Social Media and Political Agenda Setting

Fabrizio Gilardi[1]   Theresa Gessler[1]   Maël Kubli[1]   Stefan Müller[2]

[1]University of Zurich
[2]University College Dublin

International Studies Association
April 8, 2021

(Updated on April 7, 2021)

Motivation

➢ Agenda setting matters, a lot
➢ Who leads, who follows?
  · Politicians, parties, traditional media, the public?
  · Still unclear; complex relationships
➢ Social media have implications for agenda setting
➢ Few studies take into account multiple types of actors, traditional and social media, mutual influences, long periods

Social media and political agenda setting

- ➢ Social media are a relevant channel for political communication
- ➢ Social media expand the number and types of actors who can potentially shape the agenda
- ➢ Social media help political actors reach the broader public via traditional media

Research question

We examine the connections between three agendas:

1. Traditional media agenda
2. Social media agenda of parties
3. Social media agenda of politicians

Research design

- Switzerland, January 2018–December 2019
- Period includes national elections and multiple referenda
- 2.78 million articles published in 84 newspapers (full text)
- 6,500 tweets posted by parties on their official accounts (excluding retweets)
- 210,000 tweets posted by politicians on on their own accounts
- Machine-learning classifiers for four issues: environment, gender, Europe, immigration
- Vector autoregression (VAR) models (Barberá et al., 2019), controlling for press releases of parties and many organizations

Results: the three agendas are closely tied together
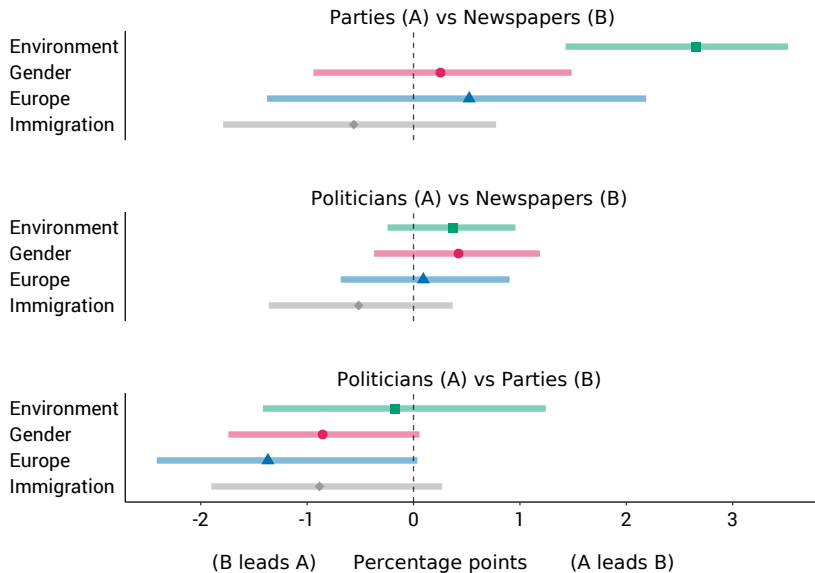
Conclusion

➢ Significant influences among most agendas across the four issues
➢ On balance, each agendas both leads and follows each other agenda to similar degrees
➢ Exception: environment issue $\rightarrow$ parties lead newspapers
➢ Role of large-scale campaigns for the responsiveness of different agendas

References

Barberá, P., A. Casas, J. Nagler, P. J. Egan, R. Bonneau, J. T. Jost, and J. A. Tucker (2019). Who Leads? Who Follows? Measuring Issue Attention and Agenda Setting by Legislators and the Mass Public Using Social Media Data. *American Political Science Review 113*(4), 883–901.