

Quality of Understanding in Campaign Communication of Political Parties and Mass Media in Austria Between 1970 and 2008

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Following the notion of deliberative democracy, political decisions are legitimized when they are based on debate that permits the circulation of information, stances, arguments, and ideas to create mutual understanding. We investigate to what extent political parties and the mass media in political campaign communication follow qualitative principles demanded by the public sphere concept. We introduce and test the index of a quality of understanding (IQU). We define four indicators for deliberation quality: statement of reasons, proposals for solutions, respect, and doubts. In the empirical part, we examine political parties' press releases and newspaper coverage of the Austrian national elections in 1970, 1983, 1999, and 2008.

Keywords: discourse, deliberation, press releases, media coverage, campaign communication, content analysis

In a deliberative democracy, citizens are involved in a decision-making process (Levine, 2003). But most people seldom participate in everyday politics. Only in elections do members of the general public get to cast their votes, and only for the political parties or candidates they think will represent them well in parliament. Following the notion of deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1992), political decisions are legitimized when they are based on debate that permits the circulation of information, positions, arguments, and ideas, because then actors are oriented to mutual understanding. These political debates are the primary criteria on which citizens base their informed decisions and make public judgments about common preferences (Habermas, 1984). Thus, political actors are accountable for clear and transparent decisions because their legitimacy depends on public support.

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Date submitted: 2015–10–18

¹ This research was sponsored by the Austrian Research Fund (FWF) (P20147).

To distribute their messages, political parties hold press conferences, give interviews and fireside chats, and send out press releases. Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell, and Semetko (1999) note that press releases “closely reflect the daily campaign. In these documents parties try to launch their main theme de jour” (p. 44). In their press releases, parties justify their views and actions so recipients can sift the better from the worse (Levine, 2003). Most likely, this communication will reach citizens via the mass media. Kaid (1976); Miller, Andsager, and Reichert (1998); and for Austria, Melischek, Rußmann, and Seethaler (2010) emphasize that press releases influence media coverage, at least to an extent. The mass media distribute “the information necessary for citizens to make an informed choice at election time” (Curran, 1991, p. 29). The media provide the only adequate opportunity for the broader electorate to inform itself about public issues and to form opinions (Dahlgren, 2005; Levine, 2003).

However, the fact that information is provided on policy issues, about political parties and candidates, on election campaigns, and so on says nothing about its quality. “Deliberation . . . is not just about the substance of an exchange. Deliberation also refers to the social process of communicating” (Gastil, 2008, p. 9). The norm of deliberation refers to procedures and qualities of public discourse. Only if the discussion is interaction oriented and permits the circulation of stances, arguments, and ideas can lead to a rational consensus among all participants (Habermas, 1992). Thus, discourse enhances “the formation of political will (i.e., public opinion)” (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 148). In this process, people must understand a political message in order to develop their own opinions. Habermas’s (1987) perspective of a deliberative democracy requires public understanding.

The main objective of this research is to investigate the extent to which political discourse in parties’ press releases and in the mass media (newspaper articles) in Austria follows qualitative principles demanded by the public sphere concept to better understand the notion of deliberation in public discourse. We introduce and test the index of a quality of understanding (IQU) (*Index für Verständigungsorientierung, VOI*). We focus on two of three primary participant groups in public debates: the political parties and the mass media. The third primary group, the citizens, do not form part of the current analysis.

This article has three sections: In the first section, we present the theoretical framework of the IQU, which is based on Habermas’s conception of deliberative democracy. In the theoretical discussion, we focus on the work of Habermas, who has strongly influenced deliberative theory. In the method and measurement section, we introduce the IQU. In the results section, we test the IQU with an empirical analysis of parties’ press releases and newspaper articles during four Austrian national elections, from 1970 to 2008. A longitudinal approach enables us to investigate continuity and change in the content and the roles of the political parties and the mass media. Such an approach will also identify comparative quality of understanding patterns among parties and the mass media and between them. This comparative approach will ensure that the conclusions drawn about the quality of understanding in campaign communication are more than merely arbitrary.

Theoretical Background

In his Theory of Communicative Action (TCA), Habermas (1984, 1987, 2001) examines various speech acts, defining the rational conditions for mutual understanding in communicative action. In everyday communication practice, participants need to accept the validity of differing demands and claims to reach a mutual understanding. They must validate the discourse. Habermas emphasizes four validity claims (*Geltungsansprüche*): intelligibility (i.e., participants use the proper grammatical rules), truth (i.e., participants are certain that they are talking about something the partner accepts as real), truthfulness (i.e., participants agree on being honest with and not misleading each other), and legitimacy (i.e., participants believe that they are acting in accordance with mutually accepted values and norms). Communication will continue as long as participants do not doubt the fulfillment of the four validity claims. However, like democracy, such an *ideal speech situation* (Habermas, 1984) "is something that we can use as a critical standard for judging the quality of actual talk, but it is not something humans can live up to" (Gastil, 2008, p. 22). Reality often falls short of these ideals. In our everyday communication, claims are open to criticism and justification. Specifically, election campaigns are times of intensive public discussion about political issues, political parties, and their candidates because "election campaigns are among the most important events in the lives of democracies and societies in transition" (Semetko, 2008, Introduction section, para. 1). Parties' views on public issues, their behaviors, and their actions are questioned by their opponents and by the mass media. Political actors criticize their opponents and question their legitimacy because their views on political issues differ. Under the conditions of such a debate, it may seem impossible to reach rational consensus. But in general, and in consensus democracies such as Austria (Lijphart, 1999), elected representatives have a certain willingness to at least compromise about issues of public concern to make deliberation happen.

To reach mutual understanding, political actors engage in discourse to defend themselves, their actions, and their positions. In this process of argumentation, validity claims are tested for their rational justifiability as true, correct, and authentic (Habermas, 1984). In an ideal speech situation, political actors will carefully examine a problem or issue to consider a broad range of perspectives (Gastil, 2000). "Each participant must make a sincere effort to make known all information, including their true intentions, interests, needs, and desires, as relevant to the particular problem under consideration" (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 3). Basic features of the democratic ideal are mutual respect (Fishkin, 1991) (i.e., participants will respectfully listen to each other), reason (Cohen, 1989; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004) (i.e., participants justify their positions and behaviors), and solutions (i.e., participants will offer solutions for that problem or issue), which leads to a genuine, rational consensus (Cohen, 1989) owing to the noncoercive persuasion of the better argument (Habermas, 1992). Only then will the communication process continue.

Although reality often falls short of these democratic ideals, only political discussion oriented to the communicative principles of understanding can promote the development of a deliberative public sphere. Based on Habermas's work and the basic features of the democratic ideal specified by major theorists and following previous empirical studies on public discourse (Gerhards, Neidhardt, & Rucht, 1998; Spöndli, 2004; Steenbergen, Bächtiger, Spöndli, & Steiner, 2003), we define the following communicative principles of understanding: statements of reasons for positions taken, proposals of solutions, expressions of respect for positions and other people, and doubts of the four validity claims.

These principles build the index of a quality of understanding (IQU), which serves as a quantitative measure of the quality of understanding of public discourse. This index is based on the subindices of the four communicative principles of understanding (indicators). Figure 1 shows the four indicators that allow us to operationalize and empirically quantify the quality of understanding of political discussions.

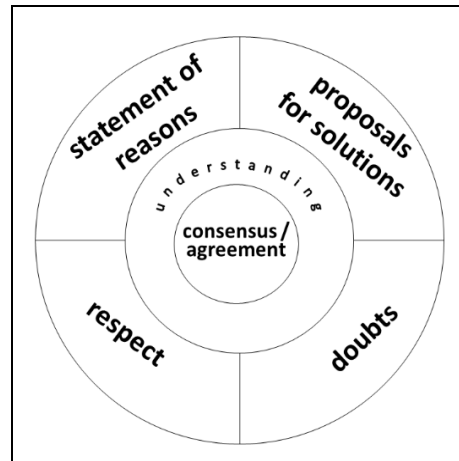


Figure 1. Indicators of the IQU.

The quality of understanding of discourse depends on the strength of the four indicators (i.e., subindices). For instance, the quality of understanding is high when political actors (a) state not only their positions on a particular problem but also the reasons behind them, (b) propose specific solutions for debatable issues, (c) deal with other participants (e.g., their opponents) in a more or less respectful way, and (d) express relevant doubts concerning positions and other participants.

To examine the political discourse in political party press releases and media coverage during elections, we focus on the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do Austrian political parties follow the principles of a quality of understanding in their press releases, and how does the quality of understanding change over time?

RQ2: To what extent do Austrian newspapers (journalists) follow the principles of a quality of understanding in their coverage, and how does the quality of understanding change over time?

Method and Measurement: Index of a Quality of Understanding

The IQU provides an overall evaluation of the quality of understanding of public discourse. In this section, we provide a detailed description of the four indicators and their subindices.

Statement of Reasons

First, political actors want to convince others (citizens and political opponents) of the importance of their issues (Gerhards, 2003). They want to persuade them to accept and to support their stances. Thus, political actors "should give reasons for [their positions and] decisions, and respond to the reasons that citizens give in return" (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 3; see also Cohen, 1989).

A few empirical studies that examine the effects of deliberation in political debates (for example, Kuhlmann, 1999; Spörndli, 2004; Steenbergen et al., 2003) highlight the importance of this principle to reaching mutual understanding. In his analysis of debates in the German Conference Committee (*Vermittlungsausschuss*), Spörndli (2004) found that in the case of debatable questions, for consensus to be reached, arguments must be well explained and logically presented.

To analyze the quality of political discussions, it seems to be important to differentiate degrees to which reasons (justifications, arguments) are stated. We distinguish four degrees, assigning a value to each: 0 = no statement of reasons is given for a position, a political act, or political behavior; 1 = *generalized* statement of reasons: indefinite, short justifications based on common sense; 2 = *simple* statement of reasons: the argument is justified by a single fact; 3 = *specific* statement of reasons: supported by facts and figures, expert opinion, or science.

In each unit of analysis (i.e., a single press release or article), we coded up to three variables in order of their appearance. For instance, if we coded three statements of reasons in a press release or article, we did not code any additional statements of reasons. The subindex statements of reasons are measured by (a) the number of justifications and (b) their degrees. Thus, higher values indicate more justifications at higher degrees. Each score aggregates (up to) three coded variables. Thus, the maximum score for degrees of statements of reasons is 9, which is given if, in the analyzed press release or newspaper article, three specific statements of reasons (concerning the main statement) have been coded. The subindex (standardized by the maximum value) is calculated using the following formula: $INDBEG^2 = (\text{CumulativeValue3VariableStatementsofReasons}/9) \times 100$.

Proposals of Solutions

Political actors have different ideas and opinions about public issues. Following the idea of deliberative democracy and Habermas's discourse ethics, disputes and conflicts should be solved with discussion to reach a rational consensus. Thus, ideally, politicians will introduce varying solutions for a particular problem (see also Cohen, 1989). Based on the analysis of abortion discourse in Germany,

² Index of Statement of Reasons.

Gerhards et al. (1998) note that, to convince others of their views and opinions, the political actors offered differing solutions for a particular problem. In the discourse on abortion, all political alternatives were outlined in a way that the public was able to follow them.

Again, we distinguish between the quality of proposals of solutions: 0 = no proposals of solutions are provided for a problem; 1 = *partial* proposals of solutions (i.e., the participants introduce an idea); 2 = *precise* proposals of solutions (a detailed concept is introduced and its de facto implementation is outlined). The subindex for proposals of solutions is aggregated the same way as the INDBEG, but its maximum value is smaller. Hence, the divisor in the formula is 6: $INDLOES = (\text{CumulativeValue3VariableProposalsofSolutions}/6) \times 100$.³

Respect

A political discussion requires "maintaining a degree of respect for yourself and your fellow participants" (Gastil, 2008, p. 10; see also Fishkin, 1991, on mutual respect). Respect means that participants need to listen to one another and to accept different viewpoints (Spörndli, 2004). Political actors and the mass media can question other political actors' positions and actions as long as criticism remains respectful (Spörndli, 2004). They must treat their opponents "as sincere, competent participants, as long as they do not themselves reject these principles" (Gastil, 2008, p. 10). The empirical analysis of debates in the German Conference Committee shows that, in political debates, mutual respect is a factor that positively impacts the process of reaching consensus (Spörndli, 2004). We define respect for positions and other political actors as another condition for mutual understanding in communicative action. We coded three respect levels: 0 = *disrespectful expression* (expressions with an explicit, negatively valenced attribute); 3 = *respectful expressions* (expressions that are neither negatively nor positively valenced; this applies to all units of analysis that are neither disrespectful nor explicitly respectful); 4 = *explicitly respectful expressions* (expressions with an explicit positively valenced attribute).

This subindex differs from the subindices of the first two indicators insofar as the respect level indicates a negative parameter. To prevent a negative index value and thus allow for aggregation of the respect level with the two other only positively evaluated indicators (statements of reasons and proposals of solutions), we assign the value 0 to the negative attribute of respect (respectless expressions), thereby assigning higher values to respectful and explicitly respectful expressions.

We summarized the variable of respect by dividing it into respect for positions and respect for other people, their behavior, and their actions; thus, this subindex has two sub-subindices: $INDPOR^4 = (\text{CumulativeValue3VariableRespectPosition}/12) \times 100$ and $INDPER^5 = (\text{CumulativeValue3VariableRespectPerson}/12) \times 100$. An aggregated index of respect is calculated thus: $INDREGEY^6 = (INDPOR + INDPER)/2$.

³ Index of Proposals of Solutions.

⁴ Index of Respect for Positions.

⁵ Index of Respect for People.

⁶ Index of Respect.

Doubts (Validity Claims)

In accordance with the Habermasian perspective of understanding, we assume that, in political discussions, political actors and the mass media sometimes cast doubts on other political actors and their messages. They disbelieve these actors' validity claims. This will disrupt discourse, and under these conditions, politics cannot reach consensus. Thus, by justifying their positions, behaviors, or actions, political actors will try to resolve doubts. We distinguish between four types of doubts: Doubts are expressed (1) about *intelligibility* if political actors or journalists question whether a statement is formulated in such a way that the members of the addressed public can understand it; (2) about *truth* if political actors or journalists question whether a statement pertaining to a specific circumstance (e.g., a situation, fact, or occurrence) is a proven fact; (3) about *truthfulness* if political actors or journalists claim that another political actor is not trustworthy. For instance, they may allege that someone has lied or accuse participants (or relevant addressees of the debate) of lacking honesty or integrity. Doubts are expressed (4) about *legitimacy* if political actors or journalists question the appropriateness of other political actors' actions, interests, and behaviors.

First, we used countervariables to draw conclusions about the different types of doubts: $zw1verst$ = number of doubts of intelligibility (max 3), $zw2wahei$ = number of doubts of truth (max 3), $zw3wahaf$ = number of doubts of truthfulness (max 3), $zw4legi$ = number of doubts of legitimacy (max 3). Then, the cumulative value for the subindex for doubts is aggregated in the same way as for the other indicators: $zweifsum = zw1verst + zw2wahei + zw3wahaf + zw4legi$ (max 3); $INDZWEIF^7 = (zweifsum/3) \times 100$.

Index of a Quality of Understanding (IQU)

The indexing process is based on a scoring system that considers the maximum possible value of each of the four subindices. We transformed the total score into a scale from 0 to 100. Owing to standardization (of the maximum value), we integrated each subindex with the same weight into the overall IQU, although the indicators have different manifestations at different levels. Thus, each subindex contributes to the IQU with the same weight: $IQU = (INDBEG + INDLOES + INDREGEY + INDZWEIF)/4$.

Data

In the second republic (after World War II), Austria is considered to be a classic example of consociationalism (Fallend, 2010; Melchior, 2005). Such a consensual democracy, as Lijphart (1999) considers Austria, is characterized by consensus policy making among the elite (Fallend, 2010). Until 1966, Austria was governed by a grand coalition of the ÖVP and SPÖ parties, and the following period (from 1966 to 1975) was characterized by single-party governments (ÖVP: 1966–1970; SPÖ: 1970–1983). At the beginning of the 1990s, "the erosion of consociationalism has led to a more dynamic and open system of political contestation" (Melchior, 2005, p. 13). This change was influenced by developments starting in the late 1970s and early 1980s (for example, social movements) and is characterized by a change from the dominance of two parties and Austrian social partnership to moderate

⁷ Index of Doubts.

party pluralism (for example, the establishment of The Greens—The Green Alternative, who entered parliament in 1986, and the takeover of the Freedom Party of Austria [FPÖ] by Jörg Haider in 1986) and the weakening of the social partnership from consensual political party culture to an individualized and controversial political culture. Around 2000, “a new differentiation emerged wherein an agreement-based model of administration shifted towards a conflict- and competition-oriented based model” (Fallend, 2010, p. 173). Today, more political actors are demanding political participation and comprehensive democratization.

We drew the data for this analysis from a comparative study of press releases of all parliamentary parties and of media coverage based on the political sections of all national newspapers that covered 14 Austrian national elections from 1966 to 2008. The comparative study focuses on the last six weeks of election campaigns. We selected this period because it is considered to be the hot phase of the campaign. Because of the elaborate analysis of the IQU and limited resources, we took a subsample of the comparative study.

Starting with the elections in 2008, the most recent election included in the comparative study, the current analysis also includes material from another three elections: Austria’s national elections in 1970, 1983, and 1999. These three elections are “*Wendewahlen*”: followed by a full or partial replacement of the governing party or parties. This gives us the opportunity to investigate continuity and change in the quality of understanding in Austria’s campaign communication over a long term. We reduced the material to three of the six weeks, the first (*pre-election period*), third (*halftime*), and sixth (*final stage*) week prior to Election Day (see Table 1). This selection allows us to consider the full time span of six weeks and the various stages of the campaigns’ hot phase and to reduce the material.

We selected press releases and newspaper articles with a policy issue as the main topic. Particularly, in press releases and news articles dominated by a substantial political topic (a policy issue), the involved actors present their tasks, goals, and solutions for the next legislative period. This is often followed by conflicts between the involved actors. The selected material gives us the opportunity to examine political conflicts.

The analyzed material consists of press releases of parties who were members of Austria’s Parliament after each election. For the Austrian national elections of 1970 and 1983, these were the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ), the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP), and the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). For the national election of 1999, the sample consists of press releases of the SPÖ, the ÖVP, the FPÖ, and The Greens—The Green Alternative (The Greens). For Austria’s national elections in 2008, we also included press releases of the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ). The media selection includes, *Kronen Zeitung (Krone)*, Austria’s largest newspaper; *Kurier*, representing Austria’s yellow press; and *Die Presse* and *Arbeiterzeitung* (for 1970 and 1983, respectively), the latter succeeded by *Der Standard* (for 1999 and 2008), the two largest quality papers. These are Austria’s daily newspapers, which lead the political discourse (Kaltenbrunner, 2010).

We treated the single press release or the single newspaper article as the unit of analysis. Four student coders coded the press releases and newspaper articles. Holsti’s coefficient was used to test

intercoder reliability. Overall, the intercoder percentage agreement for each variable falls within the (acceptable) range from 0.64 to 1.0.

Table 1. Sample of Party Press Releases and Newspaper Articles Between 1970 and 2008.

Election	No. of Press Releases	No. of Newspaper Articles
1970	117	320
1983	257	381
1999	429	335
2008	538	384

Note. The sample of press releases in 1970 consists of only one press release by the FPÖ, which we removed to prevent bias.

Results

Press Releases

First, we investigated the extent to which Austria's political parties followed the principles of a quality of understanding in their press releases in the election campaigns between 1970 and 2008. The results reveal an IQU between 35.69 and 38.30 points (on a 100-point scale) across the four analyzed campaigns (see Figure 2). (The mean provides an overall quality evaluation.) The highest IQU across all parties was reached in the 1970 campaign, and the lowest IQU in the 2008 campaign. Thus, the IQU in parties' press releases has decreased over time.

The party-level results show that political parties followed the principles of a quality of understanding between 32.5 and 42.78 points. The lowest IQU is 32.5 points for the SPÖ in the 1999 election campaign; the highest IQU is 42.78 points for the FPÖ in the same year. Thus, the campaign in 1999 reveals the largest differences in IQU between parties. The 1999 campaign also showed the greatest changes: The FPÖ became the second strongest party and entered government in a coalition with the ÖVP. The FPÖ had gained more than 5% in votes. In contrast, the SPÖ had lost about 5% in votes. After 13 years in a coalition government with the ÖVP, the SPÖ became a strong opposition party. Comparing the IQU for each party across the four analyzed campaigns, our results reveal the largest differences between campaigns for the FPÖ (1983: 35.79 points; 1999: 42.78 points; 2008: 34.85 points).

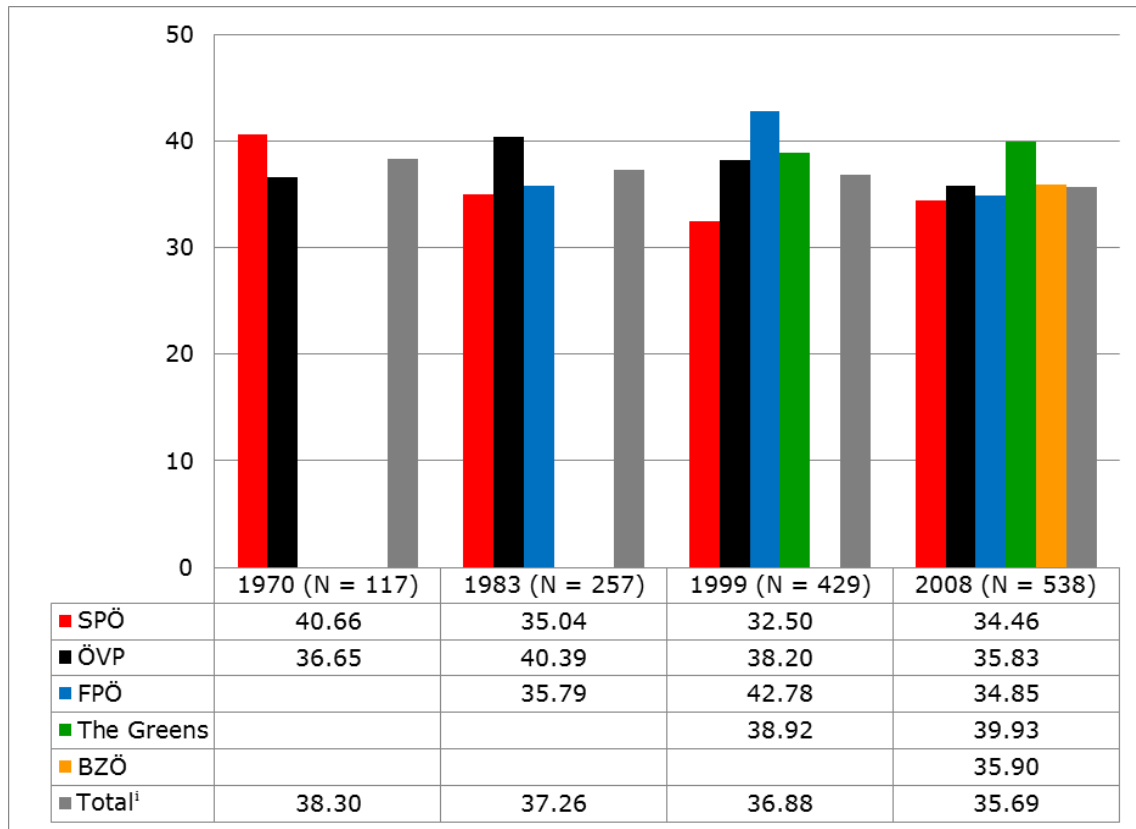


Figure 2. IQU for party press releases between 1970 and 2008.

Note. There is no significant relationship between parties in the 1970 campaign (problem of small numbers). Thus, we can only speak of a tendency when explaining the relationship between the parties in 1970. However, across the dataset (1970 to 2008), we can observe clear trends; thus, we assume the results would show a statistically significant relationship between parties in the case of a larger sample. Mean, scale 0 to 100. ⁱ1970: $p = .176$; 1983: $p = .004$; 1999: $p = .000$; 2008: $p = .011$.

To get a more precise picture of the parties' performance, we describe the four indicators (subindices) separately. We will examine the development of the four indicators over the past 40 years and distinguish between the different levels of each indicator, respectively the different types of doubts. Table 2 presents the results.

Table 2. Subindices of Indicators for Party Press Releases 1970 to 2008.

Political Parties' Press Releases for 1970 (N = 117)							
Indicators of a Quality of Understanding	SPÖ (n = 48)	ÖVP (n = 69)	FPÖ	Greens	BZÖ	Total	p
INDBEG: Level of statement of reasons	37.73	40.74	-	-	-	39.51	0.836
INDLOES: Level of proposals of solutions	19.1	14.01	-	-	-	16.1	0.094
INDREGEY: Level of respect	54.43	54.17	-	-	-	54.27	0.94
INDZWEIF: Doubts	51.39	37.68	-	-	-	43.3	0.094
IQU	40.66	36.65	-	-	-	38.3	0.176
Political Parties' Press Releases for 1983 (N = 257)							
Indicators of a Quality of Understanding	SPÖ (n = 123)	ÖVP (n = 102)	FPÖ (n = 32)	Greens	BZÖ	Total	p
INDBEG: Level of statement of reasons	27.64	33.12	31.94	-	-	30.35	0.098
INDLOES: Level of proposals of solutions	19.51	21.08	22.92	-	-	20.56	0.241
INDREGEY: Level of respect	56.98	55.39	57.03	-	-	56.36	0.403
INDZWEIF: Doubts	36.04	51.96	31.25	-	-	41.76	0.003
IQU	35.04	40.39	35.79	-	-	37.26	0.004
Political Parties' Press Releases for 1999 (N = 429)							
Indicators of a Quality of Understanding	SPÖ (n = 190)	ÖVP (n = 100)	FPÖ (n = 108)	Greens (n = 31)	BZÖ	Total	p
INDBEG: Level of statement of reasons	23.92	31.67	35.49	31.9	-	29.22	0.000
INDLOES: Level of proposals of solutions	19.82	16.17	19.75	10.75	-	18.3	0.044
INDREGEY: Level of respect	54.87	52.29	51.66	48.52	-	53	0.000
INDZWEIF: Doubts	31.4	52.67	64.2	64.52	-	47.01	0.000
IQU	32.5	38.2	42.78	38.92	-	36.88	0.000
Political Parties' Press Releases for 2008 (N = 538)							
Indicators of a Quality of Understanding	SPÖ (n = 188)	ÖVP (n = 129)	FPÖ (n = 86)	Greens (n = 64)	BZÖ (n = 71)	Total	p
INDBEG: Level of statement of reasons	36.88	35.57	33.2	43.06	33.02	36.2	0.015
INDLOES: Level of proposals of solutions	18.71	13.05	15.5	21.35	22.54	17.66	0.048
INDREGEY: Level of respect	52.3	45.87	46.12	47.92	48.59	48.76	0.000
INDZWEIF: Doubts	29.96	48.84	44.57	47.4	39.44	40.15	0.000
IQU	34.46	35.83	34.85	39.93	35.9	35.69	0.011

Note. Kruskal-Wallis p values are indicated. The indicator for respect indicates all scores for the indicators for respect for positions and for respect for other political actors.

INDBEG: Statements of reasons. The comparison within and between campaigns for the subindex for statements of reasons does not reveal a clear pattern, as illustrated in Table 2. Large differences between parties can be revealed for the 1999 campaign (SPÖ 23.92 points; FPÖ: 35.49 points) and for the 2008 campaign (BZÖ 33.02 points; Greens 43.06 points). The 1999 election was followed by great changes, and the snap election in 2008 was characterized by great conflicts between the parties. After only two years, on July 7, 2008, the ÖVP called off the coalition with the SPÖ, and Parliament decided to hold snap elections on September 28, 2008.

The highest score can be measured for The Greens in 2008 (43.06 points). This party justified many of its statements with arguments that are well explained and logically presented. For instance, in the discussion about sales tax reduction, it presented facts and figures:

The proposal by Faymann [the chancellor] scorns the people, who need a reduction of the sales tax on food the most. People with the lowest income will save only €93 per year on food supplies, whereas the 10% of Austrians with the highest income will benefit by at least €300 per year. (The Greens, 2008a, para. 1)

But in 1999, The Greens scored only 31.90 points, a difference of 11.16 points from 2008. The second highest score (40.74 points) was reached by the ÖVP almost 40 years earlier, in 1970. The SPÖ always scored the lowest for statements of reasons except in the 2008 campaign, even though the longitudinal comparison shows great differences between the analyzed campaigns (up to 13.81 points). The SPÖ often gave no reasons for its stances and decisions or only generalized statements of reasons, such as in the discourse about a possible SME funding program in 1983: "This sector has always been a focal point of the Ministry of Commerce" (SPÖ, 1983, para. 1). Only the comparison for the FPÖ reveals similarities in statements of reasons between campaigns that are more striking than differences.

In the 1970, 1983, and 1999 elections, political parties generally justified their positions with simple statements of reasons, as shown in Table 3. For instance, in the 1970 campaign, the ÖVP argued: "The one-off payment for rental apartments has been almost abolished, owing to the tenancy law amendment act, which became effective on January 1, 1968 and was initiated by the ÖVP" (ÖVP, 1970, para. 2). This changed in the 2008 elections, as parties started to use generalized, simple, and specific statements of reasons (almost) equally.

Table 3. Scores for the Indicator for Statements of Reasons for Party Press Releases Between 1970 and 2008.

Value	1970 (n = 189)	1983 (n = 368)	1999 (n = 628)	2008 (n = 914)
1	12.7	18.5	34.2	37.7
2	54.5	72.3	51.9	32.9
3	32.8	9.2	13.9	29.4

INDLOES: Proposals of solutions. Table 2 demonstrates that the share of the subindex of proposals of solutions in the IQU is the smallest of all subindices. Parties seldom introduced proposals of solutions in their press releases during the analyzed campaigns. When distinguishing between the indicator's two levels, partial and precise proposals of solutions, the data for the 1970, 1983, and 1999 campaigns clearly show that, in more than two-thirds of all cases of debatable questions on policy issues, political actors presented partial proposals of solutions (Table 4). They only introduced an idea, as the SPÖ did in the debate on steady prices in 1970: "Consumer protection can only be achieved when pooling the competences on price control, preferably in the Ministry of Social Affairs" (para. 7).

In 2008, parties started to use precise proposals of solutions, which introduce a detailed concept or outline the de facto implementation, almost as much as partial ones. In the debate about the fight against rising prices, the SPÖ sent out this solution:

The "five-point program of Werner Faymann" [the chancellor] shows that the current "fight against rising prices" is financially feasible. Already in the first half of 2006, the finance minister collected €1,572 billion by means of the new dues on sales, wages, and mineral oil taxes. (2008, para. 1)

Table 4. Scores for the Indicator for Proposals of Solutions for Party Press Releases Between 1970 and 2008.

Value	1970 (n = 85)	1983 (n = 235)	1999 (n = 368)	2008 (n = 391)
1	67.1	65.1	72.0	54.2
2	32.9	34.9	28.0	45.8

INDREGEY: Respect. Table 2 illustrates that, for the highest scoring subindex, there are no essential differences in the party comparison, in the development of the subindex for respect over time, or in the expressions of respect. Political parties normally treat each other with respect. Table 5 demonstrates that neither negatively nor positively valenced expressions dominate. Explicitly respectful expressions are a unique feature in parties' press releases. For instance, in 1983, the ÖVP was "convinced that [Social Democratic] Chancellor Kreisky will not approve of the rude and untruthful propaganda against the People's Party" (ÖVP, 1983, para. 6).

However, the party comparison reveals that the number of disrespectful expressions in press releases increased over the four decades, showing the highest score in 2008. Examples of disrespectful expressions are: "This is the political belly-flop of the government [SPÖ-ÖVP coalition]" (The Greens, 2008b, para. 2) and "The public is tired of the empty promises and untruths of the SPÖ" (ÖVP, 2008a, para. 1). Particularly in the press releases of the ÖVP and the FPÖ, respect decreased over time.

Table 5. Scores for the Indicator for Respect for Party Press Releases Between 1970 and 2008.

Value	1970 (n = 246)	1983 (n = 515)	1999 (n = 905)	2008 (n = 1210)
0	6.0	2.8	7.8	14.3
3	29.1	30.7	27.1	22.7
4	0	0.4	0.3	0.5

INDZWEIF: Doubts. Differences of the measured quality within the subindex for doubts (between parties and campaigns) are greater than for the other three subindices: Measures reach from 29.96 points (SPÖ in 2008) to 64.52 points (The Greens in 1999) (see Table 2).

Over time, the center-right party, the ÖVP (1970: 37.68 points; 2008: 48.84 points), and the right-wing party, the FPÖ (1983: 31.25 points; 2008: 44.57 points), increasingly cast doubts on other political actors and their messages. In contrast, the two parties on the left, the SPÖ (1970: 51.39 points; 2008: 29.96 points) and The Greens (1999: 64.52 points; 2008: 47.40 points), cast fewer doubts over time. The lowest score was measured for the SPÖ in 2008.

Following Habermas, we also distinguish between the four validity claims: intelligibility, truth, truthfulness, and legitimacy. The party comparison reveals a basic pattern of the use of the different types of doubts for parties' campaign communication over the study period. Comparing just the four types of doubts, the data in Table 6 reveal that three-quarters of all doubts are doubts cast on legitimacy; for instance, "It is not acceptable that the penalty for offences against property is often higher than for sexual offences" (ÖVP, 2008b, p. 2). This is followed by doubts cast on truthfulness.

There were no doubts cast on intelligibility.

Table 6. Types of Doubts for Party Press Releases Between 1970 and 2008.

Type	1970 (n = 152)	1983 (n = 322)	1999 (n = 605)	2008 (n = 648)
Intelligibility	0	0	0	0
Truth	7.2	3.1	5.0	3.1
Truthfulness	15.8	11.2	12.4	20.1
Legitimacy	77.0	85.7	82.6	76.9

Newspaper Articles

Second, we investigated newspaper articles. The data in Figure 3 demonstrate that the IQU for newspapers is between 17.64 and 19.62 points (on a 100-point scale) across the four decades. The longitudinal comparison of the IQU of the analyzed press releases and newspaper articles clearly shows that the IQU of parties' communication is twice as high as the IQU of newspaper articles. The highest IQU across all newspapers was reached in the 1970 campaign, and the lowest IQU in the 1983 campaign. Since then, the IQU in newspaper articles has increased.

The IQU illustrates slight differences between tabloid and quality presses. The lowest IQU is at 15.65 points for articles in *Kronen Zeitung*, Austria's biggest tabloid paper, in the 2008 election campaign. *Kronen Zeitung* also reveals the lowest scores in the media comparison over time. The two highest scores were measured in the quality newspapers *Arbeiterzeitung* (1970, 1983) and *Der Standard* (1999, 2008), with 22.21 points in the 1970 campaign and 20.89 points in 2008.

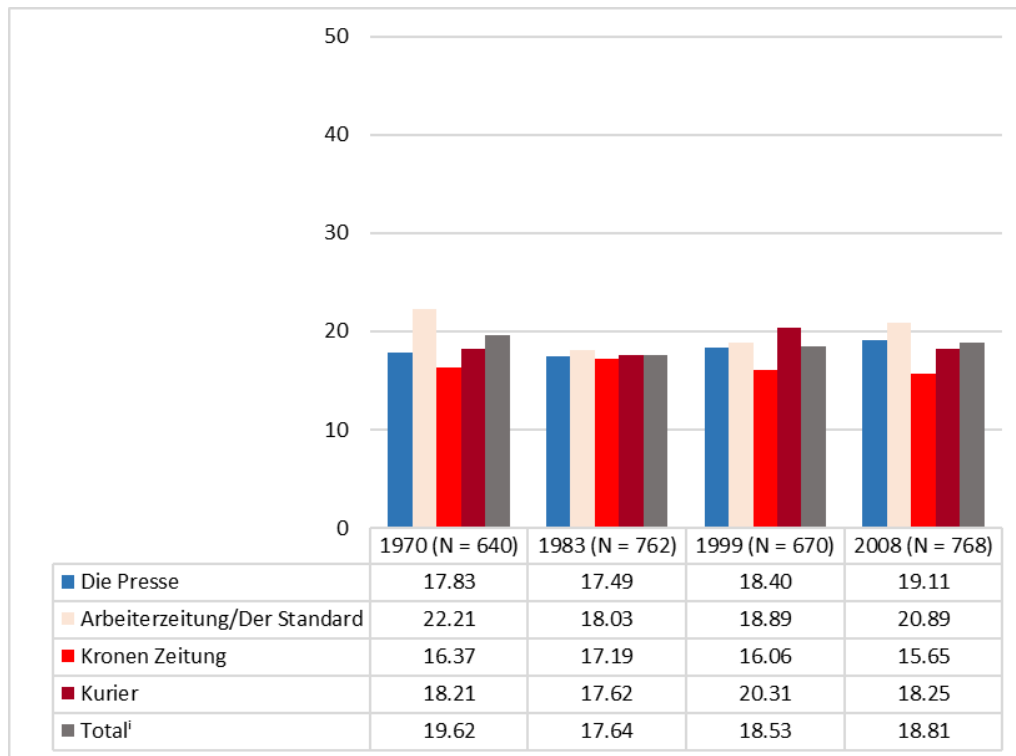


Figure 3. IQU for newspaper articles between 1970 and 2008.

Note. There are no significant relationships between newspapers for the 1983, 1999, and 2008 campaigns. Thus, we can only speak of a tendency when explaining these relationships.

Mean, scale 0 to 100. ⁱ1970: $p = .046$; 1983: $p = .339$; 1999: $p = .084$; 2008: $p = .025$.

Again, to get a more precise picture of the quality of understanding of newspaper coverage, each indicator is analyzed separately. Table 7 presents the results for each subindex for each newspaper and each election campaign.

Table 7. Subindices of Indicators for Newspaper Articles 1970 to 2008.

Newspaper Articles for 1970 (N = 640)						
Indicators of a Quality of Understanding	Die Presse (n = 208)	Arbeiter- zeitung (n = 272)	Krone (n = 56)	Kurier (n = 104)	Total	p
INDBEG: Level of statement of reasons	9.88	15.44	8.33	12.29	12.5	0.108
INDLOES: Level of proposals of solutions	1.2	4.11	0.6	1.44	2.42	0.000
INDREGEY: Level of respect	51.72	52.76	51.19	51.72	52.12	0.048
INDZWEIF: Doubts	8.49	16.54	5.36	7.37	11.46	0.002
IQU	17.83	22.21	16.37	18.21	19.62	0.046
Newspaper Articles for 1983 (N = 762)						
Indicators of a Quality of Understanding	Die Presse (n = 230)	Arbeiter- zeitung (n = 242)	Krone (n = 118)	Kurier (n = 172)	Total	p
INDBEG: Level of statement of reasons	8.6	9.96	8.47	9.63	9.24	0.829
INDLOES: Level of proposals of solutions	1.3	0.83	0.28	2.62	1.29	0.167
INDREGEY: Level of respect	52.81	51.95	50.67	52.81	52.2	0.002
INDZWEIF: Doubts	7.25	9.37	9.32	5.43	7.83	0.59
IQU	17.49	18.03	17.19	17.62	17.64	0.339
Newspaper Articles for 1999 (N = 670)						
Indicators of a Quality of Understanding	Die Presse (n = 226)	Der Standard (n = 238)	Krone (n = 100)	Kurier (n = 106)	Total	p
INDBEG: Level of statement of reasons	10.42	10.88	7	13.94	10.63	0.044
INDLOES: Level of proposals of solutions	0.81	2.24	2	0.47	1.44	0.057
INDREGEY: Level of respect	51.01	50.82	52.25	51.73	51.24	0.438
INDZWEIF: Doubts	11.36	11.62	3	15.09	10.8	0.004
IQU	18.4	18.89	16.06	20.31	18.53	0.084
Newspaper Articles for 2008 (N = 768)						
Indicators of a Quality of Understanding	Die Presse (n = 230)	Der Standard (n = 226)	Krone (n = 138)	Kurier (n = 174)	Total	p
INDBEG: Level of statement of reasons	12.37	13.77	5.88	9.83	11.04	0.024
INDLOES: Level of proposals of solutions	0.43	4.06	0.97	1.53	1.84	0.000
INDREGEY: Level of respect	51.59	49.94	51.39	51.27	51	0.411
INDZWEIF: Doubts	12.03	15.78	4.35	10.34	11.37	0.001
IQU	19.11	20.89	15.65	18.25	18.81	0.025

Note. Kruskal-Wallis p values are indicated. The indicator for respect indicates all scores for the indicators for respect for positions and respect for other political actors.

INDBEG: Statements of reasons. The comparisons within and between campaigns for the subindex for statements of reasons does not reveal a clear pattern for newspaper articles. For instance, the subindex for *Die Presse* increased over time from 9.88 to 12.37 points, and the subindex for *Kronen Zeitung* decreased over time from 8.33 to 5.88 points (the lowest score for this subindex). The subindices for *Arbeiterzeitung/Der Standard* and for *Kurier* show ups and downs between campaigns.

However, Table 8 reveals a basic pattern for the value scores for this indicator. Almost two-thirds of all justifications were simple statements of reasons, such as, "Citizens must not only know about laws, but must also understand them; thus, the current development of legal protection facilities must also to be adjusted to the increasingly complex legislation" ("Plädoyer für 'Ombudsman,'" 1970, p. 2). Generalized statements of reasons were found more often in newspaper articles than specific statements of reasons.

Table 8. Scores for the Indicator for Statement of Reasons for Newspaper Articles Between 1970 and 2008.

Value	1970 (n = 366)	1983 (n = 338)	1999 (n = 352)	2008 (n = 407)
1	18.0	21.6	24.4	27.3
2	67.2	69.2	69.0	58.0
3	14.8	9.2	6.6	14.7

INDLOES: Proposals of solutions. Proposals for solutions were barely present in newspaper articles, as shown in Table 7 by the subindex's very low scores. Over the four decades, in almost one-third of all cases, scores were below 1 point. However, as Table 9 illustrates, the number of precise proposals of solutions increased over time. For instance, in the discussion on pension increases in the 2008 campaign, citizens read in *Die Presse* ("Pensionen sind nun Wahlkampfthema," 2008) that "The representatives of the senior citizens of SPÖ and ÖVP urge to increase the margin on which the fixed pension is based from the current maximum pension of €2.161 to €2.654" (p. 6).

Table 9. Scores for the Indicator for Proposals of Solutions for Newspaper Articles Between 1970 and 2008.

Value	1970 (n = 71)	1983 (n = 35)	1999 (n = 32)	2008 (n = 54)
1	70.4	31.4	25.0	43.7
2	29.6	68.6	75.0	58.3

INDREGEY: Respect. As observed for parties' press releases, the share of the subindex for respect in the IQU is the highest of all subindices and shows no evident differences between newspapers or campaigns (Table 7). Table 10 reveals that expressions devoid of respect and explicitly respectful expressions are a unique feature in the analyzed newspaper articles.

Table 10. Scores for the Indicator for Respect for Newspaper Articles Between 1970 and 2008.

Value	1970 (n = 682)	1983 (n = 665)	1999 (n = 624)	2008 (n = 718)
0	2.0	2.0	3.6	3.9
3	15.6	12.3	11.6	11.6
4	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.1

INDZWEIF: Doubts. Differences of the measured quality within the subindex for doubts are greater than for the other three subindices: from 3 points (*Kurier* in 1999) to 16.54 points (*Arbeiterzeitung* in 1970) (Table 7). Overall, the tabloid *Kronen Zeitung* shows a lower score than the other three newspapers.

Table 11 illustrates that, for all four election campaigns, more than two-thirds of instances of doubts cast in newspaper articles are doubts on legitimacy. Doubts on truthfulness have increased over the years. Here, we found expressions such as, "The experts in the opposition called this a sham" ("Zum Golde drängt doch alles," 1970, p. 3) and "the SPÖ reform is a bare-faced lie" (*Kronen Zeitung*, 2008, p. 2). No doubts were cast on intelligibility.

Table 11. Types of Doubts for Newspaper Articles Between 1970 and 2008.

Type	1970 (n = 220)	1983 (n = 220)	1999 (n = 217)	2008 (n = 262)
Intelligibility	0	0	0	0
Truth	9.1	9.1	5.5	6.9
Truthfulness	19.55	19.5	24.0	29.0
Legitimacy	71.36	71.4	70.5	64.1

Discussion

One of the main findings is that Austrian political parties largely follow the notion of an ideal speech situation more than Austrian newspapers. The IQU of parties' press releases is twice as high as the IQU of newspaper articles. This result points to the fact that parties' campaign communication is more elaborate. After all, parties aim to influence media coverage, and press releases are an essential information input for the media. Following previous studies (Kaid, 1976; Melischek et al., 2010; Miller et al., 1998), the results indicate that parties' campaign communication does influence media coverage somewhat. Also, when considering the value scores for each indicator, similar communication patterns can be revealed for press releases and newspaper articles. However, to what extent parties are successful in transmitting their original messages to the media will have to be explored in further studies, for instance, by conducting time-series cross-section analysis.

A main difference between parties (in the aggregate) and newspapers (in the aggregate) is that the IQU in parties' press releases has decreased slightly but steadily over time, whereas the IQU in newspaper articles has increased. Although differences between the four newspapers are fairly small, Austria's largest newspaper, the tabloid *Kronen Zeitung*, scored the lowest IQU in the media comparison over time; in particular, for the subindices for statements of reasons and for doubts, the tabloid has lower scores than the other three newspapers. Thus, the quality press follows the notion of deliberation to a greater extent than the tabloid press.

The decrease in the IQU of parties' communication apparently seems to follow changes in Austrian politics, which is characterized by a shift from consensual political party culture to an individualized and controversial political culture, as outlined above. Specifically, the findings show an increase in the number of disrespectful expressions in parties' press releases from 1970 to 2008. With growing party pluralism, the struggle to reach and win voters increased, particularly as parties have faced an ongoing decline in party identification and voter turnout since the mid-1970s (Niedermayer, 2007). Thus, parties increasingly emphasize their opponents' shortcomings, they put opponents' campaigns in an unfavorable light, and the like. Such negative campaigning generally leads to less respect. In particular, in the press releases of the ÖVP and the FPÖ, respect has decreased over the four decades. Both parties also cast more doubts on other political actors and their messages over time. This might be because the ÖVP and the FPÖ sought to weaken the Austrian social partnership and to call its relevance into question. But besides this, the campaign comparisons reveal that participants treated each other with respect, and differences for the highest of all subindices are small, as can be expected for a basically classic example of consociationalism. However, explicitly respectful expressions are a unique feature in campaign communication. For the analyzed newspaper coverage, we can conclude that journalists objectively cover the news, thereby following the notion of deliberation.

Concerning the results on doubts, we found that only doubts on truthfulness have steadily increased in campaign communication since 1983. Participants increasingly claim that political actors are not trustworthy. For instance, they allege that someone has lied or accuse political actors of lacking honesty or integrity. Reasons for this development seem to be similar to those concerning the increase of disrespectful expressions as described in the previous paragraph. However, we also assume that the growing numbers of doubts on truthfulness result from an increasing personalization, in particular, in the media coverage and an increase in dramatization (Lengauer, 2012). No doubts on intelligibility were expressed in campaign communication in Austria in the sample. This finding reveals that campaign communication is well elaborated and carefully worded. For instance, communications with too many technical terms, expressions that are too complex, or incorrect grammar will not inform the public. Both the media and the political parties want citizens to understand their messages. Doubts on truth are practically absent from campaign communication. Further, in parties' press releases and in newspaper articles, the number of doubts on truth has decreased over time. Today, the Internet gives everyone unlimited access to information; thus, for instance, if politicians do not tell the truth, they are punished for it immediately. Doubts on legitimacy have been used more often than other doubts. Two-thirds and more of all doubts cast in campaign communication are doubts on legitimacy. Specifically, during election times, parties' positions, behaviors, and actions from the previous legislative period are questioned. Future

research should observe political discussion during nonelection times to examine differences between doubts cast on truthfulness and on legitimacy under different conditions.

Over the four studied decades, the findings demonstrate that political parties and newspapers primarily used simple statements of reasons to justify their positions, except in the 2008 campaign. In 2008, participants used generalized, simple, and specific statements of reasons—political parties to an even greater extent than newspapers. Although this implies that positions are justified with only generalized statements of reasons more often than in earlier campaigns, it also shows a positive development as more and more participants introduce well-explained and logically presented arguments (specific statements) as demanded by deliberative communication. In a “more dynamic and open system of political contestation” (Melchior, 2005, p. 13), specific justifications are necessary to persuade citizens and political opponents of the importance of one’s issues and stances.

Unlike in an ideal speech situation, in campaign communication, political parties and journalists hardly offered solutions for the problems they discussed. This might be because in campaign communication, participants talk about many different topics instead of discussing one particular problem in depth. The latter may lead to more, and more precise, proposals of solutions, and this might be an interesting topic for future research, particularly for the analysis of nonelection times. However, slight changes can even be found for this subindex, revealed in an increase of precise proposals of solutions in parties’ press releases and in newspaper articles over time. Since the 1980s, people’s trust in political parties’ abilities to solve social problems has declined significantly (Niedermayer, 2007), and party pluralism has grown. Thus, parties must increasingly introduce detailed concepts or outline the de facto implementation of a solution to gain voters’ attention.

Based on these findings, we assume that for the study of deliberation, it is essential that future research investigate the IQU in different political settings and cultures, such as in conflict democracies, and their influence on the IQU.

Conclusion

This study is based on the assumption that the simple fact that public discourse on policy issues exists says nothing about its quality. To gain a deeper understanding of the notion of deliberation in political discourse, we introduced the IQU, which provides an analytical template for evaluating the quality of political discourse. Investigating the extent to which the political discourse in Austria’s parties’ press releases and newspaper coverage follows qualitative principles demanded by the public sphere concept, the comparison of discourse from the past 40 years reveals an IQU for press releases between 32.5 to 42.78 points and for newspapers between 15.65 to 22.21 points. Considering that the quality of understanding of campaign communication is measured on a 100-point scale, the scores for press releases seem to be fairly low, and newspapers hardly attempt to follow democratic ideals. From this perspective, differences between parties and particularly between newspapers are also fairly small, which results in basic communication patterns of parties’ campaign communication and of newspaper coverage. On the other hand, we do not claim that any real-life communication will ever reach the maximum on the 100-point scale. We doubt that such conditions occur in real-life discourse. So, can we draw the conclusion that

political parties barely follow the principles of a quality of understanding in their press releases? From this perspective, an IQU of 32.5 to 42.78 points might be medium or high, and differences between parties are fairly large. This suggests that further comparative research is necessary to find thresholds between low, medium, and high levels of deliberation. Studies on nonelection times or on campaign communication in other countries, parties, or media systems may shed light on the influence of different contexts.

Future research also needs to examine the broader implications of the communicative principles of understanding on the public. We need to investigate recipients' awareness and perceptions of campaign communication and how they discuss politics and influence one another. Researchers highlight online communication platforms such as online discussion forums and social media as potential virtual agoras (see Muhlberger, 2006) and as "a real possibility" for citizens to discuss public issues because "they provide the kind of forum or space which makes possible the forms of conversation or discourse required by deliberative democracy" (Wright & Street, 2007, p. 851). But, as Dahlgren (2005) notes, these new platforms "do not always follow the high ideals set for deliberative democracy" (p. 156). One of the authors of this study has begun to conduct case studies on citizens' discussions of parties' online platforms by means of the IQU (Rußmann, 2012). Thus, Rußmann (2012) argues that another indicator that measures reciprocity must be included in the IQU. Political discourse is characterized by reciprocal actions between many people. Kies (2010) notes that reciprocity is a basic condition of deliberation because people must listen and react to each other. If they do not, there is only a monologue. First results of Rußmann's studies show that an IQU of more than 40 points can be partly measured, and in small(er) online communities, a higher IQU score of parties' online conversation positively influences citizens' participation in online political discussions. To fully understand effects of the quality of understanding on public discourse, further research needs to investigate the communication of and between political parties, the mass media, and citizens.

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