



WORKSHOP  
"NEW INSIGHTS INTO  
COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING"  
12-13 FEBRUARY 2026

**Second-Order Elections and Issue Attention in Parliament: The Timing of State-Level Elections and their Influence on National Party Agendas**  
Christian Bohlen  
(Universität Hamburg)

**Abstract**

Although research on party behavior between elections has grown, we lack a full picture of how legislative cycle events shape party strategies. One such event is second-order elections and their impact on national politics. Research shows consistent voter patterns: turnout is lower, small or new parties gain support, and governing parties usually lose ground, following a cyclical rhythm. We extend this perspective to party behavior, asking how these dynamics influence national party rhetoric. We theorize that as state elections near, parties emphasize state-salient issues to show responsiveness and support regional branches. This effect also depends on election competitiveness and timing. We further hypothesize that differences in issue emphasis between coalition and opposition parties increase at the mid-point of the national electoral cycle, as coalitions defend their record while opposition parties exploit voter discontent to push alternative agendas. To test this, we analyze Bundestag speeches from 1991 to 2021. Germany provides an ideal case, as its federal structure and frequent state elections link national and regional party dynamics. The findings contribute to research on issue attention, parliamentary party behavior, and electoral cycles.