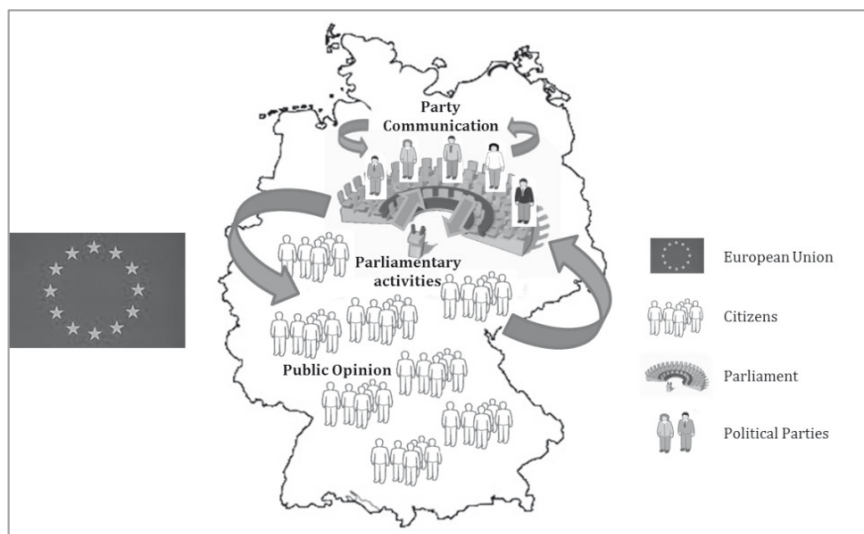


## 2 Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Overview

Four major strands of literature form the starting point of the theoretical framework explaining the contents and dynamics of party communication: theories of party competition, agenda-setting, representation, and Europeanization. In Figure 1, I depict the various, bi-directional relationships between the communication of competing parties, parliamentary activities, public opinion, and the European Union for the case of Germany.

*Figure 1:* Party communication in the German context: inter-party competition, parliamentary activities, public opinion, and the European Union



*Source:* own representation; single elements taken from ‘Weg der Gesetzgebung’, Deutscher Bundestag, Referat Öffentlichkeitsarbeit 2010, see [www.btg-bestellservice.de/pdf/20060000.pdf](http://www.btg-bestellservice.de/pdf/20060000.pdf), last access 07.07.2013.

One function of party communication in routine times of politics is to build up a positive reputation among voters (Fombrun and Shanley 1990; Lipinski 2004; Walgrave and De Swert 2007); an aspect that is also covered by theories of elite

influence on public opinion (Gabel and Scheve 2007; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Zaller 1992). The salience and issue ownership approach (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996) provides for the formulation of several expectations regarding party communication and inter-party competition during routine times of politics. First, parties are expected to communicate more on issues which they own. Second, political parties should not communicate directly on the same issue. Instead, they should talk past each other. Alternative expectations for the case that parties respond to each other are given in the argumentation of Meguid (2005, 2008). Following an adversarial versus accommodative strategy, a party either responds to the issue communication of competitors that hold the same position or the opposite position on an issue in question. For issues that are not owned by any political opponent, parties should respond to those competitors that also try to claim ownership over the issue (Sellers 2010; Vliegenthart et al. 2011).

Evidently, inter-party competition does not take place in a vacuum. The most visible venue in which inter-party competition over policies, attention, and reputation occurs is the parliamentary arena, in particular, the plenary sessions. The literatures on policy agenda-setting and political communication provide competing expectations about the dynamic link between party communication and parliamentary activities. On the one hand, parties may use their communication to push issues on the parliamentary agenda (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 2009; Cobb and Elder 1972; Kingdon 1984). On the other hand, as laid out in the introductory chapter, parties have an incentive to communicate about their activities in parliament to fulfill their function of informing citizens (Patzelt 2003; Sanders et al. 2011). In this dissertation, I empirically assess the direction of influence – from parties to parliament or from parliament to parties. Furthermore, I investigate whether there are differences between the individual parties and government and opposition parties (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010b).

Citizens, or the public at large, are an important factor outside parliament about which parties care. Here again, the literatures on elite cueing, representation and responsiveness, and more generally agenda-setting, offer competing expectations about the direction of influence linking citizens and political parties. Complementing research on party competition, a large body of political behavior literature provides evidence for the ability of political elites to shape opinion, attitudes, and beliefs of citizens (Bang Petersen et al. 2010; Gabel and Scheve 2007; Slothuus 2010). Parties may not only want to push issues on the public's agenda for reputational purposes, but also to mobilize support of the public and other political allies for certain policies (Schattschneider 1960). Hence, if such a top-down link exists, we should find effects running from parties' communication to public opinion. In contrast, the literature on representation and responsiveness (Mair 2009; Pitkin 1967) expects a bottom-up effect from the public to parties. Parties are expected to reflect the issue concerns of the public, not only in their policy activities, but also in their communication

which Hobolt and Klemmensen (2008) term rhetorical responsiveness. Thus, if an issue becomes more important to the public, this should be reflected in a heightened attention towards this issue in the communication of the political parties. The literature on partisanship suggests a qualification of these links: the effects – either top-down or bottom-up – may not occur between parties' communication and the public at large, but only between partisans and the parties they support (Budge 2001; Dalton 1985; Penner et al. 2006; Zaller 1992).

One more factor that potentially influences party communication, though more the content than its dynamics, is the embeddedness of European political parties in a multi-level context. Membership in the European Union substantially alters the environment in which national political parties act and communicate. In particular, the varying degree of competence delegation and pooling at the European level leads to the expectation that parties refer more or less to the EU, depending on the competence distribution across policy fields, a finding corroborated in various media studies (de Vreese 2001; Kevin 2003; Semetko et al. 2000; Statham and Koopmans 2009; Trenz 2004). The degree of Europeanized communication, meaning the visibility of European actors and issues in parties' communication (Adam and Pfetsch 2009), may also depend on differences between parties and the occurrence of important events at the European level.

## **2.2 Inside Parliament: Inter-party competition and parliamentary activities**

### *2.2.1 Parties in Competition: Positions, salience and the dynamics of party communication*

The dominant theories of political parties and party competition build on assumptions stemming from the rational choice framework. According to this literature, there are three main goals that political parties pursue, namely policy, office and votes (Strøm 1990; see also Fenno 1973; Mayhew 1974). Evidently, most of the literature on political parties and party competition focuses on election times and is less explicit about the motivations underlying party behavior in times of routine politics. As will be shown in the next paragraphs, election and routine times of politics are closely connected, although the link can be conceptualized in various ways leading to different, even diametrically opposed expectations about party behavior.

The literature and theories of party competition build on two different models of politics (Persson and Tabellini 2000). In a world of pre-election politics, the critical assumption is that electoral promises made by political parties are binding and enforceable. Parties propose certain policies to maximize their chances in winning the election. On the basis of these programs, voters evaluate the proposed policies and cast their vote. Implicitly these models suggest that

once a party has won the election and assumes office, it implements the policies proposed to the electorate for which it has been elected. This assumption, for example, underlies the seminal work of Downs (1957) and the electoral mandate model (Powell 2000) according to which voters are prospective, choosing between future governments when they cast their ballot.

By contrast, in a world of post-election politics, a totally different mechanism is at work. For various institutional reasons, such as multi-party settings, coalition or minority governments, electoral promises of political parties are not binding or too vague to matter. In this case, voters do not directly select parties for their proposed policies, but rather base their vote choice on the basis of different factors such as ideology, competence, honesty – often called non-policy factors – and on the past behavior of political parties, meaning their performance, successes and failures in office as incumbents or opposition. In this quite simple, yet realistic accountability model, citizens only need limited information about the political competitors in an election. In anticipation of possible rewards and punishment by the voters in the next election, government and opposition have an incentive to behave “well” in the eyes of the electorate during routine times of politics. How this anticipation of reward and punishment impacts on the communication behavior of political parties will be made more explicit after a short literature review on the most influential theories of party competition.

There are two major strands of party competition theories – spatial models building on the seminal work of Downs’ Economic Theory of Democracy (Downs 1957, see also Black 1948; Hotelling 1929) and the salience approach established by Robertson (1976) and Budge and Farlie (1983) that primarily developed in response to the spatial modeling approach. In fact, both of these approaches are also voting theories that derive expectations about elite behavior from assumptions on how voters make their vote choice just like voting behavior cannot be understood without taking elite behavior into account.

“Any explanation of how electors make voting choices rests on beliefs, explicit or implicit, about party behaviour. This is because parties provide the main political guidance for most electors, by simplifying and focusing the complex world of politics in terms of their own policies and stands. It is on the basis of the alternatives parties offer that most electors make their only direct political decisions” (Budge and Farlie 1983, 22).

In the following, I briefly present the two approaches before using them to derive expectations about party communication behavior in routine times of politics.

In its original formulation, Downs (1957) argues that parties are pure office-seekers that by means of maximizing votes achieve their primary goal of power. With reference to the spatial metaphor, voters have a preferred policy solution that is represented as an ideal point on a one-dimensional policy continuum. The voter compares her own policy preference with the policy offers

presented by the competing parties and chooses the party closest to her own ideal point (i. e., the party that proposes the policy with the smallest distance to her preferred option). This logic is referred to as proximity voting. In this framework, it is also assumed that voters are rational actors that seek to maximize their utility. Furthermore, voters are fully informed about the proposed alternatives and cast their vote accordingly. From this it follows that political parties, seeking to maximize votes to gain office, propose policy positions that minimize the distance to the majority of voters. One of the most widely cited and empirically tested implication of the Downsian spatial model is the median-voter theorem that predicts policy convergence of parties in a two-party system towards the position of the median voter.

This economic approach to party competition has been widely criticized by many scholars from various fields in political science, mainly for its restrictive assumptions that are rarely met in reality (see, for example, Stokes 1963; for an overview, see Grofman 2004). Following up on this critique, various scholars developed the saliency approach to party competition (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996; Robertson 1976). Robertson (1976) and Budge and Farlie (1983) laid out the principles of saliency theory. Their theory of selective issue emphasis provided the basis for the issue ownership approach developed and applied in the US context by Petrocik (1996, 2003). Issue ownership and saliency theory postulate that political parties cannot simply be defined by a set of policy preferences which they promote in their party programs and campaign communication in a given election. Rather, parties (or candidates) compete with each other by highlighting issues on which they have a ‘comparative advantage’ vis-à-vis their political opponents. This advantage is based on a reputation of competence. It is assumed that voters base their decision on the perceived competence attributed to each party for handling and solving particular (policy) issues and problems. This logic incentivizes parties to follow a strategy of selective issue emphasis, especially during electoral campaigns. Through the selection of particular issues, a hierarchy of importance – or salience – is established. In the words of Budge and Farlie (1983, 271):

“Parties stress particular issues because they almost always work in their favour – they do, in a real sense, “own” them [...] Once electors decide which issue is salient, the question of which party to support generally follows automatically.”

As a result, the theory expects that parties do not compete with each other by directly arguing over the same issues, but rather they try to render their own areas of concern most prominent (Budge and Farlie 1983, 23). In doing so, parties promote the saliency of a particular issue or a set of issues among the electorate. In his seminal article, Petrocik (1996) refines the concept and introduces the distinction between two types of issue ownership.

First, long-term issue ownership is closely linked to the historical origins of political parties. Parties have evolved from societal conflicts – often referred to

as cleavages – and still “[...] reflect and promote these conflicts because they are the political organized face of the religious, economic, ethnic, linguistic, and regional conflicts endemic in all societies” (Petrocik 1996, 827; see also Lipset and Rokkan 1967). The recursive link between the party and its constituency leads to a relatively stable ownership of certain issues over time. Constituencies support parties because, while in office, the party attempts to alter or protect the status quo to the benefit of the constituency. In turn, the party – for garnering the support of its constituency – has every reason to promote such policies. Petrocik terms this form of issue ownership the constituency-based ownership.

In contrast, there is also a form of short-term ownership being directly related to performance in office. Political parties are evaluated based on their success and failures while in government. This leaves space for the opposition or challenger parties to acquire a reputational advantage over the incumbent by demonstrating that the governing party (or par-ties) cannot handle their job. This implies that party reputation on certain issues can be changed by short-term factors (Brasher 2009). Taken together, long-term and short-term ownership result in distinct competence images of the parties in the eyes of the public (Bélanger 2003, 539). To name a few examples, in Western Europe, left wing parties are usually associated with positive images and a reputation of competence on welfare issues, unemployment and education while right wing parties are seen particularly strong on matters of inflation, crime and defense (Budge and Farlie 1983).

Though originally developed as explanations for electoral competition and voting behavior, both ‘classic’ theories of party competition can be used to derive expectations about the communication behavior of political parties during routine times of politics. An important fact that the “existing literature has curiously ignored” (Meguid 2005, 347) is that the strategies of parties also essentially depend on the behavior of their political competitors. The selective emphasis model and its extensions are based on some assumptions that are particularly well suited to explain routine communication and issue competition between political parties.

First, a reputation of competence matters. Schmitt (2001) proposes an extension of the salience model, namely the competence model that conceptualizes the relationship between parties and “owned” issues as dynamic (see also Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010b; Holian 2004; Walgrave et al. 2009). Parties have to work hard for being associated with a policy and problem-solving capacity in the eyes of the voters (Schmitt 2001, 36). This is in line with research that highlights ongoing changes in modern (mostly Western European) democracies: due to the decreasing importance of long-established societal cleavages, there is less socio-structural voting, especially on the basis of the class cleavage. Electoral volatility has increased over the last decades, reflecting less stable and durable party-voter-linkages. At the same time, issue voting has become increasingly important with a diversity of policy issues structuring party

and electoral competition (Dalton 1996; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; de Vries and Hobolt 2012; Franklin et al. 1992; Green-Pedersen 2007; Mair 1997).

Second, neither do parties' reputations evolve in a vacuum nor do they pop out of the air from one election to the other. From economics and business research we know that building a reputation is a long-term, inherently dynamic and strategic process (Fombrun and Shanley 1990). "[...] reputations are not shaped only by actions; they can be influenced by the messages received by the public" (Lipinski 2004; 4). This makes constant communication an important tool to build up a reputation. First and foremost, parties have to be credible and authentic to remain trustworthy. A mismatch between rhetoric and reality can undermine an actor's trustworthiness (Sanders 2009, 90). Following this logic, parties can-not simply do as they please while in office, be it as government or opposition, if they want to maintain support from citizens, neither can they 'say' whatever they want to say. It is crucial for political parties to "stay on message", issuing consistent messages to the public. I argue that routine time of politics matter tremendously for claiming and maintaining a positive reputation. Not only do political parties have to take their historical roots and core constituencies into account, but they also have to cater to current important societal problems. They regularly have to justify and prove that their decisions and actions are the "right thing to do". Since citizens do not only observe politics during election times (Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011), it becomes necessary and rational for political parties to communicate with the public at all times. As Ansolabehere and Iyengar state, routine times of politics are important for the political experience and socialization of voters because they acquire information about parties and candidates, and to some extent, factual knowledge about issues and events. Part of this knowledge feeds into the expectations about the relative capabilities of political parties to deal with specific issues (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994). In a similar vein, Walgrave and de Swert argue that "voters should be continuously (re)socialized and reminded of the fact that a party stands for a certain issue" (Walgrave and De Swert 2007, 40). These scholars have explicitly asked where issue ownership comes from and how it is maintained since the saliency and issue ownership approaches both leave room for an incremental change in issue ownership. In doing so, Walgrave and colleagues draw on the basic idea that "talking" about issues and appearing in the mass media is one way for parties to claim and maintain issue ownership. Other modes of claiming and maintaining issue ownership are the stressing of particular issues in party manifestos or in speeches given in parliament. They come to the conclusion that "[p]arties claim and maintain issue ownership(s) all the time. Simply by talking about issues [...], they are constantly engaged in a competitive issue ownership struggle" (Walgrave et al. 2009, 154).

Third and expanding the previous argument, communication in routine times of politics must be seen as an inherent part of the democratic process. A new generation of political science and communication scholars is dedicated to the study of issue dynamics in routine times of politics (Sagarzazu and Klüver



2012; Sagarzazu and Pardos-Prado 2012). Sagarzazu argues that “[h]ow parties and politicians decide the issues to be raised, and whether or not to respond to opponents, is an essential part of the democratic process. It provides competing interpretation of issues that informs the electorate as to parties’ positions” (Sagarzazu 2011, 3). Following this example, I now turn to the competing expectations we can derive from the literature presented above.

Budge and Farlie (1983) stress that their model of selective issue emphasis and the spatial modeling approach in the Downsian tradition are not strictly mutually exclusive, but they see the salience model as the predominant logic in party competition and voting behavior. Empirically we observe that “[p]olitical parties typically fight elections in two different ways: advocating their political stances on salient issues and/or claiming themselves as more capable of satisfying globally desired aims” (Gemenis and Dinas 2010, 192). As with most competing explanations about party behavior and voting, there is empirical evidence supporting each approach (Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 1994; Klingemann et al. 2006). Most empirical applications of the issue ownership approach are carried out for US presidential, congressional, or senatorial elections. These studies find that there is a considerable amount of issue convergence among the competing parties and candidates. This runs against the major implication of the issue ownership theory that in its deterministic interpretation does not expect dialogue between political parties during electoral campaigns at all. A number of explanatory factors accounting for the occurrence of issue convergence have been put forth that can be summarized as context, issue and party (competition) factors. First, contextual factors like public opinion, external events and societal factors such as the state of the economy or the level of immigration play an important role (see, for example, Damore 2005; Sides 2006; van de Wardt 2011; Vavreck 2009). Second, issue and party characteristics – which are often closely linked – play a crucial role in the dynamics of party campaigns and are also expected to affect party communication in routine times as I lay out in the following paragraphs. The basic expectation that can be derived from the issue ownership literature is that

*Issue-ownership hypothesis 1:* (H1)  
Political parties communicate more on issues which they own.

When it comes to party competition and the dynamics of party communication (i. e., the reaction to issues raised by political opponents), the deterministic interpretation of the issue ownership approach would expect that

*Issue-ownership hypothesis 2:* (H2)  
Political parties do not communicate directly on the same issue. Instead, parties talk past each other (null model).



Relaxing the deterministic reading of the issue ownership approach and contrasting it with implications of the spatial approach, a more fine-grained picture of the dynamics of inter-party communication can be derived. Generally speaking, a political party has two options when confronted with an issue raised in the communication of a political opponent. First, the party can choose to ignore the issue and not communicate on the same issue. This is what Meguid (2005, 2008) terms a dismissive strategy. Second, the party can choose to respond and talk about the same issue. In this case, the spatial and the salience model of party competition provide us with different implications as to the conditions under which parties respond to their political opponents, mainly depending on the nature of the issue.

Spatial models are inherently confrontational (Laver 2001; see also Gemenis and Dinas 2010). Political parties compete directly and openly with one another, usually with opposing positions. In a situation of party competition on a particular policy, parties can choose between two strategies: either to move toward the opponent (i. e., policy convergence) or to move away from the competitor (i. e., policy divergence). Meguid (2005, 2008) terms these strategies as accommodative versus adversarial. Although formulated to explain the behavior of niche and mainstream parties, these strategies may be generalized to the case of inter-party communication dynamics. The evolving literature on niche parties and issue entrepreneurship (Adams et al. 2006; de Vries and Hobolt 2012; Ezrow 2008; Meguid 2005, 2008) tries to reconcile spatial models with ideas from the issue ownership approach, stressing that party strategies usually encompass programmatic tools as well as salience and ownership tactics (Meguid 2005, 349). The basic hypothesis that can be derived from the spatial framework is that

*Adversarial-strategy hypothesis:* (H3)

Parties respond to the issue communication of a competitor, if the party holds the opposite position on the policy issue in question.

In other words, the more political parties are ideologically distant from a political opponent on a given policy issue or dimension, the higher the incentive to engage in an adversarial strategy highlighting the parties' own policy position opposing the position of the political opponent (Sellers 2010, 35). In contrast, the accommodative strategy proposed by Meguid (2005) is more in line with a probabilistic interpretation of the issue ownership approach. As laid out earlier, political parties engage in a constant struggle for issue ownership and a positive problem-solving reputation. While some issues may be owned by a particular party, there are issues over which no party can successfully claim ownership. This is especially the case in multi-party systems (Walgrave et al. 2009). In order to avoid the risk that another party can claim ownership over a particular issue or to give the impression of a weak or less competent party (Sellers 2010, 34; Vliegthart et al. 2011), we may expect that

*Accommodative-strategy hypothesis 1: (H4)*

Parties respond to the issue communication of a competitor, if the issue is not owned by any political opponent.

One general implication of this hypothesis is that there is more communication and competition among parties on issues that are not owned by one particular party. Another corollary of this hypothesis can be linked to the ideological distance between political parties. Since parties from the same party family, or more generally, parties that are ideologically close on a given policy issue or dimension, compete for the support of the same constituencies, I expect that

*Accommodative-strategy hypothesis 2: (H5)*

Parties respond to the issue communication of a competitor, if the party holds the similar position on the policy issue in question.

Interestingly, this last hypothesis can also be reconciled with findings from the spatial framework. Adams and Somer-Topcu (2009) find that political parties from the same party family are more likely to converge on a given policy than political parties from rival party families (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009; see also Tavits 2008). In contrast to dismissive strategies, both the adversarial and the accommodative strategy should lead to an increase in public attention towards the issue raised in their communications. While the accommodative strategies may result in issue ownership shifts, the adversarial strategy may have the unintended effect of boosting the reputation of the political opponent if the other party holds a reputational advantage over the issue under discussion.

### 2.2.2 *Top-down or Bottom-up? The party-parliament linkage*

During routine times of politics, parties in parliament accomplish two major tasks. First, as the main actors sitting in the central legislative body of representative democracies, parties fulfill a legislative function by passing binding and legally enforceable rules that ideally solve societal problems and conflicts. Second, parties in parliament attend to their duty of checking and controlling government. In parliamentary democracies, control over government is exercised in two different ways. On one side, there are opposition parties that exercise control by observing government actions, eventually passing criticism and re-requesting adjustments. In extremis, as a major sanction for fraud or misconduct, opposition parties can ask ministers or the executive as a whole to resign from office. On the other side, there are the government parties that, by lending support to the government's actions in the legislative arena, exercise control in the form of participation and cooperation (Patzelt 2003, 29-36). The main function of parliaments as legislatures and the differences between government and

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