Issue ownership and the vote: salience or competence?

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Abstract
Parties often are associated with specific issues. They can "own" an issue when they develop a reputation of competence and attention in that domain. While there is much aggregate-level evidence on the relation between issue salience and party results, the individual-level mechanisms are less well understood. This paper develops an individual-level model of issue ownership effects. It suggests distinguishing between two aspects of issue ownership: which party is considered to care most about a given issue, and which party is considered to have the best solutions in that domain. The model suggests that both aspects of issue ownership have different effects. When a party is associated with a given issue, voters' preferences on the corresponding issue should have a larger impact on the evaluation of the issue owner. But when a party is considered to be most competent in that domain, the effect of spatial distances should decrease. These hypotheses are tested with a statistical model that allows the impact of voter-party issue distances on party utilities to vary across both parties and issues. This model is applied to data from the 2011 Swiss election study.

Keywords: issue ownership, voting choice, spatial models, issue salience, party competence

1. Introduction

The concept of issue ownership points to a central form of association between parties and issues. Some parties can develop a reputation of competence and attention in some political domain and be considered to "own" the corresponding issue. Issue ownership has traditionally been considered to provide parties with an important electoral advantage (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996; Petrocik et al. 2003). Parties should benefit when the issue they own is salient during the electoral campaign.

Most of the literature on issue ownership has focused on aggregate-level consequences, looking for instance at the relation between issue salience and party support. The micro-level component of issue ownership, in contrast, is less well understood. Some recent studies have focused on that aspect (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; van der Brug 2004; Green and Hobolt 2008; Walgrave et al. 2012). They have emphasized that the effects of issue ownership are not the same for valence issues and for positional issues. The issue ownership theory was developed by focusing on valence issues. As suggested by Bélanger and Meguid (2008), this theory cannot be directly transferred to positional issues. In the latter case, the effect of ownership is likely to be conditioned by positional agreement between voters and the issue owner. Another important point raised in the recent literature is a distinction between two sides of ownership: associative ownership and competence ownership. From the point of view of the voters, a party most strongly associated with a given issue is not necessarily the party deemed most competent to handle that political issue.

This paper builds on this recent literature to suggest a voting choice model including issue ownership. It suggests that associative and competence ownership play different roles in the voting decision process. One the one hand, competence ownership should have a direct effect on the perceived attractiveness of the issue owner, while associative ownership should have no such effect. On the other hand, both sides of issue ownership should moderate the relation between voters' preferences on the corresponding dimension and the voter utility for the issue owner. But these effects should be in opposite directions. Associative ownership should reinforce the impact of spatial distances, while competence ownership should weaken it. The voting choice model suggested in this paper is a proximity model of voting choice, extended to include issue ownership. Most importantly, it differs from traditional spatial models by letting the impact of issue preferences on party utilities vary across parties. In other words, the

model developed in this study suggests that the criteria used by voters to evaluate parties may differ across parties, as a function of associative and competence ownership.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the traditional issue ownership model and reviews some of the recent literature dealing with that concept. Next, the role of issue ownership in the voting decision process is discussed, and the paper's hypotheses are introduced. Section 4 presents the data and variables used, and section 5 the models' results.

2. Issue ownership theory

The issue ownership theory, as formulated by Petrocik (Petrocik 1996; Petrocik et al. 2003), argues that parties can develop a reputation of attention and competence in a particular political domain. Issue ownership is "the ability to resolve a problem of concern to voters. It is a reputation for policy and program interests, produced by a history of attention, initiative, and innovation toward these problems" (Petrocik 1996, 826). A party owning an issue is perceived as being more willing to address this issue and as being more competent at solving it. This theory has a party-level component and an individual-level one (Bélanger and Meguid 2008). The theory's implications are quite clear at the party level. Parties should emphasize their preferred issues, in order to increase their salience among voters. At the individual level, voters are expected to make their voting decision on the basis of parties' issue-handling reputations. If a given issue is particularly salient during the campaign, the party owning that issue should enjoy an electoral advantage.

In Petrocik's theory, issue positions are not considered. The model was developed and tested by focusing on valence issues. These are issues on which all voters and parties share the same goal, such as reducing unemployment or fighting crime (Stokes 1963). While valence issues may play an important role in electoral campaigns, there are also important issues on which different political actors follow different aims. Issues such as immigration, EU integration, or nuclear energy, are just some examples of political issues on which parties and voters may hold very different preferences. On such issues, it is less clear how ownership may influence the voting decision process (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; van der Brug 2004, 210).

Part of the problem seems to be a distinction between two aspects of issue ownership: which parties are associated with specific issues and how competent parties are deemed to be to address these issues (Bellucci 2006; Walgrave et al. 2012). The first aspect points to a traditional association between a party and an issue. It is the product of a long-term attention to a given political issue. The competence aspect, on the other hand, refers to a party's reputation at handling a given issue. Following Walgrave et al. (2012), I refer to these two sides of issue ownership as "associative ownership" and "competence ownership", respectively.[1] As emphasized by Bellucci (2006), the standard issue-ownership theory assumes that associative and competence ownership are aligned. A party owning an issue both has a long-term reputation of attention to the corresponding problem and is considered to be particularly able at handling that issue. When dealing with positional issues, this congruence is certainly not guaranteed. Some parties may be strongly associated with a given political issues, because they repeatedly emphasize it in political campaigns. The associations between Green parties and environmental protection or between right-wing populist parties and immigration are two examples. Yet, as not all voters share the goals pursued by these parties, competence ownership is far from being given. Many voters are likely to agree that the Greens care most about environmental issues and they will tend to associate the party and the issue. But if they disagree with the party's aims on their central issue, they certainly will not consider that party to be most competent or to have the best solutions.

3. The role of issue ownership in the voting decision process

Once the two aspects of issue ownership are distinguished, it is less clear which role they should play in the voting decision process. The standard issue ownership expects a direct effect of ownership on party preferences. Citizens are more likely to vote for the owner of the political issue at the centre of the electoral campaign. As noted above, this applies directly only to valence issues, for which both aspects of ownership are expected to be congruent. A similar effect can be expected for positional issues, yet only when there is positional agreement between the voter and the party. Bélanger and Meguid (2008), for instance, note that ownership of positional issues should only exert a positive effect on voters' party evaluations for those citizens that share the owner's issue position. In the corresponding empirical model, they measure ownership in terms of perceived competence. This is the case

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[1] Bellucci uses the terms "issue ownership" for the former and "party competence" for the latter.

in most studies. One of the few exceptions is the recent study of Walgrave et al. (2012), who include measures of both associative and competence ownership. The effects are however also specified as direct effects of ownership on the likelihood to vote for a given party.

In this study, I suggest a different model of how ownership influences the voting decision process. To that end, this study starts from the framework of spatial models, which is the one most often used to analyse the impact of issues on the vote (Enelow and Hinich 1984, 1990; Merrill and Grofman 1999). Following the tradition of Downs (1957), such models rest on the central assumption that voting choices are influenced by the relative positions of voters and parties in the political space. Citizens are expected to have a higher utility for the party that is closest to them in the political space, as defined by one or several issue dimensions. How can associative and competence ownership influence that voting decision? I suggest here that the two aspects of issue ownership play different roles.

As far as competence ownership is concerned, I expect a direct impact on the voter's utility for the corresponding party. If a voter considers a party to be best able to solve a particular problem, the voter should be more likely to cast a vote for that party. Recognizing that a particular party is most competent should represent a strong reason to favour that party over its opponents. This is similar to the individual-level hypothesis of the standard issue ownership theory.

Associative ownership, in contrast, should not necessarily have such a direct effect. If an issue is associated with a given party, such as immigration with right-wing populist parties, this mere association will not necessarily result in more positive evaluations of the corresponding party. In contrast to competence ownership, associative ownership does not represent a reason to favour (or oppose) one given party. Not all voters will share the party's proposed solutions to address the question of immigration and associative ownership should not produce more positive (or more negative) party utilities. Yet, such a party-issue association should influence the accessibility of the corresponding issue in voters' memory. When citizens think about this party, their attitudes towards immigration should be more easily activated than their preferences regarding other issues about which this party rarely talks. Associative ownership means that a given issue is associated to the owning party in voters' minds. As a consequence, the preferences toward immigration should play an important role in explaining citizens' evaluations of that party (Iyengar 1990; Krosnick 1988, 1990). This implies that while

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associative ownership should not have a direct effect on party utilities, it should influence which issue dimensions exert a stronger impact on these utilities. An important implication of this hypothesis is that voters will not evaluate all parties on the basis of the exact same set of issues. When citizens consider the various parties and contemplate which ones represent attractive options for their voting choice, they may weight issues differently when evaluating different parties. Turning again to the example of attitudes towards immigration, voters' preferences in that matter may strongly influence their support for the right-wing populist party owning that issue, but be of less importance in explaining their stance on other parties. Similarly, preferences regarding environmental protection may be central for evaluating the electoral attractiveness of green parties but not of liberal or conservative parties.

Can competence ownership also moderate the impact of issue preferences on party evaluations? Probably, the voters who consider a party to be most competent on a given issue are more likely to be in positional agreement with that party than are other voters. Consider again the example of a Green party and of the environmental protection issue. A voter who thinks the Greens are most competent to address that issue are likely to be more favourable to environmental protection than are voters who consider that a right-wing party, for instance, is most competent in that domain. In other words, voters' evaluations of party competence not only tell us something about parties' characteristics, but also about the voter-party distance. A possible implication is that competence ownership leads to a weaker role of party-issue distances in the voting decision process. Whether a voter shares the exact same location as the Green party on the environment issue or whether they are at some distance from it may not matter much, after all, if they consider that party to be most competent on the environmental question.

To sum up this paper's hypotheses, three effects of issue ownership are expected. Competence ownership should have direct and positive effect on voters' utility for the party owner. In addition, both associative and competence ownership should have a moderating effect: associative ownership should reinforce the impact of the corresponding voter-party distance, while competence ownership should reduce it.

These hypotheses will be tested on the basis of the following model:

$$y_{ij} = \alpha_j + \sum_k \beta_k \text{dist}_{ijk} + \sum_k \gamma_k \text{care}_{ijk} + \sum_k \delta_k \text{best}_{ijk} +$$

$$+ \sum_k \phi_k \text{dist}_{ijk} \cdot \text{care}_{ijk} + \sum_k \theta_k \text{dist}_{ijk} \cdot \text{best}_{ijk} + \sum_z \omega_z x_z + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad (1)$$

The dependent variable in equation 1 is the utility of voter i for party j (y_{ij}). The term dist_{ijk} represents the squared distance between voter i and party j on issue k, that is,

$$\text{dist}_{ijk} = \left(v_{ik} - p_{jk}\right)^2 \quad (2)$$

The other variables in equation 1 are dummies for associative ownership ("care") and competence ownership ("best"), as well as a set of control variables (x_z).

The equation 1 model will be estimated while controlling for two additional voter characteristics, political sophistication and party identification. It is important to control for political sophistication, as the strength of issue voting is likely to vary between voters with a high or a low level of political sophistication. Also, party identification is likely to play an important role. Compared to non-identifiers, citizens who feel particularly close to a given political party are likely to have a higher utility for that party and lower utilities for its opponents.

4. Data and operationalization

This paper's hypotheses will be tested using data from a post electoral survey conducted at the occasion of the 2011 Swiss federal elections. The dependent variable is a voter's utility for a given political party. These utilities are measured by a battery of question on "probabilities of future vote." Respondents were asked how likely it is that they "will ever vote" for each of a series of parties. Respondents answered using an 11-point scale ranging from "very unlikely" to "very likely" (coded from 0 to 1 for the present analyses). These party utilities were measured for 7 parties: the Green Party (GPS), the Social Democratic Party (SPS), the Green Liberal Party (GLP), the Christian Democratic Party (CVP), the Conservative Democratic Party (BDP), the Liberal Party (FDP), and the Swiss People's Party (SVP).

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Voter-party distances are measured on six issues:
- Increasing or decreasing social expenses,
- Joining or staying out of the European Union,
- Giving foreigners equal chances or giving Swiss citizens better chances,
- If environmental protection or economic growth should be more important,
- Increasing or decreasing taxes on high income,
- In favour of or against nuclear energy.

For each of these issues, citizens were asked to position themselves on a five-point scale. Party positions are computed as the average position of those citizens who voted for the corresponding party. Immediately after each of the six issue questions, respondents were asked which party "cares the most" about the corresponding problem, and which party "has the best solutions" in that domain. These questions are used to measure associative and competence ownership, which are both coded as dummy variables.

Political sophistication is measured as an index of political knowledge. It is based on seven questions about the Swiss political system and Swiss politics. Party identification, finally, is based on a question asking respondents if they feel close to a political party. As the dataset is stacked, with observations corresponding to "respondent × party" combinations, two dummy variables are necessary to code that information (Lachat 2008, 2011): one dummy variable distinguishes between party identifiers and non-identifiers, while the second dummy indicates which party an identifier feels close to.

Given the stacked format of the dataset, there are several observations for each respondent which may not be independent from one another. As a consequence, robust standard errors are computed, with observations being clustered by respondent. In order to reflect the true number of respondents, the observations are weighted by the inverse of the number of available observations for each respondent.

5. Results

Before turning to the estimated results of the regression model, it is useful to start by looking at citizens' perceptions of issue ownership. For each of the six issues considered in this paper's empirical analysis, Table 1 shows the distribution of citizens' answers on associative

and competence ownership. As far as associative ownership is concerned, there are some issues for which most voters agree. For instance, almost 60 per cent of respondents consider that the Social Democrats care most about social expenses, and two thirds attribute ownership of the environmental issue to the Green party. On other issues, such as European integration or taxes on high income, ownership is more disputed, with two parties receiving almost equal shares of answers. The degree to which ownership is disputed is also reflected in the larger share of respondents who provide no answer to that question.

[Table 1 about here]

In terms of competence, the share of non-responses is larger for each issue, indicating that many voters do not consider any party to present the best solutions for a given social or political problem. Also, among those who do identify such a party, responses are less concentrated than in terms of associative ownership. On the issue of environmental protection vs. economic growth, for instance, two thirds of respondents identified the Greens as the party most strongly engaged. Yet, only 35 per cent consider that this party has the best solutions in the domain. Clearly, these results show how important it is to distinguish between these two sides of issue ownership.

The results of the estimated regression model are presented in Table 2. As far as the control variables are concerned, there are no surprising results. The significant coefficients of the party-specific constants show that average party utilities vary across parties, beyond the factors included in the regression model. The party used as the reference category is the Swiss People's Party, the party with the largest vote share. We also notice that political sophistication has no effect on party utilities. This simply means that "political novices" and "political experts" do not differ from one another in their average party preferences. Party identification, finally, shows the expected effect on party utilities. Compared to non-identifiers, respondents who feel particularly close to a political party have a much higher utility for that party and lower utilities for the other parties in competition.

[Table 2 about here]

Most important for this paper's hypotheses are the estimated coefficients of issue distances and of issue ownership. For each issue, the main effect of the voter-party distance is negative

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and significant. This effect corresponds to citizens who do not identify any owner for the corresponding issue. As expected, a greater distance from a party results in a lower party utility. Table 2 also shows that the strength of this effect varies substantially across issues. It is strongest for the social expenses issue. In that case, an increase from the smallest to the largest possible distance (i.e., from a value of 0 to 1) results in a decrease in party utility of about 0.3 on the 0-1 scale. In order to interpret the estimated effects of issue ownership, it is best to compute predicted values of the dependent variable for various types of voters. The corresponding results are shown in Figure 1 for the case of the social expenses issue. Figure 1 is divided into four panels, which show predicted party utilities for the Social Democratic Party for four types of voters: those who consider that this issue is not owned by any party (upper-left panel), those who attribute associative ownership to the SPS (upper-right panel), who attribute competence ownership to that party (lower-left panel), and finally for voters who consider that the SPS is both the associative and competence owner of the social expenses issue (lower-right panel). In each scenario, the graph shows how the predicted party utility varies as a function of the voter-party distance.[2] In all four situations, a larger distance from the party results in a lower party utility. Yet, the strength of the effect and the level at which it occurs differ.

[Figure 1 about here]

Taking the "no ownership" scenario as the point of reference, we see in the second panel that the effect of the voter-party distance is stronger for a party associated with the social expenses issue. This can also be seen in the negative and significant coefficient in Table 2 of the interaction term between associative ownership and that issue distance. In other words, for voters who associate the SPS to the social expenses issue, that issue exerts a stronger effect on their party utility. A voter close to the SPS on social expenses has a higher utility for that party when it considers it to be the associative owner. But at the same time, party utility decreases more rapidly as the voter-party distance increases.

Still in Figure 1, we observe that competence ownership of the social expenses issue has a different effect: it reduces the effect of voter-party distances. Citizens who consider that the SPS has the best solutions in the domain of social policy are more likely to vote for that party,

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[2] These predicted values were computed for respondents with the following characteristics: average degree of political sophistication, no party identification, average voter-party distance on all other issues, no owner for all other issues.

and this party utility is less strongly influenced by how close or distant they are from the SPS on that policy dimension. As associative and competence ownership have opposite effects, these largely tend to cancel each other out when citizens consider that the SPS both cares most and has the best solutions in the social policy domain. The effect of voter-party distance, i.e., the slope of the line, is thus similar in the first and last panels of Figure 1. Yet, the positive, direct effect of ownership remains: at any given distance from the party, attributing ownership of that issue to the SPS results in a higher party utility. To sum up the findings in the case of that first issue, we find support for both interactive hypotheses: associative ownership reinforces the effect of spatial distances, while competence ownership reduces it. As far as the direct effects are concerned, I expected a positive effect of perceived competence but no effect of a mere association. As it turns out, both aspects of ownership have the same positive effect.

Turning to the other issues, we see in Table 2 that the direct effect of perceived competence holds for all issues. In line with this paper's hypotheses, considering that a party has the best solutions in a given domain results in a higher party utility. Associative ownership has a similar effect for some issues, which is as strong as that of competence ownership in some cases (social expenses, nuclear energy), weaker in others (EU, environment vs. growth). The hypothesis of a zero effect is supported for only two issues (foreigners, taxes). As regards the interaction effects, evidence is also mixed. In four out of six issues, associative ownership reinforces the effect of voter-party distance, as was illustrated in Figure 1. The same pattern holds for European integration, environmental protection, and nuclear energy. The expected interaction effect between spatial distances and competence ownership, on the other hand, is confirmed for only three of the issues: social expenses, chances for foreigners, and nuclear energy.

6. Conclusion

Recent literature on the concept of ownership has emphasized that the original issue ownership theory does not apply directly to the case of positional issues. Based on this research, this paper has developed a spatial model of the voting decision process, that includes the concept of issue ownership. Central to this model is the distinction between two different sides of ownership: the mere association between a party and an issue, on the one hand, and

the perception that a party has the best solutions to solve the corresponding problem, on the other. The theoretical model introduced in this paper proposes that associative and competence ownership play distinct roles in the voting decision process. While associative ownership should reinforce the link between spatial distances and party utilities, competence ownership should reduce it.

The analysis of the 2011 Swiss election study provides partial support for these hypotheses. First, they emphasize again the need to distinguish between associative and competence ownership. As argued in the recent literature on issue ownership, these two dimensions are not always congruent. Most important, this paper's findings show some support for the hypothesis that ownership moderates the relation between spatial distances and party utilities. At least for some issues, spatial issues have a stronger effect on the party associated with a given issue, while the effect is weaker when the party is deemed most competent.

Yet, these findings also point to new questions. In this study, ownership effects were expected to be of the same strength for all issues. This is clearly not the case. Explaining this variation would be an important next step. Both associative and competence ownership have a strong interactive effect for some issues, and not for others. One possible line of inquiry would be to account as well for issue salience, as some recent studies have suggested (e.g., Walgrave et al. 2012). Another possibility would be to account for the degree to which ownership is established. On some issues, most voters agree about the owner, particularly as far as associative ownership is concerned. On other issues, voters' perceptions differ more widely. The "strength" or "clarity" of issue ownership could thus prove to be a relevant explanatory factor.

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Table 1. Distribution of associative and competence ownership for six issues (in per cent).

	Social expenses	European integration	Foreigners	Environment vs. growth	Taxes	Nuclear energy
Associative ownership						
GPS	1.0	0.7	1.1	66.2	0.2	34.9
SPS	58.9	18.6	22.9	2.4	18.0	4.6
GLP	0.3	0.3	0.3	9.9	0.3	8.5
CVP	6.9	3.4	3.1	1.1	4.4	5.6
BDP	0.4	0.4	0.3	0.2	0.7	0.6
FDP	2.5	12.2	2.0	1.1	20.9	5.6
SVP	3.8	19.6	35.7	0.9	8.5	2.3
Other	7.0	7.7	8.6	4.1	7.0	7.1
DK/NA	19.1	37.2	26.0	14.1	40.0	30.9
Competence ownership						
GPS	0.9	0.6	0.9	34.7	0.4	21.1
SPS	27.6	9.9	18.3	2.6	17.6	4.5
GLP	1.5	0.8	0.9	18.2	0.9	11.1
CVP	11.0	5.2	6.5	2.7	5.9	5.7
BDP	1.2	1.6	1.4	0.4	1.3	0.6
FDP	5.8	10.7	6.4	2.9	12.6	5.3
SVP	5.0	12.9	13.8	1.6	5.0	2.6
Other	8.3	6.3	8.1	5.2	6.6	5.8
DK/NA	38.9	52.0	43.7	31.5	49.6	43.3

Note: for all variables, N=4391

Table 2. Effects of issue distances and issue ownership on party utilities. Coefficients and robust standard errors estimated with OLS regression.

	Coef.	Std err.
Party dummies		
FDP	0.09***	0.01
BDP	0.08***	0.01
CVP	0.07***	0.01
GLP	0.13***	0.01
SP	0.05***	0.01
GPS	0.08***	0.01
Political sophistication	0.01	0.01
Party identifier	-0.06***	0.01
Identifier: own party	0.34***	0.01
Social expenses		
Distance	-0.32***	0.03
Cares most	0.07***	0.01
Best solutions	0.08***	0.01
Distance × cares most	-0.13*	0.06
Distance × best solutions	0.20*	0.08
European integration		
Distance	-0.24***	0.02
Cares most	0.04***	0.01
Best solutions	0.10***	0.01
Distance × cares most	-0.16**	0.05
Distance × best solutions	0.06	0.07
Foreigners		
Distance	-0.18***	0.02
Cares most	0.00	0.01
Best solutions	0.11***	0.01
Distance × cares most	-0.05	0.05
Distance × best solutions	0.25***	0.07
Environment vs. Growth		
Distance	-0.08**	0.02
Cares most	0.05***	0.01
Best solutions	0.10***	0.01
Distance × cares most	-0.22***	0.04
Distance × best solutions	0.01	0.05
Taxes on high incomes		
Distance	-0.05*	0.02
Cares most	0.01	0.01
Best solutions	0.08***	0.01
Distance × cares most	0.05	0.07
Distance × best solutions	0.00	0.07
Nuclear energy		
Distance	-0.12***	0.02
Cares most	0.06***	0.01
Best solutions	0.06***	0.01
Distance × cares most	-0.11**	0.04
Distance × best solutions	0.11*	0.05
Constant	0.38***	0.01
R^2	0.31	
N (weighted)	3807	

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Figure 1. Predicted party utility for the SPS, by voter-party distance and type of SPS ownership on the social expenses issue.