Topic Order in Election Manifestos

How the Order of Policy Issues Affects Voters' Perceptions of Parties' Key Issues*

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How do parties order topics in their election manifestos, and how can topic order add to our understanding of issue emphasis? That is the overarching research question of my dissertation. The section that I will present here covers the demand side, i.e., how topic order can affect voters' perception of parties' key issues. The manuscript is structured as follows: First, I will give a brief overview about why topic order matters, and summarise my key argument to give a short introduction into my dissertation topic as a whole. Second, I will argue why topic order should affect voters' perceptions of parties' key issues. Third, I will present the survey experiment that I designed to test my hypothesis. Lastly, I will showcase my preliminary results.

Election manifestos are an important pillar in parties' election campaigns that parties use to declare their plans for the next legislative period, and to support party activists in their campaign efforts (Adams et al., 2011; Budge et al., 2010; Laver et al., 2003; Merz, 2017). When studying things like coalition negotiations and portfolio allocation (Bäck et al., 2011; Eichorst, 2014), parties' support for EU integration (Gross and Debus, 2018), or issue areas and dimensions of political conflict on the sub-national level (Gross and Jankowski, 2020; Gross and Krauss, 2019), we typically use issue emphasis as one piece of information. So far, issue emphasis has been measured by looking at how much parties talk about individual issues, which is also called *issue attention* (Barberá et al., 2019; Green and Hobolt, 2008; Klüver and Bäck, 2019; Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2015; Klüver and Spoon, 2016; Otjes and Green-Pedersen, 2019; Peeters et al., 2019; Petrocik, 1996).

In addition to issue attention, I argue that we should also look at *topic order* when studying parties' issue emphasis. The reason why we should not ignore topic order is simple: Order mat-

ters almost everywhere – so why should it not matter in election manifestos[1]? I argue that topic order in election manifestos is a strategic tool that parties can use alongside issue attention. Using both topic order and issue attention allows parties to, first, highlight more topics at once, and second, to highlight different topics in different ways. For instance, topics that are relevant for a large part of the voters or that a party expects to be beneficial in the electoral game can be highlighted through topic order, so that anyone who looks at the manifesto immediately sees those issues. In addition, topics that might be less beneficial in the electoral game, but very relevant for the party base, can be emphasised through issue attention, so that a party can signal to its party base that these topics are covered in enough detail.

In the first section of my dissertation, I will study the way that parties order topics in their election manifestos in greater detail. I will analyse how factors like issue ownership and issue salience affect topic order and issue attention. Using German election manifestos, I show that topic order and issue attention are indeed two separate ways of highlighting topics in manifestos, and that parties place their owned issues earlier in their manifesto than issues that they do not own.

The second section of my dissertation looks at how topic order affects voters' perceptions of parties' key issues. This is the section that I am outlining in this manuscript.

The third and final section of my dissertation then brings the two previous sections together by analysing how topic order affects the coverage of individual topics in the news. Using newspaper articles that cover the election campaign, I will show whether topics that parties highlight through topic order also make it into the news more often than other topics.

Topic Order and Voters' Perceived Issue Importance

In addition to highlighting topics through issue attention, parties should also use topic order to highlight some issues while de-emphasising others. More specifically, parties should place topics that they want to highlight in the early chapters of their manifesto, whilst placing topics that they do not want to draw a lot of attention to in the later sections. In this section of my

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[1]Some examples for situations in which order matters are whether a child is chosen first or last for a sports team, which Star Wars trilogy to watch first, how topics are ordered in the news (Conway and Patterson, 2008; McCombs and Shaw, 1972), and the order of candidates on a ballot paper (Blom-Hansen et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2015).

dissertation, I am going to argue how readers of a manifesto should pick up on topic order as an emphasising strategy.

Whilst a particularly interested party member or voter might specifically look for the issues they are interested in, someone who rather just wants to gain a broad impression of what a party stands for might instead simply skim the document. By doing so, it is probable that they intuitively perceive topics that are covered earlier on in the manifesto as more important than those that are only covered later. One reason why people tend to perceive items that are in the beginning as more important than those that only appear later is because the first item in a list gets processed more deeply than later issues due to the way that our minds process this kind of information (Krosnick and Alwin, 1987) or due to cognitive fatigue (Blom-Hansen et al., 2016). Additionally, the concept of something being at the top is generally associated with being better or more important, whilst something being at the bottom is associated with being bad (Meier and Robinson, 2004; Tourangeau et al., 2013). In a political context, we know that voters understand this ordered logic, too: Candidates that are placed at the top of a ballot paper have been found to gain more votes than those that are placed towards the bottom (Blom-Hansen et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2015)[2]. Additionally, citizens understand that the information presented to them in the beginning of TV news or on the front page of a newspaper are those of the greatest relevance on that particular day (Graber, 2004). Thus, we can reasonably expect voters to have an understanding of the information that underlies the order of topics in election manifestos.

Given what we know about how people cognitively process longer lists of several items, and taking into account how people are capable of understanding ordered media logic and candidate order on ballot papers, we should expect them to also understand the order of topics in election manifestos. This means that someone who looks at an election manifesto should perceive the first topics to be particularly important to the party that wrote the manifesto. Whilst voters usually do not read manifestos (Adams et al., 2011; Laver, 1984), their contents find their way to the voter through other means. First, parties' candidates and campaign workers can use

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[2]Note that the study by Blom-Hansen et al. (2016) utilised the fact that in Danish local and regional elections, ballot papers might be divided into two columns. The electoral board decides whether the ballot paper has one or two columns *after* parties submit their candidate lists. This layout choice thus can have the consequence that candidates that are in the middle of their party's list appear at the top of the second column, if the ballot paper is printed in a two-column layout.

their party's manifesto to guide their campaign efforts (Däubler, 2012). Second, parties' manifestos and campaign messages are covered in the media. Yet, as journalists lack the time to read all election manifestos in great detail, they surely rely on shortcuts such as issue attention or topic order to decide which topics to cover. Thus, topic order should be one relevant factor that influences which topics voters learn about through the media[3]. Lastly, many parties write their manifestos with the knowledge that most voters will not read them, but that the manifesto's content will reach them through campaign workers and the media (Däubler, 2012). Thus, the order of topics in manifestos should be a conscious choice that parties make, in order to begin their manifesto with key issues, or issues that they expect to be beneficial in the electoral game.

H1: The earlier in an election manifesto a policy issue is discussed, the more important voters perceive it to be for the party.

DATA AND METHODS

Survey Experiment Design

In order to address the question of how political parties' actions affect voters' perceptions, I designed a survey experiment which allowed me to randomly assign participants to different variations of the independent variable – i.e., treatment and control – in order to capture how they affect the dependent variable (Mutz, 2011). Using this method hence enables me to establish a causal relationship between the independent and dependent variable (Mutz, 2011). In addition, through random assignment to treatment or control, other potentially confounding factors – such as, for example, political interest and knowledge – are equally distributed among the groups. That way, it does not affect the results that, for example, more knowledgeable respondents are potentially not as easily manipulated as less knowledgeable ones. Instead, the effect of those and similar factors simply cancels out.

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[3]Issue attention has been found to affect which topics are covered in the media (Merz, 2017). I will study how topic order in election manifestos affects the coverage of individual topics in the media in a separate chapter of my dissertation.

In the beginning of the survey, respondents were asked about a well-known party and what they think it stands for. Specifically, they got to answer the following question: "What do you think is the most important issue for [Party]?". In order to keep it simple for the respondents, this question was presented with an open text box for respondents to put in their answer, rather than having them choose one issue from a relatively long list of topics. In addition, presenting respondents with a multiple-choice style question could have led to the order of options affecting which issue area they choose, rather than respondents freely answering the question. After having answered this question, respondents were randomly assigned to either the control or one of the treatment groups.

Both treatment groups were shown a table of contents (ToC) of the party's most recent election manifesto. The reason they are exposed to the table of contents is that it provides them with an overview of how a party orders the individual policy issues, yet at the same time it is more concise and faster to grasp than, for example, skimming through the manifesto as a whole. In addition, respondents were not shown the whole table of contents, but only the first and last chapter, including all sub-chapters[4]. Since for some parties, even the tables of content can be very detailed and, hence, somewhat lengthy, this is another way of facilitating the whole procedure for the respondents in order to avoid that they lose focus and interest and are, therefore, not exposed to the whole treatment (Mutz, 2011). While the first treatment group got to see part of the real table of contents that the party used in their manifesto, the second treatment group got to see a version where those same topics are ordered differently, so that the table of contents is now turned the wrong way around (cf. Sections A.1 and A.2 in the Appendix). After having seen the table of contents, respondents will be asked to answer the following question: "What do you think was the the most important issue for [Party] *in the recent election*?" Just like in the first question, this will again be an open-ended question. The control group, in contrast, will not see any version of the party's table of contents. This enables me to not only differentiate between the effect that the real manifesto has on voters'

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[4]Note that in many election manifestos, parties start with some sort of general introduction or preamble, and end with a conclusion or call for vote. These parts are not treated as chapters here and, hence, are not covered in the tables of contents, since these parts of a manifesto typically have very broad titles that do not transfer much information – such as, for example, "Introduction" in the Greens' 2017 manifesto, or "A good country in times like these" in the CDU/CSU's 2017 manifesto.

perceptions compared to the manipulated version, but also to distinguish between how both versions individually compare to no treatment at all. Table 1 below presents an overview of how the survey experiment was designed.

When it comes to the specific parties that respondents were asked about, I divided the respondents into two groups in order to include two different parties. The first party is the German Green party. The reason I chose this party is that, traditionally, it is not only a niche party, but also one that is very strongly associated with one single topic, namely the environment and its protection. For such a party, respondents will easily be able to answer the first question as to what the Greens' overall key topic is. At the same time, it will potentially be a particularly hard case for tricking the respondents into choosing a topic other than the environment in the second question, even if they get to see the manipulated table of contents, since the Greens are so strongly associated with this topic. The second party is the German CDU/CSU. In contrast to the Greens, this is a mainstream party that is not so strongly associated with one single issue or issue area. Instead, it aims at speaking to a bigger and more diverse portion of the electorate, which could make it harder for respondents to pick just one topic in the first question, leading to a higher variance in the answers to that question. At the same time, due to the party's key issue or issues being less obvious, the effect of both versions of the table of contents might be a lot clearer than for the Green party. For both parties, I use their 2017 national election manifestos (CDU/CSU, 2017; BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN, 2017).

Table 1: Design of the Survey Experiment

Party	Treatment 1	Treatment 2	Control
Greens	Real ToC	Manipulated ToC	Nothing
CDU/CSU	Real ToC	Manipulated ToC	Nothing

Data

In order for the sample to be representative of the German electorate and in order for the number of respondents to be sufficiently high for me to draw conclusions from them, I rely on

the resources and expertise of the German Internet Panel (GIP, Blom et al., 2014). I was able to place my survey experiment in Wave 36 of the GIP which was conducted in July 2018, i.e. less than a year after the Bundestag election which was held in September 2017. In this wave, 2464 respondents answered the survey, half of which were assigned to answering questions about either the Greens or the CDU/CSU. Within each party, one third of respondents were allocated to either treatment 1, treatment 2 or the control group.

Once the survey data from Wave 36 of the GIP was obtained, I re-coded all open answers using the master codebook from the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP, Comparative Agendas Project, 2015). Out of the categories provided in the Comparative Agendas Project (2015), I used the overall categories, such as macroeconomics or health, without going into the more detailed sub-categories. In those cases where respondents answered with more than one policy issue, I always coded the one that was mentioned first. Those answers that did not contain any policy area were coded as missing values following the guidelines provided by the GIP.

Overall, most respondents who were asked about the Green Party named the environment as the most important issue, both in general and in the election, followed by energy and immigration issues. Social welfare topics, which were presented as the first topic of the manifesto in the manipulated table of contents, were mentioned by 13% of respondents as the Green Party's most important issue in the 2017 election. Many respondents who answered these questions for the CDU/CSU mentioned immigration as the party's most important issue in general, and to a lesser extent in the 2017 election. Topics that fall under the overall category of macroeconomics were also mentioned a lot as the CDU/CSU's key issue, both in general and in the election. While less than 1% of respondents saw Labour issues, which were the original manifesto's first topic, as the CDU/CSU's overall key issue, this number increased to 18% in the 2017 election. Table 5 in the Appendix provides a more detailed overview of how often each topic area was mentioned by the respondents.

The key variable of interest is whether or not a respondent's answer changed between the first and second question, and whether it changed towards the first topic they were presented with in one of the treatments. The variable CHANGE thus has three values: Change towards first topic of treatment 1, change towards the first topic of treatment 2, and neither. The third value,

neither, includes respondents whose answer did not change as well as those whose answer did change, but not towards the first topic of either of the treatments. Table 2 shows for how many respondents the perceived most important topic changed between the first and second question, in absolute and relative terms. For both parties, the vast majority of respondents did not change their answer towards any of the topics that was presented to them at the very top of the tables of contents. However, close to 10% of the respondents did change their answer towards treatment 1 or treatment 2, respectively. For those respondents who were asked about the CDU/CSU's most important topic, we can see that 14% changed their answer towards the first topic of treatment 1, which was the real table of contents that started with Labour issues [5].

Table 2: Change in Perceived Most Important Topic, by Party

	Change towards T1	Change towards T2	Neither	Total
Greens	119	114	986	1219
	9.76%	9.35%	80.89%	100%
CDU/CSU	171	114	934	1219
	14.03%	9.35%	76.62%	100%
Total	290	228	1920	2438
	11.89%	9.35%	78.75%	100%

In order to be able to tell whether these changes in respondents' answers between the first and second question are indeed due to the treatment, I take into account the variable TREAT-MENT that simply captures in which treatment group a respondent was and has, hence, three values – treatment 1, treatment 2, control.

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[5]cf. Sections A.1 and A.2 in the Appendix for an overview of how the manifestos' topics where ordered in the different treatment groups.

Preliminary Results

Figure 1 shows how topic order in election manifestos affects respondents' perceived issue importance in the cases of the Green Party 1a and the CDU/CSU 1b. The bars represent change in what respondents perceived to be parties' most important topic. In both graphs, the leftmost bar shows respondents who changed their answer towards the first topic in the original topic order, the middle bar shows respondents who changed their answer towards the first topic in the manipulated topic order, and the bar on the right shows respondents who did not change their answer to either of those two. This third category includes respondents who, when asked about the party's most important issue in the *last* election, named a topic that was not prompted by either of the treatments, or who mentioned the same topic in both questions, i.e., the treatment did not yield any change.

Figure 1a shows how topic order in the Green Party's manifesto affects respondents' perceived issue importance. As the bar on the left shows, out of all respondent who perceived environmental issues to be the Greens' most important issue in the last election, but not their overall most important topic, more than 50% had also received treatment 1, which consisted of the original topic order where the environment was the first topic. 35% of respondents who said that the environment was the Green Party's most important topic in the last election, but not in general, had received treatment 2, the manipulated topic order that presented the environment as the last topic on the list. The second bar shows respondents who perceived social welfare issues to be the Greens' most important topic in the last election, but not in general. Out of those respondents, 60% had seen treatment 2, the manipulated topic order that presented a social welfare issue at the top of the list. 30% of respondents in this group had been exposed to treatment 1, the original topic order where social welfare issues were listed last. Finally, the dark grey areas in Figure 1a show that not many respondents who were in the control group, i.e. respondents who did not see any version of the manifesto's table of contents, named either of the two topic areas as the Green Party's most important topic in the last election, but not in general. Taken together, these findings support my hypothesis that topic order in election manifestos can affect people's understanding of which topics are most important to a party.

The Chi² test presented in Table 3 in the Appendix supports this result.

Figure 1b shows how topic order affects respondents' perceived issue importance in the case of the CDU/CSU. The leftmost bar indicates that out of those respondents who perceived labour issues to be the CDU/CSU's most important issue area in the last election, but not in general, 70% had received treatment 1, which showed the original topic order that started with a labour topic. Looking at respondents who mentioned immigration to be the CDU/CSU's most important topic in the last election, this trend is not so pronounced. However, immigration was a very important topic in general at the time of the election (Bräuninger et al., 2019) and the CDU/CSU was in government, so the fact that respondents of all treatment groups mentioned immigration as an important issue for the CDU/CSU in that election is not surprising. Yet, regarding the overall trend, the Chi² test in Table 4 in the Appendix confirms that topic order in the CDU/CSU's election manifesto still affects which topics respondents perceived to be important for the CDU/CSU.

Overall, the experiment thus shows that topic order in election manifestos can affect the perceived issue importance in a reader, which supports my main argument that parties can highlight their key or most beneficial topics through their placement in the election manifesto.

Figure 1: Effect of Topic Order on Perceived Issue Importance

(a) Green Party

(b) CDU/CSU
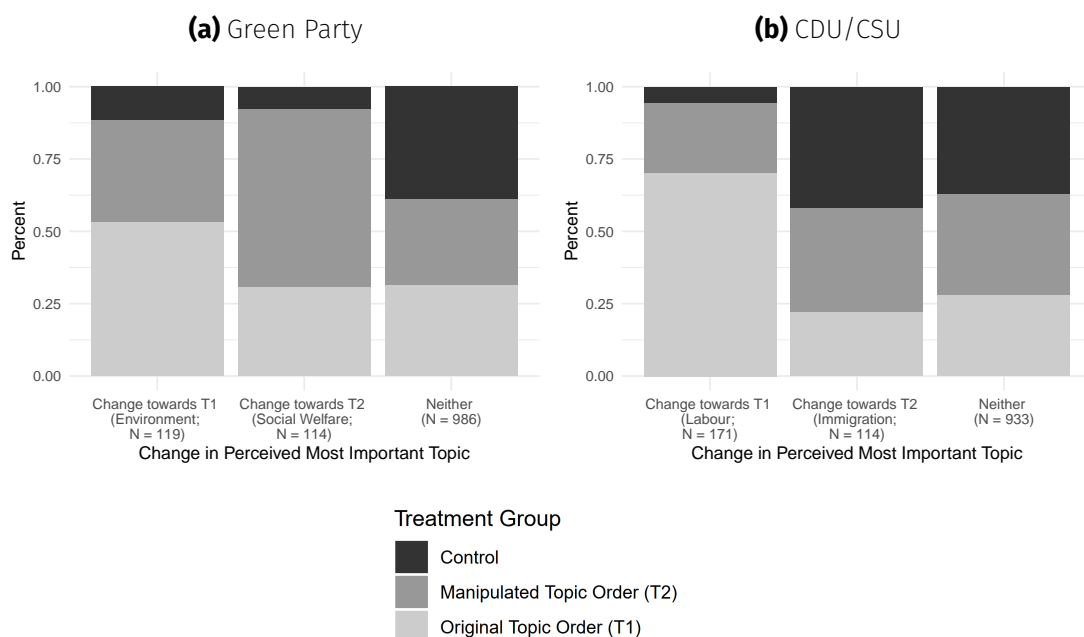
Conclusion

In this manuscript, I showed how topic order in election manifestos can affect people's perception of parties' most important topics. Using a survey experiment, I showed that respondents tend to perceive topics as key topics for a party when those topics are placed early in the election manifesto. This finding supports the overall argument of my dissertation that topic order in election manifestos matters.

The next steps for this section include to take a closer look at the effect of topic order on perceived issue importance. Specifically, I will not only look at the first topic of the treatment, but also at how the second, third, and so on topics affect perceived issue importance. If topic order matters beyond the first topic, then its effect on perceived issue attention should be present for the subsequent topics as well, albeit to a weaker extent. Additionally, I will analyse how the *last* topics in an election manifesto affects respondents' perceived issue importance, as there might be recency effects at play as well.

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A Appendix

A.1 Survey Experiment Treatments: Green Party

Original Order

A. Umwelt im Kopf

1. Wir erhalten unsere Natur

2. Wir sorgen für gesunde Lebensmittel und beenden Tierleid

3. Wir retten das Klima

4. Wir begrünen unsere Wirtschaft für Umweltschutz, Lebensqualität und Arbeitsplätze

5. Wir steigen um – komplett auf grüne Energien

6. Wir sorgen für saubere, bezahlbare und bequeme Mobilität

B. Gerechtigkeit im Sinn

1. Wir investieren in Kindertagesstätten, Schulen und Hochschulen

2. Wir kämpfen für bezahlbare Wohnungen und lebenswerte Kommunen

3. Wir teilen den Wohlstand gerechter

4. Wir machen den Sozialstaat sicher und zukunftsfest

5. Wir holen Kinder aus der Armut und fördern Familien

6. Wir kämpfen für gute Arbeit und bessere Vereinbarkeit

7. Wir gestalten Digitalisierung

Manipulated Order

A. Gerechtigkeit im Sinn

1. Wir gestalten Digitalisierung

2. Wir kämpfen für gute Arbeit und bessere Vereinbarkeit

3. Wir holen Kinder aus der Armut und fördern Familien

4. Wir machen den Sozialstaat sicher und zukunftsfest

5. Wir teilen den Wohlstand gerechter

6. Wir kämpfen für bezahlbare Wohnungen und lebenswerte Kommunen

7. Wir investieren in Kindertagesstätten, Schulen und Hochschulen

B. Umwelt im Kopf

1. Wir sorgen für saubere, bezahlbare und bequeme Mobilität

2. Wir steigen um – komplett auf grüne Energien

3. Wir begrünen unsere Wirtschaft für Umweltschutz, Lebensqualität und Arbeitsplätze

4. Wir retten das Klima

5. Wir sorgen für gesunde Lebensmittel und beenden Tierleid

6. Wir erhalten unsere Natur

A.2   Survey Experiment Treatments: CDU/CSU

Original Order

Gute Arbeit auch für morgen – Vollbeschäftigung für Deutschland

- Arbeitsplätze sichern

- Neue Arbeitsplätze schaffen

- Langzeitarbeitslosen helfen

- Qualität von Arbeit ist uns wichtig

- Selbstständigkeit und Mittelstand stärken

- Tarifpartnerschaft stärken

- Landwirtschaft hat Zukunft

- Mehr Freiraum, weniger Bürokratie

- Verkehrsinfrastruktur erneuern und ausbauen

- Energiewende zum Erfolg führen

- Forschung und neue Technologien fördern

- Globalisierung für Deutschlands Zukunft nutzen

Was unser Land zusammenhält

- Gemeinschaft und Zusammenhalt

- Ehrenamt und Sport

- Christliche Kirchen und Religionsgemeinschaften

- Religionsfreiheit in Deutschland

- Damit Integration gelingt

Manipulated Order

Was unser Land zusammenhält

- Damit Integration gelingt

- Religionsfreiheit in Deutschland

- Christliche Kirchen und Religionsgemeinschaften

- Ehrenamt und Sport

- Gemeinschaft und Zusammenhalt

Gute Arbeit auch für morgen - Vollbeschäftigung für Deutschland

- Globalisierung für Deutschlands Zukunft nutzen

- Forschung und neue Technologien fördern

- Energiewende zum Erfolg führen

- Verkehrsinfrastruktur erneuern und ausbauen

- Mehr Freiraum, weniger Bürokratie

- Landwirtschaft hat Zukunft

- Tarifpartnerschaft stärken

- Selbstständigkeit und Mittelstand stärken

- Qualität von Arbeit ist uns wichtig

- Langzeitarbeitslosen helfen

- Neue Arbeitsplätze schaffen

- Arbeitsplätze sichern

Table 3: Effect of Topic Order on Perceived Issue Importance: Green Party

Change in Perceived Most Important Topic	Treatment Group			Total
	Original Topic Order (T1)	Manipulated Topic Order (T2)	Control	
Change towards T1 (Environment)	63 (15.52)	42 (10.32)	14 (3.45)	119 (9.76)
Change towards T2 (Social Welfare)	35 (8.62)	70 (17.20)	9 (2.22)	114 (9.35)
Neither	308 (75.86)	295 (72.48)	383 (94.33)	986 (80.89)
Total	406 (100)	407 (100)	406 (100)	1219 (100)

Pearson Chi² = 93.5167; df = 4; Pr = 0.000

Table 4: Effect of Topic Order on Perceived Issue Importance: CDU/CSU

Change in Perceived Most Important Topic	Treatment Group			Total
	Original Topic Order (T1)	Manipulated Topic Order (T2)	Control	
Change towards T1 (Labour)	120 (29.56)	41 (10.10)	10 (2.46)	171 (14.04)
Change towards T2 (Environment)	25 (6.16)	41 (10.10)	48 (11.82)	114 (9.36)
Neither	261 (64.29)	324 (79.80)	348 (85.71)	933 (76.60)
Total	406 (100)	406 (100)	406 (100)	1,218 (100)

Pearson Chi² = 133.1769; df = 4; Pr = 0.000

Table 5: Respondents' Perceived Most Important Topic in General and in Last Election, by Party

	Green Party, overall	Green Party, campaign	CDU/CSU, overall	CDU/CSU, campaign
Macroeconomics	2	7	75	112
	0.21%	0.75%	7.64%	11.56%
Civil Rights	17	31	2	10
	1.77%	3.33%	0.20%	1.03%
Health	1	2	1	2
	0.10%	0.21%	0.10%	0.21%
Agriculture	7	8	2	1
	0.73%	0.86%	0.20%	0.10%
Labour	6	9	8	175
	0.62%	0.97%	0.81%	18.06%
Education	3	8	4	8
	0.31%	0.86%	0.41%	0.83%
Environment	670	491	2	0
	69.65%	52.68%	0.20%	0.00%
Energy	77	112	1	42
	8.00%	12.02%	0.10%	4.33%
Immigration	108	73	725	438
	11.23%	7.83%	73.83%	45.20%
Transportation	9	6	0	10
	0.94%	0.64%	0.00%	1.03%
Law and Crime	0	0	12	18
	0.00%	0.00%	1.22%	1.86%
Social Welfare	28	128	28	28
	2.91%	13.73%	2.85%	2.89%
Housing	2	18	0	0
	0.21%	1.93%	0.00%	0.00%
Domestic Commerce	1	0	0	0
	0.10%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Defence	0	0	1	0
	0.00%	0.00%	0.10%	0.00%
Technology	2	19	2	9
	0.21%	2.04%	0.20%	0.93%
Foreign Trade	0	0	2	50
	0,00%	0.00%	0.20%	5.16%
International Affairs	10	4	48	17
	1.04%	0.43%	4.89%	1.75%
Government Operations	3	0	5	2
	0.31%	0.00%	0.51%	0.21%
Culture	0	0	0	10
	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	1.03%
Government Participation	16	15	55	35
	1.66%	1.61%	5.60%	3.61%
Home Affairs	0	1	9	2
	0.00%	0.11%	0.92%	0.21
Total	962	932	982	969