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the Public Links Parties
to Issues and Why
It Matters

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# Associative Issue Ownership as a Determinant of Voters' Campaign Attention

JONAS LEFEVERE, ANKE TRESCH and STEFAAN WALGRAVE

*Campaigns raise public interest in politics and allow parties to convey their messages to voters. However, voters' exposure and attention during campaigns are biased towards parties and candidates they like. This hinders parties' ability to reach new voters. This paper theorises and empirically tests a simple way in which parties can break partisan selective attention: owning an issue. When parties own issues that are important for a voter, that voter is more likely to notice them. Using survey data collected prior to the 2009 Belgian regional elections it is shown that this effect exists independent of partisan preferences and while controlling for the absolute visibility of a party in the media. This indicates that issue ownership has an independent impact on voters' attention to campaigns. This finding shows that owning salient issues yields (potential) advantages for parties, since getting noticed is a prerequisite for conveying electoral messages and increasing electoral success.*

The recent increase in scholarly attention has convincingly shown that issue ownership affects the behaviour of parties, journalists and voters. Various studies show that parties tend to focus on owned issues (e.g. Budge and Farlie 1983; Egan 2013; Petrocik 1996), though convergence also seems common (e.g. Damore 2005; Sigelman and Buell 2004). Perceptions of issue ownership determine how journalists select and portray information (Hayes 2008), further encouraging parties to focus on issues on which they have a strong reputation. Issue ownership also affects voters' electoral behaviour, evidenced by a number of studies (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Lachat 2014; Van der Brug 2004; Walgrave *et al.* 2012; also Bélanger and Nadeau 2015).

However, research into the effects of issue ownership on the behaviour of parties, journalists and voters has not been followed by any examination of ownership's non-behavioural effects. Indeed, a number of prominent scholars have urged political scientists to also investigate cognitive and attitudinal effects (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Holbert *et al.* 2010; Iyengar and

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Simon 2000). Examining cognitive effects is important because media systems and news audiences have changed substantially. Specifically, the increased amount of media outlets provide voters currently with more choice regarding which communications they attend to and which they ignore (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999). Because cognitive and attitudinal filters – for example, partisan preferences – determine these choices, the increased availability of options increases the impact of these filters on voters' exposure and attention to information.

This study focuses on the impact of associative issue ownership on voters' attention to campaigns. Associative issue ownership is the spontaneous association in the voter's mind between a party and an issue (Walgrave *et al*. 2012). We argue that when a party is the associative owner of an issue that matters to a voter, the voter is more likely to pay attention to that party.

Studying what voters attend to is important, since attending to information is a prerequisite for any communication effect to occur (Zaller 1992, 1996). As indicated above, the current proliferation of media outlets – a multiplication of television and radio broadcasters, the advent of online media, and increasingly specialised media outlets – provides voters with multiple options (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999). Depending on what campaign information is attended to, voters' perceptions of political actors and the main issues of their campaigns may differ substantially, as evidenced by studies on campaign learning (Prior 2003). Biased patterns of attention and exposure to political communication also result in both lower deliberation and lower tolerance of opposing viewpoints (Garrett 2009). Attention thus has a direct effect on campaign learning, political attitudes and ultimately, electoral behaviour.

Given the importance of exposure and attention to information, a large body of literature has examined the determinants of campaign attention and exposure. At the supply side, the literature examines the properties of the campaign environment that affect which information is more likely to be attended to. At the demand side, it examines determinants that affect what voters attend to, and what they neglect. The most commonly investigated demand-side determinant is the impact of partisan preferences on exposure, commonly referred to as 'partisan selective exposure'. Voters tend to be more attentive to information that matches their existing attitudes and to sources they expect to agree with (Garrett 2009; Garrett *et al.* 2013; Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Stroud 2010). At the supply side, the visibility of parties and issues in the media is an important determinant for the extent to which voters pay attention to them. Parties receiving more coverage in the media are better able to command the electorate's attention (Blais *et al.* 2009; Hopmann *et al.* 2012).

How issue ownership affects voters' attention to campaign information has not yet been studied. If issue ownership is found to affect attention to a campaign, this suggests that parties can use their issue-owning reputations to attract the public's attention. This comes on top of the fact that on owned issues

parties hold what Riker (1993) defined as 'stronger arguments', and journalists' preference to turn to the issue-owning party (Hayes 2008). Studying the role of issue ownership on attention to a campaign fills a gap in the extant literature on issue ownership. As the robustness of issue ownership's effect on voter behaviour becomes clear, scholars increasingly question how and why issue ownership comes to affect voters' electoral behaviour. Do parties' reputations directly affect people's vote choices, or do they cause voters to perceive the campaign differently by steering their attention towards parties with strong reputations on issues the voter finds important? We leave future studies to investigate the full causal chain, and focus here on the first – but crucial – step in the process: examining the extent to which issue ownership acts as a determinant of voters' attention during electoral campaigns.

We test whether associative issue ownership affects attention to a campaign using panel survey data collected in the run-up to the 2009 regional elections in Flanders, the largest region of Belgium. Our findings indicate that when a voter perceives a party to own an issue s/he finds important, s/he is more likely to notice this party during the campaign. This effect holds even when we account for the impact of partisan preferences and actual visibility in the media, which are both important determinants of attention to a campaign.

## Associative Issue Ownership as a Determinant of Attention to a Campaign

Issue ownership theory originates from the work of Petrocik (1989, 1996) and Budge and Farlie (1983). Issue ownership refers to the claim that parties become associated with certain issues by voters, and are considered best able to deal with those issues. This gives parties a competitive advantage: when owned issues are salient to a voter, chances increase that the voter will cast their ballot for the issue-owning party. Consequently, the theory expects parties to focus mainly on issues they own. Studies that investigate the impact of issue ownership on voters have mostly examined the impact on voters' electoral behaviour, alongside examining one dimension of issue ownership: competence issue ownership (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Van der Brug 2004; but see Lachat 2014; Walgrave *et al.* 2012). In contrast, we focus here on the impact of associative issue ownership on attention to a campaign. Associative issue ownership is a voter's spontaneous association between an issue and a party (Kleinnijenhuis and Walter 2014; Lachat 2014; Walgrave *et al.* 2012). This association arises from a party's history of attending to an issue. We posit that for parties that associatively own an issue – that is, which have a reputation for caring about an issue – their ownership will act as an independent determinant of attention to the campaign by voters for whom this issue is salient.

We base this expectation on a number of claims. First, being an associative owner means that the voter spontaneously thinks of the party when considering that issue (Walgrave *et al.* 2012). When issues come to dominate the election

campaign – because of external events, public opinion, intense media coverage or parties' emphasis on the issue – chances are high that voters spontaneously begin thinking about the issue-owning party (Petrocik 1996; Riker 1993). Extant research suggests that, depending on the context, parties have an incentive to either focus on issues they own or converge on similar issues (Damore 2005; Spoon *et al*. 2014). This then determines the issues that particular campaigns will emphasise. Here, we focus on an issue's salience at the micro-level of the individual voter: when a voter considers an issue as more important it is more accessible, as is the associated party. Consequently, associative issue ownership predisposes the voter to consider the issue-owning party more often.

Second, the informational utility of the owner is higher, especially for voters who care more about the issue. Informational utility is the degree to which information can help individuals make future (electoral) decisions (Knobloch-Westerwick and Kleinman 2012). If a voter cares a lot about an issue, knowing what the issue-owning party plans to accomplish on that issue after the elections is critical: if any party is likely to deliver on promises made, it is the issue owner – if only because issue-owning parties are 'stuck' with their issues (Budge 2013; Egan 2013). First, issue-owning parties have a long-standing affiliation with their issues (Petrocik 1989, 1996). Second, they pass more legislation on these issues, indicating that the parties hold to their reputation (Egan 2013). Third, the associative issue owner is likely to enjoy high credibility on their issue, since they are perceived as genuinely concerned and committed to the issue (Sides 2006). People are more likely to expose themselves to sources with high credibility (Westerwick *et al*. 2013). Hence, the associative issue owner is more likely to gain attention because the party is considered by voters a highly credible source. Due to these three reasons – thinking of the issues *spontaneously* triggers thinking of the issue-owning party; information on an issue-owning party has *higher informational utility* because it is more committed to the issue; and the issue-owning party enjoys *high source credibility* – we expect that:

> H1: If a party is considered the associative issue owner of the issue that is most important for a voter, the party is more likely to get noticed.

## Media Attention as a Determinant of Campaign Exposure

Our dominant interest is the role associative issue ownership plays in voters' attention to a campaign. However, the extant literature outlines other important determinants of voters' attention to campaign information. Media visibility is increasingly important during campaigns. Parties and candidates do attempt to attract voters' attention through their own communications – advertisements, flyers and so on – or use their own means of communication to attempt to set the campaign agenda, for example through advertising or press releases (Hopmann *et al*. 2010). However, the mass media are crucial in reaching a

mass public. The increased mediation and mediatisation of politics has further increased the importance of appearing in the media (Tresch 2009). Indeed, being visible in media improves the electoral chances of parties and candidates (Van Aelst *et al*. 2008; Van Aelst *et al*. 2006). These findings imply that receiving more media coverage fosters the attention of the public: for any 'media effect' to occur, exposure to and reception of the relevant media coverage is necessary (Zaller 1992). Moreover, in the country studied here – Belgium – the impact of party communications is quite limited: advertisements are only allowed in the written press (Holtz-Bacha and Kaid 2006), while party budgets are restricted (Maddens *et al*. 2007), which substantially lowers the ability of parties to avoid the importance of media attention. Thus, as a baseline expectation we posit that the greater the visibility of a party in the mass media, the greater the chance that voters will pay attention to this party.

> H2: Parties that get more coverage in the media during the campaign get noticed more than parties that get less media coverage.

Furthermore, we expect that being visible on issues that the voter cares about matters independent of a parties' overall visibility. Voters who consider an issue important are *generally* more attentive to coverage of it (Bolsen and Leeper 2013; Chen 2013; Krosnick 1990; Popkin 1991). Firstly, information concerning the issue has high informative utility. If a voter considers an issue to be important, knowing where political actors stand on that issue has a higher degree of importance for voters' vote choice compared to issues that they do not care about – this contention has been confirmed in various priming studies (e.g. Druckman 2004). Secondly, the elaboration likelihood model posits that people are more likely to engage with information that they care about (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Consequently, as voters who think the issue is important are more attentive to issue-specific coverage, we expect that parties that feature more in coverage on voters' most important issue will get noticed more. Hence, we expect that:

> H3: The more visible a party is on issues important to a voter, the more likely it is that the voter will notice the party.

## Partisan Bias in Voters' Attention to Information

Whether a 'partisan bias' in people's exposure and attention to political information exists has sparked a long-standing debate among political scientists (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Holbert *et al*. 2010). Various recent studies document that people are more likely to expose themselves to outlets and information that they expect will agree with their predispositions (e.g. Evans and Andersen 2004; Garrett 2009; Garrett *et al*. 2013; Iyengar *et al*. 2008; Knobloch-Westerwick and Kleinman 2012; Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng 2009; Meffert *et al*. 2006; Stroud 2008; Westerwick *et al*. 2013).

The theoretical foundation of partisan selective exposure and attention is the concept of confirmation bias. In his seminal work on dissonance theory, Festinger (1957) posited that people are more likely to seek information that confirms their existing attitudes, and to avoid information that challenges those attitudes. The assumption is that people try to avoid cognitive dissonance: an internal conflict between new information and existing attitudes. Subsequent research has not always supported this thesis (for an overview, see Donsbach 2009). Recently, scholars have distinguished between two patterns: first, whether people have a preference for confirmatory information and, second, whether people avoid conflicting information (Garrett 2009). The first pattern is confirmed in most studies. However, regarding the second pattern, many studies find that while people have a tendency to expose themselves more to confirmatory information, they do not try to avoid contact with other (contradictory) opinions – they just have a tendency to engage more often with confirmatory information (Garrett 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick and Kleinman 2012; Westerwick *et al.* 2013).

While most of these studies examine exposure, attention is equally important. People should be more attentive to confirmatory information because it is easier to process such information: it fits logically with existing attitudes and information. Conversely, inconsistent information requires additional cognitive effort to process since it challenges predispositions. From a bounded rationality perspective, this would also suggest that people are inclined *not* to pay much attention to inconsistent information since it requires a greater investment of cognitive resources. Applied to attention, indeed, various studies suggest a preference for information about liked parties (Lau and Redlawsk 2007, 2001; Meffert *et al.* 2006). Assuming that people expect that parties they like more are more consistent with their own attitudes and beliefs, we should therefore expect that people will be more likely to pay attention to the parties they prefer.

> H4: *The more a voter prefers a party, the more likely it is that they will notice that party.*

## Methods

To test our hypotheses, we use two datasets: first, the Partirep panel survey, which surveyed a representative sample of Flemish respondents (Deschouwer *et al.* 2010). Second, we use an extensive content analysis of the political coverage of two Flemish newspapers. We discuss each dataset in turn.

The Partirep panel survey was launched prior to the Flemish regional elections of 2009. Flanders is the largest region of Belgium, a small consociational democracy in Western Europe (Deschouwer 2009). Due to the specific nature of the Belgian polity, which has split political and media systems, the Flemish and Walloon regions are mostly separated from one another (Billiet *et al.* 2008; Sinardet 2007). Moreover, the regional level of policy-making has

become important, and these elections should be considered first-order elections in the minds of voters, parties and media: the political actors were very active during the campaign, while the media gave much attention to the regional elections, almost on a par with the attention given to the national (federal) elections. Between February and May 2009, wave 1 surveyed a representative sample of eligible Flemish voters drawn from the population register of the Ministry of Domestic Affairs ($N = 2,454$) using face-to-face interviewing. The response rate (AAPOR RR1) was 49.2 per cent ($N = 1,204$). During the final two weeks of the campaign, respondents who agreed to a follow-up interview ($N = 1,103$) were again contacted for a short telephone survey. The response rate of this survey (AAPOR RR1) was 89.7 per cent ($N = 989$). Due to item non-response the final sample size is $N = 823$. The dependent variable, campaign attention, was measured in the second wave of the survey. We rely on self-reported campaign attention, measured through the following survey item: 'Which party did you notice most during the past month?' The answering categories were the various political parties[1] and a 'no party' option. Because the second wave of the survey was launched in the final two weeks of the campaign, this question measures attention to parties in the short campaign just before the elections, which is the most intensive in terms of attention to politics. Consequently, during this period voters had the most opportunity to choose which coverage they paid attention to. One drawback is that we only measure the *most* noticed party: this may affect our results since voters have probably noticed many parties. However, this limitation of the question actually works *against* our key hypothesis, since there is less variance to be explained. Using a more fine-grained measure might help us pick up the issue ownership effect: the fact that we limit ourselves to a measure that only picks up the *most* noticed party thus provides us with a more conservative test of H1. Another possible bias in our measure is that it is distorted by selective recall: again, this should work *against* H1 since research has shown that people are more likely to recall confirmatory information – in our case: recalling that they noticed their preferred party most (H4). Hence, even if the recall bias affects our measure it should lower the chances of confirming H1.

Our first independent variable, *Owner of most important issue* (H1), was measured by combining the 'most important issue' question with a measure of associative issue ownership. To measure the most important issue for the respondents, we used the following question:

> If the elections were to be held today, on which issues would you base your choice amongst the various parties? I am going to read you a list of issues, can you indicate what the most important issue of these is?

This question was asked in the first wave, which is important: it provides a measure of issue importance *prior* to the short campaign. For the same 10 issues respondents were also asked to indicate the associative issue owner

through the following question: '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 had the option to select one party, indicate that they did not know, or indicate that none of the parties comes to mind. *Owner of most important issue* takes on a value of 1 if the party is in fact the associative owner of the voters' most important issue, and 0 if not. One drawback to the associative issue ownership question is that it was only included in the third wave of the survey. It might be that the measure of associative issue ownership was affected by the campaign and the exposure/attention patterns of the respondents, increasing the risk that if a relationship is found, its causality may be reversed. Unfortunately, there is not much we can do to clarify the extent to which this alternative explanation holds. Nevertheless, since associative issue ownership has been shown to be resistant to campaign messages (Tresch *et al.* 2015), we do not expect that this has a large effect on the results: the number of voters switching associative issue owners over a short time is limited, so the odds of getting a different measure between wave 1 and 3 of the survey are minimal at best (Tresch *et al.* 2015; Walgrave *et al.* 2012).

We calculated the *Visibility* of the party in the media (H2), which is the percentage of newspaper articles mentioning the party or a politician of the party in the 30 days prior to the second-wave interview of the respondent. This percentage is calculated based on a detailed content analysis of two Flemish newspapers.[2] Though the focus on newspaper data is somewhat limiting, the distribution of issues and parties that were visible in television news broadcasts is highly similar to the newspapers.[3] Hence, we assume that the newspaper content is representative of the news agenda, at least in terms of the visibility of parties and issues. Except for special weekend and sports sections and advertisements, everything in the newspapers was coded, resulting in an overall *N* of 13,475 articles. For each article, the issues being covered were coded, as were the politicians and parties that were mentioned (if any). Inter-rater reliability for politician/party visibility was high: no measure had an α below 0.8. Regarding issues, none of the 20 codes used in the analyses had an α score lower than 0.7. All media measures are weighted to take account of prominence[4] with more prominent articles getting higher weights than less prominent articles.

For H3, we calculated *Visibility on most important issue*. We used the question mentioned above (H1) to determine respondents' most important issue. *Visibility of most important issue* is then the percentage of articles on the respondent's most important issue that mention the party or one of its politicians in the 30 days prior to the second-wave interview of the respondent. For example, suppose respondent 1 indicated that his most important issue is Mobility. CD&V would get a value of 0.01 if the party was mentioned in 1 per cent of the articles on Mobility. If Groen! was mentioned in 9 per cent of the articles on mobility, then it gets a score of 0.09.

Finally, *party preference* (H4) was measured through a proxy, party evaluation, measured in the first wave of the survey: 'What do you think of the ideas of the parties? Give each party a score from 0 to 10, 0 meaning that you do not agree with its ideas and 10 meaning that you totally agree with its ideas.' Again, the use of this measure makes the test for H4 more conservative: because the fine-grained 11-point scale increases the explanatory power over a more simplistic party preference variable, we actually *decrease* the odds of finding an associative issue ownership effect.

To test our hypotheses we run a logistic regression analysis on a stacked dataset. Table 1 shows the layout of our dataset using example data. We employ a within-person dataset design, with multiple lines per respondent – each representing a unique respondent–party combination. This allows us to test whether the visibility of a party vis-à-vis the other parties (*Visibility*) has an effect on the dependent variable (*Noticed*). Doing so increases the number of cases to 13,580, nested in 1,193 respondents. The actual *N* of the analyses is lower due to missing values and non-response. However, stacking the dataset causes the dependent to become skewed. The mean of *Noticed* is 0.066, which means that only 6.6 per cent of the cases have a value of 1 for the dependent, whereas 93.4 per cent of the cases have a value of 0. It has been shown that estimating a logistic regression on such a dependent variable may yield biased coefficients (King and Zeng 2001). Therefore, we used the Rare Events Logit (RELogit) function for Stata, developed by Tomz *et al.* (1999), to obtain correct estimates.

We also control for a number of independent variables. Because most of these are constant at the respondent level we use clustered standard errors to ensure that the standard errors for these variables are calculated correctly. As controls we use *age*, *gender*, *education*, *political knowledge* (sum scale of five knowledge questions) and *newspaper exposure* (measured on a six-point scale ranging from 'never' to 'every day of the week'). Finally, we also add the *favourability* of the media coverage towards the party, since more positive or negative coverage affects the extent to which media visibility affects voters (Lefevere 2011). Each time a party was mentioned in an article, favourability was coded as either negative (–1), neutral (0), or positive (+1). Given that

TABLE 1
EXAMPLE OF STACKED DATASET

| Respondent | Party | Noticed | Party preference | Visibility | Visibility on most important issue | Owner of most important issue |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | CD&V | 0 | 7 | 0.10 | 0.01 | 1 |
| 1 | Groen! | 1 | 5 | 0.05 | 0.09 | 0 |
| 1 | N-VA | 0 | 8 | 0.01 | 0.12 | 0 |
| … | … | … | … | … | … | … |
| 1 | PS | 0 | 2 | 0.00 | 0.12 | 0 |
| 2 | CD&V | 0 | 10 | 0.12 | 0.00 | 0 |
| 2 | Groen! | 0 | 2 | 0.07 | 0.04 | 0 |

favourability is difficult to code, inter-coder reliability for this measure was lower, but still acceptable (average α of 0.7). Favourability of the media coverage towards the party is the mean favourability score, which ranges between – 1 (all mentions were negative) to +1 (all mentions were positive).

## Results

Before we proceed to the hypothesis testing, it is informative to explore which parties were noticed most by voters. Table 2 depicts the frequencies of the dependent variable for each of the parties.

The dependent variable shows, firstly, that – as expected – the Flemish parties were noticed most by Flemish voters: the Walloon parties were only noticed most by 7 per cent of respondents. This is not unexpected: as mentioned in the methods section, the French- and Dutch-speaking parts of Belgium operate mostly separate from one another – the media and party systems are split, and public opinion also diverges (Billiet *et al.* 2008; Sinardet 2007). Similarly, the Walloon parties receive comparatively little attention in the mass media. A second conclusion is that within the Flemish parties, large differences emerge: whereas LDD was noticed most by almost one-third of the voters, other parties had to be content with a much smaller portion: Groen!, for example, was only noticed most by 4 per cent of the voters.

To test our hypotheses, Table 3 presents the results of two rare events logistic regression models: model 1 includes only direct effects, whereas model

TABLE 2
FREQUENCIES OF 'WHICH PARTY DID YOU NOTICE MOST IN THE PAST MONTH?'

| Party | Party noticed most | |
|---|---|---|
| | **%** | **N** |
| *Flemish* | | |
| CD&V | 11 | 106 |
| Groen! | 4 | 39 |
| N-VA | 7 | 67 |
| Sp.A | 6 | 61 |
| SLP | 0 | 1 |
| VB | 8 | 76 |
| Open VLD | 17 | 167 |
| LDD | 31 | 306 |
| PvdA | 1 | 8 |
| *Walloon* | | |
| MR | 3 | 25 |
| PS | 3 | 30 |
| Ecolo | 1 | 8 |
| CDH | 0 | 0 |
| PTB | 0 | 0 |
| None | 9 | 86 |
| Other | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 100 | 979 |

TABLE 3
RARE EVENTS LOGISTIC REGRESSION WITH PREDICTING WHETHER A PARTY
WAS NOTICED BY A RESPONDENT (1) OR NOT (0)

| Variables | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|---|---|---|
| Owner of most important issue (H1) | 0.62*** | 0.64*** |
| | (0.16) | (0.16) |
| Visibility (H2) | 3.63** | 1.69 |
| | (1.25) | (1.26) |
| Visibility on most important issue (H3) | −2.57*** | 3.61** |
| | (0.75) | (1.19) |
| Party evaluation (H4) | 0.14*** | 0.13*** |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Favourability of coverage on towards party * Visibility on most important issue | | 439.71*** |
| | | (69.55) |
| Age | −0.00 | −0.00 |
| | (0.00) | (0.00) |
| Gender | 0.02 | 0.02 |
| | (0.03) | (0.04) |
| Education (ref: middle education) | | |
| Lower education | −0.05 | −0.03 |
| | (0.05) | (0.05) |
| Higher education | −0.05 | −0.05 |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) |
| Political Knowledge | 0.01 | 0.01 |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) |
| Frequency of newspaper reading | 0.01 | 0.00 |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) |
| Favourability of coverage on towards party | −44.92*** | −93.99*** |
| | (6.32) | (11.11) |
| Constant | −3.89*** | −4.17*** |
| | (0.14) | (0.14) |
| Observations | 10,273 | 10,273 |
| Clusters (respondents) | 823 | 823 |

*Notes*: Table entries are unstandardised regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.
***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$.

2 adds an interaction between favourability and visibility on most important issue.

We focus first on model 1. Regarding H1, the effect of associative issue ownership (0.62 (0.16), $p < 0.001$) is significant and positive. If a voter spontaneously thinks of a party when thinking about their most important issue, this has an independent effect on their odds of noticing the party. Our key hypothesis H1 is confirmed. At least as far as attention to a campaign is concerned, associative issue ownership has a beneficial effect on parties' chances of getting noticed. As Figure 1 shows, the effect is small: a 3 per cent increase in probability of getting noticed, but it occurs across all parties and issues under study.

Visibility tests H2: the positive and significant coefficient (3.63 (1.25), $p < 0.01$) supports the expectation that increased visibility in the mass media is an important factor in getting noticed by voters. The substantive impact is

FIGURE 1
EFFECT OF OWNING A VOTERS' MOST IMPORTANT ISSUE ON CAMPAIGN
ATTENTION
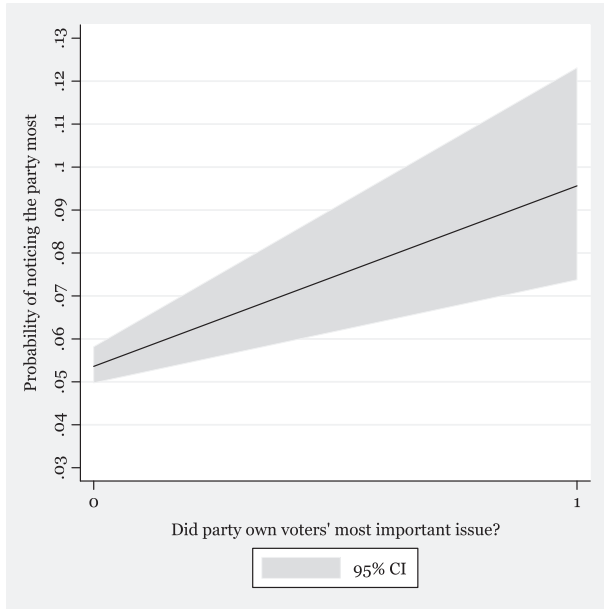


somewhat weaker than expected: the difference in getting noticed between a party with low visibility (one standard deviation below the mean) and a party with high visibility (one standard deviation above the mean) is 9 per cent. However, this effect occurs across all parties and voters, so as an across-the-board effect it does represent a substantial effect.

The coefficient for the visibility of a party on the most important issue is highly significant, but *negative* (–2.57 (0.75), $p < 0.001$). This runs counter to our expectation (H3) that the more visible a party is on issues that matter to voters, the more likely they are to get noticed. We suspected that favourability towards the party might play a role here, as earlier research on the 2009 campaign indicated that parties' abilities to prime voters was contingent upon their favourability (Lefevere 2011). Due to the fact that we only have limited variation at the party level in this regard, we wanted to limit the amount of variables at the party level to a minimum in the baseline model 1. As a test, we added an interaction between the coverage's favourability towards the party and visibility on the most important issue. The interaction proved to be significant, but most telling was the coefficient for 'Visibility on most important issue', which was now *positive* and significant. This means that if the media coverage is neutral, being visible on an issue that matters to voters has a positive effect on getting noticed, corroborating H3. Figure 2 shows the effects of increasing visibility on a voter's most important issue for negative and positive

FIGURE 2
INTERACTION BETWEEN FAVOURABILITY AND VISIBILITY ON VOTERS' MOST
IMPORTANT ISSUE
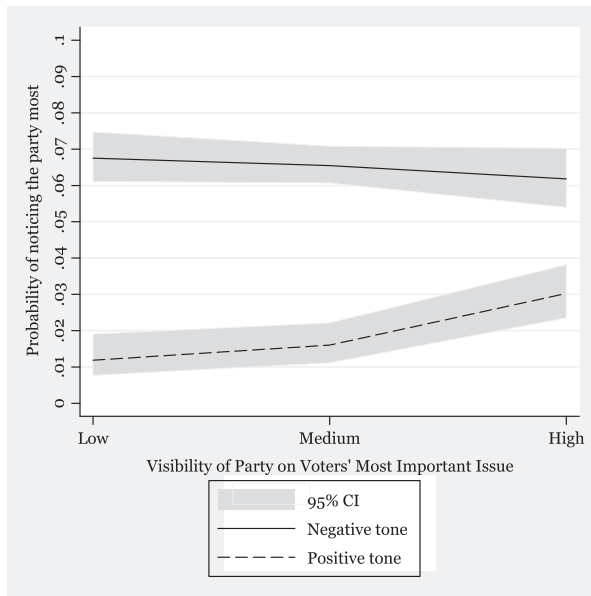


favourability.[5] If tone is negative, increased visibility on the most important issue does not affect voters' noticing the party – albeit that a negative tone generally increases the probability of being noticed. Conversely, increasing visibility on the most important issue has a small positive effect in the case of positively valenced news. This leads us to confirm H3, though the effect is small and conditional upon the absence of a negative tone.

The results also show that party preference affects attention to a campaign (H4): the more a respondent likes a party, the more likely he or she is to notice the party (0.14 (0.02), $p < 0.001$). The coefficient might seem small, but it represents a one-unit increase. Because party evaluation is an 11-point scale, the total change in probability of getting noticed between a highly disliked party and a highly liked party is 9 per cent. All else being equal, a voter is 9 per cent more likely to notice a party they scored as 10 on the party evaluation scale compared to a party they scored as 0 on the same scale.

To test whether the effect of associative issue ownership (H1) is robust, we also ran a separate rare event logistic regression for each party.[6] The results of this analysis are included in the Appendix. The evidence for our key hypothesis, the impact of associative issue ownership (H1), is consistent across parties but not always significant. For all but one party (Groen!), the coefficient is positive: it is significant at a 0.01 level for three of the seven parties[7] Regarding the effect of party preference on campaign attention, the unstacked

analyses offer almost unequivocal support for Hypothesis 4. For all but one party (the liberal Open VLD), the coefficient is highly significant and positive.

## Conclusion

Scholars' renewed interest in issue ownership has so far focused on the behaviour of voters, parties and journalists. This study is the first to move beyond behaviour to examine the effect of issue ownership on voters' attention to political parties during an electoral campaign. In shifting our interest to non-behavioural effects, this study aligns with a more general trend in political science of examining other relevant campaign effects (Iyengar and Simon 2000). At a time when voters have an unprecedented choice of information to attend to, examining the determinants of attention and exposure is increasingly important (Bennett and Iyengar 2008). Though persuasion is the ultimate goal of any political campaign, attention is a prerequisite for any campaign effect to occur, and therefore warrants independent attention. Though various studies have documented voters' tendency to pay more attention to parties they favour (Garrett 2009; Iyengar *et al.* 2008; Stroud 2008), we hypothesised that when voters consider a party to be the associative owner of an issue of importance to them, they will pay more attention to this party. Using survey data collected prior to the Flemish regional elections of 2009, we showed how, as expected, being an associative issue owner increases a party's probability of being noticed by voters for whom that issue is important. This effect holds even when we control for partisan preferences *and* the absolute visibility of parties in the media. As such, this study is the first to show how perceptions of issue ownership may act as a determinant of attention to a campaign.

Our analysis also corroborated the impact of various other determinants of attention to a campaign highlighted in previous research. We found that the more a voter liked a party, the more likely they are to notice that party, which aligns with the extensive literature on selective exposure and attention (see e.g. Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Garrett 2009; Stroud 2010). Furthermore, media emphasis increases the odds that a party was noticed by voters. Finally, apart from the advantage of being an issue owner, the findings also suggest that focusing on an issue increases a party's probability of being noticed by voters who consider the issue to be important – albeit with the important precondition that being visible on an issue that is important for voters should be positive, or otherwise voters will turn a blind eye (Krosnick 1990).

Even though our study focused explicitly on voters' perception of campaigns, we believe that the results are also of interest to studies of party behaviour. One of the basic contentions of issue ownership theory is that parties will focus on owned issues (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1989; but see Sigelman and Buell 2004). Emphasising their owned issues enables parties to field their strongest arguments and thereby dominate the campaign agenda (Riker 1993). Hayes (2008) has already shown that parties enjoy more, and more favourable, attention on owned issues. Our study complements these

findings by showing that voters also tend to be more attentive to the party that owns the issue most important to them. Thus, a focus on owned issues gives parties an advantage both in terms of the various campaigns' coverage – they hold the stronger arguments and journalists prefer to cover the issue-owning party – *and* voters' demand for information.

Our study has a number of limitations which affect the generalisability of the results and the extent to which comparisons with earlier work can be drawn. Firstly, instead of focusing on exposure our measure conflates exposure and attention. We measure whether a party was noticed most, which implies both exposure and attention to the information. Thus, even though our theoretical framework focused on attention, our empirical analysis is unable to disentangle the two. Though the work on selective exposure is most widespread, attention itself merits analysis: as Zaller (1992) argues, even if people do not selectively expose themselves they can still ignore dissonant information and thereby have biased attention. Nevertheless, future research could apply information board methods (see e.g. Lau and Redlawsk 2007), which would allow us to discern whether people are more likely to expose themselves to information dealing with the issue owner. Regardless of whether it is exposure or attention at work, the findings still show that issue ownership matters, which is an important first step.

Secondly, our data only allowed us to examine the effect of *associative* issue ownership on campaign attention. Though we expect that associative issue ownership is a more natural driver of attention because the thought of an issue triggers thinking of the party, *competence* issue ownership may be an independent driver of attention to a campaign. When a party is judged as more competent on an issue that a voter considers important, we might expect that this increases the party's utility for that voter: its track-record on the issue suggests that it may be best at handling the issue in the coming term. However, various scholars have suggested that competence issue ownership and partisanship – another determinant of attention to a campaign– are correlated (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Stubager and Slothuus 2013; Walgrave *et al.* 2014). Estimating the independent effect of competence issue ownership may prove difficult. Nevertheless, future research should try to incorporate this as a determinant of voters' attention to a campaign next to associative issue ownership.

A final drawback is the fact that we could only test our hypothesis on a single election in a single country. In similar multiparty systems where ownership perceptions and party preferences do not overlap to a large degree, we see no reason to expect the effect of associative issue ownership to differ much from what we observed in our analysis. However, it is difficult to tell whether the effect we found would also emerge in a two-party system, especially when there is polarisation amongst the public. Moreover, the single-case design meant that we could not assess the full extent to which a campaign's agenda affected voters' attention. We focused on issue salience at the micro-level of the individual voter, yet we know that different issues dominate in different campaigns. Though issue ownership theory and Riker's dominance principle

posit that parties emphasise issues they own (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1989; Riker 1993), depending on the context parties may be inclined to diverge – focusing on their owned issues – or converge – focusing on the same issues (Budge and Farlie 1983; Damore 2005; Sides 2006; Sigelman and Buell 2004; Spoon *et al*. 2014). Our single-case design did not allow us to examine the interplay between a campaign's issue agenda and the importance to voters of individual issues. Nevertheless, our findings do suggest that parties have an incentive to focus on the issues they own, as these reputations increase the public's attention to them, which may pay electoral dividends.[8] Parties may expect or anticipate these benefits, and (continue to) focus on the issues they own during election campaigns, which strengthens their reputation.

However, these drawbacks are not detrimental to the core contention of the paper, namely that associative issue ownership has effects for parties beyond the vote. Having a reputation on an issue generates automatic linkages between an issue and a party, which has a cognitive effect that transcends the filter imposed by attitudes such as party preference. This study should encourage scholars to broaden their perspective on the type of effects that issue ownership can cause, since it may advance our understanding of the way in which issue ownership reputations result in electoral advantages. Is it the case that these reputations determine voting behaviour? Or do they cause voters to pay more attention to these issue-owning parties, which in turn gives these parties a competitive edge in terms of persuasion during the campaign? We leave it to future studies to examine these questions. For now, our study has established that the effects of issue ownership stretch beyond behaviour, which promises to be a fruitful avenue of future research.

## Disclosure Statement

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## Notes

1. *Flemish parties*: CD&V (Christian Democrats), Groen! (Greens), N-VA (Flemish Nationalists), Sp.A (Socialists), SLP (Social Progressives), Vlaams Belang (Extreme Right), Open VLD (Liberals), LDD (Neo-Liberals), PvdA (Extreme Left). *French parties (note that these did not run in the election, but could be noticed nonetheless)*: MR (Liberals), PS (Socialists), Ecolo (Greens), FN (Extreme Right), CDH (Christian Democrats), Other.
2. The two coded newspapers are *De Standaard*, a quality newspaper, and *Het Laatste Nieuws*, a popular broadsheet paper with the largest circulation. These newspapers were selected so our analysis includes the most popular newspaper with less attention to political news, and a quality

newspaper (with greater attention to politics) with the largest circulation in that part of the newspaper market.

3. All 7 pm news broadcasts of the public and largest commercial broadcasters were coded for issues and actors for the same period as the newspaper data. For issues, Spearman's rank order correlation was 0.78 ($p < 0.000$); for politicians, it was 0.74 ($p < 0.000$). Because an important control variable, favourability, was not available in the television data, we only use the newspaper data.

4. The prominence score of each article is based on the *size* (small, medium or large) and *placement* (front page or not) of the article.

5. Favourability was kept fixed at 0.01 (positive) and –0.01 (negative). This equals one standard deviation above and below the mean, though we kept positive favourability at 0.01. All other variables were kept at their mean or median values.

6. Note that we were not able to run the regression for the Walloon parties and SLP/PvdA, simply because so few respondents noticed them. Also, the media attention variables had to be omitted since they only vary between parties, not respondents.

7. Additionally, for Sp.A the coefficient has a *p* value of 0.101. More importantly, the substantive probability increases are substantial for some parties. Owning the issue important to a voter increases the probability of getting noticed by 15 per cent for Christian Democrats and Neo-Liberals, by 11 per cent for the Liberals, by 7 per cent for the Flemish Nationalists, 5 per cent for the Extreme Right, and 3 per cent for the Socialists. Only for the Greens is there no change in the predicted probability at all.

8. On this point, we did examine whether increased attention to a campaign indeed increased the probability that a voter prefers a given party. To do so, we regressed a parties' electoral utility at the end of the campaign on attention to the campaign and being the owner of the most important issue. We added a party's electoral utility at the start of the campaign as a control. Both attention (0.35 (0.08), $p < 0.001$) and associative issue ownership (0.48 (0.07), $p < 0.001$) had significant effects. This suggests that, as we argue here, attention to a campaign also has electoral consequences.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1
RARE EVENTS LOGISTIC REGRESSION PREDICTING WHETHER A PARTY
WAS NOTICED BY A RESPONDENT (1) OR NOT (0)

| Variables | CD&V | Groen! | N-VA | Sp.A | VB | Open VLD | LDD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Owner of most important issue (H2) | 0.92*** (0.29) | −0.00 (1.01) | 0.33 (0.48) | 0.66 (0.42) | 0.94* (0.56) | 0.51** (0.25) | 0.37 (0.64) |
| Party evaluation (H4) | 0.26*** (0.07) | 0.31*** (0.09) | 0.23*** (0.09) | 0.17** (0.08) | 0.20*** (0.07) | 0.04 (0.07) | 0.07* (0.04) |
| Age | −0.01 (0.01) | 0.04** (0.02) | 0.02* (0.01) | −0.01 (0.01) | 0.00 (0.01) | −0.01 (0.01) | −0.02*** (0.01) |
| Gender | −0.10 (0.28) | 0.48 (0.55) | −0.01 (0.36) | 0.38 (0.41) | −0.48 (0.39) | −0.05 (0.26) | −0.11 (0.20) |
| Education (ref: middle education) | | | | | | | |
| Lower education | 0.16 (0.34) | −1.67 (1.15) | −0.43 (0.43) | 1.16** (0.50) | −0.09 (0.50) | −0.53 (0.33) | 0.18 (0.26) |
| Higher education | −0.52 (0.40) | 0.38 (0.62) | −0.31 (0.44) | 0.88* (0.51) | −0.68 (0.55) | −0.02 (0.25) | −0.08 (0.23) |
| Political knowledge | −0.10 (0.10) | −0.20 (0.15) | 0.14 (0.16) | −0.16 (0.13) | −0.19 (0.13) | 0.13 (0.08) | 0.03 (0.07) |
| Frequency of newspaper reading | −0.11 (0.07) | 0.29** (0.12) | −0.07 (0.09) | −0.08 (0.11) | −0.07 (0.09) | 0.09 (0.07) | 0.07 (0.05) |
| Constant | −2.46*** (0.63) | −7.38*** (1.56) | −4.62*** (0.64) | −3.74*** (0.90) | −2.49*** (0.76) | −2.02*** (0.73) | −0.52 (0.40) |

*Notes*: Table entries are unstandardised regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.
***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$.