

Beyond salience and position taking: How political parties communicate through their manifestos

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Abstract

This article examines aspects of election manifestos that are largely ignored by extant manifesto-based studies focusing on issue saliencies and policy positions. Drawing on the literatures on negative campaigning, retrospective voting, party mandates and personalization, we develop a scheme of categories that allows for the analysis of attacks on competitors, references to a party's track record, subjective and objective policy pledges and the prominence of party leaders in manifestos. We also show that these elements are present in manifestos of major European parties. The relevance of these categories, we argue, should be influenced by a party's status in government or opposition, its ideology, its size, the relative popularity of party leaders and the occurrence of early elections. Our systematic examination of 46 Austrian election manifestos produced between 1986 and 2013 demonstrates that many of these expectations are supported by the evidence. Most notably, it emerges that government and opposition parties write manifestos that differ with respect to all of the five characteristics analysed. This suggests that there are systematic differences between government and opposition party manifestos that should be taken into consideration by scholars engaged in manifesto-based research.

Keywords

government–opposition, manifestos, negative campaigning, party track records, personalization, policy pledges

Introduction

Election manifestos are among the richest sources of information about parties' policies. As such, they have become ubiquitous in political science research. This is not only due to the regularity by which parties produce these documents but also to the efforts by which the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP, now MARPOR) turns these texts into data (Budge et al., 1987, 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006; Volkens et al., 2013). Yet, while the importance of manifestos as a data source is widely acknowledged, there is still little consensus as to what these documents actually are.

Extant research has devoted its attention almost exclusively to the policy content of manifestos. In that respect, party strategies consist of choosing which policies to emphasize at the expense of others and which positions

to take. The theoretical assumptions and methodological choices in this research have caused a vivid debate in the literature (e.g. Dolezal et al., 2014; Franzmann and Kaiser, 2006; Gabel and Huber, 2000; Laver, 2014; Volkens, 2007). Clearly, issue attention and position taking are crucial. They rightly have been made the focal point of many studies. Yet, when writing their manifestos, parties make several additional choices that have largely escaped the

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attention of the literature. These choices refer to two dimensions of campaigning: past versus future and positive versus negative.

As regards the time dimension elections are Janus faced, looking back to the parliamentary term that has come to its end and looking into the next. Thus, elections allow for holding incumbents accountable as well as awarding parties with a mandate to be acted upon in the next term. The canonical image of manifestos is that of exclusively looking into the future and promising action or outcome. Yet, parties also look into the past and use their manifestos to talk about their record, though not always and not in a uniform way. When parties refer to the future, by contrast, they can choose between merely describing desired states of the world or explicitly committing themselves to future policies by formulating pledges (Naurin, 2011; Royed, 1996; Thomson, 2001; Thomson et al., 2014).

The second dimension relates to the decision to what extent parties want to use their manifestos to talk about themselves, their policy ideas or the quality of their candidates, and to what extent to talk about competitors. Thus, this dimension is about the relationship of positive versus negative campaigning as it is safe to assume that self-references will be of acclaiming nature and references to competing parties mostly attacks (cf. Benoit et al., 1998). The common image of party manifestos is that parties talk exclusively about themselves and ignore their competitors. This image is so strong that the major ‘show in town’, the CMP, has chosen to leave aside in its coding direct confrontation with other parties. Nevertheless, parties do refer to their competitors in their manifestos and we think that such behaviour reveals information on the nature of individual parties and their contest.

In writing their manifestos, parties carefully consider what image of elections they want to evoke. These choices reflect how the party is doing, what are its main strengths and weaknesses, what sections of the electorate are strategically important to the party and what kind of post-election relations with other parties it would like to have. These questions are among the ones party leaders are concerned with permanently as the answers will be critical to their careers and their party’s power. As central campaign documents, manifestos should reflect these analyses and translate them into a strategy. Given the eminence of these choices and the status of manifestos, we basically expect all manifestos to express them. Clearly, manifestos are not the only way by which parties communicate in the context of elections and some of the choices outlined here may be more important for other outlets such as television spots or ads in newspapers. Yet, given the centrality of manifestos and their actual use for all the strategies outlined here, the analysis of these documents should not confine itself to extracting issue attention and position taking. We think that our two heuristic dimensions provide insights to the nature of parties, the nature of their contest and the context of specific elections.

The article proceeds as follows: First, a literature review extracts how manifestos and other party communications have been analysed beyond their issue attention and position taking. We then present our concept and formulate theoretical expectations about conditions that influence the parties’ choices with respect to the content of their manifestos. Next, we present our data and subject it to an analysis covering nine parliamentary elections in Austria.

Manifestos in the party literature

Classic accounts in the party literature were sceptical concerning the relevance of manifestos. Ostrogorski regarded the platforms put forward by American parties as ‘a farce [...] in which nothing is considered as of consequence by the authors of the document’ (1902: 261). Rather, parties would either pay lip service to public sentiment or make policy statements about the urgent problems of the day only in the most evasive terms. Platforms would therefore be ‘of no value’ (1902: 262) as indicators of future policy. In a similar vein, 40 years later, Schattschneider argued that manifestos are largely inconsequential: ‘they persuade no one, deceive no one, and enlighten no one’ (1942: 567).

More recently, manifestos have become more favourably viewed. Most authors agree that they play a central role in parties’ election campaigns as they are regularly released documents which are formally or informally enacted by representative or executive party bodies (Dolezal et al., 2012). However, despite their importance, only few attempts to conceptualize these documents have been made so far. The most comprehensive conceptualization was provided by Ray (2007). In his approach, manifestos can be conceived of either as contracts between parties and voters, as sheer party advertising or as rather abstract statements of the parties’ identity and philosophy.

Manifestos belonging to the contract type comprise ‘pledges [that] should reflect a party’s realistic assessment of the policies which they would expect to implement if elected’ (Ray, 2007: 17). Starting with Pomper (1968), Pomper and Lederman (1980), Rose (1984) and Rallings (1987), the party mandate literature has used manifestos to examine government policymaking in North America and Britain by analysing pledges. More recently, this has also been done for non-majoritarian political systems (Costello and Thomson, 2008; Mansergh and Thomson, 2007; Naurin, 2011; Praprotnik, 2016; Schermann and Ennsner-Jedenastik, 2014a; Thomson, 2001; Thomson et al., 2010).

In these polities, the relationship between manifestos, coalition agreements and government policy has to be disentangled (Moury, 2009, 2011; Schermann and Ennsner-Jedenastik, 2014b). The assumption behind the party mandate approach is that parties propose their preferred policy course of action and, if elected, follow through on it (Royed, 1996). In the United Kingdom, this

thinking has even led to the establishment of the Salisbury Doctrine, a constitutional convention by which the House of Lords refrains from blocking government legislation that was promised in the ruling party's manifesto (Seaton and Winetrobe, 1998: 43–44).

Ray's categorization of manifestos has also been linked to the three party goals of policy, office and votes (Müller and Strøm, 1999). According to Clark and Bennie (2018), office-seeking parties are most likely to opt for contract-type manifestos, vote-seeking parties would be linked to the advertisement type, while policy-seeking parties should produce manifestos focusing on their policy identity. However, in their comparison of British manifestos, they find evidence that party manifestos are not always either contract or advertising or identity documents but more frequently contain elements of more than just one type.

Apart from this primarily operational problem, Ray's (2007) concept neglects several other important aspects of party competition that may be reflected also in manifestos:

First, in election campaigns, parties engage in direct confrontation. As this strategy of negative campaigning is quite important in electoral competition (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995; Geer, 2006; Lau and Rovner, 2009; Nai and Walter, 2015), a classification of party manifestos should take this factor into account as well.

Second, Ray's (2007) concept in its operative elements exclusively relates to a prospective perspective. Accordingly, it only differentiates with regard to how parties present their future plans. These plans can be presented either as contracts with the electorate represented by verifiable pledges or as weaker claims for the purpose of pure advertising. It thus disregards all references to the past. However, according to the theory of retrospective voting (e.g. Clarke et al., 2009; Downs, 1957; Fiorina, 1981), voters are likely to make their decision on parties' past deeds. We thus expect that parties will not neglect this important dimension but strategically employ their record in their campaign. Moreover, parties can make their future promises credible by pointing to their record in office. When analysing patterns of manifesto content, it is therefore important to distinguish between retro- and prospective elements.

Both dimensions of attacking the opponent and the distinction between retro- and prospective elements are included in Benoit et al.'s 'functional theory of political campaign persuasion' (e.g. Benoit et al., 1998). In this concept, parties or candidates *acclaim* positions, *attack* their opponents or *defend* their own standing in case of a previous attack. Furthermore, this concept distinguishes between the competitors' 'character' (referring to categories such as 'personal qualities' or 'leadership ability') and 'policy considerations'. As regards the latter, the authors differentiate between 'past deeds', 'future plans' and 'general goals' which is why this concept allows researchers to take the time perspective into account (see Benoit et al., 1998: 24–32).

Benoit et al. established their approach in the context of US presidential elections and successfully used it for analysing televised debates and other forms of campaign communication in various countries (e.g. Benoit and Klyukovski, 2006; Benoit et al., 2007; Herrero and Benoit, 2009). When it comes to manifestos, a type of communication these authors do not consider, this concept may require some adaptations: As interactive processes, campaigns are likely not only to contain acclaims but also to be a sequence of attacks and counterattacks or defenses. Manifestos, in contrast, are static documents written by all parties at about the same time (Dolezal et al., 2012). This difference has important implications for the parties' strategies: Defenses by definition require a previous attack by an opponent which is why they are expected to occur far more frequently in dynamic sources (e.g. press releases) than in static documents (e.g. manifestos). However, parties may defend themselves against attacks made during the 'long campaign' (i.e. during the previous legislative period), thus guarding themselves against similar attacks in the actual campaign.

All concepts discussed above are meaningful concepts that focus on important aspects of electoral campaigns. However, when it comes to a comprehensive classification of manifestos, neither of these concepts seems to be applicable without major changes or refinements. We take the benefits of these previous approaches into account and on this basis develop a new concept of classifying manifesto content.

Classifying manifesto content beyond positions and salencies: A new concept

Extant research on the content of manifestos has primarily focused on extracting policy positions and issue salencies. While taking these generic issue profiles into account, our approach goes far beyond that and includes references to the past (party records), promises about the future (pledges) and attacks on competitors (negative campaigning) as well as the degree of personalization. For the latter category, our scheme also takes visual content into account.

Based on Ray's (2007) work, Benoit's 'functional analysis' (e.g. Benoit et al., 1998), the party mandate literature (especially, Naurin, 2011; Royed, 1996; Thomson, 2001), studies on the personalization of politics (McAllister, 2007) and other ways to conceptualize a party's communication strategy (Clark and Bennie, 2018), we propose a new approach that distinguishes between different types of manifesto content. This scheme (see Figure 1) is structured by two broad, heuristic dimensions: future versus past (the horizontal axis in Figure 1) and positive versus negative (the vertical axis). Since we are mainly interested in analysing communication that goes beyond the traditional measurement of issue salencies or policy positions, we discard generic policy statements that neither contain an

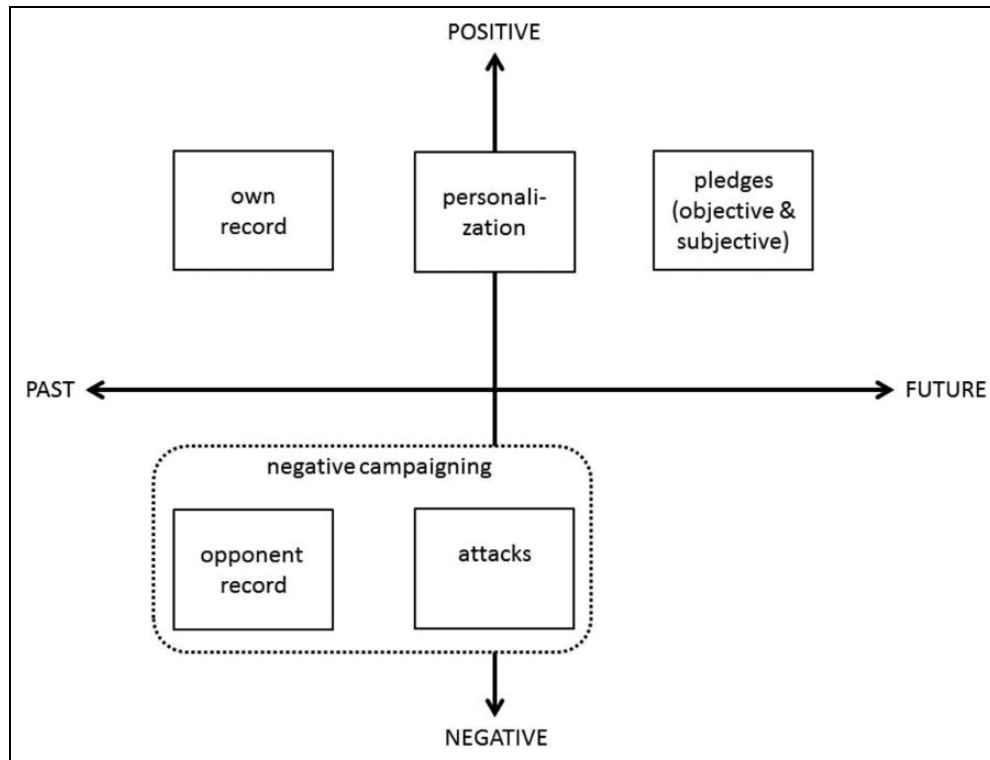


Figure 1. The conceptual scheme.

intention to act nor include references to a party's past behaviour.

The horizontal dimension refers to a party's strategy with respect to time as manifestos comprise both references towards the past and the future. While the former includes mentions of past behaviour (i.e. the party record), the latter contains future plans (i.e. pledges).

Starting with references to the past, parties may refer to their own record or to another party's past performance (see discussion of opponent record below). Incumbent parties talk about their record to underline their competence in governing the country. Opposition parties, by contrast, may point to their government record in earlier periods or other levels of government. In addition, they may also stress their performance in opposition. Irrespective of the position in government, references to past behaviour also serve to make promises mentioned in other passages of the manifesto appear more plausible. For instance, in their 2002 manifesto, the government party Freedom Party (FPÖ) reminded their readers of its record in tackling 'target group' unemployment:

During the FPÖ's participation in government, we got the unemployment rate among people with disabilities under control. (FPÖ 2002: 19)

While *party record* obviously refers to the past, promises are naturally directed towards the future. Similar to

Royed (1996), we distinguish between objective and subjective pledges.¹ Both types of pledges contain a party's commitment towards a certain action or a specific outcome. However, only the fulfilment of objective pledges can be evaluated. In Ray's (2007) terms, objective pledges aim at establishing a contract with voters and thus provide the party with an electoral mandate. They are especially relevant statements because they allow voters, the media and the general public to hold parties accountable by monitoring whether they follow through on their promises. In contrast, the evaluation of subjective pledges requires a value judgment to be made. Typically, these pledges set out the prospect of an improvement without any further specifications (e.g. fairer pensions, better education or reasonable taxes). Since the verification of subjective pledges is open to interpretation (Håkansson and Naurin, 2016; Thomson et al., 2014), accountability is more difficult to establish and as a consequence parties are less constrained by their promises.

The following examples illustrate both types of pledges. The first sentence contains an objective pledge by the People's Party (ÖVP) and the latter represents a subjective pledge by the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ).

The ÖVP guarantees that neither inheritance tax nor gift tax will be reintroduced. (ÖVP 2008: 3)

We want more fairness in the housing sector. (SPÖ 2008: 23)

The vertical dimension refers to the second fundamental strategic decision parties face when drafting their manifestos. Here, parties have to decide whether they should adopt the strategy of positive campaigning, that is, referring to themselves, or whether they should go negative and attack their competitors.

Positive campaigning comprises all issue positions, pledges and record references parties mentioned in their programme, but also aspects of personalization. A cursory look at some recent manifestos of major European parties from the centre-left and centre-right suggests that with respect to the latter aspect top candidates author a manifesto's foreword (e.g. Conservatives & Labour 2015) or append their signature to the text (e.g. Conservatives 2015; CDU/CSU 2013). Sometimes they are also mentioned on the manifesto's front page (Partito Democratico 2013) or even pictured there (Conservatives 2015). In the following sentence, taken from the preface of the Austrian BZÖ's (Alliance for the Future of Austria) 2006 manifesto, the top candidate refers to himself at length and thus provides a rather extreme example of personalization.

My name is Peter Westenthaler, I am 38 years old, married, father of a daughter and on May 20th 2006, I was elected top candidate of the BZÖ for the national elections on October 1st. BZÖ (2006) Wahlprogramm.

Negative campaigning summarizes all attacks against other parties or politicians. Following the standard approach of research, we do not differentiate between 'fair' and 'un-fair' attacks or 'personal' and 'policy-oriented' criticism (Walter, 2014: 43–44). However, we distinguish between negative campaigning that includes a reference to the past (*opponent record*) and attacks without temporal character (*attacks*). The following example of negative campaigning shows a reference to the SPÖ-ÖVP coalition's record.

The Grand Coalition is responsible for violations of human rights and restrictions of fundamental rights. (Grüne, 1999: 12)

Again, such type of content is not restricted to the Austrian case. In the following examples, parties in Germany, the United Kingdom and Italy criticize their competitors' record in government:

During their term in office the SPD and Greens have violated the Stability and Growth Pact four times and weakened its rules. (CDU/CSU 2013: 9)

Five years ago, Britain was reeling from the chaos of Labour's Great Recession. (Conservatives 2015: 7)

During the years of Berlusconiism calls for freedom were used to defend privileges and private benefits. (Partito Democratico (2013) L'Italia Giusta)

In contrast, here are some typical sentences of attacks without references to the past:

The Greens want to destroy the concept of family. (FPÖ 2013: 5)

The SPD and Greens' plans for taxation are an assault on the companies' substance. (CDU/CSU 2013: 13)

We believe the Conservatives are damaging the interests of our country by turning their backs on Europe, and isolating us abroad. (Labour 2015: 74)

Expectations

While we do not start our investigation from a comprehensive theory of how parties communicate in their manifestos, we will generate some systematic expectations about the variation in the categories' salience outlined above. As explanatory variables we consider three factors in particular: government versus opposition status, party size and party ideology. For some aspects analysed, we also use party leader sympathy scores and, as a contextual factor, differences between early and regular elections.

Party record

In line with the theory of government accountability (Fearon, 1999), the decision to refer to past behaviour should be highly conditioned on a party's previous role in government. Green and Jennings (2012) have shown that a good perception of their issue competence makes government parties more likely to attract voters. As the record is one important source to inform voters about the incumbent parties' handling of issues (Fiorina, 1981), the government parties' perceived record and competence are closely linked. We therefore expect government parties to refer more often to their own record than opposition parties.

With respect to party ideology, spatial theories of coalition formation and legislative bargaining suggest that centrist (or, more precisely, median) parties have a bargaining advantage over their competitors (Austen-Smith and Banks, 1988; Laver and Schofield, 1990; Laver and Shepsle, 1996). Centrism should thus lead to greater policy success and more record claiming.

The relevance of record references in manifestos should also be influenced by the type of election. In parliamentary democracies, government break-ups typically lead to ballots taking place before the regular ending of an electoral cycle. There is some evidence suggesting that in shortened election periods, incumbents indeed fulfil fewer pledges (Schermann and Ennsner-Jedenastik, 2014a; Thomson et al., 2014), leaving these parties with a poorer record than in terms with regular terminations. Coalition conflicts resulting in early terminations are also hardly beneficial when campaigning for future government responsibility,

which is why incumbents are expected to make fewer record references in snap elections. Opposition parties, by contrast, should try to exploit the incumbents' weak spots and thus more often critically refer to their record when an election is held early. However, given the incumbents' assumed reluctance to talk about their record, the overall relative share of record references should still be lower in years with early elections.

Pledges

Like record references, the role of pledges should also be influenced by the government–opposition divide. Here, we expect government parties to promote election manifestos that include a lower share of objective pledges compared to those of opposition parties. With regard to subjective pledges, we assume the reverse relationship.

If a government party presents a comprehensive agenda for the upcoming period although it already has had the opportunity to implement its policies, then this might create the impression of a so far inactive or at best ineffective actor. Furthermore, being more aware of financial, political and bureaucratic limitations, government parties might limit themselves to pledges they 'expect to implement if elected' (Ray, 2007: 17). They may be also more cautious when deciding on their policy proposals, since as incumbents they are held accountable for their current performance in office (Fearon, 1999), that is, for the enactment of their former promises. In contrast, opposition parties have to convince voters that they represent a better policy alternative. Therefore, they have to highlight their course of action and distinguish themselves from the way the country is currently run. With regard to their manifestos, this strategy should result in a higher share of specific and far-reaching policy proposals for the future.

As regards party size, small and large parties differ in the share of the voting population they seek to address. Given that large parties are more likely to seek support from a broader and more diverse coalition of 'issue publics' (Krosnick, 1990) with potentially conflicting policy preferences, they are more prone to employ ambiguous language in their policy statements. By contrast, small parties are more likely to have the freedom to spell out their policy demands explicitly, since their electoral base is smaller and thus less heterogeneous. We therefore expect larger parties' manifestos to exhibit higher shares of subjective pledges, whereas smaller parties' manifestos should display higher shares of objective pledges.

Considering party ideology, we assume that more extreme parties will find it easier to put forward concrete and testable propositions in their manifesto. This is because these parties may see an electoral advantage in appearing uncompromising and firm in their ideological commitment while centrist parties may benefit from moderation in the formulation of their policies what may require a higher

degree of fuzziness. We therefore expect the share of objective pledges to be higher for more extreme parties and lower for moderate parties. The opposite can be assumed with respect to subjective pledges.

Negative campaigning

The literature on negative campaigning typically expects opposition parties to follow this strategy (Lau and Rovner, 2009). These parties are not likely to benefit from their own issue competence but to profit from a weak performance of the government (Green and Jennings, 2012). Rather than boasting about their own accomplishments, opposition parties thus have an incentive to attack the government.

We also assume that more extreme parties are more likely to engage in attacks on political opponents. If we expect 'that policy disputes translate into rhetorical attacks, extreme parties must be expected to be more negative than non-extreme ones' (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010: 142).

The often conflictual circumstances surrounding an early election should also influence the amount of negative campaigning: We expect opposition parties to try to exploit the government's weakness and therefore to attack more in those instances. With early elections often resulting from conflict between coalition parties, government parties should also be more likely to criticize their coalition partner. Thus, in times of early elections, the share of negative campaigning should be higher overall.

Personalization

Of the party characteristics used so far, government status as well as ideology might explain differences in the level of personalization. The manifestos of government parties, especially those that hold the office of prime minister, should feature higher levels of personalization than opposition parties whose leaders often are less known. With respect to party ideology, researchers have often pointed at a higher level of personalization on the political right. Especially, the populist radical right has traditionally put their leaders into the focus of campaigning (Mudde, 2007: 260–263). In addition, we also assume that parties personalize their manifestos if their leaders are popular among the voters.

Table 1 provides a summary of our expectations.

Data and methods

The analysis comprises all manifestos produced for the general elections between 1986 and 2013 by parties that were represented in the Austrian parliament. This yields 46 cases that are characterized by considerable variation across parties and years in terms of electoral performance, government participation and leadership change. Four parties are included for all nine elections: the SPÖ, the Christian-democratic ÖVP, the right-wing populist FPÖ

Table 1. Summary of expectations.

Variable	Value	Types of manifesto content				
		Record	Pledges		Negative campaigning	Personalization
			Objective	Subjective		
Government status	Government	+	–	+	–	+
	Opposition	–	+	–	+	–
Party size	Large		–	+		
	Small		+	–		
Party ideology	Moderate	+	–	+	–	–
	Extreme	–	+	–	+	+
Leader sympathy	Strong					+
	Weak					–
Type of election	Early	–			+	
	Regular	+			–	

and the Greens. Two short-lived split-offs from the FPÖ are included only for shorter periods: the Liberal Forum (founded in 1993) and the BZÖ (founded in 2005), while two parties contested only the 2013 election: NEOS – The New Austria (a liberal party that later incorporated the Liberal Forum (LIF)) and the populist Team Stronach.

We applied to all manifestos a new manual coding approach that was developed within the framework of the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES) and goes beyond existing approaches (most notably the CMP) in terms of the level of detail covered as well as with regard to the variables coded (Dolezal et al., 2016). In a first step, all natural sentences in a manifesto are divided into single ‘statements’, our coding unit, according to a well-defined set of grammatical rules. These statements always comprise a relation between a subject (typically the party publishing the manifesto) and an object (an issue or another actor). If a party, for instance, states ‘We will abolish the inheritance tax and raise the retirement age’, this will generate two statements (PARTY against inheritance tax and PARTY for higher retirement age). In a second step, these statements are translated into coded data. To that end, a variable called ‘predicate’ records the nature of the relation between subject and object, differentiating negative (–1), neutral (0) and positive (+1) associations. Our example would thus produce the two following subject–predicate–object relations (i.e. statements):

PARTY –1 inheritance tax (issue code: 12318)

PARTY +1 raise of retirement age/longer working life (issue code: 11604)

For the purpose of building the categories outlined above, we make use of three variables in the coding scheme: the pledge variable generates the ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ pledge categories.² The record variable captures references to parties’ past behaviour (e.g. incumbents

appraising their achievements in office). Finally, we generate a ‘negative campaigning’ category that includes all attacks on political opponents (thus all statements that refer to some other political actor with a predicate equal to –1). Note that the present analysis discards generic policy statements since they do not convey information about communication strategies that go beyond position taking and issue emphasis.

Taken together, the categories on average cover 57% of all manifesto text. The remainder is mostly made up of generic policy statements that are neither pledges nor record references and statements describing objective realities (e.g. discussions of gross domestic product growth or trends in the unemployment rate).

Finally, we code an ordinal personalization variable for all manifestos that captures the centrality of the party’s top candidate (usually the party leader) for its message:

High	Top candidate’s name in manifesto title or picture on front page
Medium	preface or postface by top candidate, top candidate pictured inside or top candidate mentioned (but not pictured) on title page
Low	all other cases, including manifestos with no indication of personalization

Figure 2 displays the distribution of the four continuous dependent variables by party. It shows that large parts of all manifesto content are made up of pledges, the majority of them subjective, that is, not objectively testable. On average, about 35% of all statements are subjective pledges (standard deviation (SD): 11%). By contrast, the mean share of objective pledges is 16% (SD: 9%).

The other two categories are much more sparsely populated, albeit with some notable outliers. Both attacks and record references make up 3% of the average manifesto. By

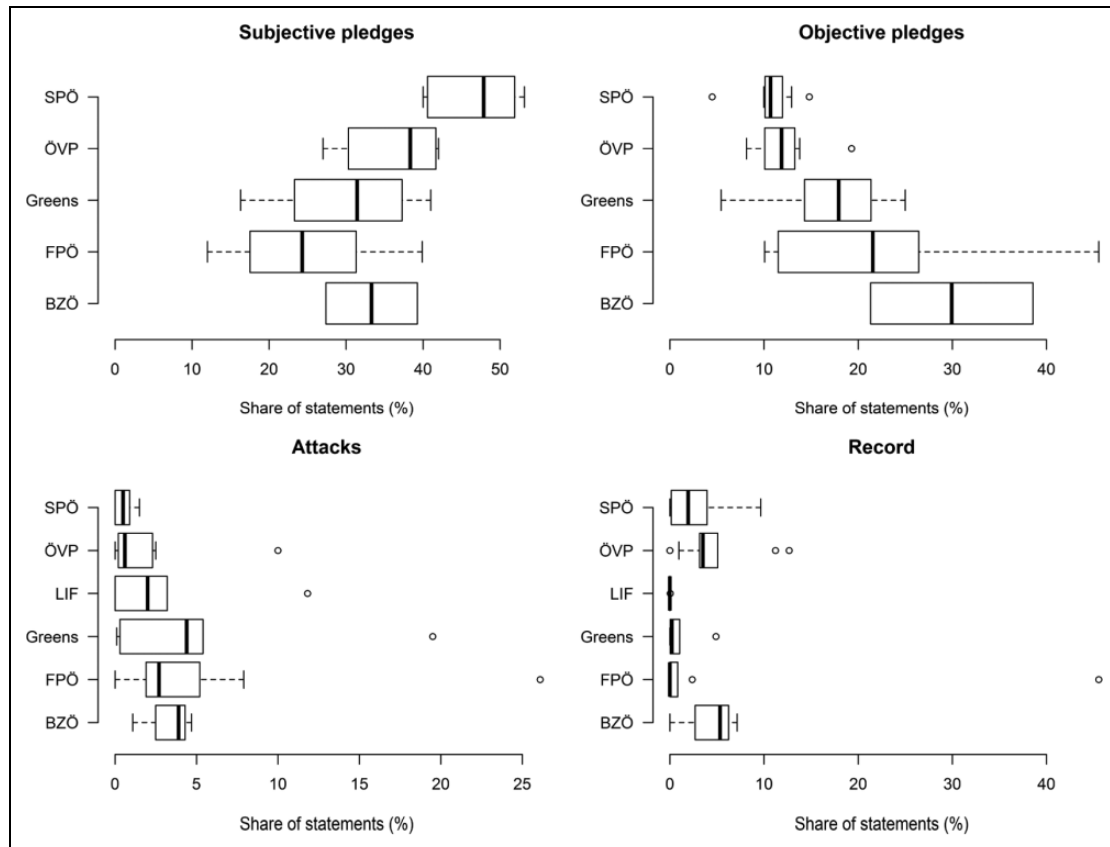


Figure 2. Distribution of four dependent variables across parties. Note: Pledge variables were not coded for LIF manifestos. Only parties that contested more than one election are included in graph. Note that the ranges for the x-axes vary for better graphical representation.

contrast, almost half of the FPÖ's 2002 manifesto (46%) is dedicated to the party's achievements in government. Having been in opposition its entire history (save for an unhappy and aborted stint in the 1980s that almost killed the party), the party obviously felt the strong urge to claim ownership of the government's policy after it entered cabinet in 2000. The BZÖ – for all practical purposes the successor of the FPÖ's governmental and parliamentary party after the party split in 2005 – followed a more muted strategy of claiming the government's record in 2006. Two years later, the references to the BZÖ's record are overwhelmingly to its performance as the leading party in the Carinthian state government.

Negative references to other parties are relatively rare, but not absent from manifestos. The FPÖ in 2013 and the Greens in 2008 are the most notable cases, dedicating a fifth or more of their manifesto to attacks. This chimes with earlier research showing that references to other political actors are not very common in manifestos (Budge and Farlie, 1983: 23).

Finally, high and medium personalization cases together cover around three-quarters of the observations (37% and 39%, respectively), with the low personalization category taking up the remaining share (24%). Table 2

shows the distribution of cases across these three categories by party.

The expectations put forward above are operationalized with a set of independent variables: Government status is a simple dummy variable denoting incumbent parties. Another dichotomous indicator marks early elections, whereas election vote shares are used to measure party size.

Ideology is measured based on AUTNES manifesto data. We subtract for each manifesto the number of left-wing statements (e.g. support for the welfare state, government regulation or immigration) from the number of right-wing statements (e.g. support for lowering taxes, cutting spending or traditional family values) and divide the result by the total number of left- and right-wing statements (for a more detailed account of this process, see Dolezal et al., 2016). The benefit of using AUTNES measures is that they allow us to include new and smaller parties for which neither expert survey nor CMP data is available (e.g. Team Stronach and NEOS in 2013). Matching expert survey data (Bakker et al., 2015; Huber and Inglehart, 1995) to the subset of data points for which this source is available yields a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.77$, $N = 32$), suggesting that our measure of left-right placements is highly valid. We include left-right

Table 2. Personalization of election manifestos.

Degree of personalization	SPÖ	ÖVP	FPÖ	Greens	BZÖ	LIF	Other	Total
Low	3	2	3	1	0	1	1	11
Medium	3	4	4	4	2	1	0	18
High	3	3	2	4	1	3	1	17
Total	9	9	9	9	3	5	2	46

SPÖ: Social Democratic Party; ÖVP: People's Party; FPÖ: Freedom Party; BZÖ: Alliance for the Future of Austria; LIF: Liberal Forum.

Table 3. Regression models.

	I	II	III	IV	V
	Subjective pledges	Objective pledges	Attacks (logged)	Record (logged)	Personalization
Party in government	9.35*** (3.18)	−9.86*** (2.81)	−0.63** (0.26)	1.39*** (0.21)	−1.82** (0.84)
Party size	0.31** (0.12)	−0.27* (0.11)			
LR position	−4.62 (18.85)	46.73*** (16.64)	−0.96 (1.67)	0.39 (1.38)	3.76 (5.67)
LR position squared	−4.90 (10.15)	−21.90** (8.96)	0.81 (0.93)	−0.31 (0.77)	−1.89 (3.31)
Early election			0.33 (0.25)	0.10 (0.21)	
Relative leader popularity					0.07** (0.03)
(Intercept)	31.68*** (7.04)	6.77 (6.22)	1.14* (0.65)	0.16 (0.54)	
R ²	0.60	0.53	0.22	0.54	
Adjusted R ²	0.54	0.46	0.15	0.49	
McFadden's R ²					0.41
N	32	32	46	46	32
Log likelihood					−29.0

Note: Entries are coefficients and standard errors from linear (models I–IV) and ordinal logistic (model V) regressions. LR: left–right.

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

placement in its linear and squared form to examine the effects of ideological extremeness. For the popularity of top candidates, we use publicly available survey data (collected through research in Austrian media archives) on the likeability/trustworthiness of top candidates. We subtract from these numbers the vote share of parties, thus arriving at a measure of how well a candidate is doing relative to his or her party.

Empirical evidence

We evaluate our assumptions with a series of parsimonious regression models, addressing one category of manifesto content at a time. Before that can happen, a number of adjustments are required, though. As Figure 2 shows, attack and record shares are strongly clustered at the low end of the scale with some outliers to the right. This reflects the fact that these variables are heavily right skewed, since many manifestos contain no or very few attacks on opponents or claims about a party's record. We apply

logarithmic transformation to make these two variables conform to the normality assumption.

The five models in Table 3 perform reasonably well, with substantial proportions of variance in the dependent variables explained by the few predictors included. Only the occurrence of attacks (model III) has a rather low adjusted R^2 at 0.15. The other three linear regressions (models I, II and IV) report explained variances of around 0.5, and the pseudo R^2 in the ordinal logit model (V) is at a similar level.

The most striking result from the five models is the consistent difference that emerges between manifestos produced by government and opposition parties. All but one of our expectations regarding this predictor are borne out by the data. Government parties make more subjective and fewer objective pledges, they attack their opponents to a lesser extent and they talk more about their past achievements. Contrary to what we assumed, they do not focus on their top candidates as much as opposition parties do. Overall, it is safe to conclude that, at least for the case of Austria,

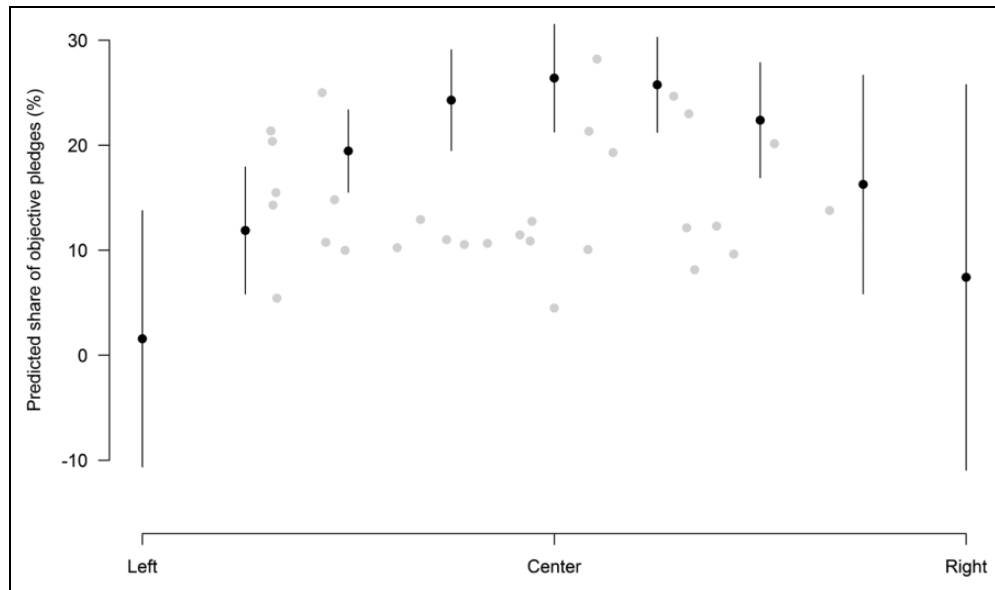


Figure 3. Predicted proportion of objective pledges by party ideology. *Note:* Predicted values and 95% confidence intervals calculated based on model II, with other variables held at typical values (modes or means). Grey dots display empirical distribution of data.

manifestos produced by government and opposition parties differ systematically across several dimensions.

The expectations for party size are confirmed by both pledge variables. Larger parties make fewer objective policy commitments in their manifestos, but award more space to subjective pledges. Note that this result holds even though party size and government participation are strongly correlated ($r = 0.58$).

The expectations related to differences between moderate and extreme parties are not borne out by the data. The result for the share of objective pledges even points in the opposite direction. The positive coefficient for the left–right variable suggests that, as we move from the left towards the centre, the predicted share of objective pledges increases. The negative coefficient for the squared term indicates that moving further to the right results in the opposite effect. Figure 3 illustrates this finding. The predicted share increases from the low single digits to over 20% as parties become more moderate. However, the grey dots (showing the empirical distribution of the 32 cases) indicate that the curvilinear effect reported by the regression model is an artefact of the statistical model and does not fit the actual data very well (the bivariate relationship corresponds to our expectation). The reason for this is the correlation between government status, party size and ideological moderation. Large parties are more likely to be in government and also cluster in the centre of the policy space.

Finally, we find a significant effect for the popularity of top candidates (relative to their party). Leaders who outperform their parties in terms of appeal among the electorate are more likely to be featured prominently in election manifestos. The raw coefficient of 0.07 translates into an

odds ratio of 1.07, indicating that with each percentage point increase in relative leader popularity the odds of a manifesto displaying a higher level of personalization rise by 7%.

About half of all expectations outlined in Table 1 materialize in the analysis. We find the expected effects for party size on pledge making and for relative leader popularity on personalization. By contrast, the impact of ideology is unclear, since it is difficult to separate this effect empirically from government participation and party size. Early elections do not appear to have much of an impact at all.

The most consistent predictor of the five categories of manifesto content is the government–opposition divide. Among our explanatory variables, only this variable is statistically significant and in line with expectations in all tests. This finding suggests that we cannot necessarily treat manifestos from government and opposition parties as belonging to the same category, especially since they also differ substantially in length (Dolezal et al., 2012: 883). To be sure, we can only speculate whether the differences observed here also feed through to systematic variation in terms of policy content, but it seems plausible to theorize that fewer objective pledges, more record claiming and fewer attacks on opponents will produce manifestos that are more moderate overall.

Conclusion

Party manifestos have earned great prominence in party research over the past decades. While the debate about how to extract valid and reliable data on issue salencies and policy positions from these texts has evolved considerably

over the years (without being settled, of course), there is little research that goes beyond saliency and position measurements. This article presents a first attempt in this direction.

We argue that manifestos convey more information than issue emphases and policy positions – the two most prevalent concerns of manifesto research thus far. Building on the literature on negative campaigning, retrospective voting, party mandates and personalization, we propose a scheme of categories that goes beyond the measurement of salience and position taking and identifies attacks on competitors, references to past behaviour, pledges (both subjective and objective) and the degrees of personalization as relevant categories of manifesto content. We then put forward a number of expectations about how these manifesto characteristics are linked to government versus opposition status, party size and ideology. Table 3 shows that the data support about half of our hypotheses.

Clearly, our analysis is mostly exploratory and features only one country. However, we have illustrated that our analytical categories are also present in the manifestos of other countries. Moreover, our empirical analysis of Austria covers a period of 30 years and elections with different government–opposition constellations. We thus believe that the patterns we have detected are empirically meaningful and worth examining in a broader research design.

While expanding the spatial and temporal coverage of our analysis would surely benefit the generalizability of our findings, we can still speculate about possible implications of our results. One central lesson is that there is ample variation in the type of document that parties put forward (and researchers analyse) as election manifestos. Our study shows that this variation is not necessarily confined to the programmatic profiles of parties with different ideologies but extends to other aspects as well. It is therefore worthwhile to ask in what way the categories of content examined here could be related with a manifesto's issue profile in terms of saliencies and positions.

The finding that government and opposition parties produce very different types of documents may, for instance, tie back to different competitive incentives for these two types of parties. Existing studies focusing on the government versus opposition status of parties have been interested in different dependent variables. Bawn and Somer-Topcu (2012), for instance, have researched which party strategies (measured via voter perceptions of party placements) are rewarded at the polls. Interestingly, they predict and find empirical support for opposition parties doing better by taking moderate positions while government parties are doing better by following a directional strategy (taking radical stands). Their argument rests on Grofman's (1985) theory of voters' discounting party claims and suggests that reality-constrained government parties with their records of compromising previous claims are particularly vulnerable to such discounting. Although our study does

not directly focus on party positions, the findings clearly show that the real-world constraints also affect government parties' manifestos. Further research might therefore ask whether the dismal electoral performance most government parties face since the 1980s (Narud and Valen, 2008) is indeed a result of the parties' being too reality bound in their self-presentation and promises or in other factors such as their objective record.

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Notes

1. Royed (1996: 79) distinguishes between definitive, difficult definitive and judgmental/rhetorical pledges. Our objective pledges relate to Royed's definitive pledges and our subjective pledges correspond to her judgmental pledges. Difficult definitive pledges are coded as objective if the course of action or the outcome promised is clear-cut (even though testing fulfilment would be difficult) and as subjective if the wording of the pledge leaves room for interpretation.
2. Note that the pledge variable could not be coded for all years and parties for reasons of resource constraint. The *N* for the pledge categories is therefore 32 instead of 46.

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