

Issue Ownership and Framing: Comparing the Scottish Political Parties on Social Media

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Abstract

This article explores how Scottish political parties frame their owned issues on social media to persuade voters during the run-up to elections. Through a qualitative analysis of 150 Twitter and Facebook posts from five major Scottish parties, the study reveals that parties employ threat and victim framing to bolster their vote share. Opposition parties predominantly portray the Scottish National Party (SNP) as a threat, while all parties frame the electorate as victims. The extent and focus of these frames vary based on parties' parliamentary strength and government/opposition status. The SNP, holding a strong governing position, focuses on advancing its independence agenda, while other parties critique the SNP and then promote their own priorities. This article contributes to framing theory by highlighting the nuanced relationship between issue ownership, threat, and victim frames in shaping electoral outcomes. The findings underscore the strategic use of social media by parties to influence voter perceptions and decisions.

Keywords: Issue Ownership; Framing; Social Media; Scottish Politics; Elections; Political Communication

Introduction²⁴

Framing has been studied extensively as a method of persuasion used by political parties during elections (Levin, Schneider, and Gaeth 1998; Stuckelberger 2021). Generally, it is generally understood as the process of identifying and interpreting a problem, followed by proposing relevant evaluations and remedies (Entman 1993). When framing is effectively used, the audience should be unaware of its effect (Arowolo 2017). Contemporary popular frames include conflict, consensus, threat, and victimhood (Bartholomé, Lecheler, and de Vreese 2018; Hameleers, Bos, and de Vreese 2017; Patterson et al. 2021; Walgrave et al. 2018). These frames can be employed in either a positive or negative manner. However, scholars have debated the effectiveness of positive and negative framing, and the results remain inconclusive (Lau, Sigelman, Heldman, and Babbitt 1999; Olsen 2020).

²⁴ This research was conducted as part of the author's MSc dissertation at the University of Glasgow in 2021 and 2022.

The use of framing by political parties to persuade the electorate through social media, particularly regarding their owned issues, has received limited scholarly attention. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube offer political parties unparalleled opportunities to connect with users and present their unfiltered messages, as demonstrated by previous research (Kalsnes 2016; Ramos-Serrano, Fernández Gómez, and Pineda 2018; Vesnic-Alujevic and Van Bauwel 2014). Given the increasing prevalence of online framing, it is crucial to examine how political parties frame the issues they own. The online environment allows politicians and parties greater freedom to frame issues according to their agenda, in contrast to traditional offline media, which often prioritizes impartiality (van der Goot et al. 2022). While a substantial body of literature has explored how political parties present their owned issues to the electorate (Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010; Zhou 2016), there is a gap in understanding how these parties employ persuasive framing techniques in their communications.

This article aims to address this gap by examining how Scottish political parties frame their owned issues on social media to persuade voters. The study focuses on the framing strategies employed by five major parties—the Scottish National Party (SNP), the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party (Conservatives), the Scottish Labour Party (Labour), the Scottish Green Party (Greens), and the Scottish Liberal Democrats (Liberal Democrats)—between November 2020 and May 2021. These parties were selected based on their popularity and influence during the Scottish Parliament election held on May 6, 2021.

The data collection method involved a combination of specialized searches and random selection to ensure the relevance of the content to each party's specific issue ownership. The specialized search identified frames within a specific year for each party, while randomization was used to select a manageable sample from the vast number of posts. Posts unrelated to each party's signature issues were filtered out before analysis, resulting in a final dataset of 150 posts divided among the five parties. The article employs framing analysis as the data analysis method, focusing on the perspective of political parties rather than individual candidates. This approach aims to provide a general overview of Scottish party communication and its potential influence on candidate behavior. Although smaller parties may experience the political landscape differently, they have a lesser ability to shape Scottish politics as a whole and were therefore excluded from the analysis.

The findings confirm that political parties frame the issues they own with threat and victim frames in the run-up to elections to increase their vote share and strength within parliament. Opposition parties use the threat frame against the party in power, while every

party perceives the electorate to be the victim. Those with governmental power frame their rhetoric strongly since they can focus wholly on their agenda, giving them a lot of resources to enhance the persuasion of the electorate regarding owned issues. While those without strength in government must put time, resources, and energy into tearing down their opponents, and then trying to implement their own agenda.

The argument is developed by first establishing the theoretical framework connecting issue ownership and framing, highlighting the strategic use of framing by parties to shape voter preferences and electoral outcomes. The following section presents this theoretical framework, examining existing literature on the topic and outlining an analytical framework. The article then identifies the need for further research on parties' framing of owned issues in the online context and describes the research design, underscoring case selection, data collection approach, and analytical methods employed. Subsequently, an analysis of the two social media platforms is provided, along with a discussion of commonalities and variances in how parties frame their signature issues. Finally, the conclusion summarizes key findings and explores wider implications for research on this evolving subject, proposing the analysis of Scottish political parties' framing strategies on social media as a means to address the research gap and provide insights into evolving political communication tactics.

Linking Framing Theory to Issue Ownership Dynamics

Framing and issue ownership are two fundamental concepts in political communication that work together to shape public perception and influence voter behavior. Framing refers to the focus on specific features of subjective reality and making them noticeable in communication to endorse a "problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman 1993, p. 52). It involves molding the meaning of a subject, which impacts relevant judgment and levels of significance for the audience and meaning management (Fairhurst 2005). Issue ownership, on the other hand, concerns voters connecting parties with specific issues (Seeberg 2017). In practicing issue ownership, parties bring their core issues onto the political agenda (Fagan 2019). There are two types of issue ownership: competence and associative. Competence issue ownership asserts that when an individual views the successful track record of a political party on an issue, they then associate this party with that issue (Belanger and Meguid 2008). Associative issue ownership, however, suggests that individuals can sporadically associate political parties with issues they assume these parties align with in their minds (Walgrave, Lefevere, and Nuytemans 2009).

Studies have shown that parties frame their owned issues to enhance their reputation among voters (Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010), demonstrating the interconnectedness of framing and issue ownership in political communication. However, the debate surrounding the effectiveness of framing owned issues and its impact on voter perception remains unresolved, highlighting the need for further research in this area. This article posits that parties can strategically frame their owned issues to influence voting behavior and expand their power. By examining parties' framing strategies around owned issues, this study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the evolving landscape of political communication tactics. Due to the limited research on parties' framing of owned issues specifically, this study takes a broader approach by analyzing how major parties have framed key policy issues. The analysis seeks to provide additional insights into how parties utilize the combination of issue ownership and framing to shape voter preferences and electoral outcomes, particularly concerning their signature topics.

Political parties often become defined by the issues they are associated with owning (Seeberg 2017). Traditionally, left-wing and social democratic parties own issues related to the welfare state (Blomqvist and Green-Pedersen 2004) and education, while right-wing parties take ownership of issues concerning national interest (Seeberg 2017). These parties then frame their owned issues according to their agenda (Valenzuela, Piña, and Ramirez 2017). In essence, parties shape the public's perception of these issues through the frames they promote, influencing whether audiences view them in positive or negative terms. The frames used by parties give issues a narrative slant, swaying perceptions of where each party stands on these matters. This, in turn, impacts whether individuals support a party or its agenda.

Thus, the framing of owned issues by political parties can determine the level of public agreement. By strategically framing their owned issues, parties can effectively shape public opinion and garner support for their agenda. This highlights the importance of issue ownership and framing in political communication and the crucial role they play in influencing the electorate. The first of such frames is the frame of conflict. This concerns the structuring of events as being conflictual between individuals, groups, or institutions to engage the audience (Bartholome, Lecheler, and Vreese 2018). Conflict frames are regularly used by political actors to ignite reactions from their audience as seen in the Netherlands (van der Goot et al. 2022). These framed conflicts are civil and salient, but do not emphasize any major clashes within this society (van der Goot et al. 2022). Politicians use social media to promote their conflict frames in more respectful ways than expected as they avoid using

unmannerly or impertinent language (van der Goot et al. 2022). However, incivility online is apparent for opposition and populist right-wing parties (van der Goot et al. 2022). This illustrates the importance of conflictual frames for specific party types, for instance, populist and opposition parties.

In Spain, the battle over Catalan independence sparked conflicting frames between pro-independence parties and opponents. Pro-independence parties framed independence as necessary to further democracy, using positive messaging to encourage favorable views of the future (Elias and Núria 2022). The anti-independence Socialist Party employed a conflict frame to promote their vision for Catalonia's future without the instability they saw independence causing (Prim 2015). Overall, nationalism and other political issues can spur negative, conflict-driven framing where parties push people to choose between two outcomes.

The next frame is consensus, which contrasts the conflict frame by emphasizing agreement between actors (Walgrave et al. 2018). Political parties in Germany used this frame frequently because consensus is central to Germany's political system (Ulrich 2006). Former Chancellor Angela Merkel employed a consensus frame to unite parties in addressing climate change, except for the Alternative for Germany (Parry 2017). Merkel calling out former US President Donald Trump's divisiveness on environmental issues highlighted this consensus frame and boosted its appeal across most German parties, showcasing its effectiveness (Parry 2017).

The third frame is victim, which focuses on inferiority or assigns blame to a perpetrator. This frame is used globally regarding environmentalism. Green parties depict the earth as the victim of human misconduct. The UK Green Party's 2017 manifesto is a case in point. The manifesto frames the earth as a helpless victim requiring safeguarding, calling on those aware of climate change harms to vote Green (UK Green Party 2017). It states that "we" are destroying the earth, identifying humanity as the culprit while urging self-reflection and action (UK Green Party 2017). Similarly, the Australian Greens portray humans as causing but also able to remedy climate change (Australian Greens 2022). They recognize damage from opposing parties in victim framing, declaring Australia itself as the specific victim rather than the wider earth (Australian Greens 2022). Furthermore, they have framed opposition parties as contributors to environmental harm, adopting a victim perspective particularly concerning Australia's environmental condition (Australian Greens 2022). Rather than positioning climate change as a global issue, the party underscores Australia's status as a victim, highlighting domestic environmental challenges.

The final frame is threat, which emphasizes a perilous situation or attackers, constructed around needing urgent action (Patterson et al. 2021). This frame entails portraying an issue, individual, or group as a “danger, risk, or hazard” (Erikson 2020, 1). Thus, the audience must view something or someone negatively, sparking defensive reactions or desertion (Shesterinina 2016). Threat framing is therefore recognized as a key component of framing theory. For example, immigration is often framed as a threat in political media through narratives linking it to “terrorism, criminality, internal security, political stability, and organized crime” in Western Europe (Helbling 2014, 25). During the Trump administration in the United States, there was a notable emphasis on law and order, often directly linked to immigration policies, such as the proposal to build a wall along the US-Mexico border. The Republican party, through its rhetoric, frequently portrayed immigrants in a threatening light, a stance that resonated with segments of the public (Levine and Arkin, 2019). The use of negative language and framing around immigration issues has been shown to exacerbate xenophobia (Heidenreich et al., 2020). The continued perpetuation of such framing has the potential to foster a society marked by increased distrust and conflict, wherein certain groups are unfairly blamed for issues unrelated to them.

In sum, framing involves manipulating a narrative to suit one’s agenda. This means that each framed issue can potentially be removed from context, and although it may include facts, the absence of unfavorable facts would be beneficial to the framing actor (Hallahan, 1999). Political parties leverage framing on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook to influence audiences.

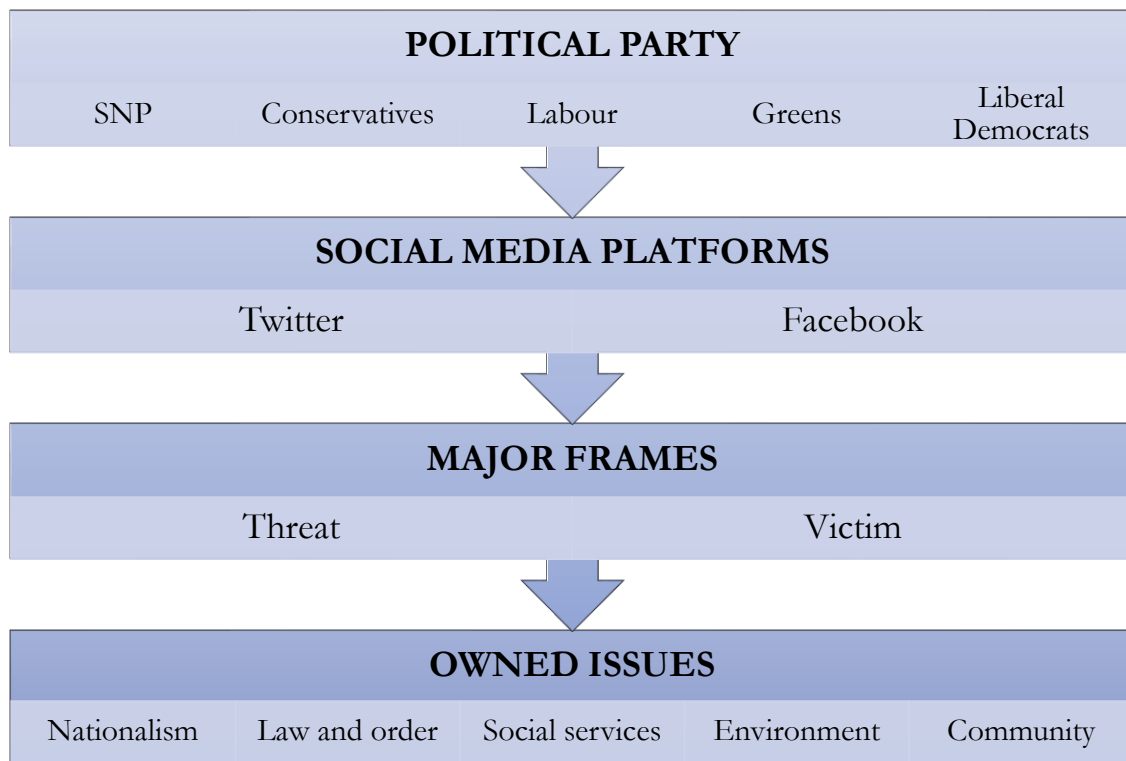
The level of activity political parties exhibit on Twitter tends to align with their ideological positions (Ramos-Serrano, Fernández Gómez and Pineda 2018). Leftist parties are more active than their right-wing equivalents (Ramos-Serrano, Fernández Gómez and Pineda 2018). Those who use Twitter in Spain are mainly younger and leftist, hence the right-wing political actors fought a losing battle (Ramos-Serrano, Fernández Gómez and Pineda 2018). Twitter usage for political parties depends on whether their audience uses this platform. This means, for example, that left-wing parties create a strong narrative on Twitter, while right-wing parties fall behind. Similarly, parties use Facebook to frame their rhetoric and reach a wider audience. Facebook provides three specific advantages for parties. These include discussions with supporters and potential voters, direct reactions to policies and party performance, and circumventing traditional media outlets (Kalsnes 2016). Despite this, larger parties tend to neglect the potential dialogue available with the electorate (Kalsnes 2016).

Analytical Framework and Research Design

This section explains the two frames used in this article: threat and victim. These are chosen among the four main frames encountered in the literature (see the previous section) because the comparison of the two is under-studied despite being directly opposed. For instance, despite each victim frame requiring an immediate threat, there is little research that explores the connection between the two. This article will provide a balanced analysis of relevant owned issues and contribute to the creation of nuanced conclusions. These two frames are simpler to recognize within the rhetoric, which leaves little space for any mistakes or misunderstandings.²⁵ This article applies a step-by-step analysis which will recognize individual political parties, their use of social media, the frames they use, the issues they own, and whether this increased their support (see Figure 1). Each component is closely interrelated, and overall framing success would be dependent upon the effective usage on every level by political parties. To reach optimal results, political parties must understand the most desirable way to use each platform and determine the benefits and downfalls of utilizing the threat and victim frames within their specific issue range.

This article will analyze the issue ownership of the five main political parties in Scotland. Their owned issues are nationalism, law and order, social services, the environment, and community issues, respectively. The comparison of these parties and their assigned owned issue will be completed through framing analysis. This article will study relevant tweets and Facebook posts to investigate the correspondence between threat and victim frames for the main parties in the Scottish arena. It will use the assigned owned issues of each party and analyze their framing of information as a threat and as a victim to establish how political parties frame issues they own to persuade the electorate to vote for them.

²⁵ For example, the frames of consensus and conflict are compared on a greater scale than threat and victim. There is no relevant gap in the literature for them to be studied further, despite their significance. Consensus and conflict can be more difficult to recognise within rhetoric, which leaves room for interpretation from the researcher and limits research accuracy since qualitative research remains subjective, and despite neutrality, the researcher's understanding of issues may be influenced by their own experiences.

Figure 1: An Overview of the Research Design

Source: Author

This article focuses on Scotland, which is a typical case for established representative democracies in which political parties use social media extensively to attract attention from the electorate. The use of social media has become the norm for political parties in contemporary times (Graham and Schwanholz 2020). This case focuses on probing the use of framing online to either confirm or disconfirm traditional framing theory, which further asserts Scotland's typical case selection (Seawright and Gerring 2008).

The analysis covers the largest parties within this electoral arena. These are the SNP with 64 parliamentary seats, Conservatives with 31 parliamentary seats, Labour with 22 parliamentary seats, Greens with seven parliamentary seats, and Liberal Democrats with four parliamentary seats (Scottish Parliament 2022). These figures correspond with the most recent Scottish Parliament election from 2021. This article deliberately excludes smaller parties and independent candidates since their influence on the wider electorate is relatively minor. By focusing on the largest political parties in Scotland, this article seeks to provide a reliable analysis that contains a wide array of in-depth data. This article acknowledges that smaller parties may be visible on social media, but they have not yet gained enough online traction to be considered equal players to the largest parties, and so a comparison between the two would be inequitable.

Each party has a specific issue ownership range. For the SNP, their owned issue is nationalism. This is asserted due to their inherent focus on Scottish independence and their popularity within this realm (SNP 2022). The Alba Party is a smaller party which also favors nationalism, but when compared to the SNP, its influence is minute in 2022 since it had 95% fewer followers on Twitter, and 98% less on Facebook. For Conservatives, their issue ownership lies within law and order which is typical for a right-wing political party (Seeberg 2017). Labour owns issues concerning social services since this has been their main issue in making political gains in the past (Labour 2022). The Green Party, expectedly, own environmentalism which is the core goal of every green political party (Seeberg 2017). Liberal Democrats own grassroots issues concerning communities through their ability to make political inroads this way and enhance their vote share (Liberal Democrats 2022).

The timeframe for analysis runs from November 2020 until the beginning of May 2021. This covers six months of data to analyze in the run-up to the election on 6 May 2021. This specific time frame is expected to provide a vast collection of data with a specific focus on each party's individual owned issues. This is anticipated due to the parties' goal to increase votes in time for the election in 2021. The goal of increased vote share is true for all upcoming elections, not restricted to the one in 2021. The examination of this timeframe will contribute to a nuanced analysis in the field of the contemporary use of framing by political parties concerning their owned issues.

This article employs a qualitative research approach to analyze 150 social media posts from Scottish political parties. Specifically, it examines 30 posts per issue per political party, with each issue represented by 15 posts across different platforms. The selection process involved using a specialized search for Twitter then to randomly choose posts. For Facebook, posts were selected based on their posting date, with the most recent posts appearing first. This article focuses solely on the textual content of social media posts, excluding the analysis of visual or audio elements.

The issues analyzed correspond to specific themes owned by each political party: nationalism for SNP, law and order for Conservatives, social issues for Labour, environmentalism for Greens, and community orientation for Liberal Democrats. Posts were randomly selected and then filtered based on their relevance to each party's owned issue and whether they contained either a threat or victim framework.

The primary unit of analysis for this study is individual sentences within the posts, focusing only on content relevant to the goals of the research. This approach is expected to yield a diverse and comprehensive dataset. Threat frames can be recognized by indications

of insecurity for individuals, their families, or communities (Boydston et al. 2013). These frames typically highlight “danger, risk, or hazard,” strategically elevating an issue on the political and public agendas (Eriksson 2020). In employing the victim frame, actors position the victim as having less power than their opponent (Guggenheim et al. 2015). The language used by political parties in their communications serves as the primary indicator of frame allocation.

The analysis in this article adopts a deductive approach, characteristic of qualitative research, with predefined frames for consideration (Weber 2021). This method, commonly used in qualitative research, enhances the study’s reliability (Weber 2021). Framing analysis serves to elucidate how individuals interpret their world and how actors disseminate information to their audience (Foley, Ward, and McNaughton 2019). This analysis aims to illuminate the emergence, transmission, and acceptance of frames (Foley, Ward, and McNaughton 2019). The flexibility of framing analysis facilitates a deeper understanding of short texts, revealing culturally specific narratives (Andersson 2022). The analysis follows three steps: (1) establishing a general understanding of the content through thorough reading, (2) identifying recurring frames, and (3) generating an in-depth comprehension of the data through analysis (Varacheva and Gherghina 2018). Subsequently, codes have been developed for each social media post to assess its relevance to the threat and victim frames. This framing analysis structure is supported by Linstrom and Marais (2012) and forms the basis of this article.

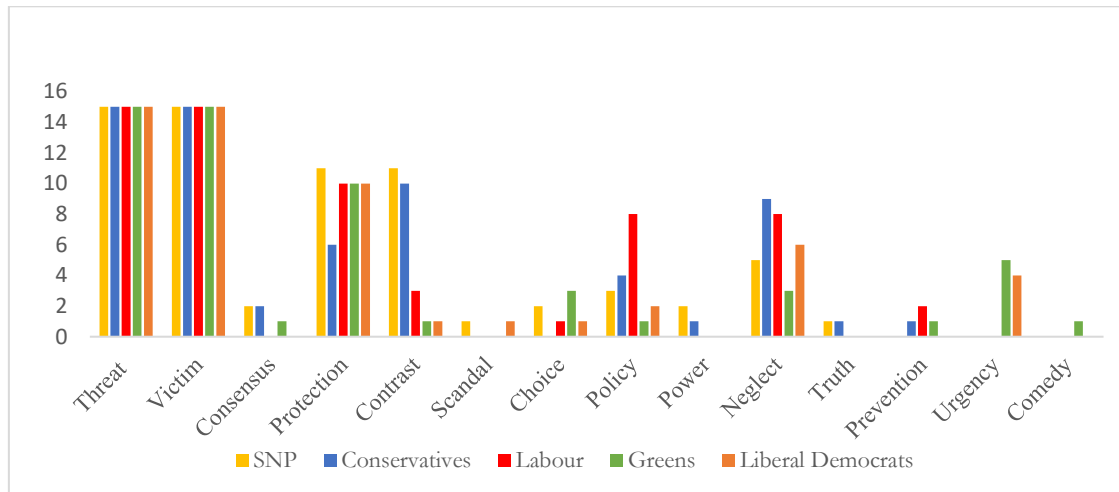
Analyzing Prevalent Frame Usage Across Parties and Platforms

Scottish political parties utilized various frames beyond threat and victim on social media (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). The SNP was notably active in employing consensus, protection, policy, and power frames on Facebook, while on Twitter, it referenced consensus, protection, contrast, scandal/crisis, and truth frames more frequently than other parties. Conservatives exhibited significant framing control with contrast, neglect, and prevention on Facebook, and consensus, neglect, and truth on Twitter. Labour predominantly presented a policy perspective, particularly on its Twitter feed. Liberal Democrats somewhat dominated the protection frame on Facebook but had less prominence on Twitter. Greens excelled in frames related to choice, urgency, and comedy on Twitter, while on Facebook, they were strong in scandal/crisis, choice, and urgency frames.

Comedy was rarely utilized as a frame. Greens achieved this by highlighting derogatory language used against their party and asserting “Better [this] than a Tory” (post

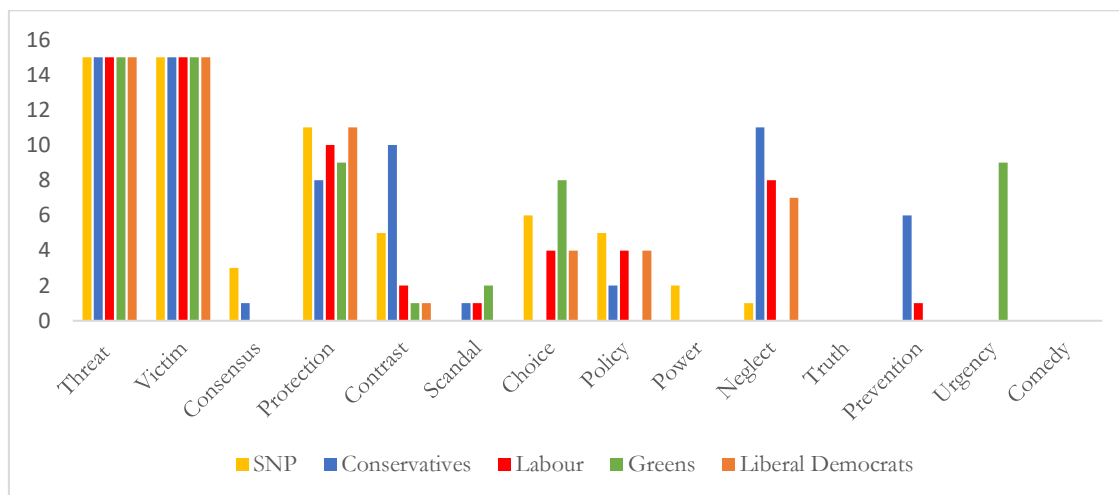
102). Urgency was another infrequently used frame but remained evident in the Greens' emphasis on the sudden importance of addressing environmental issues (post 96). The scandal frame was utilized by the SNP to underscore Boris Johnson's untrustworthiness by discrediting his character and governance (post 3). Lastly, the truth frame was employed by the two largest parties to emphasize their perceived reliability and authenticity.

Figure 2: The Use of Frames on Twitter



Source: Author.

Figure 3: The Use of Frames on Facebook



Source: Author.

On Twitter, the SNP employs threat framing in its communication to highlight the perceived negative impact of Boris Johnson and the UK Conservative Government on Scotland and its people. For instance, Johnson is depicted as out of touch with Scotland and its values. In one tweet, it is stated, “Boris Johnson’s values are not Scotland’s values” (tweet

2). Johnson and his government are portrayed as unsuitable to govern Scotland, implying that independence is the preferred path forward. The SNP explicitly advocates for independence by asserting, “Let’s put Scotland’s future in Scotland’s hands” (tweet 2). This suggests to the electorate that the Westminster government is illegitimate and poses a threat to Scotland’s well-being.

Regarding the SNP’s use of the victim frame, the focus primarily centers on portraying the Scottish people and Scotland as victims, particularly of neglect by the Westminster governments. Through a comparison of British versus Scottish wants and needs, the SNP implies that Scotland and its people are marginalized by the UK government. For instance, one tweet compares the two parliaments, depicting the Scottish Government as treating its people positively and empathetically, while the UK Government is portrayed as disrespectful and dismissive (tweet 9). This narrative contributes to the perception that the UK government poses a threat to Scottish society. The SNP effectively employs threat and victim framing in its Twitter posts on constitutionalism to bolster its vote share and advance its goal of independence.

Furthermore, by suggesting that the SNP is threatening within the Conservative’s domain of law and order, the latter party paints the SNP as agents of disorder and illegality. The SNP is depicted as careless (tweets 31, 39-45), soft (tweet 32), illegitimate (tweets 33, 37), and harmful (tweets 34-38). Sturgeon is specifically labelled a threat to law and order, and portrayed as a hypocrite due to her involvement in the spread of COVID-19 in 2021 (post 40). By positioning the SNP as proponents of opposing norms and ideals, Conservatives aim to present themselves as a preferable alternative.

The Conservative party also employs victim framing, similarly, positioning the Scottish people as victims. Both major parties strategically aim to garner support from the electorate by portraying empathy towards the people’s needs and suggesting their party will act in their best interests. For instance, tweet 36 suggests that the SNP will break up families and create division within society, disrupting order, while Conservatives promise to maintain family strength and rebuild the country post-COVID-19. Conservatives depict the SNP as rule breakers who conceal evidence and ignore crises (tweet 41). Through victim and threat framing, Conservatives imply that their opposition threatens the law and order of society.

Labour engages in extensive threat framing targeting the SNP, Scottish Government, Sturgeon, independence, Greens, Conservatives, and hunger as relevant threats. Directly attributing responsibility to the SNP (and Greens) for the crises in the social care sector (tweet 61), Labour indirectly links the SNP to issues like employment (tweet 62), healthcare

(tweet 63), poverty (tweet 64), and education (tweet 65). Labour's threat framing effectively influences discourse on social services.

In victim framing, Labour aligns with the SNP and Conservatives by portraying the Scottish people as the primary victims. Labour's identification with social services lends authenticity, addressing specific aspects of life affected by Scottish politics and incorporating supporter voices in tweets (tweet 65). The party consistently advocates for wage increases for undervalued care workers (tweets 68, 70, 71), aiming to bridge the gap between politicians and society. Labour strategically employs threat and victim framing to distinguish itself in Scottish political debates.

Greens primarily identify climate change as the main threat, consistent with their environmentalism focus. They emphasize the "climate crisis" (tweet 94) and often apply a sense of urgency to enhance the fear factor (tweets 95, 96), linking climate change to salient issues like employment (tweet 97). They criticize Johnson's trustworthiness and promote their approach for a greener future (tweet 91). Greens' victim framing emphasizes Scottish children as victims of Westminster nuclear decisions (*#BairnsNotBombs*, tweet 99). It also portrays Scotland as unequal, environmentally unfriendly, and constrained (tweets 91, 93, 103), as well as aligning the global environmentalist movement with national concerns.

Liberal Democrats utilize threat framing by targeting the Scottish Government and the SNP specifically, highlighting their failure to fulfil past promises on council tax, childcare, and education (tweet 123), and questioning when they will aid the people (tweet 129). By positioning themselves as advocates for the thriving of Scottish people unlike the SNP government, Liberal Democrats connect with the electorate while discrediting opponents. In victim framing, the party consistently sympathizes with Scottish people in every tweet, highlighting its strong connection with the electorate and emphasizing its reputation for people-centric policies.

Overall, all parties effectively use threat and victim framing in their Twitter communication, by emphasizing key issues and connecting with their respective electorates (see a summary in Table 1A in Appendix). Each party tailors its approach to align with its core values, policy priorities, and target audience. By skillfully leveraging threat and victim framing, these parties seek to shape public perception, mobilize support, and distinguish themselves in the competitive landscape of Scottish politics.

The SNP's threat framing on Facebook mirrors its approach on Twitter, with a primary focus on Boris Johnson. Johnson is portrayed as a failure (post 17), a danger (post 19), damaging (post 20), and unreliable (post 21). Westminster is depicted as a threat,

disassociated from Scotland by the SNP, highlighting key disparities and misalignments between the Scottish people and the Westminster Government (post 18). Unlike its Twitter rhetoric, on Facebook, the SNP employs the threat frame against the Labour party and its leader, Anas Sarwar. This strategic online rhetoric deepens the perceived divide between Scotland and Westminster while minimizing the potential of its opponents without discrediting its independence-favoring allies.

The SNP primarily portrays Scotland and the Scottish people as victims on Facebook, associating Westminster with imposing austerity, power control, and nuclear weapons on Scotland (post 22). They depict themselves as victims, illustrating other parties' ignorance of their wants and needs (post 20). By employing both threat and victim frames, the SNP enhances its independence agenda while emphasizing the separation of Scottish people from Westminster.

Conservatives assert that the SNP poses a major threat to law and order in Scotland, particularly focusing on Sturgeon as the figurehead for independence, which they claim will bring chaos and uncertainty (post 46). They associate her with illegitimacy, carelessness (post 52), illegality, and scandal (post 53), reinforcing the idea that change brings disorder to society. Victim framing by Conservatives highlights Scottish people's victimhood through strong language, emphasizing the damaging effects of the SNP on the country (posts 48, 49, 59).

Labour's threat framing on Facebook emphasizes the need for action, highlighting threats such as the mental health crisis, employment, education, environmentalism, and healthcare (posts 76-78). They do not directly depict the Scottish Government as a threat but instead focus on the status quo in politics. Victim framing by Labour centers on the undervalued efforts of care workers and portrays Scottish people as victims, aligning with supporter sentiments (posts 79, 80, 84).

Greens utilize threat framing on Facebook by declaring the saliency of the climate "emergency" and portraying themselves as combatants of this threat to increase their vote share (posts 108, 109). They also emphasize Scotland as the object of climate suffering, appealing to the electorate through strategic wording (post 106).

Liberal Democrats use threat framing on Facebook to connect with people's local spirit, highlighting the need for positive change in education, healthcare, employment, and environmentalism, and presenting the Scottish Government and independence as threats to their constitutional agenda (posts 136, 139). Victim framing by Liberal Democrats focuses

on various marginalized groups, illustrating a close and representative connection with the Scottish population (post 141).

Overall, all parties effectively use threat and victim framing in their Twitter and Facebook communication, by emphasizing key issues and connecting with their respective electorates (see a summary in Table 1A and Table 2A in the Appendix). While there are some common themes and tactics used across the political spectrum, each party adapts its framing approach to align with its unique policy priorities, ideological stance, and electoral goals.

Interparty Variations in Issue Framing

During election campaigns, the five Scottish political parties employ threat and victim framing in their social media rhetoric to bolster their vote share. While it was expected that parties would share more overlapping frame usage in their main topics, the opposite was observed. Nonetheless, several similarities exist in their framing strategies (summarized in Table 1). Parties predominantly portray the electorate as victims, strategically positioning themselves as combatants against societal challenges often attributed to opposing parties. This communication tactic varies from discreet word choices to direct messaging, reflecting parties' distinct goals, values, and agendas. Despite differences, parties employ similar techniques to frame their social media communication and sway the audience.

The main three opposition parties highlight the SNP as a significant threat, each utilizing different reasons based on their issue ownership. Conservatives focus on law and order, warning of the SNP's potential to "plunge us into chaos and uncertainty" (post 47). Labour critiques the SNP's performance in education within the realm of social services (post 65), while Liberal Democrats emphasize community ownership to link SNP's limited progress on various issues like council tax reform, treatment time guarantees, cycling initiatives, fuel poverty, childcare, and green jobs (post 123).

There were notable differences in the communication approaches of these political parties, particularly among those not in government. The SNP's framing techniques diverged from other parties due to its current power position, allowing it to focus on its political goals and popularity without resorting to a discrediting, threat framing agenda. The SNP intensively concentrates on the constitutional question and portrays the UK Government as disconnected and disrespectful to Scotland (posts 1 and 3).

In contrast, Conservative discourse on Twitter and Facebook heavily emphasized the SNP as a threat to society, associating them with "cover-ups, lies, deceit, secrecy, sleaze, [and]

the abuse of power” (post 37). While some opposition parties viewed the SNP as a threat, none did so to the extent practiced by Conservatives.

Labour stood out as the only party using supporters to communicate its issue ownership and frames strategically, aiming to align more closely with the people. They employed direct quotations like "there's only one party who's pledging to keep people like me in jobs," presenting Labour as the sole provider of suitable employment, emphasizing trustworthiness. Labour linked their victim frame to the specific societal group of “care workers” (posts 83, 84, 85, 87).

Liberal Democrats made a concerted effort to connect with the people, particularly on Twitter, where they portrayed Scottish people as the sole victims. They differentiated themselves by showing overwhelming concern for the electorate, connecting with specific communities like mothers, minorities, and families in their tweets (posts 146, 147, 141, 138). These specific connections personalized tweets and facilitated a stronger connection with the party. Interestingly, Liberal Democrats and Labour were the only parties that did not use frames to victimize themselves. This parallels their close alignment with the electorate on owned issues, suggesting a deliberate strategy rather than coincidence.

Table 1. Contrasting Approaches to Threat and Victim Framing Among Scottish Parties

Similarities	Differences
All parties portray the Scottish people as victims in their framing.	Greens emphasize urgency and time constraints in their framing, being the only party to focus on environmental issues as a threat.
Parties use a mix of direct and indirect communication to convey their message, with some directly stating opponents' shortcomings and others implying negative traits indirectly.	Labour specifically identifies subgroups of the Scottish population as victims on both Twitter and Facebook, while other parties do not. Labour incorporates supporter voices in its communication on both Twitter and Facebook.
Parties depict opposition leaders and parties as threats while emphasizing their own ability to tackle these challenges.	Liberal Democrats only have one victim frame on Twitter. Liberal Democrats and Labour are the only parties that do not portray themselves as victims.
Labour, Greens, and Liberal Democrats frame the political status quo as a threat, while the two dominant parties, SNP and Conservatives, do not.	Conservatives consistently focus their threat framing on the SNP across both Twitter and Facebook, a level of consistency not seen in other parties' communications.

Source: Author

Conclusion

This article explored how Scottish political parties with parliamentary representation frame their owned issues to influence the electorate's voting decisions. The findings suggest that parties' framing strategies are deeply rooted in their political context, with those in government focusing on advancing their agenda, while opposition parties often resort to discrediting their opponents while promoting their own priorities to gain support. This dichotomy highlights the power dynamics at play in the Scottish political landscape and the ways in which parties adapt their communication strategies to navigate this complex environment. This finding also underscores the nuanced and context-dependent nature of political communication strategies.

The study found that political parties strategically employ threat and victim framing in their rhetoric on Twitter and Facebook, albeit in different ways. The SNP concentrates on its independence agenda to bolster popularity, while other parties must critique the ruling party before advancing their own agendas. Victim framing portrays the electorate as victims to evoke sympathy, consistent with previous research on framing strategies of right- and left-wing parties. The extent and focus of threat framing vary based on parliamentary strength, ranging from specific issues and institutions to individuals.

This article contributes to framing studies by highlighting the nuanced relationship between issue ownership, threat, and victim frames in shaping electoral outcomes. It underscores that every political party employs victim framing to enhance its electoral prospects by positioning itself as the most competent for action while identifying other parties as threats. The extent of threat framing depends on parliamentary strength, with stronger parties focusing on agenda implementation and weaker ones on discrediting opponents.

Despite its contributions, this article has limitations. The data was restricted to 150 posts across two social media platforms over six months, potentially limiting nuance and framing dynamics before elections. Single-coder data analysis and the focus on two framing types may introduce interpretation errors. Future research could expand to other political contexts, employ qualitative and quantitative methods, and compare online and offline framing strategies to explore the evolving impact of issue ownership on political communication.

In conclusion, this study offers a valuable contribution to our understanding of how Scottish political parties frame their owned issues online, laying the groundwork for future research and enhancing our knowledge of political communication strategies. As digital

communication continues to play a central role in political campaigns, understanding the nuances of how parties frame issues and engage with voters online will be crucial for researchers, strategists, and citizens alike.

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Appendix

Table A1: Tweets as Threat and Victim

Party	Threat	Number of tweets	Victim	Number of tweets
SNP	Westminster	4	Scotland	11
	UK	1	Scottish people	7
	Conservatives	2	Scottish Government	2
	Boris Johnson	6	Scottish Parliament	1
	UK Government	4		
	COVID-19	1		
	Brexit	1		
	Rishi Sunak	1		
Conservatives	SNP member	1	People of Scotland	10
	SNP	12	Scotland	4
	Sturgeon	2	Conservatives	2
	Independence	1	Justice	1
			Scottish Parliament	1
Labour	SNP	5	Care staff	4
	Greens	1	Care users	1
	Independence	2	Scottish people	9
	Scottish Government	5	Scotland	1
	Conservatives	1		
	Hunger	1		
	Sturgeon	2		
Greens	Boris Johnson	2	Scottish people	2
	Hunters	2	Scottish wildlife	2
	Westminster	1	Scotland	7
	Climate change	6	World	1
	Scottish Government	2	Environment	1
	Ignorance	2	Greens	1
	Nuclear Weapons	1		
	Fossil Fuels	1		
Liberal Democrats	Scottish Government	5	Scottish people	15
	Repetition	2		
	SNP	5		
	Nicola Sturgeon	2		
	Boris Johnson	1		

Source: Author.

Table A2: Facebook Posts as Threat and Victim

Party	Threat	Number of posts	Victim	Number of posts
SNP	Boris Johnson	7	Scotland	11
	Anas Sarwar	2	SNP	2
	Labour	4	People of Scotland	5
	Westminster	5		
	Liberal Democrats	1		
	Brexit	3		
	UK Government	1		
	Nuclear weapons	1		
	Conservatives	1		
COVID	1			
Conservatives	Sturgeon	5	Scottish people	9
	SNP	10	Conservatives	2
	Independence	1	Scotland	4
	Salmond	1	Scottish Parliament	1
	John Swinney	1		
Labour	Independence	2	Scottish people	11
	No support	1	Care workers	4
	Other Scottish parties	1	Care receivers	1
	Missed cancer diagnoses	1		
	Politics staying the same	4		
	SNP	4		
	Poverty	1		
Greens	Westminster	2	Scotland	13
	Politics staying the same	2	Scottish people	1
	Climate change	7	World	1
	Nature emergencies	3		
	Aviation emissions	1		
Liberal Democrats	Politics staying the same	4	Scottish people	10
	Independence	3	Civil servants	1
	COVID-19	2	Minorities	2
	Poverty and hunger	1	Children	2
	Scottish Ministers	1		
	Scottish Government	3		
	SNP	1		
	Scottish society	1		

Source: Author.