

Long-term Associative Issue Ownership Change**A panel study in Belgium**

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ABSTRACT

Issue ownership has gained a prominent position as one of the key theories to understand how voter's issue perceptions affect their electoral behavior. Yet, whereas the original theory assumed that party reputations were relatively stable, various studies have shown that issue ownership perceptions fluctuate over time. Despite the growing evidence that ownership perceptions are dynamic, we know surprisingly little about the determinants of change, especially at the individual level. This paper develops an individual-level framework to understand how issue ownership perceptions change over time, arguing that mediated party communication is a key driver of change. It also incorporates individual features of voters—most notably their political predispositions—as determinants of changing issue ownership perceptions. We test our model on unique longitudinal panel data from Belgium, spanning a five year period. The results suggest that party communications, government participation, party size and voter's party preferences determine changes in ownership perceptions.

KEYWORDS

Issue ownership, Party communication, Mass media, Belgium, Elections.

Word count: 8.652

INTRODUCTION

The theory of issue ownership goes back to the 1980s (Budge and Farlie 1983), but especially in the last years scholars started to consider parties' issue reputations as determinants of voter and party behavior (for a literature overview, see: Walgrave, Lefevere, and Tresch 2015). Especially in voter research, issue ownership is increasingly used to explain individual vote choices. When a voter considers a party to be owner of an issue of importance for that voter—the party is most competent or most committed to the issue—chances increase that he/she votes for the issue-owning party (see among many other studies: Green and Hobolt 2008).

The original theory of issue ownership, initially developed by Budge and Farlie (1983) and given its name by Petrocik (1996), considered issue ownership as a stable characteristic of parties. Party reputations arose from parties' founding cleavages and were anchored in the interests of parties' core constituencies, and were unlikely to change. According to Petrocik *"perceptions of a party's issue competence probably change very slowly, when they change at all."* (1996, 826). Of course, the founding authors recognized that issue ownership perceptions are not totally frozen. Petrocik, for example, said that on 'performance issues' parties may increase or decrease their reputation by their actions while in office.

Because parties' ownership was considered as a stable trait of parties, the initial work on issue ownership looked at the impact of issue ownership on electoral outcomes and party behavior, but not at the reputations themselves. However, scholars increasingly examine voters' issue ownership perceptions, for example to understand the sources of parties' issue ownership (Stubager and Slothuus 2013; Walgrave and De Swert 2007), but also to assess to what extent the assumption of stable issue ownership holds up to empirical scrutiny. Various studies, mostly in the US and Canada, supported the stability of issue perceptions at the

aggregate level, though these studies already found that issue ownership could in fact change (see for example: Sides 2006; Bélanger 2003; but see: Brasher 2009).

However, some recent studies suggest that issue ownership perceptions are subject to change: Christensen, Dahlberg and Martinsson (2015) showed substantial instability in aggregate issue ownership perceptions in Sweden. Moreover, a variety of studies examined the origins of issue ownership at the *individual* voter level, and also found that short-term factors could affect these perceptions (see for example: Stubager and Slothuus 2013; Dahlberg and Martinsson 2015). Drawing mostly on European evidence and multi-party systems, those studies suggest that issue ownership *does* vary over time. Issue ownership perceptions of voters change, for example, due to exposure to party messages in the mass media (Walgrave, Lefevre, and Nuytemans 2009), due to long-term changes in attention to issues in parties' manifestos (Walgrave and De Swert 2007) or due to the presence of parties in government (De Bruycker and Walgrave 2013).

Yet, despite growing evidence showing that issue ownership varies over time, our understanding of the causes of issue ownership change is severely lacking. A number of studies have examined factors that influence issue ownership perceptions at a single point in time (e.g. Stubager and Slothuus 2013; Walgrave and De Swert 2007), but the only studies that examine actual *changes* in issue ownership over time tend to be aggregate level studies (Bélanger 2003; Christensen, Dahlberg, and Martinsson 2015). These long term studies are crucial because they show that perceptions change, but their cross-sectional nature impedes their ability to sort out causes of issue ownership change, especially at the individual level. The few studies that did look at individual level change use experimental designs, and have shown that media coverage can affect issue ownership perceptions (Dahlberg and Martinsson 2015; Tresch, Lefevre, and Walgrave 2015; Walgrave, Lefevre, and Nuytemans 2009;

Walgrave, Lefevere, and Tresch 2014). However, their experimental nature limits the ability of such studies to develop encompassing models to understand how individual voter's issue ownership perceptions change in the real world. Kleinnijenhuis and Walter (2014) are the only ones to use panel data to track individual level changes in associative issue ownership, but only examine a single election campaign. In short, there are simply no studies looking at long-term change and stability in issue ownership perceptions at the individual level, nor do we know of studies that develop a framework to understand the factors that drive long-term change.

In this paper we investigate shifts in individual voter's issue ownership perceptions over a period of five years. We rely on unique Belgian panel evidence spanning a five-year period (2009-2014). Moreover, we formulate an integrative theory of issue ownership change, specifying a number of mechanisms both on the party- and on the individual level. Our evidence and theoretical framework deals with associative issue ownership (Walgrave, Lefevere, and Tresch 2012): extant work on change in issue ownership has almost exclusively focused on competence issue ownership—parties' perceived ability to 'handle' an issue. Associative issue ownership is generally considered as more stable. In fact, the single study examining media impact on associative issue ownership perceptions found that these perceptions were resistant to short term media effects (Tresch, Lefevere, and Walgrave 2015), whereas competence perceptions shifted in response to media content in a similar experimental design (Walgrave, Lefevere, and Nuytemans 2009). Thus, by looking at the more stable dimension of issue ownership, we aim to take a conservative test of our issue ownership change model.

SOURCES OF ASSOCIATIVE ISSUE OWNERSHIP CHANGE

This study sets out to examine issue ownership change, but it should be acknowledged that issue ownership is a multidimensional phenomenon. Two dimensions have been present from the very beginning in the initial conceptualization by Budge and Farlie (1983) and Petrocik (1996). On the one hand, there is what Walgrave and colleagues (2012) call ‘competence’ issue ownership, being a party’s reputation of being able to handle an issue. On the other hand, ‘associative’ issue ownership refers to the commitment of a party regarding an issue. As a consequence of continued commitment to the issue, the party becomes cognitively *associated* with the issue in the voter’s mind. While the founding scholars implicitly provided a two-dimensional conceptualization of issue ownership, it has for a long time predominantly been measured via one-dimensional measures that only tap the competence dimension and neglect the associative dimension. Recently a new stream of work has employed associative measures of issue ownership (see for example: van der Brug 2004; Aalberg and Jenssen 2007; Walgrave, Lefevere, and Tresch 2012; Meyer and Müller 2013; Lachat 2014). This study deals with associative issue ownership, a party’s reputation of caring for and being committed to an issue.

Walgrave et al. (2012) argued that associative issue ownership should be (even) more stable than competence issue ownership. While parties’ reputations of dealing with issues *well* (competence) are variable and depend on performance and thus on the context (e.g. economic crises or other uncontrollable set-backs), their reputation for being committed to an issue (association) should be more stable as it is only over longer periods of time that parties can show continued care for an issue. Hence, by examining associative issue ownership we examine whether the dimension that should be most stable actually is.

A key driver of change in associative issue ownership perceptions, we argue, is party communication. In contrast to showing competence—which is more context-dependent—parties have greater control over whether they show commitment on an issue or not (Tresch, Lefevre, and Walgrave 2015). Put simply: if a party talks a lot about an issue, it will gain (or keep) associative issue ownership over it (Walgrave and De Swert 2007). But talking about an issue a lot may not suffice to gain a reputation of competence. Hence, in line with earlier aggregate-level studies (see for instance: Brasher 2009; Walgrave and De Swert 2007) and individual-level studies (see for instance: Walgrave, Lefevre, and Nuytemans 2009; Dahlberg and Martinsson 2015), the basic assumption of this study is that *party communication on issues drives associative issue ownership change*.

Yet, not all parties have an equal chance of reaching the public with their issue communication to the same extent and equally on all issues. Parties face unequal access to the mass media in general and regarding specific issues in particular (Hayes 2008). This affects their reputation for being committed to an issue (for a very similar argument about the role of party communication for issue ownership dynamics, see: Brasher 2009). Additionally, not all voters are equally sensitive to party communication as relayed via the mass media and their sensitivity varies across issues. So, we theorize that there are party-level mechanisms leading to issue ownership changes as well as voter-level mechanisms.

A first party-related factor that we expect to influence associative issue ownership change is *government participation*. Petrocik (1996, 827) hinted at this in relation to the competence dimension when he spoke about ‘performance issues’: issues that temporarily shift competence ownership because of particularly good or, more likely, bad performance of the incumbent party: “... *this irrefutable demonstration that the incumbent party cannot handle the job.*” So, for competence ownership government participation can cause both in-

and decreases in ownership. Yet, for associative issue ownership the expectation about the precise direction of the government effect is less straightforward. We know from a host of studies that government parties, compared to opposition parties, get more media attention, and thus more opportunities to talk in the media about almost any issue they want to talk about (see for example: Bennett 1990; Schoenbach, De Ridder, and Lauf 2001). Thus, parties in government get more chances to show their commitment on an issue, as they hold a dominant media position over almost all issues. Moreover, as they have the ability to initiate policy on the issue, their actions are greater evidence of commitment compared to the opposition's work, which oftentimes can only react verbally to government initiatives. A case in point here is the study of Debruycker and Walgrave (2013) in Belgium showing that the government parties got a hold of a new issue: the financial crisis. A similar argument about government participation and its effect on competence issue ownership as well was tested by Green and Jennings (2012) in the UK finding that government parties are more than opposition parties able to demonstrate commitment regarding specific issues. Though government parties have more capacity to get their issue stances and actions into the news if they want, their media standing also gives them the capacity to stay *out* of the news if they do not want to address a specific issue. In other words, government parties can choose to show commitment on an issue by talking or they can do just the opposite by not talking about the issue. Indeed, as an association can be positively or negatively laden it may be in government parties' interest to avoid association with issues that have a negative connotation or that are in crisis (e.g. when unemployment is soaring). As a result, there may be both a positive *and* a negative effect of government participation on associative issue ownership. In sum, due to the higher issue selectivity of a government party's visibility government participation not only potentially leads to a positive effect but also to a negative effect. Hence, our first hypothesis:

Voters switch issue ownership perceptions more with regard to a party that participates in government (H1).

Most longitudinal work on issue ownership has been undertaken in countries with one party in government (US, Canada, UK). Government responsibility is clear in those cases, and falls on the shoulders of the sole government party. Yet, in coalition governments it is less clear which party bears responsibility for the government's dealings with a specific issue (see for a similar argument the extensive literature about the "clarity of responsibility", e.g.: Powell and Whitten 1993; Hobolt, Tilley, and Banducci 2013). That is why we suggest the specific ministerial portfolio possessed (or not) by a specific governing party to play a role. Parties can gain an issue reputation by having a minister with the formal competence to deal with the issue. Note that, in contrast to government parties that can win or lose issue ownership, we do not believe parties are more likely to lose issue ownership when having the minister dealing with it. The responsible minister is able, but at the same time also obliged, to reach out to the public via the mass media to talk about the issues under his/her care. If he or she does not take the initiative the media will if the issue becomes more salient or problematic. So, this should, in the long-term, lead to an identification of that minister, and thus indirectly his/her party, with the issue¹. Our argument strongly resembles Brasher's (2009, 73) in her longitudinal study of issue ownership in the US. Sometimes, due to control of a government institution, parties have, what she calls, an '*institutional platform*' to communicate intensely about a particular issue. We apply this institutional communication logic to minister portfolios: by virtue of holding the formal competence to guide policy on an issue, a party can increase its reputation on an issue. *Voters switch issue ownership perceptions more towards the party that holds the ministerial portfolio relevant to the issue (H2).*

Apart from government participation and ministerial portfolios, the literature suggests a third party-level cause of issue ownership change, being parties' electoral strength. The electoral size of a party determines its political relevance, and thus its media access (Hopmann et al. 2010). Hence, larger parties should have more success in communicating their commitment on any issue, as they have more media appearances to do so. For Canada, Bélanger (2003) showed that the entry of two new parties in the early 1990s shook ownership of the three existing parties: the electoral success of parties gives them media legitimacy, enabling them to communicate their commitment towards particular issues. The causality can of course be turned upside down as new parties are successful exactly *because* they successfully claim issues to be their own. But given that media access is critical to establish issue reputations in the first place (Walgrave, Lefevere and Nuytemans, 2009), and the fact that party size has been shown to affect parties' media access, we expect that *Voters switch issue ownership perceptions more towards a party that increases its electoral size* (H3).

In addition to the three party-level explanations, two mechanisms at the voter-level could also affect issue ownership. The underlying mechanism leading to issue ownership change is party communication: our three party-level expectations all build on this logic. We can also apply this reasoning to individual voters. In an age of mediated politics, most voters acquire their political information almost exclusively through the media (Graber 2004). Consequently, the media affect the development and maintenance of issue reputations among voters: parties may stress issues in their manifestos or other communication, but it is only through media coverage that their issue emphases reach the general public (Walgrave and De Swert 2007). This is corroborated by growing evidence on the role of media exposure for issue ownership perceptions (Walgrave, Lefevere, and Nuytemans 2009; Tresch, Lefevere, and Walgrave 2015; Dahlberg and Martinsson 2015). So, people with higher levels of media

exposure should display more issue ownership instability than voters less exposed to news media coverage (Kleinnijenhuis and Walter 2014). Contrary to the linear expectation formulated above, Zaller's (1996) work suggests that especially the group with medium exposure to media tends to have most attitude changes: this group is exposed to media, but has less crystallized prior attitudes compared to the highly exposed group. That said, Kleinnijenhuis and Walter (2014) found a linear effect of exposure on short term change in issue ownership, so we maintain our expectation that: *Voters who are frequently exposed to news coverage switch issue ownership perceptions more often* (H4).

Still at the individual level, party preference could also affect voters' tendency to assign issue ownership to a different party over time. More particularly, we expect that when voters consider another party than their most preferred party as the owner of an issue, they are likely to switch ownership over time towards their most preferred party. The role of partisanship in competence issue ownership has been extensively documented (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Wagner and Zeglovits 2014). The strong connection between party preference and issue ownership has even led to a debate about the potential endogeneity of competence issue ownership and party preference (Van Der Brug 2015). We expect party preferences to also affect changes in associative issue ownership. Associative issue ownership arises out of a party's history of attention to an issue (Walgrave, Lefevre, and Tresch 2012), but party attention only results in a reputation amongst voters if they actually notice that the party attends to the issue. An extensive literature on partisan selective exposure suggests that voters are more likely to expose themselves to parties they already prefer (Garrett 2009; Stroud 2010; Lefevre, Tresch, and Walgrave 2015). As such, though voters may ascribe a reputation to any party, over time the most preferred party will enjoy an advantage as it has an easier time showing itself attending to any issue. It may even be possible that voters switch

issue ownership perceptions to the party they prefer without them being exposed to this party's message. Indeed, the simple mechanism of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957) may make that voters adapt their perception of the party that is most committed to an issue towards the party they like best. Both the information exposure and cognitive dissonance mechanisms lead to the same expectation: *Voters switch issue ownership perceptions more towards the party they prefer* (H5).

DATA AND METHODS

We draw on data collected in Belgium, a small European democracy with a proportional electoral system and a fragmented party system. Belgium is a strongly federalized country with two main regions, Dutch-speaking Flanders and Francophone Wallonia. The two electoral arenas are entirely separate (Deschouwer 2009). Still, due to the limited number of observations (we dispose of only 65 unique party-issue combinations), and since it would become even smaller if we run separate analyses for the two regions, we will consider Belgium as one case and will use the separate regional analyses as a robustness test of which the results are presented in appendix.

Concretely, we rely on the Belgian Election Panel (BEP) questioning the same sample of voters twice over the course of five years (2009-2014) (Dassonneville et al. 2014). This panel is, to our knowledge, the first to survey voters' issue ownership perceptions over an extended period of time. In total, the BEP data cover five waves, three fielded in 2009 (two pre- and one post-electoral), and two in 2014 (one pre- and one post-electoral). The issue ownership measures were asked in both post-electoral waves. The initial sample in 2009 was drawn from the population register and consisted of 4,863 citizens of at least 18 years old. The initial sample of successfully interviewed respondents (CAPI) in the first wave was 2,331, or a

response rate of 48.3%. In 2014, the entire original sample, including respondents that did not end up participating in 2009, was again contacted for the pre-electoral wave using a pen-and-paper survey. After removing respondents who passed away or emigrated, the initial sample in 2014 consisted of 4,448 valid addresses. A total of 1,542 respondents participated in the first 2014 wave (34.4%) and 707 also participated in the second 2014 wave, which used telephone interviewing (15.8%). Non-response between the two 2014 waves was substantial, in part because of respondent's refusal to provide a (cell)phone number. As not all of those respondents participated in 2009 some needed to be removed. In the end, our final sample consists of 440 voters, which equals a response rate of 9%. As such, non-response is substantial—a fact almost unavoidable in long-term panel surveys. The final wave has an overrepresentation of men and younger voters especially, and non-response in the Walloon region was higher (Dassonneville et al., 2014). Therefore, we have opted to use weights that adjust the overall distribution of age, gender, and voting preference so it matches the voting aged population in both regions.

Associative issue ownership was measured with the following question: *“When you think of the following issues, which party do you spontaneously think about?”* Respondents got a randomized list of parties and could then pick one, or indicate that all parties were equal, indicate that no party came to mind, or that they did not know. Note that this type of measure forces respondents to choose a single party as the issue owner. In our opinion, this measure most closely matches the original concept of issue ownership, which entails that a party owns an issue not by having ‘an’ association to an issue, but having the *strongest* association. However, our measure might overestimate the extent to which issue ownership changes: if a respondent considers both party A and B to have a strong association, but ends up picking A at time T and B at time T+1, this would count as a change, though in reality the respondent's

assessment of the two parties' association to the issue might not have changed much. Associative issue ownership was assessed for five issues in both 2009 and 2014: crime, immigration, environment, economic crisis and unemployment. These five issues were selected because they varied with regard to the level of ownership and the parties that hold ownership: on some issues right-wing parties own the issue, on others left-wing parties. Moreover, the selection of issues includes both valence (environment, economic crisis, unemployment and crime) as positional issues (immigration).

We use a multivariate multinomial regression analysis on a dataset with unique respondent-party-issue combinations as the units of analysis. Our dependent variable, *issue ownership change*, is categorical and can take four values: being perceived as a non-owner in 2009 and 2014 (remain non-owner), a non-owner in 2009 but an owner in 2014 (gaining ownership), an owner in 2009 but a non-owner in 2014 (losing ownership), and an owner in 2009 and 2014 (maintaining ownership). We set 'remain non-owner' as the baseline category. The reason for this is two-fold: first, not being the owner is the default situation: most parties are non-owners of most issues. The three other situations—winning, losing or keeping ownership—are the interesting deviations from the normal situation we are interested in. Secondly, and because of reason 1, this is by far the largest group of cases in the dataset, and it is customary to take the largest category as the baseline. This is especially important given our limited amount of respondents, as taking the largest category as the baseline maximizes the amount of cases used in the pairwise comparisons. As most of our independent variables vary across parties and issues, we use clustered standard errors for each unique party-issue combination (N=65) to make sure we obtain reliable estimates. Moreover, we add issue dummies to the model as controls, to take out systematic variance between the issues. We

run an aggregated Belgian model, and present separate Walloon and Flemish models as robustness tests in appendix.

The first party-level variable is *Government*, used to test Hypothesis 1, takes a value of 0 for all party-issue combinations where the party was in opposition at the federal level between 2009 and 2014, and 1 for parties in government.

Minister (Hypothesis 2) takes a value of 1 for those party-issue combinations where the party had the ministerial portfolio for that issue.

Party Size Change, used to test Hypothesis 3, contains the change in the number of regional parliamentary seats held by that party comparing the situation after the 2009 and 2014 regional elections.

At the voter level, *News Exposure* taps exposure to television news (Hypothesis 4). It was measured using the following question: “*Could you indicate, for each of the following media, how often you have watched or read them in the past two weeks?*”. We take the score for the item “*Watched a television news broadcast*”, which was measured on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (“*Never*”) to 6 (“*Every day*”). As this was measured in both 2009 and 2014, we take the mean of both measures, and rescale it so it ranges from 0 to 1. Of all mass media, television news is still the most common way in which citizens get informed about politics (De Vreese, 2013).

Finally, at the voter level, *Party Preference* (Hypothesis 5) was measured in the first wave of 2014 using the following question: “*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*”.

We include a number of control variables, all of which were measured in the first wave of 2009. We add *Age*, *Gender* (Female), *Education*, measured by asking respondents “*What is*

the highest level of education you have achieved?". Respondents could pick from 10 different levels of education, but for ease of interpretation this was recoded into a three category variable: no or lower education (1), finished high school (2, the reference category), higher education (3). *Political Sophistication* was measured by asking respondents five factual knowledge questionsⁱⁱ. Correct answers were scored 1, incorrect answers 0. The answers on the five questions were tallied, resulting in a sum scale ranging from 0-5. Finally, we add dichotomous variables for each issue (with environment as the reference) to control for systematic differences between the issues. In Appendix (Table A1) we present descriptive statistics for all variables used in this study.

RESULTS

Before testing our model of associative issue ownership change, we first examine how much voters' associative issue ownership perceptions actually shifted over the course of a five year period. The answer seems to be: quite a lot. **Table 1** lists both aggregate and individual level changes in issue ownership perceptions. For the aggregate changes, we calculate the absolute differences between parties' ownership percentages in 2009 and 2014, and divide this by two (to avoid counting shifts back and forth twice). The resulting aggregate issue ownership volatility scores are reported in the first two columns. Next to these aggregate volatility scores, we present the evidence about individual level changes. Columns three and four display the percentage of respondents changing their answer between 2009 and 2014. Columns five and six, finally, present the same percentage, except here we do not count switches to and from the 'other party/don't know'-category as changes.

[Table 1 around here]

As expected, the table suggests that aggregate-level volatility is a good deal lower than individual-level volatility: the figures in the two first columns are mostly much smaller than those in the four last columns. For example, while we observe only a 3% aggregate change in issue ownership of Environment in Flanders, underneath are 17% of voters who declare to have shifted to another party as the owner of this issue (or to not knowing). This basically means that some voters shift their issue ownership perception from party A to party B but that some other voters do the exact opposite movement, which leads to compensation on the aggregate level with frequent changes on the underlying, individual level. On average, individual volatility is more than twice as large as aggregate volatility. Across all issues and voters, on average *over half* of the respondents (57% in Flanders and 50% in Wallonia) consider another party (or no party) as owning the issue in 2014 compared to 2009. Although our measure gauging the single most associated party may increase reported volatility to some extent, we believe these are strikingly high figures, especially because associative issue ownership was considered to be the more stable dimension. In sum, we find that individual voters' associative ownership perceptions do change frequently.

Again, for some issues individual volatility is less sizeable than for others. This is the case for Environment for which ownership hardly changes. Most volatility on the individual level is found for the issues of Crime & Justice and Immigration. In Flanders, almost three fourths (73%) of the voters switched opinion on who they consider to own Crime & Justice; in Wallonia this is the case for Immigration (71%). Unemployment and the Economic Crisis score in between, with still high levels of individual volatility. Finally, looking at all switches, so also switches to smaller parties and to 'not knowing', it seems to be the case that there is more individual issue ownership volatility in Flanders compared to Wallonia.

The theoretical argument this study builds upon is that parties can gain issue ownership by communicating about an issue, and lose ownership because others talk more about an issue. It is via the mass media that these party communications reach the public at large. In fact, our three hypotheses at the party level in essence claim that government participation (H1), ministerships (H2) and party size (H3) lead to media attention for the party and thus, indirectly and via media attention, to issue ownership change. We did not present a media attention hypothesis, though, as we do not have media data at our disposal for both the Dutch- and French-speaking parts of the country. Consequently, we cannot test this mediation effect. Yet, we do have media attention data for the Flemish mediaⁱⁱⁱ. We do find that this party-issue-visibility-in-the-media variable (for descriptives, see online appendix 1) is significantly correlated with the three independent variables that we do test here. The size of the coefficient is .55 for the correlation with government participation, .55 for the correlation with ministership, and .25 for the correlation with party size change. Though our small N at the party-issue level is a limiting factor, these correlations suggest that there is a potential for media attention to play a mediating role in the effects we analyze below, but we are in no position to make strong claims about it as we lack the second 'leg' of the mediation.

The actual test of the five hypotheses is offered in **Table 2**, which presents the probability changes caused by the independent variables of interest, for each of the outcomes of the dependent variable. These probabilities are based upon the estimates obtained by the multinomial regression model (Appendix, Table A2), which regresses the four-category dependent variable - remaining a non-owner, gaining ownership, losing ownership, or remaining the owner of an issue – on the variables of interest and control variables. Because the coefficients of a multinomial model are hard to interpret, we present the model results in appendix, and focus here on the probability changes, as these allow us to assess the

substantive impact of the independent variables. As noted in the methods, we set the reference category as 'remaining non-owner', as this is by far the most common outcome. The first row of figures in Table 2 indeed shows that this outcome is by far the most likely, with an 88% predicted baseline probability. Note that the number of observations on the party-issue level is small (N=65) while it is large on the voter-issue-party level (N=13,820).

[Table 2 around here]

Being part of the government affects issue ownership perception change. A party being part of government significantly increases its chance both to gain (+3%) and to lose (+7%) ownership of an issue. This confirms H1. Government parties can claim issues via their increased media access but they can be selective and can distance themselves from an issue by not talking about it as well. In fact, the probability changes are higher for losing ownership which suggests that, in this particular Belgian case, the government parties' loss of ownership was more outspoken than their wins. This is in line with Petrocik's (1996) argument that incumbents stand to gain or lose, more than non-incumbents, ownership of performance issues. The probability changes are modest, but occur across all parties and issues.

Conversely, having a cabinet minister dealing with an issue significantly increases the issue ownership of the minister's party (3% increased probability) but it exerts no significant effect on losing or maintaining ownership. Ministers do talk extensively (and only) about the issues falling under their competences and this identification with the issue spills over to their party. H2 gets confirmation, though again we see only a modest effect across parties and issues. Note that the minister and government variables are somewhat correlated (.37), which might bias the estimates. However, we tested whether the effects held when we only included one of the two variables and this was indeed the case.

The change in the size of a party matters as well. Parties that grow in size gain more ownership of issues compared to parties that remain on the same level or shrinking. The data offer straightforward support for our expectation formulated in H3. The marginal effect's size is relatively small – 2% probability shift – but this is calculated over a one-unit change, which is the effect of a 1% increase in vote share. As vote shares can oftentimes change by a multitude of this, the impact on ownership can be substantial. Note that the party size change effect occurs independently of, and controlling for, a voter's individual preference for a party (see below). The mechanism we suggested is that larger parties get more attention in the media and therefore have more chances to talk about any issue. As a consequence, larger parties become more affiliated with all issues.

We now turn to the two individual-level hypotheses. The first was that people who are more exposed to media coverage—coverage via which parties communicate their commitment to issues—would be more affected by the increased exposure and switch issue ownership perceptions more often than people who are less exposed to the news (H4). One can see in Table 2 that both coefficients of interest—for gaining and for losing ownership—are positive and substantial: 3% and 4% shifts, respectively. This is as expected and suggests that increasing levels of exposure to media coverage do lead to a greater propensity to switch ownership. Interestingly, we also find a large drop (7%) in the probability that the voter indicates the party as a non-owner in both years. We interpret this as evidence that exposed voters are more likely to attribute ownership to parties over time, presumably as they become (more) acquainted with the parties' issue attention.

Our fifth hypothesis gets confirmation from the evidence. When people switch their issue ownership perception from one party to another, they mostly switch towards their preferred party (H5). So, voters tend to bring their issue ownership perceptions in line with

their party allegiance suggesting that party preference is as much a cause as it is a consequence of issue ownership. This further fuels the worries that have arisen about the potential endogeneity of issue ownership perceptions. Moreover, our analysis concerns associative issue ownership, which was thought to be less correlated to party preferences. Issue ownership perceptions are not only drivers of the vote as they have traditionally been considered but also the *consequence* of party preference.

We performed a number of robustness tests to see whether these results hold when splitting up the data. First, we ran separate Flemish and Walloon models with strongly reduced numbers of observations on the party-issue level (N=40 in Flanders and N=25 in Wallonia). We present these models in Appendix (Tables A3 and A4). As one can see, results are largely the same in both regions. Not all coefficients are significant—no surprise with such a small number of observations—but they point to similar mechanisms in both regions.

Second, we ran the multinomial model reported in Table 2 for each issue separately. The summary statistics of those models can be found in Appendix 3. Apart from the issue of Environment, an issue that hardly showed any change in ownership, results are similar for all issues. Government participation leads to more winning and losing ownership, ministerships increase issue ownership change —though in contrast to the aggregate analyses we find significant effects on losing ownership for the economy and unemployment. Finally, growing parties tend to see their issue ownership increasing.

CONCLUSION

Issue ownership perceptions are increasingly considered to be important determinants of electoral outcomes (Walgrave et al., 2015). Yet, it is only in recent years that researchers have begun examining the sources of issue ownership perceptions, and the extent to which these

perceptions are stable or variable over time (Christensen et al., 2014). This point is important, as one of the assumptions underlying issue ownership theory is that their issue ownership is a stable feature of parties. Yet, there is mounting evidence that issue perceptions do change over time. However, extant work on issue ownership change either examined aggregate change over a longer period of time (Christensen et al., 2014) or was only able to examine change at the individual level over short periods of time (Kleinnijenhuis & Walter, 2014; Walgrave et al., 2009). Moreover, the existing research on issue ownership change over prolonged periods of time was restricted to competence issue ownership, whereas no long term studies exist on associative issue ownership change.

This study was the first to examine how perceptions of associative issue ownership shifted over an extensive time period *at the individual level*. Using Belgian panel survey data spanning a five year period (2009-2014), we examined to what extent associative issue ownership was susceptible to change among the same voters. Moreover, we formulated a theory of issue ownership change and argued that it is affected by mechanisms at the party level and at the individual level. Following prior findings, the key mechanism in our model is parties' attention to issues in their own communication. The more voters are confronted with parties talking about an issue, the more they attribute ownership of that issue to that party. Not all parties have equivalent opportunities to reach voters, and not all voters are similarly sensitive to parties' issue messages. By and large, our theory of party communication as a driver of issue ownership change got supported by the available empirical evidence. Voters get confronted with parties talking about issues mostly through the mass media (Graber 2004). If and when they are confronted with parties' issue communication, voters shift their ownership perceptions and start to associate these parties with these issues. Government participation leads to more media access, but it can affect issue ownership both positively and

negatively. In fact, in the Belgian case under study, we found government participation to decrease parties' associative issue ownerships more. Ministerial portfolios, a novel factor typical for coalition government systems, had a sizeable and positive effect on issue ownership change: when parties hold the ministerial portfolio on an issue, they gain ownership over the issue. Finally, we hypothesized that growing parties would gain ownership over issues compared to stable or shrinking parties, as they would have an easier time getting media access. The results confirmed that winning parties gained issue ownership over the five year period under investigation. No extant work ever tested factors at the individual level but we examined two factors at the voter level. We did find that people who are more exposed to news have less stable issue ownership perceptions: they are confronted with more party issue communication and thus update their issue ownership perceptions more. Finally, voters tend to bring their ownership perceptions in line with their party preference. By incorporating party and voter factors in one model, we presented an integrated framework of individuals' issue ownership change. The effects we found were modest in size, and corresponded to probability changes of 2 to 5 percent. Yet, it is important to note that these changes occurred across parties and issues, and therefore present substantially important effects: for example, a party that gains electorally sees its chances of grasping ownership on issues increase across the board.

Can we generalize our findings, which are based on one country and only cover a single electoral cycle? Our study's generic character is disputable but the *mechanisms* of change we presented should be transferable to other contexts. The key driver of issue ownership change in our model—parties' own communication on issues (mediated by the news media)—has been shown to cause short term shifts in issue ownership perceptions in various experimental studies (e.g. Walgrave et al., 2009; Tresch et al., 2015; Martinsson et al., 2015). Moreover, we

performed several robustness tests and our results seemed to hold the track in two separate party systems (Flanders and Wallonia) and for most issues separately. Added to that, the case of Belgium with a proportional voting rule and a multi-party system is in many respects more typical than the majoritarian systems that have inspired much of the earlier work on issue ownership. In other words, it is unlikely that issue ownership perceptions in other countries would *not* be driven, at least partly, by a party's own communication and issue emphases. Parties may be more selective, or not, in their mentioning of issues when they communicate, they may be more or less dependable on the news media to connect to the public, the government bonus in media access may differ across countries, ministers may not monopolize the news on issues to the same extent as they do in Belgium, but similar mechanisms of winning and losing ownership are most probably in effect in other countries as well. Of course, acquiring issue ownership probably is not only a matter of communication, it most likely is affected by parties' actual and visible performance. And since this performance is more or less visible in different systems the effect of party communication may also vary across countries.

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FIGURES AND TABLES*Table 1: Issue ownership volatility on the aggregate and the individual level (%)*

Issue	Aggregate Volatility		Individual Volatility (all)		Individual Volatility (interparty)	
	Flanders	Wallonia	Flanders	Wallonia	Flanders	Wallonia
<i>Environment</i>	3	10	17	15	7	11
<i>Immigration</i>	32	33	66	71	47	51
<i>Crime & Justice</i>	38	14	73	60	27	53
<i>Unemployment</i>	29	12	63	46	23	46
<i>Economic Crisis</i>	28	27	67	58	36	44

Table 3: Marginal effect of each independent variable on the probability of each outcome. Table entries are probabilities (e.g. 0.01 means 1% probability), with standard errors in parentheses.

	Remaining Non-Owner	Gaining Ownership	Losing Ownership	Maintaining Ownership
Base probability ¹	0.88 (.11)	0.01 (.00)	0.01 (.01)	0.10 (.10)
Marginal Effect of... ²				
- Government (H1)	-0.09 (.05)	0.03 (.01)**	0.07 (.01)***	-0.01 (.04)
- Minister (H2)	-0.06 (.06)	0.03 (.01)***	0.00 (.01)	0.02 (.04)
- Party Size Change (H3)	0.01 (.00)	0.02 (.01)*	-0.00 (.00)	-0.00 (.00)
- News Exposure (H4)	-0.07 (.01)***	0.03 (.01)***	0.04 (.01)***	0.01 (.01)
- Party Preference (H5)	-0.08 (.02)***	0.03 (.01)***	-0.00 (.01)	0.04 (.01)***

Notes: *** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05

¹ The base probability for each outcome is calculated by setting all independent variables to their mean or median value, and then predicting the probability of each outcome.

² The marginal effect of each independent variable represents the probability change that results from a one-unit change in the independent variable. All other independent variables are kept at their mean or median value.

Appendix 1 (online)*Table A1: Descriptive statistics of variables included in the analysis*

Variable	Mean	SD	%
<i>Issue Ownership Change</i>			
- Remaining non-owner			79,9%
- Gaining ownership			7,2%
- Losing ownership			7,0%
- Maintaining ownership			5,9%
<i>Party Level</i>			
- Government (H1)	0.43	0.50	
- Minister (H2)	0.17	0.38	
- Party Size Change (H3)	1,13	11,81	
<i>Voter Level variables</i>			
- News Exposure (H4)	0.83	0.21	
- Party Preference (H5)	4.98	2.34	
<i>Control variables</i>			
- Age	53.99	15.86	
- Gender			
o Male			58.3
o Female			41.7
- Education			
o No or lower			16.1
o Finished High school			39.2
o Higher Education			44.7
- Political Sophistication	2.95	1.54	
- Party Issue Visibility in Media	16,0	9.37	

Table A2: Multinomial regression predicting different types of associative issue ownership switches for all voters (reference: remaining non-owner).

Variable	Gaining ownership		Losing ownership		Maintaining ownership	
	Coeff	Std.Err	Coeff	Std.Err	Coeff	Std.Err
<i>Party level</i>						
Government (H1)	0.85*	(0.39)	1.52***	(0.33)	-0.03	(0.75)
Minister (H2)	0.85***	(0.26)	0.12	(0.45)	0.50	(0.84)
Party Size Change (H3)	0.08***	(0.02)	-0.06+	(0.03)	-0.02	(0.03)
<i>Voter level</i>						
News Exposure (H4)	0.54*	(0.24)	0.92***	(0.25)	0.24	(0.23)
Party Preference (H5)	0.87***	(0.15)	0.08	(0.16)	0.87***	(0.15)
<i>Controls</i>						
Gender	0.16	(0.10)	0.08	(0.09)	-0.00	(0.07)
Age	-0.00	(0.00)	-0.00	(0.00)	0.01**	(0.00)
Education (ref: high school)						
- No or lower education	0.25	(0.15)	0.18	(0.15)	-0.10	(0.15)
- Higher education	0.10	(0.11)	0.02	(0.08)	0.17*	(0.08)
Political sophistication	-0.02	(0.05)	-0.01	(0.04)	0.02	(0.04)
<i>Issue dummies (ref: Environment.)</i>						
Crime	1.49*	(0.62)	1.35*	(0.63)	-1.13	(0.93)
Economy	1.30*	(0.63)	1.30*	(0.66)	-0.90	(0.98)
Unemployment	1.31*	(0.60)	1.16+	(0.66)	-0.67	(1.06)
Immigration	1.29*	(0.61)	1.34*	(0.66)	-0.97	(1.00)
Intercept	3.00	(7.79)	-2.02	(7.81)	-18.58**	(5.89)
Pseudo R ²	0.09					
N	13,820					

Note: Clustered standard errors for 65 issue-party clusters in parentheses. *** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, + p<.10

Table A3: Multinomial regression predicting different types of vote switches for Flemish voters (reference: remaining non-owner).

Variable	Gaining ownership		Losing ownership		Maintaining ownership	
	Coeff	Std. Err	Coeff	Std. Err	Coeff	Std. Err
<i>Party level</i>						
Government (H1)	0.27	(0.54)	1.42**	(0.48)	-1.05	(1.04)
Minister (H2)	1.28***	(0.33)	0.41	(0.51)	1.58	(1.12)
Party Size Change (H3)	0.07***	(0.02)	-0.08+	(0.05)	-0.02	(0.03)
<i>Voter level</i>						
News Exposure (H4)	0.49	(0.30)	0.71*	(0.33)	0.36	(0.30)
Party Preference (H5)	0.85***	(0.22)	0.03	(0.23)	1.15***	(0.21)
<i>Controls</i>						
Gender	0.11	(0.12)	0.09	(0.09)	-0.09	(0.10)
Age	-0.00	(0.00)	-0.00	(0.01)	0.01**	(0.00)
Education (ref: high school)						
- No or lower education	-0.04	(0.17)	-0.04	(0.17)	-0.24	(0.16)
- Higher education	0.02	(0.13)	0.06	(0.09)	0.03	(0.08)
Political sophistication	-0.04	(0.05)	0.01	(0.02)	0.05	(0.03)
<i>Issue dummies (ref: Envir.)</i>						
Crime	1.63+	(0.86)	1.71*	(0.86)	-1.16	(1.30)
Economy	1.32	(0.84)	1.54+	(0.87)	-1.29	(1.30)
Unemployment	1.50+	(0.83)	1.54+	(0.86)	-0.89	(1.40)
Immigration	1.49+	(0.85)	1.52	(0.93)	-0.73	(1.37)
Intercept	1.49	(9.47)	-3.31	(10.60)	-18.15**	(5.57)
Pseudo R ²	0,11					
N	9,920					

Note: Clustered standard errors for 40 issue-party clusters in parentheses. *** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, + p<.10.

Table A4: Multinomial regression predicting different types of vote switches for Walloon voters (reference: remaining non-owner).

Variable	Gaining ownership		Losing ownership		Maintaining ownership	
	Coeff	Std. Err	Coeff	Std. Err	Coeff	Std. Err
<i>Party level</i>						
Government (H1)	1.95**	(0.75)	1.47**	(0.56)	1.35	(0.97)
Minister (H2) ¹						
Party Size Change (H3)	0.03	(0.06)	-0.04	(0.07)	-0.14	(0.12)
<i>Voter level</i>						
News Exposure (H4)	0.27	(0.37)	0.80*	(0.40)	0.11	(0.23)
Party Preference (H5)	1.02***	(0.18)	0.05	(0.21)	0.42***	(0.11)
<i>Controls</i>						
Gender	0.20	(0.17)	-0.04	(0.16)	0.01	(0.09)
Age	-0.01	(0.01)	-0.01	(0.01)	0.01+	(0.01)
Education (ref: high school)						
- No or lower education	0.85***	(0.17)	0.42*	(0.20)	-0.02	(0.24)
- Higher education	0.30	(0.19)	-0.09	(0.15)	0.27*	(0.11)
Political sophistication	0.00	(0.07)	-0.03	(0.07)	0.05	(0.06)
<i>Issue dummies (ref: Envir.)</i>						
Crime	1.25	(0.83)	0.87	(0.85)	-1.11	(1.29)
Economy	1.22	(0.98)	0.94	(1.07)	-0.57	(1.47)
Unemployment	0.91	(0.83)	0.66	(1.10)	-0.43	(1.55)
Immigration	0.92	(0.78)	1.14	(0.84)	-1.49	(1.21)
Intercept	6.43	(16.91)	7.28	(11.63)	-23.90+	(12.40)
Pseudo R ²	0,09					
N	3,900					

Note: Clustered standard errors for 25 issue-party clusters in parentheses. *** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, + p<.10.

¹As all ministerial posts for the five issues were attributed to the Flemish parties in government, we cannot include the minister dummy in the Walloon model.

Table A5: Coefficients for per-issue models, for each of the party-level variables (Note that we only include respondent-level characteristics and a single party-level variable in each model, as the lower N does not allow estimating the models with the three party-level variables).

Government (H1)

Issue	Gaining		Losing		Maintaining	
	Coeff	Std. Err	Coeff	Std. Err	Coeff	Std. Err
Environment	-0.75	0.72	-0.13	0.76	-5.37***	1.24
Crime	0.70	0.63	1.06+	0.62	0.67	0.79
Economy	1.19*	0.59	2.35***	0.66	2.98**	0.88
Unemployment	0.94	0.66	2.29**	0.81	3.48**	1.04
Immigration	0.25	0.47	0.72	0.59	-0.18	0.89

Minister (H2)

Issue	Gaining		Losing		Maintaining	
	Coeff	Std. Err	Coeff	Std. Err	Coeff	Std. Err
Environment	-0.31	0.40	0.15	0.45	-3.17***	0.80
Crime	0.91*	0.37	0.14	0.35	0.43	0.45
Economy	0.51	0.40	1.25+	0.68	0.52	0.74
Unemployment	2.02*	0.40	2.67***	0.41	3.28***	0.80
Immigration	1.11***	0.27	0.22	0.35	0.58	0.62

Party Size Change (H3)

Issue	Gaining		Losing		Maintaining	
	Coeff	Std. Err	Coeff	Std. Err	Coeff	Std. Err
Environment	-0.00	0.03	-0.02	0.05	-0.03	0.07
Crime	0.07**	0.02	-0.06+	0.03	-0.07	0.08
Economy	0.07***	0.01	0.01	0.03	0.04	0.03
Unemployment	0.08***	0.01	-0.00	0.03	0.02	0.03
Immigration	0.05*	0.02	-0.08+	0.05	-0.19**	0.07

*** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, + p<.10.

ⁱ Long term in this context means the duration of a legislative period (4-5 years in Belgium). Though parties could try to claim the same portfolio's over multiple legislations, it is unlikely that they are able to do this: Gamson's Law suggests that cabinet portfolios are distributed proportionally to parties' vote shares, with bigger parties receiving more, and more important, portfolio's (Cutler et al. 2016). Because parties' vote shares fluctuate over time, it is unlikely that parties will be able to claim the same portfolios consistently.

ⁱⁱ 1. The Federal Parliament consists of... (correct: Chamber & Senate). 2. The chairman of the Chamber of Representatives is... (correct: Patrick Dewael). 3. Which of the following issues is not one of the federal government's competencies? (correct: Education). 4. Which of the following politicians is the vice-premier for the Parti Socialiste in the federal government? (correct: Laurette Onkelinx) 5. Which party is not part of the federal government? (correct: N-VA).

ⁱⁱⁱ The variable tracks the media attention for parties and issues from the first day after the 2009 elections until the elections of 2014, thus spanning the entire period between the two elections. We rely on data of the Flemish Electronic News Archive (www.nieuwsarchief.be) which collects and codes all 7pm. evening television news broadcasts of the main public and commercial broadcasters in Flanders. For each news item, it was coded which of the eight main parties were mentioned, and which issues were mentioned. Our measure takes all articles that appeared between the elections of 2009 and 2014 into account. The variable grasps the number of items mentioning a party and an issue, divided by the total amount of items covering that issue. The variable thus measures a how visible a party was on an issue compared to other parties; low values mean that the media did not mention the party as devoting much attention to the issue compared to other parties, and vice versa. For ease of interpretation of the regression coefficients, we multiply this variable with 100.