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Changing the subject: An analysis of candidates' issue emphasis in televised election debates, 1985-2019

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Abstract

Election debates are key campaign events that allow citizens to compare politicians' issue positions side-by-side. While debate moderators try to keep candidates on-topic to contrast issue positions, candidates can try to shift the debate to off-topic issues instead. Election debates thus provide a unique setting to study candidates' issue emphasis. In this context, we study: *who* veers off-topic, on *which issues*, and *when*? Our theory-driven quantitative content analysis of 24 Belgian election debates (1985-2019) shows that different candidates are equally likely to veer off-topic, but when they do, they emphasize their party's core issues and follow previous off-topic speaking turns.

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Introduction

Election debates are keystone campaign moments that attract wide attention (Juárez-Gámiz et al., 2020). The confrontation of candidates' views helps the public contrast and infer their issue positions (Benoit et al., 2003; Van Der Meer et al., 2016). Hence, debates are crucial in the electoral process: akin to a boxing match, debates expose issue positions by forcing candidates to exchange blows on key issues. Yet, these boxing matches are as much about ducking and weaving as they are about landing a hit on an opponent. For example, even though the moderator asked foreign policy questions in Romney and Obama's 2012 debate, Romney frequently went off-topic by talking about the economy (Whitesides, 2012). While this behaviour may clarify which topics candidates themselves find important, going off-topic decreases citizens' ability to directly compare candidates' issue positions.

This paper investigates the dynamics of candidates' propensity to go off-topic: emphasizing issues other than the debate topic introduced by the moderator. While extant theories to explain candidate issue emphasis exist, few studies theorize how the communication context conditions issue emphasis (Tresch et al., 2018). Considering that mediated debates provide a context that incentivizes candidates to stick to the debate topic, and hence constrains candidate issue emphasis, we develop a theoretical framework to understand why candidates, at times, still go off-topic in such contexts. We theorize factors at three levels of analysis: which *type of candidates* are more likely to veer off-topic, for which *type of issues* do candidates do so, and in what *context*? We expect that especially male candidates, candidates belonging to opposition parties and populist candidates will go off-topic more often. Moreover, candidates who veer off-topic are expected to emphasize their party's core issues and issues that are salient in the party system. Finally, the debate context can matter, as once candidates begin to break the unspoken norm of staying on-topic, this may increase other candidates' propensity to go off-topic. To evaluate our propositions, we present novel content analysis data that tracks candidate's issue emphasis in over three decades' worth of Belgian televised election debates (1985-2019).

While plenty of studies investigate candidate issue emphasis, we know surprisingly little about why candidates go off-topic in these key mediated campaign events (for an exception, see Clementson & Eveland, 2016). Yet, broadening existing knowledge about this topic is important for several reasons. First, the extent to which issue emphasis is *on*-topic affects citizens' understanding of candidates' policy offers. Debates try to force candidates to discuss similar issues. This should increase the public's understanding of these issues, as it enables a direct comparison of parties' perspectives, and helps them to make an informed choice on election day (Chong & Druckman, 2007; but see Lipsitz, 2013). So, studying the dynamics of this practice of veering off-topic is important because it influences people's understanding of political issues and their evaluation of political candidates.

Second, most studies investigate issue emphasis in unmediated forms of communication such as manifestos or press releases (e.g. Budge & Farlie, 1983; Dolezal et al., 2014). Yet, *mediated* communication channels, such as election debates, are pivotal intermediaries between politics and the public (Juárez-Gámiz et al., 2020). While these mediated channels reach large audiences, they are not neutral conduits of party messages: journalists and moderators stimulate, filter and select messages that fit their own (media) logic (Esser, 2013). Therefore, we need to consider whether theories of candidate issue emphasis are apt to explain issue emphasis in mediated settings.

Finally, we add to the ongoing debate regarding selective emphasis theory, which argues that parties will selectively emphasize favourable issues (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). Yet, the empirical evidence is mixed (Dolezal et al., 2014; Sigelman & Buell, 2004). By analysing election debates, we examine a communication format that dissuades selective emphasis, adding to prior work suggesting that the communication context conditions party issue emphasis (Ennser-Jedenastik et al., 2021; Tresch et al., 2018). Further, our framework considers other factors that make an issue 'favourable' to a party—for example an issue's systemic salience (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2015). So, we address novel questions such as: when candidates pursue off-topic issues, do they turn to issues owned by their parties or that are salient in political discourse?

Staying on-topic: Issue emphasis in election debates

For representative democracy to function well, parties need to present clear platforms to voters, who can then make an informed choice on election day (Thomassen, 1994). In presenting their platforms, parties often strategically use issues in the competition for electoral support. One strategy of such issue competition is strategic issue *emphasis* during the campaign: parties can intentionally emphasize, or de-emphasize, issues during the election campaign in an effort to change the issues that dominate the campaign in their favour (Budge & Farlie, 1983).

A thriving field of study has examined the determinants of issue emphasis. Selective emphasis theories argue that candidates and parties emphasize issues on which they enjoy a competitive advantage, but have yielded mixed evidence on this proposition (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996; but see Sigelman & Buell, 2004; Dolezal et al., 2014; Spoon et al., 2014; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2015; Seeberg, 2022). Conversely, literature on ambiguity argues that parties can avoid clarifying their positions on unfavourable issues by de-emphasizing them (Lefevre, 2023; Nasr, 2022; Page, 1976). Other theories studying issue emphasis include the ‘riding the wave’ theory—which proposes that when the public considers an issue important, parties cannot afford to *not* pay attention to it (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994; Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016; Klüver & Spoon, 2016)—and work discussing how the party system agenda, which refers to the prioritization of issues in the party system as a whole, drives issue emphasis (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010, 2015).

The communication channel is also important to understand parties’ and candidates’ issue emphasis. Tresch et al. (2018) show how parties tend to emphasize favourable issues more in press releases than in electoral manifestos, because the latter needs to present an encompassing program and is thus less accommodating to strategies where the party only talks about its preferred issues. Yet, our understanding of the way communication channels condition issue emphasis remains somewhat limited. Most studies investigate unmediated channels of communication, such as press releases and direct campaign statements (Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016; Meyer & Wagner, 2016; Seeberg, 2022; Sigelman & Buell, 2004), manifestos (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Dolezal et al., 2014; Klüver & Spoon, 2016;

Tresch et al., 2018), advertising (Damore, 2005; Kaplan et al., 2006), and parliamentary questions (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2015).

In contrast, studies on issue emphasis in *mediated* communication channels, such as the mass media, are scarcer. However, the evidence suggests that issue emphasis in these channels differs from unmediated channels: Meyer et al. (2020) demonstrate that newspaper coverage favors issues that are highly salient to the public. Moreover, there are likely differences between different mediated channels, too: Clementson & Eveland (2016) find that going off-topic is more prevalent in press conferences as compared to election debates. Importantly, the media are not neutral players that simply pass on parties' issue messages: media operate according to their own logic, and they do not treat all party messages equally (Esser, 2013; Strömbäck, 2008). They filter party messages and prefer certain messages over others. In doing so, the media affect patterns of issue emphasis (Meyer et al., 2020). Studying issue emphasis in mediated communication channels is important as the public gets much of its political information through the media. So, issue emphasis in these channels is particularly consequential for electoral outcomes (Schwarzbözl et al., 2020). And in campaign times, election debates are the mediated channel with probably the highest reach and impact.

Turning to our case of election debates, these mediated debates generally happen live, and candidates must respond to questions on the spot. Whilst candidates prepare for debates and often know what topics will feature, they cannot perfectly predict what their opponents and the moderator(s) will say. Debates are hence more spontaneous instances of political communication compared to unmediated channels. Studying them provides insights into what candidates choose to emphasize in the spur of the moment, when they cannot consult anyone.

Election debates moreover direct candidates to discussing the topic introduced by the moderator. Debate moderators have a dominant and steering role, and a key news value for media in general and debates in particular is conflict and negativity (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016). Keeping candidates on-topic allows moderators to highlight candidates' differing stances on these issues, thereby appeasing their preference for conflict (Boomgaarden et al., 2013). While we would expect

this conflict preference in *all* mediated channels, it should be especially pronounced in election debates, whose format enhances conflict between candidates (Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010). These debates are often set up to encourage separate discussions on a single topic, with the moderator asking pointed questions related to that issue. Implicitly, candidates are expected to answer these questions, thus sticking to the topic introduced by the moderator (Hansen & Benoit, 2001). Indeed, as we demonstrate in our empirical section, we find that candidates emphasize the moderator topic much more so than other topics.

Taking the debate off-topic: who, on which issues, and when?

Even in a context that favours staying on-topic, candidates can deviate from this norm: in their speaking turns, candidates may try to change the subject and mention issues that are *not* the topic of debate. In this section, we develop hypotheses on candidate, issue, and context characteristics that may increase the propensity of candidates' off-topic issue mentions.

Regarding candidate characteristics, the first distinction is between populist and non-populist candidates. We expect that populist candidates will veer off-topic more. Two complementary mechanisms underly this pattern: a populist politicians' logic and a journalistic logic. First, populist candidates side with 'the people' versus media and political elites, which is one core reason why citizens vote for populists (Mudde, 2004). Therefore, to appeal to their supporters, populist candidates would be more inclined to challenge media conventions by shifting the debate to other issues. Second, populists' simplistic, more abrasive and emotionally-laden communication style resonates well with media logic and appeals to journalistic incentives of conflict that attract the public's attention (Landerer, 2013; Manucci, 2017; Mazzoleni, 2008; but see McDonnell & Ondelli, 2022). Therefore, journalists may be prone to let populist candidates veer off-topic. Populist candidates may furthermore internalize their ability to play this media game, and go off-topic more. We cannot disentangle which of these mechanisms drive populist candidates' propensity to go off-topic more so than other candidates, but together they lead us to hypothesize that:

H1: Populist candidates are more likely to mention off-topic issues compared to non-populist candidates.

Second, we hypothesize that opposition candidates will veer off-topic more than incumbent candidates. The opposition has more freedom than incumbents to "pick their battleground" regarding the issues they want to discuss, as governing candidates have more accountability and are called to justify their policy decisions (Tresch et al., 2018). Moreover, opposition candidates can criticize current policy and explain how their proposals would be better (Bächtiger & Hangartner, 2010). Conversely, incumbent candidates need to emphasize a wide array of issues because they need to address opposition critiques, making them less free to focus on their ideal campaign agenda and more likely to stick to the debate topic (Greene, 2016).

H2: Opposition candidates are more likely to mention off-topic issues compared to incumbent candidates.

Third, we hypothesize that female candidates are less likely to veer off-topic than male candidates. One reason is that men are associated more with agentic traits (e.g., assertiveness) and women with communal traits (e.g., friendliness) (Williams & Best, 1982). These associations lead to gender role beliefs and expectations, and deviating from these expectations is likely to be sanctioned. Because men and women are generally aware of costs associated with deviating from gender role expectations, they are not likely to do so (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Since shifting the debate to other topics rather signals the possession of assertive traits, female politicians may be more hesitant to do this. A second reason is that female politicians may opt to play it safe out of a rational calculus: female politicians who 'go maverick', or go negative, face harsher voter backlash than male candidates (Krupnikov & Bauer, 2014; Vraga, 2017), so playing it safe and sticking to the debate topic may be the result of a rational calculus of female politicians to avoid such backlash.

H3: Male candidates are more likely to mention off-topic issues compared to female candidates.

When it comes to *which issues* candidates turn to when they go off-topic, we advance two expectations, built on the theory of selective emphasis. When candidates go off-topic, we expect that they will emphasize their party's core issues, i.e. issues that are traditionally 'owned' by their parties (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). Selective emphasis theory argues that parties will emphasize those issues that are historically affiliated with them. Parties do so because these issues are important to their core constituencies (Stubager & Slothuus, 2013), and because parties feel obliged to emphasize these core issues to avoid offending their electorate—they are 'stuck' with these issues (Budge, 2015). So, parties want, and may even be expected by the public, to emphasize these core issues. Even when parties are asked to provide their viewpoint on a specific issue position, they still try to turn to these core issues in their answers (Lefevere et al., 2017). Conversely, the literature on ambiguity shows that issues that are *not* core to the parties' ideal agenda may be shunned—de-emphasized—as a way to avoid making them key points of discussion (Lefevere, 2023). So, we hypothesize:

H4: When a candidate mentions an off-topic issue, it is more likely to be an issue that is a core issue on the party agenda compared to an issue that is not core to the candidate's party agenda.

Furthermore, we hypothesize that when candidates mention off-topic issues, they will likely turn to issues that have high systemic salience. Systemic salience is the general political importance of an issue. Research shows that parties adapt their issue emphasis to the party system agenda (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010, 2015; Schwarzbözl et al., 2020). So when candidates go off-topic, they may be more inclined to do so by emphasizing issues that are generally considered important. Introducing marginally important issues, in contrast, is a more risky move. We expect that:

H5: When a candidate mentions an off-topic issue, it is more likely to be an issue that has high systemic salience compared to an issue that has low systemic salience.

Finally, we cannot ignore the dynamics of the debate itself. As argued above, the underlying norm of a debate is that candidates stick to the debate topic at hand. Yet once a candidate violates the norm

of staying on-topic, other candidates may be more likely to follow this behaviour. When the descriptive norm of staying on-topic weakens, this can signal to the other candidates that norms can be violated (Cialdini et al., 1991). Such an ‘action-reaction’ effect on increased norm-violating behaviour has already been shown in other political contexts (Cheng et al., 2017; Goovaerts & Turkenburg, 2023). The first candidates’ behaviour thus implicitly condones going off-topic, and at the very least the other politicians are not the first to do it. Moreover, candidates who change the debate topic may also successfully stimulate other politicians to reply to their newly introduced issue and start a debate on that issue. So, we hypothesize:

H6: Candidates are more likely to discuss an off-topic issue if other candidates have discussed off-topic issues in the preceding speaking turn.

Method

We investigate a dataset of 24 televised election debates, broadcast between 1985 and 2019 in Flanders, the largest region of Belgium (see Online Appendix A for a detailed overview). Both the political and media system in Belgium are divided along linguistic lines, so the Flemish region has its own broadcaster(s) and set of political parties that participate in elections. We collected debates from the two main broadcasters that organize the election debates in Flanders: the public broadcaster VRT, specifically its channel “Één”, and the main commercial broadcaster/channel VTM. They are, and always have been, the most watched TV channels in Flanders.¹ Similarly to many other countries, election debates in Flanders are a key part of the electoral campaign and receive widespread public and news media attention.²

¹ Market shares fluctuated around 30% for Één and around 18-20% for VTM (2011-2021, [link](#)).

² Author survey data (n=1117) showed that 50.1% of the 18+ Flemish population watched at least one election debate for the 2018 local elections and/or 2019 general elections.

The Flemish context provides a good setting to test our hypotheses. Firstly, Flanders' *multi-party* landscape entails multiple specialized issue-profiles for the different parties, with, for instance, a green party, nationalist party and right-wing populist anti-immigration party. The diverse party landscape provides ample variation in the issues candidates own and want to emphasize (Walgrave et al., 2020). Having multiple parties also means that speaking time in debates has to be divided, so candidates must choose what to emphasize to get their message across. Moreover, Belgian politics is characterized by consensus decision-making and coalition governments, and considering media-politics relations, comparative research indicates Belgian media have considerable power and independence—as such, making Belgium a suitable case to investigate whether candidates still pursue emphasis strategies in such contexts (Deschouwer, 2009; Van Aelst et al., 2008).

Sample

Election debates were included if they featured a moderated discussion between at least two political candidates, and were broadcast one week or less before federal or regional elections. The online appendix provides a detailed overview of the debates.

Coding

Turns: candidates take *turns* in debates. A speaking turn starts when a candidate begins to talk and ends when they are interrupted, or when they are simply done talking. Before coding, every election debate was divided into turns as units of analysis (cf. Steenbergen et al., 2003). In total, the dataset consists of 2805 turns.

To assess the policy issues that candidates discussed, all turns were coded according to the codebook of the Comparative Agendas Project (www.comparativeagendas.net). The codebook was originally developed by Baumgartner and Jones (1993) for the United States, but was adapted for many different countries including Belgium. The Belgian codebook contains 21 major policy domain codes (e.g. macro-economics, foreign affairs, environment).

Automated dictionary-based coding was used. This involves counting the frequency with which words, associated with each of the 21 major issue codes, occur in a turn (see Appendix B and J). It has been successfully applied to various forms of party communication, for example manifestos and media coverage (Sevenans et al., 2013). Although the turns we study here are shorter, similarly short texts have been successfully coded using the same Belgian codebook and coding approach (Lefevere et al., 2017).

For our analysis, we reshape the dataset to long form in which a single case is a turn-issue combination, resulting in 58.905 cases in total (2805 turns*21 issues). This structure allows us to assess how candidate, issue and context characteristics may influence candidates' tendency to veer off-topic across all issue domains. Table 1 shows an excerpt of the dataset.

Table 1: Excerpt of dataset.

Case	Year	Debate	Turn	Politician Party	Issue (CAP)	% words on issue (dep. var.)	Moderator-introduced
<i>1</i>	<i>1985</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>Liberals</i>	<i>Economy</i>	<i>1.08</i>	<i>1</i>
2	1985	1	1	Liberals	Civil rights	0.00	0
...
21	1985	1	1	Liberals	Culture	0.00	0
<i>22</i>	<i>1985</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>Nationalists</i>	<i>Economy</i>	<i>2.14</i>	<i>1</i>
...

Note: Cases in italics denote turn-issue combinations that contain the 'on-topic' issue and are thus excluded from the analysis.

Starting from the top, the 1985 debate began with a turn of liberal candidate Verhofstadt. 1.08% of the words in his response dealt with the moderator-introduced issue of the economy (case 1), whereas his turn did not contain words on civil rights (case 2). The subsequent cases of turn 1 cover the remaining CAP issue codes for turn 1. Beginning with case 22, then, turn 2 of the 1985 debate starts. This turn featured the Nationalist party candidate, whose turn contained 2.14% words dealing with the economy.

As we seek to understand going off-topic, we need to establish which of these 21 issues is the intended topic of debate for that turn. To do this, one of the authors manually coded the topic of the

moderator's turn that precedes the candidate turns: the moderator introduces the debate topic, after which candidates are invited to discuss the topic, leading to several speaking turns dealing with a certain topic. Another author served as second coder and coded the topic introduced by the moderator for 25% of all turns. Inter-coder reliability was satisfactory (Cohen's kappa = 0.94). Based on this coding, we created a dichotomous variable "moderator-introduced" that tracks whether the issue was introduced by the moderator (1) or not (0). In the example dataset (Table 1), before Verhofstadt's turn (turn 1), the moderator invited the debate participants to discuss an economy-related topic, so all subsequent turn-issue combinations on the Economy issue get a value of 1, whereas other issues in the subsequent turns get a value of 0.

Given our paper's focus on going off-topic, the analysis only retains the off-topic turn-issue combinations (moderator-introduced = 0). This reduces the N to 56.100 turn-issue combinations, nested in 2.805 turns. So, we investigate candidate emphasis of issues that were *not* introduced by the moderator. Still, it is noteworthy that we find that the mean percent of on-topic words in a turn (0.90%) is nine times greater than the mean percent of off-topic words (0.09%).³ A t-test shows that this difference is significant ($t = -44.26$, $p < 0.001$). This shows that candidates do indeed mostly remain on-topic, but that they do also try and manage to shift the debate to other topics (see also Clementson & Eveland, 2016).

The independent variables assess factors that may influence candidates' propensity to mention off-topic issues. *Populist candidate* (H1) tracks whether the candidate belongs to a populist party (1) or not (0). In line with prior studies, we designate candidates from Vlaams Belang and Lijst

³ The percentages are low because the dictionary approach only considers words that can be linked exclusively to that issue as a 'match' (i.e. words that are linked to multiple issues, or no specific issue—such as "the", "any", etc.—are not counted as belonging to an issue). As a robustness check, we also conduct the analyses with a binary operationalisation of our dependent variable, indicating whether the candidate's turn contained at least one word from each issue domain (1) or not (0). Except for the "preceding turn off-topic issues" predictor, results remain similar (see Appendix F and G).

Dedecker as populist politicians (Rooduijn et al., 2019). *Opposition* (H2) indicates whether the candidate's party was part of the incumbent government (0) or in opposition (1). *Gender* (H3) tracks whether the candidate is male (0) or female (1). For H4, we track the *party's core issues*. Analogous to the dictionary coding of the dependent variable, we conducted dictionary coding of each party manifesto, tracking the percentage of words in the manifestos on each of the 21 issues. Manifesto emphasis relates to parties' ideal issue agenda, and is thus a good approximation of the relative 'favourability' of the various issues for the different parties. Studies on selective emphasis typically rely on manifesto coding as well (Dolezal et al., 2014; Wagner & Meyer, 2014). *Systemic salience* (H5) is operationalized as the mean percent attention to an issue in all party manifestos for that year. This is in line with the general conceptualization of systemic salience, as it refers to the importance of an issue in the political sphere (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2015). As such, issues that are, on average, given more attention across all parties, have higher systemic salience. Finally, to assess the influence of previous subject changes (H6), *preceding turn's off-topic issues* tracks whether an off-topic issue was mentioned in the preceding speaking turn (1) or not (0).

We additionally include the control variables *year* (treating year as a continuous variable, e.g. debates from 1985 = 1, 1987 = 3, 1991 = 7, etc.), *broadcaster* (i.e. public or commercial), *government level of the election* (i.e. federal, regional, combined), *turn length* (i.e. number of words per turn), and *issue* (dichotomous issue indicators for each of the 21 issues are added to account for the fact that some issues may be mentioned systematically more/less). Descriptive statistics for all variables are reported in Appendix C.

Analyses

We conduct OLS regressions with clustered robust standard errors at the speaker level to account for the nested nature of the data (additional robustness checks are reported in Appendices E—J, and are also discussed below).

Results

Table 2 presents the OLS regression results, Figure 1 visually depicts the results. Models I to IV present results for all drivers that we hypothesized to stimulate candidates' propensity to veer off-topic (H1-H6). Model I contains the candidate characteristics (populism, incumbency-status, gender), Model II contains the issue characteristics (core issue, systemic salience), and Model III contains the debate-context characteristic (off-topic issue mentions in the previous turn). Our interpretation of the results is based on Model IV that includes all variables.

First, the results show that, contrary to expectations, candidate characteristics do not influence candidates' propensity to veer off-topic. Although the coefficients go in expected directions, the effects are not significant. Therefore, we cannot support the first three hypotheses: populist candidates, opposition candidates and male candidates are not significantly more likely to go off-topic than non-populist candidates (H1), candidates in government (H2), or female candidates (H3).

Turning to issue characteristics, when candidates mention off-topic issues, chances are significantly higher that they mention an issue that is core to the candidate's party agenda than an issue that is not, supporting H4. Connecting this to the results of the candidate characteristics, different types of politicians are equally likely to veer off-topic, but when they do so, they turn to issues that their party typically emphasizes in its manifesto (Appendix H presents an additional test of the hypothesis, but again finds that candidates turn to core issues when they go off-topic). Next, contrary to expectations, systemic salience does not have a significant influence (H5). One explanation may be that highly salient issues are already introduced by the moderator quite often: the systemic salience of moderator-introduced issues is around 7%, compared to 4% for other issues. So, candidates may not feel the need to additionally turn to these issues in those parts of the debate where they are not the topic of discussion.

Lastly, when looking at the debate context, we see that in line with H6, candidates are significantly more likely to go off-topic when the previous turn also included off-topic issues. So, candidates who change the debate topic may successfully stimulate other politicians to veer-off-topic

as well, thereby motivating responses to the newly introduced topic. Moreover, this result may indicate that the debate norm to remain on-topic can change throughout the debate, where one off-topic mention leads to more off-topic mentions by other candidates.

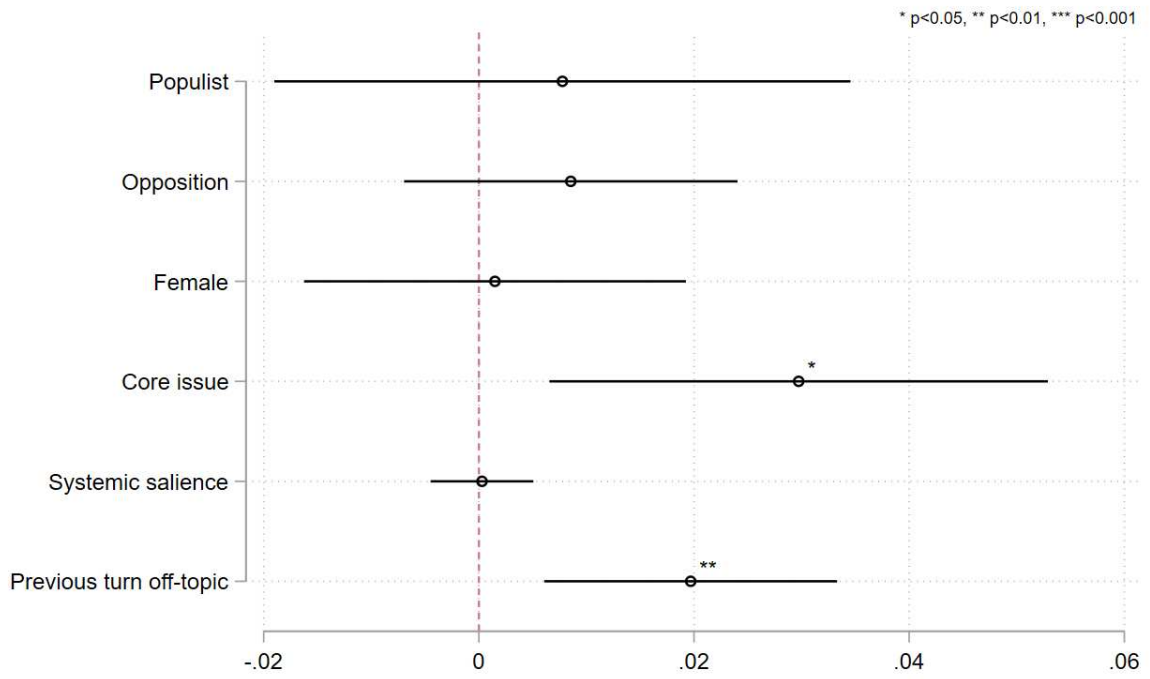
Table 2: Results of OLS regressions

	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV
	Coefficients (Robust SE)	Coefficients (Robust SE)	Coefficients (Robust SE)	Coefficients (Robust SE)
Populism (ref.=not populist)	0.007 (0.014)			0.008 (0.013)
Opposition (ref.=incumbent)	0.009 (0.008)			0.009 (0.008)
Gender (ref.=male)	0.002 (0.009)			0.001 (0.009)
Core issue		0.030 (0.011)*		0.030 (0.011)*
Systemic salience		0.000 (0.002)		0.000 (0.002)
Off-topic previous turn			0.020 (0.007)**	0.020 (0.007)**
Controls (see Appendix D)
Intercept	0.187 (0.040)***	0.134 (0.050)*	0.186 (0.040)***	0.119 (0.051)*
R ²	0.0130	0.0135	0.0131	0.0137
N	56100	56100	56100	56100

Note. Estimates are non-standardized coefficients from OLS regressions with clustered robust standard errors for the candidate speaking. Controls included in analyses left out for brevity (see Appendix D for full table). *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

Figure 1: Plotted coefficients for H1-H6

Determinants of mentioning off-topic issues



In the appendices, we report several robustness checks. Appendices E, F and G report multilevel and logistic regression setups. The multilevel linear regressions corroborate all findings from the main analyses. The logistic regressions—in which we compare candidates mentioning at least one off-topic word (1) versus no off-topic words (0)—show similar results, except for the “previous off-topic turns” predictor: the direction of the effect is again positive, but not significant. In Appendix I, we further run our analyses for two separate time periods, split at the change of the century: 1985-1999 and 2003-2019. Interestingly, while coefficients for the predictors “core issue” and “off-topic previous turn” remain positive in both time periods, they are somewhat smaller in the earlier time period and only significant in the later time period. This seems to indicate that, over time, parties have become more likely to highlight their core issues and are influenced more strongly by other politicians’ tendency to veer off-topic. These developments could broadly be connected to more prevalent issue-voting among citizens over the past decades and fading debate norms in the media. The other variables remain insignificant across both time periods.

Conclusion

This paper investigated candidates’ issue emphasis in election debates. Specifically, we assessed to what extent candidates go off-topic during the debate, *who* goes off-topic, on what *type of issue* they do so and in what *context*. Our research adds to the ongoing study of candidate issue emphasis, which mostly investigated unmediated channels such as manifestos or press releases (Dolezal et al., 2014; Sigelman & Buell, 2004). Moreover, it also speaks to literature on candidate’s refusal to clarify their issue positions and remain ambiguous: de-emphasizing unfavourable issues is one strategy in this pursuit (Lefevere, 2023; Page, 1976). In unmediated settings, parties and candidates are free to (de-)emphasize their preferred issues at will. In contrast, debates incentivize candidates to stick to the debate topic, limiting their ability to pursue strategic emphasis. As such, our study assessed whether parties pursue strategic emphasis even under strenuous circumstances.

Our content analysis of 24 Belgian election debates showed that, as expected, candidates emphasize the on-topic issue far more than other, off-topic issues. Yet, candidates do go off-topic at times, and we uncovered patterns as to when and why this occurs. We find that going off-topic is not contingent on candidate characteristics such as candidates' gender, incumbency status, or populist party affiliation. One explanation could be that because there is limited chance to go off-topic in these debates, once the opportunity arises politicians are equally likely to do so, for instance to compete for more or better coverage afterwards. Our evidence does however show that when candidates go off-topic, they turn to issues that are core to their party's agenda, which aligns with the propositions of selective emphasis theory (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). So, even in a context that incentivizes candidates to stay on-topic, we find that candidates seek out favoured issues. Contrary to expectations, an issue's systemic salience did not make it a prone target when candidates strayed off-topic. This may be because highly salient issues already get plenty of attention in election debates—minimizing candidate's need to address them in other sections of the debate. Finally, we find evidence that politicians are more likely to go off-topic when the previous turn also contained off-topic issues.

This study speaks to ongoing work on issue emphasis, in particular work on issue ownership and party ambiguity. As expected, debates are a tough place to pursue selective emphasis: candidates seeking to obscure their issue positions have a hard time doing so, as the debate setting narrows their ability to de-emphasize moderator-introduced issues. While parties may like to “talk tight budgets to bankers, and free spending to the poor” (Page, 1978, p. 108), if the moderator puts them on the spot on their budget position, they are expected to answer. This shows the importance of the communicative context in explaining issue emphasis. Issue emphasis can vary *across* communication channels—for example, it is easier to pursue selective emphasis in your own manifesto than in a debate—but it also varies *within* channels: once the debate goes off the beaten path, our study shows, straying off-topic becomes more acceptable. This aligns with recent research showing how, for example, selective emphasis shifts throughout the electoral cycle because the context within which

parties operate shifts (Seeberg, 2022). As such, candidates' pursuit of selective emphasis is conditional on the context within which they operate (Clementson & Eveland, 2016).

Our study also speaks to the continued importance of debates. While we found that candidates mainly stayed on-topic, this may not be the public perception and recollection. A good part of the public will not watch the debates itself, but rather catch the 'highlight reel' featuring testy exchanges. While our study gives all speaking turns equal weight in the analysis, these speaking turns are not treated equally in news coverage of the debate. Journalists often focus on those debate moments that are most newsworthy, covering for instance instances where candidates break the rules or violate (informal) norms of the debate (Goovaerts, 2022; Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010), or emphasizing those speaking turns in which candidates talk about their core issues (Hayes, 2008). Future work could dive deeper into these questions.

Our research design implies certain limitations: it is a single-country study, so future research could study whether our findings hold up in other political and media systems. A further caveat is that we consider issue emphasis on broadly delineated issue domains such as education or the economy. Perhaps candidates still selectively emphasize specific policy decisions within each of these domains (see also Lipsitz, 2013). Our categorization is thus a conservative look at off-topic discourse during the campaign. Our longitudinal design was targeted at overarching patterns of issue emphasis, but should be complemented with studies that consider how specific policy proposals feature in debates. Also, given the peculiar context of debates, future work could consider to what extent candidates go off-topic in other mediated contexts such as talk shows or interviews. Finally, we considered going off-topic as an isolated strategy in debates. But, it can be that candidates spontaneously pick from any number of strategies that lead to off-topic issue mentions, such as de-emphasizing, telling political falsehoods, or attacking an opponent's position (Clementson & Eveland, 2016). Future research should investigate who pursues what strategy, and under what circumstances.

Overall, our findings show that debates have, and continue to have, the ability to contrast candidate viewpoints. In doing so, they play a key role in contemporary campaigns: viewers of these

debates can more easily acquire an understanding of party positions on key issues (Van Der Meer et al., 2016). When candidates do go off-topic, they often turn to their party's core issues and inspire others in the debate to follow their lead. These off-topic issue mentions may not directly relate to the moderator topic but can still convey important information for voters: voters may simply want to hear about a candidate's position on an issue that is deemed relevant enough by the politician to discuss. Still, it would be interesting to study whether voters' understanding of party positions improves more when the debate is kept 'on the rails' and sticks to the debate topic. We leave this work to other studies. For now, we have demonstrated that while debates constrain candidates' ability to emphasize their preferred issues at will, candidates still pursue their preferred issues regardless. And when they do, other candidates are likely to follow suit and take the debate off-topic as well.

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