

Where Does Issue Ownership Come From? From the Party or from the Media?

Issue-party Identifications in Belgium, 1991–2005

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Although widely used in political science to tackle voting behavior and campaign strategy, the issue-ownership thesis remains untested when it comes to the origins of parties' identification with specific issues. This article explores where issue ownership comes from and/or how it is maintained. The authors test two possible avenues of issue ownership: the party and the mass media. On one hand, parties' own external communication may stress specific issues, claiming to be best placed to solve these issues. On the other hand, parties could be identified by the media with certain issues, leading to an implicit association between issue and party. The authors test both propositions, drawing on the case of Belgium, a small consociational democracy in Western Europe. Belgium is a good case to examine issue ownership, as its many parties are identified with many issues. Relying on extensive media data and party evidence, they find that issue ownership is related both to party communications and media coverage. This applies in particular to newer, challenging parties that are strongly identified with their core issues. In general, parties' older communications are drivers of issue ownership; in contrast, recent media coverage contributes to issue ownership. The direction of the causal arrow remains unsure.

Keywords: *issue ownership; mass media; party manifestos; Belgium; media effects*

The issue-ownership thesis claims that voters identify parties with issues: if they think about the issue, they think about the party. Issue ownership is a matter of reputation: If parties are credible and reliable on certain issues, they are considered as being better able than others to handle the problem at hand. If voters care a lot about the issue at the moment they cast their ballot, chances are high that they will vote for the party they consider to be the “owner” of the

issue—that is, the party that is best placed to tackle the issue that is on top of their mind (Petrocik 1989, 1996). Research in many countries has confirmed this basic proposition empirically. Budge and Farlie (1983), for example, showed that parties won elections when their issue was high on the public's agenda (see also Maddens 1994). By and large, in modern campaigning, issue ownership appears to be gradually replacing party identification and deep ideological affinity as driver of votes (Dalton 1984, 1996). As people identify less with parties and as their ideological links with parties are withering, they increasingly rely on issues as electoral beacons. People's viewpoint on policy themes remains relatively stable over time, but their perception of the importance of these themes is changing all the time (Page and Shapiro 1992). In other words, voters' issue saliency is a variable that produces electoral changeability and volatility. Issue ownership itself, however, is said to be stable and persisting. But where does this durable identification come from? Why do people equate certain parties with certain issues? And how is this association maintained?

The literature on issue ownership seems to neglect these straightforward questions. Issue ownership, in most accounts, is regarded as an exogenous variable, as a given thing. It is used to explain voting behavior, but it is hardly explained itself. Available answers to the question of issue ownership's origin are mostly vague and empirically untestable.

Following the classic thesis of Lipset and Rokkan (1967), Klingemann and colleagues state that parties are rooted in deep cleavages dividing society (1994: 24). Parties' beginnings determine their subsequent issue ownership: "Parties sustain an identity that is anchored in the cleavages and issues that gave rise to their birth" (1994: 24). Parties are equated with their primary, historical position and cannot move and repudiate previously held issue positions. Similarly, Petrocik (1996) states that issue ownerships depend on the social basis of a party. Parties traditionally supported by a certain social class own the issues of interest to this class. Parties promote these class cleavages as they guarantee that their constituency remains tied to the party. Both accounts suggest that issue ownership is an eternal thing, that it does not change at all and there is no absolution from the original sin: "Perceptions of party's issue competence probably change very slowly, when they change at all" (Petrocik 1996: 826).

Yet most authors leave some opening for issue ownership change. Klingemann et al. state that parties can start stressing and claiming new issues, and they can deliberately let old issue ownerships fade away into oblivion. Slowly and gradually, they can try to get a grip on new issues. This is to say that parties can enter *new* issues in the arena and claim possession of them. It does not mean that parties can hijack *another* party's issue. Issue ownerships remain essentially stable, but in selectively emphasizing or de-emphasizing, parties can reinforce old issue ownerships or claim new, free-floating issues. Petrocik, in

a similar vein, argues that issue ownerships are “produced by a history of attention, initiative and innovation towards these problems” (1996: 826). Issue ownership is thus a matter of track record. Track records can be changed, but this takes time. For the largest part, says Petrocik, the track record is determined by the record of the incumbent party. If a party in power screws up, it may lose its issue ownership temporarily and vice versa. Hence, some issue ownerships are short-term: voters evaluate the performance of the incumbent party on that specific policy domain and conditionally entrust the party with the issue. Petrocik calls these “performance issues.” The idea of incumbency as a factor is further underpinned by Merrill and Grofman’s (1997) contention that the issue-ownership model applies best to challenging, and thus, in contrast, not to incumbent parties. In short, apart from very stable and almost eternal issue ownerships, parties can have short-term ownerships, too; they can have an issue “on lease.” Recent research literature indeed seems to confirm that issue ownership can be changed, or at least, evolves (Damore 2004; Holian 2004). Issue ownership has a dynamic component. In most democracies, voters gradually have become more volatile (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). At the same time, the media have become the main intermediary between parties and voters. Moreover, parties appear to have moved ideologically closer to each other and are more flexible. In these circumstances, issue ownership might have become more changeable than before.

Klingemann and colleagues (1994) put forward different channels that may be used by parties to convey their relative interest in issues and to claim, reclaim, reinforce, or loosen their issue ownership. Politicians make speeches, they advertise, and most importantly, parties draft electoral manifestos and use their formal electoral programs to show that they care about issues. In short, Klingemann et al. (1994) maintain that parties themselves are masters of their issue ownership. Petrocik (1996) implicitly confirms this when he states that it is parties’ promotion of cleavages—and thus, of social bases—and past record that determine issue ownership. Parties and candidates strategically emphasize and de-emphasize issues.

Yet issue ownership is not only a matter of a parties’ own deliberate communication. In postindustrial democracies, issue ownership, just like any other piece of political information, is conveyed to the voter via the mass media. When Klingemann et al. say that parties communicate their issue emphases via speeches and advertisements, they implicitly refer to the role of the mass media. Indeed, it is (only) via the mass media that speeches and advertisements are relayed to the public. Even party programs are not directly communicated to the public at large but only via media coverage, as the average voter does not read party programs.

In a nutshell, the literature contends that issue ownership is most of the time long-standing and rooted in parties’ history and social base. A party’s

more recent track record, especially when in office, also plays a role. Issue ownership is not entirely stable, though. Parties can claim free-floating issues, and in contrast, gradually loosen their grip on previously owned issues. This can be done via direct communication with the public and via the media. Yet issue-ownership dynamics is not only a matter of claiming new issues or abandoning old issues; it also is a matter of maintenance of existing issue ownership(s). Voters should be continuously (re)socialized and reminded of the fact that a party stands for a certain issue. Indeed, Petrocik (1996) states that issue-handling reputations emerging from history are constantly tested and reinforced in parties' dealings with concrete cases. Especially for new voters entering the electoral arena, we cannot take for granted that they will automatically start identifying parties with issues. Again, there are two tracks for issue-ownership maintenance: the party's direct communication and the mass media's systematic identification of parties with issues. This study does not have a time-series design, and thus, it will not be able to distinguish between issue-ownership creation and issue-ownership maintenance.

Wrapping up, we consider two sources of issue-ownership: parties' own communication and mass media's coverage about parties. Thus, we simply suppose that parties, in the eyes of the voters, can be linked with issues through their own willing, claiming an issue by deliberately communicating a lot about it, or by the media that systematically mention a party when they cover a certain issue. Of course, both sources of issue ownership are not disjointed, but analytically, they are. So, we end up with two possibly competing claims: (1) Issue ownership creation and/or maintenance is affected by parties' own deliberate communication that emphasizes issues and de-emphasizes others, and (2) issue ownership is affected by media coverage that identifies parties with certain issues. The remainder of this article will test both propositions empirically.

Data and Design

To address the research questions raised above, we draw on the case of Belgium¹ in the 1991–2004 period. As a small consociational democracy, Belgium has an extremely fragmented party system (Anckar 2000). Many parties compete for voters' support, and issue ownership is one of the main mechanisms Belgian parties use to offer some bearings to the confused Belgian voter. As the Belgian political system with its many cleavages is complex, issue ownership probably plays a bigger role here than in more transparent and one-dimensional political systems; yet research in the more straightforward U.S. system tends to support the issue-ownership thesis. In the period being studied, six major parties were competing for the voters' support in Belgium: three traditional parties (Christian-democrats, liberals, and socialists) and three relatively new parties (greens, nationalists, and extreme-Right). We

expect the traditional parties to have less strong issue ownerships, while the new parties will be more strongly identified with specific issues. In the 1991–2004 period, the greens' vote share remained more or less stable, the nationalists gradually withered and reinvented themselves in a new party, while the extreme-Right party flourished and grew to become the single strongest extreme-Right party in Europe. The diverging electoral fortunes of these three challengers of traditional politics in Belgium, we believe, are associated with their issue ownership. Indeed, especially the new parties on the Left, the greens, and on the extreme-Right, the Vlaams Belang (before: Vlaams Blok), seem to have been able to profit from issue ownership. Previous analyses have shown, for example, that the success of the Vlaams Belang can partially be attributed to its ownership of the themes of immigration and crime (Walgrave and De Swert 2004).

The study relies on three sets of empirical data: (1) evidence about voters' perceptions of issues and of their partisan owners, (2) evidence relating to parties' own published stances and parliamentary activities, and (3) evidence about media coverage of issues and the extent to which mass media link parties with issues. All data are gathered in the 1991–2004 period.

Public opinion data are used to construct our dependent variable: the public perception of the identification of parties with issues. The dependent variable is gauged in 2002–2004, while both independent variables—media and party communications—are assessed from 1991 until 2004. The fact that the independents are measured in time before the dependents allows for causality conclusions, but it cannot guarantee real causality.

Two sources of public opinion data are used. First, we rely on a series of eight pooled cross-sectional polls conducted by the polling agency TNS-Media between October 2002 and May 2004 ($N = 8,332$). The TNS-Media surveys did not contain explicit issue-ownership questions, but respondents had to choose the most important issue among a closed list of twenty political issues. Second, we draw on UAWEP, a large e-mail-panel survey that the M²P research group of the University of Antwerp conducted between December 2003 and June 2004 ($N = 10,488$). The panel questionnaire contained the same twenty-issues question, and it also asked for an explicit partisan attribution—“who is best placed to deal with the issue of . . .”—of ten issues. Although the UAWEP data are not representative, they can complement the TNS-Media data in an important way: The panel participants are younger, higher schooled, and especially, more interested in politics than the average Belgian. Consequently, the UAWEP-panel respondents can be considered as political opinion leaders adopting political innovations quickly; they are more sensitive to parties' communication and media's coverage of issues (Lazarsfeld et al. 1945). So, we expect the opinion leaders of UAWEP to identify the issue ownerships more clearly and to be more reactive to parties and media.

Party communication and activities data are twofold. First, we draw on an issue analysis of parties' manifestos in 1991, 1995, 1999, 2003, and 2004. Following the approach of the Comparative Manifesto Project (Budge et al. 2001), we skimmed through every party program for the two general elections in Belgium and coded every (semi)sentence based on a detailed 143-issue codebook ($N = 42,518$). We recoded the very specific issue codes to match the more general twenty-issue codes we had at our disposal for the public opinion data (see above). Second, we issue-coded all interpellations and oral questions of all Belgian members of parliament (MPs) of all parties between 1991 and 2000 ($N = 10,712$) to test whether parties do what they say. Do parties' MPs champion the same issues parliament parties say they care about in their programs?

Finally, gauging the second independent variable, we analyzed a vast amount of news stories in print and audiovisual media from 1991 to 2004. In terms of TV news, we draw on a unique source containing a detailed description of all new stories broadcast on the two major TV channels' main evening news shows in 2003 and 2004 ($N = 32,273$).² Regarding newspaper coverage, a representative sample of articles in three national newspapers was encoded in detail from 1991 to 2000 ($N = 34,709$). All news stories were coded using a similarly detailed issue codebook that was aggregated to match the basic twenty-issue codebook of the public opinion evidence. The issue of the news story as well as the mention of *parties* in the news stories was recorded. When parties are mentioned in a news item dealing with an issue, we suppose that this co-mentioning creates a link between this issue and that party in the head of the news consumer. If parties are systematically linked with issues in the news media, this may affect the way voters perceive the partisan ownership of issues. We skipped the foreign news throughout, as party mentionings in the foreign news probably reflect more institutional (e.g., party of the minister of foreign affairs) than partisan issue ownership.

We want to test whether and to what extent the identification of parties with issues is associated with, on one hand, the issues the parties themselves emphasize in their party manifestos and in the parliamentary interventions of their MPs, or rather, on the other hand, with the way mass media in their coverage link issues with parties. First, we further our analysis using bivariate correlational techniques. Then, we explicitly confront the party and media origins of issue ownership, drawing on multivariate analyses.

Issue Ownership in Belgium 2003–2004

Empirically operationalizing issue ownership is not easy. That a party is generally considered to be best placed to handle a certain issue is not an operational definition, particularly in a political system with six parties. In the U.S.

two-party system, Petrocik (1996) simply considered issues that were predominantly (more than 50 percent) attributed to one of the two parties as being owned by that party. The main question is how large the dominance of a party on an issue must be before we can speak of issue ownership. In a fragmented party system with six parties,³ it is very tough for a party to pass the 50-percent threshold. This clearly shows in Table 1. The table contains twenty issues with which the respondents were explicitly confronted. The first column includes the (representative) TNS-Media evidence: For which party (in percentages) voted the people who stated that a certain issue was the single most important for them? The higher the percentage, the stronger the link between party and issue. The figure of 37.8 for Groen! in the *environment* row means that 37.8 percent of the voters who declared that the environment, for them, was the single most important issue stated that they would vote for the green party. We call this “implicit” issue ownership. The second column contains identical evidence but based on UAWEP. The third column as well is based on UAWEP. It shows the percentages of all respondents who, when asked explicitly, consider a certain party as being best placed to deal with the issue at stake. To stick with the same example, 59.5 percent of the respondents in the panel survey considered Groen! to be best placed to handle the environmental problems. This is “explicit” issue ownership.

Issues in the table are ranked according to the strength of issue ownership. We can roughly distinguish three types of issues (fourth column of the table).

1. Strong issue ownership approaching a monopolistic dominance applies to seven issues: the environment (Groen!), immigration and asylum (Vlaams Belang), crime (Vlaams Belang), mobility (SP.A), education (CD&V), family policy (CD&V), and taxes (VLD). Most parties own at least one issue.
2. An intermediate issue ownership with one slightly dominating party or two dominant parties (duopoly) applies to six issues: economic policy (VLD and CD&V), international security (SP.A), drugs policy (SP.A), Flemish independence (Vlaams Belang and NV.A), traffic safety (CD&V and SP.A), and health policy (CD&V and SP.A).
3. For seven issues, ownership seemed to be absent, with no party dominating the others. Employment, social security, euthanasia, justice and police, food safety, political renewal, and Third World policy all seemed to be relatively free-floating issues not systematically associated with particular parties.

Comparing the TNS-Media data with the UAWEP data confirms the expectation that the public at large (TNS-Media) and an opinion-leading part of the public (UAWEP) perceive the issue ownership of the Belgian parties somewhat differently. First, as expected, opinion leaders attribute issues more clearly to parties than the average public does: for eighteen of the twenty issues, UAWEP yields a stronger first party than does TNS-Media. This makes perfect sense as opinion leaders follow politics more closely and are better able

Table I

Issue ownership of twenty issues and six parties in Belgium, 2003–2004

	Parties	Implicit Issue Ownership		Explicit Issue Ownership	
		TNS-Media (N = 8,332)	UAWEP (N = 10,488)	UAWEP (N = 8,644)	
Environment	CD&V	16.2 (2)	6.1 (3)	9.8 (3)	Strong issue ownership
	Vlaams Belang	7.4 (6)	2.2 (5)	3.6 (5)	
	SPA-Spirit	15.9 (3)	24.9 (2)	13.4 (2)	
	VLD	11.1 (4)	3.3 (4)	3.9 (4)	
	Groen!	37.8 (1)	62.0 (1)	59.5 (1)	
	NVA	8.8 (5)	6.1 (3)	2.2 (6)	
Immigration and asylum	CD&V	8.1 (4)	10.6 (3)		Strong issue ownership
	Vlaams Belang	45.7 (1)	57.0 (1)		
	SPA-Spirit	23.1 (2)	15.0 (2)		
	VLD	11.7 (3)	8.1 (4)		
	Groen!	4.0 (6)	7.6 (5)		
	NVA	4.9 (5)	10.6 (3)		
Crime	CD&V	18.8 (3)	20.3 (2)	13.2 (4)	Strong issue ownership
	Vlaams Belang	30.0 (1)	52.1 (1)	29.6 (1)	
	SPA-Spirit	25.9 (2)	9.9 (4)	18.5 (3)	
	VLD	17.3 (4)	13.9 (3)	21.5 (2)	
	Groen!	1.3 (6)	1.8 (5)	2.9 (6)	
	NVA	4.3 (5)	20.3 (2)	4.6 (5)	
Mobility	CD&V	14.1 (4)	22.6 (2)	16.1 (2)	Strong issue ownership
	Vlaams Belang	15.3 (3)	5.4 (5)	4.2 (5)	
	SPA-Spirit	32.9 (1)	32.3 (1)	39.1 (1)	
	VLD	23.5 (2)	16.1 (4)	12.6 (3)	
	Groen!	5.9 (6)	22.2 (3)	11.3 (4)	
	NVA	7.1 (5)	22.6 (2)	3.9 (7)	
Education	CD&V	31.3 (1)	35.6 (1)	34.8 (1)	Strong issue ownership
	Vlaams Belang	9.1 (6)	3.3 (5)	5.3 (5)	
	SPA-Spirit	16.0 (2)	35.2 (2)	27.0 (2)	
	VLD	12.8 (3)	11.2 (4)	15.1 (3)	
	Groen!	10.7 (5)	11.9 (3)	5.6 (4)	
	NVA	12.3 (4)	35.6 (1)	4.8 (6)	
Family policy	CD&V	28.5 (1)	46.4 (1)	46.4 (1)	Strong issue ownership
	Vlaams Belang	18.0 (3)	6.0 (5)	7.0 (3)	
	SPA-Spirit	21.5 (2)	27.8 (2)	25.2 (2)	
	VLD	11.0 (4)	7.1 (4)	4.0 (5)	
	Groen!	8.3 (6)	10.3 (3)	6.7 (4)	
	NVA	10.1 (5)	46.4 (1)	3.6 (6)	
Taxes	CD&V	24.3 (2)	21.9 (2)		Strong issue ownership
	Vlaams Belang	18.4 (3)	18.6 (3)		
	SPA-Spirit	16.1 (4)	18.3 (4)		
	VLD	27.5 (1)	34.8 (1)		
	Groen!	2.9 (6)	3.6 (5)		

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

		Implicit Issue Ownership		Explicit Issue Ownership
		TNS-Media (N = 8,332)	UAWEP (N = 10,488)	UAWEP (N = 8,644)
International security	NVA	5.3 (5)	21.9 (2)	
	CD&V	19.4 (3)	19.0 (2)	
	Vlaams Belang	18.8 (4)	4.8 (5)	
	SPA-Spirit	20.4 (1)	44.4 (1)	Intermediate issue ownership
	VLD	19.9 (2)	11.1 (4)	
Drugs policy	Groen!	5.4 (6)	15.9 (3)	
	NVA	7.0 (5)	19.0 (2)	
	CD&V	18.8 (3)	9.4 (3)	
	Vlaams Belang	19.8 (2)	32.1 (2)	
	SPA-Spirit	22.8 (1)	37.7 (1)	Intermediate issue ownership
Flemish endence independence	VLD	16.8 (4)	7.5 (4)	
	Groen!	6.9 (6)	7.5 (4)	
	NVA	10.9 (5)	9.4 (3)	
	CD&V	20.5 (3)	47.2 (1)	
	Vlaams Belang	28.3 (1)	47.2 (1)	
Economic policy	SPA-Spirit	16.9 (4)	2.0 (4)	Intermediate issue ownership
	VLD	4.2 (5)	2.7 (3)	
	Groen!	0.6 (6)	0.0 (5)	
	NVA	21.7 (2)	47.2 (1)	
	CD&V	25.6 (2)	35.9 (1)	24.7 (2)
Traffic safety	Vlaams Belang	16.0 (3)	8.2 (4)	4.9 (4)
	SPA-Spirit	12.6 (4)	14.7 (3)	21.2 (3)
	VLD	29.9 (1)	32.8 (2)	31.8 (1)
	Groen!	4.7 (6)	5.1 (5)	3.0 (6)
	NVA	6.2 (5)	35.9 (1)	4.2 (5)
Health care	CD&V	29.3 (1)	26.9 (2)	18.3 (2)
	Vlaams Belang	12.4 (4)	5.6 (5)	7.6 (5)
	SPA-Spirit	24.9 (2)	41.6 (1)	28.6 (1)
	VLD	19.1 (3)	8.7 (4)	11.9 (4)
	Groen!	5.0 (6)	16.1 (3)	17.2 (3)
Employment	NVA	5.5 (5)	26.9 (2)	4.1 (7)
	CD&V	28.7 (1)	32.1 (2)	26.5 (2)
	Vlaams Belang	15.2 (4)	4.4 (5)	5.3 (4)
	SPA-Spirit	20.9 (2)	39.9 (1)	35.4 (1)
	VLD	15.5 (3)	10.7 (3)	4.5 (5)
No issue ownership	Groen!	3.8 (6)	10.3 (4)	20.3 (3)
	NVA	10.6 (5)	32.1 (2)	3.3 (6)
	CD&V	29.3 (1)	31.9 (2)	20.6 (3)
	Vlaams Belang	11.9 (4)	7.0 (4)	8.5 (4)
	SPA-Spirit	24.3 (2)	35.1 (1)	34.2 (1)
	VLD	16.7 (3)	16.4 (3)	21.0 (2)
	Groen!	3.3 (6)	6.5 (5)	3.2 (6)

(continued)

Table I (continued)

		Implicit Issue Ownership		Explicit Issue Ownership
Parties		TNS-Media (N = 8,332)	UAWEP (N = 10,488)	UAWEP (N = 8,644)
Social security	NVA	10.4 (5)	31.9 (2)	4.0 (5)
	CD&V	26.8 (1)	26.9 (2)	
	Vlaams Belang	11.5 (5)	4.1 (5)	
	SPA-Spirit	23.1 (2)	48.8 (1)	No issue ownership
	VLD	16.1 (3)	6.9 (4)	
Euthanasia	Groen!	3.6 (6)	10.0 (3)	
	NVA	13.6 (4)	26.9 (2)	
	CD&V	29.4 (1)	20.8 (2)	
	Vlaams Belang	11.8 (5)	8.3 (4)	
	SPA-Spirit	17.6 (2)	37.5 (1)	No issue ownership
Justice & police	VLD	14.7(4)	8.3(4)	
	Groen!	5.9 (6)	20.8 (2)	
	NVA	17.6 (2)	20.8 (2)	
	CD&V	14.9 (4)	31.5 (1)	
	Vlaams Belang	24.3 (2)	17.6 (4)	
Food safety	SPA-Spirit	31.1 (1)	21.3 (2)	No issue ownership
	VLD	16.2 (3)	19.0 (3)	
	Groen!	2.7 (6)	5.6 (5)	
	NVA	4.1 (5)	31.5 (1)	
	CD&V	25.5 (1)	18.4 (3)	
Political renewal	Vlaams Belang	18.1 (3)	5.3 (5)	
	SPA-Spirit	12.8 (4)	23.7 (2)	No issue ownership
	VLD	19.1 (2)	21.1 (4)	
	Groen!	7.4 (6)	26.3 (1)	
	NVA	11.7 (5)	18.4 (3)	
Development aid	CD&V	18.6 (3)	24.2 (1)	
	Vlaams Belang	30.2 (1)	16.7 (4)	
	SPA-Spirit	4.7 (5)	24.2 (1)	No issue ownership
	VLD	27.9 (2)	19.7 (3)	
	Groen!	16.3 (4)	12.1 (5)	
	NVA	2.3 (6)	24.2 (1)	
	CD&V	21.1 (1)	11.5 (3)	
	Vlaams Belang	10.5 (4)	2.1 (5)	
	SPA-Spirit	15.8 (3)	34.4 (2)	No issue ownership
	VLD	21.1 (1)	3.1 (4)	
	Groen!	10.5 (4)	47.9 (1)	
	NVA	5.3 (5)	11.5 (3)	

Note: Columns 1 and 2: Number of respondents (% , rank-order) voting for parties among respondents who consider issue to be the single most important. Column 3: Party (%) that is considered as best placed to deal with the issue.

to distinguish parties' diverging issue claims. Second, opinion leaders sometimes put forward other parties as being more closely affiliated with certain issues. They not only have stronger views but sometimes also different views on who owns what. That is why we, in the analyses below, run separate analyses on the TNS-Media and the UAWEP data.

Party Communications: Parties' Own Issue Claims

To acquire a reputation for dealing adequately with certain issues, parties and candidates strategically emphasize (or de-emphasize) issues in their external communication. Parties can do this by *saying* they care about an issue by stressing it in their party manifesto or by *showing* they care by intervening in parliament about the issue—interpellations and oral questions. Table 2 contains the evidence about Belgian parties' manifestos and mention of parliamentary issues.

The first thing that strikes the eye is that the percentage of manifestos and parliamentary action devoted to the twenty issues at stake lies much lower than in the perception of public opinion. Parties' issue profile, hence, is much broader than as perceived by public opinion. Parties do not limit themselves to the twenty issues of this study but display a much broader issue profile. On average and aggregated, only 59.3 percent of the total parliamentary action and 64.2 percent of the party manifestos were devoted to our twenty issues.

The second thing Table 2 shows on closer inspection is that parties' own deliberate mentioning of issues seems, in general, to be associated with the public's perception of parties' issue identities. In Table 2, we put the public opinion–based issue-ownership parties in bold to make this point. Regarding the environment—an issue the green party firmly owned—Groen! systematically intervened more in parliament than any other party, and in all its party manifestos since 1991, it reserved by far the most space for environmental topics. Considering the issue of immigration and asylum, more or less the same applies to Vlaams Belang. The party mentioned the immigration and asylum issue most in its parliamentary interventions, and in its elections programs, it spoke about the issue more than did the other parties. Let us take euthanasia as a counterexample. According to the public, this issue was not clearly owned by one party. This is confirmed when looking at parties' own mention of the issue in parliament and manifesto: all parties devote attention to the issue, and market leadership seems to be shifting all the time.

To more systematically substantiate the link between party communication and issue ownership, we calculate bivariate correlations between our three issue-ownership measures and the nine party communication series. Results are shown in Table 3.

Table 2
Party communications about issues in Belgium, 1991–2004

	Interpellations					Oral Questions					Party Manifestos			
	1991–1995	1995–2000	1991–1995	1995–2000	1991–1995	1991	1995–2000	1991	1995	1999	2003	2004		
	<i>N</i> = 1,114	<i>N</i> = 1,948	<i>N</i> = 1,200	<i>N</i> = 6,480	<i>N</i> = 5,433	<i>N</i> = 6,129	<i>N</i> = 1,2439	<i>N</i> = 8,488	<i>N</i> = 16,855					
	Parties													
Environment	CD&V	5.1	3.0	4.7	1.8	4.3	3.3	5.5	1.3	2.8				
	Vlaams Belang	1.6	0.5	2.6	1.0	0.7	2.2	1.6	1.7	4.1				
	SP.A-Spirit	14.9	1.8	9.0	3.2	5.3	4.5	8.3	1.5	6.1				
	VLD	4.4	1.9	4.9	1.9	4.9	6.8	3.1	2.0	0.7				
	Groen!	17.0	8.1	14.9	8.1	13.6	11.7	13.2	11.0	9.8				
Immigration and asylum	NVA	4.3	3.2	2.1	2.5	4.7	3.1	2.8	3.8	2.1				
	CD&V	3.4	6.8	3.5	3.7	3.8	1.3	1.1	5.4	1.6				
	Vlaams Belang	3.2	4.4	12.8	8.2	15.6	4.6	5.3	10.0	5.9				
	SP.A-Spirit	0.0	1.8	3.0	1.7	2.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.3				
	VLD	8.9	1.0	8.6	0.8	11.2	7.3	3.9	5.7	1.1				
Crime	Groen!	1.9	4.4	7.5	4.4	0.6	2.5	1.5	3.1	1.4				
	NVA	0.0	6.5	0.0	3.4	6.0	3.4	3.7	4.9	5.0				
	CD&V	8.5	5.3	10.5	6.7	2.1	2.5	3.0	4.2	0.0				
	Vlaams Belang	9.7	15.7	10.3	11.5	6.3	5.8	9.7	10.5	1.0				
	SP.A-Spirit	10.6	12.3	16.4	7.8	2.3	4.8	6.3	7.9	0				
Mobility	VLD	4.4	12.6	9.9	6.9	2.6	2.0	6.9	9.0	0.0				
	Groen!	5.7	5.9	4.5	3.9	0.3	2.9	2.0	3.8	0.0				
	NVA	19.6	6.5	9.5	11.8	4.7	1.9	3.1	5.9	0.5				
	CD&V	1.7	4.5	8.1	10.0	3.6	1.3	2.3	6.0	5.9				
	Vlaams Belang	4.8	3.9	6.4	9.6	0.7	1.8	1.4	1.9	8.3				
SP.A-Spirit		8.5	10.5	7.5	9.8	2.7	1.4	7.5	8.7	4.6				
	VLD	6.7	6.8	4.9	9.6	1.6	2.9	1.3	0.4	5.9				

	Green!	13.2	8.1	10.4	14.7	1.5	3.7	4.0	6.4	4.7
	NVA	4.3	5.1	9.5	5.3	3.4	6.1	1.9	7.7	2.1
Education	CD&V	3.4	2.3	1.2	2.3	3.9	4.1	3.8	3.1	1.2
	Vlaams Belang	1.6	1.0	1.3	2.0	1.5	2.2	1.7	3.2	0.0
	SP.A-Spirit	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.7	6.3	3.4	1.8	1.3	1.6
	VLD	0.0	0.0	1.2	1.9	6.5	6.3	7.8	0.4	1.3
	Green!	0.0	1.5	1.5	1.1	0.6	3.9	2.9	0.9	2.0
	NVA	0.0	0.5	1.1	1.7	2.1	4.9	3.0	0.7	0.1
Family policy	CD&V	0.0	1.5	0.0	2.1	4.2	1.3	4.8	1.0	2.9
	Vlaams Belang	1.6	1.0	2.6	2.9	3.0	1.8	2.7	1.8	5.1
	SP.A-Spirit	0.0	0.0	1.5	3.5	1.3	2.1	1.1	3.1	5.6
	VLD	0.0	1.0	0.0	2.7	0.3	0.5	2.8	2.5	0.9
	Green!	0.0	3.0	0.0	0.9	1.3	0.0	1.9	1.3	3.1
	NVA	4.3	1.4	0.0	2.3	0.0	1.2	2.5	2.1	6.8
Taxes	CD&V	8.5	2.3	9.3	7.9	2.7	1.3	2.5	0.5	0.9
	Vlaams Belang	3.2	1.0	3.8	3.1	1.1	1.7	2.3	1.8	1.7
	SP.A-Spirit	8.5	8.8	9.0	9.8	2.0	0.4	0.4	1.0	0.7
	VLD	2.2	5.8	12.3	9.4	2.3	5.4	3.0	10.2	7.0
	Green!	0.0	1.5	1.5	5.0	1.0	2.0	2.0	2.5	0.9
	NVA	0.0	5.6	4.2	4.4	0.9	0.8	1.5	0.7	0.6
International security	CD&V	3.4	10.6	10.5	4.5	3.7	4.8	1.1	2.6	0.1
	Vlaams Belang	22.6	16.2	15.4	10.6	4.8	4.3	2.2	0.9	0.1
	SP.A-Spirit	8.5	7.0	4.5	5.5	0.2	3.4	0.4	1.5	0.2
	VLD	15.6	6.8	9.9	5.0	2.6	1.5	2.5	1.6	0.0
	Green!	17.0	17.0	9.0	14.7	1.1	1.9	5.0	3.2	0.2
	NVA	8.7	8.8	4.2	7.4	5.5	1.0	2.6	1.0	0.0

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

	Parties	Interpellations					Oral Questions					Party Manifestos			
		1991-1995	1995-2000	1991-1995	1995-2000	1991-1995	1991	1995	1999	2003	2004				
		N = 1,114	N = 1,948	N = 1,200	N = 6,480	N = 5,433	N = 6,129	N = 1,2439	N = 8,488	N = 16,855					
Drugs policy	CD&V	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.5	2.8	0.0					
	Vlaams Belang	0.0	1.0	1.3	0.2	0.7	2.2	1.7	0.6	0.6					
	SPA-Spirit	0.0	0.0	7.5	0.3	0.4	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0					
	VLD	0.0	0.0	1.2	0.2	0.0	0.5	0.1	0.8	0.0					
	Groen!	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.2	0.2	0.3	0.1					
Flemish endence independence	NVA	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0	1.0	0.0	0.0					
	CD&V	0.0	2.3	2.3	0.5	3.6	6.4	4.4	3.1	4.5					
	Vlaams Belang	12.9	9.8	10.3	7.8	14.8	7.8	16.7	19.1	10.5					
	SPA-Spirit	0.0	1.8	1.5	1.2	1.4	1.4	0.5	2.1	1.7					
	VLD	2.2	1.9	3.7	0.8	4.2	11.7	4.3	3.7	2.0					
Economic policy	Groen!	0.0	1.5	0.0	0.7	0.4	0.9	2.0	1.4	0.3					
	NVA	17.4	5.1	16.8	3.4	15.7	11.8	11.0	13.9	12.0					
	CD&V	6.8	6.1	9.3	7.7	6.0	5.5	2.8	4.6	3.5					
	Vlaams Belang	14.5	8.8	6.4	5.3	2.2	4.2	4.5	2.0	4.1					
	SPA-Spirit	6.4	3.5	10.4	7.2	6.5	4.1	3.9	3.8	3.1					
Traffic Safety	VLD	13.3	13.6	14.8	9.8	4.4	6.3	3.8	5.3	12.2					
	Groen!	9.4	5.2	17.9	5.7	6.5	4.5	1.9	1.9	3.9					
	NVA	10.9	10.6	7.4	8.6	3.0	5.4	4.6	3.1	4.4					
	CD&V	1.7	4.5	9.3	10.7	3.6	1.7	2.7	6.0	1.0					
	Vlaams Belang	4.8	3.9	6.4	10.2	0.7	2.0	1.5	1.9	2.1					
	SPA-Spirit	8.5	10.5	7.5	10.7	2.8	1.9	9.0	8.7	0.7					
	VLD	6.7	6.8	6.2	10.8	1.6	3.4	1.8	0.4	0.0					
	Groen!	13.2	9.6	13.4	15.6	1.7	3.7	4.0	6.4	1.6					
	NVA	4.3	6.0	10.5	5.9	3.4	6.1	1.9	7.7	0.9					

Health care	CD&V	32.2	25.8	14.0	19.5	8.6	4.8	8.3	15.4	8.8
	Vlaams Belang	6.5	6.9	3.8	5.5	3.0	4.0	4.0	4.8	3.8
	SPA-Spirit	6.4	17.5	6.0	14.1	8.9	8.9	11.7	7.9	6.6
	VLD	15.6	10.7	4.9	15.2	3.4	3.9	3.7	3.7	3.5
	Groen!	7.5	8.9	3.0	8.6	3.2	6.8	5.1	7.7	6.2
	NVA	10.9	9.3	6.3	10.3	1.3	5.5	5.8	2.8	8.4
Employment	CD&V	8.5	7.6	7.0	6.9	5.1	6.3	5.4	7.6	2.5
	Vlaams Belang	4.8	6.4	5.1	4.9	2.2	4.8	3.9	2.9	3.8
	SPA-Spirit	6.4	5.3	9	8.4	8.9	11.5	12.9	9.0	5.0
	VLD	4.4	11.7	7.4	9.0	6.8	5.4	7.3	15.2	8.1
	Groen!	3.8	8.9	7.5	5.9	6.3	7.2	4.5	6.6	5.5
	NVA	0.0	8.3	8.4	7.4	0.4	6.9	5.2	3.1	3.2
Social security	CD&V	3.4	2.3	2.3	3.2	3.9	5.1	5.2	6.8	0.1
	Vlaams Belang	1.6	1.5	0.0	1.8	3.7	3.8	2.4	4.9	0.5
	SPA-Spirit	10.6	7.0	0.0	2.0	4.8	10.1	5.7	13.1	0.1
	VLD	2.2	2.9	1.2	3.3	6.0	7.3	1.7	11.5	0.2
	Groen!	0.0	2.2	1.5	1.5	4.9	4.4	2.7	2.9	0.2
	NVA	6.5	4.2	6.3	4.2	3.8	8.4	2.7	9.7	0.8
Euthanasia	CD&V	0.0	2.3	2.3	2.6	2.7	0.5	2.3	0.7	0.0
	Vlaams Belang	1.6	3.9	5.1	3.9	0.7	4.1	2.2	3.5	0.0
	SPA-Spirit	4.3	7.0	0.0	3.7	2.8	5.3	1.4	1.8	0.0
	VLD	2.2	2.9	0.0	1.7	2.3	2.9	2.8	1.6	0.0
	Groen!	5.7	3.7	3.0	3.3	5.5	4.3	2.0	4.3	0.0
	NVA	0.0	0.5	2.1	3.2	0.4	1.0	2.3	0.0	0.0
Justice & police	CD&V	8.5	9.1	5.8	7.1	1.6	2.8	6.1	2.9	0.4
	Vlaams Belang	3.2	9.3	6.4	9.2	1.5	2.2	6.1	2.9	1.4
	SPA-Spirit	0.0	5.3	6.0	8.1	2.3	3.0	1.3	2.6	0.0
	VLD	4.4	8.7	6.2	6.5	3.9	2.9	2.5	7.0	1.3
	Groen!	3.8	8.1	0.0	3.9	0.0	0.6	2.0	3.9	0.1
	NVA	8.7	14.4	8.4	16.2	2.6	2.0	3.5	3.8	0.4

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

	Parties	Interpellations					Oral Questions					Party Manifestos							
		1991–1995	1995–2000	1991–1995	1995–2000	1991	1995	1999	2003	2004	1991–1995	1995–2000	1991–1995	1995–2000	1991	1995	1999	2003	2004
		N = 1,114	N = 1,948	N = 1,200	N = 6,480	N = 5,433	N = 6,129	N = 1,2439	N = 8,488	N = 16,855									
Food safety	CD&V	5.1	0.8	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1
	Vlaams Belang	0.0	1.5	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1
	SP.A-Spirit	4.3	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.9
	VLD	2.2	0.0	1.2	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2
	Groen!	0.0	0.7	1.5	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.7
	NVA	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5
Political renewal	CD&V	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.6	0.6	4.3	1.0	0.4	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
	Vlaams Belang	1.6	2.9	0.0	1.6	2.6	3.3	2.9	4.0	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6
	SP.A-Spirit	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.9	0.3	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
	VLD	0.0	2.9	1.2	1.3	2.9	1.5	1.3	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	Groen!	0.0	0.7	1.5	0.7	3.1	4.8	1.8	1.2	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
	NVA	0.0	2.3	0.0	1.7	0.9	2.8	2.2	3.1	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
Development aid	CD&V	0.0	3.0	0.0	0.4	2.6	2.3	1.2	2.3	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
	Vlaams Belang	0.0	0.5	0.0	0.4	0.7	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3
	SP.A-Spirit	2.1	0.0	1.5	0.3	0.1	0.3	0.1	0.3	2.1	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5
	VLD	4.4	1.9	0.0	3.1	1.8	2.0	0.8	1.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	Groen!	1.9	0.7	1.5	1.1	8.8	2.7	2.1	3.3	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
	NVA	0.0	0.9	3.2	0.4	4.7	1.0	0.3	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8

Note: Interpellations, oral questions, and party manifestos: share devoted to issue (%) within party total.

Table 3

Correlation (Pearson) and significance of issue ownership and political communication of six Belgian parties and twenty issues, 1991–2004
($1.20 > N > 54$)

	TNS	UAWEP1	UAWEP2	int9195	int9500	oq9195	oq9500	pp91	pp95	pp99	pp03	pp04
TNS: Media: implicit IO	1	.509**	.794**	.154*	.148	.245**	.154*	.338**	.150	.335**	.289**	.233**
UAWEP: implicit IO		.509**	1	.214**	.211*	.248**	.211*	.417**	.324**	.459**	.389**	.336**
UAWEP: explicit IO		.794**	1	.187	.299*	.226	.240*	.606**	.323**	.634**	.467**	.273*
Interpellations 1991–1995		.154*	.187	1	.721**	.684**	.682**	.398**	.346**	.492**	.456**	.392**
Interpellations 1995–1999		.148	.211*	.721**	1	.629**	.828**	.280**	.306**	.515**	.536**	.334**
Oral questions 1991–1995		.245**	.248**	.684**	.629**	1	.683**	.474**	.410**	.475**	.502**	.440**
Oral questions 1995–1999		.154*	.211*	.682**	.828**	.683**	1	.232**	.216**	.444**	.461**	.379**
Party programs 1991		.338**	.417**	.398**	.280**	.474**	.232**	1	.652**	.675**	.651**	.500**
Party programs 1995		.150	.324**	.346**	.306**	.410**	.216**	.652**	1	.646**	.614**	.446**
Party programs 1999		.335**	.459**	.492**	.515**	.475**	.444**	.675**	.646**	1	.705**	.562**
Party programs 2003		.289**	.389**	.456**	.536**	.502**	.461**	.651**	.614**	.705**	1	.498**
Party programs 2004		.233**	.336**	.392**	.334**	.440**	.379**	.500**	.446**	.562**	.498**	1

Note: IO = issue ownership.

*Significant at the .05 level (1-tailed); **Significant at the .01 level (1-tailed).

First of all, a great many correlations between implicit and explicit issue ownership according to the public and the deliberate own-issue profiling of the parties in parliament and manifestos are significant. This can be seen in the shaded area of the table. The way parties communicate and the way they are perceived by the public are closely associated; parties communicate effectively. Second, our expectation that opinion leaders (UAWEP) would be more sensitive to party cues than the public at large (TNS-Media) is confirmed. In all instances, issue-ownership–party-communication correlations are higher for UAWEP than for TNS-Media. Third, parliamentary activities display substantially lower correlations with issue ownership than party programs. Among the parliamentary activities, oral questions seem to be slightly more connected to parties' typical issues than their interpellations. Less recent parliamentary activities (1991–1995) appear to be more associated with issue ownership than more recent activities (1995–1999). This is a first cue that issue ownership is a long-term asset that is earned via long-lasting and systematic attention for issues. Fourth, party programs are very strongly related to issue ownership. Parties, in their programs, tend to emphasize the themes they are the owner(s) of. Again, the older party programs (see in particular the 1991 and 1999 manifestos) seem to perform slightly better than more recent programs. By and large, the correlational analysis endorses our first hypothesis, that it is parties' own communication that yields issue ownership. What about media coverage?

Media Communication: Coverage Linking Parties to Issues

Media coverage was recorded in three periods: 1991–1995 (newspapers), 1995–1999 (newspapers), and 2003–2004 (TV news). We did not dispose of all data for print and audiovisual media for the whole 1991–2004 period. Yet we are pretty sure the data in Table 4 fairly well grasp Belgian media coverage during the fifteen years of our study. The question here is, to what extent do mass media mention parties in their stories about issues? Media not only mention parties, though, but also individual politicians. These individuals always belong to a party and can, to a large extent, be considered as representing their party's stance. Often, however, these politicians have executive mandates: They serve as ministers in government. These ministers not only tend to dominate the news (Walgrave and De Swert 2005), they are in particular privileged sources when it comes to their ministerial competence. That, for example, the minister of the environment from a party is identified with environmental issues in the media probably is not in the first place because of his or her party's issue ownership of the environmental issue but rather because of his or her ministerial competence. He or she simply *has* to communicate a lot about the environment. However, ministerial competences are not distributed randomly over the parties. When entering government, parties tend to claim the competences

they are the owners of. Consequently, ministerial communication about issues cannot be entirely decoupled from parties' issue ownerships. Either way, in Table 4, we assess media coverage both with and without ministers. A third distinction in the table is that between being literally cited (newspapers) or interviewed (TV) in contrast to being only mentioned by name (party or politician).

Eyeballing Table 4 supports our second hypothesis, that mass media systematically link parties with issues. Let me give the same example of the environment. The green party (Groen!) is often mentioned when the media cover environmental issues, and green politicians are often interviewed or cited on environmental matters. The same applies to the immigration and asylum issue and the Vlaams Belang; the party is mentioned and cited or interviewed most when media cover this issue. If we compare that, for example, with the distribution of media attention over the different parties regarding euthanasia—an issue that is not owned by any party—we notice that there is no clear pattern emerging; different parties are mentioned most.

A correlation matrix with our three issue-ownership measures and the eight media series confirms that media coverage is quite intimately linked with the public's perception of issue ownership: Many correlations are significant (see shaded area of Table 5). Several observations are in order. First, explicit issue ownership yields the most significant results: All media measures correlate far best with the variable directly assessing issue ownership among opinion leaders (UAWEP). Second, media coverage with or without ministers makes a considerable difference. Keeping ministers on board results in systematically higher correlations; this indicates that parties indeed choose their ministers in a function of their own issues. Third, recent TV coverage seems, in general, to correlate better with issue ownership than older newspaper coverage, as pairwise comparison shows.

By and large, at this stage, we can also confirm our second hypothesis. The mass media systematically link parties with their issues. The remaining question, of course, is whether we can distinguish the effects from parties' own communication from the effects of media coverage and what the net effect of both determinants is. This calls for a multivariate analysis.

Parties and/or Media?

Parties' communications affect their issue ownership, and so does media coverage. But is there any party communication effect controlling for media coverage and vice versa? To test this, we conducted a number of OLS regressions with measures of implicit and explicit issue ownership as dependent variables and the nine party and the eight media series as independent variables. Results of these regressions are summarily reported in Table 6. The table does

(text continues on p. 63)

Table 4

Media coverage of issues in Belgium, 1991–2004 (share of total [%] within-issue coverage that cites/mentions party/politician with and without ministers)

		Newspapers				TV News			
Parties		1991–1995 – min. N = 6,318	1991–1995 + min. N = 9,082	1995–1999 – min. N = 9,959	1995–1999 + min. N = 13,434	2003–2004 citation– min. N = 4,047	2003–2004 citation+ min N = 6,469	2003–2004 mention– min. N = 7,369	2003–2004 mention+ min. N = 11,604
Environment	CD&V	1.8	2.1	1.3	2.0	6.1	6.2	4.4	4.6
	Vlaams Belang	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.6	0.9	0.9	0.4	0.4
	SP.A-Spirit	1.2	2.2	0.3	0.8	3.0	3.1	1.9	2.5
	VLD	0.9	0.8	0.4	0.8	3.3	2.5	2.1	2.0
	Groen!	9.2	9.2	3.4	6.3	2.4	10.4	2.7	8.0
Immigration and asylum	NVA	0.8	1.1	0.4	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.7	0.7
	CD&V	1.3	1.1	1.6	1.4	2.8	2.6	2.3	2.1
	Vlaams Belang	3.4	3.4	2.6	2.6	6.0	6.0	4.6	4.6
	SP.A-Spirit	1.4	2.4	3.3	4.5	2.3	2.3	1.9	2.0
	VLD	1.8	1.9	1.1	2.0	5.0	4.0	3.7	3.7
Crime	Groen!	1.4	1.4	4.6	4.3	2.4	2.0	1.2	1.1
	NVA	0.3	0.4	1.3	1.2	3.3	3.1	1.4	1.3
	CD&V	7.1	4.9	9.9	9.8	0.8	0.7	0.7	0.6
	Vlaams Belang	6.5	6.5	8.8	8.8	1.3	1.3	1.1	1.1
	SP.A-Spirit	32.3	22.1	20.0	15.4	2.2	1.4	1.7	1.2
Mobility	VLD	6.6	6.3	8.7	7.4	1.4	2.0	0.8	1.3
	Groen!	3.7	3.7	3.4	3.3	2.0	1.2	1.0	1.0
	NVA	3.9	3.3	5.9	5.1	0.8	0.8	0.7	0.7
	CD&V	1.3	2.1	1.8	1.3	4.1	6.9	3.8	5.9
	Vlaams Belang	0.4	0.4	0.3	0.3	1.7	1.7	0.9	0.9

	SPA-Spirit	0.4	0.5	2.3	3.2	3.1	7.9	2.6	6.4
	VLD	1.1	1.1	2.1	2.3	4.2	4.7	3.4	4.4
	Groen!	1.4	1.4	3.9	3.1	2.0	2.9	1.7	2.3
	NVA	0.6	3.0	0.4	0.5	3.3	3.1	1.7	1.7
Education	CD&V	3.0	2.2	1.8	1.4	0.8	0.7	0.7	0.7
	Vlaams Belang	1.5	1.5	0.6	0.6	0.4	0.4	0.2	0.2
	SP.A-Spirit	1.7	4.7	2.7	5.0	0.9	1.4	0.8	1.2
	VLD	3.7	3.2	2.1	3.6	0.4	2.0	0.4	1.7
	Groen!	4.6	4.6	1.7	1.3	0.0	0.6	0.2	0.4
	NVA	1.9	1.7	2.7	2.5	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.3
Family policy	CD&V	0.5	0.3	1.1	1.0	1.2	1.1	0.9	0.8
	Vlaams Belang	0.8	0.8	0.9	0.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	SP.A-Spirit	0.4	0.2	0.6	0.5	1.4	1.2	1.1	1.2
	VLD	0.7	0.6	0.8	0.7	1.4	0.9	0.9	0.7
	Groen!	0.9	0.9	1.2	2.0	0.8	1.8	0.8	1.6
	NVA	0.3	0.5	0.9	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Taxes	CD&V	0.6	1.0	1.5	1.4	2.2	2.1	1.9	1.8
	Vlaams Belang	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.2	0.2
	SP.A-Spirit	0.4	0.6	1.2	1.3	2.0	2.0	2.0	1.9
	VLD	1.5	1.8	2.3	2.2	2.1	2.2	1.5	1.9
	Groen!	0.3	0.3	1.0	0.9	0.8	0.8	0.7	0.6
	NVA	0.6	0.9	0.7	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.3	0.3
International security	CD&V	2.5	6.6	2.0	2.5	2.2	2.1	2.1	2.0
	Vlaams Belang	0.4	0.4	0.6	0.6	2.2	2.2	1.1	1.1
	SP.A-Spirit	2.5	5.8	2.6	3.4	3.5	2.8	2.9	2.5
	VLD	1.4	1.7	0.8	2.6	3.6	6.8	1.4	5.2
	Groen!	5.4	5.4	3.7	3.1	2.0	5.3	3.2	3.9
	NVA	2.3	2.8	1.8	1.9	4.1	5.4	2.4	3.0

(continued)

Table 4 (continued)

	Newspapers						TV News			
	1991–1995 – min. N = 6,318	1991–1995 + min. N = 9,082	1995–1999 – min. N = 9,959	1995–1999 + min. N = 13,434	2003–2004 citation– min. N = 4,047	2003–2004 citation+ min N = 6,469	2003–2004 mention– min. N = 7,369	2003–2004 mention+ min. N = 11,604		
Parties										
Drugs policy	CD&V	0.2	0.1	0.3	0.3	0.7	0.4	0.4		
	Vlaams Belang	0.0	0.0	0.9	0.9	0.0	0.2	0.2		
	SP.A-Spirit	0.3	0.7	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.0		
	VLD	0.3	0.2	0.8	0.9	0.5	0.5	0.4		
	Groen!	0.9	0.9	2.2	2.5	1.2	1.0	1.0		
	NVA	0.2	0.2	0.9	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0		
	CD&V	8.2	7.7	3.3	3.6	1.1	1.3	1.5		
Flemish independence	Vlaams Belang	6.9	6.9	3.5	3.5	2.2	2.2	3.5		
	SP.A-Spirit	4.5	4.2	3.8	3.5	2.0	2.1	1.9		
	VLD	6.9	6.3	2.2	2.8	1.4	2.0	2.4		
	Groen!	8.3	8.3	3.2	2.5	0.4	0.8	1.3		
	NVA	17.8	17.9	8.1	8.7	4.9	4.5	4.3		
Economic policy	CD&V	3.5	4.7	1.5	3.3	6.8	8.0	6.5		
	Vlaams Belang	1.5	1.5	0.6	0.6	2.2	2.2	1.5		
	SP.A-Spirit	1.8	2.5	2.1	1.7	4.2	8.5	6.7		
	VLD	3.1	3.3	1.5	1.9	4.0	6.7	6.2		
	Groen!	1.1	1.1	1.0	1.1	2.0	1.0	1.1		
	NVA	1.2	1.6	0.5	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.7		
	CD&V	1.3	2.1	2.1	1.5	2.0	2.2	1.7		
Traffic safety	Vlaams Belang	0.4	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0		
	SP.A-Spirit	0.4	0.5	2.4	3.3	3.3	4.6	3.7		
	VLD	1.1	1.1	2.1	2.3	3.0	2.4	2.8		

Health care	Groen!	1.4	1.4	3.9	3.3	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.2
	NVA	1.1	3.5	0.4	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	CD&V	0.5	1.0	2.1	2.3	2.4	2.4	2.2	2.3
	Vlaams Belang	0.0	0.0	0.9	0.9	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.6
	SPA-Spirit	0.1	0.2	1.5	2.8	2.0	2.4	1.4	2.1
	VLD	0.3	0.2	0.9	1.3	0.7	1.1	1.0	1.2
	Groen!	1.1	1.1	2.7	6.1	0.4	5.3	0.7	5.0
	NVA	0.5	0.4	2.0	2.2	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.3
	CD&V	2.9	6.5	2.5	4.9	2.8	2.9	2.6	2.7
	Vlaams Belang	1.1	1.1	0.9	0.9	1.3	1.3	0.9	0.9
Employment	SPA-Spirit	3.2	4.3	2.4	3.8	3.4	8.2	2.8	6.8
	VLD	1.9	1.8	2.2	3.5	1.6	4.5	2.3	4.3
	Groen!	2.2	2.2	1.5	1.6	1.6	1.8	0.8	2.4
	NVA	0.8	0.7	1.8	3.0	1.6	1.6	1.0	1.0
	CD&V	1.3	2.0	2.5	3.1	0.8	0.7	0.6	0.6
	Vlaams Belang	0.0	0.0	0.9	0.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	SPA-Spirit	0.8	1.2	2.3	3.1	0.9	2.3	0.7	1.5
	VLD	1.4	1.3	1.6	2.0	0.5	0.7	0.4	0.6
	Groen!	1.1	1.1	1.0	1.1	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.1
	NVA	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Euthanasia	CD&V	2.5	1.6	2.1	1.2	0.4	0.4	0.6	0.5
	Vlaams Belang	3.4	3.4	1.5	1.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	SPA-Spirit	0.7	0.7	1.0	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	VLD	0.3	0.2	1.3	1.2	1.0	0.4	0.7	0.3
	Groen!	2.0	2.0	1.7	1.4	0.0	0.6	0.2	0.4
	NVA	0.9	1.0	0.7	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	CD&V	0.5	0.4	5.6	8.1	3.2	3.0	2.3	2.2
	Vlaams Belang	0.0	0.0	3.8	3.8	3.0	3.0	2.0	2.0
	SPA-Spirit	1.1	1.5	4.9	5.6	1.9	1.8	1.3	1.4

(continued)

Table 4 (continued)

	Newspapers				TV News				
	1991–1995 – min. N = 6,318	1991–1995 + min. N = 9,082	1995–1999 – min. N = 9,959	1995–1999 + min. N = 13,434	2003–2004 citation– min. N = 4,047	2003–2004 citation+ min N = 6,469	2003–2004 mention– min. N = 7,369	2003–2004 mention+ min. N = 11,604	
	Parties								
	VLD	0.1	0.1	9.3	8.5	1.1	4.2	0.8	3.4
	Groen!	0.6	0.6	2.9	2.2	0.0	0.6	0.3	0.4
	NVA	0.0	0.1	5.0	4.5	4.9	4.7	2.1	2.0
	CD&V	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.8	0.7	0.6	0.5
Food safety	Vlaams Belang	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	SP.A-Spirit	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.1
	VLD	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.1
	Groen!	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.2	1.4	0.7	1.4
	NVA	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Political renewal	CD&V	4.7	3.5	5.4	4.3	8.9	8.5	8.0	7.5
	Vlaams Belang	3.8	3.8	8.8	8.8	12.5	12.5	13.1	13.1
	SP.A-Spirit	3.6	3.0	4.8	3.8	8.7	6.6	8.9	7.5
	VLD	4.3	4.8	4.8	4.7	9.3	6.5	9.2	6.6
	Groen!	3.4	3.4	5.1	4.3	15.1	9.0	10.0	7.9
	NVA	5.3	4.7	5.2	5.1	8.1	7.8	9.0	8.6
Development aid	CD&V	0.2	0.7	2.1	2.3	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.1
	Vlaams Belang	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	SP.A-Spirit	0.4	1.2	1.0	1.0	0.7	0.5	0.5	0.4
	VLD	0.0	0.4	0.2	0.2	0.4	1.0	0.1	0.8
	Groen!	0.9	0.9	1.2	2.0	0.0	0.6	0.0	0.5
	NVA	0.2	0.5	0.7	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.7

Table 5

Correlation (Pearson) and significance of issue ownership and issue coverage in Belgian media, 1991–2004 (120 > N > 54)

	TNS	UAWEP1	UAWEP2	TV0304 Citations No	TV0304 with Ministers	TV0304 Mentions Ministers	NP9195 Mentions Ministers	NP9195 with Ministers	NP9599 Mentions Ministers	NP9599 with Ministers	
TNS-Media: implicit issue ownership	1	.509**	.794**	.216**	.292**	.227**	.282**	.170*	.201*	.181*	.245**
UAWEP: implicit issue ownership		1	.681**	.101	.215**	.126	.198*	.126	.218**	.128	.229**
UAWEP: explicit issue ownership			1	.307*	.587**	.389**	.580**	.191	.260*	.189	.344**
TV 2003–2004— citations—no ministers				1	.834**	.954**	.847**	.198*	.244**	.335**	.354**
TV 2003–2004— citations—with ministers					1	.824**	.970**	.198*	.262**	.298**	.399**
TV 2003–2004— mentions—no ministers						1	.889**	.251**	.302**	.363**	.384**
TV 2003–2004— mentions—with ministers							1	.227**	.288**	.318**	.413**
Newspapers 1991–1995 —mentions—no ministers								1	.950**	.769**	.704**
Newspapers 1991–1995 —mentions—with ministers									1	.695**	.681**
Newspapers 1991–1995 —mentions—no ministers										1	.943**
Newspapers 1991–1995 —mentions—with ministers											1

*Significant at the .05 level (1-tailed); **Significant at the .01 level (1-tailed).

Table 6

Regressions and significance of OLS regressions predicting implicit (TNS-Media) and explicit (UAWEP) issue ownership, with party communications and media coverage as independent variables

Dependent Variable	N	Adj. R ²	Party Communication			Media Coverage		
			Manifestos	Parliament	TV News 2003–2004	Newspapers 1991–2000	Newspapers 1991–2000	
All	120	.136	1999	—	—	Min. citation	—	—
Explicit (UAWEP)	60	.498	1999	—	—	Min. citation	—	—
Strong or intermediate issue ownership	78	.209	1991	—	—	Min. citation	—	—
Explicit (UAWEP)	48	.512	1991, 1999	—	—	Min. citation	—	—
Weak issue ownership	42	.077	—	—	—	—	Min. 1995–1999	—
Explicit (UAWEP) ^a	6	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
CD&V	20	.050	1991	—	—	—	—	—
Explicit (UAWEP)	10	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Vlaams Belang	20	.725	1991	—	—	Min. citation	—	Min. 1995–1999
Explicit (TNS)	10	.959	—	—	—	—	—	Min. 1995–1999
Explicit (UAWEP)	10	.249	2003	—	—	—	—	—
SP.A-Spirit	20	.302	2003	—	—	—	—	—
Explicit (UAWEP)	10	.302	2003	—	—	—	—	—
VLD	20	.229	2004	—	—	Min. citation	—	—
Explicit (TNS)	20	.913	—	—	—	Min. mentions	—	Min. 1991–1995
Groen!	20	.680	1991	—	—	Min. citation	—	—
Explicit (UAWEP)	10	.927	1999	—	—	—	—	Min. 1995–1999
NVA	20	.178	—	—	—	—	—	Min. 1991–1995
Explicit (TNS)	20	.159	—	—	—	—	—	Min. 1995–1999
Explicit (UAWEP)	10	.159	—	—	—	—	—	Min. 1995–1999

Note: Min. citation = issue coverage on TV news 2003–2004, including ministers and counting the number of citations of politicians; Min. mentions = issue coverage on TV news 2003–2004, including ministers and counting the number of mentions of party politicians and parties; Min. 1991–1995 = issue coverage in newspapers 1991–1995, counting the numbers of mentions of party politicians and parties; Min. 1995–1999 = issue coverage in newspapers 1995–1999, counting the numbers of mentions of party politicians and parties.

a. N is too small to estimate a regression for explicit weak issue ownership.

not report specific coefficients but only the overall explanatory power of the model and whether party or media variables are significant predictors of issue ownership. We reported the results of the best model containing only significant parameters.

The explained variance of the many regressions differs hugely. For one thing, the strength of the models estimating effects of party communication and media coverage on explicit issue ownership (UAWEP) is systematically higher than the models predicting implicit issue ownership (TNS-Media). This is precisely as we expected and confirms both the idea of opinion leaders as being more sensitive to party and media communications and the idea that a direct and explicit measurement of issue ownership is more high performing. When we ran our estimations for the strong/intermediate and the weak issue ownerships separately, we stumbled onto notable differences. Party and media communication about issues seems to be almost completely unrelated to issue ownership for those issues for which there hardly is such an ownership. This makes, of course, much sense. This is also reflected in the separate regressions we ran for all parties. Explained variance of the models for the typical, new issue parties Groen! and Vlaams Belang are forthright impressive. For mainstream, traditional parties—Sp.A-Spirit and CD&V—results are much less outspoken. Sp.A-Spirit's identification with social issues can be satisfyingly predicted by party communication and media coverage; the party still seems to have a clear issue profile. The Center party CD&V's issue ownership, however, can hardly be captured by party and media communication. Although the CD&V could, according to the voters, clearly be considered as owning certain issues, in particular, education and family policy, the explicit issue-ownership (UAWEP) model for the CD&V did not yield a single significant result. In the entire postwar period, the CD&V was almost always in power, and it only left government in 1999. The data suggest that although the party might still be considered by many voters as the clear owner of certain issues, the party itself—in its own communication in parliament and manifestos—and the media in their coverage do not seem to acknowledge CD&V's expertise and credibility for dealing with these issues. The third traditional party, VLD, "behaves" strangely. Its implicit issue-ownership model has a normal explained variance, while its explicit issue-ownership model suddenly skyrockets. We cannot explain this for the time being. Apart from that, the size of the explained variance of most models overall is satisfying. Many models have a very high explanatory power. This proves that party communication and media coverage are key to understanding issue ownership. But repeating the questions we started this article off with, what accounts best for issue ownership: party communication or media coverage?

The results show that *both* key variables seem to be affecting issue ownership to more or less the same extent. First, it is remarkable that the issues dealt with by the parliamentary activities of parties seem to be completely decoupled

from issue ownership, or at least, that they yield no added explanatory power above that of party programs. Issue ownership is not earned in parliament through systematic and laborious interventions that continually emphasize the same issues over and over again. Rather, it is a party's programs that contain the core of its issue profile. In almost all models, at least one party program is a significant predictor of issue ownership in the year 2003–2004. It is noteworthy that by and large, older party programs (1991, 1995, and 1999) are better predictors of present issue ownership than are contemporary party programs (2003–2004), although this does not apply to Sp.A-Spirit. So, party programs definitely play a role.

Second, the hypothesis that media coverage that links issues with parties makes for issue ownership can be maintained. Media do matter *on top of* parties' own communications. All significant media parameters are based on data including ministers, and almost all significant parameters (for TV) are based on the citing of politicians, not merely their mention. Ministers are instrumental in creating and maintaining issue ownership of parties, especially when they are cited regarding an issue. The results are not entirely straightforward, but the data seem to suggest that in contrast to parties' own communications, *recent* media coverage matters more than older coverage: Hardly any 1991–1995 coverage variables are significant compared to many significant variables from 1995–1999, and in particular, compared to 2003–2004 coverage. This is an exciting finding. Both party manifestos and media coverage produce issue ownership, but party manifestos seem to do so especially slowly and with long time lags, while media coverage seems to have somewhat more immediate effects. This might suggest that issue ownership is originally created by parties' own deliberate issue claims but maintained by mass media's coverage of parties and issues.

Conclusion and Discussion

In this study, we showed that parties, at least in the Belgian case, are identified with issues in a consistent manner. Both the parties' voters, implicitly, and the public at large, explicitly, acknowledge that certain parties are owners of certain issues and that some parties are better placed than others to deal with it. This issue-ownership perception is much more outspoken among opinion leaders with a keen interest in politics than among the public at large, but both largely attribute the same issues to the same parties. Newer, challenging parties have a sharper issue profile than older, traditional parties.

We structured our study around the questions of where issue ownership comes from and how it is maintained. We put forward two hypotheses: (1) Issue ownership is created and maintained by parties' own deliberate communication via their party program and their activities in parliament, and (2) issue

ownership is created and maintained by the coverage of the mass media, which constantly connects issues with parties. As it turns out, hypotheses are not contradictory but appear to be equally tenable. Both parties' own communication as well as the mass media's linking parties and issues in their daily coverage, significantly and independently of each other, affect issue ownership to more or less the same extent. As a matter of fact, there even seems to be some kind of "division of labor" or a mutually reinforcing effect: Party programs affect citizens' perception of issue ownership in the long run, with old party programs' effecting the strongest impact; media coverage, in contrast, has a more immediate effect on people's perceptions of parties' issue ownership, with these adapting relatively quickly after the coverage.

We think these findings are innovative and contribute substantially to our understanding of issue ownership and the way it comes about. Previous research speculated about the origins of issue ownership, and indeed, distinguished long-term, or permanent, and short-term, or performance, issues. Yet these claims remained largely unproven and were not supported by empirical evidence. In this article, we yield such empirical evidence. Second, this study introduces the mass media as a possible source of issue ownership. It is, among other factors, via the mass media's repeatedly mentioning issues and parties in the same news items that the identification between parties and issues in the heads of the people gets established. So far, studies about media and issue ownership have been focusing on how mass media activate existing issue ownerships by devoting many stories to certain issues and thereby rendering electoral advantage to the parties already owning the issue (see, e.g., Norris et al. 1999; Walgrave and De Swert 2004). This study takes a significant further step and shows that media not only activate existing ownerships but might be co-responsible for the existence of the issue ownership in the first place. The media's impact on issue-related campaign dynamics, hence, might even be bigger than originally thought.

The question remains, however, whether mass media create or only maintain issue ownership of parties. In this exploratory study, we could not disentangle issue-ownership maintenance from issue-ownership creation, as we did not dispose of longitudinal public opinion panel evidence. Moreover, we are not sure about the direction of the causal links we suggested. We claimed that parties and media independently of each other affect public opinion and its perception of issues and parties. But it is very hard to disentangle party and media communications empirically. Parties' own communications in parliament and manifestos are conveyed to the public via the media. Parties deliberately target the media to get their message across. Effects we attributed here to the media and not to parties might ultimately be caused by parties' strategies and tactics and not by the media as autonomous actors. Moreover, media and parties might also be reacting to and anticipating people's perception of issue-party connections.

Media, for example, might ask for a certain party's reaction considering the fact that this party is widely deemed as offering credibility and expertise regarding the issue at stake. In short, we need more research to disentangle the issue-ownership syndrome featuring public opinion, parties, and mass media. But we hope at least to have shown that media coverage must be taken into account when exploring the origins of issue ownership.

Notes

1. Belgium consists of two linguistic parts: a French-speaking part and a Dutch-speaking part, each featuring different parties and different media. In this contribution, when we speak about Belgium, we only refer to the Dutch-speaking, Flemish part of the country, containing 60 percent of the total population.
2. See www.nieuwsarchief.be for more information.
3. The six parties are the following: Groen! is the green party, Vlaams Belang is an extreme-Right populist party, SP.A is the socialist party, VLD is the (right-wing) liberal party, CD&V is the Christian-democratic party, and N.V.A is the Flemish-nationalist party. To make things complicated, in the 2004 elections, CD&V and N.V.A formed a cartel.

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