Election Campaigns, Issue Focus and Voting Intentions: Survey Experiments of Norwegian Voters

Audun Beyer,* Carl Henrik Knutsen and Bjørn Erik Rasch

This article investigates whether and how changes in issue focus in election campaigns affect voting intention, even if no preference change takes place, and whether such effects vary systematically across different groups of voters. Evidence is reported from two survey experiments of Norwegian voters, where respondents were treated with information drawing their attention towards issues pertaining either to immigration or the environment. Although irrelevant for policy learning or persuasion, this information strongly increased the support of particular parties. More specifically, parties with ‘ownership’ of the issues involved gained votes. Certain types of voters were more likely to change voting intentions post-treatment than others, but which types crucially depended on the issue area under focus. Nevertheless, the results indicate that the issue focus of campaigns is very important for vote choice. Hence, one should expect that, for instance, even ‘neutral’ political news coverage at or close to election day could affect voters in predictable ways. Furthermore, one should expect different parties to fight hard to steer the focus of campaigns towards issues where they have ownership.

Introduction

Political parties in democracies across the world – and even in electoral authoritarian regimes (see, e.g., Magaloni 2006) – put much effort and resources into election campaigns. Politicians obviously believe that election campaigns matter for voter behaviour. Yet there is no scholarly consensus on the extent to which campaigns actually influence party or candidate choice (see, e.g., Finkel 1993; Druckman 2004; Brady et al. 2006). There is even less agreement on why campaigns affect voter behaviour.

Concerning the former, we contribute by empirically studying whether and how the issue focus of campaigns affects the support for particular parties – separating between parties with and without ‘issue ownership’ (e.g., Bélanger & Meguid 2008) – using an innovative survey experimental design. We also investigate whether these effects differ across segments of...
the electorate. Regarding the latter (why campaigns matter), one question is whether campaigns mainly impact through some kind of learning or change in voter preferences, or whether priming mechanisms (also) play a crucial role. The literature on priming in campaigns is large, but often employs a more inclusive concept of priming than in experiments conducted by psychologists. Hence, observed effects could easily be caused by other mechanisms than priming as originally construed by psychologists, such as learning (Lenz 2009). More generally, it is quite difficult to establish or exclude the relevance of particular mechanisms when investigating how election campaigns influence voter behaviour. We contribute to the understanding of why campaigns affect voting since our design excludes learning, persuasion or strategic voting influencing our results and isolates issue priming as a determinant.

More concretely, we report results from two survey experiments – conducted on Norwegian voters – investigating changes in voting intentions after respondents are informed that immigration or environmental issues will dominate the campaign. We find that propensity to change party is systematically related to certain individual-specific characteristics, but these depend on the issue area under focus, indicating that the moderators of priming effects are highly context dependent (see also Togeby 2007). Notably, our results indicate that surprisingly many voters change party when election campaigns focus on either immigration or environmental issues, and the direction of change between parties is very systematic. Our research design allows us to identify an effect even in the absence of learning, persuasion and strategic voting effects. Hence, campaigns may influence voting behaviour simply through priming of issues. A central implication is that politicians and the media may influence voting behaviour through highlighting certain issue areas and downplaying others. This is congruent with the observation that politicians, arguably in the business of maximising vote shares, work hard to re-focus campaigns towards issues where they have ownership (e.g., Petrocik 1996; Simon 2002).

We first discuss literature and arguments on how and why campaigns affect voter behaviour, focusing on issue ownership and priming effects. We then present and discuss the survey instruments and method, before we report and discuss our results and present our conclusions.

Election Campaigns and Voting Behaviour

In general, the literature on campaigns and voting behaviour is inconclusive on whether campaigns are impactful or not (see, e.g., Brady et al. 2006). Whereas some studies find quite strong effects of various campaign characteristics and different types of media exposure (e.g., Holbrook 1996; Alvarez 1997; Campbell 2008; Dellavigna & Kaplan 2007), others find no systematic
effects (e.g., Lazarsfeld et al. 1944; Campbell et al. 1966; Finkel 1993). Nevertheless, for

many years, the conventional academic wisdom suggested that campaigns and the accompanying media coverage had minimal effects on voters. This wisdom has recently shifted, however, and many scholars now believe that campaigns fundamentally shape voters’ decision. (Druckman 2004, 577)

A related literature has focused on the effects of campaign expenditures, and although the results are mixed, most studies find a positive effect of campaign spending on votes – at least for non-incumbents (see, e.g., Grier 1989; Coates 1998; Mueller 2003, 485). However, there are several methodical challenges with observational studies, including selection and endogeneity issues – candidates increasing in popularity could, for instance, receive more media focus or campaign funds – and different omitted variable biases. This makes it difficult to draw inferences about the effects of campaigns on voting behaviour from directly observing (real world) media coverage, campaign expenditures and voting totals (see, e.g., Wlezien & Eriksson 2001), and experimental studies where one can directly control the treatment thus have benefits.

Furthermore, even if we accept results from observational studies indicating that campaigns affect voting behaviour, there exists a multitude of plausible mechanisms that link campaigns to voting behaviour. Some of these involve campaigns inducing some kind of voter learning, whereas others do not. Regarding learning, voters may change their voting intentions, for instance, after receiving new information about the issue positions of parties and candidates. There are also empirical indications that voters may change their behaviour because they get persuaded during campaigns (Arceneaux 2007; Huber & Arceneaux 2007). Persuasion, like learning, is caused by new information affecting beliefs or preferences. New information may also lead voters to change behaviour out of strategic concerns (Cox 1997; Blais et al. 2001). As voters form more precise expectations of the election result, they may abandon their preferred party for their second or third options to increase their probability of influencing the election outcome.

In the survey experiments reported below, however, the respondents are not exposed to information that should generate any form of changes in preferences or beliefs; they are only primed with a few descriptive sentences related to the issues of immigration or environment. If learning, persuasion and strategic voting are mainly responsible for election campaigns having an impact, we should not observe changes in reported voting intentions after our treatments.

Yet, election campaigns may matter even when voters do not learn anything about parties’ preferred policy positions, or change their evaluations
of what the ideal policies on different policy dimensions are. Voters may change their preferred party choice simply because a campaign leads them – more or less consciously – to focus on specific policies or issue dimensions during the campaign. Even if voters are perfectly aware of their ideal policy on all relevant areas, simply directing their attention towards particular issue areas may generate changes in voting behaviour. Voters may agree more with the policies of one party on one particular area, and with another party in another area. Parties should therefore have incentives to make ‘their’ issues more salient to voters by focusing their campaigns on the issues where they have ‘ownership’. There is a large literature on issue ownership (e.g., Bélanger & Meguid 2008; Meguid 2005; Petrocik 1996; Petrocik et al. 2003; Van der Brug 2004; Walgrave et al. 2009), and a number of empirical analyses document how particular parties are considered by large shares of the electorate – far exceeding their vote shares – to have superior policies on specific issue dimensions.

As indicated, in the presence of ‘issue ownership’ the focus of a campaign may influence voting even if parties do not inform voters of novel policy proposals or ‘persuade’ new voters that they have the best policies. There are different versions of the argument for why this may be the case. A more rationalist version involves voters with fixed preferences over policy outcomes, but who, to some extent, are uncertain of which policy areas politicians are going to prioritise after the election, in terms of legislation, reform and implementation. Such forward-looking voters may change their vote in response to cues, and one critical cue is how much different issue areas are highlighted and discussed during the campaign.\(^1\) Hence, the issue focus of campaigns may change voting behaviour, and systematically so if a large bulk of voters agree more with one party on one issue dimension and with another on a second.

There are also less rationalist versions of the argument, drawing on a narrower conception of ‘priming’; a change in the focus of the election campaign may steer voters to unintentionally vote for a particular party because of changed issue saliency. To comprehend this notion of priming, consider one of the original, psychological experiments of the phenomenon: Bargh et al. (1996) provided two groups of undergraduate students with different scrambled-sentence tests. One test included words like ‘aggressive’, ‘bold’, ‘rude’ and ‘interrupt’, while the other included, for instance, ‘respect’, ‘patience’, ‘yield’ and ‘polite’. After the brief test, subjects were asked to go down the hallway to talk to the person running the experiment. When arriving, the experimenter would be busy talking to a person blocking the hallway and entrance to the experimenter’s office. Subjects primed with the rude-type of words tended to interrupt the conversation earlier than subjects primed with polite-type of words. Clearly, in this experiment subjects are falling prey to causal forces operating ‘behind their backs’ – if they
had been informed about the true intentions of the experimenters, the observed effects would most likely disappear.

Effects of media priming, in particular, have been intensively examined (e.g., Iyengar & Kinder 1987; Ansolabehere et al. 1993; De Vreese 2004; Druckman 2004). Priming in this context refers to how news media by ‘calling attention to some matters while ignoring others’ influences ‘the standards that people use to make political evaluations’ of governments, leaders or candidates for public office (Iyengar & Kinder 1987, 63). Although the exact psychological processes underpinning priming effects – and how much they operate subconsciously – are under debate, one plausible process is ‘accessibility’ (Iyengar & Kinder 1987; De Vreese 2010); when asked to perform some kind of political evaluation many people seem to grab the standard for evaluation that is most accessible to them. That standard may well be the issues with high saliency on the media agenda. In any case, media priming effects may be important for understanding why election campaigns matter for voting. By focusing on particular issues, the media’s priorities may lead voters to change their votes – presumably to parties with issue ownership – based on heightened attention to those issues. The mass media (and political parties) may make some issues more salient than others as part of agenda-setting efforts, inducing some voters to vote in accordance with their preference on the most salient issue dimension.

Yet, as discussed further below, priming effects related to the issue focus of campaigns may have quite different effects on different groups of voters. For instance, priming effects may be contingent on whether individuals have formal education (e.g., Iyengar & Kinder 1987), or whether they have high levels of political knowledge or political interest (e.g., Krosnick & Brannon 1993; Miller & Krosnick 2000). Yet, such relationships may be highly contingent on the particular issue in focus, perhaps because the effects depend on what types of voters initially consider the issue politically salient (see Bélanger & Meguid 2008). The factors moderating priming effects are, more generally, highly context dependent. Togeby (2007) investigates priming effects on voter evaluations of the performance of Danish governments over time. She suggests that for priming to be of importance, the relevant ‘issue should be politicized and closely related to the key conflicts between government and opposition, or the event should be perceived as the government’s responsibility’ (Togeby 2007, 371); for some issues, political knowledge factors, for instance, function as moderators for the presence of priming.

Research Design

In our survey experiments, we investigate whether exposure to particular issues may move voters in the direction of parties with issue ownership. We
first test for priming effects on party choice. Second, we investigate how different background characteristics affect the likelihood of respondents falling prey to priming for the different issue areas.

We use two separate surveys of Norwegian voters to mimic one of the features of election campaigns – namely the ability of campaigns to focus on a small set of specific issues. Respondents first are asked about their party choice, and then treated with shallow information on issues pertaining to the environment or immigration, before we finally ask about party choice one more time. The stylised Figure 1 illustrates the basic logic of our design. We selected immigration and environment as issues because they are highly politicised and recognisable to voters, have parties with clear issue ownership and may allow future replication in other country contexts – the environment and immigration, at least in Western Europe, often constitute salient ‘new politics’ dimensions.

The telephone survey was conducted in late June 2009 and the web survey during the last weeks of the 2009 parliamentary election campaign (early September). Norway is a parliamentary democracy with parliamentary elections every four years. In the 2009–13 parliament seven parties were represented: the Progress Party, the Conservative Party, the Christian Democrats, the Liberal Party, the Centre Party, the Labour Party and the Socialist Party. The three latter parties formed a majority government, labeled the ‘Red-Green’ coalition, which also governed prior to the 2009 election.

In the telephone survey, respondents were first asked a standard question concerning vote intention if the elections were held the next day. This question was followed by a general set of omnibus questions, not related to politics. Finally, the respondents were asked about vote intention one more time, but with a twist; they were asked to assume that questions concerning integration of minorities to Norwegian society were central to the election campaign. More specifically, respondents were reminded of controversial topics such as islamification of Norwegian society, the use of hijab by female
police officers, and Muhammad caricatures and freedom of speech. Indeed, these had been topics spurring heated debates during 2009 in Norway; for instance, a claim of ‘creeping islamification’ (of Norwegian society) was put forward by the Progress Party leader in February 2009. In general, the Progress Party, which promotes a restrictive immigration policy, has had issue ownership on immigration in Norwegian politics since the late 1980s (Karlsen & Aardal 2007). Further, election surveys consistently show a large share of Norwegian voters – far larger than those actually voting for the party – prefer the immigration policies of this party. One plausible expectation is therefore that the Progress Party should increase its vote share after the immigration treatment.

We followed a similar design for the web survey, but split the sample; for the last question, respondents were randomly assigned to two stimulus conditions. One is identical to in the telephone survey, whereas the other concerns an election campaign focusing on environmental and alternative energy issues. Obviously, we expected similar movements of voters for the immigration treatment in the web survey as in the telephone survey, with the Progress Party gaining votes. After the environment treatment, we expected the Socialist Left Party and the Liberal Party to increase their vote shares relative to the initial question without stimulus. Both parties have issue ownership on environmental policy in Norwegian politics (e.g., Karlsen & Aardal 2007). Moreover, these parties’ policy positions also ‘match’ the particular framing in the treatment; both promote a ‘restrictive’ environmental policy, for instance regarding limiting exploration of new oil-fields in vulnerable areas such as outside the Lofoten archipelago. The issue of whether to allow for the expansion of oil fields into this region, which is rich in wildlife, is a widely recognised and highly polarised issue in Norwegian politics.

As discussed further below, some considerations indicate that our results might not be directly translatable to real world contexts. As holds for all survey experiments, we cannot guarantee perfect ‘external validity’. For example, how our questions are framed might artificially alter voters’ likelihood of reporting changed voting intentions, with some respondents possibly interpreting the wording as urging them to reconsider. However, this may be balanced out by another cognitive mechanism leading the stimulus to underrepresent actual changes in voting intentions; individuals may refrain from reporting changed intentions, especially over such a short time-span, to appear consistent. Previous research on recall of past voting behaviour (Waldahl & Aardal 2000) provides indications that such (conscious or subconscious) wishes to appear consistent may be prevalent in the Norwegian electorate.

Although there may be other problems related to inferring from our surveys – we are, for instance, observing reported voting intentions rather
than voting behaviour – our survey experiments have important methodo-
logical strengths. First, the same question about vote intention is asked
twice, with and without stimuli, of each respondent, allowing us to perfectly
control for individual-specific factors. Second, the web-based survey
includes measures tapping background variables, issue importance, and
political cynicism, knowledge and interest (asked about after the survey’s
first vote intention question), enabling us to analyze whether particular
voters are more likely to change voting intentions, and how. Third, there
may, as discussed, be multiple mechanisms leading a voter to change party
because of an election campaign. Importantly, both persuasion and learning
can be ruled out in our case as the treatments neither contain information
on issue positions nor arguments for taking a position (for a study highlight-
ing learning and persuasion in Norwegian campaigns, see Jensen & Aalberg
2004). Similarly, strategic voting considerations are unlikely to affect the
results. Hence, if we find that voters change parties after our treatments, we
are left with voters changing voting intentions purely based on issue
priming.

To reiterate and formalise our more specific expectations, drawing on the
assumption that parties with issue ownership systematically gain post-
treatment, we propose the following hypotheses:

\( H1: \) In the group primed with the immigration treatment, the Progress Party increases its
share of the vote.

\( H2: \) In the group primed with the environment treatment, the Socialist Left Party and the
Liberal Party increase their share of the vote.

Our design and data also allow us to study which voters change their voting
intentions after being primed with the two different treatments, thereby
illuminating how individual characteristics moderate priming effects. Existing
results – for instance on the role of political knowledge and education – are mixed (see, e.g., Togeby 2007). We also contribute by testing whether
ascribed characteristics (e.g., age and gender) moderate priming effects. We
return to hypotheses concerning these individual-level factors later in the
article. We also consider differences between the two issue areas regarding
factors moderating priming effects.

**Results**

**Party Gains and Losses**

The results – from both surveys – show large numbers of voters changing
voting intentions after the different treatments. Furthermore, the patterns
of change are consistent across the two surveys for immigration. We focus
mainly on the web survey, but Figure 2 shows voting intentions from
respondents in the telephone survey for the original and immigration treatment questions. As expected, the Progress Party increased its vote share post-treatment. The net change is remarkable; the party increases from 17.2 to 23.5 percent after voters are told that immigration policy dominates the hypothetical campaign. In contrast, Labour drops from 27.1 to 24.7 percent. Note that these figures underestimate potential changes in parties’ actual vote shares since they include respondents who may not be certain of what to vote (we omit these groups below). Interestingly, the share of respondents who does not know drops from 13.2 to 9.3 percent post-treatment, whereas the share who does not want to vote increases by about 2 percentage points.

The web-based survey reports even more dramatic changes after the stimulus conditions. Figure 3 displays the distribution of votes for the two sub-samples in the survey. Figure 3a shows that for the immigration sub-sample, 30.5 percent of voters originally said they would vote Labour. This was reduced to 23.8 percent post-treatment. The Conservative Party’s share also decreased, from 19.2 to 15.5 percent, once voters were provided with
the immigration stimulus. Indeed, all parties except the Progress Party lost votes. The Progress Party’s gain is exceptional, increasing from 22.8 to 37.3 percent. Clearly, the results from both surveys support \( H1 \). In extension, our results indicate the Progress Party should be interested in focusing on
immigration in their campaigns, while all other parties have an interest in keeping it off the agenda.

Figure 3b shows that Labour lost substantially post-treatment (from 33.7 to 26.0 percent) also in the environment sub-sample, and so did the Progress Party and Conservatives. As mentioned, the Socialist Left Party and the Liberal Party are considered ‘environment-friendly’ and have issue ownership on environmental policy. Indeed, these parties also gained the most after the environment stimulus was introduced. The Socialist Left Party more than doubled its vote share, from 9.7 to 20.0 percent, whereas the Liberal Party increased from 6.3 to 9.4 percent. We thus find strong support also for H2.

These results indicate that the focus of election campaigns produce large and systematic net voter movements. Yet it could be that several voters shift in various directions, with some voters – favouring liberal immigration policy and lax environment policy – changing away from the Progress Party and the Socialist Left Party for the immigration and environment treatments, respectively. We investigated this by constructing respondent transition matrices (see online appendix Tables A1 and A2), providing information on gross rather than net changes between parties. However, the differences between net and gross changes are surprisingly small. For example, only one respondent changed from Progress Party to Labour in the web-based survey immigration sample, whereas 24 went the other way. Three respondents left the Socialist Left Party in the environment sample, while it gained 46 new ‘voters’ (30 from Labour). The observed changes are thus surprisingly unidirectional.

To test whether the changes actually are systematic, we generated 95 percent ‘confidence intervals’ for the net changes for each party by simulating voter movements, based on (regression intercepts capturing) transition probabilities for individuals to and from the different parties, for the web-based survey sub-samples. If changes are random – that is, no parties systematically gain or lose votes on net – the 95 percent (least extreme) simulations included in the intervals should cover 0. Figure 4a shows this is not so for Labour, the Conservatives and the Centre Party in the immigration sample. These parties systematically lose votes post-treatment, whereas the Progress Party systematically win them. For the environment treatment, Figure 4b shows that the Liberal Party and the Socialist Left Party win votes whereas Labour and the Progress Party systematically lose, and the interval just passes zero. In sum, the changes observed cannot stem from random switches to and from parties; some parties gain and other lose systematically when our stimulus conditions are provided.

The strong effects of the two stimulus conditions, with one replicated over two different surveys, are notable. Indicatively, online appendix Tables A1 and A2 show that the Conservatives and Labour only retain roughly 70
Figure 4. Simulated 95 Percent Confidence Intervals on Net Percentage Changes for Different Parties, from Web Survey’s Immigration Treatment (Top) and Environment Treatment (Bottom).
percent of their original voters after the two (web-based survey) treatments are introduced. Most voters leaving these two parties change to parties with issue ownership. If our results are generalisable to ‘real world’ processes, the issue focus of campaigns matter a lot for parties.

**Which Voters Change Parties?**

The web survey included questions on ascribed characteristics such as age and gender, and on knowledge, values and opinions towards politics. Hence, we explore whether specific voters change parties more often after being primed with either the immigration or environment issues. A clear theoretical framework precisely guiding our expectations is lacking, and the analysis below admittedly has an exploratory character. Nevertheless, some plausible hypotheses are proposed. First, voters with more established voting habits might be less sensitive to priming mechanisms (see, e.g., Jensen & Aalberg 2004). Therefore, older voters may have a smaller propensity to change voting intention post-treatments (H3).

Second, well-educated voters may be better able to independently make up their minds without letting party choice being steered by the current focus on or framing of specific issues. Thus, higher educated voters may less likely change their voting intentions after the treatments (H4). However, previous empirical studies have reported that education may not be clearly linked to priming effects in any straightforward manner (Iyengar & Kinder 1987).

Third, voters who care strongly about an issue may change more often when being primed with it as this activates voting behaviour based on their strong issue-area preferences (H5a). An alternative hypothesis is that voters with a very strong interest in the issue change less often (H5b) since they already, pre-treatment, vote according to their preferences on this dimension. For instance, voters very concerned with the environment may already vote for pro-environment parties.

Fourth, voters with little political knowledge should be more inclined to change voting intentions after issue priming; their party preferences presumably have weaker anchoring in political information and understanding (H6a). However, the literature is inconclusive on the relationship between political knowledge and issue priming. Results from Togeby (2007), for example, indicate that the politically knowledgeable, in some cases, are more prone to issue priming (H6b).

Fifth, general political interest may reduce probability of changing parties (H7). The politically interested could make up their minds prior to election campaigns, having spent more time considering their options, and there is evidence from other contexts that political interest moderates priming effects (Krosnick & Brannon 1993).
Sixth, political cynicism may affect likelihood of changing parties. Political cynics may be less likely to change (H8a) because they assume their vote does not matter anyway, and vote expressively on particular parties. Yet, political cynicism might trigger protest voting only when specific issues, such as immigration, are considered important. Hence, political cynicism may induce more frequent changes in voting intentions (H8b).

We ran logit regressions with ‘Party Change’ as dependent variable (1 if respondent changed voting intention post-treatment, 0 otherwise). The regression models were applied on the two sub-samples separately. We entered age, years of education, gender (1 = female), and indices measuring issue-importance, political knowledge, political interest and political cynicism as independent variables (see online appendix for operationalisations). To investigate the sensitivity of particular results, we tested parsimonious models – including only one ‘political’ variable – and extensive models including all variables simultaneously. The latter are reported in Table 1, and the former in the online appendix.8

Models 1-I and 2-I show results for the immigration and environment treatment, respectively. There are systematic factors affecting the propensity to change parties for both treatments, but these factors are often not in line with our prior expectations or dissimilar for the two treatments. Actually, Table 1 shows that no variable is robust, with the same sign, both for propensity to change after the immigration and environment treatments. As Togeby (2007) suggests, the individual-level moderators of priming effects are highly context dependent and hard to predict.

Regarding H3 on age reducing priming effects, we find no support for the immigration treatment (model 1-I). However, we do find that younger voters are more likely to switch parties after the environment treatment (t = −2.76, model 2-1). Likewise, we find that gender is relevant, but only for the environment treatment where women are more likely to switch (t = 2.56). H4 receives no support; education is far from significant, both in models 1-I and 2-I.

The picture is also complex for the political knowledge and attitude variables. General political interest enhances (t = 1.80) the probability of changing party after the immigration treatment, which goes contrary to H7 (and, for example, the results in Krosnick & Brannon 1993). Model 2-1 reports no systematic relationship between political interest and changing parties after the environment treatment. In contrast, political knowledge reduces the probability of changing parties after the environment treatment (t = −1.69), as expected from H6a, whereas political cynicism increases it, as expected from H8b. Yet, model 1-I reports that these variables are unrelated to changing voting intentions after the immigration treatment.

Perhaps more puzzling (see Bélanger & Meguid 2008), and in contrast to H4a, are the results for issue importance. According to models 1-I and 2-I,
Table 1. Logit Regressions on Change in Voting Intentions, after Treatment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Immigration sub-sample</th>
<th>Environment sub-sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1-I</td>
<td>1-II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-I</td>
<td></td>
<td>2-II</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>Change to Progress Party</th>
<th>All changes</th>
<th>All changes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.004 (0.40)</td>
<td>-0.003 (-0.46)</td>
<td>0.002 (0.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.012 (0.60)</td>
<td>-0.120 (-0.50)</td>
<td>-0.825*** (-2.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-0.120 (-1.02)</td>
<td>-0.919 (-1.55)</td>
<td>-0.312* (-1.94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>0.325* (1.80)</td>
<td>0.452** (2.18)</td>
<td>0.931*** (3.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political knowledge</td>
<td>0.078 (0.72)</td>
<td>0.037 (0.32)</td>
<td>0.102 (0.74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political cynicism</td>
<td>0.150 (0.98)</td>
<td>0.237 (1.36)</td>
<td>0.567** (2.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue importance</td>
<td>-0.443** (-1.96)</td>
<td>0.166 (0.43)</td>
<td>0.451 (1.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>-0.200 (-0.57)</td>
<td>-1.947** (-2.24)</td>
<td>1.960* (-1.94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress Party</td>
<td>-1.947** (-2.24)</td>
<td>-1.960* (-1.94)</td>
<td>-4.060*** (-3.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservatives</td>
<td>-0.200 (0.05)</td>
<td>-0.155 (-0.40)</td>
<td>-0.681 (-1.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre Party</td>
<td>0.325 (0.83)</td>
<td>-0.171 (-0.34)</td>
<td>-2.400*** (-3.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist Left Party</td>
<td>-1.947** (-2.24)</td>
<td>-1.216 (-1.48)</td>
<td>-0.477 (-0.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Party</td>
<td>0.525 (1.01)</td>
<td>-0.981 (-1.40)</td>
<td>-2.035* (-1.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Rød’ (Left)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-1.372 (-1.59)</td>
<td>-1.146 (-1.15)</td>
<td>-1.667 (-1.58)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: ***p < 0.01; **p < 0.05; *p < 0.10. T-values in parentheses. Party dummies record pre-treatment voting intention, and reference category comprises Communist Party and voters that are uncertain, could or would not vote, or would not answer. Respondents initially voting for Progress Party are excluded from 1-III, and those initially voting for Socialist Left or Liberal Party are excluded from 2-III.

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considering an issue important does not enhance the probability of chang-
ing parties after the election campaign turns its focus toward it. Indeed, issue
importance significantly \((t = -1.96)\) reduces probability of changing voting
intentions for the immigration treatment. The argument underlying \(H4b\)
suggests why: the voters considering immigration very important may be
those already ‘voting’ for the party with issue ownership on the non-treated
question. Indeed, 73 percent of our original Progress Party voters consid-
ered immigration important. Among those changing to the Progress Party
post-treatment, 36 percent considered immigration important. The equiva-
 lent number was only 29 percent among all other voters.

Since initial voting intention may influence not only the issue importance
coefficient but also others, we control for dummies capturing (pre-
treatment) party in model 1-II. As expected, initially ‘voting’ Progress Party
is associated with a low probability of changing voting intention after the
immigration treatment, and the negative impact of issue importance disap-
pears. However, all other results remain fairly stable and the result that the
politically more interested change parties when the campaign focuses on
immigration is actually strengthened somewhat \((t = 2.18)\). Model 2-II
includes the party dummies for the environment sample, but all results here
basically remain the same: younger voters, women and political cynics are
more likely to change parties when the election campaign focuses on envi-
ronmental issues. As expected, initial Socialist Left Party or Liberal Party
voters are less likely than others to change post-treatment.

In order to further elaborate, we focused on the voters that changed to the
parties with issue ownership (Progress Party for immigration, and Socialist
Left Party and Liberal Party for environment). The dependent variable is
now scored 1 only if the voter changed to the issue ownership party. More-
over, prior Progress Party voters in the immigration sample, and Liberal and
Socialist Left voters in the environment sample, are excluded from the
analysis.

When applying the same independent variables as above, some clear
patterns now emerge in the immigration sample (model 1-III). First, men
\((t = -2.67)\) are more likely to change their vote to the Progress Party, and
the more educated are less likely \((t = -1.94)\). Moreover, the politically
interested \((t = 3.58)\) and cynical \((t = 2.61)\) are more prone to change to the
Progress Party, post-treatment. We do not find any effect of age, political
knowledge or issue importance.

Model 2-III shows results for changing to the Liberal or the Socialist Left
Party after receiving the environment treatment. The significant effects of
gender and age are retained: women and younger voters are more likely to
change. In contrast to the issue importance results for immigration, but in
accordance with \(H4a\), those considering the environment an important issue
are more likely to change, post-treatment. There is also weak evidence for
from model 2-III; those with less political interest are more likely to change \((t = -1.77)\). But, this is not retained in the parsimonious model excluding other political knowledge and attitude variables (see online appendix).

In sum, certain individual-level characteristics seemingly affect the likelihood of changing voting intention as a response to issue priming. According to our results, however, these characteristics vary with the particular issue gaining attention during the campaign and – possibly because different parties basically attract different types of voters – which party has issue ownership. For immigration, the clearest result is that the politically interested are more likely to change voting intentions when campaigns shift focus towards the issue. For the environment, the clearest results by far are that women and young voters change when focus is put on the issue.

A Brief Discussion

We have presented evidence that voters systematically abandon some parties and move to others if particular issues are focused on. Concretely, our results suggest that, in the Norwegian context, the Progress Party gains from a campaign focusing on immigration policy, whereas the Socialist Left and Liberal parties gain if environmental policy dominates the agenda. The two large parties considered by Norwegian voters to be particularly competent on fiscal policy – Labour and the Conservative Party (Karlsen & Aardal 2007) – lose dramatically in both instances. Changing the issue focus of a campaign potentially alters the voting results dramatically, in turn affecting the distribution of seats in parliament and ultimate composition of the government.

As discussed, our results can neither be due to respondents learning of parties’ policy positions nor to persuasion by good arguments; our design excludes these mechanisms from being pertinent. Moreover, respondents arguably have insufficient information to act strategically in the survey experiments. Thus, we are assured that the observed results stem from the prevalence of (genuine) issue priming or from forward-looking voters using campaigns as signals on future relevance of particular issues. In any case, the results suggest that focus on particular issues during election campaigns matter because different parties ‘own’ issues where they have substantial voter advantages.

In extension, parties and candidates should want campaign discussions to focus on ‘their’ issues and issue aspects. However, there is evidence that parties lacking issue ownership may partly counter the above-discussed effects through various strategies, such as re-framing issue complexes, building up their reputation as competent (over time) or simply re-focusing debates on different issues (Meguid 2005; Walgrave et al. 2009). Such
strategies may adjust (likely scale down) the treatment effects observed here. Particularly the latter is conceivably relevant; real world election campaigns are more ‘messy’ than our stylised treatments, involving multiple issue areas and with multiple actors presenting differently framed arguments and proposals in different areas. This may moderate the kind of priming effects generated by our treatment – even campaigns focusing largely on the environment or immigration need not alter voting totals to the extent reported above; priming effects are context sensitive (Togeby 2007). Still, the problem with alternative designs is that precisely estimating priming effects is far more difficult in real-life settings due, for instance, to various selection, endogeneity and omitted variable biases. Hence, although external validity – generalising effects to real-life settings – is always a problem of survey experiments, observational studies are associated with perhaps even larger difficulties regarding valid inferences.

Although the point estimates above may not yield precise predictions of how much the electorate swings with changes in issue focus, our very large estimates still indicate that the real world effects are non-negligible. This interpretation is supported by several observational studies on different Norwegian election campaigns and subsequent elections indicating large effects of issue focus on voter movements to particular parties – for example, with the Progress Party gaining votes after the 1987 and 1995 campaigns focused intensively on immigration (Bjørklund 1988; 1999). Despite the above-noted caveats on the generalisability of our results, a rational strategy for political actors thus seems to be promoting their own issues prior to elections. Given that politicians are strongly motivated by increasing their vote shares, one may thus expect campaigns to contain multiple debates and focuses, possibly with parties sometimes trying to avoid debating with each other and rather focusing on different issues.

Conclusion

As Wlezien and Erikson (2001, 419) note, many researchers believe that ‘events that happen during the course of the campaign cause voters’ preferences to change. . . . The problem is empirically identifying these effects.’ Several aspects of a campaign may affect voters’ preferences over parties; a particular candidate may come across as trustworthy and charismatic during a campaign; a candidate may experience scandals; a party may develop a new and attractive policy proposal; voters may learn of parties’ existing policies; and voters may vote for another party than their first preference because of strategic considerations developed during the campaign. Leaving such mechanisms aside, we have shown that campaigns may impact on voting simply due to their focus on a small and select set of issues.
The empirical analysis in this article indicates that the voting behaviour of a sizable share of the Norwegian electorate is likely to be affected by the issue focus prior to election day. In our survey experiments, parties considered to have ownership on immigration issues and environmental issues substantially increased – and in one instance more than doubled – their vote shares as an effect of a hypothetical campaign focusing on these respective issues. Although priming effects are context sensitive, there is little a priori reason to believe such issue priming effects are limited to Norway, although their strength may vary depending, for instance, on characteristics of the electoral institutions and the party system, the distribution of voter preferences and the extent to which voters make up their mind before or during the campaign. This is worth investigating in future research; one benefit of our research design is that it can easily be re-designed and employed for other countries.

Two important implications arise from our study. First, the media and other organisations may strongly influence election results by focusing on some issues rather than others. Second, strategic and clever politicians may increase their parties’ return at the polls if they manage to draw attention to issues where they have ownership and keep these issues on the agenda. Restricting the campaign to a few carefully selected issues may therefore be a better strategy than proposing broad policy platforms dealing with numerous issues. If we consider voters making informed choices to be a normatively desirable characteristic, our results may point to a problematic aspect of democratic politics: the media and parties could subtly manipulate voters to change voting intentions based on subconscious priming. However, our results could also largely reflect forward-looking voters using campaign focuses as cues on the future importance of issues, enabling them to better vote according to their (conscious) preferences. If so, our results indicate benevolent consequences of parties highlighting some issues while downplaying others. In any case, we should expect parties to fight hard to implement specific, limited agendas for election campaigns. Issue ownership may be a dynamic entity in the long run, and parties may in some instances gain from battling other parties with current ownership on their home turf (Meguid 2005; Walgrave et al. 2009). Nevertheless, our results indicate this may be a very risky strategy – at least during the relatively short time-span of an election campaign.

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NOTES

1. To concretise, consider a voter with preferences over policy outcomes in two dimensions: fiscal policy and immigration. The voter knows her ideal position on both, but is uncertain about which will be the main subject of politicians’ attention – and thus how much effort will go into policy making and reform – in the next parliamentary period. The voter may use the campaign as a cue to produce more accurate predictions of how important immigration will be relative to fiscal policy. If immigration is the main campaign topic, with politicians from Party A and Party B constantly repeating their (well-known) immigration policy proposals, she may infer that immigration will be of particular future importance. Hence, she votes for B, which has policies closer to her preference on immigration, after the campaign, although she initially considered voting for A, whose fiscal policies are preferable.

2. ‘Priming’ also relates to ‘framing’ (Scheufele & Tewksbury 2007), although their exact is under debate (see Maher 2001). A possible framing effect probably occurs before the priming effect. When respondents receive certain issue stimuli, what come to mind are probably framed versions of these issue complexes.

3. One telling example is American voters’ evaluation of President George Bush during the first Gulf War (Krosnick & Brannon 1993). When the war was highly salient on the media agenda, Bush was evaluated as a strong leader. After the war ended and the economy – which Bush was not considered to handle capably – became the dominant media topic, Bush’s popularity plummeted.

4. The first survey was part of a greater standard omnibus (N = 989) carried out by TNS Gallup Norway on a representative sample of the Norwegian population (above 18 years of age). We do not know the response rate. The second was a web survey (N = 1,001) carried out by Norstat, which has a web panel of about 70,000 respondents. Respondents earn points for each survey in which they participate, but there are strict regulations on how many surveys people are offered. The response rate for our survey was 36 percent; according to Norstat this is a quite normal rate.

5. The wording was: ‘Earlier in this survey we asked you a question concerning your vote choice if the elections for parliament were held tomorrow. We now want to ask you this question again, with a different angle: Assume that policies concerning immigration, with topics like police officers wearing the hijab; creeping islamification; caricature drawings and the freedom of speech; residence permits for people with connections to the Taliban; and similar issues were important parts of the campaign. If the elections were held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?’

6. The wording was: ‘Earlier in this survey we asked you a question concerning your vote choice if the elections for parliament were held tomorrow. We now want to ask you this question again, with a different angle: Assume that policies concerning the environment, with topics like oil spill from ship accidents; the development of new oil fields in Lofoten; and development of alternative energy sources such as wind power were important parts of the campaign. If the elections were held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?’

7. The simulations (1,000 iterations) were run using Clarify (‘estsimp’); for the STATA code, see http://folk.uio.no/carlhk/.

8. The parsimonious models incorporate only one of the political attitudes or knowledge variable; if, for example, political interest and knowledge are highly correlated, the results for either could be very sensitive to the inclusion or exclusion of the other. However, the parsimonious and extensive models yield quite similar results, indicating that multicollinearity is not a huge problem. This is supported when checking bivariate correlations – the highest (political knowledge and political interest) is only 0.44 for the immigration sub-sample and 0.37 for environment. VIF tests (calculated after ordinary least squares regressions) on variables entering Models 1-I and 2-I, show the highest VIF values (for political interest) are only 1.48 for immigration and 1.33 for environment.
REFERENCES


Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher’s web-site:

**Online Appendix**

**Table A.1.** Voter distribution (relative frequencies) in immigration sample for original and immigration-treatment questions. Web survey.

**Table A.2.** Voter distribution (relative frequencies) in environment sample for original and environment-treatment questions. Web survey.

**Table A.3.** Logit-regressions with party-change after treatment as dependent variable; immigration sub-sample; parsimonious models.

**Table A.4.** Logit-regressions with change to Progress Party after treatment as dependent variable; immigration sub-sample, parsimonious models.

**Table A.5.** Logit-regressions with party-change after treatment as dependent variable; environment sub-sample; parsimonious models.

**Table A.6.** Logit-regressions with change to Socialist- or Liberal Party after treatment as dependent variable; environment sub-sample, parsimonious models.