# Issue ownership and the vote:
## The effects of associative and competence ownership on issue voting

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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 tested with 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 1983a; Petrocik 1996; Petrocik et al. 2003). Parties should benefit when the issue they own is salient during the electoral campaign.

While the concept of issue ownership is well known, we still lack a clear understanding of the role played by these associations between parties and issues in the voting decision process. 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 (Petrocik et al. 2003) or at parties' issue emphases (Budge and Farlie 1983a). 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 suggested that the consequences of issue ownership may depend on the type of issue, and in particular that it may differ between valence issues and positional issues (Stokes 1963). The issue ownership theory was developed by focusing on valence issues, that is, issues on which all parties and voters share the same position. 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. This model focuses explicitly on positional issues and adopts the framework of spatial models of voting choice (Adams et al. 2005; Downs 1957). The main question addressed by this paper is whether and how associative and competence issue ownership influence the impact of issue preferences on party utilities. I suggest that both aspects 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. These hypotheses are tested using data from the 2011 Swiss election study.

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. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of the main findings and by suggesting some avenues for future research.

## 2. Issue ownership theory

The concept of issue ownership was suggested by Petrocik (1996). He developed a theory of party competition, based on the central idea that parties can develop a reputation of attention and competence in a particular political domain (Petrocik 1996; Petrocik et al. 2003). 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. This is close to the ideas of the theory of party competition developed by Budge and Farlie (1983a, 1983b). Their model of party competition argues that parties strategically emphasize certain issues and tend to avoid the issues favoured by their competitors. At the individual level, the issue ownership theory postulates that voters 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. And even "true" valence issues can be reframed in positional terms, when parties disagree on *how* to achieve a shared goal (van der Eijk and Franklin 2009). On such issues, it is less clear how ownership may influence the voting decision process (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; van der Brug 2004: 210).

In order to better understand the micro-level implications of issue ownership, it is important to distinguish between two aspects of that concept: which parties are associated with specific issues and how competent parties are deemed to handle these issues (Bellucci 2006; Walgrave et al., 2012). Following Walgrave et al. (2012), I refer to these two sides of issue ownership as "associative ownership" and "competence ownership", respectively.[1] Most definitions of issue ownership combine in some way these two aspects. Associative ownership 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. Competence ownership, on the other hand, refers to a party's reputation at handling a given issue.

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. With positional issues, this congruence is 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.

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[1] Bellucci (2006) uses the terms "issue ownership" for the former and "party competence" for the latter.

The electoral implications of issue ownership are thus less straightforward in the case of positional issues. For such issues, the definition of competence ownership is also more problematic. When parties and voters differ from one another about what goals should be pursued, the perceived competence of a party will certainly depend on whether voters agree with the party's position. If voters are asked which party is the best one to solve questions of immigration, taxation, or welfare state reform, their own issue preferences are very likely to influence their judgment. As a consequence, a certain degree of positional agreement is likely to be a precondition for voters to attribute competence ownership of an issue. In the empirical analyses presented below, which focuses on positional issues, I follow this conception of competence ownership and measure it with questions asking respondents which party has the "best solutions" in a given political domain. This is similar to the measure of (competence) ownership used by other authors (e.g., Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Walgrave et al. 2012).

A last point regarding the definition of issue ownership is the level at which it is measured: as a party characteristic or as an individual perception. The difference is whether ownership of a given issue is attributed to the same party for all voters, or whether one considers that different voters can attribute the ownership of a given issue to different parties. Most recent studies of ownership effects have measured these party-issue associations at the individual level (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Bellucci 2006; Walgrave et al. 2012). However, it would also be possible to define ownership at the level of parties. In a way, this is similar to the debate regarding the measurement of party positions in spatial models (Merrill and Grofman 1999): Arguments have been suggested in favour of both solutions. In this study, I will take advantage of the availability of individual-level perceptions of associative and competence ownership. But this does not mean I consider this approach to be superior to the one based on a fixed attribution of ownership.

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

Having defined the two aspects of issue ownership, we can consider the role they are expected to play in the voting decision process. In the standard issue ownership theory, issue ownership is expected to have a direct effect on party preferences. Citizens should be 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. While they refer to issue ownership in general, their empirical measure captures only competence ownership. This is the case 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, direct effects of competence and associative ownership will also be considered. But most importantly, I am interested in understanding how ownership may *moderate* the relation between voter-party distances and party utilities. As this study deals primarily with positional issues, I start from the framework of proximity models of voting choice, 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 party utilities 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. The decision which party to vote for is then based on a comparison of these party utilities, with citizens supporting the party with the highest expected utility.

What role can associative and competence ownership play in this voting decision process? First, if only direct effects are considered, I expect competence ownership to increase the voter's utility for the corresponding party. If a voter considers a party to be the best one 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 (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Walgrave et al. 2012). Associative ownership, in contrast, should not necessarily have such a positive effect on party utility. 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 a higher expected utility for the corresponding party. Associative ownership does not seem to represent a reason to favour (or oppose) one given party, as not all voters who consider a party to care most about a

given issue will share the party's proposed solutions. Yet, Walgrave et al. (2012) do find a direct effect of associative ownership. Accordingly, I expect the effect of associative ownership to be positive or zero. But in any case, it should be weaker than the effect of competence ownership, for which the link to party utilities is clearer.

In addition to their effect on party utilities, associative and competence ownership should also condition the impact of voter-party issue distances. When a citizen associates a party and an issue, this issue should be more easily accessible in voters' memory when they think about this party. Consider the example of voters who consider that the Green Party is the one caring most about the issue of environmental protection. When they think about the Greens and consider whether it represents an attractive choice for the upcoming election, their attitudes towards environmental protection 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, in that example, the preferences toward environmental protection should play an important role in explaining citizens' evaluations of the Greens (Iyengar 1990; Krosnick 1988, 1990). This means that associative ownership should influence which issue dimensions exert a stronger impact on party 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 citizens who associate environmental protection to the Greens, their preferences on that issue may strongly influence their support for the Green Party, but be of less importance in explaining their stance on other parties. It is important to note that once interactions between ownership and issue distances are included the effect of associative and competence ownership also becomes conditional on issue distance. Hence, in such a model, it makes less sense to talk about *the* effect of associative or competence ownership.

Can competence ownership also moderate the impact of issue preferences on party evaluations? As emphasized in the previous section, voters who attribute the competence ownership of a given issue to a party are likely to be relatively close to that party. 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 is most

competent in that domain. In other words, voters' evaluations of party competence not only tell something about parties' characteristics, but also about how much the voter agrees with the corresponding party position. As a consequence, for a party deemed to have the best solutions, the exact distance between voters' own position and their perceptions of the party position are likely to matter less. 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. This is why I expect competence ownership to weaken the relation between voter-party issue distances and party utilities.

The above arguments can be summarized with two sets of hypotheses. In a model including issue ownership, but no interactions with issue distances, I expect competence ownership to increase party utilities (Hypothesis 1), while the effect of associative ownership should be weaker or zero (Hypothesis 2). When including interaction terms between issue distances and each of the aspects of ownership, one should observe that associative ownership reinforces the impact of the corresponding voter-party distance (Hypothesis 3), while competence ownership should reduce it (Hypothesis 4).

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 $\text{dist}_{ijk}$ 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 ($x_z$). For the test of hypotheses 1 and 2, this model will be estimated while omitting the interaction terms.

The models will control 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 (Adams 2001; Lachat 2011).

## 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).

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 observations correspond 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.

As party utilities are measured separately for each party, 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 the distribution of associative and competence ownership. For each of the six issues mentioned above, 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]

In terms of perceived competence, the share of non-responses is larger for every 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. These results show that it is important to distinguish between these two sides of issue ownership. The average proportion of respondents who attribute both competence and associative ownership to the same party is 33 per cent.[2]

The results of the estimated regression models are presented in Table 2. Model 2 differs from Model 1 by including interaction terms between issue distances and both associative and competence ownership. 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 utility. Party identification, finally, shows the expected effect. 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]

Most important for this paper's hypotheses are the estimated coefficients of issue distances and of issue ownership. In the first model, we see that the effect of the voter-party distance is negative and significant for five out of six issues. As expected, a greater distance from a party results in a lower party utility. The exception is the issue of high income taxation, which does not appear to influence party utilities. Table 2 also shows that the strength of issue voting 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.

The results of Model 1 allow testing the first two hypotheses. Competence ownership has the expected effect of increasing the utility for the corresponding party. Voters who consider that a party has the best solutions to address a given issue have a higher propensity to vote for this party. The size of this effect varies from 0.07 (that is, 7 per cent of the range of the dependent variable) for high income taxation to 0.14 for the issue of foreigners. The effect of associative

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[2] This proportion varies from 24 per cent for European integration to 44 per cent for environment vs. growth.

ownership is weaker. Considering that a party cares most about the issue of foreigners or high income taxation has no significant effect on party utilities. For the remaining four issues, associative ownership has a positive effect, but it is weaker in magnitude than the effect of competence ownership. The results of Model 1 are thus in line with hypotheses 1 and 2.

The second model allows testing whether issue ownership moderates the strength of spatial voting. Looking first at the issue of social expenses, we notice that both interaction effects are significant. The negative coefficient for the interaction between associative ownership and the voter-party distance corresponds to the expected reinforcement effect. Party utilities are more strongly related to the distance between voters and parties on the issue of social expenses for parties that are considered to be those caring most about this issue. The second interaction term is positive, which means that attributing competence ownership to a party reduces the impact of issue voting in the evaluation of this party. In the case of this issue, both results are in line with the hypotheses presented above. Figure 1 presents the corresponding results. It is divided into three panels, which show predicted party utilities for the Social Democratic Party for three types of voters: those who consider that this issue is not owned by any party (left-hand panel), those who attribute associative ownership to the SPS (centre panel), and those who attribute competence ownership to that party (right-hand panel). In each scenario, the graph shows how the predicted party utility varies as a function of the voter-party distance.[3] In all three 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]

Taking the "no ownership" scenario as the point of reference, we see in the centre panel that the effect of the voter-party distance is stronger when the Social-Democratic party is associated with the social expenses issue. The steeper slope in the case of associative ownership reflects the negative coefficient for the first interaction term in Table 2. In other words, when voters associate the SPS to the social expenses issue, preferences on that issue exert a stronger effect on their party utility. In the right-hand panel of Figure 1, we observe that competence ownership reduces the effect of voter-party distances. Citizens who consider that the SPS has the best solutions in the domain of social policy are generally more likely to

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[3] 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.

vote for that party, and these party utilities are less strongly influenced by how close or distant they are from the SPS on that policy dimension.

The results pertaining to the issue of EU membership are slightly different. Again, associative ownership reinforces the impact of spatial distances. The interaction between issue distances and competence ownership, however, is not statistically significant. In that case, hypothesis 3 is supported, but not hypothesis 4. The corresponding results in terms of predicted values are presented in Figure 2. We see that the slope of the relation between issue distances and party utilities is steeper when the party is considered to be the associative owner of the EU membership issue. When it is perceived as being the competence owner, on the other hand, the predicted party utilities are higher, but not less strongly related to the voter-party distance.

[Figure 2]

As regards the other issues, the reinforcement effect of associative ownership can also be observed for the issues of environmental protection and nuclear energy. For the taxation issue, the interaction between associative ownership and the issue distance is not significant. But this issue has anyway a very weak impact on party utilities. The real outlier with respect to hypothesis 3 is the issue of foreigners: it influences party utilities quite strongly, but is not conditioned by associative ownership. Hypothesis 3 is thus not supported for all six issues, but the evidence for the expected interaction effect is still relatively strong.

The results of Model 2 are somewhat less convincing for hypothesis 4. The weakening effect of competence ownership on issue voting can be observed for three issues: social expenses, foreigners, and nuclear energy. For the other issues, the coefficient of the interaction term is not significantly different from 0.

## 6. Conclusion

Recent literature on the concept of ownership has emphasized that the original issue ownership theory may 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 aspects 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 a given social problem, on the other. The theoretical model introduced in this paper proposed two sets of hypotheses. First, competence ownership should increase the expected utility for the corresponding party, while associative ownership should not affect it or increase it only slightly. Second, associative ownership should reinforce the link between spatial distances and party utilities, while competence ownership should reduce it. The expected effects of associative ownership are linked with the higher accessibility of the corresponding issue considerations in voters' minds. The postulated effects of competence ownership, in contrast, are due to the fact that this form of ownership, in the case of positional issues, also conveys information about the voter-party proximity.

The analysis of the 2011 Swiss election study confirmed that is important to distinguish between these two aspects of issue ownership. The two are empirically related, but they are far from always being congruent. Furthermore, there is strong evidence that they play different roles in the voting decision process. While competence ownership is always linked with higher party utilities, the direct effect of associative ownership is weaker. And most importantly, this paper's findings support the hypotheses that ownership moderates the relation between spatial distances and party utilities. Support for the expected reinforcement effect of associative ownership was relatively strong. Of the five issues that are strongly related to party utilities, the hypothesis on the moderating role of associative ownership was supported in four cases. Evidence in favour of a weakening impact of competence ownership was weaker, as it could be observed for only three issues.

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 clearly 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.

| | Model 1 | | Model 2 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Coef. | Std err. | Coef. | Std err. |
| *Party dummies (ref.: SVP)* | | | | |
| FDP | 0.09*** | 0.01 | 0.09*** | 0.01 |
| BDP | 0.07*** | 0.01 | 0.08*** | 0.01 |
| CVP | 0.07*** | 0.01 | 0.07*** | 0.01 |
| GLP | 0.13*** | 0.01 | 0.13*** | 0.01 |
| SP | 0.05*** | 0.01 | 0.05*** | 0.01 |
| GPS | 0.08*** | 0.01 | 0.08*** | 0.01 |
| Political sophistication | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.01 |
| Party identifier | -0.06*** | 0.01 | -0.06*** | 0.01 |
| Identifier: own party | 0.34*** | 0.01 | 0.34*** | 0.01 |
| | | | | |
| *Social expenses* | | | | |
| Distance | -0.32*** | 0.03 | -0.32*** | 0.03 |
| Cares most | 0.06*** | 0.01 | 0.07*** | 0.01 |
| Best solutions | 0.09*** | 0.01 | 0.08*** | 0.01 |
| Distance × cares most | | | -0.13* | 0.06 |
| Distance × best solutions | | | 0.20* | 0.08 |
| *European integration* | | | | |
| Distance | -0.25*** | 0.02 | -0.24*** | 0.02 |
| Cares most | 0.03*** | 0.01 | 0.04*** | 0.01 |
| Best solutions | 0.10*** | 0.01 | 0.10*** | 0.01 |
| Distance × cares most | | | -0.16** | 0.05 |
| Distance × best solutions | | | 0.06 | 0.07 |
| *Foreigners* | | | | |
| Distance | -0.17*** | 0.02 | -0.18*** | 0.02 |
| Cares most | -0.01 | 0.01 | 0.00 | 0.01 |
| Best solutions | 0.14*** | 0.01 | 0.11*** | 0.01 |
| Distance × cares most | | | -0.05 | 0.05 |
| Distance × best solutions | | | 0.25*** | 0.07 |
| *Environment vs. Growth* | | | | |
| Distance | -0.12*** | 0.02 | -0.08** | 0.02 |
| Cares most | 0.03*** | 0.01 | 0.05*** | 0.01 |
| Best solutions | 0.11*** | 0.01 | 0.10*** | 0.01 |
| Distance × cares most | | | -0.22*** | 0.04 |
| Distance × best solutions | | | 0.01 | 0.05 |
| *Taxes on high incomes* | | | | |
| Distance | -0.04 | 0.02 | -0.05* | 0.02 |
| Cares most | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.01 |
| Best solutions | 0.07*** | 0.01 | 0.08*** | 0.01 |
| Distance × cares most | | | 0.05 | 0.07 |
| Distance × best solutions | | | 0.00 | 0.07 |
| *Nuclear energy* | | | | |
| Distance | -0.13*** | 0.02 | -0.12*** | 0.02 |
| Cares most | 0.05*** | 0.01 | 0.06*** | 0.01 |
| Best solutions | 0.08*** | 0.01 | 0.06*** | 0.01 |
| Distance × cares most | | | -0.11** | 0.04 |
| Distance × best solutions | | | 0.11* | 0.05 |
| Constant | 0.39*** | 0.01 | 0.38*** | 0.01 |
| R2 | 0.31 | | 0.31 | |
| N (weighted) | 3807 | | 3807 | |

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

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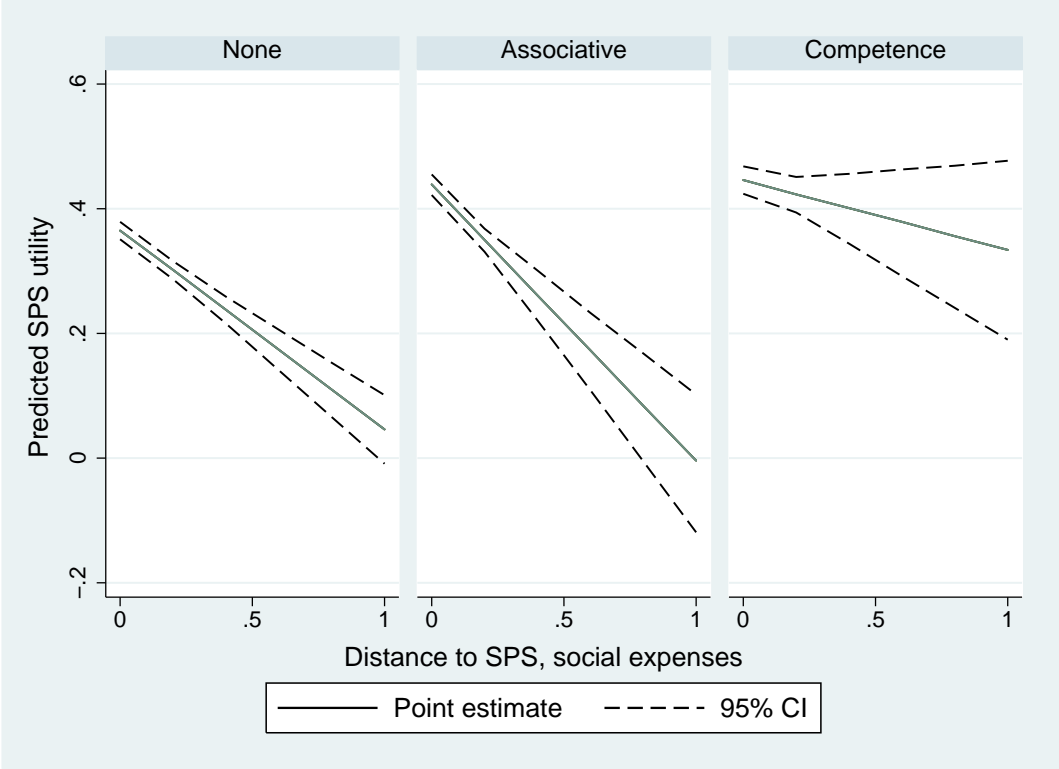


Figure 2. Predicted party utility for the SPS, by voter-party distance on the EU membership issue and by type of issue ownership.