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How voters form associative issue ownership perceptions : an analysis of specific issues

How Voters Form Associative Issue Ownership Perceptions.
An analysis of specific issues

A classic concept going back to work in the 1980s by Budge and Farlie (1983) and Petrocik (1989), issue ownership is currently booming in political science research (Walgrave, Lefevere, and Tresch 2015). Issue ownership refers to the link between issues and parties in voters' minds. In other words, issue ownership relates to an evaluation voters make of parties with regard to their dealing with particular issues. Parties 'own' issues if voters consider them best able to deal with a given issue, voters then consider the party to be the most competent and/or committed to tackle the issue. Traditional examples are green parties who own the issue of the environment or left-wing parties who are perceived to be most competent/committed to deal with welfare issues (Seeberg 2016). A recent debate in the issue ownership literature distinguishes the competence dimension of issue ownership from its commitment dimension. Scholars are increasingly qualifying their claims by talking about 'competence issue ownership' on the one hand and 'associative issue ownership' (referring to the commitment dimension) on the other hand (Walgrave, Lefevere, and Tresch 2012). Applied to elections, issue ownership theory, both of the competence and the associative variant, states that parties see their vote share increase if the issues they own become more salient among the electorate. Numerous studies yielded direct or indirect evidence underpinning this claim (see for example: Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1989; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Petrocik 1996; Bellucci 2006; Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Walgrave, Lefevere, and Tresch 2012; Egan 2013; Lachat 2014; Lanz 2017). Issue ownership, both of the competence and associative kind, seems to matter for the vote.

But how come that voters consider a certain party to be most competent and/or committed to an issue? How does the identification of parties with issues come about? While issue ownership is firmly established as a driver of the vote, the question where issue ownership itself originates from only started to enjoy scholarly attention recently (the two first papers probably being: Holian 2004; Damore 2004). The growing body of work on the origins of issue ownership points to several roots of issue ownership, the main two being parties' own attention to issues and voters' party preference.

While most of the work on the origins of issue ownership focused on the competence dimension of issue ownership, this paper deals with its associative dimension.

Drawing on a novel research design confronting Belgian voters with a very large number of specific issues randomly taken from the news media, we revisit the two existing explanations of issue ownership (attention to issues by parties and party preferences of voters). The work on the origins of issue ownership is plagued by endogeneity issues. Most importantly, the key debate is whether issue ownership perceptions explain voting or whether the opposite is the case with voting explaining issue ownership perceptions. Our design working with specific media issues has the major advantage that parties have not been able to build a long-term reputation for commitment with regard to many of these specific problems and events. This allows to directly compare specific issues on which there is information available for voters about parties' attention to these issues with situations in which such information is largely absent. Concretely, we examine whether such a low-information context triggers citizens to rely more on heuristics, such as their party preference, when attributing associative ownership to parties. In other words, our design focusing on specific issues allows to tease out under which circumstances voters rely on heuristics instead of on real information about parties' attention to issues.

We find that associative issue ownership perceptions are partly driven by real information about parties' actual attention to issues. Concretely, people tend to consider parties more as issue owners if those parties have been covered more in news coverage on those issues. This is good news for the usefulness of issue ownership as a predictor of the vote as it basically means that associative issue ownership is not entirely endogenous with party preference. Yet, instead of driving the vote as decades of research has argued, the exact opposite happens as well: people prefer a party first and then they attribute ownership to it when a new issue shows up. The partisan heuristic is powerful, and even more so when the issues are important to voters. Moreover, specific associative issue ownership is also inferred from more general, issue domain ownership perceptions. When being asked about their associative issue ownership perceptions with regard to specific issues, voters tend to use their

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ownership perceptions regarding broader issue domains and apply these general perceptions to specific issues. In other words, there is a second heuristic at play as well whereby the general is applied to the specific.

The key contribution of the study is that we show for the first time that the use of the partisan and issue domain heuristic varies with the availability of information. Compared to issues where such information is not available, with regard to issues where parties *do* have a track record of attention voters rely less on cognitive shortcuts. This suggests that the sources of issue ownership vary across issues: for some issues people's issue ownership perceptions are more valid, less endogenous and more based on real information than for other issues.

<center>*SOURCES OF ASSOCIATIVE ISSUE OWNERSHIP*</center>

Associative issue ownership — Associative issue ownership refers to the perceived commitment of a party to tackle an issue while competence issue ownership refers to the capacity of a party to 'solve' an issue. Most work on the origins of issue ownership has examined competence issue ownership and not associative issue ownership. We assume that the origins of both dimensions are partially related and we will use the literature on the origins of competence issue ownership to generate hypotheses about the origins of associative issue ownership. Some people may not be able, or willing, to make the subtle distinction between the two ways in which parties can perform on an issue—having the capacity to solve it and caring about it (see for example the study by Wagner and Zeglovits 2014 showing how people use positional considerations when having to judge the competence of parties on issues). Studies in fact found both dimensions to be substantially associated on the individual level but they are far from identical (Walgrave, Lefevere, and Tresch 2012). We expect each of the three sources of issue ownership discussed below to affect both competence and associative issue ownership, but the *weight* of the three sources most likely varies across the two dimensions. Therefore, we will draw on the more extensive literature on the origins of competence issue ownership to devise hypotheses

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about the origins of associative issue ownership below.

Further, work about the changeability of issue ownership over time has suggested that associative ownership is less changeable than competence ownership. That associative issue ownership is more invariant than competence ownership has been showed both in longitudinal (Tresch and Feddersen 2017; Walgrave and Lefevere 2017) and in experimental research (Tresch, Lefevere, and Walgrave 2015). This as well, and not only the fact that competence and association (or commitment) are two analytically different things, may affect our findings.

Actual party attention — One of the founding fathers of issue ownership theory, John Petrocik, in his seminal piece, was quite adamant where issue ownership comes from. Issue ownership, Petrocik (1996, 826) says, is "*… produced by a history of attention, initiative and innovation towards these problems which leads voters to believe that one of the parties… is more sincere and committed to doing something about them*". The other founding father, Ian Budge (2015, 771), in a recent overview, made a similar point: "*… ownership' implies establishing a reputation for greater competence and concern for certain issues by emphasizing them more*." In other words, issue ownership perceptions are based on real, external information for voters that results from parties' actual actions with regard to issues. Scholars who started to look empirically at the origins of issue ownership recently followed the lead of the founding fathers and examined the effect on issue ownership of parties' own, or (mass) mediated, attention in a longitudinal (Holian 2004 in the U.S.; Walgrave and De Swert 2007 in Belgium; Kleinnijenhuis and Walter 2014 in The Netherlands; Tresch and Feddersen 2017 in Switzerland), cross-sectional (Lanz and Feddersen 2015 in a comparative study of all OECD countries), or a short-term experimental fashion (Aalberg and Jenssen 2007 in Norway; Walgrave, Lefevere, and Nuytemans 2009 and Tresch, Lefevere, and Walgrave 2015 in Belgium; Dahlberg and Martinsson 2015 in Sweden; Stubager and Seeberg 2016 in Denmark). These studies looked at parties' issue attention in very diverse forms such as in party manifestos, parliamentary action, media interviews, televised political debates, campaign ads, media campaign coverage, general media mentions etc. While the type of

attention parties devote to an issue may make a difference (Stubager and Seeberg 2016), all these studies basically confirmed what Petrocik and Budge said: parties (or candidates) can claim, or at least increase, issue ownership of issues by talking a lot about them. In the end, these studies say, these messages will be picked up and voters will start (or continue) identifying the issue with the party. Note that all these studies looked at the origins of *competence* issue ownership and not associative issue ownership. Yet, we expect the effect of party attention to issues to be even more outspoken with regard to associative ownership. Indeed, talking a lot about an issue is a stronger signal of commitment and priorities than it is of competence.

Our first hypothesis states that there is real information in people's answers to issue ownership questions: *Voters tend to attribute ownership of a specific issue more to parties that give attention to the issue than to parties that do not (H1).*

Partisan heuristic — Apart from attention, there is a second well-established source of issue ownership perceptions: party preference. Indeed, as soon as scholars started to look at what brings about issue ownership, worries arose as to whether issue ownership is endogenous with the vote, a consequence of voting for a party instead of a cause. The underlying theoretical idea is straightforward: mostly not having specific information about whether and how a particular party is effectively handling a specific issue, people simply project their general party preference on their perception of how any issue is related to the different parties. Going back to Campbell and colleagues' (1960) idea that party preference acts as a 'perceptual screen' through which the world is perceived, voters simply nominate their own party as the one that is best able to deal with any issue (see also: Rahn, Krosnick, and Breuning 1994). When lacking information, and as their preferred party is top of mind for most voters, party preference is thus used as a heuristic to answer issue ownership questions. There is a growing body of empirical work that has looked into this matter employing a range of different methods. All this work points in the same direction: issue ownership is affected by party preference.

For instance, based on cross-sectional survey evidence, Bélanger and Meguid (2008, 482) find that party identifiers in Canada tend to nominate their own party as being best able (most competent) to deal with any issue and that issue ownership only partially transcends party preference (see also: Lanz 2017). Cross-sectional work by Stubager and Slothuus (2013) on the Danish case reaches similar conclusions. Based on longitudinal UK data spanning more than 20 years (1971-1997), Jennings and Green (2012) assess whether aggregate-level issue competence perceptions precede or rather follow aggregate party preferences for government or opposition parties in the UK. Their conclusions are nuanced in the sense that, for government parties, issue competence evaluations drive party preference but for opposition parties the inverse is the case. Opting for an opposition party 'granger-causes' an increased issue competence evaluation of this opposition party at a later stage. Also panel survey designs have been employed to show the effect of party preference on issue ownership. Walgrave and Lefevere's (2017) study, spanning a full electoral term of five years (2009-2014) in Belgium, concluded that initial party preference had a strong effect on associative issue ownership perceptions measured at the end. Voters tend to bring their perceptions of which party cares most about an issue in line with their pre-existing party preference. The same transpires from a panel study by Tresch and Federsen (2017) in Switzerland with regard to associative issue ownership: when voters, in the beginning of the campaign, prefer another party than the one they initially considered to be the owner of an issue, they are inclined to update their issue ownership perception by the end of the campaign and make it congruent with their party preference. Vliegenthart and Lefevere (2017) found the same in a panel study in The Netherlands. Further, drawing on in-depth interviews with Austrian voters Wagner and Zeglovits (2014) show that, what they call, 'party affect' has a significant bearing on competence issue ownership perceptions. Finally, recent experimental work too suggests that party preference at least partially precedes issue ownership perceptions. For instance, Walgrave and colleagues (2014) found that, if people dislike a party, party communication has no effect whatsoever on their competence issue ownership perceptions; if people already prefer the party, in contrast, the effect of party messages on their issue ownership perception is reinforced.

As good as all this work looks into competence issue ownership. Only two studies (Walgrave and Lefevere 2017; Tresch and Feddersen 2017) look at associative issue ownership as the dependent variable, but they too find an effect of party preference. Still, there are reasons to expect that party preference has a relatively smaller effect on associative compared to competence issue ownership perceptions. Experimental work on question wording of both competence and associative ownership measures has shown that the latter are more strongly affected by existing party preferences (see for instance: Walgrave et al. 2016; Lefevere et al. 2016).

In sum, the research literature suggests that, irrespective of the method used or the country in which the study was situated, issue ownership perceptions are the consequence of party preference: *Voters tend to attribute ownership of a specific issue more to the party they prefer than to parties they do not prefer (H2).*

Issue domain heuristic — Apart from actual attention and party preference, the research literature has put forward two alternative sources of issue ownership. First, there is the perception of voters that a party is defending the interests of a specific *constituency*, which then leads to the consecutive perception that it, therefore, must the owner of the issues this constituency cares about. Second, a party's track record, whether it has *performed* well when it held executive power, plays a role as well. Both these two alternative explanations were already very much present in Petrocik's (1996) initial account, in which he spoke about 'constituency-based issues' on the one hand and 'performance' issues on the other.

The constituency and performance explanations have been examined empirically at the aggregate level and at the individual level, and both seem to contribute to explaining issue ownership. Bélanger (2003), for example, shows that, in a longitudinal study, bad economic conditions translate in a loss of competence perception for Canadian government parties. Brasher (2009) comes to similar conclusions based on U.S. evidence. If the people perceive the government (president) to do a good job, the government party increases its ownership of issues (for a similar longitudinal study making a

similar point for associative issue ownership, see: Walgrave and Lefevere 2017). With regard to constituency identification, drawing on Danish cross-sectional data, Stubager and Slothuus (2013) find that voters who consider a party to be defending the interests of a specific societal group do attribute competence issue ownership to that party more than the voters who not consider the party as catering to the interests of specific groups. In a rare experimental study, Stubager and Seeberg (2016) examine Danish parties' emphasis on their constituency link and on their performance. More than merely showing that one cares or emphasizing one's position, constituency and performance mentions by parties affected subjects' issue ownership perceptions.

We believe both constituency and performance perceptions are situated at the level of broad and general issue domains such as 'the environment' or 'social welfare' and that they are rather stable. When pointing out that issue ownership is partly constituency-based, Petrocik (1996) wanted to make the exact point that there is a lot of stability to issue ownership. Even performance assessments of parties, that are by definition changeable as performance varies, are in practice fairly stable and change only slowly over the long run, in particular with the alternation of governments (Bélanger 2003; Brasher 2009). The argument we want to make is that such quite stable perceptions with regard to broad issue domains form the background against which people evaluate parties' issue ownership with regard to more specific issues. Voters who—based on the fact that for example the social democrats generally cater to the needs of the needy and have delivered on social welfare in the past—believe that social democrats own the issue of social welfare, will use this general, standing perception of issue ownership when evaluating the party's issue ownership on specific issues. In other words, we expect voters to draw on their general evaluation of parties and issues to make specific evaluations of parties and issues. Most voters are inattentive to politics, they have no clue how a party is doing with regard to a specific problem or issue. Wagner and Zeglovits (2014) reconstruct, based on in-depth interviews with survey takers, how people answer competence issue ownership questions in electoral surveys: many people seem to lack real information allowing them to evaluate parties' issue competence based on actual facts. To fill this information gap, voters use their assessment of parties' general competence

not related to issues to answer questions about issue competence (see also: Green and Jennings 2012). We put forward the same mechanism here: people project their existing issue domain perceptions onto their perception of how parties are connected to specific issues. They infer ownership over specific issues from ownership over issue domains. Research has so far mainly focused on competence issue ownership, but similar dynamics are likely to occur considering associative issue ownership.

This logic yields a third hypothesis: *Voters tend to attribute ownership of a specific issue more to the party that is considered the owner of the general issue domain the specific issue belongs to than to the other parties (H3).*

Interaction of actual attention and heuristics — Our reasoning so far considered the three horses in the race—actual attention, the partisan heuristic and the issue domain heuristic—as mutually independent. But they are not. To the extent that there is less information available to voters about how parties are actually doing with regard to specific issues—in our case: whether they devote attention—people should rely more on heuristics. They should fill the information gap with shortcuts and rely on inferences based on existing attitudes (party preference) or cognitions (issue domain ownership). In other words, the effect of both heuristics is probably moderated by the presence or absence of real information. This logic matches earlier findings that issue ownership perceptions are easier to change by communication and displaying attention if extant ownership is not yet deeply established within one party; weaker ownerships, based on less available information, are more fragile, and challenger parties can capture them more readily by sheer attention giving. Experimental and longitudinal research confirmed that ownership of, especially, new and yet unowned issues lies for the grabbing of parties who are willing to talk about them a lot (see for example: De Bruycker and Walgrave 2014; Tresch, Lefevere, and Walgrave 2015).

We coin two final hypotheses. *Voters' tendency to attribute ownership of a specific issue to the party they prefer increases as they have less information about how much attention parties are devoting to the issue (H4). Voters' tendency to attribute ownership of a specific issue to the party that*

is considered the owner of the general issue domain the specific issue belongs to increases as they have less information about how much attention parties are devoting to the issue (H5).

WHY SPECIFIC ISSUES

A host of different research strategies has been employed to examine the sources of issue ownership: some used cross-sectional survey data, some drew on longitudinal aggregate-level evidence, some had individual-level panel data at their disposal, others relied on in-depth interviews, and still others set up experiments. However, as far as we can tell, *all* known studies employed broad and established issue categories. In contrast, this study assesses people's issue ownership perceptions with regard to specific issues.

We tap issue ownership with regard to specific events and problems covered in the news media while previous work used broad issue categories and confronted people with issues such as 'the economy' or 'the environment'. Not only are such categories vague—not everyone will understand 'the economy' in a similar fashion—these broad issue categories do not clearly refer to political problems either. The economy is not an issue that can be tackled. Rather, it is a large domain of adjacent problems and it is quite well possible that some parties own some specific issues within the broader economic issue domain while other issues are owned by other parties. Defined in such a broad way, issue domains are actually synonyms of 'themes' rather than of political problems (see also: Wlezien 2005). In a rare study, Guinaudeau and Persico (2013) argue that issues are best defined narrowly and that the existing broad conceptualization of what issues are leads to confusion. For instance, the fact that some studies find that, during campaigns, parties address the same issues and that there is considerable issue overlap (see for example: Sigelman and Buell 2004)—a finding that goes against the idea that issue ownership leads to selective and distinct issue emphasis—is due, according to these authors, to the fact that issues are defined too broadly.

Therefore, this study asks citizens about their issue ownership perceptions with regard to specific issues, not issue domains. Although issue ownership has been conceptualized with regard to broad issues, we believe that a more precise issue demarcation has the distinct advantage that we can much better control for the real information about parties' dealings with issues floating around in the public domain. It is hard to say, for example, to what extent a party is dealing well or is committed to tackle the issue of 'the environment' as the environment is such a vague and broad category. Yet, it is much easier to examine, and control for, parties' dealings with 'air pollution in inner cities' as one can simply trace what parties have been saying and doing on that specific issue. In other words, the causal connection between issue attention and subsequent issue ownership can be better identified when looking at specific compared to broad issues. In this way, by looking at issue ownership over specific issues, we can learn also about the dynamics of ownership over broad issue domains.

Concretely, this study asks people about their issue ownership perceptions with regard to current problems and events that showed up in the news media. These events are very specific, and they relate to concrete problems and not to broad issue domains. Take, for example, the issue of crisis shelter for youngsters with psychological problems. This specific issue belongs to the welfare domain but it may have its own and distinct ownership. The good thing about such a specific issue is that the information about parties' dealings with the issue can be measured quite well: the issue is so specific that we can adequately grasp parties' current attention to it. This allows to compare how voters are answering issue ownership questions in an information-low compared to in a more information-rich context. This exact variance, and a reliable measure thereof, is lacking when working with broader and established issues. In other words, using specific issues permits us to examine better for which issues people tend to use heuristics to fill in the blanks.

To assess to which party voters attribute issue ownership of specific issues, we asked Belgian voters about their issue ownership perceptions with regard to six different, specific issues reported in the news media in the weeks before the survey. The issues are very concrete; they are based on factual media stories and refer to specific events bound by time and place. Each of the issues had been prominent in the news appearing on the front page of major newspapers (*De Standaard* and *Le Soir*) in the five weeks preceding each interview. Just a short summarizing title was shown to participants, for example: *The number of sick leave days for teachers has reached its highest level since 2009, with burn-out and stress as the most important causes* (*De Standaard*). These taglines were not necessarily the actual newspaper titles but rather short summaries of the media stories. Since the interviews took place over a period of several months, the design had a 'rolling' structure: for every interview a new random sample of six stories was drawn from the (rolling) population of all front-page stories published five weeks before the interview. Stories all dealt with domestic issues and so, more than international stories, dealt with problems domestic parties can act upon. A full list of specific issues can be found in the Online Appendix.

In total, 2,189 citizens were surveyed online by *SSI*. The sample is representative in terms of gender, age and education level. Citizens were presented with initially 164 different issues (news stories); we drop 29 issues for which the name of a party or a politician was mentioned in the title which reduces the number of issues to 134.

Table 1 presents all variables and their descriptives. The dependent variable is *Issue ownership*. We used a typical associative issue ownership question (Walgrave, Lefevere, and Tresch 2015): *When you think about this news fact, which party comes to mind?* Respondents were presented with a list of parties and were allowed to tick one party only. They could also say that none of the parties came to mind or that they had no idea.

Party presence in coverage is the first independent variable. It grasps the presence of each party in the coverage of a specific issue. Therefore, we conducted a content analysis of newspaper coverage of the 134 news stories. Remember that we selected the stories for inclusion in the survey based on them being front page stories of main broadsheet newspapers in Belgium (*De Standaard* and *Le Soir*). But those articles often formed only the tip of the iceberg of all newspaper coverage, with some stories attracting media-wide attention for days before and after publication on the front page of the reference broadsheet. That is why we conducted a content analysis in four newspapers by adding *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *La Libre Belgique.* We more specifically collected newspaper articles dealing with the same issue[1] on three consecutive days, including the newspaper edition before, after and the one actually containing the main article. This rather short time span makes sense in that day-to-day changes in media attention have been found to oscillate explosively (Boydstun, Hardy and Walgrave 2014).[2] Specifically, we coded how many times each party (or a politician of a party) was mentioned in each article about each issue (story). Divided by the number of articles, we get a relative measurement of party presence in news coverage on each issue; we prefer a relative measure above an absolute measure as such measure would be more an indicator of the prominence of an issue in the news than of the prominence of a party in the news[3]. Anyway, the variable allows us to assess to what extent citizens' issue ownership perceptions are based on real information. We assume that if a party is mentioned a lot in news coverage on a specific issue, this implies that the party itself has communicated a lot about it. The variable is our proxy for a party's attention to concrete issues. It does not directly measure parties' 'real' attention to issues but only the mediatized reflection of it. There is some work that examines the effect of issue ownership perceptions of journalists on their source selection choices. This work suggests that journalists tend to prioritize partisan sources that they

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[1] News items should deal with the exact same topic and cover the same time and place of the event in order to be said to deal with the exact same news story.

[2] This is not the case for media hypes/storms (Boydstun, Hardy and Walgrave 2014), yet our sample does not contain news stories that could be categorized as (part of) a media hype.

[3] To test for robustness, we constructed an absolute measure as well (the total number of party mentions in stories about an issue) and replaced the relative measure with that absolute measure. Results reported in Table 3 below were identical.

consider to be the owner of an issue (e.g. Hayes 2008; Helfer and Aelst 2016; Van Camp 2018). So, our *Party presence in coverage* variable, probably includes some of the issue domain ownership perceptions of journalists.

Second, *Party preference* measures the party voted for in the last election (2014).

Third, *Issue domain ownership* aims to grasp to what extent a party is considered as the owner of the issue domain a specific issue belongs to. We draw on aggregate data of the Belgian national election study (Partirep) of 2014. To measure domain issue ownership, Partirep used a similar question wording with regard to seven different issue domains. The 134 specific issues were then all recoded as belonging to one of the issue domains identified by Partirep: *environment, labor, economy, crime, immigration, government operations,* and *defense* (specific issues are coded according to the topic codebook of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP)). Not all our specific issues could be recoded as belonging to one of Partirep's seven issue domains; there was no match for about half of the specific issues. This further reduces the issues we work with here to 85[4]. The Online Appendix presents all specific issues and their linkage to the broad issue domains. Of the 85 retained issues, 33 per cent fall in the economy issue domain, seventeen in the labor issue domain, seventeen are classified under government operations and bureaucracy, fourteen under crime, ten under immigration, four under environment and three under defense.

Of the control variables, *Issue salience* taps into the importance a citizen attributes to a specific issue: *How important is this news fact for you?* Further, *Gender*, *Age*, *Education*, and *Political Interest* are included in all analyses.

A final word about our modelling strategy. We conduct a multi-level logistic regression with cross-nested random effects. Such models are necessary because respondents were each confronted with a sample of six different news stories, that were randomly drawn from a population of news stories. We stack the dataset so that each citizen filling in the survey is represented six times in the

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[4] We ran the models reported in Table 3 again with all 134 specific issues and defining the issues without a match with the Partirep issue domains as being not-owned. Injecting this 'noise' in our data—as some of these issues are actually owned but were simply not surveyed in the Partirep study—did not change the results.

data, once for each specific issue he or she rated. Additionally, we stack the dataset once more, to examine which party is selected as the owner of each specific issue. As there are fifteen parties, the number of observations goes up dramatically to almost 80,000 observations. As one can see in Table 1, the actual number of observations differs across variables as they are measured on a different level, with some additional variation due to missing values.

Note that the answers a respondent gives with regard to one specific issue are not really independent. Indeed, if a voter says that party A is the owner of issue X (=1), due to the dichotomous nature of the evidence, all other parties would be by definition non-owners (=0) of issue X. Normally, dependent variables that are structured in that way are modelled using conditional logit models. However, conditional logit models only allow to include *alternative-specific* variables that vary by choice, unless case specific variables (such as Issue Salience) are interacted with the different choice options – fifteen parties in our case. Doing so would result in a large amount of interaction terms, making it more difficult to interpret our findings and especially complicating the examination of the possible moderating effect of issue salience. Therefore we stick to the non-conditional modeling strategy in the paper. In the results section below we will briefly refer to evidence of a conditional logit model that is included in the Online Appendix; these models yield as good as identical results.

Table 1 – Variable descriptives

Variable name	Description/wording	Categories	Measurement level	N	Mean	S.D.	Min	Max
Region	Flemish/Walloon citizen	0 = Wallonia; 1 = Flanders	Citizen	2,173	.50	.50	0	1
Sex	*What is your gender?*	0 = Female; 1 = Male	Citizen	2,173	.50	.50	0	1
Age	*How old are you?*		Citizen	2,145	46.5	16.9	18	91
Education	*What is your highest level of education?*	0 = No education; 5 = University degree	Citizen	2,169	3.57	.84	1	5
Political interest	*To what extent are you interested in politics in general?*	0 = Not at all interested; 10 = Very interested	Citizen	2,169	5.38	2.8	0	10
Strong party preference	Does the respondent have a preference of 8 or higher (10-point scale) for at least one party as an answer to the following question: *How likely is it that you would ever vote for party X?*	0 = Respondent scores no party 8+; 1 = Respondent scores at least one party 8+	Citizen	2,173	.61	.49	0	1
Clarity domain issue ownership	% of citizens answering 'don't know' or 'no party' or 'all parties' when asked: *When you think about this topic, which party comes to your mind?* (Partirep survey)		Issue	85	16.24	4.03	5.2	28.2
General party presence in coverage	Number of times any party is mentioned in all coverage of an issue		Issue	85	3.58	5.8	0	34
Party preference	*Which party did you vote for in the last election?*	0 = Party not voted for; 1 = Party voted for	Citizen * party	21,900	.07	.25	0	1
Issue salience	*How important is this news fact for you?*	0 = Not at all important; 10 = Very important	Citizen * issue	10,605	5.17	2.7	0	10
Owner identification	*When you think about this news fact, which party comes to mind?*	0 = No party mentioned; 1 = A party mentioned	Citizen * issue	10,611	.60	.49	0	1
Issue domain ownership	% of citizens associating a certain party with an issue domain when asked: *When you think about this topic, which party comes to your mind?* (Partirep survey)		Issue * party	2,010	4.8	10.5	0	90
Party presence in coverage	Number of times a specific party is mentioned in all coverage of an issue, divided by the total number of articles on the issue		Issue * party	2,010	.03	.16	0	1.8
Issue ownership	*When you think about this news fact, which party comes to mind?*	0 = Party not mentioned; 1 = Party mentioned	Citizen * issue * party	77,250	0.07	.25	0	1

The fact that we confronted citizens with specific issues clearly affected our respondents. A good deal of them said they did not think of any party when asked about a specific issue. For about forty per cent of our associative issue ownership questions, respondents did not provide us with a specific party. This figure lies substantively higher compared to when one asks about issue domain ownership. For instance, in the already mentioned Partirep survey only between five per cent (environment) and twenty per cent (defense) of the respondents did not tick any party when asked the exact same question with regard to broad issue domains. Before we start digging into the parties that *are* considered as specific issue owners, let us briefly examine what leads to identifying any party as an issue owner in the first place. **Table 2** contains the results of a model estimating what affects the identification of an issue with a party (no matter which) compared to the absence of an issue-party identification.

Table 2 – Multi-level logistic regression with cross-nested random effects explaining identification of any party as an issue owner (DV=Owner identification, no-yes)

	Estimate (S.E)	p ≤
General party presence in coverage	.04 (.01)	**.00**
Strong party preference	.71 (.13)	**.00**
Clarity issue domain ownership	-.05 (.02)	**.01**
Sex (Man)	.44 (.14)	**.00**
Age	-.00 (.00)	.40
Education (Ref = no education)		
Lower education	.07 (.72)	.92
Secondary education	.21 (.67)	.76
High school education	.48 (.67)	.47
University education	.18 (.69)	.79
Political interest	.27 (.03)	**.00**
Region (Flanders)	.11 (.18)	.55
Intercept	-.87 (.76)	.25
Total N	6,529	
N citizens	2,126	
N stories	85	
AIC (0 model = 7,205)	6,825	

If parties in general are mentioned more often in the coverage of an issue, voters can more easily make up their mind and tick a party as owning it. This makes perfect sense, of course. If there is scant information about parties' doings with regard to issues, people cannot identify an owner. Voters who strongly prefer at least one party—meaning that they gave at least one party a score of 8 or higher on the 0-10 liking scale—are more likely to attribute ownership to a party (not necessarily the one they strongly prefer) than voters who do not especially like a certain party. Third, the more the issue domain under which the specific issue resorts is clearly owned by one party, the more easily an owner of the specific issue can be identified. Further, men are more likely to identify a party as an owner than women are and this effect comes on top of the effect of political interest, with the high interested more ready to attribute ownership than the low interested.

For more than sixty per cent of our questions with regard to which party owned a specific issue respondents were prepared to give an answer and to tick one specific party. Which party comes to their mind then? **Table 3** presents the evidence.

Table 3 – Multi-level logistic regression with cross-nested random effects explaining ownership of specific issues (DV=Issue ownership)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Estimate (S.E)	p ≤	Estimate (S.E)	P ≤	Estimate (S.E)	P ≤
Party presence in coverage (H1)	2.4 (.07)	**.00**	2.8 (.12)	**.00**	2.8 (.18)	**.00**
Party preference (H2)	1.5 (.05)	**.00**	1.8 (.05)	**.00**	.96 (.12)	**.00**
Issue domain ownership (H3)	.04 (.00)	**.00**	.04 (.00)	**.00**	.04 (.00)	**.00**
Party presence in coverage * Party preference (H4)	—		-1.5 (.13)	**.00**	-1.5 (.13)	**.00**
Party presence in coverage * Issue domain ownership (H5)	—		-.00 (.00)	.37	-.00 (.00)	.37
Issue salience	—		—		-.02 (.01)	**.05**
Party presence in coverage* Issue salience	—		—		-.00 (.02)	.92
Party preference * Issue salience	—		—		.14 (.02)	**.00**
Issue domain ownership * Issue salience	—		—		-.00 (.00)	.31
Intercept	-3.7 (.24)	.00	-3.8 (.25)	.00	-3.7 (.25)	.00
Total N	45,570		46,507		46,507	
N citizens	1,339		1,350		1,350	
N stories	85		85		85	
AIC (0 model =23,761)	19,504		19,372		19,307	

Basically, the evidence in Table 3 confirms four of the five hypotheses. **Model 1** shows that the actual attention parties devote to a specific issue matters a great deal. When a party is more frequently mentioned in the news with regard to a specific issue, the chances increase that this party is seen by voters as being the issue owner. The effect is quite potent: if a party is not mentioned at all in the coverage of an issue the chance that it is ticked as the issue owner is only six per cent, whereas that chance goes up to 63 per cent if a party is frequently (1.8 times on average) mentioned (predicted probabilities, keeping all other variables at their mean). This confirms that issue ownership perceptions are not totally off. They are based on real world information about parties' attention to the issue at stake. Voters may guess but their guesses are not totally wild. This confirms hypothesis 1, and much of the work on the origin of issue ownership claiming that issue ownership is the result of (a history of) issue attention.

Yet, apart from using actual information, people rely also on heuristics when assessing issue ownership. The first heuristic is their party preference. The evidence in Table 3 confirms that pre-existing party preferences exert a strong effect on issue ownership perceptions. This further fuels the already vivid endogeneity debate regarding issue ownership. Issue ownership, and even associative issue ownership, is not only the cause of the vote, it partially also is the consequence of it. The effect of party preference is outspoken: it increases the chance of attributing ownership to a party from five per cent to 28 per cent. Hypothesis 2 gets support from the evidence.

Issue domain ownership, the second heuristic, matters as well. If a specific issue belongs to an issue domain that is clearly owned by a certain party, the chances increase that the specific issue will be categorized as being owned by the same party. The effect is strong as well: at the lowest level of issue domain ownership of a party the share of specific issue ownership for that party is three per cent; it is 37 per cent at the highest level of issue domain ownership. This confirms hypothesis 3. People apply their general notion of issue ownership to more specific cases.

Since they are measured on different scales, we draw on standardized coefficients to meaningfully compare the relative strength of the three predictors. The effect of issue domain

ownership is strongest in explaining specific issue ownership with a very large standardized coefficient of 22.7. This means that with every increase of one standard deviation in domain ownership, the odds that that same party is attributed to be the owner of a specific issue within that domain increases by 22.7 standard deviations. The effects of the partisan heuristic and of actual information are substantial but smaller, with standardized coefficients of respectively 1.5 and 1.6. Thus, although all three predictors exert a substantial influence on issue ownership attribution, issue domain ownership seems to exert the strongest effect.

Model 2 examines whether the absence of real information (actual attention giving) boosts the use of the partisan and issue domain heuristics. This appears to be the case for the party preference but not for the issue domain heuristic. The coefficient of the interaction between a party's presence in the issue coverage and the respondent's party preference is negative, and significant. As a party is less mentioned in the news with regard to an issue, the impact of the partisan heuristic is stronger. So, the less information voters have about parties' actual attention to issues, the more they fill in the blanks by using their party preference as a shortcut. **Figure 1** below presents the evidence in the form of a graph. With regard to the other interaction hypothesis, though, the model shows no significant interaction between party presence in the media and issue domain ownership. All in all hypothesis 4 is confirmed, whereas hypothesis 5 is not.

Before we move on to our third model, we briefly demonstrate the robustness of the results with regard to our five hypotheses by employing conditional logit models (see above). In the Online Appendix, the full output of two conditional logit models is shown. Here we suffice with saying that, also in such models[5], *Party presence in coverage* (H1) has a strong effect on issue ownership attribution to a party (coeff. 2.17; S.E. .10; p<.00). Note that the coefficient is of a similar magnitude as the one reported in Table 3. The same applies to the *Party preference* (H2) effect (coeff. 1.62; S.E. .05; p<.00) and the effect of *Issue domain ownership* (H3) (coeff. .04; S.E. .00; p<.00). Also, the interaction effect between *Party presence and Party preferences* (H4) is negative, significant and again of similar

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[5] Replication of Table 3, Model 1 and 2

magnitude as the effect reported on in Table 3 (coeff: -1.37; S.E.: .12; p<.00). Finally, the interaction effect between *Party presence and Issue domain ownership* (H5) similarly remains insignificant (coeff: -.01; S.E.; .00; p<.22). So, all five hypotheses hold when specifying another model. This reinforces confidence in the fact that our findings based on a multi-level logistic regression with cross-nested random effects are robust and not artefacts of our model choice.
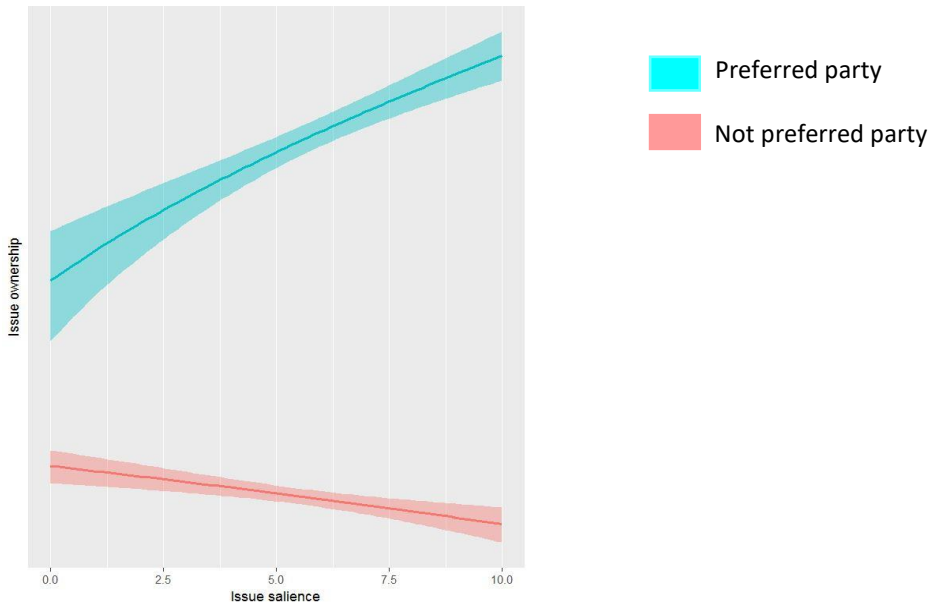
Figure 1 – Party preference * party presence
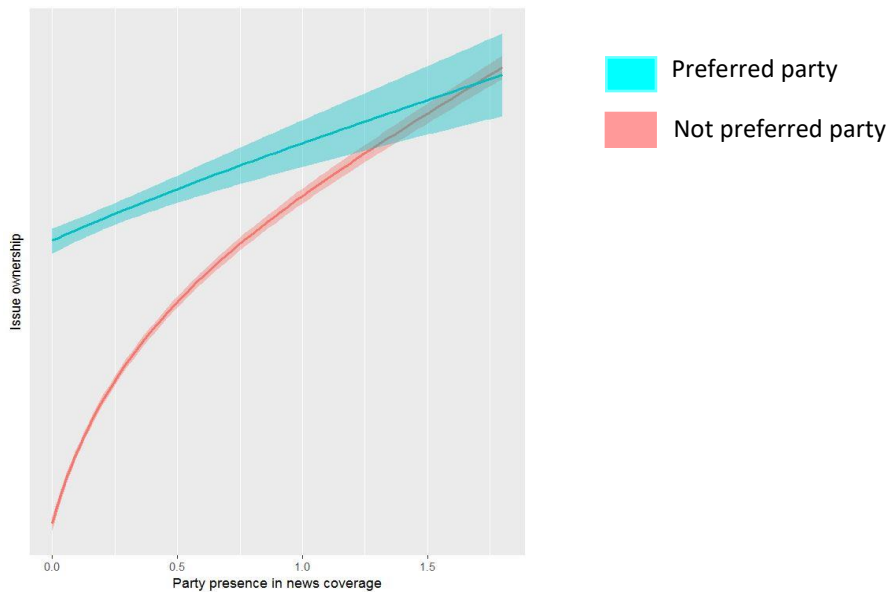
In order to further examine the robustness of the effects, Model 2 of Table 3 was reran on the Flemish and Walloon evidence separately. Although splitting up the data substantially reduces the number of observations, the results in both regions—remember that each region has a completely autonomous party and media system—support hypotheses 1-4. Our findings are not artificially produced by merging the data at the country level.

Finally, we briefly explore what conditions the effect of the two heuristics—party preference and issue domain ownership—on issue ownership perceptions. Therefore we interact both these heuristics with issue salience in **Model 3** of Table 3. Is it the case that people rely more on their party preference when they are asked about which party owns an issue when they consider this issue to be more important? Yes it is. The party preference * issue salience interaction term is positive and highly significant. **Figure 2** displays the evidence graphically; as issue salience becomes stronger the likelihood of mentioning the preferred party as issue owner increases. What does this imply? It basically means that the reverse relationship between party preference and issue ownership whereby the former impacts the latter and not the other way around is reinforced when people care about the issue at stake. In other words, the contamination of issue ownership by party preference that challenges issue ownership theory claiming that ownership affects the vote is stronger when issues are important for voters.

Figure 2 – Party preference * issue salience

CONCLUSION

Issue ownership research is booming but the last word has not been said about the origins of issue ownership. The study revisited two established sources of issue ownership—parties' issue attention and voters' party preference—and confirmed that they matter for associative issue ownership. Part of the reason people associate a party with an issue is that the party devotes attention to the issue and is covered in the news while doing so. This confirms extant research and suggests that issue ownership is partially based on real information; parties themselves are the agents of their issue ownerships; they can impact what voters think about them.

Challenging the idea that issue ownership precedes the vote, our results confirm, again, that a good deal of people's perceptions of parties and issues are influenced by their (dis)liking of a party. When voters are asked to think about an issue and to identify it with a party, they tend to think about their own party; they use a partisan heuristic. The unfortunate thing is that this 'projection effect' of party preference on issue ownership is stronger when issues are considered by the voter to be salient. This is unfortunate for issue ownership theory, because it directly goes against the repeated finding

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that issue ownership has an effect on the vote especially for salient issues. Our evidence implies that the direction of causality is even more questionable when it comes to salient issues. We establish an effect of party preference on associative issue ownership—the perception that parties are committed to an issue. Extant research concluded that endogeneity concerns are more pertinent with regard to competence than to associative issue ownership. The fact that this study finds a strong influence of party preference on associative issue ownership suggests that our findings with regard to the effect of party preference might have been even stronger had we looked at competence issue ownership instead.

Apart from the party heuristic, voters use a second heuristic: they transfer their perception of issue ownership of general issue domains to ownership of specific issues. This means again that, when assessing issue ownership, a lot of the action happens in the mind of the voter. He/she draws on general notions about similar objects and simply applies these to other, much more specific objects. There is a spillover effect whereby voters do not distinguish different constructs. While we found such spillover from the general to the specific to exist, it is plausible that similar spillover effects happen, for example between adjacent issues. Again, we can only speculate to what extent our results with regard to associative issue ownership can be transposed to competence issue ownership perceptions; but we do not see any reason why the spillover effects would be particularly stronger or weaker with regard to competence issue ownership.

The most interesting result of the study probably is that the use of the partisan heuristic varies across information contexts. Our novel design using specific issues with regard to which we could rather precisely measure the information about parties' doings actually available to voters, allowed us to compare the role played by the party heuristic when voters have few real world cues compared to when they *do* have such cues. People draw more on the partisan heuristic when there are less real world cues that can direct them to other parties. This means that the validity of issue ownership perceptions—*what* they actually tap into—varies across issues. When there is a lot of information about what parties are actually doing with regard to an issue, issue ownership perceptions reflect this

real action. When there is not a lot of information about parties' doings, however, issue ownership perceptions do not have a lot of substantive meaning, they just reflect people's existing party preference. We showed this for specific issues, but we believe that the relative cluelessness of voters with regard to parties' dealing with issues applies more generally even to broad issue domains. In fact, Wagner and Zeglovits (2014) found, by talking in depth with survey takers about why they gave a certain answer to issues ownership questions, that respondents often refer to the fact that they have no clue and draw on adjacent considerations to answer issue ownership questions. In sum, while some issue ownerships may be real and based on genuine perceptions of voters, others simply are derivatives of confounding factors. The key question for issue ownership research is how rare the first category of issue ownership is, and how frequent the second.

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