'Steal me if you can!' The impact of campaign messages on associative issue ownership

Anke Tresch
University of Geneva, Switzerland

Jonas Lefevere
University of Antwerp, Belgium

Stefaan Walgrave
University of Antwerp, Belgium

Abstract
Whereas extant work on issue ownership treats voters' issue ownership perceptions as independent variables to explain electoral choice or party behaviour, this article examines whether parties can, by communicating on an issue, turn voters' perceptions of issue ownership to their advantage. In contrast to most previous studies that have focused on competence ownership – measured as a party's capacity to handle an issue – this article analyses the short-term and long-term impact of campaign messages on voters' perceptions of associative ownership, which refers to the voters' spontaneous party–issue association, regardless of whether or not voters consider the party as the most competent at dealing with the issue at hand. Based on an online experimental design in Belgium, we show that parties are unable to steal issues that are associated with another party. However, by communicating on their own issues, parties can reinforce their reputation as an associative owner – but only in the short run and only if their previous ownership reputation is not overly strong.

Introduction

In times of loosening ties between political parties and their voters – as reflected in weakening party identification, declining membership rates and increasing electoral volatility across Western European countries (e.g. Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000) – the concept of 'issue ownership' has recently gained prominence in the study of both electoral behaviour (e.g. Bélanger and Meguid, 2008; Belucci, 2006; Green and Hobolt, 2008; van der Brug, 2004) and party competition (e.g. Damore, 2004; Holian, 2004; Sides, 2006; Sigelman and Buell, 2004; Walgrave and de Swert, 2007; Walgrave et al., 2009). Issue ownership refers to the fact that political parties are, in the minds of voters, associated with specific issues, and considered as best able to deal with them (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). The issue ownership theory formulates two expectations: First,

political parties and their candidates have incentives to focus their campaign efforts on issues for which they hold a reputation of competence – the so-called owned issues – and to sidestep or downplay issues that play to the advantage of their opponents. Second, the theory expects voters to make their choices by evaluating the competence that each party has in handling the issue(s) that dominated the

---

Corresponding author:
Anke Tresch, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Geneva, Boulevard du Pont-d'Arve 40, 1211 Genève 4, Switzerland.
Email: anke.tresch@unige.ch

agenda at election time, and to cast their vote for the issue owner.

Whereas electoral research has confirmed that issue ownership perceptions affect the individual vote either directly (e.g. Belucci, 2006; Green and Jennings, 2011), or indirectly, in combination with issue salience (e.g. Bélanger and Meguid, 2008; Green and Hobolt, 2008), recent work on party behaviour challenges the assumptions of the original issue ownership theory. These studies show that 'issue trespassing' (Damore, 2004; Sides, 2006, 2007) or 'issue convergence' (Damore, 2005; Sigelman and Buell, 2004) is a rather frequent phenomenon. Parties not only focus on the issues they own, but they often try to 'steal' the issues that have been traditionally owned by their opponents (Holian, 2004). However, this literature has hardly dealt with the *consequences* of issue trespassing on voters' issue ownership perceptions. Can parties, through their messages, successfully 'steal' issues owned by other parties and turn perceptions of issue ownership to their advantage? Alternatively, do such campaign messages only serve to reinforce existing issue handling reputations, as suggested by the original theory? To our knowledge, there is only one study so far that has empirically addressed these questions, and assessed the effect of campaign messages on voters' issue ownership perceptions (Walgrave et al., 2009). Against the conventional wisdom of the original theory, this study shows that issue trespassing can significantly increase a party's reputation on an issue that was originally owned by another party – unless, at the same time, the issue owner has the opportunity to reiterate his position and to neutralize the challenger's message. In the absence of a challenger, talking about previously owned issues does not help to reinforce a party's standing on the issue, but seems necessary to maintain their issue handling reputation (2009: 164). However, these results are based on a measure of what we call 'competence issue ownership', which indicates how competent voters think a party is in determining policies on a given issue (2009: 163). Although this measure is a standard indicator used to assess issue ownership in the minds of voters, it only captures one aspect of issue ownership; namely, issue handling competence. As such, it is arguably related to a party's performance on an issue and comes close to Petrocik's (1996: 827) idea of 'performance-based ownership'. Yet, most definitions of issue ownership include a second, 'associative' dimension, which refers to spontaneous party–issue identification in the minds of voters, regardless of whether or not the voters consider the party as the most competent at dealing with the issue at hand (Walgrave et al., 2012). In spite of the centrality of these spontaneous party–issue linkages in most conceptualizations of issue ownership, the empirical literature has always concentrated solely on competence. Against this background, the aim of this article is to assess the effect of campaign messages on voters' perceptions of *associative* issue ownership. More specifically, we test three kinds of party message effects on voters' perceptions of associative issue ownership: First, we assess the impact of voter exposure to party campaign messages on an issue that the party does not own (issue trespassing); second, we assess the effect of voter exposure to party campaign messages where the party owns the issue (issue retention); and third, we measure the long-term stability of both exposure effects. To do so, we rely on several waves of a large-scale, online experiment conducted in the context of the 2009 regional elections in Belgium. By measuring the effect of campaign messages on associative issue ownership for the first time, we contribute to the existing literature in two ways: First, we test whether issue trespassing actually pays off if the focus is on the allegedly more stable associative dimension of issue ownership. Second, given the similar set-up of our study with the one by Walgrave et al. (2009), we can put our findings into perspective and show that the theoretical and empirical distinction between the two dimensions of issue ownership – competence versus associative issue ownership – is crucial in understanding the impact of campaign messages on voters.

This article is structured as follows. In the next section, we briefly present the literature on issue ownership and issue ownership change, and develop expectations regarding the impact of parties' campaign messages on voters' perceptions of associative ownership. Then, we present our experimental data and measures, before we turn to our empirical analyses. In the last section, we discuss our findings, derive implications for party behaviour during election campaigns and point to directions for future research.

Issue ownership stability and change

As a theory of candidate and party behaviour during election campaigns, the issue ownership framework expects political parties and their candidates to concentrate their campaign efforts on owned issues and to ignore issues associated with their competitors. As a result, rather than engaging in common debates and exchanging diverging positions on similar issues, political parties stick to their preferred issues, and tend to talk past each other during election campaigns (for similar perspectives, see Carmines, 1991; Riker, 1996).

Earlier research has mainly confirmed that parties primarily focus on their own issues during election campaigns (e.g. Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik et al., 2003; Sellers, 1998). By advertising issues that are traditionally associated with their party, they can expect to boost their electoral fortunes (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994). However, more recent studies tend to invalidate the expectations of the issue ownership theory regarding party behaviour. Especially in the United States, several studies have documented instances of 'issue trespassing' (Damore, 2004; Sides, 2006) or 'issue convergence' (Damore, 2005;

Sigelman and Buell, 2004). Far from talking past each other, parties more often than not directly compete over the same set of issues, trying to 'steal' the issues that have traditionally been owned by their opponents (Holian, 2004).

There are numerous reasons why parties discuss issues connected with their opponents. Most basically, issues owned by the opponent are sometimes simply unavoidable due to external, real-world events (such as the nuclear accident in Fukushima or the financial crisis), and the 'state of the world' (Budge and Farlie, 1983), or because they figure on the structural 'party systems agenda' (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010), and/or because of changes in the public's mood, which temporarily increases the salience of selected issues, placing them very high on the public agenda (Stimson et al., 1995). Under such circumstances, political parties and their candidates need 'to be seen as concerned, responsive, and informed' about these issues, and have incentives to 'ride the wave' of issues that are timely and extremely salient to the public (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994: 337). Other, more specific explanations of issue convergence refer to factors such as partisanship, the competitive standing of candidates, or the tone of their campaign messages. In his analysis of the 1976–1996 presidential campaigns in the USA, Damore (2004, 2005) demonstrates how Democrats and candidates who were trailing in pre-election polls were more likely to trespass on their competitor's issues. Additionally, candidates tended to use opposition-owned issues to present a positive message, but were more likely to rely on owned issues when they attacked.

Occurrences of issue trespassing have occasionally been observed in other countries, but studies outside of the US context are rare. A recent Canadian study, for instance, has shown how, by framing the issues in a favourable way, the incumbent government could win the election by focusing its campaign on healthcare in spite of its poor record on this issue (Nadeau et al., 2010). In the European context, the rare studies on this topic found considerable degrees of issue overlap between political parties' issue emphases (Brouard et al., 2012; Green-Pedersen, 2007; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010). Given the lack of comparative studies between the USA and European countries, it remains an open question as to whether the frequency of issue trespassing varies according to the characteristics of the party system. However, it seems plausible that such issue overlap is more frequent in the multiparty systems of most European democracies than in the US two-party context because the political space is more crowded in multiparty systems, where several (ideologically similar) parties compete over a limited number of issues.

In sum, the recent literature on political parties' campaign behaviour has shown that political parties face constraints in selecting their issues and cannot simply ignore the issues they do not own (e.g. Damore, 2004; Nadeau et al., 2010). As a consequence, issue trespassing is relatively common and issue ownerships are more contested than is assumed when judging by the original theory. While documenting and explaining instances of issue trespassing by parties, this work has hardly dealt with the *impact* of issue trespassing on the issue ownership perceptions of the *voters*. By addressing issues owned by their opponents, can parties break the long-established party–issue associations in the minds of the voters and acquire new issue ownership reputations? Is issue trespassing a viable strategy for a party? We discuss this question in the next section.

Impact of campaign messages on voters' perceptions of issue ownership

Most scholars conceive issue ownership as a rather stable and long-standing party characteristic which emerges from a party's history and social base. Petrocik (1996), one of the founders of the original theory, considers issue-handling reputations of the parties in the minds of voters as the 'critical constants' (1996: 826) between elections. Although he foresees the possibility of issue ownership loss in the short term, especially as a result of poor performance of parties in office, he argues that perceptions of issue ownership hardly change. As a result of this conventional conception, it is hardly surprising that most empirical work has treated issue ownership perceptions in the minds of voters as independent determinants of voting behaviour (e.g. Bélanger and Meguid, 2008; Belucci, 2006; Green and Hobolt, 2008; van der Brug, 2004). Only recently have some rare studies considered them as dependent variables and studied their potentially dynamic nature (Bélanger, 2003; Brasher, 2009; Walgrave et al., 2009). These studies show that issue ownership reputations – typically measured by the perceived ability of different parties to handle certain issues – are variable over time, and respond, among other things, to performance in office (Bélanger, 2003; Brasher, 2009). However, these studies have not analysed whether changing issue ownership perceptions in the minds of voters are in any way linked to political parties' campaign strategies, especially in terms of issue trespassing. To our knowledge, the already mentioned study by Walgrave and colleagues (2009) is the only analysis of how political parties' campaign messages impact on the perceptions of issue ownership in the minds of the voters. Based on an online experiment, the authors show that individuals temporarily adjust their evaluation of parties' issue handling capacities after being exposed to party messages on the issue, especially if the issue was not previously owned by any party. If parties trespass on the issues owned by other parties, they can significantly increase their issue handling reputation, *unless* the traditional issue owner gets an opportunity to talk about this issue at the same time. Thus, communicating about one's own issues is essential to neutralizing a challenger's message, but, more generally, also to maintaining

existing issue ownership reputations in the absence of a challenger. These findings are at odds with the expectations of the original issue ownership theory, which underlines the stability of issue ownership perceptions in the minds of voters, and holds that electoral campaigning may, at best, reinforce existing issue ownership reputations in favour of the original owner (Petrocik, 1996: 826). Issue trespassing, in other words, seems to be a futile endeavour, as parties are unable to steal issues owned by other parties anyway. We argue that the differences between the assumptions of the original theory (stability) and the empirical findings by Walgrave and co-authors (change) can at least be partially explained by their focus on the competence dimension of issue ownership. In fact, their measurement of issue handling competence strongly resembles Petrocik's (1996: 827) idea of 'performance-based ownership', which is expected to fluctuate in the short run depending on the performance of the incumbent in 'bad times' – during wars, economic crises or natural disasters, for instance. Associative issue ownership, in contrast, is independent of parties' performance on issues and relates to the spontaneous identification of parties with issues in the minds of voters (Walgrave et al., 2012). Associative issue ownership thus refers to a kind of stereotype in the voters' minds. When they think about the party, the issue automatically comes to mind, and vice versa. Given the different nature of associative and competence issue ownership, especially regarding their relationship with performance, we posit that associative ownership perceptions respond differently to parties' campaign messages than the traditionally measured issue competence reputations on which the study by Walgrave et al. (2009) was based.

First of all, regarding the effect of issue trespassing, we argue that associative issue ownership cannot be stolen in the short-term context of an electoral campaign. To become an associative issue owner in the minds of voters, a party has to repeatedly communicate about (and potentially act on) an issue in a consistent way, and over a long period of time. In other words, a long and persistent history of attention and commitment toward an issue is a prerequisite to becoming an associative issue owner and to enjoying credibility on the issue in the eyes of the public (Petrocik, 1996: 826). Therefore, other parties' campaign messages are unlikely to challenge the associative issue owner because their messages do not sound familiar to the audience, but rather contradict existing partisan stereotypes. Competence issue ownership, in contrast, is less stable, as it is linked to a party's performance on an issue. This characteristic of competence issue ownership might explain why Walgrave and co-authors found a positive effect of issue trespassing on voters' perceptions of issue handling competence.

Second, and in line with Petrocik (1996: 826), we argue that issue retention by parties focusing on their own issues, leading to voter exposure to campaign messages on owned issues, reinforces previous issue ownership perceptions in the minds of voters. The reason for this is that issue ownership perceptions act as filters for assimilating specific campaign messages (see Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994). Due to a 'confirmatory bias', which makes people more willing to accept news that supports their existing stereotypes (Holian, 2004: 98), messages from the issue owner are readily incorporated, whereas other parties' messages on the issue are rejected (see also Norpoth and Buchanan, 1992). In our view, this mechanism benefits both associative and competence issue owners. However, Walgrave and colleagues (2009) found no evidence for such a reinforcement effect. We believe that the reason lies in a 'ceiling effect' due to the focus of their study on 'strongly' owned issues. If a party already holds a quasi-monopoly on an issue and is identified as the issue owner by the vast majority of the electorate, it is difficult to gain any more leverage by communicating on the issue. Therefore, we posit that campaign messages on one's own issues reinforce previous issue ownership perceptions for moderately owned issues, but have no effect in the case of strongly owned issues.

Third, however, we argue that the expected reinforcement effect of campaign messages on moderately owned issues does not persist, but fades away after a while. Thus, similar to Petrocik (1996), we conceive of issue ownership as a rather stable party characteristic, at least as far as the spontaneous associations of issues and parties are concerned. Given that perceptions of associative ownership arise from a long and persistent history of attention and commitment toward an issue, they are quite resilient, and only marginally fluctuate around a long-term equilibrium. The underlying reason for this is that long-term memory is organized as a network of interlinked nodes (Miller and Krosnick, 1996). When issues temporarily slip from one's mind, this does not sever the links between the issue and the parties – especially not if a party has continually stressed the issue in the past. Thus, media messages may temporarily activate other links, but because the links between associatively owned issues and their owners persevere, we expect that this effect is only temporary.

Data and methods

To test our assumptions, we use an experimental design embedded in an ongoing, web-based, Internet panel in Belgium, UAWEP09. Belgium is a small consociational democracy in Western Europe characterized by centrifugal tendencies: The two largest regions have acquired substantial independence, and have separate media and party systems. The Internet panel only contains Flemish respondents. The panel started in 2006 as an opt-in panel, meaning that respondents were recruited through banners on a number of online, news websites. These websites were quite diverse and included elderly organizations, soccer teams, radio stations and so forth. Furthermore, we distributed

flyers in public places. We also relied on snowball sampling, asking participants to invite other people that they knew onto the panel. Only respondents who were included at the start of the panel in 2006, and who participated in subsequent waves, were invited to take part in UAWEP09 (N=7304), on which we rely in this study. Many respondents of UAWEP09 were excluded from the analyses due to item non-response and/or non-exposure to the experimental stimulus. More specifically, first, in order to test our assumption that the reinforcement effect of issue retention is temporary, we could only include respondents who participated in all three waves of the 2009 survey (N=4174). Of those, secondly, we had to eliminate respondents for whom we had missing information on any of the relevant variables; that is, associative issue ownership in all three waves, education, gender and age (N=2774). Thirdly, of those respondents who were left, it was necessary to exclude the ones who were unable to observe the entire clip with the experimental stimulus (N=1650). Thus, we were left with a final sample of 1124 respondents. Despite the exclusion of many respondents, the sample has remained quite diverse, and hardly differs from the original sample. However, the sample is not – and never was – representative: Compared to the Flemish population, both the initial sample (N=7304) and the final sample retained for the analyses (N=1124) are decidedly more male and much more highly educated (Appendix 1).

UAWEP09 was organized in the run up to the 2009 regional elections and consisted of three waves: two pre-electoral and one post-electoral. Our analyses use data from all three waves: Wave 1 measured pre-exposure issue ownership (from 20 March until 28 April 2009), wave 2 contained the stimulus and post-exposure, issue ownership measures (27 May until 7 June) and wave 3 contained long-term, post-exposure measures (23 June until 14 August).

The stimulus consisted of a fragment of an actual evening news broadcast on the public broadcaster (*Eén*), in which a fake news item was embedded. The real items aired on 20 April 2009. The news anchor redid all the introductions to ensure his clothing was consistent throughout the news clip. The entire clip lasted roughly three minutes and thirty seconds, depending on the conditions. The control condition (in which no stimulus was present) lasted three minutes. The fake news item contained a politician (in each case, the actual party president), who gave a thirty-second quote on a given issue. To enhance realism, the regular news anchor announced the clip and stated that with the elections approaching each party would get a chance to voice their position on a given issue. Then the anchor stated that party X would present its position on issue Y. Each clip featured a different issue/party quote, but each quote lasted roughly thirty seconds. We left it up to the politicians to decide which statement to present, as long as it was on topic: It needed to state each party's position on the issue at hand. The item was embedded in a larger news item (it was preceded by a short item, and two items followed before the clip faded to black). We used a professional camera crew that regularly works for the public broadcaster to shoot the footage, and open captions (the on-screen texts offering a description of the actor) were developed by the same crew to ensure that they were identical to the open captions in the other clips. Finally, the foam tip on the microphone was the one used in public news broadcasts, and the politicians were the actual party presidents. In short, we feel that the fabricated item was as real and regular as a news item can be. None of the respondents gave us an indication that they did not believe it was a real item; respondents on the Internet panel are highly reactive and often send emails to point out spelling errors, or to offer comments on the questionnaire. However, none of the respondents were suspicious regarding the issue ownership fragments used. Exposure to the stimulus was measured by using hidden time measures that recorded the time a respondent spent on the page containing the stimulus in streaming video mode. The video-player controls were disabled to prevent respondents from fast forwarding or rewinding the clip. Only respondents who watched the entire clip were retained in the analyses. After the final wave of the survey, all respondents were debriefed by email. In the closing email for the panel survey, we explained that the clip they were shown included a fabricated news item and that it varied depending on the group to which the respondent was randomly assigned.

This study does not use all of the measures that were collected in the survey. After respondents were exposed to the clip, we asked various diversion questions. Respondents had to indicate their evaluation of the actors in the news clip based on a variety of properties (being convincing, knowing what they were talking about, being engaging, and so forth), indicate their opinion on the issues of the other clips in the news item, and give their evaluation of the news items in terms of them being newsworthy. Following these questions related to the stimulus, we measured issue salience, followed by the dependent, associative issue ownership variable. Our dependent variable, associative issue ownership, was measured as follows: 'Can you indicate for the following issue which party you spontaneously think about when you think about the issue? This does not have to be the party whose position on that issue you find most compelling.' Respondents ticked one party, indicated that they did not know, or indicated that none of the parties came to mind. For each voter and issue, each party received a separate, associative issue ownership score (0 = not owner, 1 = owner). Associative issue ownership was measured prior to exposure (wave 1), immediately post-exposure (wave 2) and once again in wave 3 to measure the long-term effect.

Our measure of associative issue ownership is mutually exclusive. That is, only one party can own an issue. Admittedly, this simplifies reality to a certain extent: Especially

in multiparty systems, it is possible that several parties are associated with an issue to some degree. Scales measuring the strength of association of each party with each issue would allow us to test this. Nevertheless, three reasons led us to use the available binary measure. First, issue ownership matters because the owner is likely to benefit electorally: People vote for the party that owns the issue. Regardless of degrees of association, it is the party with the strongest association that is likely to gain most votes when an issue becomes more salient. As such, limiting the measure to the strongest owner makes sense: Only when a party manages to become the strongest one associated with a particular issue is it likely to reap the benefits. Secondly, associative ownership is the *spontaneous* association of a party with an issue. Including multiple items, and asking respondents to indicate the strength of association for each party, would greatly increase cognitive effort. As a result, much of the spontaneity of the current measure would be lost. Third, while previous studies have generally focused on competence issue ownership, many of them use issue ownership in a dichotomous way, and identify the party that is most often cited as best able to resolve a problem as the issue owner, instead of using relative measures of issue competence (e.g. Bélanger and Meguid, 2008; Damore, 2004, 2005; Petrocik, 1996; Sides, 2006).

To test our assumption that the reinforcement effect of issue retention is conditional upon the strength of previous ownership perceptions in the minds of voters, we selected two issues: one on the left of the political spectrum (the environment) and one on the right side of the political spectrum (crime). For each issue, we asked the issue-owner party leader and the main challenger to make a thirty-second statement voicing their party's real views on the issue.

In Belgium, as in many other Western democracies, the Green party is considered the firm issue owner of the environment. In our experimental group, 91 percent of the respondents considered the Green party as the associative owner. Of all parties and all issues in Belgium, this probably is by far the strongest case of issue ownership. The Socialist party is not the owner of the environment, but is widely considered as the main challenger of the Green party when it comes to the environment and all other Green party issues. Consequently, the first key comparison is between the effect of the Green (owner) and Socialist party leaders (main challenger) talking about the environment.

The Extreme Right party can be considered as the owner of the crime issue in Belgium. Yet, its ownership of crime is considerably weaker than that of the Green party's ownership of the environment. Before experimental exposure, 77 percent of our subjects considered the Extreme Right party to be the associative owner of crime. The main challenger of the Extreme Right party is the mainstream Liberal party.

Table 1. Experimental conditions and number of exposed respondents.

Condition	Owner	N
President Green Party - Environment	Yes	210
President Socialist Party - Environment	No	235
President Extreme Right - Crime	Yes	225
President Liberal Party - Crime	No	213
Control group	–	241

This right-of-centre party has a relatively tough-on-crime policy and is considered to be the competitor of the Extreme Right on crime, although only 6 percent of the respondents named it as the associative issue owner. Again, we will compare the effect of the owner (Extreme Right) and the main challenger (Liberals) talking about their crime policies.

Admittedly, this setting does not allow for a direct test of our assumption that issue retention reinforces voters' previous ownership perceptions only for moderately owned issues, but not for strongly owned issues. On the one hand, associative issue ownership is measured in absolute terms (being the issue owner, or not) and in our data, both selected issues are clearly associated with one particular party. However, whereas the Green party's ownership of the environment issue is almost universal, the Extreme Right's ownership is considerably weaker – in contrast to the Green party, it has much room to strengthen its reputation as the associative owner of crime. On the other hand, our setting cannot control for the possibility that other factors (e.g. intrinsic characteristics of the issues) than the strength of previous ownership perceptions differentiate the crime and the environment issue, and moderate the treatment effects. However, both issues are similar in two important respects: they are valence issues and played a similar role in the 2009 election campaign. A content analysis of a popular and a quality newspaper showed that both issues received relatively little media attention during the campaign: Whereas about 3 percent of all news stories dealt with the crime issue and about 7 percent with the environment, campaign news coverage mostly focused on issues such as the economic crisis (Lefevere, 2011: 151). Thus, both issues were of similar (low) salience in the media.

Table 1 presents the different conditions and the number of exposed respondents per condition.

As is customary in experimental research, respondents were assigned to the conditions by randomly generating a condition number that was then assigned to the respondent. Nevertheless, even though we randomized, an unequal non-response in some conditions might cause the randomization to fail. To check this, we performed tests in which we compared the treatment groups to the control group on variables used in the analysis such as pre-exposure associative issue ownership, socio-demographic variables such as age, gender and education, and party evaluation and political interest.

Table 2. Effects of exposure on associative issue ownership (AIO) scores, per condition.

	Treatment group	Control group	Treatment group	Control group	N
Socialist Party – Environment	Green party		Socialist party		
– Wave 2	95%	95%	2%	1%	476
– Wave 3	96%	98%	2%	0%	
Liberal Party – Crime	Extreme right party		Liberal party		
– Wave 2	78%	79%	7%	5%	454
– Wave 3	78%	77%	5%	5%	
Green Party – Environment	Green party		Socialist party		
– Wave 2	95%	95%	2%	1%	451
– Wave 3	94%	98%	1%	0%	
Extreme Right Party – Crime	Extreme right party		Liberal party		
– Wave 2	**88%**	**79%**	1%	5%	466
– Wave 3	83%	77%	4%	5%	

Bold figures differ significantly at the 95 percent confidence level.

Results indicate that regarding party evaluation, age, gender, education and political interest differences between groups were non-existent and randomization had succeeded. Regarding associative issue ownership, one treatment group (Green party – Environment) had a significantly lower issue ownership score for the Green party pre-exposure than the control group ($M_{treatment} = 0.90$, $M_{control} = 0.95$, $p < 0.05$). As this might have affected our findings, we ran all analyses using various methods such as logistic regression and analysis of variance (with and without controlling for pre-exposure associative issue ownership). Substantive results did not differ between methods. Thus, we only present results for the analysis of variance. Results of the other analyses and randomization tests are available from the authors upon request.

Results

For each condition in the experiment we ran an analysis of variance (ANOVA), comparing the associative issue ownership scores after exposure in the treatment and control groups. Table 2 shows the short-term and long-term exposure effects on voter's associative issue ownership evaluations. For each condition, we assessed the effect of a party's message on the associative ownership score of the original issue owner (first two columns) as well as the impact on the ownership score of the main challenger (last two columns).[1]

First, let us consider the short-term (wave 2) exposure effects of *issue trespassing*. What happens if a challenger tries to steal an issue owned by another party? Two conditions test this: The Socialist party leader talks about the environment and the Liberal party leader speaks about crime. Results are straightforward and in line with our expectations: neither Socialists ($F_{(1,474)} = 0.08$, $p = 0.783$) nor Liberals ($F_{(1,452)} = 0.12$, $p = 0.733$) can make a dent in the strong association between the original owner and the issue. Comparing the associative issue ownership scores in the treatment and control groups, we see that

neither the statements of the Socialists on the environment, nor the campaign messages of the Liberals on crime have any effect on their own associative issue ownership score, or on the score of the owners. In fact, the Green party has 95 percent ownership of the environment in the treatment and in the control group. Thus, the treatment (exposure to the Socialist party president talking about the environment) had no effect. Similarly, the Liberals' messages on crime cannot challenge the Extreme Right, which has 78 percent ownership of crime in the treatment group compared to 79 percent in the control group. Conversely, neither the Socialists ($F_{(1,474)} = 0.73$, $p = 0.395$) nor the Liberals ($F_{(1,452)} = 0.53$, $p = 0.467$) can advance their own reputations as associative owner with their messages: The Socialists are at 2 percent ownership in the treatment condition, compared to 1 percent in the control group, and the Liberals are at 7 percent in the treatment condition and 5 percent in the control group. Thus, it seems as if one-time attempts to trespass on issues owned by other parties are unlikely to receive quick results – at least where associative ownership is concerned. Parties simply cannot 'fake' a history of attention and commitment toward an issue. This result applies to both issues, irrespective of the strength of previous associative issue ownership. Although our study is based on slightly different issues, and is therefore not totally comparable with the earlier work by Walgrave et al. (2009) on competence ownership, this finding is the first indication of the differential impact of campaign messages on voter perceptions of associative and competence ownership. Whereas the 2009 study found that party leaders talking about issues owned by others could significantly increase their competence reputations, we found no significant effects on associative issue ownership at all. As already argued, we attribute this difference to the fact that competence ownership is susceptible to change as a function of performance (or performance claims), while the long-standing, spontaneous associations of parties and issues are more resistant to short-term factors. This also suggests that some attitudes may be more prone to change

than others: Associative issue ownership is built up over a long period of time and is therefore (more) resistant to short messages challenging existing ownership perceptions.

Second, we focus on the short-term (wave 2) effects of *issue retention*. What happens when parties campaign on owned issues? Again, two conditions test this effect: the Green party talking about the environment and the Extreme Right addressing the crime issue. As expected, our results suggest that the effect of issue retention depends on the strength of previous associative ownership. In the case of the environment, an issue almost uniformly associated with the Green party, we observe a ceiling effect: Given that more than 90 percent of the respondents already associated the environment with the Greens before exposure (wave 1), the party was unable to make any significant progress by communicating about the issue (F(1,449) = 0.11, p = 0.741). Note that a repeated measures ANOVA that compares the wave 1 scores to the wave 2 scores in the treatment group indicates that exposure significantly increases Green ownership in the treatment group from 90 percent to 95 percent ownership (F(1,209) = 6.39, p = 0.012). As discussed in the Methods section, the fact that the ANOVA does not yield significant results is partially explained by the flawed randomization in this group. Even though exposure is significant, we would explain this as a 'catch up' process in the stimulus group rather than an actual gaining of ownership, because the stimulus group started out with a lower than average distribution pre-exposure. This finding confirms what Walgrave and co-authors (2009: 163 f.) observed for the effect of campaign messages on competence reputations in the case of strongly owned issues. However, things are different in the case of a less strongly owned issue such as crime, where we see the expected reinforcement effect (F(1,464) = 5.80, p = 0.016). By talking about crime, the Extreme Right can significantly increase its reputation as associative owner: At the same time, the Liberals lose some grip on the issue (F(1,464) = 4.35, p = 0.038) and are only identified by 1 percent of our subjects in the treatment group as the associative owner of crime (against 5 percent in the control group). When the original issue owner communicates about a moderately owned issue and increases his ownership reputation, this is at the expense of the main challenger.

Third, let us have a look at the *long-term persistence* (wave 3) of the exposure effects. With respect to issue trespassing, no effects were found in the short term, and this does not change in the long run (Socialist effect on Green party ownership: F(1,474) = 0.70, p = 0.404; Liberal effect on Extreme Right party ownership: F(1,452) = 0.17, p = 0.677). The observed reinforcement effect witnessed when the Extreme Right discussed their own crime issue, however, fades away in the long term, as expected (F(1,464) = 2.92, p = 0.088). Although the difference between respondents in the exposure and control groups comes relatively close to statistical significance, fewer respondents (83 percent) declare the Extreme Right as the associative owner of the crime issue in wave 3 than immediately after exposure in wave 2 (88 percent). If we take the scores in the control group as indicating the 'natural' level of ownership (77 percent), this indicates that exposure may increase existing associative ownership in the short term, but in the long run the overall level of ownership swings back to its long-term equilibrium. That said, overall changes are small indeed, and, if anything, the results indicate that ownership does not weaken substantially in the long run either.

Conclusion

This study is one of the rare attempts in the literature to assess the effect of parties' campaign messages on issue ownership perceptions in the minds of voters. Whereas the bulk of the literature conceives of issue ownership perceptions as constants, and treats them as independent variables to explain electoral choice and party behaviour, we examined whether parties can – by communicating on an issue – turn existing perceptions of issue ownership to their advantage. Can parties 'steal' issues by trespassing on issues traditionally associated with another party? Alternatively, can campaign messages only reinforce existing issue ownership perceptions in favour of the previous owner, as suggested by the original theory? We used an experimental design to assess the short-term and long-term impact of campaign messages on issue ownership perceptions among voters. Contrary to most previous studies, we focused on the associative dimension of issue ownership, which is an invariable component of most definitions in the literature, and one that has almost never been measured. The associative dimension refers to the spontaneous association between a party and an issue, which presumably develops out of a party's history of attention and commitment toward the issue. The traditionally measured competence dimension of issue ownership, in contrast, is linked to the perceived ability of a party to 'deal' with a given issue. Given that associative ownership stems from a long-standing politicization of an issue by a party, irrespective of its performance, we argue that associative ownership reputations are a stable party characteristic that is quite resilient to change in the context of a single election campaign. Instead, ownership is mostly only reinforced by the original owner (provided that the owner does not already hold a quasi-monopoly on the issue). Results confirm these expectations.

First, one-time issue trespassing does not seem to pay off. When parties talk about issues associated with other parties, they have a hard time challenging the initial associative owner and increasing their own standing on the issue. Second, when parties communicate on their own issues, they can reinforce their reputation as associative

issue owners, as assumed by the original issue ownership theory (Petrocik, 1996). However, our comparison between the environment and the crime issues suggests that this reinforcement is conditional upon previous issue ownership strength: Reinforcement is limited if parties are almost universally perceived by voters as the issue owner (as is the case of the Greens and the environment), but it can work for parties that have a somewhat weaker associative ownership, as they can still tighten their grip on an issue (as is the case of the Extreme Right and crime). Third, in addition, parties can only increase their standing on owned issues in the short run; after a while, the public's assessment of associative ownership tends to return to the initial situation that existed before exposure to a party's message.

These findings are important for at least two reasons. First, our study is only the second one to empirically assess the impact of parties' campaign messages on perceptions of issue ownership in the minds of voters, and the only one to focus on the associative dimension of issue ownership. Although the spontaneous party–issue associations in the minds of voters are at the heart of most existing conceptualizations of issue ownership, empirical measurements have entirely neglected this dimension, and have instead concentrated on competence ownership, as captured by some variant of the 'best party to deal with' survey item. Second, our findings can be seen as a first indication of the importance of distinguishing and measuring both dimensions of issue ownership: association and competence. If we put our findings into perspective with the only available study so far by Walgrave et al. (2009), who focused on competence ownership, it seems as if party messages lead to contradictory effects for competence and associative issue ownership. Whereas issue trespassing can pay off for challengers in terms of competence reputations, issue retention can be a good strategy for issue owners to (temporarily) bring an already well-established, associative party–issue link to people's minds. Campaigning on new issues or issues not clearly owned by any party might be another alternative. Talking about such issues presumably strengthens perceptions of issue handling competence (see Walgrave et al. (2009) for evidence on this). However, it is unclear whether addressing new or un-owned issues during a single campaign also establishes associative links: We expect that a party needs to continually address an issue over a prolonged period of time before it is considered as an associative issue owner by the public at large.

Our study has several limitations. The most important is that, in our design, party presidents could choose their own statement, as long as it focused on the correct issue (e.g. the environment). This introduces a possible confounding factor in our design: Parties were free to select some arguments and avoid others as long as their arguments were on topic. Some parties may have been more careful in selecting arguments that avoided traditional arguments brought to the fore by the issue owner, whereas others may have inadvertently used arguments that were similar to the owner's arguments. Given that such different framings of an issue can have substantial effects on the public's view on the issue and the party (Slothuus, 2010), the impact of exactly what was being said in the stimulus should not be neglected. However, we see no immediate solution to this problem – parties should be able to present their policy position, even in an experiment. Furthermore, to make a strong statement requires that the parties are given some liberty in formulating it. Second, the panel included many highly educated respondents whose attitudes may have been more resistant to party messages (Zaller, 1992). Given that our sample had only some less educated respondents, it makes it hard to fully account for this possibility. Future studies using more diverse samples should investigate whether less educated respondents are less resistant to these party messages. Third, respondents were exposed only once to a short stimulus of thirty seconds. In real-world campaigns, citizens are repeatedly exposed to parties' issue messages and we cannot be certain that enduring trespassing efforts have no effect either. Interestingly, using a similarly short stimulus, Walgrave et al. (2009) did find significant effects of issue trespassing on competence issue ownership evaluations. Thus, associative issue ownership might be a more stable party stereotype than issue competence evaluations, and therefore more resistant to change. Findings by Norpoth and Buchanan (1992) suggest that even sustained campaign trespassing efforts have little effect because they fail to erase the long-term party stereotypes on which voters rely. Nevertheless, as research on associative issue ownership is still very scarce, we encourage designs investigating the effects of repeated messages over a longer period of time. Fourth, the study only focused on two issues and four parties. That both issues used in this study were valence issues, may have affected our findings. For one, it may be the case that valence issues are more strongly 'owned' in the associative sense. For valence issues, the direction of a party's position on an issue is probably less important, and merely the attention a party places on an issue determines its associative issue ownership. In that sense, associative issue ownership of valence issues may be more robust than associative ownership of position issues. Consequently, we may have found different results had we relied on position issues. Future studies are therefore strongly encouraged to address this question.

Appendix 1:

Comparison of initial survey sample in 2009, experiment sample in 2009 and Flemish population.

	Flemish population	Initial survey sample (N=7304)	Experiment sample (N=1124)
Average age	41,5	42.00	43,22
Percent male	49,35	69.10	70,82
Level of education			
None	5%	0%	0%
Lower education	13%	1%	1%
High school	56%	27%	23%
Higher education	26%	72%	76%

Note

1. One of the reviewers raised concern because the skew in our sample toward the better educated could affect our results: More highly educated respondents are more likely to resist messages that challenge their underlying attitudes (Zaller, 1992). To test whether this was the case, we also ran all ANOVAs by including an interaction effect between the level of education and the treatment effect. However, the interaction was never significant for the eight short-term effects and was only significant in five out of the eight long-term effects. This is due, in part, to the fact that it was difficult to estimate the interaction in the first place, because the number of less educated respondents was extremely low (8 in the final sample). However, in the short term – when the treatment effect is most visible and the interaction is most likely to yield insight into the role of education – the interaction was always insignificant. In the long term, marginal means revealed that in the (very small) less educated group, large differences between the treatment and control group caused the significant interaction. However, for the average to highly educated respondents, the control and treatment scores were similar. Given these findings, we are confident that the skewed nature of our sample does not substantially affect our analyses. Therefore, we show the simpler analyses without interaction in the empirical section. The results of the additional analyses are available upon request.

References

Ansolabehere S and Iyengar S (1994) Riding the wave and claiming ownership over issues: The joint effects of advertising and news coverage in campaigns. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 58: 335–357.

Bélanger É (2003) Issue ownership by Canadian political parties 1953–2001. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 36: 539–558.

Bélanger É and Meguid BM (2008) Issue salience, issue ownership, and issue-based vote choice. *Electoral Studies* 27: 477–491.

Belucci P (2006) Tracing the cognitive and affective roots of 'party competence': Italy and Britain, 2001. *Electoral Studies* 25: 548–569.

Brasher H (2009) The dynamic character of political party evaluations. *Party Politics* 15: 69–92.

Brouard S, Grossmann E and Guinaudeau I (2012) La compétition partisane française au prisme des priorités électorales: compétition sur enjeux et appropriations thématiques. *Revue française de science politique* 62: 255–276.

Budge I and Farlie D (1983) *Explaining and Predicting Elections*. London: Allen & Urwin.

Carmines EG (1991) The logic of party alignments. *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 3: 65–80.

Dalton RJ and Wattenberg MP (2000) (eds) *Parties Without Partisans. Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Damore DF (2004) The dynamics of issue ownership in presidential campaigns. *Political Research Quarterly* 57: 391–397.

Damore DF (2005) Issue convergence in presidential campaigns. *Political Behavior* 27: 71–97.

Green J and Hobolt SB (2008) Owning the issue agenda: Party strategies and vote choices in British elections. *Electoral Studies* 27: 460–476.

Green J and Jennings W (2012) Valence as macro-competence: An analysis of mood in party competence evaluations in the U.K. *British Journal of Political Science* 42: 311–343.

Green-Pedersen C (2007) The growing importance of issue competition: The changing nature of party competition in Western Europe. *Political Studies* 55: 607–628.

Green-Pedersen C and Mortensen PB (2010) Issue competition and election campaigns: Avoidance *and* engagement. Paper presented at the ESF Workshop on Policy Agendas, Political Parties and Their Positions, Manchester, June 2010.

Holian DB (2004) He's stealing my issues! Clinton's crime rhetoric and the dynamics of issue ownership. *Political Behavior* 26: 95–124.

Lefevere J (2011) Campaign effects on voter decision making. PhD Thesis, University of Antwerp, Belgium.

Miller JM and Krosnick JA (1996) News media impact on the ingredients of presidential evaluations: A program of research on the priming hypothesis. In: Mutz DC and Sniderman PM

(eds) *Political Persuasion and Attitude Change*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 79–99.

Nadeau R, Pétry F and Bélanger E (2010) Issue-based strategies in election campaigns: The case of health care in the 2000 Canadian federal election. *Political Communication* 27: 367–388.

Norpoth H and Buchanan B (1992) Wanted: The education president: issue trespassing by political candidates. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 56: 87–99.

Petrocik JR (1996) Issue ownership and presidential elections, with a 1980 case study. *American Journal of Political Science* 40: 825–850.

Petrocik JR, Benoit WL and Hansen GJ (2003) Issue ownership and presidential campaigning, 1952–2000. *Political Science Quarterly* 118: 599–626.

Riker WH (1996) *The Strategy of Rhetoric*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Sellers PJ (1998) Strategy and background in congressional campaigns. *American Political Science Review* 92: 159–171.

Sides J (2006) The origins of campaign agendas. *British Journal of Political Science* 36: 407–436.

Sides J (2007) The consequences of campaign agendas. *American Politics Research* 35: 465–488.

Sigelman L and Buell EH Jr. (2004) Avoidance or engagement? Issue convergence in US presidential campaigns, 1960–2000. *American Journal of Political Science* 48: 650–661.

Slothuus R (2010) When can political parties lead public opinion? Evidence from a natural experiment. *Political Communication* 27: 158–177.

Stimson JA, Mackuen MB and Erikson RS (1995) Dynamic representation. *American Political Science Review* 89: 543–565.

van der Brug W (2004) Issue ownership and party choice. *Electoral Studies* 23: 209–233.

Walgrave S, Lefevere J and Nuytemans M (2009) Issue ownership stability and change: How political parties claim and maintain issues through media appearances. *Political Communication* 26: 153–172.

Walgrave S, Lefevere J and Tresch A (2012) The Assciative Dimension of Issue Ownership. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76: 771-782.

Walgrave S and de Swert K (2007) Where does issue ownership come from? From the party or from the media? Issue–party identifications in Belgium, 1991–2005. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 12: 37–67.

Author biographies

Anke Tresch is a Senior Researcher and Lecturer at the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Geneva. Her research interests lie in the fields of political parties, media and politics, and voting behaviour.

Jonas Lefevere is a Post-doctoral researcher and lecturer at the Department of Political Science at the University of Antwerp. His research focuses on public opinion, media and campaign effects, and the relation between media and politics.

Stefaan Walgrave is Professor of Political Science and head of the Media, Movements, and Politics research group (www.m2p.be) at the University of Antwerp. His work deals with social movements and protest, media and political communication, and public opinion and elections.