

Electoral Campaigns and Parliamentary Practice: Do Parties Pursue the Issues They Campaigned On?

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Abstract

Well-functioning political representation presupposes that the substantive focus of parties' parliamentary efforts reflects the issues on which parties campaigned. Although the link between electoral campaigning and parliamentary practice is crucial for successful representation in modern democracies, we still have little evidence that the issues on which political actors campaigned are the ones they focus on in day-to-day politics. We investigate the link between electoral campaigning and parliamentary practice by examining the overlap between parties' issue attention in manifestos and parliamentary questions. Our results for parties' issue attention in local campaigns and in local councils in Germany between 2011 and 2020 show that parties follow up on the issues they campaign on: The more parties emphasise an issue in their campaign, the more they pay attention to it in their parliamentary activities.

KEYWORDS

Electoral Campaigns, Issue Attention, Local Politics, Parliaments, Party Manifestos

Zusammenfassung

Eine gut funktionierende politische Repräsentation setzt voraus, dass der inhaltliche Fokus der parlamentarischen Bemühungen der Parteien denjenigen Themen entspricht, für die sie im Wahlkampf eingetreten sind. Obwohl die Verbindung zwischen Wahlkampf und parlamentarischer Praxis entscheidend für eine erfolgreiche Repräsentation in modernen Demokratien ist, haben wir immer noch

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wenig Evidenz dafür, dass die Themen, für die politische Akteure im Wahlkampf eintraten, auch diejenigen sind, auf die sie sich im politischen Alltag konzentrieren. Wir untersuchen den Zusammenhang zwischen Wahlkampf und parlamentarischer Praxis, indem wir die Überschneidung zwischen der thematischen Aufmerksamkeit der Parteien in ihren Wahlprogrammen und parlamentarischen Anfragen analysieren. Unsere Ergebnisse für die thematische Aufmerksamkeit der Parteien in kommunalen Wahlkämpfen und in Stadträten in Deutschland zwischen 2011 und 2020 zeigen, dass Parteien diejenigen Themen verfolgen, für die sie im Wahlkampf eingetreten sind: Je stärker Parteien ein Thema im Wahlkampf betonen, desto mehr Aufmerksamkeit schenken sie diesem Thema in ihren parlamentarischen Aktivitäten.

Résumé

Une représentation politique fonctionnelle présuppose que l'accent substantiel des efforts parlementaires des partis reflète les questions pour lesquelles ils ont fait campagne. Bien que le lien entre la campagne électorale et la pratique parlementaire soit crucial pour une représentation réussie dans les démocraties modernes, nous disposons encore de peu de preuves que les questions pour lesquelles les acteurs politiques ont fait campagne sont celles sur lesquelles ils se concentrent dans la politique quotidienne. Nous examinons le lien entre la campagne électorale et la pratique parlementaire en examinant le chevauchement entre l'attention portée aux enjeux dans les manifestes des partis et les questions parlementaires. Nos résultats pour l'attention aux enjeux dans les campagnes locales et dans les conseils locaux en Allemagne entre 2011 et 2020 montrent que les partis se concentrent sur les enjeux pour lesquelles ils ont fait campagne: plus les partis mettent l'accent sur un enjeu dans leur campagne, plus ils y prêtent attention dans leurs activités parlementaires.

Riassunto

Una rappresentanza politica degna di questo nome presuppone che parte sostanziale dell'attività parlamentare dei partiti politici rifletta le questioni su cui essi hanno fatto campagna. Sebbene il nesso tra campagna elettorale e attività parlamentare sia cruciale per una buona rappresentanza nelle democrazie moderne, abbiamo ancora poche prove che le questioni messe in avanti durante le campagne vengano anche trattate nella politica quotidiana. In questo articolo analizziamo quindi tale nesso, ossia in quale misura le questioni messe in avanti nei programmi dei partiti riflettano la successiva attività

parlamentare. I nostri risultati, focalizzati sul livello comunale in Germania tra il 2011 e il 2020, mostrano che i partiti danno effettivamente un seguito alle questioni per cui hanno fatto campagna: più un partito mette l'accento su una data questione nella sua campagna elettorale, più le presta attenzione nella sua attività parlamentare.

INTRODUCTION

Voters who are dissatisfied with current democratic political institutions, politicians, and processes often state that politicians “do not deliver on what they promised” or that parties' campaign statements are just “cheap talk” (see, e.g., Matthieß, 2020; Müller, 2020; Schnakenberg, 2016). Since elections and political parties are still at the heart of representative democracies, and since voters can hold politicians accountable for their behaviour in parliament and government, a close association between a party's issue attention during the electoral campaign and their issue attention in parliament is desirable. To what extent parties in parliament pursue the issues they campaigned on is therefore a crucial question for representative democracies.

Political parties and their representatives emphasise a variety of issues during their electoral campaigns. Starting with the publication of their election manifestos, parties try to shape the public agenda during the campaign by positioning themselves on and drawing attention to specific issues (see, e.g., Green-Pedersen, 2019; Merz, 2017b, 2017a). They want to show which issues are most salient for their party and that they cater to the needs of their core voter clientele (see, e.g., Baumann et al., 2021). Additionally, parties use manifestos to signal to rival parties what their policy priorities would be once in government (see, e.g., Thomson et al., 2017). Furthermore, they signal their coalition potential to other parties by highlighting which issues and positions would either be disputed or where mutual agreements could be reached if parties were in a position to bargain over the next government (Naurin & Thomson, 2020, p. 289; see also Lindahl, 2023).

However, when turning from the electoral arena to the parliamentary arena, whether parties' issue attention during the campaign is associated with their issue attention in their parliamentary activities is still an open question (but see Sulkin 2009). This study, therefore, asks: *Does a party's issue attention during the electoral campaign impact its issue attention in parliament?*

By using an original data set covering 35 local councils in large German cities between 2011 and 2020 (Gross et al., 2024), we assess the link between parties' issue attention during the campaign and in their parliamentary activities. The data combines information on parties' attention to 19 policy issues in their local election manifestos, as a proxy for parties' campaign focus, and in almost 14,000 written parliamentary questions (PQs), as a proxy for party behaviour in parliament. By focusing on 35 German cities with a population over 100,000 we can hold the general political, societal, and cultural context as well as the institutional setting constant while taking advantage of the large variation in local party systems, in the campaign preferences of local political actors, and their varying degree of involvement in parliamentary practice by submitting parliamentary questions. Finally, we provide robust evidence for a wide range of policy issues on the association between parties' issue attention in campaigns and parliament.

THE LINK BETWEEN ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS AND PARLIAMENTARY PRACTICE

Comparing what political actors talk about in their electoral campaigns with what they do in parliament is fundamental to understanding the different stages and links in the “chain of responsiveness”. It links citizens' preferences to their voting behaviour, which is shaped by

the policy offers made by the political actors during electoral campaigns, to policy outcomes, which are influenced by ‘the selection of policy makers who are committed to doing what citizens want’ (Powell, 2004, p. 95). We argue that parties should not only emphasise specific issues in their electoral campaigns but that the salience of these issues should be reflected in parties’ parliamentary activities. This is what we term the *campaign-parliamentary practice linkage*.

Our theoretical argument builds on the responsible party model (American Political Science Association, 1950) and is closely tied to Jane Mansbridge’s notion of “promissory representation” as one of the fundamental elements of representative democracies: ‘The traditional model of representation focused on the idea that during campaigns representatives made promises to constituents, which they then kept or failed to keep’ (Mansbridge, 2003, p. 515). Yet, we deviate from promissory representation, as well as also from the mandate model and the pledge fulfilment literature (see, e.g., Budge & Hofferbert, 1990; Froio et al., 2017; Naurin, Royed, et al., 2019; Thomson et al., 2017), by not focusing exclusively on the promises parties made during the campaign (and whether or not they kept them in parliament or government). There is an extensive literature combining insights from the mandate model, pledge fulfilment, and issue ownership, aptly summarised in the seminal work by Budge and Hofferbert (1990): ‘In this sense, topics emphasized by party platforms constitute implicit commitments to greater effort in the area if elected to government, at the expense of issues downgraded in the platform’ (p. 114).

Yet, to a large extent, the scholarly focus lies on the comparison between parties’ manifesto statements and their issue focus *once they are in government* (see, e.g., Bara, 2005). By contrast, we take a step back and look at parties’ issue attention in campaigns and in parliament where they emphasise specific issues via PQs without acting on them in terms of proposing bills, or adopting laws, or changing the policy status quo. The normative expectation is thus that parties devote more attention to an issue in parliament the more salient the issue was during a party’s campaign.

This link has, of course, not gone unnoticed in the literature on issue competition (for an overview see Green-Pedersen, 2019). However, the empirical work either has a strong focus on individual candidates in person-centred electoral systems, such as the US (see, e.g., Sulkin, 2009), analyses European government parties and parties’ attention to specific issues linked to specific portfolios (see, e.g., Froio et al., 2017; Otjes & Louwse, 2018), or focuses on one policy issue (see, e.g., Breunig & Schnatterer, 2020).

For example, in a landmark study on congressional candidates’ campaign appeals, Sulkin (2009) analyses candidate attention to 18 issues and compares the attention level to the attention that elected officials devoted to these issues. Leveraging data from candidates’ televised advertisements and comparing it to their subsequent legislative activity (bills, resolutions, and co-sponsorship), Sulkin (2009) demonstrates that ‘campaigns function effectively as a democratic institution, linking policy in the electoral and legislative arenas’ (p. 1105). At least for a subset of issues, there is a positive association between advertisement time candidates devoted to an issue and their subsequent amount of legislative activity regarding that issue.

Turning to parties as collective parliamentary actors, Froio et al. (2017) theorise and empirically test for the case of British governments the extent to which they have responded to issue attention in government and opposition manifestos, to changing executive agendas, as well as to issue priorities in the electorate and the mass media (see also Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016). Although external pressure drives the bulk of the policy agenda, they find evidence that the attention parties devote to specific issues in their election manifestos influences governments’ policy agenda. This is the case even in times of economic crisis when parties are preoccupied with a problem pressure agenda but still manage to devote some attention to the issues they campaigned on (see Borghetto & Russo, 2018).

Otjes and Louwerse (2018) show that parties in the Dutch lower house ask more parliamentary questions on issues to which they paid more attention in their manifestos. However, Otjes and Louwerse (2018) focus on the relationship between issue attention in manifestos and the number of parliamentary questions asked to specific ministerial portfolios associated with those issues, whereas our study focuses on all issues mentioned in manifestos and their association with all parliamentary questions asked in parliament.

Breunig and Schnatterer (2020) descriptively map all stages of the policy process (input level, policy process level, and output level) for the issue “energy policy” in Germany from 1977 to 2013. Yet, Breunig and Schnatterer (2020) only provide a ‘bird's eye view’ of parliamentary parties' attention to a specific issue without attempting to explain potential differences between parties' issue attention or extending the analytical scope to other issues affecting party competition in Germany.

Building on this literature, we start developing our argument by looking both at the party supply side and the voter demand side of political competition. Political parties conduct electoral campaigns to gain as many votes as possible on Election Day to be in an advantageous position when bargaining over the formation of a new government, obtaining portfolios, and implementing policies. Political actors' responses to voter demands are investigated mainly from two different theoretical angles: position and salience. On the one hand, parties strive to make policies which are closely related to the preferences of voters and party supporters (see, e.g., Ezrow et al., 2011; Stimson et al., 1995). On the other hand, parties focus their attention on issues which are salient to voters and party supporters, particularly if these issues are electorally beneficial to parties (see, e.g., Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016; Spoon & Klüver, 2014; Wagner & Meyer, 2014) – because voters judge them as being the most competent actors for handling this issue (see, e.g., Petrocik, 1996; Seeberg, 2017) – while simultaneously avoiding issues that are opportune for their opponents (see, e.g., Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2015; Kristensen, Green-Pedersen, et al., 2023; Seeberg, 2022). Our theoretical argument builds upon the latter strategy of political competition: the strategic manipulation of the saliency of issues, that is, parties' issue attention (Budge et al., 2001; Budge & Farlie, 1983; De Vries & Hobolt, 2020; Klingemann et al., 1994).

Parties' issue attention strategies do not stop when entering parliament. Throughout the legislative cycle, parties have an incentive to focus their attention on specific issues, for instance, by keeping their electoral promises through various stages of political competition and policy-making (see, e.g., Bara, 2005; Thomson et al., 2017), since fulfilling pledges is rewarded by voters (see, e.g., Werner, 2019), whereas breaking pledges is punished (Matthieß, 2020, 2022; Naurin, Soroka, et al., 2019).

Yet, voter dissatisfaction with parties might not only result from a perception that parties do not deliver on their electoral promises (Naurin & Thomson, 2020, p. 296), but also from voters believing that parties ignore the issues that matter to them (see, e.g., Otjes & van de Wardt, 2023). Thus, citizen dissatisfaction with political actors is not only directed at government parties but also at (established) opposition parties. Some citizens feel ignored by established political actors because they feel that an issue which is important to them does not get the level of attention it deserves. Particularly far-right parties appeal to these voters through anti-establishment sentiment and by putting more emphasis on such issues (Cohen, 2020).

This perceived deficit might be even more pronounced if parties emphasise certain issues largely during the campaign but then do not pay much attention to these issues during their parliamentary activities. Even though parties do react to the political, economic, and societal environment in which they compete (see, e.g., Borghetto & Russo, 2018; Green-Pedersen & Otjes, 2019; Otjes & Green-Pedersen, 2021; Pardos-Prado & Sagarzazu, 2019; Seeberg, 2023; Spoon et al., 2014; Tavits & Potter, 2015), shifting the focus of attention to a large degree might result in voter dealignment. This discrepancy in issue attention could backfire if voters blame

the party for “cheap talk” during the electoral campaign, while no longer caring for an issue in parliament. Therefore, we expect vote-seeking parties to devote similar levels of attention to specific issues when comparing their electoral campaign and their parliamentary activities (see also Green-Pedersen, 2019).

Consequently, we hypothesise that parties' issue attention in electoral campaigns should be positively associated with parties' issue attention in their parliamentary activities:

HYPOTHESIS. (*campaign-parliamentary practice linkage*): A party's issue attention in parliament should be higher the more salient an issue was during the party's electoral campaign.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA

To test our hypothesis, we combine campaign and parliamentary activity data from local councillors in Germany. We choose the local level in general and German local politics in particular for several reasons. First, focusing on local politics is a hard empirical test for our theoretical argument. Whereas in national politics, both electoral campaigns and parliamentary activities are intensively covered by media, political actors' behaviour in local politics is much less visible to voters because of lower media coverage of both the campaigns and the day-to-day politics (Holman & Lay, 2021; Nielsen, 2015). Lesser scrutiny of one's behaviour during electoral campaigns and in parliament could incentivise local actors to loosen the campaign-parliamentary practice linkage because they might think that they are not held accountable by voters to the same extent as they would be in national politics.

Second, unlike in Belgium or Spain, German local party organisations do not face constraints or scrutiny by national or regional party organisations when drafting their local election manifestos (Gross et al., 2023). Just as local party organisations have little say in the preparation of national manifestos, national and regional party organisations refrain from intervening in the manifesto preparation at the local level (Wegschaider et al., 2022).

Third, the possibility for voters to hold politicians accountable at the local level is hampered in Germany because party competition and legislative decision-making across the different levels of the German multi-level system are closely interrelated (Däubler & Debus, 2009; Gross & Krauss, 2021; Stecker, 2016), leading to low values on both ‘institutional clarity’ and ‘government clarity’ compared to other European states (Hobolt et al., 2013). This creates incentives for political parties to emphasise issues that are not primarily dealt with at the respective level where the electoral campaign and parliamentary activity is taking place, since most voters are unable to correctly assign responsibilities in complex multi-level systems such as the one in Germany (see, e.g., Däubler et al., 2018).

Fourth, the institutional setting is not a ‘pure’ parliamentary one but resembles a ‘mixed’ regime (Gross & Debus, 2018) with a directly elected head of the executive (the mayor) who must engage with other parliamentary actors (the councillors), which adds to the complexity of the local government setting and further impedes electoral accountability.

Fifth, with growing city populations, German local politics gets more and more politicized by parties, and local councils in larger cities are considered as equivalents to national and regional parliaments where party competition and party polarisation plays a much larger role in local policy-making than in smaller municipalities (Gross, 2023). Consequently, we analyse the campaign-parliamentary practice linkage in cities with a population over 100,000.

Lastly, the focus on one specific country allows us to hold several factors constant. All mayors in Germany are directly elected by citizens, local electoral systems are similar across German states with regard to the election of local councils, and – especially in larger

cities – it is common that parties form coalitions, sign coalition agreements, and bargain over the appointment of department heads (see, e.g., Egner, 2015; Gross, 2023; Linhart & Eichhorn, 2022).

To assess the campaign-parliamentary practice linkage, we must first decide which activities are indicative of a party's issue emphasis in electoral campaigns and in parliament. Regarding electoral campaigns we focus on parties' issue attention in election manifestos. Publicly presenting an election manifesto is usually a party's kick-off for the electoral campaign, and the manifesto lays the foundation for campaign activities in the following weeks. Parties signal to voters, party supporters, and political opponents what their main campaign positions and issues are by summarising their policy positions and making electoral promises on important issues (see e.g. Däubler, 2012; Eder et al., 2017; Harmel, 2018; Harmel et al., 2018). Consequently, manifestos can be considered as 'authoritative' and 'representative statements for the whole party' (Klingemann et al., 2006, p. 164). They 'are important sources of information for candidates' (Dolezal et al., 2012, p. 885), thus also largely streamlining politicians' individual campaigns, as well as for party activists and party officials who use manifestos as important campaign material (Eder et al., 2017).

Regarding parliamentary practice, there exist a number of sources one could study to assess parties' issue attention: legislative initiatives, legislative voting behaviour, parliamentary speeches, or oral and written parliamentary questions (PQs), among others (for an overview on the different purposes of parliamentary tools see Otjes and Louwse, 2021). We select PQs as a proxy for parties' issue attention in parliament. PQs are an easy-to-use and valuable parliamentary tool for parties to emphasise issues which are important to them. Asking oral or submitting written PQs takes fewer resources for individual MPs or parties compared to proposing a legislative initiative. Parties try to influence the parliamentary agenda by asking questions to maintain and defend their issue ownership (see, e.g., Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Otjes & Louwse, 2018; Vliegthart & Zicha, 2013).

Additionally, PQs 'are a particularly attractive monitoring instrument because they are designed to extract information from the government and can be used flexibly in large numbers at any point in time irrespective of the current legislative agenda' (Höhmman & Sieberer, 2020, p. 226). Therefore, the issues raised in PQs are indicative of the issues that parties are interested in and at the same time PQs are less constrained by strict party reason. Individual MPs can use PQs to highlight issues which are important to them, and the aggregate view of a party's PQs submitted by their MPs provides a detailed perspective of the range of issues a party tries to cover in parliament.

Accordingly, we focus on parties' attention to 19 policy issues in written parliamentary questions (PQs) from the most recent legislative period – ranging from five to six years – in 35 local councils in German cities with a population of more than 100,000 inhabitants between 2011 and 2020 (see Table A-1 in the Appendix A for an overview of the data).¹

Despite slightly different requirements of the submission of written PQs in local councils across the various local government settings, all cases have in common that PQs can be submitted by individual council members or parliamentary groups (see Table A-2 in Appendix A). In practice, most written PQs are submitted by the parliamentary group. In cases where individual council members submitted a PQ, we assigned the PQ to the respective party the councillor is a member of.

PQs were collected using web scraping and underwent manual editing as required. The dataset includes the dominant policy issue for each PQ coded based on a slightly modified version of the Comparative Agenda Project (CAP) coding scheme (cf. Baumgartner et al., 2019; Bevan, 2019).

¹We exclude the city states Berlin, Bremen, and Hamburg because both institutionally and legally they belong to the state level in Germany.

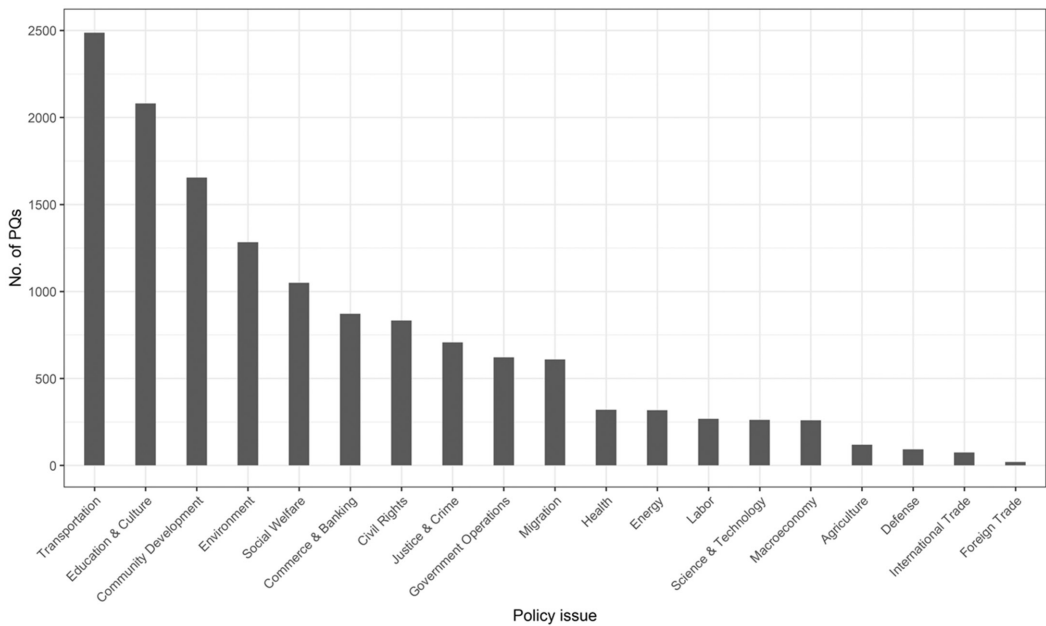


FIGURE 1 Written parliamentary questions per policy issue.

Notes: Number of written parliamentary questions (PQs) submitted by parties, differentiated per policy issues.

Dependent variable: party issue attention in parliament

Our dependent variable is the number of written PQs submitted by a party regarding a specific policy issue during a legislative period (*total number of PQs per policy issue asked by parties in city councils*). We focus on the six largest parties in Germany that are represented in the German *Bundestag*: The Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Christian Democratic Union of Germany, together with the Christian Social Union in Bavaria (CDU/CSU), the Free Democratic Party (FDP), the Alliance 90/The Greens (Greens), the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), and The Left.

We rely on a semi-automatic supervised classification approach to label the parliamentary questions according to the slightly modified version of the CAP coding scheme (for a detailed description, see [Appendix B](#)). The 19 policy issues and the number of written PQs submitted in the 35 local councils to these issues are displayed in [Figure 1](#) (see the section “Empirical findings”). Two examples of local parliamentary questions, including the original German text, an English translation, the topic label, the corresponding CAP code, and the name of the party raising the PQ, are provided in [Table C-1](#) in [Appendix C](#). Overall, our dataset consists of 13,929 written parliamentary questions.²

Independent variables

To calculate a party's attention to a specific issue during the campaign based on manifestos, we generated a party issue attention score where the issues in the manifestos were matched to the issues in the PQs. For each of the 19 policy issues, we automatically determine the 200 most

²If two or more parties ask a parliamentary question together, the PQ is counted for all respective parties separately.

important keywords per policy issue based on the labelled PQs dataset.³ We do so by calculating for each word its *tf-idf* value, its chi-square value for topic uniqueness, and its word score value, which all assess how indicative a word is for a given category. We use these lists and combine them using a voting model to determine the top 200 keywords per policy issue (for a detailed description see Nyhuis et al. (2024)).

After obtaining the keywords per issue, we use them as dictionaries to calculate a party's attention to the different policy issues in their local election manifestos. Note that this means using a relational measure of issue attention since we are not interested in the overall amount of attention a party devotes to a specific issue but rather the extent to which the issue attentions differ between parties and across issues. Local election manifestos have been retrieved from the *Local Manifesto Project* (Gross & Jankowski, 2020).

Control variables

We control for four factors that could play a role in explaining the number of written PQs submitted by a party regarding a policy issue. First, we control whether a parliamentary party is affiliated with the head of the executive, that is, the directly elected mayor. In presidential, semi-presidential, and mixed regimes, governing responsibility is shared between the government and a head of the executive (see, e.g., Cheibub et al., 2010; Duverger, 1980; Elgie, 2020; Shugart & Carey, 1992). The head of the executive is directly elected by the citizens and has its own democratic legitimation but is usually a member of a party that is also represented in parliament, or an independent candidate who is backed by (at least) one parliamentary party. It is the main function of the opposition to control this prominent figure in presidential, semi-presidential and mixed regimes. Consequently, parties which are not affiliated with the head of the executive are expected to use their parliamentary activities just like opposition parties in parliamentary systems: to control the head of the executive.

At the German local level, the directly elected mayor is the most prominent figure in local politics, represents the municipality, chairs the local council and the various committees in most German states, sets agenda, and heads the local administration (Egner, 2015). Therefore, the local political system in Germany displays various characteristics of a 'mixed regime' (Gross & Debus, 2018). Recent research shows that not only opposition parties control the head of the executive, but also coalition parties ask more parliamentary questions to the head of the executive's party, thus using PQs as an intra-coalition control mechanism (Block, 2023). Therefore, we distinguish between the head of the executive's party and other parties. We generate a dummy variable (*mayor's party*), taking on the value '1' if a party is affiliated with the mayor and '0' otherwise.

Second, we control for the number of seats a party has in the local council. We use the size of the parties in the local councils, measured as the logarithm of the number of council seats (*seats party (log)*). Larger parties might ask more questions than smaller ones because they have more resources at their disposal to submit PQs. Furthermore, the more MPs a party has in parliament, the more the MPs could specialise on specific issues, thus increasing the likelihood of submitting PQs regarding those issues.

Third, the issue emphasis approach, or 'salience theory', claims that parties compete for electoral support by putting emphasis on issues in which they are perceived as most competent by the voters (Budge & Farlie, 1983), while avoiding issues that are favourable to their opponents. Moreover, voters tend to show long-term associations between issues and parties (Seeberg, 2017, pp. 478–479; see also Stubager & Sloothus, 2013). Parties 'owning' specific

³We pre-processed both the election manifestos and the parliamentary questions by removing white spaces, punctuation, and stop words, and converted all words to lower case. Most of the data management, pre-processing, and the empirical analysis relies on the R packages *quanteda* (Benoit et al., 2018) and the *tidyverse* collection (Wickham, 2014).

issues would be expected to devote more attention to these issues than to others. Furthermore, parties ‘owning’ an issue should also attack other parties in parliament more frequently on that issue than other parties (Poljak & Seeberg, 2023). Hence, ‘issue ownership’ is assumed to influence both parties’ issue attention during the campaign and in parliamentary activities. We control for *issue ownership* with a dummy variable indicating the party ‘owning’ each of the 19 policy issues (see Appendix D for a discussion of how issue ownerships were assigned to the parties).

Lastly, we control for the government-opposition status of a party. Since there is no case in our data where a single party obtained an absolute majority of council seats, we code *government party* as ‘1’ if a party is a member of a coalition, indicated by a signed coalition agreement. We used data from Debus and Gross (2016) and Gross (2023) and supplemented this data with information from the cities’ webpages for cases not covered by the studies. There are 20 coalitions in the 35 cities under study, almost exclusively comprising different combinations of the six established parties (see Table A-1 in Appendix A). Particularly opposition parties use their parliamentary activities to control majority parties, and to present themselves as alternatives to the government. Opposition parties are held less responsible by voters and can thus try to politicise an issue to force government parties to talk more about that issue and to change legislation in their favour (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Otjes & Louwerse, 2018; Rafałowski, 2023; Seeberg, 2013, 2020).

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

In this section, we present our descriptive and multivariate analysis of the campaign-parliamentary practice-linkage. We will start with a brief description of written PQs by party and policy issues in German local councils. We then discuss our modelling choices before testing our hypothesis by relying on multi-level zero-inflated negative binomial regression models with random intercepts.

Descriptive analysis

Since this is one of the first studies analysing the use of written questions in local politics (for the Dutch case see Otjes et al., 2023), and the first study focusing on the German case, we first provide some descriptive evidence to illuminate the degree to which German local parties submit written PQs related to specific policy issues (see Table 1).

In total, the six parties under study here submitted 13,929 written PQs between 2011 and 2020. CDU/CSU and The Left display the highest numbers of PQs, whereas the AfD exhibits

TABLE 1 Written parliamentary questions by party, 2011–2020.

Party	No. of PQs	% of PQs
AfD	482	3.46
CDU/CSU	3,288	23.61
FDP	1,929	13.85
Greens	2,758	19.80
SPD	2,215	15.90
The Left	3,257	23.38
<i>Total:</i>	<i>13,929</i>	<i>100</i>

Notes: Own calculations.

the lowest number of PQs. This is not surprising because the AfD was only founded in 2013 and entered local councils only from 2014 onwards.

Figure 1 displays the total number of written PQs submitted by all parties for each of the 19 policy issues. Parties in German local councils primarily draw attention to issues where the local level either has a legal say or oversees the implementation of laws decided at the federal and state levels: the four policy issues with the highest number of written PQs are ‘Transportation’, ‘Education & Culture’, ‘Community Development & Housing’, and ‘Environment’. This pattern provides face validity to the data, which is further corroborated by party-specific variations in issue emphasis, presented in Figures A-1 and A-2 in Appendix A, and is in line with previous research on local parties’ issue attention when drafting coalition agreements (see Gross & Krauss, 2021).

Multivariate analyses

We now turn to the multivariate analyses to assess the association between parties’ issue attention in their campaigns and their parliamentary activities. The unit of analysis is the number of PQs asked by a party regarding a policy issue over the course of a legislative term. For a small set of parties, the *Local Manifesto Project* does not provide local election manifestos, and not every local council comprises all six parties under study here. In total, there are 3,248 observations for 19 policy issues, 35 cities, and six parties.

We rely on multi-level zero-inflated negative-binomial models with random intercepts. We opted for negative-binomial models since the dependent variable is overdispersed (Cameron & Trivedi, 2013). We included a zero-inflation component since the dataset contains more zeros than would be expected under a pure negative binomial distribution. We include two random intercepts for policy issues and cities. The random city intercepts control for potential differences in the number of PQs between local councils.⁴ The random policy issue intercepts control for potential differences in the number of PQs between policy issues as the scope for politicians to make decisions in a particular policy issue area differs between policy issues at the local level (see Block, 2023).

The results from two multi-level zero-inflated negative-binomial models are displayed in Table 2. The positive dispersion parameters indicate the overdispersion of the data. Model 1 analyses the hypothesised association between a party’s issue attention in its campaign and in its parliamentary activities for all observations. In Model 2, we only focus on cities with coalitions in the local council. This subset reduces the number of cities from 35 to 20 and from 3,248 observations to 1,899. All models use an intercept and the variable *seats party* (*log*) in the zero-inflation part of the model, as parties with more seats have more resources and more specialised policy experts among their ranks, allowing them to be more active and engaged in most policy issues. Therefore, we expect parties with more seats to be less prone to excessive zeros.

We normalised the independent variable, *issue attention (manifesto)*, to have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one to make our measure comparable across policy issues. Furthermore, we report Incidence Rate Ratios (IRRs) to ease interpretation of the results: an increase of one standard deviation in *issue attention (manifesto)* leads to an increase in the number of PQs regarding this policy issue by the factor of the respective IRR. An IRR value above one indicates a positive association between the two variables, whereas an IRR below one indicates a negative association.

⁴As an alternative specification, we use parties’ relative issue attention in PQs. This specification accounts for the total number of written PQs a party submitted in the local council. Using linear multi-level random intercept models, the results are essentially the same (see Table A-3 in Appendix A).

TABLE 2 Explaining political parties' issue attention in parliament.

Variables	Model 1 (all cities)		Model 2 (only cities with coalitions)	
	Log-Mean	IRR	Log-Mean	IRR
Count Model				
<i>Hypothesis:</i>				
Issue attention (manifesto)	0.14*** (0.02)	1.14	0.14*** (0.03)	1.15
<i>Controls:</i>				
Mayor's party	-0.48*** (0.06)	0.62	-0.64*** (0.08)	0.53
Seats party (log)	0.28*** (0.03)	1.32	0.35*** (0.04)	1.41
Issue ownership	-0.30*** (0.05)	0.74	-0.14* (0.06)	0.87
Government party	-0.62*** (0.06)	0.54	-0.64*** (0.06)	0.53
Intercept	0.24 (0.31)	1.27	0.25 (0.33)	1.28
Binary model				
Seats party (log)	-2.45*** (0.55)	0.09	-2.65*** (0.73)	0.07
Intercept	-0.78 (0.45)	0.46	-0.83 (0.57)	0.44
Observations	3,248		1,899	
N _{city}	35		20	
N _{issue}	19		19	
Dispersion parameter	1.71		1.74	
Log Likelihood	-6,215.3		-3,728.2	

Notes: Multi-level zero-inflated negative-binomial regression models with random intercepts for parties and cities. Dependent variable: total number of PQs per policy issue asked by parties in local city councils. Standard errors of Log-Mean coefficients in parentheses. IRR = Incidence Rate Ratio. Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Turning to the results displayed in Model 1, we find empirical support for the campaign-parliamentary practice linkage. There is a positive association between a party's issue attention in its campaign activities (manifestos) and its parliamentary activities (PQs). An increase in a party's issue attention in its manifesto leads to a higher number of PQs asked by a party regarding this issue, indicated by the positive and statistically significant coefficient for the *issue attention (manifesto)* variable.

The respective IRR indicates that an increase in a party's manifesto attention regarding a specific issue by one standard deviation leads to an increase in this party's number of written PQs by a factor of 1.14 (Model 1). Thus, an increase of one standard deviation in a party's campaign attention to a specific issue leads to a 14 per cent increase in the number of PQs asked by a party regarding that specific issue.

Our finding is not negligible when keeping in mind that a lot can happen during a legislative period: Political actors are faced with financial constraints and must deal with unexpected

political, economic, and societal developments (see, e.g., Green & Jennings, 2019; Kristensen, Green-Pedersen, et al., 2023; Kristensen, Mortensen, et al., 2023; Seeberg, 2023) – but even given such circumstances, we see *that parties in parliament pursue the issues they have campaigned on*.

The empirical findings in Model 2, restricting the analysis to cities with coalitions in the local councils, demonstrate the robustness of our results. The effects remain essentially the same. The more that parties devote their attention to a specific issue in their manifestos, the more written PQs related to that issue they submit in parliament.

Turning to the control variables, the party of the mayor asks fewer PQs related to a specific policy issue, indicated by the negative and statistically significant coefficient for *mayor's party*. We interpret this as non-mayoral parties' strategic behaviour to control the executive, that is, the mayor and the administration, by using PQs as a scrutiny tool, comparable to parties' parliamentary behaviour in national politics (see, e.g., Garritzmann, 2017; Russo & Wiberg, 2010). Furthermore, the more seats a party obtains in parliament, the more PQs a party asks related to a specific policy issue, indicated by the positive and statistically significant coefficient for *seats party (log)*. Both findings are in line with the findings of parliamentary actors' behaviour in local councils in The Netherlands (see Otjes et al., 2023).

Additionally, we find that opposition parties devote more attention to the issues they have raised in their campaigns than government parties. The coefficient of *government party* is negative and statistically significant. An increase in an opposition party's issue attention in its manifestos leads to a higher number of PQs asked by an opposition party regarding this issue. This is in line with recent findings in the literature that opposition parties use PQs as a control instrument, scrutiny mechanism and agenda-setting tool, both in national parliaments (see, e.g., Green-Pedersen, 2019; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Höhmann & Sieberer, 2020; Otjes & Louwerse, 2018), as well as in local councils in other countries (see Otjes et al., 2023). Government parties, on the other hand, might be forced by economic, societal, or political problem pressure to devote their attention to other issues to a greater extent, whereas opposition parties have more leeway in continually focusing on issues that are advantageous for them (see, e.g., Borghetto & Russo, 2018; Froio et al., 2017; Green-Pedersen, 2019; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Seeberg, 2023).

Lastly, we find a negative and statistically significant effect of *issue ownership*. If parties 'own' an issue, they ask fewer PQs regarding this specific issue, compared to other parties. Note that issue ownership affects both parties' (relative) issue attention in their election manifestos and in their written PQs. A closer look at the data shows that in most cases under study here, parties with issue ownership regarding a specific issue are either the mayor's party or are at least part of the local council coalition. It might be the case that parties with issue ownership are part of the local executive and thus forced by economic, societal, or political problem pressure to devote their attention to other issues to a greater extent.

CONCLUSION

Do parties pursue the issues they campaigned on? Building on theoretical and empirical insights from the responsible party and the mandate model, the literature on promissory representation and pledge fulfilment, as well as the literature on issue competition, we argued that there should be a campaign-parliamentary practice linkage at work where parties' issue attention in electoral campaigns positively impacts their issue attention in their parliamentary activities.

Empirically, we analysed parties' issue attention in their election manifestos and how it is associated with their issue attention in their written parliamentary questions (PQs). Using a newly compiled dataset, comprising 13,929 PQs submitted by AfD, CDU/CSU, FDP, Greens, The Left, and the SPD 35 German local councils between 2011 and 2020, we demonstrated that parties pursue the issues in parliament they have campaigned on: the higher a party's attention

to a specific issue in its election manifesto, the higher its attention to this issue in its written PQs.

Our findings contribute to the literature on the linkages between different stages of the “chain of responsiveness” and democratic representation in multi-level systems (see Däubler et al., 2018; Powell, 2004). Our finding speaks to the normatively desired behaviour of political actors in parliament that they care about the issues that they campaigned on. At least in the terms of the issue attention levels in their parliamentary activity of submitting written parliamentary questions it is *not* “cheap talk” what parties write in their election manifestos, even though issue attention is much more dynamic and volatile than parties' policy positions (Green-Pedersen, 2019, p. 23). These findings based on parties' behaviour in campaigns and in parliament thus add to research demonstrating an association between individual candidates' campaign appeals and their subsequent legislative activities (see Sulkin, 2009).

Yet, even though PQs are one of the most powerful tools of parliamentary scrutiny for parties in parliamentary and semi-presidential systems, there are also other ways in which parties can demonstrate to voters and party supporters that they do care about the issues they campaigned on: legislative initiatives, legislative voting behaviour, parliamentary speeches, or oral questions, among others. Hence, the theoretically established and empirically substantiated campaign-parliamentary practice linkage should be tested by using additional proxies for political actors' parliamentary behaviour.

Furthermore, although we find an empirical association between parties' issue attention in campaigns and parliamentary activities, we cannot test whether a specific policy problem mentioned in a local manifesto within a specific policy issue area is voiced in a similar way by politicians' written parliamentary questions. Even though this is in line with the current state-of-the-art on issue competition that “policy issues are studied rather than policy problems” (Green-Pedersen, 2019, p. 27), in-depth qualitative case studies could shed further light on the attention levels a specific policy problem receives in the electoral, legislative, and executive arena, potentially also to a varying extent over the electoral cycle (see Seeberg, 2022).

Future research could also analyse to what extent and under which conditions parties may be electorally punished by voters when loosening the campaign-parliamentary practice linkage. Decreasing the issue attention during the time in parliament might be less hurtful electorally for parties than breaking electoral promises or not fulfilling electoral pledges (see, e.g., Matthieß, 2020, 2022; Mellon et al., 2023; Werner, 2019) because pledges are much more visible to the public than parties' issue attention. This, however, might be conditioned by varying degrees of voters' issue attention throughout the electoral cycle (see Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016). Unfortunately, such fine-grained data at the local level does not exist so far.

We used the German local level as a hard empirical test for our theoretical argument regarding the campaign-parliamentary practice linkage because local politics is substantially less covered by the media, thus hampering voters' ability to hold political actors accountable. Yet, one may argue that voters also care to a lesser extent about local politics than they do about national politics, and that deviating from one's campaign issue attention in parliament is more visible – and more detrimental to a party's electoral chances – at the national level compared to the local level. Considering the multi-level nature of current political systems to gain more insights into parties' issue competition strategies, both during campaigns and in parliament, is a logical next step. Yet, so far, we lack appropriate comparable data on parties' issue attention levels across the various political layers of European multi-level systems.

Nevertheless, this article presents a first step in the theoretical and empirical analysis of PQs as important parliamentary tools in local politics. At least in local councils in Germany in cities with a population of more than 100,000 inhabitants, which have been described as ‘parliaments in disguise’ (Egner, 2015), the behaviour of local parties in using PQs bears resemblance to the behaviour of parties in national parliaments (see,

e.g., Garritzmann, 2017; Höhmann & Sieberer, 2020). Future research should test to what extent our findings on German local politics can be generalised to local parliamentary behaviour in other countries (cf. Otjes et al., 2023), and whether the identified pattern on the campaign-parliamentary practice linkage also holds cross-nationally and at other layers of multi-level systems.

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OPEN RESEARCH BADGES



This article has earned an Open Data badge for making publicly available the digitally-shareable data necessary to reproduce the reported results. The data is available at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/Z8CF3>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available at OSF <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/Z8CF3>.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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