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Introduction: Issue Ownership

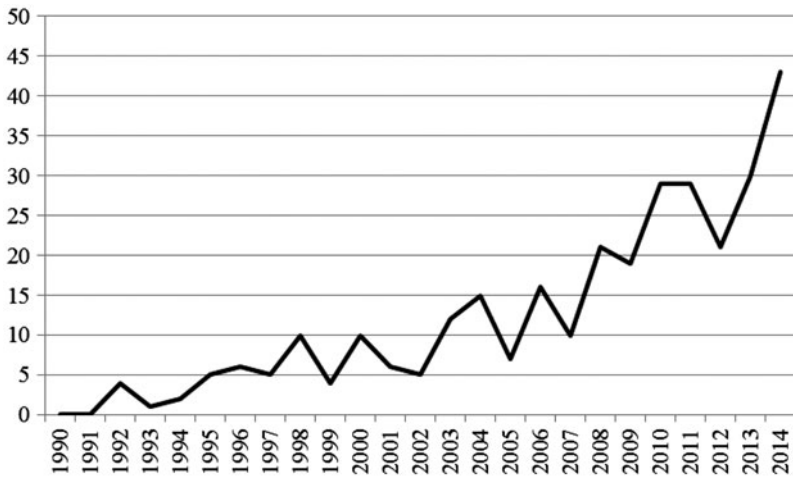
JONAS LEFEVERE, ANKE TRESCH and STEFAAN WALGRAVE

Although issue ownership theory – the idea that voters consider specific parties to be better able to deal with some issues – had already emerged in the 1980s, it is only in the past 10 years that the theory has gained prominence in the study of voter and party behaviour. Despite the steep increase in scholarly attention, there is still no consensus regarding the impact of issue ownership on parties and voters. This special issue makes two key contributions: firstly, it provides state of the art contemporary issue ownership research, by focusing on the historical roots as well on recent conceptual, theoretical and methodological developments in the field. Secondly, by focusing on new aspects and effects of issue ownership, the special issue offers a look forward and outlines a research agenda for future work on issue ownership.

More than 20 years have passed since Budge and Farlie (1983) as well as Petrocik (1989) introduced the concept of ‘issue ownership’ into the lexicon of students of political campaigns. The basic idea is that voters associate certain issues with certain political parties. In many European countries, for example, immigration is generally considered an issue belonging to (radical) right parties, social security is considered a Socialist/Social Democratic issue, and environmental protection an issue owned by Green parties. According to issue ownership theory, parties hold an advantage on these issues as the public believes that they are better suited to deal with them. Most research on issue ownership focused on its impact on party behaviour – parties are expected to focus on issues they ‘own’ – and on voter behaviour – when a voter considers a party to own an issue s/he considers important, this increases the chances that this voter will prefer that party. Yet following Petrocik’s (1989) and Budge and Farlie’s (1983) pioneering work on the topic, the concept received relatively little scholarly attention.

However, in the past decade, research on issue ownership has seen a remarkable renaissance. Figure 1 shows the number of Web of Science publications dealing with issue ownership for the period 1990–2014. After a period of relative inattention in the 1990s, it is clear that more and more scholars have been using the concept since the early 2000s. This increase in

FIGURE 1
 AMOUNT OF POLITICAL AND COMMUNICATION SCIENCE PUBLICATIONS DEALING
 WITH ISSUE OWNERSHIP IN WEB OF SCIENCE



Note: Results based on topic search for 'issue ownership' on Web of Science (January 2015) within political science and communication science publications.

work on issue ownership is no coincidence. Increasing voter volatility, the waning of persistent partisan attachment and the apparent decreasing ideological distance between parties has led scholars to seek out alternative determinants of electoral and party behaviour (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Mair *et al.* 2004). As a result, issue ownership has gained prominence in the study of both electoral behaviour (e.g. Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Green and Hobolt 2008; Van der Brug 2004) and party competition (e.g. Damore 2004; Sides 2006; Walgrave and De Swert 2004).

That said, the steep increase in scholarly attention did not result in a consensus regarding the impact of issue ownership. For example, parties have been found to converge on similar issues in various cases, and stick to their 'own' issues in others (e.g. Green and Hobolt 2008; Petrocik *et al.* 2003; Sigelman and Buell 2004; Tresch *et al.* 2014). Moreover, the impact of issue ownership perceptions on people's vote choices is sometimes found to be direct, whereas other studies suggest that the effect is only present for salient issues (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Green and Jennings 2012; Lachat 2014; Walgrave *et al.* 2012). Also, the exact conceptualisation and measurement of issue ownership have hardly been the subject of scholarly debate, and neither has the question where issue ownership comes from.

So, with a lot of work drawing on the concept but little agreement as to what issue ownership can actually mean for voting and parties, this is a good time to bring together scholars working on issue ownership in a special issue.

This issue originated in a workshop on 'Issue, Parties and the Public' that we organised at the University of Antwerp on 23 and 24 May 2013, which brought together scholars from Belgium, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Switzerland. During our discussions, we noticed that there was a need to consolidate the work that had been done thus far, but also to provide an overview of the challenges that future work on the topic would need to address.

As such, this special issue has two goals: firstly, it provides an overview of the state of the art of contemporary research on issue ownership. It is remarkable that, while issue ownership is so well known to political scientists and so widely used, never before has a collective work on the concept been produced. Investigating the state of the art is thus a timely exercise. Therefore, we include a variety of research in the special issue, including work that focuses on the roots of issue ownership research such as the selective issue emphasis of parties (articles by Budge and by Van der Brug and Berkhout), and the origins of issue ownership (Dahlberg and Martinsson). The special issue also shows the breadth of issue ownership research and testifies to the further increase in the scope of the concept's use. Some of the papers focus on novel aspects or effects of issue ownership, such as the role of frames in party issue emphasis (Van de Wardt), the impact of issue ownership on non-behavioural outcomes (Lefevere, Walgrave and Tresch), and the idea of negative issue ownership (Wagner and Meyer). Also, we include papers that use a diverse set of methods, ranging from survey research (Bélanger and Nadeau; Lefevere *et al.*) over content analysis (Van der Brug and Berkhout; Van de Wardt) to experiments (Dahlberg and Martinsson). In this way, the special issue allows interested readers to quickly familiarise themselves with the varied approaches used in issue ownership research.

Apart from providing a view of the state of the art, the second goal of this special issue is to offer a look forward and to outline the challenges that researchers interested in studying issue ownership face. Taken together, the collection of articles in this special issue outlines a research agenda. The various analyses highlight the limitations of extant issue ownership research, the weaknesses of the concept and its partiality as an explanation of voting and party behaviour. Two pieces in the special issue specifically tackle the hurdles ahead of us and directly deal with some of the limitations of present-day issue ownership research (Budge; Walgrave, Tresch and Lefevere). We hope that electoral and party researchers will take up the challenges outlined in them.

We open up the special issue with two articles that provide an explicit overview of the work done thus far but also the challenges of present-day issue ownership research. Budge (this issue) addresses the implications of saliency theory for parties' strategic behaviour during campaigns. He first discusses the historical roots of salience theory and explains which expectations regarding parties' issue emphasis derive from it. He then constructs a typology of issue ownership, defined as a parties' freedom to strategically (de-)emphasise issues, based on two dimensions – the extent to which a party is faced with internal

constraints and the way its voters react to changes in the parties' emphasis of issues. Finally, Budge calls upon future research to address the proverbial 'elephant in the room': the lack of comparative empirical analysis to truly assess the electoral impact of issue ownership.

The next article, by Walgrave, Tresch and Lefevere (this issue), takes stock of the contemporary literature on issue ownership, and describes key challenges that remain in the field. The focus is on the concept of issue ownership, which is argued to be two-dimensional. The article then discusses the implications of this two-dimensionality for the role issue ownership plays in party and voter behaviour. Finally, these authors outline what they consider to be the key gaps in the extant literature.

The two following articles examine and extend the concept of issue ownership. Wagner and Meyer (this issue) introduce the concept of 'negative issue ownership', which occurs when a party has a particularly bad reputation on an issue. Using Austrian survey data they not only show that negative issue ownership exists, but also examine the impact of government evaluation, partisan and issue preferences on perceptions of negative issue ownership.

Building on a recent research agenda investigating the origins and changeability of issue ownership, Dahlberg and Martinsson investigate the impact of party communication on issue ownership perceptions. Using a rich experiment embedded in a survey fielded prior to the 2010 Swedish elections, they find that while parties can affect issue ownership perceptions, their ability to do so is weakened when other parties communicate on the same issue.

The next two studies advance our understanding of the role issue ownership plays in *parties'* issue emphasis. Firstly, Van de Wardt (this issue) introduces the concept of framing distance, which is the extent to which parties' issue frames overlap. As most extant research on issue convergence and saliency theory has focused mostly on which issues were mentioned, but not *how* they were mentioned, his analysis offers a useful extension of the extant work in this area. Van de Wardt empirically tests his arguments through a comparative study in three countries, complemented with a case study analysis.

Van der Brug and Berkhout examine the impact of issue ownership on parties' ability to make claims on issues in the media. They examine parties' claims on the immigration issue in seven countries and for 29 parties. Even when controlling for a party's size and whether it is in government, they find that issue-owning parties make the news more often – at least on 'their' issues – compared to other parties. This suggests that issue ownership is not only a consequence of party issue emphasis, but also an important predictor of that emphasis: parties are more likely to address issues they own.

Finally, the last two articles in the special issue focus on the impact of issue ownership perceptions on *voters*. Building on an established research agenda, both studies extend the field by introducing novel theory or methods. Firstly, Lefevere, Walgrave and Tresch (this issue) argue that the extant research on issue ownership has focused almost exclusively on its effects on people's vote choices, but cognitive and attitudinal effects are increasingly

important in political communication. In line with this perspective, they argue that associative issue ownership may also affect voters' exposure and attention to campaign information. Using panel survey data collected prior to the 2009 regional elections in Belgium, they show that associative issue ownership indeed affects people's attention to the campaign, above and beyond classic explanations of attention to campaigns, such as partisan preferences.

Our special issue concludes with a paper from Bélanger and Nadeau (this issue). Their contribution combines issue ownership theory with economic voting theory. They posit that while economic conditions affect the popularity of incumbent parties, this effect is conditioned by the incumbents' issue ownership of the economy: bad economic conditions may be offset by solid party reputations on the economy, and vice versa. Empirically, Bélanger and Nadeau test their propositions for five Canadian election studies, and the results mostly confirm their expectations.

Taken together, we believe the papers in this special issue offer a rich overview of both the state of the art in issue ownership research, but it also of the challenges ahead. We would like to thank all of the authors for their contributions: their work has pushed our own understanding of issue ownership forward, and we are confident that it will continue to do so in the future. Also, the anonymous reviewers who provided valuable comments deserve our gratitude, as these comments helped improve the papers and we are very appreciative of the time the reviewers invested in this special issue. Finally, we would like to warmly thank the editorial board of *West European Politics*, and especially Wolfgang C. Müller for his support, responsiveness and professional advice in bringing about this issue.

If the special issue makes anything clear, it is that work on issue ownership is far from done. The field faces a number of challenges that we are confident will be overcome by future research. Furthermore, all contributions to this special issue suggest ways in which the research agenda can be broadened theoretically and empirically. Most likely the stream of issue ownership research is about to flow even more broadly and to increase further. We believe that these past years were only the start of issue ownership's renaissance, and hope this special issue will contribute to its further dissemination in the scholarly community.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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