

Mainstream Parties' Issue Engagement and its Implications for the Performance of Populist Parties*

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Abstract

In addition to other factors, the success of populist parties seems to be influenced by the strategic behavior of their competing opponents. Yet, it has not been clearly determined which form of behavior leads to populist success or failure. In order to gain insight into the effectiveness of strategic engagement with populist issues the present study compares an election campaign resulting in populist success with an election campaign resulting in populist failure. For this purpose, the elections in Great Britain in 2010 (low populist vote result) and 2015 (high populist vote result) were chosen. A content analysis of party statements in press releases (N = 734) and newspaper articles (N = 379) covering eight weeks prior to each Election Day was undertaken. The results suggest that the lack of engagement with a salient issue seems to open up opportunities for a populist party. Additionally, divergence and therefore the presence of conflict turns out to have a positive influence on populist success.

Keywords: populism; party behavior; election campaigns; news coverage

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1. Introduction

The question of what causes populism has been widely researched. Scientists present both macro- and micro-level factors as explanatory variables. In terms of macro-level variables, sociocultural structures, modernization and globalization trends, corruption and crises are shown to influence populist success (e.g. Hawkins 2010; Decker 2004; Zimmermann 2003; Givens 2002; Taggart 2000; Minkenberg 1998; Kriesi 1995; Betz 1994). At the micro-level, individual attitudes and emotions are presented as potential influences (e.g. Van der Brug

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et al. 2005; Betz 1994). While many studies have focused on demand-side factors (Mudde 2007), supply-side explanations have received less systematic attention, and although studies have shown that a party's behavior seems to influence their populist opponent's success or failure (e.g. Arzheimer, Carter 2006; Kitschelt, McGann, 1995), it has not been clearly established which form of behavior leads to populist success and which to populist failure. On the one hand it is argued that populists are successful because mainstream parties ignore newly emerging issues in society. This is said to upset the people and as a consequence leads to populist success (Kriesi 1995; Betz 1994). Therefore, engaging with the issues and problems that mainstream parties have been ignoring should decrease populist success. On the other hand, it is argued that populists are strong because they and their issues receive massive attention both from their opponents and especially from the media (e.g. Mudde 2007; Murphy, Devine 2016; Walgrave, De Swert 2004). Consequently, reduced engagement with or even ignorance of populist issues should reduce populist success.

The aim of the present study is to analyze the effect of mainstream parties' communicative behavior on populist success or failure. Therefore, the main guiding question is: how does party issue engagement influence populist success or failure? In the first step, a model of issue engagement is developed. In addition to noting whether or not a mainstream actor merely decides to engage in discussing an issue, the model also distinguishes different forms of engagement, namely convergence (an actor takes the same position on an issue as the populist), divergence (an actor takes an opposing position on an issue) and symbolic engagement (an actor engages with an issue but takes no position). In the second step, the influential power of the different strategies is analyzed.

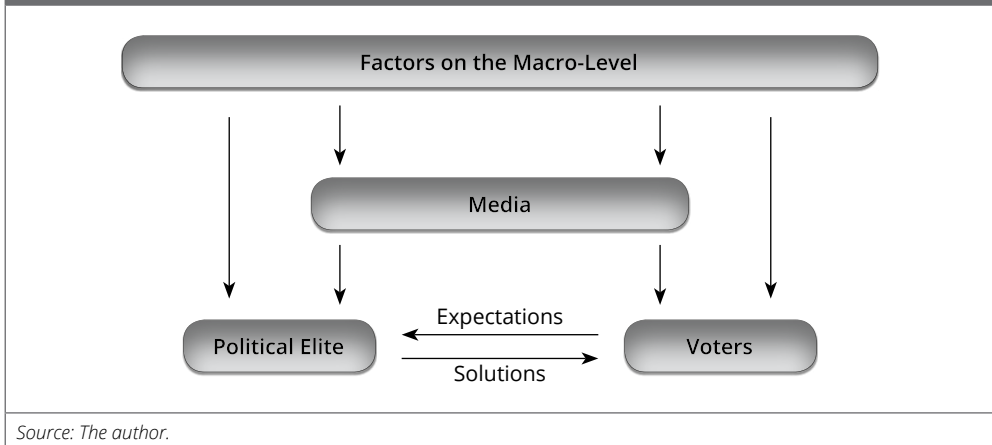
In order to investigate how mainstream party behavior influences the success or failure of populist actors, the present study focuses on the elections in Great Britain in 2010 (no populist success) and in 2015 (populist success). Press releases as well as newspaper coverage eight weeks prior to Election Day were analyzed for competing parties' issue engagement and positioning. It can be shown that, in the case of Great Britain, the lack of engagement with the salient issue of immigration especially seems to open up opportunities for the populist party UKIP. Additionally, divergence, and therefore the presence of conflict, turns out to have a positive influence on populist success.

2. Theory: Issue Engagement and Populist Success

Many countries around the world face populist actors both from the right and from the left. Especially in recent years, populism has been on the rise and the question also arises as to why populist actors gain success. Many explanations have been proposed and discussed by scientists. These explanations can be divided into two major perspectives: Causes on the demand-side and causes on the supply side (Mudde 2007: 201–231). Demand-side explanations predominantly cover the macro- and micro-levels, such as globalization trends and crises as well as the attitudes and emotional states of individuals. Especially economic problems have often been analyzed with regard to their potential to create opportunities for the rise of populists and the results are contradictory. In opposition to the expectation and

findings that populists are strong in countries with weak economic performance, newer studies show populists to be successful in economically stable countries. Voting-turnout for populist parties has been shown to be better in countries with a low unemployment rate (Arzheimer, Carter 2006: 434). With regard to the economic crisis, populists performed well in those European countries that were only little affected by the crisis (Mudde 2014).

Figure 1: Effect of macro-level factors on the political elite via voter expectations



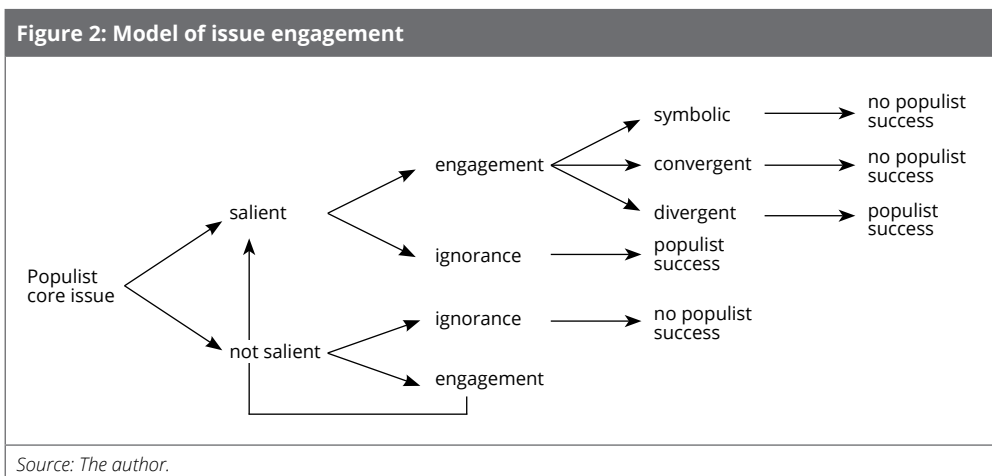
These conflicting results may be owed to the fact that events and developments on the macro-level do not necessarily directly influence the success or failure of populists. They rather create an awareness of societal changes among the people of a country and make certain issues more salient on a micro-level (Figure 1). People can be affected directly, when they suffer unemployment in economically troubling times for example. They may, however, also perceive certain issues as important because the media focuses on them or the social context in which an individual is embedded, fosters issue salience and thereby raises the perceived importance of the issue.

As a consequence, people develop expectations of the political elite and demand satisfying solutions for the perceived problems. It can be expected that only if parties offer such satisfying solutions, will people trust in their leadership competencies and vote for them. Otherwise, the chances for (populist) competitors might rise, especially when they can score on their core issues. Central in this process are the factors *issue salience* and *responsiveness*. Expectations that the political elite will solve problems can only arise when an awareness for certain issues and problems exists in the voters' minds. Because due to issue salience, party responsiveness increases as well, as studies show (Burststein 2003; Shapiro 2011: 986). Since voting behavior based on social structures such as class-voting decreases (Green-Pedersen 2007: 608) and party ties get weaker (Rohrschneider 2002: 373), issue voting either as 'the final result of a sophisticated decision calculus' or a simple 'gut response' gains importance (Carmines, Stimson 1980: 78). Not being responsive to the voters' concerns could as a consequence cost votes on Election Day (Ansolabehere, Iyengar 1994; Druckman 2014; Druckman et al. 2010). It is therefore expected that how main-

stream actors communicate plays a crucial role in the success or failure of populist actors, since it can create opportunities for populists. Yet, such supply-side explanations have not received much systematic attention (Van der Brug et al. 2005: 539). Additionally, explanations revolve around the political system itself, the opportunity structures the system might offer for populists and the populists' behavior. Especially in regards to right-wing populism, some studies have focused on analyzing mainstream parties' reactions to populism (Bale 2003; Bale et al. 2010; Downs 2001; Heinisch 2003; Loxbo 2010; Minkenberg 2001; Mudde 2007; Van Spanje 2010; Van Spanje, Van der Brug 2009). These studies were able to show that mainstream politicians tend to copy populist topics, arguments and rhetoric, yet a comprehensive understanding of how mainstream politics react to populism and how this might influence their success or failure is missing. The paper aims to close this gap by offering a model of issue engagement. Depending on whether an issue is salient or not, a party's issue engagement can foster or prevent populist success. Populist parties have issues they prefer to focus on, which will henceforth be referred to as core issues. It has to be mentioned though, that core issues are not necessarily owned issues. While issue ownership is something that is predominantly ascribed to parties by voters (Walgrave et al. 2015), core issues are issues the parties like to concern themselves with. However, intensive engagement with an issue may result in issue ownership. Populist core issues are for example race and immigration, crime, corruption, European integration as well as economic protectionism (e.g. Mudde 2013; Taggart 1995; Bernhard et al. 2015). Besides *ignoring* those issues, competing mainstream parties have different options to engage with them, namely *engaging symbolically*, *converging* or *diverging*. This leads to the following question:

RQ: How does mainstream party issue engagement influence populist success or failure?

Figure 2 shows the different engagement strategies and their expected influence on populist performance. They will be explained in the following.



2.1. Ignorance

As the figure shows, mainstream actors can ignore salient as well as non-salient issues. However, the consequences are expected to differ depending on the issue salience. It is often said that populists and their issues are visible since they receive strong attention both from the media and their opponents. Both the media and the logic it is based on create an environment that fosters populist actors: political leadership becomes increasingly personalized as the prominent role of the party apparatus diminishes, and the political contest moves into the foreground as substantive policy content becomes less (Kriesi 2014: 365–367). Therefore, it is often claimed that the media should focus on content, ideas and arguments instead of scandals, sensational statements and appealing rhetoric. Similarly, political actors are advised to focus on their own strong issues rather than getting caught up in discussing the strong issues of their populist opponents. Such ignorant behavior aims at reducing or preventing the salience of an issue and can be described as a dismissive strategy (Meguid 2005: 349). Communicating that an issue is simply not important enough to focus on may convince the media and the people to perceive this matter similarly. In a study analyzing niche party support, it was shown that the support for a niche party decreases when all opponents choose to ignore the issue of that party. However, if only one party chooses to ignore an issue while the other parties take an opposing position on it, the support might as well increase (Meguid 2005: 354).

Besides the benefits that might come from ignoring issues that may be advantageous to populists, there are further difficulties, especially when the populist issue is important to the public and highly salient in the media. If politicians perceive that the media conveys a certain degree of public opinion on a topic, they may be forced to act, because ‘not reacting to topics (widely) covered in the media might be considered as incapacity or, even worse, indifference’ (Walgrave, Van Aelst 2006: 100). Especially when issues are very complex or occur unexpectedly, like a crisis or other pressing problems, and some kind of action by politicians is expected, the adoption of an issue may be helpful (Walker 1977: 425–426). As a matter of fact, the established parties’ ignorance of newly emerging issues due to political transformation processes has been named as one factor positively influencing the success of new parties in the past, including radical right-wing parties (Betz 1994: 2–4). Therefore, strategically ignoring populist core issues appears only to be advantageous if the respective issue is not salient. It is therefore expected:

H1: Mainstream parties’ ignorance of salient populist core issues creates opportunities for populist success.

2.2. Engagement

Ignoring the issues another party is strong on is a well-known concept in the literature on issue competition. Instead of taking a position on all issues being discussed, political actors rather decide to only focus on some issues. (Budge, Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). As a result,

parties talk past each other rather than with each other (Riker 1993: 4). This aspect has been criticized, since the absence of dialogue violates the idea of informed democratic choice (Kaplan et al. 2006: 724–725). The electorate needs to be informed about the stances and plans of the different parties on pressing topics in order to have a real choice. Regarded from the perspective of responsiveness, the elites should be responsive to public opinion and mass preferences (Druckman 2014: 468–469) and therefore concern themselves with issues that are important to the public. Ignoring salient issues and therewith the public opinion might lead to negative results on Election Day (Druckman et al. 2010: 5; Ansolabehere, Iyengar 1994: 355). Mainstream parties can engage in different ways with salient populist core issues.

They can choose to focus on an issue by *converging* with the opponent's position. Following this accommodative strategy (Meguid 2005: 349) an actor accepts and supports the stance of the rival and therewith provides an alternative for the voters. This behavior may weaken opponents, since it takes away their uniqueness and might lead to a situation in which voters turn their backs on those opponents and instead side with the encroaching actor. Schumacher and Van Kersbergen (2016) were able to show that engaging with the issue of welfare chauvinism is a successful election strategy to counter populists. Choosing this strategy implies that a party is more interested in winning votes than in policy positions. They sell out their own stances in order to gain greater support, following the logic of 'if you can't beat them, join them' (Bale et al. 2010: 413). The literature refers to this strategy as a copy-cat strategy (Mudde 2007: 241) and discovers that mainstream parties tend to copy populist issues, arguments and rhetoric to counter their populist challengers (Bale 2003; Bale et al. 2010; Downs 2001; Heinisch 2003; Loxbo 2010; Minkenberg 2001; Mudde 2007; Schumacher, Van Kersbergen 2016; Van Spanje 2010; Van Spanje, Van der Brug 2009). The effectiveness of this behavior could not clearly be proven though. Most studies report mixed results and assume that the success of the strategy depends on factors such as electoral uncertainty, the fear of losing an election or the type of electoral system. While in some cases copying leads to a legitimization of the populist issue and populist success (Arzheimer, Carter 2006: 439), in other cases it enables mainstream parties to steal votes from the populist competitor. According to Mudde (2007: 241), this is the case when the mainstream actor has issue ownership over the respective issue. However, if the mainstream party has never owned the respective issue, the sudden take-over may be perceived as being not authentic by the electorate (Bale et al. 2010: 413–414), and the loss of liberal voters might be bigger than the gain of extreme ones (Bale 2003: 87). Therefore, convergence concerning issue position might be more convenient and effective for parties with a certain proximity to the issue. A further problem resulting from converging is the potential loss of credibility and internal dissent, since not all party members might support this strategy (Downs 2001: 27). Additionally, a functioning relationship with other mainstream parties might be at risk (Bale 2003: 87).

Besides converging and thereby taking over a similar position to that of the populist opponent, political actors may *engage* with an issue *symbolically*. They do so by signaling that they are aware of a certain problem and that they evaluate the issue as being important. Further elaboration on the issue, though, remains absent (Walgrave, Van Aelst 2006: 101). The actors do not position themselves on the issue or provide solutions to a pending problem.

Especially when issues are quite pressing and some kind of reaction is expected by the people, parties tend to refer to this strategy (Walker 1977: 425–426). They engage with the issue but do not give too much away about how they feel concerning the issue. With regard to election success it can be expected that convergence as well as symbolic engagement imply responsiveness by the mainstream parties to important and salient issues, create an alternative for the voters and reduce the visibility of the populist actor. It is therefore expected:

H2a: Mainstream parties' engagement with salient populist core issues through converging reduces the opportunities for populist success.

H2b: Mainstream parties' engagement with salient populist core issues through symbolic engagement reduces the opportunities for populist success.

Another way to react to salient populist core issues is by *diverging*. Meguid (2005: 349) calls this an adversarial strategy, through which an actor declares his or her opposition to the opponent's stance. If an opponent promoted higher taxes for the rich, for example, an actor would spread the idea of lower taxes for the rich. Jerit (2009: 411) describes this strategy as direct rebuttals 'in which an initial appeal is challenged by a statement making the opposite prediction.' An actor may also mention the danger, futility or even perversity of the opponent's stance (Hirschman 1991). Hänggli and Kriesi (2010: 144) call this a defensive strategy, since the main goal is to 'offer rebuttals and counterattack their adversaries.' According to Meguid (2005) such behavior would lead to further increased salience of the opponent's issue and position and might even be harmful for the party taking an opposing stance. However, one could also argue that taking an opposing position is exactly what people expect from a more moderate party they side with, especially when the opposing party operates on the extreme left or right. Voters might expect mainstream actors to publicly distance themselves from extreme views. However, attacking an opponent may increase the already existing salience of an issue and make the opponent's position even more prominent. It is therefore expected:

H2c: Mainstream parties' engagement with salient populist core issues through diverging increases the opportunities for populist success.

Finally, engagement with non-salient populist core issues should be regarded as well. According to the argumentation above, engagement with an issue has the potential to increase the already existing salience of an issue or make a non-salient issue visible and thereby generate salience. It is therefore expectable that the engagement with a non-salient issue raises the attention for this issue and as a consequence makes it a salient issue, which opens up the opportunities discussed above.

3. Case Selection, Method and Measures

3.1. Case Selection

The case selection followed the logic of a most similar system design (MSSD) (e.g. Anckar 2008; Przeworski, Teune 1970; Seawright, Gerring 2008). While normally each case is represented by a specific country, in the current paper the two ‘cases’ that were compared are the elections at two different time points in the same country, namely the election campaigns in Great Britain in 2010 and 2015. A single country was chosen in order to keep variables constant, as they have been shown to be influential on populist success and failure. Such factors include the electoral system, the political system, the media system and sociocultural structures in which individuals are embedded. Keeping those background conditions constant opens up the possibility to analyze whether the independent variable of interest, i.e. the issue engagement of mainstream parties, has an effect on the outcome variable populist success (Anckar 2008; Seawright, Gerring 2008). While in 2010 the UK Independence Party (UKIP) (which can be defined as populist actor on the right) only gained little support from the electorate (3.1%), the party gained 9.5 percentage points in the elections in 2015, leading to a vote result of 12.6 percentage points. Therefore, if the issue engagement of mainstream parties has an influencing impact on the success and failure of populist parties, there should be variation with regard to the parties’ engagement, as the theory suggests. Table 1 gives an overview of the election results of the different parties in the 2010 and 2015 elections.

Table 1: Election turnout in Great Britain 2010 and 2015

Party	Turnout 2010 (Gain/Loss)	Turnout 2015 (Gain/Loss)
Conservatives	36.1 (+3.8)	36.9 (+0.8)
Labour	29 (-6.2)	30.5 (+1.5)
Liberal Democrats	23 (+1)	7.8 (-15.2)
UK Independence Party (UKIP)	3.1 (+0.8)	12.6 (+9.5)
British National Party (BNP)	1.9 (+1.2)	-
Scottish National Party (SNP)	1.7 (+0.2)	4.8 (+3.1)
Green Party	1.0 (-)	3.8 (+2.8)

Note: In percentages.

Source: The author based on UK Political Info (2010; 2015).

3.2. Method

The present study relies on a content analysis of press releases and newspaper articles conducted by the NCCR Democracy in Zurich. The data for 2010 consists of a full sample of all press releases and newspaper articles published during the eight weeks prior to Election

Day. Data for 2015 also covers eight weeks prior to Election Day, yet, a randomized sample was taken from all press releases and articles that have been published during the relevant time period. Press releases were chosen, since they do not occur at a single time point like party manifestos but are released constantly during an election campaign. Therefore, they are able to capture behavior during campaign periods and ongoing debates quite well. News coverage was chosen as second channel to analyze party behavior. Media is the most important communication channel during election campaigns. Voters predominantly receive their information via the news. In order to cover different types of newspapers, a quality newspaper (The Times) as well as a tabloid (The Sun) were chosen.

The sample for the election in 2010 consists of 515 press releases and 192 newspaper articles (104: The Times, 88: The Sun). The 2015 sample consists of 219 press releases and 187 newspaper articles (109: The Times, 78: The Sun). The unit of analysis for the present study are statements in the press releases and newspaper articles on issues made by speakers, such as single individuals (e.g. politicians) as well as groups of individuals (e.g. parties). In order to be coded, statements had to fulfill two requirements: First, a statement had to be on an issue concerning national politics. Second, the statement had to contain either an explicitly mentioned position or interpretation/elaboration of the issue. Statements on issues were coded according to content and style and regarding the following top-issue categories: Welfare, Economy, Budget, Culture, Europe, Education, Army, Security, Immigration, Institutional Reforms, Ecology, Infrastructure, Elections and Events. Each top-issue category consisted of numerous sub-issue categories (all in all, 127 sub-issue categories). Since the present paper is concerned with issue engagement, the non-issue categories Elections and Events were excluded. Since the number of statements on the election itself (candidates, horse racing, polling...) was quite high, the number of statements relevant to the analysis was strongly reduced. All in all, 854 statements by the Conservatives, Labour, the Liberal Democrats and UKIP were analyzed in the press releases and articles from the 2010 and 2015 elections. Coders from different countries conducted the coding of the material after completing a one-week training session and a sufficient reliability test. Additionally, the reliability was controlled during the coding phase. Regarding the coding of the central issue of a statement, an overall reliability of 0.7 (Cohen's Kappa) was reached.

3.3. Measures

Populist success/failure is the dependent variable and is coded as a binary variable. All statements occurring in the 2010 sample receive the value 0 (not successful) and those in the 2015 sample the value 1 (successful). The issue engagement strategies represent the independent variables. To analyze whether the mainstream actors were converging, diverging or engaging symbolically, a variable capturing party position towards a respective issue was used. The original variable captured whether an actor is in favor of reducing or increasing something, for example a smaller or a larger welfare state. It further includes whether an actor prefers the status quo, in other words, being against an increase/a reduction of something. For example: An actor communicates that the welfare state should stay as it is and shouldn't be minimized or enlarged. Additionally, a lack of positioning was coded if none

of the options above were applicable. For the present analysis the variable was recoded into three binary variables. First, it was checked against which of the sub-issue categories UKIP positions itself clearly in its party manifestos. The following positions were found: protection of the British economy through stricter rules concerning trade and foreign investments, more nationalism and less cultural liberalism, less influence of/cooperation with the European Union, stricter immigration laws and security measures, maintenance of nuclear energy and questioning of global warming spending, more direct democratic elements as well as more control over lower levels of government. Additionally, UKIP communicated a strong welfare chauvinistic position. While they propagated the idea that natives should fully profit from the British welfare state, they wanted stricter rules concerning immigrants on multiple levels, which can therefore be defined as the will to reduce the welfare state. Afterwards, positions were coded according to how closely they aligned with the UKIP position. Finally, three binary variables were created, capturing whether one of the three engagement strategies was present or not. A statement received the value 1 if converging/diverging/symbolic engagement was present. Otherwise, a 0 was coded.

Issue ownership is assigned in two steps: first, on the basis of a party's left-right affiliation, and second, on the basis of survey data (Dalmus et al. 2017). Since issue ownership has shown to be a rather constant phenomenon, with most issues either belonging to the political right or left over longer periods of time (Seeberg 2017), the value 0.5 is assigned to each center-left/center-right party if the issue is a rather left/right issue. However, since issue ownership is not simply dependent on a party's positioning on the left-right scale but may also vary from election to election among parties, survey data from the British Election Survey is further used to clarify whether one party can be identified as leading issue owner. Respondents could name parties they consider most competent at solving certain problems. If at least 20% of the respondents endorsed one party and this party had a minimum lead of

Table 2: Issue Ownership in 2010 and 2015

	Labour		Liberal Democrats		Conservatives		UKIP	
	2010	2015	2010	2015	2010	2015	2010	2015
Welfare	0.5	1	0	0	0.5	0.5	0	0
Economy	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	1	0.5	0.5
Budget	0	0	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
Culture	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Europe	0	0	0.5	0.5	1	0.5	0.5	1
Education	0.5	1	0	0	0.5	0.5	0	0
Immigration	0	0	0.5	0.5	1	0.5	0.5	1
Army	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Security	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	1	0.5	0.5
Ecology	0.5	0.5	0	0	0	0	0	0
Institutional Reforms	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Infrastructure	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: The author.

10% over the second party, the value 1 was assigned to this party (Tresch et al. 2018). Un-owned issues received the value 0. By using such a two-step assignment, the measure considers the stable characteristic of issue ownership to belong to a center-right or center-left party and at the same time captures potential short-term changes. Table 2 gives an overview of the parties' issue ownership in 2010 and 2015.

4. Results

4.1. Issue Engagement and Ignorance

Table 3 shows the mainstream parties' issue engagement with all issues during the eight weeks prior to Election Day as well as the significance of change in issue engagement from 2010 to 2015 (press releases and news coverage taken together).

Table 3: Issue engagement of mainstream actors

Issue	PR 10	PR 15	Media 10	Media 15	Significance of change in issue engagement
Welfare	20.44	30.52	20.24	22.95	$p < .008$
Economic	19.95	18.31	11.90	14.75	$p < .713$
Budget	17.27	20.19	10.71	26.23	$p < .064$
Culture	6.57	1.41	9.52	4.92	$p < .004$
Europe	0.97	2.82	4.76	8.20	$p < .040$
Education	9.25	7.51	7.14	8.20	$p < .559$
Immigration	4.62	2.35	19.05	1.64	$p < .004$
Army	1.95	0.47	0.00	0.00	$p < .123$
Security	7.06	7.51	10.71	6.56	$p < .850$
Ecology	5.11	2.35	1.19	0.00	$p < .059$
Institutional Reforms	2.92	1.41	4.76	4.92	$p < .407$
Infrastructure	3.89	5.16	0.00	1.64	$p < .416$
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	
	n = 411	n = 213	n = 84	n = 61	

Note: In percentages. Significances are based on the Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test.
Source: The author.

As expected, in both elections some issues receive more attention than others, like welfare, the economy and budget. All three issues are central during campaigns and therefore they usually get more attention than others. The engagement with the issue Economy is in both years equally high, which can be explained by the importance of the issue itself as well as by the importance the electorate ascribes to the issue. In both election years, more than one-fourth of the voters (2010: 25.7%, 2015: 26.1%) perceive the issue as most important

(see also Table 4). In 2010, an additional 13% of the electorate also names the financial crisis as the most important issue.

Table 4: Most important issues to the electorate in 2010 and 2015

Most important issues 2010	Most important issues 2015
State of the economy (25.7)	Economy in general (26.1)
Immigration (14.4)	Immigration (22.4)
Financial Crisis (13.4)	NHS (13)

Note: In percentages.

Source: The author; based on data from the British Election Study. 2010: BES Cross-Section: N = 1,935; CAPI; Fieldwork: 23rd January – 18th April 2010 (Whiteley, Sanders 2014). 2015: Wave 5 of the 2014–2018 British Election Study Internet Panel: N = 30,725; Online survey; March 2015 – May 2015 (Fieldhouse et al. 2015).

While besides the economy most of the other issues receive similar attention in both election years, for some issues the engagement changes significantly. As for the issue Welfare, the engagement increases both in the media and the press releases. While in the news coverage the increase is only marginal, it is quite high in the parties' press releases (10 percentage points). This can be explained by the importance of the issue in general as well as the increased perceived importance of the issue among voters. While in 2010 less than 10% mentioned different welfare questions as the most important issue, in 2015, the National Health Service (NHS) was the third most important issue in the eyes of the voters (13%). This can be interpreted as an indicator of responsiveness by the elites to voter concerns. At the same time, the engagement with the issue Europe goes up, especially in the news. This increase cannot be explained by the salience of the issue among the people but rather by the fact that the British Elections to the European Parliament had taken place in 2014.

On the contrary, the engagement with the issues Immigration and Culture went down. This is especially interesting with regard to immigration, because in both election years, 2010 and 2015, the issue was mentioned as the second most important issue in Great Britain (2010: 14.4%, 2015: 22.4%). Here, the question arises, if it was only the mainstream parties that did not focus on the issue or if the focus on the issue was low in general. The latter is the case. While in 2010 16% of the statements in the news (including political actors, journalists, experts) were concerned with immigration, in 2015 it was only 2%. The news in 2015 was dominated by statements on welfare (22.81%) and budgetary questions (28.65%), followed by the economy (16.37%). The decrease in the engagement with the issue Culture is closely linked to the issue Immigration, since statements in this category were predominantly concerned with cultural liberalism, multiculturalism and nationalism.

With regard to the theory, these results are quite interesting: While the parties seem to be responsive to the public concerns regarding the issues Economy and, especially, Welfare, they do not engage strongly with the salient issue Immigration. Consequently, this presents an opportunity for a populist opponent to score on this issue. In the present analysis, such a chance seems to be given: the issue Immigration is publicly salient and is ignored by the mainstream actors. Additionally, according to the electoral survey, UKIP holds issue ownership over the issue Immigration in 2015. Therefore, the expectation of Hypothesis 1 is met.

4.2. Engagement Strategies

Table 5 shows how the mainstream actors position themselves with regard to the UKIP positions. Both convergence and symbolic engagement occur less often in 2015 than in 2010.

	Election 2010	Election 2015
Covergence	29.53	19.79
Symbolic engagement	38.26	34.38
Divergence	32.21	45.83
Total	100.00	100.00
	n = 149	n = 96
Note: In percentages. Source: The author.		

On the contrary, the amount of divergence increases in 2015 from 32% to 46%. A closer look at the results shows that the number of opposing positions on the issue Welfare especially increases. Therefore, the mainstream actors (predominantly Labour) speak out against UKIP's welfare chauvinistic tendency.

According to the results, the election in 2015 is defined by more controversy regarding the known positions of the populist UKIP. This tendency becomes even more pronounced when looking at how UKIP is reported on in the news. When focusing on the number of statements on issues (the major focus of the analysis) it becomes apparent that neither in 2010 nor in 2015 does UKIP receive serious attention in the two analyzed newspapers. However if, in addition to statements on issues, statements on targets are included in the analysis, the situation changes. While in 2010 UKIP does not arise in the news at all, in 2015 it predominantly appears as a target. Target evaluations are made by the mainstream parties as well as the journalists and are predominantly negative: they attribute a lack of understanding to UKIP members, along with claiming that they are populist, extremist, racist and acting incorrectly. Therefore, UKIP does not appear in the analyzed newspapers as a party that has something to say about certain issues but a party others have something to say about. This implies that it is not only the behavior of the opponents that is important regarding the success or failure of the populist opponent, but also how the media covers issues and more importantly which roles it ascribes to the different parties.

Table 6 shows the results of a logistic regression which measures the influence of the different engagement strategies on populist success. Additionally, it tests the influence of issue ownership.

As the results show, issue ownership ($Wald(1) = 41.432, p < .000$) as well as divergence ($Wald(1) = 4.957, p < .026$) have a significant influence on populist success. More precisely: the increase of both issue ownership and divergence increases the probability of populist success. The result concerning issue ownership might appear counterintuitive at first sight. While the Conservatives held issue ownership over the issues Immigration and Europe in

Table 6: Influence of mainstream actors' issue engagement on populist performance

Variable	B	95% CI for Odds Ratio		
	(SE)	Lower	Odds	Upper
Issue ownership	1.647*** (.256)	3.143	5.189	8.568
Convergence	-.267 (.299)	.376	.766	1.375
Symbolic engagement	.117 (.247)	.884	1.125	1.824
Divergence	.530** (.238)	1.827	1.698	2.707
Constant	-1.346 (.146)			
Nagelkerke R2	.090			
Chi-Square	51.822, df = 4, p < .000			
Note: Method: Enter. *p ≤ .05, **p ≤ .01, ***p ≤ .001; N = 769				
Source: The author.				

2010, it was UKIP that owned them in 2015. Therefore, one would expect that a decrease in issue ownership would increase populist success. However, a look at the parties' issue ownership reveals that in 2015 voters have ascribed issue ownership of more issues to Labour and the Conservatives than in 2010. While Labour had no sole issue ownership in 2010, in 2015 they do have sole ownership of their core issues Welfare and Education. The Conservatives might have lost sole ownership of Europe and Immigration, but regained ownership of the issues Economy and Security. If we look more closely at the election turnouts in Table 1, the results make even more sense: While Labour and the Conservatives kept their vote results rather constant (only a marginal gain in votes), it is the Liberal Democrats who strongly lose in the 2015 election (a loss of 15 percentage points compared to 2010).

Labour and the Tories could regain issue ownership over their core issues and thereby stabilize the support of a certain group of voters. At the same time they might not have appeared as an alternative for undecided voters, who voted for UKIP in the end.

As expected in Hypothesis 2c, divergence has a significant effect on populist success as well. Other studies already offer proof that while convergence reduces niche party success, divergence increases it due to raised salience for the niche party, its issues and positions (Meguid 2005; Schumacher, Van Kersbergen 2016). The results of the present paper point in the same direction. Conflict appears to be advantageous for UKIP. One explanation might be that conflict makes the party appear to be rebellious and interested in change. There are no significant results for issue convergence and symbolic engagement and Hypotheses 2a and b therefore have to be rejected. However, the results imply that convergence reduces populist success. Even though the result is not significant, the Odds are smaller

than 1, which indicates that with increasing convergence the probability of populist success decreases.

5. Discussion

The aim of the paper was to show that parties' strategic issue choices during an election campaign have an influence on populist success or failure. The idea was that changes on a macro-level do not directly influence people's vote choices but rather that they influence their expectations of parties. Following this idea, responsiveness to public concerns was introduced as an important task during election campaigns in order to win over voters and thereby increase the parties' own chances of winning and decrease the opponents' chances of success. A model of issue engagement was introduced. It differentiates between four different forms of engagement: ignorance, symbolic engagement, convergence and divergence.

The results showed that issue engagement matters, especially concerning those issues important to the public. In the 2015 election, the issue Immigration was highly salient, however, the mainstream actors did not engage with it. Since it was UKIP that owned the issue, the mainstream actors' behavior clearly opened up an opportunity for the populist actor to score on the issue. This result shows how important responsiveness is in general. Previous studies show that being ignorant of issues that are important to the public is dangerous and bears risks, as it might be perceived as a lack of responsiveness (Ansolabehere, Iyengar 1994; Druckman 2014; Druckman et al. 2010). The results do, however, also show specifically how ignorance of salient issues by mainstream actors opens up opportunities for populist parties to win over supporters. This is in line with Betz's (1994) argument that established parties' ignorance of newly emerging issues positively influences the success of new parties, including radical right-wing parties. Therefore, it is not the populist parties who are exclusively responsible for their own fate, but it also depends on their rivals' issue engagement and responsiveness to voters' fears and problems. It is likely that voters turn to extreme parties when they think they are not heard or represented by the more moderate mainstream actors. From this perspective, the existence of a populist party fosters inclusiveness, since voters that feel socially, economically or politically excluded have the impression that they get a voice again through the populist actor (Kaltwasser 2012).

However, the analysis also showed that the question of *how parties engage* with issues is as important as the question of *if they engage*. Even though they were not significant, the results point in the direction that converging towards a populist's position reduces success. As the literature suggested, such behavior seems to weaken opponents, since it takes away their uniqueness and at the same time provides voters an alternative (Meguid 2005; Schumacher, Van Kersbergen 2016). The mainstream parties signal that they are aware of certain problems that concern the people. Conflict is created by taking an opposing stance as well as by negatively targeting an opponent; this, in turn, influences an opponent's, in this case a populist party's, success. Conflict leads to the salience of issues and positions and thereby increases the chances of electoral success. This finding is in line with existing research (Meguid 2005). Additionally, while loyal voters of a party may welcome and expect opposition to the populists, supporters of populist parties as well as undecided voters may feel

misunderstood and misrepresented by the mainstream actors, which increases the populist success. Especially in a time of weak party ties and an increase in undecided voters, this is an important aspect. The results support this idea: Conservatives and Labour focused on their core issues and kept votes stable, yet did not win over undecided voters. Future research should focus in more detail on conflict arising due to opposing positions on an issue and due to attacks and their consequences. Is it opposing positions that are advantageous for a populist opponent or simply the fact that there is a conflict? Additionally, the role of the media should be analyzed in more detail concerning populist success. The literature offers proof that media presence influences the electoral success of populists (e.g. Mudde 2007; Murphy, Devine 2016; Walgrave, De Swert 2004). But is a mere presence in the news enough? How important is the way in which an actor is portrayed in the news?

The analysis further revealed the importance of issue ownership during election campaigns. Ignorance of a salient issue bears the risk of losing voters. However, this risk might be reduced, if the ignoring party owns another issue and concentrates on it. In the present analysis, all three mainstream actors, Labour, Tories and the Liberal Democrats, ignored the issue of immigration. However, the Labour party and the Conservatives had other issues they owned and focused on. By doing so, they prevented supporters from turning their backs on them and could maintain stable votes. The result is in line with the theoretical considerations earlier in the paper: selling out one's own stances always offers the opportunity to win over new voters but also runs the risk of losing others (Bale et al. 2010; Bale 2003). Apparently, the main strategy of Labour and the Conservatives was to stick to their policy positions on issues they own and not to risk losing loyal voters, rather than taking positions on issues they do not own in order to attract those voters that later voted for UKIP. This result illustrates the importance of issue ownership and its capacity to generate votes for the party holding it. The Liberal Democrats, on the other hand, did not own any issues and suffered great losses. In short: ignorance of an issue by mainstream actors can be a chance for a populist competitor but it is not necessarily a danger for the ignoring party, as long as it exerts issue ownership over another issue and focuses on it. Additionally, the results once more show that issue ownership is especially advantageous when the respective issue is salient (Bélanger, Meguid 2008).

The results reveal that the success and failure of strategic behavior and its influence on opposing parties is quite complex. Therefore, the behavior of parties and its consequences for opponents needs to be analyzed in much more detail. The present paper touches on the subject but more research, especially on multiparty systems, needs to be done in the future. The analysis offers some interesting results, yet the analysis is limited. It relies on two newspapers and press releases at two time points in one country. It would be interesting to analyze other media channels and also other countries with other party systems. The case selection had the advantage that major influential factors on populist success, such as party and media system or the sociocultural structures in which voters are embedded, were held constant. However, reality is complex and other factors may have been at work. It is therefore important to further look into issue engagement and its effects on opponents.

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