# Party ownership or individual specialization? A comparison of politicians' individual issue attention across three different agendas

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## Abstract

Studies have shown that parties selectively emphasize different issues to compete with each other to raise the salience for their preferred issues and to appear competent in handling them. This study applies the selective emphasis framework on individual politicians. We argue that politicians compete with both politicians from different parties as with their party members. We expect that issue ownership matters to compete with politicians from different parties and issue specialization to compete with politicians from their own party. We studied the individual issue agenda of 144 Belgian politicians for a period of 9 months on Twitter, in the news and in parliament. Our results show that issue specialization is a consistent driver of the three issue agendas of politicians, while the effect of issue ownership varies across agendas. This means that both factors are not mutually exclusive and that combining them can be an opportune strategy for politicians.

## Introduction

Research has demonstrated that political parties are strategic actors that compete with each other through the selective emphasis of different issues. This allows parties to accentuate their strength and competence on a few policy issues on which they have built a reputation (Green-Pedersen, 2007; Robertson, 1976; Schröder and Stecker, 2017). This idea has been echoed by the issue ownership literature, indicating that focusing on specific issues is an effective strategy for parties to build a reputation and garner more votes. Issue ownership means that parties can own certain issues; these are issues that people believe a certain party is better able to handle than others. If political parties then succeed at making their owned issues salient during election campaigns, they will get more votes (Petrocik, 1996). Therefore, parties selectively emphasize

certain issues to try and influence the public agenda, by making their preferred issues more salient than others.

This study argues that just as parties compete with each other through selectively addressing issues, individual politicians do so as well. Politicians are faced with two different competitors. They compete both with politicians from other parties, but they also compete with politicians from their own party. To distinguish themselves from politicians from another party, they can stress the issues their party has

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a strong reputation on. In that sense, individual politicians strengthen the party message. Nevertheless, a political party is not an overbearing entity, but rather a collection of politicians that have similar, yet not identical, preferences. Therefore, it is very rare for a party to have perfect cohesion (Ceron, 2017; Greene and Haber, 2017; McGann, 2002). While a main driver of a parties' issue agenda is issue ownership, this might be less relevant for individual politicians because by addressing party-owned issues it is harder to differentiate oneself from colleagues within the party. Just as parties can own issues that they are competent on (i.e. party ownership), politicians can, to a lesser extent, also try to build a reputation on issues that they want to prioritize. This can be labelled as the issue specialization of a politician (Damgaard, 1995; Mattson and Strøm, 1995; Sieberer, 2006; Van Schendelen, 1976; Vos, 2016). Although both terms are clearly related by their focus on issue reputation, they remain conceptually different. Issue ownership is operationalized and defined by how the public perceives the issue reputation of parties, while issue specialization is not about public perceptions, but rather what the politicians themselves identify as their specialized topics (see 'Data and methods' section).

Within parliamentary party groups, there tends to be a division of labour as members are spread over different specialized committees. Members of Parliament (MPs) are deemed as the spokesperson for the party on a specific policy if they are part of that committee (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2011; Mattson and Strøm, 1995). In other words, politicians from the same party are specialized in different policy domains. Comparable to how parties emphasize their owned issues to increase saliency for that topic, we believe that individual politicians will emphasize the issues they are specialized in to signal their expertise, not just to the general public, but also to journalists and to the selectorate of the party who compose the ballot list and distribute political mandates. However, despite numerous recent studies, little to no research has been done to confirm the argument that issue specialization is a crucial driver for the individual issue agenda of politicians. That is why the first aim of this article is to find out if individual politicians do, in fact, focus more on issues they are specialized in or whether party characteristics (i.e. issue ownership) mainly determine the issue emphasis of individual politicians.

Just as parties, politicians are strategic actors that have their own goals and think tactically about the use of all available means to realize those goals (Strömbäck and Esser, 2017). Therefore, we can also expect politicians to be strategic in choosing the channels to signal their specialization. Traditionally, politicians have roughly two ways via which they can promote their own issue agenda: first, by taking certain initiatives in parliament or government (Mayhew, 1974); and second, by getting into the news and attracting public attention with their preferred issues. During the past decennium, however, social media have given politicians a third way to directly interact with citizens and have allowed for a much more personal approach to political communication. In other words, individual politicians themselves can broadcast their own messages to a wide audience. Each of these three agendas can be conceived as an individual agenda with its own rules and conventions. This means that the specific agenda that is under study might influence the effects of issue specialization and issue ownership. Therefore, the second aim is to investigate on what platform or arena this individual issue agenda is most present. We will compare the issue attention of politicians on three different agendas: the individual media agenda (news items where a politician is present), the parliamentary agenda (initiatives a politician has taken) and the social media agenda (tweets of a politician).

We studied the three agendas of 144 Belgian MPs for a period of 9 months, collecting and coding over 73,000 documents. Overall, we find that issue specialization is a strong and consistent factor driving the selective issue emphasis on different agendas, while issue ownership is less important and works different across agendas. In the 'Results' and 'Conclusion' sections, we try to interpret these findings and suggest possible avenues for future research.

## What influences individual issue attention: Issue ownership versus issue specialization

### Party competition through selective emphasis

The idea of party competition through selective issue emphasis was established by David Robertson (1976). He argued that party competition is focused on selective emphasis rather than direct confrontation. Robertson demonstrates that the politics of competitive democracy is, in essence, the politics of problem-solving, meaning that there are several societal problems and that political parties each present ways to remedy them. Next, voters then can choose which solution they prefer. Thus, it would be illogical of opposition parties to draw attention to problem areas in which the government has been successful. Just as it would not make sense for the government to draw attention to problems, it has not been able to properly solve. Therefore, we expect parties to focus on different issues rather than compete about the same ones. Budge and Farlie (1983) further developed this selective emphasis thesis. They argue that parties stress particular issues that work in their favour. For example, left-wing parties handle unemployment and social welfare problems; right-wing parties are more skilful dealing with inflation, excessive taxation and so on. In other words, a party wins by reinforcing its base vote with the support of persuadable voters who have been attracted by a campaign fought over issues on which the party is regarded as particularly competent.

The issue ownership theory by Petrocik (1996) has expanded this idea even further, claiming that parties can

'own' certain issues. These are issues that people believe a certain party is better able to handle than others. Parties get this reputation due to a history of attention, initiative and innovation towards these issues, which leads voters to believe that one party is better equipped and committed to doing something about that issue than other parties. Therefore, if parties are able to make that issue the one at stake during a campaign, it will result in more votes for that party. Since then, researchers have provided an increasingly sophisticated understanding of what issue ownership means and how it develops over time (Thesen et al., 2017). For example, Walgrave et al. (2012) divided the concept of issue ownership into a competence dimension (how capable is the party on the issue) and an associative dimension (the spontaneous link between some issues and some parties). To sum up, selectively emphasizing issues is a crucial element in the competition for votes between political parties. Parties highlight 'owned' issues that are advantageous for themselves, while they ignore issues that are disadvantageous or are owned by other parties.

The existing issue ownership literature can partly help us to explain the issue attention of individual politicians. If parties benefit from their owned issues becoming salient, we can also expect individual politicians to address issues that their party is strong on, as a vote for the party indirectly means a vote for them. Politicians compete with politicians from other parties by selectively strengthening the parties' reputation on certain issues. For instance, politicians from a green party will pay attention to environmental issues, while an extreme right politician will more likely stress immigration. Therefore, we can expect issue ownership to have an effect on the issue attention of politicians.

> **H1**: Politicians from parties that own an issue pay more attention to that issue than politicians from parties that do not own the issue.

### Individual competition through selective emphasis

Although considerable research has been done towards the selective issue emphasis of parties, almost no research exists on the issue agenda of individual politicians. However, there are several good reasons to devote more attention to the individual level. First, in recent years, we see that party identification in general has been in decline. Individual politicians, on the other hand, are more and more becoming the forefront of the political arena. Therefore, people are more familiar with these individual politicians than they are with abstract parties (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002). This personalization of politics manifests itself in different ways. For example, in media coverage, journalists prefer individual politicians to parties (Van Aelst et al., 2012). Research also indicates that, at least in some countries, individual politicians are becoming more important

for the vote choice of citizens (Rahat and Sheafer, 2007; Takens et al., 2015; van Holsteyn and Andeweg, 2010).

Second, the introduction and rising importance of social media have given individual politicians a new tool to promote themselves and their own issue agenda. On social media, politicians post messages 'in their own name', this means that they are more free to focus on their preferred issues (Ceron, 2017). Thus, individual politicians themselves interact with the general public on social media, reinforcing their visibility and potential importance in the vote choice of citizens. Therefore, we should not only look at how parties compete but also include the competition between individual politicians. Individual politicians can compete with one another by, for example, endorsing different policy proposals (Budge and Farlie, 1983) or by using different types of rhetoric (Krebs and Jackson, 2007). This study, however, focuses on how individual politicians compete with one another through selectively emphasizing certain issues.

To get re-elected, politicians not only have to compete with politicians from different parties but also with politicians from their own party. In each party, there is a so-called intra-party competition for the best positions on the ballot list and the best mandates (e.g. minister posts or parliamentary leader posts). Individual politicians can try to impress the party leaders, or alternatively, the electorate in their district. In particular, electoral systems with a flexible list system encourage politicians to adopt personal vote-seeking strategies (Bräuninger et al., 2012). By using a preference vote for an individual politician, voters can change the list order that was created by the party selectorate. Therefore, politicians will want to differentiate themselves from politicians from their own party to move upwards on the ballot list. However, politicians can hardly rely on ideology and issue positions to differentiate themselves from politicians from their own party, seeing as they (more or less) share the same ideology. Therefore, it is an opportune strategy of politicians to not only focus on issues their party owns but also highlight other issues. Hence, we believe that issue specialization might impact the individual issue agendas of politicians.

Issue specialization can have different origins. Often politicians specialize themselves through their professional background. The education of politicians and the profession that they were active in before becoming a politician impacts the specific policy domains they specialize in (Tresch, 2009). For instance, a politician who has studied medicine and was previously a doctor will most likely be specialized in healthcare. MPs can also build this individual issue ownership through their parliamentary work. In parliament, politicians are seated in different specialized committees and because of this, politicians get specialized in those policy areas. MPs either choose their own committees or are allocated to a specific committee by their party that favours a division of labour within their organization

(Andeweg and Thomassen, 2011). Politicians are expected to work on the issues of their committees and in that way can also become the spokesperson for the party on those specific policy domains. This also helps them build a reputation within their party, as MPs indicate that they often take voting cues from the party specialist (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2011).

Next, politicians have to signal their expertise to journalists, voters and the party selectorate in order for them to know they are indeed specialists on specific topics. The same way parties can own issues by paying a lot of attention to them or coming up with new initiatives, individual politicians can also bind issues to themselves. By tweeting, through legislative proposals and by appearing in the media, politicians try to demonstrate that they are experts on a certain topic. It makes sense that if politicians try to signal their expertise, they will divert more attention towards their specialized topics on their issue agendas. This in turn will cause their agenda's to be more concentrated because they focus on a selected number of issues instead of following a 'generalist' approach by paying attention to a wide number of topics. Politicians want to signal their specialization to strengthen their visibility and relevance. First, if an issue politicians are specialists in becomes salient, they become more visible in the media. Political specialists function as any other type of expert because they are very knowledgeable about a specific topic (Albæk, 2011). Therefore, we expect journalists to utilize these specialists to give background information regarding a specific news event and comment on it (Conrad, 1999). Van Camp (2017) shows that the specialization of politicians does indeed have a positive effect on their chances of getting into the media, meaning that if politicians are specialized in a certain topic, journalists will more often include them in articles, leading to more visibility. Nevertheless, this means that journalists have to know who the specialists are, thus politicians try to signal their specializations to the media through their tweets and parliamentary work.

This visibility is beneficial to politicians for two reasons. First, it helps politicians to become more well known by the public. It is very unlikely that citizens will vote for candidates they do not know, and the most important source of information about candidates for citizens is the news media (André et al., 2012; Arnold, 2004). Moreover, Däubler et al. (2016) argue that the mentioning of an MP's name causes people to get a preference for that candidate over lesser-known candidates. Meaning that getting into the news is good for getting more votes and thus getting re-elected. Second, the visibility of politicians influences the selectorate of the party. In most political systems, party leaders arrange the positions on the ballot lists and they are the ones who distribute the mandates after the elections. The visibility of politicians can influence the decision of the party selectorate because in mediatized democracies an important selection criterion for political parties is how well their representatives have performed in the media (Sheafer and Tzionit, 2006). Therefore, visibility leads to more media exposure, which in turn leads to a higher chance of getting re-elected.

The second reason why politicians want to signal their specialization is because it raises their policy relevance within their party. When an issue is more salient, parties are expected to form policy positions on that topic. Parties rely on the expertise of their specialized politicians to form policy positions that are congruent with the party's ideology. All members of the party are then expected to endorse this position. This means that politicians are able to weigh more heavily on the political agenda when the issues they are specialized in become more salient. In addition to being able to shape the parties' policy position, specialized politicians with ambition are also more eligible to be in the running for cabinet posts. Research has shown that parties do in fact allocate minister positions to politicians with political expertise on the topic (Beckman, 2006). Thus, it is crucial for politicians to show to the leadership of their party that they are specialized, and therefore competent, in certain issues. In sum, politicians have good reasons to signal their expertise to voters, the media and the selectorate of their party and are, therefore, expected to put the issues they are specialized in on top of their individual agenda.

> **H2**: Politicians that are specialized in an issue will pay more attention to that issue than non-specialized politicians.

## Agenda autonomy

Politicians have multiple agendas on which they can address issues, that is why we opted to investigate three separate political agendas: the Twitter agenda, the individual media agenda and the parliamentary agenda. Each of these agendas has its own rules and conventions. For instance, the three agendas have a different format and length. On Twitter, users are limited to 280 characters, usually resulting in short messages, where they can link to other websites, posts pictures and so on. Parliamentary documents are much more formal, but politicians can extensively address a certain issue, making it possible to handle more complex issues. The media agenda is quite diverse in terms of format and size, depending on the type of medium and outlet. We believe that the particular set of rules and conventions of each agenda causes the individual issue attention of politicians on these channels to differ from one another. A key element in this regard is the degree of autonomy that politicians have to choose the issues they will address. Unlike with policy positions, the previous literature has not shown that parties constrain their members in which topics they can talk about (De Winter and Dumont, 2000). It seems that, as long as politicians adhere

to the party position, they are free to focus on the topics that they want. This degree of autonomy differs, however, for each agenda.

We can arrange our three agendas from most autonomous, Twitter, to least autonomous, the media. Social media, such as Twitter, are unmediated online platforms where users often post spontaneous messages. This increases the likelihood that these online posts reflect the true preferences and interests of political actors (Ceron, 2017; Schober et al., 2015). On Twitter, there are almost no restrictions as to what you can and cannot talk about. As long as it does not violate the Twitter rules, meaning no graphic violence, adult content or any abusive or hateful conducts[1], people can tweet about whichever topics they want. This indicates that most of the time, politicians are free to focus on whatever issues they seem fit on social media.

In parliament, politicians are bound by institutional rules. Parliamentarians are assigned to certain committees by their party and are expected to work on the topics of these committees (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2011). Therefore, it becomes harder for politicians to work on issues of committees that they do not belong to. Furthermore, in parliament, politicians are part of a parliamentary party group. One of the main roles of a parliamentary party group is to make sure that MPs respect a certain discipline, this means that the hands of most MPs are tied regarding confidence votes, legislation and also parliamentary questions (Dandoy, 2011; De Winter and Dumont, 2000). Therefore, politicians might have only limited autonomy about which issues they ask parliamentary questions or submit bills.

Lastly, whether or not a politician gets featured in an article is a journalistic choice and politicians mostly need to be asked to appear in an article. Leading politicians can sometimes dictate the news and force access to the media arena (Van Aelst et al., 2016), but most ordinary politicians are not newsworthy enough to claim media attention. Journalists remain the gatekeepers as to which events get covered in the news and which events do not (Jürgens et al., 2011; Reese et al., 2009). In short, we can conclude that the individual issue agenda of politicians might be dependent on the autonomy they have over the agenda.

It is also important to note that the three agendas under study are not independent of one another. Research has already shown that there is a reciprocal relationship between, for example, the media agenda and the Twitter agenda of politicians (Conway et al., 2015; Conway-Silva et al., 2018; Harder et al., 2017) but also between the media agenda and the parliamentary agenda of politicians (Sevenans, 2018; Van Aelst and Vliegenthart, 2014). However, this reciprocal influence does not affect the degree of autonomy of the different agendas. Although politicians on Twitter, for instance, often react to what is happening in the media, they still have the freedom not do so and address an alternative issue.

In general, we expect that politicians will try to signal their specialization across all of their agendas. Each agenda reaches a partly different audience; therefore, to signal their specialization to the largest amount of people, politicians will emphasize specialized issues on all three agendas. Nevertheless, we can expect issue specialization to have the most outspoken influence on the Twitter agenda. On this platform, politicians have the most autonomy to choose what issues they want to address. Since addressing personally 'owned' issues can be very beneficial, we expect that issue specialization will have the biggest influence on the Twitter agenda. This leads to the following two hypotheses:

**H3**: Issue specialization has a positive effect on the issue attention of individual politicians on all three agendas

**H4**: Issue specialization has the strongest effect on the issue attention of individual politicians on Twitter.

## Data and methods

Our analyses are based on 144 MPs from the six different parties represented in the (Flemish and federal) parliament (Groen, Socialistische Partij Anders (sp.a), Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams (CD&V), Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (VLD), Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) and Vlaams Belang). In total, there are 212 Dutch-speaking Belgian parliamentarians, but we excluded those that did not have a single document on all of our three agendas ($N = 20$) and the politicians about whom we did not have specialization data ($N = 48$). The remaining politicians had more or less the same distribution by gender and party as the whole population of Dutch-speaking Belgian politicians. The period of analysis is 8 months and ranges from January 2018 up until the first of September 2018. During that period, all the tweets from our politicians were collected, which resulted in a total of 51,691 tweets, which also included the retweets the politician had made. To measure the media agenda of the politicians, we scraped all the online articles from the websites of 13 different Flemish news outlets.[2] We selected the articles where at least one MP was present, which lead to 8857 articles. Finally, the parliamentary agenda of the politicians was constructed by collecting all the written and oral questions, interpellations and legislative proposals. This leads to a total of 12,638 parliamentary documents.

To classify each tweet, article and parliamentary document, we automatically coded all of our recorded data using the Dutch dictionary based on the issue codebook of the Comparative Agenda Project (CAP) (Sevenans et al., 2014). Sevenans and colleagues showed that dictionaries can produce reliable, valid and comparable measures of policy and media agendas. To label each text with an issue topic, the number of words from the dictionary was counted in each text. A text was labelled with the issue from which

it had the highest count of words. For instance, if a text had 10 words from the 'macroeconomics' topic and 6 words from the 'employment' topic, that text was classified as 'macroeconomics'. In the case of a tie between issues, multiple topics were assigned to the text with a weight of 1/number of ties. The same dictionary was used for each of the three agendas, to compare the different issues that were present in each of these agendas (see Online Appendix A for a list of string examples). The CAP master codebook differentiates 28 issue topics, in our data set, only 20 of those topics were present. However, we were not able to automatically attribute an issue code to all documents. Sometimes, there was no issue present (e.g. a tweet about a personal topic) or the issue was not clear because there was not enough text or none of the words in the dictionary appeared in the text. This resulted in 'non-issue' items that were omitted from our dataset. This is especially the case on Twitter where almost half of the tweets are 'unclassifiable' in terms of issue code. Often tweets consist of very short messages or replies that cannot be coded even through manual coding. On the other two agendas, the non-codings were significantly lower mainly due to the amount of text in both types of documents. In total, 1900 articles (21%) and 3700 parliamentary initiatives (29%) did not receive an issue code. For these types of documents, non-codings do not necessarily include non-substantial documents. This indicates one of the drawbacks of using a dictionary approach. It could be the case that our dictionary was not complete enough to capture all current political issue debates and, therefore, we were not able to classify the documents. Another possible method of automatically labelling the texts with a certain issue is topic modelling, a more data-driven approach in which topics are based on the words in the text. A topic model discovers the hidden topic structure in a collection of texts. This way every tweet, article and parliamentary initiative should get a topic assigned to it. The problem with this approach, however, is that the discovered topics are defined as a collection of words, without a clear definition. With the CAP dictionary, on the other hand, we start with predefined issues that allow us to make sense of our agendas and to compare them. Therefore, we opted for this approach even though this resulted in a relatively large amount of non-codings. Important to note, however, we believe that the non-coding of documents happens across different issues and therefore does not systematically influence our results.[3]

The specialization of a politician, a central independent variable, can be measured by either looking in which committees politicians are active, which we label as their objective specialization, or by directly asking them what their specializations are, which we could call their subjective specialization. In this study, we use subjective specialization, and in later analyses, we control for objective specialization as a robustness check. Subjective specialization was operationalized as follows: for all the different major

**Table 1.** Distribution of subjective specialization (*N* = 137).

| Number of specialized issues | Percentage | Cumulative percentage |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | 14.6 | 14.6 |
| 2 | 22.,6 | 37.2 |
| 3 | 33.6 | 70.8 |
| 4 | 17.5 | 88.3 |
| 5 or more | 11.6 | 100.0 |

CAP codes, MPs were asked a yes/no question whether they considered themselves to be an expert on that topic. These data were collected as part of the POLPOP project that performed a survey and a follow-up interview with all (Dutch-speaking) parliamentarians elected in either the federal parliament or the Flemish parliament, with a response rate of 75% (*N* = 137). The specific wording of the question was: 'Politicians' specialization does not always match their committee memberships. Therefore we would like to ask you in which of the following policy domains you consider yourself to be a specialist. Tick as many domains as you want'. Table 1 presents how the subjective specialization of politicians is distributed. A little over 70% of our politicians is specialized in only three or fewer issues, meaning that our politicians tend to focus on just a select number of issues, rather than trying to work on a whole range of topics (for an overview of the distribution of specialization across parties, see Online Appendix B). As for the objective specialization, we matched the different parliamentary committees to our different issue categories, and if politicians were seated in a specific committee, we considered them to be experts on that issue.

Issue ownership was operationalized by asking citizens in a survey[4] which party they instinctively thought about when hearing a certain issue. We presented respondents with 11 issues (see Online Appendix C) that appear frequently in the public debate and of which we felt confident a large amount of citizens could link to a certain political party. We used the percentage of respondents that linked a certain party with the topic and next gave each politician relative party ownerships scores. For instance, if 32% of respondents indicated that they linked party A with education and only 3% with party B, then all of the politicians from party A scored 32 on issue ownership and all those of party B scored 3 for the topic of education. See Online Appendix C for the exact ownership scores per party. However, this left us with nine issues for which we have not obtained a public attributed degree of ownership. These are more technical policy issues that appear less in the news and which are hard to link to a certain party or ideology, such as spatial planning or housing. We believed that there hardly exists a spontaneous link in the minds of voters

**Table 2.** Individual agenda correlation.

|  | Media | Twitter | Parliament |
|---|---|---|---|
| Media | 1 | – | – |
| Twitter | 0.46*** | 1 | – |
| Parliament | 0.46*** | 0.64*** | 1 |

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

**Table 3.** *T*-test for individual attention versus average party attention on specialized issues.

|  | Specialized | N | Mean | Standard deviation | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Media | No | 2452 | 5.55 | 7.95 | 0.00 |
|  | Yes | 428 | 13.32 | 19.03 |  |
| Twitter | No | 2452 | 3.67 | 4.45 | 0.00 |
|  | Yes | 428 | 9.85 | 14.21 |  |
| Parliament | No | 2452 | 5.89 | 8.07 | 0.00 |
|  | Yes | 428 | 13.71 | 19.15 |  |

between these issues and a certain party. Thus, for these issues, we gave all six parties an equal issue ownership share of 16.7 (100% divided by 6 parties).

We also included the total media attention a topic got during our 8 months under investigation, in other words, all articles from our 13 news outlets, also the ones where no MP was present. This way we could control for issues that were more in the news and might, therefore, receive more attention from politicians (for an overview of the distribution of issues across the whole media agenda, see Online Appendix D). Finally, the three dependent variables are operationalized as the relative share of attention for an issue on a politician's individual Twitter agenda, media agenda and parliamentary agenda. This means that we first divided the number of tweets/initiatives/articles that contained a certain issue by the total number of tweets /initiatives/articles of that politician. Then, we multiplied it by 100 to get the share of attention for that specific issue. The higher the share, the more emphasis was put on that issue on that specific agenda.

## Results

Our results section is divided into a descriptive section and an explanatory section. In the descriptive section, we try to get a better idea of the differences and similarities between our different agendas on the aggregate level as well as exploring the individual issue agendas of politicians. Next, in the explanatory section, we perform multilevel regressions on the share of attention an issue got on Twitter, in the media and in parliament. This enabled us to see which factors explain the individual issue attention of politicians.

### Descriptive analysis

First, we used Pearson correlations to compare the overlap between the individual Twitter, media and parliamentary agenda of politicians. Table 2 presents that there is a positive correlation between all of our agendas, meaning that the share of attention politicians give to an issue on one agenda is to a large degree related to the share of attention they give to that issue on the other agendas. This indicates that, on the individual level, the rank order of issues runs parallel. This is largely similar to the aggregated share of attention each issue gets on the three individual agendas under study, which can be seen in Online Appendix E.

Next, to get a better understanding of how diverse or rather concentrated the individual agendas of our politicians are, we calculated the Herfindahl index for all our politicians on each of the three agendas. We then calculated the mean Herfindahl for each agenda to see which agenda was the most concentrated. The Herfindahl index is a measurement that ranges from 0 to 1, the closer the index is to 1, the higher the concentration is. For individual politicians, the mean Herfindahl indexes range from 0.22 on the Twitter agenda, over 0.32 on the parliamentary agenda to 0.39 on the media agenda. This means that the attention on Twitter is more distributed across multiple issues, while politicians only tend to make it into the news with a select number of issues. The attention in parliament is situated between Twitter and the media. When comparing different types of politicians, those with the lowest Herfindahls scores are the party leaders. In particular, their media agenda is very much spread across issues suggesting that party leaders are expected to react to a great deal of issues in the news.

### Explanatory analysis

As a first way to check if specialized politicians indeed differ from their party colleagues, we calculated the average party attention for each issue on each agenda. Next, we calculated the absolute difference between the attention the individual politician had for an issue on an agenda and the attention all members of the same party had on that agenda. Finally, we used a *t*-test to investigate if the difference between the party attention and the attention of individual politicians was larger for issues they were specialized in or not. This appeared to be the case, on each of our three agendas, the differences between party and individual politician significantly increased for specialized issues. Table 3 presents that the average difference between a party and an individual politician increases with 7.8% on the media agenda, with 6.2% on the Twitter agenda and with 7.8% on the parliamentary agenda.

To find out which factors influence the issue attention of individual politicians, we conducted three cross-classified multilevel regressions on the share of attention an issue received on each of the three agendas. In model 1, the share of attention on the media attention was the dependent

**Table 4.** Multilevel regression on individual issue attention on three different agendas.

|                              | Model 1: Media agenda | Model 2: Twitter agenda | Model 3: Parliamentary agenda |
| ---------------------------- | --------------------- | ----------------------- | ----------------------------- |
| Specialization               | 2.60***               | 3.37***                 | 5.77***                       |
| Issue ownership              | −0.02                 | 0.05***                 | −0.03*                        |
| Media                        |                       | 0.22***                 | 0.23***                       |
| Twitter                      | 0.52***               |                         | 0.46***                       |
| Parliament                   | 0.30***               | 0.26***                 |                               |
| Party (ref = N-VA)           |                       |                         |                               |
| Open VLD                     | −0.55                 | 0.63                    | −0.08                         |
| CD&V                         | 0.19                  | −0.03                   | −0.35                         |
| Sp.a                         | 0.03                  | −0.02                   | 0.04                          |
| Groen                        | −0.54                 | 0.51                    | 0.07                          |
| Vlaams Belang                | −1.09                 | 0.84                    | −0.22                         |
| Total media attention        | 0.25**                | 0.08                    | 0.09                          |
| Intercept                    | −0.16                 | 0.41                    | 0.86                          |
| N (total)                    | 2900                  | 2900                    | 2900                          |
| N (Politicians)              | 144                   | 144                     | 144                           |
| Akaike information criterion (AIC) | 21,724.04       | 19,263.35               | 20,946.32                     |

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

variable, in model 2, the attention on the Twitter agenda and in model 3, the attention on the parliamentary agenda. To test our hypotheses, the specialization of the politicians and the ownership of the issue by the party were included as central-independent variables.

Our findings in Table 4 show that issue specialization has a positive effect across all agendas, confirming hypotheses 2 and 3. This means that politicians who indicate that they are specialized in an issue will spend a larger share of their attention on that topic than politicians who are not specialized in that issue. Concretely, we find that politicians will direct more of their tweets and parliamentary work towards issues they are specialized in. Additionally, specializing in an issue also helps to get into the news with that topic. We find the same positive effects when using objective specialization instead of subjective specialization (see Online Appendix F), confirming our initial findings.

Next, the effect of issue ownership seems less outspoken and differs widely across agendas. A bit surprisingly, issue ownership has a clear significant effect on the Twitter agenda, where politicians are believed to be the most autonomous. This suggests that on Twitter politicians stress not only their own issues, but also the issues owned by their party. One potential explanation is that politicians can support their colleagues and the party by retweeting their messages. Alternatively, it might be that politicians want to present themselves as loyal party members and want to make a good impression on the party leadership. Next, issue ownership has no effect on the media agenda. This means that if the party owns an issue, it does not help all the politicians of that party to get into the media with that topic.

Journalists prefer to let only the party specialist or the party leader speak on that issue.

Furthermore, issue ownership also does not encourage politicians to spend a greater share of their parliamentary work on those issues. Here, we even find a modest negative effect that suggests that MPs in their daily work are less guided by the parties issues. How can this be explained? First, it seems to confirm the idea of the division of labour that mainly manifests itself on the parliamentary agenda. Second, the negative effect might, at least in the case of government parties, be influenced by the role of ministers. Government parties try to strengthen their issue reputation by obtaining cabinet positions on the issues they own. As a consequence, however, politicians of that party cannot profile themselves on the same issue. Asking parliamentary questions to the minister of their own party is unusual, and taking parliamentary initiatives is difficult as the minister tries to develop its own policy. Overall, we have to reject hypothesis 1 stating that issue ownership is driving the selective issue attention of politicians, except in the case of Twitter.

Apart from our main independent variables, we also included several control variables. First, we added the amount of attention the individual politicians had for the issue on the other two agendas. This largely confirms the results of the aggregate correlation analysis. Namely, that the three agendas all positively influence each other and thus that politicians do try to push the same issues on all agendas. Second, we included party dummies to all our models to control for variation on the party level. None of these variables are significant, suggesting that our findings are across the board and not influenced by specific party strategies. Lastly, we added the total media attention to our analyses to control for issue fluctuations in the broader media debate. Here, we can see that the total media attention only has a positive effect on the media agenda of politicians but not on the other two agendas. The main reason for this is probably that the effect of the total media agenda is already largely encapsulated in the media agenda of politicians because the individual media agenda and total media agenda are highly similar.

Finally, we also conducted two robustness checks, presented in Online Appendix G. As a first check, we ran our multilevel regressions without the attention of the other two agendas. It was possible that the attention for an issue on the other two agendas suppressed the effects of our other independent variables. This appears hardly to be the case, the only difference is that issue ownership no longer has a significant (negative) effect on our parliamentary agenda. Second, we control for the total amount of tweets, articles or parliamentary initiatives of a politician. Because we are working with relative shares, the absolute number of documents can inflate the relative attention politicians have for an issue. Therefore, we include the total number of tweets, articles and initiatives in our model and created an

interaction variable with issue specialization. Again, we see no change in our results; issue specialization does not have a different effect for politicians with different activity rates.

## Conclusion

Inspired by research on the selective issue emphasis of political parties, this study focused on the issue strategies of individual politicians. More than ever, individual politicians have the opportunity for more personal visibility and vote-seeking strategies to differentiate themselves from politicians from other parties as well as their colleagues from their own party. Therefore, the first aim of this study was to find out if individual politicians focus more on issues they are specialized in or whether issue ownership of parties is driving the issue emphasis of individual politicians. It turned out that both matter, but issue specialization clearly trumps issue ownership. We found that issue specialization has an outspoken impact on the issue attention of politicians. The share of attention politicians pay to an issue goes up if politicians indicate that they are specialized in that topic. Additionally, we also found significant effects of issue ownership, but that effect was not consistent across all of our three different agendas.

This brings us to the second aim of the article, which is to investigate on what platform or arena this individual issue agenda is most present. First of all, we find that there is a large overlap between our three individual agendas. If the attention of politicians for an issue is high on one agenda, the attention for that issue is also high on their other two agendas. Therefore, politicians are, to a certain extent, consistent across their different agendas. This means that politicians try to reinforce their issue profile by communicating about the same issues across all of their agendas.

For issue specialization, the picture is clear and consistent: politicians try to signal or highlight their specialization through all of their communication channels and in all arenas. This indicates that politicians recognize the benefits of being regarded as a specialist on an issue. By signalling their expertise to journalists, to the party selectorate and to voters directly, politicians are able to build some sort of individual issue ownership. Probably, this personal issue reputation is mutual enforced by external communication and performance on the different agendas. For instance, if politicians build a strong reputation on a certain issue in parliament and on Twitter, they will be able to get into the media more easily on this topic. This media visibility, in turn, could help politicians to get the attention of both voters and the party leadership and strengthen the electoral or parliamentary position of the politician. We must note, however, that the effect of issue specialization seems to be equally strong on all three agendas. Thus, suggesting that our assumption (hypothesis 4) that the more autonomous the agenda, the stronger the effect of issue specialization is not confirmed.

Issue ownership, on the other hand, produces mixed effects, as it does not seem to affect all individual political agendas the same way. First of all, issue ownership has a positive effect on the issue attention of politicians on Twitter. The more an issue is linked to a party in the minds of voters, the more that members of that party will stress those issues on their personal Twitter accounts. This suggests that politicians use the issue ownership of their party to profile themselves at the expense of politicians from other parties. Secondly, we find no effect of issue ownership on the media agenda of politicians. It seems like issue ownership does not help all politicians of the party to get into the media. Most likely, journalists prefer to let the party specialists and party leaders speak about the owned issues. Finally, issue ownership has a negative effect on the individual parliamentary agenda of politicians. This confirms the idea that in parliament there is a strong division of labour. It does not matter if the issues are owned or not, in parliament, politicians work on the issues the party has assigned them to. The negative effect of issue ownership might be, in the case of government parties, explained by the role of ministers. When a minister is responsible for a certain policy area, the other members of that party are not able to shape the parties' position on that issue, thus taking parliamentary initiatives becomes difficult. Moreover, it is unconventional of politicians to ask parliamentary questions to the minister of their own party. Therefore, attention for owned issues might be lower on the parliamentary agenda.

In sum, we can conclude that politicians' issue agenda is mainly driven by their personal specialization. However, the case of the Twitter agenda shows that politicians are not solely driven by either individual or party characteristics. On the agenda over which they have the highest autonomy, we see that politicians stress a whole range of issues, combing the ones they are specialized in and the ones their party owns. This means that issue specialization and issue ownership are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Probably, it is even the most opportune strategy for politicians: signal their individual expertise and show their party loyalty at the same time.

To fully understand the reasoning behind the issue strategy of politicians, we need further research using different methods. For instance, so far it is unclear whether politicians focus on issues because of strategical reasons or rather because of their personal interests. In-depth interviews with MPs might be more suited to fully grasp why politicians post more about certain topics than others. Also, the role of the political context and the influence of certain external events on the issue strategies of politicians have been left unexplored. To fully understand the dynamics between the different agendas of politicians, future research should include more advanced analyses with a time component. This would allow us to see how the individual Twitter, media and parliamentary agenda

interact with each other. Furthermore, in a next phase, it could be valuable to go more in-depth and see if specialization could have a stronger effect for some issues than for others. The issue effects might also be depended on the type and nature of each agenda. Some channels might be more suited for some type of issues. For instance, more complex and technical issues might be harder to fully address in 280 characters and therefore be less prevalent on the Twitter agenda.

Finally, as a next step, it is relevant to see if politicians' efforts are fruitful, that is if signalling their specialization to voters actually works. Looking at the effects of issue, specialization on a politician's reputation or success could indicate whether or not the specialization of politicians matters directly for voters. Therefore, studying underlining motives, time dynamics, issue type and effects of issue specialization on politicians efforts are four potential avenues for future research. We hope this study can be a source of inspiration that showed that it is possible and relevant to focus on the individual agenda of politicians in the digital age.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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## Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. For a full list, see https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/twitter-rules.
2. We included the following outlets: De Standaard, Het Nieuwsblad, Gazet van Antwerpen, Het Belang van Limburg, De Morgen, Het Laatste Nieuws, De Tijd, Metro, Knack, Trends, Humo, Krant van West-Vlaanderen and De Zondag.
3. We performed a manual check on 200 randomly selected documents. This showed that a little over 70% of the non-codings were in fact non-classifiable documents. For the other 30%, our dictionary was not able to properly classify the documents.
4. These data were collected as part of the NWS Data project. The survey was performed by Dynata among 1340 Flemish respondents.

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