Issue Ownership: An Ambiguous Concept

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Introduction

The notion of issue ownership was first coined by Budge and Farlie (1983) when they proposed a saliency theory of party competition. Their model was developed as an alternative to spatial models of electoral democracy (e.g. Downs 1957). In Downs' model, policy positions and preferences of parties as well as of voters could be represented by positions in an ideological space (on the concept of voter ideology see Lupton, Enders and Jacoby, this Volume). Voters were expected to vote for the nearest party because, by doing so, they would choose the party that they agreed with most. A party would have an incentive to offer a combination of policy positions that would attract the largest group of voters. One of the criticisms of this model came from Stokes (1963), and much of the work in the field of issue ownership is implicitly or explicitly influenced by his contribution. Stokes argued that many political issues do not fit a spatial model. Some 'valence' issues (as considered by Green and Jennings in this Volume), such as crime, a clean environment or corruption, have essentially only one position, because everyone agrees on the ultimate goal to be achieved. Party competition on these issues typically takes the form of prioritizing some issues over others, rather than taking opposing stands (Green-Pedersen 2007). In other words, parties compete on the salience of different issues vis-à-vis each other.

Scholars who studied the campaign platforms of parties noted that not all issues conform to the basic premises of the spatial model. In particular, direct confrontations between opposing policy stands are relatively rare (e.g. Robertson 1976; Budge and Farlie 1983; Budge et al. 1987). Instead, parties selectively emphasize those topics where they feel they have a good reputation, and de-emphasize other topics. On the basis of these findings the saliency theory of party competition was developed. This starts from the notion that, within a certain historical context, most political actors favour the same course of action when addressing a particular problem (e.g. Budge 2001). Each of the parties has a set of policy issues that they 'own' – that is, policy areas where they have a relatively good reputation. Parties expect to gain electoral support by increasing the salience of each of 'their' issues during a campaign, which gives them an incentive to consistently emphasize these 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).

So, issue ownership theory originated in a focus on *salience*. Parties would emphasize some issues and thereby signal to voters their intention to give *priority* to those issues. When they were successful in increasing the salience of these issues, they would expect to benefit electorally. While *prioritizing* issues was a central component of issue ownership theory, Petrocik (1996, 826) defined the concept not just in those terms, but, additionally, in terms of *competence*. He defined ownership as 'a party's reputation of being better able than other parties to "handle" a problem facing the country'. By emphasizing certain problems in an election campaign, a party signals to voters that it 'is more sincere and committed to doing something about them' (Petrocik 1996, 826). So, the first part of his definition – 'being better able than other parties to handle an issue' – refers to a party's competence. The second part – 'being sincere and committed' – refers to a party's priorities. Ever since, two different perspectives on issue ownership have been present in the literature, some of which focus on the importance of issues while others focus more on competence. A recent literature review by Walgrave et al. (2015) shows that the latter conceptualization, which focuses on competence, is the most widely used in electoral research.

However, Petrocik's conceptualization of issue ownership was developed in the context of an aggregate level study in the US, which is in many ways the big outlier in comparative research: a country in which the electoral contest is restricted to two parties only. While it makes intuitive sense to expect parties to benefit when a majority of the voters see them as competent to deal with an issue, translating the notion of competence to the individual level as well as to elections in multiparty systems turns out to be problematic. In a recent contri-

bution Budge (2015, 761), who originally coined the term 'issue ownership', now refers to it as an 'ambiguous' concept – and rightly so, as I will argue.

The first part of this contribution provides a brief sketch of the existing research on issue ownership, as both dependent and independent variables. The second and main part of this contribution focuses on conceptual issues. In the concluding section, I will discuss avenues for further research.

A brief sketch of the literature on issue ownership

The saliency theory of party competition, outlined above, formed the basis for the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) (Budge et al. 2001); a project that started in 1979 to content analyse election manifestos of most of the major parties in many contemporary democracies.[1] The coding scheme is based on the idea that parties compete by selectively emphasizing those issues on which they feel they have a good reputation. The coding scheme defines 56 categories (themes). Quasi-sentences from the texts are categorized; the more sentences are devoted to a certain theme, the more a party is seen as emphasizing that specific issue.

In a next step, Budge and Farlie (1983) demonstrated that aggregate election outcomes could be predicted quite well on the basis of the themes that dominated in the news. This is when they introduced the term 'issue ownership'. Voters associate certain issues with some parties, and parties have become 'owners' of those issues. If 'their' issues dominate in the campaigns, voters are 'primed' to think of those issues when they decide which party to vote for (Petrocik 1996). If they think of issues on which left-wing parties have a competitive advantage, they are more likely to support the left and if they think of issues on which right-wing parties have a better reputation, they are more likely to turn to the right.

Even though the term issue ownership was introduced in the 1980s and revitalized by Petrocik in the 1990s, Lefevere et al. (2015) show that most of the work in this area has been done in the last ten years. This could be because ideological differences between the larger mainstream parties have become smaller, which makes it more difficult for voters to choose among parties on the basis of those small differences. The spatial model would then lose much of its explanatory power. Consequently, several scholars have proposed that elections are increasingly decided on the basis of valence issues instead of position issues, so that 'parties are judged on competence in place of ideological differentiation' (Green 2007, 630; see also Clarke et al. 2004, 2009; Green and Hobolt 2008). Similarly, Green-Pedersen (2007, 609) argued that 'positional competition' has become increasingly replaced by 'issue competition', which he defines as 'getting the issues that a party prefers to dominate the party political agenda'.

Most of the early studies on issue ownership used this concept as an independent variable to predict aggregate level election outcomes (e.g. Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996), individual level vote choice (e.g. Van der Brug 2004; Nadeau et al. 2001; Bellucci 2006) or campaign strategies of parties (e.g. Budge and Farlie 1983; Sellers 1998). These studies generally tended to support the main idea behind issue ownership theory. It turned out that parties did indeed privilege certain issues over others and the aggregate as well as early individual level studies did show that a party would benefit electorally if its issues would play a prominent role in the campaign.

However, various scholars started to become critical of the notion of issue ownership. As far as I know, I was the first to question the double meaning of 'ownership' in terms of competence at solving problems as well as commitment at giving priority to those issues (Van der Brug 2004). I argued that perceptions of competence were (at the individual level) largely endogenous to 1) party preferences and 2) substantive agreement with a party's policy positions. Therefore, I proposed to define issue ownership only in terms of priorities, as that was originally the crux of the saliency theory, and I proposed indicators that measured issue ownership in those terms. More recently, Walgrave et al. (2012) have largely followed my reasoning, but instead of proposing to drop the concept of 'issue competence' altogether, they propose to distinguish between the 'competence di-

mension' and the 'associative dimension' of issue ownership. The 'competence dimension' refers to a party's reputation at dealing with the issue, while the associative dimension refers to how important the issue is for the party. Their results show that 'associative issue ownership' affects party choice, even when controlling for issue competence.

In a literature review, Walgrave et al. (2015) show that a large number of studies are now focusing on the 'associative' dimension of issue ownership and several survey items now exist that ask about perceptions of the commitment of parties to addressing certain issues (e.g. Bellucci 2006; Aalberg and Jenssen 2007; Lachat 2014; Meyer and Müller 2013). In addition, the Chapel Hill Expert Survey now contains questions measuring 'how important is [ISSUE] for each of the parties' (e.g. Hooghe et al. 2010). It is perhaps not surprising that all of these authors are comparativists whose main work is on party competition in multiparty systems. Multiparty systems often include small parties that are clearly associated with certain issues, such as radical right parties associated with the issue of immigration and Green parties associated with environmental protection. However, even though these parties are clearly seen as committed to these issues, they are often not seen as particularly 'competent' to deal with them. I will elaborate on this below.

In addition to these problems, which are in many ways particular to multiparty systems, the concept of issue ownership was also questioned when scholars began to study perceptions of issue competence as a dependent variable. These studies showed that perceptions of competence were dependent upon party preferences (e.g. Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Stubager and Slothuus 2013; Walgrave et al. 2014) and upon substantive agreement with a party's policies (e.g. Bellucci 2006; Wagner and Zeglovits 2014; Stubager and Slothuus 2013; Sanders et al. 2011). Partially as a result, the research agenda changed recently from an emphasis on issue ownership as an independent variable to research trying to explain ownership (e.g. Bélanger 2003; Martinsson 2009; Green and Jennings 2012). How do parties come to be associated with certain issues, under which circumstances do they uniquely emphasize their issues and under which circumstances do they address issues that are not to their advantage? While Budge and Farlie (1983) spoke of parties 'owning' issues, Budge recently argued that this terminology was 'perhaps misleading […] it might be better said that parties cannot disown them, and just have to try to play them to best advantage' (Budge 2015, 766). Over the course of political campaigns parties often address the same issues (e.g. Green-Pedersen 2007; Walgrave and De Swert 2007; Brasher 2009); they feel forced to respond to each other and hence both pay a great deal of attention to issues that they do not 'own' (e.g. Spoon et al. 2014; Dahlberg and Martinsson 2015; Van der Brug and Berkhout 2015) and try to 'steal' ownership by 'trespassing' (e.g. Tresch et al. 2015; Arceneaux 2008). De Sio and Weber (2014) explain variations over time in the issue emphasis of parties on the basis of their 'yield' in terms of likely gains and losses in party support. The 'yield' of an issue is in turn based on distributions of issue positions. So, the latest literature on issue ownership suggests that ownership of issues is fluid and temporary (see also Christensen et al. 2014), even though it appears to be more stable in the context of the American two party system (e.g., Egan 2013). A party can gain ownership and other parties may lose it. Moreover, if we think of associative issue ownership, we can also think about it as a matter of degree. Some parties are more strongly associated with an issue than other parties.

While this research has produced much knowledge regarding the dynamics of party competition, there is much conceptual confusion in the literature around 'issue ownership' (see also Walgrave et al. 2015; Budge 2015). I will devote the main part of this contribution to addressing these conceptual points.

Conceptualizing issue ownership

Three points will be discussed in this section. First, when discussing models of issue voting, including issue ownership, we should define the meaning of a 'political issue'. Issue ownership is often theoretically intertwined with the valence aspect of political competition, building upon Stokes' (1963) notion of valence issues. Yet, in practice we cannot draw a clear distinction between valence and position issues, as will be outlined below. Second, most of the issue ownership literature defines it as a party's perceived competence at handling

an issue. However, the notion of 'competence' is under-theorized. If we think of competence as the ability to solve difficult problems, does it make sense to think of parties as being 'competent' in one issue area, but not in another? At the individual level, evaluations of competence are largely endogenous to party preferences, which makes it highly problematic to use these as predictors of the vote. Moreover, they are also influenced by agreement with the substantive policies of the party. I will argue that, in an important sense, we are in fact testing a spatial model by employing the notion of issue specific competence. Third, all of these problems are exacerbated in research on multiparty systems. For small parties it is rational to emphasize issues on which they are *not* seen as competent by a majority of the voters, but which they are nevertheless associated with. In this section I discuss these three points and conclude that students working on issue ownership would do well to drop issue based competence from their models and focus on salience (e.g. Van der Brug 2004; Walgrave et al. 2012).

Political issues: valence, position or both?

When discussing issue ownership, the first question that one might ask is what constitutes a (political) issue. In the literature on issue voting, issue evolution, issue ownership and so on, one rarely finds a definition of an 'issue'. Petrocik (1996, 826) says explicitly that he uses the words 'issues' and 'problems' interchangeably. In the seminal article in which he introduces the difference between position and valence issues, Stokes (1963) does not provide a definition of an issue either. In many studies in which issues are being addressed, the term 'issues' refers loosely to 'themes', as also observed by Guinaudeau and Persico (2013) in their rare attempt to define 'issues': they define a 'policy issue' as 'a question of public policy, as demarcated defined and specified by political actors, possibly giving rise to one or several positions' (2013, 316).

This seems to be a useful definition. When reading through the literature, it becomes clear that not all problems are considered political issues. The notion of a political issue excludes all sorts of private and/or personal 'problems'. A 'problem' becomes a political issue only when actors call for government action. So, it is not the nature of the 'problem' that defines whether or not it can be considered a political issue, but the perception of different actors that it is a problem that requires actions on the part of local, regional, national or transnational governments. For a long time and in many countries domestic violence was and sometimes is still seen as an important social problem belonging to the private sphere. As long as the topic is treated as one that does not require government interference, it is not a *political issue* (e.g. Van der Brug et al. 2015).

Guinaudeau and Persico (2013) refer in their definition to 'positions', which is a notion taken from spatial models. In spatial models of electoral competition, issue positions represent an 'ordered set of alternatives of government interventions' (Stokes 1963, 372). So there should be at least two alternative courses of government action for the issue to fit the spatial model. However, as Stokes points out, in many cases there is no disagreement about the most appropriate form of government intervention. From this observation Stokes derives his famous distinction between position and valence issues, *position issues* being those where different actors propose different forms of government intervention and *valence issues* being those 'where actors generally take the same position' (1963, 372). Stokes does not say 'where all actors propose the same type of government intervention' to distinguish valence issues from position issues, but instead he defines valence issues as 'those that merely involve the linking of the parties with some condition that is positively or negatively valued by the electorate' (1963, 373). These are issues that evolve around the question 'where credit and blame ought to be assigned' (1963, 373). Moreover, using the example of economic policies, he argues that this could have developed into either a position or a valence issue. The reason why it developed into a valence issue is that 'there is overwhelming consensus as to the goals of government action' (1963, 374).

Consequently, valence issues have been described in the literature mostly as issues where there is general agreement on the *goals* of government action. However, empirically it turns out to be very difficult to distinguish between goals and means. Whether or not there is agreement upon the goals depends mainly on the level of abstraction. At the highest level of abstraction all parties share the same goal of 'a just society', 'world

peace', etc. However, differences arise once we start to make more concrete what we mean by a just society, for instance, or how we will create a society that is more just. Where most citizens of the US and UK agreed that world peace and democracy are desirable goals, there was disagreement as to whether invading Iraq was the best way to reach those goals. Since there were clearly different kinds of government interventions proposed by parties, the Iraq war was clearly a position issue, even though most US and UK citizens would agree about the desirability of the goals set by their governments.

While people agree that less crime is to be preferred, the political left and right disagree on whether crime should be reduced by repression or by prevention through social work. Surely, we all agree that a clean environment is to be preferred over a polluted environment, but that is not what is debated. The debate is about whether we should aim for a cleaner environment even if this is achieved at the expense of economic growth.

In the conceptualization of position vs. valence issues, the idea has been for a long time that position issues were problems in which different actors disagreed on the goals of policies, while valence issues were those in which there was general agreement on these goals. When a position issue was at stake, parties would compete by offering different policy proposals, which could be presented as positions. When a valence issue was at stake, the competition would be about who is most competent to handle the problem concerned. A party with a 'good' reputation on a specific issue would try to increase the salience of the associated problems, as this would help to focus attention on the issue where the party was advantaged. By emphasizing specific issues a party would also signal to voters that it 'is more sincere and committed to doing something about them' (Petrocik 1996, 826). So, in this conceptualization, salience and competence are both elements of 'valence issues' (see also Green and Hobolt 2008). Yet, this distinction is highly problematic. Questions of competence are not limited to 'valence' issues, where different parties have similar positions. When the website that supported the execution of the Affordable Care Act (also known as 'Obamacare') experienced all sorts of technical problems, this backfired on the reputation of the competence of the administration, advantaging the quite different position of the opponents. The same is true for the Iraq invasion, which many groups opposed, particularly in the UK. When the security situation in Iraq started to deteriorate after the initial military victory, the leaders of the incumbent party appeared less competent.

We may thus conclude that competence questions are not restricted to issues that many would label 'valence issues'. The same thing can be said for priorities. Immigration is certainly a position issue: some propose more restrictive migration policies, others feel that we should be more welcoming. However, this does not mean that the issue of immigration is equally important to every actor. In line with this, several scholars have recently argued that salience and position should be distinguished and that both play a separate role in politicizing an issue (e.g. De Sio and Franklin 2012; De Sio and Weber 2014; De Vries and Hobolt 2012; Guinaudeau and Persico 2013; Van der Brug et al. 2015).

In conclusion, we need to distinguish three largely independent factors that might each play a role in the electoral process: 1) positions, 2) salience/priorities and 3) competence. Three main points have been made. First, positions pertain to different views on the most desirable government interventions. These different views may stem from differences in how we evaluate the desirability of certain goals or from differences in the means to realize those goals; but the distinction between means and goals is not helpful. Second, not all desirable goals can be realized at the same time, so politics is as much about setting priorities as it is about proposing alternative policies. Priority setting takes place in instances in which all actors agree about the most appropriate line of government intervention, but also when different lines of government intervention are proposed. Finally, voters' perceptions of competence or incompetence are not restricted to issues in which different actors agree about the most appropriate forms of government intervention. Perhaps the largest threat to a party's reputation of being competent occurs when a position issue is at stake and a governing party pushes policies through against the will of the opposition. If things go wrong, the opposition has more ammunition to harm the reputation of governing parties than in the case where the opposition did not offer alternatives.

The concept of issue competence

The most popular operationalization of issue ownership is in terms of a party's 'issue competence': which party is best able to handle a specific problem that the country faces (e.g. Petrocik 1996). At face value it makes sense to think that voters would find a party more attractive when they think it is capable of solving certain important problems. Walgrave et al. (2015) made an inventory of the different definitions and operationalizations of the concept of issue ownership employed in 35 studies. They show that most voter studies focusing on issue ownership operationalize the concept by some form of question about which party 'can handle [the issue] best' (e.g. Petrocik 1996; Bélanger 2003; Benoit and Hansen 2004; Green and Jennings 2012), 'is best placed to deal with [issue]' (Walgrave and De Swert 2007), 'would do a better job on the following issues' (e.g. Arceneaux 2008; Egan 2013; Therriault 2009), 'is best at solving the following issues' (Stubager and Slothuus 2013). So, in all of these cases, competence is ascribed to *a party or politician in relation to an issue*. Theoretically there can be three reasons why a respondent would think party A is competent at handling issue B: 1) the respondent thinks that the party has a good track record in finding competent people who are able to govern the country, the city, or whatever; 2) the respondent thinks that the party attracts politicians who are particularly competent in the specific issue in which the party has 'ownership' (which is the implicit idea of issue competence); or 3) the respondent agrees with the substantive position of the party on a specific issue. I will discuss all three in turn.

We might think of competence as the ability to solve difficult problems in general. Sanders et al. (2011) distinguish 'spatial calculations' from 'valence judgments' in models of party choice. Evaluations of leaders are among the 'valence judgments' that they consider, and this makes sense. Competence is one of the important personality traits that is often included in studies on political leadership (e.g. Kinder et al. 1980; Popkin et al. 1976; Stewart and Clarke 1992; Greene 2001; Johnston 2002; Bittner 2011), albeit that sometimes other labels are used, such as 'leadership effectiveness' (e.g. Bean and Mughan 1989; Funk 1999) or 'political craftsmanship' (Aaldering and Vliegenthart forthcoming). If voters choose a party because they think the party has a 'competent' leader, 'valence judgments' clearly play a role (e.g. Sanders et al. 2011). However, this could be independent of the specific issue at stake, so a test of the effect of leadership evaluations on the vote is *not* by itself a test of any model of *issue voting* or *issue ownership*.

In the literature on political leadership competence is described as a characteristic of a person who is capable of 'achieving difficult things', 'solving difficult problems', 'doing a good job' and so on. Since these perceptions of competence are usually seen as personality traits of individual politicians, it seems a bit of a stretch to ascribe these characteristics also to collective actors such as political parties. However, when a party has in the past often recruited competent politicians it could be the case that voters come to see the party as being 'competent', in the sense that people would trust a party to 'do a good job', or 'to take the right decisions'. Evidence suggests that this might be the case for some groups of voters. For instance, Bélanger and Meguid (2008) show that party identifiers tend to name 'their' party as the most competent to deal with almost any issue (see also Kuechler 1991; Wagner and Zeglovits 2014; Stubager and Slothuus 2013). This means not only that perceptions of competence are endogenous to party preferences but also that the perceptions of these people are *independent* of the specific issue at stake. To apply these measures, then, in a model of *issue voting* seems to be somewhat problematic, to say the least.

But not all voters do this. Many respondents consider one party as more competent to handle one issue but another party to be more competent at solving other issues. If these issues were primarily valence issues, where all parties agreed about the line of action to take, we could indeed interpret these differences as reflecting people's perceptions of the competence of parties in solving specific issues. This assumption is at the heart of much of the work on issue ownership. One could theoretically think of instances where this could be the case. A party leader might be an economist and claim to be particularly good at solving economic problems, or be an ex-policeman and claim to be good at fighting crime. However, these cases are quite rare and this would add to a party's ability to gain issue ownership only during the time when the respective person is

leading the party, while the studies on issue ownership suggest that this concept refers to a long-term association between the party and the issue. So, it seems quite far-fetched to argue that the issue specific competence of a party stems from the issue specific competences of the leaders. If a voter thinks that a party is best able to handle a specific problem, rather than the party leader being competent at handling problems in general, it seems plausible agreement with the party's policies on the issue (the party's *issue position*) plays an important role in this evaluation of 'competence'.

One might think that many issues are valence issues on which there is general agreement, but it is seldom the case that an issue arises where all parties agree about the proper actions to take. Often there is disagreement between parties if not about the goals then about the means to achieve them. Various studies have now shown that perceptions of competence are strongly affected by agreement with the policy positions of parties. Sanders et al. (2011) demonstrated this in a survey panel study of British voters, Stubager and Slothuus (2013) present similar findings on the basis of the Danish National Election Study 2007 and Therriault (2009) demonstrated the effect of policy preferences on various operationalizations of issue competence perceptions in a survey embedded experiment in the US context. Finally, Wagner and Zeglovits (2014) conducted 20 in-depth interviews to explore how people answer the question 'Which party is best at handling [an issue]?'. Many of them refer to their agreement with the party's policies.

The implications of these findings are more far-reaching than suggesting a 'simple' endogeneity problem. In its original form, Budge and Farlie proposed the saliency model as an *alternative* to a spatial model of party competition. The central assumption underlying the theory was that parties competed not by taking different positions but by emphasizing issues that they owned: issues in which they were seen as having a 'competitive advantage'. In the ensuing literature the idea of ownership was further specified as issues on which parties were seen as most competent. However, if voters tend to consider a party more competent *because* they agree with their position, the notion of issue ownership becomes almost indistinguishable from a Downsian spatial model.

Issue ownership of small parties

In my discussion of the literature I noted that attempts to measure the associative dimension of party ownership rather than the competence dimension all came from comparativists who mainly study multiparty systems. This is probably because it is problematic to apply the notion of aggregate level competence in the context of a multiparty system. In the context of a two-party system, the notion of competence is reasonably straightforward. If a majority of the voters think that the candidate of the Republican party is best able to bring down crime it makes sense for this candidate to emphasize crime in his campaign. A lot of attention to the issue of crime in the news would benefit this party in the election, even if we as academics would not know whether this would be evidence of valence judgements (most people see the candidate as competent) or positional considerations (most people want harsher sentences for criminals and support a candidate who they see as 'tough on crime').

In multiparty systems things become much fuzzier. First of all, parties do not compete for the support of a majority of the voters but with ideologically similar parties for the vote of their potential electorate. In order to be competitive they would want to emphasize those issues that help to distinguish them from their direct competitors. Yet, these could be issues that are considered important by only a small subgroup of the electorate. 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. So, for them it is important to be attractive for a small group 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 most voters do not see environmentalism as one of the 'most important problems facing the country', it could still be rational for a Green party to emphasize the issue of

environmentalism in the campaign. If 10 per cent of the voters would agree with the policies that the Greens propose on environmentalism and if those 10 per cent also feel that the issue needs to get more priority, a Green party could try to attract those 10 per cent by trying to bring attention to this issue and hence prime voters to make environmentalism a more important factor in the calculus of voters (see also Van der Brug and Berkhout 2015).

A second point is that the notion of competence is complicated in the case of small parties that have no prior experience in office. How are voters to judge whether or not such a party is 'competent'? What does it mean when a respondent says in a survey interview that a radical right party that has never been in office 'is best able to handle the issue of immigration'? Let's take a step back and think of the three components that feature in the research agenda on issue voting/issue ownership: 1) competence, 2) salience/priorities/commitments and 3) policy positions. What kind of information is available to this respondent on the three components? Since the party has never held office there is no real information available about competence. Moreover, radical right parties have a notoriously poor track record at recruiting competent politicians (e.g. Mudde 2007), which makes it even more unlikely that the respondent really thinks that the party will be able to 'solve the problems of immigration' because of the managerial capabilities of the leader. There is, however, sufficient information available about the other two components, priorities and positions. By emphasizing immigration, the party will signal its commitment to addressing the issue and there can also be no question about its policies: more restrictions on immigration. So, when a respondent says that UKIP is 'best able to handle immigration', my guess is that she means: 'I agree with UKIP that migration needs to be restricted and that this is an issue that needs to get more priority.' Yet, if this is what we are really measuring in an indirect way, why not develop more direct measures of priorities and positions instead of using the 'issue competence' question that turns out to be so problematic?

Conclusion and moving forward

The concept of issue ownership originated from the saliency theory of party competition, which was proposed originally as an alternative to spatial models (e.g. Robertson 1976; Budge and Farlie 1983). The idea was that direct confrontations between parties were quite rare and that instead parties were often selectively emphasizing issues that they 'own': topics on which they have a 'competitive advantage' or a 'good reputation'. So, the competition would be about 'valence' – who is best able to deal with the most important problems (e.g. Petrocik 1996) – rather than about different policies. Reviewing the literature, Budge (2015) concluded that 'issue ownership has turned into an "ambiguous" concept'. I wholeheartedly agree. In my view the origin of the confusion stems from two ambiguous concepts: valence and valence issues on the one hand and 'issue competence' on the other.

If 'valence' referred to the problem-solving capacities of a political leader or of his/her party, it would not be a problematic concept. It seems perfectly sensible to expect voters to consider not only the issues at stake and the positions that parties take on those issues but also whether the leaders of different parties would be competent to run the government. There is a whole literature on the effects of those leadership evaluations on the vote. The main point here is that in the large majority of cases these leadership effects are *independent of the issues* that are at stake.

Ever since Stokes (1963) introduced the concept of a valence issue scholars have been struggling to clearly distinguish between position and valence issues. Clearly Stokes was struggling with this himself when he defined *position issues* as those in which different actors propose different forms of government intervention and *valence issues* as those 'where actors generally take the same position' (1963, 372). 'Taking the same positions' is subsequently described as there being 'overwhelming consensus as to the goals of government action' (1963, 374). Had Stokes defined valence issues as those 'where different actors agree about

the most appropriate forms of government intervention', the distinction between position and valence issues would have been clear. However, very few issues would then really count as valence issues. The scholars who invented the saliency theory soon found out that many of the topics in their coding scheme needed to be represented by two categories: 'military positive' and 'military negative', 'traditional morality positive' and 'traditional morality negative' and so on. So, many issues clearly have opposite sides and the salience of each side varies over time and place. So, rather than thinking about an issue being either a valence or a position issue, it makes more sense to think of issues as being more or less polarized in terms of positions and being more or less salient at different moments in time (see also Kriesi et al. 2012; De Sio and Franklin 2012; De Vries and Hobolt 2012; Guinaudeau and Persico 2013; De Sio and Weber 2014; Van der Brug et al. 2015).

The notion of valence has been 'translated' in much of the literature as the competence of leaders or parties to solve specific issues (e.g. Petrocik 1996; Bélanger and Meguid 2008), also by authors who acknowledge that valence and position issues are hard to distinguish empirically (e.g. Green and Hobolt 2008). To measure issue ownership of parties these authors employ some form of the question about which party is 'best able to deal with [an issue]'. In this chapter I pointed at four major problems attached to the use of these questions to measure issue ownership. First, competence is by no means restricted to the types of issue that are often called 'valence' issues. On the contrary, the largest threat to the reputation occurs when incumbent parties mess up on an issue about which opposition parties have proposed alternative lines of government action.

Second, evaluations of 'which party is best at handling [an issue]' are strongly affected by party preferences (e.g. Kuechler 1991; Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Wagner and Zeglovits 2014; Stubager and Slothuus 2013). To the extent that perceptions of competence are affected by party preferences, these evaluations are *independent* of the specific issue at stake. Needless to say, this undermines the validity of the variable as a measure of issue ownership.

Third, when voters distinguish between the competence of parties on different issues, these perceptions are strongly affected by agreement with the policies the parties propose (e.g. Bellucci 2006; Sanders et al. 2011; Stubager and Slothuus 2013; Therriault 2009). So, when a voter sees a leader as good at handling crime and immigration, but bad at handling abortion and euthanasia, the voter is not evaluating the 'competence' of the leader. She simply agrees with the positions of this leader on crime and immigration, but disagrees with him/her on abortion and euthanasia. So, while the issue ownership model has been developed as an alternative to spatial models, the core concept of the issue ownership model is measured by means of variables that are contaminated by issue positions, which, needless to say, are at the heart of those spatial models.

Finally, these problems are boosted when the concept of issue competence is applied to small and/or radical parties that have no established track record of government responsibility. In those cases voters have no information to judge the parties' issue competence, which makes it even more plausible that they are judging agreement with the policy positions of these parties as well as their commitment to the issue.

For these reasons it is probably less surprising that the literature has increasingly paid attention to 'associative issue ownership' instead of 'competence issue ownership' (e.g. Van der Brug 2004; Bellucci 2006; Walgrave et al. 2012; Budge 2015; Walgrave et al. 2015). The associative dimension captures the extent to which an issue is seen as *important for a specific party*. It thus focuses exclusively on the extent to which a party is expected to prioritize an issue over other issues. This perspective puts less emphasis on the long-term competitive advantage implied by the term 'ownership', but perceives the extent to which parties are associated with certain issues as more dynamic.

Associative issue ownership does not have the four disadvantages connected to issue competence. How important an issue is for a party is unrelated to classifications of issues as being valence or position issues. Moreover, these perceptions are unlikely to be contaminated by party preferences or policy positions. Even a multiculturalist who feels disgusted by the rhetoric of an extreme right party would probably agree that immigration is an important issue for such a party. Finally, a clear advantage is that even a small and unpopular

party might be seen as an issue owner when people agree that the issue is very important to the party. So, this assessment of issue ownership depends neither upon a party's popularity nor upon the popularity of its issue positions (Van der Brug 2004; Walgrave et al. 2012, 2015).

So, to move our research agenda forward we are well advised to focus on the associative dimension of issue ownership, which is conceptually much closer to the saliency model of party competition. By emphasizing an issue, a party shows its commitment to addressing the specific issue. That is an important signal to voters who want parties to give more priority to addressing that specific issue. Such a conceptualization is not far off the conceptualization of Petrocik (1996). After all, he argued that by emphasizing certain problems in an election campaign, a party signals to voters that it 'is more sincere and committed to doing something about them' (Petrocik 1996, 826). If this is the causal argument, we do not need to bring in the confusing concept of 'issue competence'.

To be sure, I am not advocating that we should drop the notion of competence altogether. Voters' perceptions of leaders can play an important role in their calculus. So, voters may decide to support a party when they see its leader as being sympathetic, decisive or competent at managing complex problems. Yet, these considerations should not play a role in models of *issue voting*. When modelling the role of issues in elections, we should restrict ourselves to the two components of issue competition: position taking and priority setting.

Note

1. The list of countries has expanded over time. By now, 56 countries are included: https://manifestoproject.wzb.eu/

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