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The Limits of Issue Ownership Dynamics: The Constraining Effect of Party Preference*

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ABSTRACT *Issue ownership theory argues that when a voter considers a party to be the most competent amongst others to deal with an issue (that is, the party “owns” the issue), chances are the voter will vote for that party. Recent work has shown that perceptions of issue ownership are dynamic: they are affected by the media coverage of party messages. However, based on the broad literature on partisan bias, we predict that parties’ efforts to change issue ownership perceptions will have a difficult time breaching the perceptual screen created by a voter’s party preference. Using two separate experiments with a similar design we show that the effect of partisan issue messages on issue competence is moderated by party preference. The effect of issue messages is reinforced when people already like a party, and blocked when people dislike a party.*

Parties compete over issues both electorally and in terms of policy making. One of the major assets in this struggle is parties’ “issue ownership”. Issue ownership has a competence and an associative dimension (Walgrave et al., 2012): whereas competence issue ownership is the perceived – according to voters – competence of parties to deal with an issue and implement the best policies, associative issue ownership designates the spontaneous association between an issue and a party in the minds of voters, regardless of whether voters consider the party to be the most competent to deal with this issue. In line with most previous work, we focus on the competence dimension of issue ownership, which connects the electoral and policy aspects of the issue competition amongst parties.¹ The competence dimension links the beliefs of voters (electoral) to parties’ real, or perceived, performance on issues (policy).

From an issue ownership perspective, issue competition between parties implies that parties predominantly compete over issues by attempting to shift the political

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debate, and the political agenda, towards issues for which they are considered most competent. The early literature on selective issue emphasis (see for example Budge & Farlie, 1983b) claimed that parties mostly talk past each other in avoiding discussion about issues owned by another party, preferring instead to address those issues for which they enjoy a reputation of issue-handling competence – that is: the issues they “own”.

However, apart from sticking to one’s own issues, parties also have another option; they can try to gain issue ownership on issues they do not own or for which they do not have a strong reputation yet. New research has paid increasing attention to the changeability and the dynamic character of issue ownership (see for example Bélanger, 2003; Brasher, 2009; Green & Jennings, 2011; Stubager & Slothuus 2012; Walgrave et al., 2009). This work suggests that voters’ issue ownership perceptions shift over time, and that parties, by performing well while in government or by communicating effectively about an issue, can gain ownership of issues on which they scored low before (but see Tresch et al., 2013). This article engages with this recent work on issue ownership dynamics and challenges the notion that issue ownership is for the taking by any party.

Drawing on two survey-embedded experiments in Belgium during the 2007 and 2009 election campaigns, we show that the effects of issue messages in Belgium are constrained by preceding party preference. Issue messages by parties already liked by the subjects have a significantly larger impact on the updating of the perceived issue ownership of the party. Issue claims by disliked parties do not affect the issue ownership score. Preceding party preference, in other words, moderates the effect of parties’ issue claims. Parties are able to reinforce their standing on an issue amongst voters who do not strongly dislike them, while their efforts seem to be in vain when it comes to convincing voters who strongly dislike the party to begin with. Thus, our evidence based on a single country case study suggests that issue ownership is dynamic; it changes as a consequence of party messages, but the effect thereof on the vote seems to be limited, as party supporters are the most keen to update their beliefs about their party, and party opponents remain unaffected.

Issue Ownership Dynamics

Issue ownership theory, as originally developed in Europe by Budge and Farlie (1983a, 1983b) and in the United States, inspired by earlier work by Stokes (1963) and Petrocik (1996), has a double aim. First, as a theory of candidate behaviour and party competition, it explains which issues are emphasized (or downplayed) during election campaigns. Issue ownership theory holds that parties and their candidates attempt to mobilize voters by selectively focusing their campaign efforts on their so-called owned issues, and avoid issues to which their competitors are perceived better suited. By increasing the salience of owned issues during an electoral campaign – by strategically talking about their issues in their party manifesto, in their electoral communication, and in the media – parties can affect their electoral fortunes and gain electoral support (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994).

Second, issue ownership theory predicts that individuals make their voting decision based on their evaluation of the issue handling reputations of each party. Whereas the creators of issue ownership theory have tested the theory by its ability to predict election results on the aggregate level (Budge & Farlie, 1983a, 1983b; Petrocik, 1996), subsequent scholars have focused on issue ownership as a determinant of the individual vote. In a study on British and Italian voters, for example, Bellucci (2006) showed that the more a voter considers a party ideally suited to deal with an issue, the better the chances that she votes for that party. Similarly, a good deal of recent studies examined and substantiated the effect of issue ownership on the vote (sometimes in interaction with issue saliency) (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Green & Hobolt, 2008; Green & Jennings, 2011; Nadeau et al., 2000; but see, for an opposite account, van der Brug, 2004). In sum, issue ownership explains not only party behaviour but also individual voting behaviour.

Recently, scholars have begun to investigate the origins, and thus also the dynamic character, of issue ownership. Issue ownership has both a stable and a dynamic aspect; this duality was already present in Petrocik's (1996) defining formulation of the theory. The stability comes from the fact that parties are identified with and connected to socially distinctive constituencies and promote issues in their supporters' interest (see for example Stubager & Slothuus, 2012). As a result, parties become the owners of the issues their constituency cares about, and this does not change overnight.

Although most of the research has treated issue ownership as somewhat constant, there is a dynamic aspect as well. It evolves over time. Recent studies show that voters' issue ownership perceptions are changeable. Parties' ownership scores increase and decrease, and ownership is not a fixed asset (see for example Bélanger, 2003; Brasher, 2009; Green & Jennings, 2011; Walgrave et al., 2009). Some of this recent work also has provided a straightforward answer as to why issue ownership changes over time. Parties are able to affect their ownership of an issue by addressing the issue in their external communication and convincing the public that they are capable of dealing with it; by speaking persuasively about an issue, they create a link in people's minds between the issue and themselves and can thus sway the public's perception of them (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007; Walgrave & De Swert, 2007; Walgrave et al., 2009). Note that not only talking but also doing (while in government) may affect how competent parties are perceived (see for example Green & Jennings, 2011; Petrocik, 1996; Stubager & Slothuus, 2012), but here we focus on the speaking only.

Parties speak to the public in their party manifestos, in their interventions in parliament, in their press releases, but probably most, and most effectively, in their appearances in the mass media. Such media appearances are especially relevant for issue ownership as a theory of voting behaviour, because voters get most of their political information from the mass media (De Vreese, 2010). Parties constantly address issues in their public communication in the media. This is the essence of their public performances: talking about the issues of the day claiming that they are the best party at dealing with it. Whereas the founders of issue ownership theory drew on issue

ownership to explain party communication, recent work has shown that party communication explains issue ownership; thus, a new research domain on issue ownership dynamics has been opened.

The Constraining Effect of Party Preference

This study speaks to the current work on issue ownership dynamics, and examines, by means of an experiment, whether the effect of party messages on voters' perception of issue ownership is selective. We expect the effect of party messages to be constrained by pre-existent party preferences – that is, parties may affect their perceived ownership by publicly addressing the issue but only among voters who already like and support the party. Messages by disliked parties are usually filtered and discarded, while messages by already liked parties are not filtered and thus affect the party's standing on the issue as perceived by the treated subject.

The idea of selective acceptance depending on one's partisan preference is, of course, not new. In fact, it goes back to the very founders of the field of electoral studies, who showed that party preference (party identification) influences many political evaluations and perceptions (Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1964). Campbell and colleagues state: "Identification with a party raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation" (1960: 133). Partisan preferences act as a filter through which the performance of parties, and thus also their reputation in handling certain issues, is assessed (Bartels, 2002). Partisan loyalty and the need for cognitive consistency (Evans & Andersen, 2006) are among the numerous reasons for this political conditioning effect.

Partisan conditioning effects have been found to be strong and pervasive. Evans and Andersen (2006), for example, found that perceptions of the state of the economy in the United Kingdom were not driving party preferences but rather were the consequence of existing party preference. Earlier, these authors showed that this was also true for other issues in the United Kingdom: perceptions of issue proximity between parties and voters were affected by party identification, rather than the other way around. Evans and Andersen (2006) drew the conclusion that issue perceptions and proximity measures cannot be taken as independent determinants of voting decisions, as they are the consequence of party preference (Evans & Andersen, 2004). The finding that political conditioning results from perceptions of basic facts such as how the economy is doing – notions that should be more disconnected from direct political evaluations than explicit partisan issue ownership evaluations – reinforces the expectation that issue ownership evaluations are affected by party preference (see also Bartels, 2002).

The literature on rationalization by voters (see for example Rahn et al., 1994; Wawro, 2006) provides another look at the effect of party preference on issue ownership evaluations. Based on broad theories of cognitive inconsistency (Festinger, 1957), this work holds that people, consciously or unconsciously, try to avoid contradictions between their different attitudes or beliefs. Thus, when presented with new

communication from a party regarding an issue, people draw on their pre-existing *general* attitudes towards that party to produce their evaluation of the party's ownership on a *specific* issue (see for a similar logic Stubager & Slothuus, 2012).

In political communication, studies on media effects and partisan messages have shown that exposure to and acceptance of messages diverges widely based on pre-existing preferences. People tend to avoid exposure to messages about and from parties they dislike (Iyengar et al., 2008), and when they are exposed to it, they do not accept much, if any, of the incoming information. This is the basic tenet of Zaller's (1992) "Receive-Accept-Sample" (RAS) model. One of Zaller's core claims is that existing predispositions (together with political awareness) affect the acceptance of new information. If (politically aware) people encounter information that runs counter to their predispositions, chances are high that they will not accept the information, and will not adjust their opinion: "[p]eople tend to resist arguments that are inconsistent with their predispositions" (Zaller, 1992: 44). We expect this to be true regarding issue ownership as well. When people are confronted with a party message on a certain issue, they will more easily accept this message and increase the party's score when they already are positively inclined towards the party; when people, in contrast, consider the communicating party not to match their own views, the exposure to issue statements will not affect the issue ownership score. Hence, party preference is the critical moderating variable between parties' issue messages and subsequent issue ownership evaluations.

Finally, the literature on source credibility provides another take on political communication and influence. This literature states that the acceptance and persuasiveness of a message depends on the credibility of the source. The less credible a source, the less the source's message sticks (for an overview, see Pompitakpan, 2004). When we apply this observation to the effect of party messages on issue ownership, we expect that parties that are disliked by a voter would not be considered as a credible source while parties that are liked would be. Consequently, the persuasive effect of party messages is reinforced for preferred parties while it is blocked for non-preferred parties.

Wrapping up, works on selective acceptance, partisan conditioning, rationalization, and source credibility all suggest that the effect of party messages on issue ownership evaluations is moderated by pre-existing party preference. We will examine this expectation after we present our data in the next section.

Data and Methods

We draw on two survey-embedded experiments. The experiments were part of the University of Antwerp Web Panels 2007 (UAWEP07) and 2009 (UAWEP09) in the run-up to the federal elections of 2007 and the regional elections of 2009 in Belgium. Though regional and federal elections take place at different levels, in essence the parties and politicians that participate in both Belgian elections are highly similar: due to the centrifugal transferring of powers to the regional level, these elections have gained prominence, and therefore the electoral context for

both experiments is highly similar (Van Aelst & Lefevere, 2012). The 2007 panel used four waves (three pre-electoral, one post-electoral), but in the present article, we use data only from the first two waves (wave 1 was online from 7 March until 28 March; wave 2 ran from 16 April until 7 May). Similarly, for the 2009 panel, we rely only on the first two pre-electoral waves, but not on the post-electoral wave (wave 1 was online from 20 March until 28 April; wave 2 was online from 27 May until 7 June). For each experiment, we include only subjects who participated in both waves, were exposed to the treatment, and answered all relevant questions. Before applying the experimental treatment in the second wave, we pre-measured all relevant dependent and independent variables in the first wave. Immediately after treatment in the second wave, we re-measured issue ownership. In total, 1,365 respondents qualified for inclusion in 2007 and 613 qualified in 2009. Our subjects form no representative sample of the Belgian population. However, representativeness is not our aim because our experimental design is primarily aimed at achieving maximum internal validity. That said, we do dispose of a relatively diverse sample of respondents in the two experiments – the sample includes both young and old respondents, highly politically interested and less politically interested respondents, and so forth. Given that many experiments use samples that consist merely of students, we feel that our samples are adequate for the purpose of this study (Iyengar, 2001).

The treatment consisted of exposure to a fake news item embedded in a longer and real excerpt of the main evening news, *Het Journaal*, of Belgium's public broadcaster VRT. *Het Journaal* is the most popular news show in Belgium. We took a real news show broadcasted a few weeks before the experiment and added the stimulus, which was a fabricated news item described in greater detail below. The fabricated news item, our stimulus, was preceded by a very short real news item and followed by two other real news items. Respondents in the control group were exposed to the exact same fragment, minus the stimulus. The total excerpt lasted approximately three to four minutes.

The stimulus was a 30-second news item with the leader of one of Belgium's five main parties talking 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 party to explain their position on an issue. Today we have X (politician) of Z (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 in which he announced the previous and following real news items. The false news was announced as a routine item; it was by no means special or conspicuous. It was not reinforced with footage; it showed only 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 speaking emotionally or drawing attention with large gestures or appealing images; he simply and calmly exposed his party's point of view regarding the issue. In sum, the stimulus was as routine as a news

item can be; respondents had probably seen hundreds of similar news items before, and as the experiments were conducted during the campaign period, the respondents most likely had been exposed to similar items in the days before.

Party leaders of the main parties were briefed beforehand and were prepared to deliver short statements about a number of issues. In 2007 the issues were climate, crime, pensions, tax, family policy and defence. In 2009 they were environment, crime and development aid (we provide a few sample transcripts of statements in the online appendix, available on the publisher's website <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2013.811245>). Party leaders did not have to lie or play a fake role; they voiced their party's real views. The only restrictions were that their statement had to stay under approximately 30 seconds and that it had to remain on topic. As one of the authors observed while filming the clips, all party leaders were motivated to deliver a strong statement; each leader came prepared with written notes and was accompanied by his or her spokesperson. Furthermore, all party leaders decided to record multiple takes for each statement on each issue in order to get their message "right". Naturally, this does not eliminate all differences between party leaders – some of them were better at voicing a clearly structured argument than others. However, the overall quality of the statements was high and generally comparable across parties and issues.

Note that the party leaders who delivered a quote for our experiments were asked to explain only their party's *position* on the issue, while we take *competence* issue ownership as the dependent variable (see question wording below). Position and competence are not the same. From the first formulation of the issue ownership thesis, there has been an ongoing discussion about the relationship between position and competence (Petrocik, 1996; van der Brug, 2004; Walgrave et al., 2012). Strictly speaking, issue competence refers to a party's skills, expertise and capacity to implement its policies, whereas issue position refers to the party's preferred solution for a policy problem. However, because the party leaders' quotes were framed in an electoral context and because they clearly were persuasive (see online appendix available on the publisher's website <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2013.811245>), we consider the employed quotes as issue competence claims: they tried to convince viewers not only of their position but also of their capacities and ability to deal with the issue.

In 2007, we did not randomly assign the respondents to the conditions but stratified the panel's entire population on age, sex, education, party preference and political interest. For an experimental design, randomization is preferable, but a post-hoc analysis showed that due to the large amount of respondents, randomization would have yielded identical distributions of key variables across conditions. In 2009, the respondents were randomly assigned to the different conditions. After the elections, participants were fully debriefed by an email explaining that they had been exposed to a fabricated news item and that the results of the experiment would be used for scientific research.

Table 1 provides an overview of the various conditions for both 2007 and 2009, and the number of subjects who were exposed to the stimulus and who answered

Table 1. Overview of experimental conditions

2007 experiment	N
Green Party leader on environment	191
Christian Democratic Party leader on family policy	203
Socialist Party leader on crime	193
Extreme Right Party leader on pensions	188
Liberal Party leader on defence	200
Green Party leader on defence	195
Control group	195
2009 experiment	N
Green Party leader on environment	89
Liberal Party leader on crime	120
Liberal Party leader on development aid	91
Extreme Right Party leader on crime	112
Socialist Party leader on environment	93
Control group	108

all relevant questions for the analysis. As should be clear from the table, the 2009 experiment had substantially fewer respondents per group than the 2007 experiment. This lowers the statistical strength of the 2009 results, which we take into account when we discuss them. Other than the lower number of exposed respondents per condition, conditions are very similar for 2007 and 2009: in both experiments the stimulus lasted 30 seconds, and the format was identical.

In the actual analyses, we aggregate across conditions because we are interested in the overall moderating effect of party preference on issue ownership change. In other words, we exclude all issue- or party-specific effects from our analyses and look only at the aggregate results. This strategy neglects issue and party differences, but we thought it to be the best way to show what is generally occurring. In technical terms, disaggregating the results to the issue and party level would be problematic. Our conditions always combine parties and issues – respondents are exposed to a party leader from a specific party addressing a specific issue – but only a relatively small number of party–issue combinations were tested. As it stands, the current design enables us to tell whether it is the issue or the party that causes differences between conditions, since it does not systematically include every party–issue combination – doing so would require a large number of conditions and respondents.

For the issue ownership measurement, our dependent variable, we draw on the classic question “How suitable do you think each of the following parties is to deal with the issue of X?”. Each party was scored by each respondent and for each issue included in the experiment on an 11-point scale (0 = completely unsuited to 10 = completely suited). As a measure for party preference, our key independent

(moderating) variable, we used the following question: “What do you think of the ideas of the parties? Give each a score from 0 to 10, 0 meaning that you do not agree with its ideas and 10 meaning that you totally agree with its ideas”. We include party preference instead of party choice because it presents a more fine-grained variable: party choice would only tell us which party the respondent preferred *most*. Party preference, on the other hand, has the advantage of providing a gradual measure of preference for each party: instead of knowing only that a green voter did not vote for the socialists (party choice), we now control for the fact that this voter might still have a somewhat positive attitude towards the socialists (party preference).

In the online appendix (available on the publisher’s website <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2013.811245>), we provide an overview of the distribution of key variables, such as pre-exposure issue ownership, political interest, and various socio-demographic variables across the different conditions in the experiments. As should be clear from these tables, in both experiments the treatment was independent of the moderating variable (party evaluation), issue ownership, and various confounding variables.

Our modelling strategy is a multi-level one. We stack the dataset so that each respondent is represented by a number of different observations: all individual party–issue links evaluated by all single respondents form the records. As a consequence, each respondent is represented by a number of issue–party combinations (e.g., socialist party x environment). This results in a maximum of 42 combinations (six issues * seven parties) for each respondent in 2007 and 36 combinations (six issues * six parties) in 2009. By using such a stacked file, we can estimate an aggregated model across issues and parties. We are not interested here in differential effects between voters. The reason we employ a multi-level model, thus, is purely statistical: to correct our estimates for possible errors introduced by the duplication of observations in the stacked dataset (Steenbergen & Jones, 2002: 219–220).

The control group consisted of 195 people in 2007 and 108 in 2009 who were exposed to the same news video without the fabricated item with the speaking party leader. In addition, for the subjects who had been exposed to a politician speaking about a particular issue, we considered the issue ownership score they attributed to *other* parties on *other* issues as being part of the control group. This might have created a bias if other issue ownership scores were affected by the treatment. However, we tested whether such “spill-over” effect existed – that is, whether exposure to one party leader on one issue affected other issue ownership scores. This was not the case. Thus, the models below compare the issue ownership effect of exposure to a news item with a given party and a given issue with the issue score of people not exposed to messages of that party and on that issue. Strictly speaking, the absence of a spill-over effect made the use of the control group data unnecessary, as we could simply have used the answers of the respondents who were not exposed to a certain party–issue combination – but the control group was necessary to test the presence of such effects in the first place. We decided to keep the control group respondents on board to reinforce the baseline against which exposure effects were tested.

Results

Table 2 and Table 3 present multi-level linear regressions of the experiments conducted during the electoral campaigns of 2007 and 2009. Exposure to a party message regarding an issue is one of the key independent variables (0–1). Party evaluation (scale 0–10) is the other independent variable of interest. The dependent variable in all models is the issue ownership score of a party (scale 0–10) attributed by a certain respondent after exposure (or not) to an issue message by this party in wave 2.

The tables each contain a direct effect model and a model with an interaction effect between party evaluation and exposure. As we explain below, the 2009 table contains two additional models. In both 2007 and 2009, model 1 shows that issue ownership in wave 1, before exposure, is a strong predictor of issue ownership in wave 2, after exposure. There is much stability in issue ownership: people do not change their evaluation of parties’ ability to deal with an issue overnight. If the wave 1 issue ownership score increases by one point (on an 11-point scale), the score in wave 2 increases about half a point (0.54 in 2007 and 0.48 in 2009). The effect of party evaluation is very significant as well, and only slightly less strong. How a party is evaluated in wave 1, before exposure, matters much for the score this party gets on any issue in wave 2, after exposure. Per point increase on the 11-point party evaluation scale, the increase of post-exposure issue ownership is 0.35 in 2007 and 0.41 in 2009. This may

Table 2. Multi-level linear regression predicting post-exposure (wave 2) issue ownership score – 2007 experiment

	Model 1 Exposure			Model 2 Interaction		
<i>Fixed effects</i>						
Issue ownership pre-exposure (wave 1)	0.54	(0.00)	***	0.54	(0.00)	***
Party evaluation (wave 1)	0.35	(0.00)	***	0.35	(0.00)	***
Exposed to party message on issue	0.22	(0.04)	***	0.11	(0.08)	
Exposed to party message on issue* Party evaluation				0.02	(0.01)	
Constant	0.68	(0.02)	***	0.68	(0.02)	***
<i>Random effects</i>						
Respondent-level variance	0.38	(0.02)		0.38	(0.02)	
Issue-party-level variance	1.95	(0.01)		1.95	(0.01)	
Log likelihood	-102047.18			-102045.89		
N _i / N _j	1365/57330			1365/57330		

Note: **p* < 0.05; ***p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001.

Table 3. Multi-level linear regression predicting post-exposure (wave 2) issue ownership score – 2009 experiment

	Model 1 Exposure			Model 2 Interaction			Model 3 Exposure, without Liberal Party conditions			Model 4 Interaction, without Liberal Party conditions		
<i>Fixed effects</i>												
Issue ownership pre-exposure (wave 1)	0.48	(0.00)	***	0.48	(0.00)	***	0.47	(0.01)	***	0.48	(0.00)	***
Party evaluation (wave 1)	0.41	(0.00)	***	0.41	(0.00)	***	0.40	(0.01)	***	0.40	(0.00)	***
Exposed to party message on issue	0.08	(0.06)		0.06	(0.12)		0.33	(0.08)	***	0.14	(0.14)	
Exposed to party message on issue * Party evaluation				0.00	(0.02)					0.05	(0.03)	+
Constant	1.16	(0.03)	***	1.16	(0.03)	***	1.20	(0.04)	***	1.20	(0.04)	***
<i>Random effects</i>												
Respondent-level variance	0.35	(0.02)		0.35	(0.02)		0.40	(0.03)		0.40	(0.03)	
Issue-party-level variance	1.91	(0.02)		1.91	(0.02)		1.91	(0.02)		1.91	(0.02)	
Log likelihood	-45544.77			-45544.75			-29881.46			-29895.31		
N _i / N _j	613/25746			613/25746			402/16884			402/16884		

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

not seem substantial but it is, since we deal with two extended scales. The difference in average issue ownership scores between a voter that considers a party to be absolutely worthless (score “0”) and a voter that considers the same party to be the best possible party (score “10”) amounts to 3.85 points in 2007 and 4.51 in 2009. Note that this substantial party preference effect comes *on top* of the path-dependency effect of preceding wave 1 issue ownership.

The effect of exposure differs between 2009 and 2007. While both coefficients are positive, the effect of exposure is highly significant in 2007 (0.22 (0.04), $p = 0.000$) but fails to reach significance in 2009 (0.08 (0.06), $p = 0.223$). This can be partially explained by the lower N in 2009, but the coefficient itself is smaller. In 2007, exposure to party messages made a difference: people adjusted their issue ownership perception of a party when they were exposed to the party leader talking about the issue. The 2009 results seem to suggest otherwise: exposure to the exact same type of stimulus seems to have an effect in the same direction but not significantly so.

The reason for this is a confounding factor in two conditions in 2009: as Table 1 documents, two of the five treatment conditions contained the Liberal Party (Open VLD) leader Bart Somers. However, between waves 1 and 2 of the 2009 experiment, this particular party leader was caught in a scandal: in a document he promised an MP from another party a four-year salary (government paid) if he would defect and join the party leader’s party. The document was made public on 5 May, after wave 1 and before wave 2 of the experiment. While we have some measures on the drop in his personal evaluation between wave 1 and wave 2 – his average evaluation on an 11-point scale was 5.4 in wave 1, which dropped to 4.9 in wave 2 – no such measures are available for 2007, which makes it difficult to compare regression results if we included additional controls. To account for this, models 3 and 4 present the regression results for the 2009 data after the exclusion of the conditions that contained Bart Somers. Even with the lower N, model 3 shows that exposure now has a strong and significantly positive effect (0.33 (0.08), $p < 0.000$). Thus, the impact of the scandal on Bart Somers’ effectiveness to convey political messages is clearly present; his credibility has suffered. As such, the 2009 coefficients reported in model 1 and 2 should be interpreted in this light, and we suggest models 3 and 4 to be better representations of the generic effect yielded by party messages.

Model 2 for 2007 and model 4 (without Somers) for 2009 incorporate an interaction term between party evaluation and exposure to a party message regarding the issue. Including the interaction term, the main effect of exposure to a party message disappears both in 2007 and 2009; coefficients hardly differ from zero. This means that there is no effect – or only a very small and insignificant effect of 0.11 in 2007 and 0.14 in 2009 – from exposure when the party score is at its minimum (zero). People who very much dislike a party are hardly affected by the party leader claiming to have the best policy regarding a given issue. So, the potential change in issue ownership due to exposure to a party message is blocked by a low party evaluation.

In model 4 of 2009, the interaction term of (party evaluation) x (exposure to party message) is significantly linked to the issue ownership score after exposure (model 2

of 2009 does not yield significant results for the interaction term, but as we explained above there is a substantial confounding factor in the Liberal Party conditions). The interaction effect is only marginally significant, though (0.05 (0.03), $p = 0.071$). In model 2 of 2007 there is no overall significant effect of the interaction term. Yet, the calculation of marginal effects of exposure for varying levels of the moderating variable – party evaluation – is necessary to fully test the significance of an interaction (Brambor et al., 2006).

Since the interaction effect is so central to our argument, we calculated the marginal effect of exposure for each increasing value on the party evaluation scale. We follow the method proposed by Brambor et al. (2006: 70) because in both 2007 and 2009 the co-variance between exposure and its interaction term was negative; correcting for this brings about significant marginal effects even though the overall interaction term is insignificant in 2007 and hardly significant in 2009. Figure 1 plots the marginal effect of being exposed to the stimulus in the 2007 experiment for various values of party evaluation; Figure 2 shows the same marginal effects for the 2009 experiment.

When the lower limit of the confidence interval does not overlap with the zero baseline, the marginal effect of exposure becomes significant. The figures show that the marginal effect of exposure becomes significant from a party evaluation of 2 and upwards in 2009 (0.17 (0.07), $p = 0.014$) and 1 and upwards in 2007 (0.14 (0.06), $p = 0.039$). Thus, across all issues and parties, respondents who were exposed to a 30-second clip featuring a politician talking about an issue gave that party a slightly higher score on the issue compared to respondents that were not

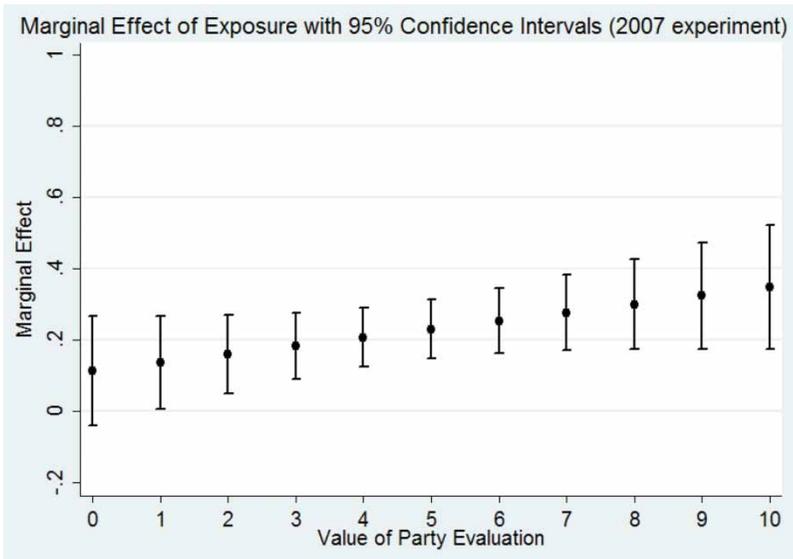


Figure 1. Moderating effect of party evaluation on issue ownership – 2007 experiment.

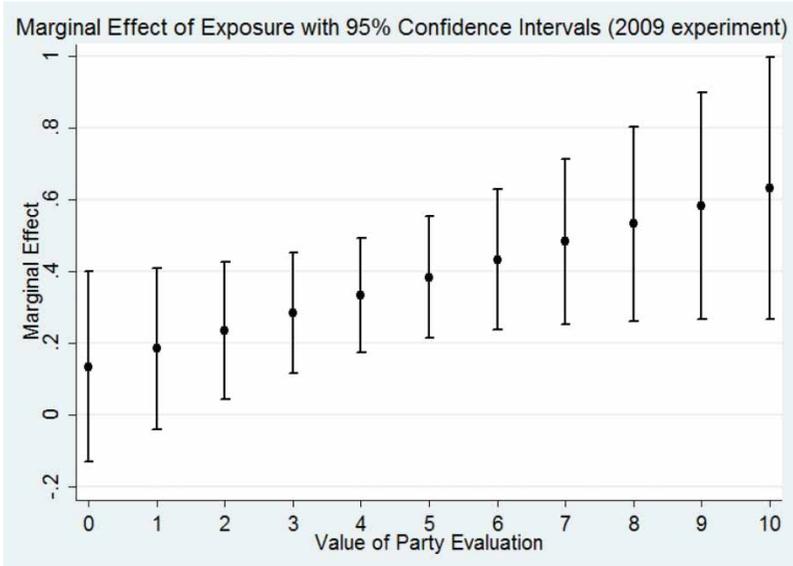


Figure 2. Moderating effect of party evaluation on issue ownership – 2009 experiment.

exposed to the clip – if they rated the party as generally unfavourable before exposure. The results for 2007 are somewhat weaker: the interaction term is insignificant, meaning that the moderating effect of party evaluation is small. However, because the results are similar to 2009, in which the interaction term and slope, even with a smaller sample size, is significant, the overall results suggest that party preference moderates the effect of exposure. The effect of media visibility is small for parties that respondents generally dislike. For a moderately positive party evaluation (6), the effect of exposure in 2007 is 0.23 (0.04) and 0.38 (0.09) in 2009, and for a highly evaluated party (9), the effect was 0.35 (0.09) and 0.58 (0.16) in 2007 and 2009, respectively. This shows that the effect of exposure is more than double the size for a highly liked party than it is for a moderately disliked party (while it is almost totally absent for a totally disliked party).

The plots show highly similar results in the 2007 and 2009 experiments, although the average increase in the exposure effect between the lowest and highest level of party evaluation is higher in the 2009 experiment. The confidence intervals are larger for the very low and for the very high party evaluation scores, as the number of observations for these extreme values is smaller (few people score parties extremely high or extremely low). By and large, the found effects are small (less than 1 point on a ten-point scale), but they are consistent and robust across the two experiments.

In other words, party evaluation affects the effectiveness of media messages on post-exposure issue ownership. Parties have a chance to increase their ownership on an issue amongst people who dislike them, but the effect increases as people

like them more. Amongst voters that dislike them (score 0 or 1), such efforts will yield little to no effect. The conclusion to draw is clear: people who already think highly of a party adjust their issue ownership perception of that party more than people who dislike the party. The overall effect of exposure is small due to the short stimulus of 30 seconds. Even here the moderating effect of party evaluation is apparent. Party evaluation is an intervening variable blocking (if party scores are very low) or reinforcing (as party scores get higher) the effect of new incoming information on the issue ownership of parties. In other words: party evaluation moderates the effect of party messages on voters' perceptions of issue ownership.

Conclusion and Discussion

The study addressed the emerging literature on issue ownership dynamics. Recent research has found that issue ownership – the perception voters hold about which party is best at handling a given issue – is not a stable but a variable party asset. Issue ownership evolves over time, parties can win or lose ownership, and their issue evaluations are subject to both short-term and long-term changes. One of the ways parties can gain ownership of an issue is by addressing the issue in press briefings, speeches, advertisements and messages distributed via general news coverage. The core idea buttressing this article was that, although changeable, there are constraints to issue ownership change that can be brought about by communication. Pre-existing party preference, we argued, acts as a perceptual screen that confines the effect of party messages.

To test this idea, we set up two survey-embedded experiments in Belgium; both experiments were almost identical but the political context and the concrete stimuli differed. The experiments directly tested whether party evaluations act as a moderator on incoming party messages meant to increase issue ownership. Our results support the idea that issue ownership perceptions are constrained by party preference. The experiments document that party preference imposes a filter on the effect of party messages on issue ownership, although the moderating effects we found are small. Party preference blocks or reinforces the effect of party messages. This finding is in line with earlier work both in political science and in communications: party preference acts as a filter through which political information is processed (Campbell et al., 1960); information that does not fit a given predisposition towards a party is rejected; and information that confirms one's predispositions is eagerly accepted (Zaller, 1992). Issue ownership *is* dynamic, but the change is limited and tends to confirm pre-existing party preference.

In terms of voting – and against a growing literature that finds issue competence perceptions have an effect on voting – this result suggests that classic issue ownership measures may not be very useful, or valid, as causes of a particular vote. Because these measures tap only the competence dimension of issue ownership, they seem to be too dependent on pre-existing party preference. The causal relationship between competence issue ownership and the vote is more complex than most extant work on issue ownership has recognized. Competence issue ownership is

potentially endogenous with the vote – rather a consequence of the vote than a cause of it. Some recent literature has already hinted in that direction (Jennings & Green, 2011; Kuechler, 1991; Stubager & Slothuus, 2012; van der Brug, 2004; Van Der Eijk et al., 1999).

A limitation of the study is the fact that we took into account only the talking by parties and not their actions. It is almost impossible to do otherwise in an experimental study – how could one expose some subjects to the real issue performance of a party while keeping other respondents shielded from this performance? But our design leaves open the question whether real acts by parties and their tangible performance may have an effect on issue ownership evaluations that is independent of pre-existent party preference. It may be the case that, notwithstanding the highly communicative character of modern-day politics, people react differently to speech acts than to, for example, real rising inflation or unemployment. We cannot exclude this possibility. Yet, cited work by Evans and Andersen (2004, 2006) and Bartels (2002) substantiates that even perceptions of economic reality are conditional on party preference suggesting that also the effect of reality, in this case actual performance of parties, is dependent on partisan affiliation.

A second limitation is that we only have data from one country. What may have affected our results is the fragmented character of Belgium's party system. Indeed, most research on issue ownership has been undertaken in two- or few-party-systems. In multi-party systems, parties stand on average closer to each other, and issue ownership is more contested (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007). There are, for example, two or more left-wing parties fighting over ownership of the welfare or the environmental issue. This may mean that the changeability of issue ownership is larger in multi-party systems, while it is a more stable party asset in two-party systems. On the other hand, average party identification and loyalty is probably higher in two-party systems, which could imply that the filtering and reinforcing power of party evaluations could be even stronger in two-party systems. In short, the external validity of our experimental evidence is not beyond doubt. We are not sure our results can be generalized to include other countries. But the fact that we found very similar effects in two different Belgian campaigns with partly different issues and largely different party leaders reinforces confidence in the generalizability of our findings. In any case, it would be interesting to pursue similar designs in two-party systems.

A third limitation is that the stimulus applied in this study is based on a one-shot exposure. We basically show that single exposure to parties talking about an issue is not able to overcome the constraints imposed by pre-existing party preference. In the real world, of course, people are frequently exposed to many iterative messages by parties. Whereas a one-shot exposure may be filtered by party preference, it can still be that at higher levels of exposure and visibility, effects do appear that surpass the constraining effect of pre-existing party preference. This article was not able to address this matter empirically but recurring issue messages may be able to overcome the barrier imposed by party preference.

Despite these limitations, our study has real-world implications for parties' communication strategies. Most basically, given that voters' pre-existing party preference

moderates the effect of issue messages on their evaluation of parties' issue handling competence, parties cannot ignore voters' partisanship when competing over policy issues. This is similar to the conclusions of previous work by Adams et al. (2005) who show that parties can gain votes by presenting policies that appeal to voters who support them for non-policy reasons (because they identify with the party or present socio-demographic characteristics that correlate with certain policy beliefs). In other words, parties will not be successful in convincing voters of their ability on issues when these voters do not like them in the first place. Thus, instead of trying to change the minds of voters who sympathize with their competitors, parties should engage in two alternative strategies. First, and most importantly, our results suggest that parties have incentives to preach to the converted – those who consider the party's issue competence as high and who most likely already vote for the party, but who have to be mobilized again at every election. Second, parties may try to reach with their issue messages the lukewarm public that does not dislike the party but may not be a party voter yet. This specific group of voters will not a priori reject the party's message, and may be convinced of the party's ability and, perhaps as a consequence, consider voting for the party. In sum, parties need to select their target audience carefully to maximize the effect of their messages regarding the issues they address.

Note

1. For reasons of convenience, we simply use the term “issue ownership” when actually referring to “competence issue ownership”. This is also what mainstream issue ownership work has implicitly done.

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