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Short-Term Issue Emphasis on Twitter During the 2017 German Election: A Comparison of the Economic Left-Right and Socio-Cultural Dimensions

ANDREA CERON , LUIGI CURINI  and
WIEBKE DREWS *

This analysis of issue emphasis on Twitter by the seven main German parties during the 2017 federal election campaign underlines the importance of taking a time-sensitive approach when investigating issue competition. We show that the attention parties give to issues they are associated with fluctuates frequently on social media and alternates with other thematic priorities that may not be 'owned'. In the digital age, therefore, established theories of issue ownership come under pressure. Our findings reveal that short-term issue emphasis is driven by exogenous shocks and spatial considerations. The exact mechanism behind parties' decisions to emphasise a specific issue in the short run depends on the type of issue in focus. Communication on economic left-right and socio-cultural issues is shaped by different strategies. Our study reveals that when studying issue competition online different policy dimensions need to be distinguished just as the temporal dynamics need to be understood. This needs to be done instead of aggregating data to give a holistic account.

INTRODUCTION

Thanks to social media, parties can bypass traditional mass media gatekeepers, broadcast messages to voters directly and engage in agenda-building (e.g. Jungherr 2016). Moreover, analytics services and data availability across various social media platforms allow parties to better understand the issues that are timely and newsworthy. They can analyse not only the effectiveness of their own campaign but also the communication strategies of competitor parties and adjust their thematic focus accordingly (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010).

Social media thus allow parties to adapt to conditions of uncertainty and react dynamically and strategically to the important issues of the day (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994). They can shape their visibility in the short-run and prime the salience of a certain issue to increase their electoral gains. Consequently, the composition of issues parties emphasise on social media across time may diversify and become rather volatile. In

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such a context, established theories of issue ownership come under particular pressure (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996) and questions on the dynamics and drivers of parties' issue emphasis on social media arise.

While there is a growing body of literature making use of social media data to gain insights into electoral competition in the digital age, so far existing studies have not focused their attention on the short-term evolution of issue emphasis, day-by-day, during the campaign. In contrast, social media data gathered over a longer period of time are usually aggregated to depict the campaign as a whole, without considering its time-sensitive evolution. This paper wants to fill this gap. To that end, it examines the extent to which political parties emphasised different issues over the course of the 2017 German federal election campaign on Twitter and explores potential drivers behind such behaviour. To improve our understanding of the latter, we discuss two theoretical explanations for the dynamics of issue competition, i.e. strategic considerations of the behaviour of ideologically adjacent parties (Downs 1957; Anonymous 2015; Williams 2015) as well as responses to exogenous shocks from parties' wider political environment (Birkland 1998; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010) and apply them to the German Twittersphere.

The German case represents an exciting opportunity to dig into this. The 2017 German electoral campaign was the turning point in which party strategists and observers started to regard social media not just as experimental and peripheral venues but as central battlegrounds crucial for winning electoral campaigns (Stier et al. 2018). This is also due to the rise of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), which was founded in 2013 and was particularly successful in adopting social media strategically for campaign purposes (Faas and Klingelhöfer 2019). The surge of the AfD transformed the German political space leading to a polarisation on the socio-cultural dimension and politicised novel issue segments, somehow breaking the existing lines of the traditional economic left-right division (Franzmann 2019; Franzmann, Giebler, and Poguntke 2020). Hence, the 2017 federal election campaign offers, first, insights into an emerging market of e-campaigning that, secondly, has seen the entrance of a new actor, which is increasing the number of issues political parties may compete over and choose to emphasise.

Our empirical analysis is based on Twitter data from the official accounts of the 7 main German parties over a period of 55 days until and including election day on 24 September 2017. Thereby, we focus on parties' daily emphasis of economic and welfare issues representing the traditional economic left-right dimension as well as European integration, green-libertarian and immigration-related issues from the socio-cultural dimension. Twitter is chosen for its high level of professionalisation and rising usage numbers in Germany, especially among activist groups, political parties, and various elites and opinion leaders (Majó-Vázquez et al. 2017). Parties use Twitter to frequently advertise their propositions and contribute to debates about policy issues in general (Anonymous 2016). This allows us to trace the evolution and dynamics of unmediated issue emphasis with an unprecedented time granularity.

Our findings underline the importance of taking on a time-sensitive approach to investigate issue emphasis. In contrast to previous research, we show that parties do not always emphasise the same issues over the entire course of the campaign on Twitter. Instead, the attention parties give to issues they are renowned for fluctuates

frequently and alternates with other thematic priorities that may not lie in their area of competence. We reveal that this cut and thrust is driven both by exogenous shocks but also spatial considerations. However, the exact mechanism behind a party's decision to emphasise a specific issue in the short run depends on the type of issue in focus. Hence, while exogenous shocks and the behaviour of ideologically adjacent rivals incentivises parties to emphasise traditional economic and welfare issues, the explanatory power of the latter becomes insignificant for green-libertarian and immigration-related matters. Parties are only drawn to tweet about such topics due to so-called focusing events, such as the 'Diesel emission scandal' inspiring environmental debates or allegedly refugee-related crimes increasing the number of tweets on immigration. Hence, uncontested socio-cultural issues strongly advocated but mainly owned by a single party remain largely unaddressed by its rivals if they do not enjoy a high public salience due to exogenous shocks. The opposite is true for EU-related issues as they have a similarly high yield for all kinds of parties but are also of a second-order character in national elections.

STATIC OR DYNAMIC? ISSUE EMPHASIS IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

At the heart of contemporary deliberations on issue competition lies the theory of issue ownership. It holds that political parties are indelibly linked to certain issues over which they enjoy a long-standing reputation for competence and handling ability (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). In order to increase their vote share, therefore, parties will raise public salience on those issues over which they have a competitive advantage. The type of issue they focus on, however, depends on the party family they belong to. Mainstream established parties, for example, tend to focus on economic issues characterising traditional class-based political debates (Rokkan and Lipset 1967; Rovny 2012). Competition here is marked by offer differentiation, i.e. the issues are not owned by a single party, instead established parties compete fiercely over who has the best policy approach to broadly speaking the same kind of problems (Meguid 2005). For new and emerging parties, it is difficult to mark their difference on a market that is already saturated with offers. Hence, they follow another strategy which is referred to as niching and conflict-mobilising (De Sio and Lachat 2019; Wagner 2012). Instead of raising salience on already existing issues, these so-called 'niche parties' (Adams et al. 2006) act as 'issue entrepreneurs' (Hobolt and de Vries 2015) and aim at raising public awareness on novel socio-cultural issues breaking existing lines of the political division (Bischof and Wagner 2017).

Issue Emphasis in the Changing Political Space in Germany

In Western Europe, the emergence of such niche parties over the past 50 years goes along with a broader transformation of the political space signalling a change in the relative importance of traditional economic vis-à-vis socio-cultural issues (Kitschelt 2018): the increasing demand for environmental protection led to the establishment of Green parties, while de-nationalisation and globalisation in recent decades boosted the salience of issues related to a new demarcation/integration conflict and gave rise to novel right-wing forces (e.g. Kriesi 2008). In Germany, the transformation of the political space has seen two main phases: first, the emergence of the Greens in the

1970s and, second, the comparatively late surge of the populist radical-right AfD after its establishment in 2013 (Arzheimer 2015). The latter has been catalysed even further by the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015 which has increasingly politicised immigration-related issues in Germany, spurred the popularity of the AfD (Faas and Klingelhöfer 2019) and made the new cultural divide (Bornschieer 2010) increasingly virulent (Franzmann 2019).

Yet, in their recent contribution to a special issue on issue competition in Western Europe, Franzmann, Giebler, and Poguntke (2020) also using Twitter data argue that the demand for immigration, green-libertarian, EU integration and other socio-cultural issues is not fully reflected in the programmatic offers of the established parties in Germany. This leads to an asymmetry in terms of what is publicly salient and what those parties actually address. The existing literature also focusing on the 2017 electoral campaign, for example, holds that established parties rarely steer the debate to issues outside the traditional economic dimension and their field of competence (Franzmann 2019): the CDU and CSU have predominantly emphasised economic issues (Jakobs and Jun 2018), which is indeed rational considering Germany’s high economic development and low unemployment rate during their term in office. However, since they formed a ‘Grand Coalition’ with the Social Democrats (SPD) and had to defend the same economic and social policies in cabinet, these parties moved closer on the socioeconomic dimension and adopt a rather centrist position (Franzmann, Giebler, and Poguntke 2020). Simultaneously, it is maintained that the CDU and CSU strategically avoided emphasising socio-cultural issues, particularly immigration, in order to minimise potential conflict and circumvent polarisation among their electorate which remains divided on that topic (Faas 2015; Faas and Klingelhöfer 2019). Moreover, although the Bavarian CSU has reasons to mobilise against immigration as it represents the conservative wing of the Christian Democrats (Franzmann, Giebler, and Poguntke 2020), CDU and CSU build one faction at the federal level, therefore any criticism of the government’s immigration-policy can potentially spark a backlash for the CSU, too (Stier et al. 2017). Such concerted behaviour of the CDU and CSU is said to have opened up the space on the ideological right that the AfD was able to occupy (Franzmann 2019). According to the literature, the SPD kept its traditional focus on labour and social policy but also complemented it with strong references to European policy to profit from their lead candidate Martin Schulz’s expertise as former president of the European Parliament (Jakobs and Jun 2018).

During the 2017 electoral campaign, the parliamentary opposition consisted of the Left and Greens. Thereby, the Left is said to have emphasised classic welfare issues and the Greens held on to their flagship of environmental protection. Yet, studies also found that the Greens did talk quite substantially about other economic, domestic, European or foreign issues which is taken as an indication for its diminishing status as niche party (Faas and Klingelhöfer 2019). The AfD and liberal FDP both represented extra-parliamentary opposition parties (Franzmann 2019). In contrast to the AfD, the FDP counts among the established parties that failed to meet the five percent threshold of the German electoral system in the 2013 election. It combines economically right-wing with societal left-wing views but focuses mostly on economic issues. The AfD developed from a Eurosceptic to an anti-immigration party with the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015 (Gessler and Hunger 2018) and focuses almost exclusively on immigration,

which it is attested to own (Grande, Schwarzbözl, and Fatke 2019), but this party also paid attention to other socio-cultural issues, such as nationalism, traditional values, and Euroscepticism (Jakobs and Jun 2018). Thereby, it aims to divert attention away from the economic left-right divide (Franzmann 2019).

Dynamic Issue Emphasis on German Parties' Twitter Accounts

Common to all the above-mentioned studies is their operationalisation of issue emphasis as a cross-sectional phenomenon that is static throughout an electoral campaign. This relates closely to the theoretical core of the issue ownership literature assuming a relatively fixed nature of party-issue association over time (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). Accordingly, parties emphasise favourable issues to suit prevailing circumstances that are rather static and unchangeable. They selectively and habitually emphasise such specific issues compared to others. Hence, according to the issue ownership literature, there is only very little (if any) flexibility in parties' issue agendas even during campaigns. Accordingly, most of the above-mentioned studies focus their attention on manifestos and press-releases that are published either at one specific point in time or irregularly.

Recent approaches to issue competition are adopting a more dynamic view than the issue ownership theory: the issue yield model, for example, assumes that parties can indeed explore new issue goals as long as their voter base is unanimous on said topic and there is widespread support even outside their constituency to maximise electoral expansion (De Sio and Lachat 2020). Yet, even though the above cited study by Franzmann, Giebler, and Poguntke (2020) on the 2017 German election is based on this theory, it aggregates Twitter data and gives a holistic account of the campaign instead of a more fine-grained, chronological and time-sensitive insight. Twitter data, however, features specific time stamps and is, therefore, a particularly useful source to examine the entire evolution of a campaign. It, therefore, appears that existing studies overlook the potential of parties – especially on social media – to make strategic use of their political communication to emphasise different issues in the short-term even as if do not own them.

Figure 1 depicts the time series of the daily emphasis of traditional economic and welfare issues as well as green-libertarian, immigration and EU-related issues on the official Twitter accounts of the main German parties over a period of 55 days until and including election day. In contrast to the existing literature, we observe a strong daily fluctuation of the composition of issues that parties chose to focus on and emphasise. While the CDU, for example, indeed devotes a quite substantial number of Tweets to the economic dimension, we cannot confirm the strategic de-emphasis of cultural issues throughout the Twitter campaign. In fact, on 22 August and 3 September 2017, EU-related or immigration issues dominated their agenda and continue to play an important role toward the end of the campaign. The latter is also true for the CSU which focuses strongly but to varying degrees on immigration, depending on the day in focus. Interestingly, the SPD seems to tweet less about EU-related issues as argued in the literature and more on green-libertarian cultural aspects, which appear to be almost as important as economic issues during the hot days shortly before the election. Similarly, the Greens' focus on green-libertarian issues does not dominate the whole campaign. In fact, it is only on 29 out of 55 days that the

FIGURE 1
DYNAMICS OF ISSUE EMPHASIS ACROSS CAMPAIGN AND ACCORDING TO PARTY

Colour online, B/W in print

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- EU
- Immigration
- Green-Lib
- Welfare
- Economy

Greens publish more Tweets on green-libertarian issues than on economic, welfare, immigration or EU topics. This seems to highlight the Greens' transformation from a niche to a mainstream party. For the FDP, we observe a growing importance of economic and welfare issues only toward the end of the campaign and not throughout the eight weeks considered in the analysis. The two parties that appear to stick most to their core competences are the Left, which focuses mostly on economic and welfare issues, and the AfD, the Twitter communication of which is clearly dominated by immigration topics (though not exclusively based on these). However, the attention both parties give to such issues fluctuates frequently and at times alternates with other thematic priorities. This implies that beyond a 'stable value' of issue ownership, the dynamics around such value can be considerable during electoral campaigns and fluctuate substantially on a day-to-day basis. The question arising from these empirical observations then revolves around the drivers explaining parties' dynamic and fluctuating issue emphasis on social media.

DRIVERS BEHIND PARTY'S STRATEGIC SHORT-TERM ISSUE EMPHASIS

We argue that two mechanisms in particular can determine parties' short-term communication strategies: (1) responses to exogenous shocks from parties' wider political environment and (2) strategic spatial considerations. Both expectations assume that political parties are rational actors that aim at maximising votes, and seek (or stay in) office.

By exogenous shocks we refer to focusing events (Birkland 1998) that are occurring in the course of the campaign. During the 2017 federal election in Germany, for example, there was a terrorist attack in Barcelona on 17 August, there were tensions in the German-Turkish relationship especially in the aftermath of the G20 summit in Hamburg in July that year, but also persistent references to the so-called 'Diesel emissions scandal' with an ever increasing number of automobile producers found or pleading guilty. This is also reflected in the headlines of major German newspapers, such as the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), which reported that online articles featuring the above-mentioned topics were read most on a given day during the campaign. The same is true for domestic and foreign natural disasters. However, timely and newsworthy events in the centre of media and public attention may also be regional in scale, such as (alleged) criminal offenses by refugees in Bavaria, which received wide attention in the FAZ online version on 16 and 17 September.

Even though parties do not have any direct influence over such incidents, the literature argues that they would want to react to and 'ride the wave' (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994) on the specific issues these events make salient and touch upon in order to signal responsiveness and considerations to their voters (Klüver and Sagarzazu 2016) and even use them to their own electoral advantage (Kriesi, Bernhard, and Hänggli 2009). Allegedly 'immigration'-related crimes, for example, are breeding grounds for AfD's positions and, thereby, serve to illustrate a fit occasion for the party to increasingly tweet about immigration. Following new disclosures, for instance, the 'Diesel emission scandal' may be instrumentalised by parties to promote their own environmental stances by intensifying their Twitter communication on green-libertarian issues. Based on these deliberations, we expect parties to react dynamically to a

specific and ever-changing hierarchy of issues determined by exogenous focusing events and salient in the mind of citizens.

Rather than looking at all the events on a given day, however, we use the party-system agenda (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010) as a proxy to determine the important daily issues these events stimulate parties to communicate about. Hence, we assume that if there is a high average emphasis of an issue by all parties at a certain point, it is likely an important topic of that day. Differently from Green-Pedersen (2019), we apply this theory to explain daily shifts in issue attention on Twitter during an electoral campaign:

H1: The (short-term) emphasis of a given issue by a particular party should be determined by the emphasis that all the other parties are giving to that issue.

However, it is not only exogenous shocks that may drive parties' strategic issue emphasis, but also ideologically strategic reasons. According to the spatial competition mechanism as grounded in the work of Downs (1957), a voter's issue preferences are placed on a hypothetical spatial field along with all possible policy stances of parties. Voters will then vote for the party with the ideological position closer to its own. Hence, parties from the same 'ideological neighbourhood' (i.e. ideologically proximate parties) are competing against each other over a similar pool of potential voters (Anonymous 2015; Adams 2012; Wagner and Meyer 2014). Even though we are not looking at parties' policy positions but merely the issues they are raising, we assume that this mechanism also holds for the latter and especially for traditional economic and welfare issues (for a similar approach, see Anonymous 2018). To clarify the rationale behind this argument it is again useful to distinguish between party types: for electoral success, new and emerging parties are dependent on the identification and importance their core voters place on the novel issue segments they introduced and may own (Abou-Chadi 2016; Adams et al. 2006; Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Rovny 2013). Such parties will stick to these issue topics throughout the campaign, irrespective of the level of overall contestation they enjoy. Established parties, in contrast, do not need to pick up those niche issues unless they enjoy high overall salience. Quite the opposite, they may even risk dividing their own electoral coalition and being electorally punished by emphasising an issue they are not renowned for (Kitschelt 2018). Hence, a party may choose to refrain from responding to its ideologically adjacent party's strong emphasis on such niche issues as there is no electoral incentive to do so. In the German context, this may particularly apply to immigration and green-libertarian issues as they are mostly and at times exclusively emphasised by the Greens and the AfD. EU-related topics, on the other hand, are argued to hold a high yield for all kinds of pro-European mainstream parties (Franzmann, Giebler, and Poguntke 2020; Wardt 2015); furthermore, European issues are deemed as socio-cultural topics in some countries but not in others (Wheatley and Mendez 2019). Accordingly, we assume them to be more contested among all kinds of parties and less affected by this mechanism.

H2: The (short-term) emphasis of traditional economic and welfare issues by a particular party should be determined by the emphasis that ideologically adjacent parties give to these issues; conversely, less contested socio-cultural issues

mainly owned and strongly emphasised by a single party should remain unad-
dressed by its ideological neighboring rivals.

365 TWITTER DATA TO MEASURE SHORT-TERM DYNAMICS OF ISSUE EMPHASIS,
ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

To explore short-term dynamics in issue emphasis, we analysed all Tweets and
Retweets¹ published on the official accounts of the seven German parties currently rep-
resented in the German Bundestag and introduced in the ‘Dynamic Issue Emphasis on
370 German Parties’ Twitter Accounts’ section, including the @CDU, @CSU, @spdde,
@dieLinke, @fdp, @Die_Grünen, @Afd_Bund and @Afd² respectively. The data
was purchased from Brandwatch, a third-party reseller. Over a period of 55 days
until and including election day on 24 September 2017 this amounted to just over
375 12,000 tweets. The AfD and the SPD were the most active on Twitter (with almost
3000 and around 2000 Tweets respectively). The CDU comes in third place, followed
by the Left, FDP, the Greens and the CSU.

All tweets were hand-coded and categorised according to their thematic focus by
one expert coder. We however checked reliability with a random sample of 502
tweets rated by a second coder. On average and for the five issue categories in
380 focus, Krippendorff’s Alpha equals 0.89 which points to a high agreement between
both coders. Content categories were added consecutively to allow for all potential
topics to be covered. Non-political chatter and politics-related tweets were categorised
as ‘other’. In total, we identified 15 substantive content categories that were mutually
exclusive in the sense that we always assign each Tweet to the most important topic it
385 referred to. Our categories are closely reflected in previous works, such as the Com-
parative Agenda Project’s general codebook (Bevan 2019). In contrast to CAP,
however, we subsumed some content categories into a single-issue topic. For
example, CAP distinguishes between ‘Macroeconomics’, ‘Domestic Commerce’ and
‘Labor’ which we summarise as ‘economic issues’ if ‘Labor’-related content, for
390 example, does not refer to unemployment benefits, which we categorised as
‘welfare’. Moreover, CAP distinguishes between ‘civil rights’ and ‘environment’,
which we eventually merged into green-libertarian issues. Beyond economic, welfare
and green-libertarian issues, we also chose to focus our analysis on immigration and
EU-related issues. This choice is explained by the nature of our analysis which is com-
395 parative to explain different communication strategies regarding the economic left/
right and socio-cultural issue segments. Second, and according to the descriptive statis-
tics presented in Table 1, on average and across all parties the five issue topics we
focus on cover 41.36 per cent of all tweets published by the parties, including the
vast amount of content falling into the ‘other’ category. Overall, welfare issues were
400 tweeted more about, with an average of 29 tweets per day, followed by economic
issues (23 tweets per day), immigration (19 tweets), and green-libertarian topics (13
tweets). Very few tweets referred to EU issues (only five per day). While there is no
CAP data available for the 2017 election to compare our numbers with, the ERC
project POLCON (Hutter and Kriesi 2019) collected data on the saliences of the
405 issues that were mentioned in relation to the parties in the main German newspapers
FAZ and Bild during the 2017 campaign. Their categories are similar to ours;

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF ISSUE EMPHASIS PER PARTY PER DAY

	AfD		CDU		CSU		FDP		Greens		Left		SPD	
	Mean	St.Dev.	Mean	St.Dev.	Mean	St.Dev.	Mean	St.Dev.	Mean	St.Dev.	Mean	St.Dev.	Mean	St.Dev.
Total number of tweets	53.3	22.3	33.9	33.8	15.9	20.5	21.4	22.5	18.3	21.4	25.2	19.3	52.3	58.8
Total number on 5 issues	16.9	11.3	11.7	14.4	5.7	7.7	10.1	13.2	10.2	12.4	12.2	11.5	21.8	23.7
5 Issues/total number	31.1%	12.2%	29.4%	19.9%	35.5%	41.5%	45.8%	35.6%	58.0%	32.8%	42.1%	19.9%	47.6%	66.6%
Economy	2.5	2.6	3.8	4.6	1.6	2.3	3.1	5.3	2.4	3.3	5.0	4.8	5.0	5.8
Welfare	2.0	2.3	4.7	6.3	1.6	2.6	3.6	5.4	1.8	3.4	5.0	5.6	10.3	12.5
Green-Lib	2.4	2.0	0.9	1.6	0.3	0.7	0.9	1.5	4.2	4.6	0.7	1.1	3.3	4.0
Immigration	9.3	6.5	1.5	3.5	1.9	2.8	2.2	5.7	1.4	2.6	1.2	2.0	2.0	4.0
EU	0.7	0.9	0.8	1.2	0.3	0.7	0.2	0.5	0.4	0.8	0.3	0.6	1.1	2.0

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furthermore, the data reveals that the five issues of our analysis are also included in 69 per cent of all the articles coded by POLCON staff, which underlines the centrality of our issue topics for the campaign.

In order to examine the extent to which our expectations hold true, we use a cross-sectional time series approach and analyse each of the five issues using Poisson regression. Our first hypothesis (H1) regarding exogenous shocks is operationalised with the party-system agenda as a proxy by looking at the average emphasis placed on each single issue on a given day by all other parties except for the marker party. We label this variable *Issue Attention by all other parties*. With respect to H2, spatial proximity is estimated based on 2017 Chapel Hill expert survey data (Polk et al. 2017) and, more specifically, using the left-right ideological positioning of each of the German parties. Starting from these positions, we estimated the average emphasis on each specific issue placed by the ideologically adjacent parties of the marker party itself. This operationalisation allows us to check if – how party i talks about issue k – is affected by what its contiguous neighbour parties do, besides and beyond what the entire party system does. We label this variable *Issue Attention by spatially adjacent parties*. Figure 2 reports the left-right placements of the German parties according to the above expert survey. As a result, *Issue Attention by spatially adjacent parties* for the SPD (i.e. an inner party) for a given issue (say economy) is estimated by averaging the emphasis on economic issues by CDU and the Greens (the two adjacent parties of the SPD). While for the AfD (i.e. an extreme party) the previous variable is estimated by considering only the emphasis given on economy by the CSU (the only adjacent party of the AfD).

Note, that according to the way we have operationalised H1 and H2, we are actually estimating a ‘spatial-X model’ (Williams 2015). Spatial econometric models are indeed quite attractive when we expect that observations are interdependent, and when we recognise the possibility of contagion, diffusion or demonstration effects among parties’ strategies as we are doing in the present work. A ‘spatial-X model’ precisely allows considering such possibility, avoiding the assumption (and the implicit bias) of conditional independence among observations in empirical testing (see also Franzese and Hays 2008). This spatial-econometric model has the following formula for a given party i (say for the emphasis on the economic issue; the same applies also to all other issues, of course):

$$\text{ECONOMY}_i = \rho \sum_{j \neq i} w_{ij} \text{ECONOMY}_j + \alpha \sum_{j \neq i} z_{ij} \text{ECONOMY}_j + \beta X + \varepsilon_i,$$

where ECONOMY_j is the value of the economic issue in the other ($i \neq j$) parties. However, we also include two different contiguity-weight matrices to reflect the

FIGURE 2
THE IDEOLOGICAL SPACE DURING THE 2017 GERMAN ELECTION



Source: 2017 Chapel Hill Expert Survey Data.

relative degree of connection from j to i . For H1, we assume that this connection is always present (i.e. $w_{ij} = 1$) for all the German parties, for H2 this connection is only present (i.e. $z_{ij} = 1$) for the adjacent parties of the marker one.³ Together, these values make up the two spatial lags. Finally, ρ and α reflect the coefficient for the spatial lags, i.e. the overall strength of ‘interdependence’ of the value of ECONOMY in party i and in other parties, as weighted by w_{ij} and z_{ij} . The other right-hand-side factors of the previous equation are all the other possible control variables.

To control for issue ownership and persistency of the issue agendas, we also included the lagged dependent variable of the respective issue at $t - 1$, whereby t is a one-day unit. We also included a variable called ‘weekends’ as we assume that parties generally tweet less when there is no working day. Moreover, we included a log for the days until election day as we expect that the discussion about specific policy issues might decrease, while more generic tweets about the need to go to vote can be posted as the election day is approaching. Additionally, there were also campaign-related media events, such as the televised debates between the two *Spitzenkandidaten* of CDU/CSU, Angela Merkel, and SPD, Martin Schulz, on 3 September and the candidates of the other four smaller parties on 30 August. Such debates were already found to initiate cyclical heydays of the 2013 election campaign on Twitter by causing an immense increase in political chat (Jungherr 2014). We, therefore, assume that in 2017, too, they provoke a boost in traffic. We, therefore, included the control variable *TV debates* accounting for the days that the two televised debates took place, i.e. 3 September with the *Spitzenkandidaten* and 30 August for all other parties. Note also that each of our statistical models reported below is estimated by including a set of party-fixed effects to account for any remaining idiosyncratic effects at the party level on issue emphasis, including difference in overall Twitter-traffic by party.

Table 2 summarises the results of our Poisson regression for each of the five issues in focus.⁴ The Poisson regression confirms to a large extent our hypotheses as outlined in the ‘Drivers Behind Party’s Strategic Short-Term Issue Emphasis’ section. When differentiating between types of issues, we find that the emphasis put by parties on traditional left-right issues is driven by both exogenous shocks (H1) and spatial considerations (H2). With economic and welfare issues being highly contested, the efficacy of the mechanisms seems plausible as all kinds of parties are emphasising these issues regularly throughout the campaign. Substantially, though, the party-system agenda which is the proxy for exogenous shocks and focusing events respectively has a stronger effect. If the other parties increase their emphasis on economic issues, the expected number of tweets posted by a marker party will increase. Analogously, the marker party’s number of posts on economic issues will increase, too, if the emphasis on economic issues by ideologically adjacent parties grows. The results are similar for welfare issues.

For green-libertarian and immigration issues belonging to the socio-cultural dimension, the picture is somewhat different. In fact, issue attention to both topics is driven strongly by exogenous shocks only, while spatial mechanisms are statistically insignificant. To sum up, we can conclude that parties are only incentivised to emphasise these two socio-cultural issues if there is an exogenous shock or focusing event, such as the

TABLE 2
POISSON REGRESSIONS ON ISSUE ATTENTION

	Economy	Welfare	Green-Lib	Immigration	EU
545 Lagged issue attention ($t = -1$ day)	0.022*** (0.005)	0.005 ⁺ (0.003)	0.043*** (0.009)	0.046*** (0.005)	0.010 (0.048)
H1: Issue attention by all other parties	0.079*** (0.014)	0.074*** (0.010)	0.103* (0.040)	0.140*** (0.017)	-0.134 (0.176)
H2: Issue attention by spatially adjacent parties	0.053*** (0.010)	0.034*** (0.006)	0.020 (0.020)	-0.006 (0.012)	0.291*** (0.083)
550 Weekends	-0.253*** (0.075)	-0.375*** (0.073)	-0.070 (0.088)	-0.252*** (0.081)	-0.711*** (0.198)
Log of days until election	-0.174*** (0.035)	-0.260*** (0.033)	-0.157*** (0.044)	-0.023 (0.041)	-0.402*** (0.083)
TV debates	0.422*** (0.117)	0.807*** (0.097)	0.450** (0.169)	0.290* (0.133)	1.198*** (0.251)
AfD			Reference group		
555 CDU	0.194 (0.121)	0.573*** (0.136)	-1.001*** (0.173)	-1.652*** (0.127)	0.033 (0.229)
CSU	-0.526*** (0.138)	-0.295* (0.145)	-1.966*** (0.253)	-1.352*** (0.120)	-0.679* (0.289)
FDP	0.112 (0.118)	0.536*** (0.122)	-0.947*** (0.167)	-1.289*** (0.107)	-1.065** (0.324)
560 Greens	-0.317* (0.132)	-0.477** (0.158)	0.436*** (0.125)	-1.676*** (0.132)	-0.630* (0.274)
Left	0.641*** (0.109)	0.960*** (0.115)	-1.272*** (0.205)	-1.863*** (0.143)	-0.801** (0.302)
SPD	0.571*** (0.111)	1.684*** (0.116)	0.228+ (0.131)	-1.362*** (0.115)	0.411+ (0.215)
565 Constant	0.946*** (0.160)	0.928*** (0.167)	1.047*** (0.192)	1.581*** (0.153)	0.774* (0.338)
Observations	378	378	378	378	378
Pseudo R^2	0.271	0.429	0.256	0.345	0.167
AIC	1944.649	2139.620	1445.382	1936.384	726.503
BIC	1995.802	2190.774	1496.536	1987.538	777.656
570 Log likelihood	-959.324	-1056.810	-709.691	-955.192	-350.251

⁺ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; Standard errors in parentheses.

575 ‘Diesel emission scandal’ that constantly opens up the debate about environmentally friendly transportation and, thus, green-libertarian issues, or the alleged crimes of refugees, which increase the salience of immigration issues. It is precisely when these events happen that they increase the salience of the related issues that parties feel inclined to pick up in their Twitter communication, even though they would usually leave it uncontested as they are owned mainly by the Greens and the AfD and do not fall in their area of competence.

580 For EU-related issues we found different results as exogenous shocks are statistically insignificant. This can be due to the lack of newsworthy focusing events concerning the EU that could have boosted public salience during the campaign. However, since parties are tweeting comparatively less about EU issues in general, the number of overall tweets may be simply too low for the party-system agenda to hold. As Euro-
585 pean elections are usually of second-order (Reif and Schmitt 1980), topics concerning

Europe and European integration are also of less importance, particularly during a national electoral campaign.

For EU-issues we do find, however, that the spatial mechanism is effective and comparatively strong. In fact, if an ideologically adjacent rival party were to publish additional tweets on EU issues, the tendency to tweet about that specific issue by the marker party would increase as well. Since the issue is not owned by one specific party and both established and emerging ones have a high yield emphasising it (Franzmann, Giebler, and Poguntke 2020), there is an electoral incentive for all kinds of ideologically proximate rivals to respond to each other's emphasis of EU topics as not to fail to signal competence and care to the similar pool of voters they compete over.

Finally, we would like to briefly comment on the party fixed effects as well as control variables. After having extracted the impact of all other independent variables and looking at the party fixed effects first, we can confirm some of the previously made findings on parties' overall issue priorities during the campaign but must also challenge others. For traditional economic and welfare issues, for example, we find that established parties like the SPD (Eco: $\beta = 0.571, p < .001$; Welfare: $\beta = 1.684, p < .001$) and the Left (Eco: $\beta = 0.641, p < .001$; Welfare: $\beta = 0.960, p < .001$) tweet significantly more than the emerging AfD, which serves as reference group here. For the CDU, this is only true for welfare issues (Welfare: $\beta = 0.573, p < .001$), while actually the CSU (Eco: $\beta = -0.526, p < .001$; Welfare: $\beta = -0.295, p < .05$) tweets much less on economic and welfare issues despite its status as sister party of the CDU. This suggests a certain dissociation from the latter's priorities on Twitter. Moreover, there is no statistically significant difference between the AfD's and FDP's emphasis of economic issues on Twitter, even though the literature found the FDP to campaign more strongly on economic issues. The Greens (Eco: $\beta = -0.317, p < .05$; Welfare: $\beta = -0.477, p < .05$) tweet less on both issues but unsurprisingly more and overall actually most on green-libertarian issues ($\beta = 0.436, p < .001$). All other parties except for the SPD, tweet significantly less on this topic; this is also true for EU-related issues. Hence, in contrast to other established parties, the SPD does in fact focus on some socio-cultural issues to a higher extent than the emerging and new AfD and, thus, reveals a more diverse and multidimensional issue composition on Twitter. In terms of immigration, the AfD clearly owns the issue as all other parties address it significantly less on their Twitter accounts. The differences in level of issue contestation is also illustrated by the intra-cluster correlation, i.e. the degree of the total variance of such a variable that is due only to a difference across parties: for EU issues it is 6 per cent, for economic issues 11 per cent but it grows to almost 30 per cent for immigration.

Our control variables confirm our previously made expectations. The German parties tweet significantly less on economic, welfare, immigration and EU-related topics during weekends. They also decrease their Twitter communication on economic, welfare, green-libertarian and EU-related aspects the closer election day is approaching. Across all issues, the TV debates have a strong effect. During these events, parties do indeed tweet more: on average, each party published 72.1 tweets on the days of the debates, whereas it was only 29.9 tweets on all other days. The coefficient is positive for all issues, so that during the days of the televised debates all parties were talking more about the five policy issues in focus here. So beyond non-political chatter or politics-related tweets, we can confirm Jungherr's (2014) findings that these days are indeed a heyday of political communication during the German campaign.

CONCLUSION

We investigated whether issue agendas of German parties on twitter are indeed stable or fluctuate over the course of the German federal election campaign of 2017. Differently from previous research, we show that parties do not always emphasise the same set of issues over time. Instead, the attention parties give to issues they are renowned for fluctuates frequently and alternates with other thematic priorities that may not lie in their area of competence. Thereby, our findings underline the importance of taking a time-sensitive approach to investigate issue emphasis, which has been mostly foregone in the existing literature. While scholars argued that there is an asymmetry between voters demands for socio-cultural topics and established parties' programmatic offers that are neglecting the latter (Franzmann 2019; Franzmann, Giebler, and Poguntke 2020), we do show that, for example, the SPD tweets relatively often about green-libertarian and EU-related issues. Simultaneously, we find that the CSU is less likely to follow the content-related strategies of the other Christian Democrats and focuses quite strongly on immigration. Such results diminish the power of earlier findings and reveal that some established parties do indeed focus on socio-cultural issues.

We additionally reveal that the cut and thrust in campaigning is driven both by exogenous shocks and spatial considerations. However, the exact mechanism behind a party's decision to emphasise a specific issue in the short run depends on the type of issue in focus. Hence, while exogenous shocks and the behaviour of ideologically adjacent rivals incentivises parties to emphasise traditional economic and welfare issues, the explanatory power of the latter renders insignificant for green-libertarian and immigration-related aspects. Parties are only drawn to tweet about such topics due to so-called focusing events, such as the 'Diesel emissions scandal' inspiring environmental debates or allegedly immigration-related crimes. Hence, uncontested socio-cultural issues strongly advocated but mainly owned by a single party remain largely unaddressed by its rivals if they do not enjoy a high public salience. The opposite is true for EU-related issues which have a similarly high yield for all kinds of parties but are also of a second-order character in national elections. Our findings also contribute to the debate on whether EU issues are more similar to the traditional economic left-right scale or to the socio-cultural dimension (something that can vary by country: Wheatley and Mendez 2019). The fact that spatial competition dynamics apply also to EU issues (likewise economic and welfare issues) and not to socio-cultural topics seems to speak in favour of the former argument.

The meaning of our findings for representative democracy may be manifold and we can remain only speculative in nature here: on the one hand, we think that the spontaneous adaptation of parties' political communication as is done on Twitter may have the potential of closing the ranks between parties and voters if the former respond to publicly salient and demanded topics and, thereby, increase, political efficacy. On the other hand, addressing diverse issues that go beyond their official party lines could undermine parties' credibility, alienate partisans and increase party-voter-distances in times of already decreasing or stagnant levels of conventional political participation in Western democracies (Van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012). Unfortunately, our paper can give no precise answer to the actual and long-term consequences. With our contribution and subsequent stimulation of the debate on short-

term issue emphasis, we do however hope to pave the way for future research tackling such questions in more detail.

680 Our study is also limited in that we are looking at a specific case – the German federal election campaign of 2017 – as well as one specific medium, Twitter. The dynamics of issue competition we are explaining, hence, relate to an election campaign and not party competition in general. However, Germany as a federal political system is attested a continuous election fever (Schmidt 2016). Future research could test whether the findings hold in different political contexts and systems, particularly in two-party systems where party competition is structured differently. Furthermore, a cross-media approach could verify whether our results also hold on other social media that 685 retain different features concerning, for instance, the length of posts.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

690 Q1 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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NOTES

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1. In the following, we mean both Tweets and Retweets when referring to Tweets.
 2. The AfD switched their official Twitter account from @AfD_Bund to @AfD on 4 September 2017.
 3. We row-standardized our connectivity (weight) matrix, as is commonly done in spatial econometrics research (see: Franzese and Hays 2008).
 - 715 4. We employed a Poisson model rather than a Negative Binomial one given that this latter model becomes biased in presence of fixed effects (Guimarães 2008).

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