

Exploring party-issue linkages as an indicator of issue ownership in election news coverage

A study of two Danish national elections

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Abstract

Research on issue ownership has placed political parties at the centre of studies. Recent research argues that this focus should be expanded. First, researchers have found that the salience of different political issues is affected by events exogenous to political parties, such as real-world events and societal trends. Second, researchers have pointed to the news media as an additional arena for issue ownership competition and maintenance, making the concept of party–issue linkages in election coverage an additional topic of study. This article contributes to election research by exploring party–issue linkage as an indicator of issue ownership for both political parties and political leaders in the two most recent national Danish elections. Both elections were affected by societal trends and real-world events. Based on large-scale content analysis and using descriptive statistics, we find a clear shift in media saliences from 2019 to 2022. We also find changes in party–issue linkage for both political parties and specific political leaders, especially regarding the most salient issues of the elections.

KEYWORDS

elections, issue salience, issue competition, news media, agenda setting

Introduction

Despite the continued focus on the professionalisation of political campaigns (Mykkänen et al., 2022) and so-called designer politics (Scammell, 2016), recent research suggests that controlling the issues that dominate the agenda is, in many ways, beyond the control of politicians and political parties (Gilardi et al., 2022). Factors external to national politics, such as global societal trends or real-world events, can upset even the most carefully planned political campaign (Dennison, 2019). In their study of changing issue salience in 28 European countries, Dennison and Kriesi (2023, p. 497) concluded that “electoral outcomes partially reflect societal trends and events over which parties have only limited control”. Indeed, outside events and crises have played leading roles in recent Danish national elections. In the 2011 election, the ongoing international economic crisis, beginning in 2008, influenced the election agenda (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2012; Stubager et al., 2013), while in the 2015 summer election, the issue of refugees and migration rose in importance (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2016) on the back of the escalating European refugee crisis that began in the spring of that year. Later analysis even named the refugee/migration issue a game changer in the campaign (Hansen & Stubager, 2017). Finally, in 2019, it was the ongoing international climate crisis that pushed the issue of climate and the environment to become one of the defining issues of the campaign (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2020; Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020; Hansen & Stubager, 2021). The most recent national election, which took place in 2022, added more external events and crises to the political agenda, most notably, the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Blach-Ørsten & Eberholst, 2023; Hansen & Stubager, 2024).

In this article, we focus on the media saliences of different political issues, as well as on party–issue linkages and party–leader linkage in the news media, as indicators of both issue ownership and issue competition. We investigate the shifts in the 2022 election compared to the 2019 election, both of which occurred in volatile times. Since legacy news media still dominate the political information landscape in Denmark (Blach-Ørsten & Mayerhöffer, 2021), we understand issue salience as ‘media salience’, that is, the amount of attention news media gives to specific issues (Moniz & Wlezien, 2020). Regarding issue ownership and issue competition, we build on recent studies that argue that political parties compete in the news media regarding engaging in popular issues, causing so-called issue overlap, and even try to ‘steal’ issues from one another (Schwarzbözl et al., 2020; Merz, 2016; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2015; Spoon et al., 2014). This is especially the case in multi-party

systems such as Denmark, where many parties challenge each other's ownership of the popular issues (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007).

Based on large-scale content analysis of news outlets (N = 1411) and four weeks of election coverage (news items) from both 2019 (N = 54,090) and 2022 (N = 48,623), this article contributes to election studies in several ways. First, while election studies often only focus on a single election, this article compares the two most recent consecutive elections. Second, the article does not focus on the relationship between the party agenda and media agenda as is often the case. Instead, the focus is on the media saliences of different issues and the party-issue linkage (Schwarzbözl et al., 2020; Merz, 2016) across two elections. This focus allows us to investigate changes in both issue salience and the news media's party-issue linkage which in theory indicate changes in issue ownership and issue competition for both parties and party leaders.

Agenda setting, media salience and issue ownership

While international studies often debate the decreasing power of legacy news media to set the political agenda (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008), studies with a focus on the Nordic countries find little evidence to suggest that legacy news media have become less important as agenda-setters (Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2017; Johansson & Strömbäck, 2019). Larger studies of news use in the same countries also show that legacy news media still dominate as information sources, even though younger news users also favour using social media (e.g., Schröder, Blach-Ørsten & Eberholst, 2023). Studies focusing on political knowledge in the modern high-choice media environment also find that using traditional or online news media correlates better with political knowledge than consuming a diet of social media (Castro et al., 2022). Finally, studies of hybrid media election campaigns in Denmark find that while it has become the new normal for many politicians to be active on X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook, few are very active and manage to capture many followers and much attention (Jensen & Schwartz, 2020). Summing up studies on the general relationship between politics and the mass media, Van Aelst and Walgrave (2016) confirm the influence of news media on politics. However, they also highlight that this influence is contingent on the specific issue at stake in the media coverage and whether political parties feel ownership of the issues at stake as well as whether the parties are in government or opposition. In other words, it matters which issues the news media focus on and which political parties feel ownership of these issues. The prominence of political issues is typically addressed as a

question of salience. Moniz and Wlezien (2020) distinguish between the *personal* salience of an issue, which is the degree to which an individual engages with that issue, and the prominence or visibility of issues in the news media or on the agenda of political parties, which they name *media* or *political* salience. Since this article focuses on the news media, we use the term ‘media salience’ in the rest of the text.

Issue ownership, on the other hand, refers to the fact that political parties, in the minds of voters, are associated with specific issues and thus considered to be more competent to deal with these issues than other parties (Petrocik, 1996; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2015). Issue ownership can be explored from at least three perspectives: first, as related to party communications and the party agenda; second, as related to voters’ considerations of which party is more competent to handle a given issue, also labelled the associative dimension of issue ownership (Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch, 2012); and third, as related to issue salience in the media coverage (Walgrave & De Swert, 2007; Merz, 2016; Tresch & Feddersen, 2019), a line of inquiry also labelled wave-riding theory (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994; Dennison & Kriesi, 2023). This article’s focus is on issue salience in the news media, which is linked to the notion of news media coverage as an indicator of issue ownership, a relationship described by Merz (2016) as party–issue linkage. Walgrave et al. (2009, p. 157) state that “(...) appearing in the media to talk about an issue is one way parties use to claim and maintain issues (...)”, and Merz (2016, p. 437) similarly observes that “party–issue linkages in media coverage are one of the main sources of issue ownership”.

Originally, issue ownership was conceived of as stable and based on political parties’ historical origins, which are related to social class. Recent research debates whether this largely remains the case or whether issue ownership should be conceptualised as more dynamic and evolving over time (Walgrave et al.; 2009; Spoon et al., 2014; Seeberg, 2017). An argument supporting the latter position suggests that issue ownership is more dynamic and evolving in multi-party systems such as those of the Nordic countries, where many parties compete for the ownership of popular issues (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007). Regarding issue competition in multi-party systems, Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2015) state that issue competition may play different roles for diverse types of parties. Investigating the party agenda in a Danish context, they argue that mainstream parties need to maintain support from many voters and may thus need to be more flexible regarding issue competition and the changing saliences of different issues. Niche parties, which focus on a small number of particular issues related to their identities, are

thus likely to be unaffected by issue competition from election to election. Thus, a ‘green party’ will always focus on climate and environmental issues even if other parties shift their agendas (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2015). In sum, the more parties there are, the more party competition there is, and the more dynamic the battle for issue ownership.

Indeed, recent studies show that political parties and politicians compete for ownership of different issues in the news media, but that competition is particularly intense for ownership of the most media-salient issues (Gilardi et al., 2022). Merz (2016) highlights the significance of media salience, as he observes that parties emphasise different issues from election to election to “ride the wave of public opinion”, that is, to emphasise in their communications those issues that have high media salience (Merz, 2016, p. 441; Dennison & Kriesi, 2023, p. 486). Indeed, wave-riding theory argues that candidates will address the issues that voters find most important with both media salience and voter surveys being used as measures of importance (Burdina, 2014; Dennison & Kriesi, 2023). In other words, parties do not just focus on the issues they own. If other issues become more salient in the news media or public opinion surveys, they seek to own these other issues as well. Hence, if an issue originally owned by one party becomes increasingly salient in the news media, it will become interesting or necessary for other parties, especially mainstream parties, to compete for ownership of it. A case in point in Denmark is the issue of refugees and migration, which was originally owned by the right-wing Danish People’s Party but for which many parties, including the Social Democrats, have since competed for ownership (Green-Pedersen, 2006; Meret, 2021). Adding to this dynamic is the fact that issue salience is often determined by factors beyond the control of political parties (Gilardi et al., 2021), especially in volatile times when outside events affect the agenda. The focus of this article is exclusively on the media agenda. The aim is to investigate, using descriptive statistics, changes in the media saliences of different political issues from one election as well as changes to party–issue linkage and party–leader issue linkage.

Background to the 2019 and 2022 election campaigns

The political system in Denmark is a parliamentary democracy. Elections to the Danish Parliament are based on proportional representation and held at least every four years, but it is within the power of the prime minister to call elections sooner if they so wish (Kristensen & Blach-Ørsten, 2020). The lack of fixed election dates

makes the Danish system stand out in a Nordic context, and this fact is often mentioned to explain, at least in part, the constant attention to opinion polls in Danish media and the political parties' constant focus on being in permanent campaign mode (Kristensen & Blach-Ørsten, 2015). Denmark practises negative parliamentarism: the government does not need to have a majority in the parliament, but there must not be a majority against it either. Historically, Danish governments have often been minority governments (Kristensen & Blach-Ørsten, 2020). Another characteristic of the Danish political system is that it is truly a multi-party system, with a high number of political parties, a development that stems from both established parties splitting into new ones (Binderkrantz & Carlsen, 2002) and new parties being added to the mix (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020, 2023).

The Danish media system can be labelled a 'Nordic media welfare state' (Syvertsen et al., 2014), and as a media system, it falls under Hallin and Mancini's (2004) grouping of a 'democratic corporatist model'. Media use in Denmark still favours public service radio and television as well as the online news sites of the major broadsheet and tabloid newspapers (Schrøder, Blach-Ørsten & Eberholst, 2023). These characteristics jointly make Denmark an interesting case of study. With 14 parties running in the 2022 election and 13 in 2019, Denmark had more parties seeking election than both Sweden¹ and Norway² in their most recent elections. The number of political parties makes Denmark a special case for the study of issue competition since many of the parties will have to compete for ownership of the same issues. In this article, we focus on the 11 parties that stood for election in both the 2019 and 2022 national Danish elections, as some of the parties running in 2019 did not run in 2022, and 2022 also saw the creation of three new parties. The parties running in both 2019 and 2022 were the Social Democrats, the Liberal Party, the Danish People's Party, the Conservatives, the Christian Democrats, the New Right, the Alternative, the Red-Green Alliance, the Social Liberal Party, the Liberal Alliance, and the Green Left/Socialist People's Party (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020, 2023). Traditionally, the Social Democrats, the Liberal Party, and the Conservatives have been the large mainstream political parties in Denmark, with the niche parties the Alternative, the Red-Green Alliance, and the Green Left/Socialist People's Party making up the opposition to the left and the niche parties the New Right, the Liberal Alliance, and the Danish People's Party making up the opposition to the right.

For the sake of simplicity, Danish politics is usually divided into two blocs (Green-Pedersen, 2020), known as the 'red bloc' and 'blue bloc'. The Social Democrats and opposition to the left make up the 'red bloc' with the Social Liberal Party sometimes joining this bloc

and sometimes not. The Conservatives and the Liberal Party together with the opposition to the right make up the ‘blue bloc’ with the Social Liberal Party sometimes joining this bloc and sometimes not (Green-Pedersen & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020). The sorting of Danish politics into two blocs is consistent with an analysis of voter behaviour, suggesting that just eight percent of the voters shift between blocs in national elections. It is also a common metaphor used by journalists, commentators, and politicians alike (Thomsen & Thomsen, 2023).

In 2019, the national election was a race between Mette Frederiksen (the Social Democrats and the red bloc) and Lars Løkke Rasmussen (the Liberal Party and the blue bloc). However, in 2022, three candidates ran for the position of prime minister: Mette Frederiksen (the Social Democrats), Jakob Elleman-Jensen (the Liberal Party), and Søren Pape Poulsen (the Conservatives). The 2019 and 2022 election campaigns both ran for four weeks and are thus considered ‘long’ in Danish election campaign history³. The 2019 election also overlapped, although not completely, with the 2019 European Parliament (EP) election. This affected both elections, with the EU being a focus in the national election and the issues of both climate and the environment as well as refugees and migration being issues in both election campaigns (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020; Blach-Ørsten et al., 2020).

Research questions

Politicians compete for ownership of different issues in the news media, but they especially compete for ownership of the most salient issues. The association of parties with different issues in news media coverage is called party–issue linkage. Party–issue linkage is a central source of issue ownership and thus a central component of issue competition and can occur when a party is mentioned in connection with an issue or when a party politician is quoted in connection with an issue. Merz (2016, p. 438) states that “a party–issue linkage can be a quote from a party’s politician or a whole interview in regard to a specific issue, or the mentioning of a party’s issue position, or any other coverage that ties a party to an issue”. An important caveat to this approach is the fact the news media do not give equal access to all parties or party leaders or place the same focus on all issues (Merz, 2016). Previous studies have shown the media to both favour the top candidates (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2020) and the sitting government, the so-called incumbency bonus (Hopmann, De Vreese & Albæk, 2011).

Based on the above, we ask the following three research questions (RQs).

RQ1: Related to the question of media salience, we ask *how the media salience of different political issues can be compared in the 2022 and 2019 elections.*

RQ2: Related to the issue of party–issue linkage, we ask first, regarding parties, *how party–issue linkage in the media in 2022 can be compared to that in the 2019 election;* and second

RQ3: Related to the issue of party–issue linkage with a focus on individual politicians, *how party leader–issue linkages in the media in 2022 can be compared to those in 2019.*

Methodology

In this article, we investigate the differences between the 2022 and 2019 national elections using large-scale content analysis of Danish election coverage. We use the Infomedia database for our study. We sample 1411 outlets and a collection of nine political issues, each of which is made up of search strings that were developed in an iterative process together with Infomedia for previous studies (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2020). In total, our automated content analysis consists of four weeks of media election coverage (news items) in both 2019 (N = 54,090) and 2022 (N = 48,623). Our sample includes 1411 content providers that make one or more mentions of the national elections. Our media sample mirrors the digitalised high-choice media environment that characterises today’s Danish media system. The 1411 outlets thus include a broad number of online and offline media ranging from legacy news media, magazines, and local news media to online news sites as well as public service television and radio, specialised news sites, special interest organisations, and other relevant homepages. This inclusive approach helps to ensure that the sample include interviews and statements politicians have given to media other than mainstream news outlets.

The study in this article presents unique, historical comparative data on the two elections. We were precluded from accessing larger and smaller news media owned by Berlingske news media, as they do not allow access beyond a three-year period. Consequently, our historical study does not include *Berlingske* (one of the three leading national newspapers) or *B.T.* (one of the two leading tabloids). Our historical focus also affects the number of political parties included in the analysis: as we focus on the 11 political parties that stood for election in both 2019 and 2022, we exclude, for the 2019 election, the Klaus Riskær Pedersen Party and the Hard Line Party and, for the 2022 election, the Danish Democrats, the Independent Greens, and

the Moderates (the last of which became one of the three government parties following the election).

Our analysis focuses on nine political issues that have been selected based on previous studies of the political, public, and news media agendas in Denmark (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2020):

- *Health and elder care*, which includes a focus on, amongst other things, hospitals, hospital reforms, health personnel, care for the elderly, chronic disease, and local and regional health and elder care.
- *Climate and the environment*, which includes a focus on, amongst other things, global warming, CO₂, the circular economy, the green transition, pollution, climate policy, and climate quotas.
- *Schools and daycare*, which includes a focus on, amongst other things, schools, kindergartens, and childcare.
- *Finance and the economy*, which includes a focus on, amongst other things, the national budget, GNP, national economics, finance, and tax.
- *The European Union (EU)*, which includes a focus, on amongst other things, European politics and institutions.
- *Defence*, which includes a focus on, amongst other things, defence politics, defence budgets, the military, and the navy.
- *Refugees and migration*, which includes a focus on, amongst other things, migration, migration policies, migration status, and immigration law.
- *Pensions*, which includes a focus on, amongst other things, retirement, early retirement, pension, and pension systems.
- *Culture, sport, and leisure*, which includes a focus on, amongst other things, free time, sports, theatre, culture, and children's theatre.

An automated content analysis was run through the Infomedia database in a specialised dashboard that, through proprietary search strings, was set up to identify political parties, party leaders, and the selected issues. It distinguishes between mentions and quotes. A *mention* refers to the proximity between words, such as a party, a politician, and an issue, while *quotes* are direct quotes in the text made by a named politician. Each issue was identified using search strings that were developed by the authors and Infomedia in an iterative process beginning with the 2019 election. The search for issues was run on headlines as well as text, including transcribed audio, and for a news item to be included in the analysis, a search word connected to one of the nine issues had to be mentioned in the headings or at least four times elsewhere in the news item. As the search strings are proprietary, they cannot be published widely;

however, they were all built up using several keywords that define and exclude content. An example of a search string is included as Appendix A. Researchers can contact the authors for further information on search strings and the sample. One news item can contain references to several issues, mentions, and quotes.

Different issues within issue ownership have historically been linked to different political blocs and parties (Damsbo-Svendsen & Seeberg, 2024). Thus, looking at the study's nine issues from a bloc perspective, those of health and eldercare, climate and the environment, schools and daycare, pensions, and culture, sport, and leisure have traditionally been focused on by the red bloc, while defence, finance and the economy, the EU, and refugees and migration have traditionally been focused on by the blue bloc. However, in recent elections, issue competition has increased around several of the issues. Although the issue of health and eldercare has traditionally been linked to the red bloc and the Social Democrats, the blue bloc has challenged this ownership since the 2000s; in the same period, the Social Democrats have challenged the blue bloc's ownership of the issue of refugees and migration (Damsbo-Svendsen & Seeberg, 2024). The climate issue has also been challenged by the blue bloc, especially immediately after the 2019 'climate' election. A survey of voters' understanding of the issue ownership of the top issues in the 2022 election placed the red bloc as owner of health, climate, and schools and daycare while giving the blue bloc a slightly dominant ownership of issues such as finance and defence. At the same time, voters seemed to believe that both blocs would be competent at handling concerns about refugees and migration (Damsbo-Svendsen & Seeberg, 2024).

Other studies of the public or political agendas have focused on more or different issues than those we have included here in our study of the news media agenda. Thus, surveys of the public agenda in the 2019 national election included 16 different political issues (Holstein, 2019), while Green-Pedersen's (2006) study of long-term change in Danish party politics was based on the creation of 24 issues to analyse the political agenda from 1953 to 2003. Our list of issues does not include a separate focus on law and order. However, many law and order-related issues in Denmark have focused on refugees and migration, and we have included search words with a focus on immigration law and other laws relevant to this question.

The overall capacity of the news media agenda to manage issues has been frequently questioned in relation to issue competition. If more issues become relevant, how will the agenda of the news media adapt? Here, the answers seem to be that there is some capacity to expand the agenda, (McCombs & Zhu, 1995; Edy & Meirick, 2018). Previous studies of the news media agenda in

Denmark (Blach-Ørsten & Willig, 2016) suggest that of the ten top stories, only around half resonate with the audience. This finding suggests that while the news media agenda may, in theory, have a huge issue capacity, the audience's attention span does not. In sum, our nine political issues seek to represent an updated list of the relevant issues of our time while at the same time taking into consideration the more limited agenda of the news audience.

Analysis

Previous studies and reports have looked at the 2019 (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2020; Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020; Stubager & Hansen, 2021) and 2022 national elections (Blach-Ørsten & Eberholst, 2023; Kosiara-Pedersen, 2023; Hansen & Stubager, 2024) and addressed the most prominent political issues and, in some cases, their media saliences. However, no study has compared party–issue and party–leader issue linkage in news media across the two elections as we do here. In the 2019 national election, which ran almost concurrently with the 2019 EP elections, the issues of the EU as well as climate and the environment took first and second place in media salience, with 27% and 21% of the media coverage, respectively. These issues were followed closely by those of schools and daycare (17%) and refugees and migration and health and elder care (both 11%). In 2022, the top five issues were health and elder care (27%), climate and the environment (25%), schools and daycare (13%), defence (10%), and finance and the economy (7%).

The salience of specific issues is often determined by events outside the control of political parties. The 2022 election campaign, for example, was particularly affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which put issues such as finance and the economy and defence on the public agenda in new ways (Schjørring, 2022). At the same time, an escalating crisis in the Danish public health sector, including a mass shooting by an untreated psychiatric patient, pushed the issue of health and elder care to the top of the voters' agenda (Schjørring, 2022). The Danish news media also broke two major scandals during the election, one regarding Danish defence and the other regarding elder care. Both stories had clear impacts on the media and political agenda in the days following their publication in terms of reach, as both were covered extensively in the news media, and of demand for political action, as politicians were forced to address both the scandals and solutions to them (Blach-Ørsten & Eberholst, 2023).

As shown by RQ1 and depicted in Figure 1, we have focused on the differences in the media saliences of the political issues in the

two elections. Figure 1 shows these differences, most of which seem clearly related to the circumstances surrounding the two elections. Thus, in 2022, three issues gained in media salience compared to 2019: health and elder care, climate and the environment, and defence. Leading the change is a 16% increase in media salience for the issue of health and elder care in 2022. At the same time, issues that were popular in 2019, such as the EU and refugees and migration, fell considerably in 2022. This trend is easily explained regarding the EU, as there was no concurrent EP election in 2022. However, the decline in the issue of refugees and migration indicates a policy change in Denmark, as this issue has played an increasingly decisive role in Danish politics since the 1990s (Green-Pedersen & Krogstrup, 2008; Dambo-Svendson & Seeberg, 2024). The continued attention to the issue of climate and the environment is also important. Historically, the salience of this issue has varied greatly. It entered the agenda in the 1960s but never figured permanently among the top issues (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2020); however, this changed in 2019 and seems to be changing still, as the issue gained four percent in media salience in 2022 despite competition from outside events and a focus on health and elder care topping the media agenda.

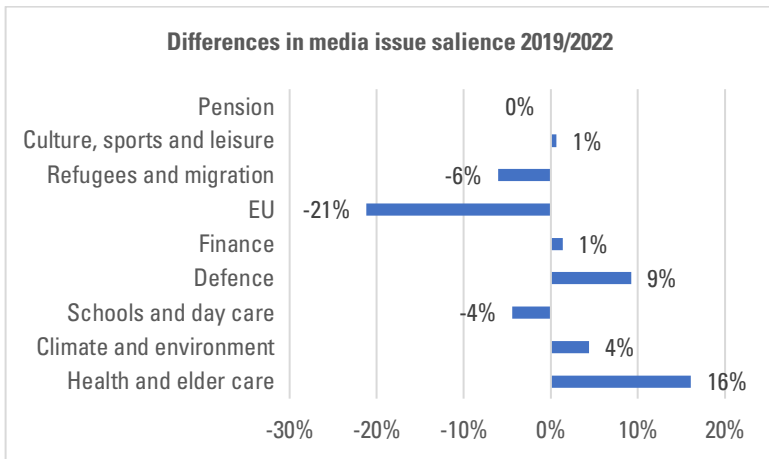


Figure 1: Differences in Media Issue Salience 2019/2022.

Note: Media issue salience shifts in the 2019/2022 elections. Positive values indicate that the issue is more salient in 2022 than in 2019. Based on 58,052 news articles from Danish news media: 33,324 in 2019 and 24,818 in 2022.

The overall capacity of the media agenda to manage an infinite number of political issues is frequently questioned in relation to the study of issue competition (McCombs & Zhu, 1995; Edy & Meirick,

2018). While international research seems to suggest that there is capacity to expand the agenda, Figure 1 indicates that as more attention is given to some issues, less attention is given to others. Indeed, three issues (refugees and migration, the EU, and schools and daycare) received much less attention in 2022 than in 2019, while three others (defence, health and elder care, and climate and the environment) received more attention. It is also notable that the overall number of news articles decreased from 2019 to 2022, indicating that the agenda did not expand. Two issues (finance and culture and sport and leisure) increased by one percent in 2022, but that is too small a change to be considered a difference. Rather, these topics, along with the issue of pensions, seem to be stable, most likely because there was no change in the related issue competition.

Turning to RQ2, the party–issue linkage in news media coverage is central to our understanding of issue ownership and issue competition (Merz, 2016). Looking at Figure 2 and the question of the differences in party–issue linkage in the 2022 and 2019 elections, we find a clear shift in the numbers of mentions in the news media coverage of some of the issues to which each party is linked. We also find a good deal of issue overlap, where parties were linked to the same issue in 2022, especially regarding the top issue of health and elder care. This issue was increasingly linked to all the parties in the media coverage, both niche and mainstream. At the same time, the niche and mainstream parties to the centre right (blue bloc), such as the Liberal Party, the Liberal Alliance, and the Danish People’s Party, were being more linked to the issue of climate and the environment than in the 2019 election. This indicates that not only were almost all the parties linked to the top issue of health and elder care, but the parties in the blue bloc were also increasingly linked to the originally ‘red-bloc’ issue of climate and the environment – an issue to which they were not similarly linked in the 2019 election. These changes may be associated with the news media’s focus on the issue of climate and the environment. However, they might also be because the political parties in the blue bloc more actively focused on this issue in their 2022 election campaign. Indeed, right-wing parties, such as the Danish People’s Party, have tried to include a more frequent focus on climate, acknowledging that the lack of this focus was one of the reasons that they did not do well in the 2019 election (Redder, 2019).

At the same time, both the niche and mainstream parties on the centre left (red bloc), such as the Social Democrats, the Social Liberal Party, the Green Left, and the Red–Green Alliance, are all increasingly linked to the defence issue in the news media coverage. This is, of course, due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the

massive political and media focus that followed it. However, being linked to the issue of defence, which is traditionally associated with right-wing parties and the blue bloc, has not been without challenges, especially for the Red–Green Alliance. The party has argued that Denmark should leave NATO and the military be defunded; however, during the campaign, it had to take a more positive view of the military due to the invasion of Ukraine, which did not go over well with all the party’s voters (Kjeldsen & Richter, 2022). From a bloc perspective, this also indicates that both blocs were affected by the changes in issue salience and party–issue linkage: the blue bloc was more often linked to the issue of climate and the environment, an issue traditionally owned by the red bloc, while the red bloc has more often been linked to the issue of the defence, an issue traditionally owned by the blue bloc.

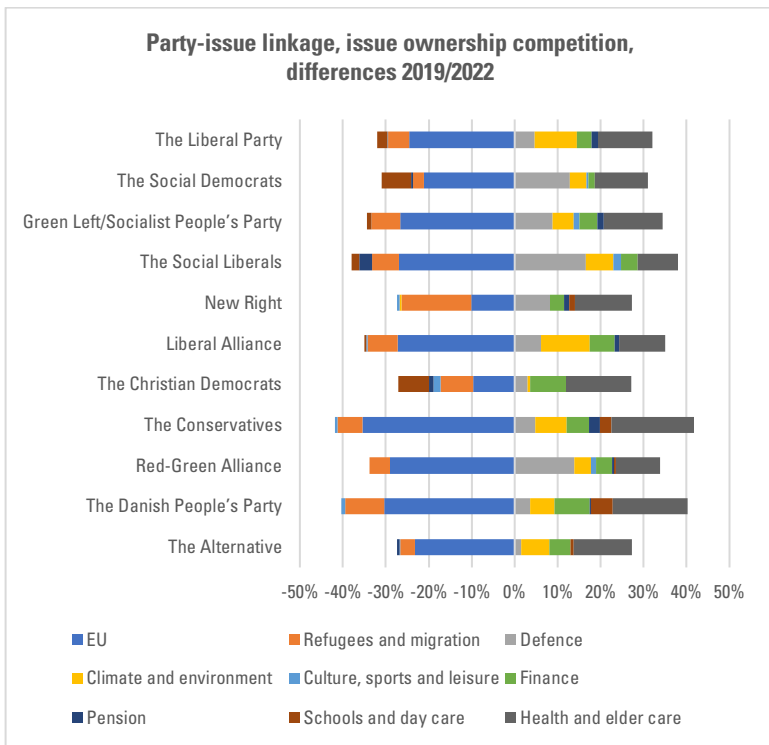


Figure 2: Party-Issue Linkage, Issue Ownership, and Issue Competition (Mentions), Differences 2019/2022.

Note: Based on 109,436 mentions of the party in connection with the issue: 66,146 in 2019 and 43,290 in 2022. One news item can generate several mentions of one or several parties. Positive values indicate an increase in mentions; negative values indicate a decrease.

As in Figure 1, we see that the shift in issues came at the cost of issues that dominated the agenda in 2019. Two issues namely, the EU and refugees and migration, both of which played a major role in 2019, were much less visible on the agenda in 2022. The importance of this shift can be seen from the fact that the two niche parties most linked to the issue of refugees and migration in 2022, the New Right and the Danish People's Party, were instead linked to other issues, such as health and elder care, defence, and climate and the environment. For the Danish People's Party, there was a nine percent drop in mentions related to the issue of 'refugees and migration', while the New Right saw an even decline of 16%. Indeed, the leader of the New Right later blamed the lack of focus on this issue on the media agenda, saying that it was difficult for her to talk about immigration if the issue she was asked to address was the mental well-being of young people (Bruhn, 2022).

In our final RQ, we focus on the party leaders and the linkages that the news media make between different party leaders and different issues. We call these 'party-leader issue linkages', and as mentioned above, we see them as a central component of both issue ownership and issue competition. We focus solely on the party leaders, who traditionally attract the most media attention, especially those running as candidates for the post of prime minister. In 2019, two candidates ran for prime minister, the leaders of the Liberal Party and the Social Democrats. In 2022, the leader of the Conservatives also ran for the position, raising the number of candidates to three. Looking at the three candidates in Figure 3, the leaders of both the Liberal Party and the Social Democrats were linked increasingly to three of the same issues: defence, climate and the environment, and health and elder care. In contrast, the leader of the Conservative Party was increasingly linked to just one very traditional Conservative issue: defence.

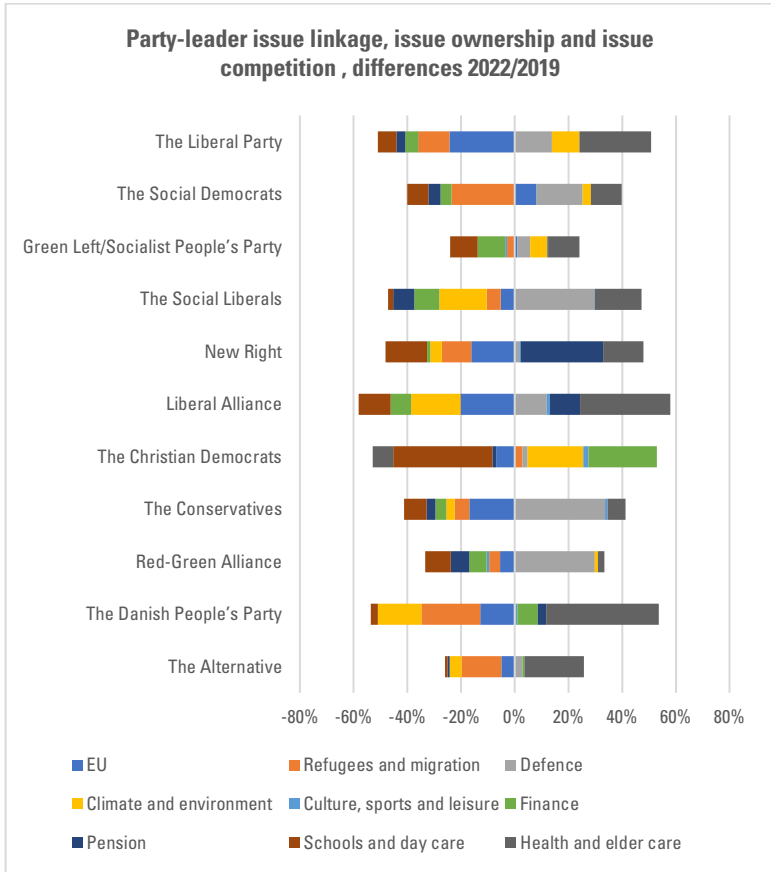


Figure 3: Party-Leader Issue Linkage, Issue Ownership, and Issue Competition (Quotes) 2019/2022.

Note: Based on 15,180 quotes from party leaders in news items related to issues: 9085 in 2019 and 6095 in 2022. One news item can generate several quotes.

Eight of the 11 party leaders were quoted between 11% and 42% more in relation to the issue of health and elder care in 2022 than in 2019, with the leading centre-right parties the Danish People's Party (42% more) and Liberal Alliance (34% more) having by far the biggest increases. Only three party leaders did not display the tendency to be linked increasingly to the issue of health and elder care: those of the Conservatives, the Red-Green Alliance, and the Christian Democrats. At the same time, six party leaders were quoted between 12% and 34% more in 2022 on the issue of defence than in 2019. Here, the leaders of the Conservatives (34%), the Social

Liberal Party (30%), and the Red–Green Alliance (30%) were responsible for the biggest increases.

Mirroring both Figure 1 and Figure 2, in Figure 3, we see how being increasingly linked to some issues led to party leaders being linked less to others. In 2022, this was particularly the case for the former ‘top’ issue of refugees and migration. While this issue originated in the blue bloc, especially with the Danish People’s Party, it developed into a mainstream issue during the first two decades of the 2000s. However, in 2022, nine of 11 party leaders were quoted between three percent and 24% less on this issue than in 2019. The leader of the Social Democrats saw the highest drop in linkage to this issue in 2022 compared to 2019 (24%), followed by the leader of the Danish People’s Party (22%).

Discussion and conclusion

Like all elections, the 2022 national Danish election had its share of winners and losers. Of the 11 parties on which we focus in this historical analysis, the Liberal Party, the Social Liberal Party, the Conservatives, the Red–Green Alliance, the Christian Democrats, and the Danish People’s Party all lost seats in Folketing in the 2022 election, with the Liberal Party taking the hardest hit (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2023). On the other hand, the Social Democrats, the Liberal Alliance, the Green Left/Socialist People’s Party, the New Right, and the Alternative all gained in the 2022 election (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2023). Not all gains or losses can be explained by media salience or party–issue linkage in the news media coverage. For instance, the fact that three candidates ran for the position of prime minister split the media attention between the candidates, but not equally. Mette Frederiksen, the Social Democrats, who also enjoyed the traditional incumbency bonus, attracted by far the most media attention across all news media platforms (31%). The two other candidates, Jacob Ellemann-Jensen, the Liberal Party, (11%) and Søren Pape Poulsen, the Conservatives, (12%), attracted less than half the same amount of attention in total. Both Ellemann-Jensen and Pape Poulsen also struggled throughout their campaigns, with Pape Poulsen followed into the election by a series of political scandals (Blach-Ørsten & Eberholst, 2023). However, a recent study of issue ownership and the 2022 election based on voter surveys suggests that the Social Democrats had a strong election due to issue ownership of the issues named health and elder care and climate and the environment in the current study (Damsbo-Svendson & Seeberg, 2024, p. 327).

Regarding issue competition, it is interesting how the two niche parties to the right, namely, the Danish People's Party and the New Right, were affected by the shifting media agenda and shifts in party–issue linkages. Both parties had previously focused particularly on the issue of refugees and migration, but in the 2022 campaign, the Danish People's Party was instead linked to the top issue of health and elder care, most likely because elder care has traditionally been another top issue of which the party can claim (co-)ownership. The New Right was not similarly linked to any of the top issues of the 2022 campaign but to the much lower-ranking issue of pensions, which was not otherwise one of their top owned issues. Despite achieving an acceptable result in the election, the leader of the New Right was criticised for not placing more focus on the issue of refugees and migration (Bruhn, 2022). This, in turn, led to internal upheaval within the party, which is presently fragmented: the leader has switched to another party, and its survival as a political party is an open question. At the same time, it is worth noting that looking only at party–issue linkage in the news media shows that the issue of climate and the environment has become part of the issue competition between both blocs, as has the issue of defence.

To sum up, this article has investigated the question of party–issue linkage in the news media as an indicator of both issue ownership and issue competition. Party–issue linkage is recognised as an important additional variable of issue ownership. During an election, particularly, when issue competition is high, party–issue linkage may help political parties to claim or maintain ownership of the most salient political issues. We have focused on a unique historical comparison of two consecutive national elections: the 2019 and 2022 national Danish elections.

Regarding our RQ1, we find a clear shift in the media saliences of different political issues from 2019 to 2022, caused to no small extent by events external to the political parties. This adds evidence to the mounting research suggesting that outside events and societal trends influence national elections in a way that is beyond the control of both parties and party leaders (Dennison & Kriesi, 2023). It may also add to the influence of the news media if the outside event is seen as breaking news, such as the sabotage of gas pipes in the Baltic Sea during the election campaign, in which case the coverage could crowd out other issues from the media agenda. The shifts also show a lower focus on the question of refugees and migration and a larger one on health and elder care, in particular, which was also pushed onto the news media agenda due to outside events, such as the Fields shooting,

However, the issue of climate and the environment, which was high on the agenda in 2019, still had a high salience in 2022,

indicating that it had earned a more 'stable' place on the election agenda than previously (see also Damsbo-Svendsen & Seeberg, 2024). The study of media salience also shows that while the news media agenda may theoretically have the capacity to accommodate an increasing number of issues, its capacity is more limited in practice, as three issues (refugees and migration, the EU, and schools and daycare) received less attention in 2022 than in 2019, while three others (defence, health and elder care, and climate and the environment) received more attention. The EU may have been among the issues that received less attention because no EP election was running concurrently in 2022. However, right-wing parties did campaign on the issue of refugees and migration and parties in the red bloc campaigned on the issue of schools and daycare, but apparently with little effect on the news media coverage.

Regarding RQ2 and party-issue linkage in the news media coverage, we find a good deal of issue competition and issue overlap in 2022, especially regarding the top issue of health and elder care. This issue is increasingly linked to all political parties, both niche and mainstream. This indicates that most parties recognised the importance of the issue for both voters and the media agenda and tried to ride the wave of its success by being linked to it in the news media (Burdina, 2014). At the same time, we find that the niche and mainstream parties of the centre-right (blue bloc), in particular, such as the Liberal Party, the Liberal Alliance, and the Danish People's Party, were also more linked to the climate and the environment issue than in 2019, again indicating the wave-riding of popular issues. In the red bloc, likewise, we find that both niche and mainstream parties, such as the Social Democrats, the Social Liberal Party, the Green Left, and the Red-Green Alliance, were increasingly linked to the issue of defence. From a bloc perspective, this could indicate that the blocs are trying to 'steal' these issues from each other. Thus, in 2022, the blue bloc was more actively linked to the issue of climate and the environment, an issue traditionally owned by the red bloc, while the red bloc was more actively linked to the issue of defence, an issue traditionally owned by the blue bloc. In sum, RQ2 thus supports investigating the news media agenda as an indicator of issue competition, the stealing of issues from other parties, and the tendency for parties to ride the wave of issues that attract the most media salience.

Turning to RQ3, the same shift in party-issue linkage as found in RQ2 can be found in the quotes of the party leaders. Looking at all 11 party leaders, eight were quoted between 11% and 42% more in relation to the issue of health and elder care in 2022 than in 2019 with the leading centre-right parties the Danish People's Party and the Liberal Alliance seeing by far the biggest increase. Only three

party leaders stand out from the tendency of being quoted more on the issue of health and elder care: those of the Conservatives, the Red–Green Alliance, and the Christian Democrats. This makes this issue the best example of how the media salience and party–issue linkage of a specific issue can result in both issue competition and issue overlap. It also indicates that party leaders are indeed well aware of the popular issues at stake in a campaign even though they and their parties do not necessarily own them, further indicating that party leaders might attempt to ride the wave of popular issues.

Overall, the three RQs suggest that media salience and party–issue linkage can be seen as important indicators in the struggle for issue ownership in a multi-party system such as the Danish one, where both niche and mainstream parties, as well as the two blocs, all compete for ownership of the most salient issues. The study also suggests that for parties, being linked to the most salient political issues is one of many elements in a successful election campaign. It also suggests that not being linked to the top salient issues or having the party’s most ‘owned’ issue lose salience may have a negative effect on a political campaign.

It is useful to compare our results to those of a recent study that investigated the salience of political issues in the 2022 election from the voters’ point of view. Damsbo-Svendsen and Seeberg (2024, p. 310) found that three issues topped the voters’ agenda in the 2022 election: climate, health, and finance. These results mirror the news media agenda presented in this study regarding two of three issues, showing that in the news media coverage, the issue of defence was more salient than that of finance. Further research could focus more on the relationship between all three agendas in the traditional understanding of agenda-setting studies: the voters’ agenda, the media agenda, and the political agenda. This could help highlight not only which issues are present on all three agendas but also differences in issue salience across the three. Future research could also look further at the role of social trends and outside events as challenges for political parties. What is the cost of riding the wave of a popular issue brought to the agenda by a societal trend? Does it make parties more legitimate in the minds of the audience, or less?

Still, an important caveat to consider when looking at the results presented in this study is that our focus represents only one side of the question of issue competition due to its focus on news media coverage. Thus, we have not included a survey of media users’ understanding of the changing media agenda. The study is also limited by its focus on nine issues, as the parties also ran on other issues that have not been included in this study or have been collapsed into ‘bigger’ issues. Thus, this study may not have

captured some of the nuances of the different political parties' party agendas in the two elections under study.

NOTES

- ¹ <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/udland/uanset-hvem-der-ender-med-statsministerposten-har-sverigedemokraterne-skrevet>
- ² <https://www.nrk.no/valg/2021/resultat/>
- ³ <https://www.ft.dk/da/folkestyret/valg-og-afstemninger/tal-og-fakta-om-valg-og-afstemninger#1ECC9517FACB4120B7854B2DEA0A287B>

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