

The Issue Initiation Model:
Unpacking How Political Parties
Can Set an Agenda

Daniel Sandvej Eriksen

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Can Set an Agenda

PhD Dissertation

Politica

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ISBN: 978-87-7335-343-1

Cover: Svend Siune

Print: Fællestrykkeriet, Aarhus University

Layout: Annette Bruun Andersen

Submitted January 31, 2025

The public defense takes place May 16, 2025

Published May 2025

Forlaget Politica

c/o Department of Political Science

Aarhus BSS, Aarhus University

Bartholins Allé 7

DK-8000 Aarhus C

Denmark

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Acknowledgements

More than three years ago, I sat down in my new office for the first time. I vividly remember the feelings I had throughout January of excitement and counting down, and how I gave vague answers when friends and families asked me exactly which tasks I would perform when I was to start. And I vividly remember how I felt when I sat there at the new desk on the first working day: Though I only recall spending the day at one of my parents' workplace a couple of times in my life, this is perhaps the feeling that most accurately captures what it was like on the first day as a PhD student. Fortunately, IT support was open that day, giving me some much-needed concrete tasks to dive into And so, my journey as a PhD student took off.

When I first started, I mostly expected this journey to be purely academic: I knew I was supposed to learn how to write academic articles, to teach, and so on. But the experiences I have had over the past three years far surpass this rather narrow view of the PhD experience: I met countless people whose interest in and dedication to their subject matter will be a constant source of fascination throughout the rest of my life; I received comments from numerous people whose experience and knowledge far surpass mine; I presented my work around the world, from Buenos Aires to Nyborg; I learned how it feels when one's own fascination with a subject meets the students' admirable dedication to their education; and I was lucky enough to meet countless colleagues in and around Aarhus who had the most fascinating and nerdy (to me, this adjective is solely positive!) interests in their professional as well as their personal lives: From meditation to mixed methods; from guitar chords to *ggplots*; from Dostoevsky to democratic backsliding; and from football to First-Past-The-Post systems. Meeting such inspiring people has been an enormous privilege and a lifelong gift.

Throughout these three years of navigating occasionally rough waters, my two supervisors have been a constant anchor in my professional life. Christoffer, I sometimes wonder whether during the last six years, you ever got tired of supervising me ... I first encountered your tireless, constructive, creative, comforting, and ever-available supervision back in 2019 when I attended your bachelor seminar. Two years later, I was lucky enough to have you as my master thesis supervisor. If it had not been for your constant dedication to and interest in my work, I doubt that I would have stayed in academia. And once I became a PhD student, your guidance and ever-relevant feedback remained a constant. My deepest thanks to you for supporting me in various ways throughout this journey. And Helene, I did not have the privilege of meeting you during my bachelor's studies, but better late than never! Your constant

engagement in and with my work has been truly inspiring. You always prepared thorough written comments to my work before our meetings. And during meetings, your constructive, creative and extremely helpful comments were essential to my work and to my education. Your engagement with whatever ideas I came up with along the way will serve as a constant inspiration for many years. Thank you so much, Helene.

Moreover, I want to thank the different PhD coordinators who held this position during my time as a PhD student, namely Helene and Lasse. Your presence and guidance have given comfort to many PhD students. And your work for the group as a whole deserves special thanks.

On that first day in the office, I luckily was not alone. Rather, I had your company, Nadine. We were lucky enough to embark on and tackle this journey together as office mates. I am very grateful for our experiences together: We listened to various (more or less outdated) songs, such as *Down Under*, *Always* from the Robot Unicorn Attack game, as well as several Christmas songs (irrespective of the time of year). We had *hindebærssnitter* and macarons. We had countless talks about professional as well as personal matters; whenever I thought I had found a new and odd interest (from studies of near death experiences to brewing kombucha) that few would know much about, you always had insightful inputs. Moreover, you remained an inspiration whenever I sought new and exciting movies or series to watch. And perhaps most importantly, you taught me about the *Brunlov* ... Thanks for all these great experiences, Nadine!

While doing a PhD might be seen as sometimes a job, sometimes an education, one aspect of the journey (at least the one in Aarhus) is certainly different from most jobs: the fact that you are part of a group of dozens of peers who are on the same expedition. For me, this environment has created countless memories with people I will always remember. We have been running around on the football pitch, whether indoors or outdoors, sweating out work-related headaches. We have been swinging the padel racket and throwing bowling balls with such flair that even the top experts—whether middle managers or retirees—would be left speechless. Our moves on the dance floor reached heights no one saw coming. We dressed up as the most competent parking officers in the history of tour de offices. And we played *Don't look back in anger* as if Oasis had never been dissolved.

I want to thank Mathias Bukh for several hours of fun, whether with the guitar in our hands, watching a Manchester United game (GGMU!), being at Silkeborg stadium, or visiting my local Vejle bar together. And thank you, Rasmus, for countless more or less (perhaps more less, as Lars Løkke would put it) productive talks with you standing in the doorway of my office, for football experiences (whether at a bar or at the now legendary Aarhus Stadium with

me as a Brøndby mole), and for swinging the padel racket (whether with the right or the left arm). Thank you, Tim, for being such a great mentee (just kidding: great person). I am really happy that we have seen more of each other as the time has passed, and I enjoyed playing darts as well as guitar with you. Also, I cannot wait to play dice at the local Vejle bar again! And Aske, I want to thank you for being one of the most inspiring persons I have ever met. Your positive, energetic, engaged, and ever-interested presence will be missed in whichever room you leave; we certainly feel that at the department. I truly enjoyed our meditation sensation sessions, and I equally enjoyed our various conversations about life, work, and everything in between.

Every day, I looked forward to the coffee breaks because of the great company who joined me on the short walk from the office to the coffee machines. Thanks to Nadine, Rasmus, Ida Vind, Jannik, Ida Nørregaard, Edoardo, Marc-Antoine, and Sofia. Our conversations were a consistent source of joy in my work life. And being in the kitchen became no less entertaining when Njal, Ida, Anna Sofie, Felix, Kamma, or Christian were around. Thank you for your always inspiring and positive influence on my workday! In addition, I wish to say a special thanks to William, Ida Albek, Louise, Karl, Mads Nørgaard, Victor, Mathias Rask, Mario, Lucas, Mathies, Ali, Mathias Falkvist, Lydia, Emilie, Rasmus Møller, Julia, Samuel, and Robert, as well as the members of the *Fuglebakken* football team, for our many great experiences, conversations, and laughs.

Throughout my time as a PhD student, I have had the opportunity to receive feedback from and engage with the work of the members of the Comparative Politics section. This has been an enormous privilege and an important part of my professional development. Likewise, the Party Politics group has been a safe and, more importantly, very constructive forum to present and engage with ongoing work with excellent scholars and mentors. Thank you for organizing this, Henrik. Moreover, I want to thank Carsten, Roman, Henrik, and Peter Bjerre for always being willing to engage with my work and for listening to my ideas. Carsten, working on project proposals with you has been—and continues to be—an enormous pleasure; I constantly learn a lot from you, and it does not hurt that we laugh a lot, too! And Roman, I am very much looking forward to having you as my mentor on my journey forward.

In addition to the countless academic and personal interactions with peers and colleagues, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to the administrative staff at the department. From the very beginning of this journey, your tireless efforts made everything run more smoothly than I could have hoped. Whether it was handling funding questions, helping plan teaching activities, travel reimbursements, conference bookings, or countless other things—your support has been invaluable.

One of the memorable parts of my PhD was my stay at the University of Zürich. It was great to get a change of scenery and meet new people in a different academic environment. Fabrizio, thanks for hosting me and for taking the time to discuss my work and ideas. And thanks to Maël, Jonathan, Natalia, and Sacha, as well as the participants at the publication seminar, for the chats and your valuable feedback. During my time in Zürich, I also had the chance to get helpful comments on my work from Isabelle Guinaudeau, Jonathan Slapin, and Lucas Leemann. Thanks a lot for reading and engaging with my work. Also, thanks to Christian Breuning and Emiliano Grosmann for taking me out for soup in Konstanz and Mediterranean food in Paris, respectively. Moreover, I want to thank Anke Tresch and Marius Busemeyer for interesting conversations about my work while I was in Zürich.

I also want to say a big thank you to the student assistants I have had the pleasure of working with along the way. Marcus, Oscar, Søren, Asvin, Fredrik, Vivyan, and Zaki—your help has been truly appreciated. Whether it was hand-coding tweets or collecting data, you all made a big difference in my project.

Now, three years after I sat down in the office as a new PhD student, I am sitting in another office with new adventures ahead. However, I cannot truly reflect upon or fully understand anything that I do in life without mentioning my family. *Maria*, you are the most wonderful sister. We have shared so many things, we have gone through so much together. And, wow, we have had so much fun! I am so proud of you. It is a source of daily happiness and a smile on my face to see how you live your life and to be a part of it. I am constantly impressed with how you face and embrace your life with a positive mindset and how you are someone people can always count on. I cannot wait to follow you in whichever direction your life will head in the future. *Mor*, I cannot find the words to describe how much you have done for me and Maria. Or to describe how great an inspiration you are and will forever be in my life. You have faced more challenges in your life than ten ordinary persons could carry. But you are no ordinary person: You sacrifice yourself for the ones you love, you always find new meaning when it is hardest to find, and you have taught me what matters in life. You will always be a huge inspiration for me in my life. I am so, so proud of you, so happy for you, and so grateful for what you have done for me. And *Far*, I am deeply grateful for the years I got to have with you. Like Mom, with your words but especially your actions, you have taught me so much about life: About how to be interested in various (non)academic things; to help others; to appreciate the small things in life; to fight for a good life; and not to let one's circumstances dictate one's attitude in and to life. Far, so many things have changed since you passed away. I very often think about what you would have done or have said or how you would have reacted to certain

situations. But one thing I know for sure: you would have had something clever, balanced, and empathetic to say. Though you cannot read these words, I have you with me every day.

Julie, you are the love of my life. When we met more than six years ago, I could not have dreamed of all the things that were to come. You constantly inspire me with your positive and optimistic mindset, your compassion for others, and your wise and creative self. You challenge me when I am wrong, and you support me when I am right. I am extremely happy to call you my wife. And I am excited about every new day I get to experience with you. Life is a gift when you are around. And I cannot wait to embark on whichever adventures lie ahead of us. Thank you, Julie, for being you.

Daniel Sandvej Eriksen,
April 2025

Preface

This summary report is part of the PhD dissertation “The Issue Initiation Model: Unpacking How Political Parties Can Set an Agenda,” conducted at the Department of Political Science, Aarhus University. The summary gives an overview of the dissertation, highlighting its main theoretical claims, methods, data, and key findings. In addition to this summary, the dissertation comprises three single-authored articles, referred to throughout the summary as *Paper 1*, *Paper 2*, and *Paper 3*. Comprehensive details about the data, research designs, additional analyses, and robustness tests can be found in the individual papers and their appendices.

Paper 1: Party Competition on Social Media: Evidence from Politicians’ Tweets. *Scandinavian Political Studies*.

Paper 2: Initiate and Elevate! How Political Parties Can Set an Agenda [Under review at *The American Political Science Review*]

Paper 3: Releasing a Trojan Horse: How Government Parties Use Social Media to Influence the Opposition’s Agenda in Parliament [Working Paper]

1. Introduction

“Democracy is a competitive political system in which competing leaders and organizations define the alternatives of public policy.”
(Schattschneider, 1965, p. 141)

In the spring of 2019, an intense debate emerged among Danish political parties around a potential new right to early senior pension for worn out workers. The government parties devoted a large share of their attention to this matter. At first glance, what made this situation particularly puzzling was the absence of any focus on the matter in the government’s agenda just months earlier: In the prime minister’s opening speech outlining the government’s plans for the coming year seven months prior, there had been no mention of pension reforms (Statsministeriet, 2018). Moreover, the government did not mention any intentions to introduce a new right to early senior pension in its coalition agreement (Regeringen, 2016). Why then would the government focus so intensely on a potential new policy that was evidently not on its agenda just months before?

The origins of this unexpected focus can be traced back to a press conference on January 22, 2019. At noon that day, Mette Frederiksen, leader of the opposition Social Democrats, proposed a new retirement pension scheme for workers who were either worn out or had been on the labor market for an extended period. The party’s official Twitter account supported this announcement with several tweets,¹ including one that stated, “The most worn-out also deserve a dignified pension 🌹.” In the following months, there were heavy discussions between the parties. Remarkably, nearly one in ten policy-related tweets from MPs representing the three liberal–conservative government parties over the following five months addressed the Social Democrats’ proposal. And in more than 18 pct. of these tweets, the government MPs engaged in direct discussions with Social Democrat MPs on the matter.

The progression from a press conference and social media campaign to intense partisan debate suggests how a party can successfully set an agenda. This very competition around which issues receive attention at the expense of others is a core political process since it is ultimately a matter of defining what politics is about (Green-Pedersen & Walgrave, 2014). Yet, we have a very

¹ While Twitter changed its name to X in July 2023, I refer to the platform as “Twitter” and to posts on the platform as “tweets,” reflecting the terminology used during the period under examination.

limited understanding of how political parties manage to follow the example above and initiate discussions. A long research tradition has examined the competition between political parties around shaping the political agenda (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Baumgartner, 1989; Baumgartner et al., 2019; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Budge, 1982; Carmines & Stimson, 1990; Robertson, 1976; Schattschneider, 1965). Within this literature, a key assumption is that political parties can indeed set an agenda by proactively initiating discussion (Baumgartner, 1989; Green-Pedersen, 2019b; Grossman & Guinaudeau, 2024).

Even though the literature implicitly portrays parties as being capable of proactively setting an agenda (e.g., Abou-Chadi, 2016; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Grossman & Guinaudeau, 2021; Petrocik, 1996), it has first and foremost focused on the constraints faced by parties in their agenda-setting efforts (e.g., Dolezal et al., 2014; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2015; Meyer & Wagner, 2016; Sigelman & Buell, 2004; Tavits & Potter, 2015; Traber et al., 2020). For instance, substantial scholarly attention has been devoted to how parties across the board must attend to worrying climate reports, crime statistics, or financial crises (e.g., Grossman & Guinaudeau, 2021; Kristensen et al., 2022; Pardos-Prado & Sagarzazu, 2019; Tavits & Potter, 2015). While existing work has shown how parties can influence the agenda—and even government legislation—by talking about an issue (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010, 2015; Seeberg, 2023), very little is known about whether and how parties can, in fact, proactively *start* discussions.

Consequently, the fundamental notion of party agency—i.e., that parties are capable of proactively setting an agenda—remains an assumption. This means that the literature cannot explain whether and how parties can initiate discussions. These dynamics are fundamental to any representative democracy since being able to redirect the attention of competing parties and other important actors is, at its core, a matter of political parties' abilities to exercise power (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Dahl, 1957, pp. 202-203). They relate to one of the most central features of democracy, namely the competition between political actors for defining “the alternatives of public policy” (Schattschneider, 1965, p. 141). I therefore pose the following question which will be addressed throughout this dissertation:

RQ: (How) can political parties set an agenda?

1.1. What I mean by “set an agenda”

By “set an agenda”, I mean that a political party manages to redirect other actors' attention towards an issue in the short term. To the extent that a party

succeeds in setting an agenda, I refer to this as a ‘breakthrough’. And as will be elaborated below, I study breakthrough in three different arenas, that is, on social media, in the news media, and in parliament.

Setting an agenda is about proactively starting discussions that did not already take place, that is, the agenda-setting party did not react to already existing discussions. Note that setting an agenda does not mean that the party invents a new policy issue. In the end, few issues are truly “new.” Attempting to trace the ultimate origin of an issue would lead, as Kingdon (1984, pp. 72–73) described, to an “infinite regress.” In other words, the fact that a party does not “invent” an issue does not preclude it from proactively generating attention around that issue.

This focus on parties’ abilities to proactively redirect the attention of other actors towards a certain issue in the short term implies two demarcations. First, I follow the basic focus within agenda-setting literature and focus on *rhetoric*, not legislation (e.g., Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Baumgartner et al., 2019; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Green-Pedersen & Walgrave, 2014).

Second, I do not focus on the long-term dynamics, for instance, whether a party influences the attention of other actors several months forward. Instead, moving beyond much of the existing work (e.g., Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Grossman & Guinaudeau, 2021; Seeberg, 2023), I zoom in on short-term dynamics by studying whether and how a party can influence the attention of other actors in the hours and days following the party’s attempt to start a discussion. This fine-grained focus is chosen because it allows me to (i) study who starts a discussion and who responds and to (ii) investigate the dynamics of agenda-setting without the influence of external forces. Indeed, excluding the influence of external forces, such as news media attention, presents a significant challenge when identifying the role of political parties in agenda-setting, which may explain why the literature has yet to address whether and how parties can proactively start discussions.

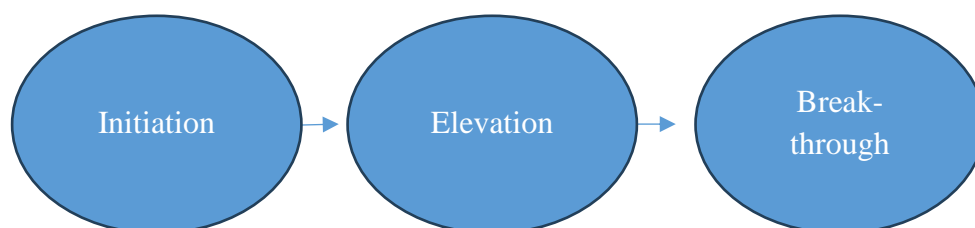
1.2. My approach to addressing the research question

I investigate the fundamental assumption that parties can proactively initiate discussions by studying *if* this is true. To answer this question, I develop and test a new model of party agenda-setting which allows for understanding *how* parties attempt to do so. *The Issue Initiation Model* addresses this dissertation’s research question by theorizing and conceptualizing political parties’ agenda-setting efforts. As theoretical tools and significant measurement contributions to the literature, I craft and test the validity of three concepts within this model. *Initiation* is the proactive efforts by parties to direct attention towards an issue by introducing their focus. This captures party communication

that does not respond to ongoing discussions and that focuses on problems that have not yet been solved. *Elevation* is defined as the efforts by politicians to promote their party's focus. This is a collective effort to signal commitment to this focus. Finally, *breakthrough* captures the extent to which other important actors engage with the focus initiated by the party. This is—in various forms which will be spelled out later—taken as the dependent variable, indicating whether the initiating party has been successful in setting an agenda.

As a direct answer to the research question above, The Issue Initiation Model theorizes that the concerted efforts by parties and their MPs to initiate and elevate their focus on an issue can lead other important actors to redirect their attention towards the issue (breakthrough). In other words, the main theoretical claim is that *parties are capable of proactively setting an agenda through strategic orchestration*. Consequently, while “messiness,” “accident,” and “dumb luck” are inherent parts of these processes (Kingdon, 1984, pp. 206-207), the model theorizes how parties have substantial agency in setting an agenda. This does not imply that parties can *control* political discussions. But it does imply that their strategic efforts to generate attention around an issue can sometimes lead other important actors to redirect their attention towards the very same issue. Figure 1.1 illustrates the theorized dynamics.

Figure 1.1: The Issue Initiation Model of Agenda-Setting



In order to put the predictions by The Issue Initiation Model to the test, I have launched a massive data collection effort to build a unique dataset across countries, time, and platforms. Specifically, I rely on more than 5.5 million tweets by political parties and MPs coupled with over 750,000 news articles and over 400,000 written parliamentary questions during the years 2011–2022 in Denmark and 2015–2022 in the UK.

The rise and spread of social media platforms has given scholars a unique window into the daily communication of political parties and politicians (e.g., Gilardi et al., 2022; Jungherr et al., 2020; Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016; Russell, 2021; Schöll et al., 2024). Any politician can voice her opinions and views instantly, constantly, and with low costs. It is therefore unsurprising that parties and politicians invest substantial and increasing amounts of time and resources into using these platforms (Bauer et al., 2023; IDA, 2019). From a

scholarly viewpoint, social media platforms constitute a unique window into parties' agenda-setting efforts on a highly granular level (Barberá et al., 2019; Schöll et al., 2024). Whereas much of the existing work examines these dynamics on the aggregated level (e.g., Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2015; Grossman & Guinaudeau, 2021; Seeberg & Adams, 2024), social media data allows me to push the literature forward by zooming in on the micro-level dynamics. This provides the opportunity to delve into agenda-setting dynamics without the influence of news media articles and external events.

Therefore, I have leveraged social media data to study parties' efforts to set an agenda. Specifically, I have collected data from Twitter for two reasons. First, during the last decade, this has been among the social media platforms used most widely by politicians (IDA, 2019; Haman and Školník, 2021). Second, in the examined period, Twitter was a primary source of inspiration and content for journalists, serving as a hotbed for discussions between political actors that often reached news media outlets and captured the broader electorate's attention (Parmelee, 2014; Russell, 2021; Shapiro & Hemphill, 2017; Zhang & Li, 2020). Indeed, an experimental study concluded that journalists deemed tweets "equally newsworthy as headlines appearing to be from the AP wire [a news agency, author's edit]", (McGregor & Molyneux, 2020, p. 597).

In sum, Twitter data constitutes a unique source to study communication by political parties and politicians in contemporary politics. Despite the significant transformations the platform has undergone in recent years, it is noteworthy how contemporary alternatives like Bluesky and Threads replicate many of its core features and structure. This suggests that the agenda-setting dynamics examined in this study remain highly relevant, not only in the present but also for the future—a point that will be elaborated in Chapter 4. In the same chapter, I also discuss alternative sources of party communication such as party manifestos and press releases.

1.3. Presenting the papers in this dissertation

A key building block in using Twitter to understand parties' and their politicians' efforts to set an agenda is to test whether their communication on this platform follows the party competition dynamics that exist in traditional political arenas (such as in parliament or in the news media). Alternatively, if politicians' communication has been "fundamentally changed" (Metz et al., 2020, p. 1491) such that politicians rarely use platforms like Twitter to push substantial policy issue discussions for their parties, studying this type of data would be of little use to scholars interested in political parties' agenda-setting efforts. *Paper 1* therefore addresses the following question: *Does Twitter constitute an arena for party competition much in the same way as established*

political settings? In order to shed light on this question, the paper addresses two specific sub-questions: (i) To what extent do MPs use Twitter to discuss policy issues or, alternatively, to engage in personalized communication? (ii) Does MP communication on Twitter follow traditional patterns related to issue ownership and the competition between opposition and government parties (cf. Baumgartner, 1989; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Petrocik, 1996)?

While most studies investigating whether Twitter mirrors traditional arenas for party competition have focused on the U.S., Paper 1 shifts the focus to Denmark. I analyzed the population of tweets by Danish MPs during two electoral terms: 2011–2015 and 2015–2019 (N = 474,280). Based on my own hand coding of more than 34,000 of these tweets, I fine-tuned a state-of-the-art language representation model (BERT) (cf. Devlin et al., 2018) to capture which policy issues Danish MPs attend to (such as macroeconomics, the environment, or international affairs).

I first show that discussion of policy issues was far more prevalent than personalized communication in the MP tweets. Moreover, I show how fundamental dynamics from established political arenas indeed play a key role in terms of which issues MPs focus on when they tweet. That is, politicians use Twitter to promote issues which are beneficial for their party in the competition with other parties. These results have important implications in that they show how politicians' social media posts are an integral aspect of contemporary party competition and agenda-setting.

With these results constituting an important building block, the main focus in Paper 2 and Paper 3 was to present and test the theorized dynamics in The Issue Initiation Model. To test the basic theoretical claim that political parties are capable of proactively setting an agenda through strategic orchestration, I content-coded and analyzed more than 5,500,000 tweets from political parties and MPs along with over 750,000 news articles and more than 400,000 written parliamentary questions in the UK and Denmark between 2015 and 2022.

I focused on initiations and elevation by *mainstream* parties and their politicians, respectively, in Paper 2 and Paper 3. However, I focused on the reactions by politicians from all competing parties. There are two key reasons for focusing on the initiation and elevation efforts of mainstream parties and their politicians. First, mainstream parties typically address a broad spectrum of policy issues, enabling an analysis of initiation and elevation dynamics across diverse issue areas. In contrast, challenger parties often concentrate on a narrower set of issues (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Green-Pedersen, 2019; Hobolt & de Vries, 2015). Nevertheless, I will later argue that the same dynamics are likely relevant to challenger parties as well. Second, mainstream parties continue to

constitute “the core of the party system” in many Western European countries (Green-Pedersen & Seeborg, 2023, p. 1; Grossman & Guinaudeau, 2021). Taken together, the behavior of mainstream parties and their politicians present an optimal case for examining the dynamics of initiation and elevation (see Paper 2, p. 13f).

The analyses in Paper 2 and Paper 3 yield significant insights. First, in Paper 2, I demonstrate that initiation and elevation of these initiations are distinct but interconnected behaviors, reflecting systematic actions by political parties and their politicians that are different from other types of behavior, such as responses to external events. Second, I show how—when a party has initiated a focus on an issue—MPs from that party can trigger discussions on Twitter with MPs from competing parties around the issue by elevating the initiated focus extensively. This finding is based on Vector Autoregression (VAR) models, with time lags as low as 15 minutes. Third, I show that both elevation, and the reactions from competing party MPs increase the extent to which the news media report on the issue on the day after the initiation. Fourth, in Paper 3, I demonstrate that government parties and their politicians can leverage social platforms to influence the opposition’s agenda in parliament: When a government party has initiated a focus on an issue on Twitter, elevation of this focus by that party’s MPs on Twitter increases the extent to which opposition MPs pose written questions to the minister about the issue. This dynamic does not work the other way around, with opposition parties being unable to influence government actors’ questioning behavior.

In sum, I find support for The Issue Initiation Model’s basic theoretical claim that the orchestrated efforts by parties and their MPs to initiate and elevate their focus can lead to a breakthrough in the sense that other important actors redirect their attention towards the issue. Table 1.1 summarizes the main focus in each of the three papers.

Table 1.1: The main focus in the three papers

	Paper 1	Paper 2	Paper 3
Main question	Does Twitter constitute an arena for party issue competition much in the same way as established political settings?	(How) can political parties initiate discussions with competing party actors on social media and influence the news media agenda?	(How) can political parties use social media to influence the agenda of competing parties in parliament?
Data	The population of tweets by Danish MPs, 2011–2019 (N = 474,280).	<p>The population of tweets by UK and Danish MPs during electoral terms in the 2015–2022 period (N = 5,615,629 tweets).</p> <p>The population of tweets by four mainstream parties in the UK and Denmark in the same period (N = 19,090 tweets).</p> <p>The population of news articles by six outlets in the two countries, covering the years 2015–2018 in the UK and 2015–2019 in Denmark (N = 752,611 articles).</p>	The same data as in Paper 2 supplemented with the population of MPs’ written questions to the minister during the 2015–2022 period in the two countries (N = 419,341 questions).

1.4. A model of social media behavior only?

The fact that this dissertation examines the behavior of political parties and politicians on social media naturally raises the question of whether the studied dynamics exist on these platforms only. In other words, is The Issue Initiation Model a model of social media behavior, or is it independent of the existence of these platforms?

Although the data in this dissertation does not provide a definitive answer to this question, I argue that the theorized dynamics are not inherently dependent on social media and likely extend to other forms of political communication that were relevant prior to the advent of social media and remain so today. For example, political parties may initiate their focus through press releases, press conferences, or sections on their websites. Elevation might, on the one hand, occur in ways that are difficult to observe systematically, such as through direct engagement with journalists—e.g., MPs making phone calls

to journalists—to elevate and signal commitment to their party’s focus. On the other hand, an easily observable example of elevation outside social media is found in parliamentary tools like questions to the minister, which offer an alternative means of studying elevation without reliance on social media data.

What social media has provided is a new set of tools to perform the same basic agenda-setting activities (cf. Jungherr, 2019). These platforms present political parties and politicians with new capabilities to perform these actions with greater immediacy and coordination. These actors can now post publicly whenever they wish, coordinate their actions precisely across members, and elevate their focus instantly multiple times throughout the day.

Social media therefore constitutes a *most likely* setting for observing the theorized dynamics: If initiation, elevation, and breakthrough are to occur anywhere, it is in the conducive environment of social media where parties and politicians have powerful tools to communicate and coordinate their efforts. Conversely, if these dynamics fail to manifest on social media, they are unlikely to exist in other settings.

Taken together, I argue that the theorized dynamics within The Issue Initiation Model are not inherently dependent on social media and likely exist outside these platforms. Political parties and politicians are likely to engage in efforts to initiate their focus on issues and elevate them using a variety of tools, from press releases and press conferences to calling journalists and parliamentary means like parliamentary questions. What social media has changed is not the nature of these dynamics but the tools available to execute them. Thus, while these platforms represent a new arena for political communication, the fundamental processes and dynamics of initiation, elevation, and breakthrough likely remain the same. Social media should be understood as a retooling—a set of new instruments that enhance already existing strategies—rather than a complete transformation of how parties and politicians try to set the agenda (see also Jungherr, 2019).

1.5. A look ahead

Taken together, this dissertation contributes substantially to our knowledge of political agenda setting. It does so by shedding new theoretical and empirical light on how parties can proactively set an agenda by initiating and elevating their focus on an issue. In the words of Schattschneider (1965, p. 66), “A democratic society is able to survive because it manages conflict by establishing priorities among a multitude of potential conflicts.” This dissertation provides new insight into how political parties and their politicians can influence this prioritization through strategic planning and orchestrated actions.

The remainder of this summary report is organized as follows: I first review the existing research in the area. Next, I introduce The Issue Initiation Model and examine its components in detail. Subsequently, I present the data underpinning the findings. I then analyze the empirical dynamics surrounding the key components of the model. Next, I outline the results related to the consequences of the theorized behavior. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the main takeaways and broader implications of the dissertation as a whole.

2. Existing studies

For at least six decades, scholars have studied political agenda-setting dynamics—i.e., why important actors end up attending to certain issues (Green-Pedersen & Walgrave, 2014). For Schattschneider (1965), these processes are ultimately a question of conflict and a matter of turning conditions into societal problems (see also Kingdon, 1984 for similar thoughts on the latter point).

John W. Kingdon (1984) later emphasized how strategic actors, timing, and chance play significant roles in making some problems salient on the political agenda. And Baumgartner and Jones (1993) developed these ideas further by focusing on how these dynamics are characterized by long periods of stability punctuated by short bursts of dramatic change. Like Kingdon, they highlighted the role of policy advocates seeking to attract attention to certain issues. What these seminal works share—beyond their explicit focus on why specific policy issues come to dominate political attention—is the recognition that chance alone does not explain the agenda. Instead, conflict, power, and strategy are *also* intrinsic to these processes.

Based on these insights, a significant branch—concentrating on the competition between political parties for promoting some issues at the expense of others—has emerged. This is the literature around party issue competition (Green-Pedersen, 2007). Inspired by the work of Robertson (1976) and Budge and Farlie (1983), scholars have long studied how political parties compete to make some policy issues more salient than others. A fundamental starting point here is that political attention to issues assumes a zero-sum character—i.e., more attention to one issue necessarily means less attention to others (Green-Pedersen, 2019b)

Ever since the seminal works by Robertson and Budge and Farlie, among others, during the last quarter of the previous century, a long-held idea was that parties compete by emphasizing different policy issues rather than engaging in a dialogue on the same issues (in addition to the work by Robertson and Budge and Farlie, see also the theory of issue evolution by Carmines and Stimson (1990) as well as the “dominance” and “dispersion” principles proposed by Riker (1996)). Political parties were seen as mainly talking past each other rather than confronting each other directly in “great debates” (Budge & Farlie, 1983, p. 23). According to this line of thought, parties were seen as being capable of shaping their own issue profiles without much consideration of the issue profiles of other parties—i.e., without being forced to adjust their issue profile according to that of other parties (Carmines & Stimson, 1990; Riker, 1996). Instead, parties were expected to primarily attend to issues that were electorally beneficial to them and them only.

John R. Petrocik built on exactly this logic by introducing the influential notion of *issue ownership*, which is constituted by a “[...] reputation for policy and program interest, produced by a history of attention, initiative and innovation toward problems, which leads voters to believe that one of the parties is more sincere and committed to do something” (1996, p. 826). According to this idea—which is very well and alive—parties must focus on the issues they own and downplay issues owned by opponents if they want to win elections (e.g., Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Seeberg, 2017, 2023; Seeberg & Nai, 2021; Tresch et al., 2015; Walgrave et al., 2015).

After the turn of the millennium, a wave of studies started questioning the claims and empirical predictions by the selective emphasize literature. In their influential article, Sigelman and Buell basically turned the predictions by the selective emphasize literature upside down by claiming that “[...] a more appropriate starting point is the assumption that the two sides will address the very same issues” (2004, p. 659). The authors introduced a measure of issue overlap, which measures the degree to which parties indeed talk about the same issues. Employing this measure on presidential campaigns in the U.S., Sigelman and Buell found a considerable degree of issue overlap among candidates. These insights sparked a number of studies that reproduced the authors’ conclusions in the U.S. (Damore, 2005; Kaplan et al., 2006; Sides, 2006) and in Western Europe (Dolezal et al., 2014).

The relevant question then is why parties to a high degree end up focusing on the same issues. Consequently, the most recent line of studies has concentrated on understanding why parties often address similar issues, even though electoral incentives typically discourage such overlap. Two primary explanations have been suggested.

First of all, real-world problems often demand political attention. In modern societies, political parties are constantly bombarded with information about the current condition of various aspects of society. Indeed, there is a general oversupply of information, or, as Simon (1983) argued, the world is “information-rich.” And since politics is very much the art of solving problems (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, 2015), information about changes in the state of problems in society is an important driver of party attention to policy issues. Voters expect political parties to solve emerging problems, and they might punish them for not doing so (Seeberg, 2017). Hence, attending to policy problems is largely a set assignment for parties (Kristensen, 2020; Tavits & Potter, 2015; Traber et al., 2020). However, as was argued above, what constitutes a problem—rather than merely a condition—is a high-stake political question (Kingdon, 1984; Schattschneider, 1965).

The stream of information to parties might come in various forms, and the character of the problems tend to vary enormously. For example, indicators

about the current state of the economy (GDP), the crime level, hospital waiting lists, climate reports (e.g., from the UN) or pupils' performance in schools (PISA reports) are statistics that parties know will always be readily available; what varies here is whether the information is from the last or the current month (year). In contrast, reports about unanticipated events like sudden revelations of contaminated water in some parts of the country, particularly brutal murders in public, or even a war in a neighboring country might demand immediate attention regardless of which issues parties would prefer to focus on. In the words of Kristensen et al. (2022, p. 1), "Whether it is an economic crisis leading to soaring unemployment rates and stalling economic growth or climate change causing increasingly severe weather with more droughts and flooding, these problems constantly put parties under pressure to devote attention to them."

Second, scholars have argued how political parties respond to the issue focus of their political competitors. Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010) proposed the idea of a "party system agenda," which implies that any one party cannot freely decide its issue attention without taking into consideration the issue foci of other parties. To illustrate with a simple example, a party cannot focus exclusively on an issue like immigration if all other parties begin emphasizing global warming. Indeed, this was the realization of the right-wing Danish People's Party during the Danish 2019 election campaign. This often forces parties to confront issues that they would rather avoid (Green-Pedersen, 2019b; Grossman & Guinaudeau, 2024). Scholars have studied specific dynamics of influence, such as how government parties respond to the issue attention of the opposition (e.g., Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Seeberg, 2023), how parties respond to the foci of parties from the same party family (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2015), and how mainstream parties respond to the niche parties' issue attention (Abou-Chadi, 2016; van de Wardt, 2015).

Even though much attention has been paid to how parties respond to their competitor's behavior, there is scant knowledge about if and how parties can indeed initiate discussions that their competitors then react to. What perhaps comes closest to doing so is the work by Henrik B. Seeberg (2015; 2013, 2023). Seeberg shows how opposition parties can even influence policy by emphasizing certain issues. Indeed, "the government is likely to adopt legislation that covers the opposition's position—even if making such policy on this issue deviates from its election platform—to silence the opposition agenda-setting." (Seeberg, 2023, p. 1). Yet, while these insights showing how opposition emphasis of an issue can spark legislation in that area are highly important, they do not shed light on how parties can proactively *start* discussions. This touches on a key distinction between issue emphasis and setting an agenda. As spelled out already in the introduction chapter, setting an agenda is about

proactively redirecting the attention of other actors towards an issue without reacting to already ongoing discussions. Instead, issue emphasize refers to talking about an issue, without necessarily initiating new discussions that did not already exist. In short, while the work by Seeberg shows that opposition issue emphasis can influence legislation, it does not address whether and how parties can set an agenda by starting a new discussion.

In summary, the latest line of research within the issue competition literature has concentrated heavily on the factors that *constrain* parties' issue focus. This is illustrated by the following quote by Grossman and Guinaudeau (2021, p. 30) arguing that “parties may be approached as ‘snakes’ in a tunnel of attention. This tunnel, defined by other parties' priorities and salient problems, is constraining and leaves only limited margins for manoeuvre.” While studies have shown that political parties can influence the agenda—and even legislation—by talking about an issue (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010, 2015; Seeberg, 2023), little is known about whether and how parties can, in fact, *start* discussions. Parties are implicitly portrayed as being able to proactively initiate discussions, yet the literature cannot explain *whether* and *how* parties can do so. In response, this dissertation sheds light on the fundamental assumption of party agency by theorizing and conceptualizing the efforts of parties and their politicians to proactively set an agenda. In the next chapter, I present the Issue Initiation Model accordingly.

3. Theory

3.1. Fundamental assumptions underlying The Issue Initiation Model

Before presenting the concepts within the model, I first lay forth two basic assumptions underpinning The Issue Initiation Model (these are also specified in paper 2, p. 6). First, political parties have electoral and ideological reasons for trying to redirect the attention of their political competitors and the mass media towards certain policy issues (Hobolt & de Vries, 2015; Petrocik, 1996). Second, parties can try to proactively generate attention around issues without inventing new issues—after all, few issues are truly “new.” Attempting to trace the ultimate origin of an issue would lead, as Kingdon (1984, pp. 72–73) described, to an “infinite regress.” In other words, the fact that a party does not “invent” an issue does not preclude it from proactively working to generate attention around that issue.

3.2. Initiation

If we want to study political parties’ proactive agenda-setting efforts—rather than their reactive behavior—it is essential to define a clear analytical starting point; that is, a “time zero” in the continuous process of agenda setting. Initiation is my proposed analytical tool to establish this starting point. Initiation is defined as the proactive efforts by political parties—not individual politicians—to redirect the attention of other important actors towards a certain issue by introducing their focus on the matter. It captures the point in time where a party reveals its focus. Initiation consists of three defining elements that together separate this behavior from other types of party behavior.

First, initiation is about a policy *issue*. This separates the concept from, for instance, negative campaigning or mere criticism of other actors. Note that by pointing to how initiation is about issues, I draw on a standard analytical lever within the literature to group bundles of related policy problems into broader issue categories (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2019; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Green-Pedersen, 2019b; Petrocik, 1996; Poljak, 2023). Yet, since political parties do not talk about issues such as transport or education in the abstract, initiations are almost always about specific policy problems related to these broader issue categories (e.g., highways or meal programs in schools).

Second, initiation is a *proactive* behavior, meaning that when initiating their focus on an issue, parties generally do not react to changes in the behavior of other important actors or events. Importantly, this sets it apart from

party communication that reacts to or comments on ongoing political discussions. In other words, the proactive aspect is what makes initiation an attempt to start discussions and redirect the attention of other actors towards a certain issue. Third, initiation is *forward looking* in the sense that the initiating party points to a policy problem that—at least according to this party—has not already been solved in the past. This separates initiations from party communication about, for instance, its own past achievements.

While initiation is a proactive and forward-looking behavior, the initiating party need not point to some specific solution to the problem for the statement to constitute initiation. Even though a party merely points to some problem without proposing a concrete solution that could help solve it, the statement is still a candidate for being coded as initiation. Consequently, initiations are different from the neighboring concept of “pledges” (Krishnarajan & Jensen, 2022). While initiation is a broad concept that captures parties’ efforts to create attention around a certain policy issue, pledges are not an agenda-setting strategy but are about shaping voters’ perceptions of a party’s policies in a certain area. An initiation can, however, contain a pledge.

In summary, initiation captures the proactive and forward-looking attempts of political parties to advance a policy issue on the agenda by revealing the party’s focus on the matter. Note that there are limits as to how often a party can initiate a focus on an issue. In particular, news worthiness is a scarce resource for parties. If a party were to create new initiations every day, the news media would likely lose interest in these initiations (Bennett, 1996).

3.3. Elevation

Elevation captures individual politicians’ promotion of their party’s focus. Elevation is a collective effort by the initiating party’s politicians to lift as a group. It is about politicians actively promoting their party’s focus, irrespective of whether this focus constitutes an initiation or not. On the one hand, politicians might elevate their party’s (reactive) critique of a competing party’s policy or the party’s response to a newly released TV documentary. On the other hand, for a political party that has initiated a focus on an issue, elevation is a way for the party and its politicians to demonstrate commitment to the initiated agenda. Elevating the initiated focus serves as a signal to other actors that the initiated focus is not merely a trial balloon but a high-priority agenda. In other words, to maximize the extent to which other important actors attend to the issue, politicians from the initiating party can elevate their party’s focus more or less intensively. This fits well with research within the social movement literature, suggesting how displaying commitment is a key factor to gaining the attention of political actors (Wouters & Walgrave, 2017).

Internal resources constrain how frequently parties can initiate and how extensively their politicians can elevate. Elevating an initiated focus requires organizational effort as politicians (and their staff) must dedicate attention to specific issues at particular times (Bauer et al., 2023). Re-election-oriented politicians may sometimes resist elevating their party's initiation, for example if it does not align with their constituency obligations (Ceron, 2017; Vigano, 2024).

In contrast to related concepts, elevation provides a distinct analytical lens for studying the collective efforts of politicians to promote issues. For instance, *issue salience* broadly refers to the prominence of a policy issue, often measured by the level of attention it receives in the news media (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008). And *issue expansion* focuses on how the discussion of an issue spreads to involve a wider range of actors across various societal arenas, such as interest groups (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Schattschneider, 1965; Paper 2, pp. 7-8). Instead, elevation sheds new light on how politicians “use their different voices to sing the same song” when their party attempts to set an agenda (paraphrasing a quote from my interview with a party strategist).²

3.4. The relationship between initiation and elevation

Figure 1.1 showed an arrow between initiation and elevation. This does not mean that elevation automatically follows from initiation. In fact, the degree to which a party and its politicians promote the initiated focus is likely to vary across initiations. Some initiations will hold greater importance for the party, resulting in more significant efforts to elevate them. That is, since elevation is a way for an initiating party and its politicians to signal commitment to the initiated agenda, politicians' elevation behavior when their party has initiated likely differs from when their party has not initiated. I delve more into these potential patterns in Chapter 5.

² I interviewed a current strategist from a Danish parliamentary party in early 2023, who opted to remain anonymous. The strategist's original quote regarding politicians' roles in promoting their party's messages stated: “It's like a choir with different voices singing the same song, bringing the same message. It's about bringing a push at the same time. It's about controlling the narrative.” Note that the primary purpose of the interview was for the author to gain overall insights into the perspectives of party strategists regarding contemporary agenda setting. It was not designed or conducted to serve as a distinct data source for the dissertation.

3.5. Breakthrough

When a political party has initiated its focus on an issue, elevation by its politicians is likely not without consequences. This is visualized by the arrow between “Elevation” and “Breakthrough” in Figure 1.1. I therefore now turn to discussing why elevation might lead to a breakthrough, meaning that competing party actors as well as the news media redirect their attention towards the initiated focus. That is, breakthrough zooms in on the behavior of actors other than the initiating party and its politicians. Hence, when theorizing the relationship between elevation and breakthrough, it is important to consider the motives and incentives of actors such as competing parties and their politicians as well as journalists.

This is a matter of probability and not determinism because elevation *increases* the chance that other actors will react to the initiated focus. In other words, the arrow from initiation via elevation to breakthrough does not mean that initiations will always lead to a breakthrough. Various factors—such as a new climate report or a new media report that demands political attention—may disrupt the party’s efforts to set an agenda. Still, in what follows, I argue that elevating the initiated focus generally increases chances that other actors will react.

3.5.1. Breakthrough with regard to competing parties’ agendas

There is good reason to expect that elevation can influence the behavior of *competing political parties and their politicians*. First, to the extent that actors from competing parties come to see the initiated focus as a high priority for the initiating party and its politicians, they may feel forced to respond. This is a likely scenario given that politicians know that journalists are continuously monitoring political actors’ behavior (Parmelee 2014, 2017; Ekman & Widholm 2015; Bukh & Mørch 2020). In other words, actors from competing parties might come to the conclusion that ignoring the initiated focus is really not an option (Green-Pedersen, 2007). Second and relatedly, irrespective of the anticipated behavior of journalists, actors from competing parties might think that the initiated focus and the communication elevating it should be criticized or questioned. This could be done in several ways, for instance by directly attacking the focus. Moreover, competing political actors could question or criticize the initiated focus by trying to change the framing implied with the initiated focus. For instance, in response to an initiated focus implying that children’s use of digital devices is a problem for their mental health, actors from competing parties may emphasize alternative factors other than social media—such as peer relationships or poverty—that could shed light on the trends of declining mental well-being among children.

Such reactions from competing parties could emerge for several reasons. For example, individual actors from these parties might engage because they themselves find that there is some need to respond to the initiated focus, perhaps because they simply disagree. That is, politicians might engage in discussions that can evolve in ways they did not foresee when they first reacted. At the same time, these reactions might also be launched in a more coordinated manner. Specifically, most political parties have, in recent years, established internal lines of communication through which they can share templates, graphics, and messages with their MPs (Bauer et al., 2023; Hanel & Marschall, 2013). In sum, when a political party has initiated a focus on a certain issue, competing political actors have various reasons to sometimes react and engage with actors from the initiating party. What is shared among these reasons is that—all else being equal—the more vigorously actors from the initiating party elevate the focus, the greater the incentive for actors from competing parties to respond.

3.5.2. Breakthrough on the news media agenda

The level of elevation is likely to influence not only the agenda of competing parties but also that of important actors outside the party system. Most notably, *traditional news media* remain a critical venue for parties to influence voters perceptions (Newman et al., 2024). It is well known that media coverage tends to “follow the trail of power” (Bennett, 1996, p. 378; Ryfe, 2006) in the sense that the behavior of powerful actors generally receives more coverage than that of less powerful actors. Furthermore, as early as the 1980s, Kingdon noted that “the press has the world’s shortest attention span” (Kingdon, 1984, p. 59). In contemporary societies, the rise of 24-hour news cycles and social media has created an ever-greater pressure on journalists to cover timely events almost as they unfold. Coupled with trends of “churnalism”—implying that journalists rely on pre-produced material such as press releases, tweets, or wire services (Kuhn & Nielsen, 2013)—this means that news outlets can be expected to be highly reactive to the behavior of powerful actors as this behavior unfolds. To the extent that the behavior makes it into one news outlet, other outlets are likely to follow suit.

Taken together, these traits provide fertile ground for political parties and politicians who wish to push an initiated focus on an issue onto the public agenda. To the degree that these actors elevate their initiated focus substantially—thus signaling that this focus is a high priority rather than a mere trial balloon—they increase the chances that journalists will find the focus relevant for their respective audiences. Conversely, if the initiating party and its politicians merely initiate their focus without actively elevating this focus, journalists will be less likely to perceive the party as being committed to prioritizing

the focus. In that case, the initiated focus is—all else equal—less newsworthy because it does not appear as a great priority for the party, reducing its perceived potential to influence the lives of citizens.

To the degree that the initiating party and its politicians succeed in engaging actors from competing parties in discussions around the initiated focus, this will likely be noticed by journalists. Specifically, conflict between powerful actors is a key ingredient in journalistic work; in the words of (Bennett, 1996, p. 377), “sources and viewpoints are ‘indexed’ (admitted through the news gates) according to the magnitude and content of conflict among key government decision makers or other players with power (as perceived by journalistic insiders) to affect the developments of a story” (see also Helfer and Aelst (2016). Discussions between actors from competing political parties hold exactly this potential. Furthermore, such discussions and conflicting views are likely to be seen by journalists as potentially important for citizens’ lives. After all, being aware of the positions of competing parties on societal problems is a prerequisite for making informed political decisions as a voter (Sigelman & Buell, 2004).

In summary, when a party has initiated its focus on a policy issue, elevation by the party’s politicians is an important activity for signaling to other important actors that the initiated focus is a high-priority agenda. In fact, I argue that elevation has consequences for the extent to which both competing parties and traditional news media attend to the initiated agenda. Despite various reasons why other actors outside and within the party system (do not) attend to the initiated focus, my argument is simply that the level of elevation is factored into the calculations of these actors.

However, it is important to note that no political party can be sure that their efforts to initiate a new discussion will be successful. Indeed, in approximately 52 pct. of all initiation cases in my data, there was no increase in the number of news articles on the day after the initiation compared to the day of the initiation. Only 14 pct. of cases saw an increase of more than 5 articles on the day after the initiation compared to the initiation day, and just 5 pct. experienced an increase of 10 or more articles. This illustrates that parties cannot simply initiate their focus and expect to set the agenda with certainty. After all, agenda-setting processes are messy and information is abundant. Before moving on to the next chapter, Table 3.1 summarizes the definitions of initiation, elevation, and breakthrough that were laid out in the current chapter.

Table 3.1: Definitions of key concepts

	Initiation	Elevation	Breakthrough
Definition	The proactive and forward-looking attempts of political parties to advance a policy issue on the agenda by revealing the party's focus on the matter	Politicians promote their party's focus	Other important actors redirect their attention towards the initiated focus
Actor(s)	A political party	Politicians	Competing political parties and their politicians (as seen from the perspective of the initiating party) and the news media

4. Data

4.1. The fortunes of social media data

Party competition scholars rely on multiple data sources, typically sources like party manifestos, press releases, or parliamentary activities. Each of these provides important insights and has spurred extensive research. Party manifestos offer systematic, longitudinal evidence on, among other things, policy positions and commitments (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Grossman & Guinaudeau, 2021, 2024; Vestergaard, 2023; Wagner, 2012). Press releases capture relatively frequent official announcements (Meyer et al., 2020; Seeberg, 2022). And parliamentary activities—such as questions to ministers and debates on the floor—shed light on party competition and individual MPs' behavior (Bevan & John, 2016; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Proksch & Slapin, 2012; Seeberg, 2020a, 2023).

Still, these data sources are less suited for my purposes. As argued earlier, I am interested in short-term dynamics, namely whether and how elevation influences the attention of other actors in the hours and days following the party's initiation. This allows for studying the temporal order of who says what when and examining the dynamics of agenda setting without the influence of news media articles and external events. Specifically, party manifestos are created around elections—approximately every fourth year—and press releases often appear weeks apart. While parliamentary activities can be more frequent, institutional rules often determine who speaks when, making it harder to observe how politicians elevate their party's focus. Moreover, some parliamentary procedures require mandatory responses (e.g., when MPs pose written questions), limiting the ability to assess whether competing parties freely choose to react.

In contrast, social media platforms address these challenges. First, posts appear in near real time, enabling me to observe the chronological sequence of who says what when (Barberá et al., 2019; Schöll et al., 2024). As Chapter 5 will show, this feature allows me to examine which actors move first. Second, external conditions remain relatively stable over a short time—e.g., journalists do not publish a physical news article once every few minutes—thus helping me isolate the influence of a party's communication efforts. Third, since any politician can post about any topic at any time, I can systematically observe how numerous actors within a party (not just spokespersons) participate in elevating their party's focus. Finally, as there is no legal obligation to respond, I can also assess whether attempts to engage competing political actors lead

to back-and-forth discussions or are simply ignored. However, while social media data offers various fortunes, there is good reason to believe that the theorized dynamics in this dissertation are not inherently dependent on social media data as was discussed in the introduction.

4.2. Twitter as a hotbed where discussions can erupt and travel to other venues

One social media platform of particular relevance for understanding contemporary party competition is Twitter. During the last decade, this was one of the most widely used platforms by politicians across the world (Haman and Školník, 2021). Several key features of Twitter make the platform especially well-suited for examining party competition and agenda-setting, as explained just below.

During the last decade, Twitter was among journalists' prime sources of inspiration and content for articles (Bane, 2019; Broersma & Graham, 2013; Chadwick, 2013; Zhang & Li, 2020). Accordingly, some studies employ what De Sio and Weber (2020) term the "press release assumption," which implies that political actors first and foremost use Twitter as a press release tool to communicate with the news media (De Sio & Weber, 2014; Shapiro & Hemphill, 2017). While Twitter has never been a platform for the general population (as its users tended to be younger and more politically engaged than the average citizen), it has served as a hotbed for partisan conflict. These debates could erupt on Twitter before then traveling to other forums—most notably, the mainstream news media—where the broader electorate were likely to pay attention. In other words, to the extent that a party succeeded in triggering a "twitter war," chances were generally good that the war would spread onto neighboring mainstream platforms (see e.g., Bane, 2019; Eriksen et al., n.d.; Gilardi et al., 2022; Langer & Gruber, 2021; Shapiro & Hemphill, 2017; Zhang & Li, 2020).

The reply function on Twitter facilitated direct interactions between users, while the retweet function allowed users to promote messages from others. These features have been fundamental to Twitter's role as a social media platform designed to foster dialogue and discussion (Jungherr et al., 2020; Russell, 2021). Moreover, the widespread use of hashtags contributed to making Twitter the place to be for obtaining and delivering real-time information. When debates unfolded on this platform, minutes or seconds—not weeks, not days, not hours—were potentially crucial for the further development of the dialogue (Su & Borah, 2019).

As a whole, Twitter data provides a unique window into parties' daily agenda-setting work in contemporary politics. Despite the fact that Twitter

has, in many ways, changed since Elon Musk’s takeover (Mezrich, 2023), and in spite of the fact that as of writing, many politicians and news agencies have migrated to other platforms, there is good reason to believe that the findings from this dissertation are still highly relevant for understanding future agenda setting. First, while Twitter was a particularly apt social media platform for studying dialogue and discussions of real-world events, this is not the only platform offering highly granular data about communication by political parties and their politicians. For instance, established platforms like TikTok or Facebook also allow every user to communicate instantly with very few formal limitations (Fowler et al., 2021; Poljak & Russell, 2024; Stuckelberger & Koedam, 2022). In other words, even though old platforms might vanish and new ones emerge, being able to communicate in real time with few limitations is a fundamental trait of any social media platform (Jungherr et al., 2020).

Second, the special features and dynamics of Twitter seem to have outlived the platform itself. Indeed, alternative platforms like Threads and Bluesky—the latter of which is, at the time of writing, taking over many frustrated users from X—imitate many of Twitter’s fundamental dynamics. On Bluesky in particular, one need only use the platform for a couple of minutes to realize how the basic setup of this platform (including posts, replies, hashtags, likes, and feeds) is almost identical to that of Twitter; also, Jack Dorsey was the founder of both platforms. Moreover, at the time of writing, it seems that Bluesky is slowly emerging as a new “intranet” between politicians and journalists (Sucio, 2024). Importantly, even if no future platform replicates Twitter, the fundamental insights from this dissertation will likely remain relevant for understanding future agenda setting. Twitter served as a space where elites—particularly journalists and politicians—could “meet,” discuss, and monitor each other’s behavior. As long as platforms facilitating such interactions exist, it is very likely that the findings will outlive Twitter and be highly relevant for understanding future agenda setting.

4.3. Collecting Twitter data

On that backdrop, I launched a massive effort to collect tweets by MPs and political parties in Denmark and in the UK. I leveraged Twitter’s API—the price of which skyrocketed in October 2022, making it impossible for me to use it after that point—to collect the population of MP tweets as well as all tweets by two mainstream parties in each country (the Conservatives and Labour in the UK, and the Liberals and the Social Democrats in Denmark). In total, the dataset consists of 19,090 party tweets³ and 5,777,817 MP tweets,⁴

³ 16,610 party tweets in the UK; 2,480 in Denmark.

⁴ 4,893,935 MP tweets in the UK; 883,882 in Denmark.

spanning the years 2011–2022 in Denmark and 2015–2022 in the UK. Notice that the dataset does not include election campaigns, which are defined as the month leading up to and including election day, because my analytical focus was on agenda setting outside election campaigns.

The UK and Denmark constitute proper cases to analyze the agenda-setting efforts of political parties and their politicians since the two countries' party and media systems share similarities but differ in important aspects. Both countries exhibit intense party competition over issue agendas, with relatively stable patterns of issue ownership (Seeberg, 2017). This implies that in these countries, parties can be expected to initiate their focus around issues to try influencing the attention of competing parties. Consequently, The Issue Initiation Model should be relevant in the competition between political parties in these two countries.

The UK, however, operates within a two-party dominant system in which Labour and the Conservatives primarily compete for government control. In contrast, Denmark's multiparty system includes approximately ten parties, often resulting in minority governments and fostering extensive legislative collaboration. Danish parties generally align with either the center-left "red" bloc or the liberal-conservative "blue" bloc (Green-Pedersen & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020). This could potentially imply that parties' efforts to initiate and elevate their focus is all the more important in the Danish context because each party is competing with a higher number of competitors for attention.

In terms of media systems, Denmark features moderate state involvement, whereas the UK has more limited state intervention, despite prominent institutions like the BBC (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). This difference could have implications for the degree to which the news media report on party initiations. For instance, greater state involvement in Denmark might foster media environments that prioritize or provide more consistent attention to parties' communications, particularly through public service broadcasting.

These differences between the two countries yield at least two significant advantages for this study. First, if similar dynamics are observed in both contexts, it strengthens the case for generalizing the arguments and concepts to other Western democracies. Second, the differences enable an exploration of how the magnitude and nature of the studied phenomena may vary between the two countries.

During the study period, Denmark experienced three different governments: two consecutive Liberal Party-led administrations (2015–2017 and 2017–2019) and a Social Democrat-led government (2019–2022). In contrast, the UK was under continuous Conservative rule throughout the entire period (Paper 2, pp. 13-14).

4.4. Content coding the tweets

Since I was interested in agenda-setting dynamics in tweets by MPs and parties, I captured the issue content of the tweets. Here, I follow an extant agenda-setting literature that has leveraged the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) coding scheme (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2019; Baumgartner & Jones, 2015; Seeberg, 2023; Vliegenthart et al., 2016). This approach aims to cover the entire policy agenda, and in contrast to alternative approaches like the CMP project, the CAP focuses on *issues*, not *positions* (Green-Pedersen, 2019a). The CAP coding scheme is, therefore, particularly well suited for my purposes. This scheme contains 22 macro categories and 230 subcategories.

I followed an extensive literature (e.g., Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Eissler et al., 2023; Green-Pedersen, 2019b; Green-Pedersen, 2020; Poljak, 2024; Russell, 2021; Sebok et al., 2024; Seeberg, 2023) and coded tweets into the macro categories (e.g., education or defense). This is because I focus on the competition between parties related to setting an agenda around policy issues that they see advantages in promoting. Relatedly, I was also interested in the dynamics around issue ownership, which inherently relates to broad issue categories like education or defense (Petrocik, 1996; Seeberg, 2017). Appendix A4 in Paper 1 shows the different issue categories within this approach. Notice that in the Danish context, I follow a common approach (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010) and add an EU category.

Note that focusing on broad issue categories makes it more challenging to find effects. To the extent that different texts discussing different policy problems are grouped under the same issue label, this introduces a degree of noise into the estimations. This noise makes it more challenging to trace how an initiated focus is elevated and potentially addressed by other actors. In other words, the reliance on broader issue categories means that my analyses—both of the dynamics surrounding initiation and elevation, as well as the effectiveness of elevation in leading to a breakthrough—take a conservative approach.

4.4.1. Content coding the tweets by Danish actors

When it comes to the tweets from the Danish actors, I coded these tweets back in 2021 and early 2022 before the release of the current generative AI models. Thus, I launched a massive manual coding effort in which I coded a randomly drawn sample of 34,242 Danish MP tweets by hand according to the CAP coding scheme. To assess the intra-coder reliability of this coding process, I manually coded a randomly drawn sample of 500 tweets selected from the total 34,242 tweets more than a year after the initial coding. This yielded a satisfying Krippendorff's alpha score of 0.79. I then fine-tuned an algorithm called BERT—which was considered state-of-the-art at the time and still is very close

to being so (Devlin et al., 2018; Sebok et al., 2024)—on the more than 34,000 manually coded tweets.

To test the accuracy of the BERT model, the manually coded tweets were split into training and test data, respectively.⁵ The BERT model predicting the CAP issue content of the tweets achieved a satisfying performance of weighted $F1 = 76$. This is comparable to the results of other similar studies (Hemphill et al., 2021; Sebok et al., 2024). It is common practice to use the F1 metric within machine learning (e.g., Hemphill et al., 2021; Sebok et al., 2024). The F1 scores represent the harmonic mean of a model’s “precision” and “recall.” For each category, precision represents the percentage of tweets that the model correctly classified into that category based on the manual coding of the test data. Recall, also referred to as sensitivity, indicates the proportion of hand-coded tweets in the test data assigned to a given category that the model successfully identified as belonging to that category. In essence, precision measures the model’s accuracy in differentiating a specific category from others, while recall evaluates the model’s effectiveness in detecting occurrences of a category (Loftis & Mortensen, 2020, pp. 19-20). In summary, by manually coding the issue content of over 34,000 tweets and fine-tuning a BERT algorithm using this dataset, I successfully predicted the issue content of more than 470,000 tweets from Danish MPs with a satisfactory accuracy, achieving a weighted F1 score of 76.

Apart from the issue content, I was also interested in the extent to which Danish MPs “self-personalize” when they tweet. This is a multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses various ways in which politicians communicate about themselves. While studies often conceptualize self-personalization differently (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Kruikemeier, 2014; McGregor et al., 2017; Metz et al., 2020), a commonly used distinction is between *private* and *professional* self-personalization. The former refers to politicians highlighting their private lives and activities (e.g., family events and fitness routines), while the latter focuses on references to their professional political work (Metz et al., 2020; Van Aelst et al., 2012; see Paper 1, p. 5). Appendix A3 in Paper 1 elaborates on the coding process and the relationship between the categories.

To capture self-personalization in the Danish MP tweets, I also—in addition to coding the issue content—manually coded the sample of 34,242 randomly drawn tweets according to whether they contained either professional, private, or no self-personalization. I then fine-tuned a separate BERT model,

⁵ It is common practice to use either an 80–20 or a 90–10 split when dividing data into training and test sets. I tested both configurations and found that my models performed with greater accuracy using the 80–20 ratio. Consequently, the training dataset included 27,321 tweets, while the test dataset comprised 6,921 tweets.

enabling me to capture the extent to which Danish MPs self-personalize when they tweet. The model achieved a weighted F1 score of 89 when classifying tweets into the two self-personalization categories. While I am not aware of other studies that automatically classify tweets into comparable categories, this figure is reasonable, and my findings regarding MPs' person-focused communication (see Figure 4.1 below) are consistent with the analysis of hand-coded tweets. Appendix A6 in Paper 1 provides a detailed overview of the training process, performance, and face validity of the two supervised BERT models.

4.4.2. Content coding the tweets by the UK actors

I collected the tweets by the UK actors in the fall of 2023—at a later point in time than the tweets by the actors from Denmark. From a practical perspective, this was key for the coding procedure since at that time, the *CAP Babel Machine* had been released and made open source (cf. Sebok et al., 2024). This is a framework that leverages the BERT model's successor: the RoBERTA model. The model was fine-tuned using a variety of political documents, including party manifestos, parliamentary speeches, and news articles (Sebok et al., 2024, p. 10). Crucially, this meant that I could skip the manual coding process for the UK tweets and leverage the CAP Babel Machine to predict the issue content of these tweets employing the CAP coding scheme.

I checked the accuracy of the model's predictions by hand coding a randomly drawn sample of 300 tweets from UK MPs and comparing the manually assigned issue categories with the predictions generated by the CAP Babel Machine. This comparison resulted in a weighted F1 score of 59. However, my analysis revealed that the model exhibited a high false positive rate for the culture issue, frequently misclassifying tweets as related to cultural matters when they were not. Excluding the culture category from the analysis improved the weighted F1 score to 67. Notably, removing culture-related tweets does not affect the findings of this dissertation (cf. Appendix A2 in Paper 2).

4.5. Why MP tweets are a good source for studying party competition dynamics on social media

A foundational step in leveraging Twitter to understand the agenda-setting efforts of parties and their politicians is to determine whether their communication on this platform aligns with the dynamics of party competition observed in traditional political arenas such as parliament or the news media. Alternatively, if politicians' communication has been "fundamentally changed" (Metz et al., 2020, p. 1491) and platforms like Twitter are rarely used to advance substantial policy discussions for their parties, then studying such

data would offer limited value to scholars examining political parties' agenda-setting strategies. Paper 1, therefore, investigates the following question: *Does Twitter constitute an arena for party competition much in the same way as established political settings?*

To get at this question, I examine the population of tweets by Danish MPs during two electoral terms: 2011–2015 and 2015–2019 (N = 474,280). Denmark is a relevant case to test the extent to which Twitter constituted an arena for party competition in a manner comparable to traditional political settings because most studies addressing this question have primarily examined the US case (e.g., Hemphill et al., 2021; Russell, 2018).

Before examining the extent of party competition dynamics in the Danish MP tweets, I present the share of tweets focusing on a policy issue and/or containing a self-personalizing aspect.⁶ This is an important step to get a first impression of whether MPs' behavior on Twitter is markedly different from their behavior in other established arenas.

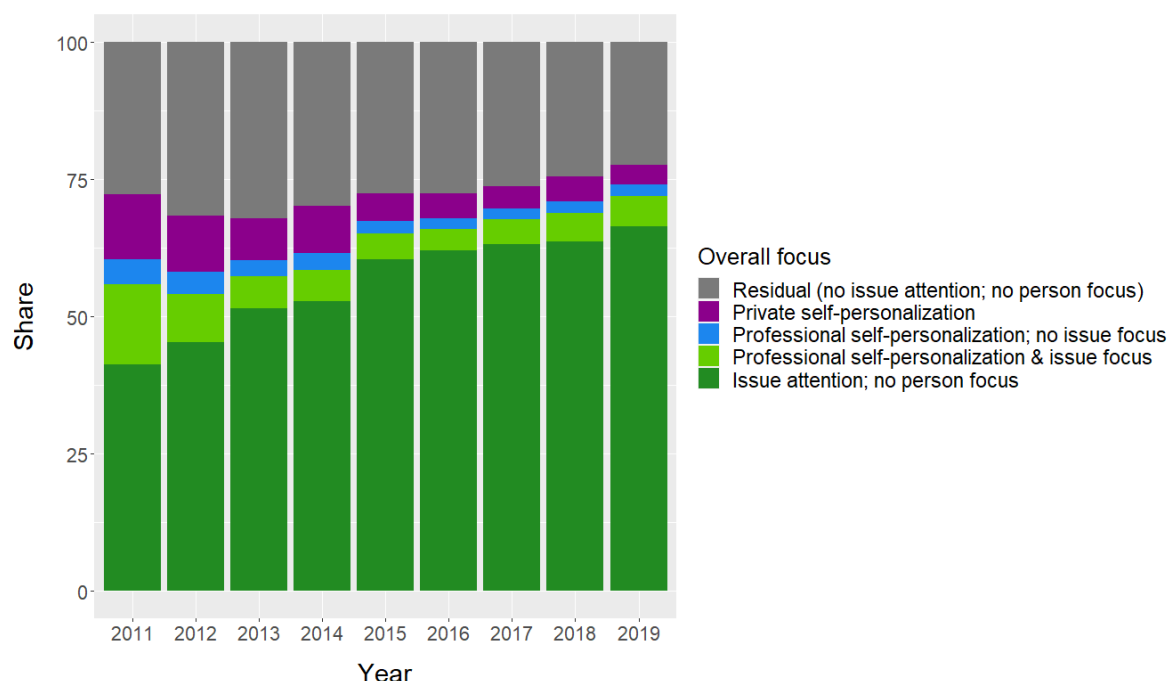
Figure 4.1 illustrates that in 2011, approximately 55 pct. of all tweets had a policy-issue focus. By 2015, this figure had risen to around 65 pct., and by 2019, about 71 pct. of tweets addressed a policy issue. In contrast, the share of tweets focusing on MPs' personal selves has consistently been lower and has declined over time. In 2011, around 32 pct. of all tweets featured either the MPs' own political activities (professional self-personalization) or private lives (private self-personalization), falling to about 15 pct. in 2015 and roughly 11 pct. in 2019⁷. Thus, policy issues receive significantly more attention than self-personalization in Danish MPs' tweets—an emphasis that has grown stronger over time.⁸

⁶ As what follows summarizes the most important arguments and findings from Paper 1, parts of the description of the results that follow are taken more or less directly from that paper.

⁷ Since I employ two different BERT models (one for policy issues, one for self-personalization) that were not dependent on each other, a limited number of tweets (2,533) are classified as containing both a policy issue focus *and* a focus on own private life (private self-personalization), even though I treated these two categories in the manual coding process as mutually exclusive. Since the classification of these tweets does not align with my manual coding scheme, I disregard them in the presentation and discussion of Figure 4.1. This has no implications for my substantial conclusions whatsoever, since they merely constitute 0.5% of all tweets.

⁸ In total, 136,131 tweets were classified as residual. In Appendix A11 in Paper 1, I examine the content of these tweets and show how, reassuringly, neither issue focus nor person focus is prevalent in these tweets. Rather, the residual tweets are, in general, noticeably shorter than other tweets and much more likely to contain dialogue than other tweets.

Figure 4.1: Danish MPs' level of issue attention and self-personalization over time



Note: N = 471,747 tweets. Note that 2,533 tweets (0.5 pct. of all tweets) have been excluded from this figure for reasons described in footnote 8.

Having established that issue attention is a key component of Danish MPs' tweets, the next relevant question is whether fundamental dynamics related to parties' issue competition in established arenas travel to MP tweets. Existing literature has demonstrated how issue competition dynamics shape politicians' communication in traditional political settings such as parliament (Baumgartner, 1989; Seeberg, 2023) and the news media (Thesen, 2013). These findings indicate that to understand politician communication, party interests must be taken into account.

A fundamental issue competition dynamic revolves around the issue ownership concept. As mentioned in Chapter 2, this consists of a "reputation for policy and program interest, produced by a history of attention, initiative and innovation toward problems." (Petrocik, 1996, p. 826). A basic implication of the issue ownership concept is that certain issues are more favorable for a given party, as an increase in the salience of these issues is generally advantageous for the party in its competition with others. Consequently, parties tend to emphasize issues they are perceived to "own" while downplaying those they do not (Seeberg, 2017, 2020; Walgrave et al., 2015). In the Danish context during the period studied, center-left parties were associated with ownership of issues like health, labor, and education, whereas liberal-conservative parties were seen as owning topics such as macroeconomics, domestic commerce, and defense (Stubager et al., 2016).

Consequently, to the extent that MPs' communication on Twitter follows this basic party competition dynamic, we should observe that MPs whose party owns an issue are generally more likely to tweet about this issue compared to MPs whose party does not own the issue. Figure 4.2 displays the results of a logit model regressing MPs' party bloc affiliation (red or blue) on the probability of tweeting about red or blue issues, confirming that red party MPs are more likely to focus on red issues. Specifically, the average predicted probability of tweeting about red issues (health, energy, environment, labor, education, and social welfare) is around 0.70 for red party MPs compared to about 0.55 for blue party MPs. Given that the dependent variable is dichotomous, the probabilities of emphasizing blue issues (macroeconomics, law and crime, defense, domestic commerce, and foreign trade) are therefore $(1 - 0.70 =) 0.30$ for red party MPs and $(1 - 0.55 =) 0.45$ for blue party MPs. This result holds when controlling for party government status (i.e., whether the party is a government, opposition, or support party). This suggests that issue ownership is an important aspect of MP social media communication, even after control for the shifting government coalitions in Denmark during the examined period.

A key finding within the party issue competition literature is that despite parties' issue ownerships, not all parties are equally free to focus on their preferred issues (Bevan & John, 2016; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Seeberg, 2023; Vliegenthart et al., 2011). Opposition parties typically have more flexibility to prioritize issues that align with their strategic interests as they are not held directly accountable for addressing policy problems (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010). In contrast, government parties face the dual challenge of addressing a wide range of policy issues and implementing policies. This often requires them to focus on topics that may not offer immediate strategic benefits to avoid criticism for neglecting the solutions to important problems (Kristensen et al., 2022; Tavits & Potter, 2015).

Figure 4.2: Average predicted probability of tweeting about red issues for blue bloc and red bloc MPs, respectively

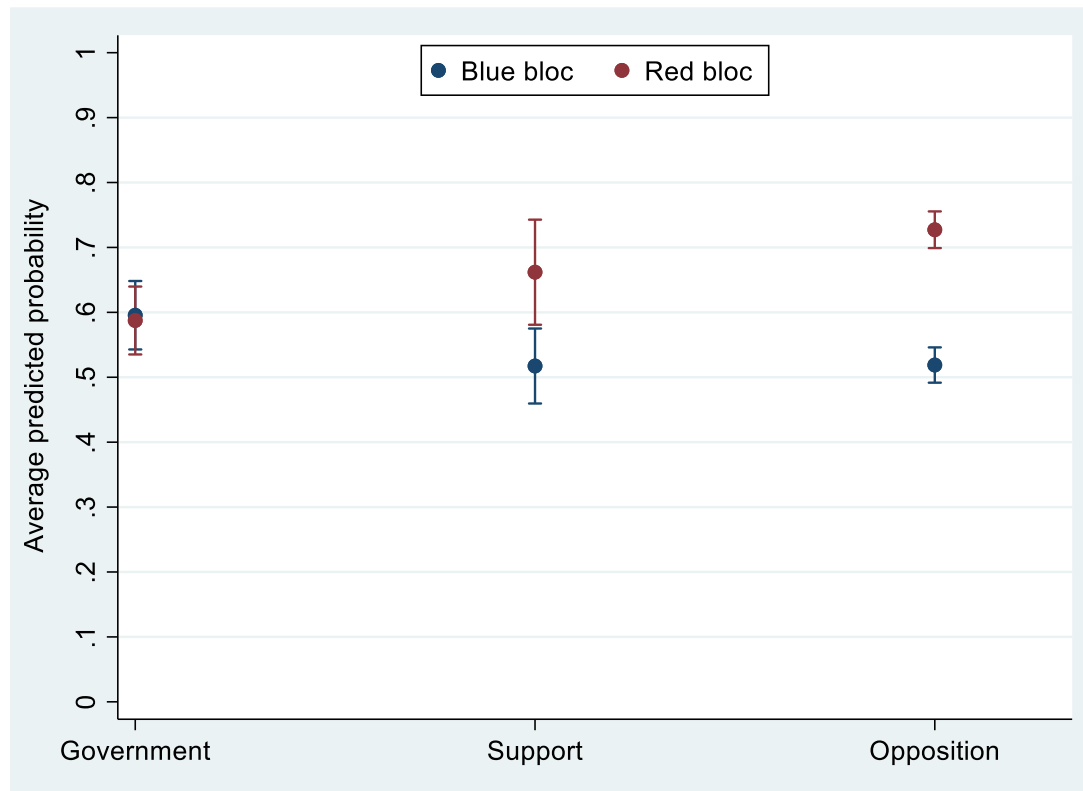


Note: N = 134,518. Estimates are calculated on the basis of the logit model in Model 1 in Paper 1. Vertical lines mark 95 pct. confidence intervals. Note that this analysis only includes tweets with a focus on red or blue issues. Coding of dependent variable, issue attention: 0 = blue issues, 1 = red issues. The following controls are included in the model: MP (1) constituency, (2) age, (3) gender, as well as separate dummies for whether the MP is (4) the party leader, (5) the party group head, (6) a minister, and (7) separate dummies capturing whether the MP was a member of the parliaments' different committees, and finally (8) a variable measuring the number of committees the MP represented at the time of posting.

To the extent that these dynamics extend to MPs' communication on social media, we would expect their focus on party-owned issues to be influenced by their party's status as either part of the government or the opposition. This pattern is exactly what Figure 4.3 below shows. The figure shows that opposition party MPs generally devote more tweets to their party's owned issues than MPs from governing parties do. Specifically, for MPs in the blue bloc, the average predicted probability of tweeting about red issues is 0.59 when they are in government compared to 0.52 when they are in opposition, indicating that these MPs tweet less about blue issues while in office. This effect is even more pronounced for red party MPs: Their probability of focusing on red issues is 0.58 when in government but rises to 0.72 in opposition. This strongly suggests that the distinction between government and opposition parties—a

distinction that has proven to be a fundamental party competition dynamic in traditional arenas—also travels to MP communication on Twitter.

Figure 4.3: Average predicted probability of tweeting about red issues under varying party bloc and party government status conditions



Note: N = 134,518. Estimates are calculated on the basis of the logit model in Model 2 in Paper 1. Vertical lines mark 95 pct. confidence intervals. Note that this analysis only includes tweets with a focus on red or blue issues. Coding of dependent variable, issue attention: 0 = blue issues, 1 = red issues. The following controls are included in the model: MP (1) constituency, (2) age, (3) gender, as well as separate dummies for whether the MP is (4) the party leader, (5) the party group head, (6) a minister, and (7) separate dummies capturing whether the MP was a member of the parliaments' different committees, and finally (8) a variable measuring the number of committees the MP represented at the time of posting.

Finally, another factor that has been shown to influence MPs' attention to issues in traditional arenas is their committee memberships (Eissler et al., 2023). MPs function as representatives of their parties within these committees. And given that certain policy issues are more advantageous for a party (Petrocik, 1996), we should observe that committee members from a party that owns the issues relevant to the committee's work are more likely to tweet about those issues than members of the same committee whose party does not own these issues. Eissler et al. (2023) identify exactly this dynamic when MPs speak in parliament.

Figures 4.4 and 4.5 demonstrate that these issue-ownership dynamics also hold true for Danish MPs' tweets. Specifically, Figure 4.4 shows that among

blue committee members (i.e., members of committees related to blue issues), MPs from blue parties have an average predicted probability of 0.52 of tweeting about blue issues, whereas red party MPs on the same committees only reach 0.34. A similar pattern appears for red committee members (i.e., members of committees related to red issues), although the gap is somewhat smaller. As seen in Figure 4.5, red committee MPs whose party owns the relevant issues have an average predicted probability of 0.75 of tweeting about red issues compared to 0.62 for red committee MPs whose party does not own these issues. Together, these findings strongly suggest that party issue ownership significantly shapes committee-related communication on Twitter.

Figure 4.4: Average predicted probability of tweeting about blue issues for blue committee members from red and blue parties, respectively



Note: N = 85,074. Estimates are odds ratios from Model 3 in Paper 1. Vertical lines mark 95 pct. confidence intervals. Note that this analysis only includes tweets with a focus on red or blue issues. Coding of dependent variable, issue attention: 0 = red issues, 1 = blue issues. The following controls are included in the model: MP (1) constituency, (2) age, (3) gender, as well as separate dummies for whether the MP is (4) the party leader, (5) the party group head, (6) a minister, and (7) a variable measuring the number of committees the MP represented at the time of posting.

Figure 4.5: Average predicted probability of tweeting about red issues for red committee members from blue and red parties, respectively



Note: N = 82,933. Estimates are odds ratios from Model 4 in Paper 1. Vertical lines mark 95 pct. confidence intervals. Note that this analysis only includes tweets with a focus on red or blue issues. Coding of dependent variable, issue attention: 0 = blue issues, 1 = red issues. The following controls are included in the model: MP (1) constituency, (2) age, (3) gender, as well as separate dummies for whether the MP is (4) the party leader, (5) the party group head, (6) a minister, and (7) a variable measuring the number of committees the MP represented at the time of posting.

In summary, Paper 3 shows how MPs' communication on Twitter largely follows the same dynamics as their communication in more established arenas such as when asking parliamentary questions or appearing in the news media. This is a strong indication that the tweets by these actors are an integral aspect of the competition between political parties to shape the agenda. In other words, MPs' tweets play a central role in contemporary agenda setting. This is good news because it means that Twitter data in general—and MPs' tweets specifically—is a highly relevant source when studying the efforts of political parties and their politicians to set an agenda.

4.6. How the data collection extends beyond social media

Despite the opportunities provided by social media data when it comes to understanding political agenda setting as discussed earlier, there is good reason to not merely harness data from these platforms. In particular, *parliament* and *traditional news media platforms* are important arenas for scholars studying agenda-setting dynamics. Relatedly, they serve as fruitful data sources for studying the extent to which initiation and elevation by parties and their politicians lead to a breakthrough in other arenas than social media.

Regarding the news media arena, traditional news outlets still serve as agenda-setting intermediaries, amplifying political discussions that reach the broader electorate. This is particularly the case for social media platforms like Twitter, which has been an intranet between political actors and journalists rather than a forum for average citizens. Importantly, many voters still rely on traditional media for political information, making it a critical venue for parties to influence voter perceptions (Newman et al., 2024).

When it comes to the parliamentary venue, even though politicians and parties spend increasing amounts of time and (staff) resources on social media (IDA, 2019), parliament is a markedly different arena. Needless to say, this is where policy is enacted. Moreover, talk in parliament is not always cheap since these activities are typically regulated legally. For example, when ministers answer questions from MPs, they are obliged to answer correctly (in addition to answering within a certain number of days). Hence, communication in parliament remains far from irrelevant. Taken together, the parliamentary and the news media venues remain highly relevant for understanding contemporary agenda setting.

On that backdrop, my data collection goes beyond Twitter and includes data from parliament and the news media. First, I leveraged parliament's API in each of the countries to obtain a unique dataset covering the population of written questions to the ministers in the Danish and the UK parliament spanning the years 2015–2022 ($N = 419,341$ questions). Written questions are particularly well suited for studying how communication on social media platforms travels to parliament since this is one of the most extensively studied types of parliamentary activities within agenda-setting literature (Garritzmann, 2017; Green-Pedersen, 2010; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Seeberg, 2023). MPs can submit questions to relevant ministers on any topic, either electronically or by mail. In both countries, ministers are obligated to provide responses to these questions within a week (Garritzmann, 2017, p. 13).

I captured the issue content of these questions by harnessing the CAP Babel Machine mentioned earlier, which is neat because I then use the same

coding scheme as was used when coding the issue content of the tweets. This allows me to measure the extent to which the issue discussions from Twitter travel to parliament. To evaluate the accuracy of the model's predictions, I manually coded a randomly selected sample of 200 written questions from each country and compared my coding with the Babel Machine's classifications. The results indicate a satisfying performance by the Babel Machine, with weighted F1 scores of 0.73 for the Danish data and 0.72 for the UK data.

Next, I obtained access to a novel dataset comprising the population of news articles from three major outlets in each country: the leading left-leaning broadsheet, the leading right-leaning broadsheet, and one mass-market newspaper. This dataset comprises a total of 752,611 articles, including those from *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, and *The Sun* in the UK, as well as *Politiken*, *Jyllands-Posten*, and *Ekstra Bladet* in Denmark. This data was generously provided by Gunnar Thesen (Thesen & De Vries, 2024). Like all other material in this dissertation, the news articles were coded according to the CAP coding scheme. The approach used by Thesen and colleagues to code the news articles into CAP categories is outlined in Thesen and De Vries (2024). The authors achieved a weighted F1 score of 64 for Danish articles and 69 for UK articles.

In sum, social media has become a highly relevant data source for scholars interested in agenda-setting dynamics. It offers fortunes such as the data being highly granular and the fact that any actor is formally free to post about anything. Moreover, my results from Paper 1 strongly suggest that MPs' communication on Twitter largely follows the same dynamics as their communication in more established arenas. Still, other arenas like parliament and mainstream news media are, for different reasons, essential to understanding the consequences of parties' and their politicians' agenda-setting efforts on social media. For that reason, my data collection goes beyond social media platforms. With these points in hand, and with all text being content coded according to the CAP coding scheme, the next chapter redirects the focus towards showing the empirical dynamics around two key concepts within The Issue Initiation Model: initiation and elevation.

5. Empirical patterns around initiation and elevation

Having introduced the Issue Initiation Model and described the dissertation's underlying data in the previous two chapters, I now turn to how I measured initiation and elevation using social media data, as well as empirical patterns around the two concepts. Note that the final concept in the model—break-through—will be operationalized and analyzed in the next chapter.

5.1. Measuring initiation

For the initiation concept to hold empirical value, two conditions must be satisfied. First, the concept must be reliably identifiable through the three constitutive criteria: It pertains to an issue, is proactive, and is forward looking. Second, initiations must occur without prior changes—namely increases—in the attention the issue received on the political agenda preceding the initiation. These two conditions will be evaluated below. The two conditions serve to solve the key challenge, which is to identify initiation as a distinct type of behavior, different from mere attention to an issue.

To measure initiations by political parties, I resort to tweets by mainstream parties in the UK and Denmark. The relevant parties are the Conservatives (@Conservatives) and Labour (@UKlabour) in the UK as well as the Liberals (@venstredk) and the Social Democrats (@Spolitik) in Denmark. Tweets posted by party accounts offer the authoritative source of party communication on Twitter as they are generally managed by party staff in close collaboration with party leadership (Bauer et al., 2023). To further ensure that the tweets reflect authoritative messages from the parties, I exclude any posts that are retweets, quoted tweets, or replies. This process yields a novel dataset of 19,090 original tweets from the four major parties in both countries.⁹

All these party tweets were manually coded in chronological order within each party. Specifically, I organized all original tweets for each party based on their creation time and proceeded to code them sequentially. This information was aggregated to the daily level so that for each day, we get information about whether each party initiated a focus on some policy issue.¹⁰

⁹ 16,610 party tweets in the UK; 2,480 in Denmark.

¹⁰ In about 3.5 pct. of all initiations, the two mainstream parties within the same country initiated their focus on the same issue on the same day. Reassuringly, leaving out these initiations from the analyses does not change the results in this dissertation.

The party tweets were coded as initiations if they revealed a focus on a policy issue, were proactive, and were forward looking. When it comes to the first condition, party tweets that did not fit into one of the CAP issue categories were disregarded. For instance, the following tweet by the UK Labour party did not qualify as an initiation because it is not about a policy issue: “Boris Johnson is unfit to lead our country”.

As for the second condition—i.e., the tweet has to be proactive—a number of situations would disqualify a tweet from being coded as initiation. First, if a party comments on the *actions of other actors* in the immediate past, the party tweet is not an initiation. For instance, if a party refers to some proposal or political deal by other parties (including itself) that was made in the immediate past before the party’s tweet, this would be *reactive* behavior and would not constitute an initiation. This also applies if the party uses another party’s actions more generally in the immediate period before the statement as a lever to point to its own priorities. For example, an opposition party might criticize a new political deal by the government related to the reduction of CO₂ emissions only to state that the party itself wants to do much more in the area. Even if the party points to some intended action that it wants to prioritize in the future, this is still a reactive strategy since it reacts to the government’s actions. However, we can imagine an alternative scenario where a party criticizes the government for its lack of action regarding some problem (e.g., hospital overcrowding) and indicates that some action should be taken. This constitutes initiation insofar as the initiating party does not react to some specific action or issue attention by the government in the immediate period before the statement. Moreover, if a party, for instance, criticizes the government for the consequences of some legislation that was passed a substantial time ago (e.g., six months) and indicates that some action should be taken, then this would constitute an initiation. What is important here is that the party does not react to some development that happened in the immediate period before the statement.

Second, party tweets that comment on ongoing *real-world events*—such as news articles, documentaries, or interest group reports—are not coded as initiation. For instance, the following tweet by a Danish party is not proactive: “We stand firmly together with our Austrian friends in the defense of freedom of speech and our free, democratic society. The scourge of terrorism must and will be combated. #dkpol.”

Third, if a political party posts about *special occasions that the party itself did not establish* (e.g., Mental Health Awareness Week, Pride, Danish National Flag Day, and May 1st) and the content directly relates to that occasion, then these statements are not considered initiations. Fourth, the same principle applies to tweets about *ongoing political negotiations*: If a party

comments on its priorities leading up to talks (e.g., in relation to a defense agreement or budget negotiations), it is not deemed initiation as long as the focus remains strictly tied to the predetermined topic of the negotiations. Consider the following tweet, which addresses upcoming defense negotiations in Denmark: “The many billions allocated for Denmark’s defense should not only be spent on ammunition. We should also invest heavily in military research. For example, we should establish a new research center in defense technologies! #dkpol.” Here, the party focuses on an issue that is already defined by the forthcoming defense negotiations. However, this restriction applies only if the statement strictly aligns with the negotiation topic. For example, if a party focuses on additional funding for psychiatry during broader budget negotiations, this would be a candidate for initiation since budget talks typically span numerous issues, and the party is proactively steering attention toward psychiatry.

Lastly, regarding the third condition—that the tweets must be forward looking—any statement that focuses on past or current action does not qualify as initiation. For instance, when a governing party refers to a measure already enacted (e.g., “We are now abolishing the education ceiling. Unfortunately, it will be without support from @venstredk and Tommy Ahlers”), it is not forward looking and hence not an initiation (Appendix A3, Paper 2).

Table 5.1 illustrates specific examples of tweets by the four mainstream parties that are (not) coded as initiation (the table reproduces Table A1 in Appendix A3, Paper 2). A student assistant was trained to test the intercoder reliability of the coding. The test yielded satisfying results. Specifically, the Krippendorff’s alpha values for the Danish and UK tweets were 0.65 and 0.45, respectively, while the corresponding percentage agreement scores were 94 pct. and 95 pct. The substantial gap between the Krippendorff’s alpha value and the percentage agreement in the UK context arises from the relatively high number of tweets coded as non-initiations. Specifically, Labour and the Conservatives produced 16,610 tweets, but only 770 of these (4.6 pct.) involved initiation. In comparison, the two Danish parties produced 2,480 tweets, of which 364 (14.6 pct.) constitute initiation. Krippendorff’s alpha assumes that coding non-occurrences is simpler than coding occurrences, which effectively underestimates overall reliability in the UK data. Accordingly, the test underestimates the overall reliability of the coding process in the UK context, especially given that identifying non-initiations is just as crucial and complex as detecting initiations in party tweets (cf. Appendix A3, Paper 2).

Table 5.1: Initiation coding examples

Party post	About a policy issue?	Proactive?	Forward looking?	Coded as initiation?	Country
“Quick loans are like quicksand. It sucks you in and holds you down. It’s time to confront quick loans.”	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	DK
“The government is once again trying to give large tax breaks to the wealthiest. At the same time, plans are being aired to cut unemployment benefits for young people. Is it just a coincidence?”	Yes	No	No	No	DK
“Who has the green ambitions for Denmark? The government wants to lower electricity tariffs. We want to make Denmark a green superpower again.”	Yes	No	Yes	No	DK
“JUST ANNOUNCED: The next Labour government will introduce a National Living Wage for all workers, including under-18s. With us? Sign our petition: https://action.labour.org.uk/page/s/national-living-wage... ”	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	UK
“Everything you need to know about our proud record on jobs #PMQs http://conservatives.com/sharethefacts/2018/09/our-strong-economy-means-record-highs-for-jobs... ”	Yes	No	No	No	UK
“First, the Tories slashed adult social care funding. Now they are scrapping free TV licenses for over 75s. Think older people deserve better treatment than this? Sign our petition and pass it on http://labour.org.uk/tvlicence 1:05 ”	Yes	No	Yes	No	UK

Note: The table reproduces Table A1 in Appendix A3, Paper 2. Note that tweets from Denmark have been translated by the author.

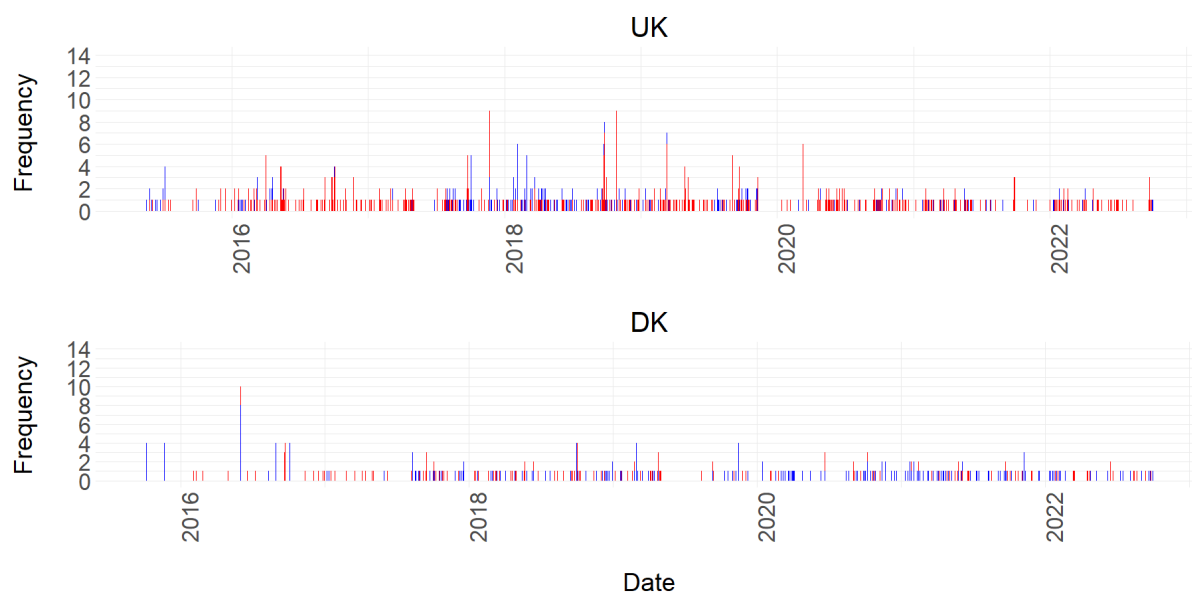
5.2. Initiation in the UK and Denmark

Having laid forth the basic logics underpinning the process of manually identifying initiations, we are now ready to have a look at the empirical dynamics around initiation in my dataset. We will start out with the distribution of initiations across parties and countries. Next, we test the validity of the initiation concept by examining the extent to which it represents proactive behavior. Specifically, we assess the critical condition that when parties initiate, they are not simply reacting to ongoing discussions.

5.2.1. The distribution and content of initiations

How many initiations did the four mainstream parties in the two countries create in the examined 2015–2022 period? Figure 5.1 answers this question. First, the figure shows how the initiations were fairly evenly spread across the period. In the UK, a total of 770 tweets that constitute initiations were created. In Denmark, the Social Democrats and the Liberals created a total of 364 initiations in total. These are substantial numbers given that there was, on average, around one initiation every 3 days in the UK and every 7 days in Denmark. Recall that both internal and external resources limit how often parties can initiate. Taken together, even though parties do not initiate every day, initiation is a prevalent and widespread phenomenon by political parties.

Figure 5.1: Number of initiations per day across parties and countries

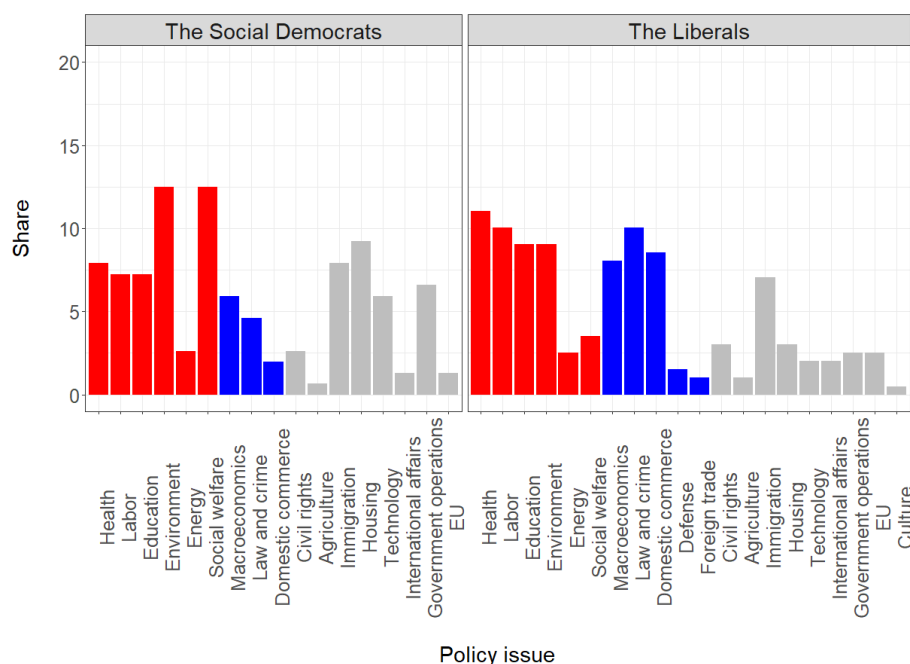


Note: Red bars indicate the frequencies for Labour (the Social Democrats), while blue bars indicate it for the Conservatives (the Liberals). On days that both parties in each country created an initiation, the bars are placed on top of each other.

The next natural question is what the content of these initiations actually is? First, the share of initiation tweets that include a proposed solution to the problem in focus is 39 pct. in the UK and 49 pct. in Denmark (not shown). Second, Figures 5.2 and 5.3 below reveal which issues the parties initiate their focus on. For the UK, red-colored issues are owned by Labour, while the Conservatives own issues colored with blue. For Denmark, issues that are colored red are owned by the center-left red bloc and thus the Social Democrats, whereas blue-colored issues are owned by the liberal-conservative blue bloc including the Liberals. Gray-colored bars represent shares for issues that are not clearly owned by any party for both countries.

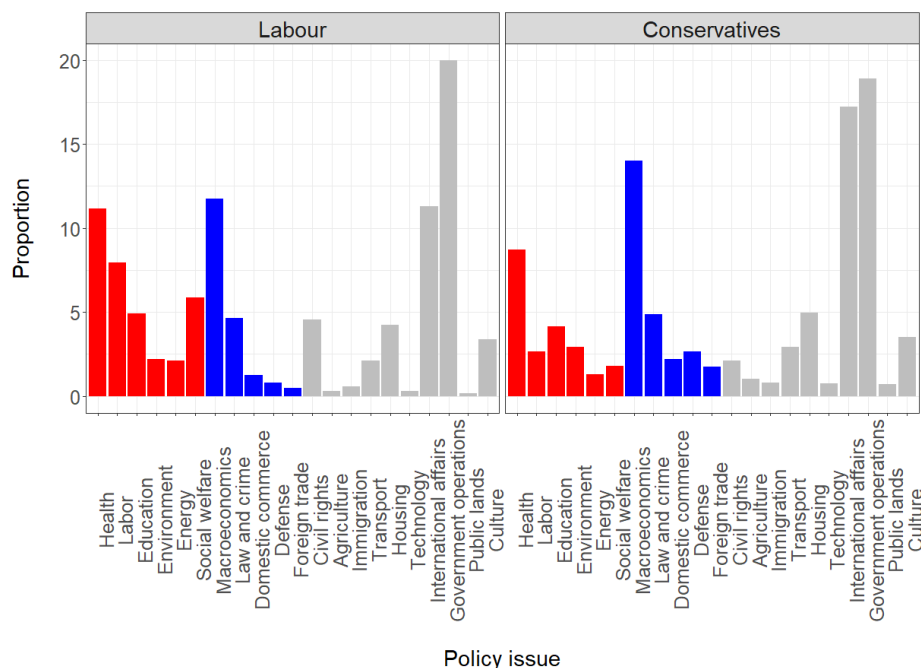
When analyzed through the lens of issue ownership theory (Petrocik, 1996), predictable differences emerge between political parties in both Denmark and the UK regarding the issues they prioritize when they initiate. For example, in Denmark, the Social Democrats concentrated on issues traditionally associated with their bloc, such as health and education, in nearly half of their initiations. In contrast, they addressed blue issues like law and crime—owned by the liberal-conservative parties—in only 14 pct. of cases. A similar pattern is evident with the Labour Party in the UK. Conversely, the Conservatives in the UK allocated nearly 15 pct. of their initiations to the macroeconomics issue, while largely avoiding issues such as social welfare and energy. The Liberals in Denmark displayed similar behavior, focusing heavily on issues aligned with their ideological ownership. However, it is noteworthy that all four parties also directed substantial attention toward issues traditionally owned by their opponents. For instance, the Liberals in Denmark concentrated on red issues in 44 pct. of their initiations, while over 10 pct. of Labour's initiations in the UK pertained to macroeconomic topics. Taken together, while there are expected differences between parties within countries related to issue ownership dynamics, the parties also initiate issues that are owned by competing parties to a substantial degree. Having studied the content of the four parties' initiations, I turn to examining the crucial condition that when parties initiate, they are not merely reacting to ongoing discussions.

Figure 5.2: Issue attention in initiations (DK)



Note: Issues that are colored red are owned by the center-left red bloc and thus the Social Democrats. Blue-colored issues are owned by the liberal-conservative blue bloc including the Liberals, whereas no party clearly owns the issues in gray. Note that the issues of defense, culture, and foreign trade are absent in the left panel because there were no initiations by the Social Democrats on these matters.

Figure 5.3: Issue attention in initiations (UK)



Note: Issues that are colored red are owned by Labour. Blue-colored issues are owned by the Conservatives, whereas no party clearly owns the issues in gray.

5.2.2. How initiation is a proactive behavior

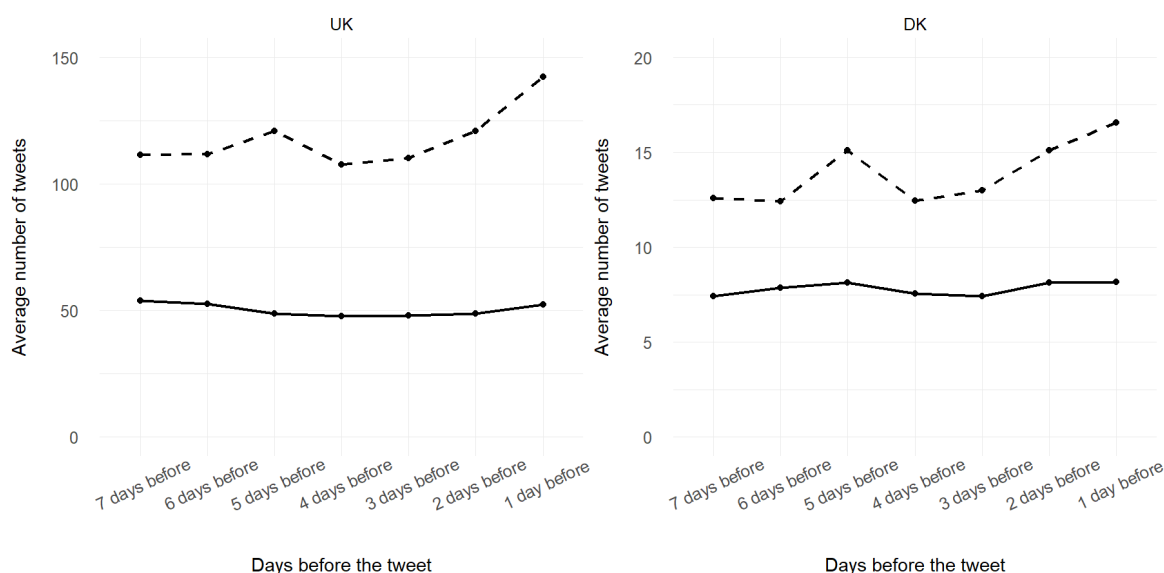
Recall that initiation is defined as proactive efforts by political parties to redirect the attention of other important actors towards a certain issue. And recall how it was ensured in the manual coding process that tweets were only coded as initiations if their wording indicated a forward-looking and proactive focus on a policy issue. While the policy issue and the forward-looking elements can be fully captured by studying the wording of the parties' statements, the proactive aspect requires additional investigation. Party communication might *seem* proactive based on the wording, while, in fact, it is a reaction to the behavior of other parties (or the news media for that matter) in the days before. To the extent that this was the case, the validity of the initiation concept would be significantly hampered because initiation would then not constitute proactive behavior. Rather, it would merely be a contribution to ongoing discussions.

Therefore, to further examine whether initiations are a proactive behavior beyond the wording of the tweets, I systematically analyze the issue attention or other important actors in the days prior to initiations. Specifically, for each initiation by a party, I measure the average level of attention to the issue of initiation by all other parties than the initiating party and the news media on each of the seven days prior to the initiation. The three figures below show these dynamics for tweets by MPs from all other political parties (Figure 5.4), for written parliamentary questions from MPs from all other parties (Figure 5.5), and for printed news media articles (Figure 5.6).

The figures show that overall attention to the initiated issue—by both other political parties and the mass media—remained largely stable in the week leading up to each initiation, with no notable surge in attention from these actors in the days before an initiation occurred. Moreover, the figures suggest that the patterns preceding *non-initiation tweets* by the four mainstream parties were different, particularly when looking at the dynamics on Twitter and in the news media. Specifically, there were noteworthy increases in the attention to the issue in the tweets by other party actors as well as the mass media in the days leading up to non-initiation tweets. The patterns in written parliamentary questions leading up to initiations and non-initiation tweets, respectively, were less different from each other than in the other arenas. This could indicate that when parties communicate on social media without initiating a new focus, they generally react more to the news media agenda and the party agenda on the specific social media platform than the parliamentary agenda. However, what is important for our purposes is that the dynamics leading up to initiations are highly stable.

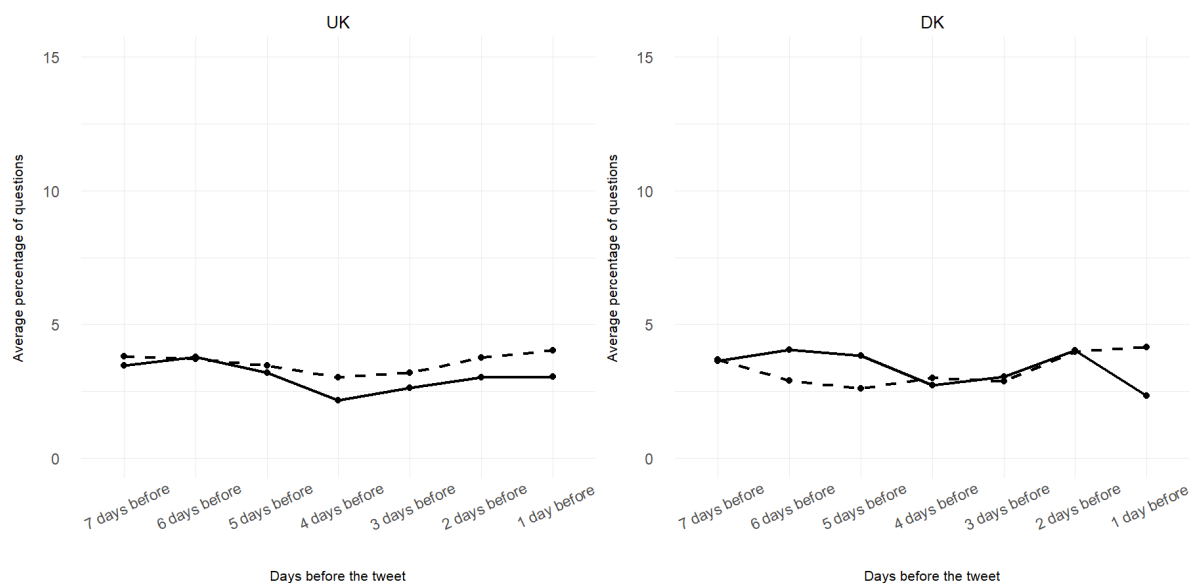
Taken together, these results strongly suggest that when initiating, the parties generally did not respond to changes in the agendas of other political parties or the mass media. This also suggests that the initiating party did not react to the emergence of real-world events. Moreover, the empirical dynamics around non-initiation tweets are generally substantially different from initiation tweets in that the former are, to a larger extent, a part of an ongoing political debate. Hence, initiation is indeed a proactive behavior that is systematically different from other types of behavior such as reactions to ongoing political debates. In the subsequent part of this chapter, I describe how I measured the next concept in The Issue Initiation Model: elevation.

Figure 5.4: Average attention on Twitter to the issue of the party tweet by MPs from all other parties than the party that posted, across initiation tweets and non-initiation tweets



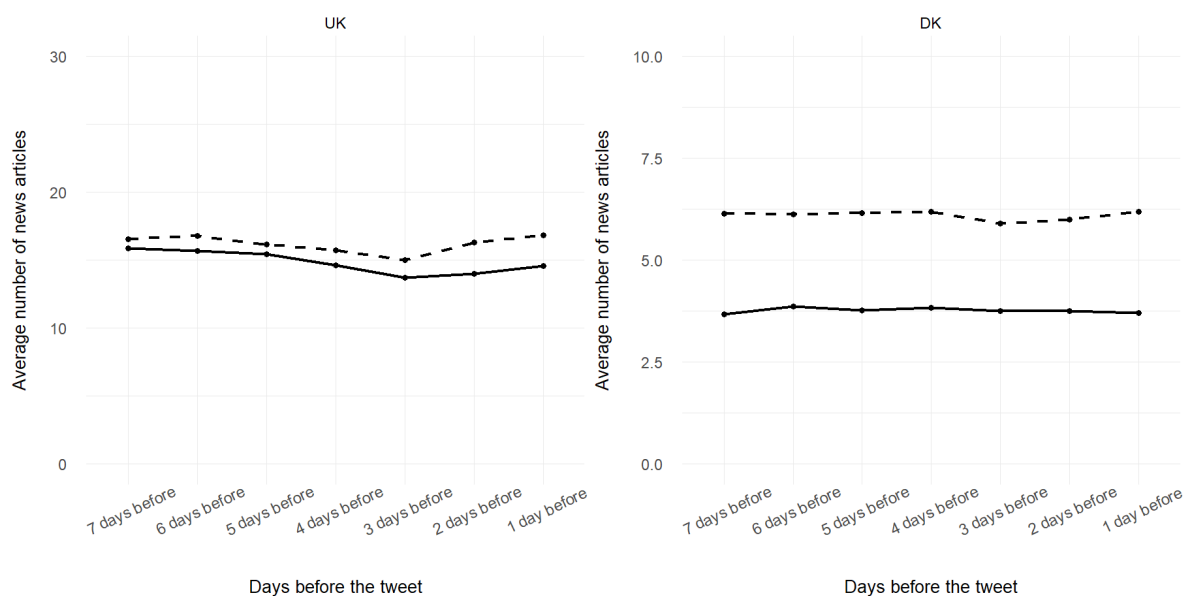
Note: The straight line represents the trend before initiation tweets, and the dotted line represents the trend before non-initiation tweets. Note that the Y-axes differ to better visualize the dynamics within each country.

Figure 5.5: Average attention in written parliamentary questions to the issue of the party tweet by MPs from all other parties than the party that posted, across initiation tweets and non-initiation tweets



Note: The straight line represents the trend before initiation tweets, and the dotted line represents the trend before non-initiation tweets. Note that the Y-axes differ to better visualize the dynamics within each country.

Figure 5.6: Average attention to the issue of the party tweet by the news media in the days leading up to the tweet, across initiation tweets and non-initiation tweets



Note: The straight line represents the trend before initiation tweets, and the dotted line represents the trend before non-initiation tweets. Note that the Y-axes differ to better visualize the dynamics within each country.

5.3. Measuring elevation

Recall that elevation is defined as politicians' promotion of their party's focus. To measure elevation, I count the number of tweets by MPs about the same issue as their party's tweet. For example, consider politicians' elevation of their party's initiation: If a party has created an initiation about macroeconomics, elevation is measured as the number of tweets from that party's MPs addressing the macroeconomic issue. This focus on aggregated issues (e.g., macroeconomics) rather than specific policy problems (such as inflation or unemployment) is the standard approach within the agenda-setting literature (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2019; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Green-Pedersen, 2019b; Petrocik, 1996; Poljak, 2023). However, I go further than existing studies and study these dynamics on the micro level. This makes it even more likely that the elevation tweets are not only addressing the same overall issue as the initiation tweets but also the same specific policy problem. In addition, I show below how a substantial share of the elevation tweets are, in fact, *retweets of a tweet that was originally created by the party*.

MP tweets are an appealing source for capturing elevation as the social media profiles of a party's MPs have become an increasingly important tool for disseminating party messages (Bauer et al., 2023; Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016). Consequently, it is reasonable to expect that when party leadership aims to set an agenda, they will rely on the social media channels of their party's MPs, among other things, to achieve this goal. This was corroborated in an interview with a former MP representing one of Denmark's major political parties,¹¹ who stated that: "[When promoting the party's announcements, author's addition], MPs are asked to be prepared to tweet." For an example of how MPs might elevate their party's focus, see Appendix A10 in Paper 2.

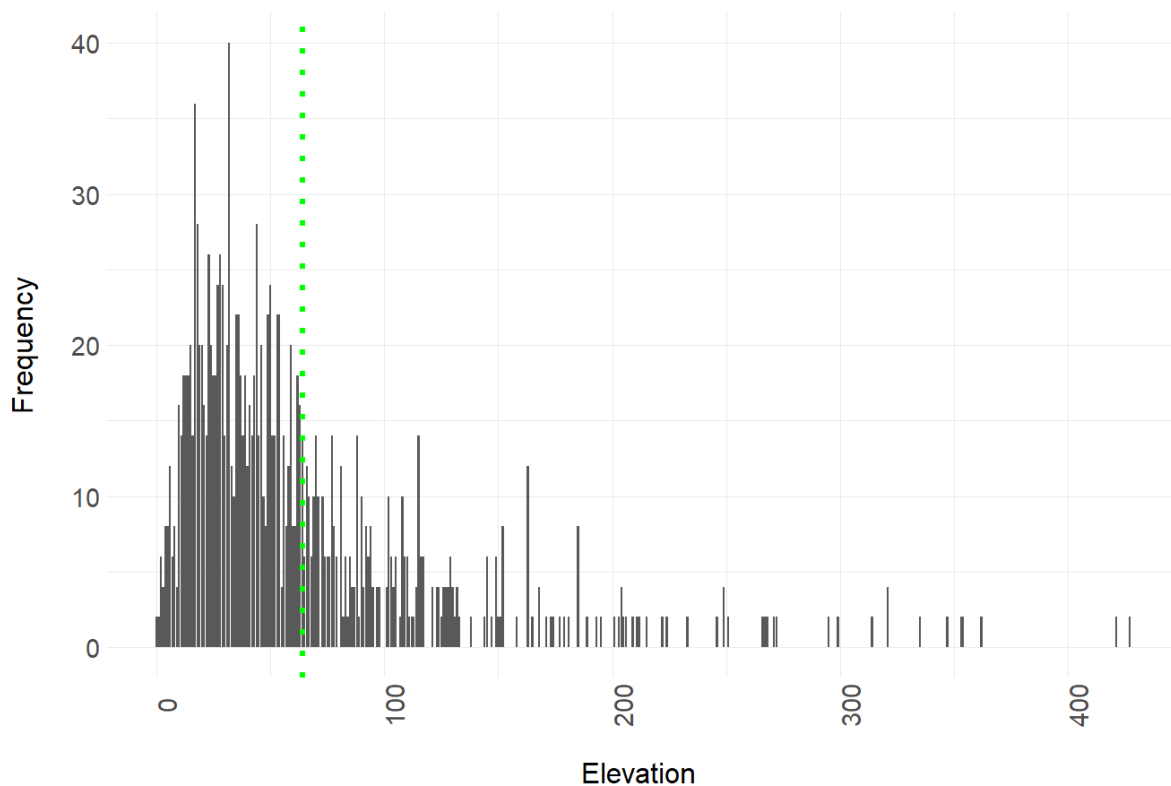
5.4. Elevation in the UK and Denmark

Given that this dissertation is concerned with parties' and their politicians' efforts to set an agenda, one type of elevation is of particular interest: elevation of party initiations. When examining this aspect of elevation, I zoom in on the elevation dynamics *on the same day as the party created the initiation* (referred to as "initiation day") because this allows for understanding the micro-level dynamics of how MPs mobilize to promote the focus that was initiated by their party.

¹¹ I interviewed the MP in May 2023, and the MP chose to remain anonymous. Note that the primary purpose of the interview was for the author to gain overall insights into the perspectives of party strategists regarding contemporary agenda setting. It was not designed or conducted to serve as a distinct data source for the dissertation.

As a first step, I test the theoretical claim that elevation does not follow automatically from initiation. To do so, I zoom in on the number of elevation tweets by the MPs on the initiation day across all 1,134 initiations in my dataset. Figure 5.7 shows considerable variation in the number of elevation tweets following different initiations (mean = 64 tweets and standard deviation = 60 tweets). Hence, just because a party has initiated a focus on a policy issue, extensive elevation does not necessarily follow. This corroborates the point in Chapter 3 that some initiations are followed by more extensive elevation than others.

Figure 5.7: The number of elevation tweets on the initiation day, across all 1,134 initiations



Note: Dotted green line indicates the mean value. Elevation is measured as tweets by MPs from the initiating party on the day of initiation about the issue of initiation.

5.4.1. Do MPs change their elevation behavior when the party initiates?

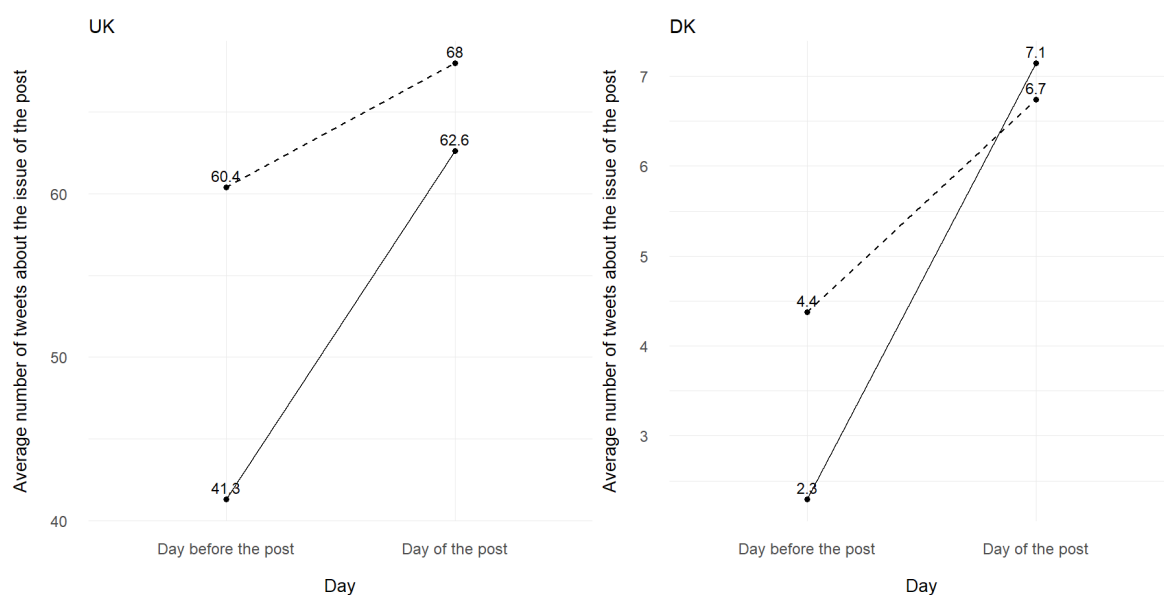
Apart from studying the empirical patterns of elevation when parties have initiated, it is also relevant to investigate the dynamics of elevation of party tweets that are *not* initiations. This allows me to compare whether the elevation dynamics when parties initiate differ from those when parties do not. This is an important step because it serves to test the validity of the elevation

concept. That is, to the extent that MPs' elevation behavior is systematically different when their party has initiated a focus on an issue, this would suggest that the efforts of parties and their politicians to set an agenda by initiating and elevating are a distinct type of behavior.

5.4.1.1. Increasing the number of elevation tweets

Recall that a key aspect of elevation when a party has initiated is for the initiating party's MPs to signal that the initiated agenda is a high priority. It is therefore relevant to examine the extent to which MPs not only tweet about the issue of initiation on initiation day but also how they mobilize by *changing* their behavior. Figure 5.8 compares the average number of tweets by MPs from the initiating party on the day of initiation (t) with the average number of tweets by these MPs about the same issue on the previous day ($t-1$).

Figure 5.8: Degree of mobilization of MPs, across initiation tweets and non-initiation tweets



Note: The full line shows the number of posts about the issue of initiation by MPs from the initiating party on the two respective days. The dotted line illustrates the same for days where the party created at least one post but did not initiate. The difference-in-differences are significant on the 1 pct. level for each plot.

The figure shows a remarkable mobilization by the initiating party's MPs in the sense that they generally create a substantially higher number of tweets about the issue of initiation on the day of initiation than on the day before (see the full lines in the two plots). This pattern is similar in both countries. In addition, the figure also shows the corresponding numbers around parties' non-initiation tweets (the dotted lines in the two plots). There is evidently a substantially larger increase in the number of tweets by these MPs about the issue

of initiation since the day before when compared to days without initiation (this difference is statistically significant on the 1 pct. level). This latter point strongly indicates that the elevation dynamics when parties initiate differ from those when parties do not.

5.4.1.2. Replicating the party's exact messages

The above figure showed that when a party initiates a focus on an issue, the party's MPs tend to elevate differently than when the party does not initiate in the sense that MPs increase their attention to issue of the party tweet more when their party initiates. Next, I analyze the extent to which MPs elevate the *exact messages* by their party. To do so, I leverage Twitter's retweet function which allows users to replicate and promote a tweet originally created by another user. Specifically, I examine the average share of elevation tweets that are retweets of a tweet originally posted by the party's official account.

Table 5.2 below shows that when their party initiates, the MPs often rally together by retweeting. In Denmark, almost a remarkable 30 pct. of all elevation tweets on initiation days constitute retweets of a tweet from the official party account. The corresponding number in the UK is lower but still substantial at around 9 pct. Moreover, the elevation dynamics around non-initiation tweets are dramatically different. In Denmark, when the official party account tweets without initiating, only 3 pct. of all the tweets from the party's MPs—on the same day and about the same issue—constitute retweets of a party tweet. In the UK, the corresponding number is approximately 1.8 pct. The differences between initiation and non-initiation party tweets within each country (28.6 pct. vs. 3.0 pct. in Denmark; 9.5 pct. vs. 1.8 pct. in the UK) are statistically significant. Taken together, these results show that when their party initiates, the MPs tend to “lift as a group” by retweeting the party message to a much greater extent than when the party does not initiate.

Furthermore, even though elevation is measured at a broader issue level, the high share of retweets from the party account on initiation day is reassuring since these tweets are not just addressing similar problems: *They are exact replications of the party's tweet*. In other words, the data strongly supports the theoretical idea behind elevation that MPs actively elevate their party's specific focus, not merely by discussing similar themes but by amplifying the party's message. The substantial share of elevation tweets that are retweets of a tweet from the party's official account on initiation days—nearly 30 pct. in Denmark and 9 pct. in the UK—shows clear alignment with the party's messaging. To reiterate, these are not just discussions on related topics; they are verbatim reproductions of the party's own words, demonstrating a deliberate and coordinated effort to reinforce the party's message.

Table 5.2: Amplifying the party message by retweeting it

Country	Party	For initiation tweets by the parties:	For non-initiation tweets by the parties:
		The share of tweets by MPs from the party that created the tweet (about the issue of initiation on the day of initiation) that constitute retweets of a tweet that was originally created by the party (in %)	The share of tweets by MPs from the party that created the tweet (about the issue of the tweet and on the day of the tweet) that constitute retweets of a tweet that was originally created by the party (in %)
DK	Social Democrats	29.3	3.0
	Liberals	28.0	3.0
	Across both parties	28.6	3.0
UK	Labour	9.8	1.8
	Conservatives	8.9	1.9
	Across both parties	9.5	1.8

Note: The reported horizontal differences are significantly different on the 1 pct. level for each row.

The noticeable difference compared to elevation on non-initiation days underscores the MPs' focused role in collectively elevating their party's initiations, demonstrating commitment to the initiated agenda.

As an alternative measure of how closely MPs promote their party's exact messages when elevating, Appendix A1 (attached to this summary report) presents the results of a text reuse analysis using cosine similarity, a widely used measure (Düpont & Rachuj, 2022). This analysis indicates some overlap in the words used in party tweets and corresponding elevation tweets. Notably, the overlap between the party's messages and its MPs' elevation of those messages is significantly higher when the party initiates than when it does not. However, the appendix also highlights that text reuse techniques are a less valid measure of MPs' promotion of their party's exact messages compared to retweets. Retweets provide a more direct and valid measure, with far less measurement noise, of the extent to which MPs elevate their party's explicit messages.

5.4.2. When parties initiate, MPs from the initiating party generally start elevating from the early morning—and before their competitors

As a final step in examining the dynamics around elevation, I zoom in on a key aspect of the overall Issue Initiation Model. Recall that the model theorizes how the orchestrated efforts by parties and their MPs to initiate and elevate their focus can lead other important actors to redirect their attention towards the issue. To the extent that this is the case, we should expect that when politicians elevate their party's initiations, they generally start elevating before other actors start reacting. To test whether this is the case, I leverage the granular nature of the Twitter data and zoom in on the micro dynamics around when the MPs tweet about the issue on initiation day.

To test whether it is true that MPs from the initiating party generally start elevating with other actors following suit—and not the other way around—Figures 5.9–5.12 compare the behavior of MPs from the initiating party with that of MPs from competing parties. The figures show which actors tend to move first when it comes to tweeting about the issue of initiation on initiation day. For each day on which a party initiated a focus on an issue, did MPs from that party create more posts about the issue from very early that morning compared to MPs from competing parties? Note that this is a highly conservative test since we are comparing the absolute number of posts by MPs from one opposition (government) party with the same statistic by MPs from all government (opposition) parties. Accordingly, the patterns reported below are considerably more pronounced if tweets are calculated as shares of the

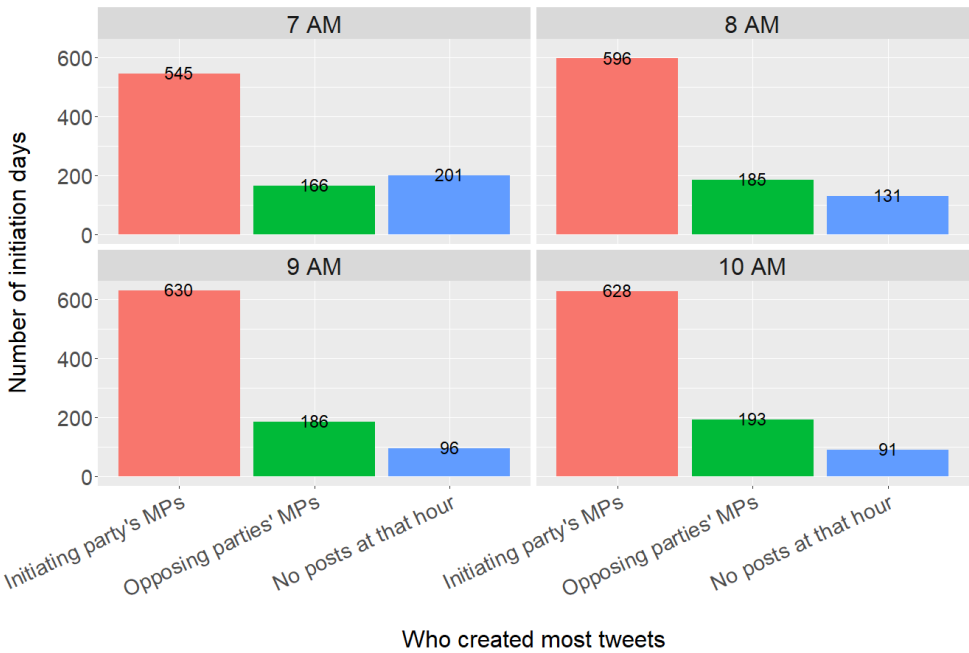
number of MPs from the respective parties (figures not shown) instead of absolute numbers of tweets.

Figures 5.9–5.12 show that across both countries, politicians from the initiating party generally posted more on the issue in question from early morning onward than MPs from competing parties did. For example, in the UK (Figure 5.9), on 545 of the initiation days, the initiating party’s MPs had created more posts related to the issue of initiation by 7 AM than their opponents. By contrast, competing parties had posted the most by 7 AM in only 166 cases, and in 201 cases, none of the actors had posted about the issue at that time. This pattern persists later in the morning and becomes more pronounced by 10 AM. Here, MPs from the initiating party had created the most posts about the issue in 698 cases versus 193 for competing MPs. A similar pattern emerges in Denmark (Figure 5.10), strongly suggesting that on initiation days, initiating party MPs typically move earlier than their competitors to address the issue.

This conclusion is reinforced when looking at averages across initiations. While Figures 5.9 and 5.10 illustrate *who moved first* on each initiation day, Figures 5.11 and 5.12 present *the average number of tweets* about the issue—from early morning onward—across all initiation days in each country. These figures do not show who posted first each day, but they do highlight differences in average post volumes. For instance, Figure 5.11 indicates that in Denmark, initiating party MPs posted an average of 0.62 tweets on the issue by 7 AM, compared with only 0.12 tweets by competing party MPs. By 10 AM, those numbers were 2.47 and 0.25, respectively. In the UK, the corresponding 10 AM averages were 21.9 tweets by initiating party MPs and 13 by competing party MPs (see Figure 5.12). All these differences are statistically significant at the 5 pct. level.

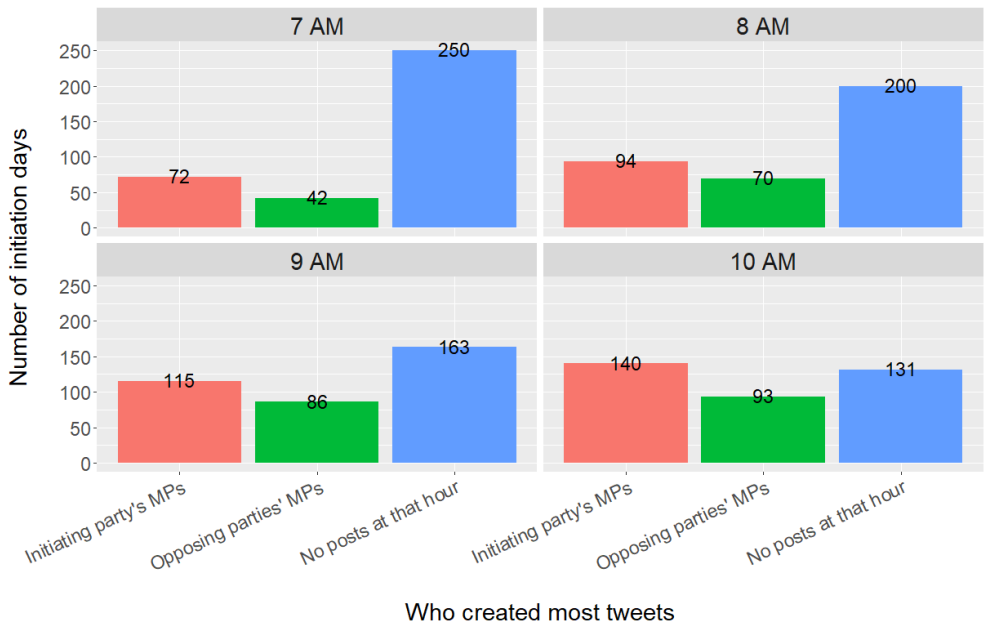
Together, Figures 5.9–5.12 strongly suggest that generally speaking, MPs from the initiating parties move before their competitors when it comes to posting about the issue of initiation. Furthermore, the tendency of the former actors to begin tweeting about the issue of initiation early in the morning suggests that their elevation efforts are proactive rather than reactions to, for example, tweets from journalists. In the next chapter, I focus on the potential consequences of politicians’ elevation of their party’s initiations—i.e., breakthrough.

Figure 5.9: Who created the most tweets about the issue of initiation in the morning? For each initiation day and for four different hour specifications (UK)



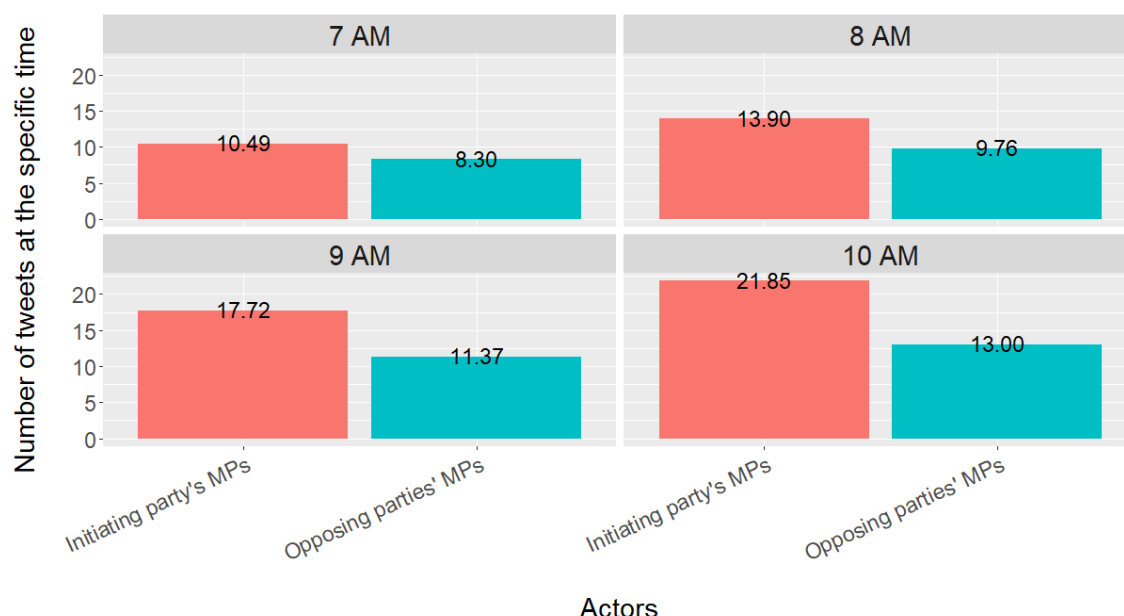
Note: For each of the four hours reported, the respective difference between the numbers for the initiating party’s MPs and the opposing parties’ MPs are significantly different on the 1 pct. level.

Figure 5.10: Who created the most tweets about the issue of initiation in the morning? For each initiation day and for four different hour specifications (DK)



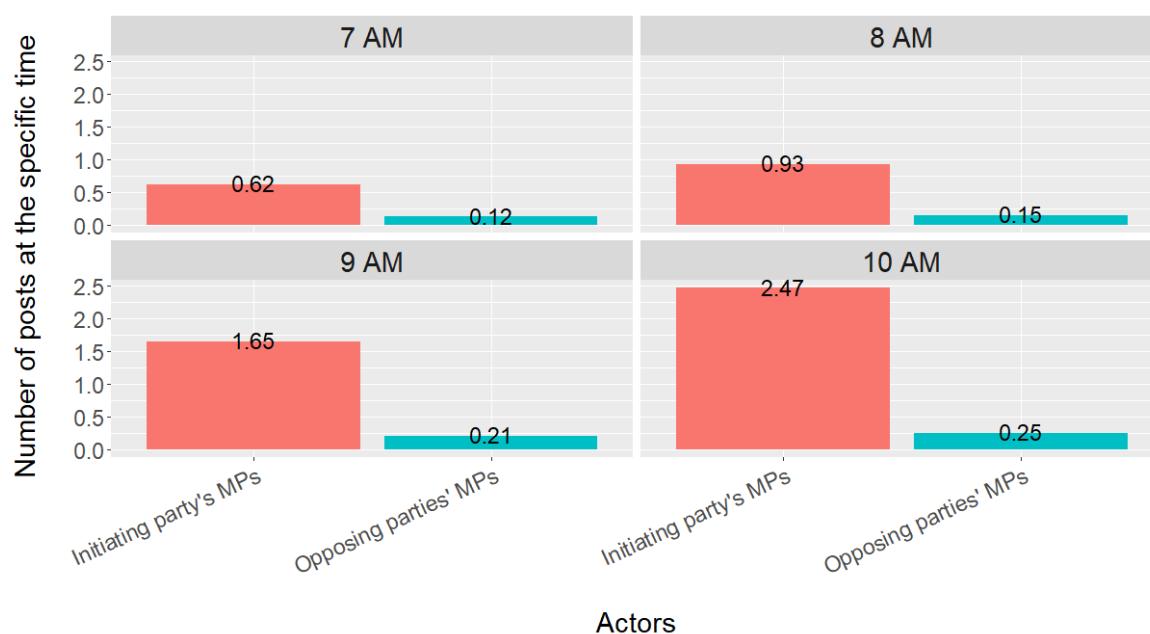
Note: For each of the four hours reported, the respective difference between the numbers for the initiating party’s MPs and the opposing parties’ MPs are significantly different on the 1 pct. level.

Figure 5.11: Average number of tweets in the morning, across all initiation days and for four different hour specifications (UK)



Note: For each of the four hours reported, the respective difference between the numbers for the initiating party's MPs and the opposing parties' MPs are significantly different on the 1 pct. level.

Figure 5.12: Average number of tweets in the morning, across all initiation days and for four different hour specifications (DK)



Note: For each of the four hours reported, the respective difference between the numbers for the initiating party's MPs and the opposing parties' MPs are significantly different on the 1 pct. level.

6. Breakthrough

In this part of the dissertation, I study the consequences of the theorized party agenda-setting behavior. The question is whether parties and their politicians are capable of proactively increasing attention around issues through strategic orchestration. To study this, I examine the following: When a party has initiated its focus on a policy issue, can elevation of this focus by the party's MPs lead to a breakthrough in the sense that other important actors redirect their attention towards the issue in the short term? I therefore now turn the focus away from the initiating party and its politicians and instead zoom in on the behavior of other actors in three different arenas: on social media, in the news media, and in parliament—starting with social media breakthrough.

The behavior of political *opponents*—rather than simply all other parties—is particularly important because these actors generally have different priorities than the initiating party. This is especially so in the context of how to handle certain policy problems and, more fundamentally, when it comes to what indeed constitutes problems that should receive political attention (Kingdon, 1984). Relatedly, a basic starting point within the literature is that parties work to try influencing the agendas of their political competitors (Green-Pedersen, 2007). I study the behavior of competing parties and their politicians on Twitter and in parliament as well as the news media agenda.¹² In the next part of the chapter, I embark on this endeavor by investigating whether elevation can influence the agendas of competing parties on Twitter.

¹² Note that as mentioned in Chapter 4, the news media data does not cover the entire 2015–2022 period. Rather, the corpus covers the years 2015–2019 in Denmark and 2015–2018 in the UK. Consequently, the analysis relying on this data only covers the years 2015–2018. Regarding the analysis of news media breakthrough, the main results thus stem from an analysis of these years. When it comes to the analysis of parliamentary breakthrough, the main models do not include controls related to the news media agenda. Instead, models with the news media agenda as controls—covering the 2015–2018 period—serve as robustness checks. These models reassuringly yield results consistent with those of the primary models covering the entire 2015–2022 period. Considering the significant and relatively stable influence of print media on politicians' parliamentary activities over the past few decades (Barberá et al., 2019; Vliegenthart et al., 2016), it is reasonable to expect that the patterns observed during the 2015–2018 period extend throughout the remainder of the timeframe as well.

6.1. Social media breakthrough

In the previous chapter, we saw how MPs actively elevate their party's focus when parties initiate. The question now is whether this signaling of commitment gets the political competitors to respond. To test this, I focus on the Twitter behavior of the initiating party's MPs as well as that of MPs from competing parties on initiation day.

Since elevation captures the extent to which politicians promote their party's initiated focus, I measure this by studying tweets by MPs from the initiating party on initiation day about the issue of the initiation. *Social media breakthrough* is measured as follows: If the initiating party is in opposition, it is determined by counting the number of tweets from government party MPs about the issue of initiation on that same day. Conversely, if the initiating party is in government, it is defined as the number of tweets from all opposition MPs about the issue of initiation on the day of initiation. In this manner, social media breakthrough captures the extent to which actors from competing parties discuss the issue of initiation on the day it is launched.

To test if elevation of the party's initiated focus can catalyze reactions from competing party MPs within the day of the initiation, I break down the number of tweets by MPs on initiation days into 15-minute intervals. To model this relationship with multiple observations per initiation day, I use a VAR model, which is commonly used in the literature (Barberá et al., 2019; Gilardi et al., 2022). This granular approach helps to both isolate micro-level dynamics and minimize the potential influence of time-varying confounders such as media attention or interest group pressure. Because VAR outputs can be difficult to interpret, I follow the studies above and employ an impulse response function (IRF).¹³ An Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) test indicates an optimal lag structure of 20 (i.e., 20 intervals of 15 minutes each), but reassuringly, alternative lag specifications do not alter the results.¹⁴

I employ country, party, year, and issue fixed effects to control for potential heterogeneous effects (Paper 2, p. 19). This is an important step to ensure that my results are not driven by factors such as party size or unobserved characteristics related to the specific policy issue. As a robustness check, I also included fixed effects for party government status to account for potential

¹³ An essential assumption in the VAR framework is stationarity, meaning the means, variances, and autocovariances of the time series remain relatively stable over time (Barberá, 2019). To verify this, I conducted two stationarity tests (the Augmented Dickey-Fuller test and the Kwiatkowski-Phillips-Schmidt-Shin test), which did not indicate any non-stationarity in the data.

¹⁴ I also ran VAR models with lag orders of 1, 10, and 30, finding that none of these alternatives substantially altered the results.

heterogeneity between government and opposition parties, which did not alter the results.

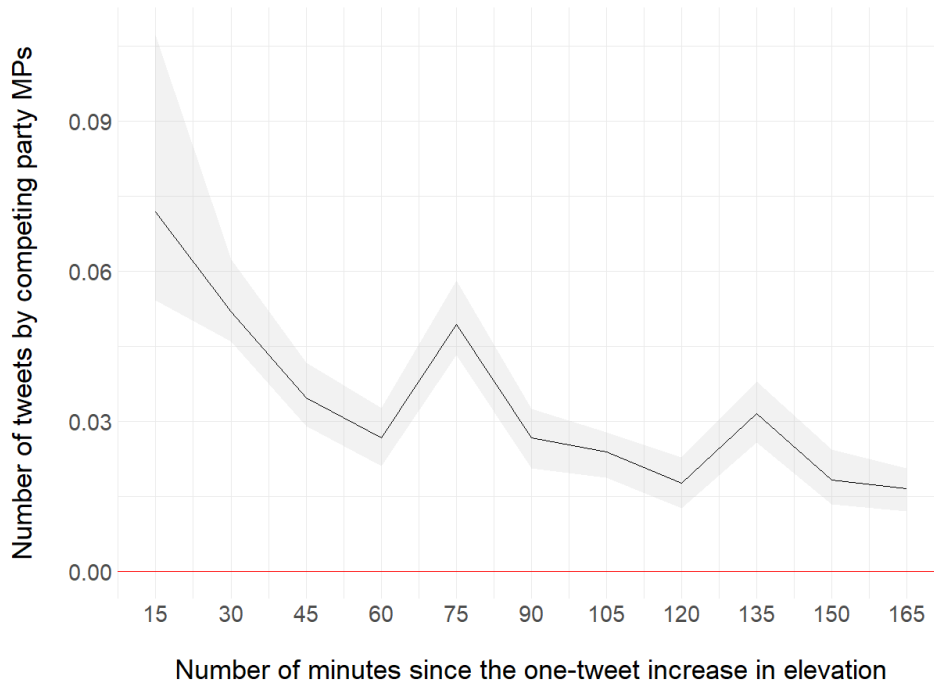
Figure 6.1 shows the results of the VAR model, suggesting significant and substantial impact of elevation on subsequent reactions by MPs from competing parties within the same day. A one-tweet increase in elevation on initiation days is predicted to boost competing party MPs' tweets on the same issue by an average of 0.07 tweets after 15 minutes. This is substantial, considering that competing party actors only post an average of 0.14 tweets about the issue of initiation every 15 minutes. As a result, we see a swift and pronounced response from competing parties. Although the coefficients gradually decline, they remain positive and statistically significant beyond 15 minutes (the figure illustrates effects up to 160 minutes after the elevation tweet). To clarify this point visually, Figure 6.2 accumulates the data shown in Figure 6.1. The upward slope in Figure 6.2 highlights the lasting impact of a single additional elevation tweet on competing party MPs' engagement with the issue of initiation (Paper 2, pp. 27-28). Appendix A6 in Paper 2 shows the statistics for each country separately, replicating the core findings.

Overall, these findings strongly indicate that elevation is an effective tactic for the initiating party and its MPs to provoke reactions from competitors. That is, when a party has initiated a focus on a policy issue, the collective efforts by the party's MPs to promote the focus generally increases the extent to which competing actors engage with the issue on Twitter. This is a noticeable result since it reveals how parties—to the extent that they manage to mobilize their MPs—can trigger party system social media discussions on issues that previously received little attention from other parties and the news media (cf. Figures 5.4–5.6). The speed of these discussions strongly indicates how the strategic efforts of the initiating party and its politicians—and not, e.g., media coverage—explain the extent to which competing party actors focus on the issue. It typically takes more than 15 minutes for journalists to write an article, which means that media coverage is unlikely to explain why competing party actors potentially react to the elevation tweets. Furthermore, Figures 5.9-5.12 in the previous chapter showed how MPs typically begin elevating the initiated focus from early morning hours, suggesting they are not reacting to journalists' tweets. These conditions increase the confidence that the rapid shifts in attention to the issue of initiation are driven primarily by party-led strategies rather than external media triggers.

By elevating their initiated focus on social media, political parties and their politicians are able to start a discussion, consequently influencing the attention that other actors give to an issue on these platforms in the short term. Having shown how parties and their politicians can initiate discussions with competing political actors on social media, the next question is whether these

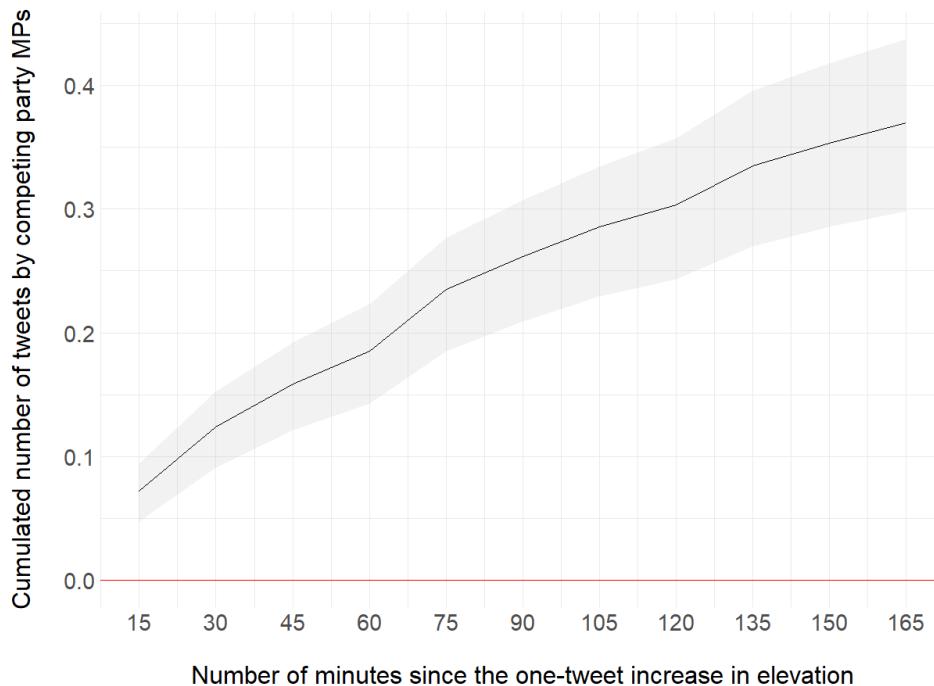
discussions remain mere “Twitter noise” or whether they also reach mainstream media, thereby attracting broader public attention.

Figure 6.1: Effect of elevation on engagement (IRF)



Note: The figure shows the effect of a one-tweet increase in the number of elevation tweets on the number of tweets about the same issue by competing party MPs 15 minutes later on the days of initiation. Country, party, year, and issue fixed effects are applied.

Figure 6.2: Effect of elevation on engagement (cumulated IRF)



Note: The figure reproduces the results from Figure 6.1 but with cumulative numbers.

6.2. News media breakthrough

To test whether the orchestrated actions by political parties and their politicians to initiate and elevate their focus on an issue travel into news media articles, I leverage the corpus of all news articles in six outlets across the UK (2015–2018) and Denmark (2015–2019). Recall that these articles have been issue coded according to the same coding scheme as all tweets.

I measure the dependent variable as the number of news articles about the issue of initiation one day after the party initiated its focus. This allows me to assess how the level of elevation on the initiation day impacts subsequent news coverage of the same issue. I use negative binomial regression because the dependent variable follows a negative binomial distribution (variance = 203.8, mean = 13.4). Since there is no overabundance of zero values, a zero-inflated model would not be appropriate. The unit of analysis is each initiation.

I control for the mass media saliency of the issue of initiation in the news media in the week prior to the initiation.¹⁵ Additionally, I include a variable indicating whether the initiation post outlines a specific course of action by the initiating party since a clear plan addressing the problem or situation highlighted in the tweet is likely to encourage engagement from other parties. Moreover, I control for party government status in order to capture potential heterogeneous effects between government and opposition parties (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010).

Further, like in the VAR models, I apply fixed effects on the party and year level to control for unobserved heterogeneity. Notice that including country fixed effects in addition to party and year fixed effects in the same model leads to perfect collinearity—resulting in the country variable being omitted from the model—because the information about party and year already captures which country the initiation originated from. I therefore do not include country fixed effects in the outputs shown. However, including country fixed effects instead of party fixed effects yields the same results as those reported. Furthermore, including issue fixed effects does not alter the findings, but it introduces significant multicollinearity.¹⁶ Therefore, the outputs shown do not incorporate issue fixed effects (Paper 2, pp. 19-20).

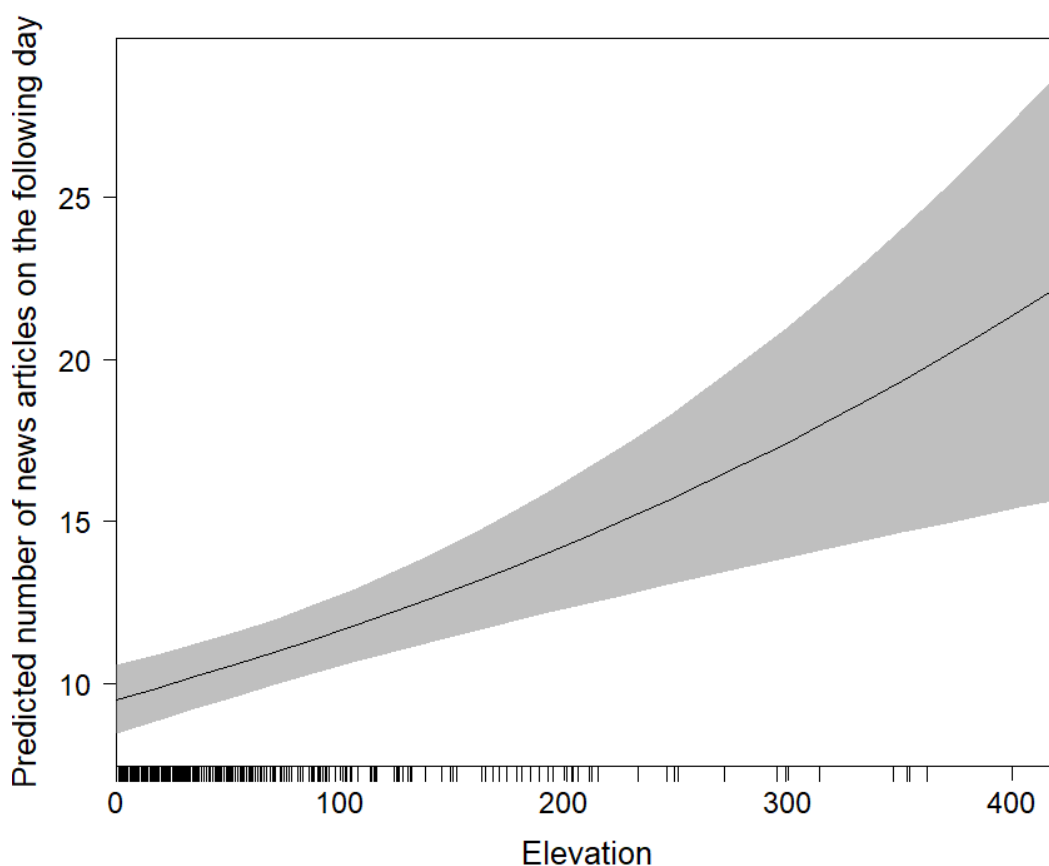
So, does elevation contribute to pushing the initiated focus into the news media on the following day? Model A1 in Appendix A8 in Paper 2 as well as

¹⁵ The results do not change if I instead control for news media salience only on the day before the initiation or on the very day of initiation.

¹⁶ Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) tests show values above 9 for the policy issue variable, while the respective values for each of the other variables are markedly lower.

Figure 6.3 below answer this question, showing that the effect of elevation is significant and substantial. For each additional elevation tweet on the day of initiation, the log count of next-day news articles increases by 0.0019 units. When exponentiated, this coefficient implies a 0.19 percentage point rise in the incidence rate of news articles for every extra tweet. Consequently, increasing elevation tweets from their minimum (0) to one standard deviation above the mean (105) boosts the expected number of next-day news articles about the initiated issue by 22.7 pct. (from 9.9 to 12.2 articles). Appendix A8 in Paper 2 reproduces these conclusions for each country separately.

Figure 6.3: The influence of elevation on subsequent mass media coverage



Note: Based on Model A1 in Appendix A8, Paper 2. The vertical lines show the distribution of the elevation variable.

These findings indicate that the level of elevation on the day of initiation has a strong influence on the next day's mass media coverage of the issue. Although it is well recognized that the agendas of political parties and news organizations often overlap (Gilardi et al., 2022; Meyer et al., 2020), this finding is noteworthy. It suggests that when a party chooses to initiate their focus on an issue that has received little attention from other parties and the media so far, the collective efforts of the party's politicians can ultimately propel that

issue into news articles (Paper 2, pp. 33-34). In other words, by initiating and elevating their focus on social media, political parties and their politicians are able to set an agenda by influencing the news media's attention on an issue in the short term.¹⁷

6.3. Parliamentary breakthrough

So far, the results have revealed how political parties and their politicians can proactively set an agenda by redirecting the social media attention of competing actors and drawing the mainstream media's focus toward a specific issue. However, as pointed out in Chapter 4, although politicians and parties are dedicating increasing amounts of time and staff resources to social media (IDA, 2019), parliament operates as a distinctly different venue. Crucially, this is where policies are enacted. Furthermore, parliamentary discourse is not "cheap talk" as these activities are often governed by legal regulations. For instance, when ministers respond to questions from MPs, they are required to provide accurate answers within a specified timeframe. In other words, the rules of the communication game in parliament are qualitatively different from those on social media. Hence, in spite of the growing prominence of social media in politics (Jungherr et al., 2020), communication in parliament remains highly consequential.

Against that backdrop, I examine whether the orchestrated efforts of parties and their politicians to initiate and elevate their focus on social media can effectively push the initiated focus into parliament. Since this dissertation focuses on rhetoric rather than legislation, I zoom in on the use of "non-legislative" activities in parliament (cf. Green-Pedersen, 2010). One of the most extensively used and studied types of non-legislative parliamentary activities is written questions to ministers (e.g., Garritzmann, 2017; Green-Pedersen, 2010; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Seeberg, 2013, 2023). This measure is particularly relevant for our purposes as any member of parliament can submit questions—either electronically or by mail—to the appropriate ministers on any issue. In both countries, ministers are obligated to respond to these questions within a week (Garritzmann, 2017, p. 13; Paper 3, pp. 11-12). To the extent that competing parties wish to react to the initiated focus, posing a written question to the relevant minister is a particularly apt way of showcasing criticism or trying to reframe the matter in question. Note that whereas government actors do not pose written questions to ministers in Denmark, this

¹⁷ Additionally, Figure 10 in Paper 2 reveals that the more the initiating party and its MPs succeed in engaging their political competitors in discussions around the issue of initiation, the more news articles there will be covering that issue on the following day.

was an often-used tool by government members of the UK parliament in the examined period (with a total of 68,068 questions by these politicians in the examined period, equaling 19.2 pct. of all questions).

To test whether the initiating party and its politicians can push the initiated focus into competing actors' written questions in parliament, I employ the following setup: For any initiation day, I examine the corresponding social media and parliamentary dynamics on that day and over the subsequent seven days (I exclude weekends because MPs can only ask written questions on working days. However, notice that the results do not change if weekends are included). Similarly, I assess whether competing party actors pose written questions to the relevant minister about the same issue during this period, and if so, how many. By measuring these activities for the initiation day and the following seven days, I can examine the relationship between the lagged number of elevation tweets ($t-1$) (*the main explanatory variable*) and the current number of parliamentary questions on the issue (t) for any given day (*the dependent variable*).

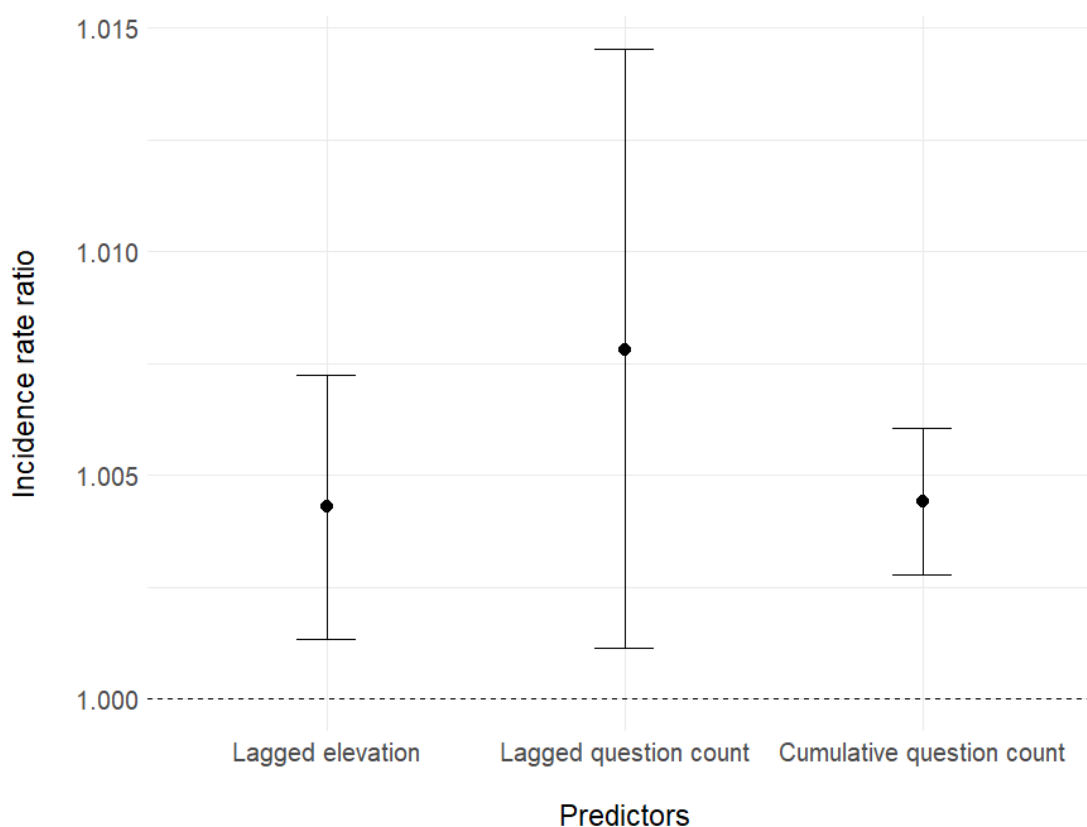
I employ two models. First, a logit model tests whether the number of elevation tweets on the day of initiation or any of the following seven days (t) increases the likelihood of opposition MPs submitting written questions about the same issue the next day ($t+1$). Country, day-of-the-week, and initiation fixed effects are included. Day-of-the-week fixed effects account for variations in opposition activity across weekdays (e.g., fewer questions submitted on Fridays in the UK; see Appendix A4 in Paper 3). And initiation fixed effects control for unobserved factors such as the policy issue in question or whether the initiation contains a proposed solution. Controls include competing parties' prior interest in the issue (lagged and cumulative written questions) and the news media agenda (lagged news articles about the issue).

Second, I run a count model to examine whether elevation tweets not only increase the likelihood but also the number of written questions by the opposition the following day. Given substantial overdispersion in the dependent variable (written questions), zero-inflated negative binomial models are used. Controls are the same as in the logit model. Moreover, country and day-of-the-week fixed effects are included. Initiation fixed effects are omitted because their inclusion makes the model computationally infeasible and prevents it from running altogether. Instead, issue fixed effects are applied as a proxy. Note that incorporating fixed effects for the issue variable with more than 20 distinct categories proved too complex for the zero-inflated negative binomial model. Hence, I group the policy issues into three categories based on issue ownership (Seeberg, 2017; the grouping of issues is shown in Appendix A5, Paper 3). This approach balances the complexity of modeling while maintaining analytical rigor (Paper 3, pp. 12-15).

The role of political parties and their MPs in parliament fundamentally differs depending on whether they hold government power (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010). Government parties are primarily responsible for proposing policies, while opposition parties focus on holding the government accountable, often by criticizing its actions or inactions (Otjes & Louwerse, 2018; Seeberg, 2023). Consequently, I analyze the ability of government and opposition parties to leverage social media to influence each other's non-legislative agendas separately.

Starting with the question of whether government parties and their politicians can influence the opposition's parliamentary agenda with initiation and by elevating their focus, Figure 6.4 presents the results of the zero-inflated negative binomial model. This model examines the daily dynamics in the week following a government party's initiation on Twitter.

Figure 6.4: The influence of elevation on day_x on the number of written questions from the opposition about the issue on the following day



Note: Output based on the zero-inflated negative binomial model in Model A4, Appendix A8, Paper 3. Fixed effects are applied on the grouped issue, country, and day-of-the-week level. $n = 1,624$ daily observations.

The findings indicate that the number of elevation tweets by government politicians on day t has a significant and substantial effect on the number of written questions posed by the opposition in parliament on day $t+1$. Each

additional elevation tweet increases the log count of opposition questions by 0.0043, translating to a 0.43 pct increase in the incidence rate of parliamentary questions. An increase in the number elevation tweets by the mean value (19.2) corresponds to an 8.6 pct. rise in the incidence rate of opposition questions the next day, a substantial effect given that the average daily percentage change in opposition questions is just 0.48 pct. Similarly, an increase of one standard deviation (29.9 tweets) results in a 13.7 pct. increase in the incidence rate of parliamentary questions (Paper 3, pp. 21-22). Models A5 and A6 in Appendix A8, Paper 3, provide results for each country separately, showing that the effect of elevation is consistent and significant in both Denmark and the UK (Paper 3, pp. 17-20). These results are reproduced in the logit model setup with initiation fixed effects (see Figure 2, Paper 3).

Turning the arrow around, the question is now whether opposition parties and their politicians can influence the government's non-legislative agenda in parliament with initiation and by elevating *their* focus. As was noted above, government actors in Denmark do not pose written questions to ministers. Consequently, I now zoom in on the British case. The question is whether the number of elevation tweets posted by Labour opposition MPs on Twitter on day t influences the government's likelihood of posing written questions about the same issue on day $t+1$ during the week following the initiation. Models A7 and A8 in Appendix A9, Paper 3, show that it does not. Both the logistic regression (Model A7) and the zero-inflated negative binomial model (Model A8) indicate no significant effect of lagged elevation tweets on government questions.

Taken together, these results suggest that by initiating and elevating their focus on Twitter, government parties and their politicians can create a parliamentary breakthrough in the sense that they can influence opposition parties' non-legislative agenda in the short term. That is, the orchestrated social media actions by government actors contribute to redirecting opposition actors' attention towards the issue of initiation. However, as Models A7 and A8 in Paper 3 suggest, opposition parties and their politicians cannot do the same: Their efforts to initiate and elevate an agenda on social media does not influence the government's rhetorical agenda in parliament. One potential reason for this latter finding is that government actors perhaps discuss the opposition's initiations in internal meetings rather than raising the matter publicly. Regardless of the reason, these results suggest that we need to revisit parts of our current understanding of agenda setting in parliament. Specifically, while existing literature has viewed the opposition's use of parliamentary activities like questions as a tool to pressure the government to focus on certain issues (Baumgartner, 1989; Bevan & John, 2016; Green-Pedersen, 2010; Seeberg, 2023),

my results imply that these opposition activities are sometimes *reactions* to the government's agenda outside the parliamentary venue.

In summary, this chapter has shown that parties and their politicians are capable of proactively increasing attention around issues through strategic orchestration. Specifically, when a party has initiated a focus on an issue, MPs from that party can trigger discussions on Twitter with MPs from competing parties around the issue by elevating the initiated focus extensively. Moreover, elevation increases the extent to which the news media report on the issue on the day after the initiation. Finally, government parties and their politicians can leverage social platforms to influence the opposition's agenda in parliament. Together, these results yield support for The Issue Initiation Model's basic theoretical claim that the orchestrated efforts by parties and their MPs to initiate and elevate their focus can lead to a breakthrough in the sense that other important actors redirect their attention towards the issue.

7. Discussion

7.1. Overall conclusions

For decades, scholars have studied the competition between political parties around shaping the political agenda (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Baumgartner, 1989; Baumgartner et al., 2019; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Budge, 1982; Carmines & Stimson, 1990; Green-Pedersen, 2007; Grossman & Guinaudeau, 2021; Robertson, 1976; Schattschneider, 1965). Within this literature, a key assumption is that political parties are able to set an agenda by proactively initiating discussions (Baumgartner, 1989; Green-Pedersen, 2019b; Grossman & Guinaudeau, 2024). Yet, the literature does not explain if and how parties can do so.

In response, this dissertation has addressed the following overarching research question: *(How) can political parties set an agenda?* To answer this question, I have crafted and empirically tested a new theory of agenda setting. The Issue Initiation Model addresses the research question by theorizing and conceptualizing political parties' efforts to set an agenda. By leveraging a unique dataset across countries, time, and platforms—allowing me to zoom in on the micro-level dynamics of agenda setting—I have shown how political parties can set an agenda through strategic planning and orchestrated actions: By initiating their focus on a policy issue that received little attention by other parties and the news media before, and by collectively elevating this focus, parties and their politicians can start a discussion and redirect other actors' attention to an issue in the short term. Indeed, I have shown how these strategies can contribute to a breakthrough in three different arenas: Initiation and elevation can influence the agendas of competing parties (i) on social media and (ii) in parliament as well as that of (iii) the mainstream news media. In short, parties are capable of proactively setting an agenda through strategic planning and orchestrated actions.

This does not mean that any one party can simply control the agenda. That is, no political party can be certain that their efforts to initiate a new discussion will be successful. Indeed, in approximately 52 pct. of all initiation cases in my data, there was no increase in the number of news articles the day after the initiation compared to the day of the initiation. Moreover, only 14 pct. of cases saw an increase of more than 5 articles on the day after the initiation compared to the initiation day, and just 5 pct. experienced an increase of 10 or more articles. This is just one indication that not all attempts to set an agenda are successful. Political parties cannot simply initiate a focus and expect to influence

the agenda with certainty. After all, agenda-setting processes are complex, and the abundance of information creates significant competition for attention.

7.2. Discussion of the chosen foci

As with any scholarly work, I have stood before crossroads several times along the way of this dissertation. Every choice carries implications, influencing both the insights gained and the limitations encountered. In this section, I reflect on the most significant decisions made and their potential impact on the lessons drawn.

7.2.1. The micro-level focus

Existing research has predominantly examined agenda-setting dynamics on the aggregated level, exploring patterns over extended periods or even between election cycles (e.g., Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Grossman & Guinaudeau, 2021; Seeberg, 2022, 2023). Whereas this analytical focus provides valuable insights into broad patterns of agenda setting, the long-term focus comes with two main shortcomings. First, it is exceedingly difficult to study who starts discussions and who follows up on them. For instance, while aggregating parties' issue attention on a yearly basis allows for studying broad trends of who attends to which issues, it is difficult to determine who started the discussions in the first place. Second and relatedly, the issue attention of parties and other important actors—perhaps most importantly the news media—becomes close to impossible to disentangle. Even if researchers make use of lags (see e.g., Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2015), with long time lags such as months or years, it is very difficult to point out who influences whom within each lag.

To minimize the influence of such challenges, I instead zoomed in on the micro-level dynamics of agenda setting. Granted, this meant that I could not determine whether initiation and elevation have long-term implications for agenda setting. However, given that the main focus of this dissertation was to study if and how parties can set an agenda by starting discussions, the ability to study the evolution from an initiation to its potential breakthrough in the short term was prioritized. In other words, there is an inherent trade-off between being able to study long-term agenda-setting dynamics on the one hand and being able to study who initiated a discussion on the other. Consequently, this dissertation's focus on daily and even 15-minute intervals was chosen because it enabled a study of (i) who initiated discussions and who responded (ii) without the influence of news media articles and external events.

7.2.2. The issue-level focus

This dissertation leveraged the macro issue categories of the CAP coding scheme to capture the content of more than 5.5 million tweets, more than 750,000 news articles, and almost half a million written questions to ministers. Among other things, it required the manual coding of more than 50,000 tweets.

This implied a focus on broad issue-level categories (such as macroeconomics or defense) rather than specific policy problems (like unemployment or the purchase of new weapon systems). Naturally, this focus introduces a certain level of noise in the analyses. For instance, an initiation tweet coded into the macroeconomics category might be focused on details regarding the inflation rate, whereas another tweet that was also labeled as macroeconomics could be discussing the tax system. Still, there are at least two reasons why the analytical focus was on broad issue categories, and why this focus does not impair the validity of the conclusions.

First, keeping the analytical focus on broad issue categories rather than specific policy problems is a standard approach within the agenda-setting literature (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2019; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Eissler et al., 2023; Green-Pedersen, 2019b; Petrocik, 1996; Poljak, 2023; Russell, 2021; Vliegenthart et al., 2016). This allows for examining patterns related to party issue ownership, as was done in both Paper 1 and Paper 2 (Petrocik, 1996). Second, focusing on broad issue categories makes it all the more challenging to find effects. That is, to the extent that different texts discussing different policy problems are, in fact, categorized under the same issue label, this introduces a certain amount of noise into the estimations, which—all else equal—makes it more demanding to trace how an initiated focus is elevated and potentially addressed by other actors. The focus on broader issue categories means that my analyses—of the dynamics around initiation, elevation, and of the effectiveness of elevation in terms of this leading to breakthroughs—adopt a conservative approach.

7.3. Generalizability of the findings

7.3.1. Outside social media

As I argued in the introduction of this dissertation, the theorized dynamics are not inherently dependent on social media and likely extend to other forms of political communication that were relevant prior to the advent of social media and remain so today. Rather than constituting the *only* arena in which parties and their politicians initiate and elevate their focus, social media constitutes a *most likely* arena for observing these dynamics. That is, if initiation, elevation,

and breakthrough are to occur anywhere, it is on these platforms where parties and politicians have tools to communicate and coordinate their efforts instantly.

I contend that the theorized dynamics within the Issue Initiation Model are not inherently tied to social media and likely occur beyond these platforms. Political parties and politicians are likely to engage in efforts to initiate their focus on issues and elevate them using a range of tools, including press releases, press conferences, direct outreach to journalists, and parliamentary activities such as questions. What social media has altered is not the nature of these dynamics but the tools available to implement them. Therefore, while these platforms constitute a new arena for political communication, the core processes of initiation, elevation, and breakthrough likely remain unchanged. Social media should be seen as a retooling—a set of new instruments that enhance pre-existing strategies—rather than a fundamental transformation of how parties and politicians seek to set the agenda (see also Jungherr et al., 2020)

7.3.2. Outside the British and the Danish context

As was pointed out in Chapter 3, the two selected countries differ in important ways, most prominently with regard to their party systems. While the UK operates under a first-past-the-post electoral system, which fosters a two-party dominant system, Denmark features a proportional representation system, leading to a multiparty system with a diverse range of parties across the political spectrum. The fact that the basic findings of this dissertation—that initiation and elevation are effective strategies for parties to set an agenda—are replicated in both countries is a promising indicator of their generalizability to other contexts. This suggests that similar dynamics of agenda setting are likely to be observed in other contemporary Western democracies such as the United States, France, or Germany, providing a strong foundation for broader applicability of The Issue Initiation Model within this context.

However, it is important to acknowledge that this dissertation focuses exclusively on two Western democracies, which inherently limits the scope of its generalizability. While the findings provide compelling evidence for the effectiveness of initiation and elevation strategies in Western political contexts, caution is warranted when attempting to apply these results to non-Western settings. Political dynamics, institutional structures, and cultural factors differ significantly in regions such as Africa, Asia, or Latin America, potentially shaping agenda-setting processes in ways not captured by this study.

7.3.3. Beyond mainstream parties

When testing the basic claims within the Issue Initiation Model, I studied initiations and elevation by mainstream parties and their politicians, respectively (while I, of course, studied reactions by actors from *all* competing parties and not only mainstream parties). As argued earlier, this focus was chosen because mainstream parties generally engage with a wide range of policy issues, allowing for a thorough examination of the dynamics within the Issue Initiation Model across various policy issues. Additionally, mainstream parties continue to define the core of the party system in many Western European countries and remain central competitors for control of government offices (Green-Pedersen & Seeberg, 2023; Grossman & Guinaudeau, 2024).

Still, there is reason to expect that the examined dynamics apply to other political parties too. For instance, as the “issue entrepreneurship” theory implies, non-mainstream parties have proven capable of changing political debates by essentially bringing new issues into the agenda, such as green parties’ focus on the climate (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Hobolt & de Vries, 2015; Spoon et al., 2014). Relatedly, it is a well-known fact that political parties respond to the issue foci of their competitors, operating within an interactive system (Green-Pedersen, 2019b; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Sigelman & Buell, 2004). This provides a basis for anticipating that not only mainstream parties can successfully set an agenda by initiating and elevating their focus. However, this remains an empirical question requiring further investigation.

7.3.4. Beyond Twitter

Apart from examining the processes outlined in the Issue Initiation Model *outside* of social media, future scholars aiming to use this framework to study future agenda setting *within* social media will inevitably need to explore these processes on platforms other than the one analyzed in this dissertation. As discussed in Chapter 4, the unique features and dynamics of Twitter appear to have outlasted the platform itself. Still, even if no future platform replicates Twitter, the fundamental insights from this dissertation will likely remain relevant for understanding future agenda setting. Twitter served as a space where elites—particularly journalists and politicians—could “meet,” discuss, and monitor each other’s behavior. As long as platforms facilitating such interactions exist, my findings can be generalized to future social media agenda setting. This applies even if social media platforms are becoming increasingly polarized, with platforms potentially catering to specific political leanings as some fear. What is important is that politicians and parties continue to observe their competitors’ actions and that journalists monitor these activities—conditions that are not dependent on specific social media platforms.

Therefore, the behaviors analyzed in this dissertation are likely to remain relevant for understanding agenda setting, not only outside social media channels but also within future social media environments.

7.4. Concluding remarks

Whereas existing research has shown that parties can influence both the rhetorical and the legislative agenda of competing parties by emphasizing certain issues (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010, 2015; Grossman & Guinaudeau, 2024; Seeberg, 2023), this dissertation breaks new ground by showing how political parties can set an agenda. Moreover, whereas the state of the art in the literature has predominately focused on the constraints faced by parties in their agenda-setting efforts (e.g., Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2015; Grossman & Guinaudeau, 2021, 2024; Kristensen et al., 2022; Pardos-Prado & Sagarzazu, 2019), this dissertation moves beyond this focus by showing how political parties have substantial agency in terms of proactively setting an agenda.

Without a doubt, parties are responsive to real-world events. However, in addition to that, they can also proactively initiate discussions, with the timing and content being driven by strategic decisions rather than reactions to external events. Thus, going back to the “snakes in a tunnel” metaphor proposed by Grossman and Guinaudeau (2021, p. 30)—implying that parties have “only limited margins for manoeuvre”—I suggest that we revise this image. Instead, political parties may be seen as *spiders in an interconnected web*. While parties cannot simply initiate their focus and expect to set an agenda with certainty, and while they are situated in a systemic web that constrains their attention, parties nonetheless have substantial agency when it comes to proactively redirecting the attention of other important actors towards certain issues.

This conclusion also has implications beyond agenda-setting literature. Despite rising voter volatility, declining party membership, and the growing influence of various extra-parliamentary communication platforms (Dassonneville, 2018; Jungherr et al., 2020), political parties retain significant agency in shaping the political agenda. This underscores their enduring relevance even as their strength is increasingly questioned in otherwise stable democracies.

In other words, contemporary political parties are not merely transmitters transmitting information from the outside into the party system. While this has been an implicit assumption in most work within the agenda-setting literature, this dissertation constitutes the first attempt to systematically theorize and test this important assumption. Hence, even though channeling of

information—like crime statistics—into political discussions is a core function of political parties in a representative democracy, this dissertation has shown how this is only one side of the coin. Apart from *reacting* to incoming information, parties are also able to *proactively* set an agenda by starting discussions and redirecting the attention of other important actors towards an issue.

Consequently, even though parties are bombarded with a constant stream of information (Baumgartner & Jones, 2015), they retain substantial agency in strategically initiating their own efforts to set an agenda. This is good news for democracy. Returning to a quote from the introduction, according to Schattschneider (1965, p. 66), “A democratic society is able to survive because it manages conflict by establishing priorities among a multitude of potential conflicts.” The Issue Initiation Model spells out how political parties try to influence this prioritization by redirecting the attention of other actors towards an issue. Ultimately, the processes within this model are an example of how political parties in a well-functioning democracy can ignite political discussions around an underlying conflict in society. As an example, consider the case mentioned in the introduction in which the then opposition Danish Social Democrats succeeded in igniting an intense debate around a new right to early senior pension for worn out workers. Recall that it was not obvious that this matter was to become prioritized on the political agenda. Yet, the strategic planning and orchestrated actions by the Social Democrats to initiate and intensely elevate their focus sparked huge political discussions. These discussions were inevitably linked to underlying conflict lines in society such as those between workers in physically strenuous jobs and those in office roles or, more broadly, between employers and employees.

While some might view such strategic attempts as pandering to future voters, I align Schattschneider’s perspective that “politics becomes meaningful when we establish our priorities” (Schattschneider, 1965, p. 73). Consequently, the attempts of political parties and their politicians to proactively set an agenda by initiating and elevating their focus is a democratic virtue in two ways. First, they channel underlying societal conflicts into political discussions on the grounds that this is a political prioritization for the party, not because there has been a change in a problem indicator. Second, they signal to current and future potential voters which issues matter to the party. These are two core functions for political parties in a well-functioning democracy. Alternatively, if political parties merely reacted to incoming information, voters’ choice between competing parties would be less meaningful. This point applies even though research has shown how different parties react to different problems depending on their issue priorities (Kristensen et al., 2022).

The Issue Initiation Model shows how political parties need not wait for acute problems to arise before they attempt to redirect political attention

towards an issue. To the extent that a certain matter becomes a political priority for the party, its actions can propel it into the political agenda. This means that underlying societal conflicts can be channeled into political discussions via the strategic actions of political parties.

Appendix

Appendix A1: Text reuse analysis of the wording overlap between (non)initiation tweets and elevation tweets

In chapter 5.4.1.2., I analyzed the extent to which MPs elevate by promoting their party's exact messages by examining retweets. As an alternative approach, I calculate in this appendix the cosine similarity for each party between (non)initiation tweets and the corresponding elevation tweets. Cosine similarity scores measure the degree of textual overlap between two pieces of text, with scores ranging from 0 (no similarity) to 1 (identical text). The results are presented in Table A.1 below.

In Denmark, the table reveals that for the Social Democrats, the average cosine similarity between initiation tweets and elevation tweets on initiation days is 0.28, indicating moderate similarity in word usage. On non-initiation days, the average cosine similarity drops to 0.21, a difference that is statistically significant at the 1 pct. level. Similarly, for The Liberals in Denmark, the cosine similarity averages 0.31 for elevation tweets on initiation days and 0.19 on non-initiation days, with this difference also being statistically significant at the 1 pct. level.

In the UK, the table shows that for the Labour Party and its MPs, the average cosine similarity between initiation tweets and elevation tweets on initiation days is 0.19, compared to 0.15 on non-initiation days—a statistically significant difference at the 1 pct. level. For the Conservatives, the corresponding scores are 0.20 and 0.15, with the difference also significant at the 1 pct. level.

These results indicate (i) some overlap in the words used in party tweets and corresponding elevation tweets and (ii) significantly greater overlap when parties initiate compared to when they do not. This supports the conclusion that when their party initiates, MPs tend to “lift as a group” by elevating the exact party message to a greater extent than when the party does not initiate.

Table A.1: Average cosine similarity between (non)initiation tweets and elevation tweets

		Similarity between initiation tweets and elevation tweets	Similarity between non- initiation tweets and elevation tweets
Denmark	The Social Democrats	0.28	0.21
	The Liberals	0.31	0.19
The UK	Labour	0.19	0.15
	Conservatives	0.20	0.15

Note: All values in the table represent average cosine similarity scores, and the differences between initiation and non-initiation tweets are statistically significant at the 1 pct. level for all comparisons within each party.

Limitations of the absolute cosine similarity scores: Examples from Denmark

It is important to note that absolute cosine similarity scores are less informative. This is, among others, due to the fact that initiations often carry several aspects, but the initiation tweets themselves can only carry so much text. For example, an initiation tweet by the Danish Social Democrats reads: “Education should be closer. No matter where you live, it should be possible to get a good education. That’s why the government is introducing a plan to significantly increase the number of higher education institutions outside our largest cities. Education is coming closer. Across all of Denmark. #dkpol.” A corresponding elevation tweet by a Social Democratic MP on the same day states: “We need more educational institutions in more places across the country. Of course, we can challenge the centralization of recent decades 🙌🙌 <https://t.co/dnYG7wCUB9>.” While the cosine similarity score for these tweets is only 0.2, it is clear that the elevation tweet promotes the same core message as the initiation tweet.

Similarly, an initiation tweet by the Social Democrats on climate policy reads: “The roadmap is ready. It won’t be easy. But together, we can achieve our ambitious climate goals 🌹❤️ #dkgreen #dkpol <https://t.co/3LfMYcC8dj>.” The corresponding elevation tweet by one of its MPs reads: “Good day today! A roadmap to 2025. 24 concrete initiatives to ensure that we achieve the 70%. <https://t.co/yHDBNgUtmC>.” Despite a cosine similarity score of only 0.14, the elevation tweet clearly references the same roadmap and goals (in fact, the MPs has attached to the post a picture in which he is holding the roadmap in a printed version).

Another example comes from the Liberals. Their initiation tweet reads: “The economic crisis is seriously beginning to take hold. That’s why we must support Denmark's entrepreneurs. @aahlers is ready with an aid package. #dkpol.” The corresponding elevation tweet states: “We must also help entrepreneurs. They cannot be saved with the other aid packages. That’s why we propose matching loans from the Growth Fund, the ability to document losses via budgets, and the creation of new seed funds. This is about jobs, the climate, and the future. <https://t.co/vMenG8uxAs>.” These tweets have a cosine similarity score of 0.27 indicating moderate similarity, but they clearly revolve around the exact same focus.

A further example involves an initiation from the Liberals about housing. Their initiation tweet reads: “We are ready with a new visionary housing proposal! Seven out of ten Danes dream of owning their own home. That’s why we are introducing a major housing proposal to give more people the opportunity to own their own home. Among other things, we will introduce a housing savings account for first-time buyers 👍.” The corresponding elevation tweet by one of its MPs states: “Venstre wants to make it easier to own your own home. There is a need for this. The Social Democratic government distorts the market even further and makes it harder to own your own home. New proposal from Venstre 💙👍 #dkpol <https://t.co/tjJVV51Bv5>.” Despite a cosine similarity score of merely 0.17, the elevation tweet clearly addresses the same specific focus.

Limitations of the absolute cosine similarity scores: Examples from the UK

The UK examples follow a similar pattern. An initiation tweet by Labour reads: “It’s time for football to put fans first. Here's our vision to start putting them back at the heart of every club. Share our goals? RT ↓ 0:24 We’ll put fans at the heart of football. Invest 5% of TV revenue in grassroots football. Improve access for disabled fans. Empower fans to elect club board members. Tackle rip-off ticket touts.” A corresponding elevation tweet from one of its MPs reads: “.@JeremyCorbyn promises more @PremierLeague #football wealth for #grassroots #FACup #VoteLabour #GE2017 <https://t.co/KIagtrdW4i>.” Although the cosine similarity score is only 0.16, the elevation tweet clearly aligns with the initiation message.

Another example from the Conservatives in the UK involves an initiation tweet that states: “Support our plans to give English MPs a veto over legislation that only affects their constituencies: <https://conservatives.com/english-laws> #EnglishVotes.” The corresponding elevation tweet by one of its MPs reads: “I welcome the statement to Parliament introducing English MP

constituency votes only on English laws to bring UK constitutional fairness.” The cosine similarity score for these tweets is 0.23, yet the alignment in focus is evident.

In summary, absolute cosine similarity scores should be interpreted cautiously. This is also the reason why I argue that studying the share of retweets of party messages is a much more direct and valid measure of the extent to which MPs elevate their party’s explicit messages, carrying a much lower degree of measurement noise. Hence, what is most important to take away from this appendix is the substantial and significant differences in word similarity scores between elevation of initiation tweets and elevation of non-initiation tweets.

English summary

Can political parties set an agenda, and if so, how? This is a fundamental yet unanswered question within the agenda-setting literature, which sits at the heart of political science research. In this dissertation, I address the question by developing *The Issue Initiation Model*. As a direct answer to this question, the model theorizes that the concerted efforts by parties and their MPs to initiate and elevate their focus can lead other important actors to redirect their attention towards the issue (breakthrough). In other words, the main theoretical claim is that parties are capable of proactively setting an agenda through strategic orchestration.

As theoretical tools and significant measurement contributions to the literature, I craft and test the validity of three concepts within this model. *Initiation* is the proactive efforts by parties to direct attention towards an issue by introducing their focus. This captures party communication which does not respond to ongoing discussions and focuses on problems that have not been solved yet. *Elevation* is defined as the efforts by politicians to promote their party's focus. This is a collective effort to signal commitment to this focus. Finally, *breakthrough* captures the extent to which other important actors engage with the focus which was initiated by the party.

I put the model to the test by leveraging a unique dataset across countries, time, and platforms. Specifically, I rely on more than 5.5 million tweets by political parties and MPs coupled with over 750,000 news articles and over 400,000 written parliamentary questions during the years 2011-2022 in Denmark and 2015-2022 in the UK. The social media data allows me to zoom in on the micro-level dynamics of agenda-setting. This provides the opportunity to delve into agenda-setting dynamics without the influence of news media articles and external events. Social media is a most likely case of observing the theorized dynamics, not the only case for doing so. That is, the theorized dynamics are not inherently dependent on social media and likely extend to other forms of political communication that were relevant prior to the advent of social media and remain so today.

The dissertation yields several important insights. First, it reveals (i) that politicians' social media posts are an integral aspect of contemporary party competition and agenda-setting. Second, it demonstrates that (ii) initiation and elevation are distinct yet interrelated types of behavior by political parties and their politicians. Third, the dissertation shows (iii) how the attempts by parties and their politicians to initiate and elevate an agenda can lead to breakthroughs in the sense that other actors—namely, political competitors and the news media—redirect their attention towards the agenda in the short

term. These breakthroughs take place in various arenas, that is, on social media, in parliament, and in printed news articles.

Together, this dissertation has important implications. From the perspective of agenda-setting research, it demonstrates how political parties and their politicians can set an agenda by proactively starting discussions. This has been a key yet implicit assumption within this literature. More broadly, the dissertation carries a positive message for democracy by demonstrating that even though parties are bombarded with information, they nonetheless retain substantial agency in strategically initiating their own efforts to set an agenda. This underscores that underlying societal conflicts can be channeled into political discussions via the strategic actions of political parties.

Dansk resumé

Kan politiske partier sætte en dagsorden, og i så fald hvordan? Dette er et fundamentalt, men stadig ubesvaret spørgsmål inden for litteraturen om dagsordensfastsættelse, som er en hjørnesten i politologisk forskning. I denne afhandling adresserer jeg spørgsmålet ved at udvikle det, jeg kalder *The Issue Initiation Model*. Som et direkte svar på spørgsmålet ovenfor teoretiserer modellen, at de målrettede bestræbelser fra partier og deres parlamentsmedlemmer på at initiere og elevere deres fokus på et politisk emne (såsom sundhed eller velfærd) kan få andre vigtige aktører til at rette deres opmærksomhed mod emnet. Med andre ord: Partier er i stand til proaktivt at sætte en dagsorden gennem strategisk orkestrering.

Som teoretiske værktøjer udvikler og tester jeg gyldigheden af tre begreber inden for denne model. *Initiering* er partiets proaktive forsøg på at rette opmærksomhed mod et emne ved at introducere deres fokus på dette. Begrebet indfanger den type partikommunikation, som ikke er en reaktion på igangværende diskussioner, og som fokuserer på problemer, der endnu ikke er løst. *Elevering* er politikeres indsats for at fremme deres partis fokus. Dette er en kollektiv indsats, som blandt andet har til formål at signalere engagement i partiets fokus. Endelig dækker begrebet *gennembrud* over i hvilket omfang andre vigtige aktører adresserer det fokus, som partiet har initieret.

Jeg tester modellen ved at anvende et unikt datasæt på tværs af lande, tid og platforme. Konkret studerer jeg mere end 5,5 millioner tweets fra politiske partier og parlamentsmedlemmer kombineret med over 750.000 nyhedsartikler og mere end 400.000 skriftlige spørgsmål i parlamentet i perioden 2011-2022 i Danmark og 2015-2022 i Storbritannien. Sociale medie-data gør mig i stand til at studere dagsordensdynamikker på mikroniveau. Det giver mulighed for at undersøge disse dynamikker uden indflydelse fra nyhedsartikler og eksterne begivenheder. Sociale medier udgør en *most likely* case for at observere de teoretiserede dynamikker, men disse platforme er ikke den eneste relevante case. De teoretiserede dynamikker er således ikke afhængige af sociale medier og kan sandsynligvis også overføres til andre former for politisk kommunikation, der var relevante før sociale mediers fremkomst og stadig er det i dag.

Afhandlingen bringer flere vigtige indsigter. For det første afslører den (i), at politikeres opslag på sociale medier er en integreret del af moderne partikonkurrence og dagsordensfastsættelse. For det andet viser den (ii), at initiering og elevering er forskellige, men sammenhængende typer af adfærd hos politiske partier og deres politikere. For det tredje demonstrerer afhandlingen (iii), hvordan partiets og politikeres forsøg på at initiere og elevere en

dagsorden kan føre til gennembrud, hvor andre aktører—navnlig politiske konkurrenter og nyhedsmedierne—omdirigerer deres opmærksomhed mod denne dagsorden. Sådanne gennembrud finder sted i forskellige arenaer, nemlig på sociale medier, i parlamentet og i trykte nyhedsartikler.

Samlet set har denne afhandling flere vigtige implikationer. Fra et dagsordensperspektiv demonstrerer den, hvordan politiske partier og deres politikere kan sætte en dagsorden ved proaktivt at starte diskussioner. Dette har været en vigtig, men implicit antagelse inden for litteraturen. Mere bredt giver afhandlingen et positivt budskab for demokratiet ved at vise, at selvom partier konstant mødes med ny information, som de skal reagere på, bevarer de en betydelig handlekraft til strategisk at igangsætte deres egne bestræbelser på at sætte en dagsorden. Dette understreger, at underliggende konflikter i samfundet kan transformeres til politiske diskussioner via politiske partiers strategiske handlinger.

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