Election Campaigns Set the Agenda

Mandate Responsiveness in Germany

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Abstract

In democracies, elections are meant to shape public policy. But how much leeway do elected representatives actually have to implement their mandate? Influential scholars think that constraints linked to regional integration, budget restrictions, and counter-majoritarian institutions dilute mandate responsiveness. However, empirical evidence for this important claim remains scarce. This article provides an empirical account of the extent to which different types of constraints limit governing parties' ability to set their electoral priorities on the agenda. Using panel negative binomial regression of German electoral and legislative priorities over a period of over three decades (1983-2016), we conclude that – even when controlling for most confounders – electoral priorities affect policies to a greater extent than scholarship has acknowledged so far. We confirm, however, the constraining effect of Europeanization, shrinking budget leeway, and intra-coalition disagreement. We elaborate on the implications for theories of public policy, democratic representation, and comparative politics.

Keywords: mandate responsiveness, government, agenda-setting, policy-making, parties

Number of words: 9208

"Party government in democratic polities will prevail when a party or parties win control of the executive as a result of competitive elections, when the political leaders in the polity are recruited by and through parties, when the (main) parties or alternatives in competition offer voters clear policy alternatives, when public policy is determined by the party or parties holding executive office, and when that executive is held accountable through parties. [...] It is the contention of this paper that, with time, these conditions are becoming marked more by their absence than by their presence in contemporary European politics. In short, as a result of long-term shifts in the character of elections, parties and party competition, it is precisely this set of conditions that is being undermined." (Mair, 2008)

In representative democracies, governments' electoral platforms should influence policymaking. Successful parties' electoral supply is expected to (at least partially) translate into effective policies and accountable representatives, notably in the sense that they must bear the consequences of not keeping the promises made to their voters. This principle is commonly conceptualized as the democratic mandate (APSA 1950; Budge and Hofferbert 1990; Mansbridge 2003). Issue attention is a topical dimension of mandate responsiveness: If this principle applies, the issues emphasized by governing parties in their manifestos should influence their policymaking priorities.

How much room for maneuver is there, however, for political actors to shape policy on the basis of their election agendas? Recent empirical research has begun to explore how electoral priorities are reflected in the adopted legislation (Froio et al. 2017; Brouard et al. 2018; Carammia et al. 2018), cabinet press releases (Borghetto and Belchior 2019), and parliamentary questions (Borghetto and Russo 2018). Findings are mixed [1] and call for a conditional approach that could reveal the conditions shaping mandate responsiveness. This article sheds new light on these ongoing debates by evaluating empirically, for the first time, the constraining impact of the main hurdles assumed to severely constrain mandate responsiveness: international interdependence and regional integration in particular (Scharpf 1999), budget pressures (Ezrow et al. 2020), counter-majoritarian institutions and coalition partners (Schmidt 1996). Concerns have been expressed that these constraints may erode representative democracy (Mair 2006) and prevent elections from fulfilling one of their core functions: providing a link between voters and public policy. Yet, empirical evidence for this constraining impact is scarce.

Inspired by the agenda-setting literature, we address these questions through the lens of issue attention. We focus on Germany, which is a fertile ground for studying determinants of the agenda-setting impact of mandates: Germany is a member of the EU, has had fluctuating budget conditions over the last three decades, and has a mixed electoral system resulting in coalition governments. For this study, we created a dataset on electoral and legislative priorities across all policy sectors, merging data collected by the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) with national-, issue- and party-level data. This dataset includes a unique set of substantive and control variables and covers a long period of time (1983-2016) with multiple changes in power.

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[1]A study on Italy finds a significant impact of electoral priorities on legislation (Carammia et al. 2018). Brouard et al. (2018) find only conditional effects in France, while Froio et al. (2017) show that the effect of British governing parties' electoral mandate is not significant when controlling for the priorities of the public, of the main opposition party, and in speeches from the Throne. These studies have only limited cumulativity given the use of different models and the inclusion of various sets of controls.

This article first discusses theories of party mandates and policy agendas, and develops our argument on how different constraints may restrict mandates' agenda-setting impact. We then present our research design, complemented by a descriptive exploration of the data used in subsequent analyses. Panel negative binomial regressions of the legislative agenda then provide robust evidence for a strong agenda-setting impact of electoral priorities. However, we also confirm the constraining effect of Europeanization, budget limitations and coalitions. The concluding section sums up our findings and discusses their broader implications for theories of comparative politics, democratic accountability, and public policy.

1   Mandates, agenda-setting and constraints

The principle of mandate responsiveness is one of the major premises of representative democracies. Empirical assessments usually look at pledge fulfillment (Thomson et al. 2017; Naurin et al. 2019a). We adopt an alternative approach focused on issue attention, based on the expectation that the issues emphasized by governing parties during their electoral campaigns significantly shape priorities on policy agendas. Whether programme-to-policy linkages also hold with respect to policy priorities has seldom been addressed (Froio et al. 2017; Brouard et al. 2018; Green-Pedersen et al. 2018; Borghetto & Belchior 2019) despite of several decades of public policy research pointing to agenda-setting, i.e. the way governments prioritize between the innumerable problems demanding public intervention – as a decisive stage of policymaking and a source of bias in the representation of social groups (Schattschneider 1960; Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Kingdon 1984; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Admittedly, mandate responsiveness would be at its best if pledged policy and enacted policy would coincide in terms of priorities and policy substance. Pledge and agenda-setting research are complementary in at least three respects.

First, the agenda-setting approach allows us to circumvent the one-sidedness of pledge research that "only looks at the question whether pledges are enacted – not whether what is enacted is pledged" (Louwerse 2012: 1252). Mandates indeed allow voters to "authorize" their representatives to pass a set of policies on their behalf (Thomassen 1994; Andeweg 2003; Louwerse 2012). Implicitly, they also delineate a legitimate perimeter for government action, as such an authorization is not given for topics that were not addressed in the program or campaign. Accordingly, pledge fulfillment is only meaningful to the extent that there is significant correspondence in priorities. Conversely, a correspondence in priorities only would at least mean that representation works well with respect to Schattschneider's "conflict of conflicts". Assessing the policy relevance of electoral programs requires working in the reverse direction from pledge fulfillment research, i.e. approaching public policy as a whole and analyzing programs as a determinant. The agenda-setting approach makes this possible.

Second, our focus on attention is consistent with the well-established observation that political parties

compete not only by shifting their positions but also by seeking to put the issues on the agenda they would prefer to see predominate (Budge and Farlie 1983; Green-Pedersen 2007; Budge 2015).

Third, policy priorities have distinct, but equally important functions and implications as substantive positions. Curtin et al. (2010:930) observe that the fragmentation of societies and electorates makes it increasingly difficult for parties to aggregate sets of policies fostering solid support and therefore to act as authorized agents when in office: "The result is the promotion of a party policy in election programs that is often less a mandate for action and more a symbolic signaling of priorities and core concerns." As a matter of fact, electoral promises can be more or less precise, with formulations leaving room for interpretation – and effectively, their implementation in practice often results in the agenda-setting of a proposal that is then debated, negotiated and adjusted. The agenda-setting dimension seems particularly important, as the substance of pledged and implemented policy can differ (sometimes substantially) from each other. By formulating electoral pledges, candidates at a particular election commit to set certain issues on the agenda and voters expect them to follow through on this agenda by passing policy. While evaluating if a policy corresponds to what was promised is a challenging task, assessing the extent to which some action was taken or not with respect to a priority emphasized during the campaign offers a more straightforward benchmark for citizens. Research on valence (e.g. Clarke et al. 2009), issue ownership (Petrocik 1996) and salience linkages between citizens and party policy (Reher 2014, 2015) underlines the importance of the extent to which parties adjust their agenda in response to changing citizens' priorities for their political attitudes and voting behavior.

Agenda-setting research draws our attention to the fact that – because government resources and policymaking capacity are limited (Baumgartner et al. 2009) – mandate representation coexists with other logics of representation, notably problem-solving (Adler and Wilkerson 2013) and responses to short-term public concerns (Stimson et al. 1995; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Rasmussen et al. 2018) and to media discourses (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2016; Vliegenthart et al. 2016). Yet, mandate responsiveness would imply that public policy priorities also respond to those emphasized by the governing parties in their electoral campaign. Significant incentives to prioritize at least some of the issues related to governing parties' electoral mandate derive from the anticipation of potential electoral sanctions for inaction with regard to policies emphasized in the campaign – as well as for policy reforms that were not authorized via the democratic mandate (Austen-Smith Banks 1988; Thomassen 1994; Aragonès et al. 2007; Battigalli et al. 2013; Corazzini et al. 2014; Naurin et al. 2019b). Electoral promises, and platforms in particular, do indeed attract considerable public and media attention, with journalists drawing up tables of the main campaign announcements, for example, or referring to such pledges as an important benchmark for assessing government performance during the parliamentary term (Naurin and Hakansson 2015: 395-396). The topics parties emphasize in their programs and in their policy decisions may be similar also because both tend to be shaped by the same factors, related in particular to their historical linkage to some constitutive issues,

such as immigration for far-right parties, social policy for social democrats, environmental protection for Greens, etc. Several scholars have recently begun to treat routine partisan activities, including press releases or parliamentary questions, as a medium of party competition (Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011; Louwerse 2012; Sagarzazu and Klüver 2017; Borghetto and Russo 2018). The same may be true for public policy: When legislating, elected officials have particularly strong incentives to stick to their priorities as announced during the election campaign. Governing parties may then benefit from their preferred topics topping the policy agenda (Petrocik 1996).

Against this background, we expect governing parties to use their formal powers and political resources to pass legislation on their mandate priorities.[2] Hence, based on the theoretical arguments just outlined, we conjecture that the policy priorities entailed in governing parties' programs have agenda-setting effects on legislative outputs.

H1: Mandate responsiveness hypothesis (Baseline)

Stronger issue emphasis in governing parties' electoral programs increases the likelihood of legislation on this issue.

Having established this baseline hypothesis, we now turn to the factors moderating this relationship between the electoral program of the executive and the legislative priorities. The literature discusses different types of forces likely to curtail the effect of mandates on policies, but empirical assessments of their actual impact are lacking.

1.1   Constraints linked to Europeanization

Several scholars have expressed concerns with the development of democracy in a context in which globalization and European integration restrict elected governments' margins for maneuver. In this view, international interdependence (Keohane and Nye, 1989; Boix 2000; Garrett 1998; Ezrow and Hellwig, 2014; Hellwig 2015) and the delegation of national powers to supranational institutions (Scharpf 1999; Mair 2006, 2009), in particular the European Union, place governing parties and therefore mandate implementation under heavy constraints. Peter Mair formulated three well-known hypotheses on this matter. He argues that the integration of certain policies and member states' convergence tends to shrink the space for domestic electoral competition. Second, the transfer of some competences to supranational agencies restricts the range of instruments available to governing parties. Third, Europeanization limits the policy repertoire of national parties by eliminating numerous practices which interfere with the realization of the common market (Mair 2007, see Nanou and Dorussen, 2012 for empirical insights on the restriction of party positions). In this context, governments need to respond not only to their pledges and to public

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[2]Between 1998 and 2018, 1,714 laws were passed by the Bundestag, 1,337 (78%) of which were directly introduced by the government. The fact that only 22% of the laws were proposed by the parliament confirms the government's dominance over the legislative agenda.

opinion but also to principals located in part beyond the domestic realm (Scharpf 1999). As Mair (2009: 16) summarizes it, "much of what keeps parties in contemporary European governments busy is Europe itself – negotiating, understanding, transposing – and [...] Europe has become a very large part of the administration of things," restricting the space for partisan policymaking.

However, we have little knowledge of the empirical impact of such developments on mandate responsiveness. Existing research has already found that EU-level influence on national lawmaking is more limited than commonly thought (Brouard et al. 2011), but scholarship has not yet examined its effect on mandate responsiveness beyond single sectors (but see Knill et al. 2010 on partisan imprint on environmental policy in countries with different levels of integration into supranational organizations). The constraining impact of European integration could well be more modest than Mair believes, as governing parties themselves exert an influence on EU policies through their representation in key EU institutions. In addition, the bite of the constraints effectively depends on the extent of integration and the degree of fit between the domestic status quo and EU norms (Börzel and Risse 2003).

Empirical analyses on how EU constraints moderate mandate responsiveness are needed. Based on the literature just reviewed, we expect Europeanization to decrease the agenda-setting impact of the government parties' programs.

H2: EU constraints hypothesis

The effect of governing parties' programs on the legislative agenda decreases as the extent to which the national government shares competences for the relevant policy area with the EU rises.

1.2   Budget constraints

Parties' capacity to enact policy involves a cost factor. Mandate responsiveness may depend to a considerable extent on the availability of sufficient resources to fund the enactment of the policies promised at elections. This cost may be marginal under favorable economic conditions associated with budget surpluses, but prohibitory in times of economic hardship. Budget constraints may be particularly strong today, following decades of economic slowdown in Western economies (McKeown 1999; Streeck 2014). These conditions and successive neoliberal reforms have contributed to a reshaping of the capacity of governments, whose objective is to ensure a balanced state budget. This is all the more true for Eurozone members that have committed themselves to keep their public deficits below 3% by signing the Stability and Growth Pact. This has not always been respected but over recent years this norm has been reinforced and several bailouts provided EU institutions with an opportunity to exert additional pressure on domestic governments for them to seek fiscal austerity and even to implement imposed reforms (Bosco and Verney 2016; Conti et al. 2018; Alonso and Ruiz-Rufino 2018). Economic hardships and budget deficits may also generate overwhelming problems that can drive governments' attention away from their program (Praprotnik 2017; Borghetto and Russo 2018; Borghetto and Belchior 2019). While the impact of budget

constraints on mandate responsiveness has not been yet measured, several findings indirectly suggest that they are an important potential condition. In particular, the political economy literature suggests that the development of spending reflects macroeconomic conditions rather than the partisan composition of government (e.g. Huber and Stephens 2001). Moreover, a recent comparative study has shown that responsiveness to public opinion is conditional on favorable macroeconomic conditions (Ezrow et al. 2020). We therefore hypothesize that budget constraints dampen mandates' agenda-setting impact and thus expect a positive relationship between budget account balance and the agenda setting impact.

H3: Budget constraints hypothesis

The effect of governing parties' programs on the legislative agenda decreases when public finances deteriorates.

1.3   Constraints linked to political conflict

Mandate responsiveness may not only be curtailed by largely exogenous constraints, but also by domestic hurdles in terms of domestic checks and balances. Governments' capacity to implement their priorities probably depends on the institutional configuration. When opposition parties control multiple counter-majoritarian institutions, such as the second chamber in a bicameral political system, elected parties may be less able to act in the fields promised (Schmidt 1996; Tsebelis 2002; Thomson et al. 2017).

Deviations from the electoral mandate may as well result from the need to compromise with coalition partners, especially if their party programs differ widely (Martin and Vanberg, 2011). Two forms of conflict are potentially constraining, corresponding to the two main traditions in the party competition literature : conflict resulting from diverging positions that are at the core of spatial models of party competition (Downs 1957) and salience conflict over the prioritization of problems (Budge and Farlie 1983; Green-Pedersen 2007). Political parties may then explicitly refrain from acting in the most contentious domains, or establish ex-ante and ex-post control mechanisms to limit ministerial drifts from the coalition position (Bergman et al. 2015).[3] Such configurations make it more difficult to legislate on the issues of concern (see Hampshire and Bale 2014 for qualitative evidence). Green-Pedersen et al. (2018) corroborate the idea that disagreement in the government coalition hinders policymaking based on the observation that the agenda-setting power of the prime minister's party decreases with increasing dissimilarity of the coalition partners' priorities. Other studies focusing on diverse political systems did not find any conditioning impact of policy disagreement between coalition partners on mandate responsiveness (Schermann and Ennser-Jedenastik 2014; Brouard et al. 2018).

H4a: Institutional constraint hypothesis

The effect of governing parties' programs on the legislative agenda is stronger when the govern-

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[3]Such mechanisms include the negotiation of a coalition agreement and of conflict resolution rules, as well as the nomination of watchdog junior ministers.

ment parties control the second chamber.

H4b: Coalition conflict hypothesis

The effect of governing parties' programs on the legislative agenda decreases with the ideological distance between the parties in government.

H4c: Coalition priority divergence hypothesis

The effect of governing parties' programs on the legislative agenda decreases with increasing dissimilarity of the priorities of the parties in government.

1.4   Constraints and their anticipation

Political parties are likely to pay attention to constraints of all types when drafting their electoral program. Especially in countries where coalitions are inevitable, or where European integration and budget orthodoxy foster a widely shared consensus, future government parties probably try to anticipate the related hurdles. In this sense, constraints may have consequences not only on mandate responsiveness, but also on the scope and level of ambition of mandates. Both effects would be relevant to voters, but in different ways: while the first may result in disappointment about a mismatch between campaign priorities and public policy, the second would translate into a restriction in political alternatives. It is important to keep in mind that given our approach, the present article sheds light only on the first effect, something we will return to when interpreting our findings.

This focus is consistent with mandate theory, which focuses on the nexus between pledged and enacted policy. It is an important aspect of the policy relevance of elections. Constraints are not always easy to evaluate in advance (Abrial and Persico 2018). More generally, parties in the run for an election do not only seek to remain credible, but also need to embody attractive visions to win the election. Faced with voters' demands and competition from their challengers (especially fringe or challenger parties that are less constrained by considerations of feasibility because they are unlikely to govern), government parties are often tempted to promise action also with respect to areas of high constraints and high incentives. This is what a qualitative look at manifestos (see examples cited in section 3.1 below) corroborates. Furthermore, as we will see below, our findings do not point to significant anticipation effects: the coefficients in Table 1 show that our estimates of mandate responsiveness remain stable when controlling for a range of constraints.

2   Case selection and empirical strategy

This study is set out to measure the agenda-setting impact of governing parties' mandates in Germany. It is also a first attempt to analyze how several conditions constrain this impact. Investigating how governments' electoral programs shape policy agendas requires data on issue attention in both governing parties'

manifestos and policymaking, measured on the same scale. We use data collected by the German CAP team on issue emphasis in party manifestos and enacted laws.[4] We use panel negative-binomial regressions to analyze how the government's electoral priorities (% of manifestos on a given topic) translate into legislative attention (monthly number of laws adopted on the same topic), controlling for a unique set of relevant factors. The data, available over a period of three decades (1983-2016), then makes it possible to analyze with interaction terms how the agenda-setting impact of manifestos varies depending on several conditions.

A within-system comparison allows circumventing the noise induced by national confounding factors. We focus on Germany and take advantage of the various institutional, political, and economic configurations observed over time as well as of differences in the extent of Europeanization across policy issues. The strength enjoyed both by German counter-majoritarian institutions and opposition parties, the need to form coalition governments, and the strong German corporatism make Germany a relatively unlikely case for observing an effect of electoral priorities on the legislative agenda. Consequently, analyzing how electoral issues shape legislative priorities in Germany can provide a lower bound for parties' ability to act on the topics emphasized in their campaign and to explore the conditions affecting program-to-policy linkages. Moreover, Germany is a good case to investigate these conditions considering the variation of our variables of interest in the last few decades. There were regular alternations in the party composition of government with varying internal ideological range as we will see, under changing economic conditions. Given the acceleration of European integration over this period, Europeanization of policymaking varies considerably across both time and policy areas. Majority control in the upper chamber (Bundesrat) also changed at several points in time.

2.1 Dependent variable: the legislative agenda

Our dependent variable is based on the manual coding of the thematic profile of each law adopted by the German parliament (N=4,060) between 1983 and 2016, using the CAP coding scheme for 19 issue topics (Breunig and Schnatterer 2020).[5] Each law is assigned to a unique topic category, which makes it possible to count the number of laws adopted each month on each issue [6]. The variable therefore captures the number of laws adopted on topic i during each month t. Our data consists of a panel cross-section with 19 topics observed for 374 months, which adds up to 7,106 observations (19 issues * 374 months).

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[4]Not all policy is legislative, but laws represent a significant share of governments' policymaking activities covering all sectors, and available sources make it possible to consistently track changes over time. As such, they offer an excellent observatory for our purpose.

[5]The original coding scheme contained 21 categories, but we chose to merge (7 and 21) and (20 and 24), given the quasi-absence of platform sentences and laws on the topics 21 and 24. We are aware that several issues may be covered by a unique law, which suggests that data collection at a more granular level would lead to better data validity. Jones et al. (2019), however, observed a strong correlation between the main topic of a law and the content of its single titles. Our approach makes the test more conservative.

[6]Prior work measure the legislative agenda using the percentage of laws adopted in a given year or mandate. Percentage

2.2 Independent variable: priorities in governing parties' platforms

Our main independent variable, which is based on the content analysis of governing parties' manifestos, captures the proportion of sentences devoted to each issue in each manifesto.[7] Party manifestos are a core source for research on the issue content of party competition. Many scholars advocate the preferred use of alternative sources, including expert surveys and political communication extracted from news coverage or tweets. Yet, for our specific research question, platforms remain the most relevant source as an authoritative document produced by parties as unitary actors, while the binding character of individual politicians' claims or parties' routine press releases may be disputed.

German governments have consistently comprised two parties over the period of study.[8] For each administration, the respective manifesto of both coalition partners was coded by assigning each sentence to an issue category following an identical scheme to the one used for the laws. This data was then used to measure the attention devoted to each topic (percentage of manifesto). For each government, starting from the premise that coalitions involve making policy compromises (Green-Pedersen et al. 2018), we aggregated these percentages with a weight reflecting the number of parliamentary seats (Döring and Manow 2019) of each coalition partner.[9]

2.3 Moderating variables

We test our conditional hypotheses by modelling interactions between attention in electoral platforms and a list of factors corresponding to our hypotheses. We investigate three different types of constrains. First, the limitation of the national sovereignty represented by the gradual delegation of competences to European institutions is measured with the percentage of adopted laws on each topic that were directly influenced by the European Union (Beyer, 2017). Second, we use the annual government budget balance (in % of GDP as provided by the World Bank) to operationalize budget constraints. Finally, we include three variables measuring each type of political conflict specified earlier. We use a dummy variable capturing whether the government is supported by a majority in the Bundesrat – the German upper chamber representing the Länder. This variable takes the value of 1 when the cabinet enjoys an absolute majority in the Bundesrat, and 0 otherwise. Governments consistently controlled the Bundesrat until the early 1990s, but this is no longer the case. In public debates, this was even regularly commented on as an obstacle to policymaking.[10] The two other variables relate to the policy differences between coalition partners. Partners may diverge from each other ideologically given distinct positions on, for instance, redistribution

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[7]This was again hand-coded by a team of trained coders. Inter-Coder Reliability is 88% for party manifestos and 82% for adopted bills (Breunig and Schnatterer, 2020).

[8]The CDU and the CSU are treated as a single party because they consistently present a common manifesto for the legislative elections.

[9]Alternative specifications using the proportion of votes or an unweighted average produced substantially identical findings (see Appendix B).

[10]In 2019, for example, opposition from the Bundesrat became salient in the context of legislation on the "climate package", with the government being constrained by the need to seek support from the Greens and the Liberals, who demanded antagonistic modifications of the law. Our analyses show the extent to which the lack of a stable majority in the Bundesrat represents a hurdle to mandate responsiveness.

or moral issues. They can also disagree as to the priority for action. For example, Social-democrats and Greens may agree on the principle of environmental protection, but the latter may devote a much higher level of priority to this issue. Accordingly, we compute two measures of intra-government distance, measured for each issue and government: (1) the absolute left-right distance, measured from CMP data for each cabinet (Volkens et al. 2013), and (2) the absolute difference in the proportion (%) of attention devoted by both partners to each specific topic.

2.4 Controls

Importantly, we control for public priorities. Public demands established in public opinion polls are a particularly influential alternative agenda-setting mechanism. This raises endogeneity concerns, since it seems probable that public priorities are already taken into account by parties when drafting their manifestos. In this sense, public priorities need to be controlled for to avoid the risk of overestimating the impact of mandates.[11] We do this based on the aggregated responses to the question on the "most important problem" (MIP) facing Germany, as polled by Politbarometer and coded using the CAP scheme.[12]

Attention to a topic in the government platform does not mean that this topic will constantly be the subject of new laws. Our models thus control for the number of laws adopted on the topic in the previous months of the legislative term (cumulative law production).

We also control for the ideological positioning of the government to avoid biases related to the heterogeneity of what is promised in substantive terms and to the fact that some policies, e.g. liberal economic reforms, do not require as many budget resources as social policy. This is done using a categorical variable characterizing left-wing (SPD-Green), right-wing (CDU-FDP), and grand coalitions (CDU-SPD).

Previous studies focusing on other countries have observed variations in mandate implementation over the course of the electoral cycle (Brouard et al. 2018; Borghetto and Belchior 2019; Duval and Pétry 2019), which may in part reflect governments' stronger policymaking capacity due to higher levels of popularity in the honeymoon period. We therefore add a control variable capturing the sequence of the electoral cycle (with a distinction between the first 12 months, the last 12 months, and periods of routine in between) and aggregate assessments of government popularity as polled monthly by Politbarometer [13]. We use a six-month lag, which corresponds to the average duration of the German legislative review process. Finally, we control for time with a count of the number of months expired since our initial period.

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[11]A previous study did indeed observe a limited agenda-setting impact of party platforms when controlling for public concerns (Froio et al. 2017).

[12]Data is available at the quarterly level. See Breunig and Schnatterer (2020) for more details on the coding process.

[13]Government popularity is measured as the monthly average answer to the question: 'On a scale from -5 to 5, how satisfied are you with the current government?'

2.5   Model

Given the count nature of the outcome and the general panel structure of the data, we use panel negative binomial regressions.[14] In the short-term, our dependent variable is likely to be driven by volatile factors such as public opinion, economic conditions, government popularity, or electoral cycles. To be able to control for them, we model our data at the month*issue level, although the relationship we are interested in happens at the term level.[15] By pooling all issues addressed by government in our analyses, we model the average effect of electoral priorities on legislative attention. Although mandate effects may vary across topics, this is not the focus of this analysis anchored at a more systemic level. Our analyses are designed to capture how the distribution of attention in manifestos shapes the distribution of attention in legislation, leaving the question of sector-specific patterns for subsequent studies.

3   Findings

## 3.1   Mandates' impact on legislative priorities

We begin with an assessment of our baseline hypothesis (H1). Figure 1 presents the data on issue attention in governing parties' manifestos and in legislation, aggregated at the term-level. This allows for a first examination of how the number of laws evolves compared to the level of attention (%) the respective topics receive in platforms.

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[14]All models were estimated in 'R' using the 'pglm' package.

[15]This modelling strategy might artificially inflate the size of our sample, which in turn would inflate the significance level of our results (Garritzmann and Seng 2016). To assess the robustness of our results, analyses were also run at the cabinet term level, controlling for the average level of public priorities and budget account balance. Findings were substantively identical (see Appendix C).

Figure 1
Issue attention in German governing parties' manifestos
and adopted legislation (1983-2016)
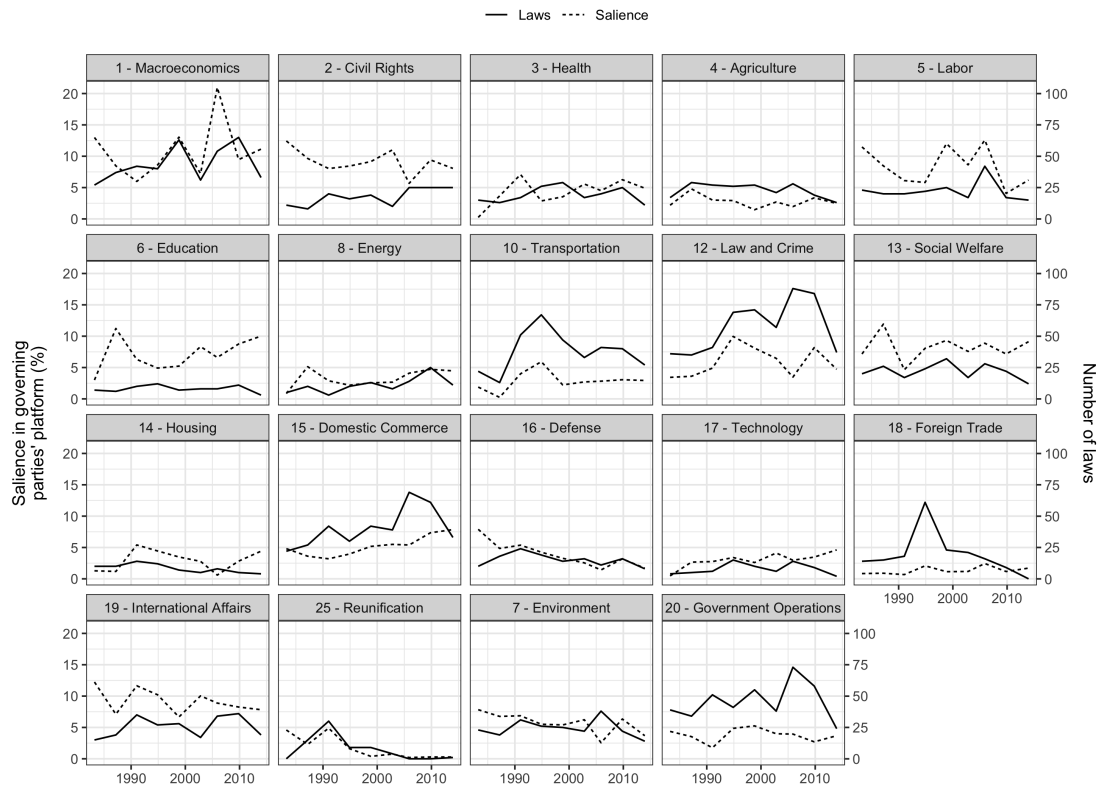
Issues receive variable levels of attention, resulting for some cases in huge gaps between low- and high-profile subjects. However, the overall amount of attention tends to be congruent across both agendas, with only a few noticeable exceptions characterized by disproportionate attention in the electoral (education, labor) or in the legislative (infrastructure, government operations) arena. Patterns vary across issues, but common trends or fluctuations are discernible on most issues. This preliminary evidence calls for multivariate analyses to assess how significant the agenda-setting impact of platforms is when controlling for all relevant factors.

The three models in Table 1 display the main results of panel negative binomial regression models testing our expectation that legislative priorities reflect issue attention in the ruling parties' platforms. The coefficients indicate for each month of the mandate how the probability of an additional law on a certain topic varies for a one-unit change in the predictors. For the main variable of interest, this would be for an increase of attention to this issue in the governing parties' platforms by 1%. In a step-by-step approach, we add basic control variables (Model 1), variables on external (Model 2) and internal (Model 3) constraints.

Table 1: Main models

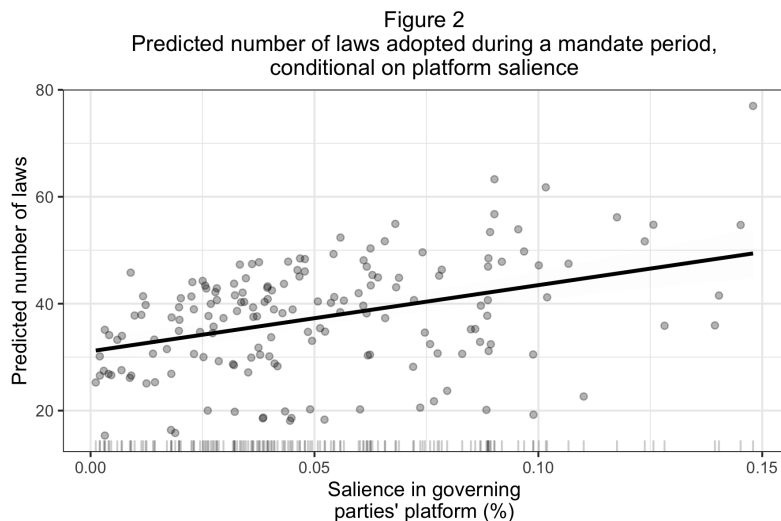|	Outcome: Number of laws		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Gov platform priorities (A)	0.021**	0.021**	0.020*
Cumulative law production	0.005*	0.004*	0.005*
Time	0.001**	0.001**	0.001
Ideological range (ref. CDU-FDP)			
Grand coalition	0.069	0.123°	
SPD-Green	−0.022	−0.140*	
Electoral cycle (ref. routine)			
Last 12 months	0.887**	0.935**	0.905**
First 12 months	0.565**	0.568**	0.574**
Gov popularity (t-1)	−0.098**	−0.044	−0.043
MIPs (t-1)	0.004*	0.003°	0.003°
Europeanization (B)		0.337°	0.334°
Budget account balance (t-1) (C)		−0.047**	−0.011
Majority in Bundesrat (D)			−0.143*
Coal. ideological range (E)			0.002
Coal. divergence of priorities (F)			0.342
Log-likelihood	-6633.69	-6620.26	-6624.11
Observations	7,106	7,106	7,106

Notes: *We use panel negative binomial regressions to model the monthly number of laws on each topic. An increase in manifesto salience significantly increases the number of adopted laws, even when controlling for the number of laws already adopted and a range of likely confounders. Government pass more laws in periods closed to elections and, surprisingly, when they do not benefit from a majority in the Bundesrat. The number of laws is higher on issues identified as priority (MIP) among citizens. Finally, the number of laws (including the translation of European guidelines) grows with EU competences.*
$°$ p < .1 ; $*$ p < .05 ; $**$ p < .01

The coefficient for government platform priorities is consistently highly significant and is not sensitive to the inclusion of control variables. Note that the coefficients for these predictors suggest that legislative productivity tends to increase over time, on topics that have already been subject to legislation in the same term and with increasing Europeanization. In line with our expectations and previous studies (Froio et al. 2017), MIPs exert a significant positive but rather small effect on the number of adopted laws. Being popular tends to be associated with less legislative productivity, as does a more favorable budget balance. On average, governments pass more laws in the last 12 months of their term, and fewer in the first 12

months. With respect to domestic institutional constraints, we find a significant negative influence only of the ideological (in positional terms) between the governing parties – and no significant effect of divergent priorities or of controlling a stable majority in the Bundesrat, confirming König's (1999) observation that opposition from the second chamber does not significantly dampen legislative productivity.

The evidence of a powerful agenda-setting impact of governing parties' platforms is strong. In substantive terms, this means that a 1% increase in manifesto salience tends to increase the likelihood of an additional law to be passed on a given topic and in a given month by 2.1% on average.[16] This is a substantial effect, considering that it is estimated at the level of single months and that the amplitude of variations in issue attention in electoral platforms is considerable.[17] This becomes even clearer when looking at the predicted number of laws depending on issue salience in the platform in Figure 2, which shows that a 5% increase in electoral attention translates into approximately 8 additional laws on a given topic for a four-year mandate. This finding is robust and strong (even in complementary analyses at the level of cabinets, see Appendix C). Overall, our analyses clearly demonstrate that party manifestos matter for the legislative agenda. This may come as a surprise, given the marginality of parties and elections in the literature on public policy and particularly in studies of policy agenda setting. Our clear and strong effects are also striking given our focus on a political system involving numerous powerful veto players.

Figure 2
Predicted number of laws adopted during a mandate period,
conditional on platform salience

Notes: *This figure represents the predicted number of laws according to model 3. For each month in our database, we predicted the expected number of laws in a given topic and summed up the predictions. Each point represents one topic during one of the nine terms we had data on. The expected number of laws increases with manifesto salience, suggesting that the legislative agenda responds at least partially to the electoral priorities as expressed during the campaign. The ticks along the x-axis indicate the overall distribution of issue salience in manifestos, which rarely overcomes 10% of a manifesto.*

A qualitative look at each government's most important policy decisions corroborates our statistical findings: A vast majority of them were announced in the governing parties' electoral platform and taken up in the coalition agreement. A systematic review would exceed the scope of this study, but a prominent example is the climate package adopted in 2019 by the current grand coalition, in line with the SPD commitment to develop a climate protection law. For the Merkel III government (2013-2017), which was

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[16]By a factor of 1.047 (exp (.046)).
[17]The standard deviation is 3.7%.

also a grand coalition, this includes notably the first-time introduction of a federal minimum wage, perhaps the most salient electoral topic at the 2013 election, but also the reform of the stay-at-home mothers' pension (Mütterrente). Other reforms include the possibility for children born to foreign parents in Germany to opt for dual citizenship, the adoption of a legal quota of 30% for women in supervisory boards, laws promoting equal pay for men and women, same-sex marriage, and the implementation of rent controls (Mietpreisbremse). Counter-examples of policies enacted in the absence of a mandate are rare and mostly justified by governments with respect to unexpected or focusing events. Such cases include Angela Merkel's decision to confirm the phasing-out of nuclear energy decided by the previous red-green government following the 2011 Fukushima catastrophe (Thurner 2017) as well as to temporarily open German borders to refugees without any border checks in 2015 in the midst of the European migrant crisis (Mushaben 2017). In the absence of such justification, unauthorized reforms face strong opposition. For example, the German adoption of a law introducing a car toll (Pkw-Maut) in 2015 was contested on the basis of Angela Merkel's previous explicit statement during her campaign that there would not be any car toll while she is Chancellor.

3.2 A hollowing-out of mandate representation?

To test our conditional hypotheses, we model interactions between electoral priorities and each of the conditions. We first turn to Europeanization (H2) and budget conditions (H3). The models presented in Table 2 and the marginal effects represented in Figure 3 corroborate both hypotheses with a negative interaction term for Europeanization and a positive one for budget account balance. The constitutive term for platform priorities in Model 1 shows that they exert a significant impact on legislative attention for areas immune to any Europeanization, e.g. those for which none of the adopted legislation originates at EU level, in particular social policy and – until the signing of the Maastricht treaty – areas such as education, labor, or security policies. In line with Mair's argument, the marginal effect of electoral priorities on laws decreases with increasing Europeanization. Their agenda-setting impact is no longer significant for policy areas with more than 30% of laws directly influenced by EU legislation. These include areas of considerable public salience, such as the internal market and agriculture over the whole period and – since the founding treaties of the 1990s – macroeconomics, energy, transport, and the environment.

Table 2: Conditional models

	Outcome: Number of laws				
	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Gov platform priorities (A)	0.045**	0.010	0.017°	0.055**	0.057**
Cumulative law production	0.005*	0.004*	0.005*	0.004*	0.004*
Time	0.001	0.0005	0.001	0.001	0.0005
Electoral cycle (ref. routine)					
Last 12 months	0.901**	0.913**	0.904**	0.920**	0.927**
First 12 months	0.571**	0.576**	0.573**	0.579**	0.584**
Gov popularity (t-1)	−0.045	−0.039	−0.043	−0.046	−0.039
MIPs (t-1)	0.003°	0.004*	0.003*	0.003°	0.002
Europeanization (B)	0.780**	0.412*	0.346°	0.323°	0.335°
Budget account balance (t-1) (C)	−0.014	−0.032*	−0.011	−0.010	−0.008
Majority in Bundesrat (D)	−0.148*	−0.144*	−0.169°	−0.148*	−0.129°
Coal. ideological range (E)	0.002	0.002	0.002	0.012**	0.003
Coal. divergence of priorities (F)	−0.265	0.359	0.271	0.511	6.577**
(A) x (B)	−0.094*				
(A) x (C)		0.004*			
(A) x (D)			0.005		
(A) x (E)				−0.002**	
(A) x (F)					−0.809**
Log-likelihood	-6621.43	-6621.85	-6624.01	-6620.04	-6616.24
Observations	7,106	7,106	7,106	7,106	7,106

Notes: *Models presented in this table expand the third model presented in table 1. Each of them features an interaction term between the manifesto salience and one of the independent variables. The effect of manifesto salience remains significant. Besides for the majority in the upper chamber, all interaction terms are also significant and suggest that the effect of the manifesto salience varies according to the level of Europeanization, the economic conditions and the degree of conflict within the government. We comment in detail on these interaction effects later on.*

° p < .1 ; * p < .05 ; ** p < .01

Our findings also confirm the conditioning impact of budget conditions. The constitutive term for platform priorities shows that for a perfectly balanced budget they do not exert any significant impact on legislation. The marginal effects displayed in Figure 3 show that they are significant only for a budget surplus exceeding 2% of GDP, as it was the case in the second half of the 1980s and consistently since the early 2000s.

Figure 3
Marginal effect of electoral priorities on legislative attention,
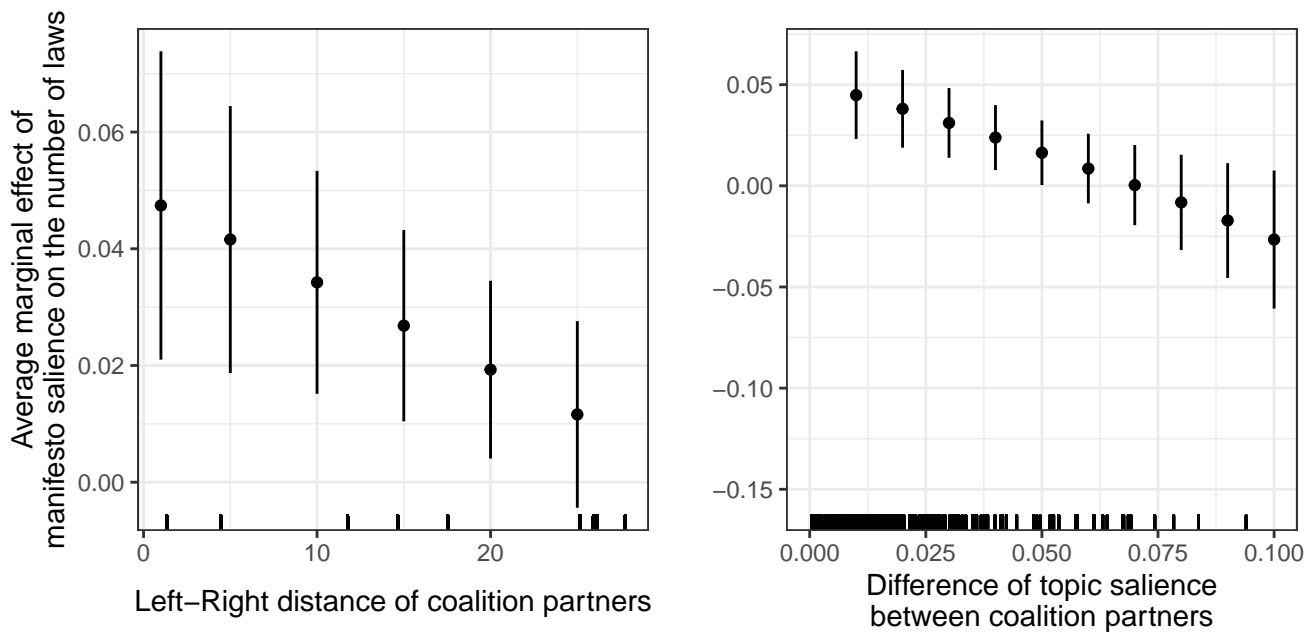for increasing levels of Europeanization and account balance
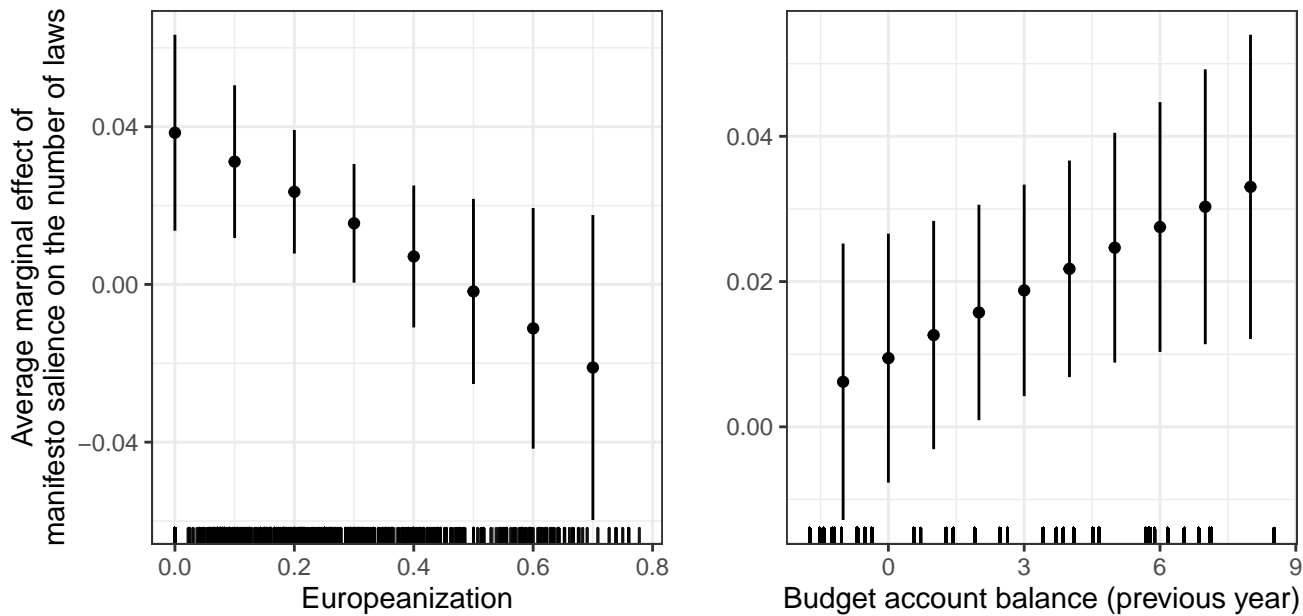
Notes: *Figures are based on models 4 and 5 respectively. The ticks along the X-axis indicate the distribution of the variables on Europeanization and budget balance, respectively. The vertical bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The y-axis denotes the effect of a variation by 1% in issue salience in governing parties' platforms on the probability of an additional law on this topic in a given month. Positive values indicate that an additional law is more likely when manifesto salience rises, whereas negative values indicate the reverse effect. As expected, the effect of manifesto salience is smaller in policy area dominated by the European Union. We also observe a smaller effect in times of economic hardship (worse budget account balance)*

This first empirical account of how mandate responsiveness is constrained by developments beyond the domestic realm generally support Mair's concerns: The relationship between electoral and legislative priorities seems to depend on a certain level of national sovereignty and favorable budget conditions. When these conditions are not met, electoral and legislative priorities appear to be statistically disconnected from each other.

Is mandate responsiveness also undermined by internal forces related to domestic conflict and the difficulty of building sufficiently large political majorities around the priorities emphasized at elections? The models in Table 2 and marginal effects in Figure 4 explore the constraining impact of the absence of stable majority supporting government legislation in the Bundesrat (H4a), the dissimilarity of the ideological positions (H4b), and issue attention (H4c) of coalition partners.

The constitutive term for platform priorities in Model 6 does not corroborate our intuition that the absence of a majority for the governing coalition in the Bundesrat opens opportunities for opposition parties to oppose legislation on electoral issues (H4a). It shows that in this configuration electoral priorities still exert a significant effect. The interaction term is not significant, suggesting that Bundesrat control does not significantly affect how electoral priorities impact the legislative agenda.

Figure 4
Marginal effect of electoral priorities on legislative attention, for increasing levels of coalition disagreement over positions and priorities

Notes: *Figures are based on models 7 and 8 respectively. The ticks along the X-axis indicate the distribution of the variables on coalition partners' left-right distance and difference in attention, respectively. The vertical bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The effect of manifesto salience on the number of adopted laws decreases the more coalition partners diverge from each other. Both positional (left-right) and priority (topic salience) conflicts decrease the average marginal effect of the manifesto salience.*

In contrast, our analyses support the expectation that coalition politics are key to the policy relevance of the mandate. Consistent with H4b and H4c, we observe that differences between the coalition parties put a strain on the agenda-setting impact of the platform priorities. Dissimilarities in terms of substantive positions and in terms of priorities both appear to strongly restrict the policy consequences of the mandate. However, ideological conflict needs to be strong to cancel out the influence of electoral priorities (a difference of at least 25% on the CMP left-right scale[18] or 5% in the share of attention[19]). These striking results support our expectation of constraints linked to intra-coalition disagreement.

4   Conclusion: the agenda-setting impact of manifestos

Elections are meant to provide a key link between voters and public policy in democracies. This link would be undermined if government policies do not honor the pledges made by government parties during their campaign. This would have dramatic potential consequences for the legitimacy of public policy and of broader democratic settings. Such concerns have gained momentum in the political science literature as well as in many political discourses in view of a range of "constraints" believed to "hollow-out" representative democracy: international interdependence and regional integration in particular, budget constraints, and counter-majoritarian institutions in the context of growing political polarization. These

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[18] A difference of 25% on the CMP left-right position was given at four occasions in the considered period (Kohl II 1983-1987, Kohl V 1994-1998, Merkel I 2005-2009 and Merkel III 2013-2017).

[19] This 5% threshold exceeds two standard deviations (sd = 2.4%).

factors may shed light on the contrasting findings that have emerged in the literature on elections' imprint on policy. Given their salience and potential implications, it is remarkable that these factors have not been analyzed in this context before. This may be due to the difficulty of providing an empirical assessment of the causal effect of electoral priorities on policy and of their moderators. Pledge fulfillment rates look high across liberal democracies (Thomson et al. 2017), but this does not necessarily mean that democratic mandates are a significant determinant of public policy: this can only be observed by working in the reverse direction, examining the entirety of policy outputs and assessing in how far they are determined by the content of governments' electoral manifesto. Further empirical challenges include the need to control for a wide range of potential confounders requiring considerable data on public concerns and the political and economic context.

We address these challenges with an original approach taking advantage of the agenda-setting perspective and of the data collected by the CAP project. This makes it possible to operationalize the policy relevance of platforms with a focus on issue attention. We chose a within-system comparison to limit the noise and compare different institutional, political, and economic configurations over time as well as differences in the extent of Europeanization across issues. We show that Germany is a fruitful case for analysis given its institutional characteristics and the wealth of comparable data available. Our study delivers two main findings.

We provide a first comprehensive examination of the most prominent factors commonly expected to impede mandate responsiveness. We confirm their constraining impact in most cases and strengthen the arguments according to which representative democracy is under stress. Interestingly, German debates on policymaking capacity have greatly focused on hurdles in the Bundesrat, resulting in the 2006 federalism reform, although empirically, most constraints seem to derive from Europeanization, scarce budget resources, and intra-coalition disagreement instead.

Yet, under most circumstances, constraints at most moderate mandates' imprint on policy rather than offsetting it entirely. Democracy does not seem to be "hollowed-out" and electoral platforms overall remain an important predictor of legislative priorities. We can show that an increase by 5% in issue attention in governing parties' platforms is associated with an average of 8 more laws adopted over the term. Substantively, this effect goes far beyond those usually found when investigating the determinants of policy change. This finding still holds under alternative model specifications and when controlling for an encompassing set of factors shaping legislative productivity and mandate implementation. In a political system in which multiple counter-powers may impede mandate responsiveness, this provides strong evidence for the crucial relevance of mandates to policymaking. Governing parties have incentives to act in the areas announced in their campaign and appear to be in the capacity to put these issues on the agenda. This may be even more the case in political systems with a stronger concentration of power. Elections and programs therefore matter and provide accurate signals of the issues to anticipate on the legislative agenda over the

years to come.

Our analysis provides many lessons for future studies. Given their strong and robust impact, including government platforms as a determinant of legislative attention should be relevant for a wide range of analyses ranging from public policy to democratic representation. This is especially the case in domains governed mainly at the national level and subject to limited intra-coalition conflict. In other areas, we have shown that mandate responsiveness is under (sometimes considerable) pressure in the context of economic hardship, Europeanization, and coalition constraints. In this sense, our findings are both good and bad news for mandate responsiveness. Overall, mandates matter, but their impact is moderated under several circumstances, which inform efforts to improve the quality of representation. Proposals intended to foster political competition and mandate responsiveness at the European level (such as the Spitzenkandidaten procedure) might be one way to enhance the relevance of elections in multi-level systems. Our findings also highlight the strategic importance of preserving budget leeway in times of growing fiscal competition and limited growth. They underline the relevance of the growing body of research on coalition bargaining and coalition governance as major determinants of mandate responsiveness, especially when the rise of challenger parties results in ideologically heterogeneous coalitions.

Our findings point to the need for research on the policy relevance of elections. On the one hand, we have acknowledged that it cannot be excluded that constraints of various types exert additional impact on the scope and ambitions of what parties, an aspect that we leave to further research. On the other hand, a lot remains to be done to unveil the conditions and hurdles to program-to-policy linkages. Future studies should develop a comparative perspective on the extent and determinants of mandate responsiveness. Cross-national comparisons are in particular warranted to identify the institutional features that are most favorable to the policy relevance of elections. Our findings could furthermore be refined by comparing issues, notably to detect how far certain types of constraints affect some areas more than others, and parties, for example to take into account the extent of fit (or misfit) between single parties and EU policy. More factors deserve closer attention, including in particular electoral cycles, portfolio allocation, and the priorities of opposition parties, the public, and the media. The relationships between different types of constraints, which may be conceptualized as convertible resources that could compensate each other, also call for qualitative investigations. Finally, future research should focus on how mandate responsiveness pays off electorally and builds democratic support.

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