From Speech to Feed: How Parliamentary Debates Shape Party Agendas on Social Media

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Abstract

Social media has become an increasingly important tool for parties to set issues on the political agenda. However, its rapid rise raises questions about the role of traditional venues such as parliaments. This study hypothesizes that parties strategically choose to *initiate* issues in parliamentary debates instead of on social media to establish dominance through real-time discussions. Consequently, only after these issues are introduced and debated in parliament do parties use digital platforms like social media to *reinforce* them on the political agenda. Analyzing over 430,000 parliamentary speeches and 240,000 Facebook posts by parties from 2010 to 2022 in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, and the UK, the study reveals that issues discussed in parliamentary debates—primarily those by opposition parties—typically do not initially emerge on social media but only attract online attention after being introduced in parliament. These findings offer new insights into the strategic decisions of parties in agenda-setting.

Keywords: Agenda-Setting, Issue Attention, Parliamentary Debates, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

The core of politics lies in the debate between political actors over issues (Schattschneider, 1960). As such, parties continuously compete over issues, striving to bring those issues they care about to the political agenda (Green-Pedersen, 2007). Moreover, the attention of parties to issues on the political agenda is often dependent on competing priorities in society (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). In traditional venues such as parliaments, for example, parties have been shown to follow up on topics debated in the press (Van Aelst & Vliegenthart, 2014) or raised by the executive cabinet (Borghetto et al., 2020).

With the rapid rise of social media, parties have now gained a powerful resource that enables them to address issues beyond those set in traditional venues (Kalsnes et al., 2017). Using social media allows parties the freedom to debate any topic they choose (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013; Ceron, 2017). Despite this autonomy, recent studies reveal that, just as in parliament, the topics that parties address on social media are still influenced by societal interests (Barberá et al., 2019; Ennser-Jedenastik et al., 2022) and by those issues that dominate the press (Gilardi et al., 2022). As a result, the political agenda often reflects similar issues across both parliamentary and social media domains (Peeters et al., 2021; Russell & Wen, 2021).

Although we know that political agendas are largely similar in both traditional parliamentary and contemporary social media venues, it remains unclear where parties *initiate* discussions of these issues and how issues are *reinforced* on the political agenda in these venues. For instance, we lack a clear understanding of whether parties strategically opt to initiate discussion of issues through readily accessible contemporary digital platforms, such as social media channels—seeking to address matters promptly but primarily reaching their existing party followers (Jürgens et al., 2011; Peeters, 2022)—or alternatively, whether they predominantly remain silent on issues, awaiting opportunities in traditional venues, such as parliamentary debates, to address issues unexpectedly, and in this way assert control over the party-system agenda (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010). Furthermore, we lack knowledge of how the initiation of discussion of an issue, whether online or in parliament, impacts its *reinforcement* in other political arenas. By addressing these questions, we will gain a deeper understanding of how

issues are introduced into the formal political agenda (Cobb et al., 1976, pp. 129-130), how attention to these issues navigates various political arenas, and thus the agenda dynamics between them.

This study tests the hypothesis that parties strategically refrain from addressing specific issues in social media, opting to *initiate* the discussion and introduction of them onto the political agenda during parliamentary debates. This tactic aims to establish their dominance in the discussion and secure a "first-mover advantage" (Poljak, 2023a). Consequently, once these issues are debated in parliament, they will be subsequently *reinforced* on parties' social media platforms. This outcome is driven by two factors: party promotion and party competition. In terms of party promotion, it might be expected that parties aim to demonstrate their commitment to an issue by debating it in parliament (Proksch & Slapin, 2012), and then promoting their in-person activities online (see also Soontjens, 2021). Furthermore, by promoting these activities online, parties effectively communicate their policy positions and records to the electorate (Kukec, 2022). At the same time, party competition is expected to incentivize parties to follow up discussions that transpire in parliament using social media. This may encompass discrediting other parties in the eyes of voters, employing blame-avoidance strategies to evade criticism (Hansson, 2018), or highlighting distinctions in their positions on an issue compared to their opponents (Seeberg, 2020).

These hypotheses will be tested by comparing issues that are mentioned in over 430,000 parliamentary speeches during question time sessions and 241,000 Facebook posts by parties in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, and the UK between 2010 and 2022. The results from these diverse countries show that parties *initiate* discussion of brand-new issues in parliamentary debates while also *reinforcing* these issues on social media. Even when issues are introduced on social media before a debate, their discussion in parliament still has the power to reinforce these issues online. These findings contribute to the existing literature on political agenda-setting in parliaments and on social media, highlighting how issues gain prominence on the political agenda and traverse various political venues.

AGENDA-SETTING IN PARLIAMENTARY AND SOCIAL MEDIA VENUES

Agenda-setting is a critical aspect of politics, concerned with how political actors transform societal issues into political problems (Green-Pedersen & Walgrave, 2014, p. 7). Actors such as political parties are continually receiving and actively seeking signals about issues that are relevant to society, aiming to place these issues on the agenda and to gain political power in the process (Abou-Chadi et al., 2020; Klüver & Sagarzazu, 2016; Wagner & Meyer, 2014).

When deciding which issues to tackle, political parties generally aim to prioritize societal issues that can maximize their gains (Petrocik, 1996). However, agenda-setting studies consistently highlight the constraints that influence this process (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). Consequently, political parties often find themselves compelled to prioritize various societal issues that may not align perfectly with their preferences. For example, parties frequently prioritize issues that resonate with the public, their voters, the media, or even rival parties (e.g., Borghetto & Russo, 2018; Klüver & Spoon, 2016). Thus, parties often allocate attention to issues that gain prominence in these areas rather than focusing solely on issues they may prefer to discuss.

Activities in traditional parliamentary venues highlight such agenda-setting by parties. For example, studies have shown that in parliament parties tend to bring up issues that dominate the news (Van Aelst & Vliegenthart, 2014; Walgrave et al., 2008) and foster political conflict (Sevenans & Vliegenthart, 2016). Parties also speak about issues that are promoted by rival parties (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010) or issues that are deemed politically relevant, such as those that are featured in coalition agreements (Höhmann & Krauss, 2022) or in their manifestos (Gross et al., 2024). Moreover, parties have been observed to be directly influenced in their parliamentary agenda-setting process through mechanisms such as lobbying (Willems & Beyers, 2023) or by citizens engaging in protest and social demonstrations (Wouters et al., 2021).

In recent years, this strategic behavior of bringing a specific set of issues to the agenda has also been shown to occur on social media. For example, Barberá et al. (2019) found that US Congress legislators usually follow citizens' attention to issues online and address those issues on their social media profiles. This finding was supported by Ennser-Jedenastik et al. (2022), who demonstrated that high-performing issue-related posts on the profiles of major mainstream

parties in Austria are more likely to reappear again in party posts. Similarly, Gilardi et al. (2022) found a high level of congruence between issues in the media and issues on the social media profiles of parties in Switzerland (see also Buyens et al., 2024; Ceron et al., 2023; Heidenreich et al., 2022). These findings from social media research align with findings from research on parliamentary venues, indicating a high level of political calculation regarding issues that should be debated.

Recently, studies have also compared the agendas pursued by parties and their members of parliament in both traditional and digital venues. Peeters et al. (2021) conducted a study on the attention paid to issues on social media and in parliament by Flemish politicians in Belgium, identifying a high congruence of issue attention in both venues. Russell and Wen (2021) similarly demonstrated a high congruence between the content of social media posts by US legislators and the bills they sponsored. Therefore, these findings empirically demonstrate that the attention paid to issues by parties in both parliament and on social media is influenced by similar factors.

## *INITIATING* AND *REINFORCING* ISSUES ON POLITICAL AGENDAS

While agenda-setting studies focusing on parliamentary and social media venues are significant, they predominantly theorize and research the *selection* of issues for political agendas in parliament and social media. As such, they often neglect the crucial steps of *introducing* issues to the agenda and *reinforcing* these issues once they are on the agenda (Cobb et al., 1976). Despite the importance of the role of such mechanisms in determining political agendas across different venues, this aspect has received relatively little attention (with one exception being Eriksen, 2023, who discusses concepts of issue initiation and elevation). Specifically, while it is understood that certain types of issues overlap across parliamentary and social media agendas (Peeters et al., 2021; Russell & Wen, 2021), it remains unclear where parties strategically decide to initiate discussions of an issue—whether in person during parliamentary debates or online—and how these discussions are subsequently reinforced across both venues.

To reveal the interplay between party issues featured on social media and in parliament, it is assumed that the discussion of issues may indeed first be *initiated* on social media (Eriksen,

2023; Peeters, 2022). This might occur because bringing an issue to parliament may be challenging, with debates occurring at fixed times, and the content of debates often predetermined by the executive cabinet. Moreover, parliament provides only a limited number of avenues, such as "question time" sessions, for parties to raise issues that they want to discuss (Poljak, 2023a) and to hold their opponents accountable (Serban, 2023). In contrast, social media is the quickest way for parties to respond to urgent issues (Peeters, 2022, p. 15). Irrespective of when an issue garners attention in society, parties and politicians can promptly engage by commenting, sharing, going live, or posting videos about it online (e.g., Buyens et al., 2024). Therefore, a prompt response on social media is crucial for parties to demonstrate their responsiveness to pressing issues. It can be assumed that this initial engagement can later be leveraged by reinforcing the issue in other venues such as parliament or through activities such as press conferences and media statements. These mechanisms are highlighted on the left side of Figure 1.

However, immediately responding to an issue online comes with several disadvantages. Specifically, addressing issues online primarily targets party followers (Jürgens et al., 2011; Peeters, 2022) through one-way communication that does not engage other political actors in the process (see e.g., Dillet, 2022). Furthermore, responding immediately also implies that parties lack any in-person activities that would provide visual cues regarding their actions on this issue. Therefore, particularly when parliaments are in session, parties may be inclined to defer from initiating discussion of issues on social media and instead wait for a parliamentary debate on the issue to occur. This strategic delay is crucial, as bringing up an issue unexpectedly in parliament when other actors are present can provide parties with a "first-mover advantage" (Poljak, 2023a). In other words, by introducing new issues unexpectedly, parties can dominate the debate, showcasing their competency on the matter (Kukec, 2022), promoting their policy positions, and simultaneously diminishing the standing of other parties (Seeberg, 2020). Ultimately, while social media allows parties to set their own agenda, it is during parliamentary debates that they gain influence over the whole party-system political agenda (e.g., Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010). As such, as seen on the right side of Figure 1, the first hypothesis (H1) argues that parties are more likely to initiate issues in parliament than on social media.

Figure 1. Visual representation of the theoretical framework
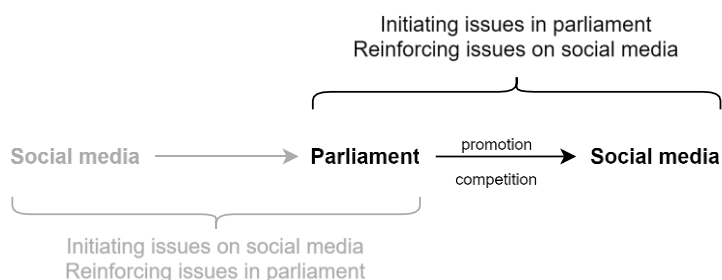
While the *initiating* mechanism rests on the idea that parties want to dominate the discussion of an issue and have the power to set the political agenda, it can also be expected that there may be a *reinforcing* mechanism in parliamentary debates on issues discussed on social media, resulting from: (i) parties promoting their parliamentary activities and policy positions; and (ii) parties engaging in post-debate party competition discrediting their opponents.

First, regarding promotion, in the past, the only way for citizens to become informed about what issues parties address in parliament came through traditional media venues such as the TV or newspapers. However, speaking in parliament and appearing in the news did not necessarily go hand in hand, and reaching the traditional news venues can still be challenging (Vos & Van Aelst, 2018). With the rise of social media, however, this situation has changed. While responding to issues on social media also depends on traditional media reporting on these responses, parties still enjoy the benefit of speaking to their own followers and voters online. As such, at least to their own voter base, parties can now easily demonstrate their responsiveness to issues in parliament by posting about them online.

Parliament becomes very useful in this regard, as it demonstrates real action on an issue that is taken by a party. In contrast, while parties may comment on an important issue as soon as it gains attention online, they cannot demonstrate any concrete action that they have taken on the issue. Parliament, and particularly parliamentary debate, is a great resource in this regard, giving parties the opportunity to perform an action that demonstrates their responsiveness to an issue. For example, interviewing Belgium politicians, Soontjens (2021) showed that they believe

that voters become aware of their commitment to an issue in parliament because it is also promoted online.

In addition, while parties can respond to issues immediately on their social media via textual cues, they will rarely have any visual cues regarding their response. Parliaments allow for visual promotion of the commitment parties are making regarding an issue, either through a video or a photo from their participation in a debate, increasing the impact this can have on citizens (e.g., Powell et al., 2015). As such, raising an issue in parliament and then following up on this issue on social media allows parties to demonstrate to voters that they are responsive and proactively doing something about this issue simply by debating it in parliament. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that politicians consider that social media posts which feature their parliamentary behavior outperform other content they post (Soontjens, 2021).

Second, regarding competition, parliament presents the core venue where parties engage in critical debates trying to discredit the position of their opponents (Poljak, 2023b; Seeberg, 2020; Serban, 2023). The directional in-person confrontation between parties has been shown to foster the greatest negativity, unlike other venues where parties do not interact in person (see e.g., Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010). However, the degree to which parties can engage in debate within parliament is predetermined by the limited time for actual speaking, particularly in highly structured debates such as question time, when parties have the freedom to address issues that they wish to speak about (Serban, 2022). Consequently, social media becomes a useful venue to further engage in discussion and party debate on an issue without time restrictions (Eriksen, 2024).

Thus, parties may follow up (explicitly or implicitly) on issues that were debated in parliament. They can, for example, criticize what was said by their opponents during the debate, thereby framing competing policy positions and competencies in a negative way (e.g., Russell, 2018). Attacking other parties' statements on issues that were debated allows parties to differentiate themselves from each other on those issues (Otjes & Louwerse, 2018) and potentially attract voters who previously supported those parties based on their stance on these issues (see e.g., Arndt, 2014; Davidsson & Marx, 2013). In addition, if a party does not have a chance to respond to criticism due to speaking-time limitations, they can do so on social media

using what have been called "blame avoidance" strategies (e.g. Hansson, 2018). Furthermore, transferring hostility over issues from parliament to an online arena can be beneficial, as negative social media posts by politicians tend to attract the most attention online (Mueller & Saeltzer, 2022; Peeters et al., 2023). Therefore, such possibilities may result in journalists picking up on the story due to the negativity bias (Soroka, 2012), and ultimately disseminating parliamentary issues debated online to the general public. Overall, the second hypothesis (H2), as shown on the right side of Figure 1, suggests that the initiation of discussion of issues in parliament leads to a shift in the discussion on social media, reinforcing on social media the attention paid to issues in parliament.

Before proceeding with the empirical exploration of the theory, it is essential to highlight the distinction between *initiating* discussion of an issue (H1) and *reinforcing* attention paid to an issue on the political agenda (H2). The former (H1) represents the critical moment when a societal problem enters the political agenda (Green-Pedersen & Walgrave, 2014). This involves issues that were previously absent from the political agenda across various venues, and thus initially lacking the attention of formal political actors, such as parties and politicians. The latter (H2) pertains to issues that are already on the political agenda. Here, an issue has already been established on the political agenda and is further sustained by continuous emphasis on the issue.

METHODOLOGY

Country Cases

The hypotheses are tested across five parliamentary democracies: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, and the United Kingdom (UK). These countries differ in their electoral systems (Lijphart, 2012), which results in different parliamentary setups (Gallagher et al., 2011). As a result, agenda-setting varies between these countries (e.g., Vliegenthart et al., 2016), so identifying similar patterns may make the results more generalizable, at least for parliamentary political systems.

In Australia, Canada, and the UK, members of parliament (MPs) are elected by and represent single-member districts, and the prime minister and cabinet ministers sit in parliament as MPs and regularly debate issues with other MPs in parliament. As such, these countries are often described as having "debating" parliaments, where the government's executive cabinet is

integrated with the parliamentary majority and major decisions are debated in a plenary setting (Dann, 2003). In contrast, in Belgium and Croatia there is a separation between the executive cabinet and parliament, made possible due to their proportional electoral systems, where multiple MPs are elected across several constituencies. This allows the seats won by the prime minister and ministers, who make up the executive cabinet and ultimately do not sit in parliament, to be filled by other members of their party. This results in a cabinet that is more removed from daily parliamentary politics. Consequently, these countries are characterized by "working" parliaments, with a stronger emphasis on policy-making within committees rather than during debates.

In each country, the focus is on issues that the parties talked about in parliamentary debates during question time (QT) sessions[1] and issues parties featured on their official Facebook pages from January 2010 to July 2022 (per country information available in Appendix A). The data analysis focused on the textual content of Facebook posts written by parties, excluding videos, photos, or links that may have accompanied the text.

Regarding parliamentary debates, QT sessions were selected because they are the most prominent and relevant form of parliamentary debate, when the executive branch of government receives questions from the legislative branch, in the morning and at noon, by both opposing and governing parties (Russo & Wiberg, 2010). Therefore, these sessions generate issue attention (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010), may lead to policy changes (Seeberg, 2023), receive a high level of media coverage (Osnabrügge et al., 2021), and influence public opinion (Seeberg, 2020). In addition, debates are deemed highly relevant by politicians themselves (Soontjens, 2021), as they allow them to address the issues of their choice (Poljak, 2023a).

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[1] In Australia, Canada, and the UK, QT sessions occur almost daily when parliament is sitting, while in Belgium, they occur weekly, and in Croatia, they take place quarterly. In all these countries, prime ministers and ministers face questions collectively, except in the UK, where cabinet members have designated slots for questioning, such as PMQs (Prime Minister's Questions). In addition to frequency, the nature of the questions also varies. In Australia and Canada, the topics are unknown prior to the debates, whereas in other cases, they are communicated beforehand (Serban, 2022). Nevertheless, in Belgium and Croatia, this communication occurs only several hours before the debate and involves mentioning a broad theme for the question (e.g., health). MPs in these countries are given a generous two-minute window to ask their questions, affording them ample space to introduce additional issues not communicated beforehand. In the UK, questions are generally tabled in advance (except for PMQs), but MPs retain the ability to pose supplementary questions to ministers without prior notice.

Regarding social media, Facebook was chosen because it is the most prominent social media platform that parties use to communicate with the general public (see also Kalsnes et al., 2017 or Ceron et al., 2023). According to the *Digital News Report* by the Reuters Institute (2022), in all countries studied, Facebook is still the most popular social media platform used by the public (67% in Australia; 69% in Belgium; 68% in Canada; 74% in Croatia; 62% in the UK). Finally, the period between 2010 and 2022 was chosen as social media has only started being heavily utilized in the last decade, and the monthly usage of Facebook has been shown to be consistent across parties in each country (see Appendix A).

Raw Data

The parliamentary speeches were available from the *QuestionTimeSpeech* database (Poljak & Mertens, 2022), which includes raw data on speeches made by politicians during all question time sessions that took place in the period studied (N=436,913; per country information available in Appendix A). This includes all parliamentary questions, answers, interruptions, speaker's interventions, and points of order. This is an advantage, as it allows us to explore issues that parties spoke about in the full parliamentary debate, and not only at the question time level, as was the case in previous studies (Borghetto & Chaqués-Bonafont, 2019). Moreover, parliamentary speeches provide a valuable resource for studying the issues that parties address within legislative institutions (Bäck & Debus, 2018; Gherghina et al., 2022). With regard to social media, Facebook posts made by major parties with parliamentary seats from each country in the period studied were scraped (N=241,895; per country information and the list of parties is available in Appendix A) using the CrowdTangle tool from Meta.

Once both raw parliamentary and social media data had been collected, the Comparative Agendas Project[2] dictionary was used to map references to key terms that relate to issues in both parliamentary debates and social media posts. For example, the dictionary associates terms such as "cost of living," "taxation," or "austerity" to the issue of the *economy*, while "war," "army," or "veteran" indicate the issue of *defense*. In total, the dictionary includes key terms from 21 major

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[2] Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) is an umbrella project that brings together scholars around the globe who code agendas according to the standardized CAP codebook (Bevan, 2019).

policy areas, such as agriculture, education, transportation, social welfare, and international relations, etc. The dictionary has been proven a reliable alternative to manual coding (Albaugh et al., 2013).[3] Having said this, the dictionary approach does have certain drawbacks, such as potentially omitting some issues. Nevertheless, since the aim was to uncover venue dynamics, issue attention was aggregated at the party-system level both in parliament and on social media (see the Final Data section below). With this approach, even if certain key terms were overlooked, the level of aggregation on the party-system level ensured that identifying these issues would not be likely to lead to fundamentally different conclusions regarding issue attention. Two examples of identifying the issue of civil rights (which is one of the CAP topics), one in a parliamentary debate and one on a social media post in Canada on May 3, 2022, are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Examples of textual data (parliament above; Facebook below) and CAP dictionary application to text

Final Data

Ultimately, both data sources were text analyzed, which allowed the generation of two clusters of variables: binary and continuous. Regarding binary variables, the analysis generated: (i) *issue mentioned on social media* and (ii) *issue mentioned in parliamentary debate*. For example, if a health issue was mentioned on social media but not in parliament on a particular date, the value of the first variable was 1 and the value of the second variable was 0. Regarding continuous variables, the analysis generated: (i) *issue attention on social media* and (ii) *issue attention in*

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[3] Because the dictionary is in English, the Croatian and Belgian parliamentary debates and Facebook posts were translated into English using Google Translate, which produced valid translations for issue classifications (De Vries et al., 2018).

parliamentary debate. Both variables indicated the amount of attention devoted to each issue in parliament and on social media on the day the debate took place, as well as the attention given to the issue on social media the day before the debate. For example, a value of 0.10 on the issue of economy in a parliamentary debate on a specific date in a country would indicate that 10% of the parliamentary debate during this QT was devoted to mentioning the economy, while the remaining 90% was devoted to other issues. Similarly, a value of 0.35 for the issue of social welfare on social media would indicate that 35% of all issue references in posts on social media on that particular day (e.g., on the day before the debate) were related to social welfare, while the remaining 65% of the attention was focused on other issues.

Overall, the final dataset included 21 major policy issues observed on a particular day in each country, looking at the mentions of these issues (yes=1; binary), and the attention devoted to each issue among all references to all other issues (continuous). Given that parliamentary debates do not take place throughout the entire year, and that there are days when parties do not post anything online, once issue-coded data from parliament and social media were merged, the final number of observations was 71,169.[4] An example of the elements of the final dataset is available in Table 1.

Table 1. Example of the final dataset

| Country	Date	Issue	Issue Mentioned on Social Media	Issue Attention on Social Media	Issue Mentioned in Parliamentary Debate	Issue Attention in Parliamentary Debate
	25.02.2021	Economy	1	.06	1	.07
		Health	1	.56	1	.19
Belgium		…	…	…	…	…
	03.04.2021	Transport	0	.00	1	.02
		Labor	1	.27	1	.07
		…	…	…	…	…

[4] In total, it was possible to successfully merge 3,389 parliamentary debates with corresponding social media posts from the day before and the day after these debates (see also Figure 3), resulting in a final dataset of N=71,169 (3,389 debates X 21 issues). Due to variations in the frequency of parliamentary debates (see footnote 1), the final dataset includes 457 debates from Australia, 322 debates from Belgium, 1,003 debates from Canada, 44 debates from Croatia, and 1,563 debates from the UK.

Analyses

To explore whether discussion of an issue was *initiated* in parliament, a descriptive analysis of issues mentioned in parliamentary debate on a specific day (t) was conducted, followed by an investigation of whether these issues were also discussed by parties on social media the day before the debate (t-1). To further confirm that issues originated in parliament and were subsequently *reinforced* online, an examination of the issues being discussed on social media *after* the debate had started (t; afternoon) was undertaken to ascertain whether parties addressed the issues online that were mentioned in the morning and at noon during the parliamentary debate (t-1).

Subsequently, to advance a stronger claim that parliaments indeed play a crucial role in *initiating* and *reinforcing* attention to issues online, logistic regression models were used to test the probability of an issue being debated in parliament or featured on social media. The first model looked at the probability of an issue being mentioned on social media following the parliamentary debate (t+1; afternoon following the debate), while considering the attention that this issue received during parliamentary debate in the morning and at noon (t; morning/noon). To check that parliaments indeed took precedence over social media, an additional model was also run, which examined the probability of an issue being mentioned in parliamentary debates (t) based on issue attention on social media the day before the debate (t-1). This strategy is showcased in Figure 3. While the selection of time lags is a point of contention in agenda-setting studies, this study used days, as opposed to weeks, months, or years. This decision was based on the temporal dimension of social media, which operates in real time and undergoes constant change. Consequently, it is challenging to envision a scenario in which a party would respond to a parliamentary debate that occurred a week prior or introduce an issue in parliament that was discussed online a month earlier.

Figure 3. Visual representation of strategy used to test hypotheses
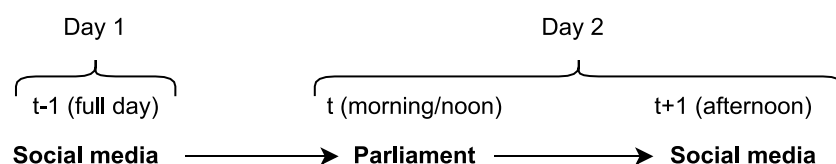
All of the models included country and issue fixed-effects to prevent bias arising from specific issues or countries. Additionally, given that the analyses measured party-system agendas, two control variables were used to account for features of the party system in each country: electoral volatility and party fragmentation (see Casal Bértoa & Enyedi, 2022).[5] Electoral volatility measures changes in party support within a country for each parliamentary term. Greater volatility is likely to stimulate more risky interplay between parliamentary and social media agendas, as the voter base may abandon a party by the time the next election comes around. Party fragmentation measures how many effective parties are present in the system during the parliamentary term. For example, fewer parties mean less risk when responding to issues, as voters have limited choice in elections. In addition, control variables for the electoral cycle (i.e., how many months had passed since the last election; see Seeberg, 2022) and social media usage (i.e., number of posts parties made on the date of the debate) were used and, to avoid possible autocorrelation in the models, lagged issue attention in the venue studied was always included. Finally, time-series regressions were also run using exclusively continuous variables (see Appendix D).

RESULTS

This section begins with a presentation of descriptive figures after which the focus is on multivariate results from the regression models. As such, Figure 4 presents the results of the analysis of issues mentioned in parliamentary debates (t) and whether these issues were mentioned on social media the day before the debate (t-1). The results support H1, indicating that parties are more inclined to *initiate* discussion of brand-new issues in parliament, as they were not mentioned on social media beforehand. Specifically, out of the 53,268 issues mentioned in parliamentary debates across the five countries analyzed, 45,937 issues (86.24%) had not been previously mentioned by parties on social media the day before the debates took place.

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[5] Note that, due to the correlation that may exist between the two, all models in the paper were also run separately including only one of the controls, with the results remaining consistent with the main findings reported in the main text.

Naturally, if we extend the timeframe to a week before these debates, the proportion of issues that were not mentioned on social media decreases. Nevertheless, 9,751 issues (18.31%) debated in parliaments had not appeared on social media even seven days before the debates. This indicates that while issues may surface on social media before the debate, parties strategically refrain from discussing a variety of topics that they plan to bring up in parliamentary debate, especially on the day before the debate takes place.
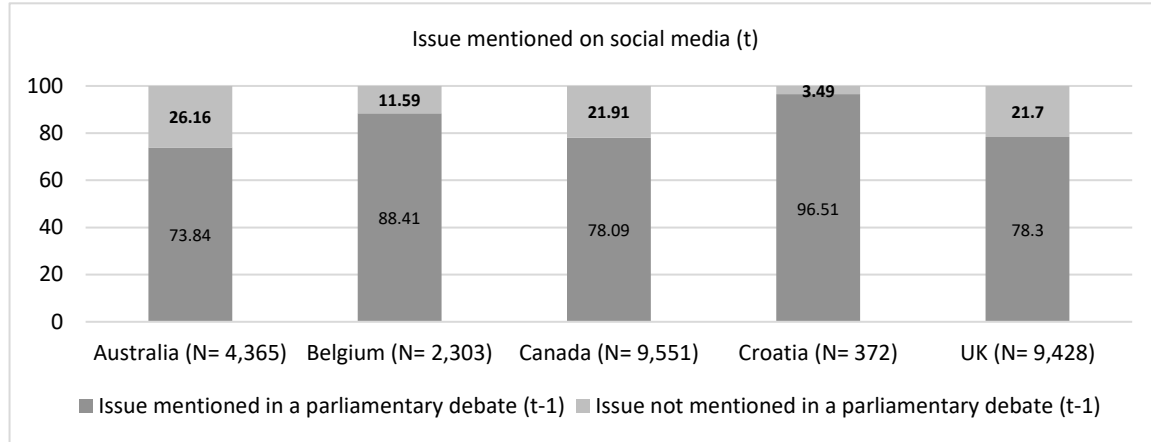
Figure 4. Share of issues that were not mentioned on social media (light-grey) but were featured in a debate
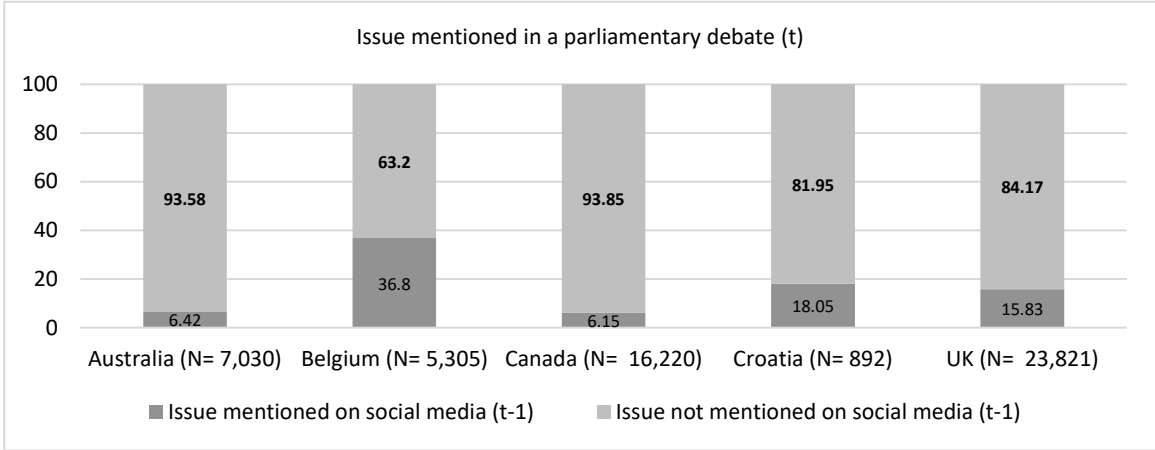
Note: N differs across countries due to the frequency of parliamentary debates (see footnote 1).

Figure 5 focuses on issues mentioned on social media after the debates (t) and whether these issues were discussed in the debates before they were posted on social media (t-1). There is support for H2, given that among the 26,019 issues that appeared on parties' social media profiles following debates, 20,458 of them (78.63%) had been discussed in parliaments before the posts were made. As such, once issues have been introduced in parliament, they are more likely to be featured online on the social media profiles of parties. Furthermore, if we consider a week after the debates, almost all issues debated in parliaments appeared on social media. Specifically, 25,822 issues (99.24%) discussed in parliaments were present on social media within a week following the debates.

Figure 5. Share of issues that were not mentioned in a debate (light-grey) but were featured on social media


Note: N differs across countries due to the frequency of parliamentary debates (see footnote 1).

To subject these descriptive findings to a more robust evaluation, the results of the logistic regression models using the post-estimated predicted probabilities are presented in Figure 6 (the full regression output is available in Appendix B). Overall, the results align with expectations. On the left side of the figure, we observe a clear pattern: as an issue garners more attention in a parliamentary debate, the probability of it being mentioned on social media following the debate increases significantly. To illustrate, comparing an issue that was not mentioned in parliament to one that received above-average attention in parliament (21%, calculated as the mean plus the standard deviation), we observe a 10.7% increase in probability (from 0.34 to 0.38). This confirms H2: issues arising in parliaments are indeed subsequently reinforced on social media, such that, if an issue receives no attention in parliament, it will be less likely that it will appear on social media.

Furthermore, to ascertain that issues discussed on social media are primarily the result of initiatives originating in parliament rather than issues already prevalent on social media, we turn to the right side of Figure 6. Here, there is a barely visible and insignificant increase in the probability of issues being debated in parliament based on the attention they received on social

media the day before. For example, comparing issues that received no attention on social media to issues that received above-average attention (16%), the probability of an issue being featured in parliamentary debate increased by only 0.2% (from 0.814 to 0.815). Therefore, regardless of the issue being present on social media or not, it has a fairly high chance of appearing in parliament. This supports H1, as issues that are *not* present on social media have an equal probability of being introduced in parliament to those that are present.

Figure 6. Predicted probability of issue being mentioned on social media based on the attention the issue received in parliament (left) and vice versa (right)
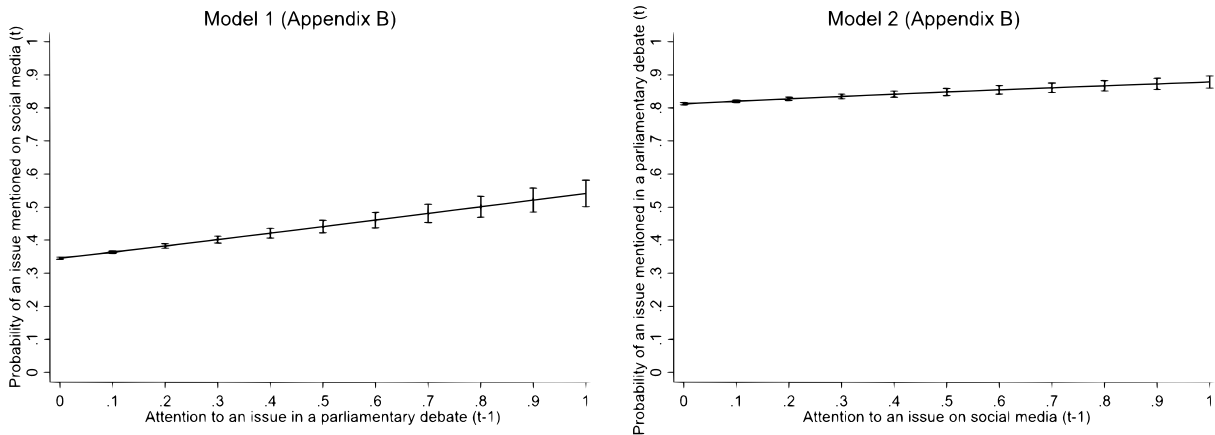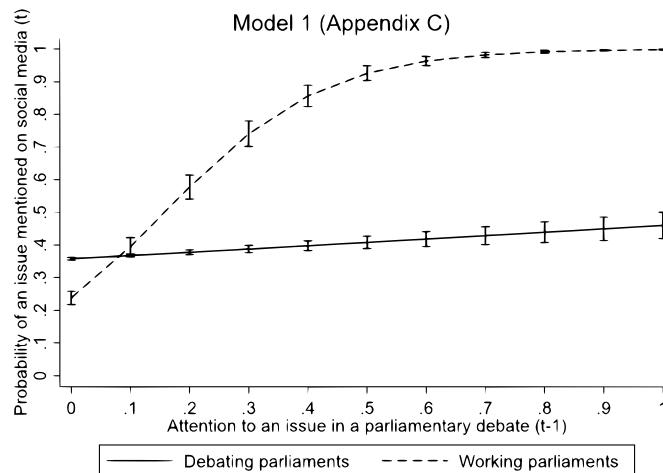

Note: 90% confidence intervals while holding other variables from regression models at their mean

Robustness Checks

Country differences. To ensure the validity of the main findings, separate regression models were conducted for each country, as outlined in Appendix C. Despite their considerable differences, the results exhibit a notable degree of consistency. Specifically, issues that received minimal attention in parliamentary debates tended to have a low probability of being mentioned on social media following debates. However, this probability steadily increased as the issue garnered more attention within the parliamentary debate. Conversely, social media did contribute to increased attention to issues in parliamentary debates across most countries, but it is noteworthy that these probabilities remained relatively high even when issues had not been discussed on social media.

While the results for each country show support for both hypotheses, one may question whether the nature of the parliamentary setup plays a role. Specifically, because Australia, Canada, and the UK have a "debating" parliamentary nature, unlike Belgium and Croatia, which, as mentioned, can be classified as "working" parliaments, this distinction may be significant (see the *Country Cases* section). To explore this, models that interact parliamentary nature with parliamentary issue attention were run to evaluate how this impacts the social media agenda. Surprisingly, the results show that working parliaments have a more profound impact on raising issues on social media compared to debating parliaments (see Figure 7). This may be due to the party-driven logic in working parliaments, where MPs follow issues important to their party, as opposed to the individual logic in debating parliaments, where MPs not only represent the party line but are also expected to represent their individual constituencies (see also Blumenau & Damiani, 2021). Consequently, the reinforcement of parliamentary issues on the party-system agenda on social media may be more pronounced in working parliaments. Nonetheless, regardless of parliamentary nature, issues debated in parliament consistently gain traction on the social media agenda following the parliamentary debate.

Figure 7. Predicted probability of issue being mentioned on social media based on the attention the issue received in parliament in debating vs. working parliaments

Note: 90% confidence intervals while holding other variables from the regression model at their mean

Government vs. Opposition Dynamics. Beyond country differences, there may also be inter-party differences in how issues from parliamentary debates gain traction on social media. Numerous studies have shown that attention to issues can vary significantly between governing and opposition parties, influencing their rhetoric (e.g., Swanson & Gherghina, 2023). Opposition parties often use QT to scrutinize the government and criticize its record on issues (Poljak, 2023b), while governing parties tend to highlight their successes (Kukec, 2022). This distinction—opposition criticism versus government praise—may lead to heightened attention on social media to opposition issues, driven by negativity bias and party competition dynamics, as described in the theory. To explore this notion, additional analyses were conducted to investigate whether the parties' social media agendas were influenced more by issues debated by opposition or governing parties in Appendix D. These analyses revealed that issues debated in parliament by opposition parties significantly drive attention to social media (see Figure 8), whereas issues addressed by governing parties have an insignificant impact.

Figure 8. Predicted probability of issue being mentioned on social media based on: (i) the attention the issue received in parliament by opposition parties (left) and (ii) the attention the issue received in parliament by governing parties (right)
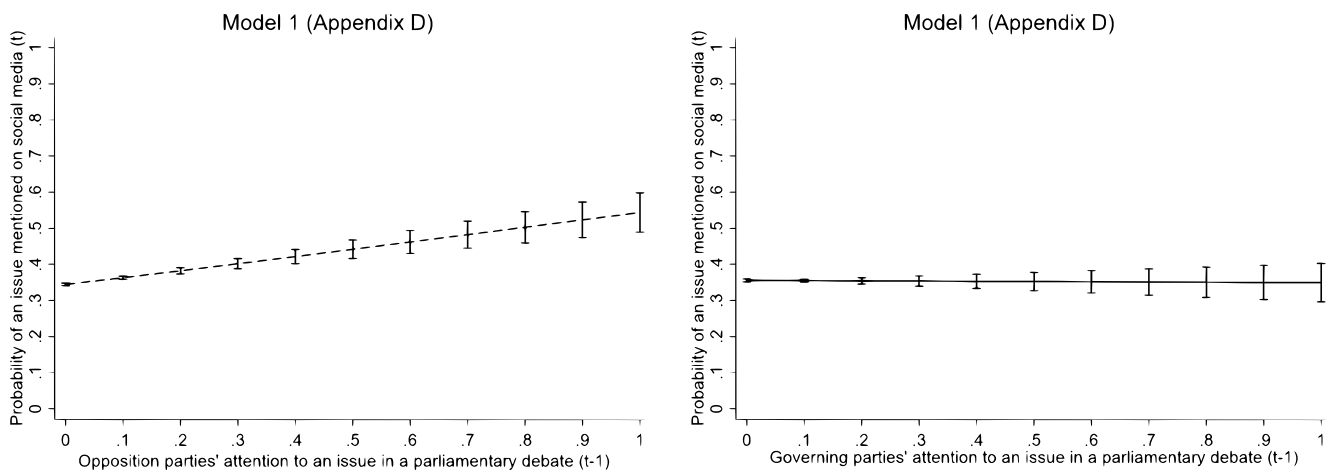
Note: 90% confidence intervals while holding other variables from regression models at their mean

Time-Series. Additionally, time-series regression models were run exclusively using continuous variables, as detailed in Appendix E. Once again, the analysis revealed a reciprocal relationship between social media and parliamentary attention to issues. Even in these models, increases in attention within parliamentary debates have a more pronounced impact on the issues featured on social media than the reverse scenario.

CONCLUSION

Social media has undoubtedly become a crucial tool for political parties to set issues on the political agenda. Unlike traditional venues such as parliament, where there are constraints in setting the agenda, social media provides parties with the freedom to discuss and prioritize any topic they choose. However, recent studies suggest that the issues highlighted on social media often mirror those found in parliamentary venues. This observation raises important questions about the dynamics between these two platforms: where are parties more likely to initiate discussion of issues on the political agenda, and how do they reinforce these issues across different political venues?

Despite previous scholarly work on agenda-setting emphasizing the significance of introducing issues into the formal political agenda (Cobb et al., 1976), surprisingly little is known about where and how issues are initially raised and reinforced. While many studies—including those examining parties' social media and parliamentary agendas—have explored the factors influencing how parties prioritize issues, a significant gap remains in our understanding of the initiation and reinforcement of issues across different political venues. This study sought to address these gaps by proposing two main hypotheses: (i) that parties strategically choose to *initiate* discussion of issues in parliamentary debates and (ii) that they subsequently *reinforce* attention paid to these issues on social media.

An analysis of issues featured in parliamentary debates and the Facebook posts of parties across vastly different countries supported the expectations. Observing issues on the social media profiles of parties days ahead of the debate, it was apparent that issues that ultimately reach parliament tend to receive less attention on social media beforehand, consistent with the first hypothesis. However, once these issues are introduced in parliament, they gain prominence

on social media. Therefore, the initial discussion of issues in parliament is followed by their reinforcement on social media, aligning with the second hypothesis. Even in cases where issues have previously featured on social media before the debate, parliamentary debate manages to keep these issues relevant online. Additionally, the results also indicated that reinforcing issues initially raised in parliamentary debates on social media afterward is mainly driven by the issues addressed by opposition parties. Therefore, it is the opposition parties, often using critical rhetoric during debates, that propel these issues, leading them to receive significant attention on social media after the debate.

These findings carry significant implications for our understanding of how issues make their way onto political agendas (Cobb et al., 1976) and the role parliamentary venues play in the agenda-setting process. Specifically, this study underscores the importance of in-person behavior and the significance of political debate in parliament (Proksch & Slapin, 2012) as the preferred venue for parties to initially bring issues to the agenda. Therefore, despite the rise of digital platforms and social media, this finding highlights that traditional venues like parliament still play a crucial role in the political system. The findings also emphasize the significance of numerous parliamentary studies that recognize parliament as a crucial venue that has an impact on voters (e.g., Osnabrügge et al., 2021). While this impact traditionally came through media that closely followed and reported on parliamentary debates, particularly events like Question Time (Salmond, 2014), this study highlighted how this impact is now similarly manifest through social media.

Furthermore, the study highlighted how issues are sustained on political agendas. Social media has opened new avenues for parties to translate their parliamentary activities into an online context, whether for promoting their positions or engaging in further debate aimed at discrediting their rivals. Therefore, the findings in this paper are crucial for understanding the dynamics of contemporary political agendas that unfold both online and offline. The study underscored how issues debated online often serve to sustain topics that are already prominent in politics.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that much of the dynamics underlying political agenda-setting are yet to be explored. Parties employ various other avenues beyond

parliament and social media to shape their agendas, such as press releases and press conferences. Additionally, while this study revealed the likelihood of issues being introduced during parliamentary sessions, it did not explore what happens when parliament is not in session and question time does not take place (but see Eriksen, 2023). This study also focused exclusively on textual data, thereby overlooking the potential impact of visuals (e.g., videos or photos) or non-verbal behaviors on shaping agendas. Further research that spans multiple venues, extends over longer periods when parliament is not in session, and that incorporates visuals and non-verbal behavior could enhance our knowledge in this domain. The present study advances our understanding of the intricate interplay between parliamentary debates and social media, shedding light on how parties strategically initiate discussion of and reinforce issues in these venues to influence political agendas.

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