik et al., 2003). As the results implicate, ideologically distant candidates were less likely to pursue issue engagement on issues strongly associated with one ideological camp. Left-wing candidates did generally avoid to talk about typical right-wing issues, such as security or immigration, whereas right wing candidates avoided to talk about left wing issues, such as the environment, which in turn led to less issue engagement between candidates of the opposing ideological camps. Yet, on unowned issues, which present a sort of neutral ground, issue engagement between ideologically proximate and ideologically distant candidates was equally likely. This outcome adds to the findings of Green & Pedersen (2015) and Meyer & Wagner (2016): Not considering issue ownership effects, they both found a simple association between ideological proximity and issue engagement. The evidence of this study indicates that this effect is likely to be limited to owned or strongly ideologically connoted issues.

When examining the interaction between ownership status and salience, I was confronted with an unexpected and puzzling finding. Apparently, with higher salience the probability for issue engagement increases on owned issues but even slightly decreases for unowned ones. In other words, the riding the wave hypothesis seems to be limited to owned issues. In their foundational text, Ansolabehere & Iyengar (1994), interested in the persuasive power of the interplay between salience and issue ownership, did particularly foresee this possibility by what they called “unequal ridership”. Unequal ridership refers to the phenomenon that candidates only prefer to talk about those salient issues that they also own. As it seems, this is precisely what happened in the 2022 French presidential election campaign: the candidates as “unequal riders” did only ride the waves of issues they owned. Because in a multi-candidate election with 8+ candidates issue ownership is mostly shared among several candidates from a distinct ideological camp (Seeberg, 2017), this circumstance has led to frequent issue engagement most likely among ideologically proximate candidates. Of course, it is also possible that the very salient owned issues by provoking an ideological conflict made candidates ignore issue ownership disadvantages precisely because of the high salience. Thus, to compensate for the issue ownership

disadvantage by building up a counter-position possibly through framing, also candidates from an opposing ideological camp may in this case have decided to pursue issue engagement.

Why though did unowned issues remain completely unaffected by the positive effect for salience on issue engagement? One explanation might be that unowned issues are often less controversial and, thus, might also less often trigger a direct response to an issue appeal within a single day. Moreover, since unowned issues are often associated with the performance of the incumbent (Petrocik, 1996), from a strategic perspective, it might often be unclear if and in how far challengers can even benefit from pursuing issue engagement on unowned issues particularly when they are highly salient. After all, if there is no unanimous negative judgment about the incumbent's performance on a certain issue, the incumbent tends to have an advantage on unowned issues. Only he/she can point to a track record that demonstrates his/her ability to handle these less-ideologically anchored issues (Druckman et al., 2010). Consequently, challengers might try to avoid the risk of unintentionally pushing the agenda of the incumbent by pursuing issue engagement on highly salient unowned issues.

There is no doubt that the incumbent plays a special role. Even when controlling for all possible factors, issue engagement with Macron was significantly less likely. Even though the informational value of this insight is limited by the fact that only a single election campaign was analyzed, the theoretical assumption that incumbents do not fully participate in issue competition (Druckman et al., 2010; Simon, 2002) could be corroborated. Although unsatisfactory from a normative point of view, this strategy seems to pay off in terms of electoral success: Greene (2020) shows that incumbents actually achieve better electoral outcomes when they focus on a few selected issues and largely avoid the “mudslinging” of the election campaign. Indeed, as my study confirmed, it is primarily the opposition that ensures thematic diversity and a potentially vivid discussion of policy issues.

Inspired by Seeberg's (2020) idea to consider time as a major explanatory variable for issue engagement, a strong positive effect for the temporal proximity to the Election Day could be observed. Here, it is important to note that the increasing likelihood for issue engagement over time cannot be reduced to a mere rise in the total number of issue appeals. Short before the election campaign, all the candidates were keen to communicate the breadth of their issue portfolios and were apparently willing to take higher risks in terms of their issue engagement behavior. The identification of this temporal trend represents an important contribution to the existent research on issue engagement, which has been largely insensitive towards temporal short-term dynamics.

A new concept, which I labelled “competitiveness”, was introduced to capture the balance of power between two candidates as well as their chances to “win the election”, i.e. qualify for the second round, at the same time. Put simply, by the means of polling data the corresponding measure indicated how tight the race between two candidates for the second (!) ticket to the final run-off round of the presidential election was at a certain point in time. Contrary to the findings made in two-party systems, according to which more competitive settings boost issue engagement between candidates (Damore, 2005; Druckman et al., 2010; Simon, 2002), a negative association between competitiveness and issue engagement was detected. However, similarly to ownership status, this effect is again conditional on ideological proximity. The more ideologically proximate the candidates are, the weaker the negative effect for competitiveness becomes. Thus, it was the ideologically distant candidates who were prone to more frequently avoid each other’s issues, the more their competitive situation resembled a toss-up. This also implies that candidates pursue more issue engagement if either the setting is uncompetitive or the candidates are ideologically proximate.

Two possible interpretations come to mind: First, this effect might simply result from the fact that ideologically distant political actors do not share the same voter target groups and, therefore, if both are equally competitive, do not attempt to win over voters from each other by pursuing issue engagement. Instead, a competitive right-wing candidate will try to attract voters from other right-wing or uncompetitive candidates, whereas an equally competitive left-wing candidate will try to appeal to voters initially committed to other left wing or uncompetitive candidates. Additionally, considering that a two round run-off presidential election does foster strategic voting, this campaign behavior can overall be deemed highly rational from a strategic perspective. Second, it appears that candidates become more risk averse when victory and defeat are close together. Pursuing issue engagement with ideologically distant competitors is often risky and has the potential to backfire (Simon, 2002), particularly when foreign-owned issues are concerned. Possibly also therefore, ideologically distant candidates tended to ignore each other’s issue appeals even more when they found themselves in a competitive situation.

How do these insights now relate to the normative claim that election campaigns should be deliberative endeavors facilitating the formation of informed opinions among the electorate? Generally, the empirical evidence shows that political actors’ strategic campaign behavior runs counter to what would be normatively desirable. Candidates avoid the discussion of issues owned by the opposing ideological camp, although here, where the policy positions tend to diverge most, the informational value of issue engagement would be highest. They are only

responsive to the publics' concerns when it is in their interest to be, i.e. when they own the respective issues. In a competitive situation between two ideologically distant candidates, where each individual vote becomes more decisive, the candidates talk less about the same issues and hamper the all the more important exchange of policy positions. With the incumbent, there is a political actor who is inclined to largely avoid participation in the election campaign altogether and, thus, also in a possible deliberative process. Actually, even the temporal trend predicting more issue engagement towards the end of the election campaign is suboptimal from a normative point of view. Deliberative processes need time to unfold and demand from civil society a certain degree of openness towards other ideological positions, which is why issue engagement would be preferable at the beginning of an election campaign. Thus, overall complementing the predominantly pessimistic picture research on issue engagement has painted so far (e.g. Meyer and Wagner, 2016; Simon, 2002), this study reaffirms that issue engagement does generally occur less under circumstances where it is most needed.

Remedies to this problem are certainly settings in which candidates, unlike on Twitter, are not entirely free to decide which issues they want to talk about. TV debates and interviews, in which a moderator or journalist urges candidates to disclose their positions and arguments even on "inconvenient" issues are the obvious examples. A sign of quality journalism must therefore be not to further fuel the ideological segmentation of issues, but to counteract this by, for instance, asking left-wing candidates specifically about their security policy and right-wing candidates about climate protection. In addition, broadcasted citizens' fora or Q&As with leading candidates can also be considered deliberative settings that enable active citizens to give input into the elite discourse and, likewise, help to prevent candidates from depriving citizens of crucial information by issue avoidance strategies (Habermas, 2006).

Finally, I would like to briefly indicate a new avenue for future research that has the potential to further deepen our understanding of issue competition. Besides issue engagement and issue avoidance, there is a third distinct form of political communication behavior, namely "framing", which so far has only rarely been considered. Being usually defined as the action of redefining a given issue by tackling it from a new perspective or by highlighting particular sub-dimensions in a way that benefits the candidate performing it (Chong and Druckman, 2007), framing lies somewhere between engagement and avoidance. In fact, it is an attempt to combine the advantages of both, one does respond to an issue appeal but, at the same time, changes the meaning of this issue. Therefore, framing is often resorted to when political actors decide to address foreign-owned issues. Since framing as a manipulative tactic would again not meet the demands

of deliberative democratic theory, it would be important to know how often this practice in relation to issue engagement is used. It is highly probable that, due to the large issue categories chosen in this study, framing constitutes a high proportion among what has been counted as issue engagement. By investigating the role of framing in election campaigns, future research will tell if the verdict of this thesis regarding the willingness of political actors to pursue *genuine* issue engagement should have been even more pessimistic.

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A: Owned Issue

B: Salience

C: Valence Issue

D: Ideological Proximity

E: Competitiveness

F: Incumbent

G: Temporal Proximity to the Election

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A: Owned Issue $\times$ Salience

B: Owned Issue $\times$ Ideological Proximity

C: Ideological Proximity $\times$ Competitiveness

10. APPENDIX

10.1 Abstract (English)

“Issue engagement”, defined as two political actors talking about the same issue, is a political science concept to empirically verify whether political actors comply with basic principles of deliberation. High levels of issue engagement facilitate the making of informed electoral decisions by citizens and can, thus, be regarded as a quality indicator for election campaigns. However, assuming that political actors pursue above all strategic goals, from a non-normative perspective, election campaigns are not employed as means to inform but rather to attract voters. Inspired by this tension between a normative and a realistic perspective, the aim of this thesis is to explain *under which circumstances issue engagement occurs during election campaigns*. Departing from a critique of a static understanding of issue engagement, being about a mere overlap in political actors’ issue profiles, this study proposes a new dynamic conceptualization of issue engagement: two political actors addressing the same issue *on the same day*. Highlighting the significance of the temporal proximity between political actors’ issue appeals, this concept increases the probability that statements made by two candidates on the same issues are actually related, which strengthens the deliberative notion of issue engagement.

Since this new concept demands an equally dynamic medium featuring a high frequency of issue appeals, I resorted to Twitter data provided by the official accounts of the 8 major candidates of the 2022 French presidential election. By the means of an *automated text analysis*, 6199 Tweets were categorized into 14 broad issue areas. Based on that, occurrences of issue engagement could be identified. The empirical evidence shows that issue engagement becomes more likely the closer the election gets but does generally occur less under circumstances where it is most needed: Candidates avoided the discussion of issues owned by the opposing ideological camp and especially in decisive “neck-and-neck” situations pursued less issue engagement. Moreover, they were only responsive to the publics’ concerns when it was in their strategic interest to be, whereas the incumbent largely avoided participating in the election campaign altogether. These findings stress the necessity of explicitly deliberative settings during election campaigns: In interviews, TV debates or citizens’ fora, candidates are urged to also discuss allegedly disadvantageous issues, which is crucial for citizens’ formation of more accurate electoral opinions.

10.2 Abstract (German)

„Issue-Engagement“, definiert als zwei politische Akteur*innen, die über dasselbe Thema sprechen, ist ein politikwissenschaftliches Konzept, mit dem empirisch überprüft werden kann, ob politischen Akteure die grundlegenden Prinzipien von Deliberation einhalten. Ein hohes Maß an Issue-Engagement erleichtert es Bürger*innen, informierte Wahlentscheidungen zu treffen, und kann daher als Qualitätsindikator für Wahlkämpfe angesehen werden. Nimmt man jedoch an, dass politische Akteur*innen vor allem strategische Ziele verfolgen, werden Wahlkämpfe aus einer nicht-normativen Perspektive nicht als Mittel zur Information, sondern zur Mobilisierung und Überzeugung von Wähler*innen eingesetzt. Inspiriert von diesem Spannungsverhältnis zwischen normativer und realistischer Perspektive ist es das Ziel dieser Arbeit zu erklären, unter welchen Umständen Issue-Engagement im Wahlkampf stattfindet. Ausgehend von der Kritik an einem statischen Verständnis von Issue-Engagement, bei dem es um eine bloße Überschneidung der Themenprofile politischer Akteur*innen geht, schlägt diese Studie eine neue dynamische Konzeptualisierung von Issue-Engagement vor: zwei politische Akteur*innen, die dasselbe Thema *am selben Tag* ansprechen. Dieses Konzept erhöht die Wahrscheinlichkeit, dass die Äußerungen von zwei Kandidat*innen zu denselben Themen tatsächlich zusammenhängen, was die deliberative Komponente von Issue-Engagement untermauert.

Da dieses neue Konzept ein ebenso dynamisches Medium mit einer hohen Frequenz von thematischen Statements erfordert, habe ich auf Twitter-Daten zurückgegriffen, die von den offiziellen Accounts der acht Haupt-Kandidat*innen der französischen Präsidentschaftswahlen 2022 stammen. Mithilfe einer *automatisierten Textanalyse* wurden 6199 Tweets in 14 große Themenbereiche kategorisiert. Auf dieser Grundlage konnte das Auftreten von Issue-Engagement gemessen werden. Die empirischen Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Issue-Engagement zwar wahrscheinlicher wird je näher der Wahltag rückt, im Allgemeinen aber genau in jenen Situationen seltener vorkommt, wo es besonders wichtig wäre: Kandidat*innen vermieden die Diskussion von Themen, die vom gegnerischen ideologischen Lager besetzt waren, und ausgerechnet bei knappen „Kopf-an-Kopf-Rennen“ kam es hier zu weniger Issue-Engagement. Weiter, gingen sie nur dann auf die Themenprioritäten der Wähler*innen ein, wenn dies in ihrem strategischen Interesse lag. Der amtierende Präsident vermied größtenteils sich überhaupt am Wahlkampf zu beteiligen. Diese Befunde unterstreichen die Notwendigkeit von dezidiert deliberativen Settings während eines Wahlkampfes: In Interviews, TV-Debatten oder Bürgerforen werden politische Akteur*innen dazu angehalten, auch vermeintlich nachteilige Themen zu diskutieren, was für eine akkurate Wahlentscheidung von Bürger*innen besonders wichtig ist.