
Original Article

How parties' issue emphasis strategies vary across communication channels: The 2009 regional election campaign in Belgium

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Abstract Issue ownership theory expects political parties to focus their campaigns on 'owned' issues for which they have a reputation of competence and a history of attention, and to avoid issues that play to the advantage of their opponents. However, recent empirical studies show that parties often campaign on the same issues. The literature has suggested several factors to account for this behavior, but has mostly neglected that issue emphasis strategies can vary across campaign communication channels and parties. Based on a quantitative content analysis of the manifestos and press releases of all seven parties competing in the 2009 regional elections in Flanders (Belgium), we make two contributions. First, we show that while there is some consistency in parties' issue priorities, they do not necessarily set the same issue priorities in their different campaign communication channels. Second, it appears that parties follow different strategies depending on their standing in the polls, and, to a lesser degree, according to their position in government or in opposition.

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Introduction

Agenda-setting scholars know that “agendas foreshadow outcomes” (Riker, 1993, p. 1). The relationship between the shapes of agendas and their outcomes is well established in the policy literature (e.g., Baumgartner and Jones, 1993), but is also



recognized in electoral politics, as well as communications, research. For instance, a burgeoning body of literature shows how extensive media coverage of specific policy issues ‘primes’ voters to give more weight to these issues when evaluating presidential candidates (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). Scholars have also shown how parties use priming as a campaign strategy. They try to set the electoral agenda by focusing public attention on certain policy issues, which voters then use as evaluation criteria to choose among parties (e.g., Jacobs and Shapiro, 1994).

One prominent perspective in the literature is that parties hardly ever prime the same policy issues during election campaigns. The saliency theory of party competition (e.g., Budge, 1982; Budge and Farlie, 1983a; Robertson, 1976) posits that parties do not primarily compete over different policy positions on given issues, as argued by direct confrontation theories that are often inspired by Downs (1957), but instead selectively emphasize certain favorable issues and downplay other unfavorable issues. Similarly, the theory of issue ownership (e.g., Petrocik, 1996) asserts that parties are, in the minds of voters, associated with specific issues, and considered most able to deal with them, i.e., they are perceived as ‘owning’ these issues. To gain an electoral advantage, the parties are incentivized to focus their campaigns on the party-owned issues that highlight their strengths and simultaneously point out their opponents’ weaknesses.

Nonetheless, the empirical evidence for this theory is mixed at best. Whereas some studies confirm that parties primarily focus on party-owned issues during election campaigns (e.g., Budge and Farlie, 1983a, b; Green and Hobolt, 2008; Petrocik, 1996; Spiliotes and Vavreck, 2002), many other studies’ findings contradict the expectations of the issue ownership theory and show that parties often focus on the same set of issues during election campaigns (Banda, 2013; Brouard *et al.*, 2012; Damore, 2004, 2005; Dolezal *et al.*, 2014; Kaplan *et al.*, 2006; Sides, 2006; Sigelman and Buell, 2004). Recent research has attempted to identify what motivates parties to engage in such “issue convergence” (e.g., Sigelman and Buell, 2004): External factors, such as the “state of the world” (Budge and Farlie, 1983) or the public mood (Stimson *et al.*, 1995), agenda-related factors, such as the “party-system agenda” (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015), organizational factors, such as party resources and organizational goals (Wagner and Meyer, 2014), and the campaign environment (Damore, 2004, 2005; Spoon *et al.*, 2014) have all been shown to matter. In this article, we contribute to this recent literature by focusing on an additional factor that has not yet attracted much attention: differences in campaign communication channels.

Previous studies have assessed parties’ issue choices in single campaign communication channels. Whereas US studies have generally relied on TV ads, European studies have usually resorted to party manifestos or, more recently, to press releases. Both strands assume that these specific data sources provide representative views of parties’ issue priorities. However, there are reasons to question this assumption; parties could very well emphasize different issues in



different communication channels (see Elmelund-Præstekær, 2011). Moreover, political ads, press releases, and party manifestos differ in their length, timing, and frequency of publication.

In this paper, we test the thesis that these differences in form between communication channels also lead to differences in content. First, by analyzing how, and the extent to which, parties' issue strategies differ across two communication channels (manifestos and press releases), we assess whether the role of issue ownership also differs according to the campaign channel. Second, we argue that different parties emphasize owned issues to varying degrees. Both parties in opposition and parties that are losing in the polls have stronger incentives to emphasize party-owned issues than winning parties and parties in government.

We test our arguments through a quantitative content analysis of party manifestos and press releases published by the seven main parties competing in the 2009 regional elections in Flanders, Belgium. The Belgian case offers a good background to assess the dynamics of issue competition in a multiparty context. The Belgian (Flemish) party system is highly fragmented, with seven major parties competing in the country's regional elections. These parties are situated along the entire range of the left–right political spectrum and offer a mix between traditional mass parties (Christian-Democrats, Socialists, and Liberals) and more recent parties that ground their success in the politicization of selected newer issues (Greens, Extreme Right, Nationalists, and Neo-Liberals).

The empirical analyses support our basic thesis. First, although there is a clear association between the issue priorities in party manifestos and in press releases, our findings show that parties do not implement the same strategy in both campaign channels. In manifestos, parties allocate more attention to issues that are also important to other parties, but they tend to place a greater emphasis on their own issues in press releases. Second, parties indeed follow different strategies depending on their standing in the polls and according to their status in government or in opposition.

Different Communication Channels, Different Issue Strategies

Agenda-setting scholars are well aware of the fact that “there is no such thing as the political agenda” (Walgrave and van Aelst, 2006, p. 94). This general statement is also true for parties' campaign agendas. In election campaigns, parties communicate their issue positions and priorities in many different ways: through party manifestos, election ads, press releases, flyers, statements in the mass media, at party conventions and public meetings, and so on. Despite parties' broad use of different communication channels, scholars have traditionally relied on single campaign channels to assess parties' issue emphasis strategies (for exceptions, see



Norris *et al.*, 1999; Green and Hobolt, 2008). In the United States, studies are generally based on political ads (e.g., Damore, 2004, 2005; Kaplan *et al.*, 2006; Sides, 2006; Sigelman and Buell, 2004; Spiliotes and Vavreck, 2002), whereas European studies typically rely on electoral manifestos (e.g., Brouard *et al.*, 2012; Dolezal *et al.*, 2014; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015; Spoon *et al.*, 2014), or on press releases (Green and Hobolt, 2008; Hopmann *et al.*, 2012; Meyer and Wagner, 2016). Whichever campaign channel is investigated, the underlying assumption is that each specific data source provides a representative view of the parties' issue priorities and that parties emphasize the same issues to a similar extent in all their campaign materials. Indeed, it can be argued that campaigns are most effective when parties stay “on message” (Norris *et al.*, 1999, p. 62) – that is, they maintain consistency and stick to their preferred issues over the course of the campaign in all their communication channels.

While we agree that parties are generally interested in producing a coherent message across their campaign channels, we argue that such consistency cannot be taken for granted. Parties' issue priorities in different campaign channels are probably correlated, but there are reasons to believe that they are not identical and that parties do, for different reasons, set different issue priorities in their various campaign materials. In fact, election ads, press releases, and party manifestos differ in their length, timing, and frequency of publication. Party manifestos are lengthy and elaborate documents that are written and released only once, *before* the actual start of the campaign. By contrast, election ads and press releases are much shorter, usually focused on a single issue, and are continually produced and published *during* the weeks before Election Day. We expect that these differences in form lead to differences in issue content. The few available studies that analyze different campaign channels provide some evidence to support this argument (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2011; Norris *et al.*, 1999; but see Green and Hobolt, 2008), but the important question is *to what extent* do they differ, and *how*? How consistent are parties' issue choices across communication channels? Do owned issues play a greater role in some communication channels, and, if so, in which ones?

Some of the literature suggests that owned issues occupy more space in manifestos than in press releases or election ads. Norris *et al.* (1999, p. 62), for instance, argue that manifestos reflect a party's “ideal strategic” agenda, which defines a party's key issues and is dominated by issues that are most favorable for the party and simultaneously the most damaging for rival parties. This is typically the case for party-owned issues. Moreover, it is Norris and colleagues' view that political ads, press releases, and flyers, by contrast, form a party's “tactical” agenda, which is in part inspired by, and based on, the ideal agenda, but is at the same time used to tactically respond to short-term developments during the campaign (such as unexpected events, media coverage, or the strategic moves of other parties) and to take up issues that have become more salient. This is possible because such “tactical” agendas are continually produced and released throughout



the campaign, whereas manifestos are published only once and cannot be used to strategically adjust to the campaign environment. For most parties, responding to short-term campaign developments in tactical agendas thus implies that they can less focus on party-owned issues than in manifestos.

Although it is plausible, this expectation is not the only one possible. The opposite expectation – that parties focus more strongly on party-owned issues in political ads and press releases than they do in manifestos – seems equally convincing. The reason is that manifestos, press releases, and ads not only differ in their timing and frequency of publication, but also in their *length*. Although the length of manifestos can vary considerably between parties, manifestos are usually comprehensive documents intended to give a broad overview of the policies and priorities that a party plans to pursue while in government. As ideal programs for government, they need to address a wide range of issues, including those issues that a party has not necessarily shown an interest in, or established a reputation of competence. As a candidate for government, a party has to show its broad interest and convey its views on many issues, even those that it cares less about. Otherwise, it risks being seen as a ‘one-trick pony’ instead of as a feasible candidate for government participation. Thus, there is some pressure to publish a ‘complete’ party manifesto.

Although manifestos probably address unowned issues in less detail than owned ones, parties have more freedom to completely ignore unowned issues in political ads or press releases. These documents are much shorter and usually deal with only one or two issues. There is no external pressure on parties to address all the issues in these documents. Although parties may use them to take up new or unpleasant issues in response to recent campaign developments (as commonly expected in the literature), they are also free to selectively draw on their ‘full’ party program to highlight traditional, party-owned issues, and to set aside other issues. Thus, parties have the right to remain silent about a range of issues in their press releases and ads, but they do not have the same right in their manifestos.

Based on this discussion and the competing theoretical considerations, we formulate the following research questions:

- RQ1:** To what extent do parties' issue priorities in manifestos influence their issue priorities in press releases?
- RQ2:** Do parties focus more strongly on party-owned issues in press releases or in manifestos?

Different Parties, Different Issue Strategies

We argue that issue strategies also vary across parties, depending on their standing in opinion polls and their status as the party in government or in opposition. Generally speaking, parties with a bad standing in the polls that are likely to lose



seats may be more willing to adjust their strategies in the final weeks before Election Day than parties that are predicted to win. Winning parties have reason to believe that they touched a chord with voters and thus have incentives to “stay put,” and their issue emphasis is expected to be consistent (Spoon *et al.*, 2014, p. 367). Hence, our first expectation:

H1: For winning parties, issue priorities in manifestos more strongly predict issue priorities in press releases than they do for losing parties.

As Green (2011) argues, when parties are popular, they have a broad set of available issues to discuss, but when parties are doing badly in opinion polls, they only have their owned issues to fall back on because these are the only areas in which they are seen as competent. According to Green, the issue ownership strategy of losing parties is driven by vote-seeking objectives, whereas others argue that it is particularly aimed at a party’s core base and represents an attempt to secure at least the support of traditional party voters who expect – sometimes even demand – that the party emphasizes its owned issues (Budge, 2015; Stubager and Slothuus, 2013). Whatever their motives, focusing on their primary issues may help losing parties to steer public attention towards their traditional strengths. Given that parties tend to have stronger arguments on owned issues (Riker, 1993), they may stand a better chance of using them to turn the tide. This is not to say that winning parties have no interest in campaigning on party-owned issues; it just means that losing parties have even stronger incentives to do so. This leads us to our second expectation:

H2: Parties that are losing in the polls focus more strongly on party-owned issues in their press releases than winning parties.

Another potentially relevant aspect is a party’s position in government or in opposition. Although not focused on election campaigns, recent agenda-setting literature has shown that parties in government are less free than parties in opposition to choose the topics they decide to address (e.g., Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010; Walgrave and van Aelst, 2006; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011). Parties in government are in charge of running the country; they cannot afford to ignore upcoming issues and problems, no matter how unpleasant they may be. This implies that they are more likely to deviate from their ‘ideal’ issue agenda and to show less continuity in their issue emphasis across communication channels than parties in opposition. A similar argument has been made for election campaigns: government parties have incentives to sell, explain, and defend their policy record on a broad range of issues, especially when the economy performs poorly, whereas opposition parties can selectively focus on favorable issues (Greene, 2015). Hence, our final two expectations:

H3: For parties in government, issue priorities in manifestos less strongly predict issue priorities in press releases than they do for parties in opposition.



H4: Parties in opposition focus more strongly on party-owned issues in their press releases than parties in government.

Belgian Parties in the Context of the 2009 Regional Elections in Flanders

In this study, we rely on data from the 2009 Flemish regional election campaign in Belgium. Flanders is the largest region in Belgium, which is itself a small, federalized democracy in Western Europe (Deschouwer, 2009). Due to strong centrifugal tendencies, the regions have gained many competences in the past decades and have become influential policy levels in their own right. Regional elections in Belgium can be considered to be of almost equal importance to their national (federal) equivalents; by no means do they demonstrate a second-order character (Van Aelst and Lefevere, 2012). The same parties compete on both levels; media attention during the campaigns is equally high, and Belgian politicians frequently switch from the regional to the federal level and vice versa, and most run in each election. Party leaders sit as often in the regional parliament as they do in the national parliament. Moreover, through a long process of devolution, the regional competences and budgetary powers of the regions match those of the national state. In sum, regional elections in Belgium are like national elections – and the 2009 regional election campaign in particular received ample attention from the media, the public, and, most importantly, the parties. In fact, regional campaign spending in 2009 totaled over 15 million euro, compared to 13 million for the 2007 national elections (Deschouwer *et al.*, 2010; Maddens, 2010).

The Flemish party system is highly fragmented. In the 2009 elections, seven main parties were competing for votes: three traditional parties – the Christian-Democrats (CD&V), Socialists (Sp.a), and Liberals (Open VLD) – and four newer parties – the Greens (Groen), Neoliberals (LDD), Extreme Rightists (VB), and Flemish Nationalists (N-VA). The incumbent Flemish government initially consisted of five parties when it was formed in 2004: Christian-Democrats, who then still formed an alliance with the Flemish Nationalists, the Liberals, and the Socialists with their small alliance partner Spirit (which ran separately in 2009 but failed to pass the electoral threshold). However, in the period between the 2004 and 2009 regional elections, Belgian politics experienced tumult. After the 2007 national elections, the strains relating to a difficult government formation caused a split in the Christian Democratic/Flemish Nationalist cartel and the Flemish Nationalists left the regional government. Furthermore, a new neoliberal party (LDD) emerged and obtained seats in the national parliament. Thus, the Christian Democrats, Liberals, and Socialists entered the 2009 campaign as incumbents, and were faced with four opposition parties (Deschouwer *et al.*, 2010). Of these four parties, two had prior government experience: the Flemish Nationalists were initially part of the incumbent regional government, and the Greens were in



government between 1999 and 2004 at the regional and national levels. In contrast, the extreme right VB, as well as the neoliberal LDD, had never been in government.

The 2009 election took place in the aftermath of the outbreak of the banking crisis, which was then still developing into a full-blown economic crisis. Unexpectedly, the economy was the most emphasized issue in the media coverage of the campaign, and it was also the most salient issue amongst voters. A related salient issue was unemployment, but the issue of state reform also received quite a lot of media attention at the time (Lefevere, 2011).

The Flemish Nationalists were the big winners of the 2009 regional elections. Running for the first time with their own party list, they gained 13 per cent of the votes at the expense of their former alliance partner, the Christian-Democrats, but mostly to the disadvantage of the Extreme Right. The Greens, Socialists, and Liberals also lost some voters, but to a much lesser extent. After the elections, a new regional government formed between the Christian-Democrats, the Socialists, and the Flemish Nationalists.

Data and Methods

To test whether parties pursue different issue strategies in different campaign communication channels, we draw on party manifestos and press releases. Both were coded according to the coding scheme of the Belgian Agendas Project (<http://www.comparativeagendas.net/belgium>). It comprises 26 major topic categories (agriculture, defense, etc.) and over 200 subcategories (agricultural trade, agricultural marketing and promotion, etc.). In this study, we only focused on the major issue topics, grouped five topics with very few cases as ‘other’ issues, and dropped the subcategory dealing with ‘political activities and elections.’ The reason for this exclusion is that this is the only topic that does not deal with policy, but politics, and thus cannot be owned by any party.

Press releases are continually published throughout the entire campaign period. We informally contacted all Flemish parties to inquire about the role of press releases in their overall campaign strategies. All parties indicated that their key campaign events were almost always accompanied by a press release. However, press releases also partially tap the parliamentary agenda, because the parliamentary groups often have the liberty of issuing their own press releases. This is not the case for the Extreme Right, whose central party press service checks all press releases. Overall, press releases capture the staged party events during the campaign. We collected and coded all press releases that were published by the seven Flemish parties from February until Election Day (June 5). One coder with prior coding experience with the classification scheme of the Belgian Agendas Project coded all the press releases ($N = 984$). After a training session, the coder



coded a first batch of press releases, which were then checked by an expert coder. Subsequently, a second training session was scheduled to improve the coding accuracy by providing additional coding guidelines. To ascertain inter-coder reliability, a random sample of 5 per cent of the press releases ($N = 44$) was double coded by the expert coder. The Krippendorff alpha for issues was 0.74, which is acceptable, especially given the complex codebook. In this article, we focus on all the press releases that were published in the ten weeks before the election ($N = 397$).

In party manifestos, every semi-sentence was coded using the same issue classification scheme. The length of the party manifestos differed substantially between parties, from a minimum of 334 semi-sentences for the Green manifesto to a maximum of 4,700 semi-sentences for the Socialist manifesto. Student coders assigned a unique issue code to each semi-sentence. Given the complex procedures, it is difficult to calculate inter-coder reliability with the traditional Krippendorff's alpha measure. Since coders first have to split the sentences when necessary, certain coders ended up with more units than others. Therefore, the correspondence of the coding distributions at the lowest coding level was compared. The average Pearson correlation is 0.77 and all correlations range between the exceptionally low 0.57 and 0.91. Given the detail and the large number of possible codes, this is a satisfying result.

To test our hypotheses, we use the following explanatory factors. We use secondary literature to determine our central independent variable: Flemish parties' issue ownership reputations in the minds of voters. On the one hand, we refer to a study by Walgrave *et al* (2012) that measures parties' (associative) issue ownership for ten issues (environment, taxes, crime, social security, unemployment, economic crisis, immigration, state reform, culture, and mobility) based on a representative panel survey conducted in the context of the 2009 regional elections (Partirep09). We use the issue ownership perceptions of Flemish respondents on the aggregate level reported in the study (Walgrave *et al*, 2012, p. 775). On the other hand, we also employ an earlier study by Walgrave and de Swert (2007, pp. 44–46) that reports (competence) issue ownership for additional issues. We apply the following criteria to decide whether an issue is owned, has shared ownership, or is unowned: if a party is designated as the issue owner by more than 20 per cent of voters, and it has a 10 per cent lead on the second party, it is assigned as the single owner of that issue (coded as '1'). If a party is designated as the issue owner by more than 20 per cent of voters, but its lead is less than 10 per cent, it is considered to be a partial owner (coded as '0.5' for each partial owner). Finally, for all other party and issue combinations, the variable is coded as 0. In the event that the two studies reported different ownerships of the same issue, we gave precedence to the study by Walgrave *et al* (2012) that presents survey evidence on voters' issue ownership perceptions in the 2009 regional elections. Table 1 lists the issue owner(s) of all coded issues.



Table 1: Issue owner(s) of issues

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Walgrave and de Swert (2007, pp. 44–46)</i>	<i>Walgrave et al. (2012, p. 775)</i>	<i>Coded issue ownership (assigned value)</i>
Macroeconomics	Economic policy: Liberals (32 per cent), Christian-Democrats (25 per cent)	Economic Crisis: Liberals (30 per cent), Christian-Democrats (29 per cent)	Christian Democrats (0.5), Liberals (0.5)
Rights & liberties	Euthanasia: no issue ownership	N/A	None (0)
Health	Health care: Socialists (34 per cent), Christian-Democrats (26 per cent)	N/A	Socialists (0.5), Christian Democrats (0.5)
Agriculture	Food safety: no issue ownership	N/A	None (0)
Labour	Employment: Socialists (34 per cent)	Unemployment: Socialists (41 per cent)	Socialists (1)
Education	Christian-Democrats (35 per cent)	N/A	Christian Democrats (1)
Environment	Greens (60 per cent)	Greens (87 per cent)	Greens (1)
Energy	N/A	N/A	Greens (1)
Immigration	Extreme Right (46 per cent)	Extreme Right (50 per cent)	Extreme Right (1)
Transportation	Mobility: Socialists (39 per cent)	Mobility: Socialists (27 per cent, less than 10 per cent lead)	Socialists (0.5)
Justice	Crime: Extreme Right (30 per cent)	Crime: Extreme Right (35 per cent)	Extreme Right (1)
Social welfare	Social security: no ownership	Socialists (50 per cent)	Socialists (1)
Housing	N/A	N/A	None (0)
Banking & commerce	N/A	N/A	Liberals (0.5), Christian Democrats (0.5)
Defence	N/A	N/A	None (0)
Science & technology	N/A	N/A	None (0)
Foreign trade	N/A	N/A	None (0)
Foreign policy	International security: Socialists (20 per cent, less than 10 per cent lead)	N/A	Socialists (0.5)
Government operation (incl. state reform)	Flemish independence: Christian-Democrats (21 per cent), Extreme Right (28 per cent), Nationalists (22 per cent)	State reform: Nationalists (33 per cent), Christian-Democrats (27 per cent)	Nationalists (0.5), Christian Democrats (0.5)
Public lands	N/A	N/A	None (0)
Culture	N/A	Socialists (24 per cent, less than 10 per cent lead)	Socialists (0.5)
Other	N/A	N/A	None (0)

Numbers between brackets indicate the percentage of voters identifying the party as issue owner (first two columns) and our coding of issue ownership, respectively (third column). For the Walgrave and de Swert study, percentages relate to their measure of ‘explicit’ issue ownership whenever possible, otherwise to the lower percentage relating to ‘implicit’ issue ownership.



The variable *poll* measures the difference in percentages (i.e., loss or gain) between the predicted vote share of a party according to the polls in the months prior to the start of the campaign, and the vote share a party obtained in the previous 2007 election. To obtain a more robust estimation of the parties' standings in the polls, we took several major polls published between September 2008 and the end of March 2009 by the newspapers *La Libre Belgique* (LLB) and *Het Laatste Nieuws* (HLN), as well as by the public broadcaster VRT, and calculated for each party the average predicted vote share (for a similar operationalization, see Walter *et al.*, 2014). The reason for picking these polls is straightforward: the September LLB poll is the first major poll published after the split of the CD&V–N–VA cartel that allowed us to obtain separate scores for these parties, whereas the March LLB poll is the last one that was published before our period of analysis of the parties' press releases. One party was clearly predicted to win in the polls: the Neoliberals (+8.8 per cent when compared to the previous election). Three parties were on an upward trajectory in the months before the election (the Greens, the Flemish Nationalists, and the Christian Democrats), whereas three parties were predicted to lose (the Socialists, the Liberals, and the Extreme Right).

Note that, we do not have exact information for when exactly the parties drafted their manifestos for the 2009 elections. All that is known for certain is that manifestos are drafted sometime before the campaign starts. For Flemish parties, drafting a manifesto is typically a long and careful process; many groups within the party are engaged in it (scientific service, caucus, special task forces, etc.) and most parties, at the end of this process, let their manifesto be solemnly approved by their members in a formal party congress just before the campaign starts. Only after this formal vote is the manifesto final. Yet, the actual writing of the manifesto takes place (many) months before this final approval is given. Additionally, the timing of party manifesto drafting and approval differs across parties. The election under consideration here took place on June 5, 2009. We include press releases from the beginning of April onwards (10 weeks before Election Day) so we can be sure that manifestos precede press releases in time and that, if there is any causal relationship between them, it goes from manifestos to releases. However, our poll measure per party is based on an average of polls over seven months preceding the campaign (September 2008–March 2009). This period definitely overlaps with party manifesto drafting. Perhaps not only the press releases, but also manifesto drafting is affected by a party's standing in the polls? We cannot definitively rule this out. But, we hold it is much more likely that press releases are affected by poll results than party manifestos. Party manifestos are much more constrained documents, and a lot of groups are involved in their drafting. It is a sticky process that takes time and in which the strategic short-term considerations play a smaller role when compared to issuing press releases. That is why we did not formulate a hypothesis about how



manifestos react to polls, and take manifestos as a point of departure from which parties can deviate through their press releases in relation to their standings in the polls.

We capture a party's status in regional government or in opposition with a dummy variable (*Government*), which takes a value of 1 for the three incumbent parties (the Christian Democrats, Liberals, and Socialists), and a value of 0 for the four opposition parties (the Greens, Flemish Nationalists, Neo-Liberals, and Extreme Right). Note that, there is no problematic colinearity between our independent variables.

Finally, we control for the extent to which other parties emphasize a given issue in their manifestos and press releases, respectively ($Attn_{\text{other parties}}$). This variable reflects the average emphasis placed on the issue by all other parties, excluding the party itself, and indicates whether parties react to the agenda set by their competitors or by common external factors (e.g., Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010, 2015; Hopmann *et al.*, 2012; Wagner and Meyer, 2014).

We use a stacked dataset to test our hypotheses. In this dataset, the number of cases is equal to the number of party/issue combinations (7 parties \times 22 issues = 154 cases). We have two dependent variables for this analysis: the percentage of attention a party dedicated to each issue in its party manifesto ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 4.66$) and in its press releases ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 5.31$). Given the small number of cases, we cannot include a random intercept for issues or party dummies, but run linear regression models with clustered standard errors on the party level to predict issue attention in manifestos and press releases. Note that in some models, issue attention in manifestos is also used as an independent variable to predict issue attention in press releases. In this way, we can assess the degree of consistency in the parties' issue choices across communication channels and provide an answer to our first research question (RQ1).

Issue Attention Strategies in the 2009 Regional Elections in Belgium

We first explore the differences in parties' issue attention across communication channels. Table 2 provides answers to our two research questions.

As shown in the first model in Table 2, parties' issue attention in manifestos has a significant and positive effect on their issue attention in press releases. Hence, there is a good deal of consistency in parties' issue attention across communication channels: issues that received higher (lower) attention in preceding manifestos also receive higher (lower) attention in subsequent press releases. This result is rather unsurprising: campaigns are said to be more effective when parties "stay on message" (Norris *et al.*, 1999). The more interesting question was rather to what extent do parties' issue priorities in



Table 2: Explaining issue attention in party manifestos and press releases, OLS regressions with clustered standard errors for parties

	<i>Model 1 (Press releases)</i>		<i>Model 2 (Press releases)</i>		<i>Model 3 (Party manifestos)</i>	
	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>SE</i>
Attn _{manif}	0.55**	0.14				
IO			6.43 ⁺	2.75	0.40	1.22
Attn _{other parties}			0.60*	0.21	0.90***	0.04
Intercept	2.03*	.66	1.31	0.93	0.44*	0.16
Adj. R ²	0.24		0.23		0.54	
N	154		154		154	

⁺ = $p < .10$, * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$.

manifestos published before the campaign predict their issue emphases in press releases published during the campaign? With only one explanatory factor, the explained variance of the model is substantial (Adj. $R^2 = .24$) but it still leaves a lot of variance unexplained. There is a clear link between manifesto and press release content, but parties also adjust their issue priorities during the campaign across communication channels. This answers RQ1.

The question is how are the strategies different? Do they more heavily emphasize party-owned issues in manifestos or in press releases (RQ2)? To answer our second research question, we present two new models that predict issue attention in press releases and manifestos (Models 2 and 3 in Table 2) by parties' issue ownership while controlling for the mean attention that other parties devote to a given issue. Issue ownership has a significant and positive effect on parties' issue attention in press releases, but has no effect on their issue attention in manifestos. The difference between the issue ownership coefficients between Models 2 and 3 is significant ($p < 0.10$). As such, we find evidence that parties do tend to emphasize owned issues significantly more in their press releases than they do in their manifestos. The models also show that parties do not compete in complete isolation from one another: The mean attention that parties devote to a particular issue influences another party's issue choices. This effect is significant and positive in both models, but it tends to be slightly stronger in the manifesto model (although the coefficients are just below statistical significance, $p = 0.11$). When other parties' attention to a given issue increases by 1 per cent, then a party's own attention to the same issue increases by 0.9 per cent in manifestos, and by 0.6 per cent in press releases. If we add a party's prior attention to the issue in its own manifesto as a control variable in Model 2 (results not shown in the table), then the effect of other parties' issue attention loses some statistical power (+0.34 per cent, $p < 0.1$) and is much weaker than in the manifesto model. At the same time, the effect of issue ownership is no longer significant ($\beta = 5.62$, $p = 0.128$).



In sum, our analyses show considerable consistency in parties' issue priorities across communication channels, but at the same time challenge the idea – that is common in the literature – that any given communication channel can provide a representative picture of a party's issue strategies in an election campaign. Parties' issue emphases are not identical in different campaign materials; they are influenced somewhat more by other parties' issue attention in manifestos than in press releases. Our results challenge the prevailing view in the literature that manifestos are 'ideal agendas' that give priority to party-owned issues. As an answer to our second research question, we can thus state that, if anything, issue ownership has more impact on parties' issue selection in press releases than in manifestos.

Yet, we argued that the degree of issue consistency across communication channels, as well as the extent to which parties focus on owned issues, depends on a party's standing in the polls and their status in government or in opposition (H1–H4). To assess these hypotheses, we estimate new press release models to test the impact of parties' standings in the polls (Table 3) and their status in government or in opposition (Table 4). Because we have a limited number of cases and several interaction terms to estimate, we proceed in different steps and present several models. However, we only comment upon the last (full) model in both tables. In these models, the interaction terms are central to assess our expectations because they allow us to examine if issue attention in manifestos has a different effect on issue attention in press releases for winning and losing parties (H1) and for parties in government and in opposition (H3), and if issue ownership plays a different role in determining issue attention in press releases of losing and winning parties (H2) and of parties in government and in opposition (H4).

Table 3 shows the findings for the impact of parties' standings in the polls.

In Model 4, the first interaction term ($\text{Poll} * \text{Attn}_{\text{manif}}$) is significant and positive. This suggests that the impact of a party's issue attention in manifestos on its issue attention in press releases is larger for parties that are winning in the polls, as predicted by H1. The second interaction term ($\text{Poll} * \text{IO}$) is also significant and has the expected negative sign. This suggests that winning parties tend to focus less on party-owned issues in their press releases than losing parties, which is in line with H2. To get a clearer view of these effects, Figures 1 and 2 depict the marginal effects of the independent variables (issue attention in manifestos and issue ownership, respectively) depending on a party's standing in the polls.

Figure 1 shows that the impact of a party's issue attention in manifestos on its issue attention in press releases is not significant across the entire range of poll predictions: for parties that are expected to lose votes, there is no significant relationship. There is, however, a weak but positive and significant marginal effect for winning parties: the more votes a party is expected to gain, the more the content of its press releases is consistent with the issue emphases in its manifesto that was published before the start of the campaign.



Table 3: The impact of standing in polls on issue attention in press releases, OLS regressions with clustered standard errors for parties

	<i>Model 1</i>		<i>Model 2</i>		<i>Model 3</i>		<i>Model 4</i>	
	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>SE</i>
Attn _{manif}	0.41 ⁺	0.18	0.42 ⁺	0.18	0.31 ⁺	0.13	0.32 ⁺	0.14
IO	5.70	3.23	3.28 ⁺	1.39	5.87 ⁺	2.99	3.44*	1.28
Attn _{other parties}	0.34 ⁺	0.14	0.37 ⁺	0.16	0.37 ⁺	0.16	0.40 ⁺	0.18
Poll	0.04	0.03	0.09 ⁺	0.04	-0.27***	0.03	-0.22**	0.04
Poll*Attn _{manif}					0.07***	0.01	0.07***	0.01
Poll*IO			-2.50*	0.70			-2.52**	0.59
Intercept	0.66	0.84	0.45	0.87	0.97 ⁺	0.49	0.75	0.52
R ²	0.34		0.39		0.41		0.46	
N	154		154		154		154	

⁺ = $p < .10$, * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$.

Table 4: The impact of parties' status in government or in opposition on issue attention in press releases, OLS regressions with clustered standard errors for parties

	<i>Model 1</i>		<i>Model 2</i>		<i>Model 3</i>		<i>Model 4</i>	
	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>SE</i>
Attn _{manif}	0.41 ⁺	0.18	0.60*	0.16	0.40 ⁺	0.18	0.59*	0.17
IO	5.74	3.24	6.35 ⁺	3.24	8.78	5.48	8.45	5.82
Attn _{other parties}	0.34 ⁺	0.14	0.37*	0.11	0.38*	0.15	0.39*	0.11
Government	-0.39	0.31	2.26*	0.71	0.10	0.48	2.44**	0.54
Government * Attn _{manif}			-0.59**	0.14			-0.56*	0.18
Government * IO					-5.82	6.13	-4.09	6.64
Intercept	0.85	0.78	-0.19	0.75	0.54	0.74	-0.34	0.65
R ²	0.34		0.39		0.35		0.41	
N	154		154		154		154	

⁺ = $p < .10$, * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$.

Conversely, Figure 2 reveals that issue ownership only has a significant effect on parties' issue attention in press releases for parties that are losing in the polls. The more a party is expected to lose voters, the more likely it is to focus on owned issues in its press releases published during the campaign. In contrast, for parties expected to increase their electoral share, the fact of owning an issue or not has no significant effect on the issue content of their press releases. Thus, we can confirm our first two hypotheses: a party's standing in the polls has an impact on its campaign strategy, although the evidence in support of H1 is relatively weak.

We may now turn to the impact of parties' position in government or in opposition (Table 4).

The first interaction term (Government*Attn_{manif}) in Model 4 is significant and negative, as expected. To get a better understanding of this effect, Figure 3

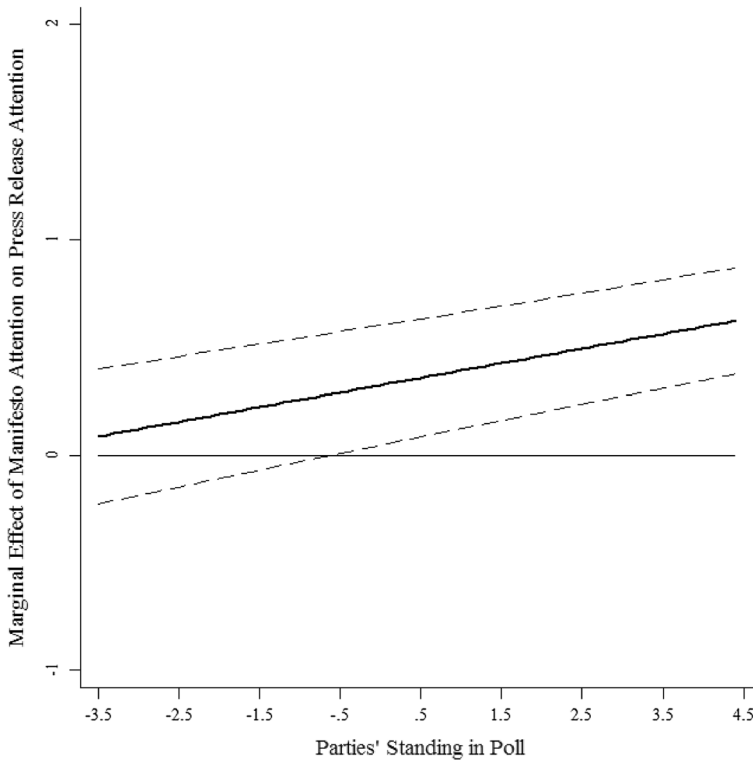


Figure 1: Marginal effect of issue attention in manifestos on issue attention in press releases, depending on a party's standing in opinion polls.

Note: Estimates based on Model 4 in Table 3. Dotted lines denote 95 per cent confidence intervals.

illustrates the marginal effect of issue attention in manifestos, depending on a party's status in government or opposition.

Figure 3 shows that the marginal effect of issue attention in manifestos on issue attention in press releases is not statistically significant for government parties, but it is for opposition parties. Thus, opposition parties are more consistent in their issue choices than parties in government: their issue choices in manifestos positively influence the issue priorities in their press releases. The second interaction term (*Government*IO*) is also negative, as expected, but the effect does not reach statistical significance. For this reason, we do not graphically show it. While the literature suggests that during non-election periods, issue ownership plays a stronger role for opposition parties than it does for government parties, it does not prove to be relevant during election campaigns and thus we reject H4.

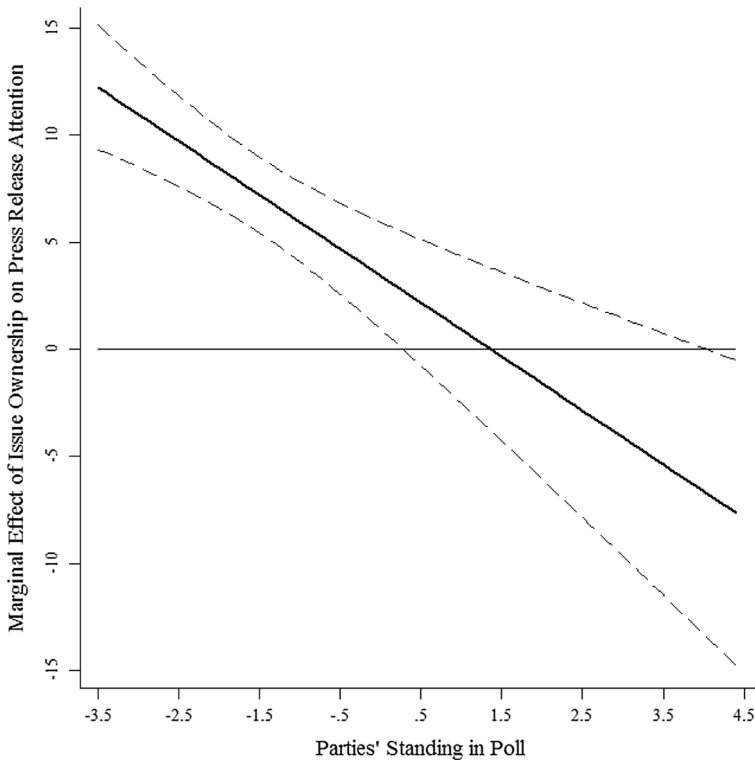


Figure 2: Marginal effect of issue ownership on issue attention in press releases, depending on a party's standing in opinion polls.

Note: Estimates based on Model 4 in Table 3. Dotted lines denote 95 per cent confidence intervals.

Conclusion and Discussion

This article contributes to the existing literature on parties' issue emphasis strategies by showing that single parties can set different issue priorities in their various campaign communication channels. On the one hand, we found a clear connection between party manifestos and press releases: when issues get attention in the manifestos, which are designed well before the start of the actual campaign, chances increase that they will also be picked up in press releases, which are continually released during the weeks leading up to Election Day. Hence, manifestos inspire parties' issue strategies in press releases, resulting in relatively consistent party messages throughout the campaign. On the other hand, however, manifestos do not fully determine the content of press releases: parties readjust their priorities during the campaign. Our findings suggest that party manifestos may be “ideal strategic”

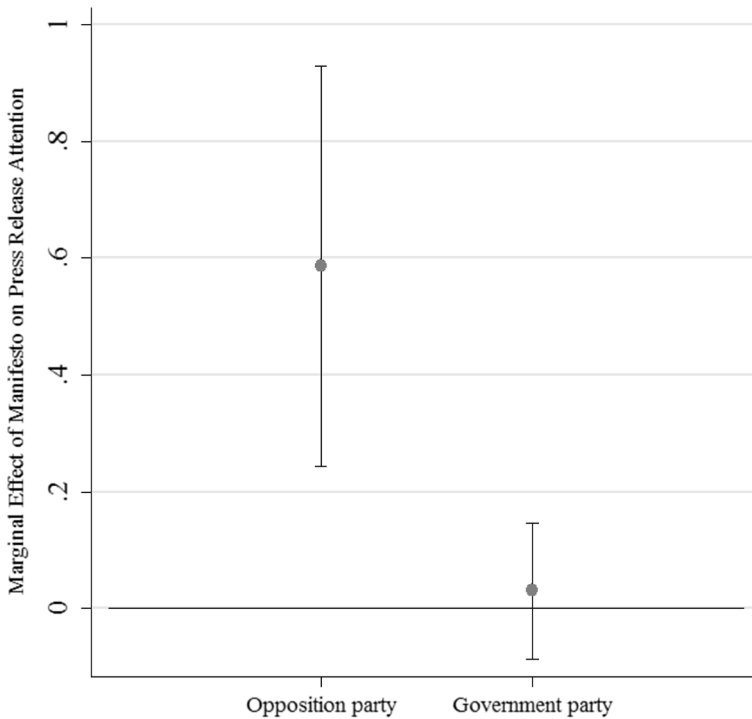


Figure 3: Marginal effect of issue attention in manifestos on issue attention in press releases, depending on a party's status in government or in opposition.

Note: Estimates based on Model 6 in Table 3. Lines denote 95 per cent confidence intervals.

agendas (Norris *et al*, 1999, p. 62) in the sense that they provide a starting point for the subsequent campaign, but not in the sense that they are primarily used to highlight traditional, party-owned issues. Rather, manifestos seem to be encompassing documents containing policy proposals on the most diverse set of issues, many of which are not owned by the party. Moreover, manifestos tend to give precedence to those issues that also receive considerable attention from other parties. In contrast, we found press releases to be slightly less influenced by other parties' issues and more focused on party-owned issues. From the perspective of citizens who are looking for information, manifestos offer more potential when it comes to directly comparing parties' positions and ideas on similar issues, whereas press releases provide them with a better indicator of parties' priorities and issues that can be expected to be tackled once the party has gained office.

Yet, not all parties pursue the same strategies. First, parties in opposition show more consistency in issue attention across communication channels. Second,



parties expecting to lose the election tend to distance themselves, issue-wise, from their manifesto and use press releases to focus on party-owned issues – presumably in an effort to turn the tide in their favor.

These findings underline the complexity of issue strategies, which not only vary across time, but also across communication channels and parties. Thus, it may not be possible to generally confirm or reject the basic expectations of the issue ownership theory as the effect of issue ownership on parties' issue emphasis is contingent. Rather, the more important question seems to be for which parties, when, and in which channels, do party-owned issues play a greater role? In other words, researchers should account for parties' variable use of different campaign materials. Different campaign communication channels are not interchangeable, and combining them in the analysis may help researchers to refine their ideas about the conditions under which parties pursue issue ownership strategies, or rather engage in direct confrontation with other parties.

A question remains regarding how previous research investigating parties' motivations to address similar issues can be integrated into our framework. It would be interesting to know whether external factors, such as sudden and unexpected events (e.g., financial crises), or agenda-related factors, such as intense issue discussions in parliament or the media, affect parties' issue strategies in manifestos and press releases to the same extent or if the incentive to address these issues (and therefore to converge issue-wise with other parties) is stronger in one of the two communication channels. We encourage future researchers to take up this question.

A final question that remains to be answered deals with the generalizability of our findings beyond the 2009 regional election campaign in Flanders, Belgium. The 2009 Flemish campaign took place in a tumultuous time: the Nationalists had just ended their alliance with the Christian Democrats, a new party, the Neoliberals, was running for office for the first time, and the financial and economic crisis may have pushed parties to emphasize issues such as the economy, social welfare, or labor, to an unusual extent. Still, we expect that varying issue strategies across communication channels and parties may also be found in other countries and at other levels of governance. The specifics may differ, of course, but we predict that parties make similar strategic calculations in other systems as well. Thus, we encourage researchers to consider different combinations of campaign communication channels to shed more light on the complexity of parties' issue strategies in election campaigns.

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Notes

- 1 We use the term “convergence” instead of other, often interchangeable terms, such as “issue trespassing” (e.g., Sides, 2006), “issue engagement” (Meyer and Wagner, 2016), or “dialogue” (e.g., Simon, 2002).
- 2 A similar argument has been advanced to hypothesize about the expected differences in the issue attention profiles of mainstream and niche parties (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015) and of smaller and large parties, respectively (Spoon *et al.*, 2014).
- 3 Lijst Dedecker (LDD) is a splinter party formed around Jean-Marie Dedecker. Dedecker was part of the Liberal party but left after an internal dispute to form his own party.
- 4 We focus on the associative dimension of issue ownership because Partirep09 includes no indicator of competence issue ownership. Although the two issue ownership dimensions affect the vote differently (Walgrave *et al.*, 2012; Lachat, 2014), the distinction is less relevant in the study of party behavior: on the aggregate level, the same party is usually considered an associative and competence issue owner, although the competence measure produces generally weaker issue ownership (e.g., Lachat, 2014).
- 5 On the aggregate level, issue ownership is a stable feature of parties (but it is not so at the individual level). That is why it is valid to merge older (Walgrave and de Swert, 2007) with more recent (Walgrave *et al.*, 2012) issue ownership data, supposing that, at the aggregate level, it has not changed much. One concern could be that our older and newer issue ownership data measure different dimensions of issue ownership: associative and competence issue ownership, respectively. Still, since these two dimensions are strongly correlated at the aggregate level—the same party is usually considered an associative and competence issue owner (e.g., Lachat, 2014, p. 734) – we decided to combine the data. Another concern is that some of our issue ownership measures were collected in 2009, that is, in the same year as the elections for which issue ownership was supposed to predict the parties’ behaviors. This potentially raises an endogeneity problem, but since issue ownership perceptions are fairly stable at the aggregate level and unlikely to be influenced by short-term factors, and since the bulk of surveys reported in Walgrave *et al.* (2012) were carried out before the publication of party press releases and manifestos, it is not very likely that the causal arrow can be reversed.
- 6 Our coding explicitly acknowledges that ownership of some issues is contested between two or more parties (Geys, 2012; Walgrave and de Swert, 2007), especially in multiparty systems. Given that the literature operationalizes issue ownership most often in a dichotomous way, there is no generally accepted standard telling us how large the dominance of one party on an issue must be in order to consider it the sole owner of the issue. We decided on a 10 per cent lead, which is substantial, especially in fragmented party systems like Belgium’s. Note that for energy, we assigned ownership to the Greens; while neither of the two published studies on which we base our operationalization measure this issue directly, in the case of Belgium, at least energy and environment are highly related. The discussions concerning energy policy predominantly focus on the phasing-out of nuclear power plants, which is closely related to the environment. We used the survey measure on the issue of “economic crisis” (Walgrave *et al.*, 2012, p. 775) to assign ownership of the “banking” issue. This seems justified given that the economic crisis was primarily concerned with crises in the banking and financial sector. For several other issues, we lack information about parties’ issue ownership; this is very often the case for relatively minor issues that are not salient for any party or the public (such as public lands, or science and technology).



- 7 To measure gains and losses in the polls, different points of reference can be chosen, namely, standing in previous polls, vote share in previous elections, or the standing of a competing party (Kleinnijenhuis and Takens 2011). Although we are interested in the dynamics of the campaign, asking how parties refocus issue attention in press releases as compared to manifestos, we decided to take the previous election as our point of reference instead of a poll shortly after the manifestos were published. The main reason for this is that the results of the previous election that are at stake in the current election are an important benchmark for campaign managers; a party may slightly lose or gain ground between two polls, but what really matters is whether the party can increase (or at least maintain) its results from the previous election. For two parties, CD&V and N-VA, no separate scores were available for 2007 since they formed a cartel at that time (they only split a few months prior to the 2009 elections). Thus, we opted to compare N-VA's score (6.75) to the voting threshold of 5 per cent, thus assigning a score of +1.75. We put CD&V at a slight gain (+1.00), as although they were polled as the largest party (21.2), they were below their 2007 cartel score.
- 8 Polls published by *La Libre Belgique* on September 27, 2008, December 23, 2008, and March 31, 2009, poll published by *Het Laatste Nieuws* on January 17, 2009, and polls published by VRT on October 16, 2008 and on March 1, 2009.
- 9 We used seemingly unrelated regression (suest) in Stata to test whether the coefficients in models 2 and 3 were significantly different, or not.

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