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Issue Ownership Stability and Change: How Political Parties Claim and Maintain Issues Through Media Appearances

STEFAAN WALGRAVE, JONAS LEFEVERE,
and MICHIEL NUYTEMANS

Drawing on a large-scale online experiment embedded in an electoral survey in Belgium, this study tests whether issue ownership is, rather than a stable condition, a dynamic process that can be manipulated by an experimental stimulus. Five thousand subjects were confronted with an embedded fake TV-news item in which the five leaders of the main Belgian parties offered their parties' stance on six issues. We find that issue ownership is a dynamic process and that news exposure leads to significant shifts in issue ownership. Especially on issues that are not owned by any party, a communicative performance by the party leader can make a difference. Regarding preowned issues, the effect is conditional; it depends on the balance of the news item.

Keywords issue ownership, media effects, media exposure, experimental design, issue, Belgium

Citizens consider some political parties as being better able than others to deal with certain political issues. Some parties are deemed to have a large degree of credibility on the issue; their policy solutions concerning the issue receive broad support from the public. These parties are said to "own" the issue. Social-democratic parties, for example, in many European nations are considered to be the "owners" of welfare issues, while green parties are largely believed to be best placed to deal with environmental issues. In the electoral literature, issue ownership is regarded as an important asset. The saliency of an issue, whether the electorate finds it an important issue or not, combined with the issue's ownership is considered a key determinant of voting. The straightforward question of where issue ownership comes from in the first place, however, has received less scholarly attention. Linked to that is the question of whether issue ownership is a stable or a transient asset of political parties. Once a party has a firm grasp on an issue, can it lose it again? And how can parties claim issues and gain ownership of previously non-owned issues?

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In this study, we argue that issue ownership is dynamic. In an online experiment, we record significant changes in issue ownership on the micro-level—that is, individual subjects significantly adjust their evaluation of parties' issue appropriateness after being exposed to party messages regarding the issue. So, issue ownership *can* be changed. Yet at the same time, the particular conditions under which issue ownership evolves and the limited size and the duration of the effects suggest that, in reality and on a macro-level, issue ownership is fairly stable. Parties claim and maintain issue ownership(s) all the time. Simply by talking about issues in the media, they are constantly engaged in a competitive issue ownership struggle. Issue ownership is fluid, but there are differences across issues. When an issue is already owned by a party, additional talking about the issue by that party does not make a difference. On an issue where parties, in contrast, are not judged to be best placed, they can increase their standing by talking about it. This happens even if the issue at stake is owned by another party. Mass media coverage plays a key role in this competitive process. It is through media exposure—more concretely via party representatives talking about issues on TV, radio, or in newspapers—that parties become connected to issues in the heads of media consumers.

To arrive at that conclusion, we draw upon a large-scale online experiment conducted in Belgium, a country with many parties and many issue ownerships. (Actually, this study does not deal with the whole of Belgium, but only with Flanders and the Flemish parties. More than 60% of the Belgium population lives in Flanders in the north of Belgium where Dutch is spokens in contrast to the south where French is spoken.) The experiment consists of exposing almost 5,000 respondents in an online electoral panel in the run-up to the 2007 general elections to embedded fake news items featuring, in alternating solo and mixed conditions, the leaders of the five major parties talking about issues. We measure issue ownership before and after the stimulus and compare the findings with a control group not exposed to the issue ownership treatment.

Issue Ownership Dynamics: Theory and Hypotheses

The issue ownership theory states that voters identify parties with issues. If voters think about the issue, they think about the party. Issue ownership is a matter of reputation: Parties are credible and reliable on certain issues, considered as being better able than others to handle the problem at hand (Campbell et al., 1960). If voters care a lot about the issue when they cast their ballot, chances are high that they will vote for the party they consider to be the "owner" of the issue (Petrocik, 1989, 1996). In many countries, this basic proposition has been empirically confirmed (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Maddens, 1994; Walgrave & De Swert, 2004). Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994), for example, found that parties are advantaged if they advertise on issues that they own. It would be in parties' electoral interest to stick to their own issues: People simply do not expect a party to say something about an issue that it is not identified with, and even if the party did say something, it most likely would not be considered credible (Van den Bulck, 1993).

People's viewpoint on policy themes remains relatively stable over time, studies show, but their perception of the importance of these themes changes constantly (Page & Shapiro, 1992). In other words, voters' issue saliency is variable, and that produces electoral change. Issue ownership itself, however, is generally considered to be rather stable. The literature seems to neglect the question of where issue ownership comes from and whether it can be changed. Most accounts implicitly consider issue ownership as a given, a constant and not a variable. Issue ownership is hardly ever the explicandum; rather, it is almost always the explanans. Following the classic thesis of Lipset and Rokkan (1967), Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge (1994) state that parties are rooted in deep cleavages

dividing society. Parties' origins determine their subsequent issue ownership: "Parties sustain an identity that is anchored in the cleavages and issues that gave rise to their birth" (Klingemann et al., 1994, p. 24). Parties are equated with their primary, historical position and cannot move and repudiate previously held issue positions. Similarly, Petrocik (1996) states that issue ownership depends on the social basis of a party. Parties traditionally supported by a certain social class own the issues of interest to this class. Both classic accounts, hence, suggest that issue ownership is very stable: "Perceptions of parties' issue competence probably change very slowly, when they change at all" (Petrocik, 1996, p. 826).

Notwithstanding the alleged stability of issue ownership, some of the classic authors leave a small opening for issue ownership change. Klingemann et al. (1994) state that parties can start stressing and claiming new issues; they can deliberately let old issue ownerships fade away. That is, parties can enter a new issue in the arena and claim possession of it. It does not mean that parties can hijack another party's issue. Issue ownerships remain essentially stable, but in their selective emphasizing or deemphasizing parties may reinforce old issue ownerships or claim new, free-floating issues. Petrocik (1996), in a similar vein, argues that issue ownerships are "produced by a history of attention, initiative and innovation towards these problems (p. 826)." Issue ownership is thus a matter of track record. Track records can be changed, but this takes time. Especially the record of the incumbent party is key, says Petrocik. If a party in power fails to deal with an issue adequately, it may lose its issue ownership temporarily, and vice versa. But after a while, the long-lasting reasons for the party issue identification outweigh the temporary anger, and the electorate reinstalls a party's issue credibility. Petrocik acknowledges, hence, that 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." In short, most classic authors implicitly admit that, apart from some extremely stable and almost eternal issue ownerships, parties can have short-term ownerships too; they can have an issue "on lease."

The recent research literature confirms that issue ownership can be changed or, at least, evolves. Damore (2004), for example, shows that presidential candidates in the U.S., under specific campaign circumstances, effectively "trespass" issues and talk about issues owned by the competitor, bringing about an issue ownership change. Sigelman and Buell (2004) found that, in 40 years of presidential campaigning in the U.S., candidates systematically addressed the issues their competitor was more identified with. Holian (2004) examined how, in 1992, presidential candidate Bill Clinton was able to take away the issue ownership of crime from the Republican party by showing time and again his commitment to law and order. Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2003) showed that the LFP headed by the populist leader Pim Fortuyn in the 2001 elections in the Netherlands managed to successfully claim and appropriate the immigration issue previously owned by the liberal party VVD. Aalberg and Jenssen (2007) studied, in a quasi-experiment, how preelectoral TV debates in the Norwegian multiparty system measurably affected and changed parties' status on issues: Parties that did well in the debate could significantly enhance their credibility on the debated issue, and the "winning" party was considered as better able to deal with the issue. Note that this study is one of the very rare in which issue ownership is considered as the dependent variable, as something that is to be explained; by far most previous research does not consider issue ownership as something that must be explained but rather as something that allows other things to be explained, mainly voting behavior.

Stability and change of issue ownership probably depend on the party system. We suppose that a two-party system leads to more stable issue ownerships than a multiparty system. In a two-party system, inevitably, one of the main parties is always considered by a majority of the voters as better able to deal with the issue. In multiparty systems with

many parties competing for only a few issues, in contrast, more issues are controversial as neighboring parties are constantly trying to take away an issue from their closest competitor (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007, p. 119). Moreover, in multiparty systems the electoral struggle unfolds along conflict dimensions involving several issue and party positions. Aalberg and Jensen maintain, consequently, that especially in multiparty systems issue ownerships are not constants but variables. The present study deals with Belgium, a country with many parties and issue ownerships. 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 bearing to voters. In the research period, five major parties were competing for voters' support: three traditional parties (Christian-democrats, liberals, and socialists) and two "new politics" parties (greens and extreme right). Of course, not all parties have an equal share in the issue competition. This too differentiates multi- from two-party systems. Some parties are better placed to drive the issue competition. Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2007) contend that especially opposition parties dominate the struggle for issues, as they are more free than government parties to address whatever issue they see fit (see also Meguid, 2005). In this article, though, we will deal with all parties as if they were equal players in the issue ownership game.

Issue ownership, we have shown, is predominantly considered to be a constant. The literature emphasizes its stability rather than its potential dynamics. Yet, there are similar exposure-based theories linking parties with issues that take the opposite position and stress people's *changing* party perceptions caused by media exposure. The most prominent of these theories is priming. Priming holds that exposure to media messages dealing with specific issues pushes people to use these issues when evaluating parties and politicians (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Media exposure increasing the accessibility of issues turns these issues into the primarily available benchmarks when people evaluate political actors—for example, when voting (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Studies have suggested that evaluation issues are indeed variable—entirely in line with the classic agenda-setting idea—but priming studies have hardly focused on how parties gain a certain standing on an issue in the first place. Priming does not deal with how parties are linked and become associated with issues. The dependent variable in priming studies is the issues people use to evaluate parties (and ultimately determine their vote choice); the dependent variable in the present study is the link itself between issues and parties. One could state that priming effects on voting behavior and on appraisals of political actors are conditional upon preexisting issue ownership. It is precisely through priming that issue ownership is activated and becomes accessible. In other words, priming as a media effect combines agenda setting and issue ownership but focuses much more on the agenda-setting aspect than on the issue ownership aspect.

Reexamining how scholars have defined issue ownership reveals that the concept actually consists of two dimensions: an associative and a competence dimension. Indeed, the issue ownership literature suggests that a good deal of issue ownership consists of the fact that people, when hearing or reading about an issue, automatically and spontaneously start thinking about a certain party. Parties are identified with issues in an associative way. The competence dimension involves which parties are best placed to deal with an issue and which parties are trusted to take the right policy measures. Clearly, associative and competence issue ownership are different things, at least analytically. When thinking about the immigration issue, for example, many Europeans probably spontaneously relate immigration with right-wing populist anti-immigration parties. However, many of these people probably do not consider these parties as promoting the best possible solution for the immigration problem, even the contrary. Although theoretically different, associative and competence issue ownership are often closely related, as parties of which people think

spontaneously when hearing about an issue are often also the parties they trust to handle the issue satisfactorily. In this study, we measure the competence dimension: Parties are considered as owners when the electorate thinks they have the best program to deal with the issue. Yet, the associative dimension of issue ownership is implicitly present in these measurements and hard to distinguish. We acknowledge that the competence dimension is probably more changeable and variable than the associative dimension of issue ownership. Media exposure, most likely, is less effective in changing the associative dimension (at least in the short term). We leave that to be explored by other studies and focus here on the competence dimension.

This study draws on the basic idea that appearing in the media to talk about an issue is one way parties use to claim and maintain issues; other ways may be stressing the issue in the party manifesto and talking about the issue in Parliament. Walgrave and De Swert (2007) recently found that media coverage linking parties with issues does in fact affect parties' issue ownership. Drawing on longitudinal time-series analyses, they established that media coverage matters, especially for short-term issue ownership dynamics. We explore this further in the present study.

Our main hypothesis, building on the mentioned literature, distinguishes between types of issues. The classic accounts (Klingemann et al., 1994; Petrocik, 1989) state that issue ownership is essentially stable except for nonowned or new issues. Other theories of opinion formation through mass media point in the same direction. For example, in his "ideodynamic" model of media's impact on opinion formation, Fan (1988) established that parties have hardly anything to "gain" from an issue when they have canvassed almost all voters in the past; everybody already knows, and all people who can be converted have been converted. Messages have less persuasive impact when more people are already convinced. Our main hypothesis (H1) states that parties can gain most from communicating about issues no other party owns, that they can gain less by talking about other parties' issues, and that they can gain hardly any leverage by making statements about an issue they already own. This hypothesis also resembles findings of previous research on attitude strength. Studies have found, for example, that people's beliefs about important issues are less affected by media coverage than their opinions about issues they consider not to be important (see, for example, Lecheler, De Vreese, & Slothuus, 2008). Similarly, we expect that a strong identification of issues with parties is more difficult to change by a news message.

A second expectation pertains to the type of stimulus and distinguishes between mixed and nonmixed exposure. We anticipate that news items containing only a single talking politician will affect the issue ownership of his or her party more than when an item contains several politicians competitively claiming the same issue. In other words, the more balanced the news, the less it affects issue ownership as parties' claims are immediately countered by other parties. According to our second hypothesis (H2), then, mixed exposure news items have less impact on issue ownership than solo exposure news items. H1 and H2 are complementary hypotheses. While the first hypothesis states that parties have the most to gain by addressing unowned or other parties' issues, the second hypothesis states that parties may neutralize each other's issue claims by appearing in the same news item as their competitors and by restating their own position regarding an issue they own or do not own.

The two first hypotheses implicitly contend that there are exposure effects across the board depending on the type of issue and the type of exposure. However, much of the media effects literature has found that media do not affect the entire audience to the same extent. Media effects are modulated by characteristics of the recipients. Some people are more affected by media messages than others; there is an extensive literature making this point

for agenda setting (e.g., Erbring, Goldenberg, & Miller, 1980; Weaver et al., 1981), for framing (e.g., Shah, Domke, & Wackman, 1996), for priming (e.g., Iyengar & Kinder, 1987), and for other media effects. It would lead us too far to develop specific hypotheses for all possible modulating factors, so we formulated a general third hypothesis (H3) that the media exposure effects on issue ownership are modulated—weakened or reinforced—by the characteristics and preceding attitudes of the recipients.

Data and Method

We draw upon an experiment embedded in the University of Antwerp Web Panel 2007 (UAWEP07). UAWEP07 was a four-wave, nonrepresentative pre- and post-electoral panel including a total of 11,164 voters in Belgium (Flanders) carried out in February–June 2007. Following the work of people such as Paul Sniderman, survey-embedded experiments are gradually gaining ground in political communication (see for an example Hagendoorn & Sniderman, 2001). Within academia, progressively more Web-based surveys are also being conducted (see Best & Krueger, 2004; Dillman, 2000). The main problem with Web surveys is representativeness. How can one get a representative sample of the population giving all members of the population an equal chance to be selected? The strategy we followed for the present study was very simple: We tried to maximize diversity. We attempted to put together a panel that was as diverse as possible and that drew respondents from all corners of society and all walks of life. For that purpose, we recruited panel participants via banners on Web sites such as these of popular radio stations, soccer teams, associations of the elderly, and women's organizations. Students taking a class in methods distributed leaflets inviting people to participate at train stations, on the street, in bars, and so forth. We also relied on snowball sampling, asking participants to invite other people they knew. All UAWEP07 respondents had participated in a previous survey for the 2006 local elections. Actual recruitment existed in asking potential participants to go to a Web site and answer an HTML-based questionnaire. People had to provide their e-mail address so that they could be recontacted for subsequent waves. No new respondents were allowed after the closing of the first wave.

The main downside of UAWEP07 is that it does not contain a representative sample of the Belgian population. Yet, on the other hand, our pool of respondents is definitely more diverse than the typical experiments conducted with college sophomores (Iyengar, 2001). Our main goal was, in fact, to test for effects of experimental stimuli. Moreover, we explicitly tested whether specific, skewed variables affected and modulated the experimental effect (see H3). Compared to the population at large, three features strike the eye: Our subjects are more likely to be male, they are higher educated, and they have more interest in politics than the average Belgian citizen. Table 1 compares the composition of UAWEP07 and the subsample of experimental participants with the Belgian population at large. Notwithstanding the considerable biases, it is fair to state that our participants are a good deal more diverse than most experimental samples.

UAWEP07 had four consecutive waves: three precampaign waves and one post-electoral wave. Before applying the experimental stimulus in the second wave in April 2007, we pre-measured all relevant dependent and independent variables in the first wave of the panel in February 2007. Immediately after the exposure in the second wave in April 2007, we measured issue ownership. We tested for longitudinal effects by remeasuring issue ownership in the third wave fielded in June 2007; the real elections took place a few days later, on June 10, 2007. As the experiment was embedded in an ongoing research project about media and elections, and as all respondents had been loyal participants since at least

Table 1
Comparison of composition of UAWAEP07 sample and experimental sample with population

	Population	UAWEP07 respondents	Experiment respondents
Age (average)	40.8[a]	40.1	40.3
Sex (% male)	51.9[b]	69.0	71.9
Education (%)			
No, primary or low secondary	38.0[c]	6.8	6.0
Higher secondary	34.0[c]	21.4	20.1
Higher education	17.0[c]	30.8	30.7
University	12.0[c]	41.0	43.1
Political interest (average on a scale of 1 to 10)	—	7.5	7.7
N		7,980	4,083

[a]For Flemish population in 2006. Source: StatBel, http://www.statbel.fgov.be/FiGUres/d23_nl.asp#1
[b]For Flemish population in 2006. Source: StatBel, http://statbel.fgov.be/pub/d2/p201y2005_nl.pdf
[c]For Flemish population in 2003. Source: Flemish Ministry of Education (numbers were rounded), http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/eDocs/pdf/257.pdf

2006, we are confident that the large majority of the respondents were not aware of the fact that they had been watching a fake news item. They were acquainted with filling in a questionnaire with political questions. The realism of the experiment was further enhanced by the fact that respondents were not invited to come to an artificial laboratory environment but simply filled in the questionnaire at home (or work) sitting behind their desk. Immediately after the treatment, we asked a series of diversion questions concerning the personal and political qualities of the politicians the respondents had been exposed to. The issue ownership question was asked only at the end of the questionnaire, while the stimulus was applied at the beginning.

The stimulus consisted of a fake news item embedded in a longer and real excerpt of the main evening news—*Het Journaal*—of the Belgian public broadcaster Eén (VRT). *Het Journaal* is the most popular news show in Belgium. We took a real news show broadcasted 4 weeks before the experiment and added the stimulus. The stimulus was preceded by a very short item and followed by two other news items. The excerpt also contained another fake news item that had been constructed for another, totally unrelated experiment about foreign news sources unconnected to domestic politics or parties. The total excerpt lasted approximately 3 to 4 minutes. All 11,164 UAWEP07 respondents were invited to participate, watch the movie, and answer the related questions (an option to bypass the fragment was offered for nonbroadband respondents, as well as a test fragment). More than half of the respondents in the second wave participated in the experiment and watched the fake news broadcast. In total, 4,920 respondents were exposed to the stimulus and answered the questions relevant to this study.

As we wanted to make sure that our respondents really watched the news excerpt, we only took into account respondents who spent at least 3 minutes in "streaming video" mode. We resurveyed these respondents in Wave 3, and 4,414 of the experiment's original participants (90%), answered a follow-up issue ownership battery allowing us to test the durability of the treatment effects. Why did only half of the UAWEP07 respondents

participate in the experiment, and what role does panel attrition play? First of all, probably not all respondents had the broadband Internet connection needed to comfortably watch the video in streaming mode. Drawing on the domain name of their e-mail address, we estimate that at least 8,000 respondents had a fast enough connection, which implies that up to 3,000 respondents were excluded because of technological reasons. Additionally, there certainly was a self-selection process. Table 1, which compares the total sample with the experimental sample, shows that the actual experimental subjects were slightly more unrepresentative than the entire UAWEP07 sample (they were a bit older, more likely to be male, and higher educated). But differences remained small.

The stimulus itself consisted of a very short news item lasting between 30 and 60 seconds in which one or two leaders of Belgium's five main parties talked about a political issue. The news anchor introduced the fake item, stating: "In a few weeks, we have general elections. In the run-up to these elections we, each day, give the floor to a (two) party(ies) to explain their position on an issue. Today we have X (and Y) (politician) of Z and W (party) who will give us their party's opinion on A (issue)." The anchor announced the news item in the well-known Eén news studio wearing the same clothes as when announcing the previous and the following real news items. The party leaders' statement invariably started with "The point of view of Z (party) on A (issue) is that . . . ."

Note that, on the one hand, the stimulus we applied to our subjects was weak and latent. The news item was announced as a routine item; it was by no means special or conspicuous. It was not reinforced with footage but only showed a standard and well-known political head talking in a perfectly normal environment (e.g., party headquarters with party logo in the background). The politicians' intervention was not triggered by a spectacular real-world event but was presented as routine coverage in the run-up to the elections. The interviewee was not emotionally talking or drawing attention through large gestures or appealing images; rather, he was calmly exposing his party's point of view regarding the issue. Also, the fake item was very brief. In sum, the experimental item was as routine as a news item can be; respondents had probably seen hundreds of similar news items before, and, as the experiment was conducted in the campaign period, they most likely had been exposed to similar items in the very days before. On the other hand, the survey questions asked immediately after issue exposure drew ample attention to the stimulus, as several diversion questions were asked directly after exposure. This may have created a larger awareness of the news item's content than in a natural situation and may have reinforced its effects.

All national party leaders of the five main parties—the VLD (liberals), CD&V (Christian democrats), Sp.a (socialists), Groen! (greens), and Vlaams Belang (extreme right)—were briefed beforehand and were prepared to make six short statements about the experimental issues (see below). Party leaders did not have to lie or play a fake role; they voiced their party's real views. The only restriction we imposed was that their statement should last approximately 30 seconds and that it should be on topic. The fake items' realism was enhanced further by using a microphone with the typical official "foam tip" with Eén's logo. Below on the screen the subjects saw the typical "name bar" with the Eén logo and in the Eén colors (see Figure 1). The interview was conducted by one of the authors, but the interviewer was never filmed, nor did the respondents hear his voice. Although we did not conduct systematic tests, we are convinced that a very large majority, if not almost every respondent, was convinced that the news item he or she saw was a real item that had been broadcasted a few weeks before. We did not have a single reaction pointing in the opposite direction. After the elections, all participants were fully debriefed by e-mails explaining that they had been exposed to a fake news item and that the results of the experiment would be used for scientific research.

Figure 1. Screen shots of typical stimuli.

We asked all party leaders to provide us with statements on six issues: (a) climate (Groen!), (b) crime (Vlaams Belang), (c) pensions (Sp.a), (d) taxes (VLD), (e) family (CD&V), and (f) defense (none) (five of these issues can be considered as being owned by one of the parties; these parties appear in parentheses). The issue of defense does not belong to any party; it is a free-floating issue. This categorization is based on Walgrave and De Swert's (2007) fine-grained analysis of issue ownership in Belgium drawing on several sources: population surveys, analyses of party manifestos, and party activities in Parliament. They established that, for example, the Belgian (Flemish) public considers Groen! to be (by far) most competent to tackle the issue of the environment (climate) in Parliament and mention it in its party manifestos. The same applies, to a somewhat smaller extent, to the crime issue and the Vlaams Belang, to family policy and the CD&V, and to the tax issue and the VLD. Walgrave and De Swert (2007) define these as "strong" issue ownerships (p. 43). They do not deal directly with the pension issue but analyze the adjacent health insurance and social security issue. On both issues, the Sp.a scores high, which leads us to attribute the pension issue to the socialist party. The defense issue is not

part of Walgrave and De Swert's analysis. Yet it is clear that no party has a strong track record on this issue in Belgium. It is a non-issue that receives very little attention and is void of political struggle. We think it is safe to consider it as unowned.

With the 30 party-issue statements, we built 12 different fake news items presented to 12 different groups. The control group consisted of 394 people who were exposed to the same news video without the fake item—not all of these people always answered all issue ownership questions in all waves, which explains the variation in the size of the control group in the analyses. The 12 items represented six theoretically different conditions. Each condition was covered by two alternative items consisting of an alternative mix of statements. We did this to make sure that the stimulus effects were not caused by the specific performance of a single party leader. In the analysis below, we always use the collapsed data of two groups ($N = \pm 600$) and compare six conditions; we do not discuss the results for the 12 groups separately. Table 2 contains the detailed operationalization.

We did not randomly assign the respondents to the 13 groups (12 "regular" conditions and one control) but stratified the panel's entire population; we assigned people to groups beforehand to ensure that the 13 groups were similar in all relevant respects. Drawing on information obtained in earlier waves of the panel, we stratified on age, sex, education, party preference, and political interest. Stratification has the same effect as randomization; the only difference is that the researcher controls the relevant variables. Consequently, differences between the 13 groups are non-existent; the groups cannot be statistically distinguished from one another. There is not a single significant difference between the control group and any of the treatment groups. A one-way ANOVA comparing differences

Table 2
Overview of experimental conditions and groups

One party leader expresses party view on issue strongly owned by *own* party
• Vera Dua (Groen!) on climate policy ($N = 365$)
• Jo Vandeurzen (CD&V) on family policy ($N = 390$)
One party leader expresses party view on issue strongly owned by *other* party
• Johan Vande Lanotte (SP.A) on crime policy ($N = 400$)
• Frank Vanhecke (Vlaams Belang) on pension policy ($N = 373$)
One party leader expresses party view on issue not owned by *any* party
• Bart Somers (VLD) on defense ($N = 385$)
• Vera Dua (Groen!) on defense ($N = 374$)
Two party leader express party view on issue: One party leader *owns* the issue, the other party does not (*challenger*)
• Frank Vanhecke (Vlaams Belang; owner) and Bart Somers (VLD; challenger) on crime policy ($N = 370$)
• Vera Dua (Groen!; owner) and Johan Vande Lanotte (SP.A; challenger) on climate policy ($N = 372$)
Two party leaders express party view on issue that is not owned by *any* party
• Frank Vanhecke (Vlaams Belang) and Johan Vande Lanotte (SP.A) on defense ($N = 357$)
• Bart Somers (VLD) and Jo Vandeurzen (CD&V) on defense ($N = 374$)
Two party leaders express party view on issue that is owned by *another* party
• Jo Vandeurzen (CD&V) and Johan Vande Lanotte (SP.A) on tax policy ($N = 396$)
• Vera Dua (Groen!) and Bart Somers (VLD) on family policy ($N = 370$)

among the seven conditions (six experimental and one control condition) indicated that condition had no significant impact on three key variables: age, sex, and political interest. Therefore, we can be certain that all possible differences between the groups in terms of the dependent variable, issue ownership, are not due to their different composition.

We measured the dependent variable by asking (for each combination of issue and party separately) the following question: "How competent, according to your opinion, is Z (party) to determine A (issue) policy? Give a score between 0 and 10 where 0 stands for completely incompetent and 10 for extremely competent." So, for every party we have a score on a 10-point scale of how competent the party is to deal with the issue. There are of course alternative ways to assess issue ownership, but they are less suited for repeated measurements and for tapping small changes per party on the respondent level. For example, one could ask people per issue for the single most competent party. Responses to this question put the relative character of issue ownership center stage—parties are competent compared to other parties—but only yield limited dichotomous information about one party instead of detailed and scaled information on all parties, as our variable does.

Analysis and Results

Differences Across Issues

Is parties' issue ownership affected by their leader communicating about the issue in the TV news? The answer is yes. In all treatment conditions, we see a significant shift in issue ownership compared to the control group. This is not to say that we do not find differences between the conditions. In fact, differences between the conditions are substantial, as Table 3 documents and as H1 predicted. Note that we do not control for any individual-level variable as, through the stratification process, the groups' composition is identical.

Before elaborating on the results, how should Table 3 be read? The six conditions are each compared to the control group. Coefficients in the table represent competence scores and increases or decreases in competence scores on a scale from 0 to 10. The significance parameter tests whether differences between W1 and W2 are significant. For example, row 5 of the table represents the outcome under Condition 3: 568 people were exposed to the Condition 3 treatment consisting of one politician speaking about an issue that is owned by another party. The initial (W1) average score of the talking leaders' parties was 4.47 on a scale from 0 to 10; that average score increased after treatment (W2) to 4.80, representing an increase of 0.33 (and that increase was significant at the $p < .001$ level). In the control group of 289 individuals answering all of the necessary questions, we recorded no significant increase or decrease in the issue ownership score of the talking politicians' parties. Note that Table 3 does not contain significance tests of the differences between the treatment and control groups. In summary, Table 3 shows the following:

1. When it comes to *an issue that is not owned by any party*, parties significantly progress and gain credibility by communicating in the news about the issue. In condition 3 and condition 5, respondents were exposed to party leaders talking about defense, an issue that is not owned by any party. The speakers were able to increase their standing on the issue (+0.33 and +0.34 on a scale from 0 to 10).
2. On *their own strongly owned issues*, parties, at first sight, do not seem to be able to make progress and to reinforce their grip: In conditions 1 and 4, the owning party does not make any progress, even declining slightly (–0.05 and –0.07). The interesting thing, though, is that in the control group the issue ownership of the owning party in

Table 3
Effects of experimental stimuli on issue ownership perceptions

	N	Exposure type	W1	W2	W2-W1	*p*
Condition 1	587	One party: own issue	7.15	7.10	–0.05	*ns*
	306	Control group	7.11	6.74	–0.37	.000
Condition 2	568	One party: other party's issue	3.68	3.95	+0.27	.000
	290	Control group	3.81	3.86	+0.05	*ns*
Condition 3	579	One party: unowned issue	4.47	4.80	+0.33	.001
	289	Control group	4.57	4.55	–0.02	*ns*
Condition 4	577	Two parties: owner and challenger				
		Owner	5.21	5.14	–0.07	*ns*
		Owner control group	5.33	5.07	–0.26	.007
		Challenger	6.11	6.12	–0.01	*ns*
		Challenger control group	5.99	5.83	–0.16	*ns*
Condition 5	584	Two parties: both unowned issue	4.75	5.09	+0.34	.002
	289	Control group	4.82	4.74	–0.08	*ns*
Condition 6	609	Two parties: both other party's issue	5.78	5.97	+0.18	.006
	316	Control group	5.68	5.52	–0.16	.003

Source: UAWEP07.
Note: The significance of W2-W1 was calculated with a paired samples *t* test.

both of these conditions decreased even more (–0.37 and –0.26). By appearing in the news and talking about their issue, owning parties seem to be able to limit the damage and mitigate a general decreasing tendency. In Condition 1, but not in Condition 4, the differences between the experimental groups and the control group *are* significant ($p = .004$). This proves that even for strong issue ownerships exposure may help to maintain an issue, in this case to limit the losses.

3. In terms of *the issues owned by others*, parties' communication makes a significant difference. In Condition 2 (one party leader talking), the communicators significantly increased their standing on an issue originally owned by another party (+0.27). In Condition 6 (two party leaders talking), both politicians were able to increase their standing on the issue significantly (+0.18). Again, the control group significantly lost confidence in the party regarding the same issue (–0.19), thereby even increasing the difference between the experimental and control groups.
4. Condition 4 was set up to confront the owner of an issue with a *challenger*—a party that is not the owner. Here we do not find any significant effects at all. Challengers cannot improve their standing on an issue. Their message seems to be entirely neutralized when the original issue owner occupies the stage too and can reiterate its issue position. Also in the control group, the challenging party did not move significantly between the two waves.

Another way to summarize the results in an aggregated way corresponds with the earlier mentioned "ideodynamic" model of Fan (1988). The less voters are already converted by a party, the larger the persuasive effect a message of that party can have. In fact, the correlation between W1 scores and W2-W1 increases or decreases is strong and negative ($r = –.73$). Thus, obviously, there is much more to gain for a party if its initial standing is low.

Further, the behavior of the control group merits our attention. We found that the issue ownership scores of the control group that was not exposed to a talking head significantly *decreased* under some conditions (in Conditions 1, 4, and 6). Why? We have no ready explanation. We are sure, though, that it is not the control group's composition that accounts for these significant declines, as the control group was identical to the treatment groups. The most plausible explanation, in our opinion, is that also in the real world issue ownership constantly changes, and maybe even more so in campaign times. The experimental manipulation in W2 (April 2007) took place in the run-up to the June 10 elections—one could argue that the campaign was already at full speed, as election day had been announced almost a year beforehand and Belgian campaigns tend to be lengthy. The decreases in the control group, therefore, may be a general campaign effect not specifically linked to parties or issues; the significant decreases in the control group are recorded on four issues and involve all parties (see Table 2). This reduces the likelihood that specific campaign effects or events are responsible. In fact, if we follow Fan's (1988) "ideodynamic" argument, we can expect that by the end of the campaign parties, after securing their loyal voters by emphasizing their own issues at the beginning of the campaign, start talking about other parties' issues to blur the issue ownership(s) of these other parties. Campaigns might in most cases erode instead of reinforce existing issue ownerships—this speculative contention deserves of course more detailed elaboration in subsequent studies. Our interpretation that we are confronted here with a general issue ownership decrease due to campaign effects is corroborated by the fact that all significant changes in the control group are negative (issue ownerships in the control group only decrease between W1 and W2) and the fact that all significant changes are associated with high issue ownership scores in W1. In fact, the negative correlation between W1 scores and W2-W1 differences is even larger in the control group than in the treatment groups ($r = -.92$). Our point is precisely that this sizeable general negative tendency can, as we have shown, be neutralized and even reversed by exposure to party leaders claiming the issue.

Summarizing, the above results confirm that there is a direct impact of parties' media communications about an issue on subsequent evaluations of these parties as being competent to deal with the issue. Not all conditions yield strong effects, but the differences between the conditions fit the expectations formulated in H1. The question remains of whether the effects are merely short term, lasting a few hours or days, or whether they are durable. As the experimental treatment was very short and not very conspicuous and as most of our respondents, being interested in politics and watching the news regularly, had probably been confronted with many similar messages between exposure and postmeasurement, we expected to find no effects remaining after a few weeks. To test for this, we asked the same issue ownership questions again in Wave 3 in June, that is, 2 months after the experimental exposure in Wave 2 in April and just a few days before the elections.

Not displayed in a table, the results indicate that most effects entirely disappear. The treatment generates an immediate effect directly after exposure, but then subjects gradually return more or less to the original position they held before being exposed to the stimulus. Their evaluations align with the tendencies in the non-exposed control group. There is one exception to this pattern. Under Condition 3, where we showed our respondents a news item containing one party talking about an issue nobody owns (defense), the effect of the stimulus remained significant (+0.20; $p = .031$) even after 2 months. This is strong evidence for our claim that issue ownership dynamics are particularly important for non-owned issues.

The evidence presented in this section corroborates H1: Media exposure matters for issue ownership; media coverage gives political actors the opportunity to claim issues.

However, in line with that hypothesis, we find substantial differences across issues. Especially for free-floating issues not owned by any party, leaders can make a difference and significantly affect people's perceptions. The reason, most likely, is a kind of "learning" effect. People probably were simply not aware of the fact that a certain party had an argued position about an issue in the first place. When they hear a party exposing its entirely unknown point of view, they learn that this party has something to say about the issue and change their evaluation (see, for example, Lenz, 2005). Communication still matters, but to a lesser extent, when it comes to issues that are owned by other parties. The least effect is generated by communicating about one's own issue. Already having a strong position on an issue, a party has nothing to gain in the short term from talking even more about it. Yet, talking about one's own issue can entirely neutralize the claims of competing parties trying to steal it. Thus, in the long term, it may still be a good idea for a party to keep communicating about the issues it already owns.

Mixed Versus Solo Conditions

Our design permits us to systematically test whether "mixed" media stimuli, featuring two parties, generate different effects than "solo" media stimuli featuring only one party. In Table 4, we compare changes in issue ownership—compared to the baseline tendency in the control group—between similar solo and mixed conditions. We compare Conditions 1 (solo) and 4 (mixed) with parties speaking about their own issue; we compare Conditions 2 (solo) and 6 (mixed) with parties talking about an issue owned by another party; and we compare Conditions 3 (solo) and 5 (mixed) with parties talking about a non-owned issue.

How should Table 4 be read? The figure 0.31 in the Condition 1–Condition 4 row and the Solo column, for example, indicates that the respondents in solo Condition 1, on average, increased the issue score of the party they had been exposed to by 0.31 on a scale from 0 to 10 compared to the tendency in the control group. In Condition 4, a mixed condition, the issue ownership increase averaged 0.17. The difference was 0.13. This means that the effect of mixed exposure is, just as the hypothesis stated, smaller than the effect of solo exposure. But the last column indicates that this difference is not significant. In fact, none of the differences are significant. Consequently, the figures in the table support straightforward conclusions: As in none of the comparisons is there a significant difference between the two types of exposure, H2 can be rejected. Solo or mixed exposure does not seem to matter. We must be cautious, though, since our design does not offer an absolutely conclusive test. We did not confront our subjects with identical quotes in a mixed and in a solo condition. We rely on comparing average results of parties in the different conditions and cannot rule out that specific quotes were more effective than others, blurring the

Table 4
Differential effects of solo vs. mixed experimental conditions

	Solo	Mixed	Solo–mixed	*p*
Condition 1–Condition 4	0.31	0.17	0.13	.234
Condition 2–Condition 6	0.17	0.29	–0.12	.194
Condition 3–Condition 5	0.37	0.41	–0.04	.734

Source: UAWEP07.
Note. The significance of solo-mixed was calculated with an independent samples *t* test.

distinction between solo and mixed exposure. On top of that, while we can reject H2 in general—whether one or two politicians address an audience does not seem to matter for the effect they have on the audience—one specific mixed configuration did yield a specific and significant effect compared to a similar solo exposure. As we showed above when testing H1, when a non-owner is balanced with an owner in a news item, the effect of the non-owner completely disappears; conversely, when a non-owner can address the public on its own without the owner reclaiming the issue in the same news clip, this can significantly affect the audience. Thus, the sheer fact that a news item contains one or two speakers does not seem to make a difference in general, but the specific configuration of the speakers and their preceding ownership of the issue may indeed matter and lead to distinct solo and mixed exposure effects.

Modulating Experimental Impact

Can we further specify our basic finding that media appearance impacts issue ownership? Are certain groups more affected by the experimental exposure than others? We constructed a new dependent variable tapping exposure (experimental group) versus non-exposure (control group). For each respondent, we computed, between Wave 1 and Wave 2, the difference in ownership of each issue/party combination he or she had been exposed to and "normalized" this individual difference score by subtracting the average tendency in the control group from it. The measure represents issue ownership change on top of the average tendency in the non-exposed control group; it represents, so to say, the "net effect" of the experimental condition. Table 5 shows the results of six regression analyses, one for each experimental condition, modeling the net issue ownership change due to experimental exposure. The independent variables are a series of individual variables that have a basis in the media effects literature.

The explained variance of the models is very low. This is proof that the experimental effects induced by the fake news item are found across the board. We can hardly differentiate between people who are susceptible to the experimental effect and people who are not. Probably the skewed nature of our sample with more male, highly educated, and politically interested people leading to limited variation in the independent variables is a part of the explanation; however, this is not likely the whole story.

Taking a closer look at Table 5, some parameters are significant, which means that they do modulate the experimental effect. But not a single parameter is significant in all six models. The best predictor of the exposure effect, significant in three models (and negative in a fourth model), is a party's preceding issue ownership. We recoded the original score on a scale from 1 to 10 into a "curvilinear" scale with the extreme positions (very high and very low score) collapsed. We quite consistently find in three experimental conditions that people with extreme opinions about a party and its capacity to deal with an issue before the experiment are *less* affected by the experimental stimulus than people with moderate opinions. People who are absolutely convinced that a party is a very bad or a very good candidate to deal with an issue are not (or less) convinced by short news exposures to change their opinion. This is entirely in line with earlier research indicating that extreme attitudes are more resistant to change (see, for example, Krosnick & Petty, 1995).

The sociodemographic controls do not influence the effect of the experimental stimulus; a few of them are significant in some models, but there is no distinct pattern. Interestingly, the two variables tapping a respondent's political preference—vote intention and quality score of talking politician—are never significant; they do not modulate the exposure effect. This is remarkable, as we expected that the more a subject liked the party or the

Table 5
Modulating factors increasing or decreasing effects of experimental stimulus

	Condition 1		Condition 2		Condition 3		Condition 4		Condition 5		Condition 6	
	Std. *B*	*p*	Std. *B*	*p*	Std. *B*	*p*	Std. *B*	*p*	Std. *B*	*p*	Std. *B*	*p*
Controls												
Sex (0 = woman; 1 = man)	–.005	.938	–.041	.523	.058	.333	.031	.678	–.150	.024	–.046	.534
Age (years)	.027	.674	–.136	.056	.075	.268	.013	.871	–.081	.269	.151	.068
Education (0 = none; 11-university)	–.124	.038	–.088	.204	.093	.137	.053	.495	.050	.480	.132	.078
Political news media use (1 = daily; 6 = never)	.061	.339	–.149	.029	.066	.314	.038	.638	–.080	.259	.088	.267
Stimulus features												
Credibility of TV station (1 = not credible; 5 = credible)	.098	.099	–.099	.129	–.064	.276	.060	.429	–.047	.516	.093	.207
Quality score of talking politician (1–7)	.102	.102	.026	.696	.104	.094	.089	.288	–.101	.145	.143	.062
Political attitudes of respondent												
Interest in politics (1 = no interest; 10 = interest)	.012	.834	.082	.198	–.031	.609	–.104	.168	–.235	.001	.023	.760
Left-right scale (1 = left, 10 = right)	.112	.064	.010	.892	–.020	.739	.016	.837	–.126	.102	.072	.364
Vote intention party 1 (0 = no; 1 = yes)	.002	.973	–.129	.071	.001	.983	–.026	.754	.109	.159	–.059	.447
Vote intention party 2 (0 = no; 1 = yes)	—	—	—	—	—	—	.066	.401	–.021	.757	.097	.203
Preceding issue ownership score (curvilinear)	.139	.028	.011	.858	–.001	.988	.165	.032	–.136	.040	.175	.014
Preceding issue saliency score (0–10)	–.009	.883	–.209	.005	–.084	.164	.059	.452	.112	.114	.117	.101
Adjusted R^2	.022		.043		.007		.000		.067		.034	
N	313		259		307		197		233		212	

Note. Parameters are standardized betas in a linear regression.

leader himself, the larger the effect would be. This is not the case. There are several variables tapping political preference—vote intention, quality score of politicians, issue ownership—and putting them all together in the same analysis might cancel out the effects. Indeed, these three variables are fairly strongly correlated ($R = \pm.30$), but running the regressions with each of them separately or with any combination of the three party variables only minimally changes the results. The only conclusion can be that political preference appears to not modulate the strength of the exposure effect.

In conclusion, we only find very small differences between different kinds of respondents. Effects are found across the board. This challenges our third hypothesis. Some modulating factors are significant, but they are fairly weak and not consistent. People who previously gave a party a moderate issue score are more susceptible to issue exposure than people who gave a party a very high or a very low score. Extreme issue ownership perceptions, hence, are more stable and unchangeable than intermediate perceptions. In a sense, what applies to parties (intermediate positions are more prone to change) also applies to individual respondents.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our aim was to test whether issue ownership is a process and not a constant. The research literature considers parties' issue ownership to be essentially stable—acquired via a long track record of high attention in manifestos, in policy proposals, and through constant parliamentary action. We showed that, in reality, the identification between parties and issues is a dynamic process and that changes in issue ownership are common. Based on an experimental design with a fake media stimulus, a 30 second quote in the news, we were able to significantly affect our subjects' perceptions as to what extent parties are considered to be competent to deal with an issue.

The most important finding is that not all issues are similarly conducive to issue ownership change. Free-floating issues are most prone to being successfully claimed by parties. Firmly owned issues are a bit more difficult to claim for other parties, but even here we found that a leader's media performance can to some extent pull an issue closer to the party. If the original owner, however, gets the media stage too and the news report is balanced, the challenging party is not able to gain any leverage and the challenger's communication is entirely neutralized. This implies that, in the long term, it is in parties' interest to continue to communicate about their own issues. If they stop talking about their issues, they may gradually lose their grip on them. We also, established that the exposure effects are fairly general; all media consumers seem to be affected to more or less the same extent. In addition, the differences between the different exposure types also turned out to be limited. Apart from one important exception—when both the issue owner and a challenger are confronted in a balanced news item—there do not seem to be many effect differences between the mixed and solo exposure conditions. Whether one or two party leaders have the stage does not seem to matter. In a nutshell, we showed that issue ownership essentially is a dynamic process directly affected by parties' communication in the media.

That issue ownership is not eternal has important consequences for campaigning. Issue ownership should be maintained, as other parties are potentially able to take over an issue neglected by the original owner. Although the classic research literature does not consider this to be realistic, the recent empirical campaign research cited above has documented that parties do in fact "trespass" and sometimes successfully grasp another party's issues. Our study has shown experimentally that this may indeed be a successful strategy.

We suggest some conditions under which parties can successfully trespass and claim others' issues. If parties receive ample media attention, and if they get the opportunity to choose their issues freely when receiving airplay, issue trespassing is a potentially winning strategy. If parties get only a small amount of media attention, the chances that they can convince voters of their unowned issue competence are small. The better strategy for a low-exposure party is to stick to its own issue to make sure nobody steals it. This implies in concrete terms that especially smaller parties—because of the small amount of media attention they get—are probably not in a good position to issue trespass. Moreover, these smaller parties typically have a very distinct issue profile and are strongly identified with only one or a few issues. Bigger parties, in contrast, receive more media attention, and this gives them more chances to start systematically claiming other parties' issues. Because they appear more frequently in the media, they can, at the same time, maintain their original issues and frequently address other issues. This broadens their issue appeal and their attractiveness to different population segments.

Apart from differences in issue trespassing opportunities between parties, our study suggests that the stage in the campaign may play a role. Issue trespassing is probably a phenomenon that occurs mainly at the end of the campaign. Parties start the campaign by "recapturing" their old issue ownerships and reconverting voters who had been converted before. At the end of the campaign, parties cannot gain new votes by simply sticking to their old issues—these issue voters have already been secured. Thus, especially at the end of the campaign, they are motivated trespass issues and try to charm different issue electorates. Issue trespassing *can* be a successful strategy, especially for large parties and at the end of the campaign. But our results also raise doubts about the electoral consequences of issue trespassing. Issue ownership is a matter of top rankings. Improving one's issue score on a poor issue, we have shown, can fairly easily be accomplished. Yet, marginally improving a low score will not produce many extra votes if the party is not able to dethrone the issue owner. Thus, many marginal issue ownership changes through targeted media appearances may, in the final count, have no effect at all on electoral results.

Issue ownership, at least in a multiparty system, is essentially a variable rather than a constant. It is significantly and directly affected by parties' media performance. Ultimately, this finding spurs the question of whether this obliterates the issue ownership idea altogether. After all, the mainstream literature considers issue ownership as something fixed; we have shown that it is not. We believe our finding that issue ownership is a dynamic process does not directly undermine the issue ownership thesis. On the contrary, our study can help explain why, although in principle easily changeable on the micro level, issue ownership is typically stable, certainly on a macro level.

First, the effects we find are relatively small. On a 10-point scale, our subjects moved the parties only marginally upward or downward. Second, and more importantly, the differential effects across conditions underscore the issue ownership idea. If issues are owned by parties, the exposure effect is less considerable than if they are not; especially for free-floating issues, in our design defense, issue ownership evolves. Yet in reality, the most important political issues are not free floating but clearly associated with a party. Free issues are probably the exception and firmly owned issues the rule. On a macro level, then, issue ownership evolves less than in an experimental micro-level situation.

Third, the effects we found are not durable but ephemeral. A few weeks after exposure, most of the effects had disappeared. Interestingly, subjects who had adjusted their initial position immediately after the treatment later returned to their previously held attitude. Thus, we managed to sway subjects' opinion, but after a while they returned to a sort of "natural equilibrium"—that is, a more resilient and stable underlying opinion about parties'

aptness to deal with an issue. This equilibrium comes very close to what we would define as the core of issue ownership—it is comparable to Petrocik's notion of "performance issues" that can be temporarily "on lease" but are repossessed by the original owner in the long run. Of course, if people are constantly confronted with consistent messages linking a party to an issue, this might in the long run also affect their "deep" disposition. The equilibrium is not really "natural"; it is human made and maintained.

This brings us to a fourth point. There was one condition in which we found no exposure effect at all: When, in the same news item, a challenging party is confronted with the issue owner, the owner's and the challenger's positions are affected. In the real world of daily news, this probably is the most frequent situation. One of the core journalistic practices is "balancing," that is, including several contradictory statements of political opponents in the same news item. Balancing issue challengers and issue owners, we showed, fundamentally changes the effect of the communication. Consistently unbalanced news systematically covering certain parties regarding certain issues while neglecting the other parties is probably rather exceptional in most Western media systems. As a consequence, the impact of media messages on macro-level issue ownership change is, on the whole and in the long run, rather small, and issue ownership is fairly stable.

Fifth, earlier studies (see, for example, Walgrave & De Swert, 2007) showed that mass media, do not associate parties with issues haphazardly. There is a clear tendency of mass media to give the stage to and to quote parties considered as issue owners. In other words, mass media constantly maintain existing associations between parties and issues. Their news selection procedures have a built-in conservative bias. In sum, issue ownership is a dynamic process directly and immediately affected by the messages parties send out. In reality, the conditions under which real shifts in macro-level issue ownership occur are probably exceedingly rare. Hence, issue ownership change is in principle possible, but stability is the rule in reality.

Our findings shed new light on the dynamic relationship between parties, media, issues, and voters. They beg for more studies in which issue ownership is viewed seriously as a dependent variable. Issue ownership is not an exogenous variable; it is not an eternal asset for parties. It can be acquired and must be earned in a competitive and ongoing process. This research only tested for the impact of one medium in one country, regarding only six issues. The empirical base to generalize our findings to other media, other countries, and other issues is lacking. But we hope we have shown that empirically examining the origins of issue ownership is a promising avenue for further research.

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