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# The Effect of Associative Issue Ownership on Parties' Presence in the News Media

WOUTER VAN DER BRUG and JOOST BERKHOUT

*Some studies suggest that challenger parties push new issues onto the agenda, especially when they 'own' these issues. Others claim that established parties largely determine how prominent issues appear on the agenda. This article contributes to this debate by focusing on an issue on which challenger parties have most 'ownership': immigration. Political claims on this issue made by political parties in newspapers in seven West European countries after three events that could potentially trigger attention to immigration were studied. Large and government parties appear most prominent in the news. However, findings show a significant, positive effect of associative issue ownership on claims-making in the news, while controlling for party size and government status. So, when challengers have issue ownership they appear as claim-makers on the issue. These results paint a balanced picture of the role that challenger and established parties have in setting the agenda.*

An important way in which political parties compete with each other for electoral support and/or office is 'issue competition': competition for the relative attention given to one issue over another (e.g. Carmines and Stimson 1989; Green-Pedersen 2007). Some parties want an issue to be high on the political agenda, while others try to keep the issue off the agenda. Reasons why parties would want an issue to be high on the agenda may be ideological. Yet there may also be various strategic reasons. That is, a party has a strategic incentive to call attention to a particular issue if it thinks its stance on that issue is more popular among its potential voters than the positions of its electoral competitors. However, parties have strategic reasons not to draw attention to issues on which they expect increased attention to be electorally harmful. This is also the case when the supporters, members or activists of a party are internally divided on an issue, or when parties in a governing coalition are divided (e.g. Schattschneider 1960). These strategic considerations could lead parties to differ in the attention they

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give to some issues over others, and, in that way, set the party political agenda. Our study focuses on differences in the media presence of parties, and particularly the role of issue ownership as a factor driving this.

A party is seen as the ‘owner’ of an issue if the public associates a party clearly with that specific issue (e.g. Van der Brug 2004; Walgrave *et al.* 2012). Research has shown that parties benefit electorally if the issues that they ‘own’ feature high on the political agenda during an election campaign (e.g. Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996), also because the media coverage of parties is most favourable on the issues that these parties own (Hayes 2008). For strategic reasons, we would therefore expect issue owners to place more emphasis on an issue than parties that are not issue owners. In this study we assess to what extent the issue ownership of parties affects whether they appear in the news media speaking on ‘their issue’. For most voters, news media are their prime source of information about the activities of parties. This makes it important for political parties to make their voice heard on ‘their issues’ in the media. Whether issue owners do so successfully has not been established.

We study the effects of issue ownership on media visibility by focusing on claims made by political parties on the issue of immigration after three events that could potentially trigger attention to this issue: the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York on 11 September 2001, the violent protests of Muslims after the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published a series of cartoons linking the prophet Mohammed to terrorism in January 2006, and the riots in the Banlieus of Paris in October 2005. Each of these events occurred outside the countries studied, and are therefore expected to exert a similar impact on each of them. The high impact and unforeseen nature of these events provide the opportunity for ‘owners’ of the issue of immigration, in particular those from the radical right, to call attention to this issue. In the terminology of Cobb and Elder (1983: 82–5), parties with some degree of issue ownership act as ‘issue initiators’ (or ‘exploiters’) on a ‘triggering event’ in such a way that they manage to convert a problem into an issue. At the same time, as we shall discuss in more detail below, mainstream parties have a joint interest not to pay too much attention to this issue.

By assessing to what extent issue owners appear in the media on ‘their’ issue after such potentially triggering events, we contribute to two strands of literature. In the first place, we contribute to the literature on issue ownership. Various studies exist in this field which explore the relationship between the electoral success of issue owners on the one hand and the prominence of the issue on the political agenda on the other (e.g. Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2007; Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996; Van der Brug 2004; Walgrave and De Swert 2004). Recently, these findings have stimulated research on the questions how and why parties establish and maintain ownership on certain issues (e.g. Walgrave and De Swert 2007). However, not much is known about the extent to which parties that have obtained ownership of an issue manage to appear in the media in relation to this issue. While we may assume that parties prefer to appear in the media in connection with their core issues, all sorts of

other party characteristics (such as the party's size or whether it is in office) may determine the attention they get in the media.

The second strand of literature to which this paper contributes is the agenda-setting literature itself. More specifically, we seek to contribute to the debate on whether the political agenda is predominantly elite-controlled or whether it is relatively open to challengers. But first a conceptual note is in order: which agenda do we study? In much research in this field, the terms 'party agenda' and 'media agenda' are defined in a relatively formal sense, namely as the topics discussed in parliament and in the news media, respectively. Such formal definitions suggest that political controversy is commonly contained within each of these agendas, whereas in reality, political debate expands or narrows via various channels (most notably, but not exclusively, the media and parliament). In contrast to these formal definitions, we therefore conceptually prioritise the behavioural notion of political controversy over the institutional locus of such controversy. We only look at the topics on the media agenda on which parties are in conflict (either in positional or salience terms). This is common in older agenda-setting literature and recent studies on contestation in 'the public sphere'. In early agenda-setting studies, the 'agenda of controversy' is defined as the 'list of questions which are recognised by the active participants in politics as legitimate subjects of attention and concern' (Walker 1966: 292, see also Cobb and Elder 1983; Kingdon 1984). In a normative and social movement tradition it is common to talk about the 'public sphere' as 'an intermediate sphere of public actions' where a 'conflict-ridden yet open and peaceful interplay between state and civil society is covered by the news media' (de Beus 2010: 14–15; also Koopmans and Statham 2010). These terms are still relatively abstract but all refer to political debate in the media.

Our study focuses on political parties in the political debate in this mediated 'public sphere'. This includes the parliamentary discussions in cases where the media reports on the debates in parliament. Yet the news also includes different ways in which parties try to call attention to the issues they wish to prioritise, such as organising press conferences, making statements to journalists, appearances at rallies or demonstrations. Moreover, parties' appearances in newspapers are not restricted to ministers and MPs, but also give room to the activities of other party representatives. There are two reasons why focusing on parties in the media is important. To start with, this is what voters observe. So if parties wish to call attention to an issue because they expect to benefit electorally, they can be expected to attempt foremost to influence the media agenda. Also, when government parties have a majority in parliament, they can exercise quite some control over the parliamentary agenda, depending upon institutional arrangements. In such a situation, challenger parties that want to increase the salience of 'their' issues have an even stronger incentive to try to get media attention.

Our main expectation in this paper is that issue owners are more likely to call attention to an issue than parties that do not own the issue. While this may appear rather obvious, it is not at all a foregone conclusion that issue

owners will dominate in the coverage of ‘their’ issues. There are different views on the extent to which government parties, or ‘governing elites’ more broadly, manage to control the agenda. One perspective sees issue formation largely as an elite- and insider-driven process, where government parties set the political agenda (e.g. Green-Pedersen 2007; Mair 1998). Governing parties will attempt to de-politicise an issue if it is orthogonal to the dominant (left/right) dimension, because it threatens existing coalitions and other patterns of cooperation between parties (e.g. Schattschneider 1960: 60–75; Walker 1966: 291). As Green-Pedersen (2012: 126) notes, ‘we need to focus on the incentives for issue politicisation facing mainstream parties’. Green-Pedersen focuses largely on the parliamentary agenda. While he may be right that governing parties can often prevent issues from becoming salient on the parliamentary agenda, they exercise more limited control over political contestation in the broader public sphere. This potentially makes it more easily accessible for those who challenge mainstream or government parties. However, Bennett (1990) argues that the media agenda is equally biased. Journalists base their coverage of politics largely on a select group of ‘credible news sources’. When mainstream parties disagree, opinions of these elites will reflect the different sides of this debate. Yet when the mainstream parties agree, opposition voices tend to be marginalised. If the top-down perspective is valid, we should find a strong overrepresentation of mainstream and particularly government parties in the news after these events. Anti-immigration parties, as challengers, may try to raise the issue, but this will largely be ignored.

Some scholars do not share the top-down perspective and see, at least potentially, a larger role for challengers in pushing ‘their’ issues on the agenda. Such challengers could be social movements at the ‘margins of the political system’, emancipating the ‘pre-political’ people and relying on ‘symbolic’ instruments of power (Koopmans 2007: 694; Lasswell 1950: 236; Walker 1966: 294). Yet contemporary party systems are sufficiently open to allow challengers to (also) organise as new parties such as the Dutch PVV or as factions in existing parties such as the Tea Party in the US Republican Party, rather than operate as social movements outside the electoral process. Recent studies indeed show that so-called ‘niche parties’ act as ‘challengers’ and are the ones pushing new issues on the agenda that established parties aim to depoliticise (e.g. De Vries and Hobolt 2012; Meguid 2005). Journalists may be quite willing to provide a platform for these challenger parties, as we will call them, because of the news value of controversy and the news journalists’ preference for an ‘anti-authorities’ storyline (Wolfsfeld 1997: 5; 2011: 45). Our study of the effect of issue ownership on party presence in the media speaks directly to this literature.

Our paper is structured as follows. We first elaborate on the concept of issue ownership and link it to the relevant literature on agenda-setting. We then discuss our research design and data, after which we present the results of our analyses. In the final section we elaborate on the theoretical as well as political implications of our findings.

## Issue Ownership

The notion of issue ownership was developed by scholars who studied the campaign platforms of parties and argued that direct confrontations between opposing policy stances are relatively rare (e.g. Budge *et al.* 1987; Budge and Farlie 1983; Robertson 1976). Instead, parties selectively emphasise those topics where they feel they have a good reputation and de-emphasise other topics. On the basis of these findings the saliency theory of party competition was developed, which holds that, within a certain historical context, most political actors favour only one course of action on most issues (e.g. Budge 2001). Each of the parties has a set of policy issues that they 'own' (i.e. policy areas where they have a relatively good reputation). So, parties can gain electoral support by increasing the salience of each of their issues during a campaign, a reason for them to consistently emphasise 'their' topics. Empirically, it has been shown that aggregate election results are indeed affected by the salience of particular issue types during the campaign preceding the election (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996).

The concept of issue ownership was defined by Petrocik (1996: 826) as a party's reputation of being better able to 'handle' a problem facing the country. This notion of issue ownership was developed in the context of an aggregate-level study of an electoral contest between two parties. Much of the literature on issue ownership centres around this notion of 'issue competence', usually measured by two survey questions: what is the most important problem facing the country and which party is best able to solve this problem (e.g. Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Bellucci 2006; Green and Hobolt 2008; Lachat 2014)? While it makes intuitive sense to expect parties to benefit when a majority of the voters see them as competent on solving an issue, there are two reasons why we do not focus on evaluations of competence in this paper. First, Sanders *et al.* (2011) demonstrated that voters tend to consider a party more competent because they agree with their position. So, the party with the most popular positions on an issue is seen as most competent. Yet if that is the case, the process that is being modelled becomes almost indistinguishable from a Downsian spatial model, even though it uses different indicators. Secondly, and for the purpose of this study perhaps more importantly, it is problematic to apply the notion of aggregate-level competence in the context of a multi-party system.<sup>1</sup> In a multi-party system, parties do not expect to gain the support of an absolute majority of the voters. As a case in point, most Green parties in Europe do not expect to get more than 10 per cent of the votes in a national election. Therefore, for them it is important to be attractive for a small niche of voters with strong feelings about the environment and who agree with the party's position on this issue. So, even if 90 per cent of the voters disagree with a Green party and see it as incompetent, the party could gain support by putting more emphasis on environmentalism in the campaign, as long as this would prime the other 10 per cent of the voters. In the case of this study, we focus on the migration issue, which is a core issue of radical right parties. Since

these parties have had many troubles recruiting competent politicians (e.g. Mudde 2007), a large majority of the voters may not think of such a party as being most competent at handling any issue. Still, calling attention to the issue might well be to their advantage because voters could see it as important that this issue gets more attention (see also Van der Brug 2004).

Walgrave *et al.* (2012) distinguished between an associative dimension and a competence dimension of ownership (see also Bellucci 2006). In this study we focus on the associative dimension only, which is the extent to which an issue is associated with a party. An advantage is that even a small and unpopular party might be seen as an issue owner, when people associate the issue with this party. So, this assessment of issue ownership will not depend upon a party's popularity, or upon the popularity of its issue positions. Following Van der Brug (2004) and Walgrave *et al.* (2012), we treat the concept of issue ownership as a matter of degree, rather than as a binary distinction. Some parties are more strongly associated with the issue of migration than others.

To summarise the argument so far, parties compete with each other not only by proposing different policies on the same issue, but also by prioritising some issues over others. We expect parties to prioritise issues on which they have much issue ownership, for ideological as well as for strategic reasons. Ideologically, the issues that parties own are usually very central in their programme. Strategically, parties may try to call attention to 'their' issues because this is likely to improve their electoral fortunes. We elaborate further on this causal mechanism in the next section.

## **Events and Agenda Control**

### *Events*

Events may suddenly and unexpectedly increase the political attention to a certain topic. Various researchers studied the effect of so-called focusing events, 'external shocks' or 'alarmed discoveries' on policy change (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Birkland 1997; Downs 1972: 39; Kingdon 1984: 99–105; Walgrave and Varone 2008: 368). According to Birkland (1997: 3) a 'potential focusing event is a rare, harmful, sudden event that becomes known to policy makers and the public virtually simultaneously'. Governing parties will have greater difficulty, compared to 'regular' times, to dominate the party political agenda because they have little time to institutionally prepare policy positions or communication strategies. Walgrave and Varone (2008: 368) note that an event is "'focal" in the sense that government may respond by putting a new policy issue on its agenda'. Scholars use the term 'focusing' to highlight that the event is actually a symptom of pre-existing policy failures or social trends. In the words of Kingdon (1984: 99), the event is 'a little push to get the attention of people in and around government', for 'highly undesirable objective social conditions' (Downs 1972: 39). Following Cobb and Elder (1983: 83–5), we prefer to use the term 'triggering event' rather than focusing event, to

highlight that, independent of actual ‘objective’ circumstances, events require political initiatives (re)defining an issue and that such initiatives are not restricted to government responses, but may also come from other political actors. Cobb and Elder (1983: 83–5) outline that issues are created through the combination of a ‘triggering device’ (i.e. event) and an ‘initiator’. They, like us, put a stronger emphasis on actor initiatives surrounding events, rather than imputing agency on the event itself, as seems to be the case in some of the studies mentioned earlier. More to the point, when an event occurs, such as 9/11 or the ‘cartoon crisis’, this provides opportunities for those who wish to push the issue of migration on the agenda. We should thus find that anti-immigration parties or other radical right movements put the issue high on the agenda after such events. In that case the issue receives more attention in the news because mainstream parties and other actors are also forced to react. As further noted below, we focus on events which are outside the realm of ‘institutionalised’ politics, such as acts of terrorism.

### *Agenda Control*

As noted earlier, one may distinguish an elite or top-down perspective and a challenger or bottom-up perspective on agenda control. Green-Pedersen (2012) argues that mainstream parties exercise quite a lot of control over the political agenda. When the issue that is owned by a challenger party is harmful to the interests of mainstream parties as a group, they will jointly keep the issue off the political agenda, for instance by ‘burying it quietly in some committee room or bureaucratic pigeonhole’ (Walker 1966: 291). In that way, the strategic incentives of existing political parties largely determine the ‘supply’ of electoral choices available to voters. This is obviously a more elite-driven perspective on the party political agenda than the perspective that highlights challengers. Various circumstantial factors probably affect how mainstream parties are able to keep an issue off the formal agenda. When we think about the agenda of parliament, there may be specific hurdles in a system to put a specific topic on the agenda, such as a minimum number of parliamentarians who want to have a debate on the issue. A very small party may not be in a position to pass that hurdle when mainstream parties want to ignore it. Yet this would only be a problem for very small parties.

Journalists may make life difficult for government parties. When anti-immigration parties voice their harsh criticisms of migration policies, one would expect their controversial quotes to have a lot of news value. So, one would expect challengers to receive much media attention. However, according to Bennett’s (1990) indexing theory, reporters tend to base their coverage of politics on an elite of ‘credible news sources’ (e.g. also see Van Dalen 2012). When mainstream parties disagree, opinions of these elites will reflect the different sides of this debate. However, when the mainstream parties agree, opposition voices tend to be marginalised, and journalists follow the

'sophisticated news management operations' of government parties (Bennett and Livingstone 2003: 360). To the extent that this perspective is valid, we should not find a strong increase in the salience of the debate on immigration after triggering events. There may be some instances where anti-immigration parties try to raise the issue, but, as studies on the relationship between journalists and social movements show, journalists will prefer actors with established 'media standing' (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993: 116). We do not expect dramatic events to affect the logic of these relationships but we expect that journalists will broaden the platform they offer (i.e. media attention becomes less scarce). This should work in favour of actors that feature lower on the journalists 'index' – in this case anti-immigration parties. Van Dalen's (2012) study showed that while government actors have a structural advantage in getting media attention, this is sometimes compensated by the fact that conflict has news value. On the basis of these findings, we could thus expect more attention to challengers after these events.

We largely follow the top-down perspective of Bennett (1990) and Green-Pedersen (2012), but provisionally. If anti-immigration parties are small, they will be marginalised by the media. So in those cases we expect the issue not to receive that much attention after an event. Further, when an anti-immigration party is part of a governing coalition, the party itself has no interest in stirring up conflicts around the issue of immigration. So in those cases we also expect that the party will not try to draw extra attention to the issue. However, when the anti-immigration party is large and in opposition, we expect that the issue will appear in the media, for three reasons. First of all, because it will be difficult for the media to ignore the opinions of anti-immigration parties if they represent a large portion of the population. Secondly, because representatives of mainstream parties will be afraid of being accused of ignoring an important issue, they will have an incentive to address the issue (e.g. Van Spanje 2010). Finally, because media may want to pay attention to challengers, since conflict is newsworthy (Bennett 2003; Neuman *et al.* 1992: 64–6).

So, the *explanandum* in this study is a party's claims-making on the issue of immigration prior to and in the aftermath of three potentially triggering events. The details of claims analysis are discussed in the next section. We are primarily interested in issue ownership as an independent variable, but we control for other predictors of attention to the issue. Specifically, we control for incumbency and party size. Moreover, we check whether the left–right position of parties matters, as we expect right-wing issue owners to be more likely to pay attention to the issue after these events than left-wing parties. Moreover, we assess whether anti-immigration parties receive more or less attention than one might expect on the basis of their issue ownership.

### **Data and Research Design**

We use political claims analysis of newspaper articles to measure our dependent variable: the party political attention to migration and civic integration of

migrants in the aftermath of potentially triggering events. This merits a couple of remarks on the type of public political behaviour observed, the use of news media as data source and the selection of events. Further below we also outline the data structure and the indicators for the explanatory factors.

Political claims-making is a certain type of political behaviour commonly defined as ‘the purposive and public articulation of political demands, calls to action, proposals, criticisms, or physical attacks, which, actually or potentially, affect the interests or integrity of the claimants and/or other collective actors’ (Koopmans *et al.* 2005: 254). Claims must be political, in the sense that they relate to collective social problems and their solutions, and not to individual problems. As is common in claims analysis, we make a distinction between a subject actor (i.e. the claimant) and various other components. For the current paper we only use information on the subject actor. Claims-making is the core business of politicians and other political actors. They do so by, for instance, sending press statements, publishing reports or, in the case of government actors, initiating policy programmes. Political claims analysis has been successfully used to measure Europeanisation of public spheres (Koopmans and Statham 2010), to examine the discursive context of migrant mobilisation (Cinalli and Giugni 2013) and to assess the political effect of citizenship regimes (Koopmans *et al.* 2005).<sup>2</sup>

We observe claims in newspapers. In principle, one could observe claims-making in various sources such as in news on television or in parliamentary debates. However, we think that newspapers are the most likely venue in which to find attention to issue owners. That is, first, television journalists are necessarily more selective and consequently may not provide space to issue owners, and, second, parliamentary debates have a relatively limited audience and, usually, a time lag, making them relatively unattractive to issue owners as a primary venue to draw attention to their issue. Further, but an argument of lesser interest to our current study, newspapers are used in practically all political claims analysis also because these include various types of political actors rather than only political parties.

Journalists have not, of course, reported claims for the sake of the political scientist wishing to engage in claims analysis. News values such as levels of conflict, authority of the political actor or just ‘juicy stories’ drive the news selection and style of reporting. Moreover, research in this area shows that claims of government actors are somewhat overrepresented in newspapers (e.g. Van Dalen 2012). This raises questions about the validity of the use of newspapers as a source, since this could introduce systematic measurement error in our data. We do not think that this is a major problem. First of all, research shows that selection bias is a relatively limited problem (Earl *et al.* 2004), and there are no reasons to assume that this error substantially changes over time or that the bias is greater in some countries than in others. So, for the purpose of comparing over time and across countries, the problem is limited. Second, and more importantly, the purpose of our study is to draw inferences about the attention that parties call to an issue. Parties that are

unable to get their claims into the media have very little political impact. Almost all citizens receive their politically relevant information through the media. While the media are selective in their attention, this ‘media bias’ becomes part of the political reality that we examine. We depart from the proposition that there is no politically relevant public sphere that exists outside of the media (as is common in this type of analysis: see Koopmans and Statham 2010: 58). By observing claims in the media, we consequently tap directly into the public debate on migration. This also implies that the filter function of the news media is actually beneficial as it works as a selection threshold for the inclusion of claims in our study.

The sample of claims is focused through the selection of newspapers, the substantive topic and the random/event-specific sampling of days. We derive claims from one quality newspaper per country.<sup>3</sup> We include only articles containing claims about migration or integration.<sup>4</sup> This is a most likely case in the sense that when no issue owner effects are found on the topic of migration then we think it is unlikely that it occurs on any other topic. We only use claims by actors affiliated with a political party. The party affiliation need not be reported in the newspaper article. The actor needs to act on behalf of the party: claim-makers may be government ministers in a (coalition) government, members of parliament or spokespersons of the ‘party on the ground’. Coders were trained until they were able to meet the generally agreed minimum standards of inter-coder reliability.<sup>5</sup>

The current article is based on a sample of days of around four weeks immediately following events that potentially trigger attention to the issue of immigration (the ‘post-event sample’). These events are: ‘9/11’ (11 September to 6 October 2001), the riots in the Paris Banlieues (27 October to 26 November 2005), and the publication of anti-Islam cartoons in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* (28 January to 11 March 2006). We employ three random samples of days a year prior to the selected events to determine a non-event reference model (the ‘pre-event’ sample). These are subsamples out of a longer running random sample of 700 days between 1995 and 2009 that was taken for the larger project of which the research presented here is a part.<sup>6</sup>

The events produced party political attention to migration or integration in the countries where they occurred. They could potentially all be picked up by political actors in the countries studied. None of the events actually took place there, so in all countries studied there is more or less the same probability that it potentially produces political contestation.

The political claims data is restructured per political party per event and each entry reports the average number of claims per day prior and in the aftermath of the event. This produces a multi-level dataset of 45 parties on three events ( $n = 135$ ).<sup>7</sup> We seek to explain the variation in claims-making on the basis of several party characteristics. The first predictor of claims-making is ‘issue ownership’, which we measure on the basis of the Chapel Hill expert survey (CHES) (Bakker *et al.* 2015). To avoid endogeneity problems, it would have been preferable to use measures of the CHES that predate the events.

Unfortunately, however, the relevant questions have only been included since the 2006 round of the CHES, which is after the events. While this is not optimal, we think that ownership of the issue of immigration was quite stable over the years that we study, so we have no reason to think that the results are biased as a result. In this survey, experts are asked to assess how important various issues are ‘in the programme of a party’, which taps almost directly into the associative dimension of issue ownership. Issues associated with a party are arguably those issues that are seen as important to the party. These questions were asked of several parties and several issues. To measure issue ownership, we add up the scores on the issues of ‘immigration’ and ‘multiculturalism’.<sup>8</sup>

As a first control variable, we include the parliamentary and governmental power of the party. This is straightforwardly indicated by the proportion of seats in parliament and by whether the party holds government office at the time of the event (data derived from Ruedin 2011). Secondly, we distinguish between left-leaning and right-leaning parties. We rely on the Chapel Hill expert survey for information on the left–right position of the party. We use this to differentiate between parties in favour of restrictive migration policies and parties that hold relatively liberal positions on the issue.

**Results**

We present several multi-level regression models in which we use the average number of claims before and after the event, respectively, as dependent variables. All our variables are at the level of party events but most of them are relatively constant characteristics of parties that do not vary between events. To take this into account, we include the party level in our multi-level model, so that we obtain valid estimates of the standard errors. Table 1 reports the

TABLE 1  
MULTI-LEVEL REGRESSION ON THE AVERAGE NUMBER OF CLAIMS PRIOR TO THE SELECTED EVENTS

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Issue ownership	0.17 (1.32)	0.19 <sup>+</sup> (1.94)	0.19 <sup>+</sup> (1.91)	0.20 (1.60)	0.23 <sup>+</sup> (1.80)
% of parliamentary seats		0.51* (5.43)	0.43* (3.92)	0.43* (3.89)	0.44* (4.01)
In government			0.16 (1.64)	0.16 (1.63)	0.16 <sup>+</sup> (1.70)
Radical right				-0.00 (-0.05)	0.013 (0.11)
L–R position					-0.10 (-0.90)
AIC	-375.9	-392.8	-393.3	-391.3	-390.1
Observations	134	133	133	133	133

Note: Standardised beta coefficients; *t* statistics in parentheses.  
<sup>+</sup>*p* < 0.1; \**p* < 0.05.

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TABLE 2  
MULTI-LEVEL REGRESSION ON THE AVERAGE NUMBER OF CLAIMS IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE SELECTED EVENTS

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Issue ownership	0.19 <sup>+</sup> (1.77)	0.21* (2.11)	0.22* (2.17)	0.21 (1.51)	0.21 (1.52)
% of parliamentary seats		0.33* (3.28)	0.21 <sup>+</sup> (1.89)	0.21 <sup>+</sup> (1.86)	0.22 <sup>+</sup> (1.89)
In government			0.25* (2.39)	0.25* (2.39)	0.25* (2.41)
Radical right				0.013 (0.09)	0.034 (0.22)
L-R position					-0.038 (-0.30)
<i>AIC</i>	28.69	20.97	17.44	19.43	21.34
Observations	132	131	131	131	131

Note: Standardised beta coefficients; *t* statistics in parentheses.

<sup>+</sup>*p* < 0.1; \**p* < 0.05.

models ‘before the event’ and Table 2 reports the results ‘after the event’. We simultaneously discuss these two tables. Please note that, as expected, the average number of claims made per day is about twice as much after the event than before the event (0.04 versus 0.15 per party, respectively). We report standardised coefficients. This implies that these aggregate differences cannot be observed in these tables but it provides us with some standard to compare effect sizes.

In model 1 we assess the bivariate relationship between issue ownership and claims-making. Parties that are seen to consider migration and civic integration important make more claims on that issue in the news. While the positive effects support the most important hypothesis of this paper, the effect does not reach statistical significance before the event (Table 1). Right after the event, the effect is statistically significant (Table 2).

In model 2 we additionally account for the parliamentary size of the party. This has a significant and positive effect on the number of claims appearing in newspapers. The effect comes in addition to the effect of associative issue ownership that becomes more clearly significant in both tables. Before and after the event we find significant effects of very similar magnitudes. In an unreported specification, we included an interaction term between issue ownership and party size. This is insignificant and does not affect the constituent terms.

In model 3 we add a variable that indicates whether a party is in office. Here we find somewhat different outcomes before and after the event. That is, before the event we do not find that government parties compared to opposition parties are more likely to appear as claim-makers in newspapers, whereas in the aftermath of events government parties are more frequent claim-makers than other parties. This is an unexpected finding. We have a speculative interpretation of this. On the one hand, as outlined earlier, journalists’ news values

make them prioritise ‘authoritative’ or powerful sources such as government actors over other actors. This should lead to larger numbers of claims on the part of coalition parties. On the other hand, literature on party strategies highlight that mainstream political parties (which commonly form government coalitions) have an incentive to de-emphasise the issue of migration and integration. Government parties should consequently make relatively few claims. Our speculation, based on these results, is that in ‘regular’ times, government parties are relatively successful in de-emphasising the issue (and appear as frequently as any other party of their size), whereas in the aftermath of triggering events government parties will feel pressured to speak out on the issue. In a separate, unreported model we also interacted parliamentary size and government participation of parties. This is not significant and does not substantially affect the coefficients of the constituent terms. This means that being in government or not similarly affects large and small parties.<sup>9</sup> The same is true for the interaction between issue ownership and coalition membership. This implies that the extent to which parties own migration does not affect the de-emphasising dynamics associated with being in office.

In model 4 we add a dichotomous variable reflecting whether a party is an anti-immigration party.<sup>10</sup> Anti-immigration parties are not just associative issue owners; they are also often treated as a separate ‘species’ by mainstream parties as well as journalists. This could lead to extra media attention or to the media ignoring them. We add this dichotomous variable to check whether there is an additional effect on top of associative issue ownership. In none of the models do we find significant effects of this dummy variable, either before or after the event. Anti-immigration parties appear relatively infrequently in newspapers – compared to what may be expected of them based on their high scores on issue ownership, while controlling for size and (usually opposition) role. We think that this may either be because journalists ‘ostracise’ these parties, as anti-immigrant parties sometimes claim, or because such parties themselves choose to appear only with few claims in the news. They may consider relatively few claims that provoke reactions to be more effective than participating in consensus-oriented political debates.

In model 5 we include a general left–right score. The effect of this variable is insignificant and does not alter the effects of the other variables. Most notably, the effect of issue ownership persists when controlling for left–right position, even though it becomes insignificant in Table 2. In several unreported model specifications we also controlled for collinearity and interactions between issue ownership and left–right position. Issue ownership tends to be relatively high at both ends of the political spectrum. We find that ‘left-wing’ issue owners are just as likely to make claims as ‘right-wing’ issue owners. Models 4 and 5 were only included to assess whether there really was an effect of issue ownership or whether this observed effect was really driven by other variables. Tables 1 and 2 present the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) of each of the models, which provides a basis to compare the fit of the nested models in each of the tables. The model with the lowest AIC value is to be

preferred over the other models. In both tables, this is model 3, which includes all variables that exert a significant effect.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Who attends to political issues in the news media? This is a perennial question in political science and is at the core of our paper. We depart from the assumption that political parties, in office, on the ground and in parliament, are the important actors in setting the political agenda. We expect political parties to differ in the strategic incentives they have in calling attention to the issue of migration and integration. The extent to which a party has associative issue ownership is one such incentive and is the main interest of our paper. We find that issue ownership is positively related to claims-making. This relationship holds while controlling for parliamentary size, office-holding, party family and left–right position. It occurs in both ‘regular’ times and immediately after potentially triggering events. This finding has a number of implications.

First, issue ownership matters for agenda-setting. There is now a substantial body of research into issue ownership. This research has produced important insights into the explanations and definitions of issue ownership. Much fewer studies address the implications of it. This is where the underlying study contributes. When we know which issues parties find important, we can make sensible predictions about who appears in political debates in the press. This is not an obvious conclusion considering the broad range of potential influences on media appearances. One such influence is outlined in indexing theory (Bennett 1990), on the basis of which we would expect reporters to base their coverage of politics mainly on an elite of ‘credible news sources’. Moreover, we know that some of the radical-right parties that are issue owners were ostracised in their countries, so that the media may not want to give them a forum (e.g. Van Spanje 2010). To be sure, our study showed that large parties and government parties receive most attention in the news, which is clearly in line with this indexing theory (see also Van Dalen 2012). So, while there could be good reasons to expect no effects of issue ownership, we do find it.

Second, party political agenda-setting is driven by both the major parties and challenger parties. We found relatively high proportions of claims-making by issue owners, after controlling for other factors that affect presence in the media. This means that political parties, when they prioritise a certain issue, appear in newspapers more frequently than parties that assign lower priorities to the same issue. This supports the view that the part of the party political agenda that is reported upon in newspapers is relatively open to challengers. At the same time, relatively large parties and parties in office clearly get more attention and thus can strongly shape the attention that is paid to issues. This is in line with a top-down perspective on agenda-setting. It seems that circumstances that originate outside the party political arena strengthen or weaken the top-down or bottom-up mechanism. More concretely, it seems that ‘events’ force government parties to attend to issues on which they prefer to be silent.

If government parties appear in the news reluctantly, it is obvious that they are not setting the agenda. In that case, they would either respond to the agendas of others (e.g. challenger parties and/or journalists).

Third, this outcome may be viewed positively from a normative perspective. Party politics should be responsive to concerns of citizens. Of course, this works largely through elections. Our finding that large parties receive more public attention shows that electoral outcomes indeed matter for who sets the agenda. At the same time, we also found that political parties that strongly care about an issue (i.e. issue owners), are also important agenda-setters. A recent US-based study by Hayes (2008) showed that the media report more favourably towards parties on those issues on which they have ownership. An important question is whether this is also the case for small challenger parties in Europe. In combination with the findings in this paper, this would suggest that the party system is relatively flexible as regards the intensity of preferences of sub-sections of the electorate, and that it is, at least, somewhat open to 'new' issues.

As always, our study has some limitations, which nuance the strength of the findings and which merit attention in future research. A first limitation is that the issue of immigration and integration is a likely issue to which 'new' or 'niche' parties rather than 'established' parties pay attention. Established parties have issue ownership on various 'older' issues. Considering that these established parties have easier access to the media than challenger parties, drawing attention to these issues in the news may be less affected by 'events'. For instance, parties in office may choose to directly initiate policy programmes and then call a press conference to present their policy proposals.

Another limitation is that we cannot assess over time how parties become issue owners. This is a limitation because it potentially affects our research design. That is, if parties make claims in the media, they consequently become associated with the issue. So to some extent the effects that we estimate may be endogenous. However, we think that this is a relatively minor issue. First, issue ownership and claims-making are conceptually fundamentally different. Issue ownership refers to the ideas of parties whereas claims-making refers to their behaviour. Ideas are logically prior to behaviour. In other words, parties first develop an ideological profile and then voice it publicly. Second, we measure these things in distinct ways that are empirically relatively distant. Our findings support this: the bivariate relationship between attention in the news and associative issue ownership is rather weak and insignificant in routine periods (Table 1). So, if experts would derive their information about the importance of an issue for a party from the media attention, this relationship would be much stronger. The experts are likely to base their perceptions largely on their knowledge of the ideologies of the parties in their country. Consequently, the effects of issue ownership only become significant in a fully specified model. Since it is unlikely that the experts read the newspapers with a fully specified model in their heads, we believe that the observed effects are only slightly overestimated. Yet to test this would require a long time series.

Finally, we did not look into the patterns of action and reaction among actors. We do refer to several assumptions about who initiates (issue owners) and who ‘reluctantly’ responds (mainstream parties) but we do not assess that empirically in this study. This matters for a more precise understanding of the assumed underlying mechanism of some of our findings. We intend to look into this in future research. We also did not look into the agenda-setting role of non-party actors. This potentially matters for the presence of certain parties. For instance, British tabloid commentators may play the role that politicians of anti-immigrant parties have in other countries.

So, the final words have not been said about the processes by which an issue reaches the agenda after a potentially triggering event. However, our study does provide some important new insights into the role of issue ownership in agenda-setting. It bridges between elite-oriented and challenger-oriented perspectives on processes of agenda-building.

### Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### Notes

1. It is also problematic to apply this concept at the individual level, because at this level party preferences are largely endogenous to evaluations of competence at solving problems (e.g. Kuechler 1991; Van der Brug 2004; Walgrave and De Swert 2007). In this paper we do not conduct such individual-level analyses.
2. As regards the procedures of identifying claims, it cannot be stressed enough that we are heavily indebted to the previous research projects mentioned.
3. The countries and newspapers covered are as follows: Austria, *Der Standard*; Belgium, *De Standaard*; Switzerland, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*; Spain, *El País*; Ireland, *The Irish Times*; The Netherlands, *De Volkskrant*; United Kingdom, *The Guardian*. The larger sample also contains data on popular newspapers. In this study we only report the results for a single quality newspaper per country, as the ‘post-event’ samples are restricted to quality newspapers only. The articles have been manually selected by browsing through physical or microfilm versions of the newspaper. This procedure was chosen over keyword search to ensure a uniform sampling strategy across countries and years.
4. Definition of migration used: we cover government activities relating to the entry and exit of people from the country, including the general policy direction, the institutional framework, issues of border controls, visa policies and actions related to illegal entry. We also cover social, cultural and economic conflicts, as well as issues related to social cohesion if they involve people with a migration background. In this context, we cover government policies on targeted integration, language and citizenship programmes, and issues on how migration affects existing government programmes such as housing, education or policing. As such, we also include coverage on the activities, problems and social contributions of migrant communities.
5. Inter-coder reliability test of the identification of claims produced a Krippendorff’s alpha of 0.55. More information about the claims data is reported by Berkhout (2012).
6. This larger project was supported by the European Commission’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007–2013) under grant agreement number 225522 (SOM: *Support and Opposition to Migration*).

7. The parties included are (issue ownership score in brackets): Belgium: Ecolo (6.3), Groen! (8.2), sp.a (5.8), PS (5.8), Open VLD (5.8), Mouvement Réformateur (5.4), CD&V (5.6), Vlaams Belang (9.9), N-VA (6.4), Parti Réformateur Libéral PRL (5.4); the Netherlands: GroenLinks (7), SP (5.8), PvdA (6.3), D66 (6.5), VVD (7.8), CDA (5.5), CU (5.3), PVV (9.5), SGP (5.3); Spain: IU (7.2), PSOE (7), PP (7.1), Convergència i Unió (6.9); Austria: Die Grünen (8.9), SPÖ (6.1), FPÖ (9.8), LiF (5.6), ÖVP (7.8); Switzerland: Grüne Partei der Schweiz (6.1), SP (6.1), FDP (6), CVP (5.8), SVP (9.4); United Kingdom: Labour Party (6.4), Liberal Democrats (5.5), Conservative Party (8.1), BNP (10); Ireland: Irish Green Party (3.9), PDs (4.9), Labour Party (4.5), Fine Gael (4.3), Fianna Fail (4.1), Sinn Fein (4.4).
8. We use the 2006 version of this survey except for a very small number of parties for which only the 2010 version contains the relevant information. Parties are considered right-wing when their score on the general left–right dimension (LRGEN) is higher than 5.5 (scale from 0 to 10). The precise Chapel Hill variable labels for salience are: MULTICULT\_SAL and IMMIG\_SAL.
9. Also note that parties in (coalition) government are relatively large: in our dataset they have on average 23 per cent of the parliamentary seats, compared to 10 per cent for parties that are not in office. An interaction term helps us to differentiate between the effect of the size of the party and the effect of the government/opposition role of the party. The two variables seem to have independent effects on claims-making.
10. We use the party family variable of the Chapel Hill survey. For the time period and countries studied, this means that the following parties are considered anti-immigration parties: BNP (British National Party), Bündnis Zukunft Österreichs (BZÖ), FPÖ, PVV (Partij voor De Vrijheid), Vlaams Belang.

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