

RESEARCH NOTE

How a New Issue Becomes an Owned Issue. Media Coverage and the Financial Crisis in Belgium (2008–2009)

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Classic issue ownership theory claims that voters link issues to political parties, and that the party holding the best reputation on the most salient issue at the time of election has a large chance of gaining the public's support (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). But where does issue ownership come from?

First, extant research showed that media coverage is a source for ownership over issues (Aalberg & Janssen, 2007; Walgrave & De Swert, 2007). When parties get the chance to address issues in the media, and when journalists talk about specific parties when covering a particular issue, a link between the party and the issue gets established. Second, because of the stable nature of an already claimed ownership, students of issue ownership have argued that mostly new or free-floating issues are subject to claiming by parties (Petrocik, 1996; Walgrave, Lefevere, & Nuytemans, 2009). Linking both arguments, we deal with *the role of the mass media in establishing the ownership over a newly emerging issue*.

We draw on the natural experiment offered by the recent financial crisis hitting the world economy in 2008–2009. In many respects, this crisis was a new phenomenon with banks on the edge of bankruptcy, the bailout of large corporations and banks, and the near collapse of entire countries. Some believe this crisis was of a nature we have not seen since the Great Depression of the thirties. It was a crisis that, next to the economy, affected every realm of the public sphere. The crisis was unexpected, and financial security, bailouts, and banking regulation were in most countries new issues that had not been on the political agenda in the preceding period. This research note examines the public's perception of the ownership over the issue of the financial crisis in Belgium (Flanders), compares it with issue ownership of other well-known issues in Belgium, and with the coverage of these issues in the Belgian news media.

News Coverage as a Source of Ownership over New Issues

When a new issue or problem enters the political debate, it is in the first place the government who is expected to deal with it and, consequently, government's actions and deeds are the subject of public scrutiny (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2009). Therefore, we expect that voters will associate new issues with government parties. The government is deemed responsible and is, therefore, associated with it, regardless of its good or bad performance. This rationale resembles the mechanism of responsibility attribution in the economic voting literature. In that work, voters are said to automatically link good or bad economic performance to the incumbent; at the ballot box, voters punish or reward the incumbent based on their assessment of the state of the economy (see Chappell & Keech, 1985; Kuklinski & West, 1981; Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000; Sheafer, 2008). This article, although, does not deal with voting as the dependent variable, but rather the preceding association between issues and voters. Our main goal is to assess *how* voters learn to make the link between a new issue and the incumbent.

The literature distinguishes four sources of issue ownership. Some of these create a stable kind of issue ownership that is deeply entrenched in voters' perceptions of parties. First, Petrocik (1996) speaks of "constituency issue ownership" sprouting from a party's roots in social networks and cleavages generating a stable issue ownership. Such issue ownership regards the mainstream issues that have long been the subject of political battle, forming the classic arena of political strife. Other origins of issue ownership are more changeable and wavering. Klingemann, Hofferbert, & Budge (1994) state that parties' own communication is a source of issue ownership: frequently addressing particular issues, parties establish an association in voters' minds between the party and the issue. Walgrave and De Swert (2007) found that parties that emphasized a certain issue via their party manifestos managed over the years to get a grip on that issue. A third source of issue ownership is the track record of the incumbent (Petrocik, 1996). It refers to how the public perceives the governing party to have handled the issue in the past, resulting in a handling reputation. Incumbents can do well, or they can do badly; hence, their issue ownership is less stable.

The most oscillating source of issue ownership, finally, is media coverage explicitly linking certain issues to certain parties, or repeatedly giving parties the opportunity to address the issue in the news. The explanation of why the media play a role in attributing issues to parties resembles the framing mechanism. When the media choose to select a specific party when reporting about an issue, they establish a connection in the mind of the media consumer between that issue and the mentioned party. Just as with framing, the issue becomes "applicable" to the party that is repeatedly linked with the issue in the news (Scheufele, 1999; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). In other words, the media transpose schemata in the mind of voters (Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987). When an issue comes to mind, voters then automatically think about a certain political party and vice versa.

Recent empirical work confirmed that media coverage affects issue ownership (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007; Walgrave & De Swert, 2007). Yet, the media mechanism connecting issues to parties should apply particularly to new issues. When new issues emerge, there essentially is *only* media coverage for voters to rely on. Especially when

the issue is not connected to social groups or existing cleavages, when the incumbent party has not had the time to build a track record, and when parties' long-term communication has not yet shifted, the most important beacon for the voter to connect issues with parties is how parties are linked to issues in the mass media. Similarly, Walgrave et al. (2009) showed that media coverage is instrumental in establishing issue ownership, especially when the issue is unowned and unclaimed—new issues are per definition unowned.

For classic and well-known economic issues, such as taxes and unemployment, we do not expect an automatic link to the government parties nor do we expect a strong media effect. Contradictory to what we expect from economic voting theory, these issues are characterized by strongly engrained ownerships based on societal cleavages connected to a specific constituency. Indeed, in Belgium (Flanders), the issues of taxes and unemployment are traditionally associated with the liberals and social democrats, respectively, regardless of whether these parties are in office (Walgrave & De Swert, 2007). As we will show later in the text, the issue ownership of the financial crisis belonged to (partly) different parties showing that the financial crisis is not a manifestation of an old issue. Before 2008, the financial crisis did not exist as a concept or term, it was not recognizable as an “issue”, and the typical consequences it had—banks on the edge of bankruptcy, the bailout of large corporations and banks, and the near collapse of entire countries—could not have been claimed by any political party, as it simply did not exist. The issue was not connected to a specific constituency or cleavage, and the government parties did not have the time to build a track record yet. For voters to get informed about the political parties that were dealing with the issue, the news was their most important source of information.

We expect that for the case at hand—the issue ownership of the financial crisis in Belgium 2008–2009—that (1) government parties more than opposition parties were connected to the financial crisis in the news media, and (2) that the government parties were considered by Belgian (Flemish) voters as the issue owners of the financial crisis. We expect (3) that media coverage was a source through which voters learned to link the financial crisis to the government parties and that this was not, or less, the case for the older and the other economic issues.

We draw on a panel survey of ~1,200 Flemings—Flanders being the largest and Dutch-speaking Northern region of Belgium—administered in the run up to the Flemish elections of June 2009. Randomly drawn from the National Register of Belgium, the response rate was 48.3% in the first wave. Trained interviewers visited and surveyed the selected respondents in the first wave long before the elections (February–May 2009). In the second and third waves, the same respondents were re-interviewed via telephone (re-contact rates 90% and 83%, respectively) right before (May 25, 2009 to June 6, 2009) and right after the elections (June 22, 2009 to September 24, 2009). The analyses here draw on wave two for all explanatory variables and on wave three for the dependent variable, this gives us some leverage on the direction of causality.

Our measure of issue ownership is based on recent work by Walgrave Lefevere, & Tresch (2012) who distinguish different dimensions of issue ownership. One of these dimensions is what they call “associative” issue ownership: the “...*associative link between certain issues and parties in the minds of the voters*” (Walgrave et al. 2012, p. 3).

The question wording is 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 pick one party only, indicate that they do not know, or indicate that none of the parties comes to mind. For each voter and issue, each party thus gets a separate associative issue ownership score (0 = not owner, 1 = owner). This is the dependent variable in our analyses. Eight issues were measured: the financial crisis, the environment, mobility, social security, state reform, taxes, unemployment, and migration. Apart from the financial crisis, all these issues are typical issues that have been around for a long time in the Belgian (Flemish) polity and that are owned by specific parties, not only by government parties.

We also did a content analysis of two major newspapers: *De Standaard*, the most well-known broadsheet, and *Het Laatste Nieuws*, the most popular tabloid. Covering almost four months (February 21, 2009 to June 6, 2009), all newspapers articles in these two newspapers—24,500—were coded in detail for issue, and these issues were traced back to the eight surveyed issues. In each coded article, the political parties mentioned were also recorded. This allows us to connect the issue content of an article with the party that is mentioned in the same article (shares of party mentions per issue). The agreement between the media coders was never <90%, and for almost all issues, Krippendorff’s α -scores were $\geq .7$. Apart from media coverage, we also draw on a number of control variables. Their operationalization can be found in Appendix.

Results

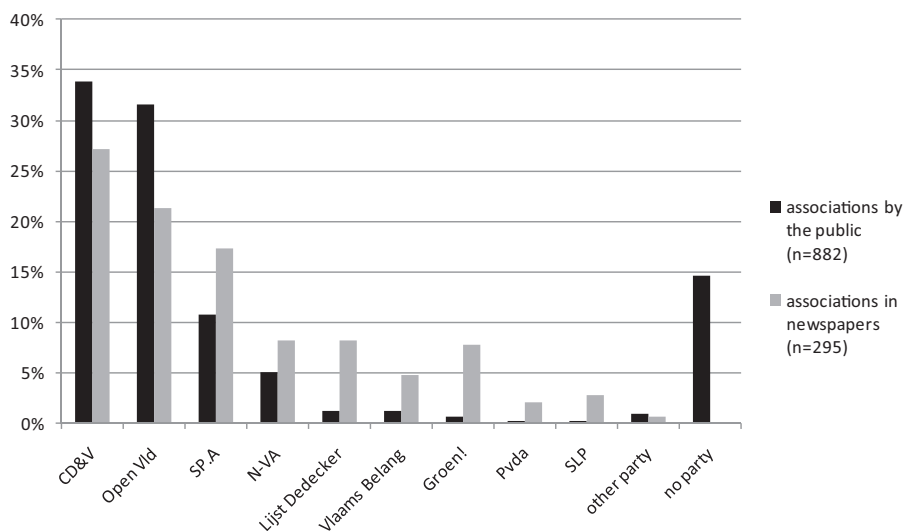
Figure 1 presents issue ownership data of the financial crisis. Which parties were identified with this issue by the Flemish voter? The black bars in the graph indicate the percentage of respondents associating the financial crisis with each of the political parties in Belgium (Flanders).

Two parties stand out leaving the others far behind: the liberal *Open Vld* and the Christian democratic *CD&V* with each >30% associations. These two parties were in office in the federal government when the financial crisis broke out and at the time of the survey. Therefore, Flemish citizens, as expected, associated the financial crisis with the political parties in office. Note that, for none of the other issues we found a similar relationship with both government parties linked to an issue. The other economic issues “taxes” and “unemployment” were owned by *Open Vld* and *Sp.a*, respectively, as is traditionally the case in Belgium.

Was media coverage the cause of the ownership over the financial crisis by the government parties? We look at the party associations in the news coverage of the financial crisis. In the research period, 295 newspaper articles covered the financial crisis. In Figure 1, the gray bars show which parties were mentioned in this crisis coverage. The same two parties stand out: *Open Vld* and *CD&V*, the two government parties. Although somewhat less dominating than among the public—probably because of the well-known balancing mechanism in the news media

Figure 1

Associations between parties and the financial crisis by the public and in the news media



(Ramsden, 1996)—both government parties got into the picture most often when news media covered the financial crisis.

To check whether the association between issue ownership in the media and in public opinion is larger for the financial crisis issue than for the other issues, we computed the differences between the black (public) and gray (media) bars portrayed in Figure 1 for all issues (not just for the financial crisis). An independent samples *t*-test shows that there is a significant ($p < .05$) difference between the mean media/public opinion differences for the financial crisis issue compared with all other issues. Media and public opinion are on average 3% more similar for the financial crisis issue than for the other issues. We can thus conclude that the similarity between media and public opinion regarding issue-party associations is significantly higher for the financial crisis compared with the other assessed issues. This suggests that news media coverage may be a more important driver of issue ownership for the new issue of the financial crisis than for the other, older and more entrenched issues.

This is no proof of causation, although. To take a further step in making a plausible causal argument—media coverage has caused citizens to link the financial crisis with the Flemish government parties—we examine whether in particular those citizens who are more *exposed* to news media coverage are associating the financial crisis with *Open Vld* and *CD&V*.

We performed binary logistic regressions (0 = picking a non-government party as owner of the financial crisis; 1 = picking one of the government parties as owner of the financial crisis) to check whether the effect of media exposure holds true when controlling for a number of sociodemographic and political variables. To control for party preference, we included a control variable tapping the extent to which a

respondent agrees with the ideas of any given party (10-point scale). We controlled for interaction effects between education and media exposure and between media exposure and party preferences for the government parties *CD&V* and *Open Vld*, we excluded the latter interactions from the analysis when insignificant (see Allison, 1999).

There is an effect from media exposure on issue ownership of the government parties even when controlling for alternative sources of issue ownership. This is shown in the first column of Table 1. Although highly educated people point more often to the government parties as the owners (Exp [B] = 1.40), the same applies to people who are more exposed to media coverage (Exp [B] = 1.28)—in which, as we showed, the crisis was predominantly coupled with the government parties. Party preferences as well seem to play a pivotal role. Remarkably, respondents who strongly agree with ideas of *CD&V* are *more* inclined to associate the financial crisis with the government parties (*CD&V* or *Open Vld*), whereas the respondents who strongly agree with ideas of *Open Vld* are *less* inclined to associate the financial crisis with the government parties. Media coverage was thus not the *only* source in establishing the ownership of the financial crisis. However, exposure to media coverage significantly increased the chance one associated the financial crisis with its issue owners.

We argued earlier in the text that mass media coverage matters for establishing ownership of newly emerging issues, whereas it does not, or less, matter for older and more established issues. To examine this, Table 1 also shows similar binary logistic regressions for all other issues, with the issue ownership of these other issues as the dependent variable; the most associated party got a score of “1” and all other parties a “0” value (Social security = *Sp.a* [54%]; Environment = *Groen!* [89%]; Taxes = *Open Vld* [51%]; Migration = *Vlaams Belang* [50%]; Unemployment = *Sp.a* [46%]; State reform = *N-VA* [30%]; we skipped the issue of mobility as none of the parties scored >30%). We also include the other economic issues “taxes” and “unemployment” to make sure the ownership of the financial crisis and the role of the news media in making it is different from that of the other economic issues. The financial crisis is the only new issue included in the analysis, all other issues were already present and well-established in the Flemish public and political debate, including the mentioned economic issues.

Is media exposure equally important for “getting it right” for these older issues as for the new issue of the financial crisis? Columns two till seven in Table 1 provide the results. They are straightforward: for *none* of the other issues media exposure exerts a significant impact on the choice of the issue owner. Only for the newly emerging issue of the financial crisis we find such a significant impact of media coverage. To test whether the impact of the media is significantly different (larger) for the financial crisis issue, we stacked the data set and compared the size of the effects of the media between the different issues. Results (data not shown in table) confirmed that the media are significantly more affecting issue ownership of the financial crisis compared with the other issues. We can conclude that our expectations are supported by the facts: in contrast to other economic issues, such as unemployment and taxes, and older and well-established issues, such as the environment and social security, news media have affected the government parties’ ownership of the new issue of the financial crisis.

Table 1
Binary Logistic Regressions: Effects on the Probability that Someone Associates an Issue with its Owner

Independent variables	Financial crisis Exp(B)	State reform Exp(B)	Taxes Exp(B)	Migration Exp(B)	Social security Exp(B)	Unemployment Exp(B)	Environment Exp(B)
Age	1.00	1.01	1.00	0.97***	0.99**	1.01	0.95***
Education	1.4***	1.27***	1.2***	1.01	1.22***	1.44***	1.10*
Sex	1.10	1.64***	0.88	1.28	1.18	1.25	0.82
Exposure to party communication	1.08*	1.02	1.01	0.98	1.00	1.04	0.96
Exposure to news media	1.28***	0.91	1.02	0.99	0.98	1.10	1.04
Political interest	1.04	1.22***	1.16***	1.06	1.16	1.15***	1.00
Policy satisfaction	1.00	1.44***	1.00	0.93	1.04	1.11	1.16
Talking about politics	1.05	0.99	1.11**	0.99	1.05	1.02	1.07
Trust in political institutions	1.01	0.98*	1.01	0.98	0.99	1.01	1.00
Exposure to news media x education	0.98*				0.98*		
Level of agreement with:							
CD&V	1.47***	0.94	1.01	1.00	0.89***	0.92***	1.01
Groen!	1.01	1.01	0.97	0.92**	0.93*	0.99	0.99
NVA	0.99	0.91**	0.99	1.02	1.08	1.01	1.01
SPA	0.83***	1.10*	0.99	1.10**	1.31	1.19***	1.00
SLP	1.00	1.02**	1.01	1.01	1.01	1.00	1.01
VB	0.94*	1.02	0.93**	1.06**	0.94*	1.01	0.99
Open VLD	0.83***	0.93	1.04	1.00	1.02	0.95	1.01
LDD	1.02	0.93	1.01	0.91**	0.91**	0.96	0.98
PvdA	1.00	1.01*	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Exposure to news media x agreement with Open VLD	1.04***						
Exposure to news media x agreement with CD&V	0.96***						
Exposure to news media x agreement with NVA	0.93***	1.03***	0.02***	8.96***	0.23***	0.01***	25.81***
Constant	0.16	0.29	0.21	0.13	0.26	0.20	0.16
Hosmer–Lemeshow (Sig.)	0.27	0.87	0.59	0.95	0.80	0.28	0.77
Percentage correct	71	73	69	63	70	65	90
<i>n</i>	736	743	738	742	744	740	749

Note. *** $\alpha < .01$. ** $\alpha < .05$. * $\alpha < .1$

Conclusion

This research note speaks to recent work that has sought to examine the origin of issue ownership. Apart from stable and long-lasting types of issue ownership based on parties' constituencies and their positions on cleavages, the link between parties and issues can be affected by more volatile and wavering media coverage connecting parties to issues. This applies especially to newly emerging issues for which the association with a particular party is absent or not yet deeply engrained.

Our contribution to theory is twofold. First, we introduced the notion of new versus old issues and showed that issue ownership dynamics differs between these two types of issues. The distinction helps us to examine the sources of issue ownership. Ownership of already claimed issues is more stable, which makes it difficult to examine its sources. For newly emerging issues, these sources can more easily be assessed, as ownership is not consolidated yet, but it can be claimed by any political party. Second, we contributed to a growing body of literature that examines the effect of media coverage on issue ownership. We showed that not only in an experimental context but also in a real-world situation resembling a natural experiment, media coverage matters.

Our study has a good many limitations. One is the fact that it remained confined to one country and one issue only. It remains to be seen whether this is a generic phenomenon that can be generalized to other issues in other countries. We think our evidence is strong enough to suggest that it may, but we remain cautious. A second limitation is the fact that, in our Belgian (Flemish) case study, we could not control for how well the two government parties dealt with the crisis. We had no measures of the evaluation by Belgian citizens of the government's performance dealing with the crisis. The fact that the government parties acquired issue ownership may not only have been the consequence of media coverage connecting them to the issue, but also of their good performance while managing the issue. Our measurement of issue ownership steers partially clear of that problem by tapping associative and not competence issue ownership, but there still may be a confounding competence dimension at play.

Appendix

Variable name	Question	Variable labels
Age		Age in years
Sex	What is your sex?	0 = Man; 1 = Woman
Education	What is your highest education?	0 = No education 1 = Elementary education 2 = Professional secondary education (not completed) 3 = Technical secondary education (not completed) 4 = General secondary education (not completed) 5 = Professional secondary education (completed) 6 = Technical secondary education (completed) 7 = General secondary education (completed) 8 = Higher nonuniversity diploma 9 = University diploma 1 = Never 2 = Less than once a week 3 = One or two days a week 4 = Three or four times a week 5 = Almost every day 6 = Systematically every day 1 = Never 2 = Seldom 3 = Sometimes 4 = Often
News media exposure (sum of two variables)	How frequently did you read the newspapers in the last two weeks? How frequently did you watch television news in the last two weeks?	
Exposure to party communication (sum of four variables)	How frequently did you visit the website of a political party last month? How frequently did you look at printed media of a political party like a folder or party magazine last month? How frequently did you see an advertisement of a political party last month, for example: in newspapers or on television? How frequently did you have direct contact with activists or members of a political party last month?	

(continued)

Continued

Variable name	Question	Variable labels
Political satisfaction	To what extent are you satisfied with the policy of the Flemish government of the last five years?	1 = Very unsatisfied 2 = Unsatisfied 3 = Not satisfied nor unsatisfied 4 = Satisfied 5 = Very satisfied
Political Interest	To what extent are you interested in politics in general?	1 = Not interested at all 2-9 = Intermediary values 10 = Very interested
Talking about politics (sum of three variables)	How frequently did you talk about politics with one of your friends last month? How frequently did you talk about politics with someone of your family last month? How frequently did you talk about politics with one of your colleagues last month?	1 = Never 2 = Seldom 3 = Sometimes 4 = Often
Trust in political institutions (sum of five variables)	To what measure do you trust political parties in general? To what measure do you trust the Flemish government? To what measure do you trust the Flemish parliament? To what measure do you trust the federal government? To what measure do you trust the federal parliament?	1 = Not trusting at all 2-9 = Intermediary values 10 = Very trusting
Party preference	To what extent do you agree with the ideas of . . . (question asked for every Flemish political party)?	0 = Completely disagree 2-9 = Intermediary values 10 = Completely agree

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